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THREE NON-ROMAN BLOOD SPORTS

THERE is more than enough evidence to show that cock-fighting, quail-fighting, and even partridge-fighting were favourite sports among the Greeks (young and old alike), no matter what part of the mediterranean world they inhabited.¹ Whether Romans ever shared these passions is another question altogether. When Saglio contributed his article on cock-fighting to the *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, he limited himself to the transports it caused the Greeks.² For this he was reprimanded, obliquely, by Schneider, asserting—but neglecting to support the assertion in detail—that Romans also took a keen interest in *Hahnenkämpfe*.³ Subsequently, Magaldi set out to prove the existence of formal *ludi gallinarii* at Pompeii, while Jennison mustered such evidence as could be found for all three forms of avian combat in Rome.⁴ Hence, apparently, it has become the *communis opinio* that Romans shared the Greeks' taste for these 'raffish' amusements.⁵ Yet there is very little evidence that the Romans ever enjoyed or encouraged cock-fighting, quail-fighting, or partridge-fighting. Moreover, none of it comes from authors who could be expected to comment on the subject, if these were regular Roman pastimes. And a high percentage of those few passages which are relevant have been taken out of context or otherwise misinterpreted, enabling sweeping generalizations to be made from cases involving either demonstrable eccentrics or else children. As this paper will show, these blood sports at least should be struck from the roster of Roman amusements.

It will be as well to begin with a fragment of Lucilius, adduced before now as proof that cock-fighting had reached Rome by the late second century B.C.:⁶

gallinaceus cum uictor se gallus honeste
in tentos digitos primoresque erigit unguis.

There is nothing in or about this fragment which compels us to set it in a sporting context. The scene of the victory could just as easily have been—in fact, more probably was—the farmyard, an ever-fertile source of Roman

¹ J. de Witte, 'Le génie des combats de coqs', *Rev. Arch.* xvii (1868), 372–81; Daremberg and Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, i. 1 (1877), 180–1; K. Schneider, *R.E.* vii (1912), 2210–15; O. Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt*, ii (1913), 136 f., 156 f., 163 f.; E. Magaldi, 'I "ludi gallinarii" a Pompei', *Historia* iii (1929), 471–85; G. Jennison, *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (1937), 14 and 18. To simplify references, each of these works will be cited hereafter by author's name and page number only.

² Daremberg and Saglio, loc. cit. It is also worth noting that L. Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners*, iv (1913), 183 and 189 f., is silent on the subject; few scholars have known more than he about Roman social history.

³ Schneider, 2215, following the lead of

de Witte, 377 ff.

⁴ Magaldi, loc. cit.; Jennison, 101, 105 f., 115.

⁵ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Art and Life* (1973), 255–7; cf. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome* (1969), 152, styling them 'amusements of the raffish, as once . . . in English society'—which in any case misrepresents the English attitude (R. W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700–1850* [1973], 49; cf. W. B. Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London*, i [1901], 171–206).

⁶ Lucilius 300–1 Marx = 300–1 Krenkel; the text is Krenkel's, following an emendation proposed by Housman (*C.Q.* i [1907], 151). The passage is adduced by Jennison, 101 and Toynbee, op. cit., 257; there is a certain ambiguity in the comments of Keller, 133 and Magaldi, 477 n. 21.

imagery.¹ Indeed, when the elder Pliny discusses poultry farming, he comments on the way in which the cocks lord it over their own kind, fighting among themselves for primacy and, when victorious in such combats, strutting around and singing their own praises.² Nor were such barnyard battles altogether avoidable; Varro and Columella both stress the importance of a poultry farmer's keeping cocks with proud spirits, 'qui elati sunt et uociferant saepe, in certamine pertinaces et qui animalia quae nocent gallinis non modo non pertimescant, sed etiam pro gallinis propugnent'.³ Lucilius' remarks, then, prove little.

Much the same is true of Ovid's reference to fighting quails in his lament for Corinna's parrot. The parrot, he says, must have been snatched away by *invidia*, being—as it was—*placidiae pacis amator*. What a contrast with quails (*Amores* 2. 6. 27–8):

ecce, coturnices inter sua proelia uiuunt,
forsitan et fiant inde frequenter anus.

It has been suggested that Ovid is talking about birds trained to fight for human amusement.⁴ There can be little doubt, I think, that the quails in question are not living in the wild, as do the vultures, kites, jackdaws and ravens mentioned in the catalogue which follows.⁵ Rather, they are bracketed with the parrot, because both are types of bird kept for humans' enjoyment.⁶ But there are two indications that quail-fighting as such is not the point. First, Ovid is manifestly contrasting the parrot's death with the quails' ability to live on (*uiuunt*); if the reference were to quail-fighting, it would be necessary to suppose that the bouts were regularly stopped before one or other of the contestants was dead, a supposition rendered distinctly unlikely both by the ancient evidence and by modern parallels.⁷ Second, the *proelia* are perfectly explicable as the kind of quarrelling, sometimes involving love-play, to be seen between pet birds. We may compare Ovid's comment in the *Ars Amatoria* (2. 465): 'quae modo pugnarunt, iungunt sua rostra columbae.' There, to be sure, there are strong amatory overtones which would be out of place in the lament for the parrot or, rather, at this point in the lament, but that is not enough to invalidate the parallel. In short, Ovid's remark has been taken out of its context in order to provide the Romans with an interest in a blood sport.

Nevertheless, it is a reference in the *Naturalis Historia* which provides the most striking example of this blatant disregard for context. Pliny remarks that some birds—for example, quails—give a cry when fighting, some birds—for example, partridges—before fighting, and some birds—for example, cocks—

¹ See, e.g., Seneca, *apoc.* 7. 3: 'gallum in suo sterquilino plurimum posse'.

² Pliny, *N.H.* 10. 47; cf. 11. 268 (discussed below), and Aelian, *Hist. anim.* 5. 5.

³ Varro, *R.R.* 3. 9. 4–5 (whence the quotation); Columella, *R.R.* 8. 2. 9–11.

⁴ Jennison, 115. For quail-fighting in Italy Keller, 163 referred to Petronius, *Sat.* 53. 12, following an unreliable text.

⁵ Ovid, *Amores* 2. 6. 33–40. On the structure of the lament see Elizabeth Thomas, 'A comparative analysis of Ovid, *Amores*, II, 6 and III, 9', *Latomus* xxiv (1965), 599–609, especially 605 f.

⁶ The custom of keeping quails as pets is attested, e.g., by Plautus, *Capt.* 1002–4. It may also explain why Pliny, *N.H.* 10. 197 terms them *placidissima animalia* (though he notes elsewhere that they can and do fight: 10. 100–1 and 11. 268). As for their being bracketed with parrots, it is noteworthy that Martial does exactly the same in his only reference to quails (10. 3. 7).

⁷ Schneider, 2212 f.; Magaldi, 475–81 with figs. 2–3; Malcolmson, *op. cit.*, 50; Boulton, *op. cit.*, 174 f., 189 f., 192 ff., 200 f., 206.

after fighting.¹ Here, at one fell swoop so to speak, Pliny seems to be providing the evidence that all three forms took place in Rome in a sporting context, nor have scholars been slow to pounce upon the gobbet.² However, the sentence which immediately precedes throws a rather different light on the situation: 'auium loquaciores quae minores et circa coitus maxime.' The fighting, in other words, accompanies not the plaudits of a human audience, but the onset of the mating season, the very same point as Pliny has made in his discussion of the partridge's mating habits in the previous book (10. 100–1).

So far we have discussed only passages which ought not so readily to have been invoked as support for claims that Romans were interested in bird-fights. Where cock-fighting in particular is concerned, there is evidence to show that the Romans regarded it as a typically Greek pursuit. It is obviously not enough to note that the best fighting-cocks came from the Greek east. For the Roman agricultural writers who state that the Tanagran and Rhodian breeds were the best, the Chalcidian and the Median the runners-up, also admit that the intensive poultry farming they themselves are recommending to the reader was developed by the Greeks of Delos.³ Cock-fighting could have been transplanted as easily as poultry farming. Nor can anything be made of Pliny's statement (*N.H.* 22. 65) that adding maidenhair, *adiantum*, to their food is thought to make partridges and cockerels better fighters. The plant is the subject of his comments, not the birds, and there is nothing to show whether he is talking of Greek or Roman practice, or whether he is following a Greek or a Roman source.⁴ Equally ambiguous is Columella's remark, made in his discussion of farmyard cocks (*R.R.* 8. 2. 11), that they must have the qualities of a fighter, 'quamuis non ad pugnam neque ad uictoriae laudem praeparentur'. For this could be held to imply that there were Romans ready to rear birds 'ad pugnam et ad uictoriae laudem', or it could mean only that this was not a Roman custom, on a farm or elsewhere.

That the latter is in fact the correct interpretation, however, may be deduced from statements Columella makes a little earlier in his discussion of cockerels for the farm. As the first of two passages establishing the Greek nature of cock-fighting, it merits full quotation: 'sed et hi (sc. Graeci), quoniam procera corpora et animos ad proelia pertinacis requirebant, praecipue Tanagricum genus et Rhodium probabant, nec minus Calcidicum et Medicum, quod ab imperito uulgo littera mutata Melicum appellatur. nobis nostrum uernaculum maxime placet, omisso tamen illo studio Graecorum, qui ferocissimum quemque alitem certaminibus et pugnae praeparabant. nos enim censemus instituere uectigal industrii patrisfamilias, non rixiosarum auium lanistae, cuius plerumque totum patrimonium, pignus aleae, uictor gallinaceus pyctes abstulit.'⁵ The passage is not without difficulty, but three observations may be made. First, if Columella is speaking simply as a conscientious poultry farmer and condemning Romans

¹ Pliny, *N.H.* 11. 268: 'alii in pugna uox, ut coturnicibus, aliis ante pugnam, ut perdicibus, aliis cum uicere, ut gallinaceis.'

² Jennison, 101 and 115; Toynbee, op. cit., 255 f. with notes 185 and 194.

³ Fighting breeds: Varro, *R.R.* 3. 9. 6, 19; Columella, *R.R.* 8. 2. 4, 12–14; Pliny, *N.H.* 10. 48. Delians: Varro, *R.R.* 3. 9. 2; Columella, *R.R.* 8. 2. 4; Pliny, *N.H.* 10. 139.

⁴ The same statement is made, inde-

pendently it seems, by Dioscorides, *Mat. med.* 4. 134. Pliny's comment is cited by Jennison, 101, and Toynbee, op. cit., 255 and n. 185.

⁵ Columella, *R.R.* 8. 2. 5 (the text is that printed by Lundström and Josephson [Uppsala, 1955]). The passage is invoked by Magaldi, 474 f.; Jennison, 101; Balsdon, op. cit., 152; and Toynbee, op. cit., 257.

who frivolously raise cocks *ad pugnam*, why does he talk of *illud studium Graecorum*? Now, it might be argued that he terms it specifically a Greek enthusiasm, because he wants to shame any Romans engaged in this pursuit by likening them to *Graeculi*. This, however, is ruled out by the second observation. Too little attention has been paid to the series of past tenses which Columella uses to describe cock-fighting here (*requirebant*, *probabant*, *praeparabant*, *abstulit*). There is, it seems, no real justification even for claiming that Columella is talking about his own day; and if that is accepted, there is no more justification for claiming that he is reprimanding Romans. Which brings us to the third point, the startling novelty of the expression *rixiosarum avium lanista*. Whether or not Romans approved of him, a *lanista* was a trainer of men, not an impresario of quarrelsome birds.¹ Columella is exercising his sarcasm on a feckless Greek, to such an extent a victim of *illud studium Graecorum* that he stakes—and loses—his inheritance because of a *uictor gallinaceus pyctes*.² Though it may be wondered whether such sarcasm is entirely appropriate to the context, Columella is presenting us with two stereotypes dear to the Roman heart, on the one side the hard-working, hard-headed *paterfamilias* of Rome, on the other side the equivalent of Juvenal's *Graeculus esuriens*.

The second reference derives from Pliny, his statement that 'Pergami omnibus annis spectaculum gallorum publice editur ceu gladiatorum' (*N.H.* 10. 50). Granted that Pliny is talking about an organized annual festival put on at public expense rather than about entertainments mounted by private enterprise, the very fact that he finds such a festival noteworthy indicates that he knows of no parallel, be it elsewhere in the Greek world or amongst the Romans.³ Which is not only a serious obstacle to Magaldi's attempt to find organized *ludi gallinarii* (as distinct from informal cock-fights) at Pompeii;⁴ it also fits neatly with the fact that in the *Satyricon* (86. 1) Pergamum is the scene of the disreputable Eumolpus' attempts to seduce the boy entrusted to his care with a gift of *gallos gallinaceos pugnacissimos duos*. More important, there is—as in Columella—the comparison with the gladiatorial show. Here too a Roman writer has chosen, or has been forced, to use gladiatorial imagery to explain cock-fighting; whether or not the comparison is sarcastic, the use of the comparison itself points directly to the conclusion that a non-Roman sport is being described.

If the arguments so far advanced are considered valid, it may at first sight seem a decisive objection to my thesis that Antony and Octavian are among the few Romans explicitly named as enjoying cock-fighting and quail-fighting. According to the accounts Plutarch gives in the *de fortuna Romanorum* and in the

¹ The evidence is presented by van Wees, *Thes. Lat. Ling.*, vii. 2, fasc. 6 (1972), 933–4, although he quite fails to note this point. There is no evidence that cock-fighting ever took place in the so-called cockpit theatres of Northern Gaul and Britain. This was a surmise by the originator of the term, Kathleen M. Kenyon (*Archaeologia* lxxxiv [1934], 246), even though it has since been represented as fact, e.g., by Olwen Brogan, *Roman Gaul* (1953), 79.

² The use of *pyctes*, a Greek term, surely hammers home the point.

³ Perhaps the games which had once been celebrated annually in Athens (Aelian, *Var.*

Hist. 2. 28; cf. Schneider, 2210 f.; Jennison, 14 n. 1) had lapsed by this date.

⁴ It is not my intention to deny that there were cock-fights in Pompeii (see below), but the arguments of Magaldi, 482 ff. are in any case unconvincing. He proposed restoring the relevant section of a single graffito (*C.I.L.* iv. 3890) to read 'IV NON NOV IN LVD(is) GALLIN(ariis) DAT(is?) V T GALL', nowhere explaining the meaning of the three final abbreviations. In fact, the inscription makes perfect sense when read thus: 'IV NON NOV IN LVD(is) GALLIN(ae) DAT(ae) V ET GALL(us)'. For such gifts see Aelian, *Hist. anim.* 2. 30; de Witte, 380; Schneider, 2214 f.

Vita Antonii, there was a story that when Antony and Octavian engaged in friendly rivalry through the medium of such sports as ball-playing, dicing, or matching cocks or quails, Octavian was always the winner, and this was taken to presage his eventual victory at Actium.¹ Proponents of the view that this reflects regular Roman practice could appeal to the evidence to be drawn from the *Life*, since this gives the place and time of these bouts, Italy shortly after the treaty of Misenum.² There is, however, a significant detail to be noticed in the *de fortuna Romanorum*. Here Plutarch says that Octavian always won, whether 'they spent their leisure in a game of ball, or dice, or even fights of pet birds, such as quails and cockerels' (πολλάκις σχολαζόντων εἰς παιδιὰν σφαίρας ἢ κύβων ἢ νῆ Δία θρεμμάτων ἀμίλλης, οἷον ὀρνύγων, ἀλεκτρυόνων). The *de fortuna Romanorum* is the earlier of the two works in question,³ and the only plausible explanation for that νῆ Δία is surely Plutarch's surprise that Romans, or adult Romans, did engage in such sports.⁴ By the time he came to write the life of Antony, it may be suggested, the surprise had worn off or, better, the story was already familiar to him; hence he neglected to repeat the emphasis.⁵

Those who find this interpretation strained may well appeal to the mosaics, paintings, and reliefs which represent cocks and quails, and less frequently actual cock-fights and quail-fights.⁶ But a cock or a quail may symbolize many things, and a motif can be transferred from one place to another without necessarily implying the transference of the practice underlying it.⁷ Even the Pompeian mosaics and paintings are of questionable relevance in this respect, since Magaldi has shown that Pompeii represents Hellenistic Greek practice.⁸ Besides, we have to set against a handful of art-works the absolutely deafening silence of so many Roman writers. There is not one word about cock-fighting, quail-fighting, or partridge-fighting in Cicero and the other orators, in the satirists, or in the historians. Further, the scandals and scurrilities purveyed by Suetonius contain not one mention of these sports. And even the *Historia Augusta* can muster but a single example, reporting that one of Severus Alexander's chief amusements at a banquet was to have partridges fight one another. Which signifies little when the author goes on to declare that the emperor was a bird fancier of quite exotic nature, maintaining aviaries of peacocks, pheasants, chickens, ducks, partridges, and doves (of doves alone he allegedly kept 20,000).⁹ The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from this anecdote is that Severus Alexander was something of an eccentric.

The two remaining references to be discussed confirm this fully, since they

¹ Plutarch, *fort. Rom.* 7 (319f); *Ant.* 33. 4. Cf. de Witte, 378; Magaldi, 472; Balsdon, op. cit., 152. Nothing can be made of the fact that on each occasion Plutarch introduces the anecdote with λέγεται; as is remarked by H. D. Westlake (*Hermes* lxxxiv [1956], 110 f.), it need not indicate disbelief.

² Plutarch, *Ant.* 33. 1-5.

³ K. Ziegler, *Plutarchos von Chaironeia*² (1964), 83 ff.; C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (1971), 14 ff. and 67 ff.

⁴ That Plutarch was not surprised at Fortune's working through birds is shown by *fort. Rom.* 8 (320 d) and especially 12 (325 c-f).

⁵ It might alternatively be argued that by

the time he came to write the *Vita Antonii*, Plutarch knew where the incident or incidents occurred—for example, the Bay of Naples—and thus that the Greek context made the episode less surprising.

⁶ See especially Magaldi, 473 ff. with figs. 1-4; Toynbee, op. cit., 255 ff. with figs. 126-7 and 131; A. Kiss, *Roman Mosaics in Hungary* (1973), 26 with fig. 18.

⁷ See especially Keller, 137 ff. on the symbolism of the cockerel.

⁸ Magaldi, 472 f.; cf. R. Étienne, *La Vie quotidienne à Pompéi* (1966), 404 ff.

⁹ S. H. A., *Sev. Alex.* 41. 5 (cited by Toynbee, op. cit., 255 with n. 185) and 7.

bring out the fact that in normal circumstances only Roman children concerned themselves with these sports, and that when they reached manhood, they put away such childish things. First, in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (1. 6), there is the statement that he learnt from Diognetus not to keep quails for fighting (*ὀρνυγοτροφεῖν*), nor to care about such trivia. As Anthony Birley has shown, this Diognetus is no doubt the painting-master whom Marcus was given when he was about eleven years old.¹ Second, and more striking still, Herodian tells us explicitly that Caracalla and Geta had quarrelled bitterly with one another as children, over such things as quail-fights and cock-fights, but that they had given up this kind of rivalry when they reached manhood, in order to engage in other, more sophisticated forms of mutual hatred.² When we know that Roman children kept birds as pets, quails and cockerels amongst them,³ it hardly seems surprising—children being children—that they matched them against each other in informal combat; but this is a far cry from the claim that Roman adults interested themselves in or enjoyed such sports.

To conclude, cock-fighting, quail-fighting, and partridge-fighting were not amusements of Roman adults. It is difficult to see why the evidence has been misinterpreted, however. One could perhaps surmise a wish to attribute to them a kind of sportsmanship not easily discerned in their gladiatorial shows and chariot races. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on a small number of mosaics and paintings as a way of overcompensating for the neglect with which social historians have so often treated the artistic evidence. In one case at least, the misinterpretation has arisen from a readiness to attribute to the Romans any and every pursuit allowing them to express their alleged lust for blood.⁴ But whatever the explanation may be, the Romans were not interested in these sports, nor is that lack of interest in the least surprising. They already had other sports to amuse them. If they wanted to see blood shed, they could go to a gladiatorial show.⁵ If they sought sheer excitement, they could wait for the chariot races.⁶ And if their aim was to bet and gamble, that they could do on gladiators, or charioteers, or throws of the dice.⁷ Cock-fighting, quail-fighting and partridge-fighting were tame by comparison, best left to Greeks and children.

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¹ A. R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius* (1966), 37, linking our passage with S. H. A., *Marcus* 4. 9. Cf. Balsdon, *op. cit.*, 152, terming Marcus 'young'.

² Herodian 3. 10. 3; adduced by de Witte, 378 and Balsdon, *loc. cit.* (dating the episode 'in their youth').

³ Quails: see above, p. 118 n. 6. Cockerels: H. Kähler, *Die Villa des Maxentius bei Piazza Armerina* (1973), pl. 41; cf. Plautus, *Asin.* 666 and, perhaps, Pliny, *N.H.* 10. 47: '(galli) regnum in quacumque sunt domo exercent.' In general see Balsdon, *op. cit.*, 91.

⁴ Magaldi, 482. On Roman cruelty there is much of value in A. W. Lintott, *Violence in*

Republican Rome (1968), 35 ff.

⁵ This is not to subscribe to the view that gladiatorial bouts invariably ended in death (a subject I hope to pursue elsewhere).

⁶ For the excitement chariot races aroused in the republican period see, e.g., Ennius, *Ann.* 82–8V.; Vergil, *Georg.* 1. 512–14; Pliny, *N.H.* 7. 186 and (perhaps) 10. 71.

⁷ See H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (1972), 223 ff.; Balsdon, *op. cit.*, 154 ff.

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