Bullfighting in Antiquity

by L.A. Curchin

Bullfights are generally thought to have originated in Spain, where they are attested from the eleventh century AD. However, various forms of bullfighting can be traced back to the ancient world.

A series of wall paintings in Egyptian tombs at Meir, El Bershah, and Beni Hassan, all dating to about 1950 BC, show bulls being driven with sticks to fight each other (fig. 1; note how the horns of each bull have pierced his opponent), while in the accompanying hieroglyphs the herdsmen cry, "Attack! Lift him and injure his private parts!" Painted potsherds from Deir-el-Medina, of about 1200 BC, portray bulls actually performing this feat (fig. 2). Since the bull's strength was linked in popular belief to his virility, any damage to his sexual prowess would seriously weaken him. We know from Egyptian writings that bulls were specially bred for the arena and had names like Broadsider and Favourite.

Fights between bulls and men may go even farther back in time. In the mythology of ancient Iraq, the goddess Ishtar offers her love to the hero Gilgamesh, but he spurns her advances and (rather tactlessly) recites a catalogue of Ishtar's previous lovers who have come to grief. Furious, Ishtar persuades her divine father Anu to create a monstrous bull, so deadly that with every snort he kills hundreds of men. But Gilgamesh grabs the bull's tail and, like a modern matador, drives a sword through the nape of the beast's neck. This story, though best known from an Assyrian copy of the seventh century BC, is partly preserved in a Sumerian version dating back to at least 2000 BC.

A famous fresco from the Minoan palace at Knossos (about 1500 BC) shows athletes seizing a charging bull by the horns and somersaulting over his back to land on their feet (fig. 3). Though modern athletes claim that this stunt is physically impossible, we know from Greek mythology of other confrontations between man and bull at Knossos. A bull sent from the sea as an omen for King Minos mated with his wife Pasiphae, who gave birth to the Minotaur, a monster half-man and half-bull, whom the Athenian hero Theseus defeated in the labyrinth. The Minotaur's father was still at large on Crete, and Hercules' seventh labour was to capture it and bring it to Greece. The bull was subsequently set loose, and ravaged the plain of Marathon until Theseus himself overpowered it.

Bullfighting occurs further east as well. A stone relief in the Persian royal palace at Persepolis (about 500 BC) shows King Darius engaged in single combat with a rampant bull. In Persian mythology, the bull was the first creation of the supreme god Ahura-Mazda. Mithra, god of truth and order, tamed the bull and kept it in a cave, but it escaped. Ahura-Mazda sent Mithra to track it down; he succeeded, and slit the bull's throat.

In ancient Thessaly (northern Greece) we find the taurocathapsia, a bullfight held in conjunction with a local religious festival. The bull was first taunted with a stuffed manikin. Then a taurelates (literally "bull driver") fought the bull from horseback. (Similarly in medieval Spain, the bullfighters were mounted and armed with a spear, a tradition preserved by the modern picador.)

Bulls were only one of the many wild animals confronted by gladiators in the Roman amphitheatre as part of the venatio (mock hunt). An inscription from Pompeii mentions two types of bullfighters (taurarii and taurocentae) as well as their assistants, the succursores, whose job it was to bait the bulls with torches, goads and stuffed dummies. A Roman mosaic in the Borghese Gallery in Rome depicts gladiators, on foot and armed with spears, fighting a bull and other animals (fig. 4).