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EXOTIC ANIMALS IN THE LIFE, CULTURE AND IMAGINATION OF THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD: BIG CATS*

by

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After Alexander the Great's Eastern campaigns, new information about real and mythical creatures that inhabited distant countries began to appear in the Mediterranean world. Later expeditions by the Ptolemaic rulers to the African hinterland contributed to an even greater extent with regard to what was known about these exotic countries and also provided information about the importation of exotic animals to the Mediterranean region. The term "exotic" is used in this dissertation in accordance with the translation of Greek ἐξωτικός given by LSJ – "foreign", "alien", but is also merged with the Greek and Latin terms θαῦμα and (in plural) *mirabilia* – a "marvel". Thus, amongst the exotic animals of the Hellenistic period we can identify big cats, such as the lion, leopard, tiger and cheetah. These four named species constitute the research subject of the dissertation.

The dissertation focuses on the zoological knowledge of felines in Graeco-Roman antiquity and confronts it with currently known scientific facts. The aim of this comparison is to reveal how accurate the knowledge of big cats

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was in antiquity and to verify ancient lore in which big cats occurred. Within the discussion, the big cats appear under their Greek and Latin names λέων, πάρδαλις, πάνθηρ, τίγρις, *leo*, *pardalis*, *panthera*, *tigris* in order to avoid confusion and any erroneous translations. The secondary aim of the dissertation is to consider how Greek and Latin zoonyms can be translated into modern languages and which species of big cats, in terms of modern science, were mentioned by ancient authors.

To gain a meaningful picture of the presence of felines in antiquity, various fragments of ancient testimonies had to be carefully investigated. This includes the works of historians and geographers (Agatharchides, Diodorus, Strabo), philosophers (Aristotle, Theophrastus, Philo of Alexandria), encyclopaedists (Pliny the Elder, Solinus) and also scientific poems (Oppian of Apamea), *collectanea* (Aelian) and early Christian writings (Physiologus). Iconographical testimonies such as the Marisa frieze and the Palestrina mosaic, as well as Delos and Pompeian mosaics and paintings are analysed along with the textual sources.

Scholarly discussion on the subject of exotic animals, including big cats, has up until now been quite limited. The subject is discussed and can be found in compendia such as the works of O. KELLER¹ and G. JENNISON² (with one of its appendices devoted to the leopard, its zoonyms and their identification), and J. TOYNBEE³. More recent publications include *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*⁴ and K. KITCHELL's *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z*⁵. Significant contributions in this field include the numerous publications by the Belgian scholar L. BODSON⁶ as well as the works of two Polish scholars, G. MALINOWSKI⁷ and K. MORTA⁸. As for the iconographical aspect, a monograph by P. MEYBOOM⁹ about the Palestrina mosaic is an important contribution. The role of lions in ancient culture has received some scholarly attention (i.e.

¹ O. KELLER, *Thiere des classischen Alterthums in culturgeschichtlicher Beziehung*, Innsbruck 1887 and *Die antike Tierwelt*, vols. I–II, Leipzig 1909–1913.

² G. JENNISON, *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome*, Manchester 1937.

³ J.M. C. TOYNBEE, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1973.

⁴ G.L. CAMPBELL (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, Oxford 2014.

⁵ K.F. KITCHELL, *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z*, New York 2014.

⁶ E.g. L. BODSON, *Ancient Greek Views on the Exotic Animal*, *Arctos* XXXII 1998, pp. 61–85.

⁷ G. MALINOWSKI, *Zwierzęta świata antycznego: studia nad "Geografią" Strabona*, Wrocław 2003.

⁸ K. MORTA, *Świat egzotycznych zwierząt u Solinusa*, Wrocław 2004.

⁹ P.G.P. MEYBOOM, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy*, Leiden 1995.

LONSDALE¹⁰, BROWN¹¹, USENER¹²), especially during the Archaic period and in the Homeric poems. Discussions about spotted felines occur in only a few articles or chapters (i.e. BUQUET¹³). As for the zoological aspect, GRZIMEK'S¹⁴ encyclopaedia is the main reference.

The starting point and the background for the discussion are the Homeric poems. Feline epithets and comparisons in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* give a picture of λέων (or λίσ) and πάρδαλις as living in a forest and feeding on farm animals. The former is characterised by its mane (both male and female) while the latter by its spots. Most significant in these works however are the descriptions used with regard to the character of big cats considered as brave and mighty. These are the qualities of a good warrior, which would become topical in the following centuries. Homer's picture is further compared with vase paintings of felines of the Archaic and Classical periods. The images of lions are tendentious but cheetahs can be recognised in several black and red-figured vase paintings of spotted cats.

The main part of the dissertation begins with an analysis of one of the most important testimonies in the area of animals in antiquity, namely Aristotle's books on animals. The philosopher's biology is based on three categories (γένος, εἶδος, διαφορά) by means of which he described and compared living beings. He also systematised the animal world by detailing three features: anatomy, biology and character (μόρια, πράξεις, ἦθος). The chapter discussing Aristotle's references to big cats (mainly λέων and πάρδαλις) is divided into parts, named *moria*, *praxeis*, *ethos*, and one additional category – geographical distribution. This division also became a pattern for the analysis of all ancient sources discussed in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

In the Aristotelian classification lions and also *pardaleis* are wild four-footed and many-toed animals living on land; they eat meat and have sharp teeth in both jaws. These qualities distinguish them from other groups of animals. Aristotle describes the bones and internal organs of the lion, invoking their dissections. However, on the basis of the information he provides, one can assume that the philosopher was not personally well acquainted with the anatomy of the lion. He also describes the way the lion moves and its procreation; his observations on

¹⁰ S. LONSDALE, *Creatures of Speech: Lion, Herding, and Hunting Similes in the "Iliad"*, Stuttgart 1990.

¹¹ W.L. BROWN, *The Etruscan Lion*, Oxford 1960.

¹² K. USENER, *Zur Existenz des Löwen im Griechenland der Antike: Eine Überprüfung auf dem Hintergrund biologischer Erkenntnisse*, Symbolae Osloenses LXIX 1994, pp. 5–33.

¹³ T. BUQUET, *Les panthères de Timothée de Gaza dans l'encyclopédie zoologique de Constantin VII*, Rursus VII 2012 [<http://rursus.revues.org/971>; DOI: 10.4000/rursus.971].

¹⁴ B. GRZIMEK (ed.), *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*, vol. XIII: *Mammals*, Van Nostrand 1972.

these matters are very apt, in contrast to the inaccuracies of the anatomical data. His treatises also describe the character of the big cats and preserve their topical image, an image that had been present in Greek literature since Homer's *Iliad*.

Some of the information evoked by Aristotle demands broader discussion and thus this information is considered in detail in the subchapters. The first issue is the disappearance of the lion from the Greek mainland, a subject which divides scholars between those trusting Aristotle's testimony, according to which lions inhabited the mountains of Macedonia during the philosopher's lifetime¹⁵, and those opposing his evidence¹⁶. On this matter, the author of the dissertation agrees with the opinions of K. USENER and R. LANE FOX that the lion could be found on the Greek mainland until at least the 4th c. BC. This opinion is based upon revised zooarchaeological data confronted with iconographical and textual sources (both literary and epigraphic). The second subchapter discusses the story of a lioness conceiving only once in her life, which was first recorded by Herodotus and then repeated, but was criticised as erroneous by Aristotle. This conviction is traceable as a moralising example in a Buddhist text, *Milindapañha* (VIII 4). Of further concern is the use of τίγρις, a zoonym evoked only once in Aristotle's works, and its possible relation to the mantichore. In all probability, the early instances of the word *tigris* (Nearchus, *FGrH* 133 F 7 [= Arr. IX 15, 3] as indicated by MEYBOOM, Aristotle, *HA* 607 A, 1–9) referred to a cheetah, whereas the animal which is nowadays known as tiger (*panthera tigris*) could have been identified under a different zoonym. The last animal that requires more inquisitive study is a story told by Aristotle that a panther is an animal that produces a beautiful fragrance by means of which it lures its victims. This myth was raised by M. DETIENNE¹⁷ in an exciting discussion of insanity and erotic passion in his *Dionysos Slain*. However, DETIENNE did not exhaust the topic. One of several traces which can reveal the origin of the story is the habitat of *pardaleis* in Cilicia and Pamphylia, regions abundant in fragrant spices. Another trace leads to the civet. The differentiation of the zonyms πάνθηρ and πάρδαλις is also important in this case. There is a small feline-like animal, the civet, which has a Sanskrit name *pūṭīka* (or *pūṭī*, which means 'stinking'). This could be mistaken with *puṇḍarīka* (etymologically related to πάνθηρ).

The second part of the dissertation analyses testimonies from the Hellenistic period. Its aim is to confront the level of zoological knowledge at the time and

¹⁵ USENER, *op. cit.* (n. 12), R.J. LANE FOX, *Introduction: Dating of the Royal Tombs at Vergina*, in: IDEM (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Ancient Macedon. Studies in the Archaeology and History of Macedon, 650 BC–300 AD*, Leiden 2011, pp. 1–34.

¹⁶ E.N. BORZA, O. PALAGIA, *The Chronology of the Macedonian Royal Tombs at Vergina*, *JDAI* CXXII 2007, pp. 81–124.

¹⁷ M. DETIENNE, *Dionysos Slain*, transl. by M. MUELLNER, L. MUELLNER, Baltimore 1979.

its subsequent development during the period of great geographical discoveries within the ancient world.

The first step of this part is to identify all the regions mentioned in the sources which were inhabited by big cats. Expectedly, the sources mention many lands now bereft of felines: North Africa, Anatolia and the Caucasus. Surprisingly, however, an animal named τίγρις could be found in Africa according to Hellenistic testimonies (cf. Ptol. *Geogr.* IV 8 [9], 4). This does not testify that tigers indeed roamed Africa, but rather shows how fluid ancient zoonyms were and that τίγρις could also designate another feline rather than the tiger, namely the cheetah.

Even more surprising are some descriptions of the appearance of the creatures being discussed. The name πάνθηρ in some instances may not in fact stand for a big cat, but a smaller feline-like creature. In case of the πάρδαλις, its hallmark was ποικιλία – its spots were emphasised in each description and compared to the appearance of islands on the sea or cities scattered on the land. In the case of the τίγρις the animal's fur also becomes its characteristic feature and is compared by Theophrastus to Calamander wood (Theophr. *Hist. pl.* V 4, 7). The next proper physical description of this Indian beast is made several centuries later by Solinus (Solin. XVII 5). Authors usually concentrate on the animal's ferocity and magnitude (Arr. *Anab.* VIII 15, 4). As for the lion, its mane is admired in literature and Agatharchides discerns four types of lions regarding their coat (Agath. frs. 68 and 69). Most troublesome in this topic are μύρμηκες – the lion-ants and their reversed genitals. However, lions do have their genital organs reversed (unlike dogs), thus this may actually be a proper description of the lion's anatomy. In Christian writings the μύρμηξ appeared as a hybrid of a lion and an ant and was attributed with a symbolic meaning. This matter is further disputed in the subchapter devoted specifically to the μύρμηξ.

Amongst the descriptions of the physical appearance of the felines, several can be regarded as fabulous. These include black lions (Plin. *HN* VIII 62) or *leopardi*, begotten by a lion and a *pardus* (Plin. *HN* VIII 42). But in fact the former could be lions that had very dark manes, while the latter could be an existing feline hybrid – the leopon. Romans in particular could have been familiar with it as this hybrid is not uncommon when lions and leopards are kept together in captivity. Moreover, this is the only big cat hybrid which can occur in natural conditions, although this is much more probable in captivity. Also, a Pompeian mosaic from the House of Faun could suggest evidence for ancient knowledge of another feline hybrid, produced through a lioness and a tiger – a tigon, as it depicts a striped lion with a mane (ridden by a cupid).

The next chapter regards the zoological observations after Aristotle. It repeats the pattern of the chapter about big cats in his zoological books and as a consequence the data is divided into Aristotle's categories. However, the character of the post-Aristotelian data has changed, and therefore the majority of information is descriptions of the behaviour and character of big cats. It is related to

a philosophical discussion which began to flourish in the Hellenistic period between Platonists, who distinguished *logos* (reason and thinking) in animals that was analogical (but not identical) to the human *logos*, and Stoics who denied it.

Strikingly, the quality of the information improves and realistic observations of the lion include its manner of walking and the sharpness of its tongue. There is also a story by Aelian (Ael. *NA* IX 1) that describes lions helping the old or weaker members of the pride, which is true. Yet, erroneous information occurs as well. Democritus claims that the lion is the only animal born with its eyes open, although in Aristotle's zoology the truth can be found, that the lion is blind at birth (naturally, occasional exceptions can appear). Fabulous stories are also repeated – such as the one of the tigress mother who pursues the kidnappers of her cubs. This tale stimulated the imagination of its readers. The tigress became a synonym of a good mother in Roman literature and the narrative was even illustrated in a mosaic adorning the floor of a villa in Piazza Armerina (the Great Hunt mosaic).

The last chapter is a summary of the visual representations of big cats in the Hellenistic period. Although Pliny (*HN* XXXVI 40) writes that some of the images of big cats were created as a result of artists observing them, regarding the region and period in which the work of art was made, they all bear signs of strong stylisation. The best and the earliest of the Hellenistic works are mosaics from the island of Delos, which was an important place on the trade route between Asia and Rome at the time they were created. On this basis we can assume that the artists were acquainted with the big cats. As for other works, although Aristotle highlighted while describing the physical features of the lioness that she does not have a mane, the Hellenistic artists (as did their Archaic and Classical predecessors) depicted the lioness as having one. Ancient authors misinterpreted feline zoonyms as much as they mixed spotted felines with one another. As a result it is not possible nowadays to translate those terms unambiguously. Also, in the case of the zoonym *τίγρις*, which is nowadays always translated as tiger, the identification of the animal described by this name is not obvious, since in antiquity in some cases it could also stand for cheetah.

The work ends with the final conclusions. The research on big cats conducted in this dissertation shows that the words of Homer about them were constantly repeated during all ancient periods, especially their topical courage. The Hellenistic period however, brought significant observations regarding the behaviour of these animals and their life. Many of them seem sometimes improbable. However, the analysis of modern research concerning the zoology and behaviour of big cats led to conclusions that the majority of data provided in ancient sources is based on accurate observations. However, some of them have often been erroneously interpreted. Many of the fable-like stories found in ancient texts through the course of investigation appeared to be plausible and compatible with modern observations of feline behaviour. Although on the subject of

descriptions it may seem that ancient authors wrote fantastic, coloured or even fabricated information, most of it is in fact close to the zoological truth, and testifies to their good acquaintance with the world of animals.

The work is supplemented by three annexes. The first one is the etymology of ancient feline names, which is in order to depict that it was not only Greek and Latin nomenclature that were incoherent and unequivocal in naming the big cats. In Sanskrit, for example, from which some of the zoonyms could have been borrowed, the feline names are even more ambiguous. The second annex shows the modern taxonomy of big cats, listing the various subspecies of lions, leopards and tigers. The third annex is an addition to the chapter about Aristotle and quotes all the passages in which felines are mentioned that were discussed in the dissertation.

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