

ANIMALS IN ANTIQUITY

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*Romulus and Remus in the Capitoline
Museum, Rome*

People in Antiquity (Greek and Roman specifically) had a very nuanced and fascinating relationship with the animal life around them. Many of their reactions to animals in their society would be familiar to us today while many would seem totally alien to modern sensibilities.

It would be fair to say that the average person living in antiquity would have many more interactions with animals on a day-to-day basis than we do today. Most people worked land and kept animals at this time and animals would have had free reign in cities and towns as livestock were able to roam relatively freely. But livestock and wildlife are very different, both to us and to people in the past.

For the most part Classical people, or those who lived about 2000 years ago, saw animals in nature as something which was to be conquered or discovered. A giraffe paraded through the streets of Alexandria was something exciting and worthy of wonder whereas wolves running through the streets of Rome was a transgression of nature into the civilised world (both of these actually happened!). Towns and cities were ‘civilised’ and wildlife entering these spaces was either exciting or terrible, something totally outside the norm.

The reality is, that keeping animals is expensive then and now, doubly so for wildlife. Kings and royalty began what we would now consider to be ‘zoos,’ keeping exotic animals in enclosures for their own enjoyment and breeding. The scientific field of biology and zoology were still a way off and the focus of these places was really more entertainment than study. The Pharaoh Ptolemy II of Egypt was said to have collected, bought, bred and eaten birds from beyond Egypt for his enjoyment.

Animals in this time were often sacred, more so even than our housecats ruling the household today in the wise words of Terry Pratchett, ‘In ancient times cats were worshiped as gods; they have not forgotten this.’ The Egyptian gods were viewed as

animals like Horus the falcon or Anubis the Jackel, but the Greek and Roman gods had their animal stand ins too. Athena with her owl or Zeus by his eagle. This reverence was often extended to particular animals in order to favour one god or another. If you wanted to please the God Apollo, you would never harm a snake as these were his protected animals.



Egyptian God, Anubis

The regular brutality over animals might be something that is much more unfamiliar with us today than it was in the antique past. Hunting of nature's beasts was truly a mark of pride among people in the past, whether it was hunting for deer and birds by young men proving themselves or trapping and killing a lion or an elephant as sport. Of course, people still hunt today, especially in rural areas like New England, but in some ways we have drawn a line in what is acceptable or not. Need I only mention Cecil the Lion, killed by a trophy hunting dentist in Zimbabwe back in 2015 as an example. But lion hunting in antiquity was a hallowed tradition and slaying one was the ultimate display of human triumph over nature and was absolutely not a concern about conservation or animal welfare.

On that sombre note I think it is worth mentioning that people living during the Classical period could deeply and truly love animals, especially the pets that they invited into their homes, to sleep at their feet. Ancient people kept animals as pets much as we do today and the types of pets have scarcely changed since that time. Dogs, cats, horses, even weasels were kept and cared for by loving owners who cherished their companionship exactly as we do today. We have no finer evidence than the places where beloved pets were buried by grieving owners, given epitaphs which have survived down the centuries to be read by us today.



Grave for a dog, 150-200 AD, Rome
"For Helena, Fosterdaughter, incomparable and worthy/deserving soul."

I will leave you with one of the most touching of these epitaphs I have ever come across:

"My eyes were wet with tears, our little dog, when I bore you [to the grave]. So, Patricus, never again shall you give me a thousand kisses. Never can you be contentedly in my lap. In sadness, I buried you, as you deserve. In a resting place of marble, I have put you for all time by the side of my shade. In your qualities, you were clever, like a human being. Ah, what a loved companion we have lost!"