

Müller-Reineke, Hendrik

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HENDRIK MÜLLER-REINEKE (UNIVERSITY OF GÖTTINGEN)

ORIENTAL ANIMALS AS MORAL EXAMPLES IN AELIAN'S *DE NATURA ANIMALIUM*

In his miscellany De natura animalium, Aelian collects a large number of anecdotes about natural phenomena, predominantly about animals and their behaviour. Aelian's collection is not genuinely scientific as his use of sources results in an interesting mixture of scientific facts and miraculous stories. In this respect, it corresponds congruously with one of the generic characteristics of ancient literary miscellany: Aelian's aim was to educate and at the same time to entertain his readership.

Although during Aelian's lifetime the Roman Empire was at its greatest dimension, there were still parts of the world that could be unknown and considered as exotic, even to an educated audience. In De natura animalium, Aelian therefore used many examples of oriental and exotic animals which sometimes have a simple paradoxographical intention; others would clearly satisfy the reader's more scientific curiosity.

In many cases, Aelian combines the description of certain species with a clear accentuation of their moral qualities that can easily be compared to human ethical attitude, and not seldomly the animals are portrayed to the reader as examples to follow.

Keywords: Aelian, Imperial Literature, Literary Miscellany, Education, Entertainment, Oriental Animals, Paradoxography, Moral Qualities

1. Introduction

Among the works of the Roman writer Claudius Aelianus, who wrote in Greek and mastered the language so impressively that he acquired the epithet *μελίγλωσσος*,¹ are 17 books about the peculiarities of animals with the title *Περὶ ζῴων ιδιότητος*, commonly known under the Latin title *De natura animalium*. This literary miscellany collects a large number of anecdotes about natural phenomena, predominantly animals and their behaviour. The

¹ Cf. *Suda* s.v. Αἰλιανός 178.

stories are partly a result of the author's own observation, but to a much larger extent, the examples are taken from earlier and contemporary Greek writers, which Aelian names irregularly (it is noteworthy though that no Latin author is named once in the whole work).

Aelian especially used the natural history writings of Aristotle, as he quotes him regularly,² but he also draws his material from other writers, whose subject matter was not necessarily zoological in the strict sense. Among his other indicated sources are 4th century writers like Aristotle's pupil Eudemus of Rhodes, who may count as the first historian of science, the geographer Megasthenes as well as the ornithologist Alexander the Myndian from the 1st century AD.³ Aelian's knowledge on fish is taken from his assumed contemporaries Oppian and Leonidas of Byzantium.⁴

As a result, Aelian's collection is far less scientific than Aristotle as his use of sources results in an interesting mixture of scientific facts and miraculous stories that corresponds congruously with one of the generic characteristics of ancient literary miscellany: as with other writers of this genre that flourished especially in the time of the Roman empire, Aelian's aim was to educate and at the same time entertain his readership.

Aelian himself states this fact explicitly both in the prologue and in the more detailed epilogue of *De natura animalium* from which we may learn about his idea in arranging his material as well. Aelian points out that he has deliberately used common style (*τὴν συνήθη λέξιν*, *NA* pr.) to make the material intelligible for a wider audience that was seeking entertainment as well as knowledge. In the epilogue Aelian therefore defends the seemingly unsystematic arrangement of *De natura animalium* by employing *ποικιλία* to avoid monotony.⁵

But what makes Aelian's work special and to a certain extent surprisingly modern is a third aim: he often combines his observations of nature

² About 50 times; yet he may have known him only at second hand through the epitome of his zoological works made by Aristophanes of Byzantium, cf. Scholfield, Alan F. [ed.]. 1958–9. *Aelian. On Animals*. With an English translation (Loeb Classical Library), 3 vols. London: Heinemann, vol. I., XV.

³ Alexander the Myndian was for Athenaeus also the most important authority on birds, cf. *Deipn.* 5,221b; 9,387e, 388d, 389c.

⁴ Aelian does not name Oppian, but 26 chapters in *NA* are remarkably similar to his *Halieutica*, cf. Keydell, Rudolf. 1937. „Oppians Gedicht von der Fischerei und Aelians Tiergeschichte.“ *Hermes*, 72, 411–434.

⁵ Cf. Ael. *NA* ep.: ... δεύτερον δὲ τῷ ποικίλῳ τῆς ἀναγνώσεως τὸ ἐφοικλὸν θηρῶν καὶ τὴν ἐκ τῶν ὁμοίων βδελυγμίαν ἀποδιδράσκων οἶονεὶ λειμῶνά τινα ἢ στέφανον ὠραῖον ἐκ τῆς πολυχροίας, ὡς ἀνθεσφόρων τῶν ζώων τῶν πολλῶν, φήθηεν δεῖν τήνδε ὑφᾶναι τε καὶ διαπλέξαι τὴν συγγραφήν.

with an allegorically moral lesson that he simply effects by contrasting the behaviour of animals⁶ with that of humankind.⁷ This moralizing tendency portrays most animals as superior to humans,⁸ even some commonly considered as wild and exotic by the ancient (and the modern) reader.

In this paper I want to take a closer look at some of the chapters in *De natura animalium* which deal with animals and beasts from regions in the Eastern hemisphere that were clearly alien to most of Aelian's audience and firstly find out in which way they are described and presented. Secondly I will concentrate on Aelian's overall moral intention by portraying animal behaviour as a good example for his human readers.

2. Oriental outlook

It is most interesting that Aelian not only wrote in Greek, but also borrowed most of his examples from either mainland Greece or Asia Minor. Roman examples are rare and they often show a certain trait of contempt for the behaviour of his fellow countryman.⁹

But Aelian also chose a good part of his material from a geographical sphere totally alien to himself and certainly to the majority of his readers. We can identify three main geographical regions in the Eastern hemisphere, namely India, Egypt and Libya which are regularly named. The latter is in antiquity commonly used as a synonym for the modern continent Africa,¹⁰ yet in *De natura animalium* we also find singular stories from Mauretania which was an independent Berber kingdom on the Mediterranean coast of North

⁶ Cf. Bowie, Ewen. 2005. „Les animaux dans le Daphnis et Chloé de Longus.“ In Pouderon, B. [ed.]. *Lieux, décors et paysages de l'ancien roman des origines à Byzance*. Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, 75–85.

⁷ Cf. Ael. *NA pr.*: τὸ δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀλόγοις μετεῖναι τινος ἀρετῆς κατὰ φύσιν, καὶ πολλὰ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πλεονεκτημάτων καὶ θαυμαστὰ ἔχειν συγκεκληρωμένα, τοῦτο ἤδη μέγα.

⁸ In this respect, Aelian is following Democritus and the ideas of the Cynic philosophers. Cf. Bracht Branham, Robert — Goulet-Cazé, Marie Odile [eds.]. 2000. *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*. (Hellenistic Culture and Society 23.) Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 61.

⁹ E.g. the orator Hortensius is said to be the first man to slaughter a peacock for a banquet, whereas Alexander the Great forbid the slaughtering of the birds he admired for their beauty, cf. Ael. *NA* 5,21.

¹⁰ In antiquity, *Africa* was the name of the Roman province in modern Tunisia. Cf. Cherry, David. 1998. *Frontier and Society in Roman North Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Africa¹¹ (and has nothing in common with the modern state of Mauretania at the Atlantic coast south of Western Sahara). The other African region Aelian explicitly refers to is Ethiopia which would be identical with the independent kingdoms of Kush or Axum.¹²

If we look more closely at the animal stories about animals from Egypt, India or Libya, Aelian on the one hand follows the tradition of paradoxography and often accentuates the mysticism and marvellousness of certain creatures, on the other hand he, in accordance with his general aim, additionally offers a particular moral lesson for the reader to learn. We find examples from these three regions in almost every single book of *De natura animalium*, yet there are certain books in which there is a noticeable focus on one of them, e.g. books 10 and 11 on Egypt and book 16 on India. Furthermore Aelian does not reduce his examples of exotic animals to certain species, but tries to cover with his anecdotes all kind of exotic animals — as a result we have stories about insects, birds, fish and mammals as well as anecdotes about obviously fabulous creatures.

In the following chapters I want to examine some of the sources Aelian might have used for his oriental outlook in *De natura animalium* and take a closer look at his selection criteria for including certain species and leave out others.

2.1 Egypt

Aelian does not name a specific source for his stories from Egypt himself and frequently uses phrases like λέγουσιν Αἰγύπτιοι in chapter 12,3 or Αἰγύπτια λόγοι (NA 16,39). Still, the knowledge he ”displays of Egypt and its topography, its local traditions, customs, and religious beliefs ... can only come from one writer well acquainted with the land and its people”.¹³ We can assume that this author is Apion, a Graeco-Egyptian grammarian and sophist from the 1st century AD who after heading the Alexandrian school as a successor to Theon settled in Rome and taught rhetoric in the reign of Claudius. His *Aegyptiaca* are a collection of Egyptian history and its mar-

¹¹ Mauretania belonged to the Roman Empire since the defeat of Carthage as a client kingdom and was later annexed by emperor Claudius as Roman province. Cf. Raven, Susan. *Rome in Africa*. 3rd rev. ed. London: Routledge, 55–63.

¹² Since Herodotus the region south of Egypt was called Ethiopia and covered modern Sudan and Ethiopia, cf. Snowden, Frank M. 1970. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Harvard University Press. See specifically Maxwell-Stuart, Peter G. 1977. „Aethiopean bulls. Aelian, *De natura animalium* 17.45.“ *Zant*, 27, 105–106.

¹³ A. F. Scholfield vol. I (1958: XIX).

vels and e.g. included the well-known story of Androclus and the lion that Aelian tells in chapter 7,48, which another miscellanist, Aulus Gellius, used in his *Attic Nights* (5,14), too.¹⁴

As one would expect, Aelian includes in his description of Egyptian fauna typical indigenous species like the Ibis (*NA* 2,35,38; 6,46; 7,45; 10,29) or the scarab (*NA* 10,15). In the accumulated stories from Egypt in book 10 though Aelian mainly stresses the importance of certain species for Egyptian religion, e.g. the hawk being the symbol of the god Horus (*NA* 10,14), the vulture believed to be sacred to Hera (10,22) or crocodiles venerated by the people of Ombos (10,21; modern Naquada), Coptos and Arsinoe (10,24; former Taucheria, obtained its name under the Ptolemies after Arsinoe II). In chapter 10,27 Aelian describes how in the district of Chusae the Egyptians worship cows as a symbol for Aphrodite. A similar story is told about dogs in chapter 10,45 which are honoured for helping Isis find Osiris and their connection through the dog-star (Sirius) with the rise of the Nile. Aelian does not certainly give a coherent picture of Egyptian religion and the importance of animals, but he stresses the respect and adoration with which they are treated.

These relatively plain statements about the religious relevance of certain animals are contrasted with more gripping anecdotes about the mysterious human *Κυνοπρόσωποι* or Dog-faces (10,25)¹⁵ that would fulfil the reader's expectation of entertainment. In the same light we may look at anecdotes like that from book 3, where Aelian describes the famous battle between the asp and the Ichneumon, a kind of mongoose (3,22) or the enmity of the elephant and the Python (6,21).

In total he refrains from giving too many examples of the unknown and mysterious as Egypt as a province was relatively well accessed by the Romans. We can get quite a different picture from his description of Libya and India as he could be sure that these parts of the world certainly were complete *terrae incognitae* for his audience.

¹⁴ Gellius characterizes Apion: *Apion, qui „Plistonices“ appellatus est, litteris homo multis praeditus rerumque Graecarum plurima atque varia scientia fuit. Eius libri non incelebres feruntur, quibus omnium ferme, quae mirifica in Aegypto visuntur audiunturque, historia comprehenditur.* (Gell. 5,14,1–2.)

¹⁵ This creature might be identified as the mandrill, a baboon that is native of West Africa, cf. Gossen, Hans. 1935. „Die Tiernamen in Aelians 17 Büchern »Peri zoon«.“ *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften und der Medizin*, 4, 128–188.

2.2. Libya

For his accounts of Libya we may assume that Aelian used the extensive geographical writings by the Numidian king Iuba II¹⁶ like the *Libyka* or *De expeditione Arabica* which also were quite influential for Plutarch or Pliny.¹⁷ We find Iuba mentioned three times in *De natura animalium*, in chapters 9,58, 15,8 and in 16,15.

As Libya, i.e. Africa would be a an unknown region of the earth again for his audience Aelian could easily include chapters on marvellous creatures and phenomena like the basilisk (2,7) the most poisonous of all snakes,¹⁸ the *Katoblepon* (7,6), a herbivore, about the size of a domestic bull whose head was so heavy that the beast could only look down (therefore its name) and since it ate only poisonous vegetation with a poisonous breath, or the boiling lake in chapter 14,19.

Yet Aelian also accentuates the miraculous abilities of some of the indigenous people, when he introduces the Psylli¹⁹ in chapter 1,57 as snake charmers.²⁰ The Cerastes which is portrayed as hostile and most deadly to all other Libyans is gently disposed to this tribe and its members are even insensible to the snake's bite and can easily cure those who have been bitten by this creature. In 16,28 Aelian expands the story by mentioning that the Psylli are not only immune to all other creatures that bite and sting (16,27),²¹ but could also conjure away the Cerastes' poison by simply spitting on the wound.

2.3. India

For his account of India Aelian most certainly followed the *Indica* by Ctesias of Cnidus who served as a physician to the Persian king Artaxerxes

¹⁶ Cf. Wellmann, Max. 1892. „Juba, eine Quelle des Aelian.“ *Hermes*, 27, 389–406, Iuba's writings are edited by Roller, Duane W. 2004. *Scholarly Kings: The Writings of Juba II of Mauretania, Archelaos of Kappadokia, Herod the Great, and the Emperor Claudius*, Chicago: Ares Publishers.

¹⁷ Cf. Plin. *HN* 8,1–34 on elephants.

¹⁸ Cf. Pliny's description in *HN* 8,23.

¹⁹ In *NA* 16,37, Aelian talks about the Indian tribe of the Psylli that breeds small livestock: their horses appear to be no bigger than rams.

²⁰ See Her. 4,173. Cf. Smith, Richard L. 2003. „What Happened to the Ancient Libyans? Chasing Sources across the Sahara from Herodotus to Ibn Khaldun.“ *Journal of World History*, 14.4, 459–500.

²¹ *NA* 16, 27: τὸ δὲ σῶμα ἔχειν ζένον τε καὶ παράδοξον ὡς πρὸς τοὺς ἑτεροφύλους ἀντικρινόμενον...

Mnemon in the 5th century BC. His book about India reports especially the Persian beliefs about this country, unfortunately only fragments have survived in the epitome produced by Photius in the 9th century.²²

Ctesias is named several times (*NA* 3,3; 4, 22, 27, 28, 47, 53; 5,3; 7,1; 16,31,42; 17,29) as a source by Aelian and most certainly used more often without reference. Another possible source for Aelian's Indian chapters is the geographer Megasthenes²³ who became an ambassador of Seleucus I. of Syria to the court of Sandrocottus,²⁴ and is the first Western eyewitness who has described the Gangetic plain. Aelian mentions him in chapters 8,7, 16,41 and 17,39, but as with Ctesias it is more likely that Aelian has not read him in the original, but used previous comprehensive collections like that written by Pamphilus of Alexandria or the *Λειμών* by Didymus Chalkenteros instead.

The wideness and unfamiliarity of India gave Aelian much more freedom to present his material than he could use for the Egyptian stories. He certainly used this freedom and as a result many of the anecdotes from India will add to the reader's prejudices of the "unknown", a mysterious land at the outer region of the world that breeds various incredible creatures.²⁵ Characteristically some of the Indian beasts appear to originate in the world of mythology or fable, like the famous Manticore in 4,21,²⁶ who is as incredible as the satyr-like people in chapter 16,21 or other terrifying creatures like winged scorpions (16,41) and gigantic serpents (16,39).

Whereas these stories about Indian animals are certainly included in *De natura animalium* simply for entertaining reasons there are others that clearly serve more serious purposes. Aelian is especially keen on elephants, both from India and Libya, and he repeatedly stresses the remarkable qualities of these animals with which they would even surpass humans.

22 Cf. Bigwood, Joan M. 1989. „Ctesias and Photius.“ *Phoenix* 43, 302–316; a new English translation is available now: Stronk, Jan P. 2010. *Ctesias' Persian History. Part 1: Introduction, Text, and Translation*. Düsseldorf: Wellem.

23 Cf. Brown, Truesdell S. 1955. „The reliability of Megasthenes.“ *AJP*, 76, 18–33; Bosworth, Albert Brian. 1996. „The Historical Settings of Megasthenes Indica.“ *CPh*, 91, 113–27.

24 Possibly Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire that spanned most of the Indian subcontinent from 321 to 185 BC. Cf. Heckel, Waldemar. 2006. *Who's Who In The Age Of Alexander The Great: Prosopography of Alexander's Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell, 244–5.

25 Cf. Vian, Francis. 1988. „A propos de deux oiseaux indiens. L'orion et la catreus.“ *Koinonia*, 12, 5–16.

26 In Farsi *mardkhora* means „man-slayer“; Aelian might talk about a tiger here; cf. A. F. Scholfield vol. I (1958: 233 note b).

This leads sometimes to a clear tendency of anthropomorphisation: Aelian claims to have been eyewitness to a spectacle in Rome when dressed up elephants imitated a human banquet perfectly (2,11). Another example is the story of Nikaia (11,14), a female elephant that served as a foster mother for a human infant entrusted to her by her mother.²⁷ Aelian ends the anecdote with a clear statement to his fellow-humans to honour and follow this exceptional example.²⁸

Although Aelian also dwells on their beastly behaviour when he describes an elephant's fight with a giant serpent (6,21) in India and with the python in Ethiopia (2,21), these animals in Aelian's *De natura animalium* can be easily compared to humans in both their intellectual and ethical qualities. He not only describes their capability to communicate nonverbally (e.g. 2,11) but they use it "to articulate their ethical consciousness",²⁹ when in chapter 8,17 an elephant leads the new wife of his trainer to the secret grave of his former wife he has killed for her money. In this story it is significant that human behaviour is characterised as destructive and evil, whereas the elephant is presented as *μισοπόνηρος*. Another example of the moral qualities and the social bond of elephant is the fact that they will not pass by a dead elephant without casting a branch or some dust on the body as the equivalent to human burial rituals.

Another Indian species that throughout *De natura animalium* is repeatedly compared to humans, at least intellectually and in their appearance, are monkeys. At the very end of *De natura animalium* this equation finds an expression of sincere admiration of these animals' intellectual capacity when in chapter 17,25 Aelian describes how Indian monkeys would imitate men in every respect and would even try to put on shoes.

3. The arrangement of the 'Indian' book 16

If we look more closely on the book 16 of *De natura animalium* we not only get a comprehensive collection of anecdotes about Indian nature and its animals, but we may also learn about the actual idea behind the ar-

²⁷ Cf. Fögen, Torsten. 2007. „Pliny the Elder's animals: some remarks on the narrative structure of *Nat. Hist.* 8–11.“ *Hermes*, 135, 184–198, 186 who points out to the exceptional fact that the elephant has been given a proper name.

²⁸ *NA* 11,14: ...οἷα δῆπον φιλοῦσι καὶ αἱ τροφοὶ καὶ αἱ τίθηται δρᾶν, ποιῶν, ὃ ἄνθρωποι, ὁ ἐλέφας. Similar pleas can be found in several anecdotes of *De natura animalium*, eg 1,4; 1,15; 1,24 etc.

²⁹ Cf. T. Fögen (2007: 187).

rangement of Aelian's material. Like other miscellanists he has often been criticised for the incoherency, but are the stories really presented in a total random order?

If we analyse the sequence of chapters in book 16, we find out that in 16,2 Aelian talks in general about birds which are characteristic of India like parrots, peacocks, or cocks of enormous size before in chapters 3–5 he focuses on single breeds like the Mynah (16,3), the adjutant stork (16,4) and the Hoopoe (16,5) that was popular among the Indian kings. In chapter 16,6 Aelian suddenly and unexpectedly changes the subject and talks about the Pangolin, before he returns to Indian birds presenting the sand-partridge. This sudden change of subject is a typical trait of Aelian's miscellanistic writings and seems to be a strategy to preserve the reader's attentiveness.

So chapter 16,8, in which he talks about sea-snakes in the Indian Ocean and water-snakes in certain lakes of the country, does not come as a surprise. After singular stories about wild Indian mule (16,9), monkeys with human intelligence (16,10)³⁰ the Yak (16,11), Aelian then continues his description of sea-creatures with a general introduction in chapter 16,12 about Indian fish, followed by remarks about skate and prawn (16,13), river- (16,14) and sea-turtles (16,17), sea-monsters, whales and dolphins (16,18) in the Indian ocean and finally the sea-hare (16,19). Again we find an inserted chapter about ants (16,15) that seems unconnected with the preceding and following chapters.

A third major part in the description of Indian nature seems to be introduced in chapter 16,20 in which Aelian says that certain areas of India contain just as many animals as "our own" country, only wild. As a result even sheep and dogs, goats and cattle roam on their own without human herdsmen. This more general introduction is followed by a large number of marvellous stories about creatures like the Cartazonus, which appears to be nothing less than a rhinoceros in the second paragraph of the same chapter, followed by fictitious stories about satyrs in the region of Colunda (16,21) and the miraculous snub-nosed Sciratae people in 16,22.

Apart from the superficial arrangement of anecdotes that does not lack a certain logic, Aelian's system of handling singular episodes can be described as aleatoric³¹ or associative. He often digresses from his original starting point and once he has started talking about Indian serpents he informs the reader about snakes in Ethiopia and Chios as well (16,39). And

³⁰ Probably the Hanuman Langur, named after a Hindu divinity. Cf. Keller, Otto. 1909. *Die antike Tierwelt*. Vol. I. Leipzig: W. Engelmann (repr. Hildesheim: Olms 1963), 9.

³¹ Cf. T. Fögen (2007: 187).

when he touches the subject of winged scorpions of India, he does not hesitate to give identical examples from Egypt (16,41–2).

In conclusion we may comprehend Aelian's intention to add variety to his storytelling, still from time to time his digressions result in a serious decrease of the reader's attention span. Yet the assumption that the arrangement of material in *De natura animalium* is due to carelessness — an arrangement that previous generations of scholars have often criticised — can easily be refuted.

4. Result

To understand Aelian's motivation to include so many exotic examples in his *De rerum natura* it is important to consider that although during Aelian's lifetime the Roman Empire was at its greatest dimension there were still parts of the world that would be unknown and considered as exotic, even to an educated audience. Aelian used this fact to produce in *De natura animalium* an entertaining mixture of anecdotes with a clear paradoxographical intention and other stories that would satisfy the reader's more scientific curiosity. Yet he does not aim for a precise zoological account, but rather dwells on less known facts and species. By choosing his examples he clearly served both ends of literary miscellany, namely to educate and entertain his readers.

As we have seen Aelian combines the description of the abilities and specifics of certain oriental species with a clear accentuation of their moral qualities that can easily be compared to human ethical attitude. Undoubtedly Aelian wanted his readers to see some of them like elephants as a moral example. In this respect he followed the ethical idea of imperial popular Stoicism that evil is rooted in the ignorance of men of the virtues and laws of nature.³²

To a certain extent this very positive view of the animal world is in line with the modern philosophical ideas of bioethics and the controversial movement of animal rights. It makes Aelian's book an important and often overlooked work of classical literature that, despite its sometimes confusing arrangement of material, follows a certain deliberate structure.

³² Cf. Hübner, Wolfgang. 1984. „Der Mensch in Aelian's Tiergeschichten.“ *Antike und Abendland*, 30, 154–176.