On the Interface of Philology and Science: The Case of Zoology\textsuperscript{1}

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At the beginning of the third book of his work On the Characteristics of Animals, Aelian\textsuperscript{2} reports a story about communication between lions and humans. If lions enter the houses of humans because of hunger, he was told, men and women react in different ways. Whereas men drive off the beast immediately, women try to persuade it using words demanding self-control. They argue like this:

Are not you ashamed, you, a Lion, the king of beasts, to come to my hut and to ask a woman to feed you, and do you, like some cripple, look to a woman’s hand hoping that thanks to her pity and compassion you may get what you want?—You who should be on your way to mountain haunts in pursuit of deer and antelopes and all other creatures that lions may eat without discredit. Whereas, like some sorry lap-dog, you are content to be fed by another.\textsuperscript{3}

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\textsuperscript{2} Ael. NA 3.1. For an interpretation of this chapter cf. Hellmann [2008] 190–192.
\textsuperscript{3} Ael. NA 3.1: σὺ δὲ οὐκ αἰδῇ λέων ὢν ὁ τῶν ζῴων βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ τὴν ἐμὴν καλύβην ἰών, καὶ γυναικὸς δεύμενος ἵνα τραφῆ, καὶ δίκην αὐθρώπου λελωμημένου τὸ σῶμα ἐς χείρας γυναικείας ἀποβλέπεις, ἵνα δικτυς καὶ ἐλέω τύχης ὦν δέχῃ; διν δέεν ἐς ὅρειος ὀρμήσαι διατριβάς ἐπὶ τε ἐλάφους καὶ θουμβαλίας.
The lion, it seems, accepts these arguments, since it moves away in shame. For Aelian, this behavior is no surprise.

Now if horses and hounds through being reared in their company understand and quail before the threats of men, I should not be surprised if Moors too, who are reared and brought up along with Lions, are understood by these very animals.4

Aelian’s conclusion makes it quite clear that his opinion is not communis opinio. He even gives some special reasons for the lion’s communicative abilities: it has been in contact with humans for a longer period of time. In his eyes, this seems to be a necessary condition for the ability to communicate, while difference in species does not seem to be decisive—at least in mammals.5

This episode may be seen as just a part of the ongoing ancient debate about the communicative abilities of animals. This debate was not limited to the scientific field of zoology, it was part of the philosophical discussion of logos—in its double sense of reason and speech—in animals, which was analyzed masterly by Richard Sorabji about 20 years ago.6

The present study will focus on ancient biological texts.7 In the first part, I will try to provide some insights into the ancient physiological concepts of speech and animals’ ability to communicate with humans as well as with individuals of their own species. From a broader perspective, the question is one of language and speech as a topic of ancient biology.

But this is just one aspect of the interrelation between biology on the one side and philology and linguistics on the other. The second aspect is the work of ancient textual scholarship on biological material. Several Alexandrian scholars worked on biological texts or created works with biological content. Andronicus of Rhodes edited Aristotle’s biological texts for ancient readers,8 and Byzantine authors created voluminous commentaries for a better under-

4 Ael. NA, 3.1: εἰ δὲ ἱπποὶ καὶ κύνες διὰ τὴν συντροφίαν ἀπειλούντων ἀνθρώπων συνιᾶται καὶ καταπτήσουσι, καὶ Μαυρουσίους οὐκ ἂν διαμάσαμι λεόντων δύναται συντρόφους καὶ ὁμοτρόφους αὐτῶν ὑπ’ αὐτῶν ἐκείνων ἀκούεσθαι. (Transl. Scholfield).
5 Since all species named are mammals.
6 Cf. Sorabji [1993].
7 This category is not without problems, of course. While there may be no question that Aristotle’s History of animals is a biological text, Plutarch’s De sollertia animalium may be classified as a philosophical work too.
8 See Montana in this volume.