

## ‘Ptolemy’s zoo’: animals in Hellenistic Egypt.

Egyptian animals have fascinated both, scholars and people not related to the scholarly world. When one thinks of Egyptian fauna crocodiles, hippopotami and cats come to mind. These animals are mainly considered in the context of Egyptian religion. But although Egyptian animals seem exotic to us, several kings of this country brought and acquired foreign animals which seemed exotic from the perspective of its inhabitants. One of them was Ptolemy II Philadelphus, a ruler of Macedonian dynasty who is believed to have established a zoological garden in Alexandria.

There are mentioned hundreds of foreign animal species present in Alexandria of Philadelphus, Arabian sheep, Indian and Molosian hounds, exotic birds probably from India, exotic cats (lions, leopards), antelopes, camels, and even elephants ostriches, giraffe, a bear, a rhinoceros. They all paraded in a procession (Pompe) at a festival honouring the deceased parents of the king. Some scholars believe that they were destined for the zoological garden of Philedelphus. However, can we be certain that all those animals were destined to a ‘zoo’? The name ‘zoo’ brings to mind some enclosure with cages and paddocks visited by people who want to entertain themselves. But one should ask whether indeed an institution, which we would nowadays call a ‘zoo’ existed in Alexandria of Ptolemy II Philadelphus – not necessarily as a one place. Another question is what it could have looked like, why all the specific animal species mentioned in the description of this festival were acquired by the king, and what happened to them after the procession. Final questions are, that if it indeed existed, how did it function, where was it placed, and whether could it be placed in Alexandria?

Information about the ‘Ptolemy’s zoo’ can be found in several ancient literary texts. But the most important source are documentary papyri, specifically from a large ancient archive of documents, the Zenon Archive. Important for this subject are also Hellenistic works of art (Palestrina mosaic and Marisa frieze which depict fantastic and exotic creatures have relations with Egypt under Ptolemaic rule). There is also need to see what archaeology and topography can tell us about the possibility of existence of Ptolemy’s zoo in Alexandria, since one needs to consider, where the animals which this Egyptian king brought to Egypt could be kept. All such data are accessible in traditional paper publications and displayed in museums: in Alexandria (National Museum, Bibliotheca Alexandrina which hold mosaics and frescos depicting animals) and in Cairo (Agricultural Museum with terracotas, Egyptian Museum). Many of them can also be accessed by digital databases, Thesaurus Linguae Graece (TLG) and Papyri.info.

In the light of the abovementioned questions the basic research to be carried out in this project is as follows: to provide theoretical knowledge in the field of ancient history about the cultural and economic role of foreign species of animals in Egypt under the rule of Ptolemy II and his successors. The results of this project will therefore provide another point of view about a very specific period in history. The project will bring a depiction of Egyptian society, culture, and economics under the rule of Ptolemy II. It can also be helpful for those interested in zoo history. Moreover, it will bring new elements into our knowledge about Ptolemaic Egypt.

The need to undertake the subject of the so called ‘Ptolemy’s zoo’ for the research project was dictated mainly by the fact that this phrase occurs in scholarly and general public texts about ancient Alexandria or zoo history which leave no doubt that there was a ‘zoo’ in Alexandria at the time of Ptolemy. However these publications do not refer to specific sources but just copy a forged phrase. Hardly any scholar attempts to analyse the primary sources, and a complex analysis of the abovementioned questions has not yet been conducted in order to give a broad picture of animals acquired by this Egyptian king of Ptolemaic dynasty and to set them in historical context.