Pliny's Imperial Zoo

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To tour the pages of Pliny's 'textual zoo', his *Naturalis Historia*, is to understand the empire and people for whom Pliny is writing. Zoos are optimal in revealing all aspects of empire: repulsion and fascination, the imperial drive to appropriate, master and understand, and Empire's urge to catalogue the complexity and specificity of the diverse forms of life (Baratay, Hardouin-Fugier 2002). Captured within the text are monsters strange and amazing which rival the religious and mythological monsters of the past. Pliny has tamed these monsters: he displays and conquers the 'others' of the world and makes them into spectacular monsters of ethnicity, that is, *monstra* who are displayed for what the Romans think are their distinctive ethnic characteristics. Garland (1995) and Barton (1993) examine the role of monsters, monstrosity and deformity in the early Empire, and Beagon (1992) and Murphy (2004) look at the ways that Pliny's encyclopedia is a reflection of the Empire around him. I build on these arguments and examine how Pliny's display of these 'monsters', people of difference and exotic animals, is similar to the emergence of zoological gardens in the fifteenth century of our era: the rich gathered curiosities from around the world to display their wealth and power and to satisfy their appetites for the obscure, bizarre and obscene.

First, I look at the original role of *monstra* in the late Republic and early Empire. A *monstrum* is a warning from the gods and was deemed as such because of its visual singularity and transgression of boundaries - a calf with two heads or a bizarre occurrence in nature. Through an elaborate religio-political system, the Roman government interpreted, analyzed and expiated these monsters that appeared as warnings from the gods. As the Roman Empire grew, foreign and exotic peoples and animals flowed into the capital. These new inhabitants, to the Romans, resembled the monsters and prodigies of the past that were sent by the gods. There was one major difference: these monsters conveyed no divine message – they were simply the fruits of Empire to be enjoyed by Rome.

Next, I examine how these monsters become the toys of the citizens of Rome. Pliny calls people from foreign lands and exotic animals *ludibria* (playthings), *deliciae* (pets), and *monstra* (monsters) simultaneously (7.32). Pliny is making what would have been a frightening sign from the gods into an amusing pet, thereby defining it as that tame and pleasant thing he wants it to be. By using traditional, amatory language, the author evokes hierarchies of power and control and makes these foreign peoples into the 'human capital' of the state and eroticized objects of Imperial power.

Finally, I look at how the people and animals Pliny describes in books 7 and 8 of the *Naturalis Historia* resemble participants in the games, and the books themselves represent the arena. Romans can observe such creatures as humanoids with dogs' heads (7.23), satyrs (7.24), and people who do not speak, but scream, have hairy bodies, grey eyes and the teeth of a dog (7.24). Pliny describes beings not only curious to look at, but potentially dangerous if encountered. Like the high walls of the arena and the measures taken to protect the audience's safety, the scrolls of the encyclopedia serve as a barrier and keep the strange animals from harming the citizens and emperor of Rome. Romans can look at them in complete safety. They do not need to look to mythology or religion: the corners of the Empire produce these marvelous wonders free of charge.

Works Cited

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