

## Animal *Mirabilia* and the Legitimacy of Empire

Sicily's Villa Romana del Casale, although built over 1500 years ago in the fourth century CE (Wilson 2018, 202), still teems with life today. Two of the villa's mosaics, the Great Hunt and Orpheus and the Beasts, showcase a veritable menagerie of animal *mirabilia* (literally "wondrous things"), ranging from the exotic to the fantastic. My paper argues that the presence of such *mirabilia* in the villa's iconographic program participates in a discourse about the legitimacy of the Empire, ultimately justifying far-reaching Roman imperial rule.

Zanker has demonstrated how the wide-reaching power of a new "visual language" allowed Augustus to construct a "new mythology of Rome" (1990, 3-4); my argument parallels this. However, while scholars have studied literary representations of animal *mirabilia* (see Murphy 2004), they have neglected their visual manifestations. Indeed, in an otherwise in-depth overview of animal *mirabilia* vis-à-vis imperial power, Beagon makes vague reference to a "pictorial tradition" before never mentioning it again (2014, 422). Accordingly, my argument brings together insights from the scholarship surrounding animal *mirabilia* and extends them into the realm of material culture.

In section one, I investigate how the Romans would have conceived of animal *mirabilia* by examining Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (*NH*). Following Pliny's injunction to avoid prematurely condemning any given animal as non-miraculous (*NH* 11.4), I concur with Beagon's estimation that *mirabilia* exist on an "actual/fantastic continuum," not a clear-cut division between extra/ordinary (2014, 418). Taking Pliny's *NH* as a metaphor for Rome's imperial mastery over the known world, I lay the groundwork for my further discussion of the relationship between Empire and *mirabilia*.

In section two, I unfold this relationship between visually represented animal *mirabilia* and Roman imperial power on two levels. First, examining the iconographic evidence, I trace the narrative of the Empire that the Great Hunt mosaic, replete with exotic and fantastic creatures, depicts in the villa. Next, I demonstrate how the Great Hunt mosaic constructs the viewer as a Roman soldier navigating the spaces of the Empire as they bring captured beasts back to the imperial core (see Moholt 2011). I demonstrate that the effect of this viewer-soldier dyad would have been the real-time enactment and justification of Roman power.

In section three, I introduce a religious element into the *mirabilia*-Empire relationship by reviewing the Orpheus mosaic in light of the discovery of a statue of Apollo in the same hall (see DePierro 2023). I first inspect the visual evidence itself, noting the inclusion of several creatures that are both native to Africa and India, while not being mentioned in contemporaneous accounts of the Orpheus and the Beasts myth like that of Philostratus the Younger. I argue that the effect of this apparent paradox is to take Orpheus out of abstract space and localize his, and by extension the Roman Empire's, power over animals to the 'ends' of the known world. Next, I contextualize this particular mosaic with Scott's findings regarding a "new syncretic cult" focused on Orpheus and Apollo arising at around the time of the villa's construction to suggest that the mosaics might have been part of a larger instantiation of Roman *pietas* as a basis for imperial rule (1995, 112).

To conclude, animal *mirabilia* were not the wild fantasies of ancient authors, but real means for expressing political power. While my investigation centers on their role in the Roman Empire, such creatures did not come into existence with the ascension of Augustus. I am particularly interested in exploring the political function of animal *mirabilia* in a Greek context,

which, through authors such as Herodotus, formed the basis in many cases for the Roman adoption of such a tradition.

#### Works Cited

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