

River Horses in Rome: Changing representations of Hippopotami in Roman art

It should not come as a surprise that hippopotami played a marginal role in the daily or economic life of most Romans. While certain material such as hippopotamus ivory and skin circulated through the Mediterranean, the animals themselves were seldom seen outside of the Egyptian Nile. Endemic only to this region and sub-Saharan Africa, hippopotami are also famously difficult to transport due to their large size and nasty temperament. While the Romans could, occasionally, move hippopotami to Italy for circus entertainment (Plin. *HN* 8.40), it was a rare occurrence. This is perhaps best illustrated in the fact that, after the collapse of the centralized Roman state, there are no records of hippopotami in Europe until the British Consul General Sir Charles Augustus Murray brought a calf to London in 1850 (Ito 2014). The vast majority of the Roman population, then, did not have the opportunity to come into contact with these animals; access was extremely limited, available only to those who moved through specific parts of Egypt or who were present at select events in the Roman circus. In sharp contrast, artistic depictions of hippopotami were present in significant numbers across the Italian peninsula.

While access to the animals in the flesh was rare, access to artistic representations of hippopotami was widely available. The works of art occurred in a variety of media in private and public settings. Whether in Nilotic paintings in Pompeii, statue bases in Rome, or the famous Nile Mosaic in Palestrina, the artistic hippopotamus played an active role in Roman visual culture.

This paper will aim to exploit this dichotomy between the “real” and the “artistic” hippopotamus. Because visual access to the living animal was so limited, the

hippopotamus offers a relatively closed system in which one can study the movement of artistic style and iconography. Initially, this movement could only occur in one direction, from Egypt out into the broader Mediterranean. These images, divorced by distance from the actual animals, were then reinterpreted and reused in a distinctly Roman style. This paper will look at hippopotamus art from the region of Campania surrounding Vesuvius because this is the most complete corpus of such artwork. This limited sample of data will show how these exotic animals acquired an physiognomy, character, and iconography of their own, divorced from the actual, living hippopotamus of Africa. This paper aims to use depictions of these animals as proxy data to examine how Roman artists and viewers looked at, interacted with, and reproduced a unique take on the exotic for their own lived environments, disconnected from the lands where the images of these beasts originated and the animals themselves.

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