ARTICLES

E. ALMAGOR, “Characterization Through Animals: The Case of Plutarch’s Artaxerxes”

J. BOULOGNE, “La philosophie du mariage chez Plutarque”

K. JAZDZEWSKA, “Not an ’innocent spectacle’: Hunting and venatio-nes in Plutarch’s De sollertia animalium”

P. LICAUSI, “Strange Animals: Extremely Interspecific Hybridization (and Anthropoiesis) in Plutarch”

P. MARZILLO, “Plutarch’s views on donkeys”

G. STEINER, “Plutarch on the Question of Justice for Animals”

F. TANGA, “Mulierum Virtutes: atti di virtù individuale e collettiva”

E. TEXEIRA, “Plutarque et le politique à la lumière du théâtre Grec”

G. WEAIRE, “Plutarch versus Dionysius on the first triumph”

NOTES AND VARIA

F. E. BRENK, “†Professor Shigetake Yaginuma”

F. FRAZIER, “†Professeur Daniel Babut (1929-2009)”

P. BERNARDAKIS, “A 1897 postcard sent by Friedrich Blass to Gregoriou Bernardakis”

BOOK REVIEWS


BIBLIOGRAPHY SECTION

Not an “innocent spectacle”: Hunting and *venationes* in Plutarch’s *De sollertia animalium*

by

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on Plutarch’s longest text on animals, *De sollertia animalium*, and proposes to consider more closely its cultural and political context by reassessing the significance of the theme of hunting. The author argues that Plutarch in the dialogue refers to Roman staged beast shows, *venationes*, and that their criticism constitutes a vital element of the text.


The title of Plutarch’s longest text devoted to the subject of animals Πότερα τῶν ζῴων φρονιμώτερα τὰ χερσαία ἢ τὰ ἑνυδρά (*Whether land or sea animals are cleverer, usually referred to as De sollertia animalium*) suggests that it is a rather frivolous rhetorical piece, lightheartedly applying the technique of arguing on both sides of a question to a minor issue. Indeed, the bulk of the text, constituted by two speeches arguing respectively for land and sea creatures (delivered by a young hunter Aristotimos and a young fisherman Phaidimnos), validates the title. However, the scope of the dialogue is extended by an opening exchange, held by two other characters, Autobulos and Soklaros. Their conversation precedes the speeches and puts them in a broader context of the discussion about rationality of animals. The general argument of the text is that

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