

Human, All Too Human: Elephants and Greeks in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (*VA*)

During their pilgrimage to visit the Indian Brahmins, Apollonius and his disciple Damis witness a young boy riding an elephant. This sight leads into the longest discourse in the biography that does not concern an overtly political topic (*VA* 2.11-16). While Damis expresses amazement at the young boy's skill in controlling such a large animal, Apollonius checks his amazement by informing him of its docile and easily trainable nature. The elephant's obedience, however, masks its sorrow, for "at night it grieves over its state of slavery, not indeed with its usual trumpeting, but with sad, pitiful moans, and if a human comes up when it is mourning like this, the elephant checks its grief as if from shame" (*VA* 2.11, tr. Jones). This paper examines the double-life of elephants in *VA* and argues that the discourse on elephants functions as an analogy of the Greek condition under the Roman Empire.

The elephant makes frequent appearances in ancient literature, from the zoological treatises of Aristotle, the encyclopedia of Pliny, and the *Moralia* of Plutarch. Throughout the literature, writers emphasize the humanity of elephants. Apollonius states that he considers the elephant "second to humans in intelligence and rational capacity" (*VA* 2.14.2). This sentiment is echoed in several of the ancient scientific, zoological, and philosophical works. In the *Natural History*, for example, Pliny says of the elephant that it "in intelligence approaches the nearest to man. It understands the language of its country, it obeys commands, and it remembers all the duties which it has been taught. It is sensible alike of the pleasures of love and glory, and, to a degree that is rare among men even, possesses notions of honesty, prudence, and equity; it has a religious respect also for the stars, and a veneration for the sun and the moon." (*NH* 8.1, tr. Bostock).

At the same time, elephants were a frequent emblem of the exotic: they belonged to the armies of Alexander and Scipio's eastern enemies; they appeared in circuses as exotic spectacles and in triumphs as symbols of the victors wealth and achievement; their tusks represent the wealth and luxury of the oriental nations. The elephant exists in ancient literature in a space that is both exotic and other, well-known and familiar.

When Apollonius and Damis encounter the Indian elephants, they are likewise encountering a reflection of the Greek people. They have a nature that is intelligent, compassionate, and virtuous, but the condition of servitude forces them to place their nature second to the will of their masters. Likewise the Greeks have an innate nature that has become obscured by Roman rule. In the land of the Brahmins, a space where no Greek or Roman has entered prior to Apollonius, we find pure Attic Greek as the language of the Brahmins (3.12), the most ancient Greek gods are worshipped (3.14), and even the land is described as resembling that of Athens (3.13). When we come to Greece proper, however, those qualities that had been preserved in India are in decay. Apollonius finds Greeks adopting Roman names (4.5), temples and shrines in decay (e.g. 4.13, 4.24, etc), and even finds Roman gladiatorial shows being staged at Greek theaters (4.22). Like the elephants, the Greeks have a virtuous nature (exhibited in non-Roman India) that has been obfuscated by their state of slavery under Roman rule.

Philostratus' use of the ancient traditions on elephant to create an analogy for the Greek condition allows us to ask bigger questions of how writers use fauna in ethnographic literature as a means of constructing the self and the other. We find that the construction of the self relies just as much upon the depiction of another species as it does another race.