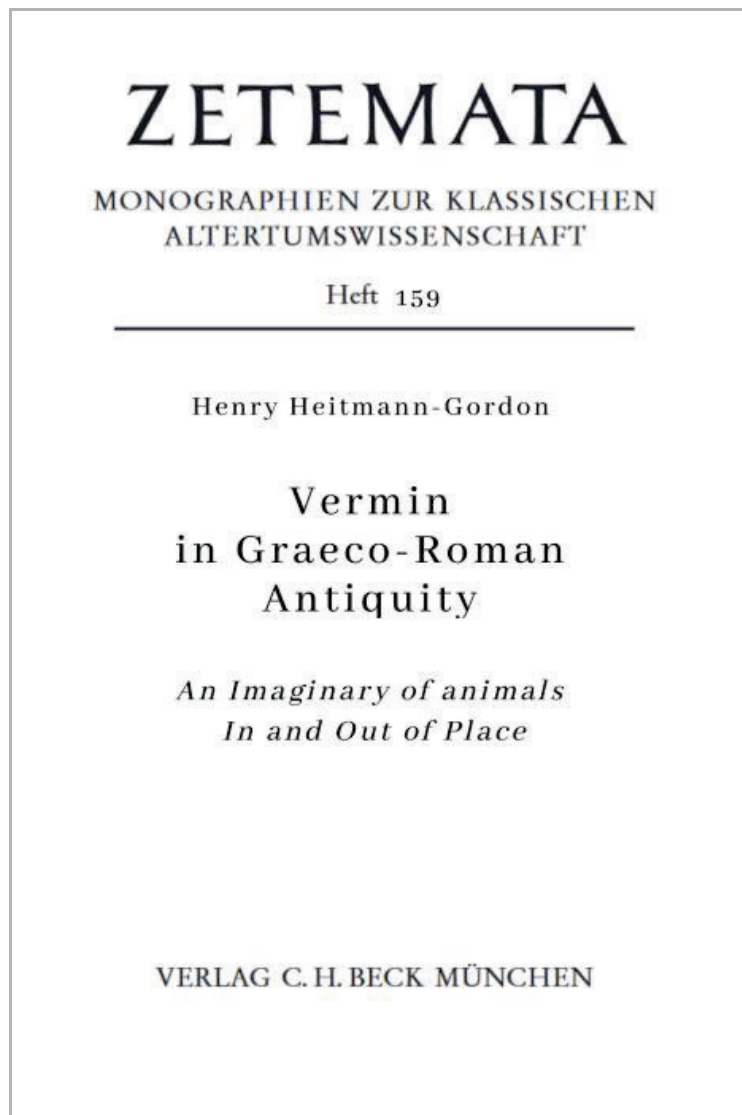


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Authors of books on animals nowadays often devote their opening pages to thanking the animals in their lives. Some even dedicate work to cherished pets and companions, dead and alive – a trend certainly in part due to the great Jocelyn Toynbee, who dedicated her milestone *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (1973) to her cat. I cannot say that I am particularly grateful to the many creepy-crawlies I have encountered in my life, most of which went unnoticed, often surely to their benefit. Nevertheless, they will no doubt have contributed their part to making me write a book on them (in fact I recall an exceptionally vicious earwig making a particular impression on me while on holiday in Denmark one summer). And though it will mean little to the animals affected, the research for this book has certainly caused me to regret many an act of casual destruction and find a new appreciation for these creatures (though I have not forgiven the earwig).

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*We have made the louse in our image;
let us see ourselves in his.*

– Michel Serres¹

I. APPROACHING ‘VERMIN’

Why Bother With ‘Vermin’?

In his story *The Flypaper* (*Das Fliegenpapier*), written in 1913, Robert Musil minutely describes a fly’s fatal encounter with a strand of this toxic yellow stuff. As the narrator engrosses himself in the fly’s perspective on its struggles against death and glue, the insect gradually becomes ever more human: Its legs become an abused woman’s helpless limbs, its body convulses in an agony more honest than even that of Laocoon. By the end, the bodies of the flies dying on the flypaper are fully superimposed on the human, and a human eye blinks back at the narrator as they breathe their last:

“And only on the side, near their leg sockets, is there some tiny wriggling organ that still lives a long time. It opens and closes, you can’t describe it without a magnifying glass, it looks like a miniscule human eye that ceaselessly opens and shuts.”²

To achieve its effect, this empathic melding of human and non-human animal dispenses with language of alterity: even though the fly is caught and killed in a contrivance of ‘pest control’, a device born of the desire to control invasive creatures, the text undercuts the conventional perspective. Musil’s narrator pays the dying creature close, even loving attention, transposing its casual destruction as a ‘pest’ into a narrative of thoroughly human suffering. This fly is no ‘pest’. Instead, it is a refraction of what it means to be human.

This book takes as its point of departure a pejorative label.³ In the 18th century, the English language developed the category of ‘pest’ to label animals and plants that are harmful to the integrity of the human body, housing or possessions, especially foodstuffs. Already much earlier, in the 14th century, it possessed a category of ‘vermin’ that comprises harmful and disgusting small animals and in-

1 Serres 2007 [1982], 7. Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr.

2 Musil 2006, 5f. Trans. Peter Wortsman.

3 I keep the terms ‘pest’ and ‘vermin’ in inverted commas throughout to signal that they are the subject of inquiry in a historical investigation of a pejorative label. We will revisit this choice in the conclusion.

sects.⁴ Both are slippery terms. In defiance of scientific rigour, they refer neither to biological classifications nor to groups of genetically related animals. What animals they refer to is instead somewhat – and in some cases exceedingly – flexible. In England these may, for instance, include the fox when humans wish to justify hunting them for “sport”, whereas in North America, they have included bobcats, lynxes, bears and other animals for the same reason,⁵ and such extensions of the terms for the sake of political argument continue to this day.⁶ Questioning any group of people as to whether, say, moles or rabbits are ‘vermin’ will elicit a diverse range of responses and often spark a controversial debate coloured by personal experience and cultural background, as I quickly discovered when discussing this topic with colleagues, students, and friends – though it does appear that mosquitoes are universally despised at least among white, educated city-dwellers in Western Europe.⁷

The slipperiness of this unscientific label prompts us to explore the tension between non-human animal and human attitude. This book will do so by looking at the cultural history of the conceptual category of ‘pest’ and ‘vermin’ in Graeco-Roman culture, and seeking to understand the historical socio-cultural significance of animals we might label as such. It thus homes in on the boundary Musil’s text highlights: the boundary between non-human animals that we routinely empathise with and creatures we casually destroy without a thought. To claim that this is, in the language of dust jackets and blurbs, an “important book”, would be somewhat paradoxical. After all, its subject are those creatures we routinely dismiss, squash, trap, and spray. Can an inconvenient irritation be “important”? It can certainly hardly be said that scholarship on ‘vermin’ is lively in Ancient History (though it is multiplying in other fields, such as cultural entomology).⁸ While much work has been done on animals that we might place in

4 See the OED s.v. “pest” 3: “Any animal, esp. an insect, that attacks or infests crops, livestock, stored goods, etc. Also (less commonly): a plant that is an invasive weed” & “vermin” 1: “*collective*. Animals of a noxious or objectionable kind [...]” & 2: “In generic or collective sense: A kind or class of obnoxious animals”.

5 Woods 2000, esp. 188-190; Reese 1937. In Australian English, it is broader still, presumably due to the sheer number of dangerous small animals (see e.g. Tomlinson 1967).

6 Lewis 2016; Secmezsoy-Urquhart 2017.

7 In his discussion of the animals Atra-hasīs, the original Noah, took onto his arc, Irving Finkel writes: “Atra-hasīs would probably identify with the common insect, the water boatman, *ēšid pān mē* (whose elegant name means ‘reaper-of-the-water-surface’). Perhaps, in his place, we might have thought twice about booking seats for the eight types of annoying flies who, according to the lexicographers, specialise in biting people, lionesses, wolves, oxen, water, stone, honey, butter and cucumber, while, if he had any sense at all, he would have left out the *zaqqītu*, or mosquito, altogether.” (2014, 202). My students, though often divided on other matters, were of one mind in their loathing of the mosquito.

8 Hogue 2003.

this category, on snails, locusts, mice and more, much of it is primarily antiquarian – in that it delights in collecting ancient facts for their own sake – or concentrates on the identification of species and the ancient classifications of animals.⁹ What little work explicitly addresses these animals as 'vermin' and seeks to understand their significance in Graeco-Roman culture has for the most part focussed on their objective hygienic impact and medicinal uses.¹⁰ In fact, truly dedicated work on this pejoratively labelled group of animals has concentrated specifically on explaining the relative absence of body parasites in Greek high literature, pointing either to hygiene standards or to a semantic regime connecting them to alterity and pollution.¹¹ The historical semantics and shape of this conceptual category have thus never been systematically assessed for Classical Antiquity. I suspect that few have lamented this gap in scholarship.

So why is this matter worth our time? Three interrelated reasons stand out to me. The first is of a general nature. Musil's text impels us to take a serious look at the parts of our existence we routinely dismiss, because doing so promises to reveal unsuspected analogies. Even that which is merely mildly irritating has a history. Historians working on other periods have shown that attitudes to 'vermin' and the cultural practices involving them change over time and differ from culture to culture. In 17th and 18th century England, for example, they were not considered dirty and disgusting, as they often are in contemporary Western society, but instead appear as competitors for scarce resources and allow for reflection on the rules of commensality and social hierarchy.¹² In Renaissance France, 'vermin' such as mice, grasshoppers and snails could be put on trial for the damages they inflicted, all to bolster the effectiveness of the Catholic Church's system of tithe collection and dispel anxieties about the food supply.¹³ Taking a cue from Musil and peering more closely at the history of those animals we casually destroy and whose disappearance we might secretly welcome even in the post-*Silent-Spring*-era of biodiversity awareness, promises to reveal the cultural values of past societies, while also allowing us to rethink our own biases and rules of engagement with such creatures.¹⁴

The second reason is that, as the anthropologist Edmund Leach suggested already in 1964, 'vermin' animals cut across structuralist conceptions of human-

9 See on the animals themselves the entries in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, as well as Keller 1909; Davies, Kathirithamby 1986; Beavis 1988, and Kitchell Jr. 2014. For a diagnosis of their real impact on modern life, the work of Norman Hickin (1985) is very valuable, who covers the biology of the animals and the parameters of their co-existence with humans, as well as a range of pest-control measures.

10 Birt 1916a, 1916b; Heimerzheim 1940; Keil 1951; Gaillard-Seux 2015.

11 Lilja 1976; Calder 2011, 59-77; Samama 2015.

12 Fissell 1999; Cole 2016, 4f. and *passim*.

13 Leeson 2013. The classic work on this topic remains Evans 1906.

14 Carson 1962. See recently for instance Outhwaite, McCann, Newbold 2022.

animal space. Human conceptions of space in terms of animals can be mapped as concentric circles, radiating out from the human Self. The inner circle encompasses pets, animals close to the heart and cherished inside the home. The next holds domestic animals, whose bodies provide economically useful goods to humans. These are followed by wild, but edible animals, the game hunted in the wilderness for nourishment and social distinction. Finally, in the outer circle on the fringes of civilisation, the realm of heroes, hydra and phoenix, we find inedible, dangerous, and even fantastical monstrosities. As Leach himself observes for the rabbits and pigeons populating our modern cities, 'vermin' can be assigned to multiple of these categories without fully fitting into any: pigeons and rabbits can be kept as pets, but may also be eaten as farm-raised or wild beasts – or they can be treated as undesirable 'vermin', whose populations require careful control through violent intervention. Leach's observations suggest that 'vermin' provide an interesting test case for poststructuralist analyses of (ancient) culture.¹⁵ Precisely because they do not fit into established ways of thinking with animals and are hence often culturally side-lined, 'vermin' promise to reveal overlooked blind spots and structural contradictions of ancient cultural semiotics, contributing to a better understanding of how people in the past made sense of their environment.

The third reason is that the more nuanced approaches inspired by the theoretical framework of Human-Animal-Studies (HAS) have begun to bring out the hidden structural modalities of ancient (and modern) human-animal interactions and the boundaries that sustain them.¹⁶ It has become increasingly obvious that human-animal relations are always also relations of power, usually unilateral power wielded by humans over animals. The sad history of the term 'vermin' and its German equivalents '*Ungeziefer*' and '*Schädling*', which have variously been used to mark not only groups of non-human animals, but also of humans as worthy of destruction, is itself a witness to such power relations, which often find expression in language, story-telling, and other forms of semiotic and symbolic order.¹⁷ Such orders enable animals (and humans) to be imagined, gazed at, rep-

15 Leach 1964, 45f., 60. See also Douglas 1966, 41-57, 166-179.

16 On HAS and the 'animal turn' see Ritvo 2007; DeMello 2012, 4: "Human-animal studies (HAS) – sometimes known as anthrozoology or animal studies – is an interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them. Central to the field is an exploration of the ways in which animal lives intersect with human societies." See in general also Steinbrecher 2016; Kompatscher, Spannring, Schachinger 2017, and for the study of Antiquity Franco 2014, esp. her appendix; Kindt 2017, 213-225; Franco 2018; Timofeeva 2020.

17 See Bein 1965, 134; Schmitz-Berning 2007, 556, 622, as well as n. 4 above and 26 below. Admittedly, in the language of the Nazi regime, "Schädling", "Parasit" and "Schmarotzer" were more important, but "Ungeziefer" was used in the same vein. The term was also used by the GDR regime, such as for "Aktion Ungeziefer" in May/June 1952, and it is saddening to see its continued use, such as by Bavarian pol-

resented, and practically treated as an increasingly powerless Other.¹⁸ Especially for Antiquity, however, the HAS tend to explore large, “culturally important”, and charismatic animals, such as the large mammals and companion animals people in Antiquity attached great economic, emotional, and cultural significance to. As the state of research on ‘vermin’ shows, animals that are not cats, dogs, farm animals or large predators are often quietly dismissed in ancient HAS.¹⁹

These three reasons why we should turn our attention to ‘vermin’ call for some reflection on how humans perceive and imagine non-human animals. James Gibson and other scholars working on ecological perception theory have put forward the notion of “affordance” to describe how this relationship works. Animals are far more than passive objects: “They move from place to place, changing the postures of their bodies, ingesting and emitting certain substances, and doing (*sic*) all this spontaneously, initiating their own movements [...]”²⁰ In addition to their vitality and activity, non-human animals have senses of their own, are alert and respond to their environment, attracting human attention. Through (mutual) perception, animals thus make “offers” to human cultural making, they make varied “affordances” as elements of a given human environment.²¹ Cultural story-telling about and with the help of animals latches onto such affordances, with

itioner Peter Ramsauer in July 2023. See further on the use of the English ‘vermin’ as a pejorative term for groups of people Brownlow 2000, 151; Marshall, Shapiro 2018.

- 18 Kalof 2007; Shelton 2007; Franco 2018, 289-298, though I am less confident about the possibility of determining the “complex dynamic between *real* human experiences of other species” as a complement to representation than she is, at least for ancient history (p. 276, emphasis in original; cf. for similar criticism of logocentric approaches to animals also Myers 2007, 42f.). On the place of animals qua Other see for instance Myers 2007, 67-88; Haraway 2008, 9f.
- 19 This is obviously a personal impression, not quantified fact, though one shared by Cole 2016, 6f. and empirically documented for ethological research, see Rosenthal et al. 2017; see for instance the selection of animals and topics treated in Part V of Roscher, Kreber, Mizelle (eds.) 2021. That this narrow focus is by no means universal is exemplified by the wonderful sourcebook by Sian Lewis and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (2018, 593-650).
- 20 Gibson 1979, 135.
- 21 Gibson 1979, 127-137, esp. 135f.; Reed 1996, ch. 3; Lobo, Heras-Escribano, Travieso 2018. Roberto Marchesini makes a similar observation when he uses the term “zootropia” to describe the innate tendency of animals to turn their attention towards other animals in his philosophical etiology (Marchesini, Andersen 2003); Edward Wilson (1984, 1) coined the comparable term “biophilia” for “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes”. See further Korhonen, Ruonakoski 2017, 16-19, 75-78, and see Bettini 2013 [1998], 126f. for a transfer of this idea to ancient symbolic order. These affordances are created by the combination of environment, animal body and behaviour, and human ability and perception, but are most importantly communicated and refracted through story-telling and other forms of communication. I use the term “imaginary” to signify this human cultural response to animal affordances, following Searle 1996, 4; Franco 2014, 172.

human and non-human contributing their part; and though the power of the storyteller invariably lies with humans, the story would not be possible without the animal's contribution.²² At the same time, human cultural making can never fully account for the animal, because animals are not humans; they can be cast as embodying human values, for instance when lions are brave or owls wise, but as religious scientist Ingvild Gilhus put it in her *Animals, Gods and Humans*, "there will always be more to the animal than that which is described in anthropocentric language."²³ The concept of affordance accounts for this complexity. It provides a way of expressing both the overwhelming power of humans in this relationship, but also acknowledges the essential contribution made by animals in an interaction that is always more than a zero-sum game.

When viewed as affordances, the bodies and behaviour of animals are therefore integral also to the dense, embodied web of power relations that puts them in their place(s).²⁴ Even the structures of human space show the signs of regulatory regimes implemented to create "proper places" for animals and to keep them there, locked within conceptual cages.²⁵ Scholars such as Michael MacKinnon and Thomas Edmund, for example, have begun to bring out the modalities of human-animal-interaction in ancient urban space, highlighting the regimes of spatial organisation that existed between humans and animals in Antiquity and how transgressions were identified and sanctioned.²⁶ In my view, the locations of 'pests' or 'vermin' within this web of coordinates, spatial and otherwise, deserve attention, because, together with large predators, animals grouped as 'vermin' are amongst those animals that most overtly cut across the imbalance of power. Like predators, they can be imagined as being possessed of harmful agency, which in turn justifies their destruction.²⁷ Unlike large predators, however, they are not controlled by hunting and in fact often elude the simple mechanisms of control provided by ancient technology: 'vermin' are outside human control, but nonetheless work their way into intimate human spaces where they elicit complex emotional and semiotic responses.²⁸ Stimulating work on insects in Antiquity, for

22 Gilhus 2006, 112f.

23 Gilhus 2006, 112.

24 Jim Mason (2007, 17-45, esp. 38-41; 2017) has suggested the term "misotheism" for such hostile attitudes; Bettini 2013 [1998], 144f.; Franco 2014, 166-168.

25 Protagoras' myth of the creation of all creatures in Plato's *Protagoras* (esp. 321b-c) may serve as an example of story-telling that assigns conceptual places, since all creatures are assigned natural faculties and appropriate habitats by Zeus.

26 MacKinnon 2013, 110-128, esp. 119-121; 2018; Thomas 2017.

27 Consider, for instance, the complex and powerful semantics of the lion, employed especially by those who hunted them: Andreae 1985; Seyer 2007; Zenzen 2018.

28 Animals that are controlled by hunting proper fall into a different conceptual category in Antiquity (Opp. *Cyn.* 2.570f.), because of the elaborate ancient elite value cosmos surrounding hunting. See Anderson 1985; Barringer 2001; Hughes 2007; MacKinnon 2014, esp. 204f. with further literature.

example, has already provided good insights into the conflicting attitudes and correspondingly varied semantics elicited by the contradictory affordances animals make, with the result that they cannot be securely “placed.” This renders them an anomaly close to home, a discomforting source of friction that one might call an “Other within”.²⁹

The Approach

The aim of this book is to review the ancient evidence for ‘vermin’ and investigate whether there was a conceptual regimen that picked up on certain affordances and used them to assign these animals proper place(s) which, when transgressed, permitted uniform, usually hostile response.³⁰ It further seeks to map out the productivity of this friction and to explain the semiotic functions these animals were assigned in Graeco-Roman culture. I argue that ancient attitudes were more diverse than one might expect and were not always dominated by a creature’s ‘verminness’, meaning the sheer fact that it appears useless, harmful, uncontrollable, unavoidable, and disgusting. I further posit that ancient sources had difficulty assigning these creatures a cultural place and fitting them into a conceptual framework of Nature, because real attitudes depended on the specific affordances of the animal, but the conceptual value of animals generally depended on their utility to humans. In some cases, this difficulty caused ‘vermin’, as an “Other within”, to acquire cultural meaning that can best be termed “ironic”, and it is in this respect that ‘vermin’ provide Graeco-Roman culture with material for cultural story-telling.

The approach that led me to these conclusions is as follows. Modern historian Steffi Windelen has demonstrated that in the 18th century the roughly equivalent German categories of ‘*Schädling*’ and ‘*Ungeziefer*’ comprised various insects (such as maggots, bugs, lice, and flies), reptiles (such as snakes and lizards), amphibious creatures (such as frogs and toads) and small mammals (such as mice, rats, moles, and weasels), but that whether these animals were in fact categorised as ‘vermin’ depended heavily on the given perspective and context.³¹ She analysed these contexts by using three anthropocentric continua that can provide the axes of a three-dimensional graph on which one might locate a viewer’s attitude towards a given animal: economic (is an animal useful or harmful?), aesthetic (is

29 I borrowed this phrase from Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (2009), but I see it is also used by Chesi, Spiegel 2020, 8. On insects see e.g. Sauvage 1970; Davies, Kathirithamby 1986; Beavis 1988; Panagiotakopulu 2000, 6-41; Egan 2014; Berrens 2018.

30 Philo, Wilbert 2000, esp. 4-13. In presenting their animal geography, they follow Michel de Certeau (1984, 114) in conceiving of place as an indication of stable and exclusive relative positions.

31 Windelen 2010. See on the history of the term ‘*Schädling*’ also Jansen 2003.

it fascinating or disgusting?), and world order (is it part of good order or a mark of disorder?). A given animal might thus be considered harmful but still beautiful or fascinating – the North American hickory tussock moth caterpillar, for instance, can cause skin irritation when handled, but is aesthetically intriguing with its fluffy “fur” and interesting monochrome pattern.³² Similarly, an animal’s harmful and disgusting presence in human space might mark disorder, for instance when mealworms are found writhing in stored flour. In a different context, the same mealworms might, however, be viewed as integral to the well-ordered cosmos when they are treated not as a practical ‘pest’, but as a problem of divine providence and coherent universe design.³³

I will apply these three categories to Graeco-Roman sources from Homer to Late Antiquity that provide information on a selection of animals, specifically mosquitoes (ἐμπίς/κώνωψ/*culex*), flies (μύια/*musca*), bed-bugs (κόρις/*cimex*), fleas (ψύλλα/*pulex*), lice (φθείρ/*pediculus*), ticks (κροτών/*ricinus*), intestinal worms (ἔλμι(ν)ς/*taenia*), mice (μῦς/*mus*), moles ((ἀ)σπάλαξ/*talpa*) and weasels (γαλιῆ/*mustela*), ants (μύρμηξ/*formica*), locusts (ἀκρίς/*locusta*), caterpillars (κάμπη/*eruca*), snakes (ὄφις/δράκων/ἔχιδνα/*serpens/anguis/vipera*), and lizards (σαῦρος/*lacerta*). While any child today is aware that these broad category terms all include many distinct species, I will not generally attempt to distinguish which species is meant by the generic term used in a given source. My interest is in the generic ancient attitudes, which were shaped in part by the fact that generic terms were applied to creatures that could differ quite substantially. Although many treatments of ancient animals, especially those in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, go to considerable lengths to correlate ancient terms with modern taxa, the aim here is to provide insights into ancient attitudes, no matter how inaccurate they may have been when considered in terms of our modern systems of knowledge. I hence follow the often vague and inconsistent use of category terms for animals in the Classical sources.

This selection of animals is further arbitrary up to a point,³⁴ since, if we truly wanted to avoid biases, a fully systematic study would have to include all ani-

32 Lotts, Naberhaus 2021.

33 Windelen 2010, e.g. 177f. This latter dynamic is in evidence in Cicero’s report on the Stoic view of animals in *De Natura Deorum*, for example 2.157, 161 with Lorenz 2000, 342, though Cicero does not explicitly speak of ‘vermin’ here. On the Stoic anthropocentrism displayed here see Newmyer 2016, 52f.

34 One could easily expand this group and include, for example, the spider, which is praised as an artful weaver (e.g. Plin. *NH.* 11.79-82; Ael. *NA.* 6.57; Plut. *Soll. An.* 966f) and not regarded as repellent in Latin (Sauvage 1970, 270; Beavis 1988, 39f.), but also fulfils many of the criteria investigated here: It was considered dangerous (Nic. *Ther.* 715-749; Xen. *Mem.* 1.3.12), sometimes disgusting (the bites of some species allegedly make one vomit spider webs: Nic. *Ther.* 732, Plin. *NH.* 29.86) and ominous (Ael. *Var. Hist.* 12.57; Plin. *NH.* 8.103; Cass. Dio 41.14), and was not eaten, but used in medicine (Diosc. *Mat. Med.* 2.68).

mals – an obviously impossible task due to the sheer amount of material one would have to consider. There are also obvious candidates missing, such as pigeons, crows, and sparrows, or wild boars, wolves, foxes, and rabbits, most of which can be treated as ‘pests’ in ancient sources, but are also tamed, hunted and/or eaten, which automatically broadens their semantics beyond the ‘verminous’.³⁵ Meanwhile, the animals I have selected provide a good spread of endo- and ectoparasites, insects and mammals, larger and smaller creatures, swarming and non-swarming animals, as well as “objectively harmful” and merely “annoying” creatures. They also comprise full synanthropes (“exploiters” of human cohabitation), casual synanthropes (“adaptors”), and non-synanthropes (“avoiders”).³⁶ The selection is further largely identical to that made in Book 13 of the 10th-century agricultural compendium known as the *Geoponica*, which adds bats, frogs, leeches, and scorpions, but lacks lice and intestinal worms.³⁷ It is my hope that this selection, limited though it is, will prove to have revealed interesting differences and similarities between ancient categorisation and modern. Throughout, I further make use of the modern collective noun ‘vermin’, which carries an anthropocentric bias against such “transgressive species”, as a foil to bring out in greater relief the complexity of ancient attitudes to these animals and their inner logic.

While it would be wonderful to be able to map out how attitudes to ‘vermin’ changed in Classical Antiquity itself, it is my impression that there is not enough material to be able to do so reliably, even if one takes into account literary sources from Homer to the *Geoponica* as I have done. Where such changes can be tentatively identified, I will do so, but on the whole, this book is (perhaps frustratingly) synchronic, as are many treatments of animals in history. It is my impression that scholars proceed in this way because animals appear to be a stable point of reference – is not a fly we encounter today much the same as one encountered by Alexander the Great? Animals are always both material beings and semiotic subjects of cultural meaning, both real creatures one can and could actually encounter and entities imagined and loaded with value. The former dimension of animals may change more slowly than the latter, but they do both change: As we will see, the significant differences between modern attitudes to, say, snakes and weasels and ancient ones should warn against such reductionist treatments. Due to the limits set by the evidence, the role of our chosen animals within the “imaginative universe” of Graeco-Roman culture is our object here,³⁸

35 To my knowledge, pigeons are never treated as ‘pests’ in Antiquity. Crows/Jackdaws: *Geop.* 14.25.3; *Dig.* 19.2.15; sparrows: *Diod.* 3.30; *Aristoph. Av.* 578; *Plin. NH.* 18.159f.; wild boars: *Schol. Apoll. Rhod.* 1.188; *Tzetzes on Lykophron* 488-490; wolves: *Opp. Cyn.* 3.262f.; foxes: *Ael. NA.* 13.11; rabbits/hares: *Plin. NH.* 8.104.

36 On these different categories of synanthropy, see O’Connor 2013, 7f.

37 See below p. 29.

38 Geertz 1973, 13.

rather than making systematic use of their continued existence and modern knowledge of habitats and physiology to flesh out this imaginary.³⁹ It will also become clear from the analysis that genre has some impact on whether and how these animals enter into the imaginary at all. Whereas the harmful and disgusting nature of animals is most prominent in agricultural manuals and medical texts, fascination is most prominent in philosophy and art; their role as agents of order and disorder looms largest in historiography, geography, and mantic texts, while empathy is strongest in genres of “lower” literature, such as mock epic and playful epigram and encomium.

In studying this imaginary, I will finally go one step beyond the three categories proposed by Windelen and add one further axis of investigation, informed by the Human-Animal-Studies approach and the ‘animal turn’: the emotional axis. The HAS have sensitized scholarship to the variability and breadth of anthropocentricity displayed throughout history in human interactions with animals. An important variable in the attitude towards creatures now commonly considered ‘pests’ or ‘vermin’ is therefore whether they were ever treated differently. Specifically, the question is whether any effort is made in the sources to adopt the animal’s perspective, empathise with its worldview and concerns, or to conceive of it as an actor in its own right and with its own individuality, for instance by giving it a personal name.⁴⁰ Are the animals chosen here cast as subjects imbued with creative agency or are they solely objects to be rejected? While such empathy is certainly a form of fascination and could thus be treated as part of the second axis, I believe it exceeds a purely aesthetic appreciation or rejection of the animal, and thus deserves to be treated in its own right.

Before these four axes can be explored, however, we need to review the abstract terminology used for such animals in Graeco-Roman sources. This will allow us to determine whether there was ever a nominalised concept equivalent to ‘pest’ or ‘vermin’ in Greek or Latin. Although translators of ancient sources, such as Pliny’s *Natural History*,⁴¹ routinely use these words, a closer look shows

39 Roland Borgards has accordingly called them “material-semiotic hybrids” (2016, 225b-244b), drawing on work by Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway. On the animal imaginary, see Sax 2013, 53-78, and now Dufourcq 2022.

40 The question is whether such creatures are ever presented “as an individual with some measure of autonomy, agency, voice, character, and as a member of a species with a nature that has certain typical capabilities and limitations” (Copeland, Shapiro 2005, 344). For such an approach, see Korhonen, Ruonakoski 2017. The power of an animal’s name as evoking a personal bond is palpable in Cato’s advice that during the *suovetaurilia* the names of the victims should not be spoken (*Agr.* 141.4; see Gilhus 2006, 120).

41 See e.g. Plin. *NH.* 28.78; 31.65 in the Loeb translation by William H.S. Jones. A full text search of the Digital Loeb Classical Library shows that this is a common phenomenon.

that this is invariably the result of modern interpretation. After considering the language, we will also briefly investigate whether we find an implicit conception of ‘vermin’ in ancient material evidence that depicts groups of animals.

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