

Zeitschrift: Museum Helveticum : schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft = Revue suisse pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique = Rivista svizzera di filologia classica

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Vereinigung für Altertumswissenschaft

Band: 63 (2006)

Heft: 3

Artikel: Lucretius and others on animals in warfare

Autor: Courtney, Edward

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-48700>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 05.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Lucretius and others on animals in warfare

By Edward Courtney, Charlottesville (Virginia)

Abstract: Lucretius 5.1308–49 alleges that primitive man employed wild beasts in warfare. Part of the problems of the passage is solved by adoption of the deletion of the confused argumentation of 1341–49. The coherent but weird account of 1308–40 is to be explained by reports in the Alexander Romance of the use specifically of lions by King Porus against Alexander; this same source is also probably at the root of the *Historia Augusta*'s assertion that Caracalla made similar use of wild beasts.

Lucretius 5.1308–49 is a passage which has caused much perplexity to interpreters, so much so that some have actually thought that it betrays insanity in the author. The passage asserts that in prehistoric days men attempted to use or used wild animals (bulls, boars, lions) in battle, and then in a confused manner throws doubt on this contention. Much of the problem disappears with the recognition that this final part (1341–49) is spurious; the deletion was proposed by F. Neumann in 1875, it is accepted in Konrad Müller's text (Zurich 1975), and the case is fully argued by M. Deufert, *Pseudo-Lukrezisches im Lukrez* (Berlin and New York 1996), 267–94. It is not my purpose to reargue this question, so I will simply remark that the man who composed these lines was probably identical with the *interpolator philosophus* who, from a somewhat similar motive, added 2.646–51 after 1.43 with the intention of confuting Lucretius out of his own mouth (see *MH* 58 (2001), 205).

With these lines removed we have remaining a coherent, albeit weird, account; the question is, what induced Lucretius to believe that wild animals were once employed in battle? Only one precedent so far has been claimed, by S. West (*Philol.* 119 (1975), 150), for such a notion; that is Plut. *De Iside* 19, where Osiris declares lions to be useful for battle. This seems unhelpful to me; it looks like a symbolic, not a historical, statement. Another suggestion which has been made is that Lucretius conceived the idea from watching the *uenationes* in the amphitheatre; this appears far-fetched to me. I wish to suggest another source which may have given the idea to Lucretius.

Romanticized versions of the conquests of Alexander allege that the Indian king Porus in the battle of the Hydaspes used wild animals in battle against him. All of course record elephants, and then some refer to other species (undefined) of wild beasts; so Julius Valerius 3.6; *Historia Alexandri Magni* (pseudo-Callisthenes), vol. 1, *recensio vetusta*, ed. G. (= W.) Kroll (Berlin 1926) 3.3 (p. 101.21); L. Bergson, *Der griechische Alexanderroman*, *Rezension Beta*

(Uppsala 1965) 3.3. However, *Vita Alexandri Regis Macedonum*, ed. J. Trumpf (Teubner 1974) p. 132 interestingly specifies lions, which Alexander is said to have repelled by getting them to assail heated statues; this work is recension Epsilon of the Alexander Romance. A similar version was in the source of recension Gamma, which however has confused things by careless abbreviation; without mention of the lions it records the heated statues, then the arrival of the elephants, and finally the Indians say 'he turned away the lions and chased the elephants' (see *Der griechische Alexanderroman, Rezension Gamma, Buch III*, ed. F. Parthe (Meisenheim 1968) pp. 338–42).

Stories about Alexander seem to have been put together into a continuous narrative something like the Alexander Romance as we know it in the second or third centuries A.D., but it is widely held that some of them relating to Egypt go back to Ptolemaic times, and there is no problem in assuming that others, such as the one which I have been discussing, could have been current in the first century B.C. and prompted the imagination of Lucretius. Alexander might seem too recent to suggest an application to primitive man, but the same might be said of the account of μεταβολή πολιτειῶν in 1133sq., a theory about which we read in Cicero (*De Rep.* 1.44sq.) and elsewhere (see F. W. Walbank's *Historical Commentary on Polybius* vol. 1. 643sq.).

If this view is correct, it will explain another oddity. M. F. Smith in the Loeb Lucretius pp. 480–81 has drawn attention to *Historia Augusta* 13.6.4, where it is reported that Caracalla used wild beasts (undefined) in combat against the Persians; this author, like Dio Cass. 78.9.1, has drawn attention to Caracalla's admiration for Alexander (13.2.1–2). Surely the eccentric writer has taken over this notion from the stories about Alexander.

Correspondence:

Edward Courtney

University of Virginia

Department of Classics

P.O. Box 400788

Charlottesville, VA 22904-4788