

Preface

The research project at the core of this volume was developed during a Conference supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung in Köln and the Excellence Cluster ‘TOPOI’ and held in Berlin from 16th to 18th October 2014. The volume collects many of the papers presented on that occasion and the publication has been generously funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

The editors are extremely grateful to all the participants, who enthusiastically accepted to develop different topics related to this new research theme. A special thank is to Eckart Olshausen and Vera Sauer, who carefully followed the peer review process and all the stages of the publication.

This book is dedicated to the lovely memory of Isabella Andorlini.

December 2016

O.D.C. – G.F.C.

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Introduction. The Griffin and the Hunting

1. Anthropocene

The proposition of determining the current geological era ‘Anthropocene’ is a debated one. Soviet biologists apparently introduced the word for the first time in the 1960s, but the modern scientific community has not yet unanimously accepted it. In common meaning and usage, Anthropocene is characterized by the massive impact of human activities on nature, environment, climate, and ecosystems. The high number of technological conquests constantly affects the planet’s natural resources and it is undeniable that alteration of the natural balance is a constant threat. To scientists, it is still difficult to define the beginning of this new geological era and distinguish it from the previous Holocene. Some scholars would fix the start of the Anthropocene after the industrial revolution in the 19th century; others think that the main turning point is marked by the massive industrial production of ‘technofossils’ (e.g. plastic, aluminiums, concrete, and any inorganic material) arising especially since the mid-20th century. The investigation of the specific climatic, biological, and geochemical marks of the technofossils, and their record in earth’s sediments and in ice cores is still work in progress.¹ Nevertheless, we are already submerged in the Anthropocene and the dramatic global climate change of the planet is one of the most tangible pieces of evidence.

Whatever the chemical and physical parameters, as well as the geological features of the Anthropocene might be, there is a major contribution to be made by thinking about this new era. As multifaceted phenomenon of human and scientific relevance, it is part of a process of transformation and development. In other words, it undoubtedly forces us to question our past. It is crucial for us to understand the historical process, which has led *homo sapiens* in his path toward the Anthropocene and how this has been shaped. This is a difficult task, and scholars are aware of being only at the beginning of it. To geologists and natural scientists, the study of the Anthropocene mainly consists of the analysis of internal material structures and elemental evidence of earth’s sediments. Specialists in the humanities look at the other side of the coin. It is often a matter of following transformations and discerning ancestral roots of what was originally different, especially in terms of past societies’ habits and life-

* Paragraphs 1, 3, and 4 of this Introduction are by Orietta D. Cordovana; paragraph 2, 5, and the bibliographical note are by Gian Franco Chiai.

¹ Seminal studies have been conducted by Nobel Prize PAUL CRUTZEN and his research group: ZALASIEWICZ, WILLIAMS, STEFFEN, and CRUTZEN, 2010: 2228–31, DOI: 10.1021/es903118j; STEFFEN, GRINEVALD, CRUTZEN and J. McNEILL, 2011: 842–67, DOI:10.1098/rsta.2010.0327. See also JAMES 2014: 1–6. The development of the scientific debate can also be followed in *Science* 8 Jan 2016, v. 351, iss. 6269, DOI: 10.1126/science.aad2622 and updates.

styles. The practice of ‘recycling’, for instance, was very common among ancient societies; it was normal to reuse glass bottles, clay jars, wineskins, and metal containers to preserve liquids and solid food. However, we cannot infer that this habit underlined a conscious idea of environmental protection in the daily life of ordinary people.

2. Common-sense environment

The question whether ancient societies had awareness of environmental problems, such as the pollution of rivers and deforestation, has been heavily disputed. Most of the studies, however, focused on the relation between nature (considered as *kosmos*), religion, and man, as well as on landscape archaeology, in order to reconstruct how man manipulated the environment, for example through urbanization and agriculture. The literature on this topic is scattered; the literary and documentary evidence (e.g. inscriptions), as well as archaeological remains have not yet been systematically collected. One of the main problems consists of projecting our modern understanding of ecological problems to the ancient world. If such an ecological awareness really existed, this probably was not widely diffused, but restricted to the intellectual and upper class within Greek and Roman society. Among many questions one is whether a common-sense understanding of the environment could have really existed in ancient times. Under common-sense environment we mean the shared common knowledge and perception of the environment by ordinary people. This concept also recalls a recent book, which deals with the idea of common-sense geography, which is considered as lower geographical knowledge and is distinguished from professional or higher geography.²

In the framework of the literary and epigraphic evidence, we find an impressive number of references concerning the importance of a clean environment. Vitruvius, for example, highlights the central role of clean water and a good ventilated place for human life in the cities. Moreover, the numerous admonitions against pollution-acts concerning public fountains, rivers, and wells suggest the presence of a shared sensibility for a clean environment, which was one of the targets of the authorities. Indeed, in the ancient world the common man knew the importance of a clean environment for a good life. Nobody will of course live in a stinking and dirty place, polluted by rubbish and intoxicated water; many inscriptions against *cacatores*, for example, found in context of private houses in Pompei, are good evidence of this sensitivity. The numerous literary eulogies of a bucolic landscape, which belongs to the world of literary fiction, could also be considered as a source to detect awareness for a clean environment. That many Roman villas have been constructed outside the cities, in the countryside and near the coasts in good ventilated places, is not an accident. This resembles a diffused and shared knowledge (at least within the upper classes) that clean places are good for the health and can help to relax body and soul. The Roman legislation also is rich with norms concerning the prohibition to pollute public streets and generally public spaces. These laws reveal a sensitivity for problems concerning the environmental pollution in order to avoid the rise of diseases among the population.

A critical selection of documentary sources, considered together with the archaeological evidence, can show the presence of a common-sense environment in the Greek and Roman world, whereas the literary evidence reflects rather the thought of the intellectual

² See GEUS and THIERING 2014.

class about destruction and pollution of the nature, as well as about the vantages of living in a clean environment.

3. The griffin and the hunting

To question ancient societies and cultures about current problems and present concerns, such as environmental protection and impact, is, therefore, part of our continuous interaction with and understanding of 'Classics' (broadly meant); any historian and classicist is very familiar with these matters, the implications of which are both conceptual and methodological.³ Precisely in terms of methodology and semantic concepts, the genesis of this research and this volume can be traced in a specific way. A practical example may illustrate the range of nuanced interpretations that usually we face in the reconstruction of the past.

A well-known Sicilian mosaic shows the remarkable iconography of a griffin, which grasps a cage with a man inside (fig.1). Aside from this mosaic, the picture can be compared only with a similar figure on a silver casket with hunting scenes discovered in the Mithraeum of London.⁴ The subject is apparently a classical one, but it can provide important insights from the past for modern questions. It is puzzling to identify the precise meaning of this picture; nonetheless, it entices us to enquire about the ancients' sensitivity for problems related to environmental impact and depletion of natural resources. The mosaic of the griffin denotes one of the multiple paradigms that allow different readings and highlight the coexistence of different symbols and never static meanings. More importantly, it shows the possible insights that we can hope to understand which are related to environmental consciousness in past societies, especially if we remain open to manifold approaches of interpretation and semantic decoding.

The Roman Villa of Casale near Piazza Armerina in Sicily represents an authentic microcosm of the aristocratic society's values and status symbols during Late Antiquity. It would be beyond the present purposes to provide full details of the architectural structures and mosaic decorations which make the building one of the most impressive examples of senatorial luxury in Roman imperial society during the Tetrarchy.⁵ Symbols, images, and details of the classical myth in the villa's mosaic floors are frequent and overwhelming. The figurative decoration is complex and varyingly arranged according to the variety of mythical themes and genre scenes, which fit specifically in each room. Yet, within the 3500 square metres of mosaics, precisely between the peristyle and the basilica, the imposing passageway of the 'Great Hunt' consists entirely of a magnificent mosaic strip which depicts lively and colourful chase episodes and the transport of wild animals for exhibitions in amphitheatres and circuses. Two apses delimit the corridor on both sides, each showing two goddesses that scholars identify as Africa/Ethiopia and Asia/India.⁶ The deities allegedly provide a general indication of undefined western and eastern locations where the animal traffic is supposed to take place. The visual perspective ranges from African western- (on the left) to Asiatic eastern-countries (on

³ The problem is tackled in incisive way and clearly explained by BEARD and HENDERSON 2000.

⁴ TOYNBEE 1963: 5, 10–2.

⁵ It is more useful to refer to the most recent literature on the topic for any further investigation. See esp. CARANDINI, RICCI and DE VOS 1982; PENSABENE 2009: 87–116; SFAMENI 2013: 159–79.

⁶ See fig. 3.1 in NELIS-CLÉMENT's paper in this volume.



Fig. 1: Roman Villa of Casale (Piazza Armerina, Sicily), mosaic of the griffin in the 'Great Hunt' Corridor, 4th cent. AD. (Photo courtesy of the Museo Regionale della Villa Romana del Casale di Piazza Armerina).

the right), but the observer's main standpoint seems to be kept to the central north-south axis of the Mediterranean basin. Different capture techniques are distinguishable in these *venationes* (hunting), which are represented with very lifelike detail. The decidedly simple scene of a griffin and a man inside a cage captures the attention of any observer who walks along the 'Great Hunt' corridor. The insertion of such a mythical beast, the griffin, at the right corner of the corridor and close to the apse of Asia/India determines a rupture in the general realistic sequence of the animals' capture. The scene is unique in the context and disengaged from the surrounding mosaic, since it moves the observer into a fantastic dimension, somewhere in the East, and centres on the fictional contest between the mythical bird and the man inside the wooden cage held tightly by the griffin. *Pace* CARANDINI and

SETTIS, there is no sign, indeed, in the nearby scenes that ‘the griffin is being lured into captivity’ (WITTS).⁷

The disturbing fascination of this picture inevitably stimulates questions. What does such image represent to viewers? Which kind of meanings and inferences can we detect? Is it a specific semantic symbol related to a definite cultural context? Two opposite theses have divided scholars. On the one hand, in the general debate we can distinguish a thesis based on a (pagan) principle of ‘contrapasso’, in terms of religious and mystical symbolism (MANGANARO). The fantastic animal would represent the goddess Nemesis’ revenge for human violence against animals (*ineffugibilis necessitas ultionis*).⁸ On the other, the iconography of the griffin and the man in the cage has been more simply connected to a late antique text (5th–6th c. AD), which describes the capture technique of the griffin. The animal is lured by oxen that are yoked to a very heavy wagon, on which it remains entrapped by its own claws:

περὶ τίγρεως ἐν ταύτῳ καὶ γρυπός. [...] ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ τὴν τοιαύτην ἄμαξαν κρύπτεται, καὶ ὅτε ἐνσχεθῆ, ἐπιπηδῶν καίει αὐτοῦ τὰς πτέρυγα.

About the tiger and in the same chapter the griffin. [...] a man is hidden under such a wagon, and when it is entangled, jumping on it he burns its wings.⁹

This is the evidence of Timotheus of Gaza, whose *bestiarium* pertained to the tradition of *cyngetica* and to the *mirabilia* literary genre. The text was transmitted *per excerpta* in a Byzantine codex of the 11th century and it is the unique source about this very odd and fantastic hunting technique. By contrast, other authors (and Timotheus himself) report the description about the capture of tigers by the stratagem of a glass ball. This scene is also depicted beside the griffin’s mosaic at Piazza Armerina. A hunter on a horse, who has stolen tiger cubs, is visible while escaping and stopping the tiger’s pursuit by means of a glass ball. The tiger is deceived by her own image on the glass, since she believes it to be one of her own cubs, and in trying to recover it, unwittingly lets the horseman flee.¹⁰

This juxtaposition of the tiger and the griffin’s capture, both in Timotheus’ account and in the mosaic floor, has reinforced the thesis that the image of the griffin would not convey any religious and mystic symbolism. The mythical beast and the man in the cage, by contrast, would illustrate a hunting episode amongst the several examples in the sequence of the corridor. The main message, therefore, was aimed to celebrate the imperial power able to subjugate any exotic animal and even mythical creatures. This interpretation has been mainly defended by SETTIS and SETTIS FRUGONI, who also thought of the villa’s owner as

⁷ CARANDINI, RICCI and DE VOS 1982: 228; SETTIS 1975: 949. WITTS 1994: 112–3.

⁸ See especially: MANGANARO 1959, 1960; FOUCHER 1969: 232–8; DUNBABIN 1978: 203; FERNÁNDEZ GALIANO 1995: 45–67.

⁹ Timotheus Gazaueus, *Excerpta ex libris de animalibus* (e cod. Paris. gr. 2422), frg. 9. The connection has been highlighted by SETTIS FRUGONI 1975: 21–32, also followed by MARROU 1978: 281–3; CARANDINI, RICCI and DE VOS 1982: 102–3, 228–30; PENSABENE 2009: 71. Without taking a defined position on the different views, a synthesis of the status quaestionis is in BLÁZQUEZ 1997: 155–63.

¹⁰ Two versions differ in classical and late antique authors. The hunter releases one of the cubs to stop the tiger: Plin., *nat. hist.* 8.66; Pomp. Mela, 3.43; Solin, 18.6–7. The hunter throws the glass ball: Ambr., *exam.* 6.4 (Migne P.L. 14.265); Claud., *de rap. Pros.* 3.265. See CARANDINI, RICCI and DE VOS 1982: Foglio 31, sc. VII A.

one of the Tetrarchs, allegedly Emperor Maximian Herculius. Nevertheless, this hypothesis concerning the imperial ownership of the villa revealed inconsistencies and, subsequently, the thesis committed to senatorial/aristocratic ownership prevailed.¹¹ However it might be, the coexistence of imperial and senatorial aristocratic values are non-conflicting, either in the figurative apparatus of the 'Great Hunt' corridor or in the villa as a whole.¹² The rule of imperial power over the animals' world is a topic compared with that of Roman soldiers' discipline under the supervision of generals of senatorial rank. Hunting was both one of the most frequent aristocratic occupations and of military training during breaks in warfare; a good soldier also was a good hunter and *venationes* improved cohesion among comrades, as well as tested the ability and precision of an army's field manoeuvres.¹³

The parallel between Timotheus' description and the iconography of the mosaic is captivating; it has to be admitted, however, that it presents some dubious elements and shortcomings. Timotheus mainly refers to the capture technique performed by a (free-moving) hunter, who hides under a wagon (ἄμαξα) and is able to catch the bird by burning its wings. By contrast, the mosaic shows a captive man inside an animal cage, who is unable to come out and chase the beast, nor is there any indication of the griffin's capture.¹⁴ More importantly, the main visual focus of this scene diverges immediately from the griffin to the human face inside the cage; the main emphasis is not on the griffin's capture, but on the man's captivity. The precise semantic meaning of the scene remains cryptic – perhaps deliberately; nevertheless, it subverts the predator-prey order, which is the guideline of the whole 'Great Hunt' mosaic. Although the nexus with Timotheus' *bestiarium* is indicative, we cannot dismiss the massive coeval evidence, both in the literature and in the material culture, of the griffin's role and its connection with Nemesis.¹⁵ This is a matter of fact in fight contexts – specifically in hunting and public exhibitions of theatres, amphitheatres, and circuses. In ancient myth and culture, the griffin is a 'totemic' animal of Apollo, Dionysus and, above all, Nemesis, goddess of justice and right balance in a subverted and unfair collision among unequal forces. Indeed, the divine bird appears a steward for fair competition between opponents.¹⁶ The evidence of material culture, inscriptions, and the literary sources are impressive and offer a clear idea of the cultural components in the background of these artistic and figurative productions.¹⁷

For the general timeframe of this period, these elements cannot be neglected. It follows that questions arise regarding the existence of certain environmental awareness, and to investigate in what sense and extent ancient artists, intellectuals, and societies perceived the environment and the exploitation of natural resources. To take only a few examples from select authors and passages, it seems that the capture and killing of animals posed both

¹¹ SETTIS 1975 and SETTIS FRUGONI 1975. It is more probable that a member of high rank aristocracy was the owner of the villa and the estate: MAZZARINO 1953: 417–21; DUNBABIN 1978: 204–12; MARROU 1978: 254–8; CRACCO RUGGINI 1980: 3–96; CARANDINI, RICCI and DE VOS 1982: 28–46.

¹² See MARROU 1978: 253–95; PENSABENE 2009: 87–116; SFAMENI 2013: 159–79.

¹³ Evidence in ancient literature is reported by MARROU 1978: 272–8.

¹⁴ Similar doubts and observations are in MARROU 1978: 282–3 and WITTS 1994: 112–3.

¹⁵ Especially Paus. 7.5.1–3; Amm. 14.11.25–6; Macr., *sat.* 1.18.17; Nonn., *dion.* 48.378–88.

¹⁶ See evidence and literature in SIMON 1962: 749–80; CORDOVANA 2007: 395–8.

¹⁷ MANGANARO 1960; DELPLACE 1980: 284–397; KARANASTASSI 1992: 733–62; RAUSA 1992: 762–70; LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1992: 770–3.

ethical problems and concerns related to their extinction, as well as the dangers of their over-exploitation. Cicero clearly complains about these matters:

But what pleasure can a cultivated man get out of seeing a weak human being torn to pieces by a powerful animal or a splendid animal transfixed by a hunting spear? (...) The last day was for the elephants. The groundlings showed much astonishment thereat, but no enjoyment. There was even an impulse of compassion, a feeling that the monsters (i.e. the elephants) had something human about them.¹⁸

Cassius Dio confirms such feelings among the common people in Pompey's time, and reports that some elephants,

contrary to Pompey's wish, were pitied by the people when, after being wounded and ceasing to fight, they walked about with their trunks raised toward heaven.¹⁹

Seneca even wonders about whether the value of a *communis ius animalium* may be admissible.²⁰ A clear concern for the extinction of some species is evident in Ammianus and Themistius, who complain of the diminishing number of hippopotami, lions, and elephants.²¹ In terms of a honourable fight, Herodian strongly criticized the unfair hunt of the 'gladiator' Commodus, when

At last the day of the show came and the amphitheatre was packed. A special raised enclosure was put up for Commodus' benefit so that he could spear the animals safely from above without endangering himself from close quarters, a demonstration of his skill but not of his courage.²²

Together with the dramatic numbers of animals killed by Commodus reported in the same chapter, Herodian underlines a basic principle of the Roman warrior culture in this episode: courage pertains to a fair fight between equal forces. These conditions of equanimity had to be respected. Nemesis' presence (also via her symbols, i.e. the griffin) had specific role and

¹⁸ Cic., *ad fam.* 7.1.3: *sed quae potest homini esse polito delectatio, cum aut homo imbecillus a valentissima bestia laniatur aut praeclara bestia venabulo transverberatur? (...) extremus elephantorū dies fuit. in quo admiratio magna vulgi atque turbae, delectatio nulla exstitit; quin etiam misericordia quaedam consecuta est atque opinio eius modi, esse quandam illi beluae cum genere humano societatem.* (Engl. transl. SHACKLETON BAILEY 2001).

¹⁹ Cass. Dio 39.38.2–3: ἠλειθήσαν γάρ τινες ὑπὸ τοῦ δήμου παρὰ τὴν τοῦ Πομπηίου γνώμην, ἐπειδὴ τραυματισθέντες τῆς μάχης ἐπάσαντο, καὶ περιόντες τὰς τε προβοσκίδας ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνέτεινον. (Engl. transl. CARY and FOSTER 1914). On the same episode also Plin., *nat. hist.* 8.20–1. In this volume NELIS-CLÉMENT offers an exhaustive collection of sources referring to animals' exploitation and trade for spectacles.

²⁰ Stoic ethics is familiar with these concepts: Sen., *de brev. vitae* 13.6–7; *nat. quaest.* 3.17–8. On the topic see NEWMYER 2006: 19–22; TUTRONE 2012; 2012–2013: 511–50.

²¹ Amm. 22.15.24; Them., *or.* 10.140.

²² Hdn. 1.15.2: ἐπεὶ δὲ κατέλαβον αἱ τῆς θεάς ἡμέραι, τὸ μὲν ἀμφιθέατρον πεπλήρωτο, τῷ δὲ Κομόδῳ περίδρομος κύκλῳ κατεσκεύαστο, ὡς μὴ συστάδην τοῖς θηρίοις μαχόμενος κινδυνεύοι, ἄνωθεν δὲ καὶ ἐξ ἀσφαλοῦς ἀκοντιζῶν εὐστοχίας μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνδρείας παρέχοιτο. (Engl. transl. WHITTAKER 1969).

function to this purpose and usually demanded the fulfilment of these conditions that she was supposed to supervise and correct.

In this general context therefore, we cannot exclude that the mosaic of the griffin at Piazza Armerina might represent a symbol of warranty for the equal development of the fight between man and wild beasts. Bearing in mind that since, even to ancient societies, prey and predator are not absolute concepts based upon natural order, and they might be subverted, environmental inferences cannot be totally excluded. Because of his own uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, man can become himself a victim. Undoubtedly the scene provides a clear example of the multilayered interpretations and even subliminal meanings that we can infer from ancient evidence. The exegesis of this composition is not simple at all, and in some way has represented a meaningful starting point for the questions developed in this volume.

In what sense and to which extent does the ancient evidence allow us to identify the roots of modern environmental sensitivity?

4. Pollution, environmental awareness, and the ancient evidence

In the ancient world, the nexus of man and environment appears problematic and quite ambiguous. In recent years several scholars have focused on this topic, which has become more and more challenging and contemporary. In the latest studies it is evident that understanding nature involved a twofold aspect in the ancient world. Both a religious and a rational-philosophic level coexisted in the approach of ancient societies toward nature, as well as in their descriptions of the intertwined dynamics between human beings and environment.²³ It is possible to distinguish, on the one hand, divine and supernatural powers that bounded and dominated nature. To humankind the only possibility for a partial control of those powers and deities consisted in specific systems of rituals and cults. On the other, especially during the classical age, the Greeks developed a rational approach, which, rooted in philosophy and physics, aimed to search for suitable answers to understand natural phenomena, as well as to bend nature herself and her resources to human needs by technological conquests. In his important work, LUKAS THOMMEN emphasized that ancient sources concerning environmental history are very limited and often return a unilateral perspective on the problem. Detailed environmental descriptions and environmental concerns did not exist. Rather, destruction of natural habitats, pollution and depletion of resources were noticed and criticized, but these observations did not receive any analysis of data.

As legitimate and true though THOMMEN's critique might be, it implies a certain value to quantitative data and statistics. Such an approach is more structured in the modern socio-economic culture than consistent with the habits of ancient societies, which were not used to statistics and to the management of quantified data. Nevertheless, from different sources, especially in epigraphy and in legal literature, it clearly emerges that both individuals and social groups were specifically responsible for certain specific measures of environmental protection. Detrimental behaviours against *publica salubritas* were subjected to

²³ This is especially evident in THOMMEN 2012.