

## Roma Cuniculosa? Rabbits and Hares in the Roman World

While scholarship on the relationships between humans and animals in antiquity has a long history, several recent publications suggest a growing interest in this subject. However, amidst this ‘animal turn’ in classical studies, only modest attention has been afforded to the rabbit and the closely related hare (e.g., Toynebee 1973; Campbell 2014; Fögen & Thomas 2017). This paper argues that such a dearth of interest is particularly unfortunate since rabbits quite likely began their domestication process during the Roman period. Furthermore, ancient Roman interactions with rabbits and hares implies an unusual diversity of relational positions with and attitudes towards these animals, something which is especially interesting given the continued complexity of human-rabbit relations today.

While the scientific community has long known that rabbits are one of the most recently domesticated animal species, until recently most scientific papers attributed the domestication of rabbits to early medieval Europe (Naff & Craig 2012), largely because of an often-misunderstood reference to the consumption of laurices by Gregory of Tours (*Historia Francorum*, 5.4). This medieval attribution of the beginnings of rabbit domestication may seem strange to classicists who recall Pliny’s discussion of the consumption of laurices (*Naturalis Historia*, 8.217) or Varro’s description of cuniculture (*De Re Rustica*, 3.12) as well as the attestation of other classical authors to the keeping of rabbits and hares. However, in the past two decades, this classical textual tradition has been somewhat buttressed by research in zooarchaeology and genetics (e.g., Callou 2003; MacKinnon 2004; Gardeisen & Valenzuela Lamas 2010; Irving-Pease et al. 2018) which has shown that the domestication of rabbits was (as it is for most domesticated species) a complicated and gradual process, albeit one which included

critical and initializing stages – namely the first verifiable keeping and breeding of rabbits in captivity – during the Roman period. Thus, among many other aspects of our contemporary society, one may arguably enumerate the domestic rabbit as an inheritance from classical civilization.

As the only currently domesticated species to have begun its domestication process in the Roman world, the rabbit offers a unique opportunity to consider the human-animal relations which accompanied that process. To that end, through a survey of classical texts, visual culture, and archaeological finds, this paper illustrates that human-rabbit/hare relations in antiquity were in fact characterized by great complexity and diversity. The inhabitants of the Roman world appear to have variably treated individual rabbits and hares (which to the Romans were generically the same) as companions, livestock, pests, prestigious game, or objects of fascination and reverence. Such a range of relational positions is, although not entirely unique, quite unusual for members of the same species. Fascinatingly, the breadth of these human-rabbit/hare relations in antiquity appears to closely mirror the set of seemingly conflicting relational positions with humans occupied by rabbits and hares in the modern world. For example, today, rabbits are often beloved companions (as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most common household pet in the United States), while also a source of meat and fur for millions (as the 10<sup>th</sup> most numerous livestock animal globally). Rabbits are considered pests by many while simultaneously attracting conservation efforts from others. Perhaps most remarkably, these multifarious treatments of real rabbits occur while fictional members of the species frequently occupy a prominent place as favorite characters in our mythologies and popular entertainments.

Ultimately, this paper contends that through a focused study of rabbits and hares in antiquity we may not only manage to appreciate more fully the complexity of human-animal

relationships in the Roman world generally, but also consider how specific ancient attitudes and practices may reflect, or even have influenced, our present, often puzzling, relationships with certain species.

### Bibliography

- Callou C. 2003. *De La Garenne Au Clavier: Étude Archéozoologique Du Lapin En Europe Occidentale*. Paris: Publications Scientifiques du Muséum.
- Campbell, G.L. (ed.) 2014. *The Oxford handbook of animals in classical thought and life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fögen, T. & Thomas, E. (eds.). 2017. *Interactions between animals and humans in Graeco-Roman antiquity*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Gardeisen, A. & Valenzuela Lamas, S. 2010. “Leporaria Urbanos: Problemática y Evidencias en el Registro Arqueológico de Lattara (Hérault, Francia).” *Pyrenae* 41, 119–40.
- Irving-Pease E.K., Frantz L.A.F., Sykes N., Callou C., & Larson, G. 2018. “Rabbits and the Specious Origins of Domestication” *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, Volume 33, Issue 3, Pages 149-152.
- MacKinnon, M. 2004. *Production and Consumption of Animals in Roman Italy: Integrating the Zooarchaeological and Textual Evidence*. Portsmouth, RI, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* 54.
- Naff, C.A. & Craig, S. 2012. “The Domestic Rabbit, *Oryctolagus Cuniculus*: Origins and History” in Suckow, M.A., Stevens, K A., & Wilson, R.P. (eds.) *The laboratory rabbit, guinea pig, hamster, and other rodents*. London: Elsevier.
- Toynbee, J.M.C. 1973. *Animals in Roman life and art*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.