

# ON THE OCCURRENCE OF LIONS IN THE GREEK AND ROMAN WORLD

by

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*Ein einziger Blick auf den Leib des Löwen, auf den Ausdruck seines Gesichts genügt, um der uralten Auffassung aller Völker, die das königliche Tier kennenlernten, vom Grunde des Herzens beizustimmen. Der Löwe ist der König der vierfüßigen Räuber, der Herrscher im Reiche der Säugetiere. Und wenn auch der ordnende Tierkundige diese königliche Würde nicht achtet und im Löwen nur eine besonders kräftig gebaute Katze erkennen muß; der Gesamteindruck des herrlichen Tieres zwingt auch den Forscher, ihm unter seinen Verwandten die erste Stelle einzuräumen.*

(Alfred BREHM, *Brehms Tierleben*. Bebilderte Volksausgabe in einem Band. Neu bearbeitet von Wilhelm BARDORFF, Berlin 1966, p. 90)

**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on descriptions of the geographical occurrence of lions in Greek and Latin literature. Special attention is devoted to Homer, Herodotus, Xenophon, Aristotle, Pausanias, Pliny the Elder, Aelian, Livy, Martial and Statius. Through close reading, this contribution examines in what contexts lions are portrayed and for what purpose. Aspects of literary genre and readership are also taken into account. Apart from the cultural and symbolic value of lions for the Greek and Roman world, information is extrapolated on the different types of interactions between lions and humans, on the keeping of lions, and on zoogeographical aspects. The use of these animals in the circus and for games is also investigated briefly.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the animal world, the lion (*Panthera leo*) has enjoyed a special role for humans since antiquity. It has often been associated with powerful figures and rulers. Given the animal's strength, ferocity and potential savagery, it represents power and danger, and evokes both fear and fascination. The zoologist Charles A.W. GUGGISBERG writes (1975: 138):

Of the lion it can be safely said that it has made a deeper and more lasting impact on human imagination than any other animal. At an early time in history it attained a prominent place in myth, fable, and folklore. It was made a symbol