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## Animal History: A Brief Introduction to Its Past and Future

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### WHY ANIMAL HISTORY?

The first issue of a new scholarly journal is an important moment to mark out the state of the field, its past, and possible future goals. *Animal History* is dedicated to cultivating and featuring rigorous and innovative research on the histories of human-animal relationships and nonhuman pasts, acting as a “home base,” so to speak, for the field. It seeks to serve historians certainly, but also humanities, social science, and science researchers looking for empirical studies and animal-centered methodologies, as well as reviews of new publications in the field and allied disciplines.

As a field of research, animal history very generally consists of two main, intertwined branches. First there is “animal lens” history that employs animals and their representations as a vehicle for understanding sometimes overlooked realms of human activity, human-animal relationships and co-evolutionary processes, and/or people’s ideas about and uses of animals in a given context.<sup>1</sup> Second, supported by that work, there is research documenting historical animals’ lives themselves, often employing environmental or animal science literature to interpret historical sources.

We recognize that historians working in the field bring with them a diverse range of personal ethics and politics. One may proceed from a desire to integrate ethical perspectives and philosophical questions about animals into one’s research, for instance, believing animals to be intrinsically valuable such that their history is too. Still others understand that historical animals matter to us because they mattered to historical people. In that vein, animal history offers an opportunity to produce accounts of the past that are more comprehensive, accurate, and ethical.

What follows is some context—a brief history of animal history, some thoughts on the unique interdisciplinarity of the field, and some words on the potential futures for historical animal studies.

### THE HISTORY OF ANIMAL HISTORY

“Some parts of animals are simple, and these can be divided into like parts.”<sup>2</sup> Thus begins the first systematic Western attempt at what was nominally called an animal history.

1. Joshua Specht, “Animal History after Its Triumph: Unexpected Animals, Evolutionary Approaches, and the Animal Lens,” *History Compass* 14, no. 7 (2016): 326.

2. Aristotle, *Aristotle’s History of Animals in Ten Books*, trans. Richard Creswell (London: George Bell and Sons, 1897), 1.

Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, however, laid the groundwork for what today we would call zoology, not "history." Championing observation, he classified animals into different groups, described their physiognomy and physiology, and documented their habits and habitats. He analyzed various modes of reproduction, migration, and food acquisition. And he attempted to gauge the intelligence and sociability of different animals, using, of course, a decidedly human measuring stick. The vast differences between Aristotle's "history" of animals and contemporary histories of animals are partly due to the disaggregating of academic disciplines—especially the so-called Sciences and Humanities—across the early modern centuries. But the divide between different definitions of "history" was surely detectable well before the common era. For example, less than a century prior to *Historia Animalium*, Thucydides published *History of the Peloponnesian War*.<sup>3</sup> In no part of that narrative did the Athenian historian break down the "simple parts" of human soldiers. There are salacious passages, but never does the text engage in a comparative analysis of the modes of reproduction between its true subjects, the Spartans and the Athenians. Instead, Thucydides provided details about the conflicts between two city-states and contextualized them as an outgrowth of estranged political and social dynamics. These works of Aristotle and Thucydides were called histories, but they were doing two decidedly different things because they centered two decidedly different beings, humans and animals.

Aristotle's classificatory system, based on a hierarchical Great Chain of Being that stretched from the "lowest" forms to the "highest" humans, remained the standard for well over a millennium, even despite cosmetic revisions after the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> In this Aristotelian typology, humans possessed a "rational soul," while all nonhumans remained tethered to their specific animal beings. When Carl Linnaeus created a "new" method of ordering in the eighteenth century, he systematized Aristotle's animal "kingdom," replacing a "chain" with a static hierarchy composed of taxonomic units that increased in size from species and genera to classes and phyla, all of which were gazed upon by humans and ultimately governed by God. The assumption that animal "histories" (pasts predetermined by form, instinct, and Nature) were something fundamentally different from capital-h (Human) History (pasts *created* by agential, thinking subjects with dynamic cultures) remained entrenched throughout the Western tradition because of these implicit assumptions of human supremacy. Yet anthropocentrism always preserves a blind spot and an immense erasure, often hidden in plain sight. For example, every kernel of Aristotle's zoology was dependent upon literal human intervention and then given meaning through human epistemologies. And surely there was never a single moment in the *actual* Peloponnesian War in which nonhuman animals weren't central players who shaped the vicissitudes of the conflict. Without animals, in fact, Spartans and Athenians would simply have had to content themselves with hurling insults at each other across the Myrtoan Sea. Both types of "history," despite their differences, always

3. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1861).

4. Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 72–74.

functioned as Trojan horses, of sorts, that hid the real significances of animals, either behind ideas about animals (as they are constructed in science) or behind humans themselves (who were always foregrounded, and thus embellished, in historical narrative).

Eventually, as well rehearsed in classic historiography and Western metanarratives, Greece gave way to Rome, which in turn gave way to Christianity, and though all carried different cosmologies, the distinct separation between human and animal remained sacrosanct. Augustine of Hippo argued that Reason gave humans pride of place in God's divine hierarchy, a theology elaborated by Aquinas and others.<sup>5</sup> When Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers secularized rationality, animals were relegated even further from human concern. René Descartes famously tagged human thought as the fundamental essence of human *being*, indeed defining the soul as merely the presence of "thought" and "language" and asserting (proving, in his mind) that animals were soulless automata without sentience, meaning, will, or any type of interiority.<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant extended this disavowal into historical theory, which emphasized that the enterprise of history was nothing more than an examination of human will.<sup>7</sup> Of course, as the social and cultural turn pointed out decades ago, "human" was always implicitly qualified to mean specific groups of entitled and advantaged humans— male, European, white, educated, upper class. By the early twentieth century, historians professionalized an academic discipline around an assumed truism: animals were simple, but (certain) humans were complex. The latter *made* history. The former were merely "natural" substrates and "natural" backdrops. *Historia Animalium* fell under the purview of detached scientific study. *Historia Humanum* became fit for contextual analysis, referencing the social and political meanings of the sentient lives of the self-constructed privileged.

In the late twentieth century, historians began to remove bricks from the edifice built out of Aristotle's best intentions. Animals slowly came into view. In 1975, Richard Bulliet published *The Camel and the Wheel*.<sup>8</sup> In 1983, Keith Thomas published *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800*, and four years later, Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*.<sup>9</sup> The following decade saw the publication of Aubrey Manning and James Serpell's collection *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*.<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Kete's *The Beast in the*

5. Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds & Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 195–207; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1922).

6. A. Boyce Gibson, *The Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Methuen & Co., 1932); Norman Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Macmillan, 1963); Matthew Senior, "The Souls of Men and Beasts, 1630–1734," in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Age of Enlightenment*, vol. 4., ed. Matthew Senior (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 23–45.

7. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose (1784)," in *Immanuel Kant Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–53.

8. Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

9. Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983); Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

10. Aubrey Manning and James Serpell, eds., *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

*Boudoir* made class a priority in her study of French petkeeping in the nineteenth century, and Karl Jacoby helped begin the process of including racial concerns in animal history with his “Slaves by Nature? Domestic Animals and Human Slaves.”<sup>11</sup>

The assault on Aristotelian foundations continued into the twenty-first century. Works like Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s *Creatures of Empire* explored animal domestication in early American history; Erica Fudge’s *Perceiving Animals* made an early posthumanist exploration of animals in the intellectual and social history of early modern England, and her *Brutal Reasoning* did the same for early modern Europe.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps most influentially for this journal, in this century’s first decade, animal history began to be institutionalized with collections like Berg’s six-volume *A Cultural History of Animals*, which carried a global focus and collected some of the first world histories of animals in English.<sup>13</sup> Single-volume collections like Dorothee Brantz’s *Beastly Natures*, Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici’s *Centering Animals in Latin American History*, and Susan Nance’s *The Historical Animal*, along with Hilda Kean and Philip Howell’s *Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* and Mieke Roscher, André Kriebler, and Brett Mizelle’s *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies*, continued to demonstrate the horizons available to animal historians.<sup>14</sup>

“History is not freely constructed by any species,” explains Erica Fudge in a rejection of traditional historiographical thought so rooted in Western biases, “it is made within the limitations of circumstances—economic, geographic, social, and so on. Animals are, in this, just like humans, who are also adapting to circumstances, some of which are the actions of other species.”<sup>15</sup> Animals, in other words, and against the influence of Aristotle, are not the sum of their simpler parts. Animals possess histories too, and their lives and behaviors matter to human histories. Perhaps even more important, human histories matter to the lives of animals and their dynamic cultures. The full panoply of species is in a state of perpetual entanglements, which the long legacy of historical theory has largely ignored.

## ANIMAL HISTORY, ANIMAL STUDIES, AND TRANSDISCIPLINARITY

As co-editors of *Animal History*, we agree that cutting-edge animal history should embrace an *ecological* vision toward methodology, theory, and approach. Though

11. Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Karl Jacoby, “Slaves by Nature? Domestic Animals and Human Slaves,” *Slavery and Abolition* 15 (April 1994): 89–99.

12. Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

13. Linda Kaloff and Brigitte Resl, eds., *A Cultural History of Animals*, vols. 1–6 (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

14. Dorothee Brantz, ed., *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Martha Few and Zeb Tortorici, *Centering Animals in Latin American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Susan Nance, ed., *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015); Hilda Kean and Philip Howell, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Animal-Human History* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Mieke Roscher, André Kriebler, and Brett Mizelle, eds., *Handbook of Historical Animal Studies* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021).

15. Erica Fudge, “What Was It Like to Be a Cow? History and Animal Studies,” in *Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kaloff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 266.

traditional academic disciplines may remain enclosed within insular departments, conferences, and publishing venues, animals themselves have always moved through, among, and beyond the very taxonomies employed by these fields to study animals and animal lives. The ancient South Asian parable of the blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time might be illustrative. One day while traveling together, these men stumble upon an elephant, yet they are unable to “see” the totality of this strange creature. Instead, hands outstretched, the men each feel different parts of the elephant’s body—flapping ears, wrinkled skin, smooth tusk, prehensile trunk, wide and taut stomach, thick and hairy tail, and sturdy leg. After different tactile experiences, they describe “the elephant” in incommensurable ways, but they each claim absolute knowledge and dispute the others’ accounts. Each man insists that they know “the elephant,” citing their individual perspectives as evidence. For example, one man posited that the elephant was like “a long, thin rope.” Another stated that the elephant was like “a stubby, thick pillar.” A third disagreed, insisting that the elephant was like “an immense sack.”<sup>16</sup> This is the situation of academic studies of animals if left to their own devices. Each knowledge system (zoology, biology, environmental history, activism, ecology, anthrozoology, critical animal studies, ethology, posthumanism, ecocriticism, veterinary science, animal geography, multispecies ethnography, and so on) is always limited, situated within its own context and perspective, rarely taking note of the other systems differently situated.<sup>17</sup> And, certainly, so many disciplines—like the parable—have historically prioritized male perspectives, functioned as if an “ideal form” (a “true” elephant) exists, and wrongly fetishized “sight” (“observation”) as the purest sense (hence, the parable’s exploitation of disabled men).

Approaching animals, and knowledges about them, *ecologically* can remedy this situation. To fully appreciate animals and their histories, knowledges must always be calibrated with others, must never make a priori assumptions about universal truths, and—most important—must always leave space for the individual animals themselves—their voices, actions, choices, resiliencies, and even silences. Knowledges should not serve as enclosures, but rather as open landscapes of inter- and intra-actions.<sup>18</sup> In animal history, no one—human or nonhuman—remains fixed. Everyone moves constantly, making decisions of their own, pushing against constraining boundaries, utilizing varying degrees of power and advantage, and producing lively worlds that overlap, at times, and exist apart, at others.

Indeed, historians are perfectly situated to find evidence of animals across prior decades, centuries, and millennia. They are well equipped to contextualize these historical animals (especially their interactions with human cultures) within a specific time and place, capturing the vivid textures that make those animals, humans, and their relations unique and important to historical narratives on all topics and scales. Within these

16. Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 22.

17. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599.

18. Karen Barad, *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

narratives, historians are particularly well positioned to untangle skeins of causation, showing how humans and animals impact each other both *within* a single historical time and place and *across* times and places. The tensions between change and continuity are indeed at the heart of the historical profession. Despite these strengths, academic historiography still developed, in its own history, to analyze change and continuity within *human* societies and cultures, as if they existed in isolation, in a vacuum of human exceptionalism.

Thus, we invite historians to break down deeply ingrained anthropocentric assumptions by employing some degree of “radical interdisciplinarity,” a “willingness to draw (potentially) from fields ranging from philosophy to veterinary medicine.”<sup>19</sup> In order to truly appreciate animals, human-animal relationships, and their impacts on global histories, cultures, languages, technologies, and environments, historical methodologies can be triangulated with the toolkits, approaches, and perspectives of other fields and knowledges that “see” animals differently. Historians of animals may turn to the sciences to better understand the bodies, behaviors, and environments of nonhuman beings, in all their immense complexity. They may also turn to the transdisciplinary fields of (critical) animal studies, which have emerged across the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s, to better understand how humans transform animals into symbols, how these metonymic artifacts take their own “lives” within cultural media, and—most important—how these representations always impact living, breathing animals, humans, and their relationships. Within any historical moment, the “real” and “symbolic” are always mutually constitutive. Since humans, animals, and human-animal relationships are always shaped by a “perpetually changing set of social, symbolic, ontological, and material relations,” we should feel free to dispense with the outmoded binaries (Nature-Culture, Body-Soul, Instinct-Reason, Material-Idea, etc.) that not only have partitioned previous generations of scholars but also have literally enclosed both humans and animals.<sup>20</sup>

Animals are transgressive, and animal history must be too. *Animal History* calls on scholars studying animals in past times, from the late Paleolithic to the twenty-first century, to employ the strengths of their specific training to reconstruct animals and their lives, relations, environments, and historical contexts. Yet this journal also insists that scholars humbly leave spaces open in their work for other ways of seeing and knowing. If, as biologists, philosophers, and cognitive theorists say, so many lives (from dolphins to humans to fungi) possess “distributed cognition”<sup>21</sup> and “extended minds,”<sup>22</sup> then it is certainly a best practice for animal history to reach outwardly, in all directions,

19. Susan Nance, “Animal History: The Final Frontier?,” *The American Historian* 6 (November 2015): 28–32.

20. Emily O’Gorman and Andrea Gaynor, “More-Than-Human Histories,” *Environmental History* 25, no. 4 (October 2020): 717.

21. John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 76. See, for example, Denise L. Herzog, “SETI Meets a Social Intelligence: Dolphins as a Model for Real-Time Interaction and Communication with a Sentient Species,” *Acta Astronautica* 67 (2010): 1451–54.

22. For a first iteration of extended mind theory, see Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *Analysis* 58 (1998): 10–23. See, for example, Karen Raber, *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 13–18.

with empathy, humility, curiosity, and a desire to have a more connected and fuller, yet never “complete,” knowledge about the past, present, and future. Conventional archives can answer many questions about animals in past centuries and millennia, yet as African historian Sandra Swart recently contends, few animal historians “have ‘left the shore’ and engaged with any new methods in reaching” animals. It is high time for animal history to “head for uncharted water” and finally bring animals to the center of cutting-edge historical writing and thinking always in conversation with the vast terrain of animal studies, broadly defined.<sup>23</sup>

## ANIMAL HISTORY'S FUTURES

The editors of *Animal History* certainly have a wish list of topics and approaches they would like to see in the journal. Adding them all up in a single word, we seek diversity. Although there is plenty of research still to be done on regions, social groups, and species long familiar to the field, we have far more work to do in documenting all geographic regions; peoples of color, indigenous people, rural and working-class populations; and less-studied species. Other methodological, authorial, and literary opportunities abound, and *Animal History* will feature scholarly work that seeks to

- Update historical fields and subfields that have traditionally ignored animals altogether.
- Find new sources and discover new ways to read traditional sources to shed light on the nonhuman.
- Supply examples of best practices in historicizing animals, whether as individuals, families, populations, species, or some other imagined grouping, and in writing with specificity about the diversity and complexity of interspecific pasts.
- Map out new global and temporally nuanced portraits of particular kinds of animals that help historians theorize scale in new and innovative ways, perhaps revising or reworking constructs like “modern,” “medieval,” “ancient,” and so forth that have so shaped historical periodization.
- Write with care and specificity about the people who shaped animal lives without falling into tropes of the essentialized “human,” which all too often reinscribes white, European, or classed assumptions.
- Employ research from environmental and animal sciences to describe animal behaviors, cultures, and health in the past, paying particular attention to both change and continuity across time.
- Utilize scholarship from critical animal studies, human-animal studies, multi-species studies, historical animal geography, anthrozoology, and related fields to “thickly” describe and document the texture of human-animal relationships in different times and places.

23. Sandra Swart, “Kicking over the Traces?: Freeing the Animal from the Archive,” in *Traces of the Animal Past: Methodological Challenges in Animal History*, ed. Jennifer Bonnell and Sean Kheraj (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2022), 23.

- Draw from animal studies, broadly defined, and posthumanism to rework/ rethink standard historical concepts (agency, subjectivity, time, causality, resistance, power, language, action, individuality, etc.), which often create narratives and approaches that erase both human and nonhuman experiences.
- Challenge the grounding of studies in single species, breeds, or “types” of animals, a practice that perpetuates an unspoken acceptance of a normative anthropocentric “center” in historical settings, by instead designing studies that document networks or webs of interactions or relations within communities and ecosystems.
- Continue to fill out the historical record with studies in already-robust animal history subfields concerning topics like agriculture and domestication, petkeeping, breeding, wildlife trades, zoos and aquariums, hunting cultures, laboratory animals, animal celebrity, biological imperialism, veterinary science and medicine, and zoonotic diseases, to name a few.
- Create entirely new fields and subfields focused on historical nonhuman lives, cultures, and experiences and their overlaps with human lives, cultures, and experiences.

There are many rivers to cross. Let’s look to others to find our ways over.

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THOMAS AIELLO is professor of History and Africana Studies at Valdosta State University. The author of more than twenty books, he holds PhDs in History and Anthrozoology and serves on the board of the Animals and Society Institute.

SUSAN NANCE is Professor of History and affiliated faculty with the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare at the University of Guelph. She is the author of various books and articles documenting the animal past.

DAN VANDERSOMMERS is assistant professor of environmental history at the University of Dayton and author of *Entangled Encounters at the National Zoo: Stories from the Animal Archive*.