

**A Note on the Lion in Antiquity** **by R.L. Porter**

I suppose I shall begin by pointing out that, as with many other aspects of the natural world, the ancients were more interested in mythical truth than scientific. Consequently the astonishing realities of lion life which we see displayed in National Geographic specials and the like would have completely eluded them. Lions live in prides of between 6-30 animals, mostly comprising the hard-working lionesses who do all the work of hunting and cub raising. A senior male, often assisted by a junior partner, has breeding the females and scrapping with strange males as his main functions. When not so occupied this noble male sponge, who does hardly any hunting himself, will sleep - 20 hours out of 24 sometimes. If lucky, he eats one day in three. However, an adult male lion can weigh up to 190 kg, live 25 years, and roar so loudly that he can be heard 5 miles away. He can also run at 65 km/h and gorge up to 40 kg of meat at one meal! This was certainly one of the most impressive carnivores of antiquity, taking precedence over wild bulls, large snakes, bears and boars in the ancient list of terrors.

In Bronze Age Greece, Asia Minor and the Levant lived a subspecies of lion, the Asiatic lion, which is somewhat smaller than his better known African counterpart. This lion probably was dying out by the fourth century B.C. in these areas, but we still have lion hunts portrayed on Macedonian mosaics of the Alexander period. Today only a few hundred of these animals still live in a park in northern India.

In ancient Egypt and Assyria (northern Iraq) lion hunting was a royal sport from earliest times. It was best done from a chariot using bow and spear,

making for an exciting leisure activity when nothing more promising was taking place, such as a nice little war. Since lions normally do not attack humans and since the king had helpers in reserve the odds were, as usual, with the human hunter. Glory and a display of regal prowess were the goals of these exercises since, as you might guess, lions make for poor eating. An Assyrian king, perhaps a remote ancestor of Saddam Hussein, once boasted c. 650 B.C. "I Ashurbanipal, King of Hosts, in my abounding strength seized a lion by the tail and smashed his skull with my axe". Assyrian artists took a ghoulish delight in depicting wounded and dying lions with graphic clarity. In Egypt the goddess Sekhmet was portrayed as a lion.

In the Greek world the lion figures prominently in the labours of Heracles, the story of lion slaying occurring twice in his saga. Heracles as a young man kills a nameless lion with a club, later his trademark, and then goes after the famous Nemean Lion whose hide was impenetrable. Heracles smashed it to death with his famous bludgeon and skinned it with its own claw, donning the skin as a trophy of valour. Heracles makes one think of the story of Samson and his bare-fisted encounter with a lion of Judah. This use of the lion to represent power goes much further when, at some time during the Bronze Age, it was adopted as a heraldic symbol for the palace at Mycenae in the Argolid, where according to legend the high king Agamemnon ruled. Over the lintel stone atop the main gate twin lions lean against a pillar, still there (minus their heads) after 3,000 years. The lions clearly symbolized the strength of the king and were magical guardians of his gates. Too bad the ancients did not realize that these misunderstood pussy cats liked to sleep 20 hours a day and would be rather inappropriate symbols of vigilance.

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