ANIMALS IN ROME I: Household Pets by: S.B.P. Haag

References to animals are, as we might expect, very common in Roman literature, and hardly less common are their likenesses in stone, paint or mosaic tesserae. Most are convincingly and realistically portrayed, from the lapdog to the tiger, the squid to the partridge, the rabbit to the mule. Only when it comes to such exotics as crocodiles or hippopotami do we find an air of unreality about them. The Romans' lives were even more involved with their animals than ours tend to be. Like us, they kept animals as pets, or as domestic and farm animals, but unlike us, they also used them in religious ceremonies as sacrificial animals, and in their famous circuses to provide bloody entertainment for the enthusiastic populace. We too breed racehorses, but (in Canada at least) we seldom raise fish except for amusement. We no longer eat songbirds and mice, or use donkey-power to grind our grain, though many of us still enjoy hunting, a pastime which the emperor Hadrian was expert at, even naming a newly founded city "Hadrian's Hunt" (Hadrianotherae) in honour of one of his most enjoyable bear hunts.

Let's look at some Roman pets. Catullus' girl-friend's sparrow (passer) is very well known, but Martial writes a poem about Issa who is "naughtier than Catullus' sparrow": Issa is a little dog (catella) who sleeps on her master Publius' lap so quietly that her breathing can't be heard. When she needs 'out', there's never an accident indoors, but with a paw she reminds her master to take her down off the couch and let her out. So chaste and modest is she, says Martial, that "she knows nothing of Venus; we haven't yet found a husband fit for such a dainty little maiden." Publius has a picture of her so true to life that it might be Issa herself, to remember her by! (Martial I. 109) What a contrast with the snarling watchdog (canis catenarius) on its chain warning the unwary visitor in Trimalchio's house, even though it's only painted:

> ad sinistram enim intrantibus
> non longe ab ostiarii (the
> doorkeeper's) cellā canis ingens,
> catenā vinctus, in pariete (on
> the wall) erat pictus superque
> quadratā (capital) litterā scriptum
> 'cave canem'.

Trimalchio has a real watchdog too, for it barks and growls, frightening one of the diners so much that he tumbles over backwards into the fishpond. Another household

pet is the magpie (pica varia) in its golden cage, greeting everyone in the front hall. (Petronius 29.1, 72.7, 28.9)

Hardly pets, but domestic animals of a sort, I suppose, are the mice in Horace's Satires II.6. (Many of us met them when we were small, as Beatrix Potter's Timmy Willy and Johnny Townmouse.) The city mouse visiting his country friend is treated to the very best oats and peas, made festive with a raisin or two and some bacon-rind, but his tastes are too refined and life in the country seems too rugged, so off they troop to town. There the surroundings are grand: scarlet rugs, ivory couches, purple draperies, and the remains of a fashionable dinner. But as the country mouse is reclining and dining at his ease, all of a sudden the doors burst open, in rush the hounds barking, and away scamper the mice in terror for their lives. "I don't need this sort of life", says country mouse "Bye bye -- it's back to the bush and the beans for me!" (Horace Sat. II. 6. 79-117)

Horace no doubt unwillingly supported plenty of mice around his farmhouse (the Romans don't seem to have cared much for cats, and didn't keep several around the barns to catch rats and mice as we do); he certainly chose to keep an old reliable horse for riding, if we believe his comments in Epistle 1.15. One year his doctor sends him to a country spa instead of on the road to Baiae or Cumae as usual:

> mutandus locus est et deversoria (lodgings) nota/Praetergendus equus. "quo tendis? non mihi Cumas/Est iter aut Baias", laevā stomachosus (angry) habenā (rein) dicet eques. (Horace Ep. I. 15. 10-13)

The horse tugs at the bit, despite the rider's words and his pulling on the rein, for it wants to take the familiar route to the seaside. If this particular horse is merely poetic licence, Hadrian the hunting emperor provides us with an epitaph on his - presumably real - horse, Borysthenes. Hadrian's poetry is perhaps not up to Horace's standards, but it reveals an unexpected glimpse of a powerful public figure's affection for a pet animal (Borysthenes was buried in the south of France at Apt, near Nîmes). Here is Stewart Perowne's translation:

Borysthenes the Alan
Caesar's hunter
Over plain and marsh
And the mounds of Tuscany
Went like the wind
After the boars of Hungary
He chased, and no boar
Dared wound him with its
glistening tusks,
Nor did any saliva
Ever touch his tail's tip
As generally happens;
But in the flower of his youth
Sound in wind and limb,
He lived out his day
And now he lies here

(S. Perowne, Hadrian, London 1960, p. 92)