Guest blog post: Animals of Rome

Thursday, August 1, 2024 by Anthony Gallipoli

Since 2022, undergraduate and graduate students studying Classics have been working with the Edgar William Pyke coin collection. Students have used the collection to inform their papers, to help Special Collections & Archives create more robust descriptions, and as research sources for their graduate work. Anthony Gallipoli (MA '24) recently competed his MA in Classics with an examination of the symbolism of the five animals depicted on the Roman Republican legionary standards. Below he gives insight into some of those animals that appear on coins in the collection. Thank you to Anthony for sharing this with us!

Horse

The horse (equus) was an important animal in the Roman Republic. It functioned as both a status symbol for the elite and a war animal for the Roman military. The horse was also one of the five animals depicted on the Roman Republican legionary standards. As such, the Romans viewed the horse as the physical manifestation of the strength, bravery, discipline, and fecundity necessary to achieve victory and sustain Roman civilization.

The early traditions of the horse in Italy were formed by the Etruscans, who merged the traditions of Near Eastern and Greek civilizations. Through Etruscan efforts, horses were widely found in Italy and held in great esteem, as they were considered to be a status symbol for the elite. Etruscan culture led to the introduction of the war chariot, sporting races, and horses of noble breeds into Central Italy. Ultimately, the horse was viewed as a marker of aristocratic status and lifestyle in Etruria.

The Romans also viewed the horse as a status symbol of the elite, however, the animal became intrinsically connected to the survival of the republic itself through the Dioscuri and Mars. In the beginning of the 5th century BCE, at the Battle of Lake Regillus (499 or 496 BCE), the Romans fought against Tarquinius Superbus, who sought to reinstall himself as king of Rome. The Romans were able to defeat the former king as they were guided by two young men, Castor and Pollux, on horseback, fighting alongside them. The Dioscuri also appeared in 168 BCE to inform Publius Vatinius that

the Romans had defeated King Perseus of Macedon. Thus, a clear association between the twins, their horses, and military victory emerged.

As a result of their actions at the Battle of Lake Regillus, a temple was dedicated to Castor and Pollux in 484 BCE, while a religious parade known as the review of the cavalry (transvectio equitum) was conducted in honour of the aid given by the Dioscuri in battle, specifically their appearance at Lake Regillus. Moreover, the announcement of military successes was made at the Temple of the Dioscuri. It becomes evident that horses were intimately connected with the Dioscuri and thus closely connected with the defence of Rome.

Meanwhile, the connection between the horses and the Dioscuri bestowed additional dignity on the Roman horsemen, as the Dioscuri were the representatives of the leading social classes. Furthermore, the cult of the Dioscuri penetrated the formal religious boundary of the city and was closer to the Temple of Vesta than any other national god, signalling the importance of the Dioscuri and their horses to the defence and prosperity of Rome.

While the horse was primarily connected with the Dioscuri and the defence of Rome, there is evidence that explicitly connects the horse to Mars and depicts the animal as a physical representation of the fecundity necessary for the continuation of the Roman state. First, the earliest Roman silver coin (didrachm), dated to 310-300 BCE, bears the helmeted head of Mars on the obverse and a horse’s head above the exergue “for the Roman” (Romano) on the reverse. On October 15th, the Romans celebrated a religious festival known as the October Horse. The day began with two-horse chariot races held on the Field of Mars, with the right-hand horse on the victorious team being sacrificed to Mars shortly thereafter. Subsequently, the horse’s head and tail were cut off, and a fight between the residents of the Sacred Way (Via Sacra) and a quarter in Rome between Esquiline, Viminal, and Quirinal hills known as Subura began. The victorious neighbourhood was allowed to affix the head to a wall in its own quarter, while the bleeding tail was swiftly taken to the royal palace (Regia) in order to drip the still warm blood on the sacred hearth of the state, perhaps as either gratitude for the completed harvest or in supplication for another successful harvest. The festival is the only known instance of the Romans sacrificing a horse. The October Horse festival may be best described as an attempt at fertility magic for the following year’s crops as well as the annual conclusion of the military and

agricultural seasons, Mars' primary capacities. What should be gleaned from this ceremony is that the horse was not only connected with military capacities but also agricultural rites, despite horses not typically being used in agricultural labour. This festival illustrates the importance of the horse's fertility to the continuance of the state in agricultural and religious terms.

As previously mentioned, the horse served as a status symbol for the elite. By the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, a transformation of a mounted elite serving a king changed into an aristocracy competing with each other for political office. In the newly established republic, the citizen body served as its infantry, while the wealthiest citizens fought on horseback. Originally, there were only 1,800 cavalry units, with the horses being provided at the state's expense, known as the public horse (equus publicus). By the end of the 5th century BCE, any male citizen who met the highest census requirements could serve as a horseman, so long as he provided his own horse, and were described as equestrians serving on their own horses (equites equo suo). Throughout the Republican period, the number of public horses remained at 1,800 units, while each holder of the public horse participated in the annual review of the cavalry parade on July 15th. These events illustrate both the prestige of the position and the horse itself.

The horsemen gradually transformed from a warrior aristocracy into a group of wealthy elites, resulting in the cavalry becoming a mark of distinction instead of an occupational status. The purpose of this group beyond service to the state was its intimate connection in displaying their own manly excellence (virtus) while defending Rome and her interests abroad. By the Late Republic, it is clear that the ability to sally forth on a horse into battle was an immense status symbol of power, respect, and wealth.

Horses, according to multiple ancient authors, are docile, intelligent, and loyal animals that demonstrate a propensity to be violent, courageous, and stubborn. Thus, the horse was an appropriate choice to serve as a totemic representation of the army's discipline and strength. First, horses are acutely attuned to their rider's emotions, especially feelings of fear. Since horses are herd animals, the fear of one horse can have a domino effect on the rest of the herd. Despite this, horses were trained to defuse fear and build courage through training, much like humans. Through their training, war horses were able to overcome their fear of physical confrontation, supplanting it with excitement and aggression. War horses, like soldiers, are drilled to be obedient, brave, and tenacious, which could only be found through patience

and instruction. An individual horse's relationship to their herd was similar to the individual relationship a soldier would have with his unit and the army.

It is clear then that the horse was not only considered a status symbol of the elite during the Roman Republic but also a totemic representation of the strength and discipline needed by the army to achieve victory. Furthermore, the horse was also partially responsible for the continued existence of the state through religious ceremonies. As the primary animal of the Dioscuri, along with its agricultural ties to Mars, the horse served as a physical manifestation of strength, bravery, and discipline, all of which were necessary traits for the Roman army's success and for the continuance of Rome itself.

Figure 1 is a Roman silver coin (denarius) from 149 BCE depicting the helmeted head of the goddess Roma on the obverse, while the reverse shows the Dioscuri mounted on their horses and holding spears. This coin further illustrates the connection between horses, the Dioscuri, the defence of Rome, and military victory. Despite the cavalry being viewed as an auxiliary force within the Roman army, the horse was still hugely important and intimately connected to the Roman Republic, as exemplified by the depiction of the goddess Roma on the obverse, the personification of Rome itself, and the reverse legend that reads, "ROMA".



Figure 1: 211 BCE silver denarius of the goddess Roma on the obverse and the Dioscuri on the reverse.

Wolf

The wolf (lupus) was another significant animal in the Roman Republic that was also depicted on the Republican legionary standards. This animal helped signify what it meant to be Roman and why they viewed themselves as

unique. Indeed, the living memory and lore of the wolf served as a mnemonic symbol and a parable of their father and founder, thereby embodying the identity of the Romans

The reverence of the wolf in Rome was most commonly associated with the myth of the she-wolf. In this myth, the she-wolf (lupa) rescued Romulus and Remus along the banks of the Tiber River near a fig tree called the Ruminalis. Subsequently, the she-wolf fed the twins in a southwestern cave on the Palatine Hill called the Lupercal, a commonly depicted scene, as seen in figure 2. The efforts of the she-wolf marked a permanent connection between the wolf, Romulus, and his father, Mars.

The wolf is integrally connected to the foundation myth of Rome through its nourishing nature as well as its wild and persistent character. Thus, the wolf is a fitting symbol for the Roman standards, indicating a Roman identity that is connected to agriculture and the wild through their father and founder. Although the she-wolf fable is unique to the Romans, the significance of the wolf and the worship of Mars were not specific to the Romans alone, as common religion, culture, and values existed among the Romans and Italians. During times of severe distress, the Romans attempted to appease Mars by conducting a Sacred Spring (ver sacrum) ceremony. This ceremony vowed to Mars a whole yield of fruits and orchards from one spring crop, cattle, and new-born children to be cast out once they matured. Only one such historical example of the Sacred Spring ceremony occurring can be reliably dated to the 2nd Punic War (218-201 BCE), a time of unparalleled distress for the Romans due to Hannibal’s invasion of Italy. However, in legend, there is a famous instance of the ceremony. It was believed that on this occasion, Mars’ sacred animals led three separate tribes to a suitable location to settle. The woodpecker (picus) led the Picentes, the bull (bos) led the Samnites to Bovianum, and the wolf (hirpus, a Sabine word that means wolf) led the Hirpini. This example further affirms the connection between Mars and the wolf, while simultaneously suggesting that the wolf was accorded similar reverence by some Italian peoples.

In Aristotle’s History of Animals, wolves are invariably wild yet also brave and crafty. Aelian echoes similar thoughts about the wolf, writing that it is cunning, strategic, fierce, and hyper-aware of its limitations, such as a lack of strength. What is most important to consider from these physical and mental characteristics is that animals were believed to require no external encouragement to action, goodness, or courage. In the ancient world,

physiognomy presupposed parallels in the nature of both animals and humans alike. The natural inclination of the wolf to continuously hunt offers a fitting parallel with the Republican army, where the regularity of war conducted against others suggests a shared subconscious pathological predilection towards brutality. While the culture of perpetual warfare was not unique to the Romans in Italy, the regularity of obscene violence perpetuated by the Republican army points to a unique affinity between the wolf and the Romans. Evidence of this connection can be best illustrated by the typical practices of the Republican army. The Romans laid waste to captured cities, with indiscriminate killing, enslavement, and rape all found to be commonplace events. Cities that surrendered were not immune to these practices, while places that rebelled against Roman authority were violently suppressed. These practices are not completely dissimilar from the habits of wolves, given their violent nature, best exemplified by a wolf pack's game of killing one of their group members after a failed hunt. From a modern perspective, the brutality and violence of the Romans seem extreme. Even in antiquity, Hellenistic armies were fearful of the Roman army due to their practices. To a wolf or Roman, however, their violent habits were completely natural.

There must have been immense totemic power in the wolf standard, as it could be connected to both Romulus and Mars. Romulus was seen as the war-loving founder of the city (753-716 BCE), who, according to tradition, informed Proculus Julius that the will of Heaven stated that the Romans must cultivate their art of war in order to dominate the world, a mandate that was unassailable by human forces. Later Romans viewed Romulus as the author of secular law, and in a more general sense, they believed the progenitors of their state to be responsible for the creation of their moral principles. Thus, carrying a wolf standard served as a mnemonic representation of Romulus and the oath implicitly taken by all Roman soldiers to further assert the will of Heaven. Concurrent with this representation, is the wolf's symbolic connection to Mars.

Originally, the role of Mars was as ambiguous as it was multi-faceted. Mars may have initially existed as an Italic spirit of the forest before transitioning into a god of the fields, responsible for protecting farmland from disease, insects, along with animal and human predators. Mars was also known as a god of death and the underworld, acting as a daemon of fertility and destruction. The best Roman evidence of this may be the Lupercalia festival.

This event served as a purification ceremony as well as a fertility rite where the priests, known as the luperci would sacrifice two goats in the Lupercal, then race around the Palatine Hill while dressed as wolves, striking women with strips of flayed goat skin to promote their fertility. Clearly, Mars had power over both aspects of life and death, so in addition to martial aspects, he had underworld characteristics. Through these varied connections, the wolf gained a chthonic aspect to its character. During the Republican period, Mars became primarily identified by the soldiers as a god of war and a god of triumphant Roman armies.

For much of the Early Republic, the wolf was solely associated with Mars, as no definite link existed between the twins and the wolf until 296 BCE, when they were added to a wolf statue in the Lupercal. This suggests a possible evolution in the significance of the wolf. Republican coinage demonstrates that the relationship between the wolf and twins only solidified further in the 3rd century BCE, as depictions of the she-wolf show her head turned back towards the twins in a suckling position. The earliest known depiction of the she-wolf and the twins on coinage is a silver coin (didrachm) dated to 269 BCE. This, along with other material evidence that cannot be discussed at length here, suggests that the wolf was originally the animal of Mars during the Early Republic, and in the late 4th and early 3rd centuries BCE, the wolf gradually gained its connection to the twins. From the mid-3rd century BCE onward, the invariable representation of the animal as a she-wolf and her suckling twins also illustrates the solidification of their relationship henceforth.

Thus, the totemic value of the wolf through its connections to Mars is clear. With the father of their state and the god of war at their side, embodied by his sacred animal, Roman soldiers must have felt assured that victory through savage brutality was not only their identity but their birthright. Enemies within Italy certainly recognized this by the 5th century BCE, as Italian tribes likened the Romans to a pack of crazed wolves. Despite this, it is clear that the Romans seriously identified themselves with the wolf. Opposing states happily played upon the narrative by mocking the similarities between the two, as the children the she-wolf fed were murderers, while the first Romans were violent fugitives and rapists. Memory and experience played an active role in the self-perception of the Romans, as some academics argue. Amidst the centuries of competing experiences, evolving self-definitions, and group affiliations within the concept of Roman

identity, the wolf served as a constant and unique mnemonic symbol and parable of their father and founder, along with their birthright and destiny.

Figure 2 is a Roman silver coin (denarius) from 137 BCE depicting the helmeted head of Roma facing right with an x in the bottom right corner. On the reverse is the she-wolf, along with the suckling twins, Romulus and Remus. Behind them is the ficus Ruminalis, with one bird perching on the trunk and two birds sitting on the upper branches. The reverse legend reads "ROMA SEX POM". This coin further demonstrates the intrinsic connection between Rome, the wolf, Romulus, and Mars. Indeed, the wolf indicated to the Romans that they were the race of Mars, destined to rule the world.



Figure 2: 137 BCE silver denarius of the goddess Roma on the obverse and the she-wolf with suckling twins, Romulus and Remus. Behind them, is the fig tree known as the Ruminalis, with one bird perching on the trunk and two birds sitting on the upper branches.

Elephant

The elephant (elephas) is more commonly associated with other ancient civilizations than it is with Rome. During the Battle of Hydaspes (326 BCE) between Alexander the Great and an Indian king known as Porus, Alexander decisively defeated the Indian king and captured over 100 Indian war elephants. Later on, during the 2nd Punic War (218-201 BCE), Hannibal of Carthage impressively crossed the Alps with his army, which included North African war elephants. Hannibal's use of war elephants against the Romans was not the first recorded instance of these animals being employed against Rome, however. While the legacy of the elephant is more strongly associated

with other civilizations in the ancient world, the elephant still played an interesting role in many political-military events in ancient Rome.

The first recorded instance of the Romans having to fight war elephants comes from the Pyrrhic War (280-275 BCE). The Battle of Heraclea (280 BCE) was witness to the first engagement between a Macedonian phalanx and a Roman legion. Rome initially held the upper hand in the battle until King Pyrrhus of Epirus unleashed his war elephants from the reserve. The Roman cavalry, at the sight of these animals, fled. The legions were subsequently routed. Pyrrhus had won the battle, but at a great cost, which later became known as a "Pyrrhic victory." The Romans described these beasts as luca bos, or Lucanian ox, named as such because they saw the elephants in a southern Italian region called Lucania. The Romans learned quickly, however, and they were much more prepared for these beasts at the Battle of Asculum (279 BCE). During this battle, the Romans deployed wagons outfitted with tridents, spikes, and scythes. The Romans also used grapnels doused in pitch and lit ablaze against the war elephants. This battle again resulted in yet another "Pyrrhic victory" for the Epirote king.

After a victorious conclusion of the Pyrrhic War in 275 BCE, the Romans displayed the captured animals in a triumph, a ceremony that celebrated a military commander who won a victory over their enemies. Later on, during the First Punic War (264-241 BCE), Lucius Caecilius Metellus celebrated a triumph. At this triumph, he displayed 120 Carthaginian war elephants that he captured at the Battle of Panormus (250 BCE). Soon after, the elephant became the symbol of his gens, the Caecilii Metelli (an important point for later on). Afterwards, the elephants were paraded around the Circus Maximus, where they were harassed and eventually killed, as apparently the Romans did not know what to do with them. Maybe the Romans did not know what to do with these beasts, but it seems more likely that they slaughtered the elephants because they were representative of their enemies. This idea is corroborated by the story of Hannibal forcing a captive Roman soldier to fight an elephant for his freedom. Somehow, the soldier slayed the beast but was murdered in turn as "reports of this encounter would bring the animals into contempt." This suggests that the Carthaginians considered the elephant an important figure in their identity on some level. It is important to note that upon the Carthaginian expansion into Spain after the First Punic War under the Barcid family (Hamilcar Barca and Hannibal), they issued coins depicting elephants. This indicates a shared connection

between military power and victory with the Barcid family and Carthage. Finally, after successfully defeating Hannibal at the Battle of Zama (202 BCE), Scipio Africanus displayed many Carthaginian war elephants in his triumph, demonstrating that the elephant indeed symbolized their defeated enemy. The Romans killed elephants in the Circus Maximus because it signified their figurative treatment of the Carthaginians themselves.

Rome used war elephants during their wars with Macedonia and the Seleucids in the 3rd century BCE and the Celtiberian tribes in Spain in the 2nd century BCE. While celebrating his victory at the Battle of Pydna (168 BCE), Aemilius Paulus had army deserters trampled to death by elephants. After the Battle of Thapsus (46 BCE), the 5th legion in Julius Caesar's army adopted the elephant as their emblem, the only Caesarian legion that did not have the bull as its emblem. By the start of the 1st century BCE, the first elephant fight had occurred in the Circus Maximus. A couple decades later, an elephant fought bulls. Not only did Rome showcase its total control over nature in these events, but they also demonstrated how they had successfully subdued a representative of their defeated enemies.

During Pompey the Great's first triumph in 81 or 80 BCE, he elected to have his triumphal chariot pulled by four elephants instead of horses. The decision can be read as an attempt to emphasize his conquest of exotic African territory and to present himself in a divine light as well. In Graeco-Roman mythology, Dionysus—or his Latin counterpart, Liber— is said to have invented the triumph. After his military victories against the Indians, Dionysus (also known as Bacchus) made his triumphal procession back to Greece. Accompanying him, among a variety of individuals and animals, were elephants pulling the triumphal chariot. In more historical terms, Pompey may have been trying to emulate the posthumous depictions of Alexander the Great on Egyptian coinage. One coin in particular depicted Alexander driving a chariot pulled by four elephants in a mythical rendition of his triumphant return from India. Pompey's use of the elephants during his triumph did not go well, however, as the elephants could not fit through the triumphal gates, despite two separate attempts to proceed through. During Julius Caesar's quadruple triumph in 46 BCE, many elephants carried torches as they proceeded to Caesar's Great Forum and dedicated a temple to Venus Genetrix.

Despite how the elephant was used by the Roman army in the later stages of the Republic, the elephant never quite evolved beyond its original perception

as a foreign representative of a luxurious yet barbarous civilization. Indeed, the elephant was mostly viewed as the antithesis of Roman civilization. Due to its liminal status as a beast that lived in the human world, it still remained a mercurial animal from the natural world, as illustrated by the many instances in battle where elephants ran amok and killed friend and foe alike.

Since we have looked at the context and symbolism of the elephant in Republican history, we can now look at the meaning of the silver denarius featured in this post. In figure 3, we see the objects of the pontifex maximus office on the obverse. This position was that of the elected chief high priest of the College of Pontiffs. On the reverse, we see an elephant facing right, trampling a dragon or snake, with the legend "CAESAR" below. Of all the coins issued by Caesar, this is the only one that features an elephant and the only Republican coin that features an elephant with a uniquely rare obverse of pontifical emblems.

Some suggest that the elephant is representative of Caesar's victory over Ariovistus in 58 BCE. However, it is more likely that, given Caesar's precarious political position at the time (49 BCE), (he recently crossed the Rubicon River), he was engaging in a propaganda campaign against his enemies in order to sway the hearts and minds of his countrymen. First, it should be noted that this particular coin was minted approximately 22.5 million times. Such a number seems unlikely, however, Caesar owed at least eight legions payment, so the necessity to keep his legions loyal provided a strong motive to mint such a vast amount of silver bullion. Caesar immediately gained access to a large amount of silver and other metals from the aerarium sanctius in Rome during the first few months of 49 BCE. Some question the year that this coin was minted, however, this coin must have been minted early on in he war, as Caesar was pontifex maximus alone until 47 BCE, afterwards he became an augur as well. After he obtained that honour, later Caesarian coins had augural symbols depicted on them.

The use of the elephant in this coin may have been a reference to Caecilii Metelli. As previously mentioned, they used the elephant as the symbol of their gens to win favour with their fellow Romans through their impressive family history. In the Late Republic, the Metelli issued coins with an elephant at least 6 times. Clearly, this was done to remind the Romans of their family's exploits against the Carthaginians and their elephants, further legitimizing the idea that the elephant represented both Carthage and their

status as a defeated enemy. By the time of Caesar, there was an evident link between the Metelli and the elephant.

The Caecilii Metelli were closely entwined with Pompey the Great. Both Pompey and Metellus Pius raised private armies for Sulla in the 80s BCE, while two of Pompey's wives came from the Metelli clan. Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio Nasica was Pompey's father-in-law after 52 BCE. Thus, the representation of an elephant on this particular coin makes sense, as the elephant symbol belonged to a rival family and his main political opponent, which allowed Caesar to both emphasize his own power while mocking his enemies. First, Metelli elephants generally face left on their coinage, while Caesar's elephant faces right. Perhaps Caesar is indicating that the power and influence of the Metelli have now been subsumed by Caesar himself. By depicting an elephant, Caesar also attempts to remind his countrymen of Pompey's failed use of elephants during his first triumph while implying that Pompey himself had regal ambitions, as the elephant was commonly connected to Alexander the Great through previously mentioned Egyptian coinage and Alexander's victories over Porus' elephants. Lastly, Caesar also mocked Domitius Ahenobarbus through this particular coin. Domitius Ahenobarbus was a vigorous opponent who tried to relieve Caesar of his Gallic command. His grandfather, Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, apparently rode in a procession of elephants through Transalpine Gaul after he defeated the Allobroges in 121 BCE. Indeed, Caesar attempted to promote himself while subsuming the power and influence of his opponents by using their own symbols to mock their family histories and their respective attempts at grandeur.

The elephant, long seen as an agent of a foreign enemy that caused much havoc in Italy, was used to represent Caesar's enemies and their own personal or familial achievements in defeating foreign enemies. However, Caesar appropriated the symbol to emphasize his opponents failures, sway political opinion, and display his own political and military strength in his quest as pontifex maximus to bring about pax deorum to a struggling Republic.



Figure 3: What is most likely a 49-48 BCE silver denarius with the instruments of the pontifex maximus office on the obverse. On the reverse, is an elephant trampling what appears to be a dragon or serpent.