

ZEBRAS IN GREEK AND ROMAN ANTIQUITY*

by

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ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to present ancient testimonies concerning zebras. Discussing the body of surviving texts, one should take under consideration a striking fact that seemed to have escaped scholars' attention: namely, a presumptive association between the testimonies left by Cassius Dio and Oppian of Apamea.

As surviving testimonies concerning zebras indicate, ancient authors used numerous and various terms for these picturesque animals. Among them one can find: ὁ ἵππότηγρις¹ ('a horse-tiger', Cass. Dio LXXVII 6, 2; Tim. Gaz. X 1), ὁ ἵππος τιγροειδής² ('a tiger-like horse, tiger-striped', Dio Cass. LXXV 14, 3), ὁ ὄνος ἄγριος ('a wild ass', Philostorg. *Scr. Eccl.* III 2³), and ὁ ὠρυγξ⁴ (Opp. C. I 317; 320). However, one cannot exclude the possibility that a common and particular name for the zebra existed, but did not survive up to modern times. The variety of the terms cited suggests that zebras were not largely known in Greek and Roman antiquity and the identification of these animals aroused many

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¹ This term causes confusion among lexicographers: PAPE s.v.: "eine große Tigerart" (citing Cass. Dio LXXVII 6); LIDDELL, SCOTT s.v.: "a large kind of tiger"; CHANTRAINE s.v.: "variété de grand tigre, pour la valeur argumentative du premier terme cf. s.u. ἵππος, τιγροειδής «tigré» (D.C.)". This meaning has been revised in: LIDDELL, SCOTT Suppl. 1996, p. 159: "for a 'large kind of tiger' read zebra". Cf. MONTANARI s.v.: "zool. zebra".

² The fact that Cassius Dio used two different terms for the same animal species is intriguing. According to RICHTER 1978, the use of these terms undoubtedly points to zebras, since both of them contain the most characteristic feature of this animal, namely stripes resembling those of a tiger.

³ Also possibly in the *Cynegetica* by Oppian of Apamea.

⁴ PAPE s.v.: "eine Art scheckiger Pferde"; LIDDELL, SCOTT s.v.: "striped or piebald horses (including zebras)"; CHANTRAINE s.v.: "chevaux ou équidés en général à robe bigarrée ou rayures, comme les zèbres".