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NERO'S PET HIPPOPOTAMUS (SUET. *NERO* 37,2)

DAVID WOODS

Creditur etiam polyphago cuidam Aegypti generis crudam carnem et quidquid daretur mandere assueto, concupisse vivos homines laniandos absumendosque obicere. (Suet. *Nero* 37,2)¹

Various translators are all agreed in identifying the *polyphagus* as a human being. Aillaud translates as a "certain glouton, un Égyptien", Graves as "a certain Egyptian – a sort of ogre", Bird as "an Egyptian who was a great eater", and Edwards as "a fiend from Egypt".² More ambiguously, Rolfe refers to "a monster of Egyptian birth", but then refers to "him" rather than to "it". This suggests that he uses the term "monster" metaphorically, and that he also understands this *polyphagus* as a human being.³ Some early modern commentators compared this incident to the alleged delight displayed by the emperor Aurelian (270–75) at a glutton who consumed a whole wild boar, one hundred loaves of bread, a sheep, and a pig (*HA Aurel.* 50,4),⁴ but if the physical impossibility of this deed were not enough in itself to raise questions as to the historicity of this incident, we now know that, writing c.395, the sole author of the *Historia Augusta* simply invented much of his material. In this case, he was probably inspired by Suet. *Nero* 37 itself, or a derivative thereof.⁵ Certainly, by the time of the *Chronographer*

¹ Ed. M. Ihm, *C. Suetonius Tranquillus: Opera I*, Leipzig 1933, 247.

² H. Aillaud, *Suétone: Vies des Douze Césars II*, Paris 1931, 184; R. Graves, *Suetonius: The Twelve Caesars* (Penguin Classics), Harmondsworth 1957, 230; H. M. Bird, *Suetonius: Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (Wordsworth Classics), Ware 1997, 267; C. Edwards, *Suetonius: Lives of the Caesars* (Oxford World's Classics), Oxford 2000, 217.

³ J. C. Rolfe, *Suetonius II* (Loeb Classical Library 38), Cambridge MA 1914, 153.

⁴ See e.g. J. H. Freese (ed.), *Suetonius. History of Twelve Caesars Translated by Philemon Holland (Anno 1606)*, London 1930, Notes and Annotations, 87.

⁵ See F. Paschoud, *Histoire Auguste V.1: Vies d'Aurélien et de Tacite*, Paris 1996, 224.

of 354 at latest, a tradition had developed that the *polyphagus* described at Suet. *Nero* 37 had been human, but the reliability of such a tradition is questionable.⁶ It need not preserve genuine knowledge otherwise lost. Suetonius remains our earliest source in this matter, and probably best preserves the form and detail of the original tale. It is important to note, therefore, that his text remains ambiguous on this issue. Two factors seem to underlie the ready assumption that the *polyphagus* must have been human. First, this term was sometimes used of certain remote tribes. According to Strabo, the inhabitants of Ireland were πολυφάγοι as well as cannibals (*Geog.* 4,5,4), and he uses the same term to describe a tribe in the foothills of the Caucasus also (*Geog.* 11,5,7). Second, the fact that Suetonius refers to "raw" (*crudam*) flesh is reminiscent of the stock allegation made against various peripheral peoples who did not practise settled agriculture in the Roman manner, that they lived on raw flesh and milk.⁷ Yet no source supports the existence of a primitive tribe of raw-flesh eating πολυφάγοι in Egypt. It is possible, of course, that this *polyphagus* was human, but an individual deviant rather than a representative of a wider cultural group, exactly as described by the *Chronographer of 354*. Nevertheless, the wider context suggests that we should identify this *polyphagus* as an animal instead, either a crocodile or a hippopotamus, probably the latter.⁸

⁶ Ed. Mommsen, *MGH AA. Chronica Minora I*, Berlin 1892, 146, 1.1–5: *Hoc imp. fuit polyfagus natione Alexandrinus nomine Arpocras, qui manducavit pauca: aprum coctum, gallinam vivam cum suas sibi pinnas, ova C, pineas C, clavos galligares, vitrea fracta, thallos de scopa palmea, mappos IIII, porcellum lactantem, manipulum feni, et adhuc esuriens esse videbatur.* The *Chronographer* (p. 147, 1.20–24) preserves a similar notice for another *polyphagus* under Severus Alexander (222–35) so that one suspects that he, or an earlier source, has rewritten and augmented a description of the Neronian *polyphagus* in the light of this later event, which need not have recorded the same phenomenon at all. Even if the Neronian *polyphagus* did in fact bear the name Harpocras, this does not necessarily mean that it was human, since it is an important part of the phenomenon of favourite animals or pets that they should be given human names. Yet anyone reading a notice recording such a detail may have been tempted to assume that the *polyphagus* was human for this very reason.

⁷ B. D. Shaw, "Eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk": the ancient Mediterranean ideology of the pastoral nomad", *Ancient Society* 13/14 (1982/3) 5–31.

⁸ K. R. Bradley, *Suetonius' Life of Nero: An Historical Commentary* (Coll. Latomus 157), Brussels 1978, 225, points us in the right direction when he describes Suetonius's account of the *polyphagus* as a "curious and far-fetched item" and makes the comparison with Vedius Pollio's eels.

The first argument in support of this identification must be that the crocodile (Plin. *NH* 8,89–94) and the hippopotamus (Plin. *NH* 8,95) were both from Egypt, unique to that province in fact. The second argument, and the reason also why we should favour the identification of the *polyphagus* as a hippopotamus rather than a crocodile, is that the hippopotamus was notorious for its appetite. Pliny reports that it used to overeat, but then prick itself upon broken reeds in order to bleed itself and unburden its body (*NH* 8,96). The third argument is that the wider literary context reveals that it was one of the standard charges made against someone as proof of his cruelty that he used to throw live prisoners to animals, often to his exotic pets, for insufficient reason. The wealthy knight Vedius Pollio (d. 15 BC) is said to have thrown slaves to be eaten alive in ponds of lampreys,⁹ while the emperor Valentinian I (364–75) is said to have fed convicted criminals to his two pet bears called Innocence and Goldflake (Amm. 29,3,9). More relevant here, Suetonius criticizes Caligula for feeding prisoners to some wild beasts collected for a show without regard to the seriousness of the charges against them (*Calig.* 27,1). It would not be the least surprising, therefore, should his source for this scandal have reported a similar such tale concerning Nero also. It may be objected at this point that the hippopotamus is a herbivore and would not have eaten any flesh, raw or cooked, living or dead. Yet Suetonius's tale hardly derives from an objective scientific study of the eating-habits of the hippopotamus. It is important also that the hippopotamus was an unusual animal whose eating habits would not have been widely known, and that it was an aggressive animal that attacked its enemies with its tusks located in its mouth, that is, by biting them.¹⁰ Hence it always looked as if the hippopotamus wished to eat its victim, even if this was not actually the case. More importantly, perhaps, the hippopotamus does sometimes consume flesh, although such behaviour has been described as aberrant and a reaction to nutritional stress.¹¹ The final point in favour of

⁹ Dio 54,23,1–6; Sen. *ira* 3,40,2, *Clem.* 1,18,2; Plin. *nat.* 9,77. In general, see R. Syme, "Who was Vedius Pollio?", *JRS* 51 (1961) 23–30.

¹⁰ On the aggressive nature of the hippopotamus, see e.g. S. K. Eltringham, *The Hippos: Natural History and Conservation*, London 1999, 120–21. The aedile M. Aemilius Scaurus was the first to exhibit a hippopotamus at Rome during his games in 58 BC (Plin. *nat.* 8,96; Amm. 22,15,24). Augustus included a hippopotamus in games in 29 BC, although Dio wrongly claims that this was the first hippopotamus displayed in Rome (51,22,5).

¹¹ Eltringham (above n. 10) 82–4.

the identification of the *polyphagus* as a hippopotamus is that Nero sent a small expedition of praetorian guard to explore the territory of the Nile between Syene and Meroë c.62, apparently in preparation for a military expedition against Ethiopia.¹² This was prime hippopotamus territory, so that these guards may well have included one of these beasts among the various exotica which they probably brought back with them to the imperial court.

So why does not Suetonius call the hippopotamus by its proper title rather than describe it so ambiguously as a *polyphagus*? The answer is that he did not himself live through many of the events which he describes and was only as good as his own source on any particular point. If this source was ambiguous or unclear, then his edited version of the same would probably have remained so also. In this particular case, since the term *polyphagus* is a transliteration from the Greek, one is tempted to assume that author of the ultimate source for this event must have written in Greek. Since Suetonius preserves two otherwise unattested Greek terms in his biography of Caligula, it is clear that the author of one of his ultimate sources for the Julio-Claudian period both wrote in Greek and delighted in the new and unusual.¹³ One suspects that the same author may have taken an equal delight also in avoiding the obvious, so that he may have preferred to describe the hippopotamus by some other circumlocution rather than by its usual title. Hence Suetonius's text is ambiguous because this was a feature of the style of his source to whose wording he preferred to adhere as closely as possible.

In conclusion, Suetonius's description of Nero's possession of a flesh-eating *polyphagus* of Egyptian origin should be read as an ambiguous description of the possession by Nero of a pet hippopotamus. This ambiguity probably reflects the ambiguity of Suetonius's ultimate Greek source here, so that one may doubt whether even he himself was entirely clear as to the true nature of this *polyphagus*.

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¹² Plin. *nat.* 6,181, 184. Cf. Sen. *nat.q.* 6,8,3–4.

¹³ See Suet. *Calig.* 29,1; 47.1. The identity of this source need not detain us here. It is not clear whether Suetonius had direct access to this Greek source or used an intermediate Latin translation. For a recent discussion of some of the relevant issues, see D. Wardle, "Cluvius Rufus and Suetonius", *Hermes* 120 (1992) 466–82.