

BOOK REVIEW

Soziale Insekten in der Antike. Ein Beitrag zu Naturkonzepten in der griechisch-römischen Kultur. By D. BERRENS. Hypomnemata 205. Göttingen, DE: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2018. Pp. 459. Hardback, \$125.00. ISBN: 978-3-525-31053-3.

Berrens' dissertation, handed in at the university of Mainz in 2016 and slightly edited for publication, provides us with an extremely useful book which analyzes the concepts of bees, wasps and ants as they are found in classical literature. This book will prove indispensable for everyone who will have to interpret or otherwise use any passage of ancient Greek and Roman literature in which these "eusocial hymenoptera," as modern biologists classify them, appear.

The first chapter (11-30) lays the theoretical foundation of the book. Following Borgards' recommendations,¹ Berrens aims first to contextualize every occurrence of an animal in any piece of literature within its contemporary set of known works. The second task is to pay close attention to the historical circumstances of the text in question. Our ways of thinking about prototypical exempla of a certain species might differ from the way a particular author thought about that animal. It is easy to suppose the opposite, especially if we are forced to make assumptions from silence. Naturally, it is difficult to fully reconstruct ancient views because our sources are limited. Nevertheless, we need to investigate what we have also in respect to anthrozoology. Thirdly, Berrens looks at the poetics of these passages in which bees, wasps and ants play a role. What one knows and what one does not know about the life of animals can, of course, influence the use and meaning of these animals within fictional and non-fictional literature. And within this framework of Human-Animal Studies, Berrens' book constitutes a major and long looked-for contribution to the field.²

¹ See in addition also R. Borgards: Introduction: Cultural and Literary Animal Studies, in: *Journal of Literary Theory* 9.2, 2015, 155-160.

² As it is the case in other disciplines (Cf. e.g. C. Wolfe: Human, All too Human: "Animal Studies" and the Humanities, in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124.2, 2009, 564-575 and R. McKay: Review Essay: What Kind of Literary Animal Studies Do We Want, Or

The second chapter (31-143) deals with differences between modern and ancient classifications of species and the question of what “social insects” are. Antiquity had its own ways of describing and classifying animals. Also, we cannot always identify which specific animals are meant by certain names. Yet, we can of course compare which attributes are given to these animals and examine the reasons for these descriptions. Last but not least in regard to the question of what the ancient definition of “social insects” was, we find that authors like Plato (*Phaedo* 82b6f.) or Aristotle (*Historia animalium* 11, 488a7-10) judge these animals from an anthropocentric viewpoint.

Chapter 3 (144-186) diligently informs us about ancient theories on the reproduction and the development of bees, wasps, and ants. Closely connected is chapter 4 (187-217) on the alleged bugonia of bees and other myths surrounding the origin of other insects. Careful in regard to the somewhat problematic material, Berrens argues for a Greek origin of the motif of bugonia.

The question which gender was attributed in antiquity to the individual groups of insects within a hive (chapter 5, 218-243) shows in particular how influential human thinking about gender and its role in their own lives was at the time (also cf. 399). The same is true about the societies formed by bees, wasps and ants (Chapter 6, 244-329). Humans, and not only in antiquity, wanted to know if they could find reassurance of their own ideas about their own attitudes when they investigated the behavior of all kinds of animals.³ Needless to say, lack of knowledge complicated mankind’s view of eusocial hymenoptera. For example, bees would not have attained their status as sexually pure animals, had the details of their mating and their nuptial flight been known before the 19th century.⁴

Berrens continues his meticulous work. Chapter 7 (330-362) discusses mantic contexts, Chapter 8 (363-391) is devoted to the relationship between bees, wasps and ants and literature, and Chapter 9 (392-404) lists the most important findings of the previous chapters.

Need?, in: *Modern Fiction Studies* 60.3, 2014, 636-644.). CLAS is a growing field also in Classics (Cf. e.g. T. Fögen, E. Thomas, edd.: *Interaction between Animals and Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2017).

³ Cf. e.g. R. Menzel, M. Eckoldt: *Die Intelligenz der Bienen. Wie sie denken, planen, fühlen und was wir daraus lernen können*. München: Albrecht Knaus Verlag 2016.

⁴ On the progress in apiology in the 19th and 20th century and its political as well as religious implications see now R. Stripf: *Die Bienenzucht in der völkisch-nationalistischen Bewegung*. Diss. Pädagogische Hochschule Heidelberg 2018, esp. 59ff. and 94f.

Lists of abbreviations (405-407), primary and secondary literature (408-436) and passages of ancient works (437-459) can be found at the end of this well-produced book. I have only a few quibbles. The “myth of the sun’s eye” (202) would have to be included as such in the bibliography. The reader does not necessarily connect the “Anthologie der demotischen Literatur” (409, a German translation from the demotic version, not the Greek) with that work. Recent years have seen a few publications, including commentaries, on the *Geoponica* (414). Commentaries on Lucan’s seventh book (7.161-164) are missing from the bibliography (416). The bibliography on Vergil lacks more up-to-date entries.

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