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No Evidence, No Argument, No History

As historian John Arnold contends, “History is an argument,”¹ requiring scholars to analyze and interpret events in order to form an argument that elucidates the relevancy of an event. A succession of facts cannot be inherently historical because mere facts do not communicate stories nor draw conclusions on their own; furthermore, without credible sources that reveal a foundation upon which an assertion can be crafted, the historical process cannot successfully transpire. Thus, when evaluating the extent to which historians can accurately document the history of animals, one must make the determination on the twofold premise: history requires arguments; arguments require evidence. Considering the inability of animals to produce their own sources and the limited perspective in human documentation of animals, historians consequently cannot construct an authentic history of animals that does not predominantly emphasize the connection to people.

One of the primary reasons that expressing the history of animals is impractical is that historians cannot assign agency to them. Arnold claims that understanding the underlying rationale and context for decisions is the catalyst in historical comprehension: “People do things for reasons ... linked to their own present. But the things that they do cause ripples. Somewhere, in the patterns formed by these colliding waves, history happens.”² Since history strives to illuminate the cause, details, and aftermath of an event, historians rely on primary sources to provide knowledge of the mentalité of those involved. Primary sources are vital because not only do they factually disclose *what* happened—they

¹ John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

² Arnold, *History*, 93.

begin to unveil *why* it happened.³ Considering the gravity of discerning rationale and mentalité in discovering why an event occurred and its implications moving forward, the missing element in the history of animals becomes apparent: with no evidence to identify the mindset of animals, historians cannot produce a comprehensive argument.

Etienne Benson encounters the difficult nature of assigning agency to animals in his article “The Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel in the United States.” When discussing the transition of squirrels from rural to urban areas, Benson has the sources to ascertain assertions primarily about people, not squirrels. Based on Arnold’s definition of history, strictly explicating the basic facts of the squirrel movement would not be history. Although Benson suitably meets Arnold’s standard of history by introducing an argument regarding the basis and ramifications of the introduction of squirrels to urban areas, the argument he presents allocates human—not animal—agency. People prompted the introduction of squirrels into cities, Benson explains, and they did so to “beautify and enliven the urban landscape.”⁴ There is no mention of the squirrels’ motivation to relocate not because Benson is disregarding evidence but because the evidence simply does not exist.

Similarly, Mark Elvin struggles to outline the history of elephants “from the elephants’ point of view”⁵ in his article “The Retreat of the Elephants.” Elvin’s only option is to explore the conflict between humans and elephants using documents that principally provide the perspective of people. He argues that one of the predominant factors in the

³ Arnold, *History*, 77-78.

⁴ Etienne Benson, “The Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel in the United States” (*Indiana: Journal of American History*, Volume 100, Issue 3, December 2013), 694.

⁵ Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*. (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004), 19.

conflict “was the farmers' defense of their crops against elephant trampling and plundering.”⁶ With no way to obtain the elephants' interpretation of events, the contention cannot be considered part of the history of elephants, no matter how valid the claim may be. Given that they do not present sources that convey the mentalité or perspective of animals, historical accounts of animals that assign human agency and craft arguments on behalf of people must be analyzed as human history.

While Benson and Elvin craft insightful historical arguments that indeed satisfy their aims, their documentation should not be deemed a “history of animals” in the same way that historians regard the “history of people.” Rather, historians attempting to chronicle the history of animals ultimately generate a history of interactions between animals and people, or peoples' perception of animals. For example, one of Benson's main points—that squirrels “created a morally and ecologically significant situation that helped define the boundaries of a more-than-human community”⁷—highlights evidence about human-animal interaction. This thread suggests a theory about people rather than making a claim about squirrels. Likewise, Elvin's article reveals how people perceived elephants but cannot conclude how elephants viewed people; he states that people were “hunting of elephants for their ivory and their trunks ... or their trapping to be trained for war, transport, or ceremonial.”⁸ As detailed, whether it be peoples' interactions with or perceptions of animals, the history of animals inevitably transforms into the history of people and animals.

⁶ Elvin, *Retreat of Elephants*, 21.

⁷ Benson, “Urbanization of Squirrels,” 704.

⁸ Elvin, *Retreat of Elephants*, 11.

Without adequate evidence, there can be no sound argument; without a sound argument, there can be no authentic history. The inability of animals to produce sources consequently results in the inability to document their history without a human-centered approach to the process. While the attempts of historians to extend human evidence for the sake of constructing an assertion about animals often result in invaluable documents, the resulting documents must be classified as the history of human perspectives on animals. History is established through arguments, but contemplating the limitations of evidence is as imperative to understand as the argument itself.

Bibliography

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