



Review

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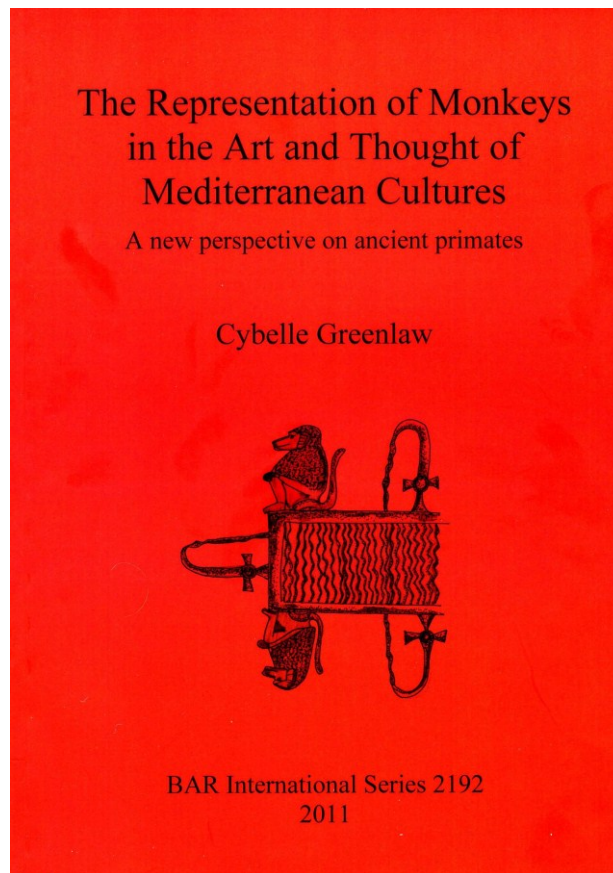
**THE REPRESENTATION OF MONKEYS IN THE ART AND THOUGHT OF
MEDITERRANEAN CULTURES: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ANCIENT PRIMATES**

Oxford, Archaeopress; British Archaeological Reports S2192, 2011

ISBN 9781407307473. Pp. 89

This book covers the representational evidence from the ancient Mediterranean world for all of the various Old World primates such as monkeys, baboons and macaques which are taxonomically classified as monkeys as opposed to the true apes. The subject is of specific interest to the scholarship of ancient Egyptian interconnections as monkeys are often clear markers of trade and cultural connections between Egypt and its neighbors to the south and between Egypt and various Mediterranean cultures. The author rightly points out the importance of an updated study of this subject as no major work has been published in this area since that of McDermott¹ appeared in 1938. Further, older works are frequently flawed by use of incorrect terminology and zoological classification, and a great deal of research has been conducted on primate behavior and geographic range in the past seventy years. For all these reasons, the present study is a welcome one.

The Introduction discusses the various species of primates found in the representational evidence of the ancient Mediterranean world. There are said to be at least five specific species (all of which have been found mummified in Egypt), and



the salient characteristics of each of these species, as well as those of some other possibly occurring ones, are discussed individually.

As might be expected, most of the representational evidence for monkeys comes from Egypt and a good portion of the book deals with this evidence. Chapter 1, "Monkeys in Egypt: From the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic Period," (pages 7-34) is the longest chapter in the book and this does not include the evidence from the Greco-Roman Period, of course, which is dealt with in later chapters. The treatment of the Egyptian representational material is thorough and well handled. The author does an excellent job of contextualizing the material and considers its symbolic aspects as well as its purely decorative purposes. Meaningless generalizations are avoided and a clear and important distinction is made between the representations and

symbolism of male and female monkeys, for example. The chapter has a number of valuable insights and the material is considered chronologically with care to distinguish diachronic changes and developments.

Chapter 2, "Monkeys in the Near East," (pages 35- 41) is much shorter but considers the representational evidence of monkeys from Anatolia and the Syrian Levant to Mesopotamia.

The chapter specifically claims to represent only “a brief overview” of the material from this extensive region and does appear somewhat sketchy after the particularly full treatment of the Egyptian material. Nevertheless, there is less evidence from the Near East, and the chapter does provide some useful information on a number of the extant examples. While the material is not divided by specific cultures and jumps back and forth within the region, it is well integrated and the chapter considers similarities between the representation of monkeys in this area with those in Egypt.

Chapter 3, “Monkeys in the Bronze Age Aegean,” is a little longer (pages 42-57) and provides more thorough coverage of the material from this area. Representations on seals, figurines, and gems are considered separately from those on wall paintings, and in both cases roles and adaptations from Egyptian art are considered in some detail. But the book goes beyond merely looking for similarities - differences are considered and analyzed and this in itself leads to a number of insights into the material. The chapter ends with a useful and detailed catalog (in table form) of Aegean seals, sealings, and jewelry depicting monkeys and a separate catalog of Aegean wall paintings having the same motif. Despite some differences, the former evidence provides many parallels of form with Egyptian representations and the latter type provides important examples of parallel contexts and roles for monkeys in Aegean art. Interestingly, although important in Minoan culture, and mainly with Egyptian influence, the study shows that the monkey was not important for the Myceneans and was consciously avoided by them as an artistic motif.

Chapter 4, “Monkeys in the Greco-Roman World,” is a fairly substantial one (pages 58-79) which changes approach in order to deal with the large amount of – often difficult to provenance - material which has survived from this dual era. As the author states, “Because of the vastness of the Greco-Roman world, the amount of cultural transference and the immense time span, the ...[evidence] of monkeys cannot always be assigned to particular time periods or regions.... Unlike the other chapters, therefore, this one is not divided into sections” (page 58). Instead, the author looks at representational and other forms of evidence which are often overlapping and from which much can be gleaned. The analysis of the material begins with evidence from mainland Greece in the Geometric Period and continues with material selected from various locations – including Cypriot, Etruscan, and finally Roman examples. This chapter is

also unique to this point in the book in that there is a detailed discussion of monkeys in the literature of Greece and Rome and a number of fables involving these animals are examined from the perspective of how the animals are viewed. This background forms the basis of the next - final - chapter.

Chapter 5, “The Greco-Roman Legacy,” is a short conclusion (pages 80-83) which examines the ongoing existence of the monkey motif in the art, literature and social perception of the medieval and modern eras. This involves everything from medieval caricature to King Kong. While a reader may wonder how the perception of monkeys in modern societies is relevant to understanding the representation of these animals in the art and thought of ancient Mediterranean cultures, the material is actually germane. The author summarizes basic human reactions and attitudes toward simians that are very clear in modern societies and which she has shown whenever they have been apparent in the ancient material. The deeper understanding of our own attitudes regarding monkeys makes possible a fuller understanding of the possible attitudes which were in place with the ancient audiences of the representations in which these animals appeared.

The volume does not include an index, but a useful bibliography rounds out the study.

Although the various chapters are somewhat uneven in the amount of material they consider and in the structure and depth of analysis offered, the value of the volume cannot be questioned. One might have wished for a somewhat more systematic treatment in some ways, but the author is to be commended for producing an extremely useful study which does not fail to examine key evidence and to highlight the cultural and artistic interconnections between Egypt and many of its neighbors in terms of this important class of animals. Only a single small typographical error was noted (“onkey” for “monkey”, page 1) in the text and the volume is well produced with line illustrations that are generally clear and well done.

Overall, this fine study fills a real need in the scholarly literature of ancient art and interconnections. It will be of value to all those with specialized interests in Egyptian and Mediterranean area art, culture, and trade. The volume successfully updates earlier studies in the area which are now seriously outdated and brings a good deal of new material to bear on its subject – material which was previously scattered and often inadequately analyzed.

- *JAIE Editorial Staff*

Notes

¹W.C. McDermott, *The Ape in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938).
