

"ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL"
A GRAECO - ROMAN ASSESSMENT OF SRI LANKA'S
NATURAL HERITAGE

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I wish to draw the reader's attention to a description of the fauna (and flora) of ancient Sri Lanka preserved in Aelian's *De Natura Animalium*¹. Although the passage has often been quoted in McCrindle's historic translation² and generally dismissed as fabulous, I feel that a fresh examination is worthwhile in view of the improved texts and authoritative commentaries that have appeared since the pioneering efforts of Schwanbeck and McCrindle himself.

Aelian (Claudius Aelianus) of Praeneste (170-235 A.D.) was a rhetorician who taught mostly at Rome. Although he was a Roman, he wrote in Greek and used mainly Greek sources. He wrote two major works, both of which consisted of miscellaneous excerpts and anecdotes gathered from diverse sources. Of these works, the *Varia Historia*, in fourteen books, deals with human life and history, while the *De Natura Animalium*, in seventeen books, is concerned chiefly with the animal kingdom.

The chief value of these works for us lies in the preservation of extracts from Greek authors whose works have not survived. However, Aelian does not usually indicate his sources by name, a fact which has given rise to much controversy over the attribution of individual passages to their authors. In his description of animals, he may have added to his reading the results of his own observations both in Italy and abroad, but this is not clearly established. For, although he is known to have boasted of never having left Italy or boarded a ship, yet he claims to have seen an ox with five feet at Alexandria.³

Aelian was influenced by the popular Stoicism of the day, and he was especially bitter against the Epicureans, even though these could not have represented a significant force in his own lifetime. Perhaps this bitterness stems from his use of authors from earlier times. Stoicism taught him to see universal reason as an active force in the animal kingdom. Nature is wise and beneficent; but man is foolish and selfish. Animals, by contrast, show devotion, courage, self-sacrifice and gratitude; they teach us contentment, control of passions and calm in the face of death.⁴ Thus his aim is not only to entertain his readers but also to educate them in a pleasant manner, not only in science, but also in morals. Consequently, he includes much that a modern biologist would have considered irrelevant.