

On a historical occurrence of the Lion, *Panthera leo*, in Turkey

by Max Kasperek

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Turkey always seems to have been on the edge of the distribution range of the lion (KUMERLOEVE 1975). It is well-known from archaeological sources as far back as the Hittite period, but KUMERLOEVE could only find one record since the classical Graeco-Roman period: DANFORD was given information that a lion was hunted after killing many horses near Birecik on the Euphrates in about 1870 (DANFORD & ALSTON 1880). In this context, it is noteworthy that a population of lions still occurred in Southern Turkey in 1840.

CHARLES FELLOWS was a traveller who visited Asia Minor on two occasions, once in 1838 (FELLOWS 1839) and once in 1840 (FELLOWS 1841). He mainly collected archaeological inscriptions and coins, but also plants (and described some new species) and animals. On his second journey, he visited the classical site of Sidymae, close to the Mediterranean Sea south of Fethiye. He there obtained information from the local population which proves the presence of the lion at that time. I reproduce here the original description by CH. FELLOWS:

"The present state of this district is extremely wild; only three or four huts are amidst these ruins on the mountain, and their occupants have always their gun slung over their shoulder, even within the limits of their own cultivated fields. On inquiry as to why this custom prevailed, we were told that the country was full of wild animals, and of the fiercest kind. I was extremely cautious and particular in my inquiries as to their nature, and have no doubt of the truth of the account which I heard from many people of the surrounding district, and each unknown to the other. In this village alone, four or five lions, called Aslan by the Turks, and other animals called Caplan (the leopard) are killed every year. The man who first told me, had himself taken the skins to the Aga, to present to different Pashas, and these presentations had been rewarded by sums of one to two hundred piastres, which he had himself received. The lions, he said, are timid unless surprised or attacked, and I could not hear that they did much injury to the flocks."

A description of the wolf and the hyaena then follows. At another point, FELLOWS directly links his observations with the pictures on classical buildings from the Greek period. "...the bull contending with lions is the most

common subject of the bas-reliefs... The lion is seen everywhere throughout the valley of Xanthus; every bas-relief, tomb, seat or coin, shows the figure or limbs of this animal. Lions still live in its mountains...".

It can thus be taken as certain, that a small population of lions was able to survive in Southern Turkey at least until the middle of the last century. Although Fellows did not see any animals or skins, the exact description of the price of the skin, the numbers, and the Turkish name (aslan) establishes the accuracy of his information beyond any doubt.

Many parts of the southern coast of Turkey have been very remote until recent times. Even nowadays some areas are difficult of access. So it is hardly surprising that the lion was able to survive there longer than in other parts of the country.

As KUMERLOEVE (1975) was only able to find DANFORD's record, one more should be added here from the 17th century. EVLIYA ÇELEBI (see ZILLIOĞLU 1966) saw a stuffed lion at Şebinkarahisar in the northwest of Erzincan. The animal was said to have lived in the vicinity of the town for seven years and to have preyed upon sheep, goats and cattle. It was hunted and brought to the governor, who had the skin stuffed and fixed above the gate of the town. ÇELEBI described the lion as a tremendous and gigantic animal, and he exaggerated its size considerably.

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