

SABIRA STÅHLBERG & INGVAR SVANBERG

Orangutans Never Made It to Uppsala

Notes on Asian Great Apes in Captivity

Few inhabitants of Uppsala know that the town hosts an original orangutan skull. This skull belongs to the Uppsala University zoological collection and is now kept in the Museum of Evolution. Carl Peter Thunberg's (1743–1828) protégé Claës Fredrik Hornstedt (1758–1809) tried to bring a live orangutan by ship to Uppsala from Batavia, Java, in 1785. Unfortunately this great ape died on the way, along with many other exotic animals such as parrots, turtles and monkeys Hornstedt brought along on the ship *Concordia* from Jakobstad (now in Finland, previously a Swedish town) to Sweden. Other travellers did not even think about the almost impossible task of transporting a tropical ape to the frozen north. Therefore the Academic Garden in Uppsala could never add a live orangutan to its menagerie collection.¹

Orangutans are the only Asian species of the great apes. Today the orangutan is divided into two taxa, the Sumatran species *Pongo abelii* Lesson 1827 and the Bornean species *Pongo pygmaeus* (Linnaeus, 1760). The latter is divided into three subspecies. In a recent published article, historian of sciences John van Wyhe and Peter C. Kjærgaard review the gradual discovery and presence of orangutans in Europe. The subject has been discussed earlier by among others Gunnar Broberg and Olav Ertl-Röhrer. An early depiction of an orangutan has recently been uncovered in the explorer Daniel Beeckman's *A Voyage to the and from the Island of Borneo* (1718). Here we wish to add a couple of marginal notes on orangutans kept in captivity, especially those linked to Scandinavia.²

In 1982 Marvin L. Jones estimated that over 1,400 orangutans had been removed alive from Borneo and Sumatra since the early eighteenth century. They were sent to menageries, research institutions and zoological gardens around the world. More than 600 were born in captivity. It is generally accepted that the first orangutan arriving in Europe alive was a specimen sent

for Willem V, Prince of Orange. The orangutan was kept in the Prince's private menagerie Het Loo near The Hague from 29 June 1776 to 22 January 1777. It was described in detail by naturalist Arnout Vosmaer in 1778. This individual survived the cold climate only for a few months, but attracted great attention during its lifetime. It is pictured on paintings from 1777 by Tethart Philipp Christian Haag together with other exotic animals. Another orangutan in Europe was a young female which lived for a few months in Empress Josephine's menagerie at her residence Jardin de la Malmaison near Paris in 1808. It was a gift from General Decaen, Governor-General of the French Indies. This orangutan was dressed up and taught to eat at the table.³

There is yet an overlooked note which deserves attention when clarifying the history of orangutans in Europe. Swedish Admiral Carl Tersmeden noted in his memoirs that he observed an orangutan at a market place in Amsterdam in 1735. He writes that it was "one of the most cruel wild beasts, therefore it was also tied with a strong iron link around its neck". Unfortunately for modern researchers he gives no description of the "beast", so we have no clue if it was really an orangutan. Naturally this animal could have been any ape or monkey – perhaps a chimpanzee or some kind of gibbon – which its owner wanted to make more interesting by calling it an orangutan.⁴

It is not unlikely that one or more orangutans were brought alive to Amsterdam on the Dutch East India Company's regular trade ships. Many exotic animals were imported and notoriously Blauw Jan and his inn at Kloveniersburgwal kept up an extensive trade in exotic animals, brought from the colonies by sailors. There is also a note that a Mr Pallavicini brought two orangutans alive to Europe in 1759, but already the Dutch philosopher Jean-Nicolas-Sébastien Allemand at the University of Leiden, who himself mentions the orangutans, doubts about their safe arrival in Europe. No other sources corroborate their presence.⁵

European travellers to Southeast and East Asia sometimes encountered captive orangutans in the region. So did for instance the Swedish chief mate on a ship, Carl Johan Gethe. In Canton, southern China, in 1748 he observed a female orangutan which came from Borneo. It was sitting down, tied on an English ship in the harbour.⁶

Carl Linnaeus gathered a rather impressive collection of living animals, including a range of primates and lemurs, raccoons, parrots and other animals from several continents in his menagerie in Uppsala. However he never received any live orangutan, neither his successor (his son) or the above mentioned

Thunberg, who in 1781 after the son's death became professor and head of the Academic Garden. One person only is known in history for trying to bring a live orangutan to Uppsala – Claës Fredrik Hornstedt. His efforts were all in vain. The dead orangutan was placed in a barrel of *arrack*, strong Indonesian spirits, for transport to Stockholm, but nothing except the skull is preserved until today; its location is the Museum of Evolution in Uppsala. Another dead orangutan in the form of a skin and parts of the skeleton is said to have been donated somewhat earlier to the Academy of Sciences in Stockholm by naturalist Anders Sparrman (1748–1820), probably purchased by him in The Netherlands.⁷ After the effort by Hornstedt it would take another 200 years before live orangutans set foot in Sweden.

Live orangutans

Early European audiences generally had nothing to compare with when they were confronted with live orangutans. Throughout the nineteenth and even in the twentieth century orangutans were thought to be dangerous, wild and perilous for humans. Traditional superstition in some countries against red hair might have been a reason for prejudice. Yet there were also writers who saw the red apes as intriguing. French author Jules Verne wrote in 1874 *The Mysterious Island*, where a group of Americans, who accidentally land on Captain Nemo's island in the Pacific, domesticate a red ape which they call Jupiter. English writer Thomas Love Peacock wrote already in 1817 a novel, *Melincourt*, where an orangutan called Sir Oran Haut-Ton imitates humans and runs for parliament elections. In Disney's animated film from 1967, based on Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894), the orangutan King Louie is added – and he wants to be human.

With the emergence of zoological gardens in Europe in the nineteenth century and better knowledge about the apes and their habits, which improved the conditions for the animals during the long transport from Asia, live orangutans became more common in Europe. They lasted not very long in captivity, however. In 1816 and 1818 two orangutans arrived in London. The latter was a Sumatran specimen and imported by the British naturalist Clarke Abel (1780–1826). It was later described as a new taxon by the French surgeon René Primevère Lesson in 1827. London zoo received a young male

which was sent by a Mr Swinton from Calcutta, India, in 1830. The transport was hardly healthy for the sensitive animal and within a few days after arrival it died. A female, named Jenny or “the first Lady Jane” came in 1837 and survived for 18 months in the London zoo. It was replaced in 1839 by another female, also named Jenny, which lived for nearly four years. The second Jenny was appreciated by many visitors, among others Queen Victoria herself. The ape triggered the imagination of several artists and writers. The most famous piece of literary orangutan fantasy is probably the short story by Edgar Allan Poe from 1841, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where the killer proves to be an orangutan. The ape had been brought from the tropics by a sailor and did not murder the two victims in cold blood, but because it was under stress, pursued by its owner and scared of his whip. The theory put forward is that the animal remains an animal, furious and unconscious about its own strength, and the real culprit was the sailor. The Hague Zoo in The Netherlands received its first live orangutan in 1839, the first of many which during this century were imported from Dutch India.⁸ Early zoo holdings of orangutans are known also from Amsterdam (1839), Antwerp (1847), Berlin (1872), Cologne (1863), Dresden (1895), Hamburg (1873), Leipzig (1894), Marseilles (1892), Rotterdam (1875), Copenhagen (1888), Stuttgart (1899) and Vienna (1878). Most of these apes lived only for a few months, although some exceptions are known.⁹



Left: *Orangutan*, from Arnout Vosmaer, *Natuurlyke Historie van der Orang-outang van Borneo* (1778). Right: Tethart Philipp Christian Haag's painting from 1777 of an orangutan in Palace Het Loo, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands (Collection of Mauritshuis, The Hague).



Scandinavian orangutans

Many European zoological gardens have kept orangutans throughout the twentieth century. Rotterdam had for instance over a hundred specimens until 1960, but in Scandinavia orangutans have been very rare zoo animals. Copenhagen has hosted orangutans since the end of the nineteenth century. Two adult specimens were shown at the zoo in 1888, but they did not survive very long. A catalogue mentions a male in the zoo in the year 1900. It was named Samson and was given as a gift by Privy Councillor H. N. Andersen. Unfortunately Samson died before a female, named Dalila, arrived as a gift from the Danish Consul in Padang, Sumatra.¹⁰

In 1907 the zoo received Peter, a male which survived for a couple of years. Peter spent a large part of the summer outdoors and was allowed to climb trees outside the ape house. It built night nests in the trees by pulling together branches in the same way as wild orangutans do in the jungle. An impressive Bornean male, Jacob, arrived at the age of three, sent by a German animal dealer in 1932. He never had a mate, but thrived until he died in 1942 of a disease in the central nervous system. In November 1943 the orangutan Musse was transferred, in connection with the war damages, from Berlin to Copenhagen zoo. It was kept there until its death in October 1946, after living almost ten years in zoos. Musse was replaced by the Sumatran male Tarzan and the female Suma, both from Rotterdam, in August 1952. Two young orangutans were born in February 1958, but did not survive. Suma died of a chronic kidney inflammation in January 1959. Tarzan was in 1979 transferred to Berlin where he died in 1991. In 1959 the zoo received two young wild-born, Plumrose (born 1958) and Borneo (born 1959) as a gift from the Conservator of Forests in Colony of North Borneo. Plumrose was transferred to Zurich in 1972, while Borneo was given to Vejle Zoo in 1969. An old female was transferred from Zurich to Copenhagen in 1972 and stayed there until it died in 1976.¹¹

Aalborg zoo in Denmark received a wild captured male named Charlie in 1960. Simultaneously a female named Sussi was acquired. Both were two years old at the arrival. They reproduced from 1972 and received seven offspring before Sussi passed away in 1988. Charlie died in 2002, 44 years old, a record age for orangutans in European zoos. Aalborg continues until today to keep orangutans. In 1986 a wild captured male arrived from Edinburgh Zoo, in 1996 a female from Rotterdam. Further specimens have been arriving from

Rotterdam, London and Borås. In 2011 Aalborg kept, according to the studbook, three males and two females.¹²

In Sweden it took a long time before live orangutans were imported. Two zoological gardens provided a home for orangutans in the 1980s. Sumatran species has been kept by Furuvik zoo outside Gävle north of Stockholm since 1988. The first male arrived from Chester zoo and passed away in 2000. The first female was born in Munich and after arriving in Furuvik, the couple had their first reproduction in 1995. Currently there is also a couple at Furuvik zoo, the male Naong (born 1990 in Basel) and the female Donja (born 1991 in Dresden). Bornean species is kept at Borås zoo since 1990. According to the studbook of 2011 they had one male (Bako) and two females (Sabine and Storma). The zoos in Helsinki, Finland (Korkeasaari/Högholmen, opened in 1889), and in Norway (Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park, opened in 1966) have as far as we know never hosted any orangutans.¹³

Some orangutans have also performed as circus animals and there are examples from Scandinavia as well, but it would be the topic for a separate study. In the end Hornstedt would have been satisfied, despite his failure to bring a live orangutan to Uppsala. Orangutans are now living in Sweden and modern Swedes can get acquainted with this peaceful, intelligent great ape.¹⁴

Notes

¹ Christina Granroth & Kees Rookmaaker, “Han var mera egentlig zoolog än botanicus”, in C. F. Hornstedt, *Brev från Batavia: En resa till Ostindien 1782–1786* (Helsingfors, 2008), 81; Ingvar Svanberg, “Deras mistande rör mig så hierteligen: Linné och hans sällskapsdjur”, *SLÅ* 2007, 106 n. 194.

² D. Brandon-Jones, A. A. Eudey, T. Geissmann, C. P. Groves, D. J. Melnick, J. C. Morales, J. M. Shekelle & C.-B. Stewart, “Asian primate classification”, *International Journal of Primatology* 25 (2004), 153–154; John van Wyhe & Peter C. Kjaergaard, “Going the whole orang: Darwin, Wallace and the natural history of orang-utans”, *Studies and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 51 (2015 B); Gunnar Broberg, *Homo sapiens*

L. (Uppsala, 1975), 188–190; Olav Ertl-Röhrer, “Zur Erforschungsgeschichte und Namengebung beim Orang-Utan, *Pongo satyrus* (Linnaeus, 1758), synonym *Pongo pygmaeus* (Hippius, 1763)”, *Spixiana* 6 (1983), 301–332; *Daily Mail* 19 March 2014.

³ Martin L. Jones, “The Orang Utan in captivity”, *The Orang Utan: Its Biology and Conservation*, ed. L. E. M. de Boer (The Hague, 1982), 17; Gustave Loisel, *Histoire des menageries de l'antiquité à nos jours 2* (Paris, 1912), 34; F. F. J. M. Pieters & L. C. Rookmakker, “Arnout Vosmaer, topcollectioneur van naturalia en zijn Regnum animale”, in *Een vorstelijke dierentuin: de menagerie van Willem V*, eds. B. C. Sliggers & A. A. Wertheim (Walburg, 1992), 29; Arnout Vosmaer, *Natuurlyke Historie van der Orang-outang van Borneo*

(Amsterdam, 1778); Bernard Chevallier, “Empress Josephine and the Naturelle Sciences”, in *Of Elephants and Roses: French Natural History 1790–1830*, ed. S. A. Prince (Washington DC, 2013), 5.

⁴ Carl Tersmeden, *Memoarer* (Stockholm, 1915), 141; cf. Broberg 1975, 188; Svanberg 2007, 67, 106 n. 194.

⁵ L. C. Rookmaaker, “J. N. S. Allamand’s additions (1769–1781) to the Nouvelle Edition of Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* published in Holland”, *Bijdragen tot de Dierkunde* 61 (1992), 144 f.

⁶ Bo Rydén, “Carl Johan Gethe, Dagbok hållen på resan till Ostindien 1746–1749”, *SLÅ* 1975–77, 96.

⁷ L. C. Rookmaaker, “A living orangutan in Uppsala in 1785”, *Zoologische Garten* N.F. 59 (1989), 275–276; Broberg 1975, 189; Hornstedt 2008, 276, 278.

⁸ Clarke Abel, “Some accounts of an orang-utang of remarkable height found on the island of Sumatra”, *Asiatic Research* 15 (1825), 489–498; Wilfrid Blunt, *The Ark in the Park: the Zoo in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1976), 38.

⁹ Jones 1982, 20; D. Hermes, “Die anthropomorphen Affen des Berliner Aquariums”, *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie* (1876), 88–94; D. H. Bolau & A. Pansch, “Der erste erwachsene orang-utan

in Deutschland”, *Zoologische Garten* 35 (1894), 97–102; for Copenhagen, see below.

¹⁰ Johann Büttikofer, “Das neue Affenhaus des Zoologischen Gartens in Rotterdam”, *Zoologischer Garten* 47:2 (1906), 33–42; Jul. Schiøtt, *Vejleder i den Zoologiske Have ved Kjøbenhavn* (Kjøbenhavn, 1900), 41; Frands Carlsen, Head of the Zoology section, research and conservation, at Copenhagen zoo has kindly provided further information on the orangutans at Zoologiske Have in Copenhagen (e-mail 8 May 2015).

¹¹ Th. Alving, *Zoologisk Have i støbeskeen: fortid, nutid, fremtid* (København, 1934), 63, 106, 151; Axel Reventlow, *Fører gennem Zoologisk Have* (København, 1953), 40; Holger Poulsen, *Zoo København* (København, 1963), 42; for war damages in Berlin zoo and the efforts to evacuate animals, see Heinz-Georg Klös, Hans Frädrich & Ursula Klös, *Die Arche Noah an der Spree* (Berlin, 1994), 125; Frands Carlsen, e-mail 8 May 2015; Megan Elder, *2011 International Studbook of the Orangutan (Pongo pygmaeus, Pongo abelii)* (Saint Paul MN, 2012), 76, 77, 88, 91.

¹² *75 år med dyrebare oplevelser: Aalborg zoo* (Aalborg, 2010); Elder 2012, 14, 28.

¹³ Data from Elder 2012, 20, 29, and www.zootierliste.de.

¹⁴ Kurt Møller Madsen, *Cirkus* (København, 1964), 76.

Summary

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Notes on Asian Great Apes in Captivity

By Sabira Ståhlberg & Ingvar Svanberg

The article discusses the presence of orangutans in European and Scandinavian captivity. An attempt to import an orangutan to Sweden by Claës Fredrik Hornstedt in 1785 failed – the ape died on the way from Java. Some zoos in Europe kept orangutans in the nineteenth century, but most of them were short-lived in captivity and only during the early twentieth century they became more common. Rotterdam had for instance over a hundred specimens until 1960, but in Scandinavia orangutans have been very

rare zoo animals. Copenhagen zoo received its first orangutans at the end of the nineteenth century, but only in 1907 the zoo received a male which survived for a couple of years. He was succeeded by several others. Sweden received its first orangutans only in the 1980s, when Furuvik zoo got its first Sumatran specimen. The Bornean species is kept at Borås zoo since 1990.

Authors' addresses:

Sabira Ståhlberg, sabirien.wordpress.com. E-mail: sabira.stahlberg@spray.se; Ingvar Svanberg, Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Box 514, 751 20 Uppsala. E-mail: ingvar.svanberg@ucrs.uu.se.