International Zoo News Vol. 44, No. 8 (1997), pp. 458–465

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF ZOOS IN ITALY UP TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

BY SPARTACO GIPPOLITI

Introduction

At first sight, the history of zoological gardens in Italy seems very simple and clear. It is usually stated that the first Italian zoo opened in 1911, when Rome Zoo was inaugurated, and that other urban zoos developed in Naples and Milan after World War II. In his classic work *Zoos of the World* (1966), James Fisher, after the Roman period, makes reference to menageries in Naples, Florence, and Milan during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. While it is generally recognized that Italy is the place of birth of botanical gardens and the home of the oldest public aquarium in the world (opened in Naples by Anthon Dhorn in 1874), its role in the development of zoos seems fairly marginal.

However, this exceptionally poor record of public zoological initiatives has recently been put in doubt by a number of published historical researches. The aim of the present paper is to review the current state of knowledge on pre-1945 Italian zoological collections and, where possible, to delineate the importance of the institutions concerned.

The pre-modern period

Already in the Middle Ages, wild animals were kept by local princes and noblemen more often than is usually thought. The Emperor Frederick II, King of Sicily, is usually considered one of the greatest falconers that ever lived. He published the famous *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* ('The Art of Hunting with Birds'), and maintained a menagerie in Palermo, said to be 'the first great menagerie' in western Europe, with a polar bear, an Asian elephant, a giraffe, and cheetahs. When going to Worms in 1235 to marry Isabella, sister of Henry III of England, Frederick brought some of his animals with him, including camels, monkeys and leopards.

In Florence, records of a municipal menagerie go back to 1319. Here, in 1331, two lion cubs were born and, for the first time, survived. In the second half of the 17th century, under Cosimo III de' Medici, there were two menageries in Florence, one in the Piazza San Marco and the other in the Boboli Gardens (Agnelli *et al.*, 1990). Cosimo's father, Ferdinand II, had established a tradition of keeping dromedaries in semi-wild conditions in Tuscany, and later, in the mid-18th century, Grand Duke Francis II of Tuscany began a true breeding station for these animals at San Rossore near Pisa; this breed, called *pisana*, survived at least until the beginning of the 20th century, as some individuals were presented by the King of Italy to Rome Zoo in 1911.

Other cities which also had their own menageries were Naples, Parma, Ferrara and Milan. In Rome, Pope Leo X himself had a menagerie in the Belvedere Garden. It included tropical birds, lions, leopards, bears and monkeys, and an Asian elephant, presented by the king of Portugal in 1514, lived there for two years. In 1608 Bishop Scipione Borghese, nephew of Pope Paul V, began the building of a park in Rome which was rich not only in works of art of exceptional value, but also in animals and plants. When it was completed, scattered about the park there were a house for lions (*Serraglio dei Leoni*), a lake for waterfowl, an enclosure for tortoises (*Serraglio delle Tartarughe*), and houses for birds and small mammals such as rabbits – one of which, the Aviary (*Uccelliera*), although modified, is still in existence. Surrounded by walls, there were two enclosures, the smaller for gazelles (*Serraglio delle Gazzelle*) and the other, covering several hectares, for hares, fallow deer, roe deer and other game species, where hunting parties were held. A house named *Gallinaro* (modified in the 18th century) was used to house ostriches, peafowl and other large birds (Anon., 1935). According to de Vico Fallani (1985), private menageries were a common feature of the residences of influential and wealthy Italians in the 18th century.

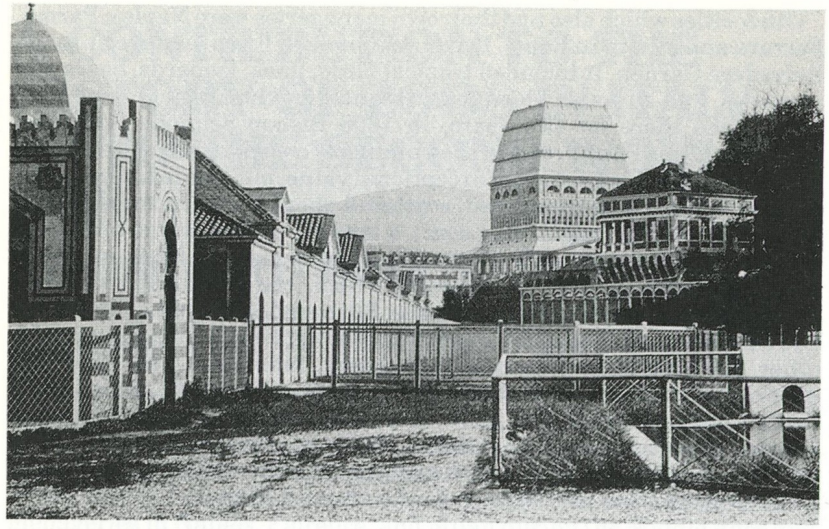
The 19th century

From 1870 until about 1960, a wolf and a golden eagle, symbols of Rome and its empire, were again kept in the Capitol, re-establishing an old tradition of keeping living symbols of the city followed by many Italian municipalities during the Middle Ages.

The domestication and/or introduction of exotic animals were the aims of the many acclimatisation societies which developed in the 19th century. In Piedmont in about 1819, the king of Savoy opened a menagerie in the park of Stupinigi, near Turin. This closed down in 1852, and a zoo in the gardens of the royal palace in Turin was opened in about 1863; although this was not a public zoo as we would understand it today, visitors were admitted free of charge, if climatic conditions allowed.

A Royal Zoological Garden was opened in Florence (then capital of the Kingdom of Italy) in 1861 by an 'Acclimatisation Zoological Society'; it was acquired by the Kingdom in 1863 and closed in 1880. A civil service 'Department for the Royal Gardens and Zoological Collections' was created in about 1863. This interest in zoos arose thanks to the influence of Victor Emmanuel II, known as the 'hunter king', the man who saved the last Alpine ibexes in the then Gran Paradiso royal reserve (now a national park). After his death in 1878, his successor, Humbert I, was much less interested in animals. The collection in the Royal Gardens in Turin was offered to the municipal council, but for financial and logistical reasons it was not possible to create a new public zoo. The Turin Zoo was closed for good in 1886, when the last two elephants were sold to Circus Wulff.

The most important and well-known animal in the Stupinigi Menagerie was a bull Asian elephant, named Fritz, presented by Mehemet Ali, Viceroy of Egypt, in 1826. Fritz lived in Stupinigi till 1852, when he was killed with carbon monoxide at the age of 52 years. Other interesting animals held include Barbary lion, passenger pigeon, Corsican deer and Nubian ibex.



Enclosures for hoofed stock, Turin Royal Zoological Garden, c. *1865. (From Maschietti* et al., *1988)*

In 1860, four nilgai born in the zoological garden of Prince Demidoff in Florence (see below) were sent to the royal park at Mandria, north-east of Turin. They flourished here, and were later introduced to the San Rossore and Castel Porziano royal estates. In the latter, near Rome, nilgai lived until the 1950s. Among the most interesting animals held by the Royal Zoological Garden of Turin during its short existence, I will cite both Barbary and Persian lions, addax and scimitar-horned oryx, a mhorr gazelle, five orang-utans, two Asian and ten African elephants, 15 giraffes and two lion tamarins. A pair of African elephants, Romeo and Juliet, were presented after 1870 by the king of Italy to the Jardin d'Acclimatation in Paris. A visitor to the zoo in December 1871 observed six African elephants, two Burchell's zebras, hybrids between Asiatic wild ass and domestic donkey, and the only roan antelope in Europe at the time. The monkey house (modelled on the one in the Jardin des Plantes) was overcrowded, while a fine group of hamadryas baboons was kept in the carnivores' gallery. This consisted of 40 outdoor cages, each communicating with an indoor cage in a gallery. The visitor was surprised to see that in December hamadryas baboons were put outside in a temperature of minus 7°C. The carnivore stock comprised 14 lions, jackals, 12 hyaenas (eight of them born there, probably *H. hyaena*), wolves, two cheetahs and many jaguars. The bear house was not very nice, but housed good specimens, among them a spectacled bear. Many interesting species of pheasants were kept in indoor, heated quarters, to the great amazement of the above-mentioned visitor.

Anatoly Demidoff (1812–1869), son of the Russian ambassador in Florence, managed an animal collection on the San Donato estate which

saw the first hatching of ostriches in Europe. Among the other animals held by Demidoff, I should mention fennec fox, sambar deer, mountain zebra, bontebok and the northern form of hartebeest (*Alcelaphus b. buselaphus*), now extinct.

Rome

In 1908, a private society, headed by Prince Francesco Chigi, was formed to develop a modern zoological garden in Rome. Unlike the previous Italian initiatives, the objective of the proposed zoo was mainly educational – 'The zoo will be an easy and ingenious way to instruct people, especially the young, offering the opportunity to learn pleasantly and without effort many zoological, botanical and geographical concepts.' The project was entrusted to Carl Hagenbeck. The site chosen for the zoo was located in the park of Villa Borghese, and partially overlapped the larger of Scipione Borghese's enclosures mentioned above (in fact, the area was chosen because no particularly historical buildings were found in it). At the time of its opening, in January 1911, the Rome Zoological Garden had more exhibits in Hagenbeckian style than any other zoo, even including Hagenbeck's own Stellingen, but this is usually ignored by recent literature (e.g. Ehrlinger, 1990). From an elevated restaurant, it was possible to view much of the zoo, in particular the temperate area on the left (with a moated enclosure for bears and 'Monte Cervino', a mountain exhibit, for ibexes and goats), a tropical area in the middle (with a lake, a large enclosure for hoofstock called 'Paradiso', an enclosure for ostriches and four moated enclosures for lions, tigers and hyenas), and a polar area on the right (with sea lions, polar bears and reindeer), the design of which resembled that of the 'Arctic Panorama' already constructed in Stellingen.

Arctic Panorama, Rome Zoological Garden, 1911.

Although the directorship was given to a German zoologist with past experience in zoo management, Dr Theodore Knottnerus-Meyer, the condition of the zoo rapidly declined. This was mainly due to the financial and time constraints imposed on the building schedule by the Rome Universal Exhibition of the same year and by the lack of transport from the city, with consequent low attendance (which was not encouraged by the death of the giraffe, sea lions, ibexes, orang-utan and others). In 1917 the Rome municipality took over responsibility for the zoo (Gippoliti, 1993). By 1930 the Hagenbeck panoramas had been severely mutilated by the collapse of Monte Cervino (1918), the division of Paradiso to create three enclosures for zebras and llamas (*c.* 1930), the moving of the ostriches to another area (before 1925), the creation of a pool for polar bears instead of the sea lion exhibit (*c.* 1923), the building of a great circular cage for black bears (*c.* 1922), and the rebuilding (on a smaller scale) of the large cat grottos (1926–27).

Milan

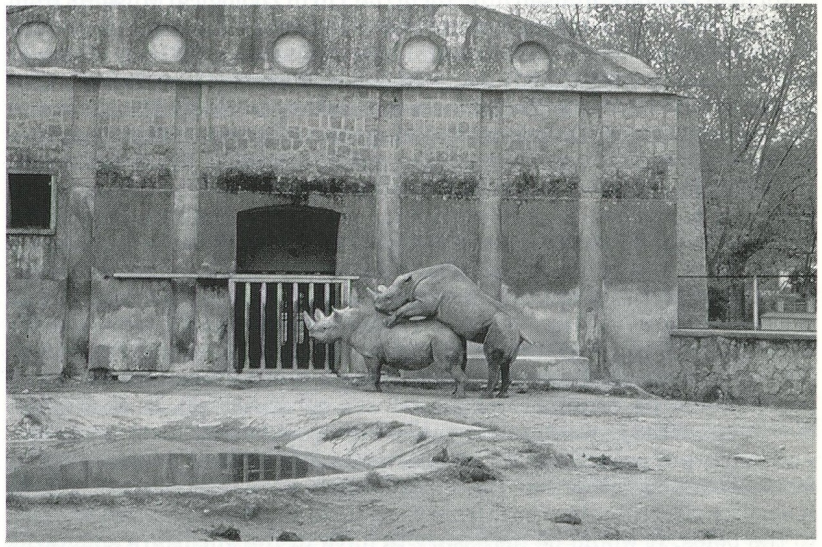
The first attempt to build a public zoo in Milan was probably that carried out under French rule in 1808, with a project for a botanical garden and menagerie on the model of the Jardin des Plantes (Vercelloni, 1987). In 1863 the zoologist Prof. Cornalia made another proposal for the creation of a true zoological and botanical garden in Milan, but without success. Loisel (1912) reports that in 1911 a 'Società del Giardino Zoologico di Milano' had a detailed plan to build a modern zoological park in Milan, following the example of Rome. But this ambitious plan – something of a mixture of the new Hagenbeckian style with a traditional 'postage-stamp' systematic collection – never materialised. In the meantime, some cages in the public gardens of Milan already existed in the second half of the 19th century. In 1871 this public menagerie included a giraffe house, a deer enclosure, an eagle cage and an area in which monkeys were chained to wooden poles. From 1930 on, this small zoo was managed by the Molinar firm, the best-known large Italian animal dealers of the time, but it closed in the 1980s, and at present the richest and most 'European' Italian city is without a modern zoological park, after almost 200 years of attempts to create one.

Genoa

In Genoa some live animals were kept alongside the Natural History Museum, founded in 1867, but it was only thanks to Oscar De Beaux that a true zoo was created. De Beaux spent some years at the Stellingen Tierpark in Hamburg. On his return to Italy, while working (first as curator of mammalogy and then as director) for the museum, he promoted the creation of a two-hectare zoo in the park of Genoa-Nervi in 1931. There he made some breeding experiments (a highly fashionable activity in those years), such as the production of a hybrid between blackbuck (*Antilope cervicapra*) and Isabelline gazelle (*Gazella dorcas isabella*), or the mixing of different geographic forms of jackal and leopard. The zoo was closed on 31 December 1940, and all the animals euthanized. Most of the animals formerly exhibited in the zoo are preserved in the museum.

Naples

The Naples Zoo was inaugurated on 25 October 1949. Earlier, however, in May 1940, the 'Triennial Overseas Exhibition' had been opened in Naples. The exhibition included a Faunistic Park with about 4,000 animals from the then Italian colonies in Africa, and, separately, a tropical aquarium. The latter was filled with fish from the Red Sea, but not from the Ethiopian lakes, as programmed, because of the ongoing war (Grieco, 1942). The Faunistic Park was created between 1937 and 1940 by the architect and city planner Luigi Piccinato (author of urban masterplans for Rome and Naples), and presented functional solutions to the housing of different species. The life of both the park and the aquarium seems to have been very short. The park was filled with animals from the Molinar firm, and the stocklist included – to mention only mammals – elephant, common hippo, black rhino, giraffe, zebra, beisa oryx, waterbuck, greater kudu, white-tailed gnu, Soemmerring's gazelle, lion, leopard, cheetah, serval, caracal, hyena, African wildcat, genet, white-tailed and Egyptian mongooses, African civet, ratel, gelada, hamadryas and common baboons, vervet monkey, guereza colobus, porcupine, wart hog and hyrax (Maschietti *et al.*, 1990). Thanks to the efforts of Paolo Cuneo, Naples was to have a zoo again in 1949, on the same site as the Faunistic Park, and some of its early exhibits achieved exceptional breeding records, among them black rhino, hippo and king vulture.



Black rhinos mating in the 1939 pachyderm house of Luigi Piccinato, Naples Zoo, 1984. (Photo: S. Gippoliti)

Both the Molinar and Terni firms of dealers were very active in organizing short-term exhibitions of newly-imported animals, especially

from Africa (Molinar) and India (Terni). In May 1937 a pair of rare Siberian cranes was presented by Terni to the King after being part of an exhibition in Florence. In April 1939, Terni returned from India with 4,000 animals, among them a pair of gaur and two (Asian!) cheetahs which were acquired by Rome Zoo.

Conclusion

This short survey of captive wild animal collections in the Italian peninsula could be considerably enlarged and improved by looking for references concerning the history and cultural life of the different cities from the Middle Ages to the Italian wars of independence. It is my hope that the present paper may encourage further research into this particular aspect of Italian history.

Another interesting aspect of menageries in Italy in the 19th century was the development of original and advanced theories on zoo 'philosophy' and management by some Italian zoologists, evidently well acquainted with the matter. According to Franco Andrea Bonelli (1784–1830), director of the Turin Zoological Museum, 'Zoological gardens . . . must be managed by intelligent and competent people; an accurate record must be kept of all that happens; there must be good vets, the zoos must be public, the animals must be accommodated in such a way that they can be observed easily by anybody without disturbing them in any way, by providing some means of observing them without the observer being seen.'

Michele Lessona, himself director of the Turin Zoological Museum from 1865 to 1894, left an original project for the housing of orang-utans in the Turin climate: '. . . It would mean keeping these animals at all times among trees in a constantly warm and humid atmosphere. During that period of the year when the animals cannot live in the open air, it would be advisable to keep them in an ample space with trees, at a temperature between 15° and 20° and a constant humidity of the air. This ample space should have a glass-covered vault like, for example, that of the gallery in Milan; it would not be necessary that it be very high, but that it be provided with a continuous renewal of air, always in the desired conditions of humidity and temperature. The walls of this glass-roofed enclosure could either be of glass too, or of brickwork, on condition that it was provided with many large windows. The animals' diet should be seasonally varied, taking into account the age and condition of each individual, but it should be substantially vegetable. Clear and clean water streams and pools should be running and placed among grassy plains and slight elevations of the ground, and together with trees there should be shrubs, and ladders or poles fitted with transverse wooden bars; the poles would be near to one another and the bars placed at such intervals as to make it easy for the animals to pass from one pole to another and from the trees to the poles. It would be necessary to have in the enclosure songbirds among the trees and gallinaceous birds on the ground, as well as rabbits, some sheep, goats or gazelles, and small dogs; the keeper with his family, and as often as possible other people as well.'

Even a preliminary investigation such as this one has uncovered evidence of the many contacts and the important influence of European zoo personalities, and the presence of interesting ideas also among their

Italian counterparts. Regrettably, the long history of human-animal relationships in Italy has not yet seen the rise of scientific zoological societies and the development of a widely-used professional code of management for animal collections. There is still no professional journal in Italian dealing with zoo matters, any more than there was 150 years ago. All these factors contribute to maintain an ambiguity between the roadside menagerie and the modern zoological collection in the eyes of Italian public opinion.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Pier Lorenzo Florio, Francesco Rocca, Giorgio Rossetti and Lothar Schlawe for help in preparing this manuscript, and Nicholas Gould for revising the English text.

References

Agnelli, P., Finotello, P.L., and Poggesi, M. (1991): Il Regio Giardino Zoologico Fiorentino. *Museologia Scientifica* 7: 285–309.

Anonymous (1935): *Il Giardino Zoologico di Roma nel XXV Anniversario*. Fratelli Palombi, Rome.

Ehrlinger, D. (1990): The Hagenbeck legacy. *International Zoo Yearbook* 29: 6–10.

Fisher, J. (1966): *Zoos of the World*. Aldus, London.

Gippoliti, S. (1993): Rome Zoo – its history, its decline and some proposals for its future. *International Zoo News* 40 (7): 35–39.

Grieco, H. (1942): Prime osservazioni biologiche sui pesci del Mar Rosso viventi nell'Acquario Tropicale della Triennale d'Oltremare. *Ann. Africa Ital.* 5 (4): 1,009–1,036.

Lessona, M. (1889): *Storia Naturale Illustrata, Vol. 1, Mammiferi*. Sonzogno, Milan.

Loisel, G. (1912): *Histoire des Ménageries de l'Antiquité à Nos Jours*. Octave Doin et Fils & Henry Laurens, Paris.

Maschietti, G., Muti, M., and Passerin d'Entreves, P. (1988): *Serragli e Menagerie*. U. Allemandi, Turin.

Maschietti, G., Muti, M., and Passerin d'Entreves, P. (1990): *Cent'anni di Storia di un Giardino Zoologico*. U. Allemandi, Turin.

Vercelloni, M. (1987): *Nella Storia e Oltre il Muro del Parco di Monza: Ménagerie Diffusa, Museo di Zoologia Fantastica*. Thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Milan Polytechnic.

de Vico Fallani, M. (1985): *Raffaele de Vico e i Giardini di Roma*. Sansoni, Florence.

Senoner, A. (1872): Zoologische Garten in Italien. *Der Zoologische Garten* 13 (9): 266–270.

Spartaco Gippoliti, Viale Liegi 48A, 00198 Roma, Italy.