

Pawing through the History of Bear Dancing in Europe

VON PELIN TÜNAYDIN (ISTANBUL)

An animal both venerated and feared, cherished and exploited, the bear is revealed by archeozoological findings to have held an important place in the lives of humans from time immemorial. Indeed, bears were not only appreciated for their ample supply of meat and fur, but also venerated by virtue of their grandeur, and perhaps more significantly, their highly anthropomorphic posture, occasional upright position, and omnivorous diet, resulting in legends of kinship¹ and bear cults. Bones of extinct cave bears have been unearthed in Switzerland and Germany; these seem to have been specially saved and positioned, suggesting the existence of a bear cult from some 60.000 years ago.² Discovered in 1994, the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc cave in Southern France displays some of the earliest cave paintings of Paleolithic humans known to date. In this 30.000-year-old cave, besides various bear drawings, a bear skull was found placed on what could possibly have been an altar.³ Known for its mother goddess cult believed to be represented in repeating reliefs and figurines, the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük located in the southern part of central Anatolia also exhibits bear imagery in different forms. Some wall paintings and reliefs previously interpreted as mother goddess depictions by former excavators, in fact, seem to represent anthropomorphic or therianthrope bear images in light of recent findings, giving rise to the notion of the bear cult as a distinguished ritual figure for Çatalhöyük communities.⁴ Moreover, some animal remains were uncovered at La Grande Rivoire rock shelter in France not too long ago. Among them was the lower jaw bone of a presumably male brown bear five or six years old that displayed a “peculiar deformation”. Consequent analysis showed that this deformation strongly suggested that bears were tamed and tethered as early as 6.000 BC and possibly traveled alongside the early itinerant hunter-gatherer communities.⁵

As illustrated by extant evidence from early societies onward, bears have been kept in captivity not only as possible guard animals, as status symbols, or as mere beastly feasts for the curious eyes, but also as performers for the entertainment of humans. The earliest known written source that mentions bear leading dates back to the ancient civilizations of the Near East. A tablet from the second millennium BC studied by the Assyriologist Ignace Jay Gelb lists entertainers of various households in the Lagash province in present-day Iraq. Among the 242 individuals catalogued are seven bear wards, alongside musicians/singers and snake charmers. For Gelb,

this profession “denoted an individual who plied his trade with a bear at his side and to the accompaniment of a musical instrument, presumably a kind of tambourine”, clearly linking this ancient practice to its later manifestations.⁶

Even if overshadowed by the extravagance and brutality of gladiatorial combats between wild animals and criminals condemned to “death by beasts” (*damnatio ad bestias*), Ancient Rome, too, witnessed bears and monkeys being led to dance and perform tricks for the amusement of the public.⁷ Unlike earlier times, though, bear keepers in the Byzantine Empire were acknowledged by a distinguishing name according to the twelfth-century canonist Theodore Balsamon: *Athinganoi*. Identified with the Gypsies⁸ (*Atsinganoi*) in the last decades, rather than the ninth-century heretical sect of the same name, this group was known to be “active as bearkeepers, snake charmers, and, in general, as animal trainers; also as acrobats and jugglers”.⁹ However, since their animal performances were not limited to entertainment but also involved claims of divinity and soothsaying, “those who drag[ged] a bear or similar animal after themselves for the enjoyment and the damage of simple-minded people and who tell the future, fate, horoscope, and whatever else may be the multitude of words of this erroneous trumpery” were to be condemned to a six-year excommunication.¹⁰ The common folk, on the other hand, was urged by the Patriarch Athanasius I of Constantinople (1230–1310) not to associate with the *Atsinganoi* or let them in their houses.¹¹

Performing Bears in European Countries

Like apes, horses, and dogs, bears were trained by performers “to imitate the actions of men, to tumble, to dance, and to perform a variety of tricks, contrary to their nature”. Illustrated manuscripts attest to the existence of tutored bears in England as early as the tenth century. Figure 1 shows a bear made to lie down reproduced from a tenth-century manuscript as well as three dancing bears and their leaders from the fourteenth century.¹² According to Linda Kalof, “Talented animals were extremely popular attractions – dancing bears, performing birds, and trained horses (...) had been standard entertainment in London since the sixteenth century. Spectators particularly enjoyed seeing animals trained to perform human behaviours”.¹³



- 1 *Bear dancing in early England: A bear made to lie down from a tenth-century manuscript (top), and three dancing bears and their leaders from the fourteenth. (Joseph Strutt, The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England, 1903 [1801], pl. 25.)*

While sources do not specify that animal performers were Gypsies, it should be noted that the first record of the presence of Gypsies in England dates back to 1505.¹⁴ Later accounts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mention groups of Gypsy bear leaders arriving in England and Scotland.¹⁵

Another form of exhibiting bears in England was bear baiting, namely the practice of chaining a bear to a pole and siccing a pack of aggressive dogs on it to watch them fight each other to death. This may in fact have been a more fashionable pastime for both commoners and royalty: “By the mid-sixteenth century bull and bear baiting had become institutionalised entertainments at the London bear garden in Southwark and were under the particular patronage of the monarch.”¹⁶ Dating back to at least 1484, the office of “the Master of the Bears” (initially called “Master, Guyder and Ruler of all our Bears”) was commissioned by the monarch and oversaw bear baiting activities in London, as well as granting licenses to – and generating income from – itinerant bear wards touring the provinces to put on matches.¹⁷ However, Julius Ruff notes that “Bear baiting was growing less and less common in [the early modern] period because

by the sixteenth century the beasts had to be imported into England. As a result they were not cheap and their owners, part of a nascent commercial entertainment industry, seldom allowed bears to be killed. Nevertheless, as they stood on their hind legs fending off attacking dogs, or rolled on those who had secured a hold on them, the bears’ agonies attracted many paying spectators”¹⁸

Bear baiting was banned by the British Parliament in 1835 (with the passing of the Cruelty to Animals Act), followed by the prohibition of bear leading at the relatively early date of 1911.¹⁹ This was partly the result of a heightening sensitivity to animal cruelty and growing concern for their humane treatment. Indeed, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was established in 1824; Princess (later Queen, r. 1837–1901) Victoria became a patron of the Society in 1835 and later granted it permission to add the prefix “Royal” to its name.²⁰ However, since bear leading was traditionally a Gypsy occupation, this effort to ban the practice may have also been the result of the government’s wish to check the country’s Gypsy population. Thus, “official references to Gypsies are to be found in the various statutes passed in order to curb, control and end their activities, way of life and presence in this country. The first of these was passed in 1530 in the reign of Henry VIII”;²¹ shortly after their first arrival and getting stricter in time.

The Germanic lands also have a long-standing familiarity with bears being led to dance and perform tricks. Hailing from thirteenth-century Arenberg and preserved at the Cologne City Museum, the upper skull of a male brown bear features certain anomalies which have been interpreted as strongly suggesting that it had belonged to a performing bear, most likely a remnant of the times of Viscounts Eberhard (r. 1200–1218) or Heinrich III (r. 1220–1252).²² Other early instances of performing bears include “jugglers with two bears” in Marburg in 1511, “Polish men with dancing bears” in Rothenburg in 1597, and Lapps displaying bears in Kassel in 1598.²³ Later, in the nineteenth century, during his travels throughout Europe, American folklorist Charles Leland (1824–1903) “met with [Hungarian Romany] exhibiting bears in Baden-Baden”. He noted that “These Ričinari,²⁴ or bear-leaders, form, however, a set within a set, and are in fact more nearly allied to the gypsy bear-leaders of Turkey and Syria than to any other of their own people. They are wild and rude to a proverb, and generally speak a peculiar dialect of Romany, which is called the Bear-leaders’ by philologists.”²⁵

As was the case in England, it would seem that the abolition of bear leading in this region awaited the first decades of the twentieth century. Theologian and animal welfarist Emil Knodt (1852–1924) voiced the suffering of various animal species in his 1903 pamphlet *Klagen der Tiere*. Among the 29 accounts of animals telling their stories of agony is one devoted to the plight of dancing bears, in which the bear would reproachfully say: “When men are happy, they dance; but when bears dance, they could not be farther from being

happy.”²⁶ Nearly three decades later, a newspaper clipping from 1929 reads: “The Ministry of the State of Bavaria has directed all police officials to refuse to extend the permits now in force for the exhibition of dancing bears and to issue no new permits. The Ministry declares that these exhibitions are frequently connected with cruel treatment of the animals and that anyway the public is showing less and less interest in the performances. Most of the owners of the bears are gypsies.”²⁷ Here, too, intensifying policies of sedentarization and assimilation directed towards Gypsies in Europe appears to have coincided with concerns for the welfare of animals.

With a long-standing circus tradition, Russian lands have been a leading site for the dancing of bears, “that most Russian of all animals” as Jane Costlow puts it. In addition to playing a ritualistic role in villages, bear performances, or “bear comedies”, for centuries have amused the Russian public who have in their language “at least twenty-seven nicknames or terms of indirection to use for the ‘one who knows where honey is’”.²⁸ Featuring Gypsies as trainers, as well as Tatars and Russian peasants from Transvolga,²⁹ Russian bear comedies took a blow and the recently established Russian Society for the Protection of Animals gained its reportedly first major victory when Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855–1881) issued the Imperial Edict on Bear Comedies in 1866: prohibiting the displaying of performing bears, reprehending the training methods and mutilation of these animals, the edict granted bear leaders five years to abandon this occupation. Yet most significantly, the ban “denounced the influence of this popular entertainment on the moral sensibilities of spectators as well as the bear trainers themselves, who were inclined to ‘hard-heartedness, immorality, drunkenness, and vagrancy’”.³⁰

Almost two decades later, the ban was to be committed to social memory with Vsevolod Garshin’s (1855–1888) 1883 satirical short story *The Bears*:

In September of 1857 the town of Bielsk was in a state of unwonted excitement. (...) The unhappy gypsies had journeyed hither from four Districts of the Government with all their household effects, horses, bears, etc. More than a hundred of these awkward beasts, ranging from tiny cubs to huge ‘old men’ whose coats had become grey or whitish from age, had collected on the town common. (...) The Authorities were waiting until all should arrive, so that the business of killing the bears might be carried out in one day and finished with once and for all. The gypsies had been given five years’ grace from the publication of the Order prohibiting performing bears, and now this period had expired. They were now to appear at specified places and themselves destroy their supporters.³¹

It has been suggested that some of the dancing bears may indeed have been killed following the ban, if not quite on the scale related by Garshin, though most are thought to



2 Mural from the Oltenia region of Romania. (<http://art-historia.blogspot.com/2009/05/inca-o-postare-pe-tema-monumentelor-din.html>)

have been sold to menageries and circuses.³² However, the practice held on into the Soviet period, during which both animal protection societies and anti-cruelty legislations were indefinitely suspended.³³ To this day, the tradition of dancing and skating bears continue in Russian circuses, if not on the streets.

Further to the north, it is recorded that two bears were exhibited in 1572 by Polish performers before Frederick II, King of Denmark and Norway (r. 1559–1588).³⁴ In the Swedish Empire, too, sources suggest that bear leaders during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came primarily from Poland (Smarhon) and Russia, as well as Hungary and the Balkans. One can assume that the practice of bear leading continued over the centuries: as of 1868, Swedish police were authorized to take action against animal exhibitors on the grounds that they posed a threat to public security. Finally, on December 30, 1916, King Gustaf V (r. 1907–1950) issued an edict regulating the exhibition of animals in menageries,³⁵ and in particular banning bear dancing, except for circuses where the practice lasted until the end of the 1950s.³⁶ Bear leading was most common in the Balkans which had a large Gypsy population that goes back to the thirteenth century.³⁷ For instance, in Bucharest, “the bear dance had turned into a regular practice among gypsy fiddlers and bandsmen as early as the seventeenth or eighteenth century”. Thus, in his *Report on Oltenia* (1727), General Charles von Tige mentions having seen “a lot of gypsies who used their flutes and cembalo to make 12 bears dance very gracefully” at the court of Voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu. For Viorel Cosma, their reception at “the princely court in Bucharest in the eighteenth century confirms not only the tradition of this age-old practice (nowadays passed on to circus performers), but also the amount of appreciation it received”.³⁸ (See Figure 2) Likewise in the Banat, eighteenth-century records indicate that Gypsies’ occupations included bear leading alongside



Macedonische Bärenreiber

- 3 Postcard from a photograph of Macedonian bear leaders. (Author's collection.)

charcoal burning, gold washing, horse trading and copper smithing.³⁹ In the early nineteenth century, the Ursari⁴⁰ also appeared among the different groups of Gypsy slaves of the Crown in Wallachia and Moldavia. They traveled from town to town exhibiting the bears they had captured in the Carpathian mountains, and paid the Crown 20 to 30 piasters annually for the privilege.⁴¹ Living in tents, they were “one of the most mobile ethnographic groups” in Europe.⁴²

As for the Bulgarian lands, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov argue the earliest bear leaders to appear there “were probably the Romani-speaking *Ričara*, the majority of whom later gradually left the Bulgarian lands. Probably during the second half of the nineteenth century, Romanian speaking *Ursara* took their place.”⁴³ The practice of bear dancing and bear-related folk rituals continued to feature prominently in both rural and urban settings in the Balkans, leaving their indelible mark on the cultural scene and social imaginary: the Bulgarian saying “A festival without a bear trainer is a waste of time”,⁴⁴ and the Serbian proverb “A bear has no fear of a tambourine but only of a cudgel”,⁴⁵ attest to that. During the 2000s, however, international efforts to abolish the practice once and for all bore fruit in countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and Romania, where it was most prevalent.

“Four-Legged Pupils”

Poland and France deserve special mention as the sites of specialized bear-leading schools. The ‘bear academy’ at Smarhon (Polish: Smorgonie, in present-day Belarus) was established in 1778⁴⁶ and remained the private estate of the princes of Radziwiłł until the nineteenth century. According to Jerzy Ficowski, the Radziwiłłs appointed Gypsy Kings under whose rule Smorgonie developed and expanded considerably. The duties of one of the Gypsy headmen included the founding of an Academy for Bears in Smorgonie, and



- 4 Anonymous hand-colored woodcut depicting a bear leading scene, from possibly the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, Poland. (Courtesy of the National Museum in Warsaw, inv. Gr.Pol.26491, photo. Wąsik Marcin)

the selection of talented Gypsies who would teach these animals to dance and perform other tricks, and arrange suitable accommodation for the four-legged pupils. Young bears caught for the purpose in the prince’s forests were brought to the academy at Smorgonie, and sometimes there were as many as several dozen animals there at one time. Radziwiłł also sent monkeys there to be trained. The establishment was open every day and a dozen or more Gypsies were permanently employed in looking after the animals and training them.⁴⁷

The bears, who had their ‘academic break’ between the 1 November and the 15 February,⁴⁸ were taught “all kinds of tricks – dancing in couples, pushing baby carriages, and so on – before they underwent a ‘final examination’ in front of a committee and were sold throughout the world. [A] bear trainer reported that one of his ‘black students,’ which he had presented as a gift, returned ‘from a place eight hours distant’ in order to ‘complete his studies in the fine art of dance.’”⁴⁹ Upon graduation, and “[w]ith royal permission, the Gypsy bear-leaders set off into the world with the graduates of the academy (...) ‘to amuse people with their acts, to collect groats from the spectators, both for the upkeep of themselves and their animals, and also for the payment to the Smorgonie treasury.’”⁵⁰

The founder of the academy was Jan Marcinkiewicz, who was appointed King of the Gypsies residing on the Radziwiłł estate in 1778. An eye-witness wrote in the 1780s:

In approaching His Highness the Prince as a faithful vassal, the king of the Gypsies had taught several bears to draw a cart in harness, which pleased the prince exceedingly. A Gypsy acted as a forerunner for these

bear tamers, and the outriders were monkeys. When once the king of the Gypsies rode in this way unexpectedly into the courtyard of the Radziwiłł palace at Nieśwież, the Prince was extraordinarily astonished and delighted and treated his guest royally, rushing up and saying: 'M'lord, gracious sovereign! You will be received as no guest is received anywhere in the world. Your visit has done me great honour which should be held in memory throughout generations'.⁵¹

Given this history, it comes as no surprise that the current coat of arms of the city of Smarhon features a black bear with a golden collar. (See Figure 5)

Bear leading in Polish territories suffered various setbacks during the nineteenth century: In the first decade of the nineteenth century, an official ban coupled with the policies of the partitioning powers made it increasingly rare to come across Gypsy bear-leaders. There were ever fewer of them to be found in the villages, and they only very rarely reached the towns and cities. 'It is as yet less than forty years since bands of Gypsies travelled in large numbers not only through our villages and small towns, but also through Warsaw itself, bringing with them bears that had been taught to dance', wrote K.W. Wóycicki in 1861. 'They would be found in the larger courtyards of the houses of the capital of the kingdom, in the squares of the towns, and a gaping crowd of the curious would soon collect to look at our Gypsies, the bears and their gambols'.⁵²

Another ban was issued at the end of the nineteenth century in Warsaw, prohibiting bear leaders and their families from entering the city. However, they could still be occasionally seen as late as the inter-war period.⁵³

Another school for bears was established in France, in the Ariègeois town of Ercé, though much later than its Polish counterpart. It is thought that local highlanders had learnt the practice from the Romanian Ursari in the nineteenth century. The curriculum included teaching the bears how to salute, simulate wrestling, simulate a defence against attacking dogs, and playing dead upon being "shot" by the leader.⁵⁴ During the year-long training, "an older bear acted as 'monitor'".⁵⁵

French bear leaders donned distinctive headdresses to pass themselves off as Gypsies, since they were well-reputed for their talents as animal trainers. However, World War I brought the end of the guild of Pyrenean bear leaders, allowing the Gypsies to reclaim their traditional occupation in the area.⁵⁶ In Ercé's neighboring town, "[t]he Ustou peasant", a newspaper reported, "either sold their bears to gypsies, or the younger son of the family would put on his béret, hand a few strings of onions over his shoulder, and set off with his bear to tramp the roads of Europe. He returned in time for the Spring plowing, with a pocketful of money earned by selling his onions and showing his bear."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in Paris, Gypsy bear and monkey leaders were spotted as late as the early 1960s.⁵⁸

5
Smarhon's (Belarus) coat of arms.



6
Bear leader in the Camargue. (Agence de presse Meurisse, 1921. National Library of France, EI-13 [2690].)



Performing Bears in the Ottoman Empire

As was the case in Western and Eastern countries around the same period, bear dancing was a popular amusement in the Ottoman Empire as well. Moreover, while royal recognition of the practice and reception of Gypsy bear leaders seem to have been isolated incidents in Europe, their appearance was well-established in Ottoman courtly events. While detailed information as to the significance of bear dancing in the daily life of ordinary subjects is lacking for the earlier periods, several foreign travelers such as Pierre Belon (1517–1564), Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw (1576–1635) and Philippe du Fresne-Canaye (1551–1610) expressed astonishment at the abundance of wild animals, including bears, in the streets of the capital. Thus, Wratislaw wrote of "wild beasts of various nature and form; lynxes and wild cats, leopards, bears, and lions, so tame and domesticated, that they are led up



416. Die Dörmü...
 Die Dörmü...
 Die Dörmü...

418. Die...
 Die...
 Die...

415. Die...
 Die...
 Die...

414. Die...
 Die...
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407. Die...
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410. Die...
 Die...
 Die...
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 Die...

7 Bear dancing in the courtyard of Elçi Hami in Çemberlitaş, Istanbul.
 (Löwenklaus album, c. 1586, fol. 141. Courtesy of the Austrian National Library, cod. 8615.)

and down the city by chains and ropes” in Istanbul.⁵⁹ However impressionistic and anecdotal they may be, accounts in travel literature provide valuable material that captures the sociocultural imaginary of the time and sheds light on both courtly and public affairs.

Bear leading was frequently featured at imperial processions and festivals. For instance, in his *Book of Travels*, the Ottoman traveler Evliyâ Çelebi (1611–1682) relates at great length the parade of craftsmen and artisans held in Istanbul prior to Murad IV’s (r. 1623–1640) campaign to Baghdad in 1638. While his numbers must generally be approached with caution, Evliyâ Çelebi indicates that there were as many as 70 bear leaders in this procession, all of whom were Gypsies residing in Istanbul. Appearing right before the butchers’ guild, the bear leaders are described as dragging their tethered bears with sticks and tambourines in their hands, reciting a tongue twister as they passed before the Sultan.⁶⁰

Books of festivals (*sûrnâme*) give vivid descriptions of Gypsy bear and monkey leaders who performed regularly at the grand entertainments held on the occasion of imperial weddings or circumcision festivals. The sumptuous festival celebrating the circumcision of Prince Mehmed (later Sultan Mehmed III, r. 1595–1603) took place at the Hippodrome in the summer of 1582 and lasted almost two whole months. For their performance, bear leaders brought along two bears and each took turns heaping praise upon his ursine workmate in highly anthropomorphic terms. All this mutual taunting was followed by the bears standing up on their hind legs and wrestling vehemently. After a while the bears calmed down, “turned hostility into festivity”, eagerly whirling and pretending to play the *zurna* and tambourine.⁶¹ While the author of this account did not identify the bear leaders, Johannes Löwenklau (1541–1594), who was visiting Istanbul at the time and attended the events, indicates that these bear performances were carried out by Gypsies.⁶²

In 1675, at the eighteen-day wedding of Mehmed IV’s (r. 1648–1687) daughter Hatice Sultan in Edirne, animal performances were greatly sought after and once again involved bears and monkeys as well as donkeys, goats, greyhounds, and snakes. According to the notes of John Covel (1638–1722), an English clergyman who witnessed the occasion, the spectacle of a bear wrestling with a naked boy was enjoyed so much that it was repeated several times before the Sultan.⁶³

One of the most celebrated Ottoman books of festivals was written and illustrated on the occasion of the circumcision festivities of the four sons of Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730). The lavish banquet was held in Istanbul in autumn 1720 and lasted 15 days, on the fourth of which Gypsy bear leaders made the scene, clanking their chains and holding their distinctive tambourines. A chamberlain by the nickname Çomar with a dreadful appearance started turning somersaults on the ground while reciting a tongue twister. (See Figure 8) What followed was Çomar tussling with a bear and the audience bursting into laughter in the face of this scene. Subsequently, the other bear leaders unchained the



8 A man wrestling with a bear at the circumcision festivities of the four sons of Ahmed III. (*Levni*, *Surnâme-i Vehbî*, c. 1730, fol. 58a. Courtesy of the Topkapı Palace Museum Library, A. 3593.)

bears and the interspecies duos performed all the wrestling moves normally carried out by pairs of humans. (See Figure 9) Following the maxim “Might makes right”, bears outmaneuvered their leaders. Afterwards, it was the monkey leaders’ turn on the ground where the animals impersonated dancing humans and displayed various difficult acts, teased and infuriated a number of goats, before finally collecting handfuls of tips from the audience and making their Gypsy handlers “happy as larks”.⁶⁴

Yet, the evident prevalence of the practice and its imperial recognition did not entail peaceful coexistence between the Ottoman public at large and the bear-leading Gypsies, whose community by and large was subjected to discriminatory taxation and exclusionary social status throughout the Empire. For instance, Alexander G. Paspali (?–1891), an Istanbul-born Greek physician and Gypsy lorist celebrated for writing the first comprehensive study of the language of Ottoman Gypsies, referred to bear and monkey leaders as



9 Gypsy bear leaders wrestling with their bears at the circumcision festivities of the four sons of Ahmed III. (*Levni*, *Surnâme-i Vehbî*, c. 1730, fol. 67a. Courtesy of the Topkapı Palace Museum Library, A. 3593.)

the wildest people of this race. They lead bears and monkeys in fairs and large cities. Some of them are blacksmiths during the winter. It is from among this class that the government finds its executioners. (...) Their gaze is savage, their walk proud. They do not form a class apart from the others, but are distinguished from fellow Gypsies by their savageness and rudeness.⁶⁵

A century later, on the eve of the fall of the Empire, a public gardens regulation was issued in Istanbul that prohibits animal performers, along with travelling musicians, singers, acrobats, jugglers and shoeshiners from entering the gardens.⁶⁶ Another document from the same year gives us a clearer idea about the pervasiveness of bears, and thus bear leading in the capital: a toll tariff for the two now-long-demolished bridges connecting the opposite shores of the

Golden Horn includes a toll for bears, which was the same amount demanded from each loaded porter and twice the amount collected from each pedestrian.⁶⁷ That such a tariff existed indicates that bears were still a common occurrence in the city.

It is said that the practice of bear leading disappeared for a while before making a reappearance in Istanbul and other big cities from the 1950s onwards.⁶⁸ And as of 1980s, it had mainly evolved into a tourist attraction. It was not until 1993 that, following some unsuccessful early attempts,⁶⁹ the government of the Republic of Turkey eradicated bear dancing with the initiative of an international bear rescue campaign called the LIBEARTY project.

The Aftermath

As evidenced by the abundant, yet sporadic accounts of bear dancing across the centuries, the history of the practice and its worldwide near total abolition closely parallels Gypsy/Romani history. As with many other traditional occupations, bear dancing, too, declined and disappeared in response to industrialization, rapid urbanization and the changing use patterns of public space, the transformation of public entertainment, and other factors. However, contrary to the disappearance of such Romani occupations as tinsmithing, sieve making, basket weaving, the demise of bear dancing was not the natural outcome of an evolutionary process, but a result of violent intervention. Given their already marginalized and socioeconomically disadvantaged status, bear-leading Roma were particularly vulnerable to intervention by authorities and were easy targets for campaigns mounted by modern-day animal liberation organizations which, for all their good intentions, failed to address the human costs of depriving people of their livelihood. Unlike their Eastern European counterparts who allegedly received a one-off sum of money in return for their confiscated bears, the bear leaders in Turkey were left completely empty-handed despite having been promised monetary compensation or permanent jobs by authorities. Moreover, it is noteworthy that while the abolition of bear dancing is salutary given the violence of the practice, bears and other animals continue to suffer and be exploited in more institutionalized settings and farther from public scrutiny, remaining socioculturally sanctioned. This side of the coin provides further indication that the success of the anti-bear dancing campaigns owes more to the ethnicity of the bear leaders and to a prejudiced 'civilizing mission' than to concern for animal welfare.

Annotations

- 1 See, for instance, A. Irving Hallowell: Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere; in *American Anthropologist New Series* 28, 1 (Jan.–Mar., 1926), p. 1–175; Altan Gökalp: Lours Anatolien: un oncle bien entreprenant; in *Études mongoles* 11

- (1980), p. 215–242; Julian Baldick: *Animal and Shaman – Ancient Religions of Central Asia*, London: I.B. Tauris 2000, passim; Michel Pastoureaux: *The Bear – History of a Fallen King*, trans. George Holoch, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2011 [2007], passim; Ergun Kocabıyık: *Dolaylı Hayvan – Süfli ve Şerefli, Hayvani ve Erotik, Şeytani ve Deli*, Istanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayinevi 2009, p. 104–142
- 2 James Serpell: *In the Company of Animals – A Study of Human–Animal Relationships*, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press (Canto) 1996 [1986], p. 182.
 - 3 Linda Kalof: Introduction – Ancient Animals; in Linda Kalof (Ed.): *A Cultural History Animals, Volume 2 – In Antiquity*, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers 2007, p. 1.
 - 4 Ali Umut Türkcan: Is it Goddess or Bear? The Role of Çatalhöyük Animal Seals in Neolithic Symbolism; in *Documenta Praehistorica* 34 (2007), p. 262.
 - 5 Louis Chaix, Anne Bridault and Régis Picavet: A Tamed Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos* L.) of the Late Mesolithic from La Grande-Rivoire (Isère, France)?; in *Journal of Archaeological Science* 24 (1997), p. 1067–1074.
 - 6 I.J. Gelb: *Homo Ludens in Early Mesopotamia*; in *Studia Orientalia* 46 (1975), p. 61–64.
 - 7 J.P.V.D. Balsdon: *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome*, London: Phoenix 2004 [1969], p. 288, 305, 306; George Jennison: *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2005 [1937], p. 78, 128–129, 167–168.
 - 8 Despite its long-standing and persisting pejorative connotations, I have opted for the term Gypsy based on its historical usage and overarching quality for a wide range of ethnonyms whose utilization and significance are complicated by imposed and/or assumed identities.
 - 9 George C. Soulis: The Gypsies in the Byzantine Empire and the Balkans in the Late Middle Ages; in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 15 (1961), p. 146–147, 163.
 - 10 Marie Theres Fögen: *Balsamon on Magic – From Roman Secular Law to Byzantine Canon Law*; in Henry Maguire (Ed.): *Byzantine Magic*, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection 1995, p. 100.
 - 11 Soulis: *Gypsies*, p. 147.
 - 12 Joseph Strutt: *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England – From the Earliest Period, Including the Rural and Domestic Recreations, May Games, Mummers, Pageants, Processions and Pompous Spectacles, Illustrated by Reproductions from Ancient Paintings in which are Represented Most of the Popular Diversions*, London: Methuen & Co. 1903 [1801], p. 195.
 - 13 Linda Kalof: *Looking at Animals in Human History*, London: Reaktion Books 2007, p. 115.
 - 14 Council of Europe, Project Education of Roma Children in Europe: *Arrival in Europe*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/FS2/2.0_arrival-europe_english.pdf, accessed November 8, 2012.
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