

RECENSIONI

FRANCESCO SCALFARI - VALORINE CHEROP CHEPKWONY

Primates in History, Myth, Art, and Science

(edited by Cecilia Veracini and Bernard Wood)

CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group, 2024, 344 pp.

In *Primates in History, Myth, Art, and Science*, editors Cecilia Veracini and Bernard Wood put together a great collection of essays that explore how non-human primates have been imagined, represented and studied throughout history. Central to the book's argument is the position occupied by primates in human thought and their crucial role in scientific investigation and myth formulation. Through the contributions of anthropologists, art historians, evolutionary biologists and historians of science, the work explores the symbolic and empirical significance of primates across cultures and historical periods.

The book is divided into five main sections: Primates in History, Primates in Myth and Religion, Primates in Art and Representation, Primates in Science and a final set of Regional Case Studies. Each section has several essays that situate primates within specific cultural or intellectual traditions.

In the first section, «Primates in History», explores early encounters with primates with a focus on of European exploration and colonialism and how it shaped textual and visual narratives that positioned primates as exotic curiosities and mirrors of human nature. It shows how primates became linked to wider ideas about difference, often appearing as boundary figures in discussions about civilization, race, and the line between humans and animals.

The second section, «Primates in Myth and Religion», turns to the symbolic and theological dimensions. Here primates portrayed in different aspects; as sacred figures, tricksters or moral exemplars across different cultural traditions. Some of the notable essays in the chapter examine Hanuman in Hindu mythology, the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) in Chinese folklore and the sacred status of monkeys in parts of Africa and South America. Overall, these essays show how primates are deeply embedded in many societies and cultures and how such representations both challenge and reinforce human-centric cosmologies.

«Primates in Art and Representation», is the third most visually stunning and analytically dense section of the book. The section is characterized

by visual material from European fine art, scientific illustration, colonial iconography and even circus posters and how they've shaped and changed scientific and cultural ideas. Especially great are the discussions of how primates were used in anatomical studies during the Enlightenment and how they figured in early debates about taxonomy and human resemblance.

In the fourth section, «Primates in Science», the focus shifts to the place of primates in natural history, comparative anatomy, evolutionary theory and modern primatology. Here, the authors follow the historical trajectory from Linnaean classification and Cuvier's anatomical dissections to Darwinian evolution and beyond. It also touches upon ethical issues surrounding the use of primates in laboratory settings.

Finally, the volume comes to a close with a collection of regional case studies that offer a valuable grounded on specific cultural and environmental contexts. While the earlier sections focused on Eurocentric narratives, the last section highlights the diverse epistemologies through which primate have been understood across the Americas, Asia, Africa and Oceania. Overall, this section exemplifies the editor's commitment to providing a global and decolonial perspective.

The editors bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to this work. On one hand, Cecilia Veracini, a biologist and anthropologist with degrees in Anthropological Sciences and the History of Science, is based at the University of Lisbon and has written extensively on the cultural history of science. On the other hand, Bernard Wood, a well-known paleoanthropologist and Professor of Human Origins at George Washington University, has spent decades examining primate and hominin anatomy, particularly through his work with Richard Leakey's important expeditions in Kenya. Their backgrounds in fieldwork, anatomy, and the history of ideas enhance the volume with both academic integrity and depth.

The volume's main strength lies in its blend of academic views; historians, anthropologists, and biologists share their insights, letting readers track the growth of both primates and our understanding of them over time. The inclusion of early illustrations, many of which are rare, adds visual appeal and historical context. A useful glossary at the end makes the book easier to understand, especially for students or newcomers to the subject.

This book will particularly attract students and scholars in anthropology, evolutionary biology, art history, and the history of science. It speaks to anyone curious about how animals, especially primates, have shaped human thoughts on identity, knowledge, and the natural world. Overall, *Primates in History, Myth, Art, and Science* is more than just a simple collection of essays. It encourages readers to reflect on the deep ties between humans and our primate relatives throughout time, cultures, and academic fields.



Primates in History, Myth, Art, and Science

Edited by
Cecilia Veracini
and **Bernard Wood**

 **CRC Press**
Taylor & Francis Group