

THE STAG BEETLE *LUCANUS CERVUS* (COLEOPTERA, LUCANIDAE)  
IN ART AND MYTHOLOGY

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RÉSUMÉ. — *Le Lucane cerf-volant* *Lucanus cervus* (Coleoptera, Lucanidae) dans l'art et la mythologie. — Connu en Europe depuis l'Antiquité, *Lucanus cervus*, le plus grand Coléoptère européen, a de tout temps captivé l'imagination et fasciné l'humanité. Les premières sources écrites dans lesquelles il est mentionné remontent à la Grèce ancienne et les dernières sont de très récentes peintures de lucanes mâles du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, ce qui démontre une remarquable durée de l'intérêt porté à cet insecte charismatique. La popularité du Lucane repose non seulement sur les légendes mythologiques mais aussi sur ses pouvoirs magiques. Au cours du temps, il s'est lentement débarrassé de la signification symbolique qui lui avait été assignée pour prendre une fonction descriptive et décorative, devenant au final le sujet favori de beaucoup d'artistes. Par son aptitude à stimuler l'imagination populaire et à jouer une variété de rôles, le Lucane apparaît même dans les illustrations satiriques. Il est inscrit au répertoire décoratif de l'Art Nouveau sur les porcelaines, les bijoux, les timbres et une variété de biens de consommation.

*Mots-clés*: Coléoptères, *Lucanus cervus*, art, mythologie.

SUMMARY. — *Lucanus cervus*, the largest European beetle, has incessantly captured the imagination and fascination of mankind and has been known in Europe since the antiquity. The first written sources, in which it is mentioned, appear in ancient Greece and the last are very recent paintings of male stag beetles from the 21st century, demonstrating a very impressive span for this charismatic beetle. The stag beetle's popularity is based not only on the mythological tales, but also on its magical powers. By the time, it slowly rid itself of the once assigned symbolic meaning and took on a descriptive and decorative function, finally becoming the favourite subject of many artists. Thanks to its ability to stimulate people's imagination and to be transformed into a variety of roles, the stag beetle appears even in satirical illustrations. It is included in the repertory of decorative Art Nouveau, on porcelain, on jewellery, on stamps and on a variety of consumer goods.

*Keywords*: Coleoptera, *Lucanus cervus*, art, mythology.

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*Lucanus cervus*, the conspicuous and largest European beetle, has incessantly captured the imagination and fascination of mankind. Impressive and almost menacing in appearance, due to the massive mouthparts of the male, it has been known in Europe since the antiquity and surfaces in various legends. The beetle appears mystical and was submersed in secrecy. Not until the 19th century, with the arrival of Egyptomania and the popularity of the holy scarab beetle, did it lose some of its symbolic power.

A several years research in many libraries, in different museums in Germany and Switzerland and in internet resulted in a book about the stag beetle in art and mythology (Sprecher & Taroni, 2004). Here, a short version of the richly illustrated book is given.

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## MYTHOLOGY, SUPERSTITION AND LEGEND

The first written sources, in which the stag beetle is mentioned, appear in ancient Greece by the Greek poet Sophokles. In one of his Satyr plays, the resemblance between the lyre and the head of the stag beetle is mentioned. Aristophanes in a comedy describes a children's game that was widespread in ancient Greece and in another comedy, a further, more obvious reference to the custom of tying beetles with a thread. These verses remind us of a common children's game of the past century played in rural areas throughout Europe. Children would collect beetles, tie a thread to a leg and then allow the beetle to fly about on the tether. Perhaps the French word "*cerf-volant*" for kite and stag beetle as well was derived from this game. This game is depicted on the title page of "*Abhandlungen von Insecten*" by Jacob Christian Schäffer. A putto holds a flying stag beetle by a tether (Fig. 1).

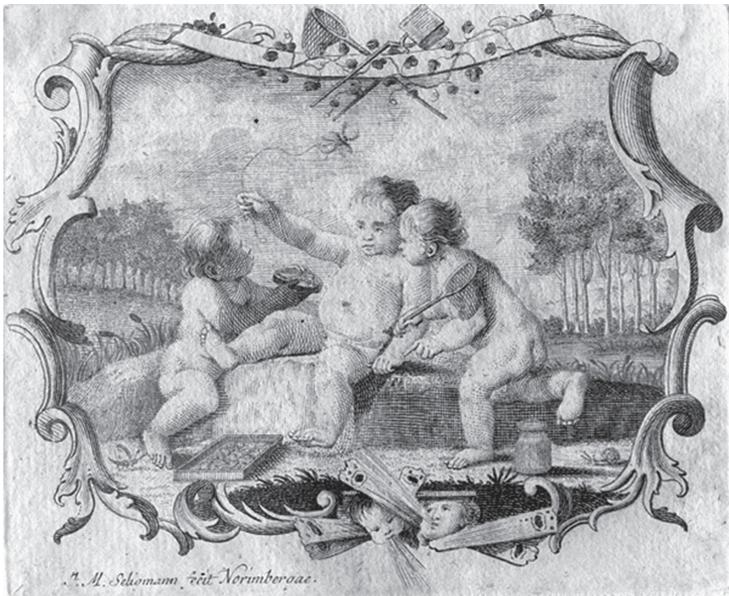


Figure 1. — Jacob Christian Schäffer, *Abhandlungen von Insecten*. Title page (1774-1779). Bibliothek ETH, Zurich.

The stag beetle was catapulted into the world of myths by the Greek poet Nikander from Kolophon. The shepherd Cerambos, in Nikanders "*Transformation*", is transformed into a stag beetle after a quarrel with the nymphs. This story resurfaced in a new version written by Ovid in the Augustan age of Rome. Antonius Liberalis inspired by the same story, wrote a summary of Nikanders narration around 150 AC: The shepherd Cerambos was a talented and by the nymphs prized singer. After a dispute, the nymphs used their magical powers and turned him into a large beetle with "horns". However, the beetle referred by modern entomological use as "*Cerambyx*", is not a stag beetle, but a longhorn beetle with short mandibles (Cerambycidae).

The stag beetle's popularity is based not only on the mythological tales, but also on its magical powers, reputed since the time of the Romans. The historian, Pliny the Elder, wrote that it was customary by both the Greeks and Romans to hang stag beetle heads around children's necks to ward off illness. This custom, or remnants thereof, survives in several Central European countries. In Germany, the stag beetle can still be found as an accessory in the traditional Bavarian costume. A silver embossed stag beetle head sometimes hangs on the "*Charivari*", a silver chain attached to the front of the "*Lederhosen*", as a talisman. The Bavar-

ians also used the ashes of the stag beetle, originally a sexual stimulant, as an effective love potion. On the other hand, the beetle's pincers were worn in the Austrian Vorarlberg region as an amulet to prevent cramps. Initially used as a diuretic, the beetle was later used as a remedy to stop children from wetting the bed. The last confirmed accounts of the therapeutic effects of the stag beetle mandibles were later reported by Thomas Mouffet. A few decades later, the Italian natural scientist Ferrante Imperato reinstated this Central European credence. He wrote that the stag beetle was treasured for its pain relieving properties and alleviation of leg cramps, and recommended wearing an amulet with a stag beetle mounted in gold or silver.

However, the stag beetle's reputation was not only positive. Jacob Grimm, best known for his fairy tales, wrote about the traditions and customs in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century. A large number of traditional expressions for stag beetle can be found in this volume. For example, the terms "*Feuerschröter*" (fire spreader) or "*Hausbrenner*" (house burner) testify for the wide-spread belief that stag beetles, by carrying coals from the hearth up to the attic with their strong mandibles, were responsible for the frequent domestic fires during this time period. Names such as "*Donnergueg*" (thunder abetting) or "*Donnerschröter*" (thunder spreader) indicate that stag-beetles attract lightning and were therefore banned from entering the home. Because of this popular belief, scientists assumed a parallel between the stag beetle and the Germanic god Donar or Thor, the god of thunder and protector of the harvest. Yet, the role of lightning rod and the assumed relationship to the god Donar may be due more to the fact that lightning tends to strike lone standing oaks, which happens to be the preferred habitat of the stag beetle. The relationship between the stag beetle and lightning is apparent in the Vosges Region, where they believed that a stag beetle head worn on a hat provided protection from lightning and the evil-eye.

## THE STAG BEETLE IN THE ARTS

The stag beetle makes its entry into art history on a miniature illumination. Giovannino de Grassi, at the end of the 14th century, portrayed the stag beetle flying away from a group of deer situated on the lower part of the painting, toward God who is sitting amongst hermits in the centre of the composition. The unusual presence of a stag beetle in a devotional painting is not coincidental, but rather based on the stag beetle's symbolic value for Jesus-Christ. This interpretation is supported by the similarity between the mandibles of the stag beetle and the antlers of the deer. Deer, because of their supposed ability to fight snakes, have been honoured as holy animals since the antiquity, and are often used in Christian paintings symbolizing Christ as victor over evil. The Christian symbolism of the stag beetle can be found in several German paintings of the 15th century. An example of this is Stefan Lochner's work in the Cathedral of Cologne, the Altar of the City Patron of Cologne, in which a small stag beetle can be seen peering out of the grass on the right panel. It also appears in two paintings of Albrecht Dürer.

The stag beetle, thanks to the great master Albrecht Dürer, finally ascends to the main subject in a painting. With the eyes of a naturalist, and by abandoning Christian symbolism, Dürer creates a watercolour that is dedicated entirely to the splendid male stag beetle. This painting by Dürer remained the primarily model for later works of art, and an exemplary prototype for generations of artists, which either copied it or were inspired by it. Dürer's pupil, Hans Hoffman, copied Dürer's popular watercolour from 1505 twice. A *Lucanus cervus* is also the main focal point of two wonderful watercolours from the Dutch artist Georg Hoefnagel.

The stag beetle, as well as the other animals and plants, resume a religious meaning in a painting from Peter Binoit. The stag beetle, once again symbolizes the victor over evil. In contrast, still life paintings from other artists show unadorned tables, which for example depict the stag beetle approaching a bowl of plums. Another German painter, Georg Flegel, also relished in livening his table settings with various insects and other small animals. The stag beetle was certainly one of the most recurrent motives in his work, often as sole living element in the painting (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. — Georg Flegel, *Esswaren mit Käfern und Meise*, 16th/17th century. Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Kunstmuseum, Basel.

About the same time, Otto Marseus van Schrieck dedicated a splendid and romantic painting to the stag beetle, on which a male and female *Lucanus cervus* are flying around a hazel shrub. In a further painting he portrays the beetle fighting with a wasp next to a bird's nest.

A rare illustration of a female stag beetle was painted by the Italian painter Giovanna Garzoni. She was famous for her illustrations of flowers and leaves carefully adorned with small insects, which she painted with the attentiveness of a botanist. The same remarkable attentiveness and observational gift are encountered by the brilliant painter Maria Sibylla Merian. Her many books captivate through their accuracy and precision to details and truly are entomological studies. The stag beetle appears in only two of her paintings.

Converging on present day, we find a stag beetle once again in a 1951 painting from the surrealist artist Félix Labisse. A huge male beetle appears to be escaping from the painting, which the painter is presently working on. Not only the façade of the library of Eberswalde, designed by the famous Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, decorated with photos chosen by Thomas Ruff and showing a long series of male stag beetles, but also paintings by the German Klaus Fabian, the Flemish Jan Fabre and the Swiss Urs Aeschbacher, demonstrate that even at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the stag beetle is still a popular subject and inspiring modern artists.

## ENTOMOLOGICAL PICTURES

First indications of the impending interest in entomology, which led to precise zoological articles and illustrated handbooks in the beginning of the 16th century, can be seen in Albrecht Dürer's famous watercolour from 1505. One of the first examples of this type of scientific publications are the "*Archetypa*" from 1592, with 48 copper engravings dedicated to both animal and plant life, by the Dutch artist Jakob Hoefnagel. Plants, insects and other small animals continue to show his father's, Georg Hoefnagel, concept of painting and style of presentation. Both panels, on which a stag beetle is shown, give exact replications of Georg's presentation. Thirty years later, Jakob Hoefnagel published another series of panels entitled "*Diversae insectorum*", which are dedicated entirely to insects and once again adorned with the same stag beetle motives as in his previous work.

The first significant naturalist publication, the monumental work of Ulisse Aldrovandi (1602) from Bologna, was published in Italy. He dedicated 7 volumes entirely to insects entitled “*De animalibus insectis*”. In one illustration he depicts two stag beetles of different size, whereby the smaller beetle measures merely half the size of the larger beetle. This suggests that Aldrovandi actually observed and ascertained the variation in body size. He also mentions several particulars, for example different popular names for the stag beetle used during various era in the most important European regions. John Johnstonus, author of “*Historiae naturalis de insectis*”, literally appropriated Aldrovandi’s work in the mid 17th century. He not only quoted verbatim the section on popular names, but he also reproduced the drawings on a panel. The title page is adorned with a stag beetle in flight, surrounded by the tails of a snake and dragon. Further scientific publications with fine engraving appeared, one example is “*Insectorum sive Minimorum Animalium Theatrum*” by Thomas Mouffet (1634). The famous naturalist, Ferrante Imperato, also depicts two different sized stag beetles in very simple drawings in his “*Historia Naturale*” (1672). He, in contrast to Mouffet, also is mistaken in assuming that the smaller male specimen is the female.

The naturalist Johann Jacob Scheuchzer describes God’s creation of nature in his treatise, “*Physica Sacra*”(1731). One panel depicts all of the insect orders in a valley basin in the Alps and right up in front a stag beetle, which is very similar to the one in the “*Archetypa*” (Fig. 3). A stag beetle in a meadow in the company of other insects is the motive of a beautifully hand painted print in the “*Monatlich herausgegebenen Insectenbelustigung*” by the German August Rösel von Rosenhof (1749). This volume is one of the most treasured books of the 18th century.



Figure 3. — Johann Jacob Scheuchzer, *Physica sacra*. Plate XII, 1731. Universitätsbibliothek, Basel.

The German scientists Carl Gustav Jablonsky and Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Herbst are credited for first attempting to portray known beetles in a strict scientific manner. One panel in their book “*Käfer*” (1785) clearly shows the size variation of males and also how the size differs from that of the female. “*Fauna Insectorum Germanicae Initia*” is a further relevant entomological contribution from the German author Georg Wolfgang Franz Panzer. It is adorned with hand coloured printed engravings from the famous naturalist Jakob Sturm.

Hereafter and throughout the 19th century, detailed and accurate entomological panels accompanied scientifically written papers. The most popular publication on European beetles was the famous “*Calwers Käferbuch*” by Carl Gustav Calwer (1858) in Stuttgart. Its success was due to the complete classification and illustrations of each species. Samuel Constant Snel-len Van Vollenhoven finally published his book “*Insecten*” (1870) showing all the developmental stages in the life of a stag beetle, from egg to larva up to the fully developed beetle, in an underground cross-section. Later, Émile Blanchard dedicated a chapter to the “*Métamorphose du cerf-volant*” in his publication “*Métamorphoses*” (1877). The stag beetle adorned the cover page of several popular books such as the “*Fauna Germanica*” by Reitter (1909). Monographs from the 20th century, which dealt with stag beetles include the books by Robert Didier.

## DECORATIONS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

A precious silver case was one of the first objects of decorative art adorned with a *Lucanus cervus*. The goldsmith Wenzel Jamnitzer from Nuremberg created it around 1565. The exterior is richly embellished with plants, on which insects, lizards and spiders crawl about. The lid is garnished with different animals and a stag beetle is located in the centre. Two centuries later, the stag beetle appears on various ceramic items, for instance, on a gorgeous porcelain platter from Faïence of Strasbourg and on Meissner porcelain from 1740, hand-painted by Johann Joachim Kändler. A stag beetle with open elytra, which is an exact replica of the beetle in Hoefnagel’s “*Archetypa*”, is painted on the tray of a delightful solitary coffee set from the porcelain manufacture Frankenthal. An impressive example of ceramic from the secession era is the “*Hirschkäferreiter*” (1919). This work depicts a putto riding on a giant stag beetle made of gold by the Polish artist Michael Powolny. Even today we find stag beetles adorning porcelain objects, such as the stag beetle plate made by the German Porcelain Company Gilitzer.

Insects also inspired the artwork of goldsmiths, the production of jewellery. The abundant fantasy of famous goldsmiths transformed *Lucanus cervus* into a valuable timepiece and into elegant silver and gold brooches. The stag beetle was also utilized to decorate everyday items: ceramic knickknacks, paper weights. The stylized form of a stag beetle can also be found on rod iron bootjacks from England.

It was common in the philately to dedicate postage stamps to animals. The butterfly was most readily chosen amongst the insects, but the stag beetle was not neglected. The first country to print a stamp with a stag beetle was Hungary in 1953. It is rarely embossed on coins: the only ones in the world are the silver coins from Poland valued at 20 and 2 Zloty.

An exceptional repertoire of forms and colours emerge during the Art Nouveau period. The stag beetle, along with an entire regiment of insects, stimulated the imagination of numerous artists. For example, it can be seen amongst leaves teeming with beetles on a tablet from the Jules Auguste Habert-Dys collection. Maurice Pillard Verneuil produced a lovely strip motif in his “*L’animal dans la décoration*” (1897). The grand master of Art Nouveau, Alphonse Mucha, shows in an article entitled “*Insectes*” three studies dedicated to stag beetles: a *Lucanus cervus* in various positions, a lively decorated border with alternating stag beetles and sunflowers and a splendid study of a vase with two lucanids.

The stag beetle also advanced into the satirical scene of this period. Works by Wilhelm Busch or the brilliant drawings by Grandville, demonstrate this advance. The great French cartoonist and illustrator immortalized the beetle in his illustrations of fables from La Fontaine and in the “*Métamorphoses du Jour*” (1839), where a stag beetle follows a procession of insects, dressed as a priest. In the “*Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux*” (1842), it is dressed on the title page as master of ceremonies. The drawings of the Swiss Martin Disteli are also inspired by Grandville’s work. He drew a stag beetle, together with other insects, listening to the sermon of a grasshopper. A further picture shows a wild male brutally killing grasshoppers in spite of pleas from another grasshopper.

A drawing by Lothar Meggendorfer for the children’s book “*Prinz Liliput*” shows a stag beetle threatening a small prince, who in panic is trying to escape by climbing a toadstool.

The beetle can also be seen in the children's story "*Sommervögel*" by Ernst Kreidolf: once at a track event standing with other beetles in front of a grandstand full of butterflies with human faces and once with real deer antler playing a horn in the company of two moth fairies while passing through a moon flooded forest on a summer night (Fig. 4). In the story "*The Butterfly Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast*", the English illustrator Alan Aldridge depicts a stag beetle playing in a band, assisting a kingfisher with the fishing net or as a battle horse ridden by an ant in shining armour.

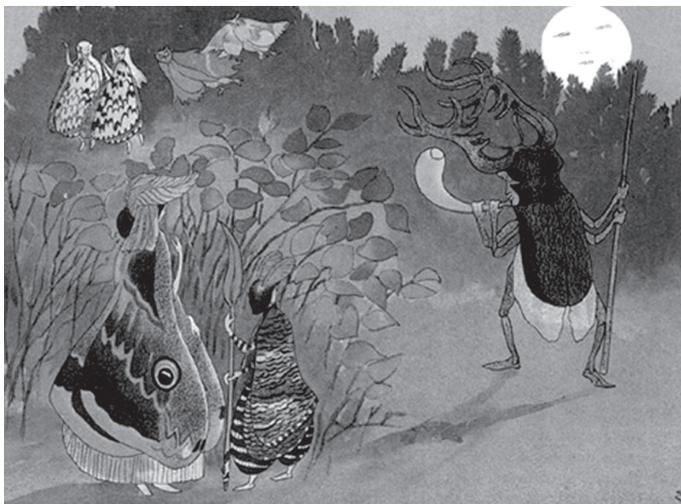


Figure 4. — Ernst Kreidolf, *Sommervögel. Mondnacht*, 1908. Kunstmuseum, Bern.

## DISCUSSION

These various fragments confirm that *Lucanus cervus* has always had a profound impact on man from earlier epochs through to till present day. The purpose of the glimpse through a two millenniums of mythology and art was to demonstrate how *Lucanus cervus* slowly but surely rid itself of the once assigned, yet never quite forgotten symbolic meaning. And how it took on a descriptive and decorative function, finally becoming the favourite subject of many artists who perhaps succumbed to the magic of this splendid animal, transforming table settings, still-life portraits and forest scenes with its sheer presence. After having nurtured many myths and legends and having roused the imagination of many artists and scholars, the stag beetle, despite its menacing appearance, has established itself in modern art and even has survived industrialization. It is included in the repertory of decorative Art Nouveau, on porcelain, on jewellery, on stamps or on coins and on a variety of consumer goods. Thanks to its ability to stimulate people's imagination and its ability to be transformed into a variety of roles, the stag beetle continues to appear in satirical illustrations and advertisements. And although we tend to have lost some of our natural enthusiasm, the glimpse of the impressive male stag beetle on a warm summer evening still continues to amaze and delight us.

## REFERENCE

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