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A Russian Polar Bear in Stockholm

Notes on Animal Diplomacy

The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus* PHIPPS, 1774) has been known in Europe since antiquity. It was also very much sought after and it early became an appreciated diplomatic gift among rulers in Europe and beyond. Hunters and travellers in the subarctic areas were of course acquainted with the species. German traveller Friedrich Martens, who sailed to Svalbard, described it in 1675 as *Ursus maritimus albus major* in his travel report. This was known to Linnaeus, but since he never had seen the animal himself he obviously regarded it as a white variety (“perhaps of a distinct species, not seen by us”) of the common brown bear and listed it for the time being as a synonym to the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) in *Systema naturae* (1758). It was therefore not Linnaeus who named it as a distinct species, but the English explorer Constantine Phipps, 2nd Baron Mulgrave, who in a travelogue in 1774 gave the first valid scientific description of the polar bear.¹

Animals as Diplomatic Gifts

The exchange of *gifts* between rulers is a long-standing tradition. For centuries the ties between royal and influential families have been confirmed by animals exchanged as gifts. Skeletons of large dogs reminding of Borzoi sight hounds have been found for instance in Iron Age burial sites with boat tombs in Vendel and Valsgärde near Uppsala in Sweden. They are considered to be diplomatic gifts between magnate families, perhaps arriving from the East Slavic territories (now Russia).²

During the medieval period animals were common diplomatic gifts among rulers in Europe. We know for instance that Emperor Charlemagne had several menageries in Holland and Germany, where he housed monkeys,





The Polar Bear in Stockholm 1686. Painting by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl.

lions, bears, camels, falcons, and many exotic birds. Charlemagne received exotic animals for his collection as gifts from rulers also outside Europe.³ In 797, the Caliph of Baghdad Harun al-Rashid presented Charlemagne with an Asian elephant named Abul-Abbas. It arrived on July 1, 802 to the Emperor's residence in Aachen. Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, had an impressive menagerie including many exotic birds given to him from other rulers. In early 1515, the King of Portugal, Manuel I, received as a gift from Sultan Muzafar II, ruler of Cambay, an Indian rhinoceros. After the arrival to Lisboa the Portuguese King sent the astonishing creature as a gift for Pope Leo X, but unfortunately the poor animal died in a shipwreck off the coast of Italy in early 1516.⁴

King Henry I of England (1068–1135) kept at Woodstock in Oxfordshire lions, leopards, camels and lynx which he had received from foreign princes. The Tower of London, probably founded in 1204, had turned into an





expanding menagerie due to the many diplomatic animal gifts the English King received from foreign rulers: leopards, lions and elephants were given to Henry III. In 1251, Henry III received a polar bear, whose food the city of London had to pay for. It was allowed to fish in the Thames. Many exotic animals were sent during the centuries to England. King James I received a cassowary (*Casuarius casuarius*) from Maurice, Prince of Orange, which survived for five years in England. The examples are of course countless and here we can only number some of them.⁵

In the course of history, small packs of reindeer from Sweden, usually in the company of a few Sámi herders, were sent to various courts in Europe, for instance the Prince-Bishop of Salzburg in 1662, Louis XIV, King of France in 1665 and Wilhelm III of Orania in 1686. Also elks have been sent from Sweden as royal gifts. In 1805 King Gustav IV Adolph sent an elk bull and cow to Prince-Elector Maximilian IV Joseph of Bavaria.⁶ Swedish monarchs have also received exotic animals as gifts. An area in Djurgården, Stockholm, is still known as Lejonslätten ('the Lion Plain'), because the king kept several lions there during the eighteenth century, a gift from the Sultan of Morocco and the Dey of Algiers, as a manifest proof of the diplomatic relations between the so-called Barbary States and Sweden.⁷

Contemporary Animal Diplomacy

In June 1953, Ho Chi Minh, then Prime Minister of North Vietnam, sent Chinese chairman Mao Zedong two Asian elephants as gifts as a symbol of friendship between the two countries. In 1956, when Soong Ching Ling, then vice-chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress, visited Burma, she was given two sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus* (RAFFLES, 1821)). In return, China later gave Burma a pair of sika deer and 100 goldfish.⁸

Exotic and unusual animals are still given as a diplomatic gesture, today however on a smaller scale and less exotic than previously in the face of changed social attitudes and protection laws. When Vladimir Putin visited Bulgaria on November 13, 2010, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov handed over a big Karakachan puppy, an impressive breed used as a livestock guardian dog by the herdsmen in Bulgarian mountain massifs, as a gift to his obviously surprised but delighted Russian guest. The dog was later named Buffy and





is now living in the home of the Russian president in Moscow. Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov presented an Akhal-Teke horse to President Xi Jinping on May 12, 2014. Also American President George W. Bush once received a puppy of a sheepdog from Bulgaria.⁹

The practice of using pandas as diplomatic gifts – in the 1970s known as panda diplomacy – has a long tradition in China. For instance, during the Tang Dynasty, Empress Wu Zetian (625–705) sent a pair of giant pandas (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca* (DAVID, 1869)) to the Japanese emperor. This custom was taken up again by the Communist regime in the late 1950s. It drew international attention when the People's Republic of China in the 1970s began to use its unique pandas in its efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the Western world. After Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, Washington received two rare giant pandas – Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling (the American president reciprocated by sending back a pair of musk oxen to Beijing). National Zoo in Washington received them from the president family and the pandas became enormously popular among the public. They were followed by others, for instance to France in 1973, when President Pompidou received two pandas, known as Yen-Yen and Li-Li (she passed away already in 1974), from China. They were kept in Bois de Vincennes Zoological Park in Paris. In 1974, when Prime Minister Edward Heath visited China, Great Britain received a couple – Chia-Chia and Ching-Ching – destined for London Zoo. In 1982, China stopped presenting pandas as gifts and only rents them out, because of the dwindling number of the animals in the country and the difficulties to reproduce them in captivity. Between 1957 and 1982 a total of 23 pandas have been given away by the Chinese government.¹⁰

Rare animals are still used as diplomatic gifts. In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, five Chinese sturgeons (*Acipenser sinensis* J. E. GRAY, 1835), symbolising the five Olympic rings, were given by China's Government to Hongkong, Little Prince George of Great Britain, and earlier his parents, have been given crocodiles in Australia.¹¹

Animal Gifts for Swedish Royals

The present King Charles XVI Gustav of Sweden has also received animals as gifts. Most well-known are the two Asian elephants, Bua and Saonoi, which





he received in 2004 from Thai King Bhumibol. The elephants are nowadays kept in the Kolmården Zoological Gardens. Also more everyday animals are among the gifts, however; in 2002 the Slovak president presented a Slovenský kopov, a hunting breed, named Zila, to the Swedish king.¹²

In modern times, presidents Urho Kekkonen and Mauno Koivisto from Finland have received horses, including the rare Orlov breed, during visits to the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. President Martti Ahtisaari visited South Africa in 1997 and was presented a rhinoceros, but Finnish zoos, including Korkeasaari/Högholmen Zoo, could not host it. In Korkeasaari a tropical building for animals from Africa and Asia was in progress. When Africasia was opened in 2002, part of the plants and small animals were presented as gifts by South Africa. President until 2012, Tarja Halonen, who is a well-known cat-lover and whose both cats had died recently, received a Siberian kitten from Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedyev and his family in 2013.¹³

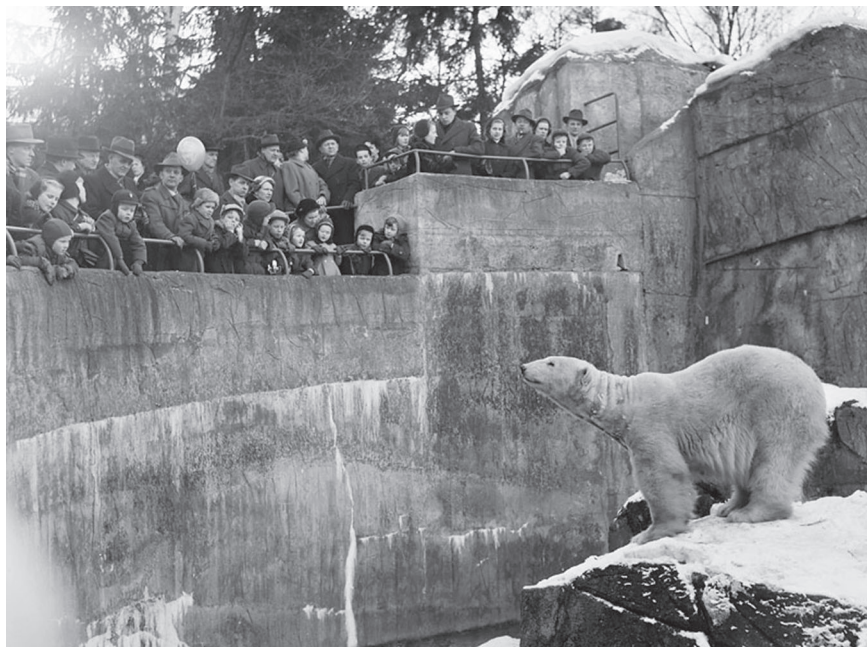
Polar Bears

Polar bears were given as gifts by Icelanders and from Greenland to Norwegian and Danish kings in exchange for services in early Medieval times. A story about Auðun Västfjording tells that he started on a trip to Denmark, buying a bear for all his money. After delivering the polar bear, Auðun wished to continue on a pilgrimage to Rome, which the king paid. Returning, the grateful king again paid for a ship which took the pilgrim back to Iceland.¹⁴

Marco Polo spoke about white bears, which would mean that hunters already in the thirteenth century visited the northern coasts of Siberia. A Norwegian noble who had emigrated to Iceland presented a polar bear and her two cubs to the Norwegian king in 880. The priest Isleif, bishop of Iceland, gave Emperor Henry a “white bear” in 1056 and in 1604 the king of Denmark paid for a white bear with a trade ship, money and a valuable gold ring. The skin were donated to altars in cathedrals and regional churches, so that the priest would keep his feet warm.¹⁵

In the 1250s King Haakon IV of Norway (who ordered the assassination of the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson) sent a polar bear to King





Polar bear at Skansen in 1952. Photo: John Kjellström, Stockholms stadsmuseum.

Henry III of England. It was kept at the Tower and the bear was encouraged to catch its own food from the river to save expenses. King Haakon also sent a polar bear to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, but the Emperor passed it on to Sultan El-Kamil of Damascus in 1234.¹⁶ In 1609, traveller Stephen Bennet caught two young polar bears on Bear Island (Bjørnøya). They were brought to England and kept in Paris Garden.¹⁷

The Stockholm Polar Bear in 1686

Already in 1626, the Swedish royal court had received a polar bear, but it probably did not live very long because it was not fed properly. According to sources in the Chamber Archive, food purchased for the polar bear count bushels of flour. We do not know where this polar bear came from and very little about its whereabouts. Yet we have more information about the next one to arrive in Sweden.¹⁸





In April 1685 King Charles XI received a polar bear as a gift from the only 13-year old Czar Peter I. In return, as diplomatic relations continued to develop, the Swedish king sent a white and brown fighting dog called Turck ('Turk') to the young Tsar. The polar bear, which originated on the island of Novaya Zemlya, was brought from Russia by the commissary Christoph von Kochen and was kept at the royal stables on the island Helgeandsholmen in Stockholm. A special building for the bear was built close to the royal stables. The bill for the construction material is still preserved. The polar bear could be observed from the windows of the royal chambers and also people passing by could watch the bear. The priest and member of parliament Olaus Bodinus saw in 1686 the polar bear swimming in Strömmen. It was fed by fish and impressed the public, because it could stay for a long time below water.¹⁹ The polar bear was alive in the autumn of 1686, but when it died is not clear from the sources. The dead polar bear was stuffed and preserved in the Armoury and it was also painted by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl. The painting is still kept in Strömsholm Palace in Västmanland.²⁰

Recent Polar Bears in the Nordic countries

It was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century before Sweden received new polar bears. Stockholm's Tivoli had in the 1890s several individuals, which eventually was taken over by Skansen's zoological department, where they became the subject of a successful breeding program that lasted for almost eighty years.²¹ The zoological garden at Skansen Open Air Museum (which opened in the autumn of 1891) in Stockholm has hosted polar bears from 1893. The first couple of polar bears were bought by Skansen in 1893, but they died very soon after their arrival, probably because of injuries they had received when captured. Five years later Skansen received two cubs, and in 1900 a female and her cub were brought to the zoo.²²

In 1906 Skansen took over six polar bears from Stockholm's Tivoli. Feeding them was of course expensive and therefore two young ones were sold to Helsinki Zoo and the female polar bear bought in 1900 was sent away to Hagenbeck in Hamburg. Another crippled one was culled. However, the remaining couple reproduced successfully in November 1902. Despite an accident in autumn 1903 when a cub was squeezed by his mother, the bree-



ding records of the species were very successful at Skansen. Until 1910 no less than 15 cubs were born at the zoo, and most of them grew up and were sold to other zoological gardens. One male thaw was purchased by Stockholm's Tivoli in 1886 died in Skansen in March 1915. Another male born at Skansen in 1906 lived until 1928.²³

New premises for the polar bears were built in 1934. The polar bears continued to thrive in the zoo and still in the 1970s cubs were often born at Skansen. Since the early twentieth century, Skansen's polar bears were also one of the most popular motifs of the postcards sold at the open air museum. Polar bears were kept in Skansen until 1984. The space required for modern keeping of the species could not be provided by the zoo.²⁴ Two other zoological gardens in Sweden have kept polar bears, one is Kolmården, the other one is Bearpark Grönklitt. The one at Grönklitt have been kept there since 2009. At Kolmården, where they regularly reproduced, polar bears were kept between 1968 and 2005.²⁵

Notes

¹ Carl Linnaeus, *Systema naturae* (Stockholm, 1758), 47; Friderich Martens, *Spitzbergische oder Groenlandische Reise Beschreibung gethan 1671* (Hamburg, 1675), 73; Constantine Phipps, *A voyage towards the North Pole: Undertaken by His Majesty's command, 1773* (London, 1774), 185. On the knowledge of polar bears in medieval times, see John Bernström, "Isbjörn," in *Kulturbistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* vol. 7 (Malmö, 1962), 467–471; Richard Ellis, *On Thin Ice: The Changing World of the Polar Bear* (New York, 2009), 209.

² Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "En hund begraven: Hunden från stenålder till medeltid," in A.-S. Gräslund & I. Svanberg, *Från renhållningsjon till modeaccessoar: 10 000 år av relationer människa-hund i Sverige* (Uppsala, 2014), 37.

³ Wilfrid Blunt, *The Ark in the Park: The Zoo in the Nineteenth Century* (Hamish Hamilton, 1976), 15–17.

⁴ T. H. Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs: 1515–1799* (London, 1986), 19.

⁵ Gustave Louisel, *Histoire des ménageries de l'antiquité à nos jours* (Paris, 1912), 154; Daniel Hahn, *The Tower Menagerie: The Amazing True Story of the Royal Collection of Wild Beasts* (London, 2003), 19 f.; Carolina Grigson, *Menagerie: The History of Exotic Animals in England* (Oxford, 2016), 1, 19.

⁶ Gösta Berg, "Lappland och Europa: Några anteckningar om renar som furstegåvor," *Svenska Landsmål och Svenskt Folkliv* 76–77 (1954), 221–244.

⁷ Gösta Berg, "Lejon, kameler, apor och andra exotiska djur i det gamla Stockholm," in *Svenska kulturbilder N.F.* vol. 5 (Stockholm, 1954), 313–336; Ingvar Svanberg, *Svenska lejon* (Stockholm, 2014), 31–37.

⁸ "Animal gifts smooth diplomatic relations," *China Daily* 17 November 2014; Olga Oksman, "The Gifts of the Presidents," *The Atlantic* 15 February 2015.

⁹ Chris Hutchins, *Putin* (Kibworth Beauchamp, 2012), 105; Olga Oksman, "The Gifts of the Presidents," *The Atlantic* 15 February 2015.



¹⁰ John Watts, "1,300 years of global diplomacy ends for China's giant pandas," *The Guardian* 14 September 2007; Cyriel Martin, "Entre Paris et Pékin, la diplomatie passe par le panda," *Le Point* 25 April 2008; George B. Schaller, *The Last Panda* (Chicago IL, 1994), 135.

¹¹ "Living fossil of fish: Chinese sturgeons debut in HK," *China View* 26 June 2008; "Australia gives Prince George baby crocodile," *Huffington Post* 25 July 2013.

¹² Sofia Nestor, *Trofäst: Hov och tass i kunglig tjänst* (Stockholm, 2010), 173.

¹³ Sanna Jokila, "Tällaisia lahjoja presidentit ovat saaneet – katso kuvat," *Uutiset* 19 June 2013 (www.mtv.fi/uutiset/kotimaa/artikkeli/tallaisia-lahjoja-presidentit-ovat-saaneet-katso-kuvat/1881050); Communication by Helsinki Zoo/Korkeasaari May 2016; "Halonens nya katt fick fnatt av uppståndelsen," *Hufvudstadsbladet* 17 January 2013.

¹⁴ Kristinn Jóhannesson, Gunnar D. Hansson & Karl G. Johansson (eds.), *Islänningasagorna: Samtliga släktasagor och fyrtonio tatar* (Reykjavík, 2014), 380–385.

¹⁵ Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (Roma, 1555), 621.

¹⁶ Hahn 2003, 19 f.; Ellis 2009, 209. On the knowledge of polar bears in medieval times, see Bernström 1962, 467–471.

¹⁷ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Vegas färd kring Asien och Europa, jemte en historisk återblick på*

föregående resor längs gamla världens nordkust vol. 1 (Stockholm, 1880), 139.

¹⁸ John Bernström, "Stockholmaren och de vilda djuren," in Magnus von Platen (ed.), *Stockholm 1252–1952: En minnesskrift* (Stockholm, 1952), 67–87.

¹⁹ Bertil Rapp, *Djur och stilleben i karolinskt måleri* (Stockholm, 1951), 125; Olaus Bodinius, *En Stockholmskildring från Karl XI:s tid: Olaus Bodinus' dagboksanteckningar från 1686 års riksdag* (Uppsala, 1938), 24.

²⁰ Rapp 1951, 123; Eva-Lena Bengtsson, "Kungliga djur," in Eva-Lena Karlsson & Rebecka Millhagen (eds.), *Strömsholms slott* (Stockholm, 2005), 192–205.

²¹ Ingvar Svanberg, "Levande samlingar: Djuren på Skansen," in *Fataburen* 2016, 84, 98.

²² Alarik Behm, "Från djurparken," in A. Lindholm (ed.), *En bok om Skansen* (Stockholm, 1933), 205–207.

²³ Alarik Behm, *Nordiska däggdjur* (Uppsala, 1922), 46.

²⁴ Per-Olof Palm, "Isbjörn," in N.-E. Bærehrendtz (ed.), *Boken om Skansen* (Höganäs, 1980), 28 f.; Ingvar Svanberg, "Walruses and other Arctic mammals at Skansen Zoo, Sweden, before 1940," *The Bartlett Society Journal* 34 (2013/2014), 44.

²⁵ www.zootierliste.de.

Summary

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Notes on Animal Diplomacy

By Sabira Ståhlberg & Ingvar Svanberg

This article discusses animals as royal gifts on the basis of an example of a polar bear Swedish King Karl XI received in 1685, which reflected the diplomatic changes in the Swedish-Russian relationship. Polar bears have been used as diplomatic gifts since Medieval times and wild animals in general much longer. Nowadays practices have





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changed and more everyday animals such as cats and dogs prevail among state animal gifts, although in some countries still wild animals are presented to official guests.

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