Pictures of Restraint: Hunting Carnivores on Mosaics from the Roman and Byzantine Periods

By Amir Gorzalczany and Baruch Rosen

Relationships between humans and captured animals have always depended on restraining devices. These were essential for imposing human will. Representations of humans controlling animals are also among the oldest motifs in ancient Near Eastern art. The Roman and Byzantine periods were no exception. Tethering appliances used in the Southern Levant during those periods are known from written sources and graphic representations on varying media: sculpture, wall paintings and carved sarcophagi. A particularly valuable means for understanding this aspect of everyday life are mosaic floors.

Tethering devices may vary according to the animal and the function expected and forced on it. Cages, ropes, tying knots and tethering gadgets used to immobilize and transport captured animals have been discussed. Devices used for both military and civilian riding or while utilizing traction animals differed from those used just for control. Tethering devices used to control a species would also vary depending on the expected function. A tracking hound would be tethered differently than a guard dog or one pulling a sled. Generally, when tethering aimed at controlling animal’s movements, such as a hunting or guarding dog, the basic controlling element was a neck collar. The leash, when used, was attached to the collar.
Dog harnessed, with a loop on the device to restrain it, on mosaic from Shechem (Neapolis) on display in the Israel Museum. (photographer unknown, courtesy of the Israel Museum)

Collared dog (dancing?) and musician (owner) represented in the Kyrie Maria Monastery mosaic at Beth She'an (Scythopolis). (photo: Walid Atrash, courtesy of the IAA)
In most mosaic depictions carnivores were depicted fighting, hunting and killing. They were divided into two categories: carnivores tamed but not domesticated and those fully domesticated. The first category is represented by the mongoose and the cheetah and the second consists of dogs. Mosaics showing additional carnivores are known from elsewhere. But these categories, and the location of the mosaics, raise questions of symbolism. What scenes depicted reality and what were idealized, and what message did control of particular animals represent?

The Mongoose

The mongoose is a wild animal but when hand-reared from youth, make excellent pets. Since antiquity mongooses have been used as snake killers. In Iraq the presence of wild mongooses, acting as pest controllers in inhabited areas, was accepted. In Egypt they were revered as eaters of crocodile eggs and snake killers.

Harnessed mongoose fighting snake, depicted in a mosaic from Jerusalem.

(after Rosen 1984, courtesy of Hilel Geva)
Collared mongoose fighting snake as depicted in the mosaic at Sede Nahum. (photo: Ricky Hershler)

Mongoose depicted in the mosaic at Horvat Be’er Shema‘. The figure is badly damaged, however, due to the collar the creature wears and the combat stance in which it is represented, it seems reasonable that it was depicted while confronting a snake. (photo: Nachshon Sneh, courtesy of Yeshayiahu Lender)
Tethered mongooses are depicted on four different mosaics from Israel. A mosaic from Jerusalem depicts a mongoose tethered by a harness. A second, on a mosaic in Be’er Shema’, wears a collar. The third, also wearing a collar is depicted, poorly preserved, on a mosaic at Sede Nahum, while the fourth appears on the mosaic in Tabgha. In two other mosaics from Syria and Lebanon, the animals do not wear a restraining device, representing perhaps wild or fully tamed specimens.

Mongooses depicted in the mosaics were probably tamed, like those exhibited by the street snake-charmers in India. At Sede Nahum the snake is partially concealed due to the mosaic’s deterioration, but since the mongoose is collared and in a fighting stance, possibly confronting a snake.

**The Cheetah**

A single harness-tethered cheetah appears in the Lod mosaic. Tamed hunting cheetahs were also used in the Middle East and India since antiquity. Other large felines handled by men in the Roman and Byzantine periods are known from Dionysian processions in the Southern Levant, such as that depicted in the Erez mosaic. It is often difficult to securely identify paraded large felines on mosaics and distinguish idealized from real events.

*The cheetah became extinct in the Levant by the first half of the 20th century. But cheetahs were kept in ancient Egypt as hunting aids since at least the 15th century BCE and in Arabia since pre-Islamic times. In medieval times hunting with tamed cheetahs was customary. Carved representations of cheetahs appear on*
stone sarcophagi. Culturally speaking, like all big felines, they are so-called ‘prestige animals,’ their use implying rank and status.

The Dog
Dogs were the first domesticated animals and hunters-gatherers developed a symbiotic co-existence with dogs in Australia and Africa. Hunter-gatherers of the Arctic bred dogs for hauling at least 2,000 years ago, while in Spain dogs were used as backpack carriers during the Early Bronze Age. The use of dogs in hauling and carriage necessitated the use of more complex devices than simple collars. Such tethering devices would have preceded the appearance of the harness seen on Roman mosaics.

Numerous depictions of dogs are known. A hunting dog tethered by a collar and a leash appears in Egypt in Ptahhoterp’s (5th Dynasty) tomb from ca. 2500 BCE. Assyrian records show collared hunting dogs. Rock carvings in Yemen, dated around the 1st century BCE, show hounds in hunts. Dogs tethered by collars and leashes were depicted on Greek works of art during the second half of the 1st millennium BCE. Examples from mosaics in Israel include both harnesses and collars.

Tethering Devices: Harnesses and Collars
The collar has been the most ubiquitous tethering device. Some dog collars seen on mosaics have an attaching ring atop the dog back for a restraining leash. The harness was less common on mosaics depicting controlled dogs on both sides of the Jordan and in North Africa.

The paucity of harnesses suggests that most owners of carnivores preferred collars over harnesses. Of the animals discussed here, the dog was the first domesticate. Wild carnivores like mongoose and the cheetah may have been tamed in pre-modern times using methods similar to modern ones. Both were tamed by professionals who captured young animals or bought them from their catchers.

The owner-users of the tamed species differed greatly. In medieval times and later in the Levant and India, the class of people who hunted with cheetahs contrasted significantly from those using tamed mongooses. The same scenario seems to have prevailed in antiquity. The cheetah was a prestige animal associated with ceremonial hunting by royalty and aristocracy.

In contrast, tamed mongooses were used to control pests, especially snakes, in rural environments. Of the six mongooses’ depictions discussed here, three were tethered by a collar and one other by a harness. In two other cases the mongooses wore no restraining device and may show either fighting in the wild or symbolic depictions.
The distinction between the frequent use of collar and the restricted use of harnesses may have been related to the attitude of the owner toward the animal or/and its intended use. The bloody scenes and differently harnessed animals in the Lod mosaics could indicate the intended role of the animal. It may simply be that the person who commissioned the mosaic was a passionate hunter who owned a cheetah and a favorite pack of hounds. In a North African mosaic names of favorite hunting hounds were inscribed above their depictions. The mongoose tethered by a harness in a Jerusalem church in a symbolic-religious Orphic scene may show Egyptian influence, remembering its role there as a killer of snakes. Replacing the common collar by a harness would have emphasized its special status. Conversely, the mongooses wearing a collar appearing in rural church mosaics depicted everyday life where both dogs and the mongoose were tethered by collars.

Depictions of a restrained animal carried messages. Putting the tethering device on a given animal, either tamed and/or domesticated, delivered two major ideas. First, the act of tethering symbolized and drew attention to the social role of the tethered animal in the given scene. The abstract idea of ‘control’ was the message conveyed by collars and harnesses. Secondly, in mosaics placed in a residence in contrast to a church, the details of the tethering drew attention to the attitude of an animal toward its physical owner, as did naming of hounds on a North African mosaic.

Future archaeological discoveries and study of ancient written sources will increase the understanding of man-animals’ relationships in antiquity and the use and meaning of the devices involved in conducting them.

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