

A Tiger by the Tail: the Hunt Mosaic from the Central Church at Cyrene

Jeremy Rossiter

A mosaic panel on display in the Cyrene Museum, lifted from the floor of the Central Church, shows a hunt scene in which a female tiger chases after a rider on horseback. The rider holds one of the tigress's cubs in his hand in an apparent attempt to lure her into a trap. This is a familiar scene which has parallels on other Late Roman mosaics (e.g. the 'Worcester Hunt Mosaic' from Antioch) and illustrates a legendary method of tiger hunting, as described by Roman writers such as Pliny (*NH* VIII. 25. 66) and Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius* 2.14). But what was the meaning of this image? What experience would a contemporary viewer have had of such a rare and exotic animal? Why include a scene of a tiger hunt in the decoration of a North African church? In seeking answers to these questions this paper explores what the Late Roman world knew about tigers and their capture and considers what particular significance this image of a tiger hunt might have had for the people of Late Roman Cyrene. In her commentary on this mosaic published in 1981, Elizabeth Alfoeldi-Rosenbaum suggested that the scene shows the hunting of a Hyrcanian (i.e Persian) tiger (Alfoeldi-Rosenbaum p.118). However, sources from the 3rd century onwards, including Aelian's *De Animalibus*, suggest that on the rare occasions when tigers were imported into the Roman world they came increasingly not from Persia but from India. Quite apart from any symbolic value which this image of tiger hunting may have had, it must also have served as a reminder to the people of Cyrene of the extent of Late Roman imperial power and of the global reach of the empire's trading networks.

Bibliography:

Alfoeldi-Rosenbaum, Elizabeth *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches* (Quaderni di Archeologia Libica 14, Rome 1980).

Ward-Perkins, John & Goodchild, Richard *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica* (Society for Libyan Studies Monograph No. 4, London 2003).



(photo author)

Jeremy Rossiter
Department of History and Classics
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada T6G 2H4
Jeremy.rossiter@ualberta.ca