

ANIMAL INSTINCTS

Patterns in the nature and distribution of Romano-British animal mosaics

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This paper argues that it is worth looking closely at the contexts in which images appear and at the topography of the sites. Three examples are discussed.¹

First, bears only appear in four Romano-British mosaics, all with Orpheus.² There are none from amphitheatre scenes, although there is evidence from London of an actual bear being used in the *venatio*,³ and Martial refers to a Caledonian bear.⁴ This suggests that the patrons and mosaicists were drawing on a popular empire-wide iconography unrelated to Britain.

This contrasts with what seems to have been the case with my second category, depictions of birds. There is a remarkable concentration of bird mosaics in two areas: in and around the Cotswolds in the south west of Britain,⁵ and in the area around the Humber estuary in the north east.⁶ Although there are many figured mosaics outside of these areas, surprisingly few birds are depicted. The countryside in these two areas is remarkably similar and in many of the mosaics the birds are both numerous and distinctive.

It has long been noted that game birds are prominent in many of these mosaics. The number and quality of bird bones found at Barnsley Park near Cirencester caused the excavator to suggest that pheasants were being hand-reared there, perhaps for food.⁷ I suggest that the proprietors of villas in these areas were influenced in the choice of images for their mosaics by activities relating to game birds. This would be particularly appropriate with the Orpheus mosaics, emphasising the ability of the villa owners to tame nature as Orpheus was able to do.

My third category concerns mosaics depicting Cadmus defeating the serpent of Mars,⁸ a myth in which water played a major part. All three sites with potential

¹ Descriptions and illustrations of all the mosaics, together with select references, can be found in the corpus by David Neal and Stephen Cosh (*Roman Mosaics of Britain* (London 2002-2010)). All the mosaics mentioned in this paper are thought to be of fourth-century date.

² Horkstow (Lincolnshire), Newton St Loe (Somerset), Withington and Woodchester (both Gloucestershire).

³ T. Wilmott, *The Roman Amphitheatre in Britain* (Stroud 2008), 163.

⁴ *Epigram* 9.

⁵ They include Orpheus mosaics from Barton Farm, Withington and Woodchester; the dove in Room 10 at Chedworth; the pair of birds in the threshold panel of the Hare mosaic from Beeches Road, Cirencester (all in Gloucestershire); and the birds in the spandrels of the Bacchus mosaic from Stonesfield (Oxfordshire).

⁶ The Orpheus mosaic from Horkstow (Lincolnshire); all three figured mosaics from Rudston (Yorkshire); and the small and little-known birds in mosaics from Kirmond-le-Mire and Roxby (both Lincolnshire).

⁷ G. Webster, P. Fowler, B. Noddle and L. Smith, 'The excavation of a Romano-British rural establishment at Barnsley Park, Gloucestershire, 1961-1979: Part III', *TBGAS* 103 (1985), 73-100.

⁸ Examples are known from Frampton (Dorset), Pitney (Somerset) and – more controversially – Brading (Isle of Wight).

depictions of this scene are remarkable for being low lying. The inclusion of Cadmus was perhaps talismanic in areas where water could pose a real threat to the villa estate.



Figure 1. Bear from Woodchester after Lysons, *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* II (1813-1817) plate XXVII.



Figure 2. Birds from Woodchester, after Lysons, *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* II (1813-1817) plates XXVI-XXVII.