

## Allusion and Ambiguity: Animals as Subjects in the Lod Mosaic

Since the discovery of the Lod mosaic in 1996, the floor has made transcontinental journeys to the Met and the Louvre, bedazzling millions at numerous exhibitions. With its far-reaching clout, the mosaic sparked the construction of The Shelby White and Leon Levy Lod Mosaic Archaeological Center in Lod, Israel. Scholarly attention has been directed at the mosaic's marine vessels (Haddad & Avissar 2003, Friedman 2004), but an explicit analysis of the profusion of animals covering its 9x17 meter composition has yet to surface. This paper seeks to examine the use of the creatures featured in the pseudo-emblema of the mosaic and their associated symbolism associated. I argue that the *dominus* made a deliberate choice to use animals as his subject, a selection that insinuates the dichotomy of the role of animals in Roman society, yet is purposefully ambiguous, as to appeal to the multifarious tastes of Jews, Christians and pagans who populated the Roman city of Lydda. This decision reflects the *dominus*' awareness of not only the complex role of animals in the human sphere, but also an acknowledgement of the diverse religious landscape and the desire for his home to appear both inoffensive and timeless in a volatile period of socio-political change in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The mosaic's pseudo-emblema presents a typical *trompe l'oeil* effect, alluding to perspective in the central space. The foreground features a bull, a tiger, an elephant, a rhinoceros and a giraffe, all of which appear at ease with each other. Within an illustrated landscape, the background presents two cliffs on which stand one male and one female lion, both of whom frame a *ketos* partially emerging from a body of water. This array of animals indubitably brings to mind the role animals would play in gladiatorial fighting in the ancient Roman world. In these events, wild beasts, plucked from their natural habitats, displayed their raw, physical power in

conflict. Exotic animals were also entering the empire for exhibition in menageries and animal parks (Kalof 2007, 34). These social pastimes were equally appealing to audience members of different social strata and diverse religious backgrounds. Thereby animals were key subjects in both performance art and visual art across the Roman empire.

These central animals in the mosaic also serve as potent symbols in their own right. To quote Sir Archibald Geikie on Romans' relationship with nature, "in every generation at Rome, there were tender-hearted members of the community who possessed and cultivated the love of animals" (Geikie 1912, 181). Roman artists, like their contemporary writers, evince compassion with the creatures they represent, and likewise, a Roman *dominus* would not only insinuate sympathy but also empower the animals in placing them as a central subject. While this scene of the Lod mosaic has no known artistic parallels, its animal connotations have been associated with the god Dionysus (Lightfoot 2010). Additionally, these same motifs may even evoke a connection to Isaiah's prophecy (Bowerstock 2011). Thus, a dichotomy exists in the role of the animal in Roman society, and ambiguity lies in what kinds of religious and mythological associations these animals suggest. The lack of scholarly attention given to the mosaic may be due in part by the questions raised about its non-human subject's significance. Through the use of animals, deliberate ambiguity intended by the commissioning *dominus* would certainly explain some of these uncertainties.

The decision to include animals in mosaic repertoire certainly highlights Roman society's complex relationship with nature. These creatures, also ubiquitous in the literature of the Roman empire, are translated from real life beings to two-dimensional images, and from superficial decoration to social signifiers, or in the case of the Lod mosaic, mystifiers. Befitting the

burgeoning discipline of Human-Animal Studies today, the illusional line dividing the human being and animal spheres has been and always will be permeable.

### Bibliography

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