



ZOOLOGICAL COMMENTS ON OSTRAKON P 2061

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Aside from the artistic sketch on the ostrakon P 2061, I have found only one other Pharaonic depiction of a cheetah or gepard (*Acinonyx jubatus*) attacking prey: the engraving on Tutankhamun's gold dagger sheath (Edwards, 1976a: 129, pl. 14; 1976b: exhibit and catalogue nos. 36). There are very few illustrations of cheetahs in Egyptian art. Several slender cats suggestive of cheetahs occur in the tombs of Beni Hassan (Newberry, 1893), but further research on these examples is necessary.

The cheetah on a leash (fig. 1) has the outline of a cheetah, but is atypical in the limited amount of spots, lack of facial markings, and lack of tail markings; perhaps a fault of the copier. Two collared cheetahs in Naville (1898: pl. LXXX) are unmistakable, but lack markings, except for the lines between their eyes and mouths.

Two cats that are commonly confused in Egyptian art are cheetah and leopard.

Zoologically, cheetahs are distinguished from leopards by slenderer bodies and necks and smaller heads, longer and slenderer legs, spots single and scattered and not in clusters or rosettes, a short mane on the neck and shoulders, tail slightly shorter in comparison with body length, but with a conspicuous



Fig. 1. Cheetah on a leash. From Davies (1943), pl. 17.

Fig. 2. Feeding the oryxes. From Newberry (1893), pl. XXVII.



tuft and ringed near the tip. The outstanding feature of the cheetah is the prominent black, curved stripe between the eye and mouth (Osborn and Helmy, 1980: 457—458; Dorst, 1970: 145, pl. 23).

All of these characteristics are not clearly defined in artistic renderings of cheetahs — spots may be arranged in definite rows, and the facial stripes may be missing. In the case of leopards, the spots may be solid, but very large.

The prey animal is an oryx, which is obvious from the long, almost straight horns and long tail. Which species is depicted is debatable. The scimitar-horned oryx, also called white oryx (*Oryx dammah*), has distinctly curved horns, a whitish body, and indistinct yellowish-brown to reddish patterns on the face, neck, shoulders, throat, chest, flanks and upper limbs, and blotches around the eyes.

Both the beisa oryx (*O. beisa*) and the Arabian oryx (*O. leucoryx*), which is also known as white oryx, have slightly curved to straight horns, grayish or whitish bodies, and distinct brown to black patterns on the face, body and legs. The broad black stripes across the eyes from the bases of the horns to the cheeks and the black, somewhat triangular mark on the face are distinctive. Living African oryx can be easily distinguished by their horn shapes (Hanák and Mazák, 1981: 302—303; Dorst, 1970: 201, pl. 31), which is not always possible with artistic renderings.

In the drawing on ostrakon P 2061 (see previous paper by E. Strouhal, figs. 5 and 6, p. 60) the horns are almost straight, which at first sight implies *O. beisa*, but there is a lack of distinct markings on the body, legs, and head, except around and in front of the eye. Even though the horns are only slightly curved, perhaps so rendered because of the position of the head, I would interpret it as *O. dammah* (see fig. 2). For comparisons see Griffith (1896, frontispiece), Davies (1913, p. XXII), and Pijoan (1975, fig. 125).

Mixtures of characters are not uncommon in Egyptian art, and this could have happened in this case from the simple fact that the Ancient Egyptians used only one name for the three species of oryx known to them (m3, m3nd).

The artist was obviously unfamiliar with the techniques cheetahs use in attacking prey. To leap on the back of an oryx

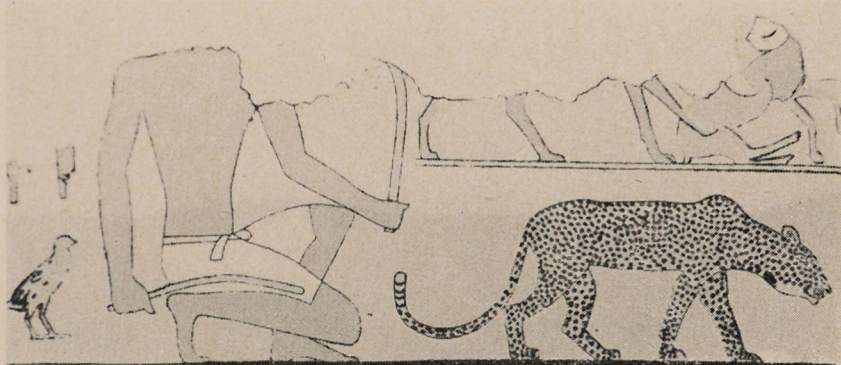


Fig. 3. Hunter with a leopard. From Petrie (1892), pl. XVII.

between its horns and grasp it by the neck would be impossible. However, similar fantasies were boldly illustrated in an XVIIIth Dynasty hunting scene at Gurnah, Thebes, in which dogs are leaping on the backs of oryx, jackals, and ostrich (Cailliaud, 1831, pl. 37; Fagan, 1975: 49) and the "spirited" animals attacking ibex and cattle on Tutankhamun's gold dagger sheath and ornate chest (Edwards, 1976a: 129, 169, pl. 32; 1976b, exhibit and catalogue nos. 21, 36).

Grasping the forelegs of prey in the jaws is also unknown among cheetah hunting methods. They trip prey by striking at their feet with a forepaw. Smaller prey, such as hares and gazelles are also knocked down with a forepaw. Then the cheetah lies on the animal and grasps its throat in its jaws. Larger and slower moving prey — oryx, kudu, zebra — are attacked by two or more cheetahs, as shown on the ostrakon, but first the prey is thrown off balance by hooking into its flank or back with the dew claw and yanking backward; then grabbing it by the throat (Kingdon, 1977: 369; Vágner, 1978: 99).

Erroneous statements that cheetahs were trained and used for hunting by the Ancient Egyptians have been perpetuated by various authors (Phillips, 1955; Dembeck, 1965: 272; Hyams, 1972: 52; Clutton-Brock, 1981: 176). I was also guilty (Osborn, 1977: 15), because I took some of these remarks to be factual and did not research Pharaonic illustrations. Of course no examples were given by these authors.

It is usually difficult to trace the origins of errors. This one may have arisen from the comment of Naville (op. cit.: 17) that the cheetahs from Punt, "were probably more or less tame, so as to be used in hunting."

Another misleading statement was that of Wreszinski (1923, fig. 396) about an illustration from the IIIrd or IVth Dynasty Tomb of Nefermat at Medum, which he described as a hunter with a leopard on a leash. Brentjes (1965: 84, fig. 86) repeated the description. There is a disfiguration in their illustrations that looks like a line leading from the left hand of the hunter. In Petrie's (1892, pl. XVII) copy of the original there is no such line (fig. 3). The hunter holds a stick in each hand and the slinking, collarless animal in front of him is, as Petrie (p. 25) stated, a leopard (*Panthera pardus*), despite the fact that the artist did not show the spots in rosettes.

The Egyptians may have kept tame cheetahs, which is suggested by the collared animals from Punt (Naville, op. cit.) and the one on a leash (fig. 1) in „tribute from southern lands" (Davies, 1943).

In reference again to Edwards (op. cit.), what he called "leopards" we regard as cheetahs and vice versa. The cat grasping the neck of an ibex on the dagger sheath looks more like a cheetah than a leopard because of its long legs, facial markings, and tail tuft. It was also identified as a „cheetah" by Carter (1927: 129), Gardiner (1941: 1), and Fox (1951, pl. 37). The cats on the backs of an ibex and a bull on the ornate chest, which Edwards (1976a: 169, pl. 32; 1976b, exhibit no. 21) called "cheetah", we consider to be leopard, as Reed and Osborn (1978: 280, fig. 14) suggested for the scene from the right side of the back of the chest.

Obviously interpreters can be confused as to whether some cats in Egyptian art are cheetahs or leopards. The gold dagger sheath adds to the confusion, because ibex are not normal prey for cheetahs. Ibex live in the mountains and cheetahs are plains dwellers. Ibex are, however, natural prey for leopards (Murray, 1935: 119).

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