

A NOTE ON THE UNIDENTIFIED ANIMAL IN THE MARISA (MARESHA) TOMB FRIEZE*

by

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In the ancient town of Maresha (Greek Μάρισα) in Idumea, a Hellenistic Sidonian tomb was discovered in 1901 by the Palestine Exploration Fund. The tomb, dated to ca. 200 BC, revealed a unique painted frieze depicting exotic animals¹: elephant, African rhinoceros, oryx, griffin, boar, giraffe, bull, lion, panther (in a hunting scene), manticore, lynx, porcupine, Indian rhinoceros², unidentified animal, onager, hippopotamus, crocodile, ibis and two fish. However, one animal remains elusive (fig. 1). This unidentified animal is small, hoofed, has a short tail and a slightly elongated snout. It has large ears and eyes (only one is visible as it is depicted in profile) but its most conspicuous feature is the large tuft between its ears.

PETERS and THIERSCH (who discovered the frescos) attempted to identify this animal as a wolf on the basis of a partial inscription, which, also, according to them reads as ΙΥΙ.Α and could be a trace of ΑΥΚΟΣ³. JACOBSON follows their argumentation, stating that the animal resembles a dog⁴, while MEYBOOM identifies

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¹ J.P. PETERS, H. THIERSCH, S.A. COOK, *Painted Tombs in the Necropolis of Marissa (Marêshah)*, London 1905; D.M. JACOBSON, *The Hellenistic Tomb Paintings of Marisa*, Warminster 2007; S. MUCZNIK, *An Exotic Menagerie in Tesserae: The Mosaic Pavement of Lod/Lydda*, Liber Annuus LX 2010, pp. 319–340.

² JACOBSON (*op. cit.* [n. 1], p. 34) also classifies this creature as an “unidentified animal”, but its single horn clearly points to it being an Indian as opposed to an African rhinoceros (depicted in the frieze with two horns standing behind an elephant).

³ PETERS, THIERSCH, COOK, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 27.

⁴ JACOBSON, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 34.

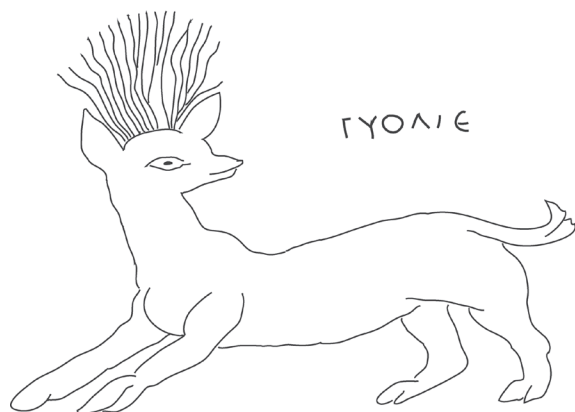


Fig. 1. Dik-dik in the Marisa frieze, 2nd c. BC, drawing by the author



Fig. 2. Female dik-dik, source Wikimedia commons, accessed on 7.12.2018 at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madoqua_kirkii_-_female_\(Namutoni\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madoqua_kirkii_-_female_(Namutoni).jpg)

the animal as a feline (lynx or caracal)⁵, although a lynx is depicted elsewhere in the frieze. The animal's features, however, point towards it being the dik-dik antelope (in particular the *Madoqua kirkii*, see fig. 2). Dik-diks are the world's smallest antelopes, with a very short tail and a large tuft on the crown of the head. The male has small horns that can be hidden in their tuft, while female dik-diks do not have horns at all, which suggests it is a representation of the female dik-dik.

⁵ P.G.P. MEYBOOM, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy*, Leiden–Boston 1995, p. 286, n. 23; E. RICE (*The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus*, Oxford 1983, p. 87) considers the animal to represent a lynx.

As for the inscription that originally bore the animal's name, it looks more like ΙΥΟΛΙΕ⁶ rather than ΙΥΙ.Λ (as suggested by PETERS and THIERSCH), which, however, does not clarify its identification. There is a Greek word which might be related to this word, namely the noun ἰουλος⁷. It was used to describe a corn-sheaf which in fact resembles the dik-dik's tuft. *Ioulos* was also used to designate the first growth of whiskers or a beard, to which the dik-dik's tuft can be compared⁸. The interpretation of this inscription neither confirms nor prevents the creature being identified as the dik-dik. There is however, a Greek word that can be associated with the dik-dik: the mysterious δίκτυς that appears in Herodotus' account of Libyan fauna (Hdt. IV 192, 2).

κατὰ τοὺς νομάδας δὲ ἔστι τούτων οὐδέν, ἀλλ' ἄλλα τοιάδε [...] καὶ βασσάρια καὶ ὕαιναί καὶ ὕστριχες καὶ κριοὶ ἄγριοι καὶ δίκτυες καὶ θῶες καὶ πάνθηρες καὶ βόρυνες.

Among the nomads there is nothing like that, but other animals such as [...] foxes, hyenas and porcupines and wild rams and *diktys* and jackals and panthers and *borynes* (transl. by the author).

In Herodotus' passage, *dyktys* has been identified as a sort of jackal due to its juxtaposition with this animal⁹. This is consistent with Hesychius, who translates *diktys* as "an *iktinos* from Laconia" (δίκτυς· ὁ ἰκτῖνος, ὑπὸ Λακόνων) which is either a "kite" or a "wolf". However, identifying the animal on the basis of its placement in Herodotus' list cannot be trusted, as the list does not follow any particular order since, in the next sentence, crocodiles are listed followed by ostriches, while *diktys* appear between wild rams and jackals. In the context of Libyan fauna, the zoonym *diktys* evokes the name dik-dik. This contemporary zoonym is of African origin and has been used there for centuries, since it most likely derives from the sound made by those small antelopes¹⁰.

⁶ G. MALINOWSKI, *Agatarchides. Dzieje: O Azji i O Europe; fragmenty historii powszechnej; O Morzu Czerwonym; traktat historyczny o krajach południa*, Wrocław 2007, p. 578; MEYBOOM, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 45. There are more options of reading the inscription, such as ΓΥΟΛΙΕ, ΓΥΟΝΕ, ΓΥΟΝΘ, ΓΥΟΙΘ, ΡΥΟΛΙΕ, ΡΥΟΝΕ, ΡΥΟΝΘ, ΡΥΟΙΘ, however none can be satisfactorily explained.

⁷ Although the inscription has υο instead of ου, other inscriptions of animal names provide unusual forms too, such as ΟΝΑΓΓΙΟΣ instead of ὄναγρος, ΛΥΝΖ instead of λύγξ, ΠΑΡΔΑΛΟΣ and ΠΑΝΘΗΡΟΣ instead of πάρδαλις and πάνθηρ which are unorthodox versions of the zoonyms, perhaps present in the Greek lower classes or written by someone for whom Greek was a second language.

⁸ It was also a name for a bug woodlouse.

⁹ D. ASHERI, A. LLOYD, A. CORCELLA, *A Commentary on Herodotus. Books I–IV*, Oxford–New York 2007, p. 715; W.W. HOW, J. WELLS, *A Commentary on Herodotus: With Introduction and Appendixes*, Oxford 1928, vol. I: *Books I–IV*, p. 402.

¹⁰ J.D. SKINNER, *The Mammals of the Southern African Sub-Region*, Cambridge 2007, p. 693.

The dik-dik's habitat has been in the region of Eastern Africa, including contemporary Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia¹¹. These regions were explored during the elephant hunts initiated by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, which resulted in his great procession in Alexandria (described by Callixeinus, Ath. V 197 C–203 B) that included a parade of exotic animals¹², and both the hunts and the parade are clearly evoked in the Marisa frieze. This Sidonian city played a role in Ptolemaic trade in the 3rd c. BC¹³ while the family buried in the tomb could have dealt with trading animals for the Ptolemies¹⁴. The frieze presents a variety of living creatures that could be encountered in the Levant, Arabia, Egypt and Africa and that were already known (e.g. felines), or were only discovered by the Ptolemaic expeditions (e.g. the giraffe).

There were many exotic species encountered and brought by Ptolemaic hunters, some of which have been recorded in the treatise *On the Red Sea* by Agatharchides of Cnidus, some are mentioned in the description of the great parade of Philadelphus, while others have been depicted in ancient art¹⁵. Not all of the animals have been so far clearly identified from the Greek zoonyms or artistic depictions. The dik-dik definitely falls into this category. These small antelopes do not avoid human settlements¹⁶ and were even captured and kept as pets by locals¹⁷. As such, they could easily have been encountered by Ptolemaic hunters and taken to Alexandria. The dik-dik's image on the Sidonian tomb is testimony that Ptolemaic exploration of African fauna was more extensive than we are currently aware.

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¹¹ B. GRZIMEK, M. HUTCHINS, *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopaedia*, vol. 12: *Mammals I*, Detroit 2004, p. 59.

¹² The procession is discussed in detail by RICE (*op. cit.* [n. 5]), and referred to by H.M. HUBBELL, *Ptolemy's Zoo*, CJ XXXI 1935, pp. 68–79.

¹³ JACOBSON, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 14, 44.

¹⁴ MUCZNIK, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 323, n. 22.

¹⁵ Especially in such works as the Palestrina Mosaic (MEYBOOM, *op. cit.* [n. 5]) and the Papyrus of Artemidorus (C. GALLAZZI, B. KRAMER, S. SETTIS, *Il Papiro di Artemidoro (P. Artemid.)*, Milano 2008).

¹⁶ GRZIMEK, HUTCHINS, *op. cit.* (n. 11), pp. 69 f.

¹⁷ J. BODDY, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*, London 1989, pp. 289 f.