

The mongoose of the Cave of Nerja, southern Spain, is not the oldest Egyptian mongoose of Europe

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ABSTRACT: This note comments on a find of the european mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon* L., 1758) from a cistern of punic age on the island of Sant'Antioco (Sardinia, Italy) that antedates a recently radiocarbon dated find of Almoravid-Almohad age at the site of Cueva de Nerja (Málaga, Spain) by close to two millennia.

KEYWORDS: MONGOOSE, *Herpestes ichneumon*, SARDINIA, PUNIC

RESUMEN: Esta nota refiere un hallazgo de meloncillo (*Herpestes ichneumon* L., 1758) en una cisterna de época púnica en la isla de Sant'Antioco (Cerdeña, Italia) que antecede en casi dos milenios el reciente hallazgo de esta misma especie en la Cueva de Nerja (Málaga, España) radiodatado en época Almorávide-Almohade.

PALABRAS CLAVE: MELONCILLO, *Herpestes ichneumon*, CERDEÑA, PÚNICO

INTRODUCTION

Three species of mongoose are today reported within the geo-political boundary of Europe. The Egyptian mongoose, *Herpestes ichneumon* (L., 1758), is dispersed in most of the south-central Iberian peninsula (ICONA, 1986; Gisbert, 1996; Mathias *et al.*, 1998; Mathias, 1999; Palomares, 2002), the small Indian mongoose, *H. auropunctatus* (Hodgson, 1836), occurs on several Dalmatian islands (Croatia) (Tvrtkovic & Krystufek, 1990; Cavallini & Serafini, 1995), while the Indian gray mongoose, *H. edwardsi* (É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1818), survived up to a few years ago in the Italian National Park of Circeo (Toschi, 1965; Biondi, 1980; Carpaneto, 1990; Angelici, 2003) (Figure 1). In central Italy, the latter species was also reported from the surroundings of Capalbio (Grosseto), in 1963 (Angelici, 2003). All these European populations of representatives of the Herpestidae family are the result of ancient or recent introductions carried out by man (cf. Masseti, 2003). Apropos this, in the very interesting article by J.A. Riquelme-Cantal, M.D. Simón-Vallejo, P. Palmqvist & M. Cortés-Sánchez «The oldest mongoose of Europe», which appeared in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*, 35 (2008): 2471-2473, the authors deal with the discovery of what they regard as the oldest remains of mongoose in Europe. This is the skull of an Egyptian

mongoose, found in the Cave of Nerja in southern Spain (Málaga), AMS dated 885 +/- 40 years BP, and thus referable to the period of the Almoravid-Almohad dominion of Andalusia. The earliest appearance in Spain of another African carnivore, the common genet, *Genetta genetta* (L., 1758), has been referred to the same chronology, as clearly demonstrated by Morales (1994) through the finds of the Portuguese site of Mértola. However, that described by Riquelme-Cantal *et al.* (2008) is not the first mongoose that appeared in Europe, but instead the oldest remains of this carnivore known to date for the Iberian peninsula.

THE MONGOOSE FROM SANT' ANTIOCO

The oldest record of the Egyptian mongoose available to date for the European territory comes from the island of Sant'Antioco, off the southwestern coast of Sardinia, where an osteological fragment of the species was discovered in a Punic cistern dated to the 5th-4th century BC (Campanella & Wilkens, 2004; Carenti & Wilkens, 2006) (Figure 2). This is a fragmentary humerus that conserves the distal epiphyses, fused, and most of the diaphyses (Figure 3).

The faunal assemblage of the cistern, a closed deposit, comprises remains of a varied provenance, largely foodstuff refuse and waste from

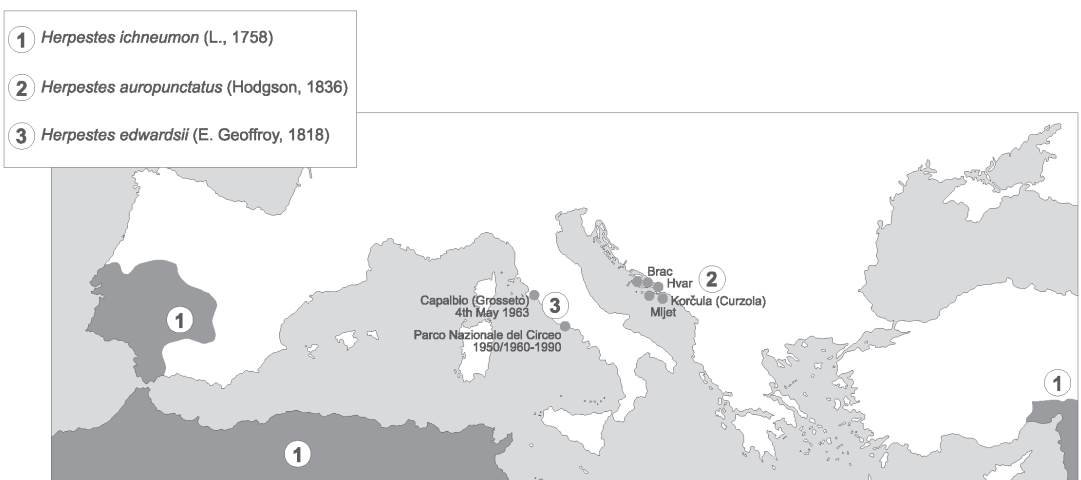


FIGURE 1

Present distribution of the Egyptian mongoose, *Herpestes ichneumon* (L., 1758), the small Indian mongoose, *H. auropunctatus* (Hodgson, 1836), and the Indian gray mongoose, *H. edwardsi* (É. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1818), in southern Europe and in the circum-Mediterranean area.

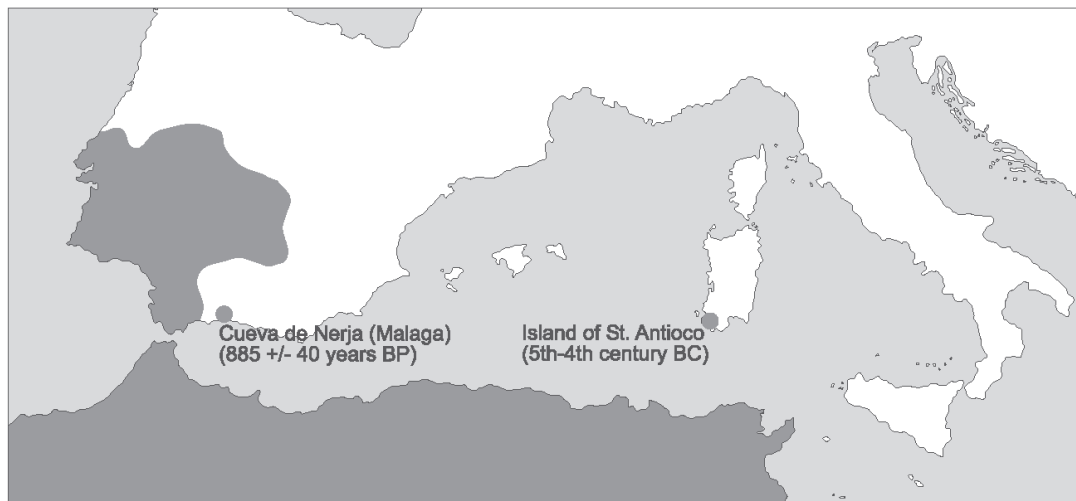


FIGURE 2

Geographical locations of the Cueva of Nerja (Málaga), in southern Spain, and of the island of Sant'Antioco, off the south-western coast of Sardinia, compared to the present dispersal of the Egyptian mongoose.



FIGURE 3

Fragmentary humerus of Egyptian mongoose found in a Punic cistern of the island of Sant'Antioco (off the south-western coast of Sardinia), dated to the 5th-4th century BC (courtesy Barbara Wilkens).

bone working. Several domestic species, such as pig, cattle, goat and sheep have been identified. Wild *taxa*, including red deer are also present. The fragment attributed to the mongoose does not show any sign of butchering. Given the presence of the carnivore in an urban context, and considering the fact that, to date, the mongoose has not been identified in any other Sardinian locations, it is difficult to believe that it was introduced for the purpose of acclimatisation and one may surmise

Archaeofauna 18 (2009): 65-68

instead that it may have been a tamed or domestic individual which was kept for the purpose of controlling rodents (see Mason, 1984; Masseti, 2002). Poisonous reptiles do not exist in Sardinia, nor did they in Punic times. Although we cannot say whether this fact was known to the ordinary population, the interest in the mongoose may have been connected with its skill in hunting rodents and large insects. Again, much later, in 16th century Cairo, the authoritative evidence of the Italian naturalist Prosper Alpinus (1581-1584) records that the local people preferred to employ the Egyptian mongoose, the so-called *rat de Pharaon* (Pharaoh rat), rather than the domestic cat, *Felis silvestris* Schreber, 1777, in their attempts at pest control. In any case, the remains of Sant'Antioco bear witness to the ancient practice of exportation of the Egyptian mongoose beyond the territories of its original diffusion. Ancient osteological remains of mongooses found beyond their natural distribution are also known, for example, from the Near East, such as those of Indian gray mongoose, discovered in Bahrain and dated to the 2nd millennium BC (Uerpmann, 1995). This presence too is connected with importation from the East as a means of pest control.

The fact that European remains of mongoose recorded for 5th-4th century BC Sardinia, and hence far older than those reported by Riquelme-Cantal *et al.* (2008), were not taken into account

by these authors, is a bit perplexing as these ought not to have escaped the scrutiny of an astute referee. Far from having the minimum intention of criticising the scientific rigour or professionalism of the paper of Riquelme-Cantal *et al.* (2008), this note is simply designed to inform about what, as things stand at present, appears to be the most ancient appearance of *H. ichneumon* in Europe, pre-dating by close to two millennia the discovery at Cueva de Nerja. It therefore seems safer to propose that the latter finding needs to be considered as the oldest mongoose to date available for continental Spain, rather than for the whole of Europe.

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