

THE MOSAICS OF THE HOUSE OF DIONYSOS AT SEPPHORIS

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The authors summarize in their book the important discovery of the third century CE House of Dionysos and its mosaics at Sepphoris, by describing, analyzing and comparing the Dionysiac scenes with literary sources and archaeological evidence.

The book comprises seven chapters, each dealing with different aspects, such as the plan of the house, the iconographic and stylistic analysis of the mosaics, their technique, the implications of the decorative program, etc. The descriptive character of the book and the presentation of the various aspects in each chapter form a clear compilation of all the components of the House of Dionysos. However, the authors' attempt to explain, interpret and analyze the whole complex, from the architectural and artistic points of view (identification of the building and the meaning of the mosaics), is neither sufficient nor convincing.

The first chapter, "The Mosaics of Ancient Palestine in the Middle and Late Roman Periods" (pp. 1-16), offers a sporadic presentation of some of the mosaics found at Sepphoris, Ein Ya'el, Gerasa, Nablus/Shechem and Lod/Lydda. This is an odd selection of mosaics that does not represent the rich and varied artistic repertoire of the mosaic pavements in Eretz Israel. It yields nothing with regard to the main topic of the book and especially to the topic of the chapter. This is a poor, irrelevant and superficial chapter with casual and inconsistent examples. The chapter pretentiously offers a few examples that do not reflect the mosaic art of Eretz Israel in the Roman period¹. The authors have erred in presenting this theme in the context of their book, since its relevance is doubtful; perhaps, the intention was to provide a background for the work.

The second chapter, "The House of Dionysos

and Its Plan" (pp. 17-46), presents a description of the complex, and deals with the methods of construction, the architectural remains, the archaeological evidence for its construction and destruction, its architectural context, and the pottery discovered within it. This is a descriptive and detailed chapter, with some analogies to other parts of the Roman Empire.

The third chapter, "Description and Iconographic Analysis of the Mosaic in the Triclinium" (pp. 47-106), forms the major and longest part of the book. And indeed, the mosaic floor of the *triclinium* of the imposing Roman residence at Sepphoris features a wide range of themes from the circle of life and cult of Dionysos. The most important theme is the *emblematic* panel of the drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles, and its relationship to the two female figures depicted on the two short sides of the decorative frame. This part of the mosaic requires more attention and consideration than are given here with regard to its interpretation and significance. The events depicted in the other panels, around the *emblema*, are generally familiar from the mythological context.

It should be noted that the wine-drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles at Sepphoris is a rarely represented subject among the Roman mosaic pavements, of which only two other similar iconographic examples have been previously found, at Antioch². Despite being a rare mythological scene in Roman visual art, it may be assumed that it conveys a symbolic and/or allegorical significance³. The authors write: "It can reasonably be assumed that the wine drinking contests were not rare occurrences at banquets and that Roman artists incorporated customs (*sic!*) with which they were familiar in the mythological depiction" (p.

¹ See M. AVI-YONAH, "Mosaic Pavements in Palestine", *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* II (1933), 136-181; III (1934), 26-47, 49-73; IV (1935), 187-193; R. and A. OVADIAH, *Hellenistic, Roman and Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel (Bibliotheca Archaeologica 6)*, Roma 1987.

² See D. LEVI, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, II, Princeton 1947, Pls. Ia, XXX a-b; A. OVADIAH and Y. TURNHEIM, "The Female Figure in the Dionysiac Mosaic at Sepphoris", *Rivista di Archaeologia* XXI (1997), Figs. 12-13.

³ OVADIAH and TURNHEIM, *ibid.*, 107-116; A. OVADIAH and Y. TURNHEIM, "The Female Figure in the Dionysiac Mosaic at Sepphoris", *Motar* 4 (1996), 7-14 (Hebrew).

50). Was this theme, indeed, adopted simply as a presentation of daily customs or as a mundane matter of no particular, allegorical, significance?

Curiously enough, the authors try to grasp the stick at both ends. Although they write: "one should perhaps attach a significance beyond the merely ornamental to scenes with ostensibly neutral connotation" (p. 94); and elsewhere: "The meticulous selection of the scenes, together with the implied parallelism between the mythical and the real, impart a special significance to the Sapphoris mosaic" (p. 85), unfortunately, no interpretation is given regarding this "significance". On the other hand, the authors reject, without any explanation based on solid grounds, the interpretation of other scholars, claiming that "Ovadiah and Turnheim interpreted the female busts in the Dionysiac mosaic, incorporated in the acanthus border as allegoric representations, but we do not find this convincing" (p. 106, n. 224).

Elsewhere in the same chapter the authors claim: "Though Dionysos was a much-loved god in the Roman period, the frequent choice of Dionysiac themes for the decoration of triclinia should be attributed primarily to his role as the god of wine and drunkenness and consequently as a symbol of sublime joy and pleasure" (p. 95). On what grounds are these claims based? If Dionysos truly symbolizes sublime joy and pleasure, why have they not connected this with the representation of the female figure in the decorative frame, as Ovadiah and Turnheim did, who interpreted it as a symbolic/allegorical depiction of Happiness (Εὐδαιμονία-*Eudaimonia*), the "mother of all virtues"⁴? This links to the victory of Dionysos over Herakles in the wine-drinking contest (in the *emblemata*), which expresses the triumph of virtue over vice, and man's ability to conquer his failings and evil instincts, and overcome his weakness, passion and vices. It thus demonstrates self-control, moderation and good sense, the qualities that will finally bring about eternal happiness. It is even possible that the second female figure (which has not survived) was intended to convey the pain, torment, sorrow, disaster, or misery (δυσδαιμονία-

dysdaimonia)⁵ resulting from the shameful defeat of Herakles in the contest. The authors, unfortunately, have isolated both conceptually and arbitrarily the *emblematic* depiction of the wine-drinking contest between Dionysos and Herakles from the female figures depicted in the decorative frame, without perceiving their significance and importance. Indeed, Dionysos is mentioned in the *Iliad* as "the joy of mortals" (χάρμα βροτοῖσιν)⁶, Hesiod calls him "joyful Dionysus" (Διωνύσου πολυγηθέος)⁷ and Nonnos calls him "a son who will make mortals forget their troubles" (...νίεα κussaμένη βροτέης ἐπλήθον ἀνίης), and his mother Semele will bring forth joy for gods and men⁸ (ὅτι θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνδράσι χάσμα λοχεύσεις). Is this really a joy or pleasure expressed solely by Dionysos in the *emblematic* scene and not by the other iconographic elements around it, especially in the decorative frame? The authors' discussion of this point is somewhat limited and short-sighted. Furthermore, in contradiction to the citations mentioned above, they write that "Every detail appearing on the mosaic directly connected with the life and cult of Dionysos... hunting scenes were chosen for the mosaic's frame not only for decorative purposes but also because they harmonized with the contents of the other parts" (p. 94). The authors contradict themselves here regarding the understanding of the mutual relationship of the female images with the Dionysiac scenes in the mosaic pavement. Moreover, they reject, as unconvincing, interpretations published by other scholars, while at the same time they use these in their own interpretation. In fact, the sublime joy or pleasure of Dionysos is indeed clearly, conceptually and directly connected to the female image in the decorative frame symbolizing the virtue of Happiness.

Sadly, there are also inaccuracies throughout the book, as for example the authors' determination that "On mosaic floors of the Late Roman period in ancient Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor inhabited scrolls were used exclusively for the adornment of the frame" (p. 94). It should be pointed out that there are mosaic pavements, for example in Jordan, in which the "inhabited" or

⁴ Cebes of THEBES, *The Tabula of Cebes* (trans. and eds. J. T. FITZGERALD and L. M. WHITE, Scholars Press, Chico [Calif.] 1983), XXI-XXIII; OVADIAH and TURNHEIM, *ibid.*, 107-116.

⁵ *The Tabula of Cebes*, XXVI.

⁶ HOMER, *Iliad*, XIV.325.

⁷ HESIOD, *Works and Days*, 614 (trans. HUGH G. EVELYN-WHITE, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.] and London 1954).

⁸ NONNOS, *Dionysiaca*, VII.367-368 (trans. W. H. D. ROUSE, Loeb Classical Library, I, Cambridge [Mass.] and London 1984).

“peopled” acanthus scrolls appear on the mosaics as a field motif⁹.

The fourth chapter, “Stylistic Analysis of the Mosaic in the Triclinium” (pp. 107-113), is an attempt, on the basis of composition and style, to date the Dionysiac mosaic at Sepphoris. This is methodologically a dangerous and shaky approach. The authors’ comparisons with other similar mosaics, such as those in Nablus/Shechem, Ein Ya’el, Shahba-Philippopolis and Mariamin in Syria, and Gerasa in Jordan, are not convincing. One should remember that the use of style and composition as dating criteria (and not only in mosaic art), is unsound and insufficient. The authors’ self-confidence regarding this matter is expressed in their claim: “The gradual interplay of light and shade and the delicate colouring, which are prominent in the Sepphoris mosaic than at Shahba-Philippopolis, suggest to us a date at the end of the second or the beginning of the third century (around the year 200 CE) for the first phase of the Sepphoris mosaic. The mosaic of Nablus and the similar mosaic of Mariamin on the other hand, most probably postdate the mid-third century, since their style reflects later stylistic changes” (pp. 111-112). This statement reflects neither scientific reliability nor scholarly responsibility.

The fifth chapter, “Technical Study of the Mosaic in the Triclinium” (pp. 115-116), refers to the technical aspects of the mosaic pavement and contributes to the understanding of the mosaic inlay, dealing with the materials, methods, colours and the bedding.

The sixth chapter, “The Mosaics in the Rooms and Corridors Flanking the Triclinium” (pp. 117-123), deals with the various mosaics presenting geometric motifs. This is a compilation and summary of the geometric panels.

The seventh and final chapter, “The Implications of the Decorative Program of the House of Dionysos” (pp. 125-134), summarizes and clarifies “a number of basic questions that arise in connection with the mosaic floor of the triclinium in the House of Dionysos” (p. 125). The authors treat two additional aspects: the identity of the mansion’s owner and the purpose of the room in which the mosaic floor was found. Indeed, these are two important points, but somewhat excessive and over ambitious! If we take into consideration the entire

mosaic pavement, the wine contest between Dionysos and Herakles, with its polemic character, indeed conveys a didactic approach rather than a “distinct religious agenda” (p. 125). However, rather than strengthening the didactic role of the wine-drinking contest and its moral results or ethical aspects, through the two female figures depicted in the decorative frame, they make do with a half view of the whole mosaic pavement and its *holistic* meaning. Unfortunately, the authors repeatedly ignore the significance of the two female figures, who symbolize the virtue of Happiness, Joy (*Eudaimonia*) and the vice of Misery (*Dysdaimonia*), which are spiritually and conceptually connected with the wine-drinking contest and present sublime and abstract ideas. In addition, they miss the opportunity to grasp the mosaic scenes in a comprehensive and all-inclusive reading, with a consequent partial and insufficient interpretation.

There is a strange statement in this chapter that “The portrayal of Dionysos and Herakles in the Sepphoris mosaic reflects this polemic within pagan society” (p. 126). On what basis did they reach this odd conclusion? Another obscure claim relates to the close association of the Dionysiac mosaics with the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos, considering it as a significant feature (p. 127). Nonnos in his work describes the hospitality extended by Dionysos to Herakles as that of reclining together, without referring to the wine-drinking contest between the two gods¹⁰.

A very confused and redundant discussion, lacking any possibility of properly solving the problem, refers to the identity of the mansion’s owner; or, who was the patron of this house (pp. 127-129). It is true that this huge house, together with its impressive mosaics, is situated on the acropolis of Sepphoris and without doubt represents great affluence. Nonetheless, there is not even one single indication that could attribute this house to R. Judah the Patriarch (Hannasi). The following contentions of the authors are an unwarranted assumption: “In the absence of the Dionysiac mosaic floor, it would have been plausible to suggest, with a good measure of caution and some reservation that this was the home of R. Judah the Prince. This suggestion would have been based not solely on the assumption that the Patriarch’s home was a large and magnificent, but also on the

⁹ See M. PICCIRILLO, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba*, Jerusalem 1989, 121, 123, 178, 190-191, 274.

¹⁰ NONNOS, *Dionysiaca*, XXV.174-193; XL.411-578.

fact that R. Judah was extremely wealthy and capable of financing the high building costs" (pp. 127-128). Another surprising claim by the authors is that "whether R. Judah the Prince would have frequented the house of his pagan neighbour if invited as a guest"; they find this quite plausible (p. 131). This is a sterile and futile discussion, though the Talmudic sources describe Sepphoris as a Jewish city, and the discovery of a synagogue and of numerous ritual baths (*miqva'ot*) (p. 127) confirms the existence of a large Jewish population there.

After this exaggerated and wearisome discussion, the authors were honest enough to admit that in lieu of any firm answers, they were "unable to reach a consensus in this regard and have decided to present each of the two opinions in the name of

its proponent, without drawing any firm conclusions in the matter" (p. 128).

In sum, the present book, with the exception of its technical and descriptive aspects, does not achieve its declared aim. The interpretations are not based on solid scientific grounds, but on personal assumptions. Nonetheless, the book presents to the reader a highly important and unique discovery, and one that hopefully will be discussed by other scholars, who will contribute their own thoughts and suggestions to the understanding of these mosaics.

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IL VIAGGIO IN ITALIA DI PIETRO DE LAMA. LA FORMAZIONE DI UN ARCHEOLOGO IN ETÀ NEOCLASSICA

Pisa, ETS 2003, pp. 276, 45 tavv. f.t., € 25,00.

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Un ritratto dell'Italia degli antiquari, alla vigilia della tempesta napoleonica: ecco il senso e l'interesse del diario del viaggio intrapreso nel 1790/91 dall'erudito parmense De Lama, pubblicato con cura e senso storico da R. nel quadro di un progetto sulla storia dell'archeologia italiana. Il sottotitolo e le ampie note introduttive (pp. 9-83) insegnano a leggere negli appunti di De Lama la storia di una formazione culturale, quella di un provinciale che da Parma si muove attraverso l'Italia centrale, fino a Napoli, acquisendo le competenze che ne faranno in patria il futuro custode delle collezioni ducali. Ma prima ancora, si direbbe, il diario è una testimonianza preziosa, proprio perché uscita da un testimone 'medio' (non troppo idiosincratico, non troppo personale), della antiquaria italiana nella sua fase finale, prenapoleonica.

De Lama è anzitutto viaggiatore: giudice attento, quindi, dei comodi e degli incomodi di viaggio, pronto a registrare cibi e osti, condizioni del tempo e delle camere (spesso abitate da cimici), malanni e qualità del sonno, cure personali (importanza del parrucchiere) e esperienze di varia umanità. Del viaggiatore egli ha la disponibilità agli incontri, il piacere per le belle e dotte cene, il gusto

della scena di genere, ora su toni di commedia (con un'aristocratica dama troppo preziosa) ora più acri, o pesantemente antisemiti, come nel caso delle visite al Ghetto di Roma (pp. 162 e 164). Uno storico politico apprezzerà la vaga notizia delle 'cose di Francia' (p. 189) o i festeggiamenti a Napoli per il parto della regina di Spagna nel marzo 1791 (p. 185); lo studioso della società troverà materiale per studi di storia dei comportamenti sociali, lo storico della lingua noterà alcuni idioletti, come il francesismo 'pulizie' per 'cortesie', o stranezze come 'cellerario' o 'pequesse' (pp. 219 e 222), mentre lo storico delle città si indurrà di ricostruire i molti edifici scomparsi o volti ad altro uso che il diarista ricorda e visita a Roma o Napoli (chiese, conventi).

Simili spunti lasciano comprendere che un approccio convergente è il più adatto a restituire a un testo come questo la sua migliore ricchezza: ma comprensibilmente la curatrice ha optato per un taglio legato alla storia dell'archeologia. Ecco allora il De Lama recarsi a visitare, e descrivere più o meno ampiamente, molte collezioni soprattutto di Firenze, Roma, Napoli, e qualche scavo, tra cui Pompei e Ercolano. Evidente l'interesse di questi dati: in molti casi di tratta dell'ultima, in alcuni