
Rosetta

Mureddu, N.; 'The Gorgon and the Cross: Rereading the Alexander Mosaic and the House of the Faun at Pompeii'

Rosetta **17**: 52 – 71

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue17/mureddu.pdf>

The Gorgon and the Cross: Rereading the Alexander Mosaic and the House of the Faun at Pompeii

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Abstract:

The House of the Faun is one of the most intriguing buildings in Pompeii. Its striking feature is the presence of several mosaics decorating the whole house, the most representative of which is perhaps the well-known Alexander Mosaic. This new study analyses the interpretation not only of the Alexander Mosaic, but of the whole set decorating the House of the Faun, by considering and comparing with the possible esoteric creeds of the late Hellenism. In the study I suggest that instead of being simply decorative features of a wealthy Samnite, the mosaics are actually linked to each other by a philosophical pattern linked with an unclear esoteric circle, related with either the Heracliteans or the Hermetics.

1. The Mosaic and its subject

The mosaic of Alexander, found at the House of the Faun at Pompeii is one of the most intriguing representations of an ancient battle (figure 1)¹. We no longer possess the original painting from which it was probably copied. Whether the original was completely identical to its transposition in stone or just a model bearing different details in comparison with the mosaic we will never know. The scene preserved by Vesuvius' lava shows a battle identified as one of the three battles Alexander fought against Darius III Codomannus between 334 and 331 BC.² Badian thinks he can recognize the last battle, Arbela (or Gaugamela) in the image showed by the mosaic, pointing out that both armies seem to be using Macedonian *sarissae*, which, according to Diodoros,³ were used only at Gaugamela.⁴



FIGURE 1: THE ALEXANDER MOSAIC, MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI, PARTICULAR. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.⁵

¹ Figures 1 – 3 will be displayed in the text, figures 4 – 12 can be found in the final list of images.

² Zevi 2000: 123.

³ Diodorus Siculus, *Histories*, XVII, 53.1.

⁴ Badian, 1999: 80, 81.

⁵ Though I have tried to contact Mr. Seindal to request a formal permission to use these pictures, I could not find his contact anywhere. Should he disapprove their use within this article they will be promptly removed. As

Nevertheless it is not clear whether the *sarissae* rising behind the Persians belonged to them or were part of an invisible Macedonian army surrounding Darius' forces. But as reasonably stated by Hölscher, usually ancient representations of battle-scenes lacked in realism;⁶ therefore trying to reconstruct a tactical scheme in this image would be vain. The scene apparently represents a unitary lapse of time, in which the battle reaches both its apex and end, culminating with Darius' retreat.

Two notable features immediately appear. The first is the character holding a wooden stick which can be easily confused with the other similar sticks surrounding it. Unfortunately at the end of the stick the mosaic is damaged, yet we can observe it is not a spear, but a banner displaying a crest now almost totally invisible. The arm holding the standard respects enough the proportions to be belonging to the third Persian soldier from the right, who might be the holder of the royal standard of Darius. In fact if we accept Badian's interpretation, the remaining crest suggests the presence of a bird, identifiable with the Achaemenid family standard.⁷ The second notable feature is the dried-up tree that stands in the background, left of the scene. The plant almost portrays a human posture, twisting its branches in unnatural positions. Whether it is a Persian death symbol, taking roots from funerary monuments in Asia Minor⁸ or not is uncertain. Mention has to be made also of Alexander's helmet, laying on the ground, below Bucephalus. It is hard to attribute its ownership to the King, but its difference from the regular soldiers' ones and its golden feature make this theory very likely. This is a *prima facie* description of the scene. Before arguing what we think its interpretation might be, it is necessary to analyze its position inside the House.

2. The House of the Faun

The so-called House of the Faun is not an average building in Pompeian architecture since it is a residence of unusual proportions.⁹ The complexity of its internal arrangement and the organization of its ground plan offer a problematic match for

a reminder, this is for a free online journal with scientific purposes only, no income whatsoever was taken at any stage of its realisation.

⁶ Hölscher, 2004: 23.

⁷ Badian, 1999:80.

⁸ Badian, 1999: 86.

⁹ Zevi, 2000: 35.

the canon described by Vitruvius in relation to Roman houses.¹⁰ Indeed the *fauces* at the entrance of the house led the view throughout one of two *atria* and the *tablinum*, towards the *peristyle*, where among the columns one could see the *exedra* at the end of the house.¹¹ A first peculiarity is the double *atrium*, indicating a dualistic concept in the architecture of the house. On top of a pedestal in the middle of the first *atrium* is a statuette of a satyr, but such occurrence is not matched by the second, today objectless, *atrium*. This implied duality feature of the house should be kept in mind until the analysis of the mosaics. Also the *exedra*, visible from the entrance, presented a peculiar painting (unique inside the house) of an assembly of centaurs and sea people. The main characteristic of the Pompeian first style is its being non-figurative. This canon applies perfectly to the rest of the house the walls of which are covered with monochrome stuccos with decorations of vines and flower scrolls.¹² The painting with the centaurs and mermaids, instead, is a novelty, presenting again the concept of double nature, bestiality and humanity struggling together to overcome each other without solution, as narrated by the Greek myths.¹³ The fact that the commissioner chose this scene to be seen from the entrance of the house is interesting. The mosaic is a pavement, so it was not invisible until the visitor reached the *exedra*. Therefore, as a device to show the owner's personality from the entrance it would not seem appropriate, but the painting was on the wall, as visible as its meaning. Was it a starting point for a reading of the whole house? The rest of the figurative scenes in the residence are not paintings but mosaics, the ones decorating the threshold under the Alexander mosaic are not apparently connected with it. They represent so-called Nilotic scenes, with typical Egyptian animals. In the *exedra* are also two pillars painted in red, while all the other pillars of the house are white.¹⁴ It is not unlikely that the *exedra* had a connection with the sacred and this will be discussed later. It has been said that the mosaics present in the house hardly have any connection with the *exedra* mosaic since they seem to exemplify a usual Hellenistic ideal, showing images of the exotic world subjected to or discovered through Macedonian conquest.¹⁵

¹⁰ Vitruvius, *Architecture*, XXXV, 110.

¹¹ Cohen, 1997: 177.

¹² Cohen, 1997: 179, 180.

¹³ Biederman, 1989: 106.

¹⁴ Zevi, 2000: 127.

¹⁵ Cohen, 1997: 195.

3. The owner

Undoubtedly the owner of the house was not a common person, but a very prestigious member of the Pompeian community. Although when the mosaic was put together (in the II century BC, judging by the pictorial style of the room)¹⁶ Pompeii was already under the Roman influence, it was still independent and its population was predominantly Samnite. The owner of the house could have well been Samnite because Oscan scripts have been found in the house,¹⁷ but the mosaic in front of the entrance shows the Latin welcoming formula: HAVE. This might be seen as a suggestion of the cultural impact that Rome had on Pompeii even before its transformation into a colony. But it could also show a Roman nobleman living in Pompeii; the only certain thing is the name of the last owner, a woman named Cassia who, as Cohen points out, has a Roman name, unless she had intruded in the Samnite family tree, also known by epigraphic evidence with the Romanized name of Satrii.¹⁸ Whether or not this family got mixed with a Roman *gens* it is not relevant here since the mosaic is pre-existent to these events. What really matters is that the purchaser of the mosaic was probably a Samnite aristocrat, aware of the artistic wave dominating the cultural *koiné* of his time. What is possible to determine from the style of the representations is that Egypt seems to have a place of honour in the domestic planning of this man.

4. The hidden symbolism

The mosaic and the arrangement of the house have been analysed so far by means of observations and scholars' conjectures. The latter have been various and each one of them raise interesting points, but they all have also a common weakness: they are partial. Different specialists looked at the mosaic with their particular *formae mentis*, trying to guess its meaning as necessarily related with the disciplines they represented. Our attempt was instead to analyse the mosaic within a multidisciplinary framework, completing the historical and archaeological evidence with disciplines as history of religions, ancient philosophy, ancient magic and symbolism. The result is undoubtedly fascinating.

¹⁶ Cohen, 1997: 188.

¹⁷ Cohen, 1997: 181.

¹⁸ Cohen, 1997: 181.

It is worth spending some time on what the owner of the property did. It has been rightly suggested that Darius and his Persians are portrayed by the mosaic with 'great sympathy'.¹⁹ The central scene is occupied by the Asian king and his immense chariot, facing defeat and death, while Alexander does not maintain his common depiction as a Greek hero. Instead here he is presented merely as a fierce warrior, although victorious.²⁰ As Stewart points out:

“Since his character was seen from boyhood to be fundamentally leonine, these qualities would have been recognized in him by his companions and other observers and so can also be used as a yardstick to assess his portraits. [...] Alexander’s leonine nature [...] brought him into direct contact with the most vital force of Greek culture, its belief in the central role of the male *aretē* as manifested in the matchless personal prowess of the lion man.”²¹

To understand what is going on it is necessary to move our attention on Darius’ right side. We should not focus on the damaged figure in the standard, it cannot lead us further. Moreover it is very likely to be less important than we think. The whole philosophy of the image is carefully hidden. The first detail to be noted is that below the standard, the Persian rider has a different attitude: he does not panic at all, he just observes and puts his hand on his head in a quiet gesture of resignation. His horse shows something indicative, the pendant decorating its ear is a white cross (figure 2).

¹⁹ Holscher, 2004: 26.

²⁰ Badian, 1999: 81.

²¹ Stewart, 1993: 77.



FIGURE 2: THE ALEXANDER MOSAIC, PARTICULAR WITH CROSS. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.

That this is not a common decoration is showed by its absence from the other steeds' garments. It is unique and has a unique role. The symbol of the cross is an ancient one, but in the context we are interested in, the Persian/Babylonian culture, the cross represents Marduk.²² The fact that the main Persian religion was Zoroastrianism, with its main divinity Ahura Mazda, is unimportant after Cyrus took Babylon in 539 BC and stated in the famous cylinder's script that he was the son of Marduk,²³ merging himself with the Babylonian pantheon. Marduk god was not only the creator of mankind, but also the generator of life, a guarantee of fertility on earth.²⁴ This should be kept in mind as the principle which permeates the right side of the mosaic.

On the left we have Alexander. It was not unusual to portray Alexander as a descendant of Heracles, with his own *leonté* or a lion head-shaped helmet.²⁵ Here

²² Cooper, 1979: 45.

²³ Rawlinson, 1884-1909: fig. 35.

²⁴ Cfr. Dalley, 2008.

²⁵ Cfr. Sheedy, 2007.

the helmet on the ground is not shaped as a lion head, it has quite an ordinary appearance.²⁶ We might interpret this as a deprivation of divine status and as a conferral of something else. What Alexander shows us is untidy hair and big eyes. Zevi's assertion about big eyes as a sign of god-like appearance, as we have seen, is vague.²⁷ Indeed what suggests a more likely answer to this expressive choice is Alexander's armour. The small face depicted on his chest may seem human but it is not, it is a gorgon (figure 3).



FIGURE 3: THE ALEXANDER MOSAIC, PARTICULAR OF THE GORGON. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.

The gorgon is the opposite of Marduk; she is an annihilator of life, a bringer of sterility. Here we might reconsider Badian's attention to the tree, which is immediately behind Alexander's ride, dying.²⁸ The tree dies because Alexander is a *gorgoneion*, his eyes are big because they had to petrify. If this logic were acceptable, it would mean that a sort of universal judgment might be on display in

²⁶ See the similar type kept in the Archaeological Museum of Corfu.

²⁷ Zevi, 2000: 123.

²⁸ Badian, 1999:80.

the mosaic scene. It might be expressing the transition from one era to another, a cyclical transformation triggered by conflict of opposite forces.

In such a context the presence of a Faun statuette in the house is not surprising. Fauns are creatures and forerunners of Dionysus, who was equated in Egypt with Osiris. Both these gods were known to have died and returned to life again. In Egypt the sun itself, symbol of Osiris, proved this miracle every day, rising in the morning aboard of its ship and bestowing life and heat until its descent into the realm of death at sunset.²⁹

If, thanks to the clever inclusion of the Gorgon and the Cross, we can recognize a motif in the design of the mosaic, what if we apply this method to the rest of the representations in the house? We can perceive easily enough that Egypt is the fundamental background. Is it just because of its value as an exemplar country, embodying the Hellenistic myth?³⁰ What if we studied the mosaics in the framework of Egyptian meanings? In that case the scenario becomes more complex. The whole plan of the mosaics in the house would seem to present a series of dichotomies.

At the entrance, the bigger *atrium* on the left shows two dramatic masks, but strangely both tragic; it can easily be said that their expressions communicate pain (figure 4).³¹ The presence of the mosaic with the Satyr and the Nymph (both Dionysian figures) in the *cubiculum* beside it can hardly be a coincidence, since that erotic scene symbolizes pleasure, the opposite of pain (figure 5).

Moving along the axis of the house, the symbols become more difficult to decipher. In the mosaic with the doves playing with a jewel-box (figure 6) we recognize again the Hellenistic symbols of imperishable soul (triumphing on material appeal?).³² At its antipodes we find the mosaic with the cat assailing a partridge (figure 7). In the Egyptian-Hellenistic culture the partridge represented Aphrodite-Isis, goddess of luxury and obscurity, while the cat represented Artemis-Bastet goddess of fertility and light. In the scene, the positive fertility, giver of light, is assailing its opposite, the negative luxury which revolves on sterile pleasure and does not give light to

²⁹ Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 42.

³⁰ Pesando, 1997: 126.

³¹ Mallon, 2007: 27.

³² Chevalier, Ghebrant, 1996: 306.

anything, fostering darkness. The presence of two ducks observing the fight might not be a case, since they symbolised both strategy and mediation between the two realms of men and gods, creating the synthesis of an ulterior dualism.³³

Moving along, another double scene can be counterpoised: an aquatic view shows the fight between an octopus and a lobster (figure 8). The former represented for the Greeks an evil creature, opposite in meaning to the good dolphin.³⁴ The octopus is here attacking the armoured lobster, associated with the moon and so with Artemis, like the cat.³⁵ This time it is evil attacking good. The previous fight finds here its opposite, so as to indicate that there is neither ultimate nor positive conclusion, evil and good cyclically overthrow each other.

In the opposite mosaic we find the famous scene where the indolence and inebriation of a Dionysian genius subdues the wild and exotic tiger (figure 9). As already said, the tiger is not present in the Greek-Egyptian repertoire of symbols, because it is a new animal. It may be true, though, that it could be representing the Hellenistic culture subduing the exotic wilderness of the Indian territories.

In the *exedra* with the Alexander mosaic we encounter the Nilotic scenes mentioned above. These scenes could not be random representations, since the central animals here are the crocodile and the hippopotamus (Figure 10), the former representing the Egyptian god Sobek (again fertility)³⁶ and the latter the goddess Thoueris (again pregnancy and birth).³⁷ On the right there is another pair of fighters, the mongoose and the snake (Figure 11), both symbols of regeneration, the first being holy to Ra (the Sun)³⁸ and the second holy to Uadjet (the cobra symbolizing regeneration with its change of skin, Hellenistic Ureus).³⁹ Again, another mosaic with a cornucopia shows fertility⁴⁰ and the last one, with a lion fighting a leopard (figure 12), would seem a clear demonstration of the knowledge that the owner of the house

³³ Mallon, 2007: 191.

³⁴ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 711.

³⁵ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 239.

³⁶ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 244, 245.

³⁷ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 507.

³⁸ Hart, 1986: 47.

³⁹ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 844.

⁴⁰ Mallon, 2007: 27.

had to possess: the lion, the Egyptian Sekhmet (meaning solar power and fertility)⁴¹ is subduing the leopard, holy to Seth (meaning death and darkness).⁴²

So all the images present in the house do not appear as a random *pastiche*, passively bought as a Hellenistic package. With every probability it is a planned disposition of symbols, concentrated into a clear dualism which sees a broad counter-position of life and death, light and shadow, and then in details various kinds of generations and degenerations. In this context Alexander and Darius are not more important than the animals mentioned, because they are just symbols. We could recognize the great mosaic as a parable with the same meaning of the other mosaics. Darius is the decline of an empire, and Alexander is the erasure who ends it before the rebirth of the new empire. So although presented as a *gorgoneion*, Alexander could not be necessarily an evil figure, but just an incarnation of change, the action, intended in Heraclitean sense.⁴³ What is mistaken for sympathy towards the Persians is instead a detached description of pain intended as realization of the frailty of materiality, crushed between the gears of the eternal struggle of the opposites characterising existence.

The strength of this hypothesis lies in the fact that these images reiterate a meaning which can be immediately perceivable both individually and in the totality of their ensemble. But why such camouflaged references in a foreign environment such as the Samnite one? Their advantage of symbols is their being able to express a meaning detached from the form which represents it, being understood only by a narrow circle of guests or initiated. Indeed the interest of the main characteristics of the symbolism explained above comes up when we compare it to Heraclitean doctrine. Heraclitus' thought intended the world as a never-ending flux where nothing is stable because everything changes and this mutability is a consequence of *Polemos*, the sovereign conflict, ruling existence. Who can tell this is happening? Only the wise men, the philosophers, the 'awake people', maybe only these people were supposed to understand the symbols in the house. But there is apparently no connection between Heraclitus and Egypt. It is maybe not too bold to reflect on

⁴¹ Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 611.

⁴² Chevalier, Gheebrant, 1996: 595.

⁴³ Waterfield, 2000: 33-46.

something that includes somehow Heraclitus and puts its theory of the contraries in a broader Hellenistic-Egyptian magical-religious context: Hermetism. If it is true that the gathering of hermetic scripts in the corpus starts from the 1st century B.C. and finds its conclusion in the 2nd century A.D., it is an acknowledged fact that such beliefs might have been conceived in the Ptolemaic period,⁴⁴ and the mosaic system showed in the House of the Faun might prove it. Although the main reference of the house is Dionysus/Osiris and not Hermes/Thot, it is also true that in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the so-called Hermes Trismegistus is only a medium, a messenger of a philosophy which does not necessarily put a precise god in a privileged position. Analysing the untitled first book of the *Corpus* it is possible to read statements such as:

- *All things that are, are moved; only that which is not is unmovable.*⁴⁵
- *All upon earth is alterable.*⁴⁶
- *Dissolvable matter is altered into contraries.*⁴⁷
- *The generation of man is corruption, the corruption is the beginning of generation.*⁴⁸

It is evident that something of the Heraclitean doctrine influenced the earlier book of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and that, given the contacts that Pompeii is known to have had with Egypt and its cults,⁴⁹ this doctrine would make the owner of the House of the Faun the most suitable adept. Though philosophy retains geographic nuances, it applies to every ethnicity, so for an Italic to be either a Heraclitean or a Hermetic (if we move the first book of the *Corpus* at least a century backward) was not odd.

In so proposing we imply that the commissioner decided the disposition and the symbolic use of the mosaics within a cohesive cult that preserved it from any possible change even after the creator's death.

Conclusions.

⁴⁴ Copenhaver, 1992: XIV-XVI.

⁴⁵ Hermes Trismegistus, *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 14.

⁴⁶ Hermes Trismegistus, *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 54.

⁴⁷ Hermes Trismegistus, *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 64.

⁴⁸ Hermes Trismegistus, *Corpus Hermeticum*, I, 65.

⁴⁹ Zevi, 2000: 126.

The Alexander Mosaic originally contained in the House of the Faun in Pompeii had in time several interpretations never definitive.

The mainstream interpretation would see the scene as the portrait of a battle between Alexander and Darius III, in which great compassion is showed towards the Persians, spectators of a massacre perpetrated by a bold ruler. In this view the presence itself of the mosaic within the house would not suggest any relationship with the other mosaics included among its decorations. All together these mosaics would be just part of a pre-established Hellenistic *koiné*, including fashionable figures and subjects mostly connected with the conquests of Alexander the Great and his military enterprises.

On the contrary, my idea suggests another possible explanation of the role that the mosaics in the House of the Faun might have had in reality. It shows the contrast between an unusual Alexander who wears the face of the Gorgon, symbol of aridity and death and presents gorgonian facial traits, and Darius, who brings forth the cross of Marduk, god of fertility. Applying these symbols to the whole house they highlight a consecution of scenes, developed in opposites, all representing the same concept of good/light/fertility/life taking over evil/darkness/sterility/death or *vice versa*. The system of opposites shown here seems to be applicable to the Heraclitean doctrine (from sixth to fifth century BC onwards) in a form strictly interconnected with Egypt. The only system recognizable in Egypt and including Heraclitus is the Hermetic doctrine resumed in the scripts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, of which the written redaction in Greek seems thought to start in the 1st century B.C., too late for this purpose. Whatever the real creed behind this figurative organisation was it is not unlikely that the House of the Faun could have been decorated on purpose with a set of symbols invisible to common visitors, but open to some kind of initiates.

List of Images



FIGURE 4: MOSAIC WITH MASKS, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT ©
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FIGURE 5: MOSAIC WITH SATYR AND NINPH, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI.
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FIGURE 6: MOSAIC WITH DOVES AND JEWELBOX, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.



FIGURE 7: MOSAIC WITH CAT AND PARTRIDGE, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.



FIGURE 8: MOSAIC WITH OCTOPUS AND LOBSTER, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.FIGURE 9: MOSAIC WITH GENIUS AND TIGER, PARTICULAR. MUSEO



ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.



Figure 10: Mosaic with Hippopotamus and Crocodile, particular. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Copyright © 1999-2014 René Seindal.



FIGURE 11: MOSAIC WITH MONGOOSE AND SNAKE, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI. COPYRIGHT © 1999-2014 RENÉ SEINDAL.



FIGURE 12: MOSAIC WITH LION AND PANTHER, PARTICULAR. MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI.

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