



Rina Talgam

The Survival of Classical Culture in *Palaestina* and *Arabia* in Late Antiquity: Mosaic Art as Test Case

In this paper I shall discuss the continuity of mythological scenes in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* during the fifth and sixth century C.E.¹. Despite the move from paganism to Christianity, classical culture continued to be part of humanistic education given to children of the upper classes, and philosophical ideas from the classical world also made their way into Christian theology². However, the profound link between Hellenic culture and the pagan world presented the Christians with a challenge, and the picture that emerges is not one of simple continuity.

A study on the Christians' response to Hellenic culture in the fields of literature, philosophy, the theater, and visual art reflects an ambivalent attitude. The various choices with regard to what could be retained within the framework of Christian art and the reasoning behind the rejection of certain themes are indicative of complex reality. Each of the options and strategies chosen by the Christians had its advantages and disadvantages.

First Option: Rejection of all Elements of Classical Culture that could be Interpreted as an Expression of Paganism

One mode of response was the complete rejection of all elements of classical culture that could be interpreted as an expression of paganism. Such was the stand taken by Jacob of Serugh (451-521 C.E.) with regard to mime performances of mythological themes: "The mimer of the spectacles meditates on the stories of the gods. Who can bathe in mud without being soiled? He mimes (stories) about the goddesses; he does not depart from the tales concerning them"³. The difficulty inherent in the absolute adoption of this approach is the obligatory relinquishment of a significant part of the culture and the fear that the imposition of a taboo could lead to an attraction toward the forbidden pleasure. This is notable in mosaic art in the decorated floors of non-religious buildings, in which use was made of compositions and motifs also appearing in religious contexts. Several examples of secular buildings decorated with themes known mainly from church mosaics were found in Caesarea⁴, Madaba⁵ (fig. 1) and Beth Govrin⁶.

¹ For a recent survey of the subject, see: FIGUERAS 2003, 49–69.

² For a discussion of the adaptability and durability of Greek culture in a Christian world see: BOWERSOCK 1993. On the topic of classical education of Christians, see: LAISTNER 1967, 49–73; LEADER-NEWBY 2004.

³ MOSS 1935, 87–112.

⁴ PORATH 2007, 117–142.

⁵ PICCIRILLO 1993, 72–75, 78–79.



Fig. 1 - The Burnt Palace of Madaba (after PICCIRILLO 1993, 72).

Second Option: Demonstrate the Compatibility of Christianity and Hellenic Culture

The opposite response attempted to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity and Hellenic culture. This is very notable in the double introduction to an *ekphrasis* (description and interpretation of a work of art) of Johannes of Gaza, which describes a painting or mosaic depicting the world (fig. 2)⁷. The cosmological picture in Gaza, which includes 50 personifications of natural forces, continues a Hellenistic and Roman tradition of allegorical depictions of the cosmos in various artistic media. Among the well-known examples are the Tazza Farnese⁸, the decoration of the cuirass on the sculpture of Augustus from Prima Porta⁹, the Parabagio plate¹⁰, and representations on mosaic floors, the most impressive one being from Shahba-Philippopolis (now in the National Museum of Damascus) dated to the second half of the third century¹¹, and the mosaic in the House of the Mithraeum in Emerita (Mérida), Spain, dated between the late second and third centuries¹². In the first part of the introduction Johannes directs his discourse to Apollo and the Muses, asking for their inspiration. In the second part he addresses his speech to God the Creator and the Lord of the universe. He asks for God's help and announces that his speech opens with supplication to God via the symbol of the Passion. The double introduction reflects Johannes' dual identity. He was a Christian scholar who saw classical literature and art as an integral part of his own tradition. The continuation of the *ekphrasis* and the work of art described by him show that the combination not only touches upon the rhetorical and esthetic tradition, but also reflects a dovetailing of the Christian religious sphere with the

⁶ VINCENT 1922, 259–81.

⁷ FRIEDLÄNDER (1912), 1969, 135–224; KRAHMER 1920; TALGAM 2009, 91–120.

⁸ DWYER 1992, 249–282; POLLINI 1992, 283–300.

⁹ HANNESTAD 1988, 50–56.

¹⁰ TOYNBEE, PAINTER 1986, 29–30.

¹¹ WILL 1953, 27–48; BALTY 1977, 28–29.

¹² QUET 1981; for more bibliography see: DUNBABIN 1999, 147–150.



Fig. 3 - The Hippolytus Hall at Madaba (after PICCIRILLO 1993, 51).

are wise, having appropriated from this literature what is suitable to us and akin to the truth, will pass over the remainder”¹⁵.

The selective approach advocated by Basil of Casarea was a common one. One of the most popular mythological stories in *Palaestina* and *Arabia* is the tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus, which appears in two mosaic floors and in a wall painting. The reasons for the choice of this subject is certainly the pride in showing off a knowledge of Euripidean drama, but also because Hippolytus has become a paradigm of chastity. The central panel in the Hall of Hippolytus at Madaba contains the two protagonists, Phaedra and Hippolytus, with the old nursemaid carrying the love letter forming the link between them and, in addition, two maidservants attempting to assuage Phaedra’s lovesickness and Hippolytus’s companions, a falconer and a young servant (fig. 3). Hippolytus, leaving for the hunt, is yet unaware of the content of the letter¹⁶. The composition resembles the

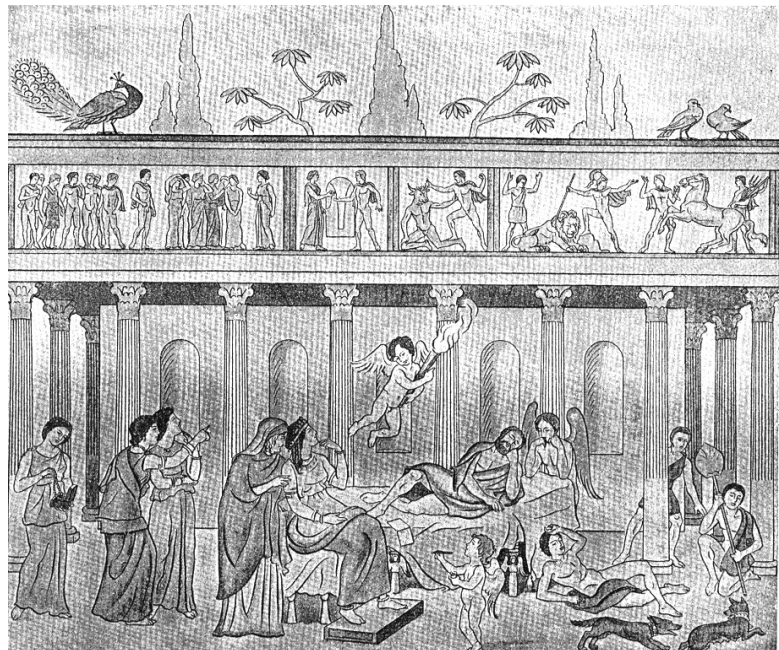


Fig. 4 - Paul Friedländer’s reconstruction of a painting described by Procopius of Gaza (FRIEDLÄNDER 1938).

¹⁵ English Translation by DEFERRARI, MCGUIRE 1934, vol. 4, 378–435.

theme's portrayal on Roman sarcophagi. The figure of the falconer is an innovation introduced by the Byzantine artists in Madaba and also in a monumental painting described in Procopius's *Ekphrasis Eikonos* (fig. 4)¹⁷. It demonstrates the popularity of falconry in the fifth and sixth centuries, when it was regarded as an essential component of a nobleman's education.

In contrast to the abbreviated depiction of the tragedy in the Madaba mosaic floor, the painting described by Procopius has a comprehensive and sophisticated composition. The question arises whether the differences derive from distinctions in the education level the Gaza artist had received an upper-class classical education, or are due to differences in the artistic media. Both probably affected the nature of the composition. However, it should be noted that the innovations introduced in the painting described by Procopius are more original than the minor modifications of classical tradition seen in these mosaic floors. A major departure from Euripides is the depiction of Theseus asleep in the palace; in the classical text it is mentioned at least twice that he is away on a state visit to Troezen (lines 281, 660). The originality of this feature explains Procopius' reasons for making particular reference to it. Theseus, portrayed in classical art literature and as a model of the Athenian ethos, is depicted in Gaza not as a majestic king and glorious hero, but as a weary old man betrayed not only by his young wife but also by his servants. Another major modification is the brutal punishment meted out to the old nursemaid; in the Euripidean tragedy she returns from the mission unharmed. Bowersock suggests that in Madaba too a servant of Hippolytus is cruelly beating the nurse. A comparison of the Gazan painting to Roman depictions of the tragedy reveals that such punishment as that inflicted on the nursemaid was entirely alien to the visual tradition of the scene. With regard to the mythological mosaics and wall paintings, one should try to discern whether it is possible to indicate clear criteria of choice. Moreover, one should note whether the choices we see in art differ from those in the literature.

Fourth Option: Apparent Approval of Greek Mythology, but in Reality the Neutralization of Its Content from Within in a Hidden Way

Another strategy that could have been chosen was the apparent acceptance of Greek mythology, but in reality the neutralization of its content from within in a covert way. Having come to know Hellenic culture from within, the Christians were able to empty it of much of its substance even while pretending to defend it. The response of Julian the Apostate makes reference to the adoption of this strategy by Christians: "We are shot with shafts feathered from our own wings, for from our own books they take arms against us"¹⁸.

One of the most effective ways of doing this was by means of parody and the use of humor in order to point out absurdities. The words placed in the mouths of the adherents at mime performances in the theater by Jacob of Serugh (Homily 5) are a good reflection of this: "I do not go that I may believe, but I go that I may laugh. And what do I lose on account of this, since I laugh and do not believe? (As for) those things in the stories which are mimed concerning the tales of the idols, I know that they are false; and I see them – laughing"¹⁹.

The influence of mime is evident in some of the mythological mosaics, and the depiction of the figures was intended to emphasize the ridiculousness of the mythological figures and in such a way amuse the viewer²⁰.

A good example is a floor mosaic in the Nile Festival Building in Sepphoris (Lower Galilee), which depicts a group of Amazons arranged in two superimposed horizontal strips (fig. 5)²¹. In the upper register, two Amazons, or an Amazon and her male companion, are seated in the shade of a canopy stretched

¹⁶ PICCIRILLO 1993, 51, 66–67.

¹⁷ FRIEDLÄNDER 1938; TALGAM 2004, 209–35.

¹⁸ FORTIN 1981, 199.

¹⁹ MOSS 1935, 109.

²⁰ This aspect is treated extensively by BOWERSOCK 2006, 31–63.

²¹ WEISS, TALGAM 2002, 77–80.



Fig. 5 - A group of dancing Amazons in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris (courtesy of Z. Weiss).

between two trees to which their horses are tethered. In the lower register, Amazons are shown in dancing poses. The cultic war-dance of the Amazons around the statue of Artemis in Ephesus has been reduced here to after-dinner entertainment. The scene is also reminiscent, to a certain extent, of the representations of an outdoor banquet, e.g., the hunters' picnic in the 'Small Hunt' mosaic at Piazza Armerina and the group of entertainers and diners depicted in an Italian mosaic dating to the fourth century C.E. at the Detroit Institute of Arts²². In Sepphoris, this genre was given a mythological interpretation.

Dancing and pantomime was a customary activity of private banquets in Late Antiquity, as reflected by Nonnos of Panopolis in his *Dionysiaca*²³, as well as by Macrobius, Ambrosius, and Ammianus Marcellinus²⁴. The dancing Amazons most probably illustrate the mime of a mythical choral group. Moreover, the wild and war-like Amazons in the Sepphoris mosaic look more like exotic women with erotic appeal, a tendency already sensed in the *Posthomerica* by Quintus of Smyrna (dating to the fourth century C.E.)²⁵. This depiction seems to support the suggestion that the Amazons were intended to provide light entertainment.

²² CARANDINI *ET AL.* 1982, p. 1, fig. 94; KONDOLEON 2000, 184–6.

²³ Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, XVIII, 99ff.; XIX, 198–284; PARRISH 1995, 330.

²⁴ ROSSITER 1991, 203, note 25; Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.1.7, 3.14.4, 7.1.16; Ambrose, *Ep.* 27.13; Amm. Marc. 14.6.20.

²⁵ BLOK 1995, 197.

Fifth Option: Allegorical Interpretation of Myths

Another way of enabling the adaptation of the classical polytheistic heritage to the monotheistic faith was by offering new interpretation, one of which was allegory. The allegorical interpretation of myths was not the invention of Byzantine Christians, but was already known in Greek and Roman culture and was especially popular among the Neoplatonists²⁶. The allegorical interpretation was well known to Christians who adopted this approach in their reading of the New Testament. As will be seen below, incorporated in some of the mythological mosaics, in addition to well-known mythological figures, were personifications that served as signifiers of allegorical interpretation. This allegorical interpretation of myths helped to assure the survival of the study of pagan literature in Christian environment. It is therefore important to take into consideration not only what are the themes that were chosen from the big reservoir of Roman art, but also to trace the way they are treated.

In the mosaic at Madaba (fig. 3) Aphrodite and Adonis are seated on a throne; near them are six *Erotes* and the three *Charites* (Graces) who are approached by a peasant girl with a basket containing fruit and a partridge labeled ΑΓΡΟΙΚΙC (reminiscent of the figure of an initiate), which points to the allegorical way in which the scene should be interpreted. Aphrodite and Adonis, together with their entourage, symbolize the mystery of natural growth and the joy of nature. Moreover, the red flowers from the overturned basket that are scattered on the ground call to mind the popular 'Day of Roses' that was celebrated throughout the Roman world in the spring (usually in May), as mentioned in various documents. In the end of the fifth and the sixth century, the myth of Aphrodite and Adonis was probably the object of declamations or performances during this festival and Procopius, Johannes of Gaza and Choricus wrote poems for it²⁷. In Johannes' anacreontic poem 5, which was delivered in that day, he offers an allegorical interpretation of the myth of Adonis. After a description of the coming of the spring, he hints at the etiological myth of Aphrodite and Adonis (lines 25-32) and then (lines 33-36) he says: "But the young man is the fruit, the mighty messenger of life, since he is a child of nature, dance of goddess of love"²⁸. The festivals dedicated to Adonis were celebrated in the spring, and one legend recounts how Aphrodite pricked her foot on a thorn and her blood colored the flowers dedicated to her lover²⁹. The figure of Eros gently touching the goddess' foot probably alludes to this minor event. The *Erotes* in the role of mischievous boys add a humorous touch to the scene and enhance the joy of the reunion. One of them has overturned the basket of flowers - a mischievous role often reserved for the hare in mosaics of our region, Aphrodite gently taps the buttocks of a second Eros with her slipper - a gesture originally depicting her threatening Pan, a third Eros climbs a tree (possibly reminiscent of the birth of young Adonis from a tree), and a fourth manages to escape.

Another mosaic from Gerasa featuring Dionysos and Aphrodite (fig. 6) can also possibly be linked with the spring festivities known as the *Maiumas*³⁰. According to John Malalas the *Maiuma* included mimes on the mysteries of Aphrodite and Dionysos³¹. The images of the two gods in the mosaic floor are only partly preserved, but the accompanying inscriptions enable their identification. The composition is arranged in two registers: the central figure in the upper one is of Dionysos, to his left is Pan holding a *pedum*, and lying at his feet is another figure holding Pan's flute. To Dionysos' right are a maenad and a satyr. In the lower register, beneath the figure of Dionysos, is Cypris (i.e., Aphrodite); in the lefthand corner is a figure identified as ΑΓΡΟΙΚΙC (a female farmer), and in the righthand corner is another figure labeled ΦΙΛΛΝΘΕC[Ι] (lover of flowers).

The agricultural aspects of Dionysos already appear in Hellenistic and Roman art. However, the god is no longer depicted surrounded by the Seasons in a representation that might evoke a cosmological significance. The Gerasa mosaic features a common Dionysiac *thiasos*, and the reference to vegetation has

²⁶ LAMBERTON 1986, viii-xi; SELLEW 1989, 79-100; HINKS 1939, 12-20.

²⁷ GLUCKER 1987, 52, 54.

²⁸ CICCOLELLA 2006, 88.

²⁹ For a list of ancient sources, see: ROSE 1959, 125, note 95.

³⁰ Z'UBI ET AL. 1994, 539-46.

³¹ *Chronographia*, 284-5.

been achieved by the presence of ΑΓΡΟΙΚΙC and φιλανθρο[ι] flanking Aphrodite. This is a far cry from Dionysos at the height of his power. A work such as the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus, in which Dionysos is rendered as a soteriological and mighty god, to date lacks any equivalent in the visual art of Palestine and Arabia.

The celebration of the Maiuma is attested at Gerasa by an inscription that was found close to the theatre and a pool. The inscription, dated to 535 C.E., declares that "The most delightful Maiuma was celebrated after the lapse of years..."³².

I hope that in this paper I have managed to reflect the complexity and diversity of the processes by which Christians responded to Hellenic art and to shed some light on the relation between change and continuity in Late Antiquity.

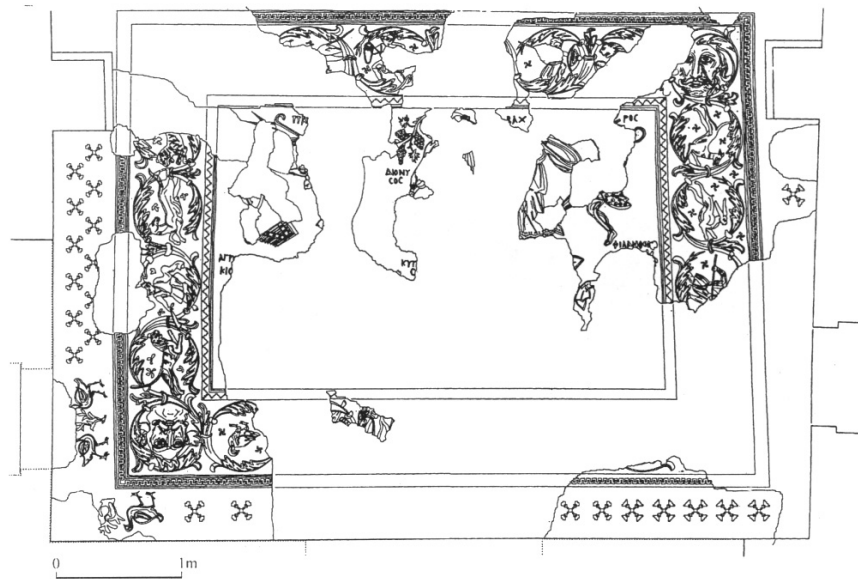


Fig. 6 - A mosaic featuring Dionysos and Aphrodite at Gerasa (after Z'UBI ET AL. 1994, 539–46).

Rina Talgam

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
E-mail: rina.talgam@mail.huji.ac.il

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³² GREATREX, WATT 1999, 1–21.

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