

# Half-Human Half-Vegetal Hybrids in Eastern Mosaics

## Doğu Mozaiklerinde Yarı İnsan Yarı Bitkisel Melezler

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### Abstract


*The aim of this paper is to investigate the evolution of the use of half-human half-vegetal figures, the so-called Rankenfrau and Rankengott, in the pavements of the Eastern Mediterranean, from their appearance in the Classical period to their appropriation in the Roman and Christian times. The contextualised analysis of this corpus, combined with a comparison to other media such as architectural sculpture, provide a good opportunity to better understand to what extent the motif varied at different times and how the worldview of the commissioners of the decors can, or not, affect their meaning. In the Classical and Hellenistic contexts, vegetalisation of the human body seems to plastically translate the prerogatives of different divinities of wild nature, growth, and life. Through the mastery of their primitive savagery, these deities allow the coexistence of two different natures and bring divine prosperity into everyday life. In Roman times these figures inherited from the Greek world went through an unprecedented formal and syntactic diversification. A new variant is even created: the foliate head, which concentrates the force of a vital principle and appears as the metonymic representation of its primordial and spontaneous fecundity. In Eastern pavements, bearded and beardless foliate heads are associated with young foliate boys in the peopled scroll borders of the public rooms of rich houses. They evoked the mastery of a vital impulse that is made beneficial for wealthy owners. During the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, whilst the foliate heads survive in the pavements of Christian monuments, the Rankenfrau and the Rankengott seem to disappear from the Eastern repertoire.*

**Keywords:** Half-human half-vegetal hybridity, Rankenfrau, Rankengott, foliate heads, Eros/Amor.

### Öz

*Bu makalenin amacı, Rankenfrau ve Rankengott olarak adlandırılan yarı insan yarı bitkisel figürlerin Doğu Akdeniz döşemelerindeki kullanımının, Klasik dönemde ortaya çıkışlarından Roma ve Hıristiyanlık dönemlerinde kendilerine mal edilmelerine kadar geçirdiği evrimi incelemektir. Bu külliyyatın bağlamsal analizi, mimari heykeltıraşlık gibi diğer medyalarla yapılan karşılaştırma ile birlikte, motifin farklı zamanlarda ne ölçüde değiştiğini ve dekorları yapanların dünya görüşünün anlamlarını nasıl etkileyip etkilemediğini daha iyi anlamak için iyi bir fırsat sunmaktadır. Klasik ve Helenistik bağlamlarda, insan bedeninin bitkiselleştirilmesi, vahşi doğa, büyüme ve yaşamın farklı ilahlarının ayrıcalıklarını plastik bir şekilde tercüme ediyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu tanrılar, ilkel vahşiliklerinin ustalığıyla iki farklı doğanın bir arada var olmasını sağlar ve ilahi refahı gündelik hayata taşırlar. Roma döneminde Yunan dünyasından miras kalan bu figürler eşi benzeri görülmemiş bir biçimsel ve sözdizimsel çeşitlenmeye uğramıştır. Hatta yeni bir varyant yaratılmıştır: yaşamsal bir ilkenin gücünü yoğunlaştıran ve onun ilkel ve kendiliğinden doğurganlığının metonimik temsili olarak ortaya çıkan yapraklı baş. Doğudaki döşemelerde, sakallı ve sakalsız yaprak başları, zengin evlerin kamusal odalarının kalabalık parşömen bordürlerindeki yapraklı genç erkeklerle ilişkilendirilir. Bunlar, zengin sahipler için faydalı hale getirilen hayati bir dürtünün ustalığını çağırıyordu. İS 6. yüzyıl boyunca, yaprak başları Hıristiyan anıtlarının döşemelerinde varlığını sürdürürken, Rankenfrau ve Rankengott Doğu repertuarından kaybolmuş gibi görünmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yarı insan yarı bitkisel melezlik, Rankenfrau, Rankengott, yapraklı kafalar, Eros/Amor.

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Half-human half-vegetal figures<sup>1</sup> first appeared in the Classical period and have since profoundly marked the Art History of our Mediterranean societies, and even beyond. In this paper, I would like to focus on a part of their history: a period of almost a thousand years, during which they were transmitted, manipulated, forgotten, or even sometimes ignored. Their exact identity, and the reasons for their hybridity, often remain questions veiled in mystery. From the Greek world to the Roman and Christian times, the pavements of the Eastern Mediterranean are characterised by a very specific use of these vegetalised figures; a context which thus provides a good opportunity to explore to what extent this motif varied at different times, and how the worldview of the commissioners of the decors can, or not, affect their meaning.

## 1. The Greek World – Creation & Conceptualisation

In a mosaic from the house B V 1 in Olynthos (Figs. 1-2), four vegetalised figures decorate one of the concentric borders. Each of them occupies the middle of a side, between two sphinxes in ‘split perspective’ (Guimier-Sorbets 1999: 23)<sup>2</sup> and corner palmettes. They are frontal, and the lower part of their bodies takes the form of two volutes which each give rise to a high half palmette in the interstice formed by the tails of the adjacent sphinxes. Their arms are raised in an Atlantean posture. The schematic drawing of the mosaic, made with pebbles, does not allow to determine the gender of the figures.



Figure 1  
Mosaic from the house B V 1, Olynthos.  
Photo from Robinson 1933: pl. 15.

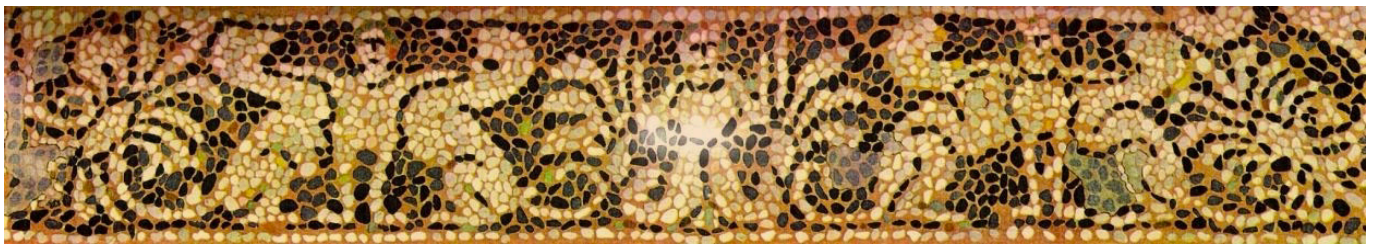


Figure 2  
Detail of the mosaic from the house B V 1,  
Olynthos. Photo from Guimier-Sorbets 1999:  
pl. 1.1.

This pavement is amongst the first occurrences of the motif; it is dated towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. During that time, half-human half-vegetal figures appeared simultaneously in various parts of the Mediterranean, which was a major crossroad of exchanges and influences, making it complicated to trace the paths taken by some motifs, enriched here and there with iconographic or semantic elements. It is therefore difficult to determine the contexts in which the motif was created, although it is generally considered that it came from the East, possibly from the Ionian coast<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of the exact place where the vegetalised human figures were created, the geographical and chronological dispersion of the documents reveals that the motif benefited from commercial and cultural exchange during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, spreading throughout the Mediterranean basin<sup>4</sup> as a result of the diffusion of the Greek iconographic repertoire, which strongly influenced the arts of Thrace,

1 Half-human half-vegetal figures of the Roman iconography are being collected in the database ‘*Diphuès* – Iconothèque de l’hybride humano-végétal’: it is a research, exchange, and dialogue tool made available to the international scientific community in open access (<http://cipl-cloud09.segi.ulg.ac.be/diphues/>).

2 ‘perspective éclatée’.

3 For different hypotheses on the origin of the motif and its diffusion around the Mediterranean, see Furtwängler 1893: 205-206; Curtius 1928: 292; Robinson 1941: 34; Curtius 1957: 196; Schauenburg 1957: 218-219; Stoop 1960: 56-57, 63; Laws 1961: 34-35; Valeva 1995: 346-347; Guimier-Sorbets 1999: 28, 30; Rupp 2007.

4 For a map with the distribution of vegetalised female figures in the Late Classical and Hellenistic periods, see Pfrommer 1990: fig. 7.

Scythia<sup>5</sup>, Magna Grecia and Etruria, where vegetalised figures can be found.

In the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the motif is found on another pavement, in the Palace of Vergina (Figs. 3-4). It decorates the four corners of the mosaic,

Figure 3  
Drawing of the mosaic from  
an *andrôn* of the Palace, Vergina.  
Photo from Ginouvès et al. 1993: fig. 103.

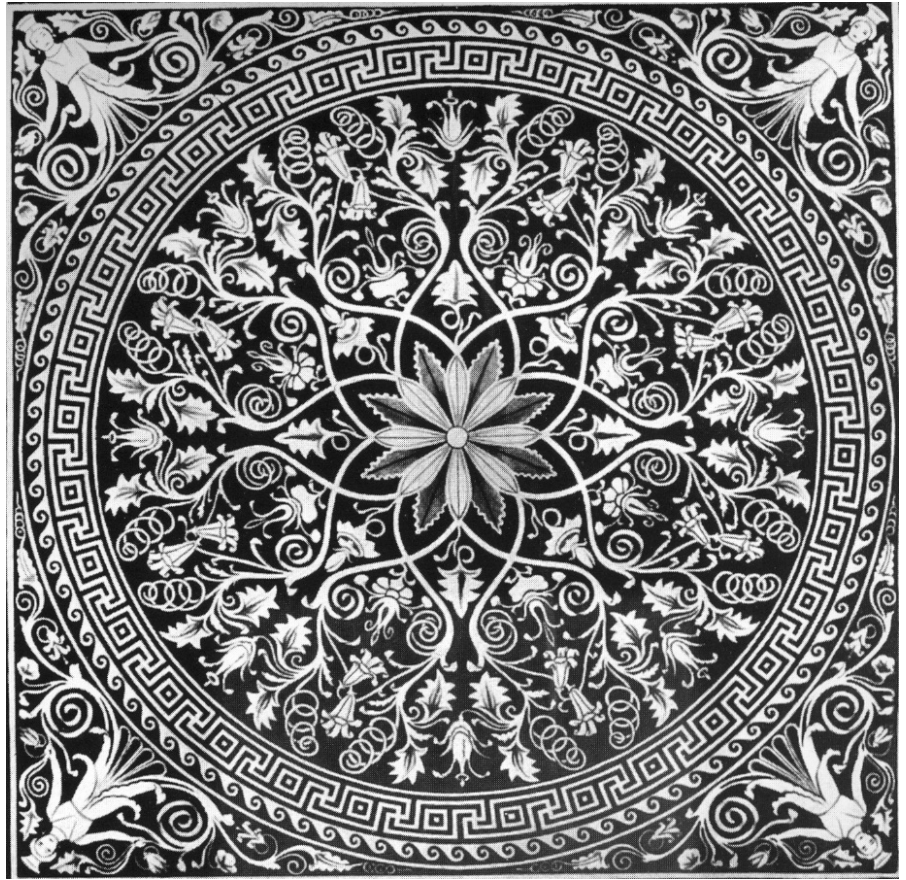


Figure 4  
Detail of a *Rankenfrau*, mosaic from an  
*andrôn* of the Palace, Vergina  
© University of Bologna – Byzantine.  
Archaeology at UNIBO Archive - IB



around a vast central vegetal carpet. Here, the life size figures are clearly women: they wear delicate earrings and a chiton, which develops into acanthus

5 Where the motif finds a beautiful field of expression thanks to the existence of the local anguiped goddess. With the exception of Ludwig Curtius, authors generally explain the success of the vegetalised form in Scythian lands by its assimilation to the Anguiped mother-goddess described by the classical authors.

leaves from which emerge a palmette and two tendrils, giving rise to fine floral volutes that they grasp with both hands. These two pavements are both from Northern Greece<sup>6</sup>. But half-human half-vegetal figures are also found in a wide variety of contexts and in other media, like ceramics (Fig. 5), sculpture, painting, or metalwork. They can be female, male, or even androgynous, they have a multitude of accessories and appear in different positions, sometimes isolated, or inserted into a larger composition. Generally, they are winged and seize the surrounding plants or animals. But what was their exact meaning? The German neologisms usually used to refer to them, *Rankenfrau* or *Rankengottin* for women and *Rankengott* for men, show the difficulty that researchers have in identifying them.

The vegetalisation of the human body appears to be a new development in the iconography of the so-called ‘Masters of Animals’, the *πότνια θηρῶν* and her male counterpart. As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, they are sometimes represented winged or with the lower part of the body replaced by an animal component<sup>7</sup>. In archaic sanctuaries, representations of the ‘Mistress of Animals’, even in a non hybrid shape, could be offerings linked to various rites of passage (Mazet 2016). Through her mastery of wild nature, the goddess accompanied the dedicant to an unknown, and therefore potentially dangerous, place. However, these images were not representations of the goddess herself, but represented the ‘mastery function’ of her activity. In the same way, the different kinds of hybridisation, combining human and vegetal or animal components, seem to function as ‘iconographic epithets’: they plastically translate a field of activity, or an intrinsic quality of a divinity. Vegetalised figures do not seem to be hybrid images of divinities, but rather plastic translations of their prerogatives, and can thus be used for different divinities of wild nature, growth, and life<sup>8</sup>. It can refer to Dionysos, Sabazios, Artemis, Aphrodite, etc., whose identification depends on the context. The vegetal part of these hybrids is always made of acanthus and does not permit the identification of the deity to which it alludes. This choice seems to be impartial, as it can be transposed to all characters and contexts without being reducible to one of them. The acanthus, a weed that grows even in the most arid lands, appears to be a guarantee of rebirth, of the triumph of life over death (Gros 2010: 133). Its vital power manifests a form of hope, sustainability, and prosperity.

There seems to be no explicit mention of vegetalised figures in Graeco-Roman texts, but the most common adjective used for hybrid beings is *διφυής*, a term denoting the simultaneity of two fundamentally distinct natures in one entity<sup>9</sup>. These hybrid shapes thus seem to emphasise the tension that can exist between the two natures that compose them, between the two forces they reconcile: hybridity distinguishes without excluding. Half-human half-vegetal figures



Figure 5  
Apulian nestoris, Varrese painter, around 340 BC (Antikensammlung – Kunsthalle, Kiel) © Kiel, Antikensammlung Inv. B 724.

6 Figures emerging from an acanthus base also appeared on mosaics, like on a pavement from Dyrhachion (Guimier-Sorbets 1993), and other media. But whilst these different forms of human-plant associations were part of the same overall semantic field, they were not necessarily synonymous: the same deity may be represented in different forms, but that does not mean that these forms were interchangeable.

7 The *πότνια θηρῶν* is the subject of an extensive scientific literature: see in particular Christou 1968; Icard Gianolio 1997; Mazet 2016. On her male counterpart, sometimes called *δεσπότης* or *πότνιος* in modern literature, see Lambrinouidakis 1997. Although he underwent similar formal developments to those of the *πότνια θηρῶν*, he is less frequently attested in the material that has come to us, and he seems to have disappeared from the documentation between the 7<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC: Nilsson 1927: 442; Hinks 1937: 263-264.

8 They inherit this aspect from the *πότνια θηρῶν*, whether or not she was represented in a hybrid shape.

9 On the vocabulary used in the Greek world to describe the monstrous, see Piettre 1996: 20-22; Boudin 2005; Aston 2011: 12-16, 33-34; Baglioni 2013.

represent a subversive nature, prolix but potentially dangerous, and which must be canalised. A creative force that, if kept in balance, can be made beneficial. Thus, it is not surprising to find these figures in the margins of decorations, or on ‘connecting elements’, like in the border of pavements, on gold headdresses, or on architectural elements that mark the transition between earth and sky, gods and men<sup>10</sup>. The deities referred to using hybrid shapes were thought to operate at the crossroad of several worlds, and to allow the coexistence of two different natures and the transition to another reality through the mastery of their primitive savagery. These figures represented a form of otherness, just like the other monsters of Greek art, which are thus relegated to the extremities of the oikoumene (Sauron 2000: 198; Li Causi 2003; Icard-Gianolio - Szabados 2009: 351; Baglioni 2013: 26). In Olynthos (Figs. 1-2), the *Rankenfrauen* are moreover associated with the sphinx, also known as an exotic, transitional figure, living at the margins of the inhabited world.

In Vergina (Figs. 3-4), they give birth to, and seize, the acanthus scrolls from which different species of leaves, sprouts and flowers emerge. The same composition also decorates the centre of the pavement. This combination of acanthus, vine, flowers, sprouts, and leaves represents a form of hybridity. Besides, the acanthus scroll does not even exist in reality: it is a creation of Greek craftsmen. It refers to the spontaneous, and even supernatural, growth of vegetation. The scrolls, promptly associated to divine power (Catriota 1995: 58), give a suprahuman dimension to the decorative program of the pavement. It could be an evocation of a divine meadow, *theios leimôn*, an ‘expression found in poetic vocabulary and in contexts where relations between the world of flowers and the world of the gods are interwoven’ (Etienne 2002: 32)<sup>11</sup>. It could also refer more specifically to a divinity, like Dionysos in the *andrôn* (Guimier-Sorbets 2004: 914-915). This kind of supranatural hybrid vegetation knows a great development during the Hellenistic period, especially in Macedonia: flowered carpets, scrolls, or isolated motifs like anthemions spread to all types of decors. They all are phyto-morphic evocations of the divine power and bring a suprahuman dimension to the decoration (Etienne 2002: 24-36; Nalimova 2017: 28-32). Moreover, the strong three dimensional illusion demonstrates a wish to merge art and reality, perhaps as a way of bringing the divine into everyday life, or as a way of placing the lives of humans within the myths and the world of the gods.

On the pavements in Vergina and Olynthos, the vegetalised figures appear in the *andrôn*, the public room which was at the heart of the social practice (Guimier-Sorbets 2011: 437-438). The decoration of the floor was oriented towards the guests, reclining on benches, and immersed them into a divine reality centred on the ritual of the *symposion*. This is the power of the immersive image, where the transitional half-human half-vegetal figures have their part. In Olynthos (Figs. 1-2), the *Rankenfrauen* seem to mark the crossing into the domain of the divine, accompanying the guests through a visual and experiential journey. In Vergina

10 In this context, it might be interesting to investigate the association with the motifs of the waves and meanders on the two pavements of Olynthos and Vergina: readable in both directions, towards and from the centre of the pavement, they may play a role in reading the decoration. Michel Fuchs, after having already questioned the meanders (Fuchs Michel, *La Maison d'Amour et des Saisons. Construction et décor d'un quartier d'Avenches. L'insula 10 Est et la peinture murale sévérienne*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Lausanne, 2003, 490-494), asks the question of the meaning of the waves associated with the dolphin in his lecture *Du dauphin au lierre, du sol blanc au décor à réseau : ornementation en contexte public entre Kymé, Myrina et Gryneion, Turquie*, given on January 28<sup>th</sup> 2021 as part of the seminar « Décor & architecture antiques d'Orient & d'Occident » (AOROC, Paris).

11 ‘(...) l’expression que l’on retrouve dans le vocabulaire poétique et dans des contextes où se tissent des relations entre ce monde des fleurs et le monde des dieux’. Roland Etienne connects these decorations of divine meadows with the Eleusinian Demeter and Koré: Etienne 2002: 33-35.

(Figs. 3-4), they are larger than life and enclose the whole room, marking in some way the symbiosis with the divine, the immersion in an idyllic nature enjoyed, until then, only by gods and heroes. According to Anne-Marie Guimier-Sorbets, in the Greek *andrôn*, the divine would be none other than Dionysos, represented metaphorically in the centre of the pavement by the floral element (Guimier-Sorbets 2004: 914-922; Guimier-Sorbets 2011: 440-443).

The abundance of vegetation in the Hellenistic art was a fertile ground for the development of formal games in which human forms and acanthus are combined in many ways, hybrid or not, in sometimes very original compositions (Picard 1963; Castriota 1995). In the frieze of the mosaic from the Palace V in Pergamon (Fig. 6), dated from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the vegetal border is formed by acanthus leaves forming *cornucopiae*, a symbol of abundance, that give birth to various flowers and sprouts amongst which winged Erotes and various insects are represented. The scroll certainly refers to Dionysos, the god of life (Guimier-Sorbets 2011: 440), since the 'leafy grapevine with succulent grape clusters on the bottom border' is 'a powerful Dionysian metonym' (Castriota 1995: 52). This Hellenistic pattern of the polycarpophoric (a mixture of several plant species) and polytheriotrophic (a mixture of several animal species) scroll enjoyed a certain success in the Late Republican and Imperial periods. Craftsmen of the Roman world will give a new life to this peopled scroll border (Toynbee -Ward Perkins 1950), into which they will frequently incorporate various kinds of half-human half-vegetal figures, as the origin or end points of the vegetation.



Figure 6  
Mosaic of Palace V, Pergamon. Photo: CC  
Wolfgang Sauber (GNU Free Documentation  
License).

## 2. The Roman World – Diversification & Diffusion

From the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Rome gradually established itself as the new economic and political centre of the Mediterranean. Works of art, mostly spoils of war, arrived from all sides, symbols of the Romans' hold on Greek culture. They filled the private collections of rich families and invaded the public domain. Soon, these artifacts imported from the Greek world were no longer enough to satisfy the Romans' devouring appetite for Greek past. To meet the important edilitary and decorative demand, a new market emerged: copies<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> On the question of Roman 'copies' of Greek works, see in particular Gazda 2002: 99-293; Huet - Wyler 2005; Dardenay 2013; Capus - Damay 2019.



Figure 7  
Marble throne from Rome (Antikensammlung – Staatlichen Museen, Berlin) © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, Photo: Universität zu Köln, Archäologisches Institut, CoDArchLab, 2342,18\_FA-SPerg000699-19\_Philipp Groß.

Numerous copyist workshops of Greek origin developed in Greece and Rome, and Roman craftsmen soon followed their lead. However, the Greek and Roman notion of ‘copies’ is different from ours, as it is the reference to the artistic authority of an original that matters, and not the exactitude of the copy. Roman copies of Greek artworks thus correspond to a range of material realities, from faithful copies to imitations, quotations, or appropriations. Different models can even be combined in the same artifact. An eclectic art was born, a true figurative synthesis of different styles from the past, combined with Greek, Eastern, and Medio-Italic traditions of the time<sup>13</sup>. The Neo-Attic workshops established in Rome were particularly in demand<sup>14</sup>, especially for their classicist and archaistic production. These two styles were especially favoured during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, but their aesthetic value alone does not explain their success. This retrospective taste for forms from the past can make sense: the classicist style can thus be used to reflect *maiestas* or *dignitas*, whilst the archaistic style can express a form of *pietas* (Dardenay 2013: 124-125).

In a market where ‘originals’ and ‘copies’ exist side by side, the very notion of ‘original’ tended to fade. As a result, it is not always easy for the modern day researcher to distinguish one from the other. The famous marble throne found between the peristyle and the pronaos of the Parthenon is a good example: it is sometimes considered to be a Classical or Hellenistic original from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and sometimes as a Roman Neo Attic copy, maybe from the Antonine period, inspired by a lost original<sup>15</sup> - of which three copies are preserved in Boston, Rome, and Berlin (Fig. 7). Besides, should we name these occurrences copies, imitations, or cross quotes?

Half-human half-vegetal hybrids spread in Roman decors from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC onwards (Toynbee - Ward Perkins 1950: 7; Floriani Squarciapino 1957: 279-280; Laws 1961; Sauron 2000). They inherit formal, symbolic, and religious elements from their Greek counterparts, but they also display an unprecedented formal and syntactic diversification, which reflects a symbolic renewal. Alongside the traditional *Rankenfrau* and *Rankengott* figures, a multitude of individuals or animals are now being vegetalised, in different postures, and with various accessories<sup>16</sup>. The strictly frontal pose is often abandoned in favour of a slightly turned or profile position that reflects an action or an interaction with other protagonists in the image. Often, such vegetalised figures are subordinated to a central deity, which is represented in a strictly frontal position.

The second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC was a period of creative effervescence.

13 On the formation of Roman art, see in particular Coarelli 1970-1971; Pensabene - Sanzi di Mino 1983: 34; Giuliano 1996: 600-606; La Rocca 1996; Bianchi Bandinelli 2010: 56-249; Sauron 2013.

14 On these workshops, see in particular Becatti 1941; Fuchs 1959; Börker 1973; Coarelli - Sauron 1978; Sauron 1979; Sauron 1981; Queyrel 1991; Sauron 2000: 132-160; Bianchi Bandinelli 2010: 203 249; Sauron 2013: 69-72, 260-262.

15 The gaps in the throne preserved in the National Museum in Athens can be filled by a cast from 1868 (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden) and the three replicas of the Antikensammlung of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, San Gregorio al cielo in Rome, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. The style of the decoration, the shape of the throne and the inscription on the upper plinth of the back side ([Επι .....]ρατο ἄρ[χ]λοτρο[ς]) suggest that it dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. It has been proposed to restore the names of the archons Demostratos (393/392), Phanostratos (383/382), Lysistratos (369/368) or Kallistratos (355/354). Gisela Richter suggests that there are four imperial copies of a Hellenistic original, rather than one classical Greek original and three Roman replicas: Richter 1954. See also Curtius 1928: 292; Langlotz 1932: 181; Hinks 1937: 264; Robinson 1941: 32-33; Stoop 1960: 54; Laws 1961: 32; Delplace 1980: 163; Valeva 1995: 337, 345; Guimier-Sorbets 1999: 27 note 80; Ustinova 1999: 104.

16 See, for example, the frescoes of the Villa Farnesina (Palazzo Massimo, Rome): Bragantini - De Vos 1982; Moormann - Mols 2008.

In this context of renewal of forms borrowed from Greek art, the craftsmen of Augustean Rome even created a new variant, the foliate head. The marble frieze of the *lacus Iuturnae*, attributed to the Augustan restoration of the monument, seems to be amongst the first preserved examples (Fig. 8). This new motif appears as a combination of different iconic units inherited from Greek art, in particular the foliate ‘skirt’ of the *Rankenfrau* and *Rankengott*, applied here to the beard, and the palmette hairstyle (Derwael in print: chapter I).



Figure 8

Fragment of the marble frieze of the *lacus Iuturnae*, Rome (Museo del Foro, Parco Archeologico del Colosseo, Rome). Photo: © Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico del Colosseo.

Vegetalisation still functions as an iconographic epithet, applied to various deities<sup>17</sup>. Half-human half-vegetal figures are, moreover, enriched with an additional level of interpretation, reflecting the way in which the Romans of that time perceived the creative and fearsome forces of nature. The multitude of small vegetal beings that invaded the Late Republican and Early Imperial decors are related to the controversial repertoire of hybrid *monstra*, a representation of a subversive and undifferentiated nature, born or reborn, evoking the origins of the world<sup>18</sup>. The *Rankenfrau*, *Rankengott* and foliate heads represented, for their part, divine entities that embodied a natural power, and were thus depicted in a sovereign and solemn attitude befitting their status. They allude to deities who channel the power of vegetation and the cycle of plants, who make wild nature fertile and beneficial: gods of major importance, especially in a society where agricultural prosperity represents a model of *felicitas* and where plant rebirth in spring is a manifestation of a primordial vitality (Gury 2016: 68-69). At the same time, the sacral-idyllic landscapes of private decors also celebrated a mastered prodigal nature, but a sacred nature of the origins where the first humans, guided by *pietas*, lived in harmony and without conflict thanks to nature’s gifts (Fabre-Serris 2008, 2009). These decors celebrated respect for the sacred, and piety, which is a central value of Roman identity.

In this context, the vegetalised figures seem to celebrate a prosperous nature, feared but revered, a prodigal original nature made beneficial and calling for

17 Sometimes, the use of the emblematic plant of a god allowed its identification, such as the vine of Dionysos on a Campana plaque from the British Museum (Inv. n°1805.0703.306). Von Rohden - Winnefeld 1911: 73 pl. 24.2; Curtius 1957: 200; Jucker 1961: 167 fig. 50; Stuveras 1969: fig. 68; Castriota 1995: 75.

18 Whether one looks at it from the point of view of prodigies announcing bloody confrontations, of a fashion sustained with a subversive aim by virtue of a *metacosmesis* revealed by the oracles, or of a contrast between chaos and the cosmos, used to enhance the stability of civilisation. For a full examination of this issue, see in particular the demonstration of Gilles Sauron: Sauron 1990; Sauron 2000: 132-176; Sauron 2013: 245-269; Sauron 2016.



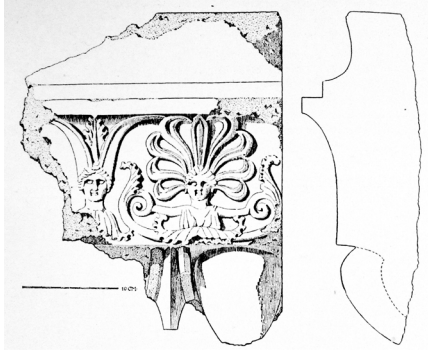


Figure 9  
Drawing of a fragment found in the cella of the Hellenistic Temple of Artemis, Sardes. Photo from Yegül 2020: fig. 2.316.

rebirth. They emphasise the benefits of a pious relationship with nature and its divinities, a connection with the sacred, and were seen as a powerful guarantee of renewal. The archaizing style of the frieze of the *lacus Iuturnae* (Fig. 8), and of the *Rankengott* on the marble thrones (Fig. 5), as we have seen, can celebrate *pietas* (Dardenay 2013: 125), and would reinforce this veneration of nature.

The different forms of reception and appropriation of Greek art, closely conditioned by a context of emulation, contribute to ‘build Rome as a specific cultural entity’<sup>19</sup> (Huet - Wyler 2005: 6). Half-human half-vegetal figures are part of the construction of the Roman identity. They allow us to better understand the relationship the Romans developed towards nature, the sacred, and the world. The mastering of the creative but subversive power of nature is an expression of the victory of order. After endless civil wars, this order was finally accomplished by Augustus: it maintained and defined the nature-*pax romana* relationship specific to the Roman world. The Roman power did not hesitate to use vegetalised figures to serve the propaganda by associating them with the theme of the return of the Golden Age, a central theme in Roman ideology. They became a leitmotif in Roman art: they spread throughout the provinces, as part of a valorising Roman repertoire, and individuals appropriate its message. These hybrid figures are transitional, they accompanied the Romans in various aspects of their present lives, and afterlives. Rapidly, local trends developed in the use of the motif, and local cultural specificities and iconographic traditions determined different levels of appropriation, particularly in the Eastern provinces.

On the East side of the Mediterranean, the Greek *Rankenfrau* is still part of the visual landscape (Fig. 9). Roman examples mark the continuity with the ancient cults of the ‘Mother Goddesses’ and indicate a wish to claim the Greek religious heritage. On the cult statue of the Ephesian Artemis (Figs. 10a-b), known from numerous Roman copies found throughout the Empire, the *Rankenfrau*

Figures 10a-b  
Cult statue of the Ephesian Artemis (Ephesus Museum). Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.



<sup>19</sup> ‘construisent Rome en tant qu’entité culturelle spécifique’.

motif appears on both sides of the *ependytes*, alongside other ‘emblems’ of the goddess. The diffusion of these statues seems to have helped maintain the motif’s association with ancient cults that were highly sacred and respected: in this case, a mystery cult, whose secrets were not to be revealed, but which involved the rebirth of the initiates. Moreover, in the decoration of the so-called ‘Temple of Hadrian’ on Curetes Street in Ephesus, the *Rankenfrau* is repeated on the frieze of the entablature (Quatember 2017: 148-149) and decorates the lunette above the entrance to the cella (Fig. 11), where it marks the passage to the goddess’ domain (Quatember 2017: 101).



Figure 11  
Pediment at the entrance of the cella,  
‘Hadrian Temple’, Ephesus, AD 117-118.  
Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.

On the other hand, the use of the foliate head, a Roman innovation, indicates a true renewal of the local repertoire. In sculpture, they are found in the same contexts than the foliate bodies, on capitals, friezes, or pediments of some public and religious buildings from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, on the Levantine coast and in Asia Minor (Fig. 12). In mosaics, there are few examples from Bithynia or Cyprus (Derwael 2021: 106-114), but it is mainly used by mosaicists from the Levantine coast, in the peopled scroll borders of domestic pavements, where bearded and beardless heads often coexist. This illusionist border is an adaptation of a Hellenistic pattern popularised by the mosaic from Palace V in Pergamon (Fig. 6). By their insertion in this type of peopled scroll, which is a highly representative motif from the claimed Hellenistic tradition, the foliate heads testify to the importance of Roman influence on the Eastern provinces, despite the strong local Greek identity.



Figure 12  
Capital of the front colonnade of the  
Basilica, Hierapolis in Phrygia, AD 125-  
150. Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.

Furthermore, there seems to be very few figures with foliate bodies in Eastern Roman mosaics. In Kadioğlu, on the Turkish Black Sea coast, a *Rankenfrau* occupies the four corner panels of a pavement also decorated with a scroll border issuing from four foliate heads and peopled with hunting Erotes. In many aspects, this pavement is an exception in the repertoire of Eastern mosaics (Eraslan 2022). So far, all other occurrences are found on the Levantine coast: they are all young foliate boys, inserted in a scroll border already peopled with foliate heads and hunting Erotes. In the ‘Mosaic of the Female Musicians’ in Mariamin (Fig. 13)<sup>20</sup>, four foliate and winged boys are positioned in each of the corners of the border. Two of them, diagonally, seem to represent Seasons: Spring holding a young goat (Fig. 14), and Autumn bearing fruits (Zaqzuq - Duchesne-Guillemain



Figure 13  
Mosaic of the Female Musicians, Mariamin (Hama Museum). Photo: Hellenic Society for Near Eastern Studies.

Figure 14  
Young foliate boy (the Spring?), detail of the Mosaic of the Female Musicians, Mariamin (Hama Museum). Photo from Balty 2011: fig. 2a.

1970: 95-96 fig. 5, 12; Balty 2011: 75). The other two protect themselves from a panther, one with a shield, the other with a stick. In the middle of the four sides of the border, the foliate heads are alternately bearded and beardless. Hunting Erotes animate the scrolls of the foliage. In a mosaic from Cyrrhus (Fig. 15)<sup>21</sup>, the two preserved corners are also decorated with young foliate boys presenting the attributes of the Seasons, but they are wingless. In the only preserved corner of the Hercules mosaic from Emesa (Fig. 16)<sup>22</sup>, a wingless young foliate boy grasps the leaves of the scrolls. Finally, on the Plutos Mosaic from Shahba (Fig. 17)<sup>23</sup>, the motif appears only once, in the centre of the border below the central painting: the young man wears a *calathos*, a *bulla* necklace, and holds the tendrils of the scroll in both hands.

In a domestic context, we could interpret these motifs on different layers. These vegetalised figures take place in scrolls constituted by the opposition between the leaves and plant windings forming *cornucopiae*, symbols of abundance. The scrolls also combine several plant and animal species, which are metonymic allusions to the divine (Castriota 1995: 58). They emphasise prosperity and abundance that derive from the owners' lifestyle and ensure its continuity: it is the expression of an eternal Golden Age. As we have seen, the foliate figures

20 Datation: AD 245-275 (Duchesne-Guillemain 1975), end of the 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD (Balty 2011).

21 Datation: 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Abdul Massih 2009).

22 Datation: first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Abdallah 2011), Severan period (Balty 1995), 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (Bowersock 1998).

23 Datation: 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Ovadiah - Turnheim 1997), AD 244-249 (Talgam - Weiss 2004), middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Balty 2011), AD 245-260 (Duchesne-Guillemain 1975), first quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (Lavagne et al. 2000), AD 316-317 (Darmon 1980).



Figure 15  
Young foliate boy, detail of a mosaic from  
Cyrrhus (Aleppo Museum). Photo from Abdul  
Massih 2009: fig. 12.

Figure 16  
Young foliate boy, detail of the Hercules  
Mosaic, Emesa (Ma'arrat An-Nou'man  
Museum). Photo from Abdallah 2011: fig. 4.

Figure 17  
Mosaic of Plutos, Shahba/Philippopolis  
(Suweida Museum).  
Photo from Balty 1991: pl. D.



symbolise the mastery of a vital impulse and a prodigious original nature made beneficial for the patron of the house. But we can go further in the interpretation, as the Romans probably did<sup>24</sup>. A first question comes to mind: is there any difference between the foliate heads and the young foliate boys? The fact that only a head is depicted, and not the whole body, is meaningful. The Latin term *caput* refers to the human head, but it can sometimes also refer to the root of a plant, or the source of a river (Onians 1951: 125; Vadé 1977: 35). If the attitude of the *Rankenfrau* and the *Rankengott* emphasises their ‘mastery function’<sup>25</sup>, the foliate head seems to represent the origin of this revered but feared nature

<sup>24</sup> On the visual habits of the Romans and their taste for *interpretatio*, see in particular Sauron 2009: 277-283.

<sup>25</sup> Itself inherited from the *potnia theron*.

that must be canalised to benefit from all its gifts. It is the very essence of the vital impulse, exploited and exhibited, like a *gorgoneion*. On the mosaics, the alternation of bearded and beardless foliate heads could represent two aspects of the same deity, such as Dionysos *dimorphos*, which Diodorus defines as ‘a double epiphany, bearded and beardless, of the same god’ (Turcan 1958: 293)<sup>26</sup>. It could also evoke the two genders, or refer to a form of natural cycle, to the succession of ages in life put in parallel with the Seasons (Derwael 2021: 112)<sup>27</sup>.

Unlike the foliate heads which are static and inactive, the young foliate boys are active. In Roman art, they are usually winged and represented in action, performing ritual acts, or hunting (Fig. 18)<sup>28</sup>. Here, they fight against wild animals and bring the gifts of the Seasons. They take part in a transitional action and celebrate its beneficial results. But who are they? For the Romans, the infant, *infans*, is a wild and shapeless being that is more animal than human. The acquisition of coherent speech marks the beginning of his education (Néraudau 1984: 53-55; Valette-Cagnac 2003: 2). At around seven years old, he thus becomes a child, *puer*, who is perceived as a fragile and pure being that must be protected (Valette-Cagnac 2003: 9), as nature or human condition (Néraudau 1984: 226). Childhood is seen as an initiation leading to rebirth (Néraudau 1984: 248), children are therefore associated with the renewal of the year and of the Seasons, and with the perpetual rejuvenation of the world. In Roman art, both the winged and wingless boys symbolise idealised versions of young people: as never-aging children, they allude to perfection and prosperity (Currie 1996: 154-156). The child, through its innocence, purity, and sacredness, is also associated with the Golden Age, a time of original innocence. However, he may be a witness of this Golden Age, but not its creator (Néraudau 1984: 121-135).

Figure 18  
Frieze fragment from the colonnade of the *temenos* of the Temple of Trajan, Trajan’s Forum, Rome (Museo Pio Gregoriano Profano, Vatican Museums).  
Photo from Packer 1997: fig. 80.



<sup>26</sup> Diodorus (*Bibliotheca historica* IV, 5, 2). On Dionysos *dimorphos*, see Turcan 1958; Turcan 2007.

<sup>27</sup> On the numerous parallels established between the human and vegetal natures, and in particular between botanical growth and hair growth, see Forbes Irving 1990; Aubriot 2001; Brulé 2008; King 2008; Brulé 2015.

<sup>28</sup> There are many examples. In scientific literature, they are rarely granted with more than a few lines.

Since vegetalisation is an epithet applied to various entities, could the foliate boys evoke the *Rankengott* aspect of Eros? The god represents an idealised vision of childhood (Blanc - Gury 1986: 1043-1044) and is represented as a winged or wingless child<sup>29</sup>, making it sometimes difficult to distinguish him from a human child. The multiplication of Eros into several Erotes, which can be traced back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Rosenmeyer 1951: 16-17), is not surprising since it is commonly used to express diversity in unity, like in the example of the Seasons (Blanc - Gury 1986: 1043)<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, in the Hesiodic tradition, Eros is the first cosmic element born out of chaos, the love god which unifies the opposite elements of nature and thus becomes the true creator of the organic world, leaving chaos behind. The *Rankengott* motif could therefore refer to the Cosmogonic Eros (Curtius 1957: 202). According to another tradition dating back to the Homeric poems, Eros is born after Aphrodite and is often her son (Rudhardt 1986: 18-24). In a completed world submitted to the order of Zeus, Eros becomes a 'preserving power' whose 'function is to perpetuate things and keep them as they are, despite the wear and tear of time' (Rudhardt 1986: 24)<sup>31</sup>. He now has a predominant role, not in the formation of the universe, but in maintaining its order and balance. As Jean Rudhardt formulated it, 'these well-known myths (...) signify the constant resurgence, in new forms, of forces from which society and the entire universe derive' (Rudhardt 1986: 33)<sup>32</sup>. Besides, the power of Eros is often related to the fecundity of nature in Roman thinking: the vital impulse, in its vegetal, Erotic or Bacchic expression, is potentially destructive, it represents 'a danger to the order of the city, a danger that must be canalised and kept away' (Gury 2014: 173)<sup>33</sup>. But once mastered, 'this energy is good enough to be invited into the world of men to enliven the house and make it fruitful' (Gury 2014: 173)<sup>34</sup>.

The young foliate boys found on Eastern domestic pavements could refer to the ambiguity between Eros and the child figure. A parallel seems to be established between the mastery of the vital impulse, and the mastery of infantile savagery, as the means of access to an ordered, civilised, and prosperous life. The wild animal hunting scenes that complete border decorations also corroborate this idea<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, the peopled scrolls on these borders would exalt the prosperous lifestyle and values of the owners of the house, represented in the central panels of the floor.

The mosaic from Shahba (Fig. 17) is here of particular interest. The central panel reflects a desire to attract and maintain the benefits of the earthly powers of fertility over the house. The figures are identified by their names in Greek capital letters. Plutos (ΠΛΟΥΤΟΣ), crowned with leaves and a *calathos*, and a figure

29 On the iconography of Eros/Amor, see in particular Stuveras 1969; Blanc - Gury 1986.

30 'The experience of the divine meets a force, not an individuality': 'l'expérience du divin rencontre une force, non une individualité' (Veyne 1976: 583).

31 'puissance conservatrice (...) pour fonction de perpétuer les choses et de les maintenir telles qu'elles sont, en dépit de l'usure du temps'.

32 'Ces mythes bien connus (...) signifient la constante résurgence, sous des formes nouvelles, de forces dont la société procède comme l'univers entier'.

33 'un danger pour l'ordre de la cité, danger qu'il convient de canaliser et de tenir à distance'.

34 'cette énergie est suffisamment bonne pour être invitée dans le monde des hommes à vivifier la maison et la rendre féconde'. Françoise Gury speaks here of gardens and their representation in Roman houses, but this remark can be applied to the rich vegetal decoration in domestic contexts.

35 The nudity of children/Erotes could also represent a form of heroisation (Néraudeau 1984: 124). On the relationship between hunting and education, see Aymard 1951: 483-502. On the relationship between hunting and ritual, see Estienne 2009. The association of youth and hunting continued into the Middle Ages: Van den Abeele 2009: 239.

holding a plate with fruits, frame a couple reclining on a bed. The woman holds a rhyton and wraps her arm around the shoulders of the man, from whose name remain only the letters OC. In the lower register, the Earth (ΓΗ), crowned with wheat ears and a *calathos*, is accompanied by children representing the Seasons. Only Summer (ΘΕΡΟΣ), Spring (ΑΙΑΡ), and Autumn (ΜΕΘΟΠΙΩΠΑ) have retained, at least partially, their names. The central couple, to which Gê and the Seasons present themselves, could correspond to Opora, the force of Summer, and Agros, the field (Duchesne-Guillemain 1975: 106-109). In the border, a single young foliate boy gives rise to the acanthus scroll, which he masters by grasping it with both hands. He stands under the central panel, in the centre, under the couple honoured by Gê and the Seasons. He is wearing a *calathos*, which refers to the fertility of the earth. He is also wearing a *bulla*, a necklace used to symbolise, honour, distinguish, and protect the *puer* (Néraudau 1984: 146). This *bulla* is certainly present to insist on the *puer*, an innocent and sacred child who has survived the dangers of infancy and who receives the education that will make him the worthy heir of his father, thus perpetuating the family line and its values (Néraudau 1984: 134). He represents a perfect child who offers the potential for development, synonymous with generational renewal of prosperity, and at the same time, he symbolises the mastering of Eros as a dangerous force that must be canalised, and which is thus made beneficial for the owner's earthly life. In this context, the meaning of the alternation of bearded and beardless foliate heads<sup>36</sup> appears more clearly: it is a reference to the succession of ages in life, put in parallel with the renewal of the Seasons, and an everlasting Golden Age assimilated into the owners' earthly life.

### 3. The Christian Contexts – Simplification

In Judea and Arabia, mosaicists in charge of decorating Christian churches and funerary monuments of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD inherited the repertoire used by their predecessors in the domestic context. Most of the pavements incorporating foliate heads in their acanthus borders (Fig. 19) were made by mosaicists of the

Figure 19  
Detail of the mosaic from the Chapel  
of the monastery, Amman.  
Photo from Piccirillo 2002: 193.



<sup>36</sup> The heads of the upper border are both beardless, whilst on the lower border one is bearded and the other beardless. The upper border may be the result of a later repair, because the leaves are thicker and less flexible than in the rest of the scroll. According to Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemain (Duchesne-Guillemain 1975: 107), this difference can be explained either by the cooperation of two craftsmen on the mosaic or by an ancient restoration of the pavement. Janine Balty initially dates this restoration to around AD 320 (Balty 1977: 24), but then opts for a dating to the Tetrarchy (Balty 2011: 85), which had already been suggested by Rina Talgam and Zeev Weiss (Talgam - Weiss 2004: 109-110).

Madaba School (Derwael 2021: 114-116 fig. 15)<sup>37</sup>. The heads are bearded and beardless and occupy the corners of an acanthus scroll on a black background, increasingly stylised, which acts as a geometrical vegetal grid. The vine occupies the centre of the pavement, on a white background, and forms volutes decorated with pastoral, hunting, or harvest scenes. During the same period, the bearded foliate heads are also used in the Bosphorus and its surroundings, especially in Constantinople. They decorate capitals and parapet pillars that were certainly parts of church complexes, or the famous mosaic of the Great Palace (Derwael 2021: 116-122).

In the churches and funerary monuments on the Levantine coast, although the decoration has no apparent theological content, the different motifs are being reread in the light of biblical texts and Christian faith (Avi-Yonah 1936; Van Elderen 1970; Piccirillo 1982; Ovadiah 1984; Piccirillo 1984a-c; Ovadiah - Ovadiah 1987; Piccirillo 1989a-c; 1995; Hachlili 2009: 229). The same can be said about style and syntax: the disappearance of depth, perspective, or movement, reduces the points of comparison between images and tangible reality, and thus detaches the viewer from his tangible reality to get him closer to divine reality (Grabar 1951: 128). In this context, the vine peopled scroll certainly evokes the Earth, God's vineyard, whereas the motifs related to the cycles of nature and time represent the prosperity of the people. Scenes from daily life, animals, and fruit trees hint to the multiplicity of Creation and suggest that God is visible through the things he has created, whilst the scenes of hunting and capture of wild animals seem to refer to the defence against hostile beings; once tamed, these dangerous animals will manifest the coming of the 'Peace of God' (Grabar 1963: 79; Grabar 1979: 53).

The foliate heads are presumably part of the celebration of God's power and goodness, but it is difficult to identify their exact meaning<sup>38</sup>. They were probably used because they were part of a repertoire considered as representative of the prestigious Roman cultural heritage. On the mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople, which is likely contemporaneous (Derwael 2021: 117-118), they appear as a strong motif of the ancient culture and heritage of the Roman Empire which are valued in the pavement. They also certainly reinforce the themes of prosperity and idyllic harmony conveyed by the central panel. As previously, they are used in a peopled scroll combining several plant and animal species, which is a metonymic allusion to the divine, expressing an eternal Golden Age. Or perhaps they were seen as personifications of some natural element or phenomenon, underlying 'the role of God as the creator of Heaven and Earth' (Hachlili 2009: 197)?

Whilst the foliate heads continued to be associated with the themes of abundance and divine peace in the repertoire of Eastern craftsmen, the foliate bodies seem to disappear from the iconography. Were they still thought to be closely related to pagan divinities connected to the Creation and the power over living beings? Pagan motifs are then still in use as personifications, or Orpheus, so it is not a question of rejecting pagan origins, but rather of rejecting pagan divinities. In Christian iconography, a *kantharos* or a cross can give rise to scrolls (Bucci 2001), and the cross itself can even be vegetalised, as we can observe on some

37 Piccirillo 1984a-b; 1989a-c; 1995; 2002; 2003.

38 On bone plates found in the south service room of the north church of Hesban and that originally decorated a wooden box (Archaeological Museum, Madaba), the five remaining foliate heads stand alongside vegetal motifs and a marine monster eating a fish: see Piccirillo 1986: n°47. They thus also decorated contemporaneous everyday objects used in a Christian context.



Armenian cross. The mastering of nature is now in the Christian god's hands, and the life steps are guided by the Church. Maybe the change of divine governance alone explains the disappearance of the half-human half-vegetal figures.

In conclusion, from the Greek world to the Roman and Christian times, half-human half-vegetal hybrids take advantage of previous formal experiences and are enriched with new meanings, forged by new ideologies, new socio-cultural contexts, and by the personal background of the viewers. They reveal man's relationship to nature and mark a connection with the divine. They represent the mastery of feared natural forces, which are made beneficial and become a source of renewal. Christian faith welcomes some of these figures as part of a prestigious cultural heritage, meanwhile they seem to progressively disappear from the Eastern repertoire. Whilst in the East a non-figural and aniconic art will develop during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, in the West the motif will benefit from the impulse of the Carolingian 'Renaissance' and become definitively established in the Western repertoire (Derwael 2017: 490-492).

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