

The Representation of the Nile on Mosaics: Various Contexts, Various Meanings

Nil Nehri'nin Mozaiklerdeki Temsili: Çeşitli Bağlamlar, Çeşitli Anlamlar

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Abstract

Based on a few examples from different regions of the Roman Empire, we study the representation of the Nile from the end of the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity. Depending on the case, the river is represented for itself, as a major element of the Egyptian landscape, a pleasant setting that brings benefits and abundance; this landscape, characterized by its flora and fauna, can also be depicted in "Nilotic scenes" with caricatured characters. In other representations, on the other hand, the god Nile is personified and the celebrations offered to him are shown to greet - and guarantee - the abundance of his flood, source of wealth and pleasure. It also happens that the personification of the Nile only serves as an allegory of the river, without wanting to highlight the god. These different iconographic schemes were to be found and intermingled in all regions of the Roman Empire until Late Antiquity. We show how the same iconography can take on, depending on the context, a religious character - when these images are associated with the cults of Egyptian deities, particularly Serapis - or a profane character, essentially in a domestic context. In the early Christian period, the Nile was considered one of the rivers of Paradise, and images of it took on a new meaning for both the commissioners and the faithful. We show how the same iconographic elements were used in different contexts, and how they were adopted, sometimes adapted, to serve different purposes and ideologies.

Keywords: Nile River, Nile God, Lagid and Roman Egypt, Roman Near East, Late Antiquity.

Öz

Roma İmparatorluğu'nun farklı bölgelerinden birkaç örneğe dayanarak Helenistik Dönem'in sonundan Geç Antik Çağ'a kadar Nil'in temsili incelenmektedir. Duruma bağlı olarak nehir, Mısır manzarasının ana unsuru olarak, fayda ve bolluk getiren hoş bir ortam olarak temsil edilir; flora ve faunasıyla karakterize edilen bu manzara, karikatür karakterlerle "Nilotik sahneler" şeklinde de tasvir edilebilir. Bazı durumlarda ise tanrı Nil kişileştirilmiş ve ona sunulan kutlamalar, zenginlik ve zevk kaynağı olan akışının bolluğunu selamlamak ve garanti altına almak için tasvir edilmiştir. Ayrıca, Nil'in kişileştirilmesinin, tanrıyı vurgulamak istemeden yalnızca nehrin bir alegorisi olarak hizmet ettiği de olur. Bu farklı ikonografik şemalar, Geç Antik Çağ'a kadar Roma İmparatorluğu'nun tüm bölgelerinde bulunur ve iç içe geçmiştir. Aynı ikonografi, bağlama bağlı olarak nasıl dini bir karaktere -bu imgeler Mısır tanrılarının kültleriyle, özellikle de Serapis'le ilişkilendirildiğinde- veya esasen yerel bir bağlamda dünyevi bir karaktere bürünebileceğini göstermektedir. Erken Hıristiyanlık döneminde, Nil cennetin nehirlerinden biri olarak kabul edilmiş ve görüntüleri hem komisyon üyeleri/görevli memurlar hem de inananlar için yeni bir anlam kazanmıştır. Aynı ikonografik öğelerin farklı bağlamlarda nasıl kullanıldığı ve bunların farklı amaçlara ve ideolojilere hizmet etmek için nasıl benimsendiği, kimi zaman da uyarlandığı gözler önüne serilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nil Nehri, Nil Tanrısı, Lagid ve Roma Mısırı, Roma Yakın Doğusu, Geç Antik Çağ.

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The Nile and Its Personifications

The Nile is the river that brings prosperity to Egypt, and which, over a length of more than 1000 km, crosses its two parts, Upper and Lower Egypt, flooded by the annual flood and fertilized by the silt that it deposited when it receded. It therefore took an important place in the landscape and the Egyptians represented it quite frequently, with scenes of hunting and fishing in the reeds, especially in tombs, such as those of Neferhotep or Nebamon or at Thebes during the 18th dynasty (Nater 2011: 74 fig. 1). They also considered it as a god and worshipped it, in order to conciliate its benevolence, ensuring the regularity and the importance of its floods which brought the fertile silt indispensable for harvests allowing to feed the whole population. For this cult, they personified his beneficial flood under the name of Hapy, and represented him either alone or in a double form, twins, one personifying Upper Egypt, with the lotus, and the other Lower Egypt, with the papyrus (Corteggiani 2007: 164-167). We thus see this double figuration linking the two parts of Egypt to support the Pharaoh's throne or the obelisk in Luxor temple (Corteggiani 2007: 167). Solitary or double, it is a male figure with a prominent belly and a female breast, both attributes marking the opulence of the food it provides to the country through its floods.

When they settled in Egypt and founded the Lagid kingdom, the Greeks were also impressed by the river, which they named Neilos, after a mythical king who made numerous improvements to the river, according to Diodorus of Sicily (*Historical Library* I, 19, 4). For the Greeks, the Nile is, like the other rivers, the son of Okeanos and Tethys (Jentel 1992). From the reign of Augustus onwards, the abundance brought by the flood was personified by the goddess Euthenia, who became the goddess of Neilos. During the festivals, the statues of the gods took part in the processions. As early as Ptolemy III, the god Nile is mentioned among other gods: the Greeks personified the river and made statues of it, now lost. However, two imperial statues, in white marble, of the Nile god and Euthenia are preserved in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Corteggiani 2007: 150-151, 363-364; Hairy 2011: 111). The god Nile is semi-recumbent, with his lower body draped in his cloak; he is leaning on a hippopotamus, holding a reed in his right hand and, in his left, a cornucopia with a child sitting at its mouth (partially preserved today) (Fig. 1).



Figure 1
Statue of the god Nile (Neilos), Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (Egypte)
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Representations of Nilotic Landscapes

Landscape paintings are known to have been the work of renowned Alexandrian painters (Croisille 2010: 29-31); they were disseminated outside Egypt and appreciated enough for paintings (*pinakes*) of Nilotic landscapes to be illusionistically reproduced on the painted walls of the royal hall of the Herodion theatre around 20-15 BC (Rozenberg 2018). The Nile featured prominently in these landscape paintings and the painted walls of the Campanian houses provide ample evidence of this (De Vos 1980).

In these landscapes rendered in paintings as well as in mosaics, the Greeks depicted the river with its reflections of light and the ripples that animate its surface, as seen in the first Nilotic scenes in the House of the Faun at Pompeii, in front of the mosaic of Alexander and Darius, at the end of the 2nd c. BC (De Caro 2001: 51-61; Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 184-185 fig. 200) (Fig. 2), and in picturesque scenes of the river's banks, such as on a panel of unknown provenance, preserved in the Madrid Archaeological Museum (Versluys 2000). In these Hellenistic mosaics, the river is depicted as part of the characteristic Egyptian landscape, with its wild flora and fauna. When these Nilotic scenes spread to Italy and throughout the Empire, the river itself with its surface ripples is rarely depicted, but it is the small, more or less caricatured figures, the fauna and flora (the nelumbos) that indicate that it is the Nile, as in the House of Menander in Pompeii (1st c. BC), or in Zliten (2nd c. AD) (Guimier-Sorbets 2011: 652-654 fig. 5-7).

Figure 2
Pompeii (Italy), Casa del Fauno, Nilotic
panel © A. Guimier, UMR ArScAn.



The mosaic of Praeneste (Palestrina), made by a team of Alexandrian mosaicists who came to Italy towards the end of the 2nd c. BC, is about the river in flood along its course, crossing various regions from the rocky regions of Nubia to the Delta in the Mediterranean, with surface ripples (Siebert 1999). It is known that this floor mosaic of a cave-nymphaeum, probably itself covered with water, was part of the Isiac sanctuary of Praeneste. In all likelihood, this mosaic copied a painting from the sanctuary of Serapis in Alexandria, the Great Serapeum, the city's major sanctuary, next to which was located the Nilometer, a device for measuring the height of the flood, and thus the extent of the land fertilized for

the year's crops and agricultural production (Hairy 2011). The cult of Serapis was linked to the Nile.

The mosaic itself shows the festivals taking place in the river delta to announce and celebrate the arrival of the annual flood (Meyboom 1995; Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 180-182 fig. 197). This admirable mosaic is already a testimony of the link between the representations of the Nile and the cults of Serapis in Alexandria and Isis and Serapis with Fortuna in Praeneste-Palestrina. It is known that the cults of the Egyptian divinities, the triad composed of Isis, Serapis and their son Harpocrates, spread from Egypt to all the countries of the Mediterranean basin very early on.

Statues of the Nile God

From the Hellenistic period, the Greeks personified the Nile and depicted the god as a semi-reclining man, like other personifications of rivers and springs. The Nile is characterized by his attributes: corpulent, the god very often holds a reed and above all a cornucopia - a symbol of the fertility he brings to the country - and he is accompanied by young children (from 1 to 16), who represent the "cubits", the unit of measurement of the flood. To underline the Egyptian personality of the god, he may be accompanied by the flora (reeds, nelumbos) and the wild fauna characteristic of its banks (crocodiles, hippopotamuses, snakes...).

Statues of this iconographic type were made as early as the Hellenistic period, but we are mainly aware of those from the imperial period, such as the large statue now in the Vatican Museum, probably from the Iseum in the Campus Martius in Rome, dated to the 1st or 2nd c. AD (Jentel 1992; Strocka 2021: 89-91 fig. 108a-b). The god is semi-reclining, above human height, leaning on a sphinx; he holds ears of wheat and a cornucopia (horn of plenty), and is surrounded by 16 children-cubits. On his base are crocodiles, hippopotamuses, ibises, and boats with small characters, familiar figures of the river.

The Nile God in a Religious Context: The Serapeum

These statues mark the presence of the Nile god in the sanctuaries of Egyptian deities where the water of the river cannot flow as it did in the equivalent sanctuaries in Egypt. As in Palestrina, the Nile god was depicted on a mosaic in the Serapeum of Patras in Greece in the second half of the 2nd c. AD or early 3rd c. Here, the Nile is personified (Fig. 3): he holds a cornucopia, next to a vase from which the waters of the river flow; he is associated with the child-cubit, while other youngsters swim in the waters of the river and play with ducks (Kolonas - Stavropoulou-Iatsi 2017: 136-137 fig. 143; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka 2019: 169 fig. 212a-b). In a cultic context, dedicated to an Egyptian deity, the personification of the Nile in its environment serves as a substitute for the river water that should have flowed in the Serapeum.

In a Domestic or Public Context, from the High Empire to Late Antiquity

In the same Peloponnesian city, Patras, about a century later (end of 3rd - beginning of 4th c. AD), in the tablinum of a house, another mosaic repeats the same theme of the Nile god holding a cornucopia and a reed, semi-reclining on a crocodile; the children-cubits are found near him and swimming in the waters of the river (Kolonas - Stavropoulou-Iatsi 2017: 81-82 fig. 87; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka 2019: 168 fig. 211a). The presence of the river is suggested in the border:

Figure 3
 Patras (Greece), Archaeological Museum,
 mosaic of a house © A. Guimier, UMR
 ArScAn.



small figures mounted on boats are sailing among the nelumbos, or pulling the boat with a rope. It is indeed the representation of the same theme as on the Serapeum mosaic, but this time it comes from a house: in a domestic context, the meaning of the scene is different, since this reference to the Nile both expresses the exoticism of Egypt and evokes its pleasures and wealth; moreover, the Nilotic scenes in the border were meant to entertain the inhabitants and visitors of the house.

The pleasures of the water are also evoked in a mural painting of the Baths of Hunting in Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya) at the end of the 2nd c. AD (Blas de Roblès 1999: 79-81). The painter emphasized the blue waves of the river; if the characteristic elements of Egypt, small characters in boats, nelumbos, ducks, ibis and hippopotamus make it possible to recognize that the landscape is Nilotic, it is obviously the topic of water which is highlighted here in the frigidarium of the Baths, with a key of exoticism.

Figure 4
 Lepcis Magna (Libya), Tripoli Museum,
 panel of the Nile festival of Lepcis Magna,
 © A. Guimier, UMR ArScAn.

The Nile flood celebration scene is represented on a mosaic panel in a house on the same site, in the 2nd c. AD (Fig. 4). The semi-reclining Nile god on a hippopotamus is pulled by children in procession to a monument inscribed Agathè Tychè, “good fortune” (Blas de Roblès 1999: 32). In the background,



fauna and flora of the Nile show that the scene is situated along the river. In this domestic context, even if a propitiatory feast to the Nile god is represented, the purpose of the scene is not cultic, but rather the expression of the pleasures and abundance that are wished to the inhabitants and visitors of the house.

Nilotic motifs were revived on pavements in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin during Late Antiquity, in a pagan and then Christian context; we will cite only a few examples here, but this iconographic theme has been the subject of several studies (Balty 1984; Hachlili 1998; Hamarneh 1999; Maguire 1999). The Nile is often personified, but is it still the god or a traditional image of the river? We will continue to call him the river god when he is personified, but he is often to be seen more as an allegory of the Egyptian river. Again, the interpretation depends on the context and culture of those who viewed the mosaics.

In the fifth century at Sepphoris (the modern Zippori in Galilee), a mosaic of a public building (Building of the Nile festival) - perhaps the municipal basilica - depicts the same festival of the Nile flood. In the upper part of the scene, Egypt - whose name is inscribed in Greek - faces the god Nile surrounded by the children-cubits, both personified. The waters of the river flow below the rocky regions, where goats are, to the city of Alexandria, identified by the inscription and by its walls, the Lighthouse and the column surmounted by the statue of Diocletian (Dunbabin 1999: 194; Strocka 2021: 128-129 fig. 138 a-g). A child-cubit climbed on the back of another to engrave the exceptional level of the flood. The height figure IZ reappears twice more in the image, to emphasize the abundance of the flood and the coming harvest. The waters of the Nile are depicted along with the characteristic flora and fauna. Above the personification of Egypt, a wreath held by birds carries an invocation of good luck, giving meaning to the scene, as on the Lepcis Magna panel.

At Beth Shean in the mid-fifth century AD, in the house of a Jew Kyrios Leontis, a pavement depicts the flooding of the Nile in a slightly different way and shows an example of the adaptation of this theme to a different religious context (Fragaki 2011: 60, 142 fig. 172; Strocka 2021: 130-131 fig. 139a-c). The personified river holding a reed is semi-reclining on a hippopotamus, leaning on a vase from which its waters flow, watering the hippo as it passes (Fig. 5). On the left, the Nilometer shows the height of the flood while a crocodile devours



Figure 5
Beth Shean, House of Kyrios Leontis, after
Fragaki 2011: fig. 172.

a buffalo above a nelumbo; the river god holds, in his outstretched right hand, a purple swampphen (*porphyrio porphyrio*), a characteristic bird of the Alexandria region (Guimier-Sorbets - Guimier in print), a city whose name is inscribed in Greek near a building with columns and a double-sloped roof, adjoining the Nilometer, perhaps the Serapeum. A boat with a sail and a man standing near the mast complete this typically Nilotic scene.

In a house at Jiye (ancient Porphyreon, on the Phoenician coast, Lebanon), the central panel of a pavement dated between AD 450 and 550, shows a semi-reclining figure on a boat-char pulled by two quadrupeds led by a boy holding a reed (Ortali-Tarazi - Waliszewski 2000; Strocka 2021: 122-123 fig. 136). The character who “navigates” in the middle of the nelumbos and aquatic birds holds a reed and a sistrum: in the absence of an inscription, all of these elements make it possible to recognize that it is a river god and more precisely of the Nile, as confirmed by the lower part of the panel (two small men also navigating in the midst of typical aquatic plants and animals) and the wide border with the Nilotic decoration (crocodile, nelumbos, aquatic birds, snakes, fish). This pavement, where the iconographic patterns of Nilotic scenes and the feast of the Nile god riding on a chariot are mixed, shows the permanence and extension of the success of Egyptian and Nilotic themes - pleasant and “exotic” images - in a domestic context during the 5th and 6th c. AD. However, the caricatural and comic aspect of the Alexandrian “pygmies” or “grylloi” has disappeared.

In regions relatively far from Alexandria and in different cultural and religious contexts, it is striking that we find the same representations of the Nile flood - personified or not - to express abundance, pleasure and good luck.

In Egypt too, the place of origin of these festivals and waterscapes, Nilotic iconography continues to be appreciated, while retaining the comic character of the adventures of the little men who animate them. On a pavement in Thmuis, a small town in the Nile Delta, a mosaic from the 3rd c. AD depicts the pleasures of a banquet in a Nilotic marshland setting, without any explicit reference to the god: the small, large-headed figures, dressed in Roman style, who cheerfully participate in the banquet and admire the evolution of a naked dancer playing with her veil, echo the wilder figures who have a more difficult time in the river marshes, struggling with the animals that attack them, according to the ancient tradition of the cranes and the “pygmies” (Fig. 6). In this reception hall, where visitors are greeted with a welcoming inscription, there is no need to depict the Nile god, or even the Nilometer, to express the benefits of the river and the pleasures of life on its banks: the house from which this mosaic probably came was located in the Delta, and the guests contemplating the scene needed no further indication to understand its geographical location. In the central banquet, the small comic characters engage in the same pleasurable activities as the guests and hosts of the house: by making the mosaic viewers laugh, this caricatured representation ensured a certain apotropaic effect, and this pavement testifies to the persistence of the Alexandrian taste for such pleasant scenes until the 3rd c. AD. Was the choice of theme merely a fashionable one? Or was its self-deprecating character intended by the commissioners and perceived by the guests, to reinforce its benefits against bad luck? It is difficult to say, but it cannot be excluded (Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 108-118 figs. 111-119; Strocka 2021: 114-115).



Figure 6
Thmuis (Egypt), Graeco-Roman Museum of
Alexandria © Archives CEAlex.

In the Christian Context

In a Christian context, representations of the Nile, the river and its personification, continued to spread, with a renewed meaning.

In the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, Tabgha, on Gennesaret Lake, a left transept pavement from the second half of the 5th c. AD depicts a Nilotic landscape: one can recognize wading birds pecking at the seeds of the nelumbos, or attacking snakes, small birds on leaves and flower corollas, reeds with a Nilometer and ramparts in the upper part (Dunbabin 1999: 194-195 fig. 207; Strocka 2021: 134 fig. 142). This characteristic nilotic landscape remains in the pagan tradition as an expression of the fertility and wealth of the land. In the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, where, according to tradition, the miracle took place, the pagan repertoire was used to express the gift of the God of the Christians, in the words of the Gospel.

It is known that the Nile (Gehon), together with the Tigris, Euphrates and Phiso, are considered the rivers of the earthly Paradise, all four of them coming from the river that watered Eden (Genesis 2, 10-14). Their iconography began in the second half of the 4th c. AD, and is attested in mosaics at the end of the 5th c., but became more widespread during the 6th c. AD: here we will cite two examples that differ in their treatment of the personified Nile.

In the 6th-century basilica complex of Qasr el-Libya (Cyrenaica, Libya), the Nile appears both as the setting for familiar scenes with the gathering of nelumbos near a crocodile devouring a quadruped (Fig. 7), and in its personified form, seated on a vase from which waves are flowing (Fig. 8). His name Gehon, written in Greek - the language of Cyrenaica - makes it possible to recognize the personification of the Nile, identifiable also thanks to his attributes: the lotus flowers with which he is crowned, as well as the cornucopia and the sistrum that he holds (Blas de Roblès 1999: 119-123; Sintès 2010: 250-257; Guimier-Sorbets 2011: 657; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka 2019: fig. 147a p. 128). The figures of these four rivers - including Gehon - can be found in the nave of Basilica

Figure 7
Qasr el-Libya (Libya), basilica complex,
Nilotic scene © A. Guimier, UMR ArScAn.



Figure 8
Qasr el-Libya (Libya), basilica complex,
the Nile god (Gehon) © A. Guimier, UMR
ArScAn.



B in Hadrianopolis (Turkey) in the 6th c. AD (Pataci - Lafli 2019; Işıklıkaya-Laubscher et al. 2022: 22-23). In the same panel, the four rivers, in bust form, wearing the Phrygian cap of the oriental traveller, hold a cornucopia from which flows the streams that occupy the whole lower part, animated by fishes. Unlike the previous example, the four rivers of Paradise are no longer distinguished by attributes, but can be identified by the Greek inscriptions.

Depending on the context, the representation of the Nile remains but its meaning varies. It is not uncommon for iconographic elements to have been more or less deliberately diverted in order to adapt them to another ideology (Azarnouche et al. 2020).

In a domestic or public context, images of the Nile - the river or its personification - express the pleasures of water and the celebrations of the flood associated with wishes for fertility, wealth and joy. In a cultic context, their meaning is different: an Egyptian god assimilated to the syncretic god Serapis created by the Lagids in Alexandria, then a deity associated with the cult of the Egyptian gods, its representation serves as a substitute for the river in their sanctuaries outside Egypt. In a Christian context, images of the Nile - landscape as personification - retain their force even if their meaning is partially modified to adapt it to the sacred texts.

On the Cosmological Mosaic of Merida

If these meanings are clear enough, I will conclude with a case of more delicate interpretation, that of the cosmological mosaic from Merida in Spain, dated to the second half of the 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century (Quet 1981; Lancha 1983; Ling 1998: 74-75; Dunbabin 1999: 147-150 fig. 155). In the ancient Augusta Emerita (Merida), capital of Lusitania, this pavement adorned the floor of a triclinium in a house near a *mithraeum*. The mosaic is very fine, made up of tiny tesserae of stone and glass, some of them gilded. Partially preserved, the highly polychrome mosaic is rich in more than 40 personifications identified by their Latin names; and the philosophical meaning of the allegory is not easy to understand as a whole.

At the bottom of the apse, on a green background, one recognizes the sky (*Caelum*), the air, with a cloud (*Nubs*) carried by the south wind (*Notus*); in the centre of the panel, the earth on a brown background, and below, the sea, on a dark blue background. In the centre, *Aeternitas*, (Eternity) is enthroned, a young man holding the circle of the zodiac with the seasons, surrounded by the chariots of the rising sun (*Oriens*) and *Occasus* (the moon). In the lower part, the personifications are related to water and maritime activities: *Oceanus* in the lower left corner, *Nilus*, *Euphrates*, *Pontus*, *Pharus*, *Navigia*, etc. (Fig. 9).

The Latin names are translations of the original Greek names, whose gender does not always correspond: thus *Aiôn* (Greek name) is masculine while its Latin translation (*Aeternitas*) is feminine, yet it is inscribed here next to the young man in the zodiac. This observation confirms the oriental origin of the painting that was reproduced here: was the painter Alexandrian or Syrian, as scholars have proposed? The mosaic workshop used local stone to make a mosaic of a type unique in Spain.

As for the Nile, it is semi-reclining near the Euphrates, not far from *Portus* and *Pharus*, whose torch illuminates the sea; it is therefore an allegory of the river as a geographical indication. Although personified, the Nile on the pavement refers to the river - a large part of the terrestrial, marine and celestial world is allegorically represented on the pavement - and not to the god.

From the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity, representations of the Nile - its landscape, the personification of the river god or its allegorical figure - spread widely outside Egypt and left a strong imprint on ancient art and mentalities. However, it is clear that the context - architectural, geographical, temporal, but also philosophical and religious - must be taken into account in order to understand the meaning of its various representations throughout Greek and Roman antiquity.

Figure 9
Merida (Spain), cosmological mosaic, detail of the Nile © Photothèque Henri Stern, UMR AOrOc.



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