

The Marine Mosaics in Late Antique Thrace

Geç Antik Dönem Trakya’ında Deniz Mozaikleri

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Abstract


It is assumed that marine mosaics were among the most popular mosaic pavements across the Roman Empire, particularly in thermal baths and triclinia. It has therefore been thought unsurprising that marine mosaics widely appear in Early Christian art. Late antique Thrace does not appear to be an exception to this trend, although few examples of such mosaics have been discovered so far. This article addresses all three examples from a villa suburbana in Serdica region as well as other examples from houses in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana. All dated to the 4th century, these mosaic pavements hold different iconography that suggest that in the marine theme was not among the most popular themes that spread in Late Antique mosaics in the cities of inner Thrace. Instead, their use is attributable to specific historical circumstances such as Julian’s advance into Thrace in 361-362 or the explicit desire and needs of a house owner to present himself as a wealthy merchant to guests. The Philippopolitan mosaic with ‘classical’ iconography may have had a Christian meaning as well. Although this study lacks the necessary support of additional examples, perhaps awaiting discovery at Thrace’s coastal cities, it is a preliminary step toward more accurately gauging the distribution of marine mosaics in Thrace and their role in the development of mosaic art in the region in Late Antiquity.

Keywords: Marine iconography, Thrace, late antiquity, merchant, villa suburbana, Julian Apostate.

Öz

Deniz mozaiklerinin Roma İmparatorluğu’nda, özellikle de termal hamamlar ve triclinialarda en popüler mozaik kaplamalar arasında yer aldığı varsayılmaktadır. Bu nedenle deniz mozaiklerinin Erken Hristiyan sanatında yaygın olarak görülmesinin şaşırtıcı olmadığı düşünülmüştür. Geç antik dönem Trakya’da bu eğilimin bir istisnası gibi görünmemektedir, ancak şimdiye kadar bu tür mozaiklerin çok az örneği keşfedilmiştir. Bu makale, Serdica bölgesindeki bir villa suburbana’da bulunan üç örneğin yanısıra Philippopolis ve Augusta Traiana’daki evlerde bulunan diğer örnekleri ele almaktadır. Hepsi 4. yüzyıla tarihlenen bu mozaik döşemeler, deniz temasının iç Trakya kentlerindeki Geç Antik Çağ mozaiklerinde yayılan en popüler temalar arasında yer almadığını gösteren farklı ikonografilere sahiptir. Bunun yerine, kullanımları Iulianus’un 361-362’de Trakya’ya ilerlemesi ya da bir ev sahibinin kendisini konuklarına zengin bir tüccar olarak sunma isteği ve ihtiyacı gibi belirli tarihsel koşullara bağlanabilir. ‘Klasik’ ikonografiye sahip Philippopolitan mozaığının Hristiyanlıkla ilgili bir anlamı da olabilir. Bu çalışma, belki de Trakya’nın kıyı kentlerinde keşfedilmeyi bekleyen başka örneklerin gerekli desteğinden yoksun olsa da, Trakya’daki deniz mozaiklerinin dağılımını ve Geç Antik Çağ’da bölgedeki mozaik sanatının gelişimindeki rollerini daha doğru bir şekilde ölçmek için bir ön adımdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Deniz ikonografisi, Trakya, geç antik dönem, tüccar, villa suburbana, Julian Apostate.

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It is now assumed that the marine mosaics were among the most popular mosaic pavements throughout the Roman Empire at all times and adorned in particular thermal baths and *triclinia*. Not surprisingly, they also found a wide admission into the Christian art. The Balkans were not an exception of this and a recent study of Ph. Kokkini gives a good deal of information about the spread of this iconography in the Roman and Early Christian mosaics in modern Greece and Albania (Kokkini 2016: 89-214). Unfortunately, Thrace and modern Bulgarian lands remained beyond scope of her study. Therefore, the goal of this article is to study the existed marine mosaics from that region and in particular these dated to the Late antique period and make some observations which would be preliminary.

Before starting, it is worth noting that the marine scenes were not among the common repertoire of the Roman mosaics in Thrace. Up to now is known only one mosaic that may be interpreted as such that is found in Thrace – that which decorated the floor of one of the rooms in the so-called ‘Western *thermae*’ in Philippopolis. It is partly preserved and presents swimming sea bull and sea centaur in black and white colour (Tsontchev 1940). The mosaic pavement is dated to the time of Antoninus Pius – middle of 2nd century AD and is the only evidence of a real marine iconography on the mosaic floor pavements in Roman Thrace so far. Indeed, some elements of the marine iconography may be found in some other mosaic pavements such as for example the image of fisherman in the iconography of the mosaic pavement of room 10 in the so-called ‘villa Armira’ (Mladenova 1965; Atanasov 2009: 106) which dated to the Hadrianic time (Popova 2015), but in this and other similar cases it is hardly to see the indisputable marine iconography. Instead, the fisherman under question fills one of 35 panels which also include mythical personages such as Artemis, Actaeon, Ariadne, Eros, Dionysus and Pan (Mladenova 1965: 22). Another example that is assumed to belong to the marine mosaics in Thrace derives from Philippopolis again and decorated a room in a private house. This is the so-called ‘Narcissus mosaic’ with the presentation in the *emblema* of a bare-bearded youth seated on a rock on which he is leaning with one hand and holding a spear in the other. In



Figure 1
The ‘Narcissus mosaic’ from Plovdiv (after <https://mosaictourplovdiv.balkanheritage.org/plovdiv-regional-archaeological-museum/> (last consulted on 02.09.2022).



Figure 2
The River – god Hebros (after The New York Sale, Auction 45, Lot 277, Date: 08.01.2019).

front of him is a water surface with a probable reflection of the youth's image (Fig. 1)(Kessyakova 2004). As judging by the name given by the archaeologist who excavated it, it is assumed that the personage should be identified with Narcissus. Recently this interpretation has been called into question and it is suggested that the youth was not Narcissus, but the personification of the River-god Hebros (Atanasov 2009: 110).

Indeed, the cult to personification of the River - god seems to have been among the most popular in the cities in Thrace, and it found its manifestation on various media, but mostly on the local civic coinage. A good example for this is Hadrianopolis that was located according to the famous passage in SHA, *Vita Heliogabal. 7.6–8* from the first quarter of 3rd century AD at the place named as 'apud Tria Flumina', and that issued a coin presenting three personifications of the River - god (of the rivers Hebros, Tonzos and Artescos) (on the source – see Nollé 2009). Philippopolis was certainly not an exception as revealed by the numerous examples of its iconography on the reverse of the civic coins, presented constantly as a bearded old man since the time of Antoninus Pius onward (Fig. 2). It is perhaps just a matter of time to uncover a mosaic pavement with the personification of the local River-god in these cities. In our case, however, the iconography of image of the youth on the mosaic pavement is in sharp contrast to that of the personification of the River – god as a bearded old man which to my mind makes the interpretation advanced doubtful. Nonetheless, this is not the standard marine iconography and therefore should not be included in a study dealing with the spread and use of marine / sea scenes in the mosaic pavements in Roman Thrace.

This brief summary reveals that the marine iconography had not gained huge popularity in the mosaic pavements in Roman Thrace and the only undisputable example up to now is that provided by the thermal complex in Philippopolis. The use of this type of iconography was sporadic and it seems that it was not built a solid base for the popularity of this iconography which reflected also in the Late antique period.

After this note, let us turn to the marine mosaics that are dated to the Late antique period from Thrace. In fact, there are only three such examples that derive from Philippopolis, Augusta Traiana and a *villa suburbana* located on the administrative territory of Serdica (Fig. 3). Indeed, the mosaic pavement of the

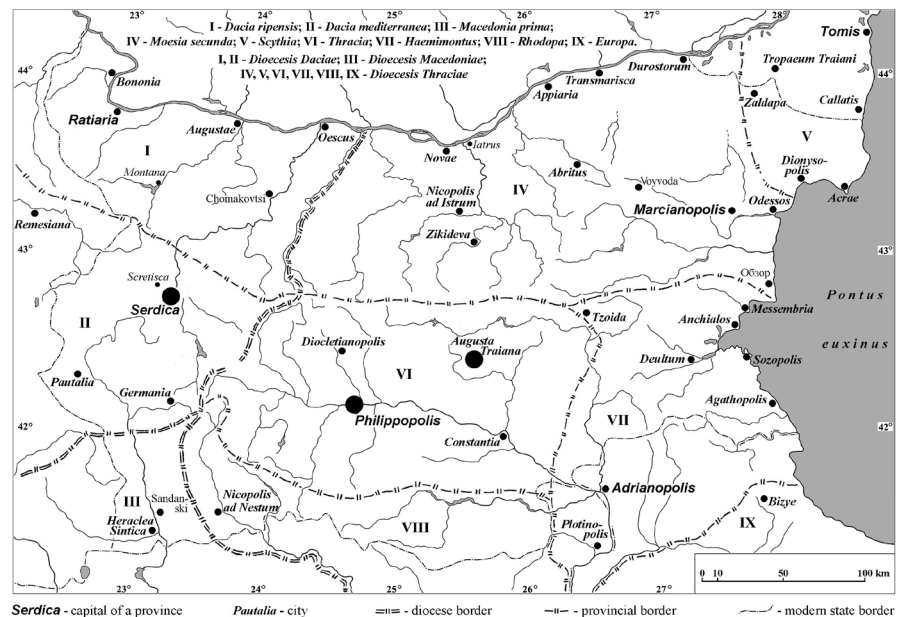
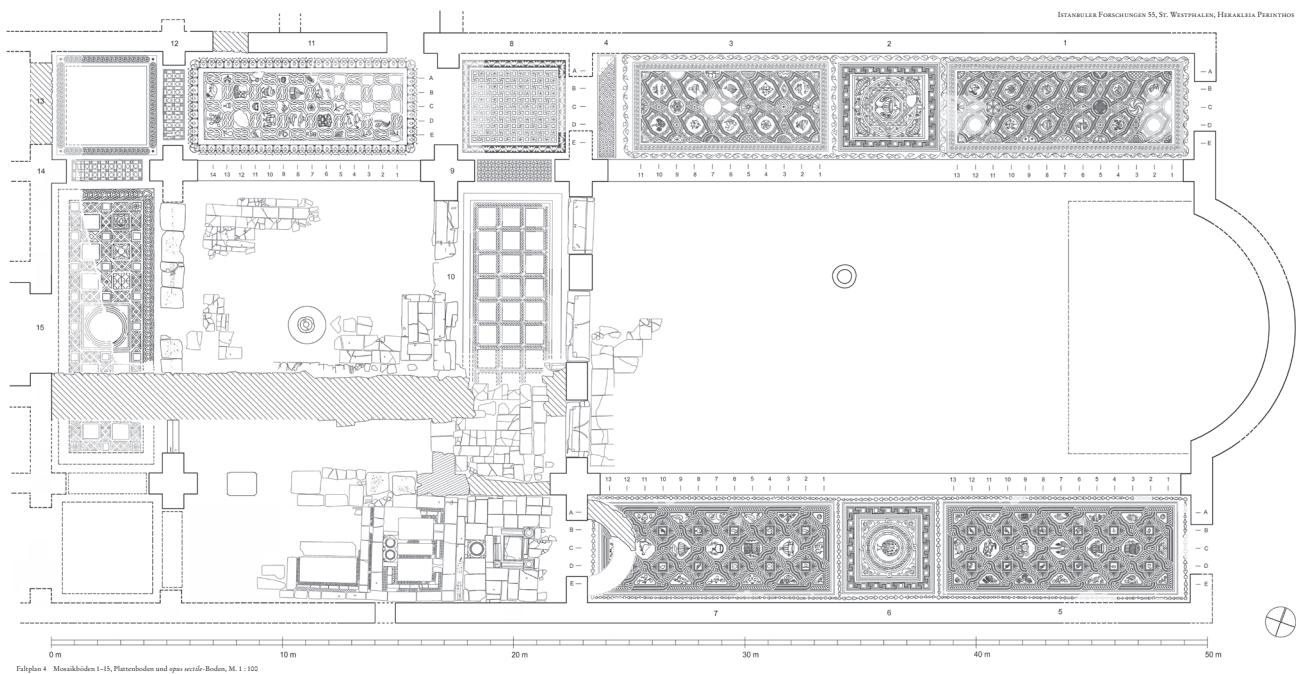


Figure 3
Late antique Thrace with the mark of the cities under question (based on the map, provided in Dintchev 2021: 37 fig. 2).

Early Christian basilica at Herakleia (former Perinthos) consists of the image of fish, but as a whole its iconography does not belong to that of the aquatic and marine theme (Fig. 4). In fact, this image is used separately and sporadic along with the images of various type of vessels, including goblet, various animals, some of them in pair, basket with fruits, geometric motifs etc. One of the scenes that uses the fish element is that with the image of ‘fish with harpoon’ that has been embodied in the mosaics of the eastern panel of both side aisles of the naos, one per each aisle, and the other one is the image of ‘heron and fish’ that is to be found in the western panel of the southern aisle (Westphalen 2016: 92-93). The sporadic use of images that are elements of the aquatic and marine iconography does not allow the interpretation of the whole iconography as marine. Unlike this mosaic, however, are the rest that will be discussed below. As they have been described in detail in the recently published *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens* (Pillinger et al. 2016), only a short description of them would be sufficient for this study.

Figure 4
General layout of the Early Christian basilica with the mosaic floor in Herakleia (former Perinthos) (after Westphalen 2016: Faltplan 4).



It seems that the mosaic pavement in the *villa suburbana* discovered at Filipovzi near Serdica (now in Sofia) is the earliest chronologically case to be considered. It is about a large villa of which the northern area with part of the inner courtyard has been excavated (Fig. 5). From the area for *otium* a huge semi-circular exedra turned to the courtyard southward was discovered, whose rings are underlined with a *porticus* embellished with mosaic pavement. In the middle of the exedra, an almost square room is constructed, with a huge entrance to the courtyard, in the front of which within the *porticus* a rectangular *piscina* was installed. The iconography of the mosaic pavement combines geometric-decorative, vegetal and figural motifs, with geometric pictorial elements predominating. The piscine is flanked on east and west by two panels whose iconography includes fish and boat. The mosaic is made in *opus tessellatum*, with only the pictorial motifs designed in finer tesserae (*opus vermiculatum*?). Each of the figural panels is 2 × 1.5 m in size, with the western panel severely damaged. The iconography of both panels differs although most of the elements used are typical for the sea scene – sea fish and a boat. Thus, despite the damage, it is clear that the western

panel consists of a ship presented in a schematic way at the very top of the scene, with a large dolphin beneath and five fish around it, all swimming in the same direction (Fig. 6). All of the elements are clearly presented, outlined, with the major colours used achieving a very lively effect.

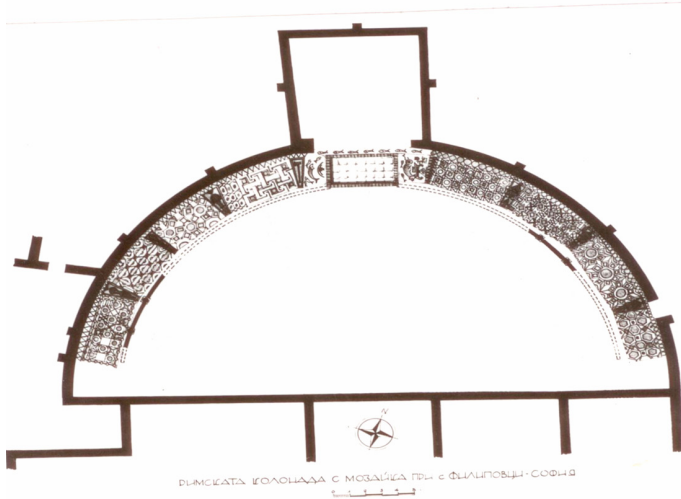


Figure 5
The mosaic pavement of the *exedrae* of the villa at Filipovtzi (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 248 abb. 602).

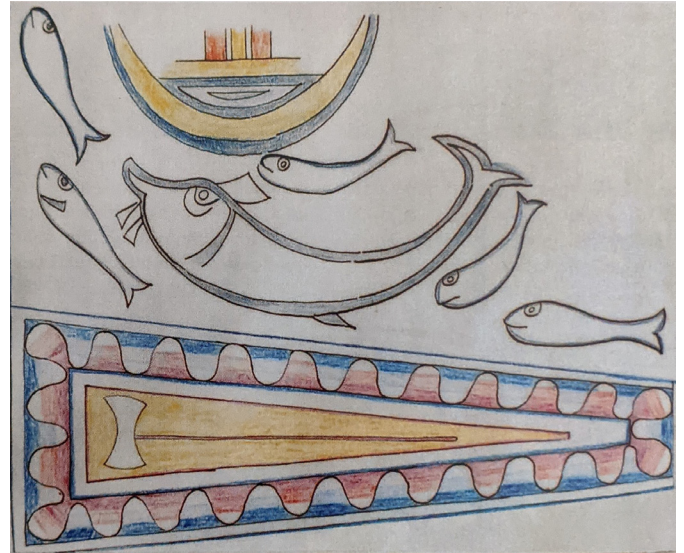


Figure 6
The western panel of the marine mosaic (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 248 abb. 603).

The iconography of the eastern scene that flanks the *piscina* from east is more complex and consists of a better presented ship in comparing with that of the previous panel (Fig. 7). It is placed on a white background again at the top within blue wavy lines indicating the sea surface. In the foreground is a large, disproportional compare to the ship dolphin swimming is presented surrounded by four fish. To the left a tower-like building made of ashlar with an arched opening is presented. Yellow, red, blue, black and white tesserae were used for this illustration.



Figure 7
The eastern panel of the marine mosaic (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 249 abb. 604).

Unlike the east panel whose composition is turned to the *piscine*, the composition of this continues toward this direction and therefore is in line with the direction of the whole mosaic.

The piscine and both panels are framed from the north by a bordure which consists of a line of seven fish.

The study of the mosaic pavement reveals the work of two mosaicists. This supposition is based on the style, manner of execution as well as the range of colour that feature the mosaic in the wings. For instance, the mosaic pavement in the western wing is made in the so-called ‘illusionistic’ style while that in the eastern wing is distinguished by a calmer, repetitive rhythm and a less vibrant color palette. What makes impression is the colouring abundance of the mosaic pavement: white, red, yellow, blue, pink, violet and green as well as two shades of grey-blue, blue and green *smalti*. All this allows the possible date of the mosaic to the first half of the 4th century AD when the new geometric motifs replaced the old motifs that defined the mosaics of the Roman period. As for the square room located beyond the *piscina*, it may be interpreted as summer *triclinium* (see full description of the mosaic and analysis in Pillinger et al. 2016: 320-324).

The iconography has already been discussed by Vanya Popova and the parallel with a black-and-white mosaic pavement known from Ostia is made. She believes that the figure presented in the eastern panel should be identified as the tower-gate of Ostia, and therefore one should see the Italic influence over the mosaic at Filipovzi and the close connection of the owner of the villa with the harbor of Rome. She goes further and suggests that this link may be through the army and therefore the mosaic is connected with the naval battle between Constantinus I and Licinius I at the Hellespont in which the owner of the villa participated. As a reward he received a land estate near Serdica by the victorious emperor (Popova 2010: 191). The better depicted ship is identified as *navis oneraria* which is the standard freighter of the Roman merchant fleet, while the other is assumed as the *kerkouros* (Popova 2010: 186 -188).

The idea with the naval connection of the villa’s owner seems plausible. Several aspects, however, remain unclear and even disputable. One of the main issue is whether he had a naval background as supposed, and if so, what kind was it? Was he a marine as suggested in the Constantinian fleet, or most probably merchant given the nature of the boats depicted on the mosaic? It is now well established that over the centuries numerous Thracians had joined the Misene fleet and some of them eventually returned home in Thrace as veterans,¹ which may explain the similarities in the iconography suggested between the mosaic in Filipovtzi and those in black and white in Ostia where a detachment of this fleet stationed. However, the depiction of commercial and probably pleasure boats only in the mosaic in Thrace as well as the lack of the depiction of Chi-Ro which is so specific for Constantine I refer to owner’s nonmilitary background. I admit that the idea of a veteran sailor that had received *honesta missio* and with the sum earned he managed to established himself in the Serdica region as a villa owner is very plausible and it may be so in other cases. In this very case, however, it seems not likely not only because of the specifics discussed so far, but due to the fact that this very villa itself with its immense proportions and lavish mosaic decoration would be too high for a military man, even if a veteran who has received awards. Other similar cases in Thrace dated to the previous century refer to rather humble villas, agricultural in nature and production-related.

The merchant ships depicted in the mosaic under consideration refer to rather different interpretation of the villa’s owner profession as a merchant. This

¹ See for instance the case with *M(arcus) Annius Severus, uet(er)anus ex clas(se) pr(aetoria) Mis(enensi), ((centurio))* – Topalilov 2018a: 203-206.

assumption may also find argument in the theme itself presented in the mosaic pavement of the boat returning safe and sound to port emphasizing thus on the link between the owner and the business (the source of his fortune), which seems to be the naval trade. The mosaic pavements with similar iconography from Ostia which are better preserved, allow the interpretation of the building depicted in our mosaic more likely as the lighthouse of the port rather than the city-gate. Besides, it is the lighthouse that usually is presented on the marine mosaics rather than the city-gate. The Ostia mosaics which presents the lighthouse and not the city-gates reveal a four staged building made of ashlar, with the last stage to contain the fire that was an essential part of the port. The openings are similar to that of Filipovtzi building which, however, has only one. Although the fragmentary of the panel, it is clear that it would hardly represent the four-staged building (Fig. 8).² We have to admit that in many cases the lighthouse image resemblances that of the Pharos at Alexandria and therefore the reconstruction of the lighthouse after that in Ostia based only on the evidence provided by the mosaic iconography may not be sufficient. In fact, the resemblance between the Ostian mosaics and that in Thrace are not so close in every aspect which calls into question the close link between them proposed and allows the supposition that it was the model of another lighthouse and why not that at Alexandria that is depicted in the mosaic rather than in Ostia. If it is the lighthouse of the Pharos at Alexandria it would shed more light on the importance of the villa's owner for the trade of Serdica and why not the province providing firm link with one of major trade ports in the empire – that of Alexandria. Otherwise, it would be only the image of a port as a part of the theme of the successful business. The villa at Filipovtzi that was in fact the place for *otium* presents his owner as one of the wealthiest merchants and why not individuals in the province. Although not many villas have been discovered up to date, the immense dimensions and lavish mosaic decoration makes it comparable in a certain sense only to the villa interpreted as *palatium/praetorium Scretisca* located near Serdica as well.³

Figure 8
The mosaic pavement from Ostia with the lighthouse (Becatti 1961: tav. CLXXIX).



² The mosaics with the lighthouse in Ostia are presented and discussed in <https://www.ostia-antica.org/portus/lighthouse-depictions-mosaics.htm> (last consulted on 4.9.2022).

³ For the villa - see Dintchev 2003; Dintchev 2020.

Another mosaic pavement with marine scene that is dated to the first half of 4th century is that which embellishes the reception hall of the *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros*. The *domus* which is located in the center of the city and comprises of half of an *insula* covering an area of ca. 1600 sq m, is a peristyle house with reception hall of 8,80/8,80 m located next to the courtyard (Fig. 9). It is assumed that the house was built in the first half/middle of 3rd century AD, but the reception hall received its mosaic pavement at the second quarter of 4th century AD.

The mosaic pavement is made in *opus tessellatum* and with finer tesserae (*opus vermiculatum?*). Although it had suffered heavily, its iconography is clear as a whole (Fig. 10). The central part consists of two panels that were surrounded east, west and south by an orthogonal composition of octagons and squares. The octagons are filled with wild animals chasing animals such as a dog, a rabbit, a bear, an ox, a boar and a deer with plants behind and the squares – with vegetables and fruit among which grapes, apples, pears, pomegranates and melons as well as flowers. The northern panel of the central part which is of interest for this study is not much preserved. It houses a tiled octagonal *piscina* in the center and it is filled with real and mythological sea creatures such as various species of fish, a crab and two Nereids, depicted in the north-east and north-west corners. Two inscriptions accompany the scene: the first says: ΚΑΛΩ[Σ ΗΛΘΕ] (Welcome !) while the other which is almost entirely destroyed is wishful and says: ΕΝ ΥΓΙ[Α] [---] Ν vacat Π [---] (Enter healthy, [---] !) (Figs. 11-12). The marine life is highly stylized, but rendered in rich polychromy (Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-129). The southern panel presents the scene *fons vitae* (Popova 2016: 169-170).

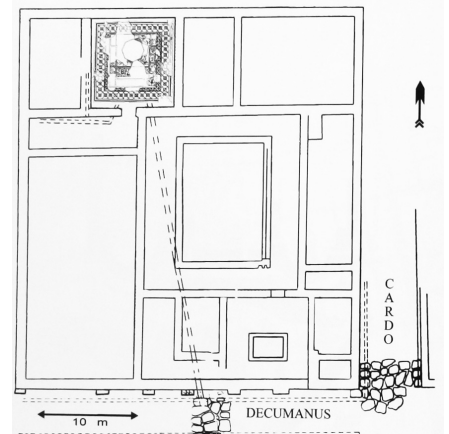


Figure 9
The peristyle *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 72 abb. 202).

Figure 10
The mosaic pavement of *aula* of the *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 73 abb. 204).

Figure 11
The marine scene of the mosaic pavement in the *aula* of the *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 77 abb. 215).



It is suggested that the mosaic represents a full cosmogonic scene: the water world in the center, with on eastern and western side framed by the presentation of the terrestrial sphere with the fruits and animals that symbolize the hospitality (*xenia*) and the years' seasons presented by the couple of animals. It is also assumed that the *fons vitae* scene that symbolizes the Heaven with the Eden/

Figure 12
The marine scene of the mosaic pavement in the *aula* of the *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 77 abb. 216).

Paradise seems to be the oldest known so far such scene in the mosaic pavements in Thrace and derived from the Jewish art. Some elements refer to paganism (cornucopia, the club, the caduceus and the *sistrum*) while others – to Christianity (crosses and cups with wine). Based on the analysis of the mosaic pavement the owner of the *domus* is identified as a Christian and possible of Syrian origin a wealthy merchant who settled in Augusta Traiana (Popova 2016: 170). Given all this, we may go further and speculate that he was connected with the wine distribution as the wine from Cilicia and Holly Land was spread in all over the empire (on the wine trade in the late antiquity – see for example Decker 2005: 51-59).

This type of iconography is unique for Augusta Traiana and Thrace for now, and may explain the possible foreign origin of the owner of the *domus*. The *piscina* that embellishes the room and which also to be found in other mosaic pavements in the city dated to the middle – second half of 4th century AD (Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-129) logically requires aquatic scene (Fig. 13). The scene reveals the high level of education of Greek mythology of the owner, and depiction of nereids may also suggest him deriving from a port town in Greece where they were especially worshiped.

Figure 13
The mosaic pavement of the *tablinum* from Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 105 abb. 290).



The last chronologically set example of marine mosaic comes from Philippopolis, the provincial capital of Late antique Thrace. The mosaic pavement embellishes possibly the reception hall of the *domus* that is located at the southern outskirts of the former Acropolis, along the *decumanus* into which the *via diagonalis/militaris* turned when entering the city. The iconography of the mosaic pavement consists of the geometric carpet and the *pseudo - emblema* inserted into the middle of the room made in *opus tessellatum* and in *opus vermiculatum* respectively. The outer border of it is filled with ivy tendrils with heart-shaped leaves, followed by a strip of meandering swastika both in black and white. The geometric carpet consists of a polychrome composition of poised tangent octagons forming four-pointed stars with squares and diamonds that have stylized flower motifs inserted (Fig. 14).

The *pseudo - emblema* is rectangular, with its northern part is destroyed. It presents a Mediterranean water landscape with a corresponding fauna and flora as well as a boat (Fig. 15). Various sea fish are shown such as a pike with open mouth and sharp teeth, a swordfish, a dolphin and a moray eel, but also snails, mussels, mollusks, crabs, wine-red corals, pipefish and sea urchins. A single, pointed dorsal fin also protrudes from the water.



Figure 14
The mosaic pavement of the *aula* of the *domus* located in the southern outskirts of the Three hills in Philippopolis (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 161 abb. 417).



Figure 15
The *emblemata* of the marine mosaic in Philippopolis (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 162 abb. 418).

In the south-east corner of the panel, a small boat is moving to the left with a wind-blown grey-white-light blue net-patterned sail. The boat has a high, irregular, trapezoidal bow and a curved stern termination in the shape of a waterfowl's head looking back. In the middle it is a youthful naked male figure sitting. Immediately to the left of the boat a *putto* riding on a dolphin is depicted. The *putto* is fragmentary preserved with only the head, the left wing and parts of the buttocks and the left foot. The mosaic is dated generally to second half of 4th century AD (Pillinger et al. 2016: 220-227), as more precise date to the time of Julian (AD 361-362) has been recently suggested (Topalilov 2022: 281-282).

This mosaic pavement is characterized by the lavish use of huge scale of colours which makes it among the most picturesque mosaics not only in Late antique Philippopolis, but in whole Thrace. Despite the presence of the boat, this is not

a typical fishing scene as although the partial destruction of the place, no fishing net with fish captured can be attested and the interpretation of the male figure in the boat as an ordinary fisherman is doubtful. The sea biodiversity depicted reveals the foreign origin of the owner, the foreign model of iconography used or foreign mosaicist as some of the fish depicted are not to be found in the Black sea. Instead, they reveal his Mediterranean origin which may be argued in the colourfulness of the composition which may point to the Syrian-Palestinian region and North Africa, with possibly Egypt as well. It is without any doubt that this scene reflects a sea-oriented society and its worldview as found elsewhere as well (Gorzalczany – Rosen 2019). Unsurprisingly, it is suggested that the monochrome colorful background is taken from the Hellenistic mosaic art of Alexandria (Pillinger et al. 2016: 225). The blue background is a sign of luxury which corresponds with the quality and colourfulness of the mosaic.

It seems that the mosaic does not present scene from the everyday life. The depiction of the *putto* riding a dolphin refers to some mythological event or concept as well as it is in Augusta Traiana with the depiction of the Nereids and Tritons. The scene itself is said to be very common in Asia Minor, Syrian and North African mosaics (Pillinger et al. 2016: 225). However, some details are not to be found as common such as for example the hair style of the *putti* etc. (Pillinger et al. 2016: 225).

Thus, it seems that the mosaic pavement is a combination between the local geometric carpet and non-local *pseudo - emblema*.

A study on the mosaics found in Lod from the end of 3rd - beginning of 4th century AD made recently can shed light on the importance of Philippopolitan mosaic. The composition of the mosaic in question is almost identical, with the depiction of fish, sea life and ships, that reflects the mighty of the sea, its bounty and wonders, but at a deeper level, the mosaic represents a model of the sea as a concept. In this case it is about the Plato/Socrates concept with the nautical scene revealing a conscious or not-so-conscious artistic reproduction of the Socratic pond (Gorzalczany - Rosen 2019: 51-52). This is not, however, the only conceptual explanation of this iconography. Thus, it is also suggested that this is the depiction of *xenia* (Dunbabin 1978: 126).

It is very tempting to suggest that the owner of the *domus* belongs to the intellectual non-Christian elite of the provincial capital moreover the pond of Plato/Socrates was connected with Black Sea (Plat. Phaid. 109 a–b) (Horden - Purcell 2000: 8–39; Gorzalczany-Rosen 2019: 51-52). If so, he would belong to the elite for which the literary sources at that time imply. Thus, although the Christianization of Philippopolis and its urban space was carried out in a huge scale since the middle of 4th century onward at the expense of the non-Christians (see for this Topalilov 2021), it seems that the local non-Christian elite was still strong enough to resist the process. A good example for this is the popularity that gained the old tradition of *Eumolpiada*, presented by Ammianus Marcellinus at least among the city-elite (Amm. 22.2.2: *Filippopolim petit, Eumolpiada veterem*; Topalilov 2018b). Besides, in late 4th century the *Passio* of St. Theodote still presents Philippopolis as the 'city of Apollo' (on the *Passio* – see Sharankov 2015). A good base for this process that may be also detected among the elite of neighboring Augusta Traiana would be the visit of emperor Julian to Thrace who passed through the region and Philippopolis on his way to Constantinople in late AD 361-early 362. His presence is surely marked by several milestones, but it is also suggested that at least one mosaic pavement found in Augusta Traiana may be also well connected with his pass. Thus, not less than eleven milestones were

set along the *via diagonalis/militaris* between Naissus and Philippopolis marking the march of the emperor through the region. They also reveal the loyalty was expressed by the elite of Naissus, Serdica and Philippopolis to the new emperor and his policy toward the *recuperata re publica*, which means the restoration of a temple, cult, and/or office associated with traditional worship which is presented as the restoration of the city/state to its former majesty and prestige. These milestones clearly indicate the still existed strong non-Christian traditions in these cities, at least among the civic elites, and this could explain the fact that after the death of the emperor the message proclaimed on the milestones, including that with the *recuperata re publica*, remained untouched on them. They are also very indicative for the emperor's *beneficia* to the cities (see on them Moysés 2019: 513-559; Sharankov 2019: 41-70). It is very tempting to suggest that the physical imperial presence play a crucial role for the restoration of some of the old cult associations such as for example that of Dionysus in Augusta Traiana which might had been commemorated on a mosaic pavement presenting the Dionysian *thiasos* (Fig. 16) (on the mosaic interpretation – see Pillinger et al. 2016: 152-159; Topalilov 2022: 281-282). Given the specifics of the marine mosaic in Philippopolis discussed above, its construction could be linked to these processes which would affirm the date proposed - late 361- early 362. If so, this is undoubtedly one of the rare cases in the Late antiquity, when a specific historical event found its expression in the mosaic art, not only in Thrace, but in the empire as a whole as well.



Figure 16
The *emblema* with the Dionysian *thiasos* from Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 107 abb. 294).

A comment is needed, however, on this interpretation. Indeed, the pond of Plato/Socrates was connected with Black Sea as mentioned above, but the biodiversity depicted in the mosaic is not typical for the Black Sea but rather for the Mediterranean Sea during the Hellenistic-Roman world. Besides, the lack of the image of Aphrodite/Venus or Poseidon/Neptune that should had been inserted in the middle of the *pseudo - emblema* required in such type of scenes is remarkable. All this doubt the interpretation suggested above of the mosaic.

The presentation of a model of a sea as a concept with its fish, sea life and ships, that reflects the mighty of the sea, its bounty and wonders may refer to a biblical theme (Isaiah 11:6) (Bowersock et al. 2015: 17–19) which would identify the creator of this word as Judeo-Christian God who created sea and the life within it (Gorzalczyk - Rosen 2019: 52). It is very tempting to imply *interpretatio christiana* to the Philippopolitan mosaic under consideration, given the importance of the fish for the Christians,⁴ but also the fact that the images of *putto* and boat become stereotypes to designate an entire universe in the mosaics in 4th century in pagan, but also Christian mosaics. Based on Cyril in his Catechesis of AD. 356, one might interpret the figure of the nude young male as ‘fisherman of souls’ which has been assumed to the similar figure of a man presented with two boats and sea full with fish on the mosaic of the Cossar Oratory of Aquileia dated at the beginning of the 4th century (DePuma 1969: 97 cat. no. 156 pl. CXII fig. 207). This could also explain the lack of the fishing net in the Philippopolitan mosaic.

Against the Christian interpretation of the mosaic iconography, however, is the development of the mosaic art in late antique Thrace as a whole and the middle – second half of 4th century AD in particular. It has already been suggested that the Christianization of the mosaic iconography in Thrace led to the full abandonment of the figural elements and the insertion of the pure geometric style, in its extreme puristic type. The mosaics in the three cities discussed so far, along with that with the presentation of the Dionysian *thiasos* from Augusta Traiana, are rather exceptions; the mosaic iconography in this period of Christianization of the society, is very different, even in those cases where some figural elements reappeared. The figural mosaics in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana belong to the mosaic of the Classical period of mosaic art in Roman Thrace which was replaced by the Early Christian in the middle-second half of 4th century AD. Therefore, although the possible Christian interpretation of the Philippopolitan marine mosaic, I would rather assume that with the philosophical importance.

This short analysis allows some observations to be made which due to the limited number of aquatic and marine mosaics discovered in Late antique Thrace, should be considered as preliminary.

Although the type of scenes such as fishing, sea scene or Nilotic, gained wide acceptance in mosaic art throughout the empire, and even become among the common mosaic compositions, it seems that this is not the case in Late antique Thrace. Besides, the cases in Philippopolis, Serdica and Augusta Traiana are sporadic and did not seem to have had impact on the development of the mosaic art in the region. Whether this picture may be changed with the still-to-be-discovered mosaic pavements in the ports of Thrace, and especially Perinthos, is unclear, but to my mind rather impossible to expect its wide acceptance in the cities in inner Thrace where up to now not much tradition in this aspect has been attested. Indeed, the cult to the personification of the River-god was among the most popular cults in these cities, but its implementation in the such iconography is uncertain.

We may assume that the aquatic and marine mosaics attested so far in Late antique Thrace in fact present three different cases. This iconography is so

4 See for instance the Catechesis of Cyril of around AD 356 in which he speaks of God who can be recognized by his creatures, among which he pointed those in the sea that has been described as *μεγάλη* (large) and *εὐρύχωρος* (huge) with reptiles, beautiful fish, and cetaceans that live there. This beauty evokes its Creator who is invisible but can be seen and worshiped through images (Cyr.H. *Catech.* 9.11) (Olszewski 1995 : 20-22 n. 83).

untypical for the Thracian mosaics that in some cases it might reveal the foreign origin of the owner or mosaicists. Of these three cases two stand out – that from the villa depicting the theme of the successful aquatic business of the owner and the mosaic in Philippopolis that reveals the intellectual quests of the owner with the presentation of the Plato/Socrates concept or Christianization using the Neoplatonism. Unsurprisingly, in these two mosaics the nautical scene is the focus of the mosaic. It is not, however, the case with the third mosaic – that in Augusta Traiana. The marine scene is located near the main architectural decoration of the reception hall, i.e. the piscine, which requires the aquatic iconography at this place and may explain the inclusion of the greeting and wishful inscriptions there. Although the marine iconography is more or less required by the specifics of the presentation of the *xenia* design, the specifics of the features presented in the panel imply that this topic was a deliberate choice by the owner of the *domus*. Thus, like the mosaic in Philippopolis and unlike that at the villa near Filipovtzi, the marine scene contains fish and sea mythic species which are presented in a realistic way, but in colouring abundance.

In all three buildings the marine scene decorates the most important parts of the buildings – their reception halls. The marine scene in the Philippopolitan mosaic pavements fills the whole *pseudo - emblema* which indisputably reveals that this scene played primary role in the decoration of the room. Unlike this are the rest of the cases where the marine scene was located around the piscine which might had required their presence.

As already mentioned, these three cases which are not numerous for the purpose are not sufficient to study the distribution of the marine mosaics and their role in the development of the mosaic art in Late antique Thrace. The lack of this tradition, at least in inland Thrace, which in fact should be taken as logical, may be indirectly attested in the numerous mosaic pavements that decorated the Early Christian basilicas. The lack of any hint about the marine scene, sea life or similar, in these mosaics is eloquently enough for this tradition.

It seems, however, that the situation is quite different in coastal cities. The sporadic appearance of elements of marine scenes in the mosaic floors of the basilica of Herakleia is a clear indication of the existence of such tradition in the coastal cities of Thrace, and it is probably only a matter of time and the survival of the mosaic floors that they will be discovered. So, this short study is just the first step in studying this phenomenon and undoubtedly every new discovery will contribute significantly to its study.

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