

The Eagle Symbol in the Mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople

İstanbul'daki Büyük Saray Mozağindeki Kartal Sembolü

Laura CASO*

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Abstract

This iconographic and iconological research has shown the political value of the eagle symbol in the Palace Mosaic in Constantinople. Thus this subject has both ornamental and political significance, but political meaning is predominant. The chronology (532 as terminus post quem) and the historical-archaeological context have disclosed relations between the eagle symbol and the Emperor Justinian I. The eagle strangling a snake, in this perspective, becomes the symbol of supreme power of Justinian, while the snake is the symbol of all enemies of the empire. We can see these enemies in two masked heads in the frame. The first one evokes a subject very well characterized on the ethnic and physiognomic level, that is a Persian soldier, as Darius III, King of the Persians, and his soldiers in the Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii. This masked head recalls to mind the defeat of the Persians and the peace treaty between Justinian and Chosroes I in 532. The second masked head symbolizes Oceanus, the god of the mysterious west, i. e. it invokes the recovery of the Western Empire by Justinian (535-553). Therefore Justinian the Great was a new Augustus and, as the first emperor, politically exploited the language of images, especially the eagle symbol.

Keywords: Iconological analysis, eagle, snake, Justinian I.

Öz

Bu ikonografik ve ikonolojik araştırma, İstanbul'daki Saray Mozağı'ndeki kartal sembolünün siyasi değerini göstermiştir. Dolayısıyla bu konunun hem dekoratif hem de siyasi anlamı vardır, ancak siyasi anlamı daha baskındır. Kronoloji (terminus post quem olarak 532) ve tarihsel-arkeolojik bağlam, kartal sembolü ile İmparator I. Iustinianus arasındaki ilişkileri ortaya çıkarmıştır. Yılan boğan kartal, bu perspektifte Iustinianus'un üstün gücünün sembolü olurken, yılan imparatorluğun tüm düşmanlarının sembolüdür. Bu düşmanlar çerçevede yer alan iki maskeli baş betiminde görülmektedir. İlki, Pompeii'deki Faun Evi'nden İskender Mozağı'nde, etnik ve fizyonomik düzeyde çok iyi karakterize edilmiş bir konuyu, yani bir Pers askeri olarak Perslerin kralı III. Darius ve askerlerini çağrıştırmaktadır. Bu maskeli baş, Perslerin yenilgisini ve 532'de I. Iustinianus ile I. Chosroes arasındaki barış anlaşmasını hatırlatır. İkinci maskeli baş, gizemli batının tanrısı Oceanus'u simgeler; başka bir deyişle de Batı İmparatorluğu'nun Iustinianus (535-553) tarafından yeniden ele geçirilmesini temsil etmektedir. Bu nedenle Büyük Iustinianus yeni bir Augustus'tu ve ilk imparator olarak, özellikle kartal sembolü olmak üzere görüntülerin dilini politik olarak kullanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkonolojik çözümleme, kartal, yılan, I. Iustinianus.

* Laura Caso, Archaeologist, Scholar of Iconography and Iconology, MIUR, Naples, Italy.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8903-4079>.
E-mail: caso.laura@gmail.com

Between 1935 and 1954 a team of excavators from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, digging in the site of the Byzantine Imperial Palace (Fig. 1) in Constantinople, unearthed a magnificent figural mosaic pavement (Brett 1942: 34-43; Talbot Rice 1965: 1-5)¹. It occupies three (in all likelihood originally four) sides of a peristyle with an exterior measurement of 55.5 x 66.5 m and a width varying between 7.2 and 10 m. Assuming that the mosaic occupied all four sides of the peristyle court, we may estimate its total area to have been approximately 1,900 square metres (it spreads over 1,872 square metres). Although less than a quarter of the mosaic is actually preserved, large portions of the mosaic survive virtually intact (Trilling 1989: 28). The halls, surrounded by 10 x 12 or 13 Corinthian columns at the sides opening onto the peristyle courtyard, were 9 m deep. With a column base diameter of 0.90 m, their height was thus 8.50 to 9 m. The archaeologists also brought to light with the peristyle court an axially joining apse hall and some adjacent parts of a large group of buildings (Jobst et al. 1997: 24, 20). This apse hall (*exedra*) was probably a courtroom for hearings (*Augusteum*), in all likelihood dating to the reign of Justinian I (527-565) (Russo 2015: 105-108). The building type – peristyle court and axially aligned palace *aula* – has its origins in the ancient layout of Greek and Roman palaces, imperial and aristocratic villas (Becatti 1959: 904-906; Jobst et al. 1997: 24-25). The tessellated pavement was composed of a lot of coloured limestone, terracotta and glass cubes of 5 mm in average edge length, depicting scenes and subjects put in place between the white limestone cubes in fish-scale technique (Jobst et al. 1997: 28-33). Especially this fish-scale technique (Fig. 2) is very interesting and innovative.

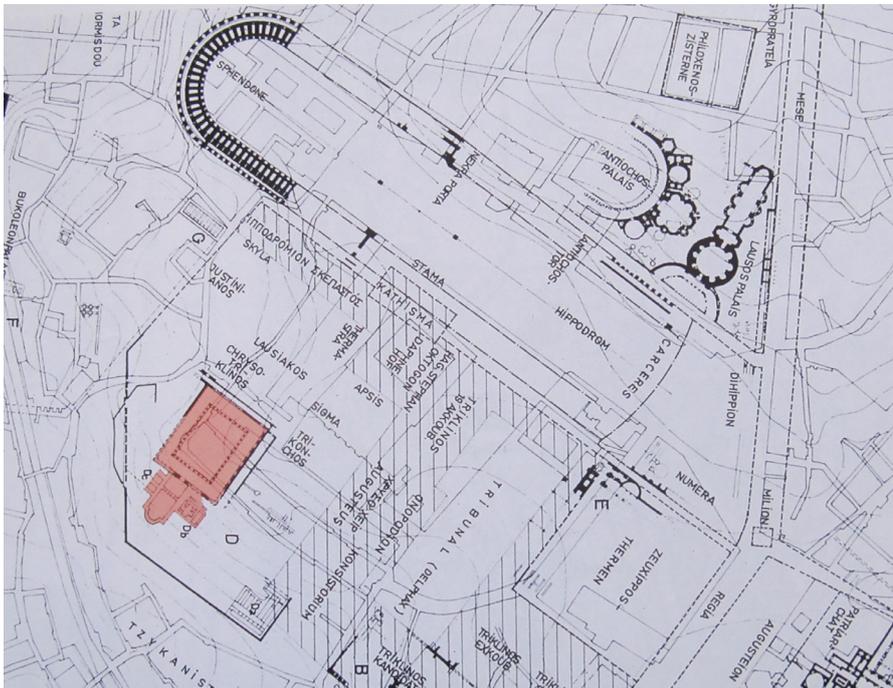


Figure 1
Layout plan of the Great Palace quarter.
Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 17.

It is no doubt that the Palace Mosaic was the largest and most evocative landscape mosaic in antiquity. Thus it was a masterpiece of secular decorative art in the Constantinople of late antiquity, adorning one of the main wings of the

¹ The Palace Mosaic was carefully restored during the '80's by the Austrian team lead by H. W. Jobst. The mosaic panels were subsequently moved to the new Museum of the Mosaics in Istanbul, where they are now on display in a modern museographical setting. See Jobst 1995: 2-22; Ronchey - Braccini 2010: 396.

Figure 2

The spring goddess. North-eastern hall, register 3 (sector E). Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 52.



imperial palace, near the *Chrysotriclinium* (Becatti 1959: 906; Jobst et al. 1997: 24, 27). The floor was covered by a wide and colorful gallery of scenes that fitted the architectural frame and consisted of four strips of friezes. The frame is crossed by an amazingly naturalistic acanthus scroll (0.90 metres in width), which appears to have been regularly interspersed by imposing masked heads (Ronchey - Braccini 2010: 396). This frame, which symbolizes a *paradeisos*², holds four registers of inhabited scenes, ideally to be watched from the courtyard side of the peristyle. The scenes are not limited to a single row, but sometimes stray into a neighbouring row; moreover the pictures are occasionally separated by ground lines, scenic or architectural motifs, but we cannot see drop shadows (Jobst et al. 1997: 44-45). When looking at the pictures we observe a movement from left to right in the north-eastern side, where we can admire the detail of the eagle and the snake, directed towards the Palace *Aula* in the south-east. On the surviving parts of the mosaic we still count 90 different themes populated

² The *paradeisos* is a Dionysian theme that we can observe particularly in Roman painting, i. e. in Pompeian frescoes of Third Style; see the Casa del Bracciale d'oro frescoes at Pompeii, especially the frescoes decorating the *oecus* 32, where the portraits of the owners, with the appearance of Maenads and Sylens, are painted in a luxuriant and naturalistic garden.

by some 150 human and animal subjects (Macchiarella 2005: 1). The pictures represent the labour of herdsmen (Fig. 3) and peasants, the prowess of huntsmen (Fig. 4); there are also children playing (Fig. 5), a herdsman with lute, a fisherman, a breast-feeding mother, grazing animals (Fig. 6): bucolic scenes in the open air (Fig. 7), with a lot of details that we can find as *ekphraseis* in the contemporary *epigrammata* (cfr. the poetry collection of Agathias, especially A.P.VI,167). But these pictures alternate with wild beasts, exotic creatures and mythological motifs, in a cosmogonic and cosmological philosophy of the life, where the myth, according to Plato (cfr. *Timaeus*), is the main synthesis of the two opposite ideas: ἄνθρωπος καὶ θεός. The figural subjects are integrated by scenic, vegetal and architectural elements on an abstract and white background. No inscriptions have been found so that it can be assumed that past citizens, courtiers and viewers understood the images without explanation (Jobst et al. 1997: 45).

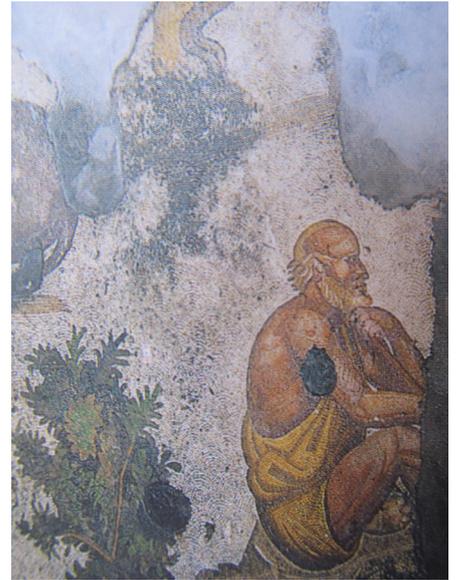


Figure 3
Old herdsman sitting on a rock. North-eastern hall, registers 2-3 (sector B). Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 43.



Figure 4
Tiger hunt. Corner of north-western/north-eastern halls (sector A). Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 39.



Figure 5
Hoop game in the arena: a boy at the turning column. North-eastern hall, register 1 (sector E). Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 49.

Figure 6
Eagle strangling a snake, grazing animals
and huntsman. North-eastern hall, sector B.
Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 34.



Figure 7
Three long-haired goats reposing. North-
eastern hall, register 2 (sector B).
Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 43.



I think, on some iconological, historical and archaeological data, that the Palace Mosaic can be dated to the reign of Justinian I, exactly after 532, that is after the *Nika* insurrection, when the emperor Justinian, according to Procopius (Prok. aed. I), became the patron for numerous buildings or monuments which were destroyed by the rebels (Pernice 1933: 389). Ever since its discovery the Palace Mosaic has been the subject of controversy about its dating. Previous attempts indicated the late 4th century to the early 6th century, although the majority of scholars inclined towards the 6th century (Becatti 1959: 906; Ling 1998: 97; Dunbabin 2001: 233-234; Pappalardo - Ciardiello 2010: 285)³. A solution to the problem had to await new excavations by Werner Jobst at those places of the

³ J. Trilling dates back the Palace Mosaic to the reign of Heraclius (610-641), while G. Macchiarella dates back the Floor Mosaic to the reign of Theophilus (829-842). See Trilling 1989: 29-31; Macchiarella 2005: 4-6.

north-eastern hall where the mosaic had remained undamaged (Jobst et al. 1997: 58-61). The materials found underneath were expected to clarify the chronology of the mosaic. The findings indicate that the peristyle and its mosaic were made in a period of new construction, when the peristyle court was placed on top of an older structure. This new construction could be dated exactly from the material found in the debris underneath the mosaic. Of this material (a lot of pottery fragments in the insulating layer), pieces of common jars are particularly noticeable which were identified as Gaza amphorae. These amphorae are very frequent in 5th century layers. In addition to the Gaza pottery, the team of Werner Jobst found fragments of African vessels also made in the second half of the 5th century and pieces of fine pottery from the last quarter of the 5th century. Because of these findings it can be stated with some assurance that the Palace Mosaic was made in the first half of the 6th century in the course of major reconstruction works at the Great Palace. The only emperor who could be the patron for this work was Justinian I (527-565). Therefore the long debate about dating the Palace Mosaic has come to a turning point.

The fight between an eagle and a snake (Fig. 8), the object of this research, is represented in the north-eastern hall, register 2 (sector B, panel B5) (Jobst et al. 1997: 42-43). The representation of the bird of prey and the snake is very naturalistic: the bird is still on the ground and about to soar with its prey, a big



Figure 8
Eagle strangling a snake. North-eastern hall,
register 2 (sector B, panel B5).
Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 42.

snake, in its beak and claws. The eagle eyes are truly impressive, because they are fixed on the snake eyes: it is noticeable the dominating gaze of the eagle against the defiant look of the snake. Moreover the size of the bird of prey is majestic and much larger than the size of the second lowest eagle on the right, whose prey is a little bird. We can explain the size much larger of the first bird of prey by means of symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning is very ancient and has its roots in Mesopotamia and the Near East (Wittkower 1939: 294). It has always been associated with the idea of supreme power, that evokes the idea of divinity of sky and light, i. e. *Zeus* or *Iuppiter* in ancient Greek and Roman religion. Thus the eagle is not only the attribute of *Zeus*, but it is often identified with the god. The very ancient subject of the eagle strangling a snake is also very widespread, either in literary or visual sources (Wittkower 1939: 307-308). The

fighting motif (the eagle and the snake) occurs for the first time in the Iliad (XII, 201 ff), here with a specifically mantic meaning. An eagle with a snake in its beak appears above the Trojans, while they assault the ships of the Greeks. The snake liberates itself from the claws of the bird and falls into the Trojan lines. This is taken as a bad *omen* and in fact the attack on the ships fails. Moreover the eagle appears as a zoological observation in Greek literature (Aristot. hist. an. 609 a/4; Ael. NA 2, 26). The subject is similarly treated by Latin poets (Verg. Aen. 11, 751-756; Ov. met. 4, 362-364) and other writers (Plin. nat. 10, 17), who emphasize the victorious character of the eagle more than the Greeks do.

Apollonius of Tyana tries to get rid of a snake plague by putting on a column, in Constantinople, the statue of an eagle with a snake in its claws. In a rite of sympathetic magic Apollonius employs the symbol of the god to overcome evil. Nicetas Choniates saw the monument in the hippodrome of Constantinople in 1204, when the Crusader army conquered and sacked the city of Constantinople (Wittkower 1939: 308; Paribeni 2010: 254). Nicetas described in *De signis Constantinopolitanis* the bronze group of the eagle and snake which was above the *spina* of the hippodrome, before the looting by the Crusaders (van Dielen 1975: 647-653; Vespignani 2005: 305-310). Consequently Justinian I knew very well the bronze group depicting the fighting motive. This work, which was in the hippodrome very close to the Imperial Palace (Fig. 1)⁴, likely inspired the emperor about his patronage for the same subject in the Palace Mosaic. The eagle becomes the political symbol of the imperial power, while the snake symbolizes the enemies of the emperor. The eagle, that is Justinian, fighting against the snake defeats and annihilates evil, that is all enemies of the empire on the political, military and religious level. The outcome of the victory is order, justice and cosmic harmony, moreover the triumph of reason, beauty and fairness: the main purpose of the imperial government.



Figure 9
Eagle strangling a snake, mosaic from Nola (Museo Provinciale Campano).
Photo: According to Tammisto 1997: plate 53, fig. 1.

The fight of the eagle and snake also recurs in a magnificent mosaic from Nola (Fig. 9) likely from the Temple of Jupiter (Tammisto 1997: 102-103, 410-411; De Rosa 2015: 491). In its present state, the mosaic (h. 115 cm, w. 81 cm) is composed of two fragments both in good state of preservation. The upper one shows on a white ground the underparts of an eagle holding a snake with its feet, the bird's tail and middle part of the wing. The lower fragment shows on the same white background the tip of the tail and part of the wing and below the tip of the snake's tail, thus undoubtedly belonging to the upper part. Remarkable is also the use of *opus vermiculatum* of good quality in the execution of the parts with the bird and the snake, whereas the surrounding white area with the wedges, supposed to be the bird's shadow, are in coarser *opus tessellatum*. The mosaic dates back to the late second up to the early first century BC; stylistic criteria and fine quality suggest a date before the devastations in the Social War (90-88 BC) and by Spartacus' troops (73 BC). A pebble mosaic in Aigeira shows an eagle in a similar pose strangling a snake (Tammisto 1997: 102). The Aigeiran mosaic is dated to the second quarter of the third century BC, so that the supposed original concerning both mosaics may be an early Hellenistic or even earlier painting.

The eagle's iconological meaning as a symbol of supreme power mostly relates to the Emperor Augustus. In fact this symbol becomes more powerful on the political and military level under the reign of Augustus, whose political propaganda was

4 In ancient times the palatial hill rose 32.50 metres over a distance of 500 metres from the Sea of Marmara to the Hippodrome. The palatial district extended from Hagia Sophia and the Hippodrome to the coast line, where the sea wall played the role of a formidable defence. See Ciancio Rossetto 1994: 157-162.

very careful about the power of images, especially in visual sources. The eagle often appears on coins and artifacts (cameos, reliefs), from this period. We can see the Jupiter eagle holding the palm of victory and the *corona civica* on a very beautiful cameo (after 27 BC), that is after the acclamation of *Augustus* by the Senate (Zanker 2006: 101). It is very interesting a base for tripod, concerning the *collegium* of *Quindecimviri sacris faciundis*, with a relief depicting in the upper part an imposing eagle and bottom in the corners four sphinxes (Zanker 2006: 130). This is an Apollonian context, due to the presence of the sphinxes: we remember that the empire of Augustus was under protection of Apollo, the patron of the social and political order, the guarantor of justice, as punisher of any form of ὕβρις, and the advocate of cosmic harmony. This supreme idea of beauty, supported by λόγος, is in many artifacts, monuments and masterpieces from this period, first among all the *Ara Pacis Augustae*.

The Emperor Justinian I knowingly looked at the Augustan model, namely at the model of the founder of the empire, because he re-established the Roman Empire for the last time. Thus we can call Justinian I new Augustus and as new Augustus he rebuilt, monumentalized and sumptuously decorated the city of Constantinople. Justinian I or Justinian the Great, as patron for the Palace Mosaic, wanted to celebrate his victory and his triumph over all enemies of the empire, both in the east and in the west, by means of a repertoire of selected images from the iconographic and iconological perspective. Consequently the *musivarius pictor* or rather the *musivarii pictores* made and put in the Palace Mosaic some subjects that were carefully chosen on the historical and symbolic level, especially two masked heads in the acanthus scroll of the frame. Both masked heads relate to the main subject: the eagle strangling a snake, which is the symbol of invincible power of the Emperor Justinian, whereas these masked heads symbolize the enemies of the empire equivalent to the snake i.e. evil. The first masked head (Fig. 10) is in the courtyard side of the north-eastern hall (sector B) (Jobst et al. 1997: 36-37). It depicts in a lush and naturalistic acanthus scroll the very characterized head of a man on the ethnic and physiognomic level. In fact this moustachioed man evokes a Persian soldier, similar to Darius



Figure 10
Moustachioed masked head. Courtyard side
of the north-eastern hall (sector B).
Photo: According to Russo 2015: 107.

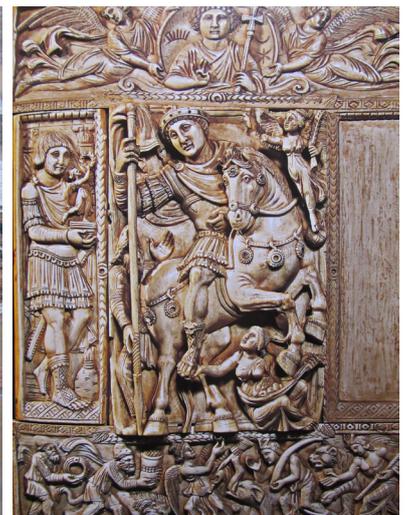
III (Fig. 11) and his Persian soldiers (Fig. 12) fighting against Alexander the Great (Fig. 13) in the Alexander Mosaic⁵ (MANN: The National Archaeological Museum of Naples) from the House of the Faun in Pompeii. The scene depicts one of the battles between Alexander the Great, who charges on horseback bare-headed from left to right, and Darius III on the run in his chariot, on the right. The King of the Macedonians is shaven and has a smooth and idealized face, as the Emperor Justinian in the Barberini Ivory (Fig. 14) (Velmans 2015a: 125-126). The Emperor is, as triumphant victor on horseback, in the main panel, whereas in the bottom panel barbarians, Persians or Scythians on the left and Indians on the right, bring tribute (*aurum coronarium*). In fact the Persian, evoked by this first masked head, relates to the defeat of the enemy by the general of Justinian Belisarius and to the peace treaty in 532 between Justinian and Chosroes I King of the Persians (Pernice 1933: 388).

Figure 11
Darius III in the Alexander Mosaic (MANN).
Photo: According to Pappalardo, Ciardiello
2010: 155.

Figure 12
Persian soldiers in the Alexander Mosaic
(MANN). Photo: According to Pappalardo,
Ciardiello 2010: 161.

Figure 13
Alexander the Great in the Alexander Mosaic
(MANN). Photo: According to Pappalardo,
Ciardiello 2010: 160.

Figure 14
Barberini Ivory (Musée du Louvre).
Photo: According to Velmans 2015: 125.



5 This famous mosaic is a copy of one of the great paintings of the early Hellenistic period (the second half of the 4th century BC), but the identification of the original painting is very uncertain, whether it was a work by Philoxenos of Eretria or whether it was a painting by Apelles. See de Vos 1994: 83-85, 123; Moreno 2000: pls. VIII, IX, XI, XVII; Pappalardo - Ciardiello 2010: 152-165; De Caro 2019: 90, 96-100.

The second masked head (Fig. 15), with an acanthus beard, is in wall side of the south-western hall (Jobst et al. 1997: 38-39). It depicts an imposing protome of Oceanus, the primordial Titan god of the great, earth-encircling River Ocean (Hom. Il. XIV, 201; XVI, 151; XVIII, 607). In the Hellenistic age Oceanus was reimagined as the god of the increasingly accessible Atlantic and Indian



Figure 15
Masked head with an acanthus beard (Oceanus). Wall side of the south-western hall. Photo: According to Jobst et al. 1997: 38.

Oceans, but the old cosmological idea of a great, earth-encircling, freshwater stream survived. We have to remember, according to ancient mythology, that the abode of Oceanus was the far and fabulous west, that is the ends of the world (Sichtermann 1963: 619-621). Oceanus is often depicted in ancient mosaics (cfr. Oceanus mosaic in the Archaeological Museum of Antakya dating back to the 2nd century, Oceanus and Tethys mosaic in Antakya Museum dating from the 4th century and Oceanus mosaic in the Archaeological Museum of Sousse/Hadrumetum, probably dating back to the end of the 2nd century) (Fig. 16) (Pappalardo - Ciardiello 2010: 88, 90-91). The masked head of Oceanus,

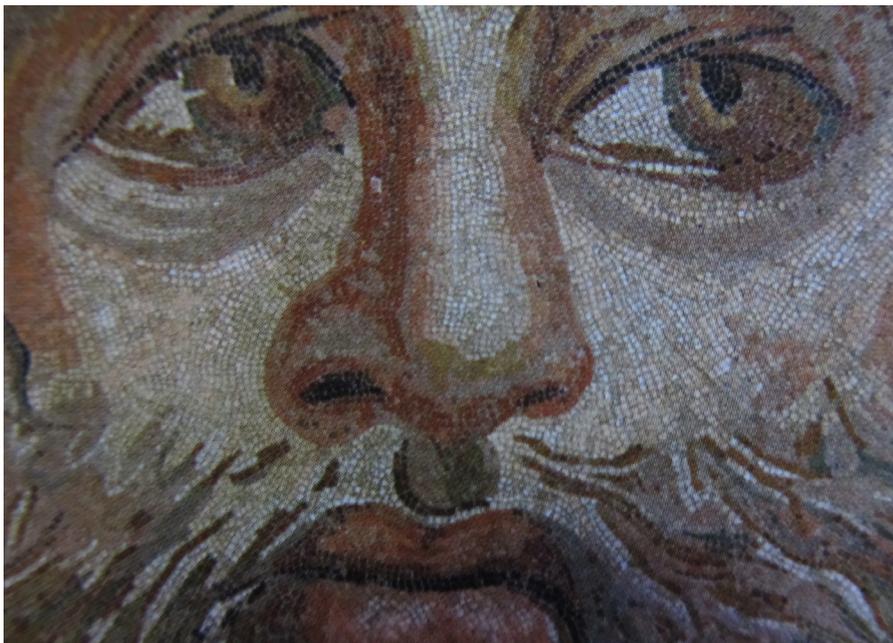


Figure 16
Oceanus detail, mosaic from Sousse (Hadrumetum). Photo: According to Pappalardo, Ciardiello 2010: 88.



Figure 17
The philosopher in the fresco from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (MANN). Photo: According to Grasso 2009: 173.



Figure 18
Sacro-idyllic landscape in a fresco from the Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase. (MANN). Photo: According to Rocco 2009: 212.

evoking the fabulous west, that is the ends of the world, likely relates to the conquest of Italy and Western Roman Empire by Justinian during the Gothic War (535-553). In any case the masked head of Oceanus evokes the great, earth-encircling River Ocean, that calls to mind the circular shape of the *forum* of Constantine in Constantinople, in imitation of the universal empire (Velmans 2015b: 7). It is the same empire pursued by both Augustus and Constantine, of which Justinian is the direct heir from the ideological point of view.

We can observe the reflection of this ideology in the Palace Mosaic, where the eagle symbol controls and dominates the opposite elements, concerning good and evil, depicted in the scenes of the floor mosaic, as fighting animals, e.g. eagle and snake, deer and snake, elephant and lion. The dynamic and violent themes, including hunting scenes, fall into the Dionysian orbit, while others scenes as groups of grazing animals, bucolic subjects, scenes of rural life, children playing relate to the Apollonian sphere dominated by order, rationality and measure. Therefore the eagle in this context becomes the bird of the cosmological and Apollonian light which drives imperial politics. On the other hand Dionysus is invoked in the Palace Mosaic by mythological subjects, especially Pan with a child (the little Dionysus?) and the spring goddess (Fig. 2), a charming Season who reposes on a bed of rock at the banks of a pond. The spectacular griffins, on the contrary, invoke the complementary essence of both gods: Apollo and Dionysus.

These mythological subjects, with different subjects and decorative motifs (cfr. the acanthus scroll), were conveyed by the Hellenistic tradition with regard to contents and forms. Consequently we can rightly recognize in these scenes the legacy of perennial Hellenism (Kitzinger 1977: 22-44). This is noticeable e. g. about the anatomical accuracy and naturalism of the animals, especially wild and exotic beasts, and about the iconography of certain subjects, as the old herdsman (Fig. 3) sitting on a rock, who evokes the philosopher in the fresco of Second Style from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Fig. 17) (MANN: The National Archaeological Museum of Naples) (Grasso 2009: 172-173, 178). Moreover the legacy of Hellenism is evident in architectural elements also recurring in some Roman paintings of Second Style. The white, abstract, elegant background, common to some African mosaics, calls to mind, going backwards, the harmonious and rational background that we can admire in some frescoes of the Augustan age, as the paintings from the Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase (Fig. 18) (MANN: The National Archaeological Museum of Naples) (Rocco 2009: 216-217). Remarkable is also the fish-scale technique, whose use increases the sense of depth and the propagation of light, as in some floor mosaics from Syria and Lebanon (Russo 2015: 108). This calls to mind the optical studies of that period by Anthemius of Tralles, the architect commissioned by the Emperor Justinian to design Hagia Sophia in Constantinople from 532 to 537.

The memory of the imperial eagle of Justinian the Great, the patron for the Palace Mosaic, survived immortal throughout the Middle Ages reaching up to Dante Alighieri, who celebrates the invincible bird and thus presents Justinian: “Cesare fui e son Iustiniano, / che, per voler del primo amor ch’i’ sento, / d’entro le leggi trassi il troppo e ‘l vano.” (Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Paradiso, Canto VI, 10-12).

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