

The Revival of Interest in Representing Plays of Menander in the Late 2nd and Early 3rd Centuries AD: A Historical and Art-Historical Phenomenon

İS 2. Yüzyıl Sonları ve Erken 3. Yüzyıllarda Menander Oyunlarının Temsil Edilmesine İlginin Yeniden Canlanması: Tarihsel ve Sanat-Tarihsel Bir Fenomen

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Abstract


An important revival in representing plays of Menander in private homes, in the form of both mosaics and frescoes, occurred primarily in the eastern part of the Roman empire in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD, with a limited echo felt in the west. The present article tries to explain why and how this artistic phenomenon took place, and a review of the relevant works of art and their chronology is presented in this interpretation. The discussion also refers to the frequent depiction of theater masks in well-to-do households, and the related custom of presenting theatrical entertainment at the banquet or "dinner theater." Also significant for our purpose are the continued vitality of theater festivals throughout the Greek-speaking provinces during the first half of the 3rd century, and the retrospective attitude of the Second Sophistic, with its high esteem for classical drama of the past. This outlook was focused on Athens, and it had great admiration for the plays of Menander and Euripides. One additional feature influencing the artistic renewal in question is the high value placed on Menander's plays as models of literary expression in the curriculum of schools, especially for training students in rhetoric and declamation. Collectively, all of the factors mentioned above contributed to the Menander revival in the visual arts during the period specified.

Keywords: Menander, Ephesos, Antioch, Zeugma, Mytilene, theater festivals, theater masks, Second Sophistic, school curricula.

Öz

Menander oyunlarının özel konutlarda yer alan hem mozaik hem de fresklerde temsil edilmesinde önemli bir canlanma, esas olarak İS 2. yüzyılın sonlarında ve 3. yüzyılın başlarında Roma İmparatorluğu'nun doğu kesiminde meydana gelmiş ve batıda sınırlı bir yankı hissedilmiştir. Bu makale, bu sanatsal olgunun neden ve nasıl gerçekleştiğini açıklamaya çalışmakta ve bu yorumda ilgili sanat eserlerinin ve kronolojilerinin bir incelemesi sunulmaktadır. Tartışma aynı zamanda hâli vakti yerinde evlerde tiyatro maskelerinin sık sık tasvir edilmesine ve buna bağlı olarak ziyafette ya da "akşam yemeği tiyatrosunda" teatral eğlence sunma geleneğine atıfta bulunmaktadır. 3. yüzyılın ilk yarısında Yunanca konuşulan eyaletlerde tiyatro festivallerinin devam eden canlılığı ve geçmişin klasik tiyatrosuna büyük saygı duyan İkinci Sofistlerin geriye dönük tutumu da amacımız için önemlidir. Bu bakış açısı Atina'ya odaklanmıştı ve Menander ile Euripides'in oyunlarına büyük bir hayranlık duyuyordu. Söz konusu sanatsal yenilenmeyi etkileyen ek bir özellik de, okulların müfredatında, özellikle öğrencileri retorik ve nutuk konusunda eğitmek için, edebi anlatım modeli olarak Menander'in oyunlarına verilen yüksek değerdir. Toplu olarak, yukarıda belirtilen faktörlerin tümü, belirtilen dönemde görsel sanatlarda Menander canlanmasına katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Menander, Ephesos, Antiocheia, Zeugma, Midilli, tiyatro festivalleri, tiyatro maskeleri, İkinci Sofistler, okul müfredatı.

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This article is offered as a contribution to the Festschrift honoring Werner Jobst, and I hope he enjoys reading it. The article's purpose is to explain why illustrations of Menander's plays enjoyed a revival in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD, primarily in the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Roman empire. It is a phenomenon seen principally in mosaic pavements and in a few wall paintings, works previously discussed by other authors. My interpretation builds upon and adds to the excellent analysis in the book by S. Nervegna, *Menander in Antiquity: The Contexts of Reception* (2013)¹. I wish to suggest that various factors, artistic, cultural, historical, and social, underlay the revival in imagery, and also to propose how the visual representation of the plays may have spread, geographically, in the process. I shall review the relevant monuments and their chronology.

Menander's popularity as an author remained consistent in the Roman imperial era, not only through public performances on the stage, but also in private settings, especially for the reading and discussion of his plays among the educated social elite. The poet was one of the most admired Classical Greek writers, comparable in reputation to Homer and Euripides (Nervegna 2013: 2, 4, 201)². One has the testimony of writers such as Plutarch (Plut. *Mor.* 673e, 712b-d) in the 2nd century AD, and Athenaeus³ in the early 3rd century about the pleasure of reciting passages from Menander, because of the plays' very accessible language, clever plots, and practical moral instruction. Scenes of the poet's works also very likely were performed as "dinner theater"⁴ in wealthy households, and a favored location for such entertainment was a *triclinium*; some homes had accomplished actors among the proprietors' slaves⁵. Moreover, individual houses at Pompeii occasionally were decorated with mosaics showing ancient Greek theatrical activities, such as an *emblema* from the *tablinum* of the House of the Tragic Poet (Fig. 1), that represents the cast of a satyr play preparing for a performance (Bergmann – Victoria 1994: 235, 237, 254-255 fig. 2; Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: 188-193 figs. on 188-189, 191-193). The actors and an elderly *choregos* or chorus leader, who gives the performers instructions, appear within a columned building ornamented with garlands. This image not only indicates the patron's appreciation of classical drama, but also it may allude indirectly to actual, small-scale performances that occurred in the space where the mosaic was found. Other familiar mosaic *emblemata*, from the Villa of Cicero at Pompeii (Figs. 2 - 3), signed by Dioskurides of Samos, feature scenes both from Menander's *Theophoroumene* (*The Domonic Girl*) and his *Synaristosai* (*Women Lunching Together*) (see Bieber 1961: 95-96, 105-106 figs. 346-347; *MNC* 3rd ed. 1995: 94, 2: 3 DM 1-2; Csapo 1999: 165 fig. 1; Andreae 2003: 218-227; Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: 36 photo on 34; Dunbabin 2016: 58, 61 figs. 3.3, 3.4). One scholar⁶ claimed that that these panels, dated to the

1 To date this remains the most comprehensive interpretation of Menander's plays and their visual representation.

2 Csapo (2010: 143), states that Menander initially was third in popularity among the most acclaimed Greek authors, but Menander's reputation increased significantly in the first three centuries AD.

3 E.g., Athen. 6.243a, 247f (*Synaristosai*), 258e, 270d (Athenaeus III, trans. C. B. Gulick, Loeb Classical Library, 1967).

4 See esp. Jones 1991: that scholar's discussion focuses on visual and dramatic entertainment at the *symposium* in aristocratic Roman households following dinner, and it draws a link between a host's private benefaction and generous public spectacles that he might also sponsor. Fantham (1984: 306) referred to a letter by Pliny to his friend Septicius Clarus, in which the Latin author alluded to comic performance at dinner. Whole plays were sometimes presented, Jones 1991: 193.

5 See Nervegna 2013: 178, who noted epigraphic evidence about slave actors in well-to-do households that comes from family *columbaria*.

6 Csapo (1999: 165, 175-176), who discussed these panels as part of an iconographic tradition related

Figure 1
Pompeii, House of the Tragic Poet, mosaic with cast of a satyr play. Photo after Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: fig. on 188.



Figure 2
Pompeii, Villa of Cicero, mosaic of *Theophoroumene*. Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.4.





Figure 3
Pompeii, Villa of Cicero, mosaic of
Synaristosai.
Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.3.

late 2nd century BC, were transplanted to Pompeii from elsewhere. The imagery follows an iconographic tradition reaching back to the early 3rd century BC, and forming a “set” or cycle of illustrations that served as a prototype for later works of art of Menandrian content.

Another type of theatrical reference common to mosaics at Pompeii and elsewhere, and represented abundantly in the high and late empire, is images of actors’ masks⁷, which have been documented at many locations. From Pompeii itself come the finely rendered tragic masks adorning a richly fruited garland in a mosaic from the *fauces* of the House of the Faun (Bieber 1961: 158-159 fig. 574; Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: 136 figs. on 138-139, 142-143; Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 185 fig. 202). Also of great interest is a 2nd-century pavement from the Aventine Hill in Rome (Fig. 4) signed in Greek by Heraklitos (Dunbabin 1999: 26, 271, 274 fig. 26; Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: 36 figs. on 39-41). On three sides it represented a wide frieze with an *asarotos oikos* or unswept floor showing the discarded elements of a meal, whereas on the fourth side appears a horizontal row of theatrical masks. Some of the latter rest on low plinths, and

to the mosaics with illustrations of Menander’s plays found at Mytilene (see below in this article).

⁷ On the ubiquity of representations of theater masks in Roman mosaics, see among others Huskinson 2002-2003: 132; Balmelle – Darmon 2017: 148-149, 199-200; Raynaud – Islami 2018: 220-223.



Figure 4
Rome, Mosaic of Heraklitos. Photo after
Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2010: fig. on 40
(edited).

short ornamented columns punctuate the group. K. Dunbabin suggested that the mosaic decorated a *triclinium*, because of the food illustrated (Dunbabin 1999: 271). But we can go a step further and propose that the presence of theater masks refers to entertainment performed in the same space on festive occasions. We also note a single mosaic panel kept today in the Cummer Museum of Art in Jacksonville, Florida⁸ (Fig. 5). This panel, dated to the 1st century AD and said to come from the western empire, depicts the mask of a grimacing old man with a wide-open mouth and staring eyes, probably to be identified as a lead slave in New Comedy⁹. He wears a wreath tied by a ribbon, and the mask rests on a low plinth. This image so closely resembles a mask in a mosaic from Ampurias (Emporiae) that the two examples derive from the same artistic model (for the Spanish work, see Raynaud - Islami 2018: fig. 270).

A very useful inventory of masks illustrated in pavements from across the empire occurs in an appendix to a recent book dealing with mosaics at the site of Butrint in Albania (Raynaud – Islami 2018: 220-223). The Triconch Complex at that location, one phase of which is dated to the 2nd century AD, contains a few noteworthy pavements with masks. The Room of the Masks with Mosaic 12 in this residence (Fig. 6) exhibits five panels with individual tragic and comic masks (Raynaud – Islami 2018: 71-80 figs. 75, 79-82, 86-87, illus. on book's back cover). From that space a corridor leads to the building's largest room, apparently a *triclinium*, containing Mosaic 13, located in the apse and displaying a shield pattern with a fragmentary mask at its center; the latter faces toward the main part of the room (Raynaud – Islami 2018: 80-90 figs. 88, 100-102). It is possible that actors in the larger square area entertained banqueters reclining in

⁸ I thank Holly Keris, Chief Curator of the Cummer Museum of Art, for information about and a photograph of this object, previously identified as a mask of Silenus and thought to have been part of a larger mosaic.

⁹ On this type of mask, see *MNC* 3rd ed. 1995: I, 26-29, mask 22; on terracotta examples and statuettes with such masks, I, nos. 1 AT 5, pl. 2; AT 37e, pl. 5; 1 AT 58d, pl. 8; 1 NT 4, pl. 13; 1 TT 5, pl. 14; RT 6b, pl. 20; 3 XB 3, pl. 36.



Figure 5
Jacksonville, Cummer Museum of Art:
Artist unknown (Roman), mosaic with mask
of Silenus [previous identification],
1st century A.D., stone tesserae and cement,
12 ¼ x 12 ¼ x 2 ½ in. Purchased with funds
from Morton R. Hirschberg Bequest, AP.
1990.19.1. Photo courtesy of H. Keris, Chief
Curator.

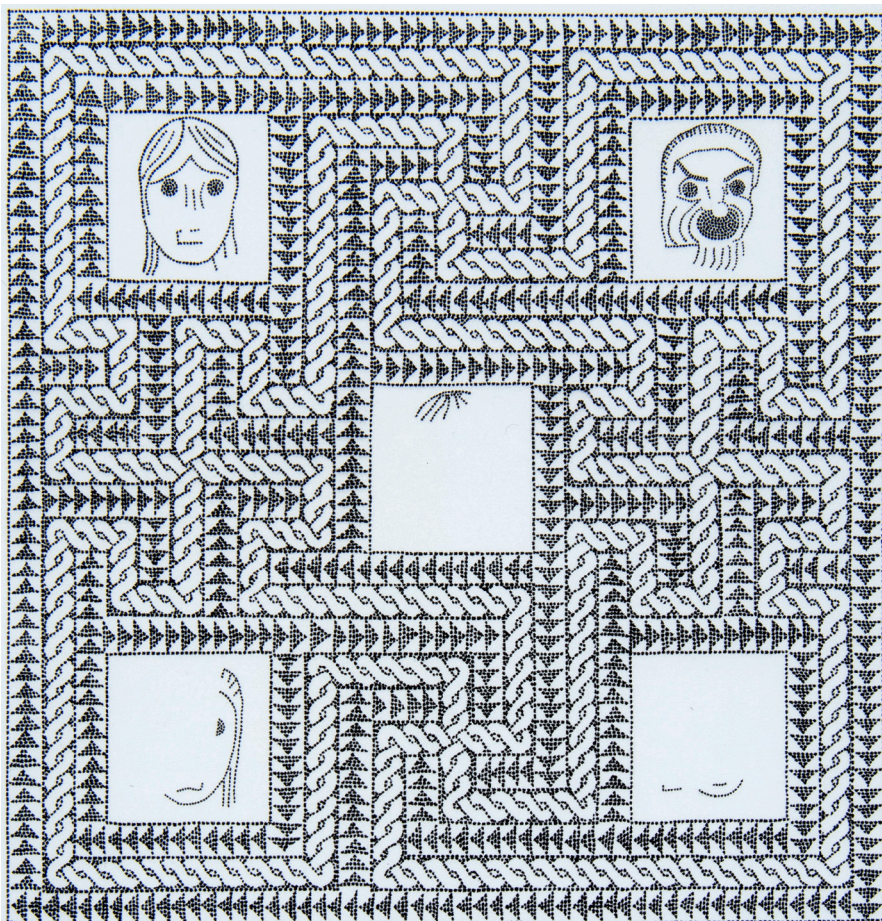


Figure 6
Butrint, Triconch Complex, drawing of
mosaic of masks. Photo after Raynaud –
Alami 2018: fig. 86.

Figure 7
 Villa Armira, mosaic with family group and
 mythological figures.
 Photo courtesy of V. Popova.

the apse. At a different eastern residence, the Villa Armira near Ivailovgrad in ancient Thrace (modern Bulgaria), a pavement of early 2nd-century date (Figs. 7, 8, mask in lower right panel) represents several theater masks and mythological figures, as well as lifelike family portraits of a father and his two very young offspring (Mladenova 1983: 153-156 figs. 8-10; Kabakchieva 2012: 33 figs. on 32-35; Valeva 2015; Parrish 2020: esp. 220-224, 231-232 figs. 2, 17-19). This arrangement suggests that the room (No. 10 in the villa), of fairly large size, was used for dramatic presentations, perhaps literary recitations. These activities and the mosaic's mythological imagery apparently were intended to instruct the two young children depicted in the family group about classical culture, as they grew up.





Figure 8
Villa Armira, detail of mosaic with family
group and mythological figures.
Photo courtesy of V. Popova.

One of the most extensive displays of theatrical masks in Roman mosaics occurs in a pavement that adorned the *triclinium* (Room 12) of the House of the Masks at Hadrumetum-Sousse (Fig. 9) in Tunisia (Foucher 1965: 23-24, 51-56, 61-72, figs. 37, 88-120, fold-out plan of the house after 80). Interspersed among the masks are figures of birds, fish, quadrupeds, and fruits. It is implied by the excavator that this mosaic dates to the later 2nd or early 3rd century AD. Moreover, the mosaic floor in an adjacent salon or *oecus* (Room 6) in the same dwelling represents, inside a large medallion, a seated poet holding a bound *volumen*, with a tragic mask placed alongside. In front of him appears a *capsa* filled with other scrolls, and on the right stands an actor holding a comic mask (Foucher 1965: 15-16 figs. 20, 87; Dunbabin 2016: 81 fig. 3.23). Three more masks embellish the threshold of Room 6 (Foucher 1965: 13-15 fig. 19; Yacoub 1995: 145-147 fig. 67). The combination of numerous masks with items appropriate to the banquet, seen in the *triclinium* pavement, suggests that “dinner theater” was performed in this space, matching what we concluded about the Heraklitos Mosaic from the *triclinium* of the house on the Aventine in Rome (Fig. 4). Additional dramatic activity, such as recitations of plays, may have occurred in the *oecus* (Room 6) of the dwelling at Sousse. The strong emphasis on the theatrical theme in the House of the Masks at Sousse led Foucher to propose that this structure, if not a private residence, may have been the meeting place of an association or guild of professional actors (Foucher 1965: 78-79). In my view, the former identification as a private home seems more likely.

It is against this artistic backdrop that there appeared, in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries, several other mosaics and a group of frescoes representing the plays of Menander, initially seen in Asia Minor and Syria and echoed elsewhere. We shall summarize these works of art, which have been carefully described and analyzed by other scholars, and then offer an explanation for their occurrence. Two sites are especially important in this regard, Ephesos and Antioch, cities with a strong theatrical tradition (on the well-preserved theater at Ephesos, see Scherrer 2000: 158-160 figs. 1-2). At Ephesos, in Apartment I of Terrace House 2, exists a reception space (SR 6) decorated with paintings illustrating plays of both Menander and Euripides, which was labeled the *Theaterzimmer* by archaeologists of the Austrian team (Strocka 1977: 48 figs. 64-69; Parrish 1995: 154-155 fig. 13; Blanchard 2009: xxvi-xxvii, xxxi, xxxiii-xxxv, figs. bet. xxx and xxxi; Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2011: 115 figs. 204-205). Altogether,

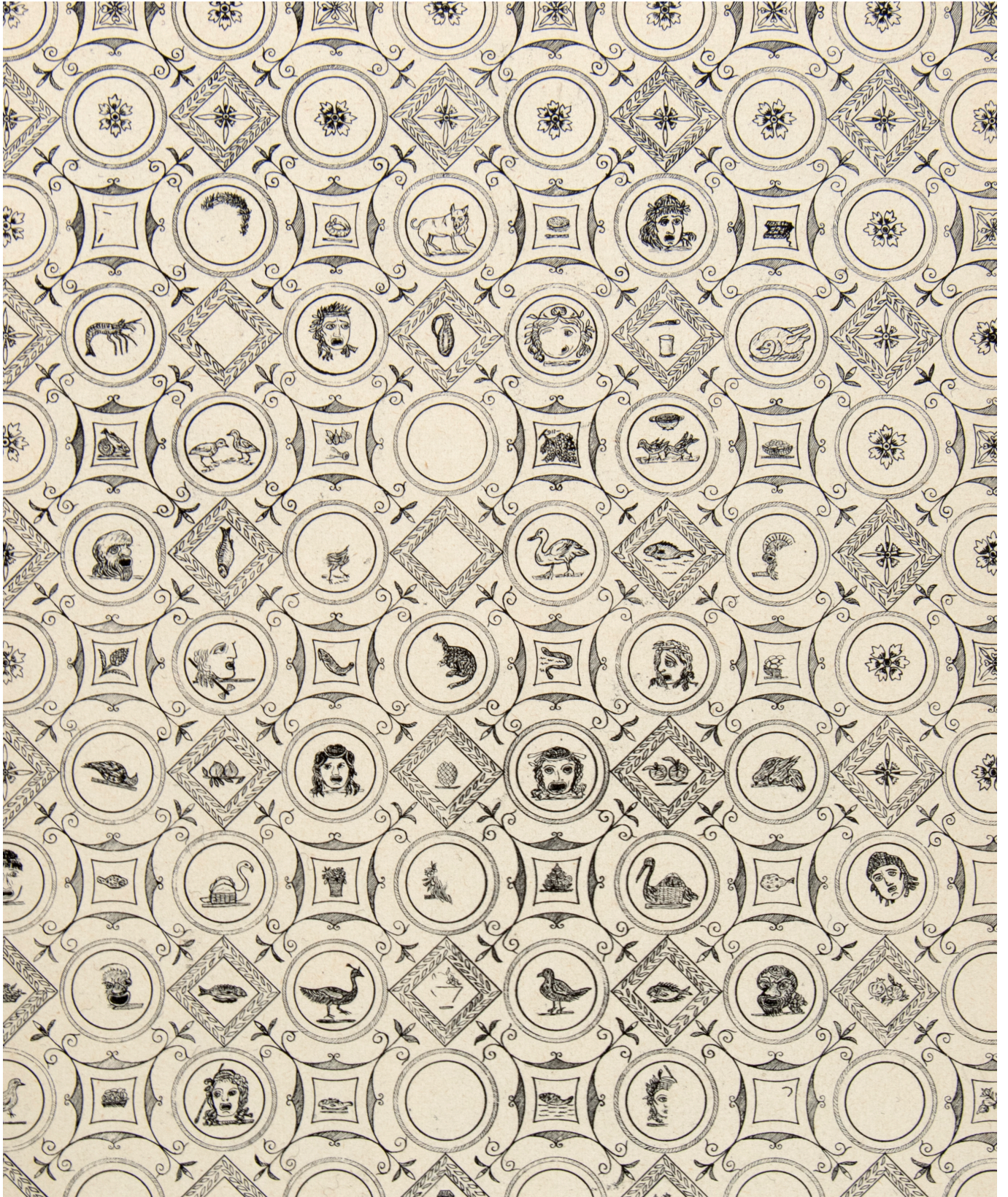


Figure 9
Hadrumetum-Sousse, House of the Masks,
Room 12, drawing of mosaic of masks.
Photo after Foucher 1965: fig. 37.

five comedies and five tragedies are paired in this ensemble, although only two such groupings are well enough preserved to be identified: those of Menander's *Sikyonioides* (the *Sicyonians*) (Fig. 10) and Euripides' *Orestes* (Fig. 11), in addition to the *Theophoroumene* and *Iphigenia* by the same two authors. As noted by A. Blanchard and others, such pairings have earlier precedents and are not



Figure 10
Ephesos, Apartment I of Terrace House 2,
fresco with *Sikyonioides*.
Photo after Strocka 1977: fig. 64.



Figure 11
Ephesos, Apartment I of Terrace House 2,
fresco with *Orestes*.
Photo after Strocka 1977: fig. 67.

uncommon, since Menander admired Euripides' works (Blanchard 2009: xxxiv). In fact, in the papyrus text of the *Sikyonioides* which Blanchard studied and translated, there are two direct references to the *Orestes*. These frescoes in a rich dwelling in central Ephesus reflect the vitality of stage performance of classic Greek drama in the local theater, and the fond appreciation of such plays by the city's social elite. In addition, the *Theaterzimmer* contains other frescoes with monumental figures, perhaps deities and heroes, who carry food items suitable to the banquet, whereas the walls' upper frieze exhibits theater masks. All of the

painted imagery suggests that dramatic entertainment accompanied meals served in this room, similar to what we have noted in other domestic contexts (on this point, see Parrish 1995: 157-158). The wall paintings at Ephesos are dated to the late 2nd or, more likely, early 3rd century AD (Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 580, date the frescoes to ca. AD 230), when the red-ground style of paintings, evident in the scenes of Menander’s and Euripides’ plays, was popular at Ephesos (cf. the Socrates fresco in Apartment IV of Insula 2, and a fresco of an Eros driving a *biga* pulled by leopards in Apartment III, Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2011: 85 fig. 127; 111 fig. 190).

The other key archaeological site for revived interest in representing Menander’s plays in the early 3rd century, namely, Antioch, displays that interest in a few different mosaics, most importantly, the pavement with four scenes of the poet’s dramas (Fig. 12) published by K. Gutzwiller and O. Çelik (Gutzwiller - Çelik

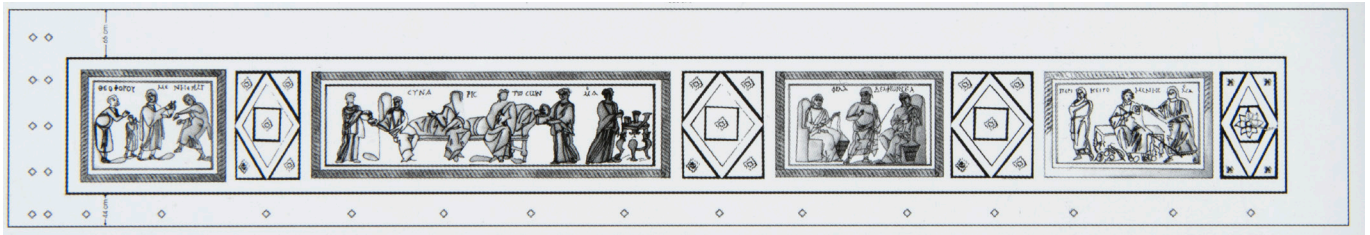


Figure 12
Antioch, House at Daphne, drawing of
mosaic with scenes of Menander’s plays.
Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.8.

2012: 573-623; see also Dunbabin 2016: 64-66). These two authors believe the pavement decorated a corridor or portico of a luxurious home in the wealthy residential quarter of Daphne, where the mosaic was found (Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 575, 577, for the pavement’s location; cf. other Menander mosaics, ornamenting the portico of a home at Mytilene, Charitonidis et al. 1970: 53-62, discussed below). The findspot at Antioch occurs approximately 200 m from the main theater in that city. This pavement is assigned to the first half of the 3rd century (Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 579, 617), a chronology which I claim can be narrowed down to the early decades of that century, contemporary with many other mosaics of varied subject from Antioch. In a horizontal format, the four aligned figural panels of the floor from Daphne, separated by single, large, upright lozenges, illustrate from left to right Menander’s *Theophoroumene* (Fig. 13), the *Synaristosai* (Fig. 14), the *Philadelphoi* (*Sisters Who Love Brothers*), and the *Perikeiromene* (*The Girl Who Gets Her Hair Cut Short*). The panels are discussed individually (Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 606-617 figs. 29, 32-34 [*Theophoroumene*]; 597-606 figs. 21, 25-26 [*Synaristosai*]; 590-597 figs. 17-21 [*Philadelphoi*]; 581-590 figs. 10-13 [*Perikeiromene*]). I thank K. Gutzwiller for the photo reproduced in Fig. 14 of this article. Each panel is inscribed with the play’s title and, in abbreviated form, the number of the act depicted. The figures’ costumes reflect contemporary Roman fashion, and the masks worn by these individuals are traditional comic types. As both K. Gutzwiller and K. Dunbabin emphasized, some of the imagery derives from artistic models related to the Dioskurides *emblemata* from Pompeii (Figs. 2 - 3) and, more distantly, to Hellenistic Greek antecedents that were adapted and manipulated in the later Roman empire, as historical circumstances changed (see the finely nuanced interpretation of the process of artistic transmission in Dunbabin 2016: 72-77). In some mosaics depicting scenes of comedy, a different episode apparently was substituted for the standard image of a given play. The Antiochene mosaic patron was familiar enough with the content of the plays shown in his home to recognize the individual characters and episodes portrayed. Gutzwiller provided a very informative analysis of each of the four scenes illustrated in that pavement.



Figure 13
Antioch House at Daphne, mosaic panel
with *Theophoroumene*.
Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.9.



Figure 14
Antioch, House at Daphne, mosaic panel
with *Synaristosai*.
Photo courtesy of K. Gutzwiller.

Gutzwiller also referred to the often reproduced and inscribed mosaic from a different location at Antioch, the House of Menander, which represents the poet, his female companion Glykera, and the personification of Comedy (*Komodia*) (Fig. 15), and which offers further visual evidence of the poet's popularity in that city (see Levi 1947: 201-204, 625 pl. XLVc; Cimok 2000: 180-181 fig. on 181; Kondoleon 2000: 156 no. 40, fig. on same page; Gutzwiller - Çelik 2012: 574 fig. 2). The fact that the romantic couple in this example reclines at a banquet or *symposium* with Comedy present, and that this pavement adorned a *triclinium*, underscores the suitability of the poet's plays for entertainment on convivial occasions (on the mosaic's architectural setting, Dobbins 2000: 57-58 [Room 1] pl. on 50). Following D. Levi's chronology, C. Kondoleon assigned this pavement to the third quarter of the 3rd century, but in my view, that date should be revised upward to the Severan period. One reason is the design and rendering of the geometric panels framing the *emblema*, which display a diagonal grid or checkerboard of serrated filets with enclosed elements (see *Décor I*: pl. 24a-g). This type of design has several artistic counterparts in the Antiochene mosaic repertory (cf. Cimok 2000, borders of mosaics representing Narcissus and Echo,



Figure 15
Antioch, House of Menander, mosaic with Menander, Glykera and Comedy.
Photo after Kondoleon 2000: fig. on 156.

114-115 fig. on 115; Perseus and Andromeda, 132-133 fig. on both pages; Thetis, 196-197 fig. on 197).

What the preceding discussion indicates is that at Ephesos and Antioch, there originated an artistic fashion of depicting Menander's plays in well-to-do homes of the early 3rd century, which spread to other locations. This artistic phenomenon can be linked to the continued popularity of theater festivals in the Greek-speaking part of the empire, a topic to be discussed below. One direction in which this fashion traveled is northeastward to Zeugma, situated approximately 100 km from Antioch in ancient Syria (for a map locating both Zeugma and Antioch, see Liebeschuetz 1972: fold-out map after 302). C. Abadie-Reynal and J.-P. Darmon first published the well-preserved pavement displaying Menander's *Synaristosai* (Fig. 16), found in the House of the Mosaic of the *Synaristosai* at Zeugma (Abadie-Reynal – Darmon 2003: 81-83, 87-99 figs. 4 [plan of Zeugma house], 10, 12-23; Darmon 2018b: 581-582 figs. 3-4). The play's title appears in the *emblema*'s upper zone, and in the lower part occurs the mosaicist's signature, Zosimos of Samsat¹⁰, a craftsman who was active at Zeugma around the year AD 200. The pavement of the *Synaristosai* was oriented toward the interior of the *triclinium* it adorned, so that it could be easily observed by diners reclining on couches on the mosaic's U-shaped frame (Fig. 17). This border has a geometric design resembling that of the Menander panel in the House of Menander at Antioch (Fig. 15), as noted by Darmon, and therefore both works seem contemporary. It is further evidence of the influence exerted by mosaicists from Antioch on craftsmen working at Zeugma.

In my view, the renewed interest in representing plays of Menander in the mosaic medium at Antioch and Zeugma, together with the Menander frescoes at Ephesos,

¹⁰ For a second mosaic at Zeugma signed by Zosimos and representing the Marine Venus, see Abadie-Reynal – Darmon 2003: 99 fig. 27; also Darmon 2018b: 579, 581, 583-586 figs. 1-2, 5, 7.



Figure 16
Zeugma, House of the
Synaristosai, mosaic emblem
of *Synaristosai*. Photo after
Abadie-Reynal – Darmon
2003: fig.23.



Figure 17
Zeugma, House of the
Synaristosai, mosaic of
Synaristosai with its U-shaped
frame. Photo after Dunbabin
2016: fig. 3.2.

sparked a diffusion of this type of imagery to other sites in the Greek-speaking part of the empire, and to a much lesser extent in the west. We find examples at two sites on Crete, one of them the House of Pheidias at Kissamos, probably to be dated to the early 3rd century and depicting respectively Menander's *Sikyonios* (*sic*) (Fig. 18) and his *Theophoroumene* (Fig. 19) (Nervegna 2013: 141-142, 150-151, 166; Markoulaki 2015: esp. figs. 3-5; Dunbabin 2016: 65,

Figure 18
Kissamos, mosaic panel of *Sikyonios*.
Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.12.



Figure 19
Kissamos, mosaic panel of
Theophoroumene.
Photo after Dunbabin 2016: fig. 3.11.



67, 69 figs. 3.11-3.12). The former panel is signed by a mosaicist from Antioch. A different pair of mosaic panels from Chania, a nearby site on Crete, has been dated somewhat later, around the mid- to late 3rd century (Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 580 no. 3 figs. 6-7; Nervegna 2013: 138-139, 154, 158 figs. 9b,

17b; Dunbabin 2016: 64 fig. 3.7). The better-preserved of the two *emblemata* in this pavement illustrates Menander's *Plokion* (*The Necklace*). It also seems likely that an important mosaic from the site of Ulpia Oescus in Bulgaria, which represents Menander's play the *Achaioi* (*The Achaeans*) in its central panel (Fig. 20) and is inscribed with the poet's name (written in the genitive), dates to the Severan period (Ivanov 1954: including pls. 2, 8-13; Mihailov 1958: II no. 597 bis; Barov 1970; Charitonidis et al. 1970: 98-99 pl. 27,1; *MNC* 3rd ed. 1995: II 468, 6 DM 1; Nervegna 2013: 138, 142 fig. 19; Slavova 2021: 19-33 figs. 1-6). This pavement was the only known record of that drama until there was found a papyrus fragment (P. Oxy. XXVII 2462) which mentioned the same text by Menander. It confirmed that the subject is contemporary to that author's time and not a parody of a historical theme. A new interpretation of this mosaic's imagery has been published by M. Slavova, and in her article that scholar reaffirmed the pavement's dating to Severan times (Slavova 2021: 33; see also Gutzwiller – Çelik 2012: 58 on this pavement).

Figure 20
Ulpia Oescus, mosaic of *Achaioi*.
Photo after Ivanov 1954: pl. 8.



Other mosaics with scenes of Menander’s plays from eastern locations are dated to the later 3rd century and after, and they include the magnificent ensemble (Fig. 21) with illustrations of his plays, eleven in all, discovered in the House of Menander at Mytilene (Charitonidis et al. 1970: 26-62 fig. 4, pls. 2-24; Csapo 1999: 154-188 figs. 2, 4, 8-9, 11-12; Csapo 2010: 140-167 fig. 5.1; Nervegna 2013: 137-138, 140, 143, 149-150, 154-156, 165-166 figs. 9a-11a, 12, 13a, 14-16a). This group of mosaics is shown here in an overall drawing, because the pavement was divided into several separate panels after its excavation. Seven of the dramas ornamented the home’s *triclinium* (Room T) and faced diners inside the room (Fig. 22), while four more were displayed in a horizontal row in an adjacent portico (P). One of the plays represented in the dining room, the

Figure 21
Mytilene, House of Menander, drawing of mosaics in *triclinium* (T) and portico (P).
Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: fig. 1.

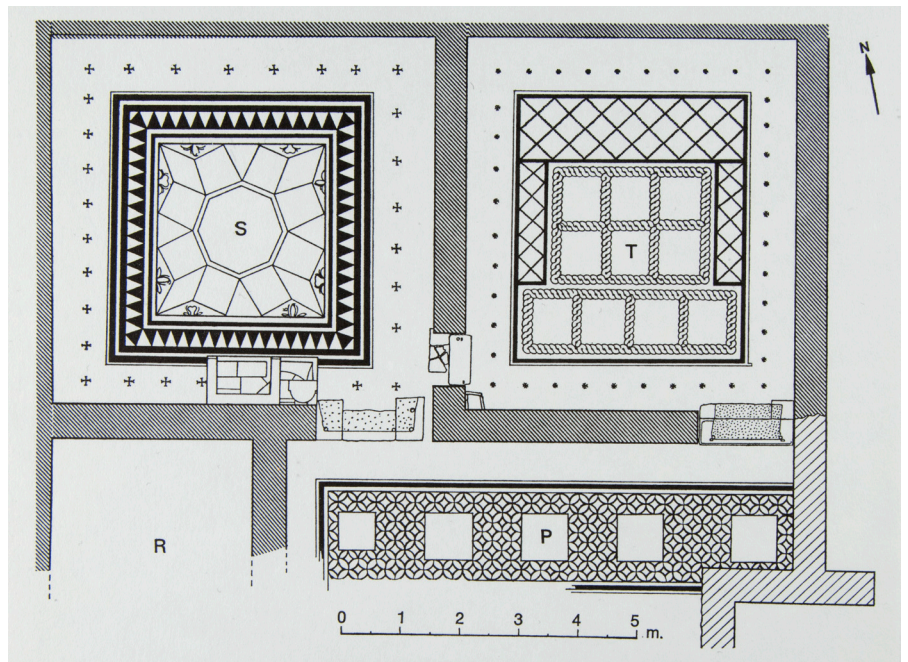
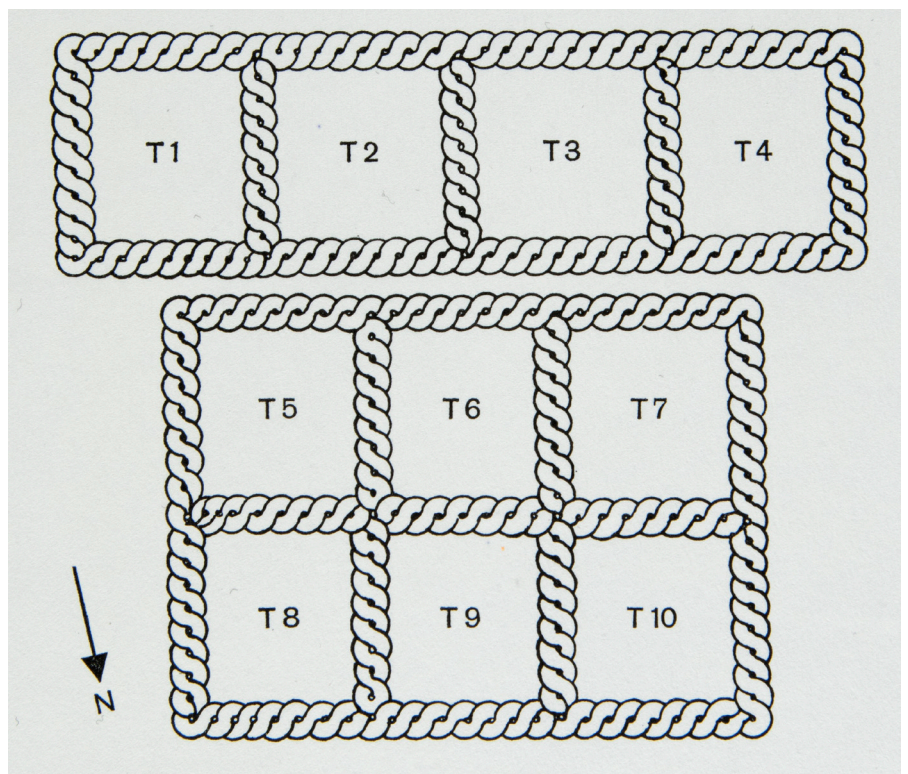


Figure 22
Mytilene, House of Menander, drawing of *triclinium* mosaic with numbered panels.
Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: fig. 4.



Synaristosai, Panel T6 in the drawing, is reproduced in our Fig. 23 (Charitonidis et al. 1970: 41-44 pl. 5,1), and the *Theophoroumene*, Panel T3, appears in our Fig. 24 (Charitonidis et al. 1970: 46-49 pl. 6,1). In the cross-bar of the T in the *triclinium* mosaic, there also were shown busts of Menander and the Muse Thalia, in addition to a scene of the *Plokion* and a panel depicting small, standing portraits of Socrates and his disciples Simmias and Kebes (Charitonidis et al. 1970: Panel T1, 27-31, pl. 2,1 [Menander portrait]; Panel T4, 36-38, pl. 3,3 [Thalia]; Panel T2, 31-33, pl. 3,1 [*Plokion*]; Panel T3, 33-36, pl. 3,2 [Socrates and his disciples]). E. Csapo convincingly traced the iconography of the Mytilene mosaics with Menander scenes ultimately to Early Hellenistic sources, namely, a pictorial cycle created shortly after the poet's death (Csapo 1999: 163).



Figure 23
Mytilene, House of Menander, mosaic panel
with *Synaristosai*.
Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: pl. 5,1.

Besides their impressive number, what is especially noteworthy about the Mytilene panels is their very full inscriptions, including not only each play's title and the particular scene depicted but also the names of the principal characters; see, for example, the episode of music-making from the *Theophoroumene* (Fig. 24). The mosaic patron was well aware of the poet's literary prestige, and he apparently wished to be recognized as person of high culture by ornamenting his home with a plethora of the poet's works (see Csapo 1999: 161; Nervegna 2013: 193-194). The proprietor may not have been very familiar with individual plays' contents, and for that reason he may have had the main characters identified by name (a suggestion of M. Slavova, shared with me). By contrast, K. Dunbabin claimed that the ample inscriptions in the Mytilene panels reflect a special liking for the written word in the later Roman empire (Dunbabin 2016: 71). We note in passing that that the plays represented in the house's portico, which are somewhat different in style from those in the *triclinium*, do not specify individual characters. Some scholars have dated the pavement ensemble at Mytilene to the later 3rd or early 4th century (e.g., Dunbabin 2016: 68, caption of image), whereas Nervegna placed it in the later 4th century (Nervegna 2013: 137).

Figure 24
Mytilene, House of Menander, mosaic panel
with *Theophoroumene*.
Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: pl. 6,1.



Representations of Menander's plays circulated widely in the Roman empire, and examples have been identified at various sites in the west, most notably at Grand (Fig. 25) in eastern Gaul (Balmelle - Darmon 2017: 47, 49, 147 figs. 50, 179). The now fragmentary work discovered there has been interpreted as a depiction of Menander's *Phasma* (*The Apparition*). This pavement decorated a very large apsidal room in a building of uncertain function, and this room perhaps is to be identified as the main reception space of a luxurious residence. The mosaic is dated to the first half of the 3rd century, when the Menander revival was at its height. There survives the left end of the elongated mosaic panel that ornamented the center of the reception room at Grand, and it shows a male figure who wears a tunic and a mask with a wide open mouth, standing within a doorway and facing to the right, as he carries a long stick. The same play also was illustrated in a mosaic panel at Mytilene (Fig. 26), in which this type of individual occurs outside a doorway and faces to the left, reversing the placement of his counterpart in the panel from Grand (see Charitonidis et al. 1970: Panel P5, 60-62 pl. 8,2). As Darmon observed, such a reversal of an actor's position in a given scene typifies the dramatic episodes illustrated at Mytilene.

In my opinion, the entire Menander revival that started in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD would not have occurred to the extent that it did without contemporary stage performances of Menander's plays, in local theaters and at theater festivals. As other scholars have demonstrated, there is abundant evidence, literary, archaeological, and epigraphic, for the persistent performance of classical drama in the eastern empire during the first half of the 3rd century. The theater at Athens remained particularly active (on this point, see Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 91-93, 301-303)¹¹. Evidence of this activity comes from

¹¹ Pickard-Cambridge underscored the continued flourishing of guilds of the Artists of Dionysos into the late 3rd century; these professional associations included poets, actors of various types (among them comedians), chorus singers, and other types of performers.



Figure 25
Grand, building with large reception room,
left end of mosaic panel with *Phasma*.
Photo after Balmelle – Darmon 2017: fig.
179.



Figure 26
Mytilene, House of Menander, mosaic panel
with *Phasma*.
Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: pl. 8,2.

objects excavated in the Athenian Agora, including terracotta statuettes and reliefs of 3rd-century date, that apparently were produced in response to a genuine demand for such items on the part of the theatergoing public (Grandjouan 1961: 21 nos. 498-506, 110 pls. 11, 32). More significant is archaeologists' discovery of admission tickets in the form of inscribed lead tokens (Fig. 27), that show masks resting on altars, and that were used for live performances of Menander's *Theophoroumene* (Lang – Crosby 1964: 122, L329a-e, pl. 30 [illus. of L329]; Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 271-272, fig. 140 below; Charitonidis et al. 1970: 49 pl. 25,6-8; *MNC* 3rd ed. 1995, II, 6AC 1a-d). The tokens can be dated to the period just before the Herulian attack of AD 267. Another relevant artifact, from Thessaloniki, is a marble gravestone honoring the actor Marcus Verenius, which has been assigned to the late 2nd or early 3rd century (Green 1994: 157-158 fig. 6.11). The individual portrayed wears a crown and an elaborate costume and gestures with one raised hand, as a comic mask appears at his side.



Figure 27
Athens, lead tokens for performances of *Theophoroumene*. Photo after Charitonidis et al. 1970: pl. 25,7-8.

But the most compelling evidence for the continued vitality of stage performance in this period is the records of theater festivals held in numerous locations in ancient Greece and Asia Minor and in other provinces. The financing of festivals by generous local individuals of high rank superseded the construction of buildings as a form of civic donation and patriotic benefaction (Mitchell 1990: 189-190). These festivals include, among others, the Mouseia at Thespiai, the Lysimacheia at Aphrodisias, and of special interest the Demostheneia at Oinoanda in Cilicia. The latter are known through a lengthy inscription, published by M. Wörrle and describing their occurrence from AD 221-233 (Wörrle 1988: esp. 228-237; Mitchell 1990: 123-127, with English translation of the inscription). All of these festivals continued to flourish during the first half of the 3rd century. The Demostheneia, named after a wealthy local benefactor, were a penteteric event (presented every four years), and were funded by a large endowment. The festival was supervised by a specially chosen *agonothete* who was obliged to wear a purple robe and a gold crown during the festival. Moreover, we have precise information about the prize money awarded to the winning contestants, including those ranked first, second, and third in various categories, as summarized in a chart by Wörrle (1988: 234). The winners played various types of musical instruments, and actors (*komoidoi*) performed classical

comedy and classical tragedy (*tragoidoi*), which were presented as scenes or episodes of plays or as recitations (on the schedule of prizes for actors in a contest at Aphrodisias of the late 2nd century, see Dunbabin 2016: 54). It is inconceivable that the actors did not present, at a minimum, excerpts from Menander's and Euripides' plays. Even though the prize money awarded to the victorious comedians at Oinoanda was only one-fourth of the amount offered to their counterparts in the more prestigious Lysimacheia at Aphrodisias, this activity sustained the theatrical tradition in the former city. In the view of J. Liebeschuetz, who drew upon evidence from Libanios's orations, occasional live performances of classical drama apparently persisted at Antioch, albeit in a limited (probably excerpted) form, into the 4th century, along with performances of mime (Liebeschuetz 1972: 144).

An underlying motivation in the popularity and survival of these local festivals is that they were native products and a focus of Greek cultural identity (Green 1994: 156). Moreover, the Second Sophistic, which attained great prominence among the intellectual elite in the mid- and later 2nd century AD, helped promote the general enthusiasm for classical Greek literature in the high and late empire, because of its retrospective, archaizing attitude (see esp. Bowersock 1969: 15-16, 22, 27, 44; Nervegna 2013: 199). The Sophists looked back with pride to Athens's earlier cultural prominence and glorious achievements. The cities of Athens, Ephesos, and Smyrna produced many of the most eminent Sophists, who typically came from notable, wealthy families, and who were expected to donate generous funds for the adornment of their chosen towns. The Sophists were at the height of their influence in the later 2nd and early 3rd centuries, the latter being the time when Philostratus wrote his *Lives of the Sophists* and lived primarily in Athens.

We further note that besides Greece, Asia Minor, and Syria, another province of the imperial east, Roman Egypt, also remained active in sponsoring theatrical performance, as demonstrated by E. G. Turner (Turner 1963: 120-122). He persuasively interpreted a 3rd-century AD papyrus (P.Oxy. 2458) as a guide to actors preparing to perform a play of Euripides, his *Cresphontes* (for a useful summary of other scholars' reactions to Turner's interpretation, see Dunbabin 2016: 55 n. 32). It is likely that similar "acting copies" existed for individuals performing plays of Menander, although such a text had not been found at the time of Turner's writing. There came to light a papyrus of this type by a different author of New Comedy (P.S. I. 1176), suggesting that an example by Menander himself may surface in the future (Turner 1963: 127).

One other social and cultural factor, reinforcing Menander's reputation as an author to emulate and a model of literary expression in the later empire, is the teaching of his works in the curriculum of schools, a topic examined closely by Nervegna (Nervegna 2013: esp. 201-224). Collections and anthologies of the poet's writings began to be compiled a few generations after his death, and in the Roman imperial era of the 1st century, Quintilian (Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.69) claimed that Menander's texts were of primary importance for training students in oratory. The goal was to have them learn rhetoric and public declamation, as explained by E. Fantham (1984: 305-306). Quintilian specifically recommended studying scenes of disputes in some of Menander's plays, while other dramatic passages by the poet provided insights into various social types and temperaments. Menander's plays also offered valuable lessons about ethics, and they inspired teachers to make compilations of wise maxims, called *gnomai*, culled from the texts of his plays; Nervegna provides several examples (Nervegna 2013:

204-206). Indeed, copies of *Menander's Maxims* survived into Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Besides Menander, Euripides was a favorite source of these truthful sayings, and the maxims of the two poets often overlapped, since Menander frequently borrowed ideas from his tragic counterpart. The favored themes include those dealing with wealth, virtue, and personal luck (Nervegna 2013: 206, 210). The mining of Menander's plays for maxims greatly affected the poet's literary reception in schools, and by extension also made him a source of wisdom among adults. This attitude must have influenced the renewed interest in representing Menander's plays in private homes, since their dramatic content offered an all-round education or *enkyklios paideia* (Nervegna 2013: 258). In fact, the educational role of mosaic images in private households of the imperial era, for transmitting cultural values to posterity, also applies to numerous other themes that were illustrated, as explained by Darmon among others (see Darmon 2018a: esp. 368-370).

In conclusion, I have proposed in this article that various factors collectively stimulated the Menander revival in the visual arts of the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries AD. This imagery was a means of reaffirming Greek cultural identity, and it helped sustain an essential part of a rich literary tradition inherited by citizens of the eastern empire. The Second Sophistic also influenced the development of this artistic phenomenon, indirectly. More important, however, were the continued and uninterrupted popularity of theater festivals at numerous locations in the eastern provinces, and the high value placed on the teaching of Menander's plays in local schools. The resulting artistic fashion signified heightened cultural awareness and social prestige, and this fashion was spread both by itinerant mosaicists and (very probably) by the circulation of artists' model books. All of these factors combined to promote a reawakened interest in representing pavement tableaux and mural images of literary works by one of classical antiquity's most revered poets¹².

¹² I wish to thank Kathy Evans of the Department of Art and Design at Purdue University for her kind help in preparing the illustrations of this article.

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