

# Some Aspects of Religiosity in Ostia Antica Through Mosaics

## Mozaikler Aracılığıyla Ostia Antica'da Dindarlığın Bazı Yönleri

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### Abstract

*While mythology is one of the most widespread themes in the mosaics of Ostia Antica (both floor and non-floor), some compositions have a marked importance from a religious and cultic point of view.*

*We intend to examine the mosaic representations of aspects of the Ostian cults, among which that of Mithras stands out in a particular way for its diffusion and for the amplitude of its testimonies. The mosaic undoubtedly had the purpose of immediate visual communication of its contents, also because the religion of Mithras was accepted above all by low-level believers for whom communication through images was more suitable. However, in Ostia, among the followers of the cult, there is evidence of high-ranking personages, perhaps even belonging to the imperial family.*

*Next to that of Mithras we want to highlight the cult of Sabazio, of other oriental divinities in the past traces have been found, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly, in the House of the Dioscures, in the House of the Fishes, in the Neptune's baths and in the opus sectile building of the Marine Gate (4<sup>th</sup> century AD).*

**Keywords:** Mithrei, oriental cults, Ostia, religiosity, syncretism.

### Öz

*Mitoloji, Ostia Antica'nın mozaiklerinde (hem zeminde olanlar hem de olmayanlar) en yaygın temalardan biri iken, bazı kompozisyonlar dini ve kült ile ilgili bakış açısından belirgin bir öneme sahiptir.*

*Bu çalışmada Ostia kültürünün mozaik temsillerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmakta olup; bunlar arasında Mithras kültü yayılımı ve tanıklıklarının çokluğu açısından özel bir şekilde öne çıkmaktadır. Mozaik, kuşkusuz, içeriğinin anında görsel olarak iletilmesi amacını taşıyordu, çünkü Mithras dini, her şeyden önce, görüntüler aracılığıyla iletişimin daha uygun olduğu alt kademe inananlar tarafından kabul edilmişti. Bununla birlikte, Ostia'da kültürün takipçileri arasında, yüksek rütbeli şahsiyetlerin, hatta belki de imparatorluk ailesinden kimselerin de olduğuna dair kanıtlar bulunmaktadır.*

*Mithras'ın yanında Sabazio kültü de vurgulanacak olup, geçmişteki diğer doğu tanrılarının izleri kimi zaman doğru kimi zaman yanlış biçimde de olsa Dioscures Evi'nde, Balıklar Evi'nde, Neptün Hamamları'nda ve Deniz Kapısı'nın opus sectile binasında (İS 4. yy) bulunmuştur.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mithralar, doğu kültürleri, Ostia, dindarlık, senkretizm.

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The technique of mosaic floors is widespread in the ancient Roman city of Ostia, especially in the black and white version. Colourful mosaics, on the other hand, are rarely attested until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, while in the later period they were used on the most prestigious buildings.

The simple mosaics with geometric motifs of the late republican age were soon joined (from the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD) by figurative ones, often very complex. In most cases, the images had a communicative purpose by alluding to the function of the building or to the people who frequented it. For example, the numerous representations of Neptune and his large procession of Nereids, Tritons and sea monsters in the baths are well suited to covering the large spaces available with figures, but at the same time they are closely linked to the intended use of the baths themselves (Fig. 1).

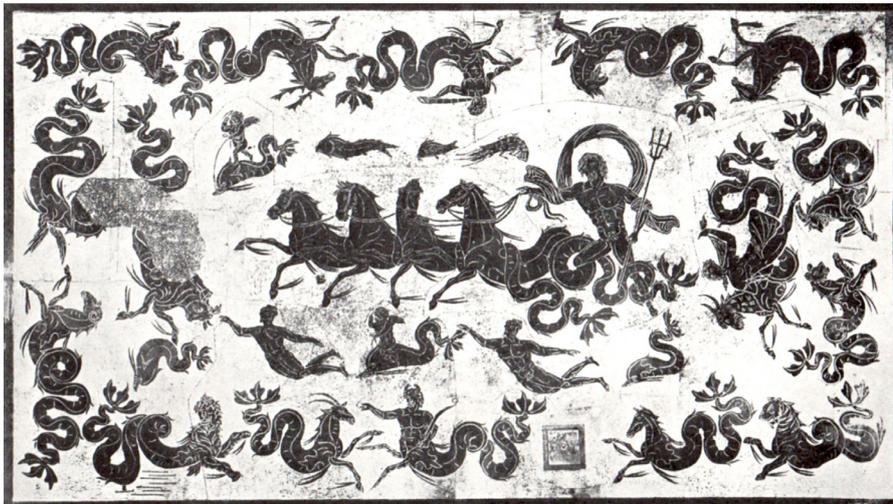


Figure 1  
Neptune Baths: Neptune with Nereids  
(Becatti 1961: pl. 124).

Religious buildings, independently of the deity worshipped inside, also make use of this artistic technique for their decoration. In some cases, there is a precise link between religious practices and the figurative motifs of the decoration; in others their purpose is purely ornamental.

Among the most common sacred sites that employed the mosaic technique there were the *mithraea*, normally small underground and secluded rooms where ceremonies in honour of the Persian god Mithras were done.

The importance of this cult in Ostia is underlined by its vitality over time (from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD onwards), its diffusion in all social classes, the number of cult buildings preserved, the possible links with other religions.

20 *mithraea* have been identified so far in Ostia (for the spread of the cult of Mithras among the inhabitants of Ostia see Merkelbach 1998: 181-183). This issue includes the disappeared structures (Mithraeum Fagan), of uncertain identification (Shrine of the Three Naves) as well as the most recent discoveries (House of stucco capitals). They are characterised by a constant scheme, consisting of rectangular rooms with a vaulted roof in imitation of the symbolic underground cave (Dunbabin 1999: 62-64), with the *podia* on the long sides and an altar at the bottom. The central passage between the *podia* could be decorated with scenes recalling the sacred symbols of worship.

Let's look at some of them:

Mithraeum of *Felicissimus*, mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Becatti 1954: 105-112; Becatti 1961: 227-230 n. 428; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 52-54). This is the best example of the link between worship and decoration (Fig. 2). It is the most

Figure 2  
Mithraeum of *Felicissimus*. Photo by Parco  
Archeologico di Ostia (P.A.O.).



significant to understand the Mithraic religion. Seven panels in the central floor allude to the seven degrees of initiation (see Hänninen 2019: 320) that the worshipper had to go through, each under the tutelage of a planetary deity. The initiation ladder is the traditional one, as reported by St Jerome: “[...] *et, ut omittam vetera, ne apud incredulos nimis fabulosa videantur ante paucos annos propinquus vester Graccus nobilitatem patriciam nomine sonans, cum praefecturam regeret urbanam, nonne specu Mithrae et omnia portentuosissima simulacra, quibus corax, cryphius, miles, leo, Perses, heliodromus, pater initiantur, subvertit, fregit, exussit et his quasi obsidibus ante praemissis impetravit baptismum Christi?*” (*Epist. CVII, 2 ad Laetam*).

An exception to the traditional order of the initiatory ladder that sees in succession Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Moon, Sun, Saturn is given by the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca in Rome, where the position of Mercury and the Moon is exchanged.

It is likely that this mithraeum belonged to a college (Battisti 2021: 311).

At the end of the path, an eighth panel, twice as wide, bears the name of the dedicator, who is unknown: *Felicissimus ex voto f(ecit)* (AE 1946, 118; Bouke van der Meer 2012: 104 n. 40).

However, the floor mosaic is not limited to these panels. In front of the entrance there is a stylised tree, perhaps a symbol of flourishing and luxuriant nature fecundated by the blood of the bull killed by the god. Next to it is a small well, symbolising the source of the primitive mithraeum and the water that had never to lack. This last element was also symbolised by the image of a two-handled crater. On the right side is a quadrangular altar with a burning fire. Fire and water are two fundamental elements of the Mithraic cult. Above the crater are two conical caps, *pilei*, with a star, typical attributes of the Dioscures, who in the astral conception of Mithraism represented the two celestial hemispheres, although one cannot exclude a syncretistic form of worship in honour of the divine twins, which will be discussed later.

Mithraeum of the Seven Gates, AD 160-170, with mosaics from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Becatti 1954: 93-99; Becatti 1961: 198-99 n. 378; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 50-51): This was built inside a warehouse without modifying the original layout, with the exception of the back wall, where a brick niche was created (Fig. 3). While the walls were decorated with frescoes on plaster, the floor was decorated with mosaics.



Figure 3  
Mithraeum of the Seven Gates. Photo by  
Roger Ulrich.

The threshold depicts an architectural motif of arches with the central one being larger. The latter is flanked by two pillars with capitals and is surmounted by a crown of merlons with an *oscillum* hanging in the centre of the archway. The smaller arches, three on each side, are divided by columns and have battlements above them. The number “7” in the arches is not accidental (according to Celsus, quoted by Origen, c. Cels., VI, 22, the symbolism of the doors is connected with the metal of which they were made), as it is also found in other mithraea in reference to the initiatory degrees and planetary spheres. The divinities are also depicted in mosaic: four within panels on the vertical walls of the podiums, two on the floor behind the masonry altar, and the last one, the sun, to be interpreted as a personification of the god Mithras, must have been painted in the niche of the back wall. The podiums ended with two small pillars decorated with laurel bushes and with the mosaic images of *Cautes* and *Cautopates*.

On the right podium one recognises Mars in a standing position with a spear in his right hand and a trophy with armour resting on his left shoulder. The god is wearing a helmet and a tunic. The second panel depicts the moon as a naked girl with a crescent on her head, holding the edges of a veil in her hands in a pose that was common in Ostia for female mythological figures. This is the typical scheme of the Anadyomene as told by Cicero (Cic.nat. III, 59) and Pliny (Plin.nat. XXXV, 87 and 91). In the small central niche is Mercury, depicted nude, with the chlamys on his left arm, the caduceus in his left hand and a bag in his right. Behind the altar in the floor is Jupiter, standing, bearded, with a mantle that envelops him and leaves his chest bare. In his right hand he holds the thunderbolt, in his left hand the sceptre. Next to him is the bust of Saturn, veiled, bearded and with a sickle protruding from his right shoulder.

The central crater indicates water, the earth is symbolised by the serpent emerging from a rock and heading towards the crater to drink the water. The air is represented by a bird, perhaps an eagle.

In this mithraeum the deities are depicted in an anthropomorphic manner and are recognisable by their attributes, in contrast to the Mithraeum of *Felicissimus* where are present only the symbols alluding to the gods.

Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres, dating from between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Becatti 1954: 123-124; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 43-44; D’Asdia 2002: 441-442): takes its name from the mosaic floor decoration consisting of seven successive semicircles alluding to the seven planetary spheres and the seven degrees of initiation (Fig. 4). At the beginning of the path there is a dagger, in memory of the one used by Mithras to kill the bull. The mosaic covering the *podia* on both sides depicts the planetary divinities; above the counters are the signs of the zodiac (left side: *Aries*, *Taurus*, *Gemini*, *Cancer*, *Leo*, *Virgo*; right side: *Pisces*, *Aquarius*, *Capricornus*, *Sagittarius*, *Scorpio*, *Libra*). From the order can be deduced that the left side coincided with the astrological north, summer and spring, and the day. The right side represented south, winter and fall, and night.

At the front of the benches are the torchbearers *Cautes* and *Cautopates*, who were associated with Sol and Luna. *Cautes* raises a small torch. In his other hand is a cock, referring to the morning. *Cautopates* is lowering a large torch, the fire of which is indicated by red *tesserae*. It is peculiar that *Cautes* is on the “south” and dark side, *Cautopates* on the “north” and light side. This can be explained by linking them to another aspect of “north” and “south”: the places where the souls of men entered and left the world.

Figure 4  
Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres. Photo by P.A.O.



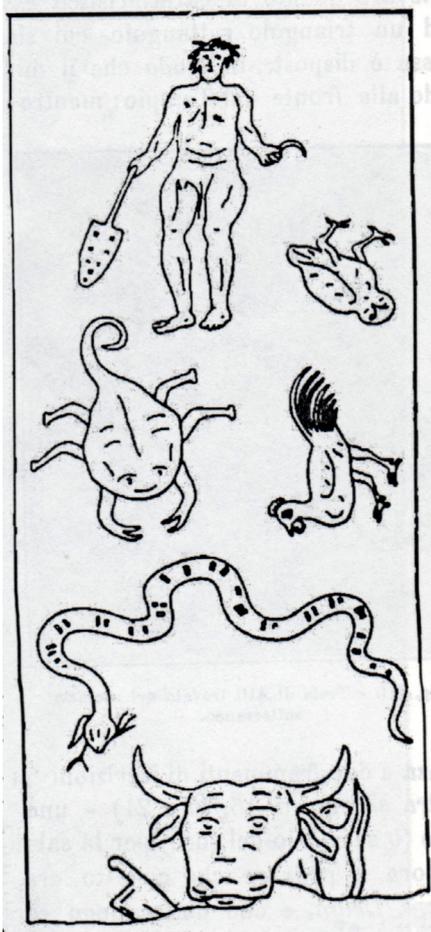


Figure 5  
Mithraeum of the Animals (draw by Paschetto 1912: 375).

These figurations formed the core of Filippo Coarelli's hypothesis according to which the spheres are inspired by the neoplatonic philosophical theories of *Apuleius*, the author of *The Golden Ass*, who would also have been the owner of the adjacent *domus* (Coarelli 1989: 27-42). This hypothesis, however, is not tenable for onomastic and dating reasons. Moreover, the mithraeum is only adjacent to the *domus* because the internal connection was made during subsequent restoration work (Van Haepelen 2021: 352).

Another ingenious hypothesis, but one that does not fully correspond to the astronomical data, is that of Roger Beck who, in the reciprocal position of the planets and the signs of the zodiac, depicted in the mosaic of the Mithraeum, believes that the spring equinox of AD 172 or 173 is recalled (Beck 1979: 515-529).

Mithraeum of the Animals, 2<sup>nd</sup> half 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (Becatti 1954: 87-92; Becatti 1961: 177-179 n. 327; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 48-49): again, the place of worship takes its name from the mosaic floor decoration (Fig. 5). The building has been related to the Magna Mater's Field a place sacred to the goddess Cybele. Moreover, there are elements in common between these two religions of oriental origin, such as the killing of the bull. On the floor, between the piers and the podia, is a black-and-white mosaic. There are six depictions: the first figure at the entrance is a *Leo* (the lion, the fourth degree of the Mithraic scale, which, being halfway up, represents the passage between the lower and higher degrees), a naked man holding ritual objects (a pruning knife and some sort of shovel). The animals depicted on the floor are those that normally appear in canonical tauroctonia (the only exception being the absence of the dog): the head of the bull, the snake, the scorpion, the raven and the cock. The bull is the cosmic animal that is killed to ensure the rebirth and salvation of the soul; the snake alludes with its coils to the passing of time and is at the same time the emblem of the earth from which everything begins; the scorpion intervenes in the sacrifice of the bull by trying to hinder the action, clutching the animal's testicles; the raven is the herald of Mithras and a grade of initiation (*corax*); the cock is the attribute of *Cautes* and announces the rising of the sun.

Mithraeum of the *Planta Pedis*, AD 176-180 (Becatti 1954: 77-85; Becatti 1961: 142 n. 281; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 47-48): the decoration of the mithraeum is almost a century later than its construction, being dated to the time of Valerian (AD 253-260). This is limited to the mosaic representation of an imprint of a shod right foot (Fig. 6). A religious significance was attributed to it: it could be



Figure 6  
Mithraeum of the *Planta Pedis*. Photo by Francesca Licordari.

the foot of the god, on which the initiates placed their own feet. Foot-imprints are also documented in the cult of Serapis. The Ostian Serapeum is close to this Mithraeum. Another connection between Mithras and Serapis is their association with *Sol* (Quack 2013: 168).

The image of the snake also appears here with the functions explained above.

Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace, AD 162 (Becatti 1954: 53-57; Becatti 1961: 167 n. 309; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 44-46): the mithraeum, located in the west part of a high-level palace (the so-called Imperial Palace), was considered as a clear testimony of the favour that Mithraism found in the highest spheres of Roman society, until its official recognition by Commodus (Fig. 7). The mosaic floor was made at the expense of a certain *Lucius Agrius Calendio* (it should be noted that the *gens Agria* is well attested in Ostia with 28 occurrences): *Soli Invict(o) Mit(hrae) d(onum) d(edit) L(ucius) Agrius Calendio*. The inscription (CIL XIV 56) is repeated twice at both side counters, so that it could be read easily from both positions. There are no images in this pavement and the *Calendio* inscription is so important that it has an exclusive role. We are unable, however, to determine the degree of initiation achieved by the worshipper.

In the vestibule of the mithraeum, a niche was found with a coloured mosaic depicting *Silvanus* (Becatti 1961: 167-168 n. 310), confirming the relationship that may have existed between Mithras and *Silvanus* (recalled by 15 entries), already highlighted by an inscription from the *Planta Pedis* Mithraeum, now preserved in the Galleria Lapidaria (Vermaseren 1956-1960: 133 n. 276).

Other religious buildings, which have also yielded sacred mosaic decoration, are similar in plan to mithraea.

Shrine of the Three Naves, Severan age (Becatti 1954: 69-75; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 46; Van Haepere 2019: 118-20): the tutelary deity of this place of worship is not known (Fig. 8). The podia suggest a mithraeum, but the mosaic in front of the aedicule at the back has generic motifs that allude to a ritual sacrifice: an altar, a knife, a pig and a krater. The altar is the sacred place where the sacrifice is made, the knife or dagger is the sacrificial instrument, while the pig is the victim; finally, the krater is intended to hold water for purification. Other hypotheses link it to a Syriac religion or to the Dionysian religion (due to the discovery of a statuette adorned with vine leaves) or make it the social headquarters of a college (Pavolini 2006: 144).

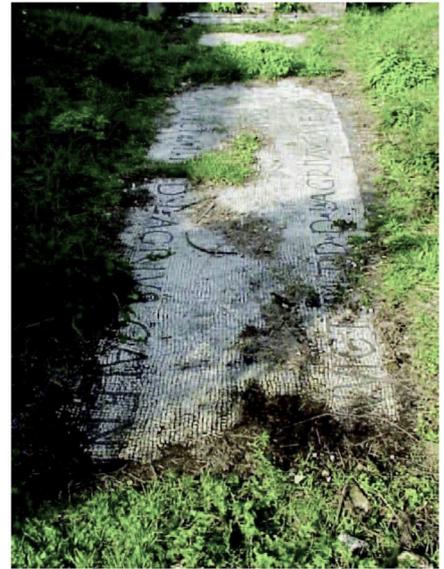


Figure 7  
Mithraeum of the Imperial Palace. Photo by Jan Theo Bakker.



Figure 8  
Shrine of the Three Naves. Photo by Jan Theo Bakker.

*Horrea of Hortensius*, 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Van Haepren 2019: 116-118): one of the best examples of syncretism between Mithras and other religions can be found in these warehouses, whose oldest phase dates back to the Julio-Claudian period (Fig. 9). On the floor of the sacellum there is a radiated serpentine disk that suggests the Sun, two black torches on the bottom (let us not forget that in the Mithraic religion they are the symbols of *Cautes* and *Cautopates*) and a dedication from which we learn that *L. Hortensius Heraclida*, commander of a ship of the Miseno military fleet, had the temple built to fulfil a vow (CIL XIV 4317) and that the priest *Iulius Victorinus* had taken care of the mosaic covering.

Figure 9  
*Horrea of Hortensius*. Photo by P.A.O.



The so-called Sabazeum, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Becatti 1954: 113-117; Becatti 1961: 232 n. 431; Floriani Squarciapino 1962: 54-55): on the west part of the floor, between the podia, is a black-and-white mosaic (Fig. 10). We have a white tile inscription with black background (reversed from the other mosaics); only in one other case does a mosaic with the same characteristics appear, in the entrance of the Fire Station. Since an inscription with a dedication to Jupiter *Sabazius* was found in the filling soil, it was long thought that this could be a Sabazeum, but the side podia lead back to the Mithraic religion (*Fructus / suis in / pendis / consum / mavit*, CIL XIV 4297). The name of the dedicator, *Fructus*, also appears in the mosaic (in Ostia, there are 13 other attestations of the surname *Fructus*, mostly from college rolls). The krater, the snake, the sun and the moon also appear in the symbolism of the cult of Jupiter *Sabazius*.

Figure 10  
I.e. *Sabazeum*. Photo by P.A.O.



This building, from a religious point of view, is much more complex because in addition to *Sol Invictus* there are other divinities such as *Mercurius* and *Caelestis*, almost an Italic version of the main African triad, especially since the African community had a significant presence in Ostia (Licordari 2019: 733-736).

The syncretistic tendency of the Mithraic cult is quite visible and the Persian deity is combined from time to time with other deities, with the Mithraeum being combined with another sanctuary.

In comparison with a cult such as Mithras, the representations concerning the traditional Roman religion have a very modest position.

Recall the scene of Mars approaching the sleeping Rhea Silvia (Becatti 1961: 36-37 n. 59, pl. CV; Pellegrino 2017: 55), one of the happiest achievements of

the Hadrian's Age (Fig. 11). The artist has succeeded in effectively translating a pictorial prototype, known from other monuments, into a black and white scene using only a few white lines that manage to create with great simplicity even perspective effects in the rendering of the shield, the cloak and the water coming out of the amphora (Licordari - Pellegrino 2022: 286-287).



Figure 11  
Rhea Silvia and Mars (Pellegrino 2017: 54).

It is not known for sure which building the mosaic came from, but it is very likely that it was from the so-called oil warehouses on the bank of the Tiber, not far from the site of the present museum, excavated in 1783 at the initiative of Diego di Noronha (Pietrangeli 1943: 2), Portugal's ambassador to Rome, and Abbot Gaetano Montanari.

The remarkable quality of the mosaic work and its dimensions (4.32 x 4.27 m) suggest that it was a very representative complex, certainly not a warehouse, which could only be located next to the solemn and scenic porticoed road that led from the landing on the left bank of the Tiber to the city forum.

The source of inspiration for the scene is Ovid (*Ov.fast.* III, 9-40), who describes Rhea Silvia in a dream state, of which she only remembers, on waking, that she was keeping vigil by the fire. The place where this happens is not just any place, but a place that induces sleep, characterised by the murmur of the waters, the shade of the willows and the chirping of the birds (Gabriele 2021: 125).

An attempt to accentuate the depth of the scene is perhaps given by the different size of the two figures: the woman, larger, in the foreground, the god, smaller, descending from above and still far away. Giovanni Becatti, in noting the height of the author's technical and stylistic qualities, compares him to the master of the Neptune mosaic, the most significant representative of the artistic environment of the Hadrian's Age (Becatti 1961: 310).

To have achieved remarkable artistic results with just a few touches with simple two-tone painting - reminiscent of the 'silhouette' style of the early imperial age - is no small feat. The style expressed in great simplicity, but also with remarkable elegance, is classical, the same style that characterises sculpture of the period, such as the Hadrian round reliefs inserted in the Arch of Constantine (Clarke 1979: 76-78).

To remain within the sphere of official religion we must turn our attention to the chapel for the imperial cult inside the Barracks of the Fire Brigade (Becatti 1961: 61-62 n. 76), the *Caesareum*. The mosaic, dating from the Severian period, partially incomplete, represents three phases of a bull sacrifice (Fig. 12). The importance of traditional deities in this period faded and the cult remained centred on the figure of the emperor, whose sacredness was accentuated.

Figure 12  
Barracks of the Vigili: Detail of the sacrifice scene (Becatti 1961: pl. 100).



Venus is the deity most present in the mosaic art of Ostia: if on the one hand she is linked to Mithras with the rank of *Nymphus*, the bridegroom, on the other hand she is loaded with symbolic meanings. According to the humanistic and philosophical tendencies of the time, it could be an allegory of serenity and well-being, which also reappears in sculptures placed in later buildings, such as those of Cupid and Psyche or Eros stringing a bow.

Venus is also present in the mosaic of the *Domus fulminata* (House of the Thunderbolt), first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Becatti 1961: 108 n. 203), seen standing and in perspective, nude with two veils hanging from her arms. The fragment of the Venus mosaic inscription (Homann-Wedeking 1942: 314 = AE 1946, 187) seems superfluous in view of the precise characterisation of the goddess (Jenssen Tveit 2007: 125 I-32), unless it is to be understood, in view of the other shreds of letters nearby, as part of a dedication (Fig. 13).

The figure of Venus, and in particular the sea-Venus, is in fact a constant in African mosaics, in which the original religious meaning is transformed into an allegory of love and serenity. The close relationship established between Ostia and the African provinces (western Mediterranean), which we already mentioned, is thus further confirmed.

Images of deities can also be found in funerary contexts, such as Venus in tomb 75 on the Isola Sacra (Calza 1940: 174 pl. 86) and Dionysus, depicted on a panther, on the floor of a tomb in Pianabella Necropolis (mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD). The latter example is one of the most successful achievements in this field. The beardless god rides the animal sacred to him in an elegant interweaving of plants (Pellegrino 2017: 55-56). The symbolism of the scene is clear, with the divinity seen like an expression of nature, which in a continuous cycle, after death, resurrects and flourishes.



Figure 13  
Venus in the mosaic of the House of the  
Thunderbolt (Becatti 1961: pl. 112).

Other divinities closely linked to the *Urbs* are the Dioscures, present since the time of the early Republican Rome. In the *domus*, which takes its name from them, they may have a reference to the activity of the owner of the villa (Fig. 14).



Figure 14  
*Domus* of the Dioscures (Pellegrino 2017:  
94).

According to the myth, the Dioscures were rewarded by Neptune with the power to control the seas and the winds and were therefore worshipped in Ostia as protectors of navigation and trade. Their cult is attested at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>

century AD by a cippus (Bloch 1953: 245 = AE 1955, 166) dedicated to Neptune himself, Castor and Pollux, as well as by a metrical inscription (CIL XIV 1), unfortunately lost, and by another cippus coming from the Serapeum (Pellegrino 1988: 228 nt. 16 = AE 1988, 213), where they are worshipped together with Jupiter Serapis; finally, their *aedes* is attested by another inscription (CIL XIV 376). On 27<sup>th</sup> January of each year the *praetor urbanus* and then (from the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) the *praefectus urbi* celebrated *ludi* for the salvation of the Roman people (Meiggs 1977: 344-345).

It has been suggested that this domus might have belonged to *Ceionius Rufius Volusianus Lampadius*, *praefectus urbi* in AD 365-366 (Meiggs 1977: 398), or to some other personage, unknown to us, involved in the management of the annona. The presence of mythological subjects, at a time when Christianity was about to become the official religion of the Empire, is a demonstration of the persistence of pagan beliefs in Ostia, especially among a part of the aristocracy still tied to the traditional cults of Roman society.

It is probably only by chance that there are no mosaics in Ostia that can be connected with the Christian religion. In fact, Christianity is locally well attested: the basilica east of Via del Sabazeo identifiable with that of Saints Peter, Paul and John the Baptist, the so-called Christian Basilica, the numerous inscriptions (just over two hundred) and historical sources (Aug.conf. IX), the presence of the *Anicii* (CIL XIV 1875) and *Symmachi* (Gasperini 1988: 242 = AE 1988, 217) families, the *Volusianus* of the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, not to mention Porto, which in the late period formed a community of its own.

The hypotheses formulated by Becatti to recognise the Christian imprint in particular monograms and abbreviations in the mosaics of non-Christian buildings, such as the House of the Fishes (Brenk 2001: 263-264), that of the Dioscures (*PE* ligament) or the Baths of Neptune are difficult to support. If the mosaic representations mentioned above are datable to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. to a time when religion was still formally “tolerated”, but in fact advancing and widespread, one cannot see the need to resort to cryptic expressions more typical of a time of persecution.

The bearded figure of the *opus sectile* in the *domus* outside the Marine Gate, often interpreted as a Christ seen as a philosopher and teacher, according to the canons of Christian iconography at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 15), can also be seen, with equally convincing arguments, as a philosopher to be framed in the context of the neoplatonic culture of the time: the master represented in a frontal pose addressing one of his disciples (Brenk 2001: 266-268; Mazzucato 2021: 582).

Figure 15  
Domus of the *opus sectile* outside Porta Marina (Pellegrino 2017: 99).



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## Statement

The authors of this article declare that it was written in accordance with the ethics of research and publication