Self-Presentation and Display of *Paideia* by Roman Imperial Villa Owners. The Case of the Cosmological Mosaic in Mérida

Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi Villa Sahiplerinin *Paideia'yı* Sergileme ve Sunum Biçimleri. Mérida'daki Kozmolojik Mozaik Örneği

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Abstract

In the Roman Imperial period, paideia and, relatedly, language were used as important tools by the social elite to prove and consolidate their status in a society characterised by social mobility. It is therefore not surprising that this phenomenon also manifested itself in decorative home furnishings, as the education acquired could be showcased during receptions and banquets to guests of similar social status. The owners of the villae and domus were able to stage themselves and their specific education in a variety of ways. A special example for this is the cosmological mosaic in Mérida, which is unique in many respects. Some of the 32 preserved personifications depicting the structure of the cosmos are characterized by a tense relationship between iconography and name inscriptions. These cases show that the cultural practice of embellished and riddled speaking, popular from the High Imperial period onwards, was applied to a visual medium. This enabled the patron to display his rhetoric abilities and high level of education to his invited guests.

Keywords: *Cosmological mosaic, Mérida, paideia, thetorical tropes, Quintilian.*

Öz

Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi'nde paideia ve buna bağlı olarak dil, toplumsal hareketlilikle karakterize edilen bir toplumda sosyal elitin statüsünü kanıtlamak ve pekiştirmek için önemli araçlar olarak kullanılmıştır. Bu olgunun, dekoratif ev eşyalarında da kendisini göstermesi bu nedenle şaşırtıcı değildir; zira edinilen eğitim, aynı sosyal statüye sahip davetlilerin katıldığı kabul ve ziyafetlerde sergilenebiliyordu. Villae ve domus sahipleri, kendilerini ve özgül eğitim birikimlerini farklı yollarla sahneleyebilmişlerdir. Bunun özel bir örneğini pek çok açıdan benzersiz olan Mérida'daki kozmolojik mozaik teşkil etmektedir. Kozmosun yapısını betimleyen 32 korunmuş kişileştirmenin bir kısmı, ikonografi ile ad yazıtları arasındaki gerilimli ilişkiyle dikkat çekmektedir. Bu durumlar, Yüksek İmparatorluk Dönemi'nden itibaren yaygınlaşan süslü ve muammalı konuşma kültürünün görsel bir ortama da aktarıldığını göstermektedir. Böylelikle mozaik sahibi, davet ettiği konuklara hitabet yetisini ve yüksek eğitim düzeyini görsel bir bağlamda teşhir edebilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kozmolojik mozaik, Mérida, paideia, retorik tropeler, Quintilianus.*

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1. Introduction

In imperial times, education was of high significance for the Roman upper ranks. Since it was not accessible to the lower population strata, it became, among other things, an exclusive indicator of elite identity and social distinction (Hahn 2010: 441). Yet, also within the elite, the desire to emphasise one's own *paideia* manifested. It was not only mere self-representation, however, but a deliberately applied instrument for gaining and securing social status. Precisely because there was a social mobility within all social ranks and therefore citizens were to some extent able to move up and down in this social hierarchy; there was a constant competition between the members of the same class. It is therefore not surprising that this need for representation and competition also shaped the domestic culture and is reflected in the furnishings. Higher education of any kind, be it philosophical, literary or rhetorical, was staged at receptions and banquets in order to showcase one's own intellectual abilities and the connected social status to the guests. Residences and villas formed the stage for this, which is why selected aspects were integrated into the furnishing that could serve as references to education and connecting factors for educational discourses. In the following, an extraordinary mosaic from Augusta Emerita will be used to illustrate how this striving for self-representation could be expressed with the help of carefully chosen (mosaic) décor. In doing so, it is important to analyse how the patron presented his specific *paideia* and how it was imparted through a pictorial medium.

2. Education and Language – Social Distinction and Elite Identity

Thanks to contemporary sources, we know the Roman school and educational system quite well (Marrou 1977: 525; Christes 2006: 21-22; Vössing 2006: 140-142). The focus was on subjects which were seen as feasible. They include above all grammar, dialectics and rhetoric, since their mastering was a fundamental requirement for a successful career in politics (Schmitz 1977: 9-20). Other disciplines, which were not useful for this purpose, as for example philosophy, astronomy and mathematics, were seen as negligible. This "specialist knowledge" could be deepened on a private basis in the area of the *otium* (Marrou 1977: 518; Borg 2004: 157).

Any education exceeding elementary school was a privilege for the upper ranks. Whereas the educational training of children from the lower ranks was already finished after they had learned reading, writing and calculating, boys and girls from wealthier families were allowed to attend the grammar and rhetoric schools. Therefore, the higher education, sometimes taught by a private teacher, was much less common (Marrou 1977: 505; Christes 2006: 18-19). The *grammaticus* essentially taught the grammatic and metric foundations of the Latin and Greek languages. It was also crucial to get to know important poets and their work. By attending grammar school, children mainly learned to recognise individual components of language and literature and to dissect them (Marrou 1977: 507-510).

The boundaries to the rhetoric education, which was the higher type of school, are fluid. As such, already practical style exercises counted as so-called preliminary exercises which were supposed to prepare the pupils for the rhetoric school. The aim of this education was the mastering of the rhetoric art (Marrou 1977: 519-525; Bormann 2006: 104-106; Vössing 2006: 139-140). Every educated citizen who had devoted himself to rhetoric knew the twelve-part main work of Quintilian. The *institutio oratoria* is a basic rhetoric and educational compendium

which approaches in length the whole field of rhetoric. This influential guide was published in the late 1ˢᵗ century AD and addressed, among others, aspects as methodology or style.

The approach to language within the social elite changed in the High Empire. With the increased usage of *ornatus* (adornment of speech), what was said was highly embellished and often expressed ambiguously. Popular linguistic rhetorical devices were forms of *improper speech* (tropes), whereby something what is meant is said without naming it unambiguously. Language was modified and adjusted almost playfully. The result was an artificial language which was hardly feasible in everyday life – but was never meant to be (Schmitz 1977: 67-90).

However, the higher education transcended a pure transfer of knowledge and should rather be understood as part of an elitist education according to social rank. The studies were supposed to impart scholarliness and to familiarise the pupils with rank-specific contents and code of conduct in order for them to meet the Roman standard of *mos maiorum*. Therefore, the higher education also had a socialising role: pupils were given the opportunity to make new contacts within an exclusive social circle and to strengthen the common identity within this circle. The identity formation of elites automatically led to further widening the distance between the educated elite and the rest of the population. Education, presented externally by manners of appearance and speech, was deliberately used as a distinguishing feature[1]. The ability to master and apply language correctly became a clear separating line between the few educated people and the many uneducated ones (Schmitz 1977: 89. 97; Kim 2010: 467). Therefore, *paideia* was highly significant for the self-dramatizing elite, since it was a means of ostentatiously showing themselves as a closed community which outclassed the "others" socially and culturally (Vössing 2006: 142-145; Bormann 2006: 109-110).

The distinction from the uneducated classes by means of language and education reflects the elitist self-image (Schmitz 1977: 127; Hahn 2010: 440-442). However, also apart from the public space, the self-presentation of the social upper class still plays an important role. As already mentioned, the urge to representation also manifested in residential furnishings of *villae* or *domus*. Elements of furniture were installed in the private context which emphasised the education of the patron and were supposed to impress the peers who came to visit – as for example busts of philosophers or mosaics with sometimes ambiguous innuendos of literary *opera magna* (Borg 2004: 157. 171-173; Hahn 2010: 444)[2].

As already known, mainly rooms used for receiving guests were suitable as installation sites for representative furnishings. Especially dining rooms were pivotal, as the discussion about educational-specific topics during the *cena* or respectively during the following banquet was an integral component of the Roman education and guest culture (Squire 2009: 171). At the same time, people had the opportunity to compete with each other more or less playfully during these debates – hardly surprising given the fact that competitive minds were formed already in school (Schmitz 1977: 108. 127-133). Thereby, the decorative

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1   It should also be noted that not all members of the upper classes could afford the same level of higher education, so that *paideia* also became a distinguishing feature within their own social structures: Hahn 2010: 439; Schmitz 1977: 97-98. 101-133.

2   See e.g. the mosaic from Alter do Chão with the depiction of a scene from the Aeneid (Dunbabin 2015: 50-56; Caetano – Mourão 2011) or the mosaic from Lullingstone/Kent, which shows Europa and Zeus, whereas the inscription alludes to both the Aeneid and the poetry of Ovid (Leader-Newby 2007: 190-193; Squire 2009: 169-171).

elements of the room function as visual incentives for the conversations occurring during the banquet (Squire 2009: 171; Muth 1998: 67-69). For this purpose, among other things, there were often personifications displayed which advert to, for example, philosophical or cosmic phenomena and thereby actively animate people to contemplate (Leader-Newby 2005: 234-235)[3].

3. The Cosmological Mosaic in Mérida as a "Magnifying Glass" of *Paideia*

The cosmological mosaic from Mérida is an example *par excellence* for how a patron could stage his rhetoric education with the help of decorative furnishing (Figs. 1-2). The floor mosaic measures 8,09 x 5,92 m and dates to the late 2nd/ early 3rd century AD (Dunbabin 1999: 149; Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1979: 34)[4]. The polychrome figurative panel is surrounded by a black and white geometric frame and displays the structure of the cosmos. The 32 preserved personifications mostly embody natural, temporal or cosmological phenomena and are distributed in the three compositional levels maritime, terrestrial and celestial. For the most part, these personifications are newly introduced and can be identified with the aid of their iconographic features, attributes, by context and by their respective name inscriptions. Since the identification of the figures on the basis of their attributes or their iconography alone is almost never possible, the name inscriptions form a pivotal factor (Borg 2002: 82; Meyer 2007: 184-202. Leader-Newby 2007: 181). It is evident, however, that in some cases picture and inscription are not completely congruent[5]. Here, both were correlated in a complex way: viewers are confronted with a combination of established iconography and at first seemingly incongruous inscriptions. Therefore, a tension between the form of representation and inscription arises.

Figure 1
Oblique view of the cosmological mosaic in Mérida (D-DAI-MAD-WIT-DMF-380, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Madrid, photo: P. Witte).

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3 On personifications thoroughly e.g. Shapiro 1986; Borg 2002; Leader-Newby 2005; López Monteagudo 1997; Meyer 2007. On personifications on the mosaics from Lusitania specifically s. Honikel forthcoming.

4 Among the most relevant publications on the Cosmological Mosaic: García Sandoval 1969; Blanco Freijeiro 1978; Alföldi 1979; Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1979; Quet 1981; Lancha 1983; Fernández-Galiano 1990; Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1993; Lancha 1996.

5 On this see also Honikel 2021; 2022.

Figure 2
A closer view of the figurative panel
(D-DAI-MAD-WIT-DMF-373, Deutsches
Archäologisches Institut Madrid, photo: P.
Witte).

The cosmological image reflects the patrons' intention to present his education to his guests with the help of the mosaic. How he wanted to showcase his familiarity with stylistic devices and rhetorical figures becomes apparent in the tension-filled relationship between picture and inscription. The different modes of how both factors on the cosmological mosaic were put into relation to each other show a tropological exchange. The practice of expressing what is meant via rhetoric tropes (without naming it unambiguously) was a popular cultural practice within the educated upper class especially from the 2nd century AD onwards – and is here manifested in a pictorial medium.

Before we can demonstrate on two examples how this artificial language has been implemented into the relationship of image and text, we need to clarify what rhetoric tropes are and how they can be transferred to a pictorial medium at all. Rhetoric tropes designate a number of linguistic stylistic devices which describe the substitution of one expression by another. Thereby, the general structure of a trope is usually the same: the actual but not named expression (what is meant) is substituted by another one (what is said). Since this substitute expression is no synonym for what is meant, the recipient is urged to extrapolate the absent expression for himself. This breach between what is meant and what is said inevitably results in a tension which can be resolved via an exact linguistic and interpretative analysis. Since the intended statement and the substituents are not congruent, a semantic added value emerges. The closer the substitute is semantically related to the actual term, the sooner the existing discrepancy can be dissolved (Plett 2001: 89-90; Krah 2006: 129-131). However, in order to transfer this literary method to a pictorial medium, we need to enhance the terminology of what is said and what is meant with a third, namely, what is shown. If these factors are applied to the cosmological mosaic, the result of a combination of what is shown (the iconography) and what is said (the inscription) is what is meant (the actual proper of a figure). Thus, the intended message only emerges from the interaction of image and inscription.

Precisely because of an initial irritation which the viewer experiences due to the charged relationship, he is motivated to deal more intensively with the individual

personifications. What is said and what is shown respectively raise associations within the recipient which he needs to arrange, evaluate and put into relation to each other. Most figures and inscriptions on the cosmological mosaic can be connected to certain mythological figures or also to actual cosmic or natural phenomena. What exactly the viewer originally associated with the pictures or the text can certainly not be reliably reconstructed and will also have been individually dependent on personal experiences (Haug 2020: 13-16). However, the preoccupation with the figurative panel surely motivates to reflect on what is perceived, what is already known and with what this can be connected.

3.1. Tranquillitas

In the left corner of the maritime level, Tranquillitas emerges from behind Oceanus (Fig. 3). Apart from rich jewellery – bracelets, a necklace and a diadem – the personification appears nude. Her lower body is concealed by the reclining Oceanus. While her left arm is outstretched, the right hand holds a strand of the open hair. Comparisons for a personification with the name Tranquillitas can be found exclusively on a small number of Roman coins. The way of representing the personification on the coins differs clearly from the unspecific appearance of the figure on our mosaic, however. On the coin reverses, Tranquillitas is displayed unfailingly dressed and standing or leaning on a pillar. Beyond that, she had a rather broad repertory of attributes, measured against the scarcity of her depictions: beside globe, sceptre, modius and ears of grain, there are also steering oar, capricorn or prora (Fig. 4)[6].
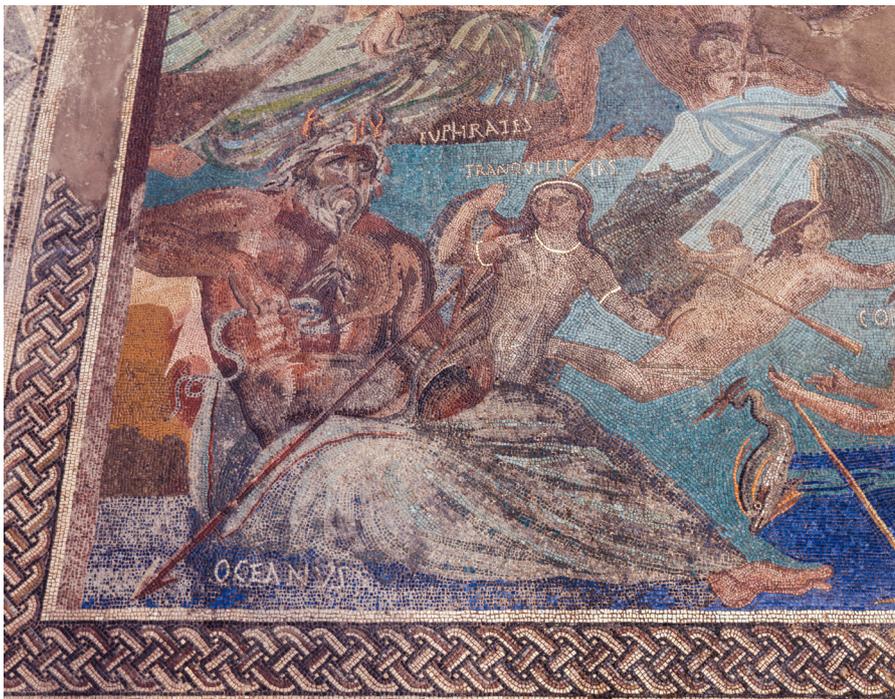

Figure 3
Detail of Oceanus and Tranquillitas in the maritime level (D-DAI-MAD-WIT-DMF-371, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Madrid, photo: P. Witte).

Figure 4
Silver Denarius with the depiction of Tranquillitas on the reverse (American Numismatic Society <http://numismatics.org/collection/1995.11.380> (31.12.2024) fig. bottom left).

Due to these iconographic differences, we can assume that the meaning of the personification on the cosmological mosaic and on the coin reverses are not congruent – although the attributes as steering oar or prora might suggest just that. Although they have a maritime reference, they should be interpreted differently in the context of imperial coinage. As globe and sceptre as well, they

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6   See e.g. Tranquillitas with steering oar and ears of grain on a Denarius from Rome (150-151 AD): RIC III Antoninus Pius 202b; Tranquillitas with Capricorn and scepter on an Antoninianus from Rome (156-157 AD): RIC IV Philip I 9.

here serve as politically charged attributes which in these cases characterise Tranquillitas as ruler of public security (Weil 2005: 82; Meyer 2007: 197). Since pictures on reverses often promote the successes of the emperor – here a time of political tranquillity – the personification fits well into the established repertory of coinage. However, in epigraphic and literary sources, the name Tranquillitas is ambiguous and was used for the personification of the public security and the one of the quiet sea (Vollkommer 1997: 50-51).

Tranquillitas on the cosmological mosaic cannot be read automatically, since the iconography is unspecific and the name inscription is ambiguous. This discrepancy, however, can be dissolved successively: the factors image and inscription need to be identified and assigned by the viewer in two separate steps (Squire 2009: 169-170). Only after that, both can be interconnected and analysed. What is shown receives a clear maritime characterisation by the placement in the maritime level. This is further emphasised by the compositional proximity to Oceanus, shells, dolphins and other sea personifications[7]. In combination with what is said (the inscription) it becomes clear that within the range of meanings of the term *tranquillitas* (= tranquillity), the maritime aspect is emphasised. Therefore, we are dealing not with the personification of political calm here, but specifically with the personification of the tranquillity of the sea. An identification of Tranquillitas would not have been possible without the interplay of iconography and inscription.

This relationship between images and text can be closer defined by the term synecdoche. This trope describes the substitution of a broader semantic term with a more narrow semantic term and vice versa, that is, the substitution of a more narrow semantic term with a semantically broader one (Quint. inst. 8.6.19-22; Plett 2001: 92-93; Krah 2006: 139-141). The general semantic field *sea* is clarified by the characterisation of the personification as a sea being. This is why the ambiguous inscription can be understood specifically as the tranquillity of the sea. At the same time, the inscription offers the decisive reading clue in order to grasp the semantically broader iconography more precisely. Therefore, iconography and inscription explain themselves reciprocally.

3.2. Occasus

In the case of Occasus, we can observe another, even more complex mode of combination of picture and text, since both the iconography and the inscription are ambiguous[8].

With its back to the viewer, the personification steers its biga over the mountains, implied by Mons, to the upper right border of the cosmological image (Fig. 5). Thereby, she forms the counterpart to the personification of Oriens which rises in his quadriga at the upper left side. Apart from a red mantle which Occasus has thrown over her left shoulder, she is nude. She holds the reigns of her two

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7   Iconographic parallels to Tranquillitas can be found, for example, on mosaics depicting the birth of Venus, who is also shown unclothed and surrounded by sea creatures, holding strands of her hair. On this see e.g., a mosaic from Timgad (3rd century AD): Dunbabin 1999: 126 fig. 129; or a Mosaic from Halicarnassus (5th century AD): Scheibelreiter-Gail 2011: 570 fig. 291. However, this theme is only increasingly found on mosaics from around the 3rd century AD onwards. The motif of holding strands of hair is also found in other erotic depictions of female figures bathing. A good iconographic analogy for the compositional combination of Oceanus and Tranquillitas, which Anja Klöckner was kind enough to point out to me, can be found in depictions of the birth of Dionysus from Zeus' thigh: see e.g. rf. volute krater from Bari, Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Taranto, I.G. 8264 (410-385 BC): Borda 1966: 34 fig. 25.

8   This segment is a slightly shortened version of Honikel 2022: 494-498. On Occasus see also Neira Jiménez 1992: 942.

Figure 5
Detail of Occasus in the celestial level
(D-DAI-MAD-WIT-R-19-75-01, Deutsches
Archäologisches Institut Madrid, photo: P.
Witte).

white horses with both hands and looks back over her left shoulder. Around her
head with pinned-up hairdo, there is a crescent. No other pictorial references are
known for a personification by the name of Occasus. Parallels to representations
of the moon goddess Luna/Selene are certainly evident; this is especially true for
the crescent and the steering of the biga[9].

Proceeding only from the level of attributes of what is shown, an identification
as the moon goddess immediately suggests itself. However, some of the pictorial
elements are unfamiliar for her[10]. At first, we should mention the obvious
nakedness, since as a rule, the goddess appears mostly dressed. An exception are
a few mural paintings and mosaics on which, when meeting her lover Endymion,
she has been portrayed more revealing, albeit not completely undressed[11]. The
extreme posterior view of the figure on the mosaic is also unusual and is hardly

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9   See e.g. the Luna-Tondo from the Arch of Constantine in Rome (constantinian): Roell 2007: 66-70. See
    also depictions of Selene on rf. pottery: Erhardt 2004: 14-27; Rf. Kylix from Vulci, Antikensammlung
    Berlin, F 2293 (490-485 BC): Cohen 2006: 177-179. On the iconography of the moon goddess on
    Roman mosaics: San Nicolás Pedraz 2014: 133-144.

10 Occasus shares the greatest iconographic similarity with the depiction of Luna on the
    "Planetengöttermosaik" in Orbe (200-230 AD). The draping of the garment, the rear view and the
    ascending chariot show clear correspondences in both mosaics. However, the mosaic from Orbe, in
    which different iconographic features of the moon goddess (rear view, exposure, ascension) were
    combined, is also singular in many aspects. On this see also San Nicolás Pedraz 2014: 137; Quet 1981:
    126-129. On the so-called Planetengöttermosaik from Orbe see Koller 1973: 61-75; Gonzenbach
    1974; 1975: 121-128.

11 On this see e.g. the mosaic from Thysdrus, El Djem Museum, F 18 (160-233 AD): Muth 1998: 394-
    395; Mosaic from Uthina, Musée National du Bardo Tunis, A 128 (late 2nd/early 3rd century AD):
    Muth 1998: 398.

present in the depictions of the moon goddess[12]. This rather reminds of the iconography of nereids riding on sea creatures, turning their naked back to the viewer[13]. What is least compatible with the usual representation of the moon goddess is the rising biga of Occasus. Although there are some iconographic parallels, they belong to fixed narrative sequences which are always about the parting from Endymion – which is clearly not the case here[14].

This is also true for all mentioned pictorial elements which are unusual for Luna. In the parallels mentioned, the moon goddess is always embedded into a different narrative setting, be it as a lover or entangled in the gigantomachy, but she is clearly not the counterpart to the steerer of the sun carriage, as she is here (see Fig. 2). In the context of the rising cart of Sol, the moon goddess usually appears dressed, and her biga is shown in a declining movement. Thereby, she does not turn her back to the viewer. The conventional combination of the two deities stands for the natural cycle of both celestial bodies – when the sun rises, the moon sets.

On the cosmological mosaic, different iconographic components are coalesced in the personification of Occasus, referring to different narrative settings of the moon goddess. With the attributes moon crescent and biga, the connection to the moon goddess is established, whereby, at the same time, the elements mentioned above suggest a distinction from this same figure. Occasus and Luna cannot be equated, even if the superordinated reference frame moon becomes apparent. But which specific manifestation of the moon is meant here? The compositional correlation to Oriens, the personification of the sunrise, emphasises Occasus' role as his counterpart. Since the biga of Occasus also rises, we could understand the figure as the personified moonrise.

At first glance, however, this contradicts the name Occasus, which, in a general sense, can be translated as *falling*, *going down*. In Roman cosmology, the term describes the setting of the sun or also the setting of the stars (Manil. I, 174-176. 192-193. 827). Only figuratively, the term can also stand for the moonrise that occurs at sunset (Neira Jiménez 1992: 942). Therefore, the inscription is just as ambiguous as the image and allows more than one interpretation. This polyvalency results in a tension in the relationship of iconography and text; in order to solve it, the viewer first needs to overcome the occurring irritation and reflect on all references of meaning in order to understand what is meant.

In the case of Occasus, there are distinct iconographic congruences to a mythological figure from a close semantic field. Hereby, she does not correspond to a consistent iconography of a deity but was composed of several pictorial elements. In contrast to the figure of Tranquillitas mentioned above, picture *and* name are ambiguous, which is why the trope of metonymy might possibly be more suitable to define the relationship of pictures and text in this case.

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12 On this see e.g. the frieze from the Pergamon Altar, showing the depiction of Selene, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (180-150 BC): Heilmeyer 1997: 92; Endymion sarcophagus from Palestrina, Museo Archeologico Nazionale Palestrina (140-150 AD): Agnoli 2002: 263-272. In both parallels, however, the goddess is fully clothed, which is in complete contrast to the figure of Occasus on the mosaic.

13 Possibly this association was intended to establish a connection to the maritime level. For iconographic parallels to this, see e.g. Nereid mosaic from Dougga, Bardo Museum Tunis (3rd century AD): Abed-Ben Khader 2003: 535 cat. 321; Mosaic from the Villa Romana del Casale in Sicily (306-361 AD): Pappalardo – Ciardiello 2018: 158-160.

14 Parallels to the ascending moon chariot: Endymion sarcophagus from Ostia, Metropolitan Musem of Art New York, 47.100.4 (c. 210 AD): Sichtermann 1992: 134-138; Endymion sarcophagus from Palestrina, Museo Archeologico Nazionale Palestrina (140-150 AD). A unique exception is the depiction of Helios and Selene on an early 5th century diptych in which both ascend simultaneously: Diptych from Egypt (?), Bibliothèque Municipale Sens, Ms. 46 (c. 400 AD): Brilliant 1979: 158.

Metonymy describes the substitution of a term with another term which is semantically connected with the actual term. So, as what is meant and what is said are connected by a content-related point of contact, they can be deciphered via this mutual point of intersection. In contrast to the synecdoche, the substituting term is not semantically broader or more narrow but generally shares a mutual content-related reference frame with the substituted term (Quint. inst. 8.6.23-28; Plett 2001: 98-99; Krah 2006: 137-140). As we can see, both tropes show great similarities and can sometimes not easily be separated from each other. Both metonymy and synecdoche are built on a mutual semantic feature. What shall be put on record are the multifaceted references between the personification and the semantic field moon. The attributes hint to the moon goddess, whereas the inscription points to a specific manifestation of the celestial body. Only by the depiction of the rising biga it becomes apparent that here it means not the basic meaning of the *setting* of the moon, but the nuance of meaning the *rising* of the moon.

Since the somatic gender of personifications generally corresponds to the grammatical gender (Shapiro 1986: 5; Borg 2002: 82; Meyer 2007: 183), there is another trigger for irritation here, as the grammatical gender of Occasus does not correspond to the somatic gender of the figure. The personification carries a male name, while it is designated as female. It will have demanded a high level of abstraction by the viewer to dissolve this irritation because here is a breach with habitual pictorial structures. Then again, the breach between grammatical and somatic gender needs to be accepted, since only by a visual hint to the moon goddess the specific semantics of the personification can be displayed.

It should also be pointed out that in the case of Occasus, a further form of tension arises from the combination with another personification on the mosaic. The personification Oriens, portrayed as Sol, and Occasus, insinuating aspects of Luna, form a fixed pair both based on iconography and inscriptions. This affiliation is emphasised also compositionally, since both of them ride their horse carriages in the same direction within the celestial level. The name inscriptions offer a fixed conceptual pair, since Oriens and Occasus refer to related abstracta. Literally, they name the opposing but closely connected expressions rise/east and setting/west. Only figuratively – namely after the identification of the personifications on the mosaic – the implicit meanings sunrise and moonrise can be deducted. In contrast, Sol and Luna are rooted in the heads of the viewers as an established iconographic pair (Erhardt 2004: 7–27). The pictorial tradition of rising sun quadriga and setting moon biga is broken by the depiction of Oriens and Occasus with their simultaneously upward-striving chariots. Thereby, a paradox is created: sun and moon cannot rise at the same time. Thus, on the cosmological mosaic, the cycle of sun and moon, often thematised in the ancient pictorial world, is depicted in a constellation which is astronomically impossible. The cyclic movement of the celestial bodies which normally results from the images of Sol and Luna seems to be exactly what is not meant in the case of Oriens and Occasus (Honikel 2022: 504).

The personification Occasus is not easy to interpret for the viewer. The relationship between image and text is characterised by tensions and ambiguities which result in irritation. The first thing to mention is what is shown, which on one hand clearly refers to the moon goddess by means of the attributes. On the other hand, by mixing different iconographic elements from different contexts, an image is created that does not resemble Luna. As a result, the manner of representation of the personification Occasus is to a certain extent fragmented

within itself. What is said, the inscription, is characterized by a polyvalency which can only be solved with the aid of the image. However, the combination of these two factors generates another tension: the grammatical and somatic gender do not correspond in the case of Occasus – a phenomenon which was highly unusual for the ancient viewer. Despite these breaches, what is meant can be deciphered by the sophisticated reference between text and image.

4. Conclusion

The cosmological mosaic in Mérida conveys a lot about its patron. It is clear from the high-quality elaboration and the complex subject matter of the decorative panel that he came from the upper social classes and must have enjoyed a higher education – since it implies that he must have dealt with the structure of the cosmos during the *otium*. After close analysis of the individual personifications and the respective name inscriptions on the mosaic, it became evident that he also must have received an education in rhetoric. The artificial language or respectively the improper speech celebrated by the elite has been transferred to this medium. The preference for highly complex elaboration and mystification of language in Imperial times is reflected by the relationship of text and images. Through the tropological exchange, respectively different but nonetheless semantically connected associations emerge in the viewer which need to be connected with each other in order to get to the intended message. Due to the ambiguous references, new contexts of meaning arise.

The analysis of the polyvalent mythological figures was more complex because of the charged relationship between iconography and text. Here, it was necessary to deal with both factors longer, to recognise all associations and to put them together. This process alone, like the study of the complete image, offers many reference points for an educated conversation. This of course requires that the invited guests who were received in the Casa del Mitreo had a similar educational background as the patron himself. This mosaic was created as a representative element of furnishing from a member of an exclusive society for members of that very society. It was designed to stage the own intellectual abilities by transferring the contemporarily popular play with ambiguities in language onto a pictorial medium.

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