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Address / Adres:
Bursa Uludağ University / Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi
Faculty of Art and Sciences / Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi
Department of Archaeology / Arkeoloji Bölümü
16059 - Nilüfer / BURSA – TÜRKİYE

Tel & Fax: + 90 224 2941892
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CONTENTS

JOURNAL OF MOSAIC RESEARCH

Archaeology / Arkeoloji

1 Nissma BOUZOUBAA - Abdelilah DEKAYIR

Bases de Données et représentation spatiale des mosaïques romaines du Maroc

Fas Mozaiklerinin Mekânsal Temsilleri ve Veritabanları

17 Nadezhda A. DUBOVA - Natalia A. KOVALEVA - Galina E. VERESOTSKAYA - Anatolij M. YUMINOV

Mosaics from the Bronze Age Necropolis in Gonur Depe, Turkmenistan

Türkmenistan, Gonur Depe, Tunç Çağı Nekropol Mozaikleri

37 Maria de Jesus DURAN KREMER

Some Considerations on the Interplay Composition - Surface

Etkileşim Kompozisyonu Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler - Yüzey

47 Amir GORZALCZANY - Baruch ROSEN

The Marine Scene in the Lod Mosaics

Lod Mozaikleri Üzerindeki Deniz Sahneleri

63 Eva GROSSMANN

Iconography of Marine Vessels Depicted in Mosaics and Its Importance to Marine Archaeology

Mozaikler Üzerinde Betimlenen Deniz Taşıtlarının İkonografisi ve Deniz Arkeolojisi Açısından Önemi

75 Jamel HAJJI

Le Patrimoine Mosaïstique En Tunisie : Un État De Lieu

Tunus Mozaik Mirası : Genel Bir Tanı

107 Hakan HİSARLIGİL - Beyhan BOLAK HİSARLIGİL

The Third Dimension of the Magdouh Mosaic in Antioch

Antakya Magdouh Mozaiği'nin Üçüncü Boyutu

119 Cetty MUSCOLINO

The Gold in the Mosaics of Ravenna

Ravenna Mozaiklerinde Altın

133 Miguel PESSOA - Ana Luísa Ravara MENDES - Elsa SIMÕES -Sónia VICENTE

Roman Villa of Rabaçal, Penela, Portugal. A Mediterranean Production Centre and Palatial Home with Mosaic Floors from the Late Antiquity in the Territory of the Ciuitas of Conimbriga and the Lands of Sicó

Rabaçal Roma Villası, Penela, Portekiz. Conimbriga Kentleri ve Sicó Toprakları Bölgesinde Geç Antik Dönemden Bir Akdeniz Üretim Merkezi ve Mozaik Tabanlı Saray Evi

149 Michael TEICHMANN

Republikanische und kaiserzeitliche Mosaike im südlichen, küstennahen Latium. Ein quantitativer Analyseansatz

Latium'un Güney Kıyılarındaki Cumhuriyet ve İmparatorluk Dönemi Mozaikleri. Nicel Bir Analiz

161 Licínia WRENCH - Marcelo MENDES PINTO - Fátima ABRAÇOS

Contribution to the Corpus of the Roman Mosaics of Conuentus Bracaraugustanus: Study of the Geometric Mosaic of the Roman Villa of Sendim, Felgueiras, Porto, Portugal

Conuentus Bracaraugustanus Roma Mozaikleri Korpusuna Katkı: Felgueiras, Porto, Portekiz'deki Sendim Roma Villası'nın Geometrik Mozaiğinin İncelenmesi

Modern Mosaic Studies / Modern Mozaik Çalışmaları

179 Mustafa ŞAHİN

I. Uluslararası Apollonia Mozaik Çalıştayı, 26 Ağustos - 1 Eylül 2019 - Gölyazı / Nilüfer / Bursa

I. International Apollonia Mosaic Workshop, 26 August - 1 September 2019 - Gölyazı / Nilüfer / Bursa

Book Review / Kitap İncelemesi

193 Maja KRAMER

Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos del Conventus Astigitanus,

Sebastián Vargas Vázquez.

199 Guidelines for Authors / Yazarlar İçin Yazım Kuralları

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JMR 12, 2019 47-62

The Marine Scene in the Lod Mosaics

Lod Mozaikleri Üzerindeki Deniz Sahneleri

Amir GORZALCZANY [*] - Baruch ROSEN[**]

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Abstract

The Lod mosaic, discovered in the city bearing that name in Israel, was laid in a luxurious villa urbana in the late 3rd or early 4th century AD. It contains inter alia a nautical scene presented as a floor carpet in the form of a pond. The scene includes sea life and two ships. One is sailing freely while the other, facing the opposite direction, is becalmed and perhaps in distress. The scene, in that place and time, symbolized the penetration into this country of the sea-oriented Greco-Roman culture. The pond containing the sea life and the vessels conveyed the idea of the sea, full of life, as a representation of the world organized by its creator. The scene details of the sea symbolize the truism "big fish eat little fish," which also appears in contemporary literature. The vessels symbolize life as a sea voyage, also reflected in contemporary sources. The two ships affected contrarily by the same wind suggest the metaphor that a benefit divinely granted to one may be undesirable to another, and that it is impossible to appease everyone all the time. Such ships could also present additional ship associated symbolic concepts. To the modern observer the pond and its contents look as if they were purposefully and successfully designed to fit most cultural backgrounds of contemporary viewers, be they Jews, Christians, Samaritans or pagans.

Keywords: *Mosaic, marine motifs, Roman-Byzantine, ships, sea monsters.*

Öz

İsrail'de Lod kentinde bulunan ve kentin adını taşıyan Lod Mozaikleri MS 3. yüzyıl sonlarında ya da MS 4. yüzyıl başlarında lüks bir şehir villasına (villa urbana) döşenmişlerdir. Diğerlerinin yanısıra göl şeklinde işlenen döşemede deniz betimi yer almaktadır. Sahnede deniz yaşamı ve iki gemi betimlenmiştir. Gemilerden biri serbestçe seyrederken, diğeri ters yöne bakar şekilde hareketsiz ve belki de tehlike altındaymış gibidir. Bir bütün olarak bu sahne, o yer ve zamanda, deniz odaklı Greko-Romen kültürünün ülkeye girişini sembolize etmektedir. Mozaik sanatçısı deniz yaşamını ve gemileri içeren göl ile birlikte, hayat dolu bir şekilde deniz fikrini, biçimlendirilen yeni dünyanın bir temsili olarak aktarmaktadır. Denizin sahne detayları, çağdaş literatürde ortaya çıkan "büyük balık küçük balığı yer" şeklindeki gerçekçiliği sembolize etmektedir. Gemiler, çağdaş kaynaklara da yansıdığı gibi hayatı bir deniz yolculuğu olarak simgelemektedir. Aynı rüzgardan aksine etkilenen iki gemi, birine ilahi olarak verilen bir faydanın bir başkası tarafından arzu edilmeyebileceğini ve herkesi her zaman memnun etmenin imkansız olduğu metaforunu yansıtmaktadır. Bu gemiler ayrıca gemiyle ilişkili sembolik kavramları da gösterebilir. Deniz ve içerikleri, modern gözlemciye, Yahudilerin, Hıristiyanların, Samiriyelilerin veya paganlar gibi çağdaşı izleyicilerinin çoğunun kültürel geçmişine uyacak şekilde amaçlı ve başarılı bir şekilde tasarlanmış gibi görünüyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Mozaik, denizle ilgili mıotifler, Roma-Bizans, gemiler, deniz yaratıkları.*

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[*] Amir Gorzalczany, Scientific Processing Branch, Publications Department, Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), 12 Lavanda St. Tel Aviv, Israel. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6910-6776. E-mail: amir@israntique.org.il

[**] Baruch Rosen, Independent Researcher, Tel Aviv, Israel. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2350-1441. E-mail: rosenbar@netvision.net.il

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), especially to Jon Seligman (head of the IAA Excavations, Survey and Research Department), Ram Shoeff (graphics) and Nikki Davidov (photography). All the pictures are by courtesy of the IAA. The mosaics, dated to the late 3rd–early 4th centuries AD, were discovered in the city of Lod, (Lydda) Israel (and see Schwartz 1991; 2015; Oppenheimer 1998), and excavated during several seasons between 1996 and 2018, first by Miriam Avissar and later by one of the authors (A.G.) on behalf of the IAA.

Introduction

The Lod mosaic (Avissar 1996; 1999; 2001; Haddad - Avissar 2003; Friedman 2004; Gorzalczany 2015; 2018; Gorzalczany et al. 2016) was discovered and exposed during salvage excavations in the city bearing that name in central Israel, about 30 km. east of the city of Tel Aviv. Its technical execution, the ideological themes conveyed and the symbolic intellectual world that it depicts are only partly understood by the casual modern viewer. This exceptional late 3rd- or early 4th-century AD example of the mosaic art of the southern Levant during the Late Roman-Byzantine period, was reviewed in a 2015 book summarizing the information about it and containing an extensive bibliography (Bowersock et al. 2015; Talgam 2015a; 2015b). This mosaic includes, *inter alia*, a unique nautical scene presented as a floor carpet (Fig. 1). That scene is the subject of this article.

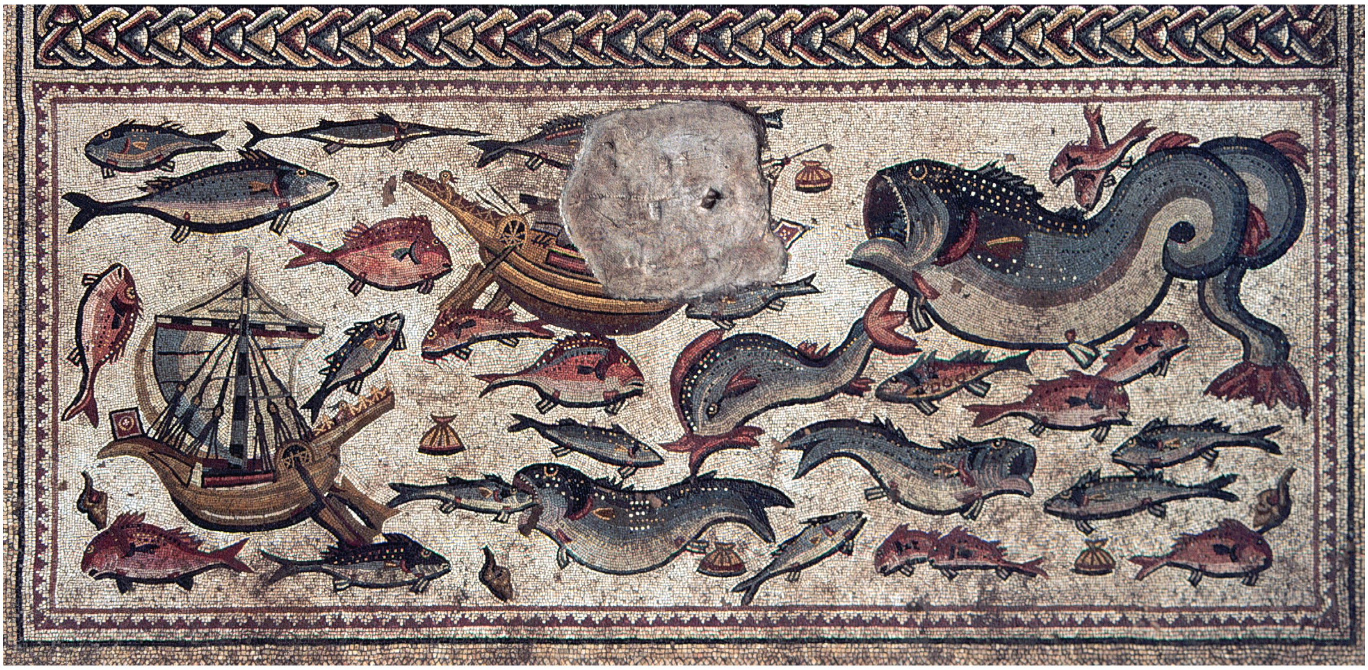

Figure 1
The marine scene depicted on the mosaic floor at Lod (Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

The Villa of the Late Roman Period at Lod

A wealthy villa consisting of several wings was uncovered: two wings were roughly aligned north south and a third was situated east of them (Gorzalczany 2015; 2018; Gorzalczany et al. 2016). The longitudinal axis connecting the northern and southern wings was not straight. It had several minor angles in it, suggesting that the wings were not constructed simultaneously. The southern one was later addition. However, it seems that the building was in use for a long time. When the villa reached its maximum size all the wings were in use. The northern wing included a luxurious *triclinium* paved by a magnificent mosaic found in an excellent state of preservation, featuring geometrical patterns, fish, birds and real animals as well as mythological creatures. One of the carpets depicts a rich marine scene discussed below. South of the room, a vestibule was discovered, which was paved by white mosaics within black rectangular frames, not well preserved. The vestibule led to the eastern wing which could have been reached by descending stairs that did not survive. South of the vestibule, a peristyle courtyard was exposed. At its center was a mosaic divided into rectangular frames and in each frame, medallions arranged in three columns and three rows decorated with images of animals, hunting scenes, fish and animals fighting each other. The eastern wing was only partially excavated, because part of it was below modern buildings, thus outside the boundaries of the excavation. It contained at least two rooms, which were paved with fine quality mosaics. One of the rooms features a rectangular *emblema*, made of small tesserae of excellent quality. The *emblema* contains a circular central medallion surrounded by several red, black and white concentric circles. This room was identified as a second, smaller triclinium, due to a rectangular feature marked by a strip of three rows of tesserae arranged differently than the ones surrounding it. The rectangle may represent the place where a *klinē*, a couch or recliner for guests at a banquet was located.

The rooms were also used in the Byzantine period after some of the floors were raised. Numerous levels of repairs and occurrences of raised floors in the building and the adjacent street level were recognized, and it is apparent that the villa was in use as early as the Roman period and remained inhabited, despite conspicuous structural changes for a long time, up to the Byzantine and Umayyad periods. The marine scene has been discussed several times (Haddad - Avissar 2003; Friedman 2004; see endnotes in Talgam 2015a: 103–107; 2015b: 109). The following article will cite and discuss additional sources and ideas bearing on the background of this nautical panorama and deemed relevant to understanding its messages.

On the Content of Nautical Scenes in Mosaics

Listing and discussing the whole corpus of nautical scenes in the mosaics left from classic cultures is beyond the capacity of any single article. Previous researchers who have discussed selected parts of that huge body of work have already commented briefly on the place of nautical scenes in the corpus of Roman mosaics e.g., in North Africa, Syria and Italy (Talgam 2015a: *passim*). Nautical scenes in such mosaics, as is the case in many other scenes, often depicted literary-mythological events and concepts.

It would be impossible, within the framework of this research, to discuss in depth the totality of mosaics with Pagan, Jewish and Christian maritime motifs in the southern Levant. That little investigated phenomenon can be exemplified by the recently exposed splendid mosaic of Hoquq, attributed to a 5th century CE synagogue (Magness et al. 2018; 2019; Britt - Boustan 2019). This mosaic features marine scenes previously considered atypical for a synagogue. Among these non-kosher sea creatures and scenes from the Homeric world. Similar scenes appear in the synagogue of Khirbet Wadi Hamam mosaic, located only 8 km south of the first (Leibner - Miller 2010: esp. 258–259; Leibner - Arubas 2015: esp 37; Miller - Leibner 2018: 166–167 figs. 4.32–34). We should also mention the non-Jewish motives appearing in the earlier marine mosaic of the Roman villa of ‘Ein Ya‘el, Jerusalem (Edelstein 1993: 117; Roussin 1995).

These and the Lod mosaic, the subject of this article, represent the worldviews of their creators as well as those of the intended contemporary viewers of the finished works. Superficially, such nautical mosaics depicted scenes from everyday life and conveyed supposedly well-known events from the repertoire of local and universal mythologies. But these mosaics also transmitted a subtext that required deep cultural awareness to understand.

The figurative elements were meant, first, to attract the attention and the interest of all viewers. But a deeper understanding of the scenes called for more extensive contemplation of their details. Only thus could the ancients achieve further comprehension of the deeper, subsurface messages in the panorama. At least few contemporary observers might have been expected to try to discover such less obvious symbolic content. Indeed, to encourage such an approach, mosaics were often placed in an architectural setting that facilitated, even encouraged, lengthy intellectual contemplations and discussions. Customarily, mosaics were set in sacred sanctuaries where explanatory rites and sermons helped expose their less explicit meanings (several such explanatory sermons are cited below). Private halls, where symposiums and gatherings would have occurred, also furnished such an environment. That seems to have been the situation in the case of the Lod mosaic.

Modern observers who wish to look for hidden messages in such mosaics are detached by the distance in time and culture from the society that created them and must bridge a conceptual chasm. This is true for every item from antiquity; however, it is especially valid for the transitional period discussed here (Brown 1971: *passim*). Also, this article reflects a time when Classical Antiquity is approaching its end and Christianity, an outgrowth of Judaism, is still incorporating elements of its dialogue with Paganism. Therefore, also a better understanding of the mosaic discussed here can be achieved by referring, directly or through various intermediaries, to available sources of information bearing on the cultural lexicon of Greek-Roman antiquity. To this must be added the repertoire of Jewish-Christian literary and figurative sources, as well as elements from Levantine Paganism.

The Sea in the Lod Mosaic, a Hellenistic/Roman Point of View

The notable fact that this elaborate mosaic, explicitly associated with the sea, is located in Lod, a city not on the seacoast, deserves attention. Lod is situated inland in a country less associated with the sea than other regions of the Greco-Roman world, bearing marine mosaics, such as the coastal lands of Roman Africa, Magna Graecia, Greece, coastal Anatolia, Phoenicia and the Mediterranean islands. Relative to the contemporary Roman Imperial and Middle Roman period, when all the Mediterranean world is integrated including many large harbor cities and a well-developed road system linking the coastal cities with the inland, Palestine, according to contemporary rabbinic sources still in many aspects bears inland idiosyncrasy. Perhaps reflected by Josephus, the Jewish historian (37–c. 100 AD), who defined his people thus: *"As for ourselves therefore, we neither inhabit a maritime country; nor do we delight in merchandise, nor in such a mixture with other men as arise from it. But the cities we dwell in are remote from the sea: and having a fruitful country for our habitation, we take pains in cultivating only"* (Ios. c. Ap. I, 12). That saying might have been acceptable for the period preceding the Hasmoneans dynasty, but its traces may be still present in the period of the mosaic.

As will be exemplified below, the mosaic presents nautical themes reflecting the worldview of sea-oriented societies.

Written sources and archaeological materials are the means by which the 21st-century observer accesses that world view. In this article, the discussion of the cultural backgrounds of the sea scene begins with Homer. To continue this line of thought, Homer is followed by Plato-Socrates and Xenophon (5th-4th centuries BC) and later by Aristotle. Aristotle is followed by Jewish and Christian scholars. Here we also included Lucian of Samosata (2nd century AD), an Aramaic-speaking intellectual, who later became a noted Greek author. Lucian and the Jewish scholars/sages mentioned below belonged, culturally and historically, to non-Hellenic landlubber societies, as defined by Josephus above. Yet all these intellectuals, living in a period spanning more than a millennium, used allusions and comparisons, based on marine elements, to comment on the human situation. The processes of integrating authors who came from "barbarian" landlocked cultures with the sea-oriented Greco-Roman culture must have included a deepening acquaintance with the sea.

The roots of the eminent role of the sea in Greco-Roman culture are to be found in traditional tales and myths (e.g. Finley 1962: 58, 74; Malkin 1998: 1-3, 62–74 and *passim*). One of the oldest appears in a tale told twice in Homer's *Odyssey* (Hom.Od. 11: 125; 23: 270–280). Odysseus is trying to appease Poseidon, the sea god and the father of Polyphemus, the man-eating giant Cyclops blinded by Odysseus, so that Poseidon will forgive Odysseus who will then be allowed to sail home peacefully. To do so, Ulysses (Odysseus) descends to Hades and is instructed there, by the soul of Tiresias the seer, to take an oar from his ship and to walk far inland. He should stop on finding a "land that knows nothing of the sea." There, the oar would be mistaken for a winnowing fan. At that point, Odysseus should plant the oar in the local soil and offer a sacrifice to Poseidon, thus symbolically dedicating that landlocked site to the sea god. That deed will enable him to sail home. That episode was an early literary expression of the key role of recognition of the sea and nautical matters as separating Greeks from barbarians. At the same time, it was a comment on the missionary tendencies of Greek culture. The Lod mosaic can exemplify a place in which such a Homeric oar was planted. Later, Plato, quoting Socrates, defined the maritime nature of his culture: *"I believe that the earth is very large and that we who dwell between the Pillars of Heracles and the river Phasis live in a small part of it about the sea, like ants or frogs about a pond…"* (Plat.Phaid. 109a–b). The river Phasis has been identified with the Rioni River on the Black Sea coast of Georgia. This article suggests that the nautical scene in the Lod mosaic presents a conscious or not-so-conscious artistic reproduction of the Socratic pond. In the times of Plato/Socrates, the exuberant shout *"the sea! the sea!"* of Xenophon-led Greek mercenaries, when seeing the sea, is an additional example of the Greek-Sea relationships (Xenophon.an. IV, VII. 24). While the Romans started as a nation of landlubbers, that 'pond' later became, ideologically, the heart of the Roman Empire, "Mare Nostrum". The pivotal role of the Mediterranean in Greco-Roman culture continued later with the rise of Christianity and the splitting of the empire. Yet, when acquiring that culture, superficially or in depth, some Eastern peoples, like the Jews or the Aramaic Christians, kept the essences of their own old cultures. The mosaic's location at Lod, the pond it depicts, its content and the literary background of its scenes may serve as an example of the dialectic, mixed culture at Lod specifically, and in the eastern part of the empire in general, during the 3rd–4th centuries, the period when the mosaic was laid (Brown 1971: 7–17 and *passim*; Ovadiah - Mucznik 1998; Talgam 2015a *passim*).

These cultures did not evolve in a vacuum. Since prehistoric times, the Mediterranean Sea has been a melting pot of races and cultures, this process has been investigated from numerous aspects and points of view (e.g. Horden - Purcell 2000: esp. 26–49; Broodbank 2013: 593–610). The point of view of such researchers varied and included history, anthropology, ecology, commerce, agriculture, physical environment and more. The trends of economic and social developments along history were shaped by geography and environment (Braudel 1972). Our knowledge about the crystallization of Mediterranean societies was enriched by the discovery and study of profuse documentation and primary sources e.g. the Cairo Geniza (Goitein 1999).

The Lod Nautical Scene Conveyed Messages Suitable to Various Observers

In view of the above it is suggested that the nautical scene as a whole – fish, sea life and ships – depicted in the Lod mosaic reflected the might of the sea, its bounty and wonders. At a deeper level, the mosaic represents a model of the sea as a concept (Fig. 1). To one versed in the Classics, it is the pond of Plato/Socrates a symbol of the Mediterranean Sea during the Hellenistic-Roman world (Horden - Purcell 2000: 8–39). To a contemporary, 'average viewer,' if there ever was such a person, the scene symbolized abundance. This was noted in a study of sea life in North African mosaics: It was a *xenia* design, welcoming guests, as well as possessing the power to increase prosperity and a protective, apotropaic effect (Dunbabin 1978: 126). But in addition to these common massages, in the period in which the Lod mosaic was laid, and in the surrounding country, to a Jew or a Christian exposed to the Bible, particularly to Psalm 104, it would have sent an additional message. It has already been suggested that a biblical theme (Isaiah 11:6) and its implied message about a peaceful utopian world was included in another part of the Lod mosaic (Bowersock et al. 2015: 17–19).

Here, the nautical scene, ships and sea life, could have conveyed, besides an attachment to the sea and aesthetic pleasure, a subtext describing the power of the Judeo-Christian God: *"How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all your creatures. There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number – living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan, which you formed to frolic there"* (Psalm 104: 23–26). Key elements of that paragraph are present in the pond: "the sea"; "teaming with creatures"; "both large and small"; "ships go to and fro"; and the "leviathan" whale (?). One of the "fish" in the mosaic is defined by its unnaturally coiled tail as a symbolic whale (Fig. 2), perhaps at the time related to the leviathan of the Psalm 104 and to various depictions of sea monsters. That sea creature *(Ketos, Cetus)* with its coiling tail appears commonly in Jonah scenes on mosaics and wall paintings from Late Antiquity/early Christianity (Lawrence 1962; Papadopoulos - Ruscillo 2002).

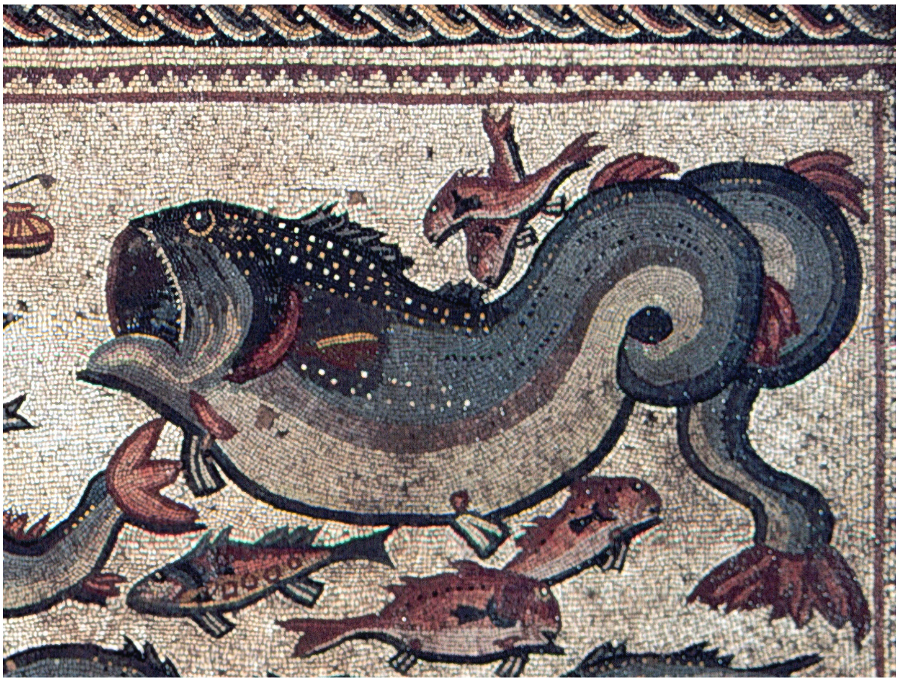

Figure 2
A marine monster (Leviathan?) with coiled tail (Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

Psalm 104 is cited in Jewish liturgies associated with a ceremony conducted on the first day of the lunar month. That psalm was and is included in Christian lectionaries, prayers and homilies (see St. Agustin sermon below). The use of Psalm 104 in Christian rites is mentioned by Gregory of Nyssa, in the mid-4th century AD (Ferguson 1997). Psalms in general constituted an important part of early church services, as seen in Canon 17 of the Synod (343? –381? AD) of Laodicea (Percival 1977: 133) and Jonah and the leviathan appear in both Jewish (Magness 2010: 143) and Christian art, e.g., the Mausoleum of the Julii in Rome (Toynbee 1971: 140–141) as symbols of death and resurrection. Interestingly, modern biblical expositors have noted the age-old pagan characteristics of Psalm 104, referring to the primordial god (goddess?) of the sea. Of importance here is the association of that psalm with pre-Hellenic, Phoenician and Canaanite myths and their sea gods (Dahood 1970: 31-48). These old sea gods of the Levant merged later with the Greco-Roman pantheon. Some mosaics of Mediterranean lands show such a sea god surrounded by a nautical panorama (Dunbabin 1978: 159–158)[1]. The pond in the Lod mosaic can be seen as a much-modified offshoot of such mosaics, common all around the Mediterranean basin with scenes of sea life centered on divine figures associated with the sea. Later such "cleansed" pagan traditions, affected various Christian symbolic perceptions, expressions and sermons. Thus, it can be suggested that the universal sacral character of the pond in the Lod mosaic, teeming with sea life and ships, symbolized for both Jews and Christians the God who created sea and the life within it. Possibly, parts or even most of that subtext could have been perceived, at various levels, by some Levantine people of all confessions: pagans, Jews, and later, Christians. The question is to whom in Lod it was addressed in the 3rd-4th century CE due to the longue-durée aspect of pagans, Jews, and later, Christians? Was this building open and used by all of them? And, when, in what circumstances? Having said that, one should keep in mind that excavations in the site carried out by one of authors and still in progress indicate that the building was occupied and used for long periods of time in such rapidly changing times.

Big Fish Eat Little Fish

An additional symbolic depiction appears in the pond, which, as noted, represents the sea. It is the "fish-eating-fish" scenes. While the fish-eating-fish scene at the bottom center of the mosaic pond is not strikingly cruel, relative to several bloody hunting scenes in the Lod mosaics, it certainly reflects similar symbolism. Ovadiah and Mucznik also remarked on this scene: "In the lower part of the panel another large fish is swallowing a smaller one" (Ovadiah - Mucznik 1998: 6) (Figs. 3-4). Earlier, when analyzing the northern carpet of the Lod mosaic these authors commented that animals in the mosaic "… appear to reflect the struggle for survival in nature" (Ovadiah - Mucznik 1998: 3).

Notably in that pond, in addition to the fish mentioned above, two more fish present a 'devouring' image, symbolized by their open mouth, armed by sharp teeth, absent in other fish. The second fish, which is depicted threatening a ship, is the biggest in the 'pond.' This fish may have been associated with the "great fish", the one swallowing Jonah, appearing in early Jewish and Christian art. A third 'devouring' fish, as defined by its sharp teeth, threatens two fish swimming toward it. The social history of proverbs and sayings associated with fish-eating-fish imagery, from antiquity to the present, has been discussed previously

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[1] And see there references to associated figures.

(Parsons 1945; Mieder 2014: 178–228). An early Greek perception of fish in the sea is dated to approximately the 8th–7th centuries BC: "*Listen now to right, ceasing altogether to think of violence. For the son of Cronos has ordained this law for men, that fishes and beasts and winged fowls should devour one another, for right is not in them; but to mankind he gave right which proves far the best. For whoever knows the right and is ready to speak it, far-seeing Zeus gives him prosperity"* (Hes.erg. 274–285). The oldest biblical passage bearing on the generalized aphorism "fish eat fish" and the sea as a place of anarchy appears in the book of Habakkuk, dated to the last years of the First Temple, the early 6th century BC: *"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he? And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?"* (Habakkuk 1: 13–15).

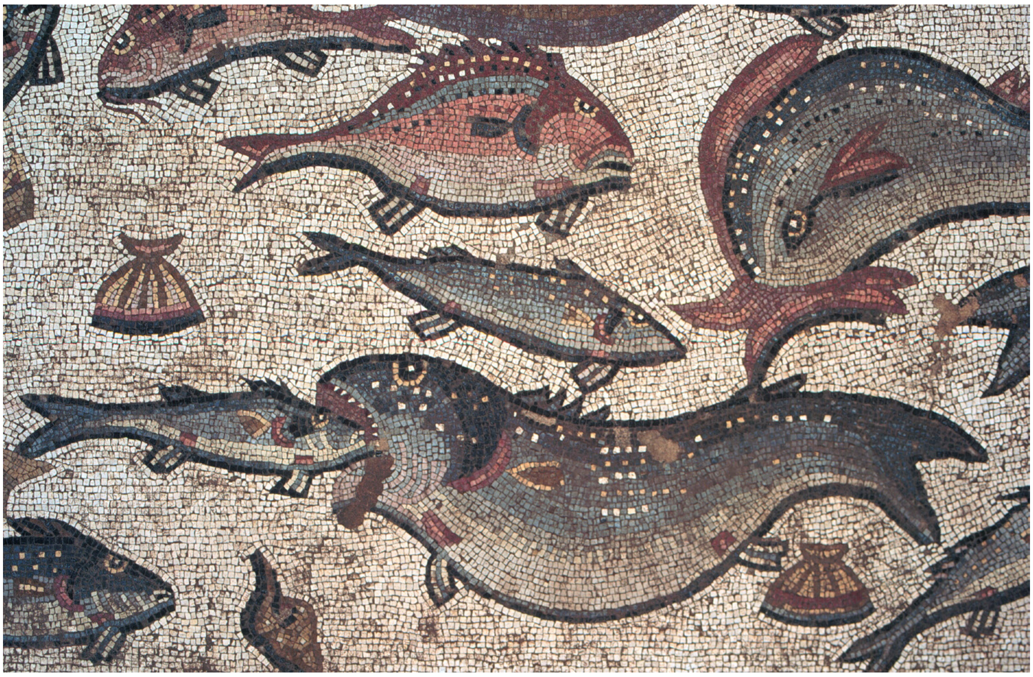


Figure 3
Big fish swallowing a small fish (Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

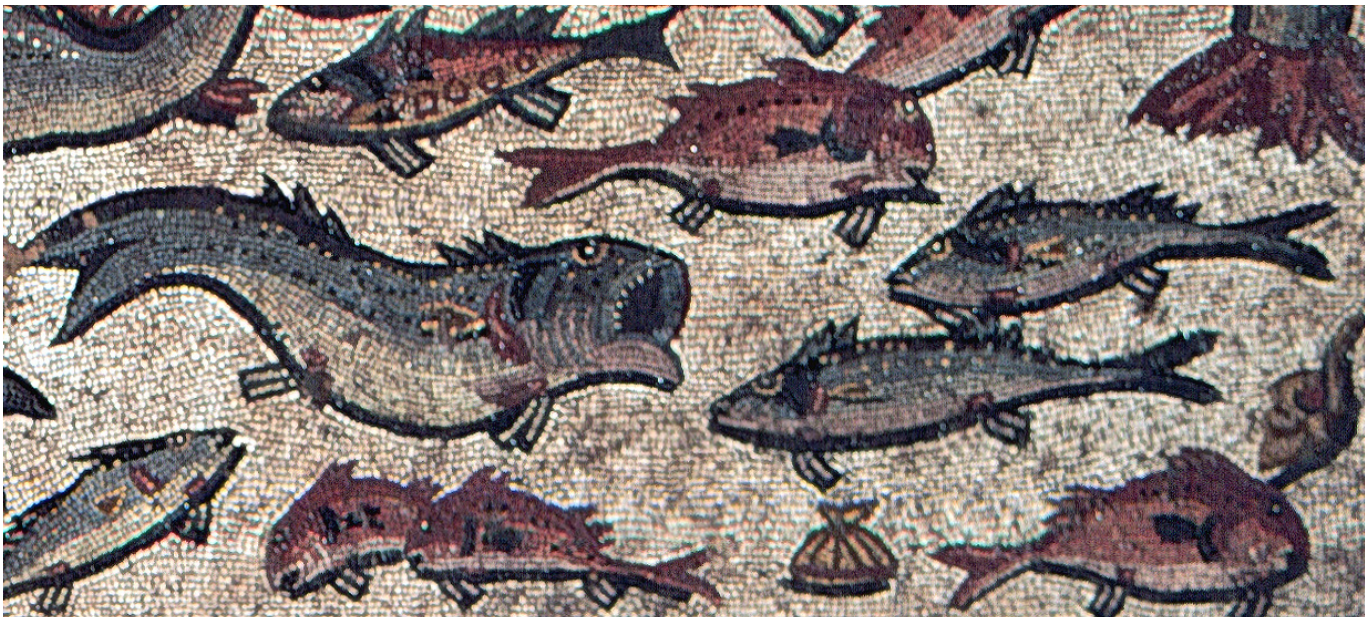


Figure 4
Big fish threatening a smaller fish (Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

Going back to Greek tradition, an example of that aphorism in the form of "big fish eat little fish" appears in a specific saying by Aristotle (384–322 BC) about the fish known as a *phycis*: "Very often, however, as has been stated, they devour one another and especially do the large one devour the smaller" (Aristot. hist. an. 591b. 14). Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC) commented on big fish eating small fish in his discussion of fish ponds (Varro rust. III 17.6).

The image of the sea as a model of anarchy was adopted by the Church fathers, e.g. St. Irenaeus (c. 125–202 AD), who was born in Smyrna and died as a bishop of Lyon, France. The quotation is from *Against Heresies*, his major work, which defined extreme opposition to the earthy rule as an heresy: *"Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations….so that under the fear of human rule, men may not eat each other up like fishes; but that, by means of the establishment of laws, they may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations. And considered from this point of view, those who exact tribute from us are God's ministers, serving for this very purpose"* (Iren. Heresies V 24, 2). Parsons (1945) demonstrated the use of that motive also by Athenagoras (2nd century, Athens), St. Basil (4th century AD, Caesarea Cappadocia) and St Ambrose (4th century AD, Milan). Of special interest in the present discussion are two sayings connecting the biblical passages cited above to the fish-eat-fish motif expounded upon by the Church fathers. St. John Chrysostom (late 4th century, Antioch and Constantinople), quoting Habakkuk (cited above) while commenting on Genesis (Parsons 1945: 381). In a commentary on Psalm 104, St. Augustine (354–430 AD, North Africa) shows, as mentioned above, an awareness of the connection between that psalm and the worldview of fish eating fish (Parsons 1945: 382).

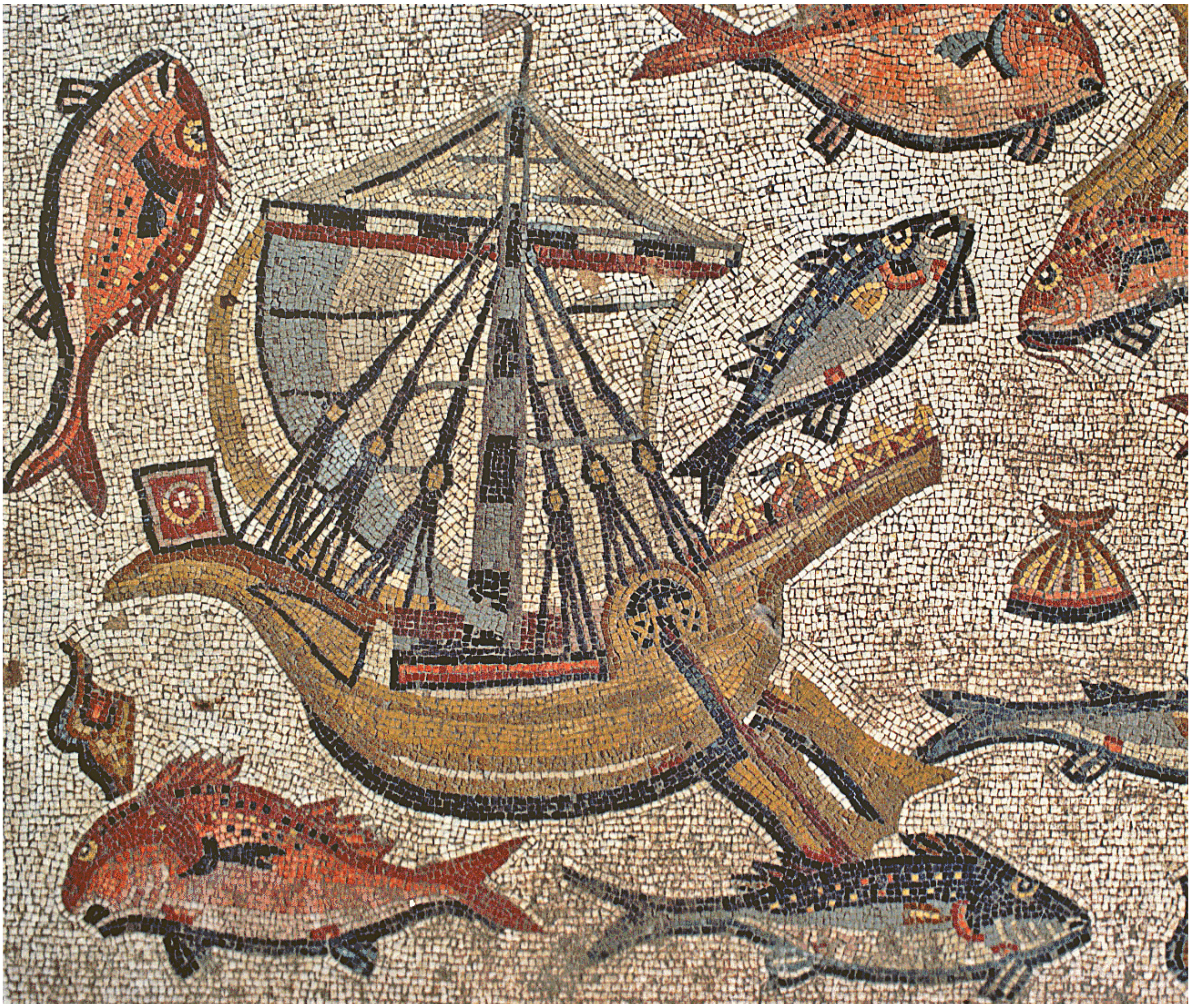
A Talmudic equivalent of that world view appears in tractate Avodah Zara (about idolatry). *"Just as among fish of the sea, the greater swallow up the smaller ones, so with men, were it not for fear of the government, men would swallow each other alive"*. This is just what we learnt: Rabbi Hanina, the Deputy High Priest (second half of the 1st century) said, *"Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear thereof, men would swallow each other alive"* (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 4a).

Seemingly a basic element of the worldview, i.e., big fish eating small fish, expressed as natural behavior, and seen as such by Aristotle and later in writings by Christian and Jewish intellectuals, was conveyed by the marine scene in the Lod mosaic. Surely some of the contemporary viewers of that mosaic understood the sociopolitical subtext of that 'fish-eat-fish' scene. Some could have also realized the need for a governing authority to control that 'natural' law. A modern commenter on the spirit of the time of Late Antiquity suggested such an attitude was expressed by the pagan historian Dio Cassius in the first half of the 3rd century AD. Man should accept the strong rule of one man "as long as it gave him an orderly world" (Brown 1971: 18). A modern viewer of the mosaic will realize that the problems of rules and rulers and the state acting as moderator of human evil are still with us even nowadays. The modern viewer will realize that the problems reflected in this aspect of the mosaic are valid today as they were in those times.

A Successful Ship versus a Distressed One May Symbolize Diverse Concepts

The absence of representations of human figures in the Lod mosaic has been noted (Bowersock et al. 2015: 19; Talgam 2015a: 101–102). Human presence in the world-pond is marked by human works – two ships of the type *navis oneraria,* the most common carrier ship of the Mediterranean Roman fleet (Casson 1971: 157–200; figs. 154, 156; Ericson 1984; Friedman 2004). One is advancing, sailing with full sails, "running free" before the wind (Fig. 5). The other, facing the opposite direction, stands becalmed (Fig. 6). It is 'at sea', which the dictionary defines as: "to be confused, to be lost and bewildered." The artist stressed that helplessness and the ship's frustrating situation by lowering the mast, yards, sails and tackle (Hadad - Avissar 2003; Rosen 2004)[2]. In stark contrast, these are proudly presented on the freely sailing ship, speeding away from its stranded mate. In view of the previously discussed "big fish eat little fish" scene, significantly, the helplessness of the becalmed ship is stressed by the threatening big fish poised opposite it with open mouth armed by sharp teeth, which was discussed above.

Figure 5
A vessel sailing at full speed, with wind-swollen sails (Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).



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[2] For an alternative approach see Friedman 2004.

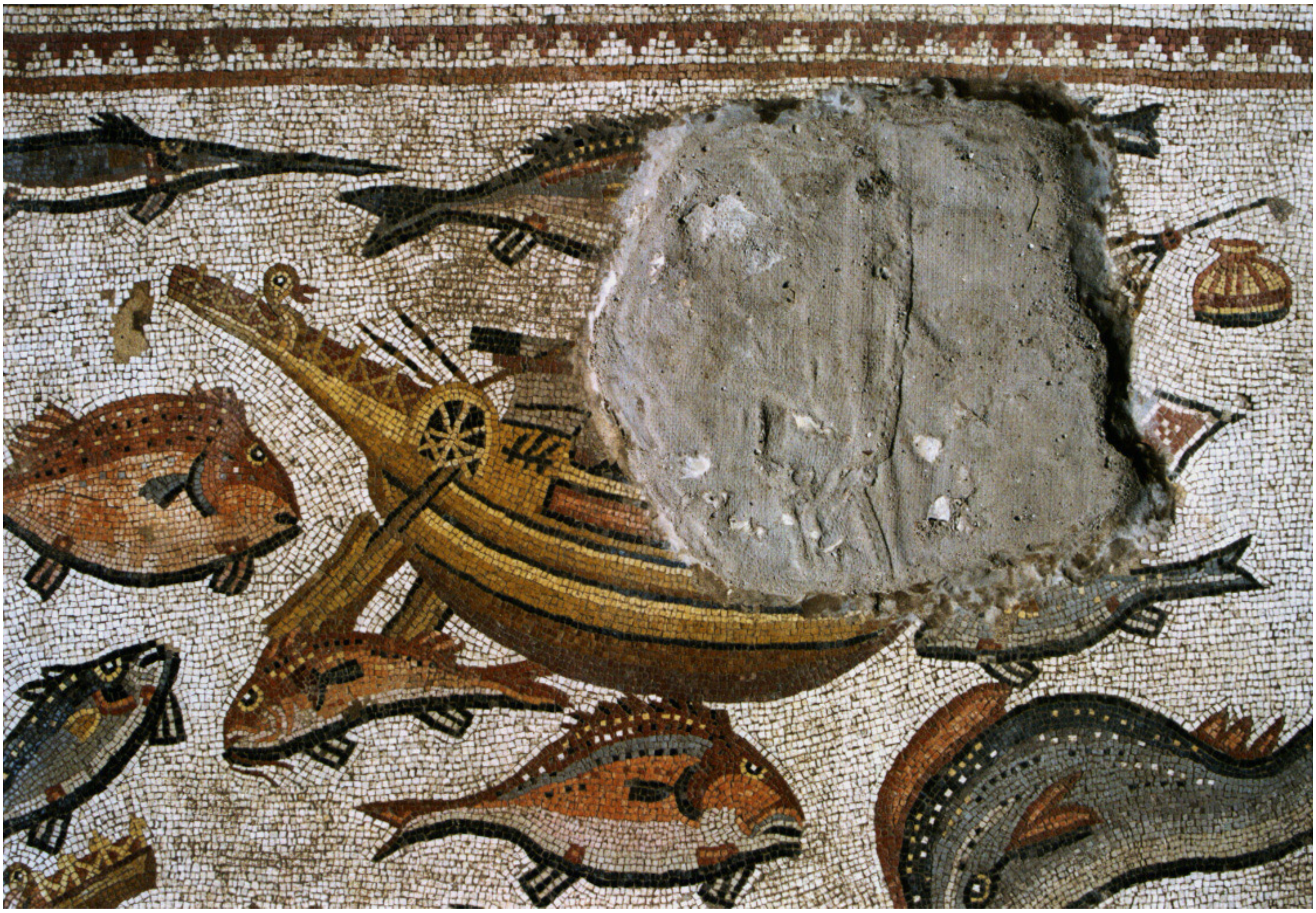

Figure 6
A second, stranded ship facing the opposite direction, helpless as shown by the lowered masts, yards, tackles and sails.
(Photo Nicky Davidov, Courtesy Israel Antiquities Authority).

The two ships trying to advance in contrary directions relying on the same wind and the ensuing contrary results symbolize a truism: "You can't please all the people all the time". A blessing for one could be a curse for another". Here a given wind is a useful for one ship and useless, even detrimental, for another. Two such ships appear in a Greek text by Lucian of Samosata (c. 125 AD–after 180 AD). Lucian, a noted orator-writer in Greek was a son of an Aramaic-speaking family. His Aramaic was similar to the vernacular of the Talmudic sages and the language spoken by early Christians. The relevant paragraph appears in a tale composed by Lucian "Icaromenippus, an aerial expedition." (Lukian. Icaromenippus. 25) In the tale, the protagonist flies all the way up to the abode of the gods, aiming to learn how they govern the world (Fowler - Fowler 1905; Nesselrath et al. 2005). *"There he observed Zeus listening to prayers...From every quarter of Earth were coming the most various and contradictory petitions; ...Of those at sea, one prayed for a north, another for a south wind; the farmer asked for rain, the fuller for sun… In one case, I saw him puzzled; two men praying for opposite things and promising the same sacrifices, he could not tell which of them to favor…"* A Jewish form of that Greek discourse appears in Esther Rabba, a homily on the book of Esther. The present form of that Midrash may be late, perhaps as late as the Early Islamic period. However, most scholars concur that it contains older material. As the story goes King Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) arranged a royal party and ordered: "….they should do to any man pleasure" (Esther 1:8). According to the Midrash the Lord rebuked the king: "I do not satisfy all those created, and you ask to: "do to any man pleasure"? As the world is managed, two men ask to marry one woman, can she marry both? Only this one or that one. And so, two ships navigating a harbor, one is asking for a northern wind and one asking for a southern wind, can one wind move both of them as one? Either to this or to that.…" (Tabory - Atzmon 2014: 62–63).

But the two ships may portray more than the vain attempt to sail in opposite directions with the same wind; the scene may also express a different ideology or worldview. Another Talmudic homily discusses different symbolism for two sailing ships pointing in opposite directions: "One ship was departing a port while another was entering it. People were feting the departing boat [perhaps it was a ship on maiden voyage or a ship-launching ceremony?], while none were celebrating the arriving one. An observer commented: 'It should be the opposite, for a departing ship calls for sadness because it will now face so many unknown dangers, while the arriving ship (coming home) we know will be at rest. So it is with people: birth is a grave and even fearful event while death brings eternal peace (*Kohelet Rabba 7; Shemot Rabba 48*). Similar symbolism, of life as a ship voyage and death as the (final) port, appears in late (1st? to 3rd? centuries AD) Greek literature: "But whereas we mortals have death as the destined port of our ills if our lot is miserable" (Longinus 9:7; Beaulieu 2008: *passim*).

The ship graffito in the Beth She'arim cemetery (Mazar 1973: 52, 117 pl. XXIII; Avi-Yonah et al. 1981: 44-47), dated later than the Lod mosaic and reflecting a mixed Jewish, Aramaic and Greek culture, could support the idea of the soul as a sailing ship coming to such final rest peacefully, in such symbolism the wrecked ship could represent a calamitous end. In Beth She'arim, the ship could symbolize a person arriving in peace to his/her final rest. A ship associated with death, perhaps symbolizing the grave as the final harbor, appears in *Satyricon*: *"I beg you to carve ships under full sail on the monument…"* (Petron. Satyricon 71: 6–8).

An additional, different, Christian symbolism that can be applied to the two ships scene can be surmised by the simile appearing in St. Agustin sermon on Psalm 104, 34 *"… By ships we understand churches; they go among the storms, among the tempests of temptations … among the beasts, both small and great. Christ … is the Pilot. … They will sail safely … they will be led to the land of rest"* (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801104.htm). Here the Christian church is the successful ship and the unbelievers are the wrecked ship.

Discussion

Various suggestions on the readily apparent symbolism as well as the more obscure subtext of the marine scene in the Lod mosaic have been discussed above. Citations from ancient Hellenistic, Roman, Jewish and Christian literary sources were used in proposing specific symbolic interpretations. These sources seem to indicate that the creators of the Lod mosaic could have included followers of the skeptic philosophy, pagans, Jews, Samaritans or Christians, and the intended viewers of that work of art could have been as heterogeneous as its creators.

It is not suggested that those who designed and laid the mosaic, or those who commissioned it, read the texts cited above, or/and similar texts, and created the mosaic accordingly. We do posit however, that the intellectual worldview of those who commissioned and created the mosaic and their lexicons of symbolism, images and similes were similar, if not identical, to those of the intellectuals who authored, studied and taught the passages cited above. The wide distribution, in that cultural environment, of the concepts presented above manifests their universality among the classes of people known to have lived in Lod and its environs in those times. The most prominent concepts were the pond as a symbol of the world, more precisely, the Mediterranean world. Considering that scene as a geographical expression is supported by additional pictorial representations of the geography of distant lands and exotic animals laid out in other sections of the Lod mosaic. Superficially, the sea life and ships observed in the pond could represent the physical world. Simultaneously, at a deeper level these views promulgated the creation and the maintenance of an orderly world by a supreme power, be it a specifically named god, as in Psalm 104, or an ideological-philosophical entity. Additionally, a strongly expressed truism conveyed by the Lod mosaic was big fish eating little fish as a metaphor of the way in which the world functions. It is proposed here that like the literary expositors of that truism, its political implications were obvious to some viewers of the mosaic. A third truism portrayed by the mosaic was that even those who rule the universe cannot satisfy everyone all the time, and what is desired by one can be calamitous to another. Also, there is a possibility that this work of art brings up the ship as a soul symbolism, or the metaphor of life as a sea voyage. Finally, consideration should be given to the interpretation, influenced by Psalm 104, of the successfully sailing ship depicted in the mosaic as a prefiguration of a victorious church.

An early study of the Lod mosaic by Ovadiah and Mucznik (1998) led them to suggest that "the mosaic in question comprises two conceptual and visual trends having a polar and antithetical character that is classical and anti-classical". The comprehensive survey of Israeli and relevant Levantine mosaics by Talgam (2014) could perhaps lead to the refining of the term "anti-classical" by such a definition as "late-classical" or a synthesis of the classical past and the new wave of modified classicism and the contribution of the various forms of raising Christianity. A later comprehensive study of the Lod mosaic commented: "One interpretation does not have to eradicate another… multiple meanings could exist simultaneously…" It is highly likely that the cultural backgrounds of the people frequenting the reception hall were diverse and each would have interpreted the combination of motifs according to their own world view" (Talgam 2015a: 84 and *passim*). Such a mixture of ethnic and religious characteristics is typical to the inhabitants of urban centers. The question arises about the ethnic and religious composition of the inhabitants of Lod (Diospolis) as an urban center. Isaac (1998: 66–73) postulated that cases of mixed population, evident in large urban centers, were also common among rural populations. Fischer - Taxel (2008: 30) correctly point out that Isaac thesis is mainly based on data collected from Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries, when there was still a large amount of paganism in the area and Christianity was a new faith, vigorously expanding.

Although mostly populations belonging to different denominations used to live in different localities, principally in the rural environment (especially during the late Byzantine period, for a detailed discussion see Fischer - Taxel 2008: 29-31), the cases of large urban centers were different. In cities such as Gaza there is a Christian majority, but it is still inhabited by large pagan, Jewish and Samaritan minorities (Glucker 1987: 46-51, 99-102). In En-Gedi discoveries suggest the existence of such a mixed population (De Vincenz 2007: 395) and in Scythopolis/Bet Shean there is evidence of a mixed population, including Jews, Christians, Pagans, and Samaritans (Tsafrir - Foerster 1997: 102-104, 106-108, 116-117). The case of Lod is similar. One might ask whether each of these communities inhabited a particular, restricted area of the city, and to what extent the interaction between these entities led them to share public and private spaces. It is not impossible that each community was confined to a specific dwelling area.

However, bearing in mind the evident situation of wealth and social prestige of the inhabitants of the *villa* in Lod, it can be assumed that the social role they occupied was prominent and even representative, from a social, religious and perhaps economic and commercial point of view. In such a case, it is logical to assume that these functions caused them to interact at various levels, with members of other communities, creating a liminal situation. One can think that in such a scenario many visitants, belonging to the different ethnic-religious groups frequented the villa in different circumstances, together or separately; thus, being able to appreciate the mosaics. What, then, was the message interpreted by the eventual spectators? Does the pond represent a world at a peaceful equilibrium? Is it a symbol of a world in which fish eat fish? Are the sea creatures acting in an apotropaic capacity? What are the two ships symbolizing? Perhaps it is all things to all people?

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