

УДК 7.033.2...1

ББК 85.14; 6 3. 3 (0) 4

DOI:10.18688/aa155-2-18

Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom

Dionysos and His Retinue in the Art of Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine

In late antique Palestine the predominant mythological subject in the visual arts was Dionysian imagery, reflecting a Hellenistic cultural heritage no longer identified exclusively with paganism. Yet it is not easy to understand why the vestiges of the cult of Dionysos remained omnipotent in the Near East throughout the Byzantine and early Islamic periods. The popularity, universality, and longevity of the god's cult are most likely due to the convivial aspect of wine-consuming among the Greeks: the idea of sharing and enjoying [8, p. 193], [22, p. 332]. Not only did the participants of the symposium share equally in the rejoicing, but Dionysos transformed in an immaterial sense the human banquet into a divine occasion that allowed each individual to identify with the divine spirit, creating a firm bond between the human and the divine, the mortal and the immortal.

Archaeological remains comprise a diversity of materials and objects and provide an insight into religious and profane beliefs and practices; most wide-spread and numerous are mosaic floors of reception and dining halls in private mansions. In the Holy Land Dionysian imagery is found on mosaic floors and on objects of daily use. The finds themselves seldom answer fundamental questions with regard to their secular and/or spiritual meaning and their ethno-religious association. On the material level, pagans, Jews, and Christians generally used the same objects in daily life, in funerary customs and even in ritual contexts, and embellished their homes with the same kind of mosaic floors and frescoes.

Dionysiac imagery is dominant on mosaic floors which adorned the dining rooms (*triclinia*) of villas. The earliest are late Roman mosaic floors at Sepphoris and Gerasa. The House of Dionysos at Sepphoris is located in a prominent position on the acropolis in close proximity to the theatre and is evidence for the owner's eminent social standing [30, fig. 17 on p. 20 for plan, fig. 22 on p. 22 for isometric reconstruction]. Constructed around 200 CE the building was destroyed sometime after the mid-4th century, probably in the earthquake of 363 when theatre and villa were buried [30, p. 29]. Representing the most complete floor in the Holy Land with 14 episodes 12 individual scenes can be identified, generally accompanied by inscriptions [29, pp. 27–43, 432–433, fig. 31 on p. 28; 30, fig. 32 on p. 47, fig. 33 on p. 48]. The central panel depicts the drinking contest between Heracles and Dionysos in the company of satyrs and maenads [5, pp. 40–41, figs. 2.5–2.6], [29, fig. 32 on p. 28], [30, pp. 48–51, colour pl. IA–B].

The motif of the Indian triumph, referred to as 'ΠΙΟΜΗΗ / procession' on the Sepphoris mosaic, is a particularly popular one (Ill. 30) [8, fig. 2], [29, fig. 39 on p. 32], [30, pp. 63–66, fig. 48, colour pl. VA]. To date, nearly 30 mosaic floors of a wide chronological and geogra-

phical distribution have been recorded, half of them in North Africa [7, pp. 173–187]. About the splendid procession held in honour of Dionysos by Ptolemy II Philadelphus in Alexandria in c. 271–270 BCE we are informed by the eyewitness account of Callixeinos of Rhodes, preserved in the writings of Athenaios of Naukratis [31, pp. 381–388]. In the fifth century CE epic poem on Dionysos, the *Dionysiaca* by Nonnos of Panopolis, the Indian campaign is a central subject: the god sets out to spread his cult in the regions conquered by Alexander the Great, is victorious in India and returns in a triumphal procession [15, pp. 21–23; 19, pp. 560–561]. Compare the scene on Sepphoris mosaic floor (Ill. 30) with that on a silver plate in the British Museum, dated to the 2nd/3rd centuries CE and tentatively assigned to craftsman in the Parthian or early Sasanian empires [6, pp. 49–51, pl. 27:196]. In the Byzantine period Dionysos and his retinue were frequent motifs on textiles. Two similar textiles with Dionysos triumphantly celebrating his conquest of India, one in the Metropolitan Museum [15, pl. 2; 28, p. 90], the other in the Hermitage [15, pls. 1a–b], most probably originate from a burial context in Achmim, ancient Panopolis, it is the home town of the author of the *Dionysiaca*. Depicted is a central figure, identified as Dionysos [15, pp. 1–2], standing in a cart drawn by panthers or lions in the company of male and female figures. On a textile in the Hermitage Ariadne and Dionysos in the company of Heracles are depicted in the central scene; in the surrounding frame the heroes' twelve labors are illustrated [27, p. 92]. In the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris the wedding banquet of Dionysos and Ariadne is defined by the inscription 'YMENAIOC / marriage' [8, pp. 217–219, fig. 21 on p. 209], [29, fig. 38 on p. 31], [30, pp. 61–63, fig. 46, colour pl. IVB]. A significant iconographic detail is the lidded basket on Ariadne's knees to be identified as the *cista mystica*, the definite symbol of the Dionysiac mysteries [8, p. 206], [30, p. 62]. The other object related to the cult, the *liknon*, is depicted twice, in the scene of the gift-bearers and the carrier of the *liknon* in the Dionysiac procession [8, pp. 205–206], [29, pp. 33–34, fig. 43 on p. 34, figs. 44–45 on pp. 34–35], [30, pp. 71–72, 82]. Thus, the panel does not merely portray the mythological story but should be understood as an allegory for the unions that were to bring felicity to the god's adherents [30, p. 85].

Nothing is known about the owner of the mansion. In the opinion of the excavator Z. Weiss, the owner might have been a high Roman official, a wealthy Jewish citizen or even the Patriarch 'R. Judah the Prince, since the building was equipped with a ritual bath, although no distinctly Jewish finds were retrieved. It was a period when the majority of



Fig. 1a. Oboda. Fragment of bone carving, depicting a maenad. A. Negev, Oboda Excavations 1958–1961. Photo Elia.



Fig. 1b. Suggested reconstruction. Drawing Sarah Halbreich.

the inhabitants were Jewish and the city was administered by Jews. At the same time a center of Rabbinic learning and study, references in Mishnah and Talmud underline that the cult of Dionysos and the theatre with festivities in his honor were objectionable to orthodox Jews. It appears that the Hellenistic-Roman pagan life-style and orthodox Judaism could exist side by side in a pluralistic society [30, pp. 129–130], though it is difficult to assess whether the supposed co-existence and tolerance were in fact real. Weiss' view is opposed by R. Talgam who prefers to attribute the



Fig. 2. Oinophoros. Jerusalem antiquities market. After 'Atiqot Hebrew Series 1974, Pl. XXXI: 1-2.

mosaic to a pagan citizen, emphasizing the religious intent and the eminent role of the life of Dionysos for the adherents to the Dionysiac mystery cult [30, pp. 130–131].

The mosaic floor in Gerasa, discovered in 1907 and dispersed on the antiquities market with major sections exhibited in Berlin and Yale and additional fragments in other public and private collections, is only partially preserved and reconstructed in different arrangements [for the most recent reconstruction see 12, fig. 4 on p. 150], [for earlier suggestions see 13, fig. 1 on p. 313; 14, fig. 43 on p. 36; 29, pp. 49–51]. With a suggested date from the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries [12, p. 151] two nearly intact friezes show Dionysian subjects: the first the drunken Heracles supported by a satyr who carries his club and Heracles trying to grab a girl's dress, probably Auge, and the second the triumphal procession with Dionysos and Ariadne reclining on a chariot drawn by centaurs [12, fig. 3 on p. 148]; both have parallels in the Sepphoris floor [30, pp. 54–57, 63–66, colour plates IIIA, IVB]. In view of distinct correspondences of subjects and compositions in the Gerasa and Sepphoris mosaic floors Grossmann concludes that similar Dionysiac episodes were depicted on both floors and tentatively suggests that the missing central panel at Gerasa was a depiction of the drinking contest between Dionysos and Heracles [12, p. 151].

In the Byzantine period, Dionysiac scenes are found in Gerasa and Sheikh Zuweid. The poorly preserved mosaic floor, excavated in Gerasa, dates from the late 6th century, a time of prosperity in the city with four new churches erected and the city's bath restored. The central panel is divided into two registers, the upper one is a procession of five figures with Pan, Dionysos, a maenad and a satyr identified [29, pp. 372–373, fig. 462 on p. 373], [32, pp. 544–545, fig. 2 on p. 543].

The mosaic floor of three panels at Sheikh Zuweid shows in the middle panel Dionysos and his retinue in two registers [18, pp. 444–445, 463–464], [20, pp. 51–53], [21, pp. 183–185, pl. 22], [29, pp. 373–375]. In the upper one the god in his chariot is named and to the right we read the word 'TEAETH / ritual or initiation', referring to the orgiastic ceremony of the mysteries [8, pp. 209, 217, fig. 13 on p. 209], [21, p. 184, pl. 25a–b], [29, fig. 464 on p. 375]. The

drunken Heracles is the main subject of the lower register [21, pl. 24b]. Situated close to Gaza, a famous center of classical education and learning, it is quite possible that artisans from Gaza workshops are responsible for the mosaic floor. Dated to the post-Constantinian period on stylistic grounds it is impossible to determine whether the building was owned by a pagan or Christian [21, p. 191].

Little can be said about two fragmentary mosaic floors from private houses, dated to the 5th–6th centuries CE. In two villas at Madaba, a Christian city with numerous churches, the Bacchic procession was depicted on the mosaic floors; in the first, the dancing maenad and satyr survived, the floor originally comprised also the figure of Ariadne now destroyed; in the second, the Mosaic of Achilles, a satyr playing the flute and a figure clad in a long tunic are preserved [23, pp. 76–77, figs. 33–34, 40, 44–45], [29, pp. 371–372, fig. 461 on p. 372]. The mosaic floor unearthed in Kibbutz Erez was part of a villa though no architectural remains were found; the surviving panel with the triumphal procession is most likely related to the Indian campaign [18, pp. 445, 459, 463], [20, p. 58, pl. XLVII], [29, pp. 375–376, fig. 465 on p. 376].

We now look at figured bone carvings retrieved from domestic and funerary contexts in relatively small numbers in comparison to the substantial quantity discovered in Egypt. Once considered Alexandrian imports evidence for regional and local Palestinian production centers is definite with workshop refuse recorded in Caesarea and Ashkelon [11, p. 186, note 5]. Within a tomb near Haifa, at ancient Sycamina, fragments of a box or casket were found; a Greek inscription names a certain Namosas, son of Menahem, as tomb occupant, described as ‘most illustrious and elder’. If the inscription belongs to the burial which is not sure, the honorary titles give a date range from Constantine to the 5th century [1, pp. 336–337, fig. 328], [9, pp. 89–92], [11, pp. 195–196, 198, fig. 7 on p. 196]. The two figures of the standing nude youths from the burial, identified as satyrs, display a bearing very common on bone carvings; a fragment from Elusa [11, pp. 191–192, fig. 5 on p. 190], [17, pl. 13, nos. 42, 44].

A dominant subject is the dancing maenad; the fragment from Byzantine Oboda in the Negev (Fig. 1a-b) [25, pl. 3:30 on p. 203] has a parallel from Egypt [17, p. 105, pl. 32, no. 102]. Note the fluted column on the left; additional fragments of the same carving include an arch with a conch, thus it is feasible to reconstruct the figure standing under an arch [for parallels see 17, pls. 3b, 17a, 37c, 38a]. On clay oinophoroi manufactured in Sagalassos members of the *thiasos* are depicted standing under arches [24, pp. 205–206, pl. 2 on p. 216].

Dionysos and Ariadne as well as members of his retinue, placed under arcades, are a feature of Egyptian textile furnishings which probably adorned the walls of dining rooms; the most complete tapestry is the hanging the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg [5, pp. 45–46, figs. 2.10–2.11], [8, fig. 9a–b on p. 202], [22, pp. 313–316, fig. 1 on p. 317], [27, pp. 84–87], [28, fig. 1 on pp. 146–147]. Whether they were used in Palestine is a matter of conjecture, to date no evidence has come to light. Attributed to the 4th and 5th centuries these are large, multi-colored woven tapestries, subdivided by arcades, under which Dionysos and his cycle are standing either alone or in pairs.

The last class of objects to be presented consists of mold-made clay oinophoroi — wine decanters, manufactured in two regions — in Asia Minor and Tunesia, dated to the Byzantine period. So far, only sporadic vessels from workshops at Knidos and Sagalassos have been unearthed in Palestine. A complete vessel, produced in a Knidian workshop and acquired on the

Jerusalem Antiquities market [3, pl. XXXI:1–2], shows Dionysos accompanied by Silenos on one side and a satyr on the other side (Fig. 2); a fragment with part of a maenad and clusters of grapes was retrieved during a survey at Tell esh-Sheikh near Sheikh Zuweid [2, p. 91, pl. XXIX:2:1]. In the Temple Mount excavations in Jerusalem a fragmentary Knidian oinophoros was found, lacking its neck and handles and part of the relief decoration; the intact scene depicts Dionysos and a maenad, accompanied by a panther [4, pp. 98–99, ill. on p. 99]. At Capernaum the fragment of an oinophoros from Sagalassos was found [16, p. 82, no. 1–c2198], [24, p. 209]. The workshops produced vessels depicting members of the Dionysiac thiasos, yet no images of Dionysos and Ariadne [24, p. 208].

Besides bone carvings and clay vessels dancing and standing Silenoi, satyrs and maenads are frequent motifs on silver plates of eastern manufacture, for example the plate in the Hermitage with the dancing maenad and Silenos [10, pl. 28:1]. Most likely, the motifs were employed for decorative purposes, devoid of any cultic connotation and significance. Displaying ostentatious silverware as table furnishings was a practice common among the well-to-do members of the civilian and administrative social elite in both the Roman and the Byzantine periods [26, pp. 44–45].

The presentation makes clear that Dionysian imagery played an important role in the embellishment of dining rooms with their decorated mosaic floors and textile wall hangings, marble tables, portable clay and silver vessels used in serving and consuming meals as well as containers and furniture fittings carved of bone [22]. On the mosaic pavements it is possible to represent a variety of scenes related to Dionysos' life; on objects of daily use, due to limited space, there is a restriction to one or two scenes like drunken Dionysos supported by a satyr or Silenos and a maenad. Overall, the same repertoire was shared by mosaicists, weavers, silversmiths and ceramists. In the Byzantine period mosaic floors in villas were ornamented with Dionysiac scenes, other mythological subjects, hunting scenes and the Nile Festival, while many ecclesiastical buildings, churches, monasteries and synagogues were adorned with pavements displaying inhabited vine scrolls with arable, hunting and pastoral scenes [18, pp. 442, 457, 464–470].

Whether Dionysian imagery is an expression of purely decorative style or of spiritual beliefs and cultic practices and to which extent it implies the coexistence of Classical and Christian narratives in the visual arts and in literature are fundamental questions without universal answer, depending on context, time and location. The interpretations of the message(s) conveyed by the images are controversial; it is beyond the scope of the present overview of finds to analyze and discuss the divergent interpretations proposed by each of the scholars referred to in this paper. Generally speaking, several explanations can be put forward for the popularity and persistence of the biography of Dionysos in predominantly Christian communities like Byzantine Gerasa, Madaba, Gaza, Oboda and Elusa as well as in a pagan and Jewish society like Sepphoris in the late Roman period:

- a) the cultural changes that took place in the Levant after Alexander the Great, the attractions of Classical culture;
- b) the challenge to late antique polytheistic and syncretistic religious movements;
- c) the veneration of a single pagan divinity like Dionysos as antipode to monotheistic Christianity;
- d) the long-lasting dialogue and dispute between the Classical heritage and Christian beliefs;

e) the preference for certain subjects in the 'formal language' of the late Antique period, subjects directly related to customer demand and available in workshops and markets;

f) the significance of imagery conveying the dichotomy of divine and human, immortal and mortal as well as the moral ideas of good and evil, virtue and vice;

g) the loss of the original religious and cultic significance in the course of continuous copying and trading over a long period;

h) the attraction of neutral and generic representations that created an atmosphere of joy and tranquility, of well-being and eternal peace, with vine and wine as an allegory of the *vita felix*, the happy life.

Title. Dionysos and His Retinue in the Art of Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine

Author. Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom — Ph. D., independant scholar. The University of Göttingen, Wilhelmsplatz 1, 37073 Göttingen, Germany. renate34@gmx.de.

Abstract. Dionysian imagery was a popular subject in the visual arts of ancient Palestine, reflecting a Hellenistic cultural heritage no longer identified with paganism. Dionysus' popularity, universality, and longevity are due to the convivial aspect of wine-consuming among the Greeks: the idea of sharing. Scenes and motifs embellish different items: mosaic floors, sculpture and carved stone; marble and stone sarcophagi and lead coffins; tableware, household vessels, metal and clay lamps; bronze and clay figurines; ivory and bone carvings; textiles; coins; jewelry. The contextual evidence indicates that pagans, Jews and Christians made use of the same iconography.

Keywords: cult of Dionysus; late Roman and Byzantine Palestine; villa furnishings; symposium; social elite; paganism; Judaism; Christianity.

Название статьи. Дионис и его свита в искусстве Палестины позднеримского периода и эпохи византийского владычества.

Сведения об авторе. Розенталь-Хегинботтом Рената — Ph. D., исследователь. Гёттингенский университет, Wilhelmsplatz 1, Гёттинген, Германия, 37073. renate34@gmx.de.

Аннотация. Дионисийские мотивы, весьма популярные в изобразительном искусстве Палестины периода византийского правления, несли в себе наследие эллинистической эпохи, но теперь более не были связаны с языческими верованиями. Такая повсеместная и длительная популярность Диониса среди греков была связана со свойственной им культурой употребления вина во время праздничных застолий. Эти мотивы и сцены использовались в декоре многих сохранившихся предметов: мозаичных полов, мраморных и каменных саркофагов, столовых приборов, домашней утвари, бронзовых и глиняных фигурок, ламп, в резьбе на кости и камне, текстиле, чеканке и ювелирных украшениях. Данное исследование указывает на то, что одна и та же связанная с Дионисом иконография прослеживается среди большого количества артефактов, принадлежащих как язычникам, так и христианам и иудеям, проживающим на территории Палестины периода византийского правления.

Ключевые слова: культ Диониса; поздняя античность; Византия; Палестина; отделка вилл; элита общества; язычество; иудаизм; христианство.

References

1. Bel N. Des traditions variées. *L'Orient romain et byzantine au Louvre*. Arles, Actes Sud Publ., 2012, pp. 332–337.
2. Ben-Arieh S. Survey Between Raphia and the Brook of Egypt. *Atiqot Hebrew Series*, 1974, no. 7, pp. 91–94 (in Hebrew with English summary).
3. Ben-Arieh S. An Oinophoros. *Atiqot Hebrew Series*, 1974, no. 7, p. 97 (in Hebrew with English summary).
4. Ben-Dov M. *Jerusalem, Man and Stone: An Archaeologist's Personal View of His City*. Tel Aviv, Modan Publishing House Publ., 1990. 285 p.
5. Bowersock G. W. *Mosaics as History. The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam*. Cambridge, Mass, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Publ., 2006. 146 p.
6. Dalton O. M. *The Treasure of the Oxus with Other Examples of Early Oriental Metal-Work*. London, Oxford University Press Publ., 1964. 75 p.
7. Dunbabin K. M. D. *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage*. Oxford, Clarendon Press Publ., 1978. 303 p.
8. Dunbabin K. M. D. Domestic Dionysos? Telete in Mosaics from Zeugma and the Late Roman Near East. *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 2008, no. 21, pp. 193–224.
9. Dussaud R. *Les monuments palestiniens et judaïques. Musée du Louvre*. Paris, E. Leroux Publ., 1912. 130 p.
10. Garezou M.-X. Le roptron et la clochette: musique dionysiaque sur un plat byzantine. *Antike Kunst*, 1993, no. 36.2, pp. 111–119.

11. Goldfus H.; Bowes K. New Late Roman Bone Carvings from Ḥaluṣa and the Problem of Regional Bone Carving Workshops in Palestine. *Israel Exploration Journal*, 2000, no. 50, pp. 185–202.
12. Grossmann R. A. A New Reconstruction of a Mosaic from Gerasa. *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2006, pp. 148–153.
13. Joyce H. A Mosaic from Gerasa in Orange, Texas, and Berlin. *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Römische Abteilung*, 1980, no. 87, pp. 307–325.
14. Kriseleit I. *Altes Museum, Pergamonmuseum, Antike Mosaiken*. Berlin, Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000, pp. 35–40.
15. Lenzen V. F. The Triumph of Dionysos on Textiles of Late Antique Egypt. *University of California Publications in Classical Archaeology*, 1960, no. 5, pp. 1–23.
16. Loffreda S. *Cafarnao VIII. Documentazione fotografica degli oggetti (1968–2003)* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Collectio Maior 50). Jerusalem, edizioni terra santa, 2008. 151 p.
17. Marangou L. *Bone Carvings from Egypt, I. Graeco-Roman Period* (Benaki Museum, Athens). Tübingen, Wasmuth, 1976. 72 p.
18. Merrony M. W. The Reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity in the Early Byzantine Mosaic Pavements of Arabia and Palestine. *Liber Annuus*, 1998, no. 48, pp. 441–482.
19. Miguélez Cavero L. The Appearance of the Gods in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos. *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 2009, no. 49, pp. 557–583.
20. Ovadiah R. and A. *Mosaic Pavements in Israel*. Rome, “L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 1987. 276 p.
21. Ovadiah A.; Gomez de Silva C.; Mucznik S. The Mosaic Pavements of Sheikh Zouède in Northern Sinai. *Tesserae, Festschrift für Josef Engemann, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum Ergänzungsband*, 1991, no. 18, pp. 181–191.
22. Parrish D. A Mythological Theme in the Decoration of Late Roman Dining Rooms: Dionysos and His Circle. *Revue Archéologique*, 1995, pp. 307–332.
23. Piccirillo M. *The Mosaics of Jordan*. Amman, American Center of Oriental Research, 1997. 383 p.
24. Poblome J. Dionysiac Oinophoroi from Sagalassos in Egypt. In *Egyptian Religion in the Last Thousand Years. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*. Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 1998, pp. 205–225.
25. Rosenthal-Heginbottom R. Small Finds from the Excavations (1958–61). *The Architecture of Oboda: Final Report* (Qedem 36). Negev A. Jerusalem, Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997, pp. 193–214.
26. Rosenthal-Heginbottom R. Roman and Late Antique Hoards of Silver Tableware as Status Symbols. *Hoard and Genizot as Chapters in History*. Catalogue No. 33, Spring 2013. Haifa, Hecht Museum, University of Haifa, pp. 41–48.
27. Rutschowskaya M.-H. *Tissus coptes*. Paris, Éditions Adam Biro, 1990. 159 p.
28. Schrenk S. (Wall-)Hangings Depicted in Late Antique Works of Art? The Question of Function. *Clothing the House. Furnishing Textiles of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries*. Moor A. De and Fluck C. Tiel, Lannoo Publishers, 2009, pp. 146–155.
29. Talgam R. *Mosaics of Faith, Floors of Pagans, Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims in the Holy Land*. Jerusalem, Yad Ben-Zvi-Press, 2014. 579 p.
30. Talgam R.; Weiss Z. *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris* (Qedem 44). Jerusalem, Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004. 136 p.
31. Thompson D. J. Philadelphus’ Procession: Dynastic Power in a Mediterranean Context. *Politics, Administration and Society in the Hellenistic and Roman World* (Studia Hellenistica 36). Mooren L. ed. Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2000, pp. 365–388.
32. Z’ubi I.; Gatier P. L.; Piccirillo M.; Seigne J. Note sur une mosaïque à scène bachique dans und palais d’époque byzantine à Jerash. *Liber Annuus*, 1994, no. 44, pp. 539–546.