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## Scenes of Daily Life in the Mosaics of Ostia<sup>1</sup>

Between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B. C., the use of mosaic paving in the main rooms of both public and private buildings became established in Ostia. The technique adopted consisted in the laying of small quadrangular *tesserae*, generally measuring one centimetre on each side and sometimes, in situations requiring a more valuable work, even less; the material used was limestone, which lent itself to an easy and clean cut for the white *tesserae* and flint of a dark grey colour for the black ones; local stones were used for the coloured *tesserae*, while marble was preferred in the *opus sectile* paving with larger “tiles” (Ill. 19).

The use of marble in floors became widespread in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Evidence of this can be found in the Ostian inscriptions, which were quite frequently intentionally broken and squared to fit into coverings<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, the floor beneath the mosaic needed adequate preparation, which Vitruvius (7, 1, 55) and Pliny (*Nat. hist.* 36, 186) describe precisely. Specifically, the technical and chronological aspects of the construction of the Ostian mosaics are documented in Becatti [2, p. 250] and Pellegrino [15, pp. 23–26] with previous bibliography.

Initially, a simpler type of mosaic with a plain black background and white *tesserae*, sometimes arranged regularly and sometimes scattered, became popular. Later on, the light-coloured mosaic floor became more common, with geometric and floral decorations obtained with black *tesserae*. This work was simple and inexpensive to produce. As time went by, the motifs were enriched with figures and scenes in colour, also due to the growing influence of the Hellenistic tradition.

The oldest remains, as you can imagine, are not numerous because they have been erased by successive constructions. This phenomenon of demolition and reconstruction in Ostia was not only widespread, but also led to a gradual and noticeable rise in ground level. This situation, common in all ancient cities, is more accentuated in our case than elsewhere: in fact, the flooding of the Tiber and the presence of aquifers made it necessary to periodically raise the ground level in many parts of the settlement, perhaps also as part of an urban renewal project implemented by the colony’s administration. In addition, at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D., legislation issued by the capital’s government specifically required the construction of new and more powerful foundations for the construction of high housing complexes [13, pp. 17–18; 14, pp. 32–34], which entailed raising ground levels [7, pp. 63–97]. However, the use of the stratigraphic method in the excavations has brought to light the evidence that remained buried.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the Archaeological Park of Ostia Antica for the use of the images.

<sup>2</sup> The reuse of marble from inscriptions, especially those coming from the various necropolises that offered an overabundance of suitable material for the purpose of covering, is a characteristic of Ostian epigraphy. We can calculate that there are at least five hundred reused slabs out of ten thousand documents available.

The wide range of Ostian mosaics can be seen both in public spaces, particularly baths or the headquarters of professional associations, and in the private rooms of homes.

The work of the mosaicists was certainly not cheap, the cost of a mosaic was probably as high, if not higher, than that of a wall fresco, while its patronage was to be found among more or less wealthy middle-class families.

The lower classes were content to use a figurative repertoire often of low artistic quality and with simple and not particularly original motifs. The more affluent section of the population, out of an understandable spirit of emulation, preferred on more than one occasion to commission works that required the use of colour, which, applied with a wide range of colours, allowed the representation of figurative themes with a more sophisticated realistic rendering.

However, also with the black-and-white mosaic technique highly valuable compositions were executed. In large areas, especially in the baths, mythological themes and fantasy compositions are especially common, with an abundance of animals, gods, and sea monsters, which were particularly appropriate for a seaside location. The figures are so varied that they almost constitute a bestiary of the period. At the same time, the depiction of other animals, especially birds and fish, is the result of careful observation of the surroundings. The motifs derive from repertoires that have been widespread since the late Hellenistic period and passed on from one workshop to another workshop through the use of cartoons. The decorative motifs were repeated with small variations, often due to the need to adapt the existing composition to the geometric shape of the rooms, a goal that could also be achieved by enlarging the scene by combining cartoons of different origins.

Generally speaking, however, Roman craftsmen were able to express a stylistic quality of considerable value in this field, creating an original style compared to Hellenistic mosaic production. In fact, especially in large areas such as baths, they were able to cover very large surfaces with exceptional skill, using only black and white tiles, a task that would have been impossible with the polychrome technique. A skilful dosage between the white background of the floors, the black figures and the rendering of the internal details of these with white lines, succeeded in creating airy and very harmonious compositions that, as in stylistic logic, have been compared to Attic ceramics with black figures, as in the Neptune Baths built around 139 A. D. at the behest of Hadrian and later of Antoninus Pius [4, pp. 310–311].

Another element of originality of Roman mosaic art was that of creating a new relationship between the mosaic that decorated vast surfaces and the observer, so that the latter, in order to admire and understand the figurative theme of the decorated floor, could not observe it from a fixed point but had to move and follow it around the room: this is what Clarke defined as “Kinesthetic Address” [3, pp. 1–17; 4, p. 21], consisting in the fact that the viewer was led to follow the drawings of the figures with his eyes through one or more compartments, in order to understand the meaning of the scenes. The classic example is represented by the mosaics of the aforementioned Neptune Baths, whose grandiose subject matter unfolds along the course of three rooms (vestibule, entrance hall, *frigidarium*) arranged in axial sequence.

Variations on the main theme may have been the work of local artists who were not always precise and careful in their understanding and reworking of the original subjects. It should also be added that restorations from two centuries ago and at different times might also have

influenced the understanding of the scenes. This fact clearly occurs in the case of the mosaic inscriptions.

Ostia, a lively and animated city due to its port and its trade with the major Mediterranean cities, also offers a vast repertoire of scenes dedicated to daily life, on which we intend to focus our attention.

While the execution is often approximate because it is not based on tried and tested repertoires, the composition sometimes shows certain freshness due to the imagination of the moment.

The following main themes can be identified as:

- 1) The **world of sport**, with boxers, wrestlers and especially aspects of circus competitions. These representations, which have always been the focus of attention in the ancient world, were mainly used in public and private baths, which by their nature were places intended for the care of the body, recreation, and maintenance of social relationships.

Often, the names of the athletes are also given as proof of the authenticity of the scene. The fact that the names refer to real persons is documented. This is the case of the wrestlers *Alexander* and *Helix* (Fig. 1), in the homonymous *caupona* from fourth region [2, pp.205–207], identified by Christopher Jones [9, pp.293–298] as *C. Perelius Aurelius Alexander* and *Aurelius Helix*, two famous pankration specialists active in the time of Elagabalus (218–222) and multiple winners in Rome. The mosaic is therefore to be understood as a tribute paid by the owner of the *caupona* to two well-known personalities with a large fan base<sup>3</sup>.

Two wrestlers [16, p.223] are also depicted in the eponymous block of the Severan age [14, pp.4–11] in fifth region: for one of them, *Artemi*, it is certainly the shortened form of a surname, such as *Artemi(dorus)*, *Artemi(sius)*, or more probably *Artemi(us)*.

The predilection of Severan mosaics for gymnasium scenes is related to a period of intense building activity, which led to the construction of new baths or the renovation of previous ones.

The mosaic of the *apodyterium* (changing room) in the baths of Porta Marina, also dating back to the Severan period, is more accurate. It effectively depicts the athletes around a table with prizes, with good attention to detail and an elegant fluidity of line [17, pp.81–82]. This is one of the best achievements of the genre, thanks to the mosaicist's ability to render the psychology of the characters, from the balanced calm of the judge to the exaltation after a victory, from the tension before a fight to the relaxation after a competition. Since competitions are not an end in themselves, but require a prize, it is the prize that occupies the central place in the scene around which the other characters revolve.

Aspects of daily life are treated differently depending on the era. For example, the circus theme was particularly popular throughout the empire in the late period. Another fine example is the mosaic of the *calidarium* (room with the hot-water basin) of the baths of the Imperial Palace (now dated to the Severan period [13, in press], brought to light after excavations in the 1980s. It presents imposing figures of charioteers seen from the front (Fig. 2), accompanied by

<sup>3</sup> Wrestling, being considered 'quieter' and 'safer', was reserved for the junior classes, while the adult athletes were engaged in boxing and pancrazio; in the latter, a mixture of wrestling and boxing, fighting was barehanded and any technique was allowed except biting and gouging the opponent's eyes out.

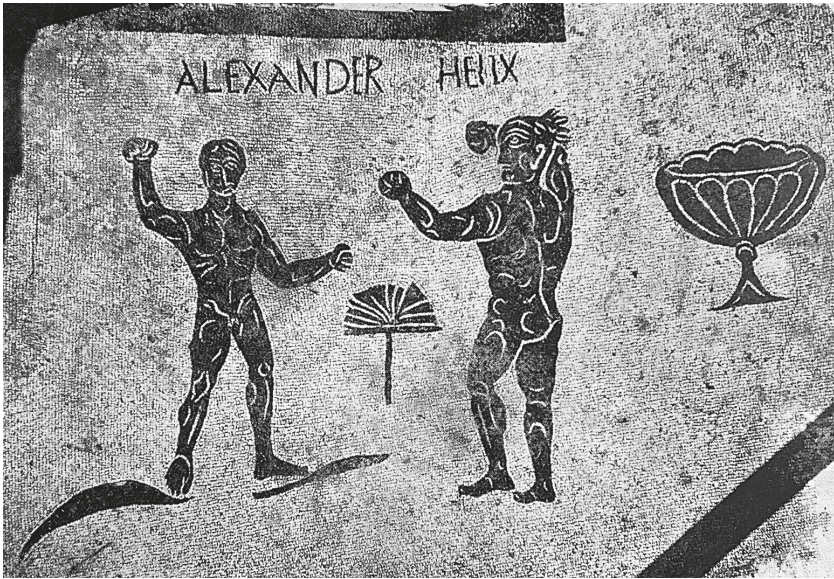


Fig. 1. The wrestlers Alexander and Helix. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica

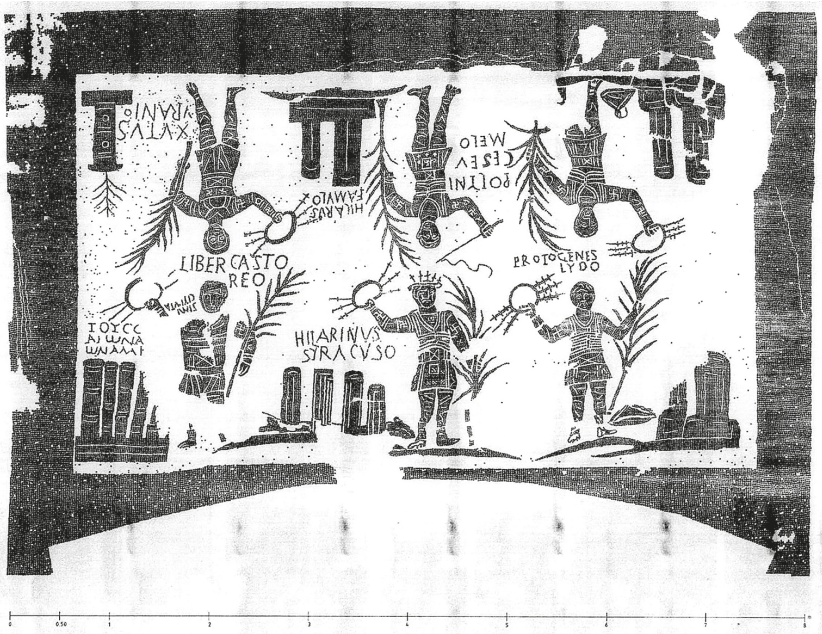


Fig. 2. The charioteers of Palazzo imperiale. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica



inscriptions, in the act of displaying the symbols of their victories next to the prizes won in the competitions, the *βραβεία*, reproduced with cylinders of different heights according to their importance. The style belongs to the current of the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A. D., which tends to represent grandiose scenes with a strong visual impact, as can be seen in the figures of the athletes shown in their solemn frontality. The inscriptions mention the names of the charioteers, evidently famous in Rome and well known in Ostia as well, paired with those of the respective horses that had favoured victory. The fact of indicating the names of the horses, as well as those of the mules in the Baths of *Cisiarii* or that of the dog *Monnus* in the building of the same name, adds a touch of realism and everyday life to the scene.

- 2) **Peasant life** with depictions of the seasons or work in the fields, as in a funerary mosaic on the Isola Sacra, which came to light a few years ago following public works [17, pp. 65–66]. This is the so-called “Tomb of the Reaping” dated to around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D. and decorated with a paneled floor with scenes rendered in a popular and immediate style (Fig. 3):

- the harrowing of the soil by a farmer using a pair of oxen;
- weeding the seeded crop and removing weeds;
- harvesting carried out by two labourers;
- the transport of the ears of corn by two reapers;
- harvesting carried out with two pairs of horses;
- cleaning the grain.

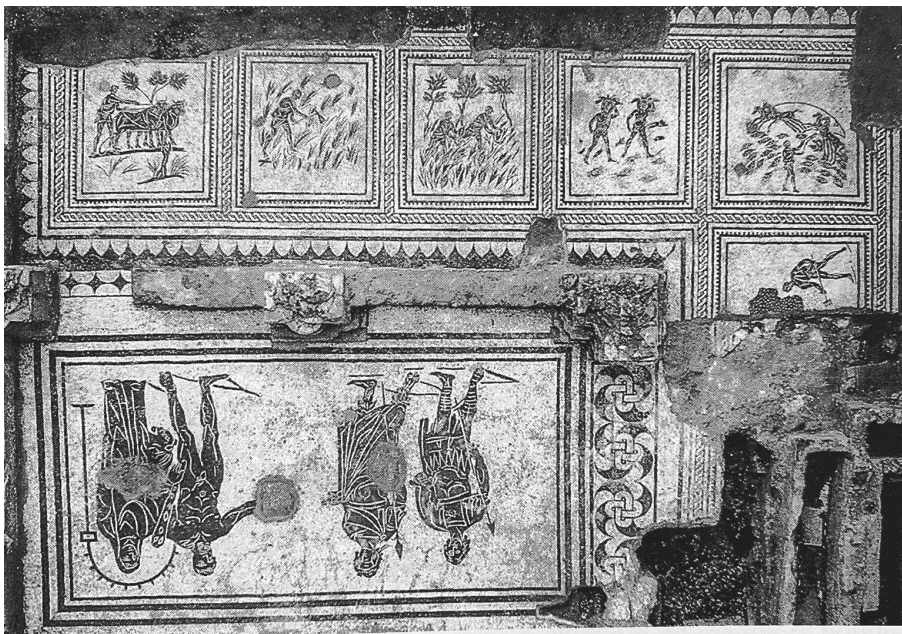


Fig. 3. Tomb of the Reaping. Fiumicino, Isola sacra. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica

One wonders whether the choice of these scenes, which accurately depict the succession of agricultural work, is due to a particular interest of the owner of the tomb, which in any case must have been directed towards trade rather than the cultivation of wheat, since this cereal was mainly imported.

It should be noted that in the same tomb, but in another area, there is another mosaic of a cultured character with mythological content alluding to the passage from life to death (the myth of Admetus and Alcestis [17, p. 66]).

It should be noted that two levels of interpretation are evident in this decoration, one with a funerary character expressed in the erudite model of a mythical subject (the death and rebirth of Alcestis), and the other with a theme of everyday life rendered in a more cursive style and more easily understood.

Also related to this theme of transport is the lively and interesting mosaic from the Hadrianic period in the baths of *Cisariii*, which depicts two concentric walls complete with gates and towers (Fig. 4). The inner wall is supported, almost protected by four telamons, which in their symbolic representation seem to prelude the medieval conception that placed schematic images of cities and buildings in the hands of saints or benefactors [2, p. 298]. On the outside of the latter, scenes from the life of the carters are arranged on the four sides: the journey, the stop, the attack of the beasts (four mules). Traditionally it is believed that the building belonged to the association of *cisariii*, but it is more likely that it was a reception facility for travellers arriving in Ostia by land or sea/river (the building was near the river quay).

The mosaicist reproduces the subjects taken from Hellenistic cartoons, but also displays an entirely Roman style: this is evident in the scenes of real life with carters of a popular flavour (for which there were no prototypes to copy) and in the external walls which are nothing more than an attempt to present in an elementary form of the third dimension the simple and elegant borders of towers already present in scenes of the late Hellenistic period. Here too, with a touch of realism, the names of four mules are given, *Potiscus*, *Barosus*, *Pudens*, *Podagrosus*<sup>4</sup>, which are certainly not high-sounding, but are taken from ordinary life experience. In this case too, it is necessary to emphasise the twofold stylistic aspect that, on the one hand, provides for a more cursive rendering of the scenes of everyday life, where the mosaicists could not use Hellenistic cartoons, and, on the other hand, a more stylistically correct depiction of the mythological and decorative themes (sea monsters and fish) derived from previous and more elaborate iconographic compositions.

- 3) The **world of commerce** with the multiple scenes in the Piazzale delle Corporazioni, which are a unique testimony to the commercial relations between the capital, Rome, and the provinces.

The dating of the mosaics in the forecourt is closely linked to the chronology of the vast building complex that they decorate. The present situation reflects the final phase of the use of the complex, modified by the works carried out in the Severan period to enlarge the theatre. These works also involved the temple in the centre of the forecourt, whose purpose has recently been revised [12, in press], making use of unpublished epigraphic fragments.

<sup>4</sup> The inscriptions are published in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (= C. I. L.) 14, 04754.



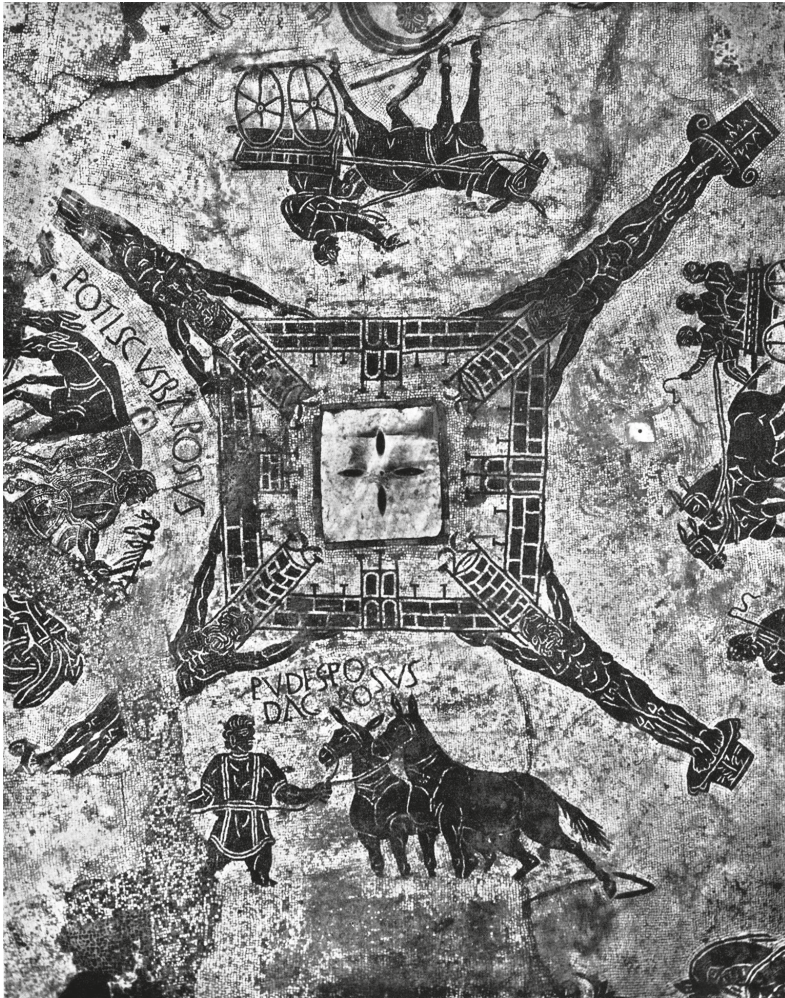


Fig. 4. Mosaic of Baths of Cisiarii. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica

Giovanni Becatti has identified 58 *stationes* with figurative scenes alluding to commercial activities rendered in a bare and immediate style, functional to an uneducated clientele who needed above all clear and well-read representations [2, p. 64]. Of these, 10 refer to local colleges (the usual activity of fitting out and repairing ships; transporting, measuring and distributing grain); 9 are of African boatmen, 3 from Egypt, 2 from Sardinia, 1 from Narbonne Gaul. The preponderance of relations with African provinces is confirmed by epigraphy (onomastic data, use of augural formulas), *instrumentum domesticum* (*amphorae*, *dolia*), and the layout of places of worship.

The theme of trade and maritime traffic from the Mediterranean basin to the port of Ostia had been expressed since the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. in the so-called mosaic of the

Provinces, brought to light by the stratigraphic excavation conducted under the Via dei Vigili [2, pp. 45–47; 17, pp. 33–34].

The central panel with the dolphins is a motif derived from more elaborate Hellenistic cartoons, but rendered in an innovative style: the four fish are not depicted with volume effects, but with their bodies all black and rendered with few internal details that stand out with fluid elegance against the light background. This is the style, typically Roman, defined by Clarke as “à silhouette”, also attested in Pompeii [4, pp. 76–78].

What jobs did the Ostian population do? Undoubtedly, everything connected with port activity. This activity was organised by professional associations. Even if we are not able to establish what the actual role of these organisations was, at least in the first three centuries of the empire, and especially whether they had a public function from the earliest times, we do know that for every aspect of maritime and commercial traffic there was a corporation. Sometimes the guild consisted of a few dozen members, sometimes of hundreds. This situation is attested by abundant epigraphic material, which is also often found in the mosaics.

It should be added that the situation of the Ostian port (or rather of the ports) was not the easiest. For the whole republican period, the port was located on the course of the Tiber, between the mouth and the first bend. Then the progressive silting up due to the dragging of the earthy debris by the current made it necessary to build a real port. This took place under Claudius and the port was inaugurated in the first year of Nero’s reign. When this proved to be insufficient and dangerous, Trajan had another basin dug, larger, more internal, and therefore more protected. But it was then necessary to provide for the loading and unloading of goods, with the ships of greater tonnage sometimes anchored offshore, and then for the transshipment. Then the cargoes were taken to Rome, either by water by hauling boats or by land along the Portuense and Ostiense roads. The Tiber at the mouth of the river divides into two arms: on the left arm, there was Ostia, and on the right arm, opened in the imperial age, there was the port settlement of *Portus* which became a city only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A. D. under emperor Constantine. Between the two arms rises the Isola Sacra. The lack of bridges to cross the river for almost all the imperial age obliged the population to use a ferry service. The latter was performed by four ferryboat corporations (*traiectus*) attested by epigraphic sources: two are poorly documented (*traiectus togatensium* and *marmorariorum*), but the other two — on the basis of very recent studies — are among the most important in Ostia (*traiectus Luculli* [10, pp. 149–161; 19, pp. 131–145] and *traiectus Rusticelii* [11, pp. 361–366]).

#### 4) Depictions of socially humble people such as bath attendants in baths.

In what is commonly known as the Baths of *Buticosus* from the mid-Imperial period, we have a depiction [2, pp. 29–30, n. 51; 17, p. 59] of the bathing attendant *Epictetus* (a surname of clear Grecanic etymology, one of the most common in Ostia, with 34 references). The popular flavour of the depiction, which is simple and brief, almost like an image taken from life, since there were no Hellenistic models to take inspiration from, is accentuated by the name *Buticosus* attributed to the lifeguard himself [6, p. 158], perhaps with a phallic meaning.

#### 5) The activity of measuring grain and recording it on accounts raises the question of the particular importance of supplying the urban population. This work was carried



out by the corporation of *mensores frumentarii*. Its importance is underlined not so much by the at least twelve epigraphic attestations, as by the importance and the rank of the personages to whom this college placed dedications.

The mosaic that best illustrates this task, from the Severan period, depicts a scene of transporting and measuring cereals (Fig. 5): it is located inside a large *horreum* (warehouse) not far from the river port [2, pp. 33–36; 17, p. 81]. Six figures can be seen gathered around a bushel that is being filled. On the left, one of them is carrying a sack of grain: he is probably a *saccarius* and differs from the other *mensores* (measurers) by his dress; his is a two-piece tunic that reaches the knee, while the measurers are dressed in a sort of one-piece tunics. To his right, there is a small figure raising his right hand. He probably uses the technique of digital computation (i.e. with his fingers). It would therefore be a *calculator*. From his stature, we deduce that he is a boy. Here again, the theme represented justifies the simple stylistic rendering with immediate legibility effects. The use of boys in this accountancy work is confirmed by a funerary inscription<sup>5</sup>, which commemorates a young man of 13 years old who was employed in this work.



Fig. 5. Room of *mensores*. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica

- 6) Other minor **hints of everyday life concern hunting and fishing**; however, they often have an exotic setting (usually on the banks of the Nile), but this is outside the scope of this paper. However, the mosaics alluding to fishing and fishing trade are interest-

<sup>5</sup> C.I.L. 14, 00472.

ing: they show that this activity could be particularly profitable, so much so that it aroused the envy of the people, as can be seen from some of the mosaic inscriptions. We cite, for example, the well-known scene in the *Taberna* of fishmongers, where the dolphin attacks the octopus (Ill. 20), completed by the inscription *Inbide calco te*<sup>6</sup>. Strangely enough, Becatti [2, p. 191] intended the inscription as being directed against the dolphin, as a disturber of fishing and an enemy of fishermen. This argument was taken up by Pompili [18, p. 5]. In reality, ancient authors did not think so, especially Pliny (*Nat. hist.* 9, 31) who highlighted the sense of friendship and loyalty of this cetacean towards men and especially children (as can be seen in the numerous illustrations of putti riding on the animal's back).

The ideas offered by the mosaics go beyond the purely iconographic motif and offer a different point of view to increase and improve our knowledge of how daily life took place in a locality of no small importance<sup>7</sup>, which, because of its geographical position and the activities that took place there, can be considered a reflection of life in the capital of the empire.

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<sup>6</sup> C. I. L. 14, 04757.

<sup>7</sup> It is believed that Ostia had about 50,000 inhabitants at the time of Antoninus Pius; although the calculation is affected by many variables that we are unable to specify, at least the population density must have been significant [16, p. 36].

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**Title.** Scenes of Daily Life in the Mosaics of Ostia

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**Abstract.** During the heyday of mosaic in Ostia, that is to say during the imperial age, the patrons were families of a more or less wealthy bourgeoisie. They were content to embellish the black and white mosaic floors with a figurative repertoire often of low artistic quality and with simple and not particularly original motifs. The more affluent classes, however, were influenced by Hellenistic figurative culture and made frequent use of colour. Mythological and fantasy themes with an abundance of animals, gods, and sea monsters are especially common in large areas. These motifs derive from repertoires that had been widespread since the late Hellenistic period and were repeated with minor variations. Local artists could be more or less skilled in understanding and reworking the subjects. But Ostia, a lively and animated city due to its port and its trade with the major Mediterranean cities, also offers a vast repertoire of scenes dedicated to daily life, on which we intend to focus our attention. A number of main themes can be identified, such as sport (boxers, wrestlers, and especially aspects of circus competitions), rural life (depictions of the seasons, agricultural activity), the world of commerce with the scenes on the Corporation Square, depictions of socially humble people, the measurement of grain and the provisioning of the urban population, and “Nilotic” hunting and fishing scenes.

**Keywords:** Ancient Ostia, mosaics, daily life, baths, trade, sport

**Название статьи.** Сцены повседневной жизни в мозаиках Остии

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**Аннотация.** В период расцвета мозаики в Остии, то есть в эпоху империи, её заказчиками выступали семьи более или менее богатой буржуазии. Они довольствовались тем, что украшали чёрно-белые мозаичные полы фигуративными композициями, часто низкого художественного качества, а также простыми и не особенно оригинальными мотивами. Однако более состоятельные классы находились под влиянием эллинистической образной культуры и часто использовали цветные мозаики. Мифологические и фантастические сюжеты с обилием животных, божеств и морских чудовищ были особенно распространены по всей империи. Морские мотивы были широко известны с позднего эллинизма и воспроизводились с незначительными вариациями. Местные художники в той или иной степени воспринимали и перерабатывали такие сюжеты. Остия, оживлённый портовый город, ведущий торговлю с крупнейшими средиземноморскими городами, также предлагал и обширный репертуар сцен, посвящённых повседневной жизни, на которых мы намерены сосредоточить наше внимание. Среди них можно выделить ряд таких основных тем, как: занятие разными видами спорта (часто показывались боксёры, борцы и особенно сюжеты цирковых соревнований); сельская жизнь (изображения времён года, сельскохозяйственной деятельности); торговый мир со сценами на площади Корпораций; изображения социально скромных людей; взвешивание зерна и раздача продовольствия городскому населению; а также “нильские” сцены охоты и рыбалки.

**Ключевые слова:** Древняя Остия, мозаика, повседневная жизнь, бани, торговля, спорт





Ill. 19. Floor *ad opus sectile* in the Domus of Cupid and Psyche. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica



Ill. 20. Taberna of Fishmongers. Ostia antica. © Parco Archeologico di Ostia antica