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**DE RERUM NATURA: THE LOD MOSAIC
FLOOR AS A COSMOLOGICAL AND
TRANSCENDENTAL ALLEGORY**

INTRODUCTION

Discovered in 1996, the Roman carpet mosaic in Lod (ancient Lydda),¹ has attracted the attention of researchers and art lovers with its unique aesthetic and quality of preservation (fig. 1). The mosaic is dated to around 300 CE, its dimensions are approximately 17 m long by 9 m wide, and it probably once decorated a reception hall in a private house.² The carpet mosaic consists in three panels: the large middle panel enclosed in a square frame presents an almost circular polygonal composition divided into triangles and squares of different sizes, surrounding a central octagonal space. All the

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1 Lydda was named *Diospolis*, ‘City of Zeus’, at the time of Hadrian. See: Edith Mary Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1981), 241.

2 The mosaic was discovered by the Israel Antiquities Authority, e.g.: Miriam Avissar, ‘Lod – a Mosaic Floor’, *Hadashot Arkheologiyot (Archaeological News)*, 105 (1966), 157–160; Miriam Avissar, ‘Lod – a Mosaic Floor’, *Excavations and Surveys in Israel*, 17 (1998), 169–172; Asher Ovadia, Sonia Mucznik, ‘Classical Heritage and Anti-Classical Trends in the Mosaic Pavement of Lydda (Lod)’, *Assaph, Studies in Art History*, 3 (1998), 1–18; Rina Talgam, ‘Unearthing a Masterpiece: A Roman Mosaic from Lod, Israel’, *Expedition*, 55.1 (2013), 4–5; Glen W. Bowersock, Joshua Schwartz, Amir Gorzalczy, Rina Talgam, *The Lod Mosaic: A Spectacular Roman Mosaic Floor* (New York: Scala Arts Publishers, Inc., 2015). See also the official website of the mosaic: <http://www.lodmosaic.org/home.html>, and detailed photos in the public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Lod_Mosaic [accessed 01.12.2021]. The entire mosaic comprises two large carpets divided by an elongated rectangular horizontal panel containing a decorative pattern. This study focuses on the northern carpet which consists in three homogenous panels.

geometric spaces are filled with animals portrayed in a naturalistic manner, even mimetic. Two smaller rectangular panels, one above and one below, adjoin the middle panel. The upper panel features nine hexagons and two trapezoid forms, each one with an animal, while the bottom panel differs from the others, portraying marine creatures and ships devoid of geometric frames.

In the Homeric age, the universe was imagined as a disk of land surrounded by an Ocean, and generally throughout ancient times there was debate about the shape of the universe.³ Animals were exploited in everyday life for food, hunting, pleasure, and ostentation.⁴ Here, I seek to focus on the metaphoric and symbolic meanings of the animals and other images depicted, interpreting them as an allegory of the way the cosmos and relations between the human and the Divine were perceived in Antiquity.⁵

While a metaphorical interpretation has been suggested by Amir Gorzalczany and Baruch Rosen regarding the lower ocean scene,⁶ the present study seeks to interpret the whole mosaic as a unified work, based on the approach that every part of the mosaic contributes to the overall idea.

The argument presented in this study is that the three parts of the mosaic together represent a cosmological and transcendental allegory based on – mainly Neo-Platonist – Roman thought. Emanation is a main concept in Neo-Platonist thought, and thus the assumption examined here is that the mosaic reflects Neo-Platonist notions about the emanation of the cosmos and Creation from the One (*hen*), and the yearning of the human to transcend and unite with the Divine.

3 James, S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14, 41–44.

4 Johnson Donald Hughes, 'Hunting in the Ancient Mediterranean World', *A Cultural History of Animals in Antiquity*, ed. by Linda Kalof, Brigitte Resl (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007), 51–70; Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 36–39.

5 On the perception of artistic representation as conceptual and metaphorical see: David Summers, 'Representation', *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson, Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3–16; Alex Potts, 'Sign', *ibid.*, 17–30; David Carrier, 'Art History', *ibid.*, 129–141. On Ancient art as metaphorical see: Jas Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality & Subjectivity in Art & Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 23, 25, 133, 136, 138, 142, 148; Andrew Stewart, *Art, Desire and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3–7.

6 Amir Gorzalczany, Baruch Rosen, 'The Marine Scene in the Lod Mosaics', *Journal of Mosaic Research*, 12 (2019), 47–61.



FIG. 1. THE MOSAIC FROM LOD, AROUND 300 CE (APPROXIMATELY 17 M LONG AND 9 M WIDE). ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

PHUSIS: THE EARTHLY NATURE

The middle panel is a square containing a polygon with an octagon in its centre, surrounded by triangular and square forms. The composition is symmetrical, with the geometric forms being organised in multiples of four, and the entirety surrounded by a repetitive dynamic patterned frame. The central octagon is surrounded by four squares and twelve triangles, with four triangular shapes in each corner of the large square that frames the entirety. Each geometric form is filled with animal images portrayed quite naturalistically.⁷ As stated earlier, in Antiquity there were debates about the shape of the universe. However, the argument presented here is that the middle panel was not intended to present a real or illustrative portrayal of the shape of the universe, but rather to provide an allegory of the essence and nature of the earthly world as perceived in Roman – mainly Neo-Platonic – thought.

The immediate symbolism that arises from the geometric features is that of a universe that is governed by rules where nothing is random. Indeed, the Creation itself was perceived as controlled by rules and a law generated from the One (*hen*); nothing was created without a reason. The universe was perceived as governed by a perfect order that is managed by eternal law, to which all are subject.⁸

Proportion and symmetry, according to Plotinus, are manifestations of the intellect, which is a reflection of the Divine, the One. The universe was created as a reflection of the One, and its beauty is manifested in such visual features as unity, symmetry, and proportionality, which reflect intelligence.⁹ The earthly universe is far from being perfect, and is remote from the Supreme Being, although it is a reflection and expansion of this being. The human soul has an unconscious yearning to return to its divine origin.¹⁰

The most characteristic feature of the Supreme World is unity. This is a notable feature of the middle panel, together with multiplicity: on the one hand, the almost circular polygon within the square frame is

7 Ovadiah, Mucznik, 'Classical Heritage and Anti-Classical Trends in the Mosaic Pavement of Lydda (Lod)', 1–18. A description of the animals, expanding the symbolic meaning in the context of the mosaic will follow.

8 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, transl. by Arthur H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), II 4, 32–45; III.

9 Ibid., I 2, 6; VI 3, 16; VI 7, 22.

10 Ibid., I 6, 2–5; II 9, 7; III 2, 2; III 6, 2; III 8, 10; IV 8, 7; V 1, 3; V 2, 1; VI 9, 7; VI 21, 22; III 5, 1.

very focused and characterised by a tight concentric composition, as an embodiment of unity; while on the other hand the composition reflects a variety of geometric forms as an embodiment of multiplicity.¹¹ These features convey the message of a universe dominated by cyclicity, harmony, permanence, and eternity. Similar features, such as a concentric circular composition and a multiplicity of geometric forms, can be seen in other Roman mosaic floors. Noteworthy is the floor from El Djem (fig. 2),¹² the circular geometric composition of which seems too to reflect the harmony, cyclicity, eternity, permanence, and unity of the universe, while the figures portrayed within the circular forms are personifications of the cosmic elements: eternal time, the sun, the moon, and the seasons.¹³ Multiplicity as an allegory of the universe is also reflected in another mosaic from El-Djem portraying a carpet of acanthus foliage (fig. 3).¹⁴ Although the motifs in this mosaic seem initially to be scattered at random, the composition presents the foliage symmetrically with eight vertical and diagonal axes leading to the centre of the composition. The eight axes portray personifications of the elements, such as Oceanus, basket carriers, *canephoroi* (associated with Dionysus and hence with nature and abundance), the four seasons, and *genii*, representing humankind; while the central image within a circular frame is that of *Annus*, a personification of the year. Hence, the universal order, in its multiplicity and its unity, is presented and represented by both artistic motifs and allegorical images.¹⁵

Multiplicity is the earthly manifestation of the *idea*, the Supreme Being, which is nature, *phusis*. The world of phenomena is an imitation of the lofty spiritual world, its source, and emanates from it.¹⁶ In the world of phenomena multiplicity overshadows unity and is in a constant circular motion in order to preserve its existence. The earthly world is transient in contrast to the spiritual world, which is eternal.

11 On the Aristotelian principle of unity in multiplicity see: Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. by Gerald Frank Else (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 7. 10–12; 8. 30–35.

12 A mosaic from El Djem, *Eternal Time, the Sun, the Moon, and the Seasons*, 3rd century CE (310×350 cm). El Djem Museum, Tunisia.

13 Hédi Slim, 'Temps éternel, temps cyclique', Michele Blanchad-Lemee, Mongi Ennaifer, Hédi and Latifa Slim, *Sols de l'Afrique romaine: Musaiques de Tunisie* (Paris: Impr. Nationale, 1995), 37–40.

14 A mosaic from El Djem, *The Genius of the Year Surrounded by the Four Seasons*, 2nd century CE (440×590 cm). El Djem Museum, Tunisia.

15 Slim, 'Temps éternel, temps cyclique', 41–44.

16 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, II 9, 16; III 5, 2; III 8, 3–5; IV 2, 1; IV 4, 11; IV 7, 8; IV 8, 2–7; V 1, 2; V 3, 3–7; VI 2, 22.

The spiritual world has no beginning and no end, it is in constant formation and all its parts and beings depend on each other.¹⁷ These features find expression in the middle panel of the Lod mosaic: the composition is homogenous and enclosed in a square frame that also encompasses multiple parts and images. The repetitive dynamic patterned frame further accentuates its motion.

The sense of circularity conveyed by the polygon suggests the notion of the circularity of the earth and round-the-world journeys, such as Homer's *Odyssey* or Apollonius' *Argonautica*.¹⁸

The animals portrayed are as follows: in the centre octagon elephant, giraffe, tiger, bull, rhinoceros, lion and lioness, with a marine monster (*ketos*) in the background. The animals appearing in the four square shapes inside the polygon are: a gazelle, two leopards over an amphora, a rabbit nibbling grapes next to a dog, and a lion attacking a stag. Connecting between each of the four squares are three interlocking triangles. The two upper middle triangles feature sea mammals (perhaps seals), and the two lower middle triangles feature fish. The two triangles on either side of a middle triangle each feature the same bird. The species can be identified as (clockwise): swan, perhaps partridge or quail, dove, and a kind of goose or Porphyrio. Each of the four right angles of the external square frame is divided into two small triangles, each with a dolphin.

The variety of animals portrayed in the middle panel suggests a typical feature symbolising the mundane world. In reality animals were mainly used for food, fighting, and entertainment. The slaughter of animals in spectacles was very popular. This was part of the Roman policy of *Panem et Circenses*, aimed at supplying lavish spectacles in order to divert the public from affairs of state and avoid their intervention, while reinforcing the popularity of the emperors and the loyalty of the public. Animal slaughter was also carried out when celebrating victory in war. The bloody spectacles manifested the power of the emperors, and were thus politicised. The spectacles consisted in humans killing animals and animals killing other animals. They offered proof of the superiority of humans and their domination over nature, while demonstrating the savage and irrational violence of nature. At the same time they signified

17 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, II 2; II 3, 7; II 6, 1; III 1, 6; IV 7, 8; IV 4, 33–39; V 3, 8; VI 2, 7; VI 3, 15–17.

18 Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 26–31.

Roman supremacy over the rest of the world, particularly over their barbarian enemies.¹⁹

The animals in the centre octagon are mainly associated with the continent of Africa, which was a highly important Roman province. Personifications of Africa appear in other Roman mosaics, such as on the floor carpet from El Djem, where the figure is portrayed wearing a headdress in the shape of elephant ears.²⁰

Elephants were valued for their intelligence,²¹ hunted for their ivory tusks, used simultaneously as dynastic emblems of a country and as weapons of war, allowed ostentation, and were associated with the emperors as the bearers of their cult images, both as statue icons and as signifying the eternal nature of the empire, as represented by the emperors.²²

Elephants were also believed to be protégés of Helios/Sol, and thus symbolised light and life.²³ Hence, elephants were closely associated with earthly life. Giraffes too symbolised Africa. Toynbee notes that from the end of the second century CE onwards, all our information on giraffes in Roman times is in the context of public spectacles attended by emperors, and of emperors' triumphal processions. Giraffes were also given as diplomatic gifts by African rulers to Roman emperors, and became part of menageries.²⁴ It is said that Commodus killed a giraffe with his own hand, entirely unaided.²⁵

Tigers and leopards are predators that were associated with savageness mainly in the arena, and also with man's victory over

19 Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History*, 8–9; Jo-Ann Shelton, 'Beastly Spectacles in the Ancient Mediterranean World', *A Cultural History of Animals in Antiquity*, ed. by Linda Kalof, Brigitte Resl (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2007), 116–117, 121. On the *panem et Circenses* policy in Augustan times see: Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 322–323; Zvi Yavetz, *Augustus: The Victory of Moderation* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1989), 140–143; Otto Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1941), 5; Suetonius, 'Augustus', *Lives of the Caesars*, transl. by Catharine Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–45; Juvenal, *The Satires of Juvenal*, transl. by Hubert Creekmore (New York: New American Library, 1963), X. 72.

20 Hédi Slim, 'L'Afrique, Rome et L'Empire', *Sols de l'Afrique romaine*, 17–35.

21 Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History*, 35.

22 Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 42–43, 50–54; Sian Lewis, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 426–427.

23 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 53–54.

24 Ibid., 141–142; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 453.

25 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 141–142; Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Dio's Roman History*, transl. by Cary Earnest (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), LXXIII.10.3.

evil forces in nature.²⁶ Wild bulls were a frequent sight in the arenas of Rome and throughout the entire Roman world. Bulls were also related to Roman eating habits, since eating beef and veal was very common.²⁷ Bulls were required for sacrificial rituals, the *suovetaurilia* ritual held for the deity Mars, in particular.²⁸ Oxen were first and foremost work animals used for drawing wagons, carts, ploughs, and for threshing.²⁹ The rhinoceros, also associated with Africa, was considered an exotic beast and also appeared in the arena.³⁰

The lion was an animal identified with power, nobility, and majesty, and hence was associated with the emperors, their power and victories; it too was used as an arena beast. The lion was also associated with the victory of the soul over death.³¹ This is manifested in the mosaic in the way in which a lion and a lioness are exhibited. They each sit on a cliff, specifically they are elevated as rulers.

The *ketos*, which is the marine monster portrayed between the cliffs, is the only mythological animal in the mosaic. Sea monsters always inspired both fascination and fear in the minds of the ancients, and they played roles in myths such as Perseus and Andromeda, and Herakles and Hesione.³² The *ketos* seems to symbolise the mythical forces that dominate the universe.

The very fact that both predatory and food animals are portrayed conforms to Plotinus' conception according to which the earthly world is composed of contrasts: black and white, heat and cold, wise and foolish, etc. These diverse elements create one harmonious whole at the same time making it multiple and varied.³³ Good and evil are interdependent; the quest for good requires the acceptance

26 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 71–72, 82–83; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 338, 342–344, 453; Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, LXXVI.7.5; Pliny, *Natural History*, transl. by Harris Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), VIII.64, X.202.

27 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 149–152; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 32–33.

28 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 152.

29 Ibid., 152–162.

30 Ibid., 126–127; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 444.

31 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 64–66; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 322, 332.

32 Alexander L. Jaffe, 'Sea Monsters in Antiquity: A Classical and Zoological Investigation', *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal of Classics*, 1 (2) (2013), 1–13.

33 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, III 2, 16.

of evil. Life demands a constant struggle and exists through the mutual and constant destruction and regeneration of its components. Egoism causes the entities of the world to struggle against each other. Predation is a necessary part of the circle of life and death. And death is a basic counterpart of life. However, sometimes, in order to survive, opposing elements must collaborate and support each other. This collaboration was perceived by Plotinus as the basis of altruism.³⁴ He perceived earthly life as a drama, and the universe as a huge stage, with the humans as actors in this dramatic arena.³⁵ The central octagon in the mosaic indeed seems to be a stage presenting an allegory of earthly life.

The polygon that surrounds the central octagon seems to offer an allegory of the nature of the universe, with the images as symbols of its various features.

The gazelle or deer was exploited in reality for sport, food, and pleasure, and as entertainment as a pet, or it was displayed at spectacles due to its beauty.³⁶ In mythology the deer or gazelle is a delicate creature sacrificed or hunted: in the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon, the young girl is replaced by a deer;³⁷ while one of Heracles' labours was to capture the cunning gazelle sacred to Artemis, which eluded him for a year.³⁸ Hence, the deer became an allegorical image of vulnerability, and in the context of the allegory of the Creation, the deer, and especially the female gazelle, can symbolise the fragile and transient human condition. Indeed, the upper square features a struggle between a lion and a stag, or perhaps a gazelle, due to the shape of its horns. This kind of struggle between a predator and its prey offers an allegory of the nature of the universe as understood by Plotinus.³⁹

Two other predators appear in the opposite square at the bottom, which shows two leopards clinging to a large golden goblet. Leopards had a connection with the Dionysian milieu, especially when depicted alongside a vase, with its association to wine. In symbolising Dionysian

34 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I 8, 3; III 2, 4; III 2, 17; III 3, 3.

35 Ibid., III 2, 17.

36 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 16, 18–19, 143–145, 147.

37 Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, transl. by Florence Melian Stawell (London: G. Bell, 1929).

38 Apollodorus, *The Library*, transl. by James George Frazer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), II 5.3.

39 See note 35.

savageness, the leopards depicted here would seem to allude to Dionysus and the human need for the Dionysian Mysteries as a means to enabling exaltation from the earthly sphere to the Divine.⁴⁰

Another allusion to the Dionysian realm is found in the square presenting a rabbit nibbling at a cluster of grapes. Rabbits were hunted for food and sport, as well as being pets, in Roman life,⁴¹ but in the mythological realm they were torn apart by the Maenads as sacred victims of the Bacchanalian frenzy.⁴² The grapes in the mosaic strengthen the allusion to Dionysus, while the metaphor for human vulnerability is symbolised by the rabbit.⁴³

The dog that appears in the same square suggests its use in reality in guarding, hunting, and performing.⁴⁴ However, it could also allude to Acteon's dogs, which tore him to pieces as punishment by Artemis for his human desire to see the goddess naked while bathing.⁴⁵ In this respect, the dog is a symbol of human flaws and vulnerability. Moreover, in reference to Cerberus, the dog was always also seen in the context of guarding the entrance to the Kingdom of the Dead.⁴⁶ The dog is therefore a reminder of human temporality, and might also symbolise this in the mosaic.

The triangular shapes in the polygon portray images of fish and birds, as identified above. Swans were dedicated to Apollo and were a symbol of a happy death. The swan was also sacred to Venus, who is described in poetry as borne through the air by a flock of swans.⁴⁷ Likewise, the myth of Leda and the Swan was widespread in Roman times, as can be understood from its appearance on

40 Euripides, *Bacchae*, transl. by Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1998), 1017–1019; Antoninus Liberalis, *Les Metamorphoses*, transl. by Manolis Papathomopoulos (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1968), 10.2; Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*, transl. by W. H. D. Rouse (London: W. Heinemann, 1940), 40. 43–60; Sara Macias Otero, "The Image of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*: The God and his Epiphanies", *Redefining Dionysos*, ed. by Alberto Bernabé Pajares, Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, et al. (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 329–348.

41 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 200–203.

42 Jan N, Bremmer, 'Greek Maenadism Reconsidered', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 55 (1984), 267–268.

43 Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 372.

44 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 102–122.

45 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, transl. by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), III, 138–252.

46 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 122–123,

47 Ibid., 259–261.

sarcophagi, symbolising a happy death,⁴⁸ and is thus connected with Platonic human desire for transcendence and merger with the Divine.⁴⁹

Partridges and quails were both kept for fighting and hunted as a delicacy.⁵⁰ The quail was also perceived as a symbol of the soul still imprisoned in the body and longing to escape into the heavenly vineyard.⁵¹

Doves were kept for pleasure, food, sacrificial offering, and the delivery of messages, and were the subject of various literary metaphors. Doves became a symbol of love, desire, and fertility, and were the sacred birds of Venus. In the context of mortality, doves were depicted on tombstones as being caressed by the figures of the dead.⁵²

Geese were used for food, to supply feathers, as guards, and as pets for pleasure and amusement. In the ritual context, geese were sacred to Aphrodite, and also to Juno and to Priapus.⁵³ The sacredness connected with the birds' spiritual flight could indicate the birds in the mosaic as constituting mediators between the earthly world and the Divine.

The fish and seals that appear in each middle triangle contribute further to this perception. Fish were used primarily for food, but also for visual pleasure and ostentation, especially molluscs such as *murena*.⁵⁴ In the religious and funereal context fish were perceived as symbols of the living dead, appeared frequently in funerary art, and were associated with immortality.⁵⁵ Seals are creatures that need to come onto dry land in order to rest, to mate, and to give birth, and in order to escape marine predators. Indeed, unlike most other marine

48 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 260; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 525.

49 Plato, *Phaedrus*, transl. by Benjamin Jowett (Champaign, Ill.: Project Gutenberg, 1999), 250–251.

50 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 256; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 264.

51 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 256.

52 Ibid., 258–259; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 254–255.

53 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 256, 261–263; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 230, 235–236. See also the episode portrayed in the *Satyricon*: Petronius, *The Satyricon*, transl. by P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.21.

54 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 209–211; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 669–670.

55 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 212;



FIG. 2. ROMAN MOSAIC FLOORS, ETERNAL TIME, THE SUN, THE MOON, AND THE SEASONS, 3RD CENTURY CE (310×350 CM). EL DJEM MUSEUM, TUNISIA. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

animals they move between the depths of the sea and the land, and hence were considered uncanny creatures.⁵⁶ Moreover, being a mammal as well as a sea-dweller, the seal is a liminal creature, and its appearance in the mosaic could suggest the liminal zone between the earthly and the Divine spheres.

Eight dolphins are presented in the triangles making up the right-angles of the square frame. The dolphin was considered the ruler

⁵⁶ Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 408.



FIG. 3. ROMAN MOSAIC FLOORS FROM EL DJEM, THE GENIUS OF THE YEAR SURROUNDED BY THE FOUR SEASONS, 2ND CENTURY CE (440×590 CM). EL DJEM MUSEUM, TUNISIA. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

of the sea, and killing or hunting dolphins was a sacrilegious act. Dolphins were widespread in the Mediterranean, were considered to be highly intelligent, and were beloved by humans as a friendly animal. Dolphins were followers of Zeus, belonged to the Dionysian milieu, and were perceived as symbols of the journey of the soul across the ocean to the Blessed Isles.⁵⁷ In this respect, the dolphins in this mosaic represent the enclosure of the earthly sphere.

IDEA: THE YEARNING FOR THE SUBLIME

The upper panel is a rectangle containing nine hexagons and two trapezoid forms, separated from each other by a repetitive dynamic-pattern frame. The composition of the panel is geometrical and symmetrical, characterised by a simultaneous unity and multiplicity. The geometric forms contain images of still life and animals. Hence, four main aesthetic features can be discerned in this panel: geometric

⁵⁷ Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 207; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: a Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 410, 414–415.

composition; geometric forms; unity and multiplicity; and images of reality.

The Divine Being, which is the One (*hen*) according to Plotinus is abstract and cannot be portrayed; it created all forms, but is itself formless.⁵⁸ Hence, the argument presented here is that this panel does not present an explicit image of the Divine, but rather signs or symbols of this being; and, mainly, an allegorical representation of its infinite interconnection with the human. The geometric composition and forms reflect the Plotinian notion of harmonious Divine existence. Accordingly, the abstract gods are embodied by the eternal celestial luminaries that exist in harmony, following the eternal rules of nature.⁵⁹ The entire spirit is that of permanence and eternity, in accordance with the absoluteness and eternity of the One and the luminaries.⁶⁰

As noted above, the geometric composition constitutes a unity that encompasses multiplicity. This too tends to reflect the Plotinian perception according to which the One is the foundation of all being and from which everything emanates. The One has no limits, it is omnipresent, static, endless, and eternal, and comprises all beings.⁶¹ The One is the source of multiplicity and the creator of all beings, but it does not resemble the beings that it emanates.⁶² Multiplicity in this case references Lucretius' theory regarding the atoms:

Now come, and next hereafter apprehend
What sorts, how vastly different in form,
How varied in multitudinous shapes they are -
These old beginnings of the universe;
Not in the sense that only few are furnished
With one like form, but rather not at all
In general have they likeness each with each,
No marvel: since the stock of them's so great
That there's no end (as I have taught) nor sum,

58 Plotinus, *Enneads*, V 3, 15; VI 7, 15; VI 7, 17; VI 8, 7-8, 20; VI 9, 6.

59 Ibid., II 1; II 9, 8; III 5, 6; IV 4, 8; II 2, 2.

60 Ibid., I 7, 1-2; II 1; III 8, 9; IV 5, 9; VI 7, 8; VI 8, 9; VI 9, 4.

61 Ibid., I 7, 1-2; I 1, 8; II 9, 7; III 8, 9; III 9, 2; IV 3, 9; IV 5, 9; IV 8, 2, 7; V 5, 8-10; V 6; V 31, 12; VI 2, 22; VI 8, 7-9; VI 9, 4; .

62 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I 1, 8; II 9, 7-9; II 9, 2; III 4, 4; III 9, 2; IV 3, 9; IV 8, 2-3; IV 8, 7; V 3, 11; V 5, 3; V 7; V 9, 8; VI 6, 15; VI 7, 17; VI 8, 9; VI 5, 6.

They must indeed not one and all be marked
By equal outline and by shape the same.⁶³

As nature intends.
Lastly, with any grain,
Thou'lt see that no one kernel in one kind
Is so far like another, that there still
Is not in shapes some difference running through.
By a like law we see how earth is pied
With shells and conchs, where, with soft waves, the sea
Beats on the thirsty sands of curving shores.
Wherefore again, again, since seeds of things
Exist by nature, nor were wrought with hands
After a fixed pattern of one other,
They needs must flitter to and fro with shapes
In types dissimilar to one another.⁶⁴

And a prodigious hurly-burly mass
Compounded of all kinds of primal germs,
Whose battling discords in disorder kept
Interstices, and paths, coherencies,
And weights, and blows, encounterings, and motions,
Because, by reason of their forms unlike
And varied shapes, they could not all thuswise
Remain conjoined nor harmoniously
Have interplay of movements. But from there
Portions began to fly asunder, and like
With like to join, and to block out a world,
And to divide its members and dispose
Its mightier parts- that is, to set secure
The lofty heavens from the lands, and cause
The sea to spread with waters separate,
And fires of ether separate and pure
Likewise to congregate apart.⁶⁵

63 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, transl. by Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2001), 2.333-341.

64 Ibid., 2.371-380.

65 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 5.436-448.

The images in the hexagons can also be perceived allegorically. Those in the upper row are arranged symmetrically, with two hexagons displaying a predator with its prey, and the three in between them presenting images from quotidian life. The images are as follows: two hexagons feature a lioness attacking and preying upon a stag, and a lion depicted with its head *en face* and its body in a three-quarter pose resting next to its prey, probably an ox, bull, or cow. The images in the three hexagons in between present a round basket with two handles filled with various kinds of fish; a hen or a pigeon surrounded by five chicks; and two different fish facing in opposite directions. The two images of a prey animal devouring another animal could be interpreted in relation to Neo-Platonism as an allegory of the interrelations between the human and the Divine: humans always yearn to merge with the Divine, which has immeasurable power over them.

The images of the fish were interpreted above as a symbol of immortality and the seals as that of liminality. Chickens were sacred in Roman public affairs and were used as a tool of divination, as well as a sacrificial animal, offered mainly to the god Persephone. The connection between the chicken and Persephone indicates its role as a liminal creature, guardian of the transition from day to night, and hence rites of passage.⁶⁶ These images, thus, might symbolise the liminal zone and the aspiration of the human to transcend and merge with the Divine and gain immortality.

Three of the four hexagons in the lower row contain images of a predator attacking another animal: a leopard attacking a stag in a way similar to that shown in the upper row; a water snake attacking a large fish; and a tiger attacking a horse. Between the leopard and the water snake images, the fourth image is that of a peacock with its tail spread. The two groups of the attacking animals face symmetrically towards the centre, while the peacock and the water snake are frontal.⁶⁷ The trapezoid at one end of the lower row contains an image of a bird (perhaps a pigeon) and that at the other end, a seal.

The peacock, an animal that was sacred to Hera/Juno, was associated with the Divine and apotheosis; and, due to its circular

66 Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 252–253.

67 This identification follows Ovadiah and Mucznik. See: Ovadiah, Mucznik, 'Classical Heritage and Anti-Classical Trends in the Mosaic Pavement of Lydda (Lod)', 1–18.

tail, which resembled the vault of heaven when spread, and was jewelled like stars, the peacock was considered the symbol of the sky, apotheosis, and immortality.⁶⁸ The three scenes of an animal attacking another animal relate also to the interconnection noted above between the human and the Divine; the bird and seal at either end suggest the transience of human life; and the peacock could represent the aspiration of the human for transcendence, to merge with the Divine and gain apotheosis.

THALASSA: THE DIVINE PURIFYING OCEAN

The lower rectangular panel presents a marine scene that greatly differs from the two panels above it. This scene is characterised by a diffused composition in which fish and marine mammals of many sorts are displayed. Dominants are a whale, a dolphin, and a seal, with a seal devouring a fish in the foreground. Two sailboats are portrayed, one of them badly damaged. Elie Haddad and Miriam Avissar consider the ship to be a merchant vessel and assume that the artist had sought to show how important the ship was for the owner of the villa to which the mosaic belonged. They suggest that the ship may have suffered a 'marine trauma' and been in great danger, and this was the way chosen to present it to the viewer. Likewise, as also concluded by Haddad and Avissar, the damaged ship could be considered a form of *ex-voto*, expressing gratitude for the safe deliverance of the owner of the villa after his perilous voyage.⁶⁹

Amir Gorzalczany and Baruch Rosen have discussed the metaphorical significance of the nautical scene, and suggest that it presents an artistic reproduction of the Socratic pond, in which the humans live in a small part of the earth around the sea, like frogs around a pond.⁷⁰ That pond became in Roman times the core of the Roman Empire, and is referred to as Mare Nostrum. Accordingly, this mosaic offers an example of the dialectic, mixed culture, at

68 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 251–252; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 272, 277.

69 Elie Haddad, Miriam Avissar, 'A Suggested Reconstruction of one of the Merchant Ships on the Mosaic Floor in Lod (Lydda) Israel', *The International Journal of Nautical Archeology*, 32 (1) (2003), 74, 76.

70 Plato, *Euthyphro Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus*, transl. by Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), *Phaedo*, 109a-b.

Lod specifically and in the eastern part of the empire in general during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the period when the mosaic was created.⁷¹ The pond is perceived by these authors as a symbol of the Mediterranean world,⁷² with the scene symbolising abundance since the fish were perceived as *xenia*, a raw offering to guests. At the same time, however, the mosaic represents a model of the sea as a concept, and as a peaceful utopian world.⁷³ Gorzalczany and Rosen suggest that the universal sacral character of the pond in the Lod mosaic symbolised for Pagans, Jews, and Christians alike the God who had created the sea and all the life within it.⁷⁴

Images of a big fish eating a smaller one have been perceived as the struggle for survival in nature;⁷⁵ and the sea has been understood as a model of anarchy, as well as of the relationship between rulers and subjects.⁷⁶ Likewise, the two ships affected contrarily by the same wind suggest a metaphor for 'A blessing for one could be a curse for another', and that it is impossible to appease everyone all the time.⁷⁷ In conclusion, the marine life and ships represent the creation and maintenance of an orderly world by a supreme power.⁷⁸

Regarding the aim of the present study to interrelate all the parts of the mosaic, further analysis will follow, as well as an additional correlation with literary and philosophical sources.

The scene is disproportional, especially the boats in relation to the fish, and offers a flat background with no illusionary perspective. The images, in contrast, are depicted in a naturalistic manner. This dual artistic expression tends to suggest the symbolic meaning of this

71 Gorzalczany, Rosen, 'The Marine Scene in the Lod Mosaics', 51.

72 Ibid., 59.

73 Ibid., 52; Bowersock, Schwartz, Gorzalczany, Talgam, *The Lod Mosaic: A Spectacular Roman Mosaic Floor*, 17–19. On *xenia* see e.g.: Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 18–59; Micahel J. Squire, 'Framing the Roman "still life": Campanian wall-painting and the frames of mural make-believe', *The Frame in Classical Art: A Cultural History*, ed. by Verity J. Platt, Micahel J. Squire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 188–253; Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 126.

74 Gorzalczany, Rosen, 'The Marine Scene in the Lod Mosaics', 53.

75 Ibid., 3.

76 Ibid., 53–55.

77 Ibid., 57.

78 Ibid., 59.

panel. In effect, the sea is only hinted at, but not actually portrayed, with the fish being displayed against a flat, neutral background. This manner of conceptualising the sea perhaps stems from perceiving it as belonging to the realm of the Divine, which is conceptual and cannot be captured visually. A comparable portrayal of a flat background filled with naturalistic images of sea creatures is that of a fishing scene in a mosaic from Sousse (fig. 4).⁷⁹

In Antiquity, the sea and its expanses were of enormous significance. The Ocean of the archaic era was perceived as stretching out into an unimaginable distance, forming a region beyond the boundaries of the earth; and, as noted by Romm, Ocean presented itself to the early Greeks as a terrifying and unapproachable entity.⁸⁰ Romm also remarks that Greek seamen preferred to stay within sight of land at all times, for the loss of eye contact with land was regarded with great apprehension, and open-sea voyages were undertaken only out of necessity.⁸¹

The early Greek philosophers perceived the ocean as *he etere thalassa* (the eternal sea), which encircled the universe and was the remnant of the initial fluid that was the foundation of Creation. According to Thales, water is the origin of everything.⁸² An entire culture, its mythology and customs, thus evolved around the meanings of the sea and sailing.⁸³

Both Homer and Hesiod recounted how beneath heaven and at the end of the earth a powerful river flows, which they called Oceanus. The flood waters of this river encircled the land and sea on all sides in a flowing path, and was the source 'from whom all rivers flow and

79 Roman mosaic floor, *Sea and Fishing*, 2nd century CE (320×280 cm). Sousse Museum, Tunisia.

80 Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 15–16.

81 Ibid., 16–20. Romm cites incidents recorded by Herodotus of fear of the expanses of the ocean that prevented people from going on long journeys. See: Herodotus, *The Histories*, transl. by Alfred D. Godley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920–1925), 4.43, 8.132; Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 16–17.

82 Charlse H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 102–103; I. A. Šišova, 'The Ocean as Perceived by Ancient Authors', *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii = Journal of Ancient History*, 161 (1982), 114–115; Patricia F. O'Grady, *Thales of Miletus: The Beginnings of Western Science and Philosophy* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2002), 29–31; Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, 1.3.983 b.

83 Irad Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Irad Malkin, Arie Fishman, 'Homer, Odyssey ILL153–85: A Maritime Commentary', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 2 (1987), 250–258.

every sea, and all the springs and deep wells'.⁸⁴ Homer described the ocean as 'Divine' and 'The origin of all gods', and 'He who was framed begetter of all'.⁸⁵ According to Hesiod, a tenth part of the ocean's water flows into the river Styx, and the rest into the sea: 'A branch of Okeanos, it is allotted a tenth part of the water. Nine parts, coiling around earth and the sea's broad back in silver whirlings fall into the brine.'⁸⁶ The Ocean could simultaneously represent the outer limits of both geographic space and historical time; and, as remarked by Romm, this combination would have endowed men with a sense of fear, fascination, and reverence.⁸⁷

Great seas like the Nile (today known as a river) were perceived as a huge ferocious obstacle, powerful and unexpected, and symbolised the constant danger of death that faced the hero;⁸⁸ and, as also noted by Romm, the Ocean was associated in many cosmogonist myths with the primeval monsters or giants that must be overcome before the universe can be properly ordered.⁸⁹

Crossing the sea and overcoming its obstacles were perceived as a rite of initiation, as can be learned from the river god Proteus' prediction to Menelaus.⁹⁰ The *Odyssey* tells of dangers such as the confrontation of Odysseus with the monster Charybdis, who would swallow entire ships;⁹¹ and the monster Skylla, who would grab sailors from every passing ship with her terrible teeth.⁹² The *Odyssey* is an extreme parable of a journey that is not only geographical, but also one of consciousness.⁹³

84 Homer, *The Iliad*, transl. by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 18. 607, 21. 195–197; Hesiod, *Theogony*, transl. by Norman O. Brown (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 20.

85 Homer, *The Odyssey*, transl. by Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 11.2, 20.65; Homer, *The Iliad*, 14.201, 18.399, 14.246.

86 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 778–779, 788–789, 790–791; David M. Johnson, 'Hesiod's Description of Tartarus ('Theogony', 721–819)', *Phoenix*, 53, 1, 2 (1999), 24.

87 Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 26.

88 Blanchard-Lemee, 'La mer: des poisons, des navires et des dieux', 128.

89 Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 24.

90 Blanchard-Lemee, 'La mer: des poisons, des navires et des dieux', 128; Homer, *The Odyssey*, 4.475–480.

91 Homer, *The Odyssey*, 12.208–260.

92 Ibid., 12.73–126, 223–260.

93 Carol Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5–6.

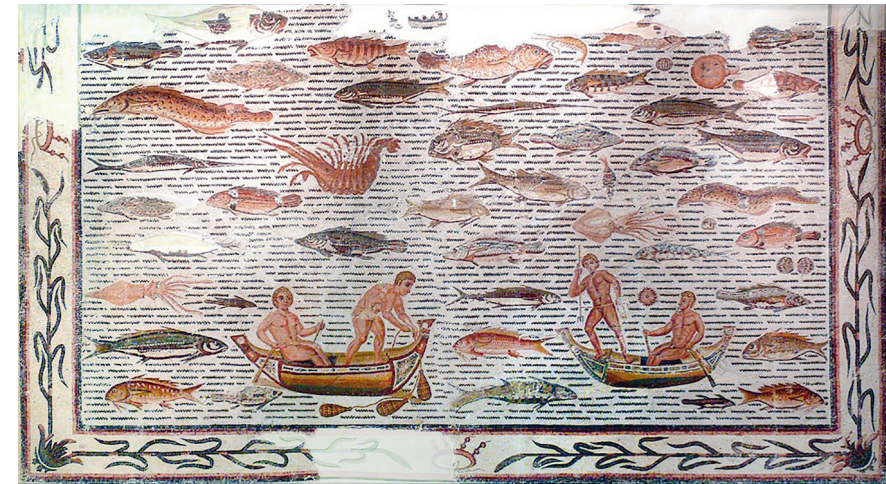


FIG. 4. ROMAN MOSAIC FLOOR, SEA AND FISHING, 2ND CENTURY CE (320×280 CM). SOUSSE MUSEUM, TUNISIA. PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, AD MESKENS.

The geographical and cosmological being was perceived as comprised of covert and overt territories,⁹⁴ and hence as a metaphor for the journey of initiation. The ocean, the rivers, the seas, the springs, and wells were all perceived as tremendous entities surrounding the circle of earth, partly revealed and partly hidden, but so vast and immense as to be beyond the conceptualisation of a human being.

The naturalistic portrayal of the fish suggests nature and the temporality of life. As also a symbol of immortality however, as noted above, fish can also symbolise the journey of catharsis taken by the soul in order to merge with the Divine. Hence, the naturalistic portrayal may intend to intensify this message. According to Plotinus, the soul has to undergo a journey by means of which it will gradually attain purification.⁹⁵

This is accentuated by the image of the dolphin in the mosaic from Lod as a symbol of the journey of the soul across the ocean to

94 See the words of Odysseus to his people: Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.190–192; Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 184.

95 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, I. 2, 3.

the Blessed Isles, as noted previously.⁹⁶ Whales were perceived in Antiquity as phenomenal and marvellous creatures, and naturally also as very dangerous.⁹⁷ In the mosaic, the whale appears to be opening its jaws while threatening the ship in front of it. In this respect, the sea can be perceived allegorically as a great obstacle that one has to overcome in order to gain immortality.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to uncover the metaphorical meanings encapsulated in the seemingly realistic images featured in the mosaic carpet from Lod, perceiving them as a cosmological and transcendental allegory based on Roman thought.

As portrayed poetically by James S. Romm, the image of the whole earth as represented on ancient maps and globes, or as a modern satellite image of a floating blue green sphere, was an alien image to the ancients. Consequently, their minds and imagination were engaged in defining and illustrating the universe.⁹⁸ The mosaic from Lod seems to be a product of such imagination. The geometric composition of the middle panel, however, is neither a concrete nor an illustrative portrayal of the shape of the universe, but an allegory of the essence and nature of the earthly world as perceived in Roman thought.

It seems that a world in which one's fate is unknown and which is often disrupted by wars, plagues, and disasters, needed a utopic image of a well-composed and rational universe. Given that disorder was considered an enemy of human existence, boundaries constituted the most fundamental act by which the ancients defined the world.⁹⁹ Partition by boundaries characterises the middle panel, which is polygonal and symmetrical. This geometric and well-ordered composition alludes to a world dominated by law and order, governed by the One (*hen*), since proportion and symmetry, according to Plotinus, are manifestations of the intellect, which is a reflection of

96 Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art*, 207; Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 414–415.

97 Lewis, Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, 417–421.

98 Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought*, 9.

99 *Ibid.*, 10–11.

the Divine. The two notable features of the middle panel are unity and multiplicity. Unity is the characteristic of the *idea*, or the Supreme World, while multiplicity is its earthly manifestation, i.e. nature, or *phusis*, which emanates from the sublime being. The animals portrayed are wild mammals, predators and prey, marine species, and bird species. Literally speaking, this variety of animals that were used in the everyday world for food, fighting and entertainment might symbolise that world. Most of the animals are associated with the Roman province of Africa and hence bear political implications. Metaphorically speaking, the animals in the central octagon can be associated with the contrasts that characterise the earthly world, and mostly with the balance of power between good and evil. This octagon is also associated with survival, circularity, and collaboration between opposing elements, which was perceived by Plotinus as the basic tenet of altruism. He perceived life as a drama, the universe as a huge stage, and humans as the actors in this dramatic arena. In light of this, the octagon suggests a stage presenting an allegory of earthly life, and of the human condition.

The animals in the triangular shapes of the polygon surrounding the central octagon are various birds and fish, which have been interpreted here as an allegory of the nature of the universe: its multiplicity, human fragility, vulnerability, temporality, and the transience of the human condition. The other images in the polygon would seem to reflect the human longing for spiritual elevation, for immortality, exaltation, transcendence, and merging with the Divine.

The upper rectangular panel displaying images of still life and animals set within nine hexagons and two trapezoid forms, has been interpreted here as representing signs or symbols that allude to the Divine, and as an allegorical representation of its infinite interconnection with the human. The geometric composition is both unified and encompasses a multiplicity, reflecting the Plotinian notion of the harmonious divine existence, the endless and eternal nature of the One, and of the One being the source of multiplicity and the creator of all beings.

The images in the hexagons can be perceived allegorically as the interrelations between the human and the Divine, and as symbolising the liminal zone and the aspiration of the human to transcend, merge with the Divine, and gain immortality. The lower rectangular panel presents a marine scene characterised by a diffused composition,

displaying fish and marine mammals of many species and two ships. This panel presents a dual artistic style characterised by a flat background devoid of any illusionary perspective, but whose images are depicted in a naturalistic style. This manner of conceptualising the sea might reflect its perception as vast and beyond visual capture, and hence as belonging to the realm of the Divine.

The naturalistic portrayal of the fish might signify nature and the temporality of life; while, as a symbol of immortality, the fish seems to symbolise the cathartic journey of the soul towards transcendence. In relation to Plotinian thought, and regarding the other images of immortality in this panel, such as the dolphin, the sea can be perceived as a vast obstacle of initiation that one has to overcome and pass in order to gain immortality.

To conclude, the two main messages emerging from the mosaic manifest two basic Antiquity beliefs: the transience and fragility of the human condition, and the desire of the human to transcend and merge with the Divine. These messages are portrayed implicitly in the mosaic by means of images that may at first glance appear mimetic and realistic; but are actually conceptual. It is this sophisticated artistic portrayal that confers upon this mosaic its uniqueness and originality.

NAVA SEVILLA-SADEH: *DE RERUM NATURA: THE LOD MOSAIC FLOOR AS A COSMOLOGICAL AND TRANSCENDENTAL ALLEGORY*

KEYWORDS: ROMAN MOSAIC ART; ROMAN THOUGHT; PLATONISM; NEO-PLATONISM

SUMMARY

The Lod Roman carpet mosaic, dated to around 300 CE, consists in three panels containing images of animals. The centre and upper panels present geometric forms enclosing various images, while the lower panel portrays various marine creatures and ships within the same undivided space. This portrayal seems to be offering a conceptual representation of the universe as it was perceived in Antiquity.

Anchored in the methodology of artistic research, the present study seeks to analyse both the aesthetic features of each panel and the mosaic as a unified work, based on the approach that these features, together and individually, contribute to the overall idea. Based on Roman thought, this study focuses on the metaphorical and symbolic meanings of the depicted animals and other images, interpreting them as a cosmological and transcendental allegory.

CV

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