

Irene Gilodi

## Birds, Flowers and Crocodiles The Nilotic Pavement in the House of Leontis

Irene Gilodi  
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin  
gilodire@hu-berlin.de

In remarkable continuity with popular artistic practices in Roman imperial times, the plentiful Nilotic landscape, with its wildlife of aquatic birds, fishes and other animals, continued to adorn both walls and floors of churches and private houses in the Byzantine provinces of Palestine and Arabia. How can we account for this continuity, equally present in Christian and Jewish environments? What specific decorations can evoke an 'idea of Egypt' and what meaning could this iconography carry in a late antique context? This article answers these questions by examining in particular the iconography of the crocodile, from Ancient Egyptian devotional practices to Roman symbolic associations. The mosaic in the great hall of the so-called House of Leontis features this animal as part of its Nilotic repertoire, and couples this decoration with a visual rendering of the Homeric tale of Odysseus. Indeed, Nilotic elements, long-time carriers of augural meaning were often associated with mythology, history, literature, and the theater. Thus, this floor offers the perfect opportunity to illustrate how the refined visual language adopted by the Jewish elite of Scythopolis embraced its Hellenistic and Roman cultural origins.

**Keywords:** Nilotic, Nile, Egypt, Odyssey, crocodile, Scythopolis, Jewish profane buildings, floor mosaic

"Alas, alas the brutal outrage with which, you crocodile,  
you boast arrogantly, bellowing on the sea.  
May the mighty Nile, who watches you,  
overwhelm your arrogance and destroy you".

Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, 876-881

A paddling of ducks glides with the current on a river stream; the water's surface and the surrounding meadow are dotted with floating leaves and lotus flowers; the river is ripe with fish and a couple of ibises is traversing its course. This is the figuration on the rectangular mosaic (fig. 1) decorating the intercolumn of the Christian church of Sts. Lot and Procopius (ca. 550), located at Khirbet Mukhayyat (in modern-day Jordan), not far from Moses' burial place at Mount Nebo. The use of this specific flora and fauna evokes an 'idea of Egypt and the Nile' and situates this artefact within a longstanding tradition of Nilotic motifs that were used to adorn all kinds of artistic productions. The depiction on floors of water ponds, surrounded by vegetation and inhabited by animals, was a decorative technique implemented already in ancient Egypt, as attested by the stucco pavement fragment with a duck and marsh plants (fig. 2) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (ca. 1390-1353 BCE).<sup>1</sup> Nilotic ornamentation enjoyed great popularity in Roman art and was replicated in multiple mediums and techniques throughout its history (Versluys, 2002). It adorned silver cups, textiles, frescoes, terracotta wall panels and mosaic pavements: from the famous Republican-era mosaic of Palestrina, formerly Praeneste (Meyboom, 1995), to the many depictions attested from Pompeii, and throughout the age of Imperial Rome in every province.<sup>2</sup> Its popularity never waned and numerous examples of Nilotic decoration are attested in late antique Levant as well (Balty, 1995; Maguire, 1998; Hachlili, 1998; Maguire, 2007; Hachlili, 2009; Talgam, 2014; Britt, 2019).

Shortly before the mosaic of Sts. Lot and Procopius was laid, a similar Nilotic landscape was used to decorate the walls of the aisles in the church of St. Stephen in Gaza (again a Christian building). This artwork did not survive the test of time but we have, as precious evidence of its appearance and significance, the description provided in the *ekphrasis* of the church by the Greek rhetorician Choricus of Gaza. Near the end of his speech, almost as an after-thought, Choricus mentions the 'charming' decoration of the Nile: "The river itself is nowhere portrayed in the way painters portray rivers, but is suggested by means of distinctive currents and symbols, as well as by the meadows along its banks. Various kinds of birds that often wash in that river's streams dwell in the meadows" (Choricus, *Laudatio Marciani II*). While the depiction of the personified Nile ("the way paint-



1 Floor mosaic, detail of the Nilotic landscape, Sts. Lot and Procopius, Khirbet Mukhayyat (Jordan), ca. 550 CE



2 Painted plaster pavement fragment, ca. 1390-1353 BCE, from Egypt

ers portray rivers") had become somewhat problematic in a Christian religious context, the Nile iconography could still be suggested through the use of specific vegetation and animals. But why do specific animals and vegetation evoke the idea of Egypt and the Nile? And what remains of the Roman cultural background when we talk about the implementation of Nilotic iconography in Late Antiquity?

In delineating what Late Antiquity meant for him, Peter Brown borrowed from the field of crystallography an expression that had already been used by Henri Irénée Marrou to photograph the relationship of this period with the preceding Roman era (Brown, 2012, 90): the word is *pseudomorphosis*. That means that the surface appears the same, but the inner structure that supports that surface has drastically changed. I argue that this idea of pseudomorphosis is a good theoretical lens to look at Nilotic decorations in Christian and Jewish context in the centuries preceding the Islamic conquest of the Levant. By looking at the Nilotic decoration of the House of Leontis in Scythopolis, and by concentrating in particular on the iconography of the crocodile, depicted in the mosaic, this contribution aims to show how the Hellenistic tradition, filtered through the experience of the Imperial Roman past, continued to be an important part of late antique Palestinian cultural and artistic life.

### **Egypt and the Nile**

An immediate mental association between the river Nile and the land of Egypt lives on to this day and was certainly present in late antique Palestine. Indeed, at that time mosaics with Nilotic landscapes often featured city-portraits of Egyptian towns, sometimes accompanied by the inscription ΕΓΥΠΤΟΣ (Egyptos), such as in the Haditha chapel (excavated near Lod, Israel).<sup>3</sup> According to the common perception, Egypt itself was a 'gift' from the Nile (Herodotus, II, 5) and its legendary affluence was mentioned already by Homer, both in the Iliad (IX, 379-384) and the Odyssey (IV, 125). Egypt's prosperity always depended on the river flooding pattern and the particularity of the Nile River that carries and deposits silt instead of eroding land. Herodotus remarks on the connection between the river and food resources, not just in the form of fertile soil but also of fishes and lotuses.<sup>4</sup> Ancient Greek authors debated the borders of Egypt by taking the Nile

as the main reference point: Egypt was either only its delta or it extended all the way to the first cataract at Aswan (Herodotus, II, 15-17). Egypt was neither Libya (Africa) nor Asia, but straddled in-between, just like the course of the river marking this geographical boundary. Herodotus reports the words of the oracle of Ammon as following: "All the land, he said, watered by the Nile in its course was Egypt, and all who dwelt lower than the city Elephantine and drank of that river's water were Egyptians" (Herodotus, II, 18).

In the profane context, alongside evoking the land of Egypt by means of its flora and fauna or through the use of geographic inscriptions, patrons and artists also opted for visual renderings of the Nile River "the way painters portray rivers". A representation of the personified Nile and its flooding can be found in the House of Leontis within the ancient town of Scythopolis, in the Jordan River valley (modern-day Beit She'an, Israel). In late antiquity, Scythopolis, the capital of the Roman province Palaestina Secunda, was a multicultural-interfaith town, where Jews, Samaritans, Christians and pagans coexisted.<sup>5</sup> Here a large architectural complex, known as the House of Leontis, dated to the mid-5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century, was brought to light in 1964. Part of the complex is still to be excavated, but of the uncovered buildings we have a small prayer room (probably a synagogue), a courtyard and a long reception hall. Zori, who conducted the first excavation, believed the complex to be a private mansion (Zori, 1966, 124), while other scholars subsequently believed it to be a synagogue-with-annex-complex (Hüttenmeister and Reeg, 1977, 62-64) or an inn (Sivan, 2008, 159-160).<sup>6</sup> According to Ze'ev Safrai it could have functioned as a basilica for communal use, perhaps a common place of worship, shared by (both) Jews and Christians alike (Safrai, 2003).

The hall mosaic (fig. 3), divided in three sections, mentions in a dedicatory Greek inscription in the central panel a certain Leontis Kloubas (hence the name of the site). This inscription is coupled with a menorah, visually identifying the patron as a member of the Jewish community. The field around the inscription is adorned with a pattern of stylized birds that must have featured in mosaicists' pattern books, because we find similar examples in several contemporary floors (Habas, 2021, 172-173). On the other two extremities of the long hall are two panels: one Nilotic, the other mythological, representing episodes from the Homeric tale of Odysseus.<sup>7</sup> The





3 Drawing of the floor mosaic in the hall of the House of Leontis Kloubas in Beit She'an, Israel, from N. Zori, *The House of Kyrios Leontis at Beth Shean*, 1966



4 Floor mosaic, Nilotic panel from the House of Leontis Kloubas, mid-5<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> c., CE

Nilotic panel (fig. 4) features the above mentioned personification of the Nile, reclining on what is probably a strange-looking hippo (or a crocodile following Zori, 1966, 131) and resting his elbow on a round vase that marks the river's source; the water flows from the vase all the way to the river delta and the Mediterranean Sea with its ships; around the Nile is the typical vegetation of lotus flowers and other plants, and a fauna made of ibis birds and hunting beasts. The Nile holds in his right hand a duck, symbolic of plenty, and raises it toward the top left corner, where an obelisk (a nilometer for measuring the rising of the flood) and a simple building stand for the city-portrait of Alexandria (as clarified by an inscription).<sup>8</sup>

Underneath the city, a savage beast is attempting to eat a cow or an ox. This could be a peculiar rendering of the long-established iconography of a crocodile eating an ass. In his *Natural History*, Pliny reports that the famous painter Nealkes (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE), when tasked with depicting the naval battle between Egyptians and Persians on the river Nile, inserted the detail of a crocodile assaulting from the river an ass standing on the bank (Pliny, *N. H.*, XXXV, 141-142). This detail was precisely intended to show that the depicted waters were those of the Nile and not of the sea nor any other river (Aföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins, 1980, 46). The fact that a crocodile was present, was enough for identification.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, both crocodiles and hippos were enormous animals that instilled fear and awe and contributed to the idea that, if such animals lived there, the Nile must be a great and important river.<sup>10</sup>

### **Crocodiles and the Idea of Egypt**

Hippos and crocodiles have a long history of being portrayed both figuratively and in geographical texts as curiosities from the exotic South, a trend that only intensified in Roman republican and imperial times. Pliny informs us that a hippo and five crocodiles were exhibited for the first time in Rome during the Aedilician Games of Marcus Scaurus in 58 BCE (Pliny, *N. H.*, VIII, 40). Crocodiles regularly appeared on artefacts with Nilotic decorations and in Roman Egypt their bodies were also used to create luxurious objects of prestige, such as the parade armor (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> c. CE), made of sewn crocodile skin and used by a Roman soldier during cult processions, now in the British Museum.<sup>11</sup> Crocodiles were dangerous

and it was hard to hunt and kill them, as such they were perceived as devious, malicious beasts, infesting both land and water (Pliny, *N. H.*, VIII, 37-38). In Roman Egypt crocodiles could stand in place for demonic forces, defeated by the protecting deities of the land. In a window frame with an apotropaic function (now in the Louvre), the falcon-headed god Horus, avenger of Osiris and destroyer of demonic animals, is depicted as a mounted Roman soldier in the act of spearing an evil crocodile.<sup>12</sup> David Frankfurter notes that the connection between this image and its Christian parallels (such as St. George against the dragon) is not simply a formal one but it involves “what the images conveyed in the cosmos: *apotropeia*, repulsion, victory over chaos and misfortune” (Frankfurter, 1998, 3). This identification of crocodiles with evil forces and devils continued throughout the Byzantine and Western Middle Ages, all the way to the crocodile-shaped dragon under St. Theodoros’ feet, in the hybrid statue in the Piazzetta di San Marco in Venice and the embalmed crocodiles in Italian Marian churches.<sup>13</sup>

Crocodiles appear in ancient Egyptian devotion also in the so-called *Horus cippi*, healing stelae with a standard iconography of the god Horus standing victorious on two crocodiles, while holding snakes and other dangerous animals.<sup>14</sup> The act of pouring water on the stelae and then drinking it was believed to be curative and the Horus cippi were used to heal afflictions by snake and scorpion venom.<sup>15</sup> The fight of Horus against the crocodile as symbolic of the fight against evil, in the specific context of amulets and talismans, migrated to a Christian context. In fact, a 6<sup>th</sup>-century Christian amulet with Greek inscriptions (fig. 5), now in the British Museum, visually combined elements from the Horus cippi and Jewish-Christian symbolism and iconography (Barb, 1964, 10-17; Lidova, 2017, 46).<sup>16</sup>

While for the ancient Egyptians hippos were animals of rebirth, the much more ambivalent crocodile was called “wrinkle face” (Arnold, 1995, 32) and, because of the danger it posed, it was given a prominent role in magic rituals and folklore. The crocodile-god Sobek, particularly venerated near Fayum, received regular offerings to protect the farmland and at his temples, pet crocodiles were kept and fed (Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, VIII, 4.ii), and preserved through embalming after death.<sup>17</sup> The sacred crocodiles of Sobek were a sort of ‘tourist attraction’ in Roman times (Draycott, 2010, 213-214), and the sanctuary of Sobek at





5 Christian amulet with Greek inscriptions, 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE (electrotype replica of a Byzantine original?)

Fayum continued to be the center of active devotion throughout Ptolemaic Egypt and Roman Egypt. The association of the Ptolemaic dynasty with this animal was strengthened by a legend, according to which Perdiccas' troops were annihilated by the waters of the Nile and by crocodiles while trying to cross the river to attack Ptolemy I (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, XVIII, 34-35). In helping Ptolemy defeat his enemy and start his dynasty, the crocodile thus becomes an instrument of divine justice and vengeance. It repelled Perdiccas, like it had punished before the cruel king Achoetes who had brought woes to the people of Egypt, according to the Ptolemaic historian Manetho (Fragment 27, in Bianchi, 2021, 124).



6 Denarius of Octavian, silver, 28 BCE



7 Sestertius of Caracalla, copper alloy, 215 CE

Given the association between Ptolemy and the crocodile, it is not surprising that, when Mark Anthony restored to Cleopatra VII and their children several lands formerly part of the Ptolemaic empire, the event was commemorated by a provincial governor by the name of Crassus with the issue of a series of coins that prominently feature a crocodile.<sup>18</sup> By the time the Roman battle at Actium was

fought (31 BCE) the crocodile had become a symbol of Egypt as a whole and of Cleopatra and her dynasty in particular. It is for this reason that the coin minted by Augustus to celebrate the Actium victory has his portrait on the obverse and a crocodile with the words AEGVPTO CAPTA on the reverse (fig. 6).<sup>19</sup> Other coins issued by Augustus and Agrippa memorialized the event by showing a crocodile chained to a palm tree,<sup>20</sup> a motif similar to the one of the chained prisoners in the IVDEA CAPTA coins, commemorating the conquest of Judea under Vespasian in 71 CE.<sup>21</sup>

Imperial Rome continued to use the crocodile as a symbol for Egypt, as testified by the coin minted in 215 CE to commemorate Caracalla's 'visit' to Alexandria, and the brutal repression of riots in that city by Roman imperial troops (fig. 7).<sup>22</sup> On the reverse of this coin, Caracalla, wearing military attire, crushes a crocodile with his foot, a symbol of the submission of Egypt to Roman imperialism, while the goddess Isis rushes toward him, to extend the gifts of the land to the emperor. The gifts consist primarily of Egyptian grain, on which Rome was utterly dependent (Hackworth Petersen, 2016). Interestingly, the coin minted by Caracalla is remarkably reminiscent of a coin issued three decades earlier by the emperor Commodus.<sup>23</sup> In Commodus' coin, the emperor stands as a naked Heracles, with a foot on the prow of a boat (exactly in the same position as Caracalla's crocodile), while a personified Africa, holding the attributes of Isis, offers him grain. This coin can be understood as a commemoration of the auxiliary fleet instituted by Commodus to remedy the dependence of Rome on Egyptian grain by improving trade with other African regions, a dependence that had already been the cause of famines, plagues, and much unrest. Thus, it seems that by substituting (in the exact same place and manner) the prow of the boat from Commodus' coin with a crocodile, symbolic of the land of Egypt, and by having Isis offer him all the grains of this land, Caracalla is remarking on the fact that, due to his strong military control of the region, Rome no longer needs to look elsewhere for grain, like in the days of the 'weak' Commodus.

By the time crocodiles are portrayed in the mosaics of late antique Palestine, like in the House of Leontis, they have lost most of the original religious significance attributed to them by Ancient Egyptians. However, they still carried a stratified and deep-rooted symbolism, as well as being clear visual markers for the land of Egypt, its prosperity and economic importance.





8 Floor mosaic, mythological panel from the House of Leontis Kloubas, mid-5<sup>th</sup> – early 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE

### Seafaring and Trade with Egypt

The presence of a Nilotic landscape in the House of Leontis can be best understood in relation to the other mosaic panel in the same floor, the one depicting scenes from the *Odyssey* (fig. 8). The composition of this panel is divided into two registers, connected and separated through a complex pattern of curvy lines, depicting sea waves. On the top left side of the upper register (under a lacuna), a Nereid is riding an Ichthyocentaur;<sup>24</sup> in front of her, on the right, is a ship with

a man tied to its mast. The man tied to the mast is clearly Odysseus, as described by Homer (*Odyssey*, Book XII), passing beyond earshot of the Sirens. One siren is depicted below Odysseus, as she attempts to lead astray another boat (the one in the lower register). The lower register is thus constructed as the reverse composition of the one above: with a ship on the left and a mythological creature (in this case, a flute-playing siren, half woman/half bird) on the right. The boat on the left carries two large jugs, or amphorae, and one man, who's battling another sea monster with the help of a trident. Traditionally, this scene has been interpreted by scholars as a representation of the passage of the *Odyssey* in which the hero fights against Scylla, a passage that immediately follows the episode of the sirens (Hachlili, 2009, 97; Talgam, 2014, 376-377). However, it is my contention that this interpretation does not consider the fact that, in Scythopolis, the siren is luring into danger the boat in the lower level, not the one with Ulysses tied to the mast; moreover, this happens *while* the man onboard this second ship is battling the sea-monster. Additionally, the small rendering of the two amphorae seems particularly relevant, considering the scarcity of any other detail in the composition, and it identifies this ship as a merchant vessel. If indeed this were a depiction of Ulysses fighting Scylla, how can we account for this discrepancy?

I propose a different reading, based on the Greek inscription, situated between the man on the boat and the siren. This inscription reads: Κ(ύρι)ε β(ο)ήθ(ει) Λεοντί/ου κλουβ(α) / Lord, help Leontis Kloubas, a common formula (Zori, 1966, 132-133; Habas, 2021, 171). Here, it seems, Leontis Kloubas is invoking divine protection against the many dangers involved in seafaring: the merchant ship in the lower register, battling against such dangers, is a mirror image of the perilous journey of Odysseus (above), and hoping for an equally happy ending. As already mentioned, Leontis Kloubas is credited in the inscription in the middle panel of the hall with having commissioned and paid for the entire mosaic pavement, in order to be remembered and to secure salvation for himself and his brother Jonathan (Habas, 2021, 173). While it is not possible to ascertain for certain who Leontis Kloubas was (Zori, 1966, 133-134; Safrai, 2003, 248), we can assume that he was a rich and powerful man of Jewish faith. Some scholars have suggested that Leontis Kloubas or his family might have been originally from Alexandria, which would



account for the second panel, the Nilotic one with the Egyptian town explicitly mentioned (Sivan, 2008, 160). But, instead, could he not have been a merchant involved in commerce with Alexandria in Egypt?

Alexandria was a very important harbor, shipping grains around the Mediterranean and importing/exporting textiles all the way to central Asia (Pritchard, 2006; Williams, 2012). In a town like Scythopolis, a famous weaving center (Sivan 2008, 163), where commercial activities were flourishing in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, it would certainly have been possible for Leontis Kloubas and his brother to be rich merchants, perhaps involved in long-distance seafaring trade and commanding a few *naukleroï*. If this reading is correct, it would imply that, if indeed the building was a secular basilica for public use, it served more likely a function related to local and long-distance trade. If it was an inn (as favored by some authors), it seems its proprietor was both an inn-keeper *and* a merchant, hosting other merchants in his hall.

After all, this was an epoch of unprecedented economic boom in the area, mirrored by a construction boom as well. Toward the end of the Roman era, the Jezreel Valley swamps dried up and in the following centuries large portions of land near Scythopolis became available for settlement and agriculture (Bar, 2004, 312). Additionally, according to new paleoclimatic evidence, after the period of drought that took place between ca. 350-470 CE in the Eastern Mediterranean, a drastic shift in climate resulted in much wetter conditions for the following two centuries (Izdebski et al., 2015). This shift, together with complex water management systems, enabled extensive agricultural practices, such as wine making, that became of fundamental importance for the economic prosperity of the region.<sup>25</sup>

I argue that it is this sudden shift toward a less arid climate, and the fecundity and material prosperity it brought that are mirrored in the joyous depiction of river waters in the Nilotic panel at Scythopolis. The fecundity brought onto Egypt by the Nile was a powerful visual herald of prosperity for the region of Scythopolis. While Safrai convincingly made the case for a public use of this complex (Safrai, 2003, 246), I disagree with its characterization as a prayer hall. Indeed, a profane function relating to trade and the economy seems more likely. This would account



9 Floor mosaic, detail of the Nilotic decoration, Hippolitus Hall, Madaba (Jordan), early 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE



10 Floor mosaic, detail with a crocodile, House of Dionysus, Sepphoris (Israel), 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE

for the patron being a member of the merchant class and the iconography of plenty implied in the Nilotic scene.

### **A Shared Cultural Heritage – Some Conclusions**

What seems apparent in the House of Leontis is that the Hellenistic culture was an important part of the common cultural heritage of late antique Palestine, in a Jewish and Christian milieu alike. Or, in other words, as Hagigh Sivan has suggested, a shared appreciation of aesthetics, both intellectual and artistic, was what nurtured a sense of citizenship in the Palestinian town (Sivan, 2008, 14). As part of the shared cultural heritage of the Mediterranean *koiné*, classical mythology had lost all religious dimensions and was set firmly in the realm of artistic tradition and poetic invention, as well as that of symbolic representation.

In Madaba (east of the Jordan river) we find a Christian parallel to the Jewish context of the Scythopolis floor and another example of Nilotic elements intermingling with visual renderings of poetry and mythology. The so-called Hippolitus hall (fig. 9), early 6<sup>th</sup> century, derives its name from the central representation in two registers of the myth of Phaedra and Hippolitus (or the tragedy by Euripides). A separate portion of mosaic, adjacent to the mythological one, is decorated with refined elements of Nilotica, showing a marked appreciation for the visual language of naturalistic Roman art.

A bridge between the earlier imperial past and these late antique examples is the Roman villa dated to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Sepphoris, in the Lower Galilee. This villa belonged most likely to a Jew of prestige, and it had a triclinium decorated with scenes from the life of Dionysus, depicted with marked naturalism (Talgam and Weiss, 2004). A section in the southern border of the mosaic was at some point replaced with a Nilotic landscape, showing naked putti (possibly pygmies) fighting a crocodile and hunting birds (fig. 10). Once more we find in the same floor, and treated with apparently the same attitude, Nilotic imagery and mythological themes.

The appreciation for mythological themes and ancient theater was clearly shared by both Jewish and Christian communities of Palestine.<sup>26</sup> The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE-50 CE) describes the acts of devotions

of Egyptian Jews toward the Nile, while making clear that they were carried out without compromise to Jewish law. Similarly, he saw no problem in Jewish participation in theater performances and athletic games (Kerkeslage, 1998, 215). In Scythopolis the Jewish religious festival of Purim, with all its drinking and merry making, provided a link with the city's pagan past and its titular divinity (and legendary founder) Dionysus (Sivan, 2008, 159). While in Gaza, the Christian fest of St Stephen consisted not only of a religious procession, but also of theatrical performances and night spectacles of mimes (Sivan, 2008, 152).

As Bowersock suggests, mythological mosaics could also be associated to the immensely popular mime-theater of late antiquity (Bowersock, 2006, 54). This form of entertainment was clearly a subject of debate: contested by some early Christian authors, such as Jacob of Serugh (451-521) (Talgam, 2010, 54), it was defended by others, such as the above mentioned Choricus in a speech known as *Apologia mimorum*. The connection to theatrical performance seems to be very suggestive when speaking of the tragedy of Phaedra, or of other mosaics of the region featuring Dionysus, Achilles and Odysseus.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, while in a religious context (such as in the Christian churches of Gaza and Khirbet Mukhayyat) artists had to carefully evoke the Nile without depicting it, in the private hall in Scythopolis they could freely express all their appreciation (and that of their patron) for the Hellenistic artistic tradition. The Nilotic iconography, acceptable in a profane environment for both Jews and Christians, had well-established precursors in Hellenistic and Roman art and went hand in hand with episodes from the Odyssey and with myths and stories often represented on stage.

Moreover, the positive augural meaning of the Nile and the land of plenty (Egypt) was in harmony with the wish for protection expressed elsewhere in the House of Leontis. The iconography of the Nile, with its associations with fertility, abundance and good fortune would have been well suited to a building dedicated to commerce and trade, a building offered to the community by a rich citizen in search of social recognition.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548432> (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 2 Including Cyrenaica, where there are also prominent examples from late antiquity (Aföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins, 1980).
- 3 Conversely, M. Avi-Yonah identifies this inscription not with the land of Egypt but with the city of Memphis (Avi-Yonah, 1972, 121).
- 4 “When the river is in flood and flows over the plains, many lilies, which the Egyptians call lotus, grow in the water” (Herodotus, II, 92).
- 5 The Christian community of Scythopolis was traditionally composed of different sects: at least until the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century there was a large Arian community. Additionally, the Jewish-Christian sect of the Ebionites also had a presence in the city in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, if Epiphanius’ *Panarion* is to be believed.
- 6 For a brief review of these positions see Habas (2021, 192).
- 7 The three sections of the hall mosaic are now preserved (as separate panels) in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem.
- 8 Whether Alexandria was technically a part of Egypt or *near* Egypt, for the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine mindset is a complex matter (see MacDonald, 2021).
- 9 According to Herodotus, Etearchus king of the Ammonians was told by certain young Nasamonians that after a long journey through the desert they arrived by a large river with crocodiles and hippos (probably the Niger). Indeed, no North-Africans nor Greek knew exactly where the source of the Nile was, nor what shape its course took passed the first few cataracts, but based on the account of the animals described by the young men, Etearchus presumed this river to be the Nile, and Herodotus agrees with him (Herodotus, II, 32-33).
- 10 Following Seneca’s reflections in a passage dedicated to the Nile, one may judge the greatness of a river by the size of the animals, that can live off the river’s offerings (Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, IV, 171).
- 11 British Museum, museum no. EA5473: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y\\_EA5473](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA5473) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 12 Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, Numéro principal: E 4850: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010050476> (accessed 31 May 2022).



- 13 This interesting phenomenon sees the presence of embalmed crocodiles in some early modern churches devoted to the cult of Mary, for example the Santuario Madonna delle Lacrime in Ponte Nossa by Bergamo or the Santuario di Santa Maria delle Grazie near Mantua.
- 14 The most majestic example of these stelae, known to scholars also as “Horus on the Crocodiles”, is the Metternich Stela, now in the MET: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546037> (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 15 See for example: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545766> (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 16 The amulet is perhaps an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century electrotype of a Byzantine original. British Museum, museum number: 1938,1010.1 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_1938-1010-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1938-1010-1) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 17 An entire museum dedicated to mummified crocodiles and their relation to the god Sobek opened by the temple of Kom Ombo (near Aswan) in 2012.
- 18 It is unclear if this Crassus is Marcus Licinius Crassus, grandson of the triumvir by the same name, or Publius Canidius Crassus, who campaigned with Mark Anthony in the East (Draycott, 2012, 51)
- 19 British Museum, no. 1866,1201.4189: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_1866-1201-4189](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1866-1201-4189) (accessed 31 May 2022). Cleopatra’s daughter, Cleopatra Selene, then reappropriated this symbology for herself and a coin issued by her husband, Juba II, king of Mauretania, shows the monarch on one side and a crocodile with the Greek inscription BASILISSA CLEOPATRA, on the other: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_1908-0404-65](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1908-0404-65) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 20 British Museum, no. 1935,1102.9: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_1935-1102-9](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1935-1102-9) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 21 British Museum, no. R.10656: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_R-10656](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_R-10656) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 22 British Museum, no. 1872,0709.786: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_1872-0709-786](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1872-0709-786) (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 23 See exemplar on the site of the Classical Numismatic Group: <https://www.cng-coins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=165019> (accessed 31 May 2022).
- 24 A similar motive in mosaic can be found in the so-called mosaic of Amphitrite in the Villa Selene, in Leptis Magna (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), a villa famous also for its humorous Nilotic mosaic band featuring fighting pygmies.

- 25 A mosaic from Kissufim (near Gaza, today in the Israel Museum of Jerusalem), depicting a wine merchant holding a grape in his right hand and leading a camel carrying long, thin amphorae, stands testament to the importance of Palestinian wine trade.
- 26 On Jewish exposure to Greco-Roman culture and its absorption into Jewish tradition see Weiss (2010).
- 27 In Madaba, archeologists also uncovered a mosaic (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE) featuring Patroclus and Achilles playing the cythara and one depicting a Bacchic procession with dancing maenad and satyr.

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## Illustrations

- Fig. 1 Floor mosaic, detail of the Nilotic landscape, Sts. Lot and Procopius, Khirbet Mukhayyat (Jordan), ca. 550, photo: Helen Miles.
- Fig. 2 Painted plaster pavement fragment, ca. 1390-1353 BCE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), public domain.
- Fig. 3 Drawing of the floor mosaic in the hall of the House of Leontis Kloubas, Beit She'an, Israel, from N. Zori, "The House of Kyrios Leontis at Beth Shean", *Israel Exploration Journal*, 16/2, 1966, p. 128, fig. 4.
- Fig. 4 Floor mosaic, Nilotic panel with Odysseus and the Nile from the House of Leontis Kloubas, Beit She'an, Israel, mid-5<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, photo: Gary Todd, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.
- Fig. 5 Christian amulet with Greek inscriptions, 6<sup>th</sup> c. (electrotype replica of a Byzantine original?), British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum, [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org).
- Fig. 6 Denarius of Octavian, silver, 28 BCE, British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum, [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org).
- Fig. 7 Sestertius of Caracalla, copper alloy, 215 CE, British Museum, London, © The Trustees of the British Museum, [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org).
- Fig. 8 Floor mosaic, mythological panel with Odysseus and the Sirens from the House of Leontis Kloubas, mid-5<sup>th</sup>-early 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, photo: Gary Todd, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.
- Fig. 9 Floor mosaic, detail of the Nilotic decoration, Hippolitus Hall, Madaba (Jordan), early 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, photo: Elias Roviello.
- Fig. 10 Floor mosaic, detail with a crocodile, House of Dionysus, Sepphoris (Israel), 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, photo: Marco Prins, [www.livius.org](http://www.livius.org), public domain.