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9

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Federica Fontana
- 9 -

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divinità, ministri, devoti*

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a cura di
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Emanuela Murgia

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Emanuela MURGIA

Dionysian-themed African mosaics: some reflections*

ABSTRACT

The African provinces, maybe more than other regions of the Empire, are known to have delivered pavements characterized by a Dionysiac theme (Dionysos, satyrs, bacchantes, other members of his *thiasos*, Dionysiac emblems such as vines, masks, *etc.*). The meaning to be related to those mosaics is very debated, in particular whether to consider them as reliable sources or not to define the traits of the African Dionysism. To resolve the issue, it is necessary to study the mosaics in their own context. This contribution intends to analyse, as an example, the *oecus* mosaic from the ‘House of *Silenus*’ at El Jem-*Thysdrus*, aiming to clarify if it could be intended in a symbolic interpretation (*i.e.* the scene allude to certain aspects of the Dionysiac mysteries) as it is traditionally proposed.

KEYWORDS

El Jem-*Thysdrus*, carpet-vine, Dionysos, Casa del Sileno, *liknon*, Dionysiac myths, Dionysiac repertory, cult, mosaics, Vergil, ritual, mysteries

The study of images depicting deities, myths or rites, and especially those pertaining to a domestic context, give rise to a many issues for reflection concerning methodology¹. It is beyond doubt that such documents are not merely to be understood in terms of the decorative sphere, but are often of great significance not only when seeking to identify the aesthetic preferences of whoever commissioned them, but also their cultural identity². It is equally true, however, that only by adopting a global approach in relation to the entire sum of available data relating to their context³ is it possible to shed light on the 'status' of those images which have effectively been described as «aux limites du religieux»⁴ (and, it must be said, even such an approach is not always successful).

Among such images, a place of particular significance is occupied by depictions which belong to the Dionysian sphere⁵, whose interpretation is the object of a methodological debate which is far from concluded⁶. Allusions to a 'religious' or even 'spiritual' value of paintings and mosaic depictions of Dionysus and the episodes of his myth are not rare (this applies also, metonymically, to images of *thyrsi*, tambourines, *rhytha*, masks, characters of the *thiasus*, panthers *etc.*)⁷; references to the adherence to *Dionysism*

* I am very grateful to Marco Fernandelli for his bibliographic advice and suggestions.

¹ Cfr. *Image et Religion* 2008 and the papers presented for the *Image et religion dans l'espace domestique* conference organised on 6-7 June 2003 in Athens by the École Française d'Athènes, in collaboration with the École Française de Rome and the Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene; the papers were published in «MEFRA» 113, 1 2001 and «MEFRA» 116, 2 2004. The topic of the representation of the 'divine' was also the subject of the colloquia organised by the research group *Figura. La représentation du divin dans les mondes grec et romain*.

² MUGIONE, POUZADOUX 2008, p. 303, ROBERT 2008, pp. 414-415.

³ Cfr. SCHMITT-PANTEL 2008, p. 307, ROBERT 2008, pp. 412-413. On the other hand, see the invitation in GRASSIGLI 1995, pp. 230, 235 on the topic of the representations of the myth of Lycurgus, for «un diverso itinerario di studio» to be undertaken in order to avoid that the iconographic theme in question should, «invece di stabilire un rapporto dialettico con il contesto», end up «subirne la determinazione, ricevendo un senso solo da esso». In other words, the iconography itself would justify the presence of a scene from the Lycurgus myth in a given context and not viceversa.

⁴ A definition adopted in *Image et Religion* 2008.

⁵ Cfr. for example GRASSIGLI 1995, pp. 229-248, PARRISH 1995, pp. 307-332, DARMON 1999, pp. 198-199, PARRISH 2004, pp. 75-84, GUIMIER-SORBETS 2011, pp. 437-446 on the mosaic repertoire, GRIESI 2011, pp. 243-264, on the Herculaneum paintings.

⁶ WYLER 2004, pp. 933-951, WYLER 2008, pp. 449-459, DARMON 2008, pp. 485-500, DUNBABIN 2008, p. 193.

⁷ Cfr. GRIMAL 1981, p. 323: «les échos dans l'âme», «sentiment du divin, de la présence, des objets naturels, de 'démones'»; GRASSIGLI 1997, p. 706: «È più difficile, invece, valutare appieno la portata degli altri soggetti dionisiaci. In ogni caso è ovvio ritenere possibile l'esistenza di vari gradi di intensità o di specificità religiosa per un medesimo soggetto»; DARMON 2008, p. 499: «On est tenté de supposer qu'au bout du compte, pour qui savait les lire, leurs représentations profanes restaient imprégnées de quelque valeur spirituelle. Et, même vécues dans la maison, au quotidien, elles continuaient à véhiculer quelque effluve de leur nature divine». On the ambiguity of such considerations, WYLER 2008, pp. 450-451.

on the part of whoever commissioned the artwork are just as frequent⁸, as are readings which view the images through the lens of initiation cults⁹.

To accept such interpretative categories can lead researchers to consider mosaics and paintings with a Dionysian theme as being reliable sources for the reconstruction of the religious culture in a given context. An exemplary case of such a tendency is that of the Roman provinces in Africa which have produced, in greater number than perhaps any other region of the Empire, Dionysian-themed decorated floors and “carpet-vine” into which are intertwined repertoire figures (such as satyrs, *sileni*, Bacchae, *erotes* etc.) and, elsewhere, scenes from the Dionysian myth proper (the triumph of Dionysus, Dionysus and *Icarius*, sleeping Ariadne etc.)¹⁰.

Some scholars, prominent among whom is Roger Hanoune, consider it unlikely that such mosaic floors can be taken as reliable sources to outline the characters of African *Dionysism*: «ils ne nous apprennent rien ou presque sur les convictions des commanditaires de ces revêtements de sol et ne transforment évidemment pas leurs maisons en sanctuaires ou en sièges de confréries dévotes, que ce soit à *Cuicul* pour la Maison de Bacchus ou à *Thysdrus* pour la Maison de la procession dionysique»¹¹.

Conversely, others have suggested a specific «connotazione mistico rituale» for the so-called ‘carpet-vines’¹². In particular, Francesca Ghedini has made clear how «la straordinaria fioritura di raffigurazioni dionisiache nella produzione musiva delle province africane» is to be explained «nell’ottica dell’esaltazione di una divinità che da un lato si pone come ponte fra terra e cielo, soddisfacendo quella forte esigenza di misticismo propria delle popolazioni locali, dall’altro si qualifica come dio della vegetazione e della fecondità»¹³. In her view, Dionysian-themed mosaics (dating from between the second half of the 2nd c. A.D. to the 4th c. A.D.)¹⁴ would thus be a confirmation of the existence,

⁸ For a discussion of the use of this term, sometimes inappropriate, WYLER 2008, p. 449.

⁹ Cfr. for example GRASSIGLI 1995, pp. 229-248.

¹⁰ DUNBABIN 1978, pp. 173-187, *LIMC* IV, s.v. *Dionysos/Bacchus (in peripheria occidentali)*, pp. 921-922 (S. BOUCHER), KONDOLÉON 1995, p. 236, SLIM 1995, pp. 87-119, GHEDINI 1997, pp. 215-247, BALMELLE, BRUN 2005, pp. 899-921 (specifically with reference to the repertoire of scenes depicting agricultural work), NOVELLO 2007, pp. 67-80.

¹¹ HANOUNE 1986, pp. 152-153. On the mosaics of the *Maison de Bacchus* (Djemila–*Cuicul*) and of the *Maison de la procession dionysiaque* (El Jem–*Thysdrus*), cfr. the recent publication by TURCAN 2003, pp. 125-127. For a discussion of the identification of Dionysiac cult sites, see JACCOTTET 2010, pp. 249-267, especially pp. 254-264.

¹² Cfr. GHEDINI 1997, pp. 215, 241. Previously along the same lines, not exclusively with reference to the ‘carpet-vines’, see FOUCHER 1974-1975, p. 8, BOUSSAADA AHLEM 1992, p. 1060. Similarly NOVELLO 2007, pp. 75-80.

¹³ GHEDINI 1997, p. 241.

¹⁴ GHEDINI 1997, pp. 232-233.

in the private sphere, of a long-lasting cultural tradition which, starting from the earliest Punic attestations,¹⁵ would stretch all the way to the beginning of late antiquity¹⁶.

As Stéphanie Wyler has pointed out, «le premier écueil à éviter est de confondre les différentes manifestations du dionysisme à travers les âges et les aires géographiques»¹⁷ and «à partir d'un langage commun, religieux ou iconographique, les images du dionysisme sont libres de manipulations et d'interprétations, dans la mesure précisément où le contexte dans lequel elles ont été conçues et reçues n'est pas culturel»¹⁸.

In the light of such considerations, it appears to be of the utmost urgency that we take a fresh look at context¹⁹.

Among the rich *corpus* of mosaics with a Dionysian theme, in this paper I will offer an analysis of the floor which adorned the *oecus* of the 'House of *Silenus*' in El Jem-*Thysdrus* (figg. 1-2)²⁰ whose depictions are, according to some scholars, «connotate in *sensu religioso*» (the drunken *Silenus* with *Erotes* and Nymphs, the unveiling of the *phallus*, the maenad with a snake, the *silenus* taming a lion)²¹.

The frequency of the occurrence of the Dionysian theme in the mosaics in ancient *Thysdrus*, when compared to the rest of *Africa Proconsularis*, is such²² that it begs an investigation into the reasons behind it, whether they are to be sought in some sort of 'fashion', in the exhibiting of a Classical culture or, rather, in the adherence on the part of the owners of the various houses «à l'idéologie impériale fondée sur un syncrétisme où le bachisme avait sa large part»²³. The latter hypothesis appears to have gained the most credit among scholars: for example, it has been suggested that whoever commissioned the building of the 'House of the months'²⁴ be identified as an initiate of the mysteries

¹⁵ On this evidence PICARD 1979, pp. 83-113.

¹⁶ GHEDINI 1997, pp. 240-241. The scholar furthermore suggests that the depiction of vines could be an allusion to *diasparagmos*, GHEDINI 1997, p. 241. Likewise NOVELLO 2007, p. 77.

¹⁷ WYLER 2008, p. 449.

¹⁸ WYLER 2008, p. 450. See for example the evolution of the Dionysiac figurative programmes in Pompeii between the Republican age and the age of the Principate, WYLER 2006, pp. 155-163. Cfr. also ZANKER 2009, pp. 91-92 on the topic of the use of the Dionysiac repertoire as a synonym for the adoption of a Hellenizing life-style. Similar considerations can also be valid, *mutatis mutandis*, for Egyptian-style paintings, BRAGANTINI 2012, pp. 21-33.

¹⁹ In this regard, cf. JACCOTTET 2003, pp. 184-189, 193 who invites extreme caution in considering 'Dionysian' images extrapolated from their original context.

²⁰ FOUCHER 1961, pp. 27-29, FOUCHER 1964, pp. 252-253, DUNBABIN 1978, p. 117, n. 28, PARRISH 1984, n. 33, GHEDINI 1997, pp. 242-243, nn. 5-6, *Edilizia residenziale* 2003, *Thysdrus* 8, NOVELLO 2007, p. 256, *Thys.* 6.

²¹ GHEDINI 1997, pp. 226-228, NOVELLO 2007, pp. 76-77.

²² For a catalogue of such testimonies see FOUCHER 1981, *passim*, NOVELLO 2007, pp. 204-205, 254-261.

²³ FOUCHER 1981, p. 691, FOUCHER 1994, pp. 79-80.

²⁴ On which FOUCHER 1994, pp. 70-80, EASTMAN 2001, pp. 183-200, FOUCHER 2000, pp. 63-108,

of *Dionysos-Bacchus-Osiris*²⁵. Another relevant case is found in the 'House of *Bacchus*'²⁶, where the subject of one of the mosaics (dating to the second half of the 4th c. A.D.) would appear to «rievocare, in un momento in cui il paganesimo morente lasciava spazio alla nuova religione cristiana e al sotterraneo dilagare di culti salvazionistici, l'antica figura del *Shadrappa* punico»²⁷. Is it therefore possible to claim that the mosaic repertoire in *Thysdrus* was characterised by a strong semantic connotation, and that Dionysus featured in the mosaics in his multiple appearances and possible relations with other deities (*Bacchus*, *Liber Pater*, *Osiris*, *Shadrappa*) or mythical characters (Orpheus)?

It is clear that we can only obtain an answer to such a question by interrogating a multitude of sources (epigraphic, literary, archaeological), thus following the lead of religious historians²⁸.

It is well known that both the iconographical and epigraphical repertoire show evidence for a very substantial presence of the cult of *Liber Pater* in the African provinces²⁹; furthermore, archaeological sources and inscriptions frequently originate from the same site (as is the case in *Carthago*, *Thuburbo Maius*, *Cuicul*, *Thugga*, etc.), a circumstance which, according to Jalloul Boussaada Ahlem, stands in contradiction with the thesis whereby the Dionysian-themed mosaics have a purely ornamental value³⁰. In the site of El Jem-*Thysdrus*, however, no dedication to the god has been recovered³¹. Moreover,

FOUCHER 2001, pp. 205-214, *Edilizia residenziale* 2003, *Thysdrus* 4, DESCHAMPS 2005, pp. 103-130, EASTMAN 2005, pp. 1065-1072, NOVELLO 2007, p. 255, *Thys.* 3, with their different hypotheses for the dating of the mosaic floors (from the beginning of the 3rd c. A.D. to the end of the same century).

²⁵ DESCHAMPS 2005, pp. 103-130.

²⁶ DUNBABIN 1978, p. 258, n. 12 a-b, NOVELLO 2007, p. 260, *Thys.* 23.

²⁷ NOVELLO 2007, p. 77. Thus LE GLAY 1975, p. 134 had already identified the haloed figura accompanied by a gecko as an 'African *Bacchus*', the outcome of a double or triple syncretism; *LIMC* IV, s.v. *Dionysos/Bacchus (in peripheria occidentali)*, p. 918, n. 197 (S. BOUCHER). Cfr. also CADOTTE 2007, p. 259.

²⁸ Contemporary research in this field has left behind the categories outlined by BÉNABOU 1976, LE GLAY 1966, LE GLAY 1975, pp. 123-151, and essentially re-proposed by CADOTTE 2007, and is heading towards a more 'flexible' interpretative model for the various African religious identities, especially in the light of the different topographical, institutional and political contexts in which they came about, cfr. the recent summary proposed by MIATTO 2014, pp. 231-241. See especially SEBAÏ 1999, pp. 81-94, SEBAÏ 2005, pp. 39-56, SEBAÏ 2014, pp. 129-141.

²⁹ BRUHL 1953, p. 223, HANOUNE 1986, pp. 156-158, BOUSSAADA AHLEM 1992, p. 1049, CADOTTE 2007, pp. 253-281.

³⁰ BOUSSAADA AHLEM 1992, p. 1049. This claim, however, would require reconsideration especially in chronological terms: indeed, the majority of the inscriptions can be dated to between the 2nd and 3rd c. A.D., and their occurrence decreases drastically in the late Imperial age, BOUSSAADA AHLEM 1992, pp. 1050, 1056. According to NOVELLO 2007, p. 80 the documentary gap is to be explained with reference to the casual nature of the findings and to the «differenti tipi di cultualità sottesa all'ornamentazione degli edifici abitativi da una parte, alla dedica di iscrizioni dall'altra». What such differences actually were, however, remains to be explained.

³¹ CADOTTE 2007, pp. 267-270, 453-456.

among the literary sources traditionally taken into account by scholars who study *Dionysism* in Africa, there are no references to *Thysdrus*: indeed, *Arnobius* (*nat.* 5.19) describes *bacchanalia* (...) *inmania* with episodes of *diasparagmos* in the *Sicca* region, whereas Saint Augustine (*epist.* 17.4) mentions the bacchanals of the notables of *Medauros*³².

The gap in the documentary evidence is in itself an element deserving of some reflection; however, given that this is a case of an *argumentum ex silentio*, the only possibility is to give maximum value to the only available source (the iconographic source)³³ with the aid of 'other' indicators.

Such a methodological approach is, ultimately, the same as that adopted by Francesca Ghedini in her analysis of the aforementioned mosaic with *Silenus* in the homonymous House in *Thysdrus*, where she offers an interpretation of the scene «in chiave orfico/dionisiaca»³⁴ on the basis of Virgil's Eclogue 6 and suggests a semantic relation linking the mosaic to another mythological scene which she describes as «fortemente pervasa di riferimenti dionisiaci»³⁵, depicted in a 4th century mosaic originating from Cherchel-Caesarea³⁶. Ghedini's reading, however, contains some areas of doubt.

The *Thysdrus* mosaic floor, dated variably between the late Severan age and the 4th c. A.D.³⁷, presents a lush 'carpet-vine', with *erotes* harvesting the grapes amongst the *racemes* and a group of characters from the *thiasus* arranged along the edge of the 'carpet': satyrs and maenads paired with large animals (dromedaries, elephants, panthers, lions *etc.*) and a kneeling male figure who is seen extracting an object from a basket placed on the ground (perhaps the unveiling of the *linkon* with the *phallus*?); and the centre of the scene a hexagonal pseudo-emblema represents a nymph and three youths intent on tying up a semi-recumbent *Silenus*. According to the scholarship, this scene has a precise literary counterpart in the Virgilian episode (*ecl.* 6.13-86) in which the drunken *Silenus*, surprised in his sleep by shepherds *Chromis* and *Mnasyllus* and by Aegle the Nymph, is imprisoned and forced to sing³⁸.

³² HANOUNE 1986, pp. 153-156.

³³ A reading of the building's floor plan is difficult. The mosaic adorned the floor of a rectangular room, adjacent to a larger, with a trapeze-shaped entrance decorated with the Dionysiac procession. It is impossible to clarify whether the two rooms were connected, nor what were their functions might have been, GHEDINI 1997, p. 236.

³⁴ GHEDINI 1997, p. 228.

³⁵ GHEDINI 1997, p. 228.

³⁶ DUNBABIN 1978, p. 255, n. 10, PARRISH 1984, pp. 132-134, GHEDINI 1997, p. 242, n. 3. According to NOVELLO 2007, p. 77, nt. 108 the same value should be assigned to the depiction of a drunken Dionysus in a Carthaginian mosaic (on which DUNBABIN 1978, p. 252, n. 22, GHEDINI 1997, p. 242, n. 2).

³⁷ DUNBABIN 1978, p. 117, n. 28 (260-280 A.D.), GHEDINI 1997, p. 243 (end of the Severan age), PARRISH 1984, n. 33 (middle of the 3rd c. A.D.), FOUCHER 1981, p. 686, fig. 1 (4th c. A.D.).

³⁸ FOUCHER 1964, pp. 252-253, de Saint Denis 1963, pp. 23-20, FOUCHER 1981, pp. 686, 692, GHEDINI 1997, pp. 226-228.

According to Francesca Ghedini, the song was cosmogonic in character (from its *incipit* which describes the origin of the world, to the narration of myths evoking «il faticoso cammino verso un universo civilizzato e il percorso inverso»³⁹), so much so that it should be understood as an authentic «canto di rivelazione, in cui la rievocazione del lontano passato, fa balenare la possibilità di un ritorno all'età dell'oro attraverso la mistica orfico/dionisiaca»⁴⁰, following the interpretation proposed by Francesco Della Corte⁴¹.

Thus, for Ghedini, the theme chosen by the whoever commissioned the mosaic in the House of *Silenus* is not a generic allusion to Classical culture, on which the *dominus* of the House was evidently drawing but, rather, an allusion to the civilising character of Dionysus and, more importantly, a figurative, visual medium by which to reveal «la via di un percorso iniziatico in chiave orfico/dionisiaca»⁴². Furthermore, Ghedini assigns the same significance to the scene of *Silenus* with putti in the 4th c. A.D. floor-mosaic made by *Caecilius* for a residential (?) building in Cherchel⁴³.

This theory has been the object of further development in the work of Marta Novello, who assigns «un messaggio salvazionistico» to the *Thysdrus* mosaic⁴⁴.

Some aspects of this suggestion, however, remain unconvincing. I will limit myself to a few observations.

As mentioned above, the song of *Silenus* remains, to this day, an exegetical *crux*: some interpreters see it as a lucretian and epicurean derivation, others detect in it a Dionysiac inspiration, for others still it is an eclectic creation.⁴⁵ The risk involved in not accounting for all the philological interpretations but accepting just one of them (in this case, the reading of the song as pertaining to the sphere of initiation rites) is that it leads to a forced evaluation of the possible message entrusted to the scene depicted in the *Thysdrus* mosaic.

Quite apart from the meaning to be assigned to the Eclogue itself which, as is known, opens and closes with the presence of Apollo⁴⁶, it is clear that it would be hard to justify the use of such a meaning in the interpretation of the El Jem and Cherchel mosaics, which date to the 3rd to 4th c. A.D., nor, conversely, should the latter contribute to shed light on the contents of Virgil's verses⁴⁷, composed as they were in the 40s and 30s of the

³⁹ GHEDINI 1997, p. 227.

⁴⁰ GHEDINI 1997, p. 227.

⁴¹ DELLA CORTE 1983-1984, pp. 165-178.

⁴² GHEDINI 1997, p. 228.

⁴³ GHEDINI 1997, pp. 227-228.

⁴⁴ NOVELLO 2007, p. 77.

⁴⁵ PARATORE 1964, pp. 509-537, CUPAILO 1996, p. 490, ARICÒ 2012, p. 141, CUCCHIARELLI 2012, p. 26.

⁴⁶ CUCCHIARELLI 2012, p. 320.

⁴⁷ This, however, is the opinion of GHEDINI 1997, p. 228.

1st c. B.C.⁴⁸. The only possible manner of determining the nature and extent of the relation incurring between archaeological and literary source is to consider how the latter might have been viewed and read by readers of the middle and late Imperial age. In this regard, Francesca Ghedini has observed that «forse proprio per la sua forte connotazione iniziatica, l'egloga VI era talvolta recitata a teatro»⁴⁹, quoting in support the well-known passage from Servius *ad ecl.* 6.11: *dicitur autem ingenti favore esse recitata, adeo ut, cum eam postea Cytheris meretrix cantasset in theatro, quam in fine Lycoridem vocat, stupefactus Cicero, cuius esset, requireret. Et cum eum tandem aliquando vidisset, dixisse dicitur et ad suam et ad illius laudem magnae spes altera Romae: quod iste postea ad Ascanium transtulit, sicut commentatores loquuntur*. First of all, it is important to point out that the commentator limits himself to mentioning the song of *Lycoris* and not the fact that the eclogue was recited in the theatre due to its 'connotazione iniziatica'⁵⁰. Moreover, the episode itself is an object of controversy as to its reliability, and scholarly opinion on this issue is far from unanimous⁵¹.

The fact that the complexity of the Virgilian discourse was not fully understood in late antiquity appears further to be confirmed by the fact that *Nemesianus*, freely reinterpreting Virgil's Eclogues 4 and 6, entrusts the task of narrating the stories of *Bacchus* to Pan, divine minstrel⁵².

As a final consideration on this issue, it should be noted that the mosaic scene with the drunken *Silenus* presents the rendering of a situation taken from a work of *literature* and not from a *mythological* episode⁵³, which in itself is reason enough to exclude the possibility that this might be an example of *cultural* connotation, whatever the nature of the cult in question.

In this context, therefore, also the scene of the revelation of the *liknon*⁵⁴, depicted at the edge of the 'carpet-vine' in the House of *Silenus*, cannot be taken as a precise reference to the «momento centrale della cerimonia iniziatica»⁵⁵, nor does it appear endowed with the peculiar connotation «in senso religioso» in which terms it has, instead, been

⁴⁸ CUCCHIARELLI 2012, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁹ GHEDINI 1997, p. 228.

⁵⁰ On this, cfr. DON. *Vita* 26 p. 8 Hagen *Bucolica eo successu edidit ut in scaena quoque per cantores crebro pronuntiarentur*. On the theatrical success of the Eclogues, VAN SICKLE 2003.

⁵¹ *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* I, s.v. *Bucoliche: la recitazione*, p. 576 (M. BONARIA), *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* III, s.v. *Licoride*, p. 216 (M. BONARIA), MANZONI 1995, pp. 36-38, TRAINA 1999, p. 96.

⁵² CUCCHIARELLI 2012, p. 320.

⁵³ A valid point in this respect is found in the observations made by CUCCHIARELLI 2012, p. 320 with regard to Eclogue 6: «Dal suo dionisiaco antro, il Sileno non fa rivelazioni religiose: richiama concetti, luoghi e fatti del misticismo, ma limitandosi a evocare per suggestioni».

⁵⁴ On which cfr. *ThesCRA* II, s.v. *Initiation/Initiation/Initiation/Iniziazione*, pp. 98-101 (W. BURKERT).

⁵⁵ GHEDINI 1997, p. 227. Cfr., however, JACCOTTET 2003, pp. 99-100, 140-143.

described⁵⁶. In this regard, it is worth recalling the warning issued by Anne-Françoise Jaccottet on the exegesis of the recurring motif of the unveiling of the *phallus*. Jaccottet has specified that the unveiling or the laying down of the *liknon* was not a necessary requirement for initiation (indeed, there is no mention of it in epigraphic sources)⁵⁷ and how, on the contrary, there was a host of different rituals for the participation in the mysteries. In the eyes of the ancients, this iconographic theme constituted the best symbol through which to allude to the Dionysiac sphere and that of initiation; nevertheless, «leur rapport à la réalité n'est pas primordial et les éléments isolés, qui renvoient à la réalité cultuelle sont complètement redigérés pour entrer dans le langage et la syntaxe iconographiques qui suivent leurs propres règles»⁵⁸.

In conclusion, therefore, it seems to me that the drunken *Silenus* and the nymphs of the *Thysdrus*-El Jem mosaic clearly refer to a *cultural* sphere and not to a *cultual* sphere, in support of what has been suggested by Anne-Françoise Jaccottet, whose considerations I wish to quote at the close of the discussion offered in this paper: «l'imagerie dionysiaque est un monde à part entière, riche d'une tradition pluriséculaire et dont la diffusion extraordinaire en fait une référence universelle. Les images dionysiaques, véritable patrimoine iconographique, jouent le rôle d'une *koinè* visuelle dans laquelle chacun dans l'Antiquité se reconnaît culturellement. C'est cette dimension culturelle qui doit nous faire relativiser notre approche des images dionysiaques»⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ FOUCHER 1981, p. 691, GHEDINI 1997, p. 243, NOVELLO 2007, p. 77.

⁵⁷ BURKERT 1989 mentions the fact that the *liknon* with *phallus* appears in Bacchic contexts but with no particular 'mystical' connotations. On the use of the *cista mystica* in the cults of Isis, *Mater Magna* and Demetra, see LE GLAY 1966, p. 362.

⁵⁸ JACCOTTET 2005-2006, pp. 237-238.

⁵⁹ JACCOTTET 2005-2006, p. 238.

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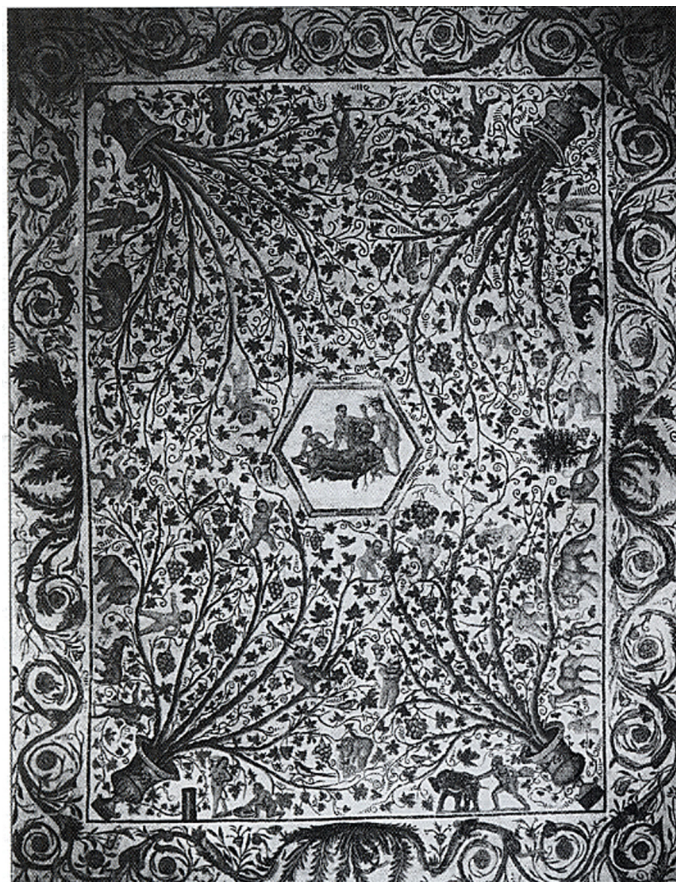
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ILLUSTRAZIONI

- Fig. 1 The *oecus* mosaic from the 'House of *Silenus*' at El Jem-*Thysdrus* (da Ghedini 1997, p. 223, fig. 7).
- Fig. 2 The *oecus* mosaic from the 'House of *Silenus*' at El Jem-*Thysdrus*, detail (da Ghedini 1997, p. 227, fig. 12).



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