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The "Oceanic Head" in Mosaic: Origin, Iconographic Variations and Polysemy of a Roman Motif

Mozaikte "Okeanos Başı": Bir Roma Motifinin Kökeni, İkonografik Çeşitlemeleri ve Çok Anlamlılığı

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Abstract

The "oceanic head" motif depicts a bearded male head featuring aquatic appendages, such as crustacean claws. This motif would enjoy a long legacy in Roman décors, particularly within the repertoire of mosaicists. It appears in Roman iconography around the middle of the 1st century AD, when the ideology of mastery over Oceanus was developing in Latin literature. In this context, the representation of the god Ocean in the form of a mere head presents him as the source (caput) of all waters, fearsome and subversive, yet ultimately defeated and harnessed like a gorgoneion for the benefit of Rome, caput mundi. The motif symbolises the cosmic scope of Roman domination, emphasising both the control of the world's borders and their integration into the Empire's frontiers. However, the analysis of the formal and syntactic specificities of the pavements and their contexts of use reveals a more complex semantic range: from a simple evocation of the aquatic environment, to a reference to a place of leisure or danger, a source of fertility, abundance, and income, a cosmographic entity, an apotropaic force, worshiped waters, an evocation of contact between worlds, or of the all-encompassing presence of a single unifying watercourse. Moreover, the crustacean claws and other marine appendages could also be applied to various entities of the aquatic realm, such as Neptune and possibly Dionysus/Bacchus, another "master of the liquid element".

Keywords: *Oceanus, Neptune, marine divinities, caput, mask.*

Öz

"Okeanos başı" motifi, kabukluların kıskaçları gibi sucul uzantılarla betimlenen sakallı bir erkek başından oluşur. Bu motif, Roma dekorasyonlarında, özellikle de mozaik ustalarının repertuvarında uzun süre varlığını sürdürmüştür. Latin edebiyatında Oceanus üzerindeki hâkimiyet düşüncesinin gelişmeye başladığı MS 1. yüzyılın ortalarında Roma ikonografisinde görülmeye başlamıştır. Bu bağlamda, tanrı Okeanos'un yalnızca bir baş biçiminde betimlenmesi, onu bütün suların kaynağı (caput) olarak sunarken aynı zamanda korkutucu ve yıkıcı niteliğini de vurgular. Bununla birlikte Okeanos, tıpkı bir gorgoneion gibi, nihayetinde yenilgiye uğratılmış ve Roma'nın, caput mundi'nin yararına boyunduruk altına alınmış bir güç olarak tasvir edilir. Motif, Roma egemenliğinin kozmik boyutunu simgeler; dünyanın sınırları üzerindeki denetimi ve bu sınırların İmparatorluk sınırlarına (frontiers) dâhil edilmesini aynı anda vurgular. Bununla birlikte, döşemelerin biçimsel ve sentaktik özelliklerinin yanı sıra kullanım bağlamlarının incelenmesi, motifin daha karmaşık bir anlam yelpazesine sahip olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu anlamlar; sucul çevrenin basit bir çağrışımından, bir eğlence veya tehlike mekânına; bereket, bolluk ve gelir kaynağına; kozmografik bir varlığa; apotropaik bir güce; tapınım gören sulara; dünyalar arasındaki temasın bir ifadesine ya da her şeyi kuşatan, bütünleştirici tek bir su akarsuyunun varlığına yapılan göndermeye kadar uzanmaktadır. Bunun yanı sıra, kabuklu hayvanların kıskaçları ve diğer denizel uzantılar, sucul âlemin farklı varlıklarına da uygulanabilmiştir. Bunlar arasında Neptün ve muhtemelen bir başka "sıvı unsurun efendisi" olan Dionysos/Bakkhos da bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Okeanos, Neptün, denizel tanrılar, caput, maske.*

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From the 1st century AD onwards, heads featuring crustacean claws and other aquatic appendages are attested in Roman iconography. They are traditionally identified with the god *Oceanus*[1]. Some scholars extend this identification to all bearded heads, even when they lack any features associated with the aquatic world (e.g. Rudhardt 1971: 58, 92; Malissard 2012: 273). The many iconographic variations, as well as the few preserved inscriptions, seem nonetheless to indicate that this motif may also have been applied to other deities associated with the sea and the ocean. With all due caution, we shall therefore refer to "oceanic heads" to describe such heads.

Within this extensive corpus, mosaics clearly stand out. They display distinctive formal and syntactic treatments, as well as original regional adaptations that reflect different relationships to the ocean, the sea, waters, and their properties. A critical and contextualised comparative analysis of these occurrences, considered across the Empire and from a transmedial perspective, helps to better understand the conception of these images and their polysemy within the visual culture of the Roman world.

1. Context of Origin

In the context of formal manipulations in Late Republican art, numerous motifs arise, renewing the forms inherited from Greek tradition. A notable diversification and an increased exploitation of heads or masks occur. They repeat in the panels of friezes or are placed at the centre of figurative scenes where they are disproportionately large and are highlighted by the surrounding characters. Some heads are adorned with accessories or feature theriomorphic or phytomorphic appendages, which sometimes help us identify them, such as the horns of Jupiter Ammon or the vine-leaf beard of Dionysus[2]. Beardless heads with fins beneath the chin (Fig. 1) as well as bearded heads positioned between dolphins (Fig. 2) are found in various architectural decorations. The former are generally identified as "marine Medusa" (Von Rohden - Winnefeld 1911: 268), while the latter are thought to represent Neptune or Ocean (Campana 1851: 47-47; Pensabene 2017: 168-169).





Figures 1 -2
Campana reliefs, 50 BC-AD 50, Louvre Museum © 2009 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Anne Chauvet.

1 On the iconography of the god, see among others Guidi 1935: 149-155; LRE XVII: 2308-2361; Foucher 1963: 139-144; Sichtermann 1963; Voute 1972: 654-659; Foucher 1975; Dunbabin 1978: 149-154; Paulian 1979; Santoro Bianchi 1988; Tölle-Kastenbein 1992: 445-448; LLIMC VII: 31-33; LLIMC VIII: 907-915; Santoro Bianchi 2001; Lopez Monteagudo 2009; Neira Jiménez 2010; Rodriguez Lopez 2011; Eraslan 2012, 2013, 2015; Derwael 2015; Cavalieri 2018; Neira 2018.

2 See, for example, two Campana reliefs from Italy, one kept in the Louvre Museum with a head of Jupiter Ammon between two half-vegetal satyrs (S 6607; https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010288304), and one from Cumae kept in the *Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei* (Baia) with a head of Bacchus whose beard is composed of vine leaves (Derwael 2023: n°TC-A.It.4 fig. 15).

However, it is not until the mid-1st century AD that the “oceanic head” appears in mural décors, depicting a bearded male figure represented solely by his head and featuring aquatic elements that form actual bodily appendages (Fig. 3). At this period, it consists of crustacean claws positioned at the top of the head like horns, sometimes associated with conical ears (of marine, animal or vegetal nature), or with an abundant beard from which two sea creatures emerge. The beard is frequently composed of acanthus leaves. This vegetal hybridity, which enjoys considerable success in architectural decorations at the time, serves to represent the prerogatives of various deities – such as Dionysus, Pan or Jupiter Ammon – associated with the origin of a vital principle (Derwael 2023: 70-82). It plays on the polysemy of the Latin term *caput*, which refers both to a head and to the root of a plant or the source of a river (Cuny-le-Callet 2005: 291-293).



Figure 3
Detail of the frieze from the nymphaeum in the summer *triclinium* of the house of Neptune and Amphitrite, Herculanum, AD 62-79 © Ministero della Cultura - Parco Archeologico di Ercolano – Photo: Domenico Esposito.

This development of the “head with claws” motif is contemporary with the increasing use of the word *oceanus* in Latin literature (Paulian 1975: 53) and with a new conception of the god *Oceanus*, based on themes inherited from the Greek literary and mythological tradition. The explorations undertaken from Caesar to the Flavian period, alongside the expansion of Roman power, lead to the development of the ideology of mastery over *Oceanus* (Paulian 1975: 53-58; Dion 1977: 247-275; Richard 1991: 91-104; Bajard 1998: 177-191; Santoro Bianchi 2001: 84-95). Following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic kings, reaching the outer limits of the inhabited world grants the emperor global, even cosmic, domination[3]. Latin authors emphasise an imperial figure of divine nature, able to defy a forbidden boundary long considered as uncrossable. Ocean is indeed a circular cosmic river at the origin of all waters and all life (Rudhardt 1971: 44-53, 76-79; Santoro Bianchi 1988), the boundary (Rudhardt 1971: 73-76; Fridh 1985: 1-22; Santoro Bianchi 1988; Napoli 2006: 343-346; Icard - Szabados 2008: 268; Malissard 2012: 290-293) leading to regions inhabited by monsters and fabulous peoples (Li Causi 2003; LLIMC Suppl.: 351; Baglioni 2013: 26), to the Fortunate Isles (Chappuis Sandoz 2004: 72-75), or even to the afterlife. Moreover, navigation is considered a battle with the sea and presented as a victory (Richard 1991: 103), while crossing a river or building a bridge represents confrontations marking territorial appropriation

3 On the *imitatio Alexandri*: Pugliese Carratelli 1992.

(Richard 1991: 103; Bajard 1998: 189). As he crosses the Ocean, the victorious emperor incorporates this outer zone of the world into the Empire's borders (Richard 1991: 97; Barrett 2000: 596-606). The belief in Rome's destiny as the guarantor of cosmic order is thus reinforced, the origin of all things being now under Roman control (Nicolet 1988: 41-68).

Oceanus thus appears to be a strong candidate for the identification of the motif, at least in certain contexts. Alongside the image of Ocean as a subdued river, its reduction to a mere head presents him as a primal deity, the source of life at the head of all waters. He is depicted like a *gorgoneion*, fearsome and subversive, yet ultimately defeated and harnessed for the benefit of Rome, *caput mundi.* In propagandistic contexts, such as on the breastplate of a cuirassed imperial statue, the oceanic head reinforces the cosmic scope of Roman domination, emphasising the control of *Oceanus*, now incorporated into the Empire's frontiers. The vegetalised form emphasises the god's primordial nature as a source of prosperity and renewal (Derwael 2023: 73-82).

2. Diffusion Through the Empire and Regional Variations

The oceanic head is rapidly adopted across all media of the visual culture and in all kinds of contexts. It first spread through Italic wall decorations of the Fourth Style, most often used within panels, as on the vaults and walls of the Domus Aurea[4], or in "grotesque" friezes, as in the *nymphaeum* of the House of Neptune and Amphitrite in Herculaneum (V, 6–7), where it is formally linked to vegetalised griffins, kantharoi, and floral motifs (Fig. 3). More rarely, it may also evolve freely within the figurative field, as in the stucco decoration of the Forum Baths in Pompeii (VII, 5, 2)[5]. Theses compositions quickly disseminate to the provinces. In the realm of sculpture, it was most frequently employed on Italic sarcophagi of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, where a single head usually appears at the centre of the chest or the lid, between marine creatures[6]. Terracotta and metal tableware, as well as circular metal appliques throughout the Empire also feature this motif, where it is frequently associated with other marine figures[7].

In mosaics, the oceanic head is usually isolated within a panel or inserted into a figurative scene but rarely incorporated into a border frieze[8]. The motif is usually put at the centre or on the periphery of a pavement. It could be single or repeated. When it is multiplied, it is almost always quadrupled (Figs. 4a-b). At Nasrallah (Tunisia) (Ennaïfer - Ben Lazreg 2005: 525 fig. 4, 7.) or the House of the Fishing Scene at Althiburos (Tunisia) (Figs. 5a-b), however, it appears only

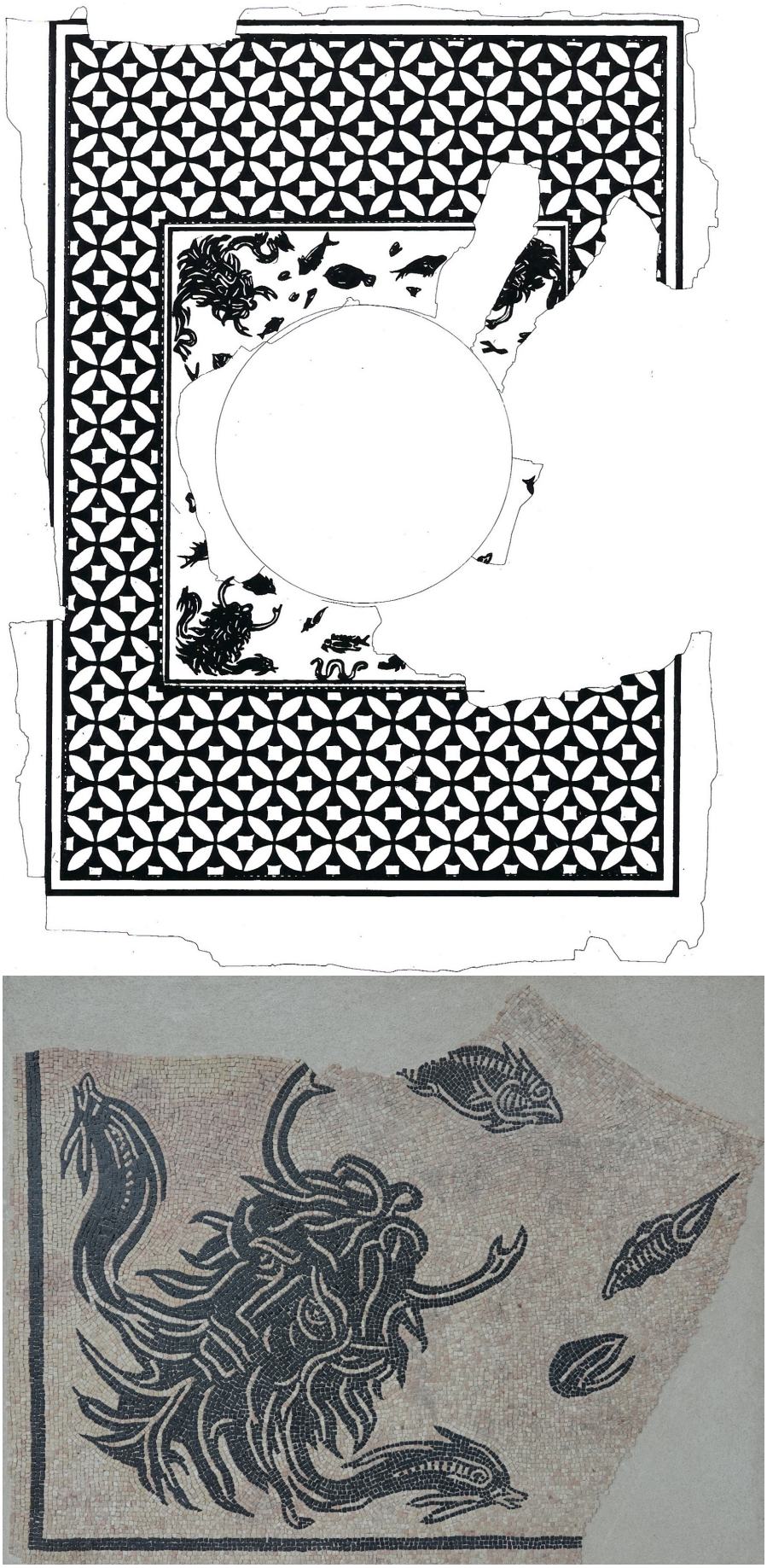
4 For instance, on the *Volta Rossa* (Meyboom - Moormann 2013: 162-164 fig. 33.9).

5 The motif decorates the lunette on the south wall of the *apodyterium* (b). It measures nearly one metre in height and occupies a central position in the decoration (Derwael 2023: n°Stu.It.3 fig. 62).

6 For instance, on a sarcophagus from Rome kept in the Villa Borghese (Rumpf 1969: 15-16 n°42 pl. 48).

7 For instance, an oval silver dish found in a grave near Lillebonne (Robert 2017: fig. 11).

8 At Orbe-Boscéaz (Derwael 2023: n°Mo.GS.2* with previous references), one might therefore question the accuracy of the drawing made by Ch. Bétrix in 1845, which depicts the foliate head, positioned at the centre of a short side of the acanthus scroll border, bearing a pair of crustacean claws grasping (?) a shell. Could this be a misinterpretation prompted by the presence of a Triton and marine creatures in the apse located directly above this section of the pavement? The fact that the crustacean claws extend beyond the acanthus border to encroach upon the apse is, moreover, rather surprising. On the Orpheus mosaic from the Villa at Woodchester (Derwael 2023: n°Mo.Br.2 with previous references), a head featuring red outgrowths is positioned at the centre of an acanthus scroll border. Could these be interpreted as crustacean claws and antennae? The schematic rendering of the drawing makes the identification of these elements uncertain. On a mosaic at La Milla del Rio, oceanic heads could have decorated the corners of an acanthus scroll, but the motif is too poorly preserved (Voute 1972: 661-662 fig. 11; Paulian 1979: 127-128; Corpus España IX, 40 n°23 pl. 21, 41; Lopez Monteagudo 2009: 293 fig. 12).



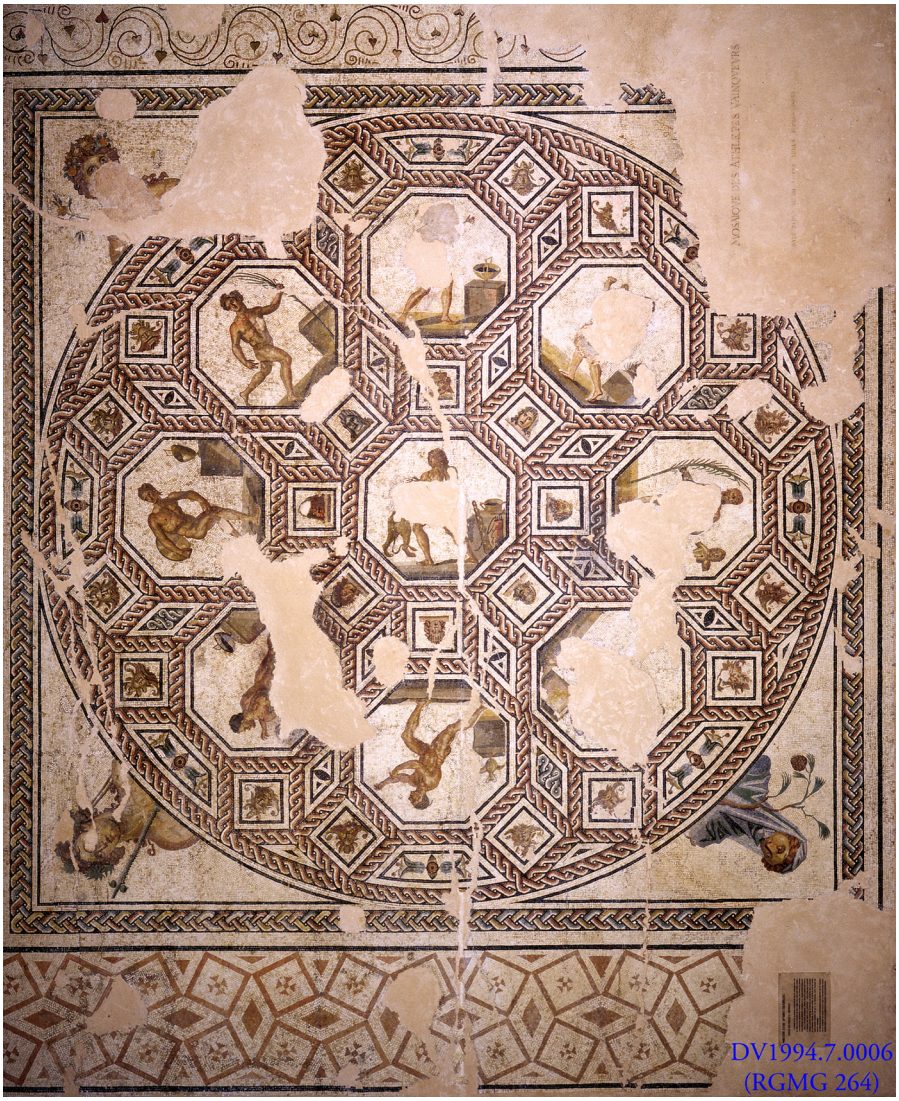
Figures 4a-b
Drawing of the mosaic from the basin of the *atrium* in the House of the Ocean Gods and detail of one oceanic head, Saint-Romain-en-Gal, 2nd – early 3rd century AD, Archaeological Museum of Saint-Romain-en-Gal. (a) Drawing from Desbat et al. 1994: 212. (b) © Musée et sites gallo-romains de Saint-Romain-en-Gal – Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.

twice, whereas on the Mosaic of the Victorious Athletes at Vienne (France) (Figs. 6a-b), it is repeated sixteen times in a composition that associates Hercules with athletes and theatrical masks.





Figures 5a-b
Mosaic from the House of the Fishing Scene, Althiburos, Bardo Museum © Musée du Bardo, Tunis – Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.





Figures 6a-b
Mosaic of the Victorious Athletes, Vienne, late 2nd - early 3rd century AD, Saint-Romain-en-Gal Museum. © Musée et sites gallo-romains de Saint-Romain-en-Gal – Photo: P. Veyseyrre (mosaic), Stéphanie Derwael (detail).

In each region of the Empire, the oceanic head is generally used according to regional trends, such as the black-and-white in Italy (Fig. 7) or its inclusion in the panels of geometric carpets in Gaul and Germania (Figs. 6a-b). The greatest variety in the form of the motif and the type of composition is observed in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. Surprisingly, the head with aquatic appendages is attested only in the Western part of the Empire. In the Eastern provinces, figures with claws are always depicted as busts or full-length figures, adopting the posture of river gods. Divine representations undoubtedly follow Hellenistic tradition closely, a legacy that was particularly valued and actively claimed by Eastern craftsmen (Eraslan 2022: 115). The motif of the foliate head[9], by contrast, is common in the East, but its identification remains uncertain, as it never features any (aquatic) appendages (Figs. 8a-b). Some scholars have suggested that these foliate heads may represent Ocean (Ovadiah - Turnheim 1997: 112; Balty 2011: 80-83; Eraslan 2022: 110-117). This seems unlikely (Derwael 2023: 65-67, 170-179): the inclusion of oceanic heads within an acanthus border is rare and questionable[10]; the vegetalisation of bearded heads may apply to various deities, identifiable by distinctive appendages (horns, crustacean claws, etc.); and the craftsmen responsible for these Eastern pavement borders were perfectly able of rendering true crustacean claws, which appear elsewhere on marine-themed mosaics. On a mosaic pavement from Kadıoğlu (Turkey) (Fig. 8b), the ear-substituting elements of the foliate heads within the acanthus border are not crustacean claws (Eraslan 2022: 110-117) but vegetal elements similar to the orange-red bracts that give rise to the volutes of the acanthus scroll. While they



Figure 7
Mosaic from room D of the Maritime Baths, Ostia Antica, Severian period © Archivio Fotografico del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica.

9 On this motif in the Roman world, see Derwael 2023 and the corpus available online on the *Diphuès* Database (http://cipl-cloud45.segi.ulg.ac.be/diphues/diphues_home.aspx).

10 See *supra* note 9.



Figures 8a-b
Foliate heads from Eastern provinces. (a) Cyrrhus, 3rd century AD, Alep Museum © Musée d’Alep – Photo: Abdul Massih 2009: fig. 13. (b) Kadıoğlu, AD 275-300, Zonguldak Eregli Museum. Photo from Eraslan 2022: fig. 9 (Zonguldak Ereğli Müze Müdürlüğü Arşivi).

Figures 9
Mosaic from the *frigidarium* of the Baths at Themetra, 3rd century AD, Archaeological Museum of Sousse © Musée Archéologique, Sousse – Photo: Salah Jabeur



may indeed evoke the ears of several oceanic heads found in North African mosaics, they are equally common in a wide range of non-oceanic foliate heads across the Empire, where they more closely resemble flower buds about to bloom (Derwael 2023: 52-53). The heads from Kadıoğlu thus fit seamlessly within the tradition of Eastern pavements of that period, following a compositional scheme developed in Levantine workshops.



Across all media, the aquatic heads generally feature the distinctive pair of crustacean claws, an abundant beard (sometimes composed of leaves) and/or conical ears. Mosaicists employed the motif in the most diverse ways, particularly in North Africa, where the aquatic elements are especially numerous and varied. Crustacean claws are the most common feature, positioned at the top of the head like horns, while crustacean legs and antennae, coral branches (Fig. 9), reed branches or leaves may sprout among the hair. Dolphins, fish, or, more rarely, *ketos* may also emerge from the hair, beard, or even the ears or mouth, though it is not always possible to determine whether they literally originate from the head or are simply depicted as swimming in the surrounding water. Oceanic heads also frequently display conical, red-pink ears with a polylobed edge, which sometimes appear floral and at other times aquatic, evoking fish gills or shells. As noted in relation to the Kadıoğlu pavement (Fig. 8b), this detail is also employed on foliate heads – whether oceanic or not – from which it likely originates. It is also attested on oceanic heads in mural painting and, to a lesser extent, in stone, terracotta, or metal objects that have lost their original polychromy[11]. The beard and moustache can also contribute to the composite nature of the figure: always abundant and seemingly animated by the waves (Fig. 10), they may be composed, wholly or partially, of terrestrial plants (such as acanthus or floral scrolls) (Fig. 11b) or aquatic ones (such as seaweed) (Fig. 12). Depending on the artistic style of the composition, it is not always easy to determine whether the beard is a naturally greenish, “floating” one, whether the locks have a watery, silty, or sinuous appearance reminiscent of marine creatures, or whether they are leaves imitating undulating seaweed. In some cases, as at Montréal-du-Gers (France) (Fig. 13) or in the House of Protomai at Utica[12],

11 For instance, on a wall painting from Nabeul (Blanc-Bijon 2011: 59-60 fig. 2) or on the appliques of a bronze vessel from Bergamo (Fortunati - Vitali 2019: 176 fig. 101).

12 Bardo Museum, Tunis (inv. 3646): Alexander et al. 1976: 25-26 n°274 pl. XVI.



Figure 10
Mosaic of *Oceanus* from the Villa of Carranque, 4th century AD, Carranque Archaeological Park © Global Digital Heritage, 2018 (https://globaldigitalheritage.org/model/carranque-mosaic-of-oceanus/).



Figures 11a-b
Plan of the House of Bacchus and Ariadne and photo of the mosaic basin with oceanic head, Thuburbo Majus, Bardo Museum. (a) Map from Jashemski 1995: fig. 2; annotations in colours added by Stéphanie Derwael (b) © Musée du Bardo, Tunis.





Figure 12 (left)
Mosaic from the House of the Red Columns, Acholla, 2nd-3rd century AD, Bardo Museum © Musée du Bardo, Tunis – Photo: Salah Jabeur.

Figure 13 (right)
Mosaic from the villa at Le Glésia (Montréal-du-Gers),Archaeological Museum of Lectoure ©CDPM32/Flaran-MuseeDeLectoure; Photo: M. Hue.

the skill of the mosaicist may be called into question. But it seems that this ambiguity in the depiction of the beard and ears more generally reflects a deliberate play on form, assimilating various elements of the marine environment. Finally, from the slightly open mouth – which may reveal the upper teeth – streams of water sometimes flow, as in a baths mosaic at Themetra (Tunisia) (Fig. 9) or in a domestic basin at Sousse (Tunisia) (Fig. 14). At Saint-Rustice (France) (Fig. 15), no fewer than three streams of water flow from the mouth and cascade down in front of the head. At Piazza Armerina (Sicily), fish emerge directly from the flowing waters issuing from the mouth[13]. The image evokes the sound of water, at times directly perceptible thanks to nearby fountains or basins. In some basins

Figure 14
Mosaic basin of a private house, Sousse, 2nd century AD, Archaeological Museum of Sousse © Musée Archéologique, Sousse – Photo: Salah Jabeur.



13 Piazza Armerina, Mosaic of Arion (room 41): Gentili 1959: fig. 9; Steger 2017: fig. 162.



Figure 15
Detail of the oceanic head from the mosaic of the multi-apsed hall (possibly the *apodyterium* of the baths), Saint-Rustice, late 4th - 5th century AD, Saint-Raymond Museum in Toulouse © Musée Saint-Raymond de Toulouse.

such as at Thuburbo Maius (Tunisia) (Fig. 11b), water even spouted directly from the mouth of the oceanic head (Jashemski 1995: 562). Additionally, one or more horizontal lines of tesserae occasionally appear in front of the beard when the head is depicted within a body of water, indicating that it is emerging from the waves (Figs. 9, 16a-b). These details appear to be specific to mosaic art, unless they were originally painted on sculptures or objects made of metal or terracotta, which have since lost their colours. On metal pieces, a more or less angular wavy line (a festoon motif) appears across the forehead, eyebrows, or cheeks of several oceanic heads[14]. This may also represent the water level, or foam settling on the face emerging from the sea (Paulian 1979: 120), unless it is intended to depict seaweed leaves (Garcia y Bellido 1940: 55; Picard 1947: 196), fins, or a scaly pattern.

3. Contextualised Interpretations

The motif's original context seems to support the identification of these heads with *Oceanus*. Several inscriptions on mosaics explicitly name the figure of a bearded god with crustacean claws as Ocean, whether portrayed full-length, as in the cosmological mosaic of Merida (Spain)[15], reduced to a bust, as at Garni (Armenia)[16], or represented solely by a head, as at Montréal-du-Gers (France)

14 For instance, on a small bronze applique from Lixus (Archaeological Museum, Rabat): Garcia y Bellido 1940; Picard 1947: 195-199 fig. 5; Boube-Piccot 1969: 307-309 n°382 pl. 241, 253.

15 Inscription *Oceanus*. Archaeological Museum, Merida; 3rd century AD. Quet 1981; Lancha 1983.

16 Inscription ΩΚΕΑΝΟΣ. Archaeological Museum, Garni; 4th century AD. LLIMC VIII 1997: 910 n°53.



Figures 16a-b
Mosaic from the *triclinium* of the House of Cato and detail of the oceanic head, Utica, late 2nd - early 3rd century AD, Bardo Museum © Musée du Bardo, Tunis – Photo: Salah Jabeur.

(Fig. 13)[17]. However, on a mosaic from the Frampton Villa (Britain), the inscription *Neptuni uertex regmen sortiti mobile uentis / scultum cui cerulea es[t] delfinis cincta duob[us]* on both sides of the head seems instead to identify it as Neptune[18]. According to P. Witts, "Britain's geographical position, lying in Ocean's stream" might explain this representation, reflecting the importance of "propitiating Oceanus as well as Neptune" (Witts 2016: 109-114). At Quintanilla de la Cueza (Spain) (Fig. 17), ivy leaves feature alongside the crustacean claws, which has been interpreted as a form of syncretism between Ocean and Bacchus (Garcia Guinea 2000: 267), another "master of the liquid element" (Plut. De Is. et Os. 365A: οὐ μόνον τοῦ οἴνου Διόνυσος ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσας ὑγρᾶς φύσεως Ἕλληνες ἡγοῦνται κύριον). In each region, Italic water deities such as Ocean may also have undergone a process of *interpretatio*, assimilating former indigenous water entities. In North Africa, *Oceanus* may thus have been associated with the Phoenician Hadad, Baal of the waters (Picard 1937a-b[19]), while Neptune was equated with various Libyan water *genii* and was one of the main deities of waters and fertility (Toutain 1905: 378; Gsell 1920: 334; Benabou 1976: 275; Cadotte 2007: 320-321). Moreover, other bearded marine figures, such as Tritons and Ichthyocentaurs, also bear crustacean claws and antennae (Voute 1972: 656-658; Tölle-Kastenbein 1992: 451; LLIMC VIII 1997: 73-85).



Figure 17
Detail of the Mosaic of Leda from the Villa Tejada, Quintanilla de la Cueza, late 3rd – mid-4th century AD. Photo from Garcia Guinea 2000: 301.

The term "oceanic head" thus designates heads adorned with marine appendages – a motif that could be applied to various entities of the aquatic realm[20], just as

17 Inscription *Ocianus*. Archaeological Museum, Lectoure. Voute 1972: 654; Balmelle 1987: 194-197 n°311 pl. CXLI. In an email (13 January 2014), Michel Hue, Director of the Departmental Heritage and Museums Conservation of the Gers, informed me that, in his view, the identification is « totalement distincte du motif en question, et se réfère uniquement au monde marin ».

18 4th century AD. Smith 1969: 109 pl. 3.27; Cosh - Neal 2005: 134-137 n°168.2 fig. 127, 130. On the inscription: CIL VII, 2; Burn 1969: 168-169; Zavaroni 2004. F. Bücheler suggests that one should understand « Neptune a obtenu par le sort la gouvernance des vents rapides, lui dont la barbe bleue en sculpture est entourée de deux dauphins » *(Neptunus regmen sortitus ventorum mobilium cui in sculptura barba caerulea delphinis cincta est*): *Anthologie latine* II: 720-721, n°1524. The pavement is now lost, making it impossible to verify the accuracy of the lithograph produced in 1796 by S. Lysons.

19 Ch. Picard, however, bases his argument on documents of the 2nd century AD and on the undated mask from Lixus, while also invoking unconfirmed Alexandrian influences.

20 Concerning the mosaic from a basin in Carthage in which leaves form the beard of a partially preserved head, R. Hinks refers to Glaucus, who attains immortality through a plant and is transformed into a marine creature (Hinks 1933: 74-75). See also Derwael 2023: 74 fig. 38.

the vegetal beard could be used for several deities. The use of crustacean claws (χηλαί, also used for the arms of a breakwater or the harbour moles[21]), which appear to replace the traditional bovine horns of river gods, also seems intended to evoke specifically the marine environment. The motif, however, is not confined to the coastal regions of the Roman Empire and could be encountered at inland sites. How can we explain its use in these various contexts? Only a careful contextual analysis of the pavements, particularly regarding the choice of motif combinations, can help to clarify the meaning of the oceanic head. Distinctive formal and syntactic treatments of the décor could indeed reflect various relationships with the ocean, the sea, waters, and their properties.

In water-related structures (*atria*, baths, fountains), the aquatic nature of the motif justifies its use. Its identification with the god Ocean aligns with the occasional use of the term *oceanus* to designate a large basin or pool, as seen in the inscription on a lintel from AD 368-370 found in Tunisia[22], or in a passage from the *Historia Augusta* which reveals that Alexander Severus was the first to use this term to designate a *solium*[23]. Thermal buildings could also have been identified with the cosmos and the pool perceived as the architectural translation of the sea (Thébert 2003: 477-478). The use of the motif in apsidal spaces may likewise allude to its cosmological significance as the circular boundary of inhabited space (Santoro Bianchi 1988: 192).

The reference to maritime and cosmic domination, celebrated in the original context of the motif, is deeply rooted in Roman thought and may remain implicit in certain contexts, because the Romans were enjoying the enduring benefits of the *Pax Romana* and celebrating their wealth and way of life. The mosaic from the *frigidarium* of the baths at Themetra (Tunisia) (Fig. 9) may be interpreted as a visual translation of Roman imperial expansion and the harnessing of oceanic waters (Napoli 2006: 337-347): the head is positioned at the centre of a fish-filled sea navigated by fishing boats and merchant vessels and encircled by frontier buildings symbolising Rome’s universal dominion. However, while this imperial message may be underlying in certain contexts, the motif often carries a more pragmatic dimension. It might allude to the patron’s activities and his involvement in maritime trade, such as on the Althiburos Catalogue of Ships Mosaic (Tunisia) (Foucher 1963: 140; Ennaïfer 1976: 101). The association of the oceanic head with the busts of the Winds seems to present the god *Oceanus* as a protector of navigation (Neira Jiménez 2010: 95), with the Winds enabling a peaceful crossing and the arrival of goods at the harbour (Lancha 1985: 166–167; López Monteagudo 2009: 288; Neira Jiménez 2010: 95). On the mosaic at Faro – possibly part of a room linked to maritime trade (Lancha 1985: 167; López Monteagudo 2009: 289) – this theme is particularly appropriate for a harbour city facing the Atlantic. When the motif dominates a sea filled with marine animals, ships, and fishermen, it evokes the benefits of a divine space accessible to humans (Malek 1999: 214) – a sea seen as a source of food and economic wealth, as well as a place of leisure and enjoyment, as on the mosaic

21 According to 18th century encyclopaedists, these claws served to express Oceanus’ domination over harbours (Truillot 1938: 184).

22 *Saluis d(ominis) n(ostris) Valentiniano Valente Gratiano perpetuis Aug(ustis), proconsul[a]tu Petroni Claudi c(larissimi) u(iri), et Mari Victoriani, l[e]gati Kartaginis c(larissimi) u(iri), | oceanum a fundamentis coeptum et soliarem ruina conlapsum, ad perfectionem cultumque perductos ingressus nouos, signis adpositis, decorauit | Flauianus Leontius alme Kart(aginis) principalis, curator rei p(ublicae), ordinis splendidissimi conlatione, cum amore populi incoau[i]t, perfecit, dedicauit.* AE 1975, 873; Beschaouch 1975: 101-111 fig. 3-5; Lepelley 1981: 54-55 n. 4; Thébert 2003: 486.

23 H. A. XXV, 5-6: *Oceani solium primus inter principes appellavit, cum Traianus id non fecisset sed diebus solia deputasset*. Beschaouch 1975: 109; Santoro Bianchi 1988: 191; Thébert 2003: 478.

from the House of the Fishing Scene at Althiburos (Fig. 5a). The depiction of the sea – often featuring segments of straight or broken lines – invites one to engage with it, as expressed by Philostratus in his *Islands*: ἀλλ΄ ὅπως ἑκὼν λελήσῃ τῆς γῆς, καὶ θάλαττά σοι ταυτὶ δόξει μήτ΄ ἐξηρμένη καὶ ἀναχαιτίζουσα μήθ΄ ὑπτία καὶ γαληνή, πλωτὴ δέ τις καὶ οἷον ἔμπνους (Philostr. II, 17), « But you must be willing to forget the land and to accept this as the sea, not roused and turbulent nor yet flat and calm, but a sea fit for sailing and as it were alive and breathing » (LCL 256: 194-195).

The motif may also sometimes reflect a desire to attract the favour of the forces in question, or even to invoke "a form of numinous presence", as seen in basins populated with aquatic figures evolving around the head (Darmon 2008: 495). The close connection between water and the sacred likely allows for a religious significance to be attributed to various oceanic heads. Water, moreover, could be worshipped (Rudhardt 1971: 106-108; Richard 1991: 103; Cardim Ribeiro 2019): *Magnorum fluminum capita ueneramur ; subita ex abdito uasti amnis eruptio aras habet ; coluntur aquarum calentium fontes, et stagna quaedam uel opacitas uel inmensa altitudo sacrauit* (Sen. epist. IV, 41, 3), "We worship the sources of mighty rivers; we erect altars at places where great streams burst suddenly from hidden sources; we adore springs of hot water as divine, and consecrate certain pools because of their dark waters or their immeasurable depth" (LCL 75: 275).

When a single, imposing head presides over a sea populated with sea monsters, Nereids, Cupids, or deities such as Neptune and Amphitrite, the composition celebrates the divine waters under the patronage of *Oceanus*. The waters often flow directly from the god's slightly open mouth, as seen in the House of Cato in Utica (Tunisia) (Fig. 16b), the Arion mosaic in the Villa at Piazza Armerina (Sicily)[24], or the multi-apsed hall at Saint-Rustice (France) (Fig. 15). At Utica (Fig. 16a), the divine hierarchy is made directly apparent in the organisation of the pavement (Malek 1999: 219): in a fish-filled sea, Nereids ride Tritons, ichthyocentaurs and hybrid marine animals, while female figures reclining in boats are surrounded by winged Erotes on dolphins or riding and hunting flying birds; above this ensemble, Amphitrite and Neptune are represented on a quadriga drawn by sea horses; finally, Ocean, as both the origin and the end point of the aquatic element, emerges from the water and towers above the composition. At Saint-Rustice (Fig. 15), *Oceanus* occupies the centre of the room, from where he gives rise to both fresh and salt waters upon which Nereids, Nymphs and Tritons move about. He is moreover enhanced by the embroidered fabric hanging behind him (Morvillez 1997: 25-27).

Some pavements emphasize the fertility of the water. In the House of Bacchus and Ariadne at Thuburbo Maius (Tunisia) (Fig. 11a-b), an oceanic head decorates the bottom of the basin located between a corridor decorated with fish and an open garden planted with fruit trees and evergreen shrubs. Water spouted from his mouth, animating the leaves and flowering stems of his beard. The head is surrounded by sea monsters and Nereids on the basin's inside wall and is topped with birds and *xenia* on its rim. Considered within the architectural context of the house (Fig. 11a), the oceanic head contributes to a visual perspective where imaginary space and empirical space intertwine (Derwael 2023: 129-132 fig. 89): the gaze of the guests reclining in the large *triclinium* moved from the fish-filled sea to the figure of the god, ultimately leading to the idyllic nature of the garden. Ocean, the origin of all life, appears as the source of the salty waters

24 See *supra* note 15.

that bless the table with seafood and facilitate trade, but also as the source of the fresh waters that foster the earthly prosperity of the garden, of the house producing olive oil, and of the city of Thuburbo Maius, located in a fertile region renowned for its grain, oil, and fruits. The water flowing from the mouth of Ocean also contributes to the acoustic aesthetic of the garden. In Latin literature, the murmur of running water is often associated with birdsong as a synonym of tranquillity, of a poetic and musical atmosphere, or evocation of a *locus amoenus* (Vendries 2014: 211-230). In the House of the Nymphs in Nabeul (Tunisia)[25], an oceanic head decorates the basin of the garden, amidst a detailed aquatic fauna. Once filled, the basin was brought to life by the presence of these marine beings, whose forms were made all the more legible and dynamic by the white background, moving in rhythm with the water’s play. The head is positioned along the central axis of the main entrance of the house, occupying a key position within its iconographic program (Darmon 1980: 85) organised around the celebration of marriage (Darmon 1980: 146-150, 286). The basin would thus be linked to the ritual of the *loutrophoria*, and *Oceanus*, the source of all waters and springs, would embody the fertility of the legitimate marriage (Darmon 1980: 87)[26].

The sea is also a perilous environment from which protection is sought or whose favor must be secured. Some heads with piercing gazes may thus have served a prophylactic or apotropaic function. It is suggested by inscriptions found on two mosaics of the 4th-5th centuries AD, in Aïn Temouchent (*Invida sidereo rumpantur pectora visu - cedat et in nostris / lingua proterva locis hoc studio superamus avos gratumque / renidet aedibus in nostris summus apex operis - feliciter*) and El Haouaria (*Invide, livide, titula tahta que(m) adseverabas fieri non posse perfecte sunt dd.nn.ss. minime ne contemnas*). They attribute to the motif a power against hostile forces, without explicitly naming the figure (Dunbabin 1978: 152-154). These pavements date no earlier than the 4th century AD, but perhaps the same prophylactic value should be attributed to heads with penetrating gazes isolated at the centre of a pavement. At Sidi-el-Hani (Tunisia) (Fig. 18), the slightly open mouth reveals the teeth, the piercing gaze is rendered in a blue-green hue suggestive of otherness (Bradley 2009: 136; Grand-Clément 2011: 256-262, 399-403; Neri - Morvillez 2023), and the furrowed brows arrest the viewer. This type of heads both materialize and ward off the danger. The coral branches raised atop the head in the baths of Themetra (Fig. 9) might also have an apotropaic value against *Invidia* and the dangers of navigation (Napoli 2006: 347-348). The monumental dimensions of several heads, which could reach up to two metres in height as at Saint-Rustice (Fig. 15), undoubtedly contributed to the striking and imposing presence of the divine figure. The Christian destruction of some of these effigies, such as in El Haouaria, seems to indicate that the motif was then perceived as carrying a harmful “magical” power (Dunbabin 1978: 152-153).

The oceanic heads could also carry a kinetic and acoustic backdrop evocative of the contact between worlds, as well as of the inviolability of a place. Ocean as well as sea monsters with coiled fish tails and the front bodies of bovines or wild beasts – frequently represented around the oceanic head – are indeed motifs that refer to the deep whirlpools of water, which emit resounding sounds[27]. The word

25 On the head of this pavement: Voute 1972: 656; Darmon 1980: 84-90 n°20 pl. XLII-XLIV, LXXX; Malek 2005: 1343-1345 fig. 7a; Derwael 2015.

26 On the relationship between Ocean and the fertility of marriage, see also Rudhardt 1971: 89.

27 Okeanos is βαθυδινής (deep-eddying), for instance in Hom. Od. X 511 (ἐπ᾽ Ὠκεανῷ βαθυδίνῃ). On the sounds of rivers and sea, see for instance Aristoph. Nub. 280-283 (καὶ ποταμῶν ζαθέων κελαδήματα, καὶ πόντον κελάδοντα βαρύβρομον).



Figure 18
Baths mosaic at Sidi-el-Hani, 2nd century AD, Bardo Museum. © Musée du Bardo, Tunis – Photo: Stéphanie Derwael.

μυκάομαι, for example, used to describe whirlpools or eddies in water, also refers to the roaring of a lion, the bellowing of bovines, or the sound of thunder or an earthquake: a terrible and frightening noise associated with the boundary between worlds[28]. Mosaicists may have thus made symbolic use of motifs

28 On the ontological duality of whirlpools and sounds associated with water, see the work of P.

associated with the whirlpool, bellowing, and roaring to express the otherness of the world presented to the observers. On a mosaic from the House of the Red Columns at Acholla (Tunisia) (Fig. 12) or on a mosaic from Ancona (Italy)[29], for instance, marine creatures with the heads of bellowing or roaring animals emerge directly from behind the oceanic head.

But what could be the meaning of repeating the motif within a single mosaic? According to several scholars, it may have had an apotropaic intent to protect the corners of the room (Fendri 1963: 12; Foucher 1963: 139; Dunbabin 1978: 151; Paulian 1979: 128). The multiplication of such a motif within the same décor can also express the renewal of a natural cycle and abundance (Le Pape 2009: 49). On the periphery of a radial composition, the repetition of the oceanic head could visually express either the diversity of waters originating from the primordial Ocean[30] or the all-encompassing presence of a single watercourse[31]. According to P. Voute, when no allusion to the *oikouménè* occupies the centre of the composition, as in the House of the Ocean Gods at Saint-Romain-en-Gal (France) (Fig. 4a) or on the mosaic at Nole (Italy) (Voute 1972: 650-654 fig. 1, 9; Derwael 2023: n°Mo.It.4*), the repetition of the motif is more suggestive of Tritons or Ichthyocentaurs used as τόποι evoking the aquatic realm, as these figures commonly appear in groups, whereas *Oceanus* is a singular entity whose multiplication in such a context would be inappropriate (Voute 1972: 659-660, 669-670). How, then, can we account for the presence of foliate oceanic heads in the sixteen square panels framing the Mosaic of the Victorious Athletes at Vienne (France) (Fig. 6a-b)? The pavement is centred on the image of Hercules slaying the Nemean lion, beside which are depicted his club, a bow, a quiver, and a cup. Eight theatrical masks – tragic and comic – as well as eight athletes shown with the prize of their victory surround the figure of the hero. In the corners are the busts of the Seasons. The room adorned with this mosaic belonged either to a private residence or to an athletes’ association. Its decoration celebrates Herculean *virtus* and the reward for effort and perseverance (Le Glay 1983: 265). The oceanic heads have so far been ignored in interpretations of the pavement, or regarded as merely ornamental, or even prophylactic (Tourrenc 1975: 137 n. 12). On the contrary, they fully contribute to its symbolism. On the edge of this agonistic content, the busts of the Seasons and the oceanic heads impart a universal and even cosmic significance to the message of the pavement, evoking the *felicitas temporum*. The former lend the scene a sense of permanence and immortality, while the latter convey a sense of ubiquity. In such compositions, the number of oceanic heads is of no real importance and can be multiplied infinitely. Their peripheral repetition symbolises both universality and ubiquity, much like the busts of the Winds might also do, for example. The oceanic heads thus represent one of the iconographic options available to the craftsmen to convey the intended message of the pavement. The aquatic element as such is not what matters here. Rather, it is Ocean as a singular river encircling the terrestrial world that is being invoked. In the same way, as demonstrated by A.-A. Malek, the four heads on the Genius of the Year Mosaic from El Jem (Tunisia) (Fig. 19) contribute to the symbolic representation of the gods’ immanence in nature: they

Bonnechere on the vortex: e.g. lecture *Howling Whirls* given during the conference *The Motif of the Whirlpool and Psychic Phenomena in Ancient Greece* (Tufts University, 18-19 April 2015); Bonnechere 2018.

29 3rd century AD, Museo Nazionale delle Marche. Mercando 2003: 334 fig. 22.

30 Repetition can also express diversity within unity (LLIMC III 1986: 1043, regarding Eros). On the plurality of the divine: Veyne 1976: 583; Vernant 1990: 10-33; Detienne 1997; Bettini 2017.

31 This concept would persist in the pavements of various late baptisteries, where the heads of the four rivers of paradise spout water flowing towards the central baptismal font (Voute 1972: 668-669).



Figure 19
Mosaic of the Genius of the Year and the Seasons, El Jem, 2nd century AD, Archaeological Museum of El Jem © Musée Archéologique, El Jem – Photo: Salah Jabeur.

represent the oceanic waters surrounding the terrestrial world and are associated with the cyclical time of the seasons and with Aion, the eternal time, reflecting a vision specific to Roman North Africa where the imaginary world serves as a means of apprehending the numinous world (Malek in press).

In funerary contexts, the oceanic head is a frequent motif, used in the décor of sarcophagi, urns, metal objects deposited in the tomb, as well as in wall paintings. The identification of these heads with *Oceanus* appears well established. Concepts of the afterlife vary according to period and individual philosophical or religious beliefs, yet *Oceanus* appears to retain his symbolic role as a boundary (Cumont 1966: 188-189; Rumpf 1969: 125-127; Rudhardt 1971: 87-102; Foucher 1975: 50; Turcan 1999: 110-119; Icard - Szabados 2008: 268)[32]. As the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus states in the 5th century AD, he is "a principle of distinction between different orders of reality" (*Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, 40c: πανταχοῦ γὰρ διορίζειν [δεῖν] τὰς πρώτας τάξεις ἀπὸ τῶν δευτέρων, οὐχ ἀλόγως χαὶ τῶν ποιητῶν Ὠχεανὸν χαλούντων τὸν ὁρίζοντα τῆς γῆς). He represents the boundary between the world of the living and the afterlife, whether the subterranean realm of Persephone, the Elysian Fields or the Fortunate/Blessed Isles[33], where water possesses regenerative and purifying

32 On the liminal function of rivers in Greek thought: Baslez 2003.

33 The Elysian Fields or the Fortunate/Blessed Isles are frequently conflated (Hass 1998: 116-126;

properties (Rudhardt 1971: 87-102). In this context, the *Oceanus* head is frequently depicted alongside sea monsters, Tritons and Ichthyocentaurs often ridden by Nereids and Cupids. On sarcophagi, the marine waves on which these figures gracefully move sometimes appear to flow directly from the head itself. These maritime compositions could thus allude to the soul’s transoceanic journey, facilitated by the Nereids and sea monsters acting as psychopomps (Wrede 1976: 147-167; Turcan 1999: 110-119; Zanker - Ewald 2004: 117-134; Icard - Szabados 2008) – although not all scholars agree on the actual representation of such a voyage in funerary iconography (Brandenburg 1967: 224–225). On the mosaic from the mausoleum of Casal Bertone in Rome (Italy) (Fig. 20), four oceanic heads occupy the corners of a pavement. They feature crustacean claws, legs and antennae, and dolphins emerge from their beard, some strands of which take the form of stylised leaves[34]. At the centre, Bacchus stands on a chariot drawn by two panthers and holding a thyrsus, accompanied by a standing figure holding a cup and a third figure, too poorly preserved to be clearly identified. Between the corner heads are depicted a woman holding a cup with fruits and seating on marine animals, a centaur fighting a panther, a chariot drawn by horses, and a man thrusting a spear into a boar. What could be the meaning of the foliate oceanic heads in this tomb? Do they allude to the soul’s transoceanic journey in a Bacchic context? Or might they instead serve here to evoke an aspect of Bacchus’ power[35]? Plutarch presents him as “master of the liquid element” (De Is. et Os. 365A: οὐ μόνον τοῦ οἴνου Διόνυσος ἀλλὰ καὶ πάσας ὑγρᾶς φύσεως Ἕλληνες ἡγοῦνται κύριον)[36], which would enable him to travel freely between the underworld and the earthly realm (Daraki 1982). But these heads could also be used here to evoke the roaring sounds of waters accompanying the *katabasis* (Bonnechere 2018: 240, 245). In literature, it is not uncommon for the same words to describe both the Dionysiac cacophony and the resounding noises of rivers and the sea – sounds that are synonymous with the contact between worlds. They are, for instance, βαρύβρομοι (Aristoph. Nub. 299-313). As P. Bonnechere states, “this explains quite well why Dionysos, the god of wine, music and trance, arrives by the sea, and why entrances to the Netherworld are often caves in front of the sea” (Bonnechere 2018: 247). Bacchic iconography and oceanic heads would thus be linked, in this funerary context, to the semantic cluster of contact between worlds[37]. Finally, we should not forget that some erudite patrons may have drawn on a combination of poetic references to display their culture in a funerary context. A funerary inscription from Rome (CIL VI, 21521 = CLE no. 1009), which at first appears to be a proclamation of apotheosis, in fact combines references to Virgil, Horace, and Ovid (Pekáry 1994: 95; Scheid 2023: 156–157). Could this also be the case in some décors (whether funerary or not), whose various motifs might allude to prestigious monuments or literary works?

Chappuis Sandoz 2004: 101).

34 The stylisation of the motifs on the black and white pavements of Italy does not facilitate the identification of the leafy beards, but comparison with other vegetal motifs on the pavement can help. Here, the plant stems serving as a geometric framework, dividing the pavement into nine distinct zones, feature stylised leaves with a central white vein, resembling the strands of the beard of the oceanic heads.

35 Some scholars interpret the entire corpus of foliate heads as being related to the cult of Dionysus/Bacchus (references in Derwael 2023: 70).

36 Both from water and from plant sap (Otto 1933: 148-159). Already in the Greek world, Dionysus was a god of vegetation and sap, a chthonic deity associated with the rebirth of nature and the hope of life after death (Otto 1969: 161-168; Castriota 1995: 74-76).

37 On this principle of semantic clusters, evidenced in both texts and images, see, among others, the works of P. Bonnechere and G. Cursaru on the semantic field of the vortex (*e.g.* Bonnechere - Cursaru (in press)), or Pirenne-Delforge - Pironti 2016 on the personnality of Hera.

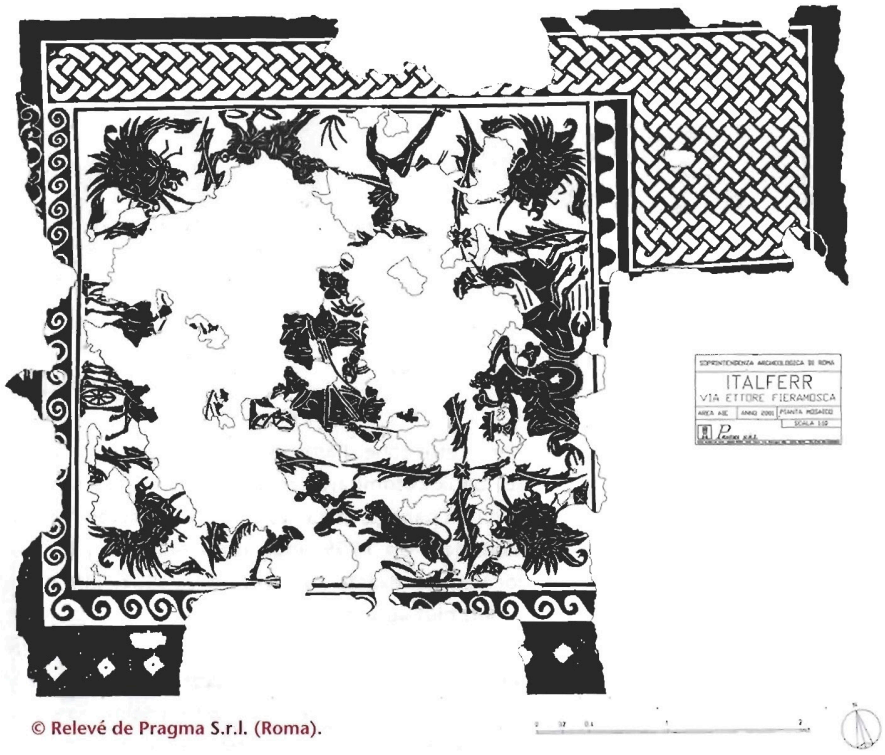


Figure 20
Drawing of the mosaic from the mausoleum of Casal Bertone, Rome. Photo from Musco et al. 2008: 35.

Figurative and literary arts both reflect a shared poetic vision, revealing the way Romans perceived the world. A detailed and contextualised analysis of mosaics featuring one or more oceanic heads has confirmed the polysemic nature of the motif within Roman décors. The iconography of the god *Oceanus* appears to be sufficiently rooted in tradition to allow for its identification in a wide range of contexts. However, the polysemy of visual referents suggest that these heads may also have represented other water deities, such as Neptune and possibly Dionysus/Bacchus. Could also an ἅλιος γέρων, "old man of the sea", such as Nereus, Proteus, or Phorcys, likewise have been depicted in this form?

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