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The mosaic with the depiction of two goddesses pouring a libation (St Petersburg, Hermitage) : iconography and meaning

Elena KOUVSHINOVA

The mosaic under discussion (fig. 1) was found in the Baths of Plotina between Rome and Albano. According to documents in the archives of the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, the mosaic was bought in Rome by the Russian emperor Nikolai I during his period as ambassador in Italy in 1853 (Hermitage archive, Act 1856, 38/47, p. 24). It was brought to St Petersburg in 1856 (Act 1856, 38/47, p. 1-28), and, according to S. Korsunskaja, underwent restoration¹. But the acts cited by Korsunskaja relate only to the delivery of the mosaic. To date I have been unable to find documents referring to the restoration. The only point that I can make is that restorations in Russia were usually carried out in smalti.

In 1856 the mosaic was exhibited in the Posolsky entrance of the Winter Palace (Act 1856, 38, p. 26). In 1859, as a result of the project of G. Shtakenshnader, it was set in the pavement of the Fourth Ancient Room of the Hermitage.

In his article "Nimbus und Strahlenkranz in der Werken der alten Kunst" Ludolf Stephani identified the subject as a depiction of Hylas and the nymphs². This interpretation was accepted by G. Kieseritsky in his catalogue of 1901³, and since then no one has doubted it. A formal analysis was given by Sophia Korsunskaja in 1930 in her article "Mosaic mit Hyllasdarstellung"⁴. After that the mosaic was mentioned in the work of M.E. Blake, "Mosaics of the Late Empire in Rome", published in 1940⁵. It has since been included in the article on Hylas in *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*⁶.

R. Pichikjan and A.F. Berdnikov described the mosaic as the "abduction of Hylas" in their article "Rimskie mozaiki v muzejax Moskvyy i Leningrada"⁷. But there is no depiction of abduction here. The two writers seem to have freely adapted the ideas of foregoing authors on the subject. They attribute the mosaic to the time of the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117), but on

¹ S. KORSUNSKAJA, "Mosaic mit Hyllasdarstellung", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung* 45, 1930, p. 166-171, esp. p. 166.

² L. STEPHANI, "Nimbus und Strahlenkranz in der Werken der alten Kunst", Imp. - 4 (140 S.) St Petersburg 1859. Leipzig Voss. Aus *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St-Petersbourg* besonders abgedruckt, p. 1-188, esp. p. 50.

³ G. KIZERICKIJ, *Mizej Drevnej skul'ptury*, St. Petersburg 1901, p. 102.

⁴ S. KORSUNSKAJA, "Mosaic mit Hyllasdarstellung", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung* 45, 1930, p. 166-171.

⁵ M.E. BLAKE, "Mosaics of the Late Empire in Rome", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 17, 1940, p. 110.

⁶ J.H. OAKLEY, s.v. "Hylas", *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, 5. 1, Zurich and Munich 1990, p. 574-579, esp. p. 577 ("Hylas 32").

⁷ I.P. PIČIKJAN, A.F. BERDNIKOV, "Rimskie mozaiki v muzejax Moskvyy i Leningrada", in *Naučnye soobščeniya Gosudarstvennogo Muzeja Iskusstva Narodov Vostoka*, Vypusk XI, Moskva 1979, p. 55-63.

insufficient grounds⁸. In the *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* John H. Oakley dates it to the 2nd, 3rd or 4th centuries A.D.⁹

The mosaic is an object of interest because its iconography is unusual for a representation of the Hylas legend (fig. 2). But it is important to note that there have been extensive changes as a result of restoration (see Appendix). The central area between the figures was destroyed and subsequently replaced with white marble tesserae. The left hand of the female figure at the right may have been altered during the restoration. The background around the young man was especially badly damaged. The two female figures were carried out in a form of tessellation different from that used for the young man.

The female figures, identified as goddesses by their bluish-grey nimbi, have wreaths of reeds like those worn by river gods, but they do not rest their hands on vessels as river gods do. What they are doing is pouring a libation. From its colour the liquid used in the libation looks like water, and it seems that an abundant quantity is being poured. The liquid is being poured on the earth. But the relevant part of the mosaic is damaged, so, while we can speak of the depiction of a libation, it is impossible to recognize exactly what kind of libation was depicted. We can guess from the goddesses' wreaths of reeds (as well as from the colour) that the liquid was water, but it is impossible to be certain that the figure on the right held a vessel because the restoration has distorted the gesture of her right hand. From the original parts, however, it is possible to conjecture that what she held was most probably a bowl.

The libation of water that was represented could have been made with four main purposes in mind. Firstly, to give power to somebody. If a libation was poured for a person who was killed, that means that they were infused with blood. Secondly, the libation may have functioned as a kind of sacrament to give inspiration. Thirdly, the libation may have been designed to force somebody to do something. Fourthly, the libation could have been used for protection and purification in connection with a ritual sacrifice¹⁰.

When accompanying a sacrifice the libation took place both before and after the principal act of sacrifice¹¹. In Roman times it was more common for libation to accompany sacrifice than to be performed independently¹². The libation was poured on the earth¹³, on the *omphalos*¹⁴, on an incense burner¹⁵, or on a sacrificial altar¹⁶. It depended for whom the libation was made.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁹ OAKLEY, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ S.v. "Wasser. Kultus (Riten)", *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Katoikoi - Kunegn), Stuttgart 1922, p. 2177-2179, esp. p. 2178.

¹¹ S.v. "Trankopfer", *Pauly-Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* VI, Stuttgart 1937, p. 2131-2137, esp. p. 2136.

¹² *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

¹³ S.v. "Artemis" 981, *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 2. 2, Zurich and Munich 1984, p. 519.

¹⁴ S.v. "Apollon" 679 b, *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 2. 2, Zurich and Munich 1984, p. 238.

¹⁵ S.v. "Artemis" 997, *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 2. 2, Zurich and Munich 1984, p. 521.

In the mosaic the libation poured on the earth can be connected with a sacrifice to chthonic divinities. Probably it is the head of one of these divinities which was depicted here. This head directs its gaze towards the young man. It seems that the divinity is not just a personification but it is waiting for its sacrifice.

But it seems that the goddesses with nimbi do not notice the youth. They are busy with the libation and concentrate on this. The youth, however, looks at one of the goddesses.

To understand the meaning of the libation we need to take account of other features in the scene, notably the nimbi. Ludolf Stephani's study of nimbi cites many examples but his conclusion that the nimbus is an attribute of eternal youth seems too general and superficial¹⁷. Sophia Korsunskaja was right when she wrote that the depiction of the nimbi here is closely connected with sacrifice, but this observation was not developed by her¹⁸.

Frequently in classical iconography the depiction of nimbi resembles that of a veil or similar billowing drapery. The veil, along with a related series of ritually significant elements played a protecting role during the complicated process of the death-resurrection of gods and goddesses (for example in a number of depictions of Leto with Apollo and Artemis¹⁹ or in the depiction of Nereids from the House of Aion in Kato Paphos).

The nimbus is a standard attribute illustrating the status of gods and goddesses; it is particularly frequent in representations of astral divinities. Also depicted with nimbi are kings and queens resurrected through sacrifice. But the representation of nimbi in connection with a libation is of interest. The depiction of gods and goddesses who both perform libations and wear nimbi is rare, though an exception is provided by a Thracian relief which shows Hera and Zeus pouring a libation (fig. 3).

What is significant about the goddesses in the Hermitage mosaic is that they are connected with the primal element water. This is indicated, as already stated, by their crowns of reeds. But these reeds look not only like crowns but also like haloes of green rays, either supplementing the nimbi or forming additional nimbi. Moreover, the goddesses are shown disrobing, their drapery on their shoulders. This symbolises an imminent immersion: they are ready for the ritual swimming which brings a new birth. The young man has a cloak fastened by a brooch on his shoulder but he too is otherwise naked. These details signify the future moment of the ritual bath as a vehicle of resurrection²⁰.

¹⁶ S.v "Apollon" 457, *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 2. 2, Zurich and Munich 1984, p. 219.

¹⁷ L. STEPHANI, "Nimbus und Strahlenkranz in der Werken der alten Kunst", Imp. - 4 (140 S.) St Petersburg 1859. Leipzig Voss. Aus *Mémoires de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St-Petersbourg* besonders abgedruckt, p. 1-188.

¹⁸ S. KORSUNSKAJA, "Mosaic mit Hylasdarstellung", *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung* 45, 1930, p. 166-171, esp. p. 170.

¹⁹ S.v "Leto" 13, 17, *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* 7. 2, Zurich and Munich 1992, p. 131.

²⁰ I. AKIMOVA, A.G. KIFIŠIN, "O miforitual'nom smysle zontika", in *Etruski i Sredizemnomor'e*, Moskva 1994, p. 167-244, esp. p. 185-202.

In this case the resurrected character is strengthened by the act of libation, and the presence of the nimbi accentuates this fact.

Perhaps the youth too will rise again because of the libation and become a god. But there is insufficient evidence to identify him as Hylas. He is only one of the heroes to have undergone apotheosis.

APPENDIX

Prior to the congress in Lausanne I wrote a letter to the Organizing Committee suggesting that the restoration carried out on the mosaic might have obscured the subject-matter. I did not refer to this in my actual paper because at that time, as a result of the inadequate reference material on ancient mosaics in Russian libraries, I had not been able to look for parallels in support of a new interpretation. In Lausanne doubts were raised over the subject of the mosaic by various scholars, for example J.-P. Darmon, R. Ling, D. Parrish, and W.A. Daszewski ; and I have since written to accept the suggestion of R. Ling that the iconography would be consistent with a possible identification of the subject as "Diana and Actaion". I am very grateful to the people concerned for giving me their opinions. They have prompted me to examine the mosaic more carefully and to identify different types of restoration on stylistic grounds (fig. 3).

In the figure of the young man only the head, the torso, the right hand, the upper parts of the right leg and the left hand look original. This part of the scene is reminiscent of the iconographical patterns for figures of Hylas. As stated in the text above, the background in this area was especially badly damaged, and the central area between the figures has been replaced by white marble tesserae.

The figures of the goddesses pouring libations, again as stated above, are carried out in a different style from the young man. J.-P. Darmon has proposed that the female figures are not ancient. W.A. Daszewski, on the other hand, is of the opinion that they are original. I do not, at the moment, feel sufficiently experienced to enter into a debate ; but I have noted clear signs that these figures too were restored. The figure of the goddess at the left was not damaged except for the part of the nimbus near her forehead, some small tesserae in the body and drapery, and perhaps the jar. But the goddess at the right has been less fortunate. The left hand with the jar and the upper part of the torso may have been altered ; the rest of the torso and the upper part of the right leg have been carried out in another and more energetic manner, with the inclusion of many small pieces of smalt ; the right hand and leg, as well as the lower part of the left leg, have also been restored with smalti. The drapery has been restored with outlines indicated in black tesserae.

The attitudes of these figures, pouring a liquid from their vessels on to the earth, recall the attitudes of nymphs in depictions of the legend of Diana and Actaion. Indeed the earth itself looks like an insertion of the nineteenth century, as observed by several specialists, for example W.A. Daszewski. This enables me to accept that the subject of the mosaic could have been

Diana and Actaion. But, as noted in the text, it is impossible to be sure that the female figure on the right is pouring liquid from a vessel because of the awkward gesture of her restored right hand.

Even if all three figures were correctly restored, there is insufficient evidence to establish that the young man was Hylas. He is only one of the heroes to have suffered similar fate. For example Actaion, Leucippus and even Orpheus were all sacrificed by female divinities²¹.

DISCUSSION

Jean-Pierre **Darmon** : Cette mosaïque paraît si énormément restaurée avant son installation au musée qu'il me semble impossible ou très difficile de restituer son iconographie originale et *a fortiori* de l'interpréter.

Elena **Kouvshinova** : The restoration has been documented in the Hermitage Acts as early restorations and those carried out at the Hermitage : However I believe that although it is difficult to be certain, there is enough evidence to support my interpretation of the situation (not the myth but the mythological ritualistic aspect).

Roger **Ling** : I would prefer to look for a standard mythological interpretation, and wonder whether the true meaning has been confused by restoration. There seem to me two anomalies that raise suspicions : 1) there is a gap in the centre of the composition where a figure might be expected ; 2) the male figure in the background looks like an observer, or rather a voyeur. These observations bring two possibilities to mind : 1) that the scene actually depicted Actaeon seeing Diana bathing, 2) that it depicted Marsyas watching Athena playing the flutes (in which case the nymphs are pouring the water of the pool in which Athena sees her reflection). In either case we need to replace an essential figure in the central foreground which was destroyed by modern restorers, probably even before the mosaic reached St. Petersburg.

Elena **Kouvshinova** : There is no doubt that the restoration has made interpretation difficult. The young male could be Mylas, Acteon or Marsyas. However my suggestion that the scene shows a sacrificial element still stands. I think many other elements in the iconography support

²¹ For help received in the preparation of this manuscript I am very grateful to Mr. Matveev, the Vice-Director of the Hermitage, to Miss S.P. Boriskovskaya, advisor of the Classical Art Department in the Hermitage, Miss E.N. Hodza, Keeper of Ancient Mosaics in the Hermitage, Mr. R.E. Field, Miss A. Agy, Miss V.B. Blek, Professor in the St Petersburg Academic Art Academy, and Mr. S. Nikitin, the Academy's photographer.

my view. I can show the archival material about the restoration. The iconography of the mosaic looks really like Actaeon seeing Diana.

Stephen **Zwirn** : This presentation would have benefitted from an image showing what is considered restoration, because so many questions stem from what is original and what is not. An anomalous detail is the fact that the two "goddesses" have haloes and reeds. Reeds are usually the attributes of river gods/goddesses. Any interpretation should take this probable identification into consideration.

Elena **Kouvshinova** : The wreaths of reeds in the hair are only evidence of their connection with the primal water element. For example satyrs can have them.

Anthony **Beeson** : Reeds in the hair and water pouring from jars shows they are water nymphs. I think that this may show Narcissus looking at his reflection in their pool.

Elena **Kouvshinova** : See my answer to Stephen Zwirn. I do not think that there is sufficient evidence for this to be Narcissus exactly.



Fig.1a- The mosaic with the depiction of two goddesses pouring a libation. St Petersburg, Hermitage.



Fig.1b- The mosaic with the depiction of two goddesses pouring a libation. St Petersburg, Hermitage.



Fig. 2 - Hera and Zeus pouring a libation. After *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (s.v. "Hera in Thracia", 13).



Fig. 3 - The restorations in the mosaic with the depiction of two goddesses pouring a libation. St Petersburg, Hermitage.