ICONOGRAPHY AND IDEOLOGY IN THE MOSAICS OF CONIMBRIGA: THE POINT OF VIEW OF ANIMALS

ICONOGRAFIA Y IDEOLOGIA EN LOS MOSAICOS DE CONIMBRIGA: EL PUNTO DE VISTA DE LOS ANIMALES

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Recibido: 02-II-2024; aceptado: 08-III-2024

ABSTRACT

Conimbriga preserves one of the most significant iconographic programs of Roman Lusitania, particularly in the House of the fountains. This is evidenced in the mosaics that decorated the aristocratic residence in the second half of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD.

The multiple representations of animals displayed on these mosaics range from local to exotic fauna, from domestic to wild animals, from isolated animals to those in context with humans, living or dead and, at the very limit, from natural to mythological beings.

Considering the intentionality that underlies any iconographic program, the analysis of these mosaics can be deepened in order to understand various aspects of the culture and ideology of the owners and commissioners. This includes, for example, knowledge of the world and of classical mythology, the relationship between Man and Animal and the representation of the cosmos and the role these two domains play in it.

This analysis will involve contrasting certain issues raised in iconological analysis with the known archaeozoological evidence from the Roman city, within the scope of ongoing projects.

KEY WORDS: Conimbriga; Mosaics; Animals; Stoicism.

RESUMEN

Conimbriga conserva, particularmente en la Casa de los surtidores, uno de los programas iconográficos más significativos de la Lusitania romana, expresado en los mosaicos que, en la segunda mitad del siglo II y principios del siglo III d.C., decoraban la residencia aristocrática.

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Research financed with National Funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., within the project UIDB/00196/2020.

Las múltiples representaciones de animales que muestran estos mosaicos se dividen entre fauna local y exótica, entre animales domésticos y salvajes, animales aislados o en contexto con humanos, vivos o muertos y, en el límite, entre seres naturales y mitológicos.

Considerando la intencionalidad que subyace a cualquier programa iconográfico, se puede profundizar en el análisis de estos mosaicos para comprender diversos aspectos de la cultura y ideología de sus propietarios y comisarios, en lo que respecta, por ejemplo, al conocimiento del mundo y a la mitología clásica, la relación entre el Hombre y el Animal y la representación del cosmos y el papel que estos dos dominios juegan en él.

Este análisis se realizará contrastando algunos de los problemas planteados con los testimonios arqueo-zoológicos conocidos de la ciudad romana, en el ámbito de los proyectos en curso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Conimbriga; Mosaicos; Animales; Estoicismo.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE OF THE EVIDENCE[2]

The Roman town of Conimbriga (Condeixa-a-Nova, Coimbra, Portugal) in the province of Lusitania was one of the westernmost cities of the Empire.

Excavated since 1899, the area currently exposed amounts to approximately 17% of the original maximum extension of 22 hectares, which were delimitated by an Early-Imperial town-wall. In this area, a total of five large *domus* have provided evidence for their mosaic decorative programs. One of them, the House of the fountains, will be the centre of this analysis, for the wealth of animal representations it offers (Oleiro, 1992; Oliveira, 2005; Correia, 2013: 290-316; id., 2017).

This situation obviously entails a degree of bias in the analysis, as it involves a single iconographic program, probably commissioned by a single homeowner to a specific mosaic workshop, working within a limited timeframe for its production (Correia, loc. cit.). That may, however, also be seen as an advantage, providing us with a coherent slice of evidence that, should the possible bias and singularity of the program be duly taken into account, can yield important insights into the worldview of a provincial aristocrat at the far edge of the Empire.

The mosaics of Conimbriga, including those of the House of the fountains, have been the object of multiple analyses by various scholars. The novelty of the present approach is the selection of a group of motifs – the animals – as the starting point. In fact, animals are the only group of motifs that is represented in all the various themes that have been identified in those mosaics: mythology (López, 1990; Durán, 1993), astronomy (Morand, 2005), hunting (Lancha, 2004; Caetano, 2017: 173-193) and family representation

(2) This paper was presented as a conference in the Panel "Animal Culture and Animal Behaviour in the Ancient World", organized by Sian Lewis and Paula Barata Dias in the 14th Celtic Conference in Classics, in Coimbra, July 2023, with the title "Animals in Roman Lusitania: its representations in the mosaics of Conimbriga and its ideological references". We thank the panel organizers and other participants for the discussions of the first version.

(Lancha, 2004; Correia, 2013: 299-300). It will be argued that, precisely because of their ubiquity in the iconography, animals can be considered essential to understand the intellectual references underlying the decoration commission.

2. MOSAICS AS PLASTIC EXPRESSION

The first aspect that must be considered is the quality of the representation depicted in the mosaics. This quality is a basic condition in order to elaborate reasonings about what is actually being represented. There are, in fact, some examples of remarkable realism of representation that support the assumption that what one can see represented in a mosaic is indeed what the commissioners ordered and mosaicists executed.

The first obvious example is the swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, an animal that is not very common in artistic representations. This species, identified as autochthonous (Lopes et al., 2016), is depicted at the corners of the *tondo* of the great deer hunt in the House of the fountains (CMRP I, 9; Fig. 1) and in a private room in the House attributed to Cantaber (MC, 46). The realism of the representation is striking for an animal of such a characteristic anatomy.

Fig. 1. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 9. Detail: *Porphyrio porphyrio* Photo: H. Rendeiro©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

The second example, in the central *tondo* of the same mosaic from the House of the fountains, is the representation of the horses, *Equus cabalus*, galloping (Fig. 2). Although the representation as a whole is not strikingly realistic (a matter of scale, the same thing happening with the deer and hind, *Cervus elaphus*, in the scene; Fig. 3), the

Fig. 2. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 9. Details: Galloping horses, Equus Cabalus. Photo: H. Rendeiro©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

Fig. 3. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 9. Central medallion, the deer hunt. Photo: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

peculiarity of the representation of the ears of the horses must be noted. Remarkably, the front horses behind the prey have their ears bent backward, while the following horses have their ears straight up. This differentiation accurately represents two common natural attitudes in galloping horses, suggesting the difference cannot be coincidental.

The third striking example is the dromedary, *Camelus dromedarius*, represented in another famous mosaic of the House of the fountains (CMRP I, 12; Fig. 4). The central medallion is not a fine example of realistic representation: the elephant is crass (it cannot be determined whether it belongs to the *Elephas* or *Loxodonta* genus) and the palm tree is barely recognisable as such (*Phoenix dactylifera*?). The dromedary, however, is proportionately depicted in dark yellow stone and shows the unmistakable natural attitude of the forelegs bent under the chest. This extraordinarily realistic vignette takes us to the next point.

Fig. 4. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 12. Central medallion, the elephant and the camel. Photo: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

3. MOSAICS AS ARCHAEOZOOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The accurate depiction of a dromedary in an early 3rd century AD mosaic in Conimbriga has been contextualized with a piece of archaeozoological evidence: the presence of a dromedary bone in the town (Cardoso, 1992).

The bone proves that dromedaries were known in Conimbriga. The problem is that the dating of the bone is unknown and, although an early Roman chronology is possible,

other, later hypotheses exist, namely related to the Moorish presence in the region, from the 8th century AD onwards. Overall, it seems more probable that the connection between the presence of the animal and its representation in the mosaic has coincided in time, rather than being a random accumulation of fortuitous circumstances.

This line of reasoning suggests that other poorly depicted animals, such as elephants (as mentioned, *Elephas maximus* or *Loxodonta africana*) and lions (*Panthera leo*?), were probably not present in Conimbriga in conditions that would allow them to serve as models for mosaicists. This raises questions about the process of work in mosaic workshops and the methods used to acquire and reproduce specific motifs. At this point, however, the evidence available to us is especially limited.

While various animals are depicted in the mosaics, perhaps the most relevant aspect of the archaeozoological importance of the mosaic depictions has to do with dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*).

There are four different scenes with dogs in the mosaics of the House of the fountains: the ones in the hare hunter medallion (CMRP I, 5; Fig. 5-1); the Acteon medallion (CMRP I, 1.7; Fig. 5-2); the various dogs present in the boar hunting *predellae* of the victorious charioteer mosaic (CMRP I, 11; Fig. 5-3, 4, 5) and the two dogs in the aforementioned deer hunt mosaic (CMRP I, 9).

Part of the variability in the depiction of the dogs can be attributed to mere artistic convention. For example, contrasting manes of grey and red, or variations in size, may be dictated more by composition requirements than by the actual diversity of known animals.

If realistically depicted, Acteon's dogs would be animals not much greater than 60cm in length, while those in the deer hunt or the boar hunt would be significantly larger. However, it should be mentioned that such a size range is consistent with what is known of paw imprints in ceramic building materials, a hitherto undervalued class of evidence in these matters.

Fig. 5. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, representations of dogs, *Canis lupus familiaris*. 1 – mosaic CMRP I, 1.5; 2 – mosaic CMRP I, 1.7; 3 – mosaic CMRP I, 11, detail of one the *predellae*; 4 – mosaic CMRP I, 11, another detail of one of the *predellae*; 5 - mosaic CMRP I, 11, another *predella*, the boar hunt. 1-4 Photos V.H.Correia; 5 Photo H. Rendeiro, all©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

What cannot be attributed to convention is the difference between these dogs and the one that accompanied the hare hunter. The former are long-snouted dogs, while the hare hunter's is clearly a short-snouted animal. This is clearly and indication of species and varietal selection, not only present but indeed completely developed in the Roman period in this region (Pires *et al*., 2018).

The most striking depiction, although unfortunately badly damaged (the head, which would be crucial, is lost), is the black-and-white dog in the boar hunt (Fig. 4). It is obviously a prize animal, being carried by an individual attendant. The spotted black and white mane adds to its attractiveness, as does its size. Additionally, the dog's prominent position within the returning party indicates its status, notable in a mosaic where the commissioner had the concern of having their servants identified by name (Fig. 4 -5).

All this indicates the presence and the will to depict the individuality of the three main varieties of dogs that, historically, can be identified in Iberia: the long-snouted *podengo* (terrier-like); the short-snouted *perdigueiro* (a kind of pointer) and the *galgo* (greyhound). The probable evolution of specific cinegenic use of these varieties (pointer to hunt hares; greyhounds to hunt boars), is interesting, but falls outside the scope of the present paper.

4. ANIMALS IN CONTEXT

We can now begin to analyse the contexts in which the animals appear.

4.1. Domestic animals

The most represented domestic animal in the mosaics of Conimbriga is the dog. It is depicted on multiple occasions as a hunting aid (CMRP I, 9; 11; 1.5; Fig. 5) and, in one other instance, in the context of the myth of Acteon (CMRP I, 1.7; Fig. 6), where its role goes awry.

The second most commonly represented domestic animal is the horse (CMRP I, 9; 11). It often appears in a hunting context, either directly, being ridden in pursuit of deer, or indirectly, being led to the stables after the boar hunt. Additionally, it appears yoked four abreast in the *quadriga* of the charioteer (CMRP I, 11-center; Fig. 7).

Other domestic animals have unique representations: the donkey is used as transport in the Silenus mosaic (CMRP I, 8); the pig (actually a piglet), is transported, already butchered (CMRP I, 15), representing produce in general rather than the animal itself (Fig. 8).

The main takeaway from this is the complete dissociation between the animals depicted in the mosaics and the common domestic animals usually documented in faunal studies, such as oxen, ovicaprids, and swine (cf. Cardoso 1995; Detry et al. 2014; Correia et al. 2023). An exception to this discrepancy would be the Minotaur with an ox-head (CMRP I, 1.24; MC, 61).

Fig. 6. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 1.7. Acteon. Photo: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

Fig. 7. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 11. Central medallion, the victorious charioteer. Photo: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

Fig. 8. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, details domestic animals and servants. 1 - mosaic CMRP I, 8. Old man (Silenus) transported on a donkey guided by a servant (Dyonisos); 2 - mosaic CMRP I, 15. Servant carrying a butchered piglet. Photo: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

4.2. Wild prey

Unlike the portrayal of domestic animals, mosaic depictions of wild prey align with the faunal record, attesting that deer, *Cervus elaphu*s, and boar, *Sus scrofa*, were the most common animals actively hunted and consumed in Conimbriga.

Both species are represented prominently in a hunting episode each (CMRP I, 9 and 11. Fig. 3; 5-5); and hinds are depicted in the great *triclinium* mosaic (CMRP I, 10) alongside lions (Fig. 9).

Deviations from the faunal record lie in the fact that no roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*. Cf. Cardoso 1995; Detry *et al.* 2014) is represented, but their bones have

Fig. 9. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 10. 1 – hind; 2 - lion. Photos: H. Rendeiro©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

been recovered. An inversion of this issue has to do with the depiction of a hare (*Lepus europaeus;* CMRP I, 5), an animal which does not appear in the faunal record, although rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*, its domesticity uncertain) is common. However, both problems seem rather marginal in relation to the major dissociation mentioned above.

4.3. Birds

Birds introduce another level of complexity to the analysis. They are not common representations, although the swamphen, *Porphyrio porphyrio*, is notorious (CMRP I, 9, Fig. 1; MC, 46, Fig. 10-1). In other mosaics of the House of the fountains, a bird that may perhaps be identified as a heron (genus *Ardea*) or a stork (genus *Ciconia*) is repeatedly depicted among the motifs (CMRP I, 3; Fig. 10-2). Additionally, an unidentified bird (maybe a little bustard, *Tetrax tetrax*) is depicted (CMRP I, 10; Fig. 14-2) in alternate medallions to *cantharoi* (more on this point later).

The complexity these animals introduce has to do with the fact that, from their representations only, one cannot guess what they are doing there. Recourse to other sources is needed.

For birds in general, the most obvious connection is to auspices. That is the etymology Varro offers for *auspicium*: *avem specere* (*De lingua latina* VI, 82). And from Plauto, we learn that these auspices could be taken in the private sphere (*Asinaria* II, 1). It is, thus, probable that the representation of birds was generally related to the knowledge (or lack thereof) of the will of the gods and destiny.

For the swamphen, a somewhat famous animal in classical literature, the reference by Aelian (*De natura animalium* III, 42) suffices to justify its depiction: a monogamous animal, with a particular sensibility to treason and adultery. Perhaps this explains its choice for the entrance of a room identified with a sleeping room for the house owners. This room is otherwise decorated with a scallop shell, referencing Venus (MC, 46, in room C26 of the House attributed to Cantaber; Fig. 11).

Fig. 10. Conimbriga, details of birds. 1 - House attributed to Cantaber, mosaic MC, 46. Pair of swamphens; 2 - House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 3. Stork or heron. 1, Photo: D. Pavone/Mediaprimer; 2 Photo: V. H. Correia, both©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

Fig. 11. Conimbriga, House attributed to Cantaber, mosaic MC, 46. Detail of apse: scallop shell and fish. Photo: D. Pavone/Mediaprimer ©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

The role of birds in the diet of ancient Romans remains uncertain due to the difficulty in retrieving their bones compared to mammals. On the other hand, however, we know that birds, such as the griffon vulture, *Gyps fulvus*, were hunted or at least valued. For example, their carcasses were prized as a source of long bones used to make flutes (Moreno, Pimenta, 2004). Thus, here too the presence of birds, somewhat detached from everyday life, can be noted.

4.4. Fish and other marine life

At this stage in our analysis, we are delving further and further into obviously non-naturalistic references.

Let us start with the simpler images: there are various good candidates, from a perspective that prioritizes a naturalistically correct depiction of species, for the small fish that appear in various circumstances (namely around *tondi* in CMRP I, 1.3, 1.7, and vestigial in 1.12, and in CMRP I, 3; Fig. 6, 12-1). Blackbelly rosefish, *Helicolenus dactilopterus*, tub gurnard, *Chelidonichthys ucerne,* and red mullet, *Mullus surmuletus*, are all common fish in the coasts of the Middle Atlantic, from which Conimbriga is not exceedingly far. It stands to reason that those small fish may be more than just in-filling motifs, but actual representations of what was part of the diet in Coinimbriga back then. However, fish-bone recovery is a tricky issue, and we have just a sliver of evidence, mostly still under study, to compare.

The marine animal most prominently depicted in the mosaics (in the same locations mentioned above but twice in CMRP I, 3) is the dolphin (genus *Delphinidae;* Fig. 12-2).

The problem is that the model systematically adopted to depict such an animal is not a natural model, but the more common, artistically idealized one. One can be certain that, had the commissioners' and artisans' intentions been such, actual, realistic models could have been taken from nature, as it happened with the dromedary. Dolphins would have been known in the estuary of the Mondego, and local knowledge of *Balaenoptera* existed to some extent. This is confirmed by the (admittedly rather odd) find of a whale vertebra in the town.

Hence, the intention instead would have been to depict the mythical animal from the story of Arion, the human-friendly inhabitant of the sea (Herodotus, *Histories* I, 24). Always in the mythical domain, that animal is represented either accompanying a triton, opposite the *kethos* (CMRP I, 3), or surrounding either a trident or a scallop shell (*Pecten maximus*) (MC, 46).

The association of fish and trident is subject to discussion. The trident is depicted with a ribbon knot surrounding it, almost as if standing in for a *thyrsus*. This motif was specifically chosen to decorate the corners of *tondi* with heroic scenes, suggesting there may be a connection to Dionysian imagery and the journey of the soul through the Ocean (Turcan, 1966: 544).

Fig. 12. Conimbriga, details of marine life. 1 – House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 3. Central emblema with triton and fish; 2 – House of the fountains, mosaic CMRP I, 3. Detail of dolphin; 3 – House of the skelletons, mosaic MC, 26. Scallop shells and cantharoi. 1- 2 Photos: V. H. Correia; 3 Photo: Pavone/Mediaprimer; all©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

The scallop shell (CMRP I, 15; MC, 26 and 46, Fig. 11 and 12-3) is usually a symbol of Venus. C. Mourão (2008: 44-49) would prefer an interpretation closer to the aforementioned one about the trident but, considering the whole evidence for the shell's representation in Conimbriga, perhaps the traditional interpretation still applies.

The choice of model and the context hence lead us to categorically position the dolphin halfway between the actual representation of a living animal, and our next category: purely mythological animals.

4.5. Mythological animals

The mythological animals depicted in the mosaics of Conimbriga are five or six: the Pegasus (CMRP I, 1.3), the Chimera (*ibidem*), a marine centaur (or triton) carrying a *vexillum* (CMRP I, 3), and the *khetos* (twice: with Perseus, and opposite to dolphins; CMRP I, 1.1 and 3 respectively). If one wants to include the Minotaur (Oleiro 1994) in this group (him, thus, being the sixth mythological animal), there are two representations of him (CMRP I, 1.24 and MC, 61).

Their animal parts are anatomically correct, as may be evidenced when one compares Pegasus with the horses in the mosaics of the House of fountains and especially the ox-head in CMRP I, 1.24. Their association with mythological heroes – Bellerophon, Perseus, Theseus - another large swath of the iconography of the house, is of the utmost significance.

5. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS ON CONTEXTS

We are now in a position to refine our analyses of the contexts of the animals depicted in these mosaics, as well as to add some observations related to other elements within them that also hold significant ideological value. This hinges on the assumption, clearly articulated by Jean-Pierre Darmon (1989: 21), that "Il n'y a *a priori* aucun doute

Fig. 13. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, mythological animals. 1 - mosaic CMRP I, 1.1. Perseus and the *khetos*. 2 - mosaic CMRP I, 1.3. Bellerophon chasing Chimaera. Photos: D. Ferreira©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

que l'Antiquité a recherché un sens allégorique dans les récits mythologiques". According to Darmon, this assumption is founded on "la conviction que le monde sensible est le signe d'un monde supérieur qui se dérobe à notre connaissance directe, mais qui s'ouvre à nous par ce detour" (Pépin, 1976: 34).

5.1. Animals and humans: hunting

Animals, especially those immediately recognisable in the surrounding natural world, are depicted in the mosaics primarily in their interaction with humans, namely in hunting scenes either as prey or as aides.

Thus, the centrality of Man and its prized predatory activity is central to the ideology of the commissioners of these mosaics (Morand, 1994: 36-50). *Virtus* is indeed a central value for them, and its role in self-representation as means of self-promotion cannot be underestimated.

The exceptions are two: the exotic tableau in CMRP I, 12, which has already been connected to the cult of Bacchus (as an allusion to the god's Indian triumph) or to the myth of Orpheus, and the pairing of prey and predator, hind and lion, in the great *triclinium*. We shall return to this agonistic pairing in a moment.

5.2. Dionysos, hidden in plain sight

Dionysos was worshiped in Conimbriga as Liber Pater (*Fouilles de Conimbriga* II, nº 13), but there are several other references to his cult in the mosaics; the most common one being the *cantharos* (CMRP I, 1.9, 9 and 10; MC, 22, 26, 32 and 48), from which vine scrolls emerge or which contains wine, the god's gift to humanity (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* III 5, 1). The Silenus mosaic is another important instance of this symbolism (Kuznetsova, 1997: 38-41), as are the feminine figures in the corners of the *tondo* in the charioteer mosaic. These figures hold vine scrolls and have been

perceptively identified as Dionysian caryatides, holding the cosmos while the victorious hero (the charioteer, actually the *dominus*) progresses in apotheosis. The identification of those figures with the *Horae* (López, 1990: 218) does not diminish the crucial point of this identification; on the contrary, it underscores the significance of this association. Perhaps one should not rush to say that the representation of the *Horae* next to the personified Seasons is merely a matter of tautology.

The triton medallion has been interpreted as a synoptic view of the marine triumph of the god (Oleiro, 1992: 86). If we start from that point – as I believe we should – the Dionysian idea is at the centre of a major allegorical feature of the mosaics: Bacchus, the triumphant god of wine and inspiration is at the centre of agonistic dualities (Morand, 1994: 116-126).

One of these dualities opposes prey and predator (in CMRP I, 10-upper centre) as we mentioned: hind and lion (Fig. 9).

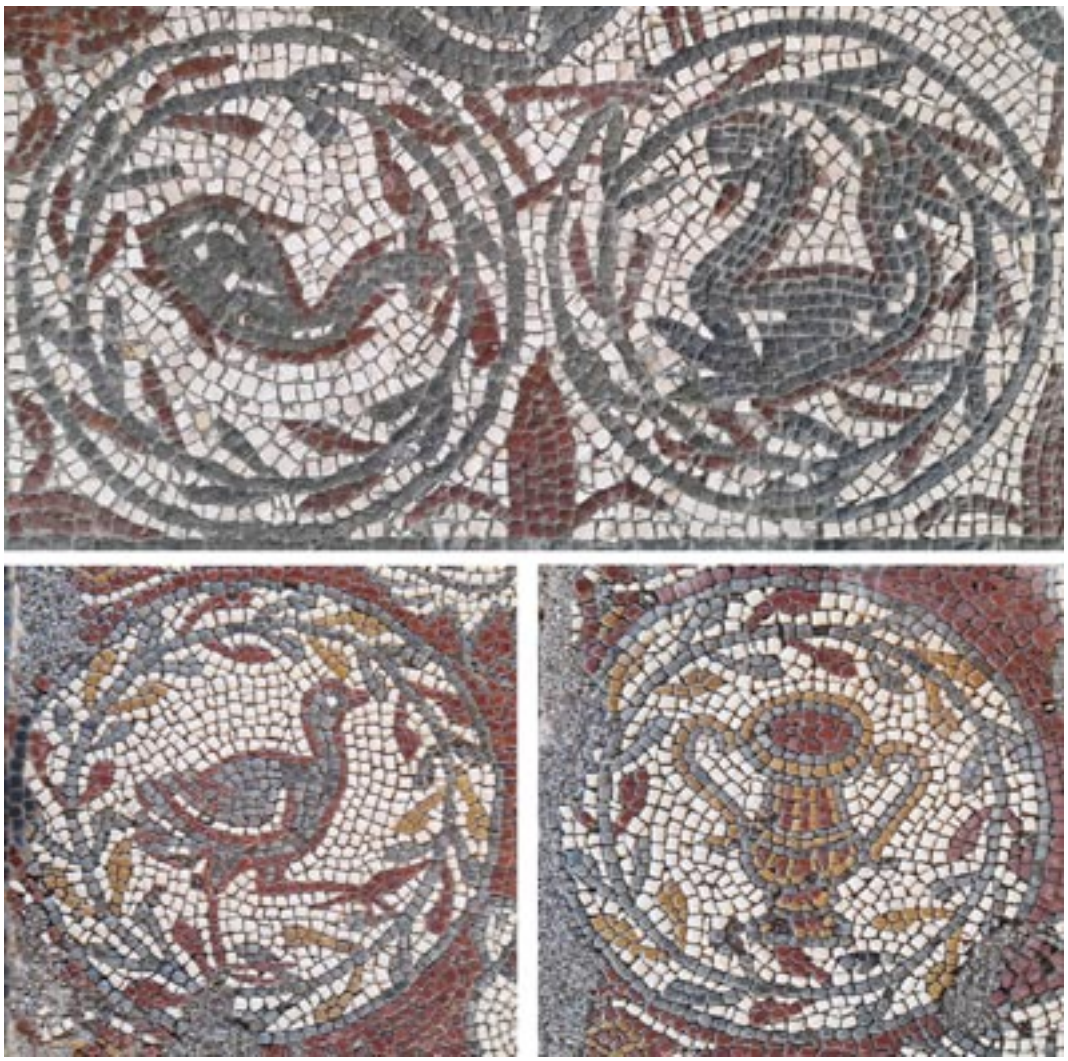

Fig. 14. Conimbriga, House of the fountains, pairs of medallions. 1 – mosaic CMRP I, 3. Dolphins and *kethoi*; 2 – mosaic CMRP I, 10-lower centre: bird; 3 – id., ibid. *cantharos*. Photos: V. H. Correia©Museum of Conimbriga, with permission.

Another duality is present in the dolphin and the *khetos* (in CMRP I, 3; Fig. 14-1): the friendly animal and the monster, both in marine context, and both with ulterior relations to Dionysian mythology. This alludes yet again to the marine triumph of the god. Another revealing element is the presence of birds: destiny, fate, the will of the gods, represented by the omens birds convey, are interspersed with the *agon* that is alluded to.

In this light, the third duality (in CMRP I, 10–lower centre; Fig. 14-2, 3) reveals itself: the bird and the *cantharos*, symbolizing omen and action, fate and *virtus*. This concept is not too distant from the basic idea behind the hunting depictions, but it adds a layer of cultural refinement, of erudition and abstract thought that is of prime interest to understand.

6. WHAT WERE THEY THINKING?

We don't know! But it seems obvious that they thought very highly of themselves.

The mosaics explain, rather than just allude to, the incomparable potency of the *dominus* by virtue of his *virtus*. It is he who – thanks to his various incomparable qualities, no doubt – ensures the order of the world remains. It is he around whom that world exists – as expressed in seasons, daily activities and prized activities, like hunting. It is he – the victorious charioteer (Almeida, 1970; Dunbabin, 1982; López, 1999) – who is able to overcome the *agon* between peril and victory, omen and action, *Fortuna* (or its desertion) and *Honos* (in its perennial presence).

A key to deciphering the meaning of this iconographic program lies in another mosaic, which, as an artistic accomplishment of a different magnitude, allows us to contextualize it: the cosmological mosaic of the *Casa del mitreo* in Mérida (Blanco, 1978: 35-38, nº 17).

This mosaic, apparently the transcription of a wall-painting model onto a pavement position, is an exposition on the extent of the world and the Roman Empire. It is an allegory of Rome, a symbol of the *oekouméné*, in line with the sentiments of Aelius Aristides (*Eis Rômen*). Its main proposition would be that the Roman Empire is an integral part of the created, stable Universe. As the Universe is eternal, so too is the Empire. In fact, the figure of *Aeternitas* would be depicted right at the centre of the mosaic (Quet, 1981).

This is not a public work of art or an imperial commission, though. It is the choice piece of a provincial aristocrat (op. laud.: 193), who searches outside town (which had its own rather competent and sometimes brilliant mosaic workshops) for a work of art of exceptional value and significance. If nothing else, the demonstrated ability to convey extraordinary meaning through the decoration of a pavement should suffice to prove that, as previously suggested, the choices made in the mosaics in the House of the fountains were anything but casual. In fact, these choices were made within the same semantic field, albeit on a smaller scale, as those made in Mérida. *Mundus* and *Dominus,* in Conimbriga, may be seen as the scaled-down equivalent of *Kosmos* and *Imperium,* in Mérida.

It is also no coincidence that the sea plays such a relevant role in both Mérida and Conimbriga, despite neither town being coastal. As the centre of the Empire was in the Mediterranean Sea, the significance of the Ocean would not have been lost on anyone. Thus, it likely played a more significant role than merely serving as a transcendent motif for immortality (cf. Hill, 2006; Mourão, 2008; Reis and Oliveira, 2009).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Marie-Henriette Quet (loc. cit.: 190-192) attributes the essence of this discourse to Stoic philosophy. This point must be remembered, because in Conimbriga there is at least another point of evidence of familiarity with the Stoa, although probably through Cicero: the ROTAS SATOR palindrome (Etienne, 1978), based on the axiom *Sator omnia continet* (*De natura deorum*, II, 86).

Another clue to the intellectual world in which these aristocrats lived is a short poem once inscribed in a lost funerary inscription from the town (*Fouilles de Conimbriga* II, nº 71). The poem has echoes of Virgil and Horace. In the *Aeneid* 1.254, *Sator* is used as synonym for Creator, while in 4.550, the topic of a life without crime is discussed, a theme the poem's author claims for himself. Horace's *Epodon* 11.1-2 expresses modesty in writing, as does the poem, while *Ode* III 2.17, mentions *virtus*. This draws an almost perfect circle around the poem and around the ideological tropes expressed in the mosaics.

This allows us to place the animals in their significant context: domestic or wild, common or exotic, and at the limit, real or mythological. They are a part of the natural, eternal world, where the power of the *dominus* is arguably just as natural and wants to be considered just as eternal. Animals are more than just tools at Man's disposal, without which survival would not be possible. Still, they amount to little more than objects of its actions.

Additionally, action is the essential link between the exercise of *virtus,* in the sense of the Homeric *aretê* (Büchner, 1967: 388 *apud* Pereira, 1984: 400) and Dyonisian *enthousiasmós*. These are both forms of overcoming individual limitations and attaining immortality (Morand, 1994: 265-266), again connected to the stoic philosophy of Panaetius (Pereira op. laud; cf. Grimal, 1975: 306-309).

Animals which lacked familiarity – the prey, the exotic, the numinous – represented for the men that ordered these mosaics the extent of the world where they wanted to impose their personality and their activity; a world which would not be complete without them. They too were objects but, to that extent, they were mirrors of their masters.

ABREVIATIONS

CMRP I = Oleiro 1992
MC = Oliveira 2005

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