Lore of late antique culture in Cilicia: the Syedra mosaics

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ABSTRACT

Two figural floor mosaics, representing the Abduction of Hylas and the Fishing Erotes, have been uncovered in the ancient settlement of Syedra, and at present they are on display in the local museum.

The representations of the mosaic panels demonstrate existence of a social life rich in cultural activities in Cilicia in the course of the third century C.E. Particularly representation of the Abduction of Hylas theme, rarely found depicted on floor mosaics, denotes that the Cilicians' cultural activities were deeply imbued with mythology, literature and arts.

RESUMO

Dois mosaicos figurativos, representando o Sequestro de Hylas e o Pescador Erotes, foram encontrados nas ruínas de Syedra, hoje ambos se encontram disponíveis para visita pública no museu local.

As representações dos painéis destes mosaicos demonstram a existência de uma vida social rica em actividades culturais em Cilicia durante o curso da terceira Era Cristiana. Especialmente a representação do sequestro de Hylas, o que raramente seria representado em um mosaico, denota que as actividades culturais dos Cilician's representam a variedade de interesse deste povo em mitologia, literatura e artes.

Exquisitely illustrated marine scenes, mythological themes and stories narrated in literary sources adorned floor mosaics of the late antique Cilician buildings. These mosaics rival in artistic quality with those of the neighbouring regions. More fine figural mosaics are to be uncovered enriching the Cilician mosaic corpus if systematic excavations at the region continue. The Cilician mosaic corpus already consists of figural compositions, which some are rarely found depicted in the mosaic corpi of the Mediterranean countries. Existence of such rare images denotes a well-established antique culture in Cilicia imbued by myths and narrations. Among numerous mosaics two figural compositions are picked to exemplify the cultured social life of the antique Cilicia. These are the *Fishing Erotes*[1] and the *Abduction of Hylas*[2] mosaics unearthed close to each other at the same site in Western Cilicia.

Archaeologists of Alanya Museum had to rescue a floor mosaic unearthed by an illicit excavation at the ancient city of Syedra in 1994. Looters destroyed one third of the mosaic digging earth deep in search of gold. The mosaic 2.96 by 3.11 m in size used to adorn floor of a shallow pool with a water outlet, which presumably belonged to the baths of the lower city.[3] The archaeologists removed the mosaic from the site, had it conserved, and installed in the museum garden with a decorative wooden shelter over it.

The colorful mosaic composition illustrates two Erotes fishing in a boat surrounded by numerous sea creatures. The composition is framed by bead-and-reel motif in black-and-white. The fishing scene is centrally placed in the composition figuring one Eros rowing the boat while the other stands at the deck holding a fishing angle. Both figures are vested only with a pair of wings spread wide open. Eros figures are rendered in hues of pink, russet, ochre yellow, grey, white, and tawny colors executed with smaller tesserae than of the background of the composition. The tesserae density ranges 180 T/dm^2 to ca. 90 T/dm^2 in fish figures, down to 56 T/dm^{2}at the border motif. A hierarchy in rendition of the composition elements is observed from central scene to outwards. The fishing boat is small having its back curved upwards and front curved inwards in U-shape with its deck jutting out where the fishing Eros stands. The boat is rendered with a broad stroke of a brush in brown outlining its form while the vessel is white and highlighted in yellow, and lighter hues of brown. Various species of fish populate the composition in which a dramatic act of a huge dolphin catching an eel or a murena takes place. The dolphin, with its trifid tail scrolled upward, is illustrated expressively casting furious looks while the eel wriggles to free itself. The scene dominates upper half space of the composition above the Erotes fishing scene, which is to be viewed from the opposite side of the mosaic panel. On the short side of the composition, to the left of the fishing Erotes, is a rocky seascape with two fish swimming to the same direction, upwards facing the dolphin and eel scene. Behind the dolphin a swordfish is swimming to the opposite direction, towards the next short side of the mosaic panel. A similar rocky seascape was most likely repeated at this short side of the composition to achieve symmetry. There is a big lacuna at this part of the mosaic obstructing the image on the right short side.

Although representation of the two Erotes in the boat entices a viewpoint to the beholder, the dolphin catching eel scene invites the viewer to the opposite side. The mosaicist achieved two-points of view dividing the composition horizontally into two oblong spaces. Moreover, on the left short side of the composition figures of two fish, swimming upwards, are to be viewed from the short side. The swordfish placed behind the dolphin invites the viewer to move eyes to the next short side of the composition. Thus, orientation of the sea creatures imposes the viewer to walk around the mosaic panel, and follow the scenes for full appreciation. The artist, illustrating individual scenes each with different orientation, created multiple viewpoints of which the Erotes scene is the focal point. Similar compositional features have been observed in Antioch, as well as, in the North African mosaics besides with the ambiguous rendition of space.[4]

Fishing Erotes figures have been illustrated in two other Cilician mosaics: these are the Tethys mosaics

[1] Karamut, 1995, p. 77-89; Karamut, 1996, p. 49-56; Türkmen, 1999, p. 2.

[2] The floor mosaics have been examined in the *Late Roman and Early Byzantine Floor Mosaics in Cilicia*. The Ph.D dissertation submitted by F. Tülek to the University of IllinoisatUrbana-Champaign, IL, USA in 2004; p. 362-374.

[3] Karamut, 1994, p. 79.

[4] Dunbabin, 1978.

found in Anazarbus and in Iskenderun-Myriandus. In both floor mosaics the Fishing Erotes scenes are employed as auxiliary to the major composition while in Syedra mosaic the Fishing Erotes scene is the focal point of the composition. In these two Cilician mosaics, the Anazarbus and Iskenderun Tethys mosaics, the Erotes scenes in which figures are represented riding dolphins playfully and fishing are placed at both sides as accessory scenes having little or no interaction with the centrally placed deity and the major scene. In the Anazarbus Tethys mosaic, scenes of two Erotes fill the composition symmetrically on both sides in the same orientation with the major figure. In this mosaic the Eros on the right of the composition sits on a rock, fishing, and attired in fisherman's garments and a cap. The Eros, on the left, is figured nude playfully riding a sumptuously illustrated big dolphin. While with his left hand he holds the straps attached to the gill of the dolphin, with his raised right hand he holds a whip slashing the air. In Iskenderun Tethys mosaic, also, two Erotes scenes accompany the major scene. However, each of the Eros figure is oriented to the short sides of the composition similar to the Syedra mosaic. The Eros on the right is figured sailing a wine amphora, while standing on it he holds two edges of the sail. The wine amphora utilized as a mock-up boat, sails in full speed while the wind blows. The Eros on the left rides a dolphin while fishing with a fish rod. The playful Erotes figures oriented to the shorter sides also have no interaction with the central figure, the deity Tethys. These Erotes figures are auxiliary to the major composition. They populate the composition, and their movement enhance expressiveness of the illustration, which is in contrast with the static and remote representation of the deity. The mosaicist of the Iskenderun mosaic achieved polarization of composition and in doing so created multiple viewpoints by placing the figures at different axis, as is the case with the Syedra mosaic. In this respect Iskenderun Tethys mosaic composition bears similar features to the Syedra Fishing Erotes mosaic.

Similarly represented Erotes figures are found in Antioch mosaics, as well as in the Cilician mosaics. In Antioch, in the House of the Boat of Psyches floor mosaic of the pool 5 contains three Erotes, each figured individually allocated at a space for them. These Erotes also fish while riding dolphins playfully. In the same house the Tethys mosaic of Room 6 contains representation of Eros fishing while riding the dolphin.[5] On the other hand, in the Syedra mosaic the fishing Erotes are portrayed in a boat fishing and rowing which echoes the genre scenes of fishermen observed in North African mosaics.[6] The Erotes figures of Syedra are re-enacting the daily life of the Cilician fishermen.

Representation types of Erotes found in Cilicia mosaics are, so far, grouped in two as having been focal point of compositions or auxiliary scenes to the major composition. A third type of Eros scene is found in the Cilician mosaic corpus where Eros figures are placed in a frieze, which encloses major figural panel. In these frieze-type Erotes scenes figures are fully attired or half nude, hunt wild animals. In this case the Erotes figures are not the Cilician fishermen, but they represent the Cilician hunters. A *Hunting Erotes frieze* mosaic is found on display at the Adana Archaeology museum, presumably it is part of the *Punishment of Dirce* mosaic. Another *Hunting Erotes frieze* enclosing a figural composition of a mythological theme is on display at the Alanya museum. The frieze encloses illustration of the *Abduction of Hylas* theme. The *Hunting Erotes frieze* of the *Hylas* mosaic contains a landscaped setting, which is populated with animals and trees. In this sense it differs from that of the Dirce frieze.

As mentioned above, Alanya museum houses a second figural mosaic panel lifted back in 1970s from the lower part of the ancient settlement of Syedra close to the location of the recent mosaic find. An investigation with the help of the museum staff and the landlord of the real estate revealed that the figural mosaic was decorating second floor of a late Roman structure, which presumably was a residence. The Hylas mosaic panel was kept at the depots of the museum for a long time. Finally, it has been conserved and installed into the floor of the Heracles Hall at the Alanya Museum.

The lifted floor mosaic contains a figural composition enclosed by multiple frames. These frames contain border ornaments, which are composed of, from inwards to outwards, an acanthus scroll, an elaborate *Hunting Erotes frieze,* and a guilloche band flanked by black-and-white crow-step motifs.

[5] Levi, 1947, *Pls.* XXXIX.b and XLI.a, c, d.

[6] The examples of genre scenes of fishermen on the mosaics of North Africa are abundant. See Foucher, 1957; Foucher, 1958.

The floor mosaic measures ca. 4.74 by 4.70 m. The figural composition measures 1.60 by 1.70m.[7] Ornaments at the outer frame contain tesserae of lesser density in each dm^2 than the ornaments or the figures of the inner frames. While the guilloche motif of the outer frame contains 50 T/dm^2 the hunting frieze contains 144 T/ dm^2. Density of the tesserae gradually increases inwards. This is a feature observed in figural mythological scenes of the Adana museum mosaics, as well as, in the *Fishing Erotes* mosaic in Syedra.

The major composition bears a scene of a male figure, almost naked, vested only with a billowing cloak, is by a water source with three female figures. His hands are stretched out to both sides struggling against the women who attack and restrain him. The composition illustrates the mythological theme narrating the story of Hylas' abduction.[8] Hylas, a friend of Heracles accompanied him at his journey with *Argonauts*. He was overtaken at a spring by the nymphs during his search for water, while Argonauts were making the food ready at the shore of Propontis in Mysia. The Abduction of Hylas by nymphs is a well-known mythological theme. The scene is easily identified with the representation of the *Abduction of Hylas* as it expressively illustrates the struggle between the nymphs and the hero.

The three nymphs are figured at the back attacking Hylas. The nymphs are depicted facing the viewer. The nymph at the left grabs his head with her left arm stretched far, and appears to be pulling his hair. The nymph at the center firmly holds the right arm of the hero, who has stretched it out to balance himself. The third nymph is at the right of the composition, placed slightly at a lower level than two female figures. Hylas is also depicted frontally, with head slightly turned to his right. The shoulder line of him is oblique to the right of the composition indicating that his left knee is bent on a rock or ground. Eyes of the four figures are directed to the action of the central nymph who grabs him by the arm forcefully. There is an action of imposed force and struggle expressed in the way the figures are depicted.

The nymphs are nude, except for their armbands. Hues of pink and yellow colors are employed in the rendition of the nudity with white highlights. The navels of the female torso are rendered neatly, whereas the bosoms are rather small like those of an adolescent. Their long hair falls in locks over bare shoulders, and the grey crown in spikes completes the headdress. The nymph at the centre is red haired while the one at the left is blonde, and the one on the right has reddish brown hair. They have large outlined eyes in brown, and over red painted full lips a long nose completes the features of the oval faces. Hylas wears a purple draped *chlamys* over his shoulders leaving the raised masculine arm bare. Brown, curly hair frames his large face.

The figures are placed on a white background in a minimal landscape. On the right of the composition is a brown tree trunk with brunches projecting and on the left is a massive rock constituting of the landscape setting. A bird is perched at the tip of the grey branch. It resembles a dove and its attention is drawn to the scene looking down. The lower part of the mosaic panel is entirely destroyed obstructing a full appreciation of the scene and its description.

As for the framing ornaments, an acanthus scroll is rendered on black ground in red, brown, pink, and yellow. Each scroll of acanthus leaves contains a fruit, a flower, or an object pendant from a tendril bifurcating from the leaves. While the fruits are mainly pomegranates and pears the flowers are highly stylized lotuses. The mosaicist freely plays with the choice of the fillers of the scrolls not necessarily being faithful to nature or any sketch at disposal. Otherwise, there is no rationale in depicting a pelta or a poised square pendant in the scrolls. A third unusual filler motif in a floral ornament is a pendant sphere in red, which contains two grey lines resembling an iris of an eye. The next frame of the mosaic is a *Hunting Frieze*, where Erotes are illustrated attacking wild animals with their spears. Each Eros chases a wild animal or fights against a leopard, a boar, or a bear. A dog participates the chase running after a hare.

In terms of the layout of the mosaic and composition arrangement in which a figural representation is framed by an acanthus scroll and a hunting frieze the *Abduction of Hylas* mosaic is similar to the *Punishment of Dirce* mosaic found in Adana.

[7] The mosaic has been installed into the floor covered with steel and glass construction. The tesserae count and examination of the mosaic could be carried out to a limited extent.

[8] Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica* trans. by R. C. Seaton. London. 1912.

The myth of Hylas was popular in Hellenistic and Roman literature. However, its representation in art has been found mostly in Roman art from the early imperial period to the late. In Rough Cilicia the representation of the myth has been found only in one floor mosaic. The Abduction of Hylas mosaic found at the ancient settlement of Syedra is one of the nine portrayals of the theme in floor mosaics. A survey of S. Muth concluded that portrayals of the Hylas themes have been found in residential complexes[9]. The Syedra Hylas mosaic also adorned floor of a residential complex.

A corpus of the representation of the theme has been pursued since the first survey conducted on it in 1895. R. Ling lists thirty-three representations of Hylas in numerous media of art, noting that only five of those representations in painting are confined to the depictions of the abduction of Hylas.[10] In mosaics, representations of the theme of *Hylas* totals up to fifteen panels, including the diverse interpretations of the theme, such as aftermath of the abduction, scenes populated with the figures of Heracles, as well as with other heroes, or the protagonist depicted alone. Confining examination of the theme to the representations of the original story, as Ling did in paintings, Muth listed eight representations of theme in floor mosaics illustrating abduction phase, with which the inclusion of the Syedra Hylas mosaic the list totals up to nine.[11] Muth also noted that all of the Hylas mosaics dates to High, or to Late Imperial periods.

Among the representations of the abduction scene in mosaics the *Abduction of Hylas* unearthed in Volubilis is similar to the Syedra Hylas mosaic in terms of depicting the hero frontally with his right arm raised up in struggle and left knee bent on the ground.[12] Similarly, in the Volubilis Hylas mosaic a nymph is at the back of the hero grabbing his raised arm and the nymph on the right holds his chin restraining him to pull down into water. The Volubilis Hylas mosaic is found in a residential structure, at the House of the Mosaic of Venus, which is dated to the end of the second century or to the beginning of the third century.

On the basis of stylistic features both the *Fishing Erotes* and the *Abduction of Hylas* mosaics have been tentatively dated to the beginning of the third century.[13]

As for the third century late antique cultural life in Cilicia these two floor mosaics of high artistic quality represent a social and artistic life cultivated with late antique culture, which is imbued by myths and narrations. Besides, these mosaics indicate that Cilicia was not isolated from other centers of culture. Moreover, the Cilician Mosaic corpus yielded representations of mythological themes in arts, which are found rarely illustrated in the late antique world, as the *Abduction of Hylas*, denoting that Cilicia was not a cultural backwater at all.

[9] Muth, 1999, p. 109-129

[10] Ling, 1979, p. 775. For a bibliograhy on corpus of the representations of Hylas see Türk, 1895, 74-94; Grünhagen, 1954, p. 53-57; Brommer, 1983, p. 381-392; Oakley, 1990, p. 574-579; Muth, 1999, 109-129.

[11] Oakley enumerates nine representations of the theme in mosaics including one in opus sectile. Out of nine one of the enlisted mosaic by Lancha, found at Seleucia am Pamphylia in Turkey, does not contain representation of Hylas.(Lancha, 1980, 381). The floor mosaic illustrates the theme *Orpheus Taming Animals,* in which the Orpheus is centrally placed flanked by two figures each seated leaning a tree. The two figures are *dryads*, sisters of Eurydice, deceased wife of Orpheus. One of the figures bears her named inscribed ΨΛΗ, which seemingly has been mistaken with the name Hylas. The Seleucia at Pamphylia Orpheus mosaic is on display at the Antalya Archaeology Museum, and the illustration of the mosaic has yet been only published in Tülek, 1998, 50ff, Fig. 25.

[12] The list is given in detail with their bibliography by S. Muth, 1999, 112ff: Cirta-Constantine Hylas mosaic from a Roman house on display at the Museum of Constantine, dated to the second half of the second century to the third century; Cuicul-Djemila Hylas mosaic from the House of Hylas, at the Museum of Djemila, dated to the second half of the fourth century to the early fifth century; Italica, Seville, from the House of Hylas, on display at the local Archaeology Museum, dated to the second half of the second century and to the early third century; Quintana of Marco, León, from the villa of Los Villares, on display at the archaeology museum, dated to the late third century to the fourth century; Caranque-Toledo, from the Villa de Materno, at the Museum of Santa Cruz, dated to the second half of the fourth century to the early fifth century; Vienne, Saint-Romain-en-Gal (St. Colombe), from Roman house on display at the Painting and Sculpture Museum of Grenoble, dated to the second half of the second century to the early third century and the last Hylas mosaic, so far found, representing the abduction scene is from Greece, Amphipolis, Kavalla, found in a Roman villa dating to the second half of the second century to the third century.

[13] Tülek, 2004, p. 374.

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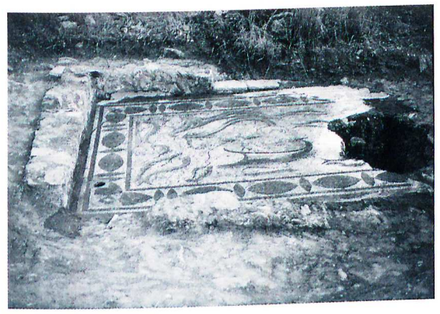
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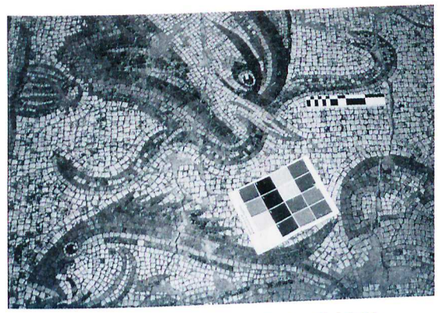
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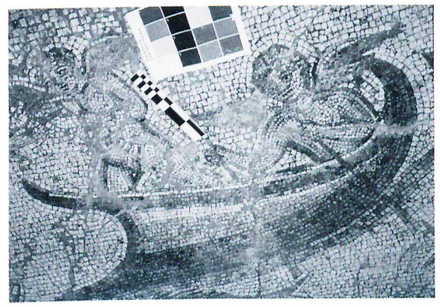
1. The Syedra Fishing Erotes mosaic, *in situ*



2. The Syedra Fishing Erotes mosaic, detail rocky seascape



3. The Syedra Fishing Erotes mosaic, detail dolphin



4. The Syedra Fishing Erotes mosaic, detail boat



5. The Abduction of Hylas mosaic lifted from the ancient settlement of Syedra



6. The Abduction of Hylas mosaic on display at the Alanya Archaeology Museum