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## A MOTIF OF PARROTS IN DIONYSIAN CONTEXTS ON SELECTED EXAMPLES OF HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN MOSAICS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper provides an overview of the mosaics in which parrots are represented as a motive accompanying Dionysian themes. Based on the written and iconographic sources, the author argues that a parrot was an intrinsic element of the visual language conveying ideas of earthly happiness and eternal bliss, as well as the Hellenistic concept of *tryphé*.

**KEYWORDS:** parrot; Dionysos; Nilotic scenes; Roman mosaics; *tryphé*

Parrots are one of the most recurrent motives in Hellenistic and Roman art, yet it has not received much scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> The birds appear in mosaics in various iconographical contexts and they are too abundant to consider all of them in one paper. Therefore, in this essay, I will focus on the depictions of parrots in *emblemata*-type panels or filling compartments which accompany

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<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, there is no monograph devoted to this topic. Individual examples of representation of the parrots in Hellenistic and Roman art in various contexts are discussed in: Keller 1913, 45-49; Toynbee 1973, 247-249; Tammisto 1997, 80-84; Arnott 2007, 293-294; Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones 2018, 268-272.

scenes representing Dionysian themes. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the important role of parrots in the visual language communicating the idea of *tryphé* inherent to the royal philosophies of Hellenistic rulers, as well as visions of *luxuria* characteristic of Roman villas with their prosperous and cultivated surroundings.

As an introduction, I will present the image of the bird as it emerges from Greek and Roman written sources. Before proceeding to the representations of a parrot in Roman art, I will devote one section to a Hellenistic mosaic from Pergamon, which seems to be a paradigm for all the later representations of a parrot and is crucial for understanding the meaning of this bird in Dionisiac contexts. In the following paragraphs, I will examine chosen examples from various parts of the Roman Empire to illustrate the popularity of a parrot in combination with Dionisiac subjects and analyse the more detailed meanings that could have been articulated with a bigger or lesser emphasis in individual cases.

## Parrot in written sources

Judging from written sources, the ancient Greeks and Romans were probably aware of only three or four species of parrots. They all came from India and belonged to the genus *Psittacula*. The most popular ones, described and depicted most often, were the alexandrine parrot (*Psittacula eupatria*) and the rose-ringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) (Arnott 2007, 292; Boehrer 2010, 8, 182).<sup>2</sup> The former is bigger than the latter, but both are characterised by green plumage, a long tail and a strong beak. No distinction between the two is made in written sources and as it is not always possible to determine the exact species in the visual representations (on the “conventionally hybrid and generic” character of the depictions of *psittacus*, see Tammisto 1997, 82), therefore in this paper I will use “parrot” and “parakeet” interchangeably (particularly if it has no bearing on the meaning of the motif).

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<sup>2</sup> Ptolemy (*Geog.* VII.2.23) writes about white parrots living in eastern Bangladesh and west Myanmar and both the Greeks in the times of Alexander (pseudo-Callisthenes, *Life of Alexander* III.18) and the Romans during Nero’s African campaign might have had encountered grey species of parrots in Ethiopia (Plin. *NH* VI.35), but they are never mentioned explicitly in other written sources nor represented in art (Arnott 2007, 292; Boehrer 2015, 3).

The first mention of a parrot in Greek sources comes from Ctesias of Cnidos, who had the opportunity to admire this bird at the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes II (404-358 BC) (Ctes. *Ind.* III.45a = Photius, *Bibl.* 72; see also Bigwood 1993). From his account, it can be deduced that parrots were occasionally brought from India to Persia by merchants or diplomats, but they were still a rarity in this period (there are not many parrots in Achaemenid art either; see Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones 2018, 269-270). In the Greek world, parrots appeared on a large scale only after Alexander the Great had reached India in his conquest of the East (Nearchus 133 F 9 = Arrian, *Ind.* XV.8).<sup>3</sup> Alexander's success was assimilated with the Indian triumph of Dionysos, and Hellenistic rulers liked to allude to both of those triumphs, symbolised by the oriental luxury goods and exotic animals. It is explicit in the description of the grand procession organised in Alexandria by Ptolemy II Philadelphos (283-246 BC), in which parrots – together with other birds of India and Ethiopia – were carried in the cages to be admired as examples of the luxuries obtained through the Ptolemies' connections and control (Callixeinus of Rhodes 627F2 = Ath. 201b, 387d; Rice 1983, 84-86). In Hellenistic times, parrot became a popular pet among the elites (Phil. *Anim.* 13), and it would be so in the Roman world from the time of the Late Republic (see e.g. Varro, *Rust.* III.9.17; Plin. *Ep.* IV.2.3; Ov. *Am.* II.6, *Stat. Silv.* II.4). The association of those birds with high social status seems to be confirmed by Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* IV, 56), who says that parrots appearing in dreams represent “men seeking honours.”

Usually, the first (and emphasised) piece of information about parrots that we get from ancient sources is that the bird comes from India (Ctes. *Ind.* III.45a; Arist. *HA* 597b 27; Plin. *NH* X.58; Petr. *fragm.* 31.1-4; Apul. *Flor.* XII.1; Paus. II.28.1; Ael. *NA* XIII.18, XVI.2; Solin. 191.8; Claud. *In Eutr.* II.330-331; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.23, XIV.3.6).<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning that together with hanuman langurs (*Semnopithecus spp.*) and a guinea fowl (*Numida spp.*), a parrot appears as an attribute of the earliest known personification of India on the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century silver dish from Lampsacus (Agrawala 1965, 194-196). From all those sources, it is evident, that a parrot was one of the symbols of luxury and wonders of the East.

<sup>3</sup> It is curious to note that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the red-breasted parakeet (*Psittacula Alexandri*, Linnaeus 1758) was named in honour of Alexander the Great and it was the first eponym in scientific avian nomenclature (Jobling 2010, 41).

<sup>4</sup> Diod. Sic. II.53.2 mentions parrots living in Syria. Scholars think that either it is an error, or “ringed-neck parakeets (wild or feral) already existed in antiquity around the mouth of the River Euphrates just like today's feral population in this area” (Arnott 2007, 293).

The bird's overall green colour combined with the contrasting red hue of the collar and the beak was so conspicuous that on top of the brief information on those colours in encyclopaedic works (like Plin. *NH* X.58; Apul. *Flor.* XII.1; Solin. 191.8.13; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.24), one can find elaborate poetic descriptions. Ovid compares the hue of the parrot's feathers to emeralds and the beak to saffron (Ovid *Am.* II.6), both emeralds and saffron being exotic and luxurious goods. Statius (*Silv.* II.4.25) calls a parrot "a green ruler of the Eos land" (*viridis regnator Eoae*), thus expressing the associations that must have been quite common: green is a colour of the spring, the growth of plants, the morning freshness, etc. Oppian (*Cynegetica* II.406) compares the green colour of the parrot's feathers explicitly to grass.

All the sources note the parrot's ability to imitate human speech, sometimes with the annotation that it surpasses all the other talking birds in this respect (Ctes. *Ind.* III.45a; Arist. *HA* 597b 27; Plin. *NH* X.58; Plut. *Mor.* 972; Dionys. *De avib.* I.19; Apul. *Flor.* XII.6; Ael. *NA* VI.19, XIII.18; Porph. *Abs.* III.4.4; Solin. 191.8; Olympiodorus *Fragm.* 36; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.24). This exceptional ability is explained by some of the authors with the extraordinary width of the parrot's tongue in comparison to that of other birds (Arist. *HA* 597b 27; Plin. *NH* X.58; Apul. *Flor.* XII.6; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.24).<sup>5</sup> Aristotle and Pliny add that parrots become especially eloquent after drinking wine (Arist. *HA* 597b 27; Plin. *NH* X.58). Ancient sources repeatedly tell us that parrots were taught to say greetings (Phil. *Anim.* 13; Pers. *Prologue*; Ovid *Am.* II.6; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.24) and in particular to hail the rulers (Phil. *Anim.* 13; Mart. *Ep.* XIV.73; AP IX.562; Stat. *Silv.* II.4; Macrob. *Sat.* II.4.30; Isid. *Etym.* XII.7.24). According to Boehrer, the topos of parrots repeating "ave Caesar" may be understood as "a symbolic compensation for the existence of unconquered lands (we don't have India but its birds pay us homage)" (Boehrer 2004, 5). Ancient encyclopaedias and treatises warn that if a parrot is taught to swear, it will endlessly repeat the swearwords and the only remedy will be to cut its tongue off or simply let the bird free in the forest (Plin. *NH* X.58; Apul. *Flor.* XII.8-9). Because of their astonishing skill of articulating words, parrots are often mentioned in discourses on animal intelligence and its limitations, as well as the meaning of *logos* (Phld. I.100, I.114-116; Phil. *Anim.* 13, 98; Plut. *Mor.* 972; Sext. *Emp. Adv. Log.* I.274, II.275; Porph. *Abs.* III.4.4). A parrot and its talents was an attractive topic for thinkers associated with the

<sup>5</sup> Apuleius (*Flor.* XII.6) adds that the most intelligent parrots are the ones which have five toes, which is a mistake, as no parrot has five toes, but is very much in line with the tendency of ancient authors to anthropomorphise parrots; see Boehrer 2004, 7.

second sophistic (Philostr. *VS* I.7.487 mentions “Encomium of a parrot” by Dio Chrys.). Callimachus compares orators to parrots (Callim. *Iamb.* 2, fragm. 192). In addition to the ability to speak, some authors were impressed by the hardness of the parrot’s beak (Plin. *NH* X.58; Solin. 191.8; Dionys. *De avib.* I.19; Apul. *Flor.* XII.2-3; *Cyran.* III.52).

Unlike many other birds, parrots only sporadically appear in a culinary context in written sources (Eubul. *Fragm.* 120.4 [123.4]; Apic. 232). It seems that eating a parrot was considered an extravagance and possibly even an outrage because of the bird’s ability to speak like a human, which is especially apparent in Porphyry’s treatise on vegetarianism (*Abs.* III.4.4; compare with Ael. *NA* XIII.18, who says that “no Indian eats a parrot” because it “gives the most convincing imitation of human speech”). This did not impede emperor Heliogabalus to feed parrots not only to the guests of his notorious banquets but also to the lions that he kept in his palace (SHA, *Heliogabalus* 20.4-6 and 21.2). Some probably believed that the parrot’s meat had healing properties and that the parrot’s beak (being exceptionally hard) repelled all evil when worn as an amulet (*Cyranides* III.52). This may explain the enormous popularity of the bird on engraved gems (e.g., a series of carnelian intaglios from the Snettisham Village hoard in the British Museum, inv. nos. 1986,0401.204- 1986,0401.2015).

To sum it up, a parrot in written sources is explicitly linked with India and its wonders. The description of the Ptolemaic procession in Alexandria suggests that the Indian origin of the bird evoked associations with Dionosos and his Indian triumph, which will be also expressed in art. In addition, a parrot became one of the symbols of what the Greeks called *tryphé* and what defined the royal philosophies of Hellenistic rulers, namely, the rule providing splendour, brilliance and wealth (Ameling 2002, 884; on positive and negative aspects of this phenomenon, see e.g. Gouëssan 2013). In the Roman world, this style of living was expressed by the concepts of *luxuria* and *otium* and was typical for villa culture. The written sources suggest that having a parrot as a pet was one of the indicators of wealth and elite status. It went hand in hand with prosperity and sophisticated pleasures.

### “An archetype parrot” – a Pergamon mosaic in Berlin

The earliest known depiction of a parrot in monumental art of the classical world is a mosaic in the so-called Altar Room of the Palace V in Pergamon, now in the

Pergamon Museum in Berlin (Kawerau and Wiegand 1930, 58-61, figs. XII and XV; Thomas 2021, 178-186, fig. 5.9). It is worth describing it in detail, as it seems to be the key to understanding most of the later depictions of parrots. Rephrasing Goethe, who marvelled at one of the horses from the pediments of Parthenon as an *Urpferd* (“primeval horse”) (*Über Kunst und Altertum* II, 2, 1820, 88-89), we might risk calling the Pergamon masterpiece “an archetype parrot.”

The palace was built under Eumenes II (197-159 BC) and the mosaic is also dated to his reign, or, at the latest, to the times of his successor Attalos II (159-138 BC) (Thomas 2021, 179). This specific room was most likely a chapel dedicated to the cult of ancestors, and as the Attalids derived their lineage from Dionysos, it was probably a statue of this god that stood on a pedestal opposite the entrance (Kutbay 1990, 1). On both sides of the pedestal, mosaics with tragic and comic theatre masks alluded to Dionysos’s role as the patron deity of theatre. The remaining part of the surface of the floor was covered by three rows of mosaics (Pl. 1: 1). Two of them depicted garlands wreathed of ivy (one of explicit Dionysos’ attributes), as well as ears of corn, flowers, and fruits – all associated with the unstoppable growth, the abundance of food, and the joy of life. The row in between the garlands, i.e., in the middle of the room, was divided into three *emblema*-type rectangular panels; the one on the left presented a parrot (Pl. 1: 2). The bird is shown in profile, standing on a rectangular pedestal positioned diagonally to the viewer, which allowed the artist to show off his skills of using linear perspective and thus to create the illusion of depth. The bird’s characteristic contour and colours are captured with extraordinary naturalism. The nuances of multiple shades of green and red can be appreciated the more so that the background is neutral (behind the parrot completely black and below it beige and grey). The tail of the parrot is casting a long shadow on the surface the pedestal stands on, which contributes to the overall illusion of three-dimensionality.

The two other panels are destructed so much it is impossible to tell what they represented, but everything that has been preserved in the decoration of this room – theatrical masks, lush vegetation, and a parrot – clearly points to Dionysos. Besides the religious meaning, the mosaic had a political one too. The Attalids are presented here as the descendants of Dionysos and the heirs of Alexander the Great, as both Dionysos and Alexander reached India, the indigenous land of parrots. When we recall a description of the Ptolemaic procession, this chain of associations becomes even more eloquent, we might even call it “intertextual.” In addition, as Joshua J. Thomas suggests in his book on the

relationship of art and science in the Hellenistic kingdoms, the parrot's ability to mimic human voice "appealed to the royal taste for *paradoxa* and extraordinary natural phenomena," which was an important factor in the development of Hellenistic culture (Thomas 2021, 184).

This triple association which a parrot could evoke would also be present in Roman art. On one level, the parrot was a curiosity, a fascinating creature (as confirmed by the numerous lines devoted to it in scientific and philosophical treatises); on another, it was a symbol of conquests or at least control over exotic lands that provide all kinds of luxuries (which was also repeatedly expressed in written sources); and finally, the bird had a religious meaning as an attribute of Dionysos, the god of wine, vegetation, fertility, rebirth, religious ecstasy, and theatre (as evident in visual sources, even though not articulated explicitly in written ones).

## **Parrots accompanying Dionysian themes in Roman mosaics**

Despite the resistance of the Senate against the cult of Dionysos, which was associated so closely with the Hellenistic rulers, and the official disapproval of Hellenistic *tryphé* in the Republic and early Empire, the spreading of both the Dionysian mysteries and the taste for oriental luxuries was unstoppable. This is reflected, among others, in wall paintings and mosaics decorating Roman houses across the Empire (see e.g. Musiał 2009, 234-237). Dionysian themes became increasingly popular in all fields of art in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Zanker and Ewald 2012, 131) and this is the period to which the examples described below are dated.

One of the simplest ways of organising an iconographic programme centred on the figure of Dionysos consisted of placing the images of the god, his followers (satyrs, maenads, etc.) and attributes (panthers, grapes, kantharoi, etc.) in geometric compartments framed with ornamental borders. In such cases, Dionysos is frequently surrounded by personifications or symbols of the seasons, which highlighted his role as the god of vegetation with its cyclic rebirth (the combination of those two themes was perfectly suited for sarcophagi, see McCann 1978, 97, Zanker and Ewald 2012, 163-165). Sometimes, a parrot is chosen to represent one of the seasons. It can be seen, for example, on the mosaic from a Roman villa in Cologne dating from around 220 AD (in the Römisch-Germanisches Museum; Dunbabin 1999, fig. 83). The surface of the floor is divided into square

and polygonal panels. The central panel displays drunken Dionysos supported by a satyr. The surrounding panels show Sylenos and Pan, satyrs and maenads playing instruments and dancing, Eros on a lion, as well as baskets and vessels full of ripe fruit. As for the borders of the mosaic, not all the panels are preserved well enough to allow the identification of motifs; the surviving ones contain images of two ducks, two pairs of pigeons flanking a kantharos, a pair of purple swamphens (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) and a pair of parakeets harnessed to two-wheeled carts (Pl. 1: 3). The cart pulled by parakeets contains harvest implements, and the purple swamphens are pulling a cart loaded with grapes. Those details allow for the interpretation that, in addition to the general association with Dionysos and his cult, the idea of cyclic renewal of nature is conveyed by allusion to the seasons. The parakeet seems to be a symbol of summer, and the purple swamphen of autumn, while two destroyed panels probably represented birds with attributes corresponding to winter and spring (Toynbee 1973, 281).<sup>6</sup>

A similar combination of Dionysos and seasons can be seen in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup>-century Villa Dionysos in Knossos (Sweetman 2013, 157-164, Pl. 2 and 3). It is interesting to note that a large number of imported wine amphorae were found on the premises of this villa, which makes scholars suppose that the owner may have prospered through the wine trade (Paton 2022, 347-348). The mosaics clearly allude to this affluence. In one of them (in the room N2), a central medallion shows a bust of Dionysos, surrounded by geometric compartments with depictions of four birds and four plants symbolising the four seasons. This time a parrot seems to be paired with grapes and thus symbolises autumn – the Dionysian season *par excellence*, the time of the vintage and wine-pressing. On a mosaic in an adjacent room (N1) in the circle divided into hexagonal compartments, there are busts of the figures from Dionysian *thiasos*: Pan, Sylen, satyrs and maenads. Around the circle, there are depictions of fish lying on a one-legged table, a cock and a partridge facing each other, two doves perched on a bowl, two peacocks flanking a vessel (this part of a mosaic is partially destroyed), and two parrots standing on either side of a kantharos. Fishes and birds (especially domestic fowl and game-birds, like a cock and a partridge) were among the favourite motives in the still-life paintings and mosaics called

<sup>6</sup> The association of harnessed birds with the cyclical renewal of nature was strictly linked to what they were supposed to evoke: the circus races, which were endowed with cosmological, seasonal, and astrological symbolism (as described e.g. in Tert. *Spect.* 9). For other examples of harnessed birds representing circus races, see Toynbee 1973, 280-283. On the iconography of the purple swamphens in circus scenes and other, see Lopes *et al.* 2016: 581-588.



*xenia*. This genre alluded to an old tradition of presenting guests with various foodstuffs (Vitr. *De arch.* VI.7.4.) as a sign of hospitality and generosity. *Xenia* motives in the decoration of a house attested to the wealth and status, they were a display of luxury (Bryson 1990, 52). In addition to this, the repetition of the birds and vessel scheme seems crucial for the interpretation. Such compositions are reminiscences of the famous mosaic by a Pergamene artist, Sosus (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), which showed doves drinking water from a basin, sunning and preening themselves (Plin. *NH* XXXVI.184). Numerous Roman variations of this subject are considered to convey predominantly Aphrodisiac and Dionysian meanings and to create an idyllic atmosphere (Tammisto 1997, 79). It is worth mentioning that parrots are frequently combined with a vessel on Roman mosaics and sometimes they are accompanied by doves (e.g., an *emblema* from Santa Maria Capua Vetere, currently in the Archaeological Museum in Naples inv. no MN 9992, dated to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – see Tammisto 1997, 380-381, fig. DM4.1; an *emblema* in Museo Ostiense inv. no 36584, dated to the Augustan period – see Tammisto 1997, 382-383, fig. DM6.1).<sup>7</sup> Birds and vessel motifs might also refer to a *Lebenskraft* (life force, vitality) concept (Tammisto 1997, 79), which seems to be the case of Knossos mosaic, where apart from the Aphrodisiac doves, Dionysian peacocks and parrots were chosen to be depicted. Finally, birds drinking water from a basin or flanking a kantharos, which was used specifically for drinking wine, might have carried allusions to the refreshment (*refrigerium*) of the souls (the birds-and-vessel motif will be later appropriated with this meaning in Christian art) (Tammisto 1997, 79). It cannot be excluded that along with the basic meaning of the whole iconographic programme of Villa Dionysos in Knossos, which communicated the wealth and prosperity of its owner (most probably achieved thanks to the wine trade, thus to Dionysos himself, as it were), there was also a deeper message of the hope for re-birth and eternal bliss promised by Dionysos to his worshippers. The symbolism of re-birth, which is intrinsically linked to the universal yearly cycle of decay, death, and renewal, is expressed in the Dionysos and seasons mosaic, while the prospect of a happy afterlife in the Dionysos' followers and *xenia* mosaic.

<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to ascertain if this variant has anything to do with the conviction expressed in written sources that doves and parrots are predisposed to live in amity, but it is worth mentioning that there was such a pairing in the most influential natural history treatise and in widely read poetry (Pliny *NH* X.96; Ovid *Am.* II.10-13). Pairing doves and parrots on the mosaics may have been a deliberate choice to strengthen a general association of doves with peace. Such an *emblema* was perfectly suited for the idyllic atmosphere of a countryside villa, whose owner could have bred doves and had a parrot pet, as was common for the elites of this time.

The most sophisticated iconographic programme incorporating both Dionysian themes and parrots can be seen on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century mosaics from a villa at Daphne-Harbiye 23/24 M/N in Antioch (the so-called “House of the Boat of Psyche”). The house takes its name from the most unusual iconographic subject found inside, but in view of the repetitiveness of motifs, it could equally well be called “The House of Parrots and Peacocks.” In one of the rooms, there was a mosaic showing a banquet scene with allegorical figures (currently in the Baltimore Museum of Art, inv. no 1937.127; Stillwell 1938, pl. 40). We can see Oinos (a personification of wine) serving wine to Opora (a personification of fruit) and Agros (a personification of cultivated fields). On the ornamental borders of the central composition, there are panels with depictions of theatrical masks (an allusion to Dionysos), as well as three birds with flowers and fruit: a peacock, a partridge, and a parakeet (Pl. 1: 4). The choice of these birds is quite telling. Peacocks, like parrots deriving from India and thus associated with Dionysos, were one of the images of *tryphé* and signs of elite status (Miller 1989; Arnott 2007, 342-345; Green 2023, 116-118). Partridges were considered to be libidinous and as such had an Aphrodisiac aspect that often went together with a Dionisiac one (Arnott 2007, 254-255; Tammisto 1997, 85-87). The combination of a parakeet, peacock and partridge emphasises the overall Dionisiac atmosphere of the banquet shown in the main compartment. Additionally, the mosaics illustrate the agricultural bounty, as well as the prosperity of the owner of the villa, communicated by personifications of Oinos, Opora and Agros.

In another room of the same villa (currently in the Hatay Archaeological Museum in Antakya, inv. no 843-846; Stillwell 1938, pl. 35, no 48), a central panel with a depiction of Psyche is set together with three smaller panels, two of which show Dionisiac scenes (Pl. 1: 5). One depicts a satyr running with a lion, another Lycurgus, a legendary Thracian king who unsuccessfully tried to ban Dionysos’ cult and was severely punished for it (Hom. *Il.* VI, 130-140; Apollod. III, 5, 1). Whereas the prevalent idea in the banquet mosaic described earlier was earthly well-being, this room seems to refer to the prospect of eternal happiness. The mythological panels are surrounded by geometric fields which contain alternating theatrical masks and birds. The animals chosen to be represented directly under the central scene (Lycurgus entangled in the exuberant grapevine shrub) are a peacock and a parrot, both perched on flowering twigs. Again, the choice of birds is far from accidental. They highlight the unstoppable growth of nature and the triumph of Dionysos, whose cult involved a promise of rebirth and eternal bliss.

Finally, in yet another room of the same villa (currently in the Baltimore Museum of Art, inv. no 1937.126; Stillwell 1938, pl. 33), one can find two more images of a parrot, this time accompanying a large panel with a representation of Tethys and Oceanus (Pl. 1: 6). Mosaics featuring Oceanus are very common in the whole Roman world, although various regions favoured different iconographical schemes (Foucher 1975; Rodríguez López 2011). Compositions in which Tethys accompanies her husband and brother Oceanus are especially popular in Asian provinces (Voute 1972, 653; Eraslan 2015). Represented as a married couple, they personified the powers of nature and its fertility. Underneath this panel, there is a representation of a peacock and two parrots, all three birds perched on leafy twigs. The birds seem to create a link between marine and Dionysian themes, both of which illustrate the forces of life and the abundance of nature.

The last example that I would like to address does not show a Dionysian theme in the main compartment, yet there are clear allusions to this god in the surrounding *emblemata*-like panels. On a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>-century mosaic from Vigna Maccarani on Aventine Hill (currently in the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome, inv. no MNR 171 – see Versluys 2002, 76-77), the central section shows a Nilotic landscape with pygmies fighting hippopotamuses. It is surrounded by eight rectangular panels showing alternating pairs of theatrical masks placed on a rectangular pedestal and swimming ducks and parrots perched on flowering twigs. In one panel, both parrots are seated on twigs covered with leaves and small red flowers; in the other panel, one of the parrots is holding in its claws a lizard and attacking it with its beak (Pl. 1: 7).

Theatrical masks immediately take us to the sphere of Dionysos' agency and it is not an accidental combination. The primary function of the Nilotic landscapes was to connote the idea of fertility, cyclic renewal of nature, agricultural bounty, well-being and affluence – the concepts which were also integrally linked with Dionysos. As Paul G. Meyboom puts it in a comment about the Palestrina mosaic: “This allegorical picture illustrates the Ptolemaic ideology of the *tryphé*. The *tryphé* represents the affluence and bliss which Dionysos and the sovereign have the power to give the country” (Meyboom 1995, 78). Both Nilotic and Dionysian scenes perfectly fit the atmosphere of a Roman elite house, especially the recreational rooms in a country or suburban villa. A telling example of the exchangeability of Dionysian and Nilotic scenes is offered by the triclinium in a Roman residence at Sepphoris in Galilee, where a mosaic representing a Dionysian procession was at some point replaced by a Nilotic landscape (Talgam and Weiss 2004, 48).

Moreover, the Vigna Maccarani mosaic might have had an apotropaic meaning. Pygmies fighting hippopotamuses recall the ancient Egyptian theme of hippopotamus and crocodile hunts, which symbolised the struggle between the forces of cosmic order and chaos (Barrett 2019, 62). In this context, one of the parrots attacking a lizard seems to be a well-considered detail. A motif of birds (associated with the sky and the sun) fighting reptiles (chthonic creatures) was a common symbol of the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and life over death. It is curious to note that the most explicit variant of the bird-reptile combat was a struggle between an eagle and a serpent (Wittkower 1939), however, the Nilotic landscapes had their own variation of this topic, in which herons, cranes, storks, ibises or flamingos were fighting cobras or pythons (e.g., Versluys 2002, cat. no 079, 081, 109, 122; 127; 130). It seems that using the motif of a parrot attacking a lizard instead of a set of animals typical for the egyptianising context, was not accidental. By introducing this detail, an artist added one more element enhancing the composition's general message of praising life.

## Conclusions

Parrots are one of the most persisting motifs of Greco-Roman art. In this paper, I focused on several examples in which the bird is shown in a Dionysian context, represented directly (through the mythological figures and scenes) or indirectly (by the god's attributes such as theatrical masks). All those mosaics convey a similar message. On one level, they speak of earthly happiness associated with agricultural bounty and the cyclic rebirth of nature, good fortune, wealth and prosperity which allows a *tryphé* lifestyle. On another level, at least some of the examples may be understood as an expression of the hope to overcome death and reach eternal happiness. A parrot is a recurring element of such iconographical programmes and an intrinsic component of the visual language expressing the idea of terrestrial and eternal bliss.

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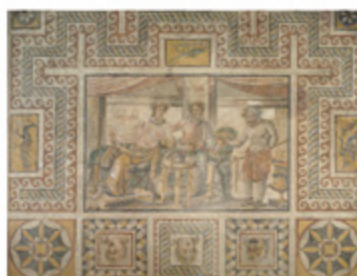
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Pl. 1: 1 – A reconstruction of the floor decoration of the Altar Chamber of Palace V in Pergamon (after Kawerau and Wiegand, fig. XII)

- Pl. 1: 2 – A parrot mosaic from the Altar Chamber of Palace V in Pergamon (source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parrot\\_mosaic\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Parrot_mosaic_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg))
- Pl. 1: 3 – Parrots harnessed to a cart on a Dionysos mosaic from Cologne (source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dionysosmosaik\\_\(Cologne\)\\_-\\_Details#/media/File:Dionysus\\_mosaic\\_\(detail\),\\_from\\_around\\_A.D.\\_220-230,\\_Romisch-Germanisches\\_Museum,\\_Cologne\\_\(8115573645\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dionysosmosaik_(Cologne)_-_Details#/media/File:Dionysus_mosaic_(detail),_from_around_A.D._220-230,_Romisch-Germanisches_Museum,_Cologne_(8115573645).jpg))
- Pl. 1: 4 – A parrot, a peacock and a partridge accompanying the banquet scene in the House of the Boat of Psyche in Antioch (after Molacek and Rogers 2021, fig. 14)
- Pl. 1: 5 – A parrot and a peacock under a Lycurgus panel in the House of the Boat of Psyche in Antioch (source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Boat\\_of\\_psyche\\_mosaic\\_\(Antakya\\_Archaeological\\_Museum\)#/media/File:Hatay\\_Archaeology\\_Museum,\\_Antakya,\\_Turkey\\_\(36061659491\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Boat_of_psyche_mosaic_(Antakya_Archaeological_Museum)#/media/File:Hatay_Archaeology_Museum,_Antakya,_Turkey_(36061659491).jpg))
- Pl. 1: 6 – A peacock and two parrots under the Oceanus and Tethys mosaic in the House of the Boat of Psyche in Antioch (after Molacek and Rogers 2021, fig. 9)
- Pl. 1: 7 – Parrots accompanying the Nilotic landscape on a mosaic from Vigna Maccheroni in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome (source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Ancient\\_Roman\\_mosaics\\_in\\_the\\_Palazzo\\_Massimo\\_alle\\_Terme#/media/File:0\\_'Mosa%C3%AFque\\_aux\\_oiseaux'\\_-\\_Pal\\_Massimo\\_1.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Ancient_Roman_mosaics_in_the_Palazzo_Massimo_alle_Terme#/media/File:0_'Mosa%C3%AFque_aux_oiseaux'_-_Pal_Massimo_1.JPG))