https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-1718_75_5

From Earthly to Divine: the transition of the *asàrotos òikos* motif into late antiquity and Early Christian art

Ehud Fathy
ehud23@yahoo.com
Tel Aviv University
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3503-9303

Artigo submetido a 13-06-2018 e aprovado a 08-11-2019

Abstract

The *asàrotos òikos* or "unswept floor" is a decorative theme found in Roman mosaics. The theme depicts scraps of food along other items, as if scattered across the room's floor. According to Pliny the theme was first created by Sosus in Pergamon. The mosaic Pliny is referring to was never discovered; however, later Roman variations on this theme were discovered in both Italy and Tunisia. This article seeks to examine the changes made to the *asàrotos òikos* motif when it transitions from centre to periphery and from the first to the sixth century CE. This article explores the functions and meanings the theme has held in Roman thought during the first and second century CE, the change in perception and use of the theme during the third century in the provincial Roman towns of North Africa, the influence of the theme on Early Christian art – both in style and iconography, and the new meanings possibly assigned to the theme upon its later use in a Byzantine basilica.

Keywords: Roman art, mosaic, unswept floor, *asàrotos òikos, Sosus, Heraclitus, Aquileia, Santa Costanza,* Sidi-Abiche.

One of the less common themes of Roman mosaics is the *asàrotos òikos* or "unswept floor," depicting refuse from the dinner table and other sweepings, scattered evenly on the room's floor, as if they had been left there. According to Pliny, Sosus, who among the Greeks attained the highest excellence in the art of mosaics, created this theme for a mosaic he

laid in Pergamon. The mosaic was made of small *tesserae* tinted in various shades. Pliny adds that one remarkable detail is a dove, which is drinking and casting the shadow of its head on the water, while others are sunning and preening themselves on the brim of a large drinking vessel. [1]In the account Pliny provides, the relationship between the *asàrotos òikos* and the "drinking doves" mosaics is not entirely clear, whether they were part of the same decorative scheme, found in the same building, or mentioned in sequence only because they were made by the same artist.[2] Sosus presumably created the two mosaics during the second century BCE.[3] The *asàrotos òikos* mosaic Pliny is referring to was never discovered; however, later Roman variations on this theme were discovered in both Italy and Tunisia. This article seeks to examine the changes the *asàrotos òikos* motif underwent when it transitioned from centre to periphery and from the first to the third century CE, and to suggest which new functions and meanings the motif might have gained in Early Christian art.

The Mosaics

The first re-emergence of the theme was in Italy, between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century CE. The overall design of the Italian mosaics suggests that the artists attempted to follow Pliny's literal description as much as possible. The most well-known example of the theme was discovered in Rome in 1833 (fig. 1). It decorated the floor of a *domus* located in *Vigna Lupi* ("wolves' vineyard"), south of the Aventine Hill and in front of the Aurelian wall. The mosaic dates to the beginning of the second century CE, and is signed in Greek by Heraklitos.[4] It measures 4.10 x 4.05 meters, and is housed today in the collections of the Vatican.[5] A mosaic showcasing the theme was also discovered in 1859 in Aquileia, an ancient Roman city at the head of the Adriatic (fig. 2).[6] This mosaic dates to the second half of the first century CE. It too decorated the floor of a *domus*, the location of which was never precisely marked,

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1 Plin. *Nat*. 36.60.25.
2 Parlasca 1963: 276; Herter 1976:127.
3 Dunbabin 1999: 27.
4 ΗΡΑΚΛΙΤΟΣ ΗΡΓΑΣΑΤΟ
5 Werner 1998: 260f; Parlasca 1963: 277; Donderer 1987: 365-377; Ribi 2001: 364.
6 Strabo, *Geographica*, 5.1.8.

Heraklitos, *asàrotos òikos*, second century CE, discovered in a private house in Rome, in front of the Aurelian Walls and south of the Aventine Hill, now in Gregoriano Profano Museum, Vatican, dimensions: 4.10x4.05m. Artwork in public domain; photo by Alex Ripp.

asàrotos òikos, second half of the first century to the beginning of the second century CE, discovered in a private house in Aquileia, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Aquileia, dimensions: 2.33x2.49m. By YukioSanjo, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30863754

but is known to have been situated northwest of the basilica and southeast of the forum. The 2.49 x 2.33 meters mosaic was stored in nine separate panels, until it was reassembled in 1919-22. Today, it is displayed today in Aquileia's Archaeological Museum. Upon discovery, the central *emblema* had already been extracted, leaving only two fragments: the wings of a bird in the upper right corner and the paw of a feline in the lower left corner.[7]

The motif transitions when it crosses the border to the Roman colonies of North Africa. While the Italian examples continue in the spirit of the Hellenistic prototype, the mosaics which were discovered in modern day Tunisia show less desire to follow Pliny's literary description of the original prototype. They date to the third century CE and differ from the Italian examples both stylistically and conceptually: they are smaller, and do not cover the entire perimeter of the room. The earliest one was discovered at "Salonius House" in Uthina (modern day Oudna), and was composed of five or six *emblemata*, which depict scarps of food against a black background and measure 60x70 centimetres each. Only two of the *emblemata* were extracted, and are housed today in the National Museum of Bardo (fig. 3,4).[8] Another variation on the theme was discovered in the "House of the Months" in Thysdrus (modern day El Djem). In between the U and T sections of the decorative programme, a narrow frieze which depicts scraps of food was inserted (fig. 5,6). The mosaic is displayed today in its entirety at the Archaeological Museum of Sousse.

An *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was part of the decorative scheme of a Byzantine basilica's floor in Sidi-Abiche, but was completely destroyed upon extraction. All that remains is a written description and a black and white photograph of a watercolour sketch depicting the entire decorative scheme (fig. 7). [9]According to these sources, the scraps of food were presented against a black background, on a large frieze which separated the image of the nave from the images of the choir area and the two side aisles.

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[7] Perpignani 2012: 20-22, 24, 31-36.

[8] Gauckler 1896: 213-214; Gauckler 1910: 132 n.388.3; Gauckler 1904: 2099 n.5; Parlasca 1963: 280; Foucher 1961: 297 n.4 pl.XVIII; Dunbabin 1978: 17 n.19.

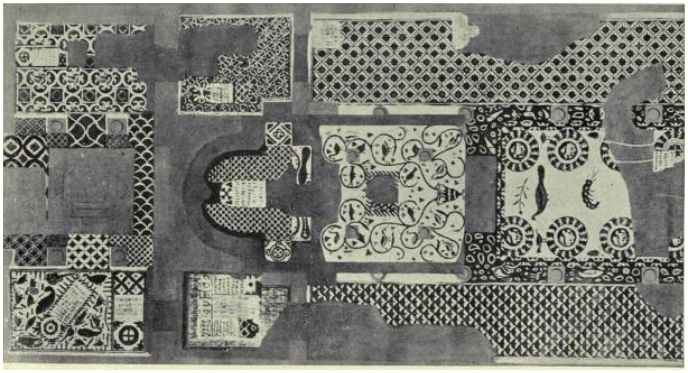
[9] Gauckler, 1910: 84 n.248 A4; Freshfield 1918: 145-146 fig.39; Renard 1956: 310; Blanchard-Lemée 1996: 73-78.

asàrotos òikos emblema, the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD, discovered at "Salonius House" of the third century CE in Oudna (Uthina), now in the Bardo National Museum, Tunis, dimensions: 59.4x71.4x7.6cms. By the J. Paul Getty Museum, https://www.getty.edu/museum/conservation/partnerships/roman_mosaics/index.html

asàrotos òikos emblema, the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD, discovered at "Salonius House" of the third century CE in Oudna (Uthina), now in the Bardo National Museum, Tunis, dimensions: 59.4x71.4x7.6cms. By Pascal Radigue, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3130621

asàrotos òikos, 210-235 CE, discovered at the "House of the Months" in El Djem (Thysdrus), now in Sousse Archaeological Museum, Tunis. By Charo Marco, CC BY-NC-ND 2.5 ES, http://derecoquinaria-sagunt.blogspot.com/2010/12/asaroton-oecon.html

Detail from fig.5.



M. Demont (photo. Rev. Canon Raoul), the decorative floor scheme of the Byzantine basilica excavated in Sidi Abiche, watercolour sketch. Source: Freshfield 1918, 145 fig. 39. [The book was published before 1923, so no copyrights apply].

The Appearance of the Motif in Italy

The re-emergence of the *asàrotos òikos* theme in second century Rome was not coincidental. It can be contributed to a flourishing desire among the Roman elite to adopt certain elements from Greek tradition and to revive the glorious cultural past of Hellenic times in their domestic spheres. This period, also known as the "Second Sophistic," was characterised by an overall change in Roman attitude towards Greek culture. Greek intellectuals were now allowed to resume their activities, travel outside of Greece, work in education, and gain social esteem, as a new appreciation of Hellenistic culture began to flourish.[10] The Roman variations on the *asàrotos òikos* theme could be seen as part of the endeavour to re-establish Hellenistic culture in Rome. The Roman *domus* were covered with vast amounts of decoration. The artistic décor did not only represent the Greek cultural heritage, but also concocted fantasies about a lavish, often princely lifestyle, luxurious banqueting and refined tastes. [11]

Roman elite's appropriation of Greek culture was done in a conscious effort to use art and culture as social signifiers. In a fashion similar to Hellenistic times, art was once again viewed as a pedagogic instrument, as a tool for learning and self-improvement, and as a cultural distinction between those who received the proper education and those who did not. This process was prompted by the increasing social mobility of the time, which had blurred the boundaries between the different classes. The Roman higher class wished to maintain a feeling of superiority over the freedmen, who were once their subordinates but were now rapidly increasing in wealth and political power. As part of the endeavour to reconstruct some form of social hierarchy, a high artistic culture was developed, in which art was integrated with the rhetorical practices that were a key component in the pedagogy of elitist education.[12] Thus, consuming art in a rational and sophisticated manner became the benchmark of good breeding. [13]In the spirit of the time, the elitist patrons who commissioned the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics sought to present themselves as erudite individuals, persons of

[10] Anderson 1993: 1-2.
[11] Zanker 2010: 27.
[12] Tanner 2006: 246, 274-275.
[13] Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, 13, 17.1.

sophisticated tastes, who could appreciate the many references and irony embedded in the theme.

In this elitist mode of viewing, artworks were not meant to be understood as merely depicting deities, heroes, myths or historical events. Instead, they were to be considered for their greater symbolic value. The topics depicted were designed to lend themselves to a rhetorical discourse. The discussion was not only regarding each individual image, but also concerning the relationships between the images, and the programmatic theme which arose from their collocation. It is probable to assume that the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics were part of a sophisticated iconographical programme, which decorated the private dwellings of Rome's upper class, and were meant, among other things, to simulate a learned discourse during the luxurious banquets which took place in the same rooms. For example, the Vatican mosaic (fig. 1) depicts, side by side, many different themes: scraps of food, theatre masks and instruments associated with the Dionysian mystery, Isis, Osiris, the flooding of the Nile, and the river's animals and vegetation. Several discourses could have been prompted by this mosaic, such as: the luxurious dining practices of the ancient Greeks, the mosaics Sosus created in Pergamon as described by Pliny, Zeuxis and Parrhasius' painting competition, or other literary accounts which discuss the tension between reality and artistic depiction (for example, Plato's dismissal of imitative art as forgery and falsehood, or Vitruvius' stance on the issue).[14] Depending on the guests' inclinations, the discourse could have also touched on topics such as: the traditional Roman rituals of the dead, or the ways of the Dionysian Mystery and the worship of Isis and Osiris in their Romanised form.[15]

The Appearance of the Motif in North Africa

In the two mosaics discovered in the provincial towns of North Africa, the *asàrotos òikos* motif functions in a different manner. The earlier mosaic was discovered in "Salonius House" (fig. 3,4). According to Paul Gaukler, who excavated the site, the floor was paved with a new marble mosaic with the following layout: at the periphery, a broad vine band and an olive

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[14] Plato, *De republica*, 10.601a-603b; Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 7.5.3-4; Clarke 1991: 49-50.

[15] Plutarch, *De Iside et de Osiride*, 351c-384c; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.24-30.

serrated line; in the centre, on a white background, a reddish-brown Greek frame surrounds nine *emblemata* which are arranged in a staggered pattern ("quinconce"). Gaukler adds that the three medallions of the middle row are "in ordinary mosaic" and represent birds in coarse inlay. The other six medallions are extremely delicate; the *tesserae* are assembled on square tiles, with an apparent rim forming a frame.[16] The middle one represents a pheasant frolicking ("ébattant") on copper pots; while the others represent the *asàrotos òikos* motif, executed with an extraordinary attention to detail ("minutie"), and therefore seem to be of Italian manufacture (fig. 8).[17] Most of the *emblemata* were destroyed, and those that remain are severely damaged. Upon discovery, the mosaic was dated to the third or fourth century CE, based on coins of Maximian and Constantine which

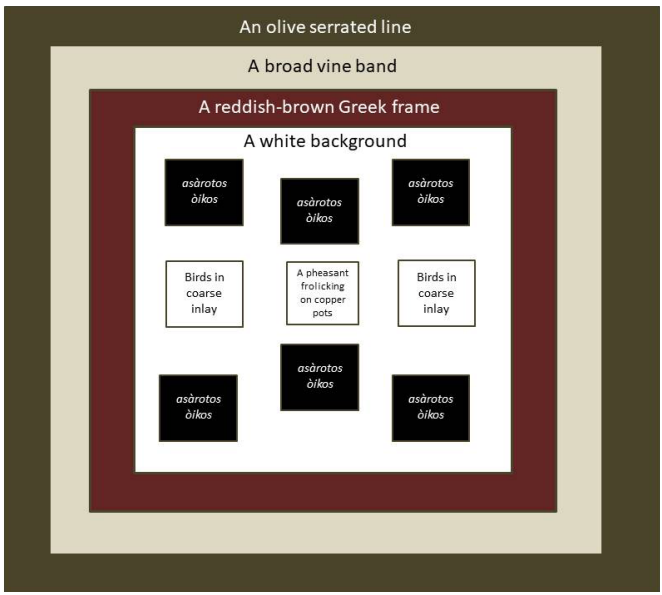

Illustration of the overall decorative scheme contacting the *asàrotos òikos emblemata* which was discovered in Salonius House in Oudna (based on the literary descriptions). Illustration by author.

[16] Gauckler 1896: 213.
[17] Ibid., 214.

were found in the ground underneath the mosaic.[18] However, the quality of the inlay work and the use of *opus vermiculatum* ("worm-like work") indicate that the *emblemata* were made during the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE.[19] Set on terracotta bases,[20] they were likely imported already made from workshops in Southern Italy.[21] They were repurposed in the decoration of a North African *domus* at the end of the third century CE, and were combined with other "still life" motifs in a later setting. The quality of the new parts is far inferior by comparison, as they lack the precision and refinement found in the *asàrotos òikos emblemata*.[22]

The scraps of food are depicted against a black background. Floor mosaics were usually set against a light background due to their functional use.[23] A black background promotes the cancellation and disappearance of the floor's surface.[24] The colourful scraps of food stand out more distinctly against it. They become autonomous objects, freed from the floor's surface. While this highlights the illusionism of the depiction, realism is being compromised, as the scraps of food seem to be floating against a void. Especially at night, when the room was lit by candles and lamps, the black background made the spatial perception more difficult, and might have even raised fear of stepping on the floor. In the third style of decoration, large wall panels were sometimes painted black, on which fantastic architecture composed of hybrid creatures and miniature "still life" artefacts was painted. Sometimes Egyptian panels were also included, as well as Dionysian themes.[25] In Vitruvius' mind, while optical illusionism (which is typical to the second style) shows good taste and sophistication, fantastic imagery represents a deviation from it, because it depicts things which cannot exist in reality.[26] One well known example of such decoration is the Imperial Villa at Boscotrecase.[27] The depiction of fantastic imagery

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18 Ibid; Deonna 1961: 119.
19 Salomonson 1964: 47; Dunbabin 1978: 17 n.19.
20 Salomonson 1964: 46.
21 Dunbabin 1978: 17.
22 Deonna 1996: 78.
23 Bustamante 2009: 104.
24 Molholt 2008: 84-85.
25 Clarke 1991: 52-53, 65.
26 Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, 7.5.3-4; Clarke 1991: 49-50.
27 https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bsco/hd_bsco.htm, 23.03.2016.

against a black background can also be found in the fourth style. For example, in the House of the Vettii, little cupids are depicted performing daily activities against a black background. [28]Although the *asàrotos òikos emblemata* are dated to a slightly later period, it is possible that they were influenced by this style of decoration. If so, then according to Vitruvius himself, their purpose was not to copy the material world in a realistic way, but to capture the viewer in a world of fantasy.

The use of black background could also be understood as symbolic; in Greek and Roman literature the spirits of the dead are many times referred to as black. [29]Cassius Dio tells of the emperor Domitianus who invited the noble senators and equestrians to a room which was completely painted black, and sat them on black sofas next to tombstones which carried their names. Black painted slaves entered the room and circled the guests in a terrifying dance. Offerings to the spirits of the dead were then presented, all black, and placed in black utensils. The guests shivered in fear and remained dead silent, as if they were already in the netherworld. [30]The Roman emperor used black for dramatic effect because of the association of shadow and darkness with death, the netherworld and the spirits of the deceased. The choice of a black background in the *asàrotos òikos emblemata* might have served a similar purpose in raising awe-inspiring thoughts about the world of the dead. In that respect, the black background fits G.W. Elderkin's theory that the scraps of food act as permanent offerings to the spirits of the dead, which according to Roman tradition reside under the floors of the house.[31]

While the size and scheme of the Italian mosaics make it probable to assume that they decorated a *triclinium* floor, in North Africa, during the third century CE, floors of many large rooms (*oeci*) were decorated with mosaics depicting foodstuffs. These depictions were perceived as independent images within the overall decorative scheme due to their framing in panels.[32] In accordance with the fashions of the time, the *asàrotos òikos emblemata* were newly set as "fillers" in a larger decorative scheme. The stylistic alteration also affected the symbolic meaning. In the

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[28] Clarke 2003: 98-101.
[29] Dunbabin 1986: 195 n.43.
[30] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 67.9.
[31] Elderkin 1937: 74-75.
[32] Squire 2009: 371-372.

Italian examples, the scraps of food circle the room, simulating the look of the floor following a luxurious banquet, and therefore could have been part of the visual representation of the *carpe diem* theme. This theme, which was associated with banqueting in Roman literature and poetry as well as appearing in the rituals of the banquet itself, urged the banquet's participants to enjoy the food, wine, luxury and general hedonistic atmosphere of the event while they still lasted.[33] During the Roman banquet, skeleton statuettes were passed around the dinner guests, as attested in *Satyricon*.[34] Some *triclinium* mosaics depict skeletons, either as a servant carrying wine jugs (fig. 9) or as a reclining guest (fig. 10). A table top mosaic, which was discovered in a summer *triclinium* in Pompeii, features a skull hanging from a mason's level and resting on a wheel, which can be interpreted as the wheel of fortune (fig. 11). Between the skull and the wheel rests a butterfly, which could symbolise the soul. On the left end of the mason's level the garments of a rich person are hanging, while on the right end hangs the clothes of a beggar, indicating that in death everyone is equal.[35] Allusions to the *carpe diem* theme can also be found on silver cups which depict animated skeletons revelling in a banquet alongside *carpe diem* themed inscriptions, The most famous example of which are silver goblets 7 and 8 from the treasure of Boscoreale, which date to the first century CE (fig. 12). While the Italian mosaics' portrayal of the aftermath of a luxurious banquet could also be seen as a visual representation of the *carpe diem* theme, in Oudna the *asàrotos òikos* motif was broken down into five separate panels and combined with other decorative elements. The motif therefore lacks a degree of power in promoting unbridled hedonism or in drawing the viewer into a world of scholarly discourse. It would appear then that the food scraps were re-categorised as high quality fillers, and were appreciated mainly due to their decorative attributes.

A second North African mosaic was discovered in the "House of the Months" in El Djem (fig. 5,6). The U and T shaped decorative scheme is

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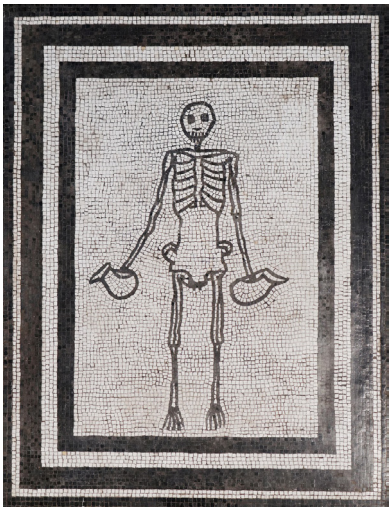
[33] Horatius, *Carmina*, 1.4, 11; 1.11; 2.3 ,14; Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 3.912-915; Martialis, *Epigrammata*, 2.59, 5.64; *Appendix Vergiliana*, Copa 38.

[34] Petronius, *Satyricon*, 34.

[35] The *omnia mors aequat* ("death levels all") theme may also be derived from Roman literature: Horatius, *Carmina*, 2.3, 21-28; Lucianus, *Dialogi mortuorum*, 25; Lucianus, *Necyomantia*, 15.



Skeleton carrying wine jugs, floor mosaic, first half of the first century CE, discovered in The House of the Vestal Virgins, Pompeii, now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. By Naples National Archaeological Museum [Public domain] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carpe_Diem_MAN_Napoli_Inv9978.jpg

Reclining skeleton with a Greek inscription that reads "know thyself," floor mosaic, first half of the second century CE, discovered in a tomb on Via Appia, now in Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome, inventory number 1025. The artist is unknown. [Public domain] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman-mosaic-know-thyself.jpg

omnia mors aequat (“death levels all”), mosaic decorating the top of a summer *triclinium* table, discovered in Pompeii, first century CE, now in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, 47x41cms. By Naples National Archaeological Museum [Public domain] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MANNapoli_109982_roue_de_la_fortune_memento_mori.jpg

Silver goblet with convivial skeletons in relief, from the treasure of Boscoreale, first century CE, now in the Louvre, Paris, height 10.40cms. The artist is unknown. [Public domain]

typical to rooms designated as *triclinium*. [36]The U-shaped area, on which the *klini* couches stood, is decorated with a geometric design in the shape of diamonds, each containing a stylised rosette. The T-shaped area, where the food was served and the entertainers performed, is decorated with *xenia* images in cushion-shaped setting, which might have represented the changing of the seasons. [37]In between these two parts, a narrow strip of food scraps was inserted. The mosaic was created around 210-235 CE, at least one hundred years after the rest.[38] The chronological difference is also reflected in the quality of the inlay work, which is significantly cruder, and makes it difficult to identify which foodstuffs are being depicted.

The El Djem mosaic is the only example in which the location of the *asàrotos òikos* frieze corresponds with the actual space in which scraps of food might have naturally fallen. But even in this example the representation is not entirely realistic: the arrangement of the food scraps continues the tradition of placing them in regular intervals, separated from one another, while in reality the food remains which were thrown on the floor must have accumulated in small piles. Moreover, the scraps of food are depicted against a pristine white background, that too is unrealistic, and contradictory Roman literary accounts which describe the floor during the banquet as mudded with puddles of spilt wine.[39] In order to protect the mosaics, before the banquet began the floor was covered with sawdust, on which fragrant red flowers were scattered. [40]In Satyricon the floor is covered with powder made from a precious stone.[41] Some frescoes and mosaics echo these practices, such as a fresco nicknamed *End of the Banquet* from room 15 of Casa di Bacco in Pompeii (fig. 13) or a mosaic depicting half roses which decorated the *oecus* floor of a different El Djem *domus*.[42] The *asàrotos òikos* mosaic however, does not include any references to sawdust, spilt wine or fragrant red flowers, and therefore cannot be considered a realistic depiction of the *triclinium* floor during or after the banquet.

[36] Carucci 2007: 38-39.
[37] Dunbabin 1978: 260 n.e.
[38] Foucher 1961: 50 ff; Carucci 2007: 38-39.
[39] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8.3.66; Lucianus, *Nigrinus*, 31-32.
[40] Dunbabin 1978: 125 n.58.
[41] Petronius, *Satyricon*, LXVIII.
[42] *Inv. Tun.* 71, b, and plate cf. Dunbabin 1978: 125 n.58.

End of the Banquet, fresco, 45-79 CE, discovered in Casa di Bacco ("House of the Triclinium"), Pompeii, west wall of room 15 (*triclinium*), now in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, inventory number 120029. Naples National Archaeological Museum [Public domain] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_family_feast_painting_Naples.jpg

Some have argued that the common appearance of classical motifs in provincial art reveals the conservative tastes of a pagan aristocracy, holding out against the spread of Christianity.[43] But in the case of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics such explanation is not necessary, as the theme belonged to the environment of cultivated leisure, which prosperous and educated Romans sought to construct in their domestic spheres.[44] The North African patrons who commissioned these mosaics strove to distinguish themselves from their provincial surroundings. By importing the motif they sought to create a direct connection between themselves and the cultivated Roman elite, and to bridge the gap between the periphery of the empire and its centre.

[43] Stewart 2008: 17 n.75.
[44] Ibid., 170-173.

It seems that in the transmission of the *asàrotos òikos* theme from Italy to North Africa, it had been simplified. The decorative plans of the third century CE did not preserve the original range of meanings which could be found in Italian examples. They might have been influenced by local traditions and their conventions, or perhaps it was an unskilled or ill-informed effort to imitate classical imagery.[45] The theme had been reduced to a decorative motif, part of an extensive lexicon of imagery, considered in Roman tradition a suitable setting for luxurious dinning. In both of the Tunisian examples, the *asàrotos òikos* motif was integrated with *xenia* imagery. The popularity of *xenia* and Dionysian motifs in the villas of North Africa indicates that by the third century CE such themes had become commonplace decoration, and have lost a lot of their original context and symbolic meaning. They were now generally associated with the changing of the seasons and the abundance of the land. The same can be said regarding the *asàrotos òikos* motif: in the El Djem mosaic the inclusion of the motif does not evidently contribute to any coherent programmatic meaning. The thin strap of foodstuffs was probably included mainly for the amusement of the guests, rather than to stimulate a learned discourse; and in Oudna the reuse of the *asàrotos òikos emblemata* was probably due to the high quality of their inlay work.

While the motif had lost a lot of its original symbolic value, it could be argued that it gained a new referential meaning. Both in Italy and in North Africa the motif represented a nostalgic yearning for a previous age of enlightenment and prosperity, and a conscious effort to use art as a social signifier. But while the re-emergence of the motif in Italy was part of the appropriation of Greek high culture, the appearance of the motif in Tunisia alludes to a glorious *Roman* past. The "golden age" for which they were now yearning, was the refined elitist culture of Rome during the first centuries CE. Artistic trends did generally move from centre to periphery, but on some occasions it was the art of the provinces that influenced Italy. Trends also moved between the provinces themselves. The pluralism of Roman art is evident not only in border regions, but also in its centre, where different social groups had different tastes and used art in different ways.[46] However, it can be said that this reuse of motif was part of a broader attempt found in North Africa to create a cultural connection to

[45] Stewart 2008: 162.

[46] Ibid., 160-161, 170, 175-176.

the Italian centre, and to the glorious Roman past. For this purpose elitist models of art were being employed by a ruling class which was striving to define and distinguish itself. This effort demonstrates a conscious attempt at self-historization. This cultural transmission across geographical borders inevitably changed the original meaning, and the end result was the creation of something new.

The Appearance of the Motif in Early Christian Art

Like many other Roman motifs, the *asàrotos òikos* was adopted by Christianity, which might have bestowed upon it a different meaning. The motif was included in the decorative scheme of a Byzantine basilica excavated in Sidi Abiche, which also included several bishops' floor tombs. In between the nave and the side aisles, a U-shaped frieze depicting scraps of food was inserted (fig. 7).[47] The excavation of the basilica was headed by the church, and therefore the goal was to uncover as many holy relics as possible, rather than to investigate the past. For that reason the publication of the finds focuses mainly on the epitaphs and other Christian findings. The discovery of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic is very briefly mentioned. Moreover, the *asàrotos òikos* frieze was completely destroyed upon the extraction of the epitaphs and some of the nave mosaics, which were transformed to the Enfidha Museum. All which remains is the literary account provided by Gauckler, who describes the frieze as a "sloppy later replica of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic laid by Sosus in Pergamon."[48] Gauckler also mentions a watercolour sketch of the decorative programme of the floor. [49]This too did not survive, but is documented by a black and white photo, the quality of which does not allow much further discussion. [50]All that can be learned from the photo is the location of the frieze, which cut the nave into two parts and separated it from the aisles. The U-shape frieze circles a mosaic that is composed of a central image which depicts two animals (a peacock and a giant shrimp?) and a branch with something round (a flower or a fruit?) at the end of it against a light background. On each side of this central image four rosettes are depicted, each one contacting

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47 Renard 1956:310; Blanchard-Lemée 1996: 73-78.

48 Gauckler 1910: 84 n.248 A4.

49 Ibid., 85.

50 Freshfield 1913-18: 145-146 fig.39.

a lamb and branches which resemble the one in the centre. On top of two of these rosettes unrecognisable birds perch. The image on the other half of the nave is that of a *kantharos* from which a stylish vine grows. Inside its curling branches, which bear vine leaves and grape clusters, various birds are depicted. In the upper part of the *kantharos* mosaic, on the site where the altar table must have stood, the epitaph of priest Felicissimus is inserted. The church at Sidi Abiche was probably constructed during the sixth century CE, or even slightly later than that.[51] At the time, the practice of reusing architectural elements of earlier structures, such as columns and mosaics, was widespread throughout the empire. It is possible that, much like the Oudna *emblemata*, in this case also the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic was not created in the same period as the building in which it was discovered. Since the frieze did not survive, it cannot be determined with certainty that it was not created in the sixth century. However, the appearance of the *asàrotos òikos* motif in a Christian basilica, together with bishops' tombs and alongside an image which is reminiscent of Sosus' "drinking doves" mosaic (which in Christianity symbolises the "thirsty souls"), may indicate that the *asàrotos òikos* motif was also given a new Christian reference.[52]

The reuse of the motif could be associated with the new attitudes towards wealth and religious giving, which emerged from the preaching of Augustine in Hippo at the beginning of the fifth century CE. Augustine claimed that wealth was not to be thrown away in headlong renunciation, but to be transferred to the churches.[53] The banquet, which provided the upper class with a celebratory assertion of their abundance, was now perceived in the context of the divine.[54] According to the new perception, since wealth is bestowed upon man by God, part of the treasure should be sent up and stored in heaven, and that can be achieved by using wealth for God's purposes, such as the feeding of the poor and the endowment of his churches.[55] The inclusion of the *asàrotos òikos* motif, which was associated with luxurious elitist banqueting, in a North African church may

[51] Duval 1972: 118.

[52] Renard 1956: 314.

[53] Augustine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 60.3-8; Augustine, *Letters*, 130, 157; Brown 2014: xx, 192-193, 326-329.

[54] Brown 2014: 197-198, 234.

[55] Augustine, *Sermon on the Mount*, 56.9; Brown 2014: 239.

represent this shift in focus, from the accumulation of worldly wealth to an investment in the kingdom of heaven.

While the basilica in Sidi Abiche was constructed around the sixth century or later, the *asàrotos òikos* motif already resonates in the Roman-Christian art of the fourth century CE, which was often characterised by the synchronism of pagan iconography and Christian belief. [56]In the fourth century, the ways of viewing art had changed so dramatically that images taken from pagan iconography, which some believers could have perceived as anti-Christian, were "baptised" into Christianity and acquired a new meaning that made them acceptable. [57]In practice, for fourth-century viewers there was no clear distinction between pagan and Christian motifs.[58] As part of this renewed use of pagan themes, it is possible that an attempt was made to incorporate the *asàrotos òikos* theme into the Christian world of images. The scraps of food, which symbolised luxury and leisure, but also annihilation and destruction, no longer appeared. Instead, they had been replaced by images that hint at an idyllic eternal world. Yet, many of the stylistic elements of theme are still visible, such as: the seemingly random, yet orderly and harmonious arrangement of the objects, and the depiction of the objects in bright colours and illusionistic three-dimensionality against a monochrome (usually white), flat and even background. The change in iconography might have been the result of the dramatic change in the context of viewing art, from viewing art in an erudite manner, which contributed to the banquet's cultural atmosphere by stimulating a learned discourse, to viewing art in the context of the spiritual experience, which took place in and outside the church.

One of the modes of viewing art which Early Christianity adopted was that of mystic viewing. It is predicated upon the assumption that in the mystic experience the dualism of subject and object can be transcended into a unity that is neither subject nor object and yet is simultaneously both. [59]The most comprehensive and influential formulation of the mystical model is the *Enneads* of Plotinus (third century CE), in which he suggests that the mystical vision is a union of self and other beyond the dual: "The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with

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[56] Elsner 1995: 190-191.
[57] Ibid., 255-256.
[58] Ibid., 258.
[59] Ibid., 1995: 90 n.2.

the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it." [60]This union, which Plotinus calls "a thought transcending thought" (*hypernoesis*) [61]is beyond language and beyond knowing. [62]It is a state in which there is no distinction, no movement, no emotion or desire, no reason or thought, a state without the self, a state of quiet solitude, a stillness of the being, which is no longer busy with itself, but is altogether at rest. [63]According to Plotinus, the statues which are located in the outer shrine are "secondary objects of contemplation" (*deutera theamata*) while inside the sanctuary the viewer might experience "a different way of seeing things" (*ou theama alla allos tropos tou idein*).[64] The movement into the shrine is also a movement into the self (*to endom theama*). Simultaneously it is a movement out of self, as the self surrenders, presses towards, and unites with the Supreme. Although in late antiquity there may have been fundamental theological differences between Christianity and paganism, this Christian appropriation of a metaphor about the subjective effects of religious action shows a deep continuity in the *experience* of personal piety.[65] The importance of Plotinus arises from the combination he made between the religious context of pilgrimage and ritual contemplation of sacred images, with a philosophical discourse of contemplation which goes back to Plato. [66]

When Paulinus (354-431 CE) describes the Christian wall paintings of the new basilica in Nola, Italy, he defines the ways in which Christian art is perceived in terms of nutrition: the images nourish the soul of the spectator. Those who were used to pagan cults, in which their belly was their God, are now converted into proselytes for Christ, while they admire the images of the saints. Although Paulinus would have preferred a sober community, he forgives the "illiterate peasants," whose minds he describes as "rude," for continuing the pagan traditions of feasting and pouring wine over the graves of the saints. Paulinus hopes that the sacred paintings will influence the spirit of the peasants, and that while beholding the colourful scenes, which are explained by inscriptions over them, their thoughts will

[60] Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.9.10.
[61] Ibid., 6.8.16.32
[62] Ibid., 6.9.4.4.
[63] Ibid., 6.9.3.11.
[64] Ibid., 6.9.11.18 ff.
[65] Elsner 1995: 92.
[66] Ibid., 93.

turn more slowly to eating, as they "saturate themselves with a fast that is pleasing to the eyes." While the paintings artfully divert their thoughts from their hunger, a better habit might take root in them. Paulinus further argues that when one views the narrative images of saints, the virtue induced by their pious examples steals upon one's heart, and then the thirst for drinking wine is being quenched. According to him, while the peasants pass the day by looking at the frescoes, they fill their beakers less frequently, and since they spent most of their free time with the images of the saints, they have only a few hours to devote to the meal.[67] This passage may explain, at least to some degree, the absence of the *asàrotos òikos* theme from Early Christian art (except for the basilica in Sidi Abiche). The scraps of food, which symbolise the luxurious pagan banquets, characterised by drunkenness and excessive eating, are being replaced by the holy images of virtues. Under the mystic mood of vision this shift can be perceived as earthly food being replaced by divine nourishment. It seems that when Christianity appropriated the *asàrotos òikos* theme, it detached it from the aspects of gluttony, drunkenness and elitism, and exchanged them with images that are intended to nourish the eyes and the soul, and not the stomach and the body. The discourse of the erudite Roman elite, which took place in front of images that employed the tactic of disguised symbolism (such as the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics), was replaced by a different kind of discourse, in which the viewers explain the sacred images to one another and discuss the religious ethics learned from them. The influence of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics on the Christian world of imagery is apparent in vault mosaics VIII and VI of the ambulatory in Santa Costanza (fig. 14). The composition echoes the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics: the objects are arranged in a seemingly random fashion, and are facing different directions (vault mosaic VIII also includes a reference to Sosus's "drinking doves" mosaic). This type of composition, which ranges from exemplary order and organisation to confusion and chaos, was used in other Hellenistic mosaics. Such compositions could be understood as a visual expression of the tension between the earthly world, which is logical and measurable, and the mystical world, which exists beyond human understanding.[68] This could help to explain why Early Christian art adopted the *asàrotos òikos* composition, and used it for its own purposes. It is well established that in

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[67] Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina*, 27.512–595.

[68] Lavin 2005: 933-940.

Vault mosaic VIII, fourth century CE, the ambulatory of Santa Costanza, Rome. By Pitichinaccio, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Santa_Costanza_mosaic.jpg

antiquity there was a long tradition of mirroring the canopy of the sky in floor mosaics which were meant to represent the eternal sphere.[69] The vault mosaics of Santa Costanza continue this tradition of reversing floor and ceiling, as they represent objects and images, which were commonly found in the floor mosaics of Roman villas, on the ceiling. When the same objects and images appeared on the room's floor, they were associated with earthly nutrition, fleeting corporal pleasures and pagan cult practices. When they appear on the ceiling it is in the visual context of the eternal sphere, and they represent the nutrition of the soul in an idyllic eternal world. The similarities between these Christian and pagan representations are not as coincidental as they may first appear: in its early days, Christianity formulated its approach to death in a fashion similar to the beliefs of the common mystery

[69] Lehmann 1945: 4-6.

cults found in Rome during the first centuries CE. Christianity placed an even greater emphasis on the possibility of the redemption of its disciples, and much like the Greco-Roman mysteries, preferred art which was more symbolic than realistic and that could embody spiritual ideas. It is not difficult to see why the emphasis Christianity placed on the promise of eternal redemption appealed to the Romans, who cherished the spirits of their ancestors, worried about their own fate, and were preoccupied with thoughts regarding their imminent demise. Christianity's perception of the netherworld as a form of liberation from earthly pains had influenced the typical epitaphs found on tombstones, which now read "Requiescit in Pace" (or only the abbreviated "Pace") and emphasised the idea that the deceased's virtues would be rewarded in the afterlife. [70]Similarly, the iconography of the mosaics had somewhat changed – gone are the objects that symbolise the Dionysian Mysteries and the cult of Isis and Osiris, or are related to earthly nourishment, the banquet, fantasies regarding Greek *luxuria*, connoisseurship and erudition. Only the images that symbolise paradise remain, such as: vines, branches carrying fruit, jugs, peacocks and other birds. Despite the change in iconography, the artistic style was adopted, probably because it expresses the mystical aspects of the occult world.

The *asàrotos òikos* motif, which was created by Sosus in Pergamon, found new life and new meaning in different periods of Roman history. At the end of the first and the beginning of the second century CE, it was used by the Roman elite as a social status symbol, one which represented their cultural supremacy via their ability to rationally decipher complex literary references disguised in the representation of daily objects –such as in the depiction of the refuse from the dinner table. For the Roman elite, the theme was associated with luxurious Hellenic dining practices and served as part of the visual representation of the *carpe diem* theme found in the *triclinium* during the feast. At the beginning of the third century CE, in the Roman towns of North Africa, the theme was once again used as a social signifier, this time by people who saw themselves as part of the Roman elite, even if they lacked the appropriate credentials. They adopted various Roman decorative themes in order to create a cultural connection between their period and the past, and between the periphery, in which

[70] Hopkins 1983: 231-232.

they resided, and the Roman centre. In the days of Early Christianity, the incorporation of the motif (or at least its composition and some of its elements) symbolised a shift in focus, from a preoccupation with earthly delights and bodily pleasures to an interest in the nutrition of the soul and an investment in the kingdom of heaven. In all of those instances, the seemingly realistic depiction of common objects, encountered in daily life, was used as a vehicle for a deeper symbolic meaning, which helped the patrons in their effort to self-define and distinguish themselves from their changing surroundings.

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