

## THE ASÀROTOS ÒIKOS MOSAIC AS AN ELITE STATUS SYMBOL

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the *asarotos oikos* theme in roman mosaics, and aims at exploring the social significance these depictions have held during the late Imperial age, and their relation to the proceedings of the banquet. This study suggests that disguised symbolism and erudite references rest behind the representation of these seemingly daily objects, which could only be fully understood by members of the Roman cultural elite, who possessed the proper education for the task. The mosaic served as a starting point for the elitist practice of an erudite discourse and as a reminder of the brevity of life.

*Keywords:* asàrotos òikos, unswept floor, roman elitist art, Heraclitus mosaic, carpe diem, roman banquet, Sosos of Pergamon.

One of the less common themes of roman mosaics is the *asàrotos òikos* or «unswept floor», depicting titbits of a luxurious meal, scattered evenly on the room's floor. According to Pliny this theme was originally created by the mosaicist Sosos in Pergamon,<sup>1</sup> presumably in the second century BCE.<sup>2</sup>

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«Sosus, qui Pergami stravit quem vocant asaroton oecon, quoniam purgamenta cenae in pavimentis quaeque everri solent velut relictæ fecerat parvis e tessellis tinctisque in varios colores. mirabilis ibi columba bibens et aquam umbra capitis infuscans; apricantur aliae scabentes sese in canthari labro». PLINY, *Natural History*, 36.60.25.

2. KATHERINE M. D. DUNBABIN: *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 27.

The mosaic Pliny is referring to was never discovered; however, later Roman copies of this theme appear in Italy and in the Roman Colonies of North Africa, from the end of the first to the middle of the third century CE. These mosaics have been mostly categorised as decorative elements or as genre depictions, and little research has gone into their symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the theme is often mentioned in conjunction with *xenia* depictions, and therefore attributed the same meaning as *xenia*, regardless of the fact that the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics depict the refuse of a meal against a neutral background, which is characteristically very different from the common *xenia* depictions of juicy, appetising fruit, vegetables, eggs and cheese, or unprepared game and seafood, placed in wicker baskets, glass bowls, white metal plates or clay vases, resting on shelves, inside pantries or in other domestic surroundings.

The *asàrotos òikos* mosaics have all been discovered exclusively in the domestic spaces of the Roman elite. The manufacturing of such detailed mosaics must have demanded great financial investment, and while the mosaics must have amused the guests with their trompe-l'œil qualities, it is hard to believe that such an expenditure was made with this sole purpose in mind. The aim of this article is to explore the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics as a Roman status symbol of elitist erudition: a seemingly realistic portrayal that encases disguised symbolic meanings, only fully understood by the old ruling class, who possessed the proper training and the necessary education for the task. The employment of disguised symbolism was a reaction to the swift political and economic upheavals of the late Imperial age, sought after by an elite fearful of quickly losing its premier position, and grasping at the notion of cultural supremacy over former subordinates who had recently risen to power.

The most well-known example of the *asàrotos òikos* theme was discovered in 1833 in front of the Aurelian wall, south of the *Aventinus mons* – one of the seven hills of ancient Rome. The mosaic dates to the beginning of the second century CE, and it is signed in Greek by the artist Heraklitos (figs. 1-2).<sup>3</sup> The mosaic, measures 4.05 x 4.05 meters, and is housed today in the collections of the Vatican museum. A different mosaic of the same theme was discovered in Aquileia, an ancient Roman city in northern Italy at the head of the Adriatic (fig. 3). It was discovered in 1859 in a *domus* belonging to the upper Roman class, the location of which was never precisely marked, but is known to have been situated northwest of the Basilica and southeast of the Forum. The mosaic has been dated to the second half of the first century CE. In 1859, an attempt to remove the mosaic from the floor had caused it considerable damage. It was stored in nine separate panels, until reassembled in 1919-22 (fig. 4). Today it is displayed in the Aquileia Museum. The dimensions of the mosaic are 2.49 x 2.33 meters, and it covered the entire floor of the room. The central *emblema* is missing. It was extracted, leaving only two details in two opposite corners: the paw of a feline and the wings of a bird. Mosaics featuring

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3. ΗΡΑΚΛΙΤΟΣ ΗΡΔΑΣΑΤΟ

the same theme have also been discovered in Tunisia, they are smaller and they do not cover the perimeter of the room. The earliest of these was discovered at Salonius House in Oudna, and it is composed of five *emblemata* measuring 60 x 70 centimeters each (fig. 5), that date to the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE. These *emblemata* were taken out of their original setting and repositioned at the centre of a large room in a luxurious villa. The five *emblemata* are housed today in the National Museum of Bardo. A second mosaic was discovered at Maison des Mois in El Djem, and it consisted of a narrow U-shaped frieze, part of the U and T decorative programme common to *triclinium* floors (fig. 6). This mosaic is a bit later, from around 210-235 CE. It is housed today in the Archaeological Museum of Sousse. An *asàrotos oikos* mosaic was part of the decorative scheme of a byzantine basilica's floor in Sidi-Abich, but was completely destroyed upon extraction.<sup>4</sup>

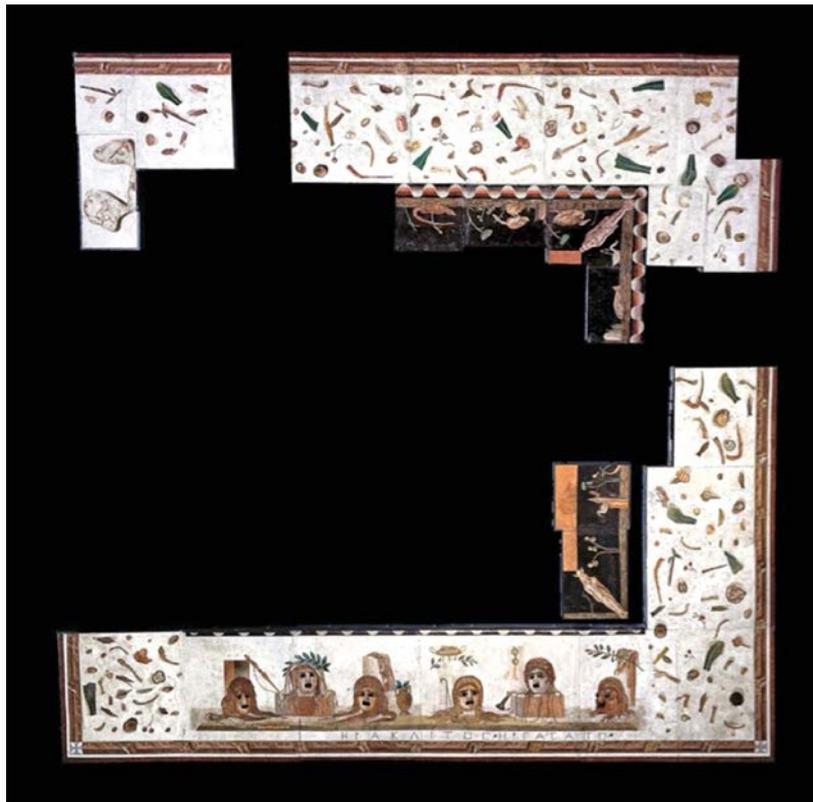


Fig. 1. *Asàrotos oikos* (overview), 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, ex Lateranese, Rome, 4.05 x 4.05 meters

4. MARCEL RENARD: «Pline l'Ancien et le motif de l'asarôtos oikos», *Hommages à Max Niedermann*, Collection Latomus Vol. XXIII, revue d'études latines, Bruxelles (Berchem), 1956, p. 310.



Fig. 2. *Asàrotos òikos* (detail), 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, ex Lateranese, Rome, 4.05 x 4.05 meters



Fig. 3. *Asàrotos òikos* (detail), the second half of the first century CE, Aquileia Museum, 2.49 x 2.33 meters

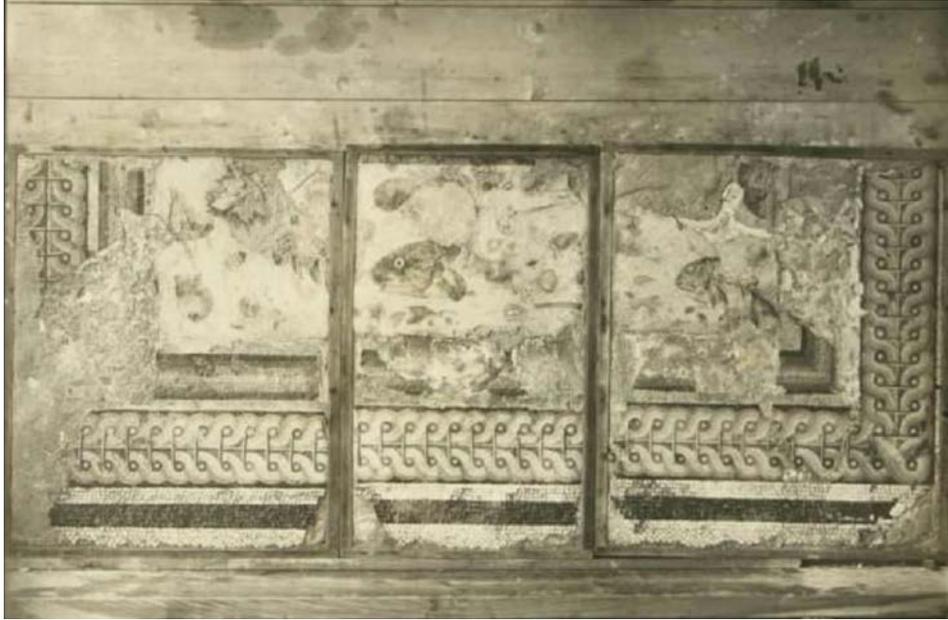


Fig. 4. *Asàrotos òikos* (three panels), the second half of the first century CE, Aquileia Museum, 2.49 x 2.33 meters



Fig. 5. *Asàrotos òikos* (one of five *emblemata*) discovered in the Salonius House in Oudna, end of first or beginning of second century CE, National Museum of Bardo, 60 x 70 centimeters each



Fig. 6. *Asàrotos òikos* (detail) discovered at Maison des Mois in El Djem, circa 210-235 CE, Archaeological Museum of Sousse, n/a

The technique adopted in the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics is known as *opus vermiculatum* in which very small (from 1 mm to 4 mm) tesserae of different dimensions and irregular shapes are used to create a multi-coloured, variegated and detailed representation. It is plausible to assume that the *asàrotos òikos* decorated the *triclinium* – the room reserved for banqueting in the Roman *domus*, since the depiction is essentially the debris of a meal. During the Roman banquets the guests would discard scraps of unwanted food on the floor. The theme could also hold a funerary meaning, since during feasts in honour of the dead, food was offered to the deceased by throwing it on the floor. According to this interpretation, the artistic representation replaces the actual artefacts as permanent symbolic offerings.<sup>5</sup> The choice to display opulence and wealth or to nourish ancestral spirits with what is essentially trash could seem somewhat puzzling. It is necessary to look into the wider characteristics of the period in order to fully grasp the specific role these mosaics must have played in Roman society during the time of their commissioning.

The re-emergence of the *asàrotos òikos* theme in second century Rome is not coincidental. It came at a period in which a conscious effort to revive the glorious past of the Hellenic tradition was made. This *Philhellenism*, also known as the «Second Sophistic», was willingly and deliberately promoted by Roman emperors such as Trajan and Hadrian,<sup>6</sup> for political and intellectual reasons.<sup>7</sup> The «Second Sophistic» is characterised by an overall changed attitude of the Roman world towards the Greek culture of the eastern part of

5. GEORGE WICKER ELDERKIN: «Sosus and Aristophanes», *Classical Philology*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jan., 1937), pp. 74-75.

6. *Historia Augusta, Hadrian*, 1.5.

7. TIM WHITMARSH: *The Second Sophistic*, Published for the Classical Association by Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 12-15.

the Mediterranean. Augustus, who had won the battle of Actium, allowed the Greek world to stabilise during his regime, and Greek intellectuals could resume their activities, travel outside of Greece, talk in public, work in education and gain esteem. In this new, more hospitable climate a new awareness of Hellenism flourished unimpeded.<sup>8</sup> The quotation of the Hellenistic *asàrotos òikos* theme, which must have won acclaim due to Pliny's literary description, could be seen as expressing the desire of rebirthing Hellenistic culture. In the spirit of the time, the rich patron who commissioned the work sought to present himself as an erudite individual, of sophisticated tastes, belonging to the Roman elite. Visual imagery reflects the inner life of the society in which it was created, and provides insight into the values and imagination of the people living at that time, in a way which sometimes cannot be fully understood based on literary sources alone.<sup>9</sup> The act of quoting a familiar and well-documented visual source can make a reference to the original context from which it is derived, whether it continues or alters it. It is for this reason that one must first turn to the cultural world of the Hellenistic period, in order to better understand the cultural circumstances which allowed for the flourishing of this motif.

In the second century BCE, nostalgia for the luxurious part of Greek civilization grew amongst the Hellenistic intellectuals, prompting a desire to present and glorify the achievements of ancient Athens.<sup>10</sup> Mosaicists, such as Sosos, were required to possess high capacities of observation and innovation in order to fulfil the desires of their patrons. Unlike the artists of the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, Hellenistic artists could no longer rely on their ability to overshadow their rivals in the execution of traditional schemes; instead they were required to find a new model which would express their patron's tastes in the best possible way, whether those leaned towards the heroic or the erotic, the sentimental or the anecdotal, or even the combination of all of these. The choices made dramatically influenced their success as artists.<sup>11</sup> Hellenistic techniques of visualisation aimed at impacting the audiences' or spectators' viewing, particularly in terms of their spatial involvement with the image they were presented with.<sup>12</sup> Hellenistic new visual themes and material were likely to have been manipulated in order to provoke more specifically emotional responses, such as laughter, surprise, erotic stimulation or pity.<sup>13</sup> In accordance with the spirit of the time, the visual motif chosen for Sosos's work is

8. GRAHAM ANDERSON: *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, pp. 1-2.

9. PAUL ZANKER: *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1990, pp. 259-261; PAUL ZANKER: «Zur Funktion und Bedeutung griechischer Skulptur in der Römerzeit», *Le classicisme à Rome*, Fondation Hardt, Entretiens 25, Geneva, 1978, p. 3.

10. JEROME JORDAN POLLITT: *The Ancient View of Greek Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1974, p. 52.

11. JOHN ONIANS: *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, p. 129.

12. GRAHAM ZANKER: *Modes of Viewing in Hellenistic Poetry and Art*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 2004, pp. 26, 103-108.

13. ZANKER, *Modes of Viewing in Hellenistic*, p. 26.

innovative, since it is the first time the depiction of scraps of food is mentioned in ancient sources as an autonomous subject. At the same time, the motif serves to refer the Hellenistic viewers to traditions of hospitality and luxurious dining, which were associated with the glorious Greek past, and which were immortalised in both Greek art and literature. The depiction of scraps of food on the room's floor may also refer the contemporary viewer to the religious-mystical prohibitions of Pythagoras, who preached to his disciples about moderation and restraint in food consumption, and therefore forbade them to eat that which had fallen under the table.<sup>14</sup> A similar prohibition appears in a fragment from Aristophanes' play *Heroes*, which forbids eating the food which fell under the table, since these crumbs belong to the «heroes».<sup>15</sup> This tradition was also later mentioned by Athenaeus.<sup>16</sup>

Jeremy Tanner examines the development of art in the Greco-Roman world using a sociological approach, which seeks to explain the function art plays in the context of social interaction. Tanner claims that works of art contain «expressive symbolism», a term which can be applied to any gesture or object which represents the feelings or the attitude of one person towards another, and in that way effectively expresses the nature of their interaction.<sup>17</sup> Tanner uses this method in order to research the relationships between developments in social structures, cultural changes, and artistic rationalisation in ancient Greece.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, he identifies a change in the status of art that took place during the Hellenistic period, and which is continued later in Roman culture. While in ancient Athens art fulfilled mainly political and ritual roles, and served as a backdrop to daily activities, in the Hellenistic period when art moves from the public sphere to the private one, its social function changes, as well as its modes of viewing. This change in the reception of Hellenistic art was prompted by the formation of a new elitist culture of viewing, which was characterised by an extensive formal aesthetic vocabulary, familiarity with the names of the great classical artists and knowledge of the history of classical art (the fifth and fourth centuries BCE). Proficiency in these disciplines enabled viewers to name and apprehend stylistic differences, to make explicit the variable aesthetic base on which the artistic meaning was constructed, and through which different aesthetic effects were achieved. The mastery of these cultural tools enabled the viewer to criticise and rate the accomplishments of individual artists against the development of a specific artistic tradition, set apart from the realm of everyday life; rather different from the way in which

14. ARISTOTLE, *On the Pythagoreans* cf. DIOGENES LAERTES, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.1(34).

15. ARISTOPHANES, *Heroes*, cf. AUGUST MEINEKE, *Fragmenta comicorum graecorum, typis et impensis*, G. Reimeri, 1839, Vol. I, p. 285; Vol. II, p. 1070.

16. ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophistae*, 10.427e.

17. JEREMY TANNER: «Aesthetics and Art History Writing in Comparative Historical Perspective», *Arethusa*, 43, 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 270-274; JEREMY TANNER: *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

18. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, pp. 29-30.

art was viewed before: characterised by reading forms implicitly in order to construct an extra-artistic social or religious meaning.<sup>19</sup> The personal styles of artists were clearly recognised and explicitly distinguished, and the correct attribution to specific sculptures or painters preoccupied the learned viewer as well as the art history writers.<sup>20</sup> These verbal and visual skills were developed and applied in the practice of attentive viewing, while examining every small detail of the artefacts,<sup>21</sup> separately from the commotion of daily business.<sup>22</sup> To quote Pliny: «the appreciation [*admiratio*] involved needs leisure and deep silence in our surroundings».<sup>23</sup> This new form of occupation in art was associated with the development of a system of related practices and new social roles, such as: collectors, art dealers, forging of old masters (such as Myron and Praxiteles),<sup>24</sup> creating exhibition halls in private spheres, art criticism, as well as art tourism, in order to view at first hand such «must-see» (*visenda*) works as: *Venus Anadyomene* by Apelles, *Medea* by Timomachos or Myron's *Cow*.<sup>25</sup> If previously art writing was the domain of artists who explored the topic mostly from a technical angle, primarily done with other artists in mind, then from the Hellenistic period onwards art writing shifts into the hands of intellectuals, some of whom were artists themselves, and it was done with other men of culture in mind.<sup>26</sup> The combination of all of these elements attests to the way in which the nature of reception had drastically changed in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds; henceforward the intellect stands at the centre of viewing and the new aesthetic sensitivity requires schooling and commentary.<sup>27</sup>

The inclusion of *scientia artium* in Pliny's encyclopaedia demonstrates that there was no clear distinction between art history and other fields of knowledge, since according to his sophist method, *artes* are merely rational applications of forms of knowledge, and *scientia* is explained as the discoveries made by man but based on imitative instinct and that which nature freely shows or gives.<sup>28</sup> Whilst painting and sculpture may occupy a considerably lower position than philosophy or rhetoric, they still offer a wider span of rational action than manual labour.<sup>29</sup>

Viewing art as a pedagogical instrument, as a tool for learning and for self-improvement, was a new approach, one which developed in the Hellenistic world and was later implemented in Rome's higher class. This new approach

19. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, pp. 209-210.

20. CICERO, *De Oratore*, 3.7.26; PHILO, *On Drunkenness*, 89; DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS, *De Demosthene*, 50, *Dinarchus*, 7; PLINY, *NH*, 36.28-29.

21. PLUTARCH, «De tranquillitate animi», *Moralia*, 470a.

22. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, p. 210.

23. PLINY, *NH*, 36.27.

24. PHAEDRUS, «Fable I - Demetrius and Menander», *The Fables of Phaedrus*.

25. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, p. 211.

26. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History*, p. 215.

27. See also: JAŠ ELSNER, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [England] and New York, 1995.

28. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, 1.982b; PLINY, *NH*, 7.123, 191-209.

29. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, p. 240.

could be read as a reaction to the social changes which blurred the existing boundaries between the different classes. These changes gave rise to the need of the ruling class to achieve exclusivity over social and cultural luxury, to separate itself from its subordinates, and by doing so, to reconstruct the social hierarchy. The etiquette of high artistic culture was integrated with rhetorical practices, which were transmitted as a key component in the pedagogy of elitist education.<sup>30</sup> According to Gellius, the meaning of *humanitas* is not «benevolence» (*filanthropía*), signifying a friendly spirit and kindness towards all men without distinction, but rather it is «education» (*paideía*) – erudition and training in the liberal arts (*eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*). According to Gellius, those who earnestly desire and seek after these are the most highly humanised; for the pursuit of that kind of knowledge and the training given by it have been granted to man alone out of all the animals, and for that reason it is termed *humanitas*.<sup>31</sup>

In the Hellenistic and Roman worlds the mode of viewing art was not emotional; it was part of a greater world view in which self-control was a precondition for the implementation of authority.<sup>32</sup> Cicero claims those who command great wars, exercise high authority (*magnis imperiis*) and govern provinces have to manifest a spirit worthy of praise (*animum laude dignum*); those who are dumbstruck by a painting or a statue, gaze in admiration and gush with exclamations of delight, are judged by Cicero to be the slaves of every foolishness. Art is delightful, but it has to be viewed through learned eyes (*eruditos oculos*).<sup>33</sup> Cicero follows the same example of Aristotle, who claims that visual arts are intermediate between the sensual desires of the body and the rational pleasures of the mind, such as the joy which comes from learning.<sup>34</sup> The pleasure generated by the viewing practices of the Hellenistic and Roman elites was deeply rational and over-intellectualised; it was a culture of viewing which was self-conscience, that enabled self-reflexive criticism regarding the relationship between form, content and the viewer's response, and under which works of art were perceived as manifestations of artistic reason (rather than of creative will).<sup>35</sup>

Works of art were not meant to be understood only at face value, as merely depicting deities or heroes, myths or historical events, but also to be considered for their greater symbolic meaning. For example, in rooms that were painted to simulate picture galleries, the choice of topics was often programmatic. The topics depicted were designed to lend themselves to a rhetorical discourse, not only regarding each individual painting, but also concerning the relationships between the individual paintings and the general theme that arises from their

30. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History*, 2006, p. 246.

31. GELLIUS, *Noctes Atticae*, 13, 17.1.

32. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece*, 2006, pp. 246, 255-257.

33. CICERO, *Paradoxa stoicorum*, 36-38.

34. ARISTOTLE, *Ethika nikomacheia*, 1117b28-1118a25.

35. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History*, 2006, pp. 272-273.

collocation, such as the dangers of desire. The concept of a programmatic theme corresponded visually with the familiar rhetorical practice of «disputations» (*controversiae*).<sup>36</sup> The relationships between the different paintings could be put in rhetorical terminology, such as: similitude, difference, analogy. It is the suggested theme of the programme, rather than the scenes themselves, which was intended to become the topic of discourse, enabling the participants to take pleasure in the artists' cleverness and propriety in adapting the mode of representation to the theme. The richness of the viewers' reading correlated with the depth of their mythological knowledge, the fullness of their critical vocabulary, and the refinement of their rhetorical skills – which enabled them to distinguish and exercise such rhetorical tropes as irony, metonymy, synecdoche and so on.<sup>37</sup>

This new function of images as signifiers of elitist Greek-style culture was complemented by the social rituals common to the villa life of the upper class, rituals that bridged between the artistic decoration of the rooms and the daily activities which took place in them. An erudite conversation amongst friends or with the house philosopher was a vital part of leisure activities. The topics of the conversations chosen during the banquets were often Greek, while Greek and eastern dishes were served to the guests. Each decorative element was intended to glorify villa life by regularly creating associations to Greek culture. In these meticulously decorated spaces the participants viewed Greece as a visualised ideal – a superior realm.<sup>38</sup> This complementary relationship between decoration and function seems to have been established in the Imperial period, and was the result of the increasingly profound assimilation of Greek culture amongst the Roman elite and a relaxation in the ambivalence about Greek art, spurred on by a pressing need of the elite to distinguish itself culturally from the increasingly wealthy and powerful freedmen.<sup>39</sup>

In this imagery world, the specific elements were taken in their entirety from Greek art, but reassembled and repositioned in a new and original way, and more importantly served a different function. The vast amount of decoration did not merely serve as a reminder of the richness of the Greek cultural heritage, but also concocted fantasies about a luxurious, even princely lifestyle. Depending on the situation, the viewer's eye could perceive individual details differently: by accident or by design, selectively or comprehensively, browsing through or looking attentively, and was free to scan the compilation of images and to move through it freely.<sup>40</sup>

And so the process of establishing art history, which began during the Hellenistic period, came to its full realisation in Imperial Rome. After the

36. RICHARD BRILLIANT: *Visual Narratives: Storytelling in Etruscan and Roman Art*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1984, p. 69.

37. BRILLIANT, *Visual Narratives*, 1984, pp.71-73.

38. PAUL ZANKER: *Roman Art*, J. Paul Getty Museum, California, 2010, pp. 27, 33.

39. TANNER, *The Invention of Art History*, 2006, pp. 274-275.

40. ZANKER, *Roman Art*, 2010, p. 27.

fall of the Greek polis and in the face of increased social mobility, the high culture of the Hellenistic kings was embraced as an elite status symbol of cultural distinction. Hellenistic erudition was newly embraced as an elitist practice in Imperial Rome, prompted by social changes of a similar nature. The modes of viewing art in both Hellenistic and Roman society were derived from elements characteristic of elitist Greek education, and its commitment to the philosophical ideal of the rational man. The appropriation of Greek high culture amongst the members of the Roman elite, in accordance with the basic rationalistic assumptions of Greek philosophy, contributed to the conservation of their social status as the cultural elite of Rome.

The *asàrotos òikos* theme, which was originally created for members of the Pergamonian elite and was later readopted by Rome's higher class, indicates these tendencies faithfully. The theme represents a fantasy of Greek *symposium*, the form of reading thoroughly depends on the observer's level of education (it could range anywhere between amusing trompe-l'œil to the representation of fundamental philosophical ideas), it serves as a jumping board for erudite discourse and it mediates the artistic representation and the actual use of the room. The mosaics' programme promotes an intellectual mode of viewing, one that could provide not only an aesthetic sensual pleasure (which is more immediate) but also the rational pleasure of the mind, which comes from analysing the stylistic and iconographical components of the work, using comparative principles borrowed from rhetoric studies, in order to create commentary. The erudition required for a deeper understanding of the image was an exclusive and distinctive functional element of the elite, one that the nouveau-riche social climbers did not possess, a last hindrance in the face of social sea-changes. The choice to represent «still life» imagery expresses in a potent and particular way the requirement made on the viewer to possess the relevant education. Whilst mythological scenes were partly familiar and recognisable to the lower classes as well, who could derive pleasure from the recognition of the myth and the manner in which it was presented (even if they were lacking in art-history proficiency and in critical analytic ability of rhetoric pedagogy), understanding the meaning of still life representations requires a much broader education. The *asàrotos òikos* mosaics had given aesthetic pleasure and a sense of humorous delight to all who have viewed them in the past, and still encounter them today (such as the numerous tourists visiting the Vatican museums annually), but only those with relevant education could pick up on the literary, mythological and philosophical references the theme arouses, as well as on the chosen programmatic theme, which was designed to lend itself to the objective of a rhetorical discourse, and to create a richer reading of the work. Still life imagery often produces an enigmatic sensation – the viewer is left wondering about the reason for which the specific objects depicted were chosen, followed by a consideration of the specific manner in which they are represented – solving the enigma requires the fundamental

knowledge of the period's literature essential for the decoding of disguised symbolism, combined with the developed rhetorical skills necessary for the stylistic analysis of the work.

The *asàrotos òikos* mosaic housed today in the Vatican museum is an exceptional example of an elitist work of art, specifically targeting a highly educated upper-class viewer. This mosaic visually represents a compilation of symbolic meanings grouped together. Understanding the nature of the relationship between the different subjects and deciphering the context under which they were connected attested to the erudition of the viewer, which served as a testimony of elitist status. In the same way one treats the decorative scheme which appears on the *triclinium* walls in Pompeii as a singular programme, the reading of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics should consider the decoration of the room's floor in its entirety. The frieze depicting scraps of food is the widest and most dominant, and therefore possibly the central and most important one of the programme; but it does not stand alone, rather it corresponds with other subjects included in the decorative scheme of the room's floor, which support and reinforce each other symbolically.<sup>41</sup>

The Vatican mosaic did not survive in its entirety. It is currently composed of three narrow outer friezes mirroring the ceiling, followed by wider inner friezes, on two of which scraps of food are depicted (the edges of a third one suggest that the same theme appeared there as well), while the depiction on the fourth one is that of theatre masks alongside Dionysian artefacts, under which the signature of the artist appears in Greek alphabet (figs. 1-2). Further in are a few fragments of a scene depicting the annual flooding of the Niles, followed by a few fragments of solid terracotta colour. The central part of the mosaic is missing altogether; usually it would hold an *emblema* which was pre-set in the studio on a marble or stone cassata (and therefore was removable), and would display meticulously made imagery (such as Villa Adriana's «drinking doves» mosaic, a theme also attributed by Pliny to Sosos).<sup>42</sup>

This decorative scheme implicitly alludes and refers to a number of topics which could have stood at the centre of an erudite discourse: the visual association tied to the glorious cultural past of Hellenistic Pergamon, the study of art history, Pliny's tales of art and artists, the philosophical consideration of the tension between reality and artistic depiction, and imitative art as forgery and falsehood. Depending on the banquet guests' inclinations, the discourse arising from the mosaic could have also touched on topics such as: the traditional Roman rituals of the dead, the ways of the Dionysian Mystery as depicted in classical literature and as practiced in the Roman household, and the myth of Osiris and Isis as perpetuated in the writings of Plutarch

41. Complex decorative master-schemes are known to have outlined the nature of the decoration in Roman villas found in Antioch and in North Africa, see: CHRISTINE KONDOLEON: *Antioch: The Lost City*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2000, pp. 171.

42. PLINY, *NH*, 36.60.

and Apuleius. As archaeological and literary testimonies reveal, the worship of these three deities had grown in popularity during the Imperial era, possibly because the myths and rituals suggest a promise of resurrection and redemption to the disciples.<sup>43</sup> In accordance with the intellectual fashions of the era, the depiction of scraps of food could have also aroused a discourse concerning the fragility of life – the *carpe diem* theme, which was associated with banqueting in Roman literature and poetry, as well as in the practices and rituals of the banquet itself. The theme urged and encouraged the banquet's participants, most of which were members of the Roman elite, to enjoy the food, wine, luxury and general hedonistic atmosphere of the event while they lasted.

The symbolic connection between feasting and banqueting to the cycle of life and death gained popularity in Roman literature and culture during the narrow span of Hellenistic or Late Republican, Augustus and Early Imperial periods. It became the height of fashion in the early days of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, only to diminish rapidly until vanishing altogether during the Late Imperial era. During the Imperial era, Latin and Greek writers portray the dead as living beings appearing in the shape of a skeleton or as extremely emaciated figures, they create an analogy between life and banquet, leading to the recommendation of leaving life in the same manner a guest would retire from the banquet – completely full. The reminder of death as a spur to enjoy the pleasures of life is a fundamental aspect of ancient thought, by no means confined to self-styled Epicureans, and reached peak popularity at the same time the skeleton motif was at its most favoured – during the first centuries BCE and CE.<sup>44</sup> It is also then that the best verbal illustrations of this frame of mind appear: Lucretius depicts his banquet guests garlanded and clutching their goblets, mourning the brevity of life.<sup>45</sup> Horace's *carpe diem* odes transition between descriptions of the banquet and thoughts regarding the imminence and inevitability of death.<sup>46</sup> Martial views the imperial tomb as a reminder to enjoy the pleasures of the banquet,<sup>47</sup> and in the pseudo-Vergilian poem *Copa* the invitation to enjoy the pleasures of the banquet ends with the vivid image of death pinching the reveller's ear as if to say: «live now, for I am coming» ('*vivite' ait, 'venio'*).<sup>48</sup>

This approach was not only limited to verbal discourse, but was also put into practice amongst the higher classes. In Alexandria, Cleopatra and Antony formed the secret society of «Inimitable Livers» (Ἀμιμητόβιοι), dedicated to hedonism, if not debauchery, spending their time dining luxuriously amongst

43. PLUTARCH, «De Iside et de Osiride», *Moralia*, 351c-384c; APULEIUS, *Metamorphoses* (The Golden Ass), XI.24-30.

44. KATHERINE M. D. DUNBABIN: «'Sic erimus cuncti...' The Skeleton in Greco-Roman Art», *Jahrbuch des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, 101 (1986), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 187-194

45. LUCRETIUS, *De rerum natura*, 3.912-915.

46. HORACE, *Carmina*, 1.4, 11; 2.3, 14

47. MARTIAL, *Epigrammata*, 2.59, 5.64.

48. [VERGIL], *Appendix Vergiliana. Copa*, 38.

a small number of guests – 12 in total, in accordance with Greek tradition (and possibly also associated with the cult of Dionysian Mysteries). It was the very imminence of death which added urgency to their enjoyment.<sup>49</sup> Cleopatra and Antony later dissolved this society and founded another, of the same daintiness, luxury and extravagance, which they named the society of «Partners in Death» (Συναποθανούμενοι), for their friends enrolled themselves as those who would die together, and passed the time banqueting delightfully, whilst Cleopatra was testing the effects of all sorts of deadly poisons, until she discovered that the bite of the asp alone induced a sleepy torpor and sinking, with no spasm or groan.<sup>50</sup>

This ambition to enjoy life to its fullest extent before the final grip of death is represented in a less flamboyant fashion on artefacts of daily use, such as: miniature sculptures, clay cups, lamps, mosaics or tombstones. Skeleton statuettes were passed around the banquet's guests as a reminder to enjoy life as much as possible. One of the main functions of the skeleton models was to serve as a visual reminder to the epicurean idea of remembering death (*memento mori*).<sup>51</sup> The skeleton image is nearly always associated with the pleasures of life and is especially tied with the banquet and the *symposium*, in what is referred to as «feast of the spirits» (*larva convivialis*).<sup>52</sup> One literary example is a passage in *Satyricon*, where in the early stages of the banquet the wealthy freedman Trimalchio bursts out in lamentation about the brevity of life. While the guests are drinking and admiring every luxury in great detail, a slave brings in a silver skeleton (*larva*) with movable limbs and spine, and throws it down on the table several times. The different contortions it falls into inspire Trimalchio to poetical reflections upon the nature of human life:

Alas for us poor mortals, all that poor man is, is nothing. So we shall all be, after the world below takes us away. Let us live then while it goes well with us.<sup>53</sup>

The *carpe diem* theme that inspired this passage reflects a real-life practice current amongst the roman higher classes at that time.<sup>54</sup> Another literary reference to the theme comes from Martial, who addresses a diner in a «crumb» sized room (*Mica*) overlooking the imperial mausoleum's dome, crushing the couches under his weight, drinking wine, self-crowned with roses; perfumed with *nardinum*,<sup>55</sup> to tell him that the God himself (or the emperor entombed

49. PLUTARCH, *Antonius*, 28.2.

50. *Ibid*; 71.3-5.

51. DUNBABIN, «*Sic erimus cuncti*», 1986, pp. 192-193.

52. SENECA, *Epistles*, 24.18; APULEIUS, *Metamorphoses*, I.6; APULEIUS, *Apologia*, LXIII.1-6; PETRONIUS, *Satyricon*, XXXIV.8.

53. PETRONIUS, *Satyricon*, XXXIV.

54. DUNBABIN, «*Sic erimus cuncti*», 1986, p. 195.

55. Perfume plant from the Himalayas used in the making of scented oil, which Achilles applied to the body of Patroclus, see: HOMER, *Iliad*, 18.310-367.

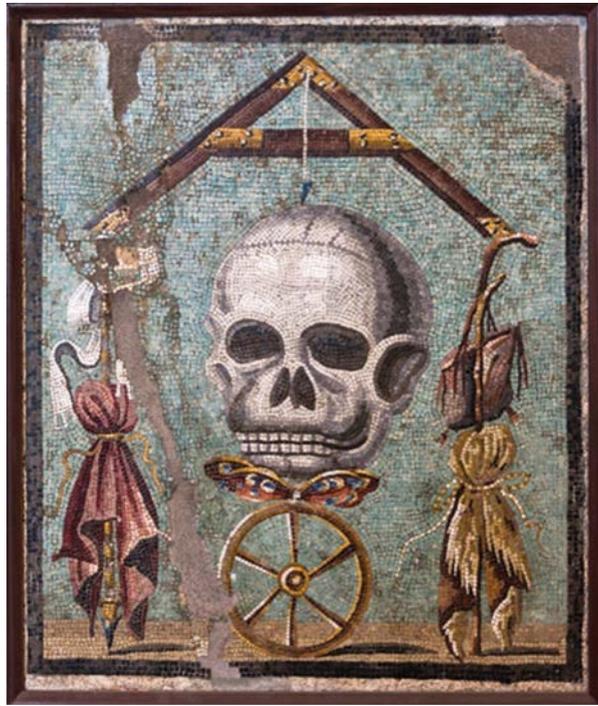


Fig. 7. *Omnia mors aequat* («death levels all»), discovered in Pompeii, first century CE, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, 47 x 41 centimeters

in the mausoleum) bids him to remember death.<sup>56</sup> A similar notion appears in Horace's *Carmina*, where the poet reminds the readers that all men, rich or poor, prince or pauper, are equal in the face of death, and encourages them to enjoy the old Falernian wine and luxurious feasts while there is still time.<sup>57</sup> If not, he warns, a worthier heir will drain the Caecuban wine guarded now behind a hundred padlocks, and drench the pavement with wine finer than the one on which the pontiff feasts.<sup>58</sup> Not only is everyone equal in the face of death, but according to Lucian everyone is also equal in post-mortem. He tells of Menippus the Cynic's visit to the underworld, in which he was asked to be the judge in a beauty contest between Nireus, who was considered the most handsome Greek in Troy apart from Achilles,<sup>59</sup> and Thersites, described as the ugliest and most impertinent man of all those that came before Troy.<sup>60</sup> Menippus rejects the competition saying that no difference exists between their bones, all that once was is now ancient history, and the world of the dead is

56. MARTIAL, *Epigrammata*, 2.59.

57. HORACE, *Carmina*, 1.4, 13-14; 2.3, 21-28.

58. HORACE, *Carmina*, 2.14, 5-6, 11-12, 25-28.

59. HOMER, *Iliad*, 2.671

60. HOMER, *Iliad*, 2.212-220.

truly a democracy: it equalizes all.<sup>61</sup> Physical beauty, earthly glory and material wealth are meaningless after death, and therefore the banqueter should revel in the pleasures of life while still possible. This idea is visually portrayed in a mosaic *emblema* found in Pompeii, which was set into the table of a summer *triclinium* (fig. 7). It is a complex allegory of the «death levels all» (*omnia mors aequat*) idea: on the wheel of fortune rests a butterfly (symbolising the soul), above which a skull hangs from a masonry level. The level in turn holds in balance the king's sceptre, diadem and purple on one side, and a beggar's staff, scrip and ragged cloak on the other.<sup>62</sup>

The purpose behind these warnings of mortality, which appear both in roman literary sources and in visual representations in the *triclinium*, was to urge the readers/viewers to enjoy the good things in their possession on this very day, and not to hang on some lingering hope, nor to save the best items or the expensive objects for a special occasion. Under this frame of mind, the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics could be viewed as visually expressing the temporality of good things. They should be understood as more than just mere *trompe l'oeil* – they are a reminder that happiness is impermanent, man is doomed, the earthly pleasures will be lost, and all which will remain in the aftermath is the debris of this once-glorious past.

While the representation of deities and heroes is consistent with their constancy, permanence and immutability, qualities which one could hold on to, the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics represent *humilia*: a fleeting moment, something mundane and of lesser value, an organic substance, and, in fact, trash. The transitionary and perishable nature of these objects might seem to contradict the perpetuity of the artistic representation, but behind this perpetuation of food scraps stand symbolical ideas regarding the immortality and consistency of the soul. One of the implications of immortalisation through art is to remind the viewers of their own temporal earthly existence, and the depiction of perishables fits this objective perfectly. For example, flowers appear as a metaphor to the brevity of life in a poem once attributed to Vergil (but probably written by Ausonius), in which the speaker instructs the maid to pick the roses whilst they and she are still young, and to remember that much like these flowers her time too shall quickly expire.<sup>63</sup> The roses were chosen as a metaphor to shortness of youth because they wither several days after blossoming. The scraps of food serve a similar purpose, they represent that which once was, but now is gone. This idea is reinforced by the inclusion of some withering leaves in the mosaics, already brown and crumbling at their edges. This makes for a dialectic representation, showing simultaneously the two contrasting polarities of nourishment and debris, fertility and withering, life and death.

61. LUCIAN, *Dialogi Mortuorum*, 25; LUCIAN, *Necyomantia*, 15.

62. DUNBABIN, «Sic erimus cuncti», 1986, p. 213, fig. 22.

63. [«Hoc carmen scripsit poeta ignotus» – VERGIL/AUSONIUS?], «De Rosis Nascentibus», *Works of Virgil*, line 39.

The depiction of theatre masks in the Vatican *asàrotos òikos* mosaic can also serve in this purpose, since it could be viewed as a visual representation of the literary metaphors comparing human life with theatrical drama as part of the *carpe diem* theme. The link between theatre and death is embodied in *Frogs* by Aristophanes, when Dionysus descends into Hades in order to retrieve Euripides from the underworld, and finds himself judging over a contest for the seat of «Best Tragic Poet» at the dinner table of Pluto.<sup>64</sup> When describing the account of Menippus' encounter with the dead, Lucian takes advantage of the situation in order to use many cynical proverbs comparing the human condition to stage life: human life is a spectacle, fate assigns the participants with different costumes – all varieties must participate in the play, one is king while the other one a slave, one is handsome, the other a hunchback. The participants usually change characters before the end, and when it arrives all take off their garments, dispense with their characters alongside their bodies, and return to their original condition. The same is known from the theatre, the tragic actor portrays a variety of famous personalities, but when the play is over he removes his costume and returns to his state as a miserable creature – such is the condition of the human race.<sup>65</sup> These ideas regarding the parallelism between human life and the stage also appear in visual art. For example, silver cups from the Boscoreale Treasure depicting animated skeletons revelling in a banquet alongside tragic theatre masks (fig. 8). The inscriptions distributed around the cups repeat different *carpe diem*-themed proverbs, and identify some of the skeletons as well-known poets and philosophers, such as the Greek tragic poet Moschion of Athens, famously quoted as saying that life is nothing but a play.<sup>66</sup> The theatre masks in the Vatican *asàrotos òikos* mosaic continue this tradition, and serve as yet another layer of the wider *carpe diem* theme found in this mosaic.

A reference to the theme of *carpe diem* might have also been included in the *asàrotos òikos* mosaic discovered in Aquileia. From the central *emblema*, originally inlaid on a marble slab and already missing at the time of the mosaic's discovery, two fragments remain at opposite corners, depicting the paw of a feline and the wings of a bird. By comparing those fragments with feline and bird imagery discovered in *domus* around Campania, it is possible to deduce that the image was most likely that of a cat preying on a bird, possibly a chicken. This theme is not of Pergamonian heritage; rather it most likely have originated in Alexandria, and therefore assigned to the category of *Aegytiaca*. However, similar imagery of a cat chasing a bird was included in banqueting scenes found in Etruscan funerary art of the fifth century BCE, and on an Apulian vase by Iliupersis dated to the middle of the fourth century BCE. While the image on the vase could be an emblematic symbol of the Niles, the

64. ARISTOPHANES, *Frogs*, 750 ff.

65. LUCIAN, *Necyomantia*, 16.

66. DUNBABIN, «Sic erimus cuncti», 1986, pp. 224-228, fig. 37-42.



Fig. 8. Silver goblet with convivial skeletons in relief from the treasure of Boscoreale, first century CE, Louvre Museum, H. : 10,40 cm.; D. : 10,40 cm

battle between feline and bird could also be seen as symbolising the struggle between light and darkness, life and death, or as an allegory of *psychomachia*.<sup>67</sup> Since no further indication which could specifically bind the appearance of the theme in the Aquileia mosaic to these ideas exists, it was more likely meant to be understood as an allegorical scene relating to the brevity of life and its cessation.<sup>68</sup>

The elitist practice of *carpe diem* – trying to enjoy luxurious living as much as possible in the face of impending death – created a moral dilemma in roman society, which found its way into the world of visual art as well. Norman Bryson interprets *xenia* depictions as symbolising the tension between the cultivated world – represented by processed food, which was hunted, prepared and cooked, to the uncivilised world – a rich, bountiful world, in which nature offers mankind its gifts freely. Bryson bases his analysis on Philostratus

67. HENNING WREDE: «Monumente der antikaiserlich-philosophischen Opposition», *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts*, 102 (1987), pp. 384-390 cf. ANTERO TAMMISTO: *Birds in Mosaics: A Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics*, Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae, Vol. XVIII, Rome, 1997, pp. 91, 302-303 n. 641.

68. TAMMISTO, *Birds in Mosaics*, 1997, p.91.

*Imagines*, and especially on two *ekphrasis* of *xenia*,<sup>69</sup> and in accordance with the description categorizes *xenia* depictions into two separate groups. The natural world is represented by what he calls «first *xenia*» – imagery of food that does not require any preparation: gathered items such as fruit, milk and honey, or naturally fermented foods such as cheese and wine. The «second *xenia*» includes food which requires men's active involvement and interference with nature: seafood, game and food products which require preparation such as cooking, roasting or baking. According to Bryson, while the «first *xenia*» symbolises harmony between man and nature, and equality between guest and host, the «second *xenia*» violates this equilibrium, differentiates social statuses, and introduces violent actions while underlining sensuous pleasure and hedonism.<sup>70</sup>

The «first *xenia*» seems to be morally favoured amongst writers of the Imperial age. Philostratus hurries the viewer/reader to not wait for the cooks, but rather to partake of the food that needs no fire, to take the ripe fruit, of which there is a pile in the other basket, because in a little while «the dew will be gone from it».<sup>71</sup> Philostratus alludes to the brevity of life, and recommends seizing the moment instead of wasting precious time waiting for cultivated pleasures. Pliny praises garden produce over foods hunted in remote locations; he explains that while in Greece Epicurus – the greatest connoisseur in the enjoyments of leisurely life – dwelled in a garden he had laid out in the middle of Athens, in Rome the garden functioned as the poor man's field, and it was from the garden that the lower classes procured their daily food, which is why it had a bad reputation despite having no fault of its own. But still, he adds, it is a great deal better than diving into the abysses of the sea searching for oysters, seeking pheasants from over the Phasis River, or hunting for the mythical Meleagrides birds in Numidia and Memnonides in Æthiopia – all done at great personal risk. Garden produce is much cheaper by comparison and fulfils every need and want, it does not require any fire and therefore saves on fuel, it is readily available, easier on the digestive system and does not overload the senses.<sup>72</sup>

The difference between these two types of offerings also comes across in the literary style Philostratus uses for each of them, attesting to a different narrative context. The «first *xenia*» tentatively hints at cultic offering, in the manner of the dedicatory epigrams of the sixth book of *Anthologia Palatina*. The wide array of fruits detailed is reminiscent of *cornucopia* descriptions and could be understood as an ode to nature. In contrast, the «second *xenia*» ends by constructing an elaborate narrative framework, implicating the described

69. PHILOSTRATUS, *Imagines*, 1, 31; 2, 26.

70. NORMAN BRYSON, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Reaktion, London, 1990, pp. 27-28.

71. PHILOSTRATUS, *Imagines*, 2, 26.

72. PLINY, *NH*, 19.19.

foodstuff within a story set in past, present and future imperfect tense:<sup>73</sup> These *xenia* are offered to the master of the farm, and although he is currently taking a bath, drunk from Pramnian or Thasian wines, he could also drink the sweet new wine which is set on the table, and then later on his return to the city, reeking of pressed grapes and of the leisure associated with the countryside, he might belch in the faces of city dwellers.<sup>74</sup>

The manner of this description, which seals the «second *xenia*» *ekphrasis*, suggests that Philostratus takes a critical tone towards the farm master's life of country leisure and delights. Similarly Varro does not spare his criticism over the dining practices of the Roman elite. Some Romans, he writes, set up a *triclinium* for dining in the *pinacotheca*, a place defined by artistic artifice. Why, he wonders, should they not enjoy instead a scene set by nature, such as a charming arrangement of fruit? Provided that these fruit were not bought in Rome and then brought back to the country in order to set up a «fruit-gallery» (*oporotheca*) for the sake of a dinner party.<sup>75</sup> This segment emphasises the difference in Roman thought between the wild and the domesticated, the rural and the urban, nature and art, and accordingly past and present – these binaries resonate a larger and growing debate held in Roman society about *luxuria*. One notion was that Greek art was a source of moral corruption, and that Greek-style luxury was a danger to the Republic's tradition of *mores maiorum*. Following this perception, the self-sufficient Roman villa was a work of art, and possessed enough elegance and luxury in its own right. A well-managed Roman villa, exhibiting the natural harvest that such efficiency yields, does not require any Greek art for its decoration. Not only should the fruit provide the proper scenery instead of the paintings, but one should also strictly observe that these fruit are derived from the very villa in which they are displayed. Because of the associations between different foods with different moral codes, the Roman Republic institutionally monitored, controlled and even outlawed certain foodstuffs. As early as the second century BCE, sumptuary laws specified what was deemed sufficiently nutritious in virtue, versus what was judged to be morally corrupting. In this manner a polarity was constructed in Roman thought between simple and luxurious, marking out the difference between the pure, rustic nature of the Roman past and the current over-sophisticated urban culture. At one extremity stood nutrition based on the diet of the respectable dinners of old – simple, frugal, locally produced; while at the other extremity were the sorts of exotic foods imported from the eastern empire.<sup>76</sup>

This view of cultivated living as a corrupting force did not originate in Rome, but is evident in the Greek tradition itself. The abandonment of cultured living in favour of returning to a natural state of savagery is a principal concept

73. MICHAEL SQUIRE, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 425, n. 162.

74. PHILOSTRATUS, *Imagines*, 2, 26.4.

75. VARRO, *De re rustica*, 1.59.2.

76. SQUIRE, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, 2009, pp. 410-413.

of *bacchanalia*. Euripides addresses this in *Bacchai*: The women of Thebes abandon the city and civilisation behind and head for the hills to practice in the cult of Dionysus. In their newly found savage state all labour is forgotten: they scrape the earth with their bare fingers and milk rises from it, they stomp the ground with *thyrsos* and a fountain of wine hatches from it, and honey trickles from the rods.<sup>77</sup> This literary description of abundance offered by uncultivated nature highlights the dispensability of human culture.

The consumable subjects of Campanian imagery were mostly composed of simple, frugal produce that could be grown in the private gardens of the *domus*, or game and seafood the Campanian towns dwellers could have easily purchased in the Macellum market – the sorts of food associated with good old-fashioned *mores maiorum*. Valerius Maximus asserts the simplicity of the ancient Romans in eating was a clear gauge of their civilisation and self-restraint.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, while the depicted food products may seem humble in their nature, the commissioning of these works of art is anything but: the image displayed is perceived as a rejection of *luxuria*, but the painting is in itself a luxurious product of delight.

In the Vatican *asàrotos òikos* mosaic, the types of food displayed do not correspond with sumptuary laws and *mores maiorum* ideas, rather the opposite – they display the farthest depiction of abundant living, hedonism, connoisseurship and *luxuria*. Many of the items depicted are scraps of expensive seafood: lobsters, sea urchins, tropical stripy or jagged Murex Brandaris shells – from which the purple dye for the colouring of royal robes was produced, oysters and a squid. Other luxury items are imported foodstuffs: figs, dates and date seeds – imported from the Middle East, mulberries and cherries of Asian origin, ginger roots imported from India as early as the first century CE, and lotus seeds – which according to Athenaeus were boiled and served in festive feasts as early as the second century BCE.<sup>79</sup> Alongside these difficult-to-obtain items, scraps of less exotic foodstuffs are also depicted: hazelnuts, almonds, acorns, fish, poultry, green and red grapes, olives, a slice of yellow apple, a small pine cone, some pomegranate seeds and withering laurel leaves which are scattered throughout. The majority of the foodstuffs are not local or rustic, nor do they represent traditional Roman dishes; rather, these are exotic foods (accused of corrupting Romans' moral standards), and a meal which is very definitely urban in nature (unlike the garden produce *xenia* of Pompeii), which coincides with the mosaic's discovery on the Aventine Hill – one of Rome's richest quarters. The copious amount of seafood is a signifier of special luxury. In a rhetorical ploy, Seneca employs the description of an expensive seafood plate at the centre of a tirade he gave against intolerance, greed and

77. EURIPIDES, *Bacchae*, 700-710.

78. VALERIUS MAXIMUS, *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium*, 2.5.5: «Fuit etiam illa simplicitas antiquorum in cibo capiendi humanitatis simul et continentiae certissima index».

79. ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophistae*, 3.72b-73b.

the blurring of morality amongst the Romans.<sup>80</sup> However, daily conduct was not always consistent with such moralistic rhetoric, as suggested by one of Horace's satires, in which the character of Davus, a free-tongued cheeky slave, criticises authority in the shape of the writer himself. Horace is a split soul who plays town and country mouse at whim.<sup>81</sup> He attests that he is gratefully satisfied with his present situation, and states that he does not wish for more than a plot of land, not overly large, and a plate of greens with just enough dressing. He claims that he does not long for the pleasurable oblivion of a life full of solitude, devoted to reading the books of the ancients, sleep and leisure, nor does he wish to treat his friends to suppers fit for the gods. At which point Davus rebukes the author, describing him as one whose appetite is disproportionate to his size, claiming that Horace only praises country vegetables when he is not busy loitering outside luxurious urban feasts, and that in his heart of hearts he prefers the «endlessly indulging feast» (*epulae sine fine petita*) over a «light snack» (*tenuis victus*).<sup>82</sup>

The display of imported foodstuffs from faraway locations is not merely a display of social and economic status, but could also hold a political meaning – a declaration of power by the ruling class of Imperial Rome, which at that time governed the vast majority of the ancient world, and regularly imported exotic foods from distant colonies. A literary parallel would be the gastronomical description of a plate of food called «Minerva's shield», which was made out of pike's livers, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, flamingo tongues and lamprey's testicles, all of which were brought into Rome by the captains of Roman war vessels presiding over the vast expanses of the empire – from Parthia to the Spanish Strait.<sup>83</sup> This dish represents the imperial conquest of the world in miniature.<sup>84</sup> The triumphs of the Roman Empire are bound together with the abundance of exotic food, and the good fortune of the host, who can serve these rich delicacies to his guests in testimony of his senatorial status.

This vast array of elitist symbolism disguised in the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics can only be fully understood when examined in the context of the social, economic and political changes of the time. While the Empire was at its imperialistic peak and Rome was awash in imported goods from faraway countries, the Roman elite was in danger of losing its superior status. In an effort to separate itself from the newly wealthy social climbers who were gaining political power, the Roman elite emphasised its cultural superiority by producing or commissioning works of literature and of visual art that were full of subtexts which could only be fully appreciated by other erudite

80. SENECA, *Epistles*, 95.26-29.

81. EMILY GOWERS: *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 133.

82. HORACE, *Satires*, 2.6.1; 4; 2.7.29-32; 107.

83. SÜETONIUS, *Vitellius*, 13.

84. GOWERS, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature*, 1993, p. 36.

members of the same group. Since the *triclinium* was the place in which a lot of these cultivated activities took place, its decoration played a special role in eliciting a discourse, one in which the guests could flaunt their knowledge and education. The theme is also closely associated with the elitist notion of *carpe diem* – encouraging members of the higher class to enjoy their privileges as much as they could, while they lasted, and before they would be overtaken by their subordinates. While some Roman moralists shied away from this form of appropriating luxurious Greek living, fearing it might destabilise the very core of Roman values, the educated members of the Roman elite welcomed it with open arms, finding refuge in leisure. Romans' obsession with death, their heightened awareness regarding the brevity of life, and their fear of the grim reaper knocking at their doors at any minute was closely linked with the funerary themes represented in several of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics. The mosaics do not allude solely to the traditional Roman rituals of the dead, but also to the Dionysian Mysteries and the cult of Osiris and Isis, flourishing amongst the members of the Roman elite at that time, promising the disciples already privileged in this life that their soul would also receive protection and better treatment in the afterlife. The programmatic theme of the *asàrotos òikos* mosaics binds together elitist hedonism with cultic participation since they represent two sides of the same coin – both are applications of the Roman elite's futile struggle against the inevitability of death: their desire to enjoy earthly life to the maximum, and their attempt at securing a better existence for their individual soul in the netherworld.

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