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**“A CASE FOR ARTISTIC INVENTION: A CYPRIOT PYRAMOS AND THISBE”
(PLATES XX-XXI)**

The excavations of Kyriakos Nicolaou at the House of Dionysos in Nea Paphos on Cyprus brought to light a remarkable series of imperial Roman mosaics. I am thankful to Kyriakos and Ino Nicolaou for their permission to study the iconography and style of these pavements for my forthcoming book from Cornell University Press. A number of the subjects are unusual in their themes and compositions, especially for the archaeologically confirmed date of the late second century A.D.¹ This paper will address the panel with Pyramos and Thisbe, the first from the south side of the four mythological scenes decorating the west portico.² The others from the south to the north are: Dionysos offering the gift of wine to Ikarios and the “First Wine Drinkers”; Poseidon and Amymon; and lastly, Apollo and Daphne. Each panel is individually framed by a band filled with a braid pattern, and all four panels are surrounded by a wide polychrome band of octagons and crosses that determine oblong hexagons. The figured panels are treated as pseudo-*emblemata*, that is, they are set within multiple decorative borders as framed pictures in the traditional eastern manner.

The panel with Pyramos and Thisbe provides evidence not only for a wide range of influences on the Paphian workshop, but also for its individuality. Discrepancies between the literary narrative and the pictorial representation of the story indicate a welding of at least two distinct traditions within this one panel. An analysis of this local variant of the tale of Pyramos and Thisbe sheds light on iconographic exchanges between the Greek East and the Latin West during the Roman Imperial period, as well as on the mechanics of transmission and production.

Only two panels are provided with inscriptions to identify figures and these are Pyramos and Thisbe and the “First Wine-Drinkers”. In both instances the use of labels suggests that these are self-conscious inventions. The Pyramos and Thisbe scene does have antecedents, while the “Invention of Wine” mosaic seems to be a completely fresh creation. It is precisely because the sources of the Pyramos and Thisbe composition are traceable and the combination of figures appears to be *ad hoc* that it offers a rare insight into the process of artistic production.

The panel (1.15 X 2.26m) includes Thisbe standing to the left, Pyramos reclined to the right and a spotted leopardess in the background between them (pl. XXa). Thisbe, in a contrapposto stance, lifts up her extended right hand with open palm as she turns her face towards Pyramos and her other hand extends downward. Her grey sleeveless chiton with red-brown folds falls in three tiers down to her orange-colored feet. The costume slips off her left shoulder, revealing her breast. She wears a cap-like headdress and her hair falls in four long curly locks down to her shoulders. She stands near a rocky outcrop with a tall leafy bush. In contrast, Pyramos lies on the ground against a rocky hill, propped up by his left hand resting on a metallic hydria that is overturned and flowing. He holds tall green river-reeds in the same hand, while his right lifts up an orange and yellow cornucopia filled with fruits. A crown of reeds rests on his head indicating, along with the other attributes and his reclining position, that he represents a river god. A grey himation with dark green folds drapes over his left arm and covers him from the waist down. He turns his beardless face away from Thisbe. In the background between the ill-fated lovers, a spotted leopardess stands on a mound of grey earth and clutches Thisbe's cloak in her maw.

1. See J. Hayes forthcoming volume in the *Paphos* (III) series to be published by the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus.

2. For the preliminary report of the excavation and description of this mosaic see K. Nicolaou, “The Mosaics at Kato Paphos”, *RDAC* 1963, 56-72, esp. 11-12; and C. Vermeule, *Greek and Roman Cyprus* (Boston 1976) 95, n. 10.

The presence of the cloak, leopardess, and young maiden recalls Ovid's account in the fourth book of the *Metamorphoses* (55-166) wherein Pyramos and Thisbe are the prototypical star-crossed lovers. The two young lovers, prevented from meeting by their feuding families, arrange a secret nocturnal rendez-vous at Ninus' tomb. Thisbe arrives first and is frightened away by the approach of a lioness with her fresh kill. She drops her cloak in flight and when Pyramos arrives he sees it bloodied, having been mauled by the lioness, and assumes the worst. He kills himself and when Thisbe returns she finds his body and does likewise, after a heart-wrenching soliloquy. Her blood stains a mulberry tree, perhaps indicated by a spiky bush in our mosaic, which henceforth bears black fruits in mourning for the lovers.

The Paphian mosaic clearly portrays the moment when Thisbe flees and the lioness, here a spotted leopardess, finds the abandoned cloak. Thisbe's fright is persuasively depicted by her gestures—extended arms and fingers, open palms; by her expression of surprise with widened eyes and pursed lips; and by the chiton slipping off her shoulders indicating a state of disarray. The figure of a reclining river god at this point in the drama might represent the spring at which the lioness quenches her thirst before stalking away (*Metamorphoses* IV. 98). However, the label "Pyramos" indicates another intention.

There is a well established legend preserved in late antique sources from the East that connects Pyramos and Thisbe in a very different way.³ The earliest of these is Nonnos' *Dionysiaca* (VI. 346-355), written in fifth century Alexandria, but undoubtedly based on earlier sources in which Pyramos is a river god. In this poem Pyramos and Thisbe are described as two rivers that, along with the Nile and Euphrates, Alpheios and Arethusa, are likened to lovers who seek each other and flow into one another. Topographically, Pyramos is a river in Cilicia that is included in Strabo's *Geography*.⁴ The presence of Pyramos as river god in Paphos must reflect knowledge of the eastern legend and a familiarity with the river itself; it might also testify to the currency of a local (eastern) variant of the Ovidian account.⁵

The Paphian mosaic represents a fusion of the Ovidian and eastern traditions. Pictorially, the panel is a conflation. The lioness and cloak can be found in Pompeian paintings that illustrate Ovid's text, and Pyramos occurs as a river god in Syrian mosaics. The only visual parallel for the representation of Thisbe at Paphos is found in a recently discovered mosaic with Pyramos and Thisbe from a Roman villa in Carranque (Toledo), Spain. An examination of the respective sources elucidates the *ad hoc* process involved in the selection and combination of figures in the Paphian composition. Of the four Pompeian paintings, and one from a tomb on the Isola Sacra in Rome depicting Pyramos and Thisbe, three include the lioness and two the cloak.⁶ The comparison

3. For a discussion of the different accounts of Pyramos and Thisbe, see T.T. Duke, "Ovid's Pyramos and Thisbe", *The Classical Journal* 66 (1971) 320-327; also see I. Baldassarre, "Piramo e Tisbe: dal Mito all'Imaginario", *L'Art Décoratif à Rome (Collection de l'Ecole Française de Rome* 55, 1981) 338, n. 6; and *RE* XXIV, 1-11 s.v. "Pyramos" and VII (A1), 286-291 s.v. "Thisbe".

4. For a geographical account of the Pyramos river see, *RE* s.v. "Pyramos".

5. For a discussion of eastern versions of the legend, see Duke, 1971 (above n. 3). Peter Knox, in a forthcoming article, "Pyramos and Thisbe in Cyprus", in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* suggests that the Paphian mosaic attests to the currency of a popular eastern version of the story that was closer to Ovid's account than hitherto imagined.

6. A painting from the House of Lucretius Fronto (V, 4, 11) shows only the rear of the lioness as she flees in the upper right hand corner (Baldassarre, above n.3, p. 341, fig. 2); the lioness and cloak are found in a painting from the House of the "Bikini Venus" (*ibid.*, p. 341, fig. 3); and in a painting from the House of Loreius Tiburtinus (II, 2, 2) the lioness is in full view leaping toward the left hand side of the panel (*ibid.*, p. 342, fig. 4). The example from Pompeii, IX, 5, 14, now in the Naples museum (G.E. Rizzo, *La Pittura ellenistico-romano*, Milan, 1929, pl. CXXXIV, a) and the one from the Isola Sacra (Baldassarre, above n. 3, p. 343, figs. 5-6) do not include either the cloak or the lioness.

with the Paphian mosaic ends here. The Pompeian scenes show the tragic climax of the tale when Thisbe flings herself over him, lifting herself up with her extended left hand and plunging in the sword with the right (pl. XXb).⁷ The site of Ninus' tomb is designated by a stone pillar with a funerary urn in two cases, and in all but one example the paintings include a young tree.⁸ In the instances where the lioness is included, she is definitely fleeing in the background and the cloak remains in the foreground hanging on a tree. Quite clearly from their very similar treatment of the subject, the Pompeian paintings derive from a common model. In the Paphian mosaic, the presence of the cloak and leopardess indicates a familiarity with Ovid's tale but does not necessarily indicate a dependence on the Pompeian source.

The discovery of the Carranque mosaic, tentatively dated on stylistic grounds from the mid-4th century to the mid-5th century, provides evidence for the circulation of a visual model in the west that differs from the Pompeian paintings and is closer to the Paphian mosaic.⁹ On the Spanish floor mosaic *Pyramos and Thisbe* (pl. XXIa) form one of four "lunette" panels with mythological scenes that, according to the inscription, decorated a *cubiculum*. Thisbe occupies the center of the panel as she runs with outstretched hands towards the left, away from the frightful sight of the lioness mauling the blood-stained cloak.¹⁰ At the far left Pyramos stands behind a tree with white berries, most likely the mulberry bush which will have its fruits stained red in memory of the blood of the lovers.¹¹ With the exception of the representation of Pyramos as an adult male rather than as a river deity, the Carranque mosaic is quite close-stylistic differences aside-to the Paphian composition. Certainly, the existence of this scene as far west as Spain and in mosaic underlines the fact that the Paphian artist could well have depended on a visual model that he adapted according to local traditions. It may also be possible to postulate a literary source that predates Ovid with a storyline that follows the outline indicated in the Paphian mosaic. However, the presence of the lioness and cloak in the Paphos mosaic and the white berry tree in the Carranque mosaic argue forcefully for a familiarity with the Ovidian account; the representation of Pyramos as a river deity argues for a local artistic reinterpretation.

The depiction of Pyramos as a young, beardless river god occurs twice in Antioch, in the House of Cilicia and in the House of Porticoes (pl. XXIb).¹² In these Antiochene mosaics, however, Pyramos appears as a bust crowned with reeds accompanied by other river gods identified by inscriptions. A key to understanding the genesis of the Paphian Pyramos is provided by the late second century mosaics from the Portico of the Rivers in the House of the Porticoes wherein four square panels contain busts of the rivers Alpheios, Arethusa, Pyramos and Thisbe. Arethusa and Thisbe appear as female busts and confirm the interpretation of these four as two pairs of lovers transformed into the rivers and springs described in Nonnos' poem. In the early second century House of Cilicia, only two of the four busts survive, Pyramos and Tigris, who are assigned a topographical meaning because of their combination with the personification of Cilicia.¹³

7. The example shown here is from the House of Lucretius Fronto (V, 4, 11), see Rizzo (above n. 6) pl. CXXXIV, b; and K. Scheffold, *Die Wände Pompejis* (Berlin 1957) 86.

8. The one painting without a tree is from the House of the "Bikini Venus" (I, 11, 6), see Baldassarre (above n. 3) fig. 3.

9. See J. Arce, "El mosaico de Las Metamorfosis' de Carranque (Toledo)," *Madridrer Mitteilungen* 27 (1986) 365-374, pl. 71a.

10. Arce (above n.9, 368) identifies the feline as a tigress, but the stripes appear to be stylized shadow lines used by the mosaicist throughout the floor, see especially the figure of Pyramos who is covered with the same light stripes.

11. See Duke (above n. 3) 324-325, on the white mulberry tree.

12. See D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947) 58, pl. IX, b and pp. 109-110, pl. XVIII, c, respectively.

13. Levi (above n. 12) 58, where Levi suggests the missing rivers are the Kydnos and the Euphrates.

The Paphian Pyramos clearly alludes to the fluvial divinity known to us from Nonnos' poem. Syrian artists outside Antioch were also aware of this tradition because at least one of the four mosaics of seated river gods from the Severan Baths of Ghallineh (district of Lattakia) represents a fluvial couple.¹⁴ The river Alpheios, identified by inscription, is depicted sitting beside his consort Arethusa, the Sicilian fountain nymph, who puts her arm around his shoulder.¹⁵ He holds a metallic (gold?) cornucopia and she holds a (silver?) pitcher in her left hand, providing the only attributes that distinguish this otherwise generic scene of a romantic couple. This Syrian mosaic shows that these watery lovers were represented also as full-length figures. In addition, a mosaic from Antioch of around the mid-third century represents two reclining river gods labeled as Ladon and Psalis attest to the Syrian penchant for such personifications.¹⁶

It is probable that the unique Paphian scene represents a conflation resulting from an eastern artist's reinterpretation of a western illustration of Ovid's tale according to the tradition with which he was most familiar, namely that reflected in Nonnos' poem. The Paphian Thisbe appears to be a generic type of standing female who uses standard gestures of exclamation.¹⁷ The cloak and leopardess necessarily derive from the Ovidian version and Pyramos as a river god strongly supports the argument for ties to an Antiochene workshop. The mosaicist might have misunderstood the western model, substituting the hero with a river god and a lioness with a leopardess, because he was unfamiliar with both the pictorial and the literary tradition of the West. The depiction of Pyramos as a river god could also have been based on the local knowledge of the craftsman, that is, that the course of the Pyramos river was traced by Strabo from the coast of Cilicia to its mouth in northeastern Cyprus.¹⁸ The figure of Pyramos, thus, not only attests to the currency of the Antiochene repertoire in Paphos, but also refers generally to the geographic proximity of the coast of Syria and Asia Minor.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η παρούσα μελέτη ασχολείται με την παράξενη απεικόνιση του Πύραμου και της Θίσβης σε ψηφιδωτό της Έπαυλης του Διονύσου στην Πάφο. Από συγκρίσεις με παρόμοιες παραστάσεις και από φιλολογικές πηγές, φαίνεται καθαρά πως ο ψηφοθέτης δημιούργησε μια επί τόπου σύνθεση κάνοντας χρήση στοιχείων από ένα καλά γνωστό και πλατιά διαδομένο οπτικό μοντέλο, το οποίο προσαρμοσε και διαφοροποίησε, για να ταιριάζει στην τοπική (ανατολική) εκδοχή του μύθου. Προσεκτική ανάλυση αυτού του ψηφιδωτού αποκαλύπτει τον τρόπο των καλλιτεχνικών ανταλλαγών μεταξύ της ελληνικής Ανατολής και της λατινικής Δύσης, καθώς επίσης και τους τρόπους δημιουργίας ψηφιδωτών.

14. J. Balty, *Mosaïques Antiques de Syrie* (Brussels 1977) 14-15, who illustrates and discusses the panel with the Orontes now in the Damascus Museum. The other panels are unpublished. Balty assigns them to the Severan period on the basis of style.

15. This mosaic is in the Tartous Museum. The author is indebted to Dr. Terry Allen for the information and visual documentation.

16. The mosaic is from room 13 in the House of Menander, upper level, Levi (above n. 12) 205, pl. XLVI, c.

17. The pose is very similar to the one Phaedra strikes in the House of the Red Pavement, see Levi (above n. 12) 75, pl. XI, b; and her gesture of exclamation replicates the one used by Narcissus in the House of Narcissus, *ibid.*, pl. X, b.

18. See above n. 4.



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b



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b