Boundaries, Magic, and Popular Religion in two Mosaics from Ancient Thysdrus (El Jem in Tunisia)

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Illustration 1: *Owl Mosaic,* late 3rd century CE. Threshold mosaic from the Baths of the Owl in Thysdrus, El Jem Museum, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Illustration 2: *January* from the *Mosaic of the Months,* late 2nd/ early 3rd century CE from room 6, the House of the Months in Thysdrus, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

This paper demonstrates how two mosaics from Thysdrus (modern El Jem in Tunisia): the *Owl Mosaic* of the late third century CE [illustration 1], a threshold mosaic from the Baths of the Owl and the *January* panel of *The Mosaic of the Months* from the House of the Months [illustration 2], dating to the late second-early third century CE, may be

viewed through the lenses of the materiality of magic[50] and lived ancient religion[51] for highlighting intersections among boundaries, magic, and what has been considered popular religious practices.

Jerry Toner defines popular culture as "the culture of the non-elite" that was "the unofficial and subordinate culture of Roman society."[52] Toner's "non-elite" were employed in various professions: "peasants, craftsmen and artisans, labourers, healers, fortune-tellers, storytellers and entertainers, shopkeepers and traders," as well as "women, their children," slaves, and the poor.[53] Other terms for non-elite or popular culture include "the culture of the Roman plebs,"[54] that of "ordinary Romans,"[55] and that of "sub-elites."[56] According to Clarke, the ability to be esteemed was what divided the "elite" from the "non-elite."[57]

Domestic religious practices have been discussed in terms of popular religion, religious aspects of popular culture,[58] but Romans of all classes participated in the domestic cult. Likewise, belief in the power of magic was not limited to the non-elite,[59] even if an elite author scorned a specific magical rite or practitioner.

There is, however, no universal definition for magic. Scholarship has been divided between the emic (the insider) and the etic (the outsider) interpretations based on terms developed by Kenneth Pike in 1967. Magic may be interpreted as a divide between one group and another where magic is an unauthorized practice conducted by the other group, eventually entering into a discussion between what belongs to the one group and

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[50] Studies of ancient magic have largely been the focus of philologists focusing on the "text" of textual sources such as papyri and inscribed objects like lead curse tablets. In recent years, there have been more publications focusing on the material aspects of magic due toward what Bremmer, 2015, p.9 calls the "material turn" that developed from the "cultural turn" which began in the 1980s and 1990s. Examples of these include Boschung and Bremmer, 2015, Houlbrook and Armitage, 2015, Wilburn, 2016, and Parker and McKie, 2018.

[51] Lived ancient religion, the theory proposed by Rüpke, 2011, arose from lived religion which focuses on "what people actually do" Rüpke, 2019.

[52] Toner, 2009, p.1

[53] Toner, 2009, p.1

[54] Horsfall, 2012

[55] Clarke, 2003. Clarke's Introduction, with a reference to Géza Alföldy's *A Social History of Rome*, provides a discussion of the "four prerequisites" for membership among the "elite" of Roman society- "money, important public appointments, social prestige, and a membership in an *ordo*. (The *ordines* are those of senator, decurion, and equestrian.)" Clarke, 2003, p.4 Additional studies of non-elite Roman culture can be found in Orr, 1980, Dorcey, 1992, Santrot et al., 2007, De Angelis et al., 2012, Joshel and Petersen, 2015, Houlbrook and Armitage, 2015, Petersen, 2015b, Petersen, 2015a, Teixidor, 2015, Grig, 2016b, Perry, 2016, Flower, 2017, and Richlin, 2017. Croom, 2010, p.33 states that in the first century CE, 1,000,000 *sesterces* were required for a senator and 400,000 *sesterces* for an equestrian.

[56] Perry, 2016

[57] Clarke, 2003, p.5

[58] Bodel, 2008, p.251 and Orr, 1980. In conjunction with "popular medicine" see Harris, 2016 and Draycott, 2017. For connections between popular religious practices and that of the Roman state see Alvar Nuño, 2011.

[59] Toner p. 40 cites Libanius' discovery of magic having been employed against him in Libanius, *Orations* I.249. Denzey Lewis, 2015, p.259 addresses magic not being limited to a certain social class in Late Antiquity, especially in regard to early Christianity.

what belongs to the other.[60] This other can co-exist alongside what has been classified as official practices, and may even be recognized as beneficial for carrying out certain purposes.[61]

Determining what is the other may be a manner of perception. Emphasizing foreign origins for magical rites, such as those performed by Circe and Medea, infamous mythological witches, may have allowed Romans to overlook similarities between magic and the official state religion.[62] Recently, David Frankfurter has proposed that the terms "magic" or "magical" can serve as a quality of certain practices and materials that highlights for our scholarly scrutiny features of materiality, potency, or verbal or ritual performance we might not otherwise appreciate as part of a culture's religious world, or aspects of the social location of ritual practices we might not otherwise appreciate. "Magic"- the category- becomes thus a heuristic tool rather than a second-order (etic) classification.[63]

Magical intent can be gleaned through objects themselves, such as how they were handled, where they were placed or oriented, who they were directed towards, and by whom. These material aspects may be gathered to analyze how magic and religion might have overlapped, existed simultaneously, or clashed. This is in keeping with the theory of lived ancient religion, where the emphasis is not on a prescribed set of beliefs, but on the religious actions carried out in the course of everyday life.[64] Within lived ancient religion, there does not need to be a divide between magic and religion, but a flexibility depending upon particular situations. In the case of the mosaics from Thysdrus, the objects demonstrate magic, or at least elements of magic such as the warding off of evil, transcending social class within a North African town.

Thysdrus (modern El Jem)[65] was located in the province of Africa Proconsularis[66] about half-way between the modern cities of Sousse and Sfax, laying on a plateau slightly over 550 feet (168m) high.[67] Thysdrus' designation as a "free town" (*oppida libera*) resulted in its growth into a trading center, a crossroads between the coastal cities and

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[60] Frankfurter, 2019, p.5
[61] Frankfurter, 2019, p.5
[62] Alvar Nuño, 2011, pp.123–124
[63] Frankfurter, 2019, pp.13–14
[64] Raja and Rüpke, 2015, p.4
[65] Thysdrus is the most commonly used form for the ancient name of the town (a convention I follow) although other forms include Thysdra and Tisdra. According to a label in the El Jem Museum, the name Thysdrus, which is of Berber origin, might mean "the passage."
[66] Augustus combined *Africa vetus*, "old Africa," which became a province after the end of the Punic Wars, with *Africa nova*, "new Africa," which included former Numidian territory, to form *Africa Proconsularis*. After Diocletian divided *Africa Proconsularis* into three sub-divisions, Thysdrus became part of the province of *Byzacena*. For more on the history of Thysdrus see Slim and Rebourg, 1995, Slim, 1996, Eastman, 1996, and Guizani, 2013.
[67] Slim, 1996, p.8

settlements further inland.[68] During the late second and early third centuries CE, Thysdrus became one of the most prosperous towns in Africa largely due to its olive oil industry.[69] In 238 CE, Thysdrus was the site of a riot that resulted in Gordian I being proclaimed emperor. The site is best known today for its large Roman amphitheatre,[70] and as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Thysdrus also possessed a circus for chariot races that was nearly the size of the Circus of Maxentius in Rome; with its circus and two amphitheatres, Thysdrus was an entertainment capital for the region. Elaborate mosaics decorated the floors of many of Thysdrus's buildings, attesting to the wealth of the town. The mosaics of Thysdrus are among the most important in North Africa due to their large, polychrome compositions of various subjects.[71] They also attest to the town's workshops which served Thysdrus and its surrounding areas.[72]

Aicha Ben Abed Ben Khader describes Roman Africa as "the archetypal land of magic, people feared evil spells, the occult power of magicians, and the "negative energy" radiated by the malevolent eye of the jealous."[73] The evil eye, (*oculi maligni*), or the power of the malicious gaze of the envious, was a real fear in antiquity (and in some Mediterranean countries today), not just among pagans.[74] John H. Elliott asks: "Who and what attracts the Evil Eye and envy?" [75] The answer is simply "anyone and anything of value," yet certain persons, including children, attractive young adults, and pregnant women were more at risk than others.[76] Passage from one important stage of life to another could also draw the attention of the evil eye.[77] Likewise, boundaries, such as property lines and the intersections of streets within towns, were both dangerous and sacred. They presented weakened points in the lines of defense that could be penetrated

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[68] Slim, 1996, pp.14–16

[69] Olive tree groves can still be seen in the countryside surrounding El Jem; many more may have existed in antiquity when the climate was not as arid as it is today. According to a December 2017 *Reuters* article, olive oil is still a major industry in Tunisia, with 80% of almost 280 million tons exported. https://www.reuters.com/article/tunisia-economy/tunisia-expects-surge-in-olive-oil-production-in-fillip-to-battered-economy-idUSL8N1OI3B9

[70]The Large Amphitheatre of Thysdrus held 35,000 spectators; only the Colosseum and amphitheatre of Capua in Italian Campania were larger. The first amphitheatre of Thysdrus was built (ca. first century CE) underneath where the Small Amphitheatre, (early Flavian period, ca. 70-90 CE) can be found today, a short walk from the museum and the visible large houses of the south-west quarter such as the *Sollertiana Domus* and the House of the Peacock. For more on the amphitheatres of Thysdrus see Slim, 1986.

[71] Figural subjects include the realm of Bacchus/ Dionysos (god, fauns/ satyrs, maenads, etc.), illustration of myths, the amphitheatre (wild animal hunts and the symbols of the factions who were in charge of staging the games), the Four Seasons, etc. geometric (black and white and polychrome) designs and vegetal scrolls are also significant non-figural subjects. These mosaics are housed in museums across Tunisia including the National Bardo Museum in Tunis, the Sousse Museum, and the El Jem Museum.

[72] For more on the mosaic workshops of Thysdrus see Eastman, 1996, p.24, 2001, p.184

[73] Ben Khader, 2006, p.59. This statement is not surprising; the North African town of Sabratha was where Apuleius was brought up on charges for allegedly using magic in order to marry a wealthy woman in 158 CE. For more on Apuleius' trial, see Bradley, 1997.

[74] Donceel-Voûte, 2018, p.47 states that two of the ceiling tiles from the third century CE Jewish synagogue at Dura-Europos were of images of the evil eye being attacked. Early Christians also believed in the power of the evil eye.

[75] Elliott, 2016, p.143

[76] Elliott, 2016, pp.143–144

[77] Elliott, 2016, p.144

by the evil eye both physically and spiritually. These weak points would often need to be secured, especially by supernatural means, that is, through the use of magic.

Wielders of the evil eye did not just dislike their targets; they hated them and actively wished them harm.[78] Envy (*invidia* in Latin or *pthonos*, φθόνοσ, in Greek) was often the cause for such hatred. Yet, damage brought upon by the evil eye could even be unintentional.[79] Wind chimes, often in the form of an erect phallus (*tintinnabula*) with bells attached by chains, were hung in Roman domestic spaces to avert the evil eye. The purpose of the phallus, a powerful symbol of male fertility, and its bells were to distract malicious forces and to be humorous[80] because laughter could break the gaze of the person casting the evil eye.[81] The gaze was the means by which the evil eye could do its harm. Even the Latin word for Envy (*invidia*), coming from the verb *invideo*, has the power of the gaze at its core.[82]

Tintinnabulae were not the only means of dispelling the evil eye. Elliott lists other methods (*apotropaica*): "powerful words, sayings, incantations, curses, manual gestures, and actions such as spitting, affixing plaques and protective devices to houses and shops, placing mosaics at house thresholds, and the wearing and employing of amulets of various kinds and sizes."[83] Several of these *apotropaica* operate through *mimesis*, or imitation, where an image of something may be embedded with "the power of or over that object," which is based upon the idea of "like influences like (*simila similibus*),"[84] or sympathetic magic. In Elliott's words, "the power that harms, is the same that can protect."[85] Such is the case of the apotropaic phallic images, which do not function as fertility symbols, but deflect the malice of the evil eye backward upon the one wielding it. The Roman pantheon also consisted of several deities whose powers could be invoked when faced with a boundary and its dangers including the *Lares Compitales* (gods of the crossroads), the dual-faced Janus, and even Fascinus. Fascinus was the embodiment of an erect phallus, described by Pliny the Elder[86] as a protector of both babies and triumphant generals, whose worship was presided over by the Vestal Virgins, indicating the incorporation of his cult into the official state religion.[87] Like

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[78] Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983, p.10

[79] Dasen, 2015, p.181; Bailliot, 2019, pp.181–182 cite Plutarch *Moralia Table-Talk* 682A, where children can become the accidental victims of even their own father's gaze. This emphasizes the need for the protection of children against the evil eye.

[80] Clarke, 2007, p.69. For more information on *tintinnabulae* see Martínez, 2011; Alvar Nuño, 2012; Berriola, 2016; and Parker, 2018.

[81] Bond, 2015 and Clarke, 2007, p.69

[82] Bailliot, 2019, p.180 note # 26, citing Ernout and Meillet, 1951, p.494

[83] Elliott, 2016, pp.158–159. Dasen, 2015, p.181 references Plutarch *Moralia Table-Talk* 681E-682A, where amulets (*probaskania*) are described as wearable forms of protection, whose strange appearance were designed as traps for the evil eye. Bailliot, 2019, p.182 states that amulets with the shape of phalloi and eyes were among the most common types. For more on phallic amulets see Alvar Nuño, 2012; Whitmore, 2018.

[84] Elliott, 2016, p.159

[85] Elliott, 2016, p.162

[86] Pliny, *Natural History*, XXVIII.39. Alvar Nuño, 2011, p.113 states that Pliny is the sole text that refers to Fascinus.

[87] Alvar Nuño, 2011, pp.113–114 and Bailliot, 2019, p.182

tintinnabulae and amulets possessing a phallic shape, the form of Fascinus, repelled envy and the evil eye.

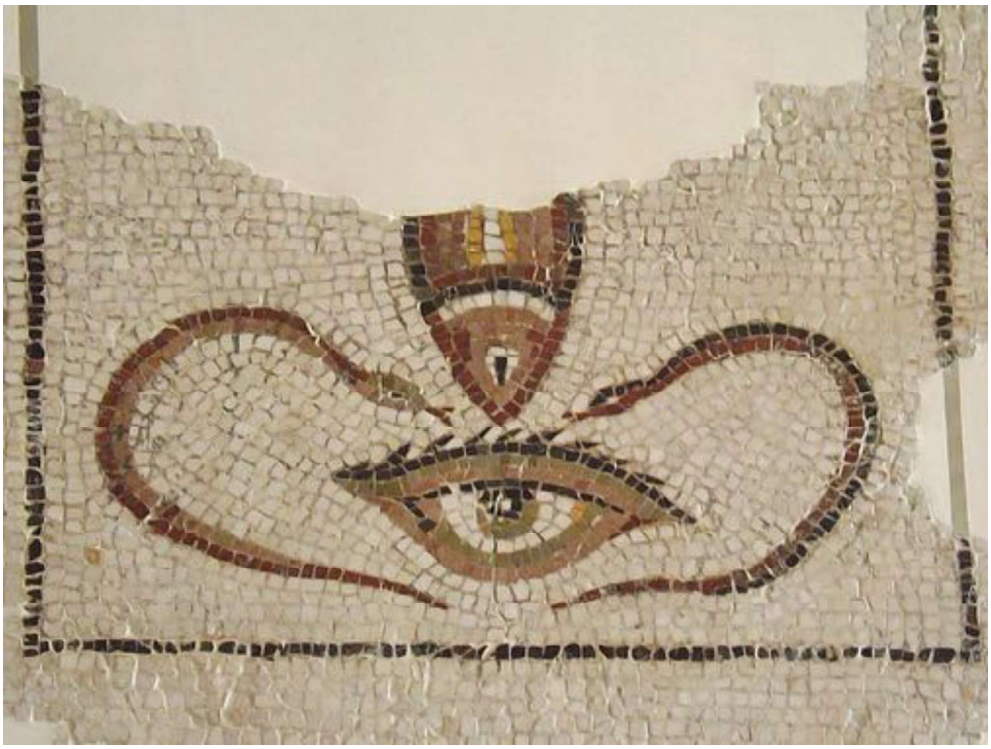

Illustration 3: *Threshold Mosaic* from a Roman house in modern Moknine, Tunisia, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Images of the phallus could also appear in mosaics. Several threshold mosaics are in the collection of the Sousse Museum.[88] A fragmentary threshold mosaic from modern Moknine, located between Sousse (ancient Hadrume(n)tum) and El Jem (ancient Thysdrus), depicts a fish-shaped phallus with an eye above a representation of an open human eye enclosed by snakes.[89] [illustration 3] The inclusion of the evil eye affirms the mosaic's magical intent. A Roman house in Thysdrus, itself, contained a mosaic with an

[88] See Foucher, 1957 for more information on the apotropaic mosaics in the Sousse Museum and Alvar Nuño, 2012, pp.172–174 for North Africa in general, including those from Sousse.

[89] Elliott, 2016, p.202 suggests that the fish-phallus is ejaculating into the eye, combing the powers of the phallus with "spitting." Greek tragedy connects snakes with the evil eye: Aeschylus, *Persians* 81-82 and Euripides *Orestes* 479-480. For more on snakes and the evil eye see Elliott, 2016, p.140

erect phallus and two bulls.[90] Mosaics, such as these with phalloi work as apotropaia to keep the destructive force of the evil eye from entering a building.[91]

Ben Khader's statement about magic rings true not just for North Africa, but for much of the Roman world. However, it might have special significance for Thysdrus. There is epigraphic evidence on a fragment of terracotta from a cemetery south of modern El Jem (Thysdrus) for a "magic shop" (*officina magica*) belonging to a magician/potter named Donatus.[92] According to Louis Foucher, inscriptions on pottery related to magic are uncommon.[93] Foucher asks several questions including whether the reason why we do not have more evidence for Donatus' work is because the excavations of Thysdrus have produced so few cemeteries, and what other goods Donatus might have produced.[94]

Cemeteries are significant because they have yielded evidence for magic in the form of curse tablets (*defixiones*). *Defixiones* were usually inscribed on lead tablets and involved the invocation of (usually) spirits of the underworld, followed by the burial of the tablet near its intended victim. They were used in various situations, including attending or participating in the games in the circus or amphitheatre. Based on surviving evidence, it was more common for curses to have been used in the circus.[95] At the end of the 19th century, about forty curse tablets were discovered in cemeteries located near Hadrume(n)tum (modern Sousse),[96] which have been dated to the second- third centuries CE. based upon the dating of the cemeteries.[97] This is the same time period as the *Owl Mosaic* and the *Mosaic of the Months*, and even in antiquity, Hadrume(n)tum was not a great distance from Thysdrus. The material from Sousse is also significant because there was also a magician's kit, an undecorated container for curse tablets with an inscribed (although incredibly worn) single, broken tablet and the stylus used to make the inscription placed inside the box.[98] According to Michael D'Amato, magic was a

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[90] Alvar Nuño, 2012, p.172

[91] According to Dunbabin, 1979, p.162 the room that the threshold mosaic of the fish-phallus opened onto contained a mosaic with a gorgoneion, another apotropaic image. This would have ensured extra protection. One apotropaic image would not cancel out another, rather it would have added even more reinforcement.

[92] Foucher, 2000b, pp.57–58. "*ECXOFICINAMAGICA, DONATVSTISOCTIBIOTAMVS, TEBIDERE.*" which Foucher has amended to *"Ecx of(f)icina magica Donatus t(u)is (h)oc tibi o(p)tamus te bidere (= videre)"* Foucher, 2000b, pp.58–59.

[93] Foucher, 2000b, p.59

[94] Foucher, 2000b, p.59

[95] Zaleski, 2014, p.599 cites the burial of curses within a cemetery near the circus of Carthage and Le Glay, 1990, p.222 and Zaleski, 2014, p.599 cite a curse from the amphitheatre of Carthage that wishes for the death and destruction of a hunter named Gallicus. For more on *defixiones* and their role in the games see Heintz, 1998 and Gómez-Pantoja Fernández-Salguero, 2007.

[96] Németh, 2011, p.96. The curse tablets from Hadrume(n)tum were first published by Auguste Audollent in the early 20th century.

[97] Németh, 2013, p.204

[98] Németh, 2013, pp.203–205. Németh, 2013, p.203 concluded that the kit, which had also been previously identified with a Carthaginian provenance, was indeed from Hadrume(n)tum. According to Németh, 2011, p.96, the *charakteres,* or magical symbols, are unique to Hadrume(n)tum.

serious business in Hadrume(n)tum, where evidence points toward two different magicians, whom he calls "ritual experts," producing objects for profit.[99]

As both a craftsman and a magician, Donatus was not a member of the elite. He might not have been the only magician working in the vicinity of Thysdrus at a particular time, as seen by the presence of magicians in Hadrume(n)tum. When the games were in session, Thysdrus's population swelled. This would have been an opportunity for increased revenue for businesses housing and feeding the crowds coming to watch the games. Likewise, the influx of visitors may have also included traveling magicians or even those from nearby Hadrume(n)tum, eager for their share of the profits and to fulfill the populace's needs for ensuring a favorite's success in the arena or debilitating certain opponents by means of *defixiones*. With competition among magicians, or each specializing in different types of magic, Donatus would have had a need to advertise his services.

The provincial elite of Thysdrus may have accumulated their wealth from the entertainments in the amphitheatre or the exportation of olive oil, but local architectural (and environmental - due to availability of water) preferences meant that many of even the largest of Thysdrus' houses were built without baths; most of the town's residents would have frequented public baths.[100] As in Pompeii, there were several public bath complexes distributed through the town. The Baths of the Owl was a small facility located in the south-east quarter of Thysdrus.[101] [illustration 4] The *Owl Mosaic*, the namesake of the baths, [illustration 1] was from the threshold of the *frigidarium*, or cold pool.[102]

[99] In November 2019, Michael D'Amato of the University of California at Riverside presented his unpublished paper, The Economy of Magic in Roman Hadrumetum at the Columbia University Ancient Mediterranean Graduate Student Conference, The World Upside Down.

[100] Eastman, 1996, p.19. Foucher, 1961, p.37 records a private bath in the First House in Terrain Jilani Guirat.

[101] Vismara, 2007, p.112. Thébert, 2003's entry for Thysdrus contains only the Great Baths. Foucher, 1961 contains the excavation report for the Small Baths.

[102] Vismara, 2007, p.112 and Bustamante, 2012, p.124

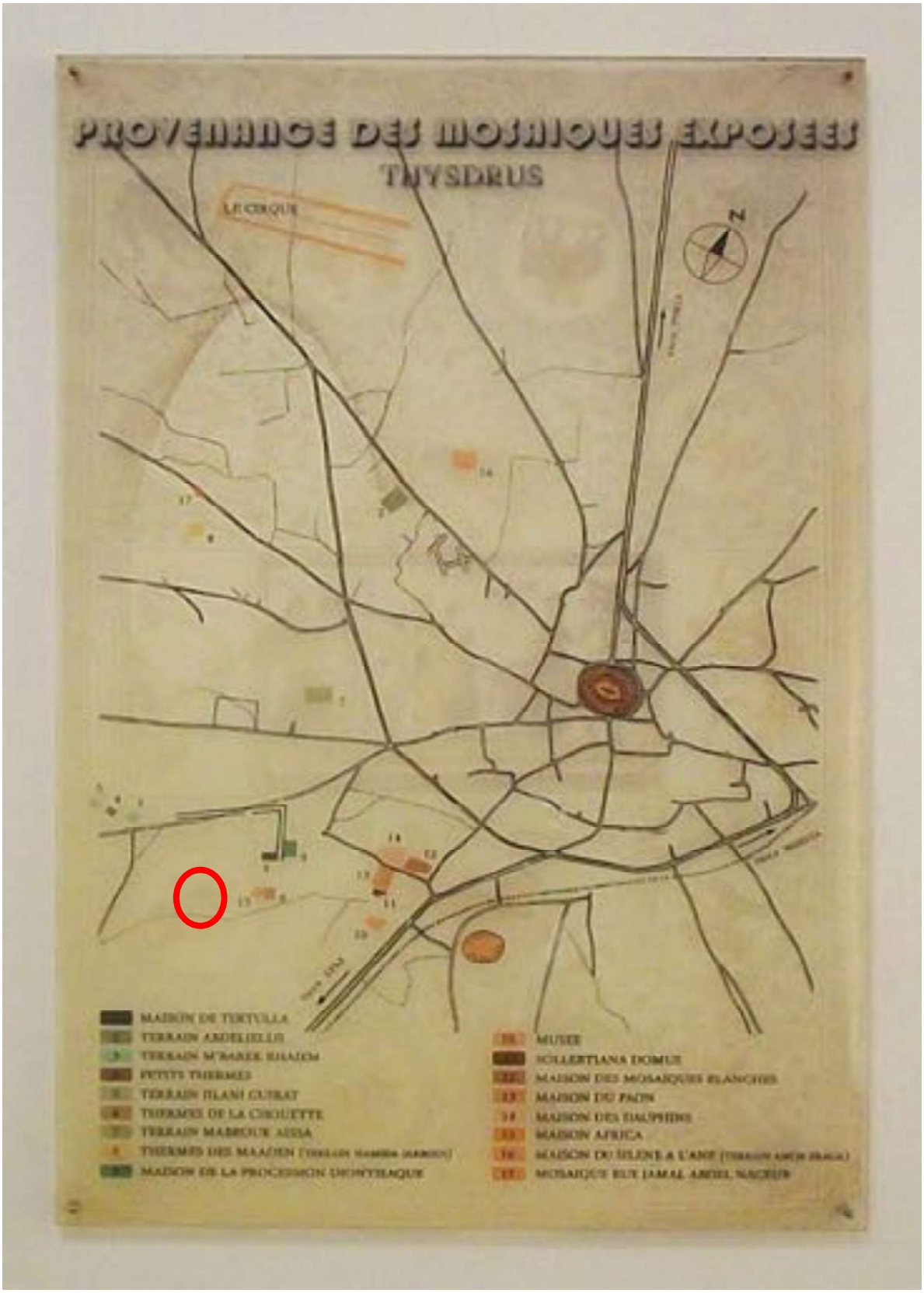

Illustration 4: Plan of Thysdrus showing the locations of the mosaics in the El Jem Museum (the Baths of the Owl are circled), El Jem Museum, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The mosaic measures almost two feet (60 cm) long by a little over one and one-quarter feet (40 cm) wide.[103] It contains a large, over-life-size, almost anthropomorphic, clothed owl standing in the center[104] whose gaze is frontal, although its body is in three-quarter view,[105] surrounded by several other birds that are smaller in scale.[106] Magali Baillot has even seen the tip of the left wing of the owl as giving "the middle finger" (*medius impudicus*) to the other birds.[107] Naturalism has yielded to abstraction in the mosaicist's use of hierarchical perspective; the owl is the largest and the most important element (although the degree of abstraction makes identifying a particular species of owl difficult), but all of the birds are enlarged, with some about a third of the size of the two trees that flank the owl. These trees appear to be olive trees,[108] which might not reach great heights, but should be quite a bit larger than songbirds and owls. To the opposite side of each tree are pillars between what looks like an American football goalpost (although with a more rounded top) [illustration 11], symbols that will be discussed below. Even more enigmatic are the two "leaves" that are falling along with the songbirds, on either side of the owl [illustration 5], which will also be discussed more fully.

[103] Bustamante, 2012, p.123

[104] The owl is not seated or enthroned as Ben Khader stated, 2006, p.59; there is no throne, chair, or stool and the owl's feet are touching the ground.

[105] Vismara, 2007, p.112; Bustamante, 2012, p.130

[106] Bustamante, 2012, p.130 describes the other birds as "gravitating" toward the owl. Hegelbach, 2018, pp.357–358 interprets the positioning of the other birds around the owl as a form of "mobbing." Hegelbach's study is from an ornithological perspective.

[107] Bailliot, 2019, p.183. This gesture, where the middle finger is extended and the other fingers are retracted, makes the hand resemble an erect phallus.

[108] Bustamante, 2012, p.130 describes the trees as olive trees without question, while Vismara, 2007, p.113 comments on the twisted form of the trees which may allow them to be identified as olive trees.

Illustration 5: *Owl Mosaic,* late 3rd century CE (detail). Threshold mosaic from the Baths of the Owl in Thysdrus, El Jem Museum, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The figural elements are enclosed by a decorative geometric border with zigzags of black and multi-colored tiles surrounded on each side by a thin black border. Above the geometric border is a Latin inscription[109] set in black tiles on a white ground that extends around the perimeter of the rectangle containing both the geometric border and the figures. The inscription, itself, will be returned to. The mosaic was restored in antiquity.[110] Restoration implies that the work was valued long after its completion. Above the inscription is an ivy-leaf scroll [illustration 1], which is continuous, forming what seems to be a border for a larger composition that has not been preserved. Another indication that there once was more to the mosaic is the slight extension of the thin black border at the upper left. The original composition of the *Owl Mosaic* may have resembled

[109] *AE* 1995, 1643

[110] Vismara, 2007, p.113. However, Vismara gives no further information as to what was restored or when. There are two areas at the bottom of the mosaic where tiles appear to have been reset. A few other places where damage may have occurred are where beige tiles have been used rather than white near some of the birds, a few lost tiles at the top of the tree on the right, and a crack above the tree on the left.

something like the threshold mosaic component[111] of the contemporary *Lod Mosaic* from Israel, with a thick decorative border followed by the main panel (*emblema*) contained within a thin black border, and flanked by a field of predominately white tiles on either side.

Pauline Donceel-Voûte has referred to thresholds as "checkpoints," where they "stop the 'enemy outside' from becoming the most unwanted 'enemy inside'."[112] Petronius' *Satyricon* provides evidence for Romans considering the left unlucky and thresholds needing to be crossed by first using the right foot.[113] In many parts of the Roman world, thresholds may have been marked by mosaics, including the evil eye and fish-phallus mosaic from Moknine [illustration 3] already mentioned, the *in-situ* black and white geometric example from Thysdrus [illustration 6], and the *Owl Mosaic*. [illustration 1] Threshold mosaics delineate the transition from one space into another, i.e. the crossing of a boundary. Sarah Bond has likened threshold mosaics to modern welcome mats.[114] Welcome mats have both decorative and practical purposes; they keep grime from the outdoors from entering the indoors. Yet, the modern welcome mat largely lacks the threshold mosaic's ability to keep evil forces at bay through its images and inscriptions.

[111] The section with the display vessels made of precious metals. For the *Lod Mosaic,* see Lightfoot, 2010 and Avni et al., 2015. Lightfoot, 2010 points out similarities with North African mosaics including African wild animals such as the giraffe and rhinoceros.
[112] Donceel-Voûte, 2018, p.37
[113] Petronius, *Satyricon* 30. Stumbling over a threshold was considered bad luck. Ogle, 1911, p.253 explains the origin of a bride being carried over the threshold of her husband's house as to avoid an inauspicious start to the marriage.
[114] Bond, 2015

Illustration 6: *In-situ* Threshold Mosaic from Anteroom XXVIII of the *Sollertiana Domus,* 2nd century/ early 3rd century, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Metaphysical protection could also be obtained through threshold deposits, which have a long history in the ancient Mediterranean. Five terracotta dogs in the British Museum, each originally painted a solid shade of white, black, red, or blue, were discovered beneath the threshold of an entrance to the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE) at Nineveh.[115] Each figurine was paired with another in the same color[116] and inscribed with incantations in cuneiform. When the spell was cast, the figurine became embodied with the power of the figure it represented.[117] Like the massive, hybrid guardian figures (*lamassu*) flanking doorways in Assyrian palaces, these figurines had an apotropaic function.[118] The *lamassu* were minor divinities, intimidating visitors through their size and the ferocity of the lions and bulls, animals whose lower bodies they possessed, while the terracotta dogs were invisible protectors. Although the dogs

[115] Faraone, 1992, pp.23–24; Wilburn, 2018, p.109. For more on Assyrian terracotta figurine deposits, see Nakamura, 2004. For the objects, themselves, see the British Museum's website: https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=388873&partId=1

[116] These are now lost, but each would have been buried on the opposite side of the doorway. See Faraone, 1992, p.23

[117] Nakamura, 2004, p.17

[118] Faraone, 1992, p.23

were magical agents just like the *lamassu*, they were hidden representations of real animals, watchdogs, that might have lived in the palace.

Dogs appeared as protectors in the Greco-Roman world as well. According to J.M.C. Toynbee, Molossian hounds made good guard dogs.[119] In Book VII of the *Odyssey,* the craftsman god Hephaestus is the creator of ancient robots, gold and silver animated statues of dogs guarding the palace of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians.[120] In Pompeii, dogs in mosaics guard the entrance to the House of the Tragic Poet (VI.8.5) with its "beware of the dog" (*cave canem*) inscription[121] and the entrance to the House of Paquius Proculus (I.7.1). A later, North African threshold mosaic from the mid-second century CE of a greyhound from Hadrume(n)tum (modern Sousse in Tunisia),[122] [illustration 7] emphasizes the animal's role as a hunter, and attests to continuity in the use of these mosaics and their spread beyond the Italian peninsula. As with the Assyrian figurines, the mosaic dogs might embody actual animals belonging to the house's owner. Because the Pompeian mosaics were visible from the streets, they might have served to discourage theft, suggesting that a robber would have to contend with a watchdog, whether or not a real dog was present.[123] The fictional Trimalchio's house was watched over by the dog Scylax,[124] and featured a wall painting of a dog that startled the narrator who mistook it for the real thing. The House of Orpheus in Pompeii (VI.14.20), revealed the remains of a dog chained inside the entrance in combination with a dog mosaic, uniting the powers of the animal and its image.

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[119] Toynbee, 1996, p.107
[120] Homer, *Odyssey,* VII.91-.94
[121] *CIL* V 877. For more on the magical function of the dog mosaic from the House of the Tragic Poet, see Wilburn, 2018, p.108
[122] Now in the Sousse Museum but originally from a threshold in a Roman house, according to the museum's wall label. Bustamante, 2012, p.135 states that the "Sloughi" (a type of greyhound) were necessary for successful hunts. In the Bardo Museum, there is a third century CE mosaic from Thysdrus of a hare hunt with hunters (on horseback and on foot) using dogs to track and chase their prey. Some of these dogs resemble greyhounds, such as in the threshold mosaic from Sousse.
[123] Wilburn, 2018, p.108 provides a summary of the views held by various scholars regarding the dog mosaic from the House of the Tragic Poet.
[124] Petronius, *Satyricon* 64

Illustration 7: Fragment of a *Hunting Scene: Slender Greyhound with Erect Ears and Open Mouth,* mid-2nd century CE*,* threshold mosaic from a Roman house in Hadrume(n)tum (Sousse), Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Other animals could be magical agents. In northern Spain and southern France, bird deposits have been discovered inside terracotta vases buried beneath doorways in villas, residences of the elite, or buried in a series.[125] At the Villa of Tolegassos in Ampurias (Catalonia), for example, one or two eggs, or an egg accompanied by the head of a chicken or rooster, were placed on top of avian bones inside the vases.[126] Other sites in the Pyrenees, such as Pla de l'Aïgo near Caramany, France, have produced similar finds, most dating to the second to early third centuries CE. From excavations conducted up until the early 1990s, bird bones (primarily chicken) consisted of 35% of the animal remains found in Roman graves in the West, but only 2% of those found in settlement

[125] Bowes, 2015, p.216. For more information on the "bird deposits" see Marí and Mascort, 1988, Casas and Arbulo, 1997, and Fabre et al., 1999. Deposits of faunal remains in domestic contexts appear to have been an Iberian practice during the Iron Age in what is now north-eastern Catalonia. Belarte and Valenzuela-Lamas, 2013 studies 15 sites near modern Barcelona where animal deposits (primarily sheep and goats but also pigs, poultry, and dogs) were found. Belarte and Valenzuela-Lamas, 2013, p.177 states that in the Roman period, the deposits were mainly of poultry combined with eggs that were placed inside clay pots. The earlier Iberian deposits did not include the eggs or the pottery. Roman deposits, such as at the Villa of Tolegassos, might reflect the effect of Romanization upon native religious beliefs. See Ogle, 1911 for literary evidence of Roman threshold deposits.

[126] Fabre et al., 1999, p.290

sites.[127] The bird bones from the cemeteries have been interpreted as actual or symbolic food offerings for the deceased.[128] The connection between birds and Roman funerary ritual has also been pointed out by Kim Bowes, who observed that the bird deposits of the Pyrenees were not meant for the dead, but living Romans.[129] She states, "these deposits seem to be manning the boundaries of the living, calling upon the apotropaic power of both living and unborn birds to protect the homes of humans."[130] The presence of the bird deposits within villas, properties owned by the wealthy, attest to magic as not just a popular act for the non-elite.

Elite Romans, and wealthy freedmen like Trimalchio, consumed a wide variety of birds. Quails, partridges, thrushes, and turtledoves destined for the dinner plates of the wealthy were raised and fattened in the aviaries of Thysdrus.[131] Varro mentions that an aviary (*ornithon*) belonging to one Italian villa produced 5,000 thrushes in the course of a year, which were sold for 3 *denarii* each, for a profit of 60,000 *sesterces*.[132] One of the ancient aviaries of Thysdrus has been preserved near the Museum of El Jem and it constitutes a rare Roman building type.[133]

[127] Lauwerier, 1993, p.79. The highest percentage of animal bones found in Roman cemeteries come from pigs; poultry comes in second. Lauwerier does warn that the numbers might be skewed because larger portions of beef could have been cut away from the animals' bones without having to transport the bones to the cemetery for disposal, accounting for the smaller percentage recovered.
[128] Lauwerier, 1993, p.81
[129] Bowes, 2015, p.216
[130] Bowes, 2015, p.216
[131] Slim and Rebourg, 1995, p.60
[132] Varro, *De Re Rustica* 3.2.15 in Littlewood, 1987, p.14
[133] Slim and Rebourg, 1995, p.60

Illustration 8: Threshold (?) mosaic from Hadrume(n)tum (Sousse), Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The songbirds depicted in the *Owl Mosaic* resemble forms of thrushes.[134] Two thrushes flanking a basket, pecking at its contents are depicted in a mosaic from Hadrume(n)tum in the Sousse Museum.[135] [illustration 8] The Romans may not have drawn a distinction between songbirds such as thrushes and the chicken/ rooster remains in the Spanish and French bird deposits. The *Owl Mosaic* and (most likely) the threshold mosaic with the thrushes were inserted into thresholds, serving a protective function like the bird deposits, except it is the image of the birds, rather than the remains of birds that are the magical agents.

Owls were not quite like other members of the avian family. In the fable attributed to Aesop of the Owl and the Birds there is a distinction between the owl and the other birds. The owl offers advice in regard to avoiding mistletoe (used in create a sticky substance

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[134] Vismara, 2007, p.113

[135] The museum label describes the basket filled with olives and olive tree leaves. The coloration of the tiles, a brownish-red and a greenish-yellow suggests that the basket could contain olives or grapes; the presence of the leaves/ greenery, however, suggests a floral arrangement. It is unclear whether the birds stand upon the ground or on some type of stepped platform. There are also enigmatic forms, resembling doorways with slightly projecting awnings or post and lintel constructions, which the museum label does not mention. This mosaic does not seem to come from a securely excavated context, as the label gives its date only as "Roman era," its origin from Sousse (ancient Hadrume(n)tum), and its possible placement in a threshold, "threshold mosaic?"

for trapping birds), flax (used to make nets for capturing birds), and a human archer (in search of feathers for making arrows that can reach speeds that surpass that of the birds), but the other birds ignore the warnings, resulting in their own detriment. The fable casts the owl as wise and the other birds, who are only described as not being owls, as foolish.[136]

The *Owl Mosaic's* inscription[137] [illustration 5], like the fable and the image in the mosaic, itself, isolates the owl from the other birds. The inscription also reveals an apotropaic function: "The birds are bursting with envy and the owl does not give a damn," *invidia rumpuntur aves neque noctua curat*. The inscription, which is in hexameter, appears to be a reference to an epigram by Martial:[138]

> *Rumpitur invidia quidam, carissime Iuli,*
> *quod me Roma legit, rumpitur invidia.*
> *rumpitur invidia quod turba semper in omni*
> *monstramur digito, rumpitur invidia.*
> *rumpitur invidia tribuit quod Caesar uterque*
> *ius mihi natorum, rumpitur invidia.*
> *rumpitur invidia quod rus mihi dulce sub urbe est*
> *parvaque in urbe domus, rumpitur invidia.*
> *rumpitur invidia quod sum iucundus amicis,*
> *quod conviva frequens, rumpitur invidia.*
> *rumpitur invidia quod amamur quodque probamur:*
> *rumpatur quisquis rumpitur invidia.*

which D. R. Shackleton Bailey has translated as:

> A certain person, dearest Julius, is bursting with
> envy because Rome reads me—bursting with envy.
> He is bursting with envy because fingers always
> point me out in every crowd—bursting with envy.
> He is bursting with envy because both Caesars gave
> me the Right of Children—bursting with envy. He
> is bursting with envy because I have a pleasant
> country place near Rome and a small house in the
> city—bursting with envy. He is bursting with envy
> because my friends enjoy my company and I am

[136] For more on the fable see Hegelbach, 2018, pp.355–356. For other references to owls in ancient literary sources see Alvar Nuño, 2009
[137] *AE* 1995, 1643
[138] Martial, *Epigrams,* IX.97

> often asked out to dinner—bursting with envy. He
> is bursting with envy because I am liked and
> approved of. Whosoever is bursting with envy, let
> him burst.[139]

The phrase "bursting with envy" is repeated throughout Martial's poem, like the chorus of a song. Martial uses *invidia* (envy) more times within epigram IX.97 than he does in any of his other poems.[140] This would imply that the artist and/ or patron of the *Owl Mosaic* either knew this poem, or that it was recognized as a part of a corpus bringing "bursting" and "envy" together. While the former is possible (albeit difficult to prove), the latter appears to be the case.

The poems of Martial are not alone.[141] An inscription composed in elegiac couplets[142] appears on a late fourth or early 5th century CE mosaic from Ain Temouchent near Sétif (ancient *Sitifis*), Algeria:

> *inuida sidereo rumpantur pectora uisu*
> *cedat et in nostris lingua proterua locis*
> *hoc studio superamus auo gratumque renidet*
> *aedibus in nostris summus apex operis.*
> *Feliciter.*[143]

which Gaston Boissier and Arabella Ward have translated as:

> At this divine spectacle, may envy burst from spite,
> and may insolent tongues cease to murmur.
> In the love of the arts we surpass our fathers.
> It is a joy to see this marvellous work shining in our homes.[144]

This mosaic, now in the Archaeological Museum of Sétif, features a giant head of the sea god Oceanus surrounded by Nereids riding hippocamps and dolphins.[145] Katherine Dunbabin calls attention to the use of "*sidereo visu*" in the inscription, connecting it with the frontal, overly large eyes of Oceanus as a device like a mask, designed to stop evil,

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[139] Martial, 1993, pp.314–317
[140] Six additional epigrams by Martial contain the word "*invidia.*"
[141] Vismara, 2007, p.113 and Beschaouch, 2017, p.1338 have found use of "*rumpor*" and "*invideo*" in Ovid, *Heroides*, XVI. 223
[142] Vismara, 2007, p.113
[143] *CIL* VIII, 8509 = *ILS*, 6041 = *CLE*, 883
[144] Boissier, 1899, p.236
[145] Dunbabin, 1999, p.151 and Thébert, 2003, pp.500–501

and likens the staring image of a deity to the later Byzantine images of Christ as pantokrator.[146]

Illustration 9: Mosaic from private bath complex in El-Haouaria in Sidi Ali Nasrallah, near Kairoun, Tunisia, late 4th century CE. Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Further evidence for envy being invoked in an inscription comes from a late fourth century CE mosaic [illustration 9] from a private bath complex in El-Haouaria in Sidi Ali Nasrallah, south-west of Kairouan, which has a figural composition in the center panel (*emblema*) with polychrome designs (perhaps stylized fish and tendrils terminating into triskeles, all converging at a central, stylized *pelta*) in the form of semi-circles on either side of the *emblema*, and with an inscription[147] [illustration 10] directly above the *emblema* in the position of a threshold mosaic. The central *emblema* is identified as

[146] Dunbabin, 1999, p.152
[147] *Inscriptions latines de la Tunisie*, # 279 = *CIL* VIII, 23131, cited in Beschaouch, 2007, pp.197–198

Minerva and Neptune's contest for the patronage of Athens, with a winged Victory between them.[148] The inscription spans five lines in what the museum label calls a "magical inscription against envy"[149]:

> *Invide livide, titula ta-*
> *nta, quem (= quae) adsevera-*
> *bas fieri, non posse, perfec*
> *(= perfecta) sunt; DD.NN.SS. mi-*
> *nima ne contemnas*[150]

which Azedine Beschaouch has translated as:

> Hey! Hateful envy!
> These dedications of important buildings,
> which according to your insistence could not see the light of day,
> here they are led to completion![151]

through the magic of the written word that can be summed up as "take that, envy! You have no power here." The El-Haouaria mosaic also provides a North African context how the *Owl Mosaic* (from a threshold like the inscription from the El-Haouaria mosaic) might have interacted with other decoration within the same room, like the *Lod Mosaic* from Israel mentioned earlier. By the late third century CE, "bursting with envy" may have become an idiomatic expression, as "green with envy" is today.

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[148] Sousse Museum label
[149] Sousse Museum label
[150] Beschaouch, 2007, p.198
[151] Beschaouch, 2007, p.198: "Hé ! l'Envieux livide! Ces dédicaces d'édifices si considérables, qui, selon tes assertions, ne pouvaient voir le jour, les voilà menées à leur achèvement !...

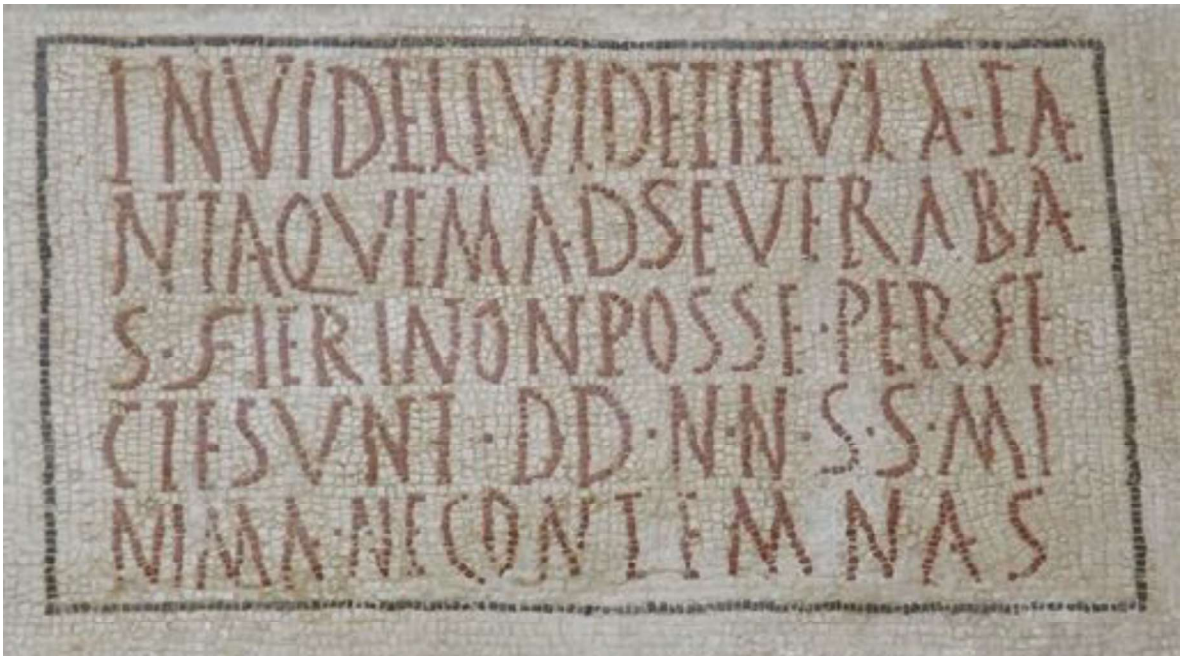

Illustration 10: Mosaic from private bath complex in El-Haouaria in Sidi Ali Nasrallah, near Kairoun, Tunisia, late 4th century CE. Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

In the El-Haouaria mosaic, envy is being confronted and vanquished from the baths

A circular, lead amulet from Haidra (ancient Ammaedara) in western Tunisia features a frontal-facing owl with its body in three-quarter view on one side, and an inscription on the other:

NVIDIA INVIZIOS
À NGEL TIBI
AD ANIMA
PVRA ET
MVNDA[152]

[152] *Invidia invidiosa! Nihil tibi ad anima pura et munda* from Merlin, 1940, p.489

which John H. Elliott has translated as:

> Envious Envy, there is nothing for you to do against a soul
> that is pure and unstained.[153]

Here, as in other amulets found in Carthage (including one from the Antonine Baths) and from other Tunisian provenances, the image of the owl is coupled with an incantation against envy.[154] The amulet from Carthage, although its inscription has largely worn away,[155] presents the unification of text and image in the context of a Roman bath, much like that of the *Owl Mosaic*.

Although owls could appear on amulets, they are rarely depicted in Hellenistic Greek and early Roman mosaics[156] as well as in the later mosaics of North Africa.[157] This is likely because owls, through the power of their gazes, were associated with being able to cast the evil eye,[158] hence the owl in the *Owl Mosaic's* apotropaic function. A fragment of an early fourth century CE mosaic from Oderzo (ancient Opitergium) near Venice[159] displays a non-anthropomorphic frontal-gazing owl on a perch with several birds flying in its direction. Yet, this mosaic is very different than the *Owl Mosaic*. It belongs to a larger scene of hunting and rustic life, much like the *Small Hunt* mosaic from the Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina in Sicily.[160] Although the owl from Oderzo still faces the viewer, the effect is quite ordinary, lacking the apotropaic power of the *Owl Mosaic*.

The Oderzo mosaic seems a more likely candidate for a depiction of the mobbing phenomenon, a coordinated effort of various birds of different species to come together to attack an owl described by Johann Hegelbach,[161] than the *Owl Mosaic* of Thysdrus because the placement of the Odzero owl on a perch suggests that it is domesticated and is being used as a lure.[162] According to Hegelbach, it is not envy that motivates the mobbing birds to attack, but a sense of cowardice, that it is only through their greater numbers that they can over-power the owl.[163] Although Hegelbach does not discuss the

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[153] Elliott, 2016, pp.259–260.
[154] For more on these amulets see Merlin, 1940
[155] Merlin, 1940, p.488
[156] Owls appear only twice in Hellenistic and Augustan-period mosaics according to Tammisto, 1997, p.133. One is a mosaic from Delos, Greece, where the goddess Athena holds an owl of the Little Owl type. The other is an owl perched on top of a vase in the scroll border of the *Fish Mosaic* from the House of the Faun in Pompeii; this border also contains other types of birds.
[157] Foucher, 1957, pp.177–178
[158] Elliott, 2016, p.140 references the story of the owl made by the 5th century BCE Greek architect Iktinos, that was able to attract and destroy other birds in Ausonius, *Mosella*, 308–310
[159] Now in the Museo Civico Archeologico 'Eno Bellis' in Oderzo (Treviso), Italy
[160] See Braconi, 2016 and http://tess.beniculturali.unipd.it/web/scheda/?recid=6311
[161] See Hegelbach, 2018
[162] Hegelbach, 2018, p.366 states that owls of the Little Owl variety were tamed in antiquity.
[163] Hegelbach, 2018, p.353

Oderzo mosaic, many of his examples of works of art[164] utilize artistic license in depicting the species of birds mobbing the owl, substituting bigger and more colorful varieties of birds for those that would actually engage in the practice.[165]

A panel (*emblema*) of another non-anthropomorphic, frontal-gazing owl composed of grayish tiles comes from the *Mosaic of the Birds* in the *House of the Birds* in ancient Italica, near Seville, in Spain.[166] This panel is one part of a whole composition of *emblemata,* each focusing on different varieties of birds for what appears to be decorative purposes, framing a courtyard. Like the Oderzo owl, it lacks apotropaic power. Nor are the other birds "mobbing" the owl, but each are placed in their own panels (*emblemata*).

The closest parallel to the *Owl Mosaic* is the Mosaic from the *Basilica Hiliariana* on the Caelian Hill in Rome. The *Basilica Hilariana* was built in the mid-second century CE by Manius Publicus Hilarus, a pearl-seller, for the *Dendrophori*, a private club (*collegium*) dedicated to worshipping Attis and Cybele. While admittance to the building may have been limited to members of the *collegium*, it, like the Baths of the Owl in Thysdrus, was a space designed to accommodate an assembly of people. The mosaic, in black and white tiles, reveals the open evil eye in the center, pierced by a long spear, with animals[167] forming a radial composition, including a frontal-gazing owl perched atop the evil eye. The owl here, like the one in the *Owl Mosaic,* is apotropaic, warding off the power of the evil eye. This is without question due to the owl's placement. The inscription above the figural composition,[168] inside a rectangular plaque with a projecting triangular shape on each of its short sides (*tabula ansata*), not only provides the name of the building, but it invokes the blessing of the gods to counteract the malice of the evil eye. The "authority" implied by a *tabula ansata* was also a form of protection.[169]

The evil eye attacked is the subject of other Roman mosaics, namely the second century CE *Evil Eye Mosaic* from Antioch-on-the-Orontes near the Turkish-Syrian border.[170] Here, many of the symbols already discussed including a figure (a dwarf) with a large phallus, a dog, and a bird, along with others, with a trident and sword in place of the

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[164] Although apart from the *Owl Mosaic* and a painted stele from Paestum, Hegelbach's examples are works with Renaissance or later dates.
[165] Hegelbach, 2018, pp.366–367
[166] The *House of the Birds* was constructed in the Hadrianic period (117 -138 CE) and it was occupied until Late Antiquity. For more information see García Bellido, 1960 and http://www.museosdeandalucia.es/web/conjuntoarqueologicodeitalica/espacios-singulares
[167] The animals, apart from the owl are a large bird, a crow or raven in a tree, a stag, a tiger, a goat, a dog, a bull, a scorpion, and a snake. For more information about this mosaic see Blake, 1936, p.158, Salvetti et al., 2004, Alvar Nuño, 2009, p.196 and http://tess.beniculturali.unipd.it/web/scheda/?recid=3597
[168] *CIL* VI. 30973, Translated by Caroline Lawrence as "May the gods be favourable to those who enter here as well as to the Basilica Hilariana."
[169] Bond, 2015
[170] Hatay Archaeological Museum in Antakya, Turkey # 1024

spear in the *Basilica Hilariana* mosaic, battle the evil eye made visible.[171] The owl, however, is missing from the Antioch mosaic. An inscription in Greek, και συ, (*kai su*), meaning "and you" confirms the magical intent, directing evil forces back upon the one casting them. Another mosaic from the third century CE from the Roman villa near Skala on the island of Kephallonia (Kefalonia), Greece, shows a personified version of Envy (*Pthonos*) strangling himself and being attacked by animals.[172] Like the *Basilica Hilariana* mosaic, each of these examples as well as the *Owl Mosaic* combine visual images with written words for reinforced protection from the evil eye.

A different interpretation of the *Owl Mosaic* has been proposed by Mehmet and N. Ipek Kobaner: the mosaic is a representation of the effects of extreme heat, malaria, yellow fever, or West Nile virus based upon what could make birds fall in mid-flight as well as malaria epidemics recorded in the Roman empire in the 4th century CE.[173] However, this hypothesis does not consider the inscription nor commonly held beliefs in magic, and assumes a literal reading, that the mosaic documents an epidemic, which is highly unlikely; disease is not a common subject in Roman mosaics.[174] Kobaner and Kobaner also mention "military signs represent Roman sovereignty and military power,"[175] yet they do not explain what those signs are in the mosaic.[176] They call the dying songbirds "rebels"[177] but, again, there is no explanation why. Finally, their interpretation does not consider the way in which the songbirds have been afflicted (just that they -are- afflicted), which points to the workings of the evil eye and envy.

Some of the birds surrounding the owl in the *Owl Mosaic* are in the process of flying and are seemingly struck by a force that causes them to drop from the sky, with two already on the ground [illustration 5]. Romans were accustomed to their priests watching birds fly in the religious practice of augury, which determined the favor of the gods. As explained by the inscription, this force is jealousy, although no bird is depicted as literally "bursting" or exploding into pieces. Two of the birds appear to be caught on the branches of each tree; they are not perched, as their feet do not make contact with the branches. These are the birds that Vismara describes as "hanging by the neck" on the lower branches of the trees.[178]

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[171] For more information see Levi, 1971, pp.28–34, 1941
[172] For more information see Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983 and Dunbabin, 1999, pp.312–313
[173] Kobaner and Kobaner, 2012, pp.29–30. The authors have medical training and their article is very brief at only two pages.
[174] When one encounters a misshapen figure, such as the hunchback from second century CE *Lucky Hunchback Mosaic* from Antioch, Hatay Archaeological Museum in Antakya, Turkey, #1026/a, it is largely for apotropaic purposes.
[175] Kobaner and Kobaner, 2012, p.30
[176] Could Kobaner and Kobaner be referring to the three pillars on either side of the trees in the *Owl Mosaic*? [illustration 13] These are the symbol of the Telegenii, which will be discussed more fully.
[177] Kobaner and Kobaner, 2012, p.30
[178] Vismara, 2007, p.113

Death by "hanging by the neck" may be associated with suicide: the tightening of a rope around the neck leads to the inability to breathe, and eventual death by suffocation. Another of Martial's epigrams, VIII.61, addresses envy, but chooses a form[179] of the verb *liveo* (to envy or to be jealous of) instead of the noun *invidia* in its first line:

livet Charinus, rumpitur, furit, plorat

Here, Dunbabin and Dickie explain that "Martial's success so affects Charinus with *livor* that the emotion fills him to the point of bursting, drives him to a frenzy, makes him weak, and look for a high branch from which to hang himself."[180] Charinus' envy must have been considerable to have produced such a reaction. But even in less severe instances, the envious may be seen as literally choking when faced with the good fortune of others.[181]

Death awaits the personification of Envy (*Pthonos*) in the mosaic from Kephallonia (Kefalonia) either through suicide as a result of self-strangulation, or from being mauled by the attacking animals. Visual representations of suicide by hanging include the suicide of Judas on an early fifth century CE Christian ivory casket with one of the earliest images of the Crucifixion in the British Museum.[182] Although the casket belongs to the century after the *Owl Mosaic,* close to when paganism is being outlawed, by illustrating a scene from the Gospels, it equates suicide by hanging with a death suited for a villain. The tree branch depicted on the casket, which features a bird feeding its young in a nest in the foliage at the top, buckles with the weight of Judas' body, pulling it downward, but the trees in the *Owl Mosaic* [illustration 5] are not affected by the suicidal songbirds: the *Owl Mosaic* birds are over-sized, but their weight is inconsequential. More importantly, like in the case of Charinus, it is envying the fortunate circumstances of others that have made the person doing the envying miserable and depressed.[183] Envy, therefore, is a cause of suicide, for only death can release the person doing the envying from the pain envy has brought.[184] The songbirds in the *Owl Mosaic*, even those who have not decided to take their own lives, are suffocating, or bursting from within. This leads one to wonder whose good fortune they are envious of.

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[179] third person singular, present active indicative
[180] Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983, p.12
[181] Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983, p.12 and for more examples where the envious choke or are led to burst
[182] British Museum # 1856,0623.5
https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=60937&partId=1
[183] Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983, p.11
[184] Dunbabin and Dickie, 1983, p.11. Dunbabin and Dickie cite Libanius *Declamatio* 30 and Ovid Metamorphoses 2.812 as sources for jealousy of another's situation so severe that it leads one to want to commit suicide.

Illustration 11: *Owl Mosaic,* (detail- Telegenii symbol), late 3rd century CE. Threshold mosaic from the Baths of the Owl in Thysdrus, El Jem Museum, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The Telegenii are the ones who are being envied in the *Owl Mosaic*. The number III with the center Roman numeral in the form of a crescent on a pole, the primary symbol of the Telegenii, is found on either side of the *Owl Mosaic,* nestled between each tree and the zig-zag border. [illustration 11] The Telegenii were members of a private club (*sodalitas*) in North Africa dedicated to organizing, financing, and performing wild beast hunts (*venationes*) in the amphitheatre. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* notes that the use of *sodalitas* over *collegium* had "private and religious overtones."[185] There were several of these North African *sodalitates*, which, like the Telegenii, had heraldic symbols identifying them.[186] Beschaouch, an expert on the *sodalitates* of North Africa, breaks these symbols into two parts, the number and what he calls the emblem.[187] When more than one of the *sodalitates* used the same emblem, it was in conjunction with a different

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[185] *Oxford Classical Dictionary* online, https://oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-1695

[186] Adezine Beschaouch has published widely on the *sodalitates* of North Africa. See: Beschaouch, 1966, 1977, 2006a, 2006c, 2007, 2011, 1979, 2006b, 2012, 2017.

[187] Beschaouch, 2011, p.316. These symbols would have been immediately recognizable, much like the logos of major corporations today. The examples Beschaouch, 2011, pp.316–317 provides are of the Leonti = the image of a lion, the Taurisci= a bull, the Ostraci= a shell, and the Rosari = roses.

Roman numeral.[188] Each of the *sodalitates* competed against each other, not just in the games, but in a visual battle for support among the populace through slogans, such as *Telegeni nika*![189] and advertisements.[190] They also functioned as a burial club and were engaged in commerce. Although their primary role was as promoters of the games, the Telegenii were exporters of olive oil, evidenced by an amphora found in Thaenae (Thina) with their symbol.[191] The number of mosaics and inscriptions referring to the Telegenii suggest they were among the most successful of the factions.[192]

If Gilbert Charles-Picard is correct in connecting the *sodalitas* of the Telegenii to a passage in the *Life of Claudius*,[193] the Telegenii might be the oldest of these factions, with a presence in Rome in the first century CE, which, at that time, was not viewed in a positive manner.[194] This early, negative view of the Telegenii may not have extended to those on North African soil. As the Empire progressed, the popularity of the animal hunts in the African provinces increased, as did the prosperity of olive-producing towns like Thrysdrus. In this way, the Telegenii, or certain members among the group, may have become members of the provincial elite. The power and wealth of the Telegenii would have been admired by their supporters and detested by their detractors. Envy of the success of the Telegenii is what the inscription in the *Owl Mosaic* points to.

The sites of Bulla Regia, Timgad, and Thyveste contain evidence for the Telegenii's fondness of gathering in baths, where they may have conducted ritual purifications[195] perhaps as part of the association's religious functions. The *Owl Mosaic* might mark such a gathering place for the Telegenii in the Baths of the Owl of Thysdrus, or perhaps the building was built as their headquarters.[196] The Telegenii were not the only faction in Thysdrus that favored meeting in the baths. Another bath complex, the Small Baths,[197] located in the southern part of Terrain M'Barek Rhaiem, contained a mosaic with the

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[188] Beschaouch, 2011, p.317

[189] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1335

[190] Beschaouch, 2011, p.317. The competition, however, was not always friendly. Elliott, 2016, p.202 cites a representation of a phallus on the amphitheatre of Nimes, France, illustrating a need for protection.

[191] Bomgardner, 2009, p.170 and Gonzalez, 2018, pp.230–231. Charles-Picard, 1993, p.90 suggests that the connection between the *sodalitates* and trade began with transporting the wild animals used in the hunts, and then expanded into the exporting of agricultural products, like the olive oil that Thysdrus was known for.

[192] Slim, 2004, p.112; Charles-Picard, 1993, p.84. Animal hunts were more popular than man-to-man gladiatorial combat in North Africa. According to Bustamante, 2012, p.134, the factions' hunts resulted in extinction of the North African lion.

[193] Suetonius *Life of Claudius*, 40.6, *Quid, ego tibi Telegenius videor,* cited in Charles-Picard, 1993, p.83

[194] Charles-Picard, 1993, p.91. Charles-Picard, 1993, p.91 believes that a mosaic in the House of the Peacock in Thysdrus that depicts the symbol of the Telegenii may date to the first century CE, rather than the second century CE date allocated to it by Louis Foucher, and therefore, it would be the earliest evidence for the Telegenii in North Africa.

[195] Gonzalez, 2018, p.231

[196] Slim, 1995, p.270 and Bustamante, 2012, p.137. Vismara, 2007, p.113, however, points out that the ivy-scroll border complicates the theory that the Telegenii were the owners of the Baths of the Owl. Ivy was associated with other *sodalitates*: the Crescentii, the Perexii, the Quintasii, and the Taurisci. Vismara, 2007, p.113. Ivy is also associated with the god Dionysos / Bacchus, who figures prominently within the mosaics of Thysdrus. It is possible that the ivy border might just be decorative.

[197] See Foucher, 1961, pp.34–36

symbol of the Pentasi, another *sodalitas,* in room 2.[198] There was much concern for the workings of the evil eye while frequenting the public baths.[199] A Roman's first stop inside a bath, after leaving the changing room where he or she would be exposed, was the *frigidarium*; it was here where supernatural protection needed to be invoked.[200] An early third century CE threshold mosaic of a merchant ship from the *frigidarium* of the Baths of Themetra near Sousse has been described by the museum as having a bird's head on its bow[201] [illustration 12] The figurehead is fairly abstract and may not necessarily represent an avian, although birds were used as a symbol by at least one of the *sodalitates*.[202] This mosaic might refer to one of the *sodalitates*, since it came from the entrance to a *frigidarium,* like the *Owl Mosaic*. Several of the apotropaic mosaics already discussed come from *frigidaria*.

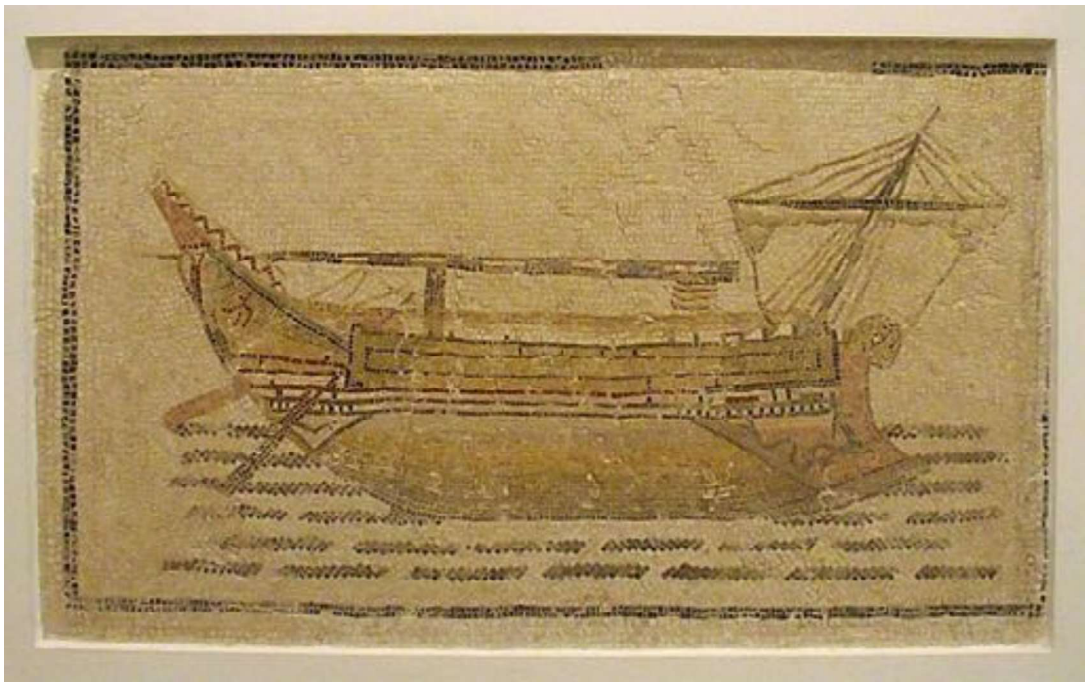

Illustration 12: Threshold mosaic of a merchant ship from the *frigidarium* of Baths of Themetra in Themetra (modern Chott Meriam), early third century CE, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

[198] Slim, 1995, p.270. The symbol of the Pentasi was fish with the number V. The mosaic in room 2 of the Small Baths, features five roundels, each containing a fish with the Roman numeral rendered this way: IIIII. Foucher, 1961, p.34 recognizes the symbolic value of the five fish depicted in the Small Bath's mosaic, but enough work on the *sodalitates* had not been completed at the time of his writing the excavation report.

[199] Curse tablets, such as the 130 found at the sanctuary of Sulis-Minerva at Bath in England mentioned in Fagan, 2002, p.37, provide evidence for magic in Roman baths. Much of the cursing is directed at thieves who have stolen the clothing of bath-goers or petitioning the gods to punish the offenders. Fagan, 2002, p.37. For more on magic at the baths see Dunbabin, 1989; Clarke, 2007, pp.74–75; and Wilburn, 2018.

[200] Bustamante, 2012, p.131

[201] Sousse Museum label. Foucher, 1967 focuses on another mosaic from ancient Themetra with a sailboat as the central *emblema* surrounded by still life (*xenia*) motifs

[202] The Aucupi use dead birds as their symbol. See Beschaouch, 2017.

In the case of the *Owl Mosaic*, the owl might have been taken over as another emblem of the Telegenii, and because owls are natural predators of smaller birds, it emphasizes the superiority of the Telegenii over other *sodalitates* in Thysdrus.[203] If the two trees in the *Owl Mosaic* represent olive trees [illustration 5], they may be a way of indicating that the scene is taking place in Thysdrus, a town where olives were an important source of its wealth, and therefore, it could be a reference to the Telegenii of Thysdrus.[204] The symbol of the Telegenii [illustration 11] can also be found in the threshold decoration of houses, or in the *oecus,* or *triclinium*, the main dining and entertaining spaces within Roman homes.[205] In Thysdrus, it occurs 7 times[206] including in the mosaic from room 2 of the *House of the Months,* the residence where the calendar mosaic containing the January panel [illustration 2] was discovered. This might suggest that the owner of the house was a member of the Telegenii or a devoted fan.

The *Owl Mosaic* has been viewed in light of the competition of the various *sodalitates* in Thysdrus.[207] In his most recent publication, Beschaouch has begun to unravel whose envy the owl "does not give a damn about." He has recognized the symbol of another *sodalitas*, the Aucupi, in the *Owl Mosaic* in the form of the dead/ dying songbirds, and the five ivy leaves in the border above the figural component.[208] [illustrations 1 and 5] The Aucupi were a faction dedicated to hunting birds who were associated with the Roman numeral V, and whose name is a play on the Latin word for birds (*aves*).[209] The word *aves* also appears in the mosaic's inscription, where the literal word and its image below are working in concert.[210] If Beschaouch is correct, the mosaic declares the Aucupi as possessors of the evil eye against the Telegenii, and that the Telegenii have deflected malice back onto the Aucupi.

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[203] Bustamante, 2012, p.137

[204] Bustamante, 2012, p.140 is convinced that the trees are olive trees and that they are, indeed, direct references to the Telegenii of Thysdrus

[205] Gonzalez, 2018, p.231

[206] Gonzalez, 2018, p.232

[207] Vismara, 2007 and Bustamante, 2012. Vismara's and Bustamante's contributions have not received the attention they deserve in the more recent conversations in English about the mosaic.

[208] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1336

[209] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1336. Beschaouch, 2017, p.1336 also cites a gravestone from Hadrume(n)tum now in the Bardo Museum, as the source for the name of the Aucupi and their symbol: *CIL*, VIII, 22992 = *ILTun.,* 177 from modern Sousse: *D(is) m(anibus) s(acrum)/ C. Volumnius Faustinus v(bcit)a(nnis) XXVII/die I. C. Volumnius Saturninus pa(tri) piissimo/ AVCVPI.*

[210] Beschaouch, 2017, pp.1336–1337

Illustration 13: *"Chessboard" Mosaic* (Detail- "Aucupi" group of 5 dead birds). Mosaic from Thysdrus in the Bardo Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Beschaouch has counted five of the songbirds on either side of the owl.[211] His number of five counts the bird above the owl twice: once for the group on the left, and again for the group on the right. It leads one to wonder whether the artist conceived of the composition as divided, where one bird could be counted twice to make a grouping of five on either side. There are only nine songbirds in all, not ten. His count of five ivy leaves in the border is also somewhat problematic, as the leaf on the far left is cropped and the thin black border extends slightly, suggesting that there would have been more than what currently survives. The ivy may have continued into this now-missing space.

[211] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1336

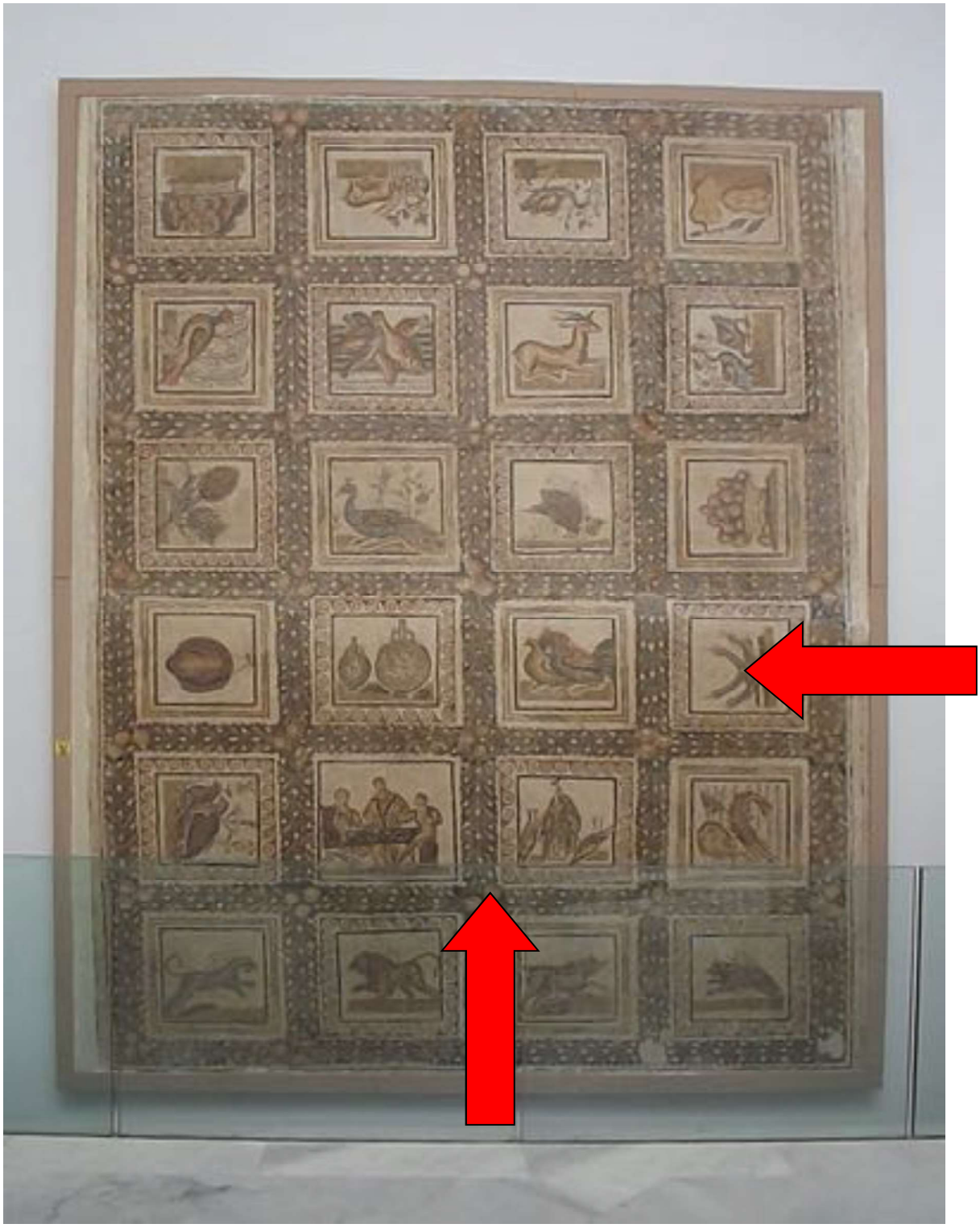

Illustration 14: *"Chessboard" Mosaic* (Entire mosaic with locations of the Aucupi and Mensuri panels). Mosaic from Thysdrus in the Bardo Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

Beschaouch has identified a panel of a mosaic from Thysdrus now in the Bardo Museum, a square from a grid composition that he calls a "chessboard," with the symbol of the Aucupi: five dead birds.[212] [illustrations 13 and 14] Without Beschaouch's interpretation, the panel appears to be just a straightforward depiction, as one would expect to find in North African still-life (*xenia*) mosaics.[213] *Xenia* mosaics have been interpreted as images of hospitality, which greet visitors to the spaces they decorate by visually offering them various types of food and drink.[214] Rooms used for dining (*triclinia*) and entertaining are where these *xenia* mosaics are commonly found.[215] Dead birds appear in Roman wall paintings from the Vesuvian region such as the four dead thrushes bound together over a plate of eggs in the *Still Life* from the tablinum of the Praedia of Julia Felix (II.4.10) and the three dead thrushes in the *Still Life with Thrushes and Mushrooms* from Herculaneum.**[216]** These earlier paintings operate like the *xenia* mosaics, where the dead birds appear alongside other forms of food.

From the same "chessboard" mosaic, Beschaouch has identified a symbol of yet another *sodalitas*, in the form of African locust tree pods, or carob pods (*siliqua*), as a symbol of the Mensuri.[217] [illustrations 14 and 15] He has demonstrated that the *Mosaic from Chlef*, now in the Antiquities Museum of Algiers, depicts hunters from the Caprasi *sodalitas,* symbolized by the wild boar with the three stalks of millet, and those from the Mensuri *sodalitas,* symbolized by the carob pods and the inscription, which appears just above the pods, beginning with "*siliqua,*" which according to Pliny the Elder could refer to carob pods, and mean "measure," which is also the translation of Mensuri.[218]

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[212] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1336

[213] With the exception of the single *emblema* containing three men playing a game of dice. Dunbabin, 1979, p.125 calls this *emblema* "unusual" in regard to *xenia* mosaics. At the time of her book's writing, the symbolic representations for the *sodalitates* had not been unraveled to the extent that they are now. Dunbabin, 1979, p.125 proposes that the panels with the animals in the mosaic "seem to be yet more examples of the mysterious emblematic or symbolic use of various amphitheatre animals." As we now know that the *emblema* with the lion, for example, is associated with the Leonti.

[214] Dunbabin, 1979, p.124

[215] Dunbabin, 1979, p.124

[216] Naples Museum # 8647, Jashemski and Meyer, 2002, p.128. See Jashemski and Meyer, 2002, pp.398–399 for more images of thrushes, alive and dead, in Roman painting.

[217] Beschaouch, 2006a, p.1499

[218] Beschaouch, 2006a, pp.1492–1498

Illustration 15: *"Chessboard" Mosaic* (Detail- "Mensuri" carob pod). Mosaic from Thysdrus in the Bardo Museum, Tunis, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

It is surprising that Beschaouch, himself, has not recognized the carob pods, the symbol of the Mensuri, in the *Owl Mosaic* in the form of the falling "leaves" that are not, in fact, leaves. Many descriptions of the *Owl Mosaic* have even bypassed their presence.[219] Like the carob pods in the "checkerboard" mosaic from Thysdrus [illustration 15], the carob pods in the *Owl Mosaic* are also largely green [illustration 5] and of a similar shape, although the ones in the *Owl Mosaic* are more abstract. As the pods in the *Owl Mosaic* are falling alongside the songbirds, it seems plausible to include the members of the Mensuri *sodalitas* among those who are envious of the Telegenii. Thus, the *Owl Mosaic* may be read as a statement that the Telegenii are immune to the envy of not just any of the other factions active in Thysdrus, but especially that of the Mensuri and Aucupi.

The figure of the owl, itself, has been interpreted as a reference to Minerva, one of the most important gods of Thysdrus,[220] but Bacchus/ Dionysos was the patron god of the Telegenii. Bustamante has described the frontal gaze of the owl like a mask and akin to

[219] When the preliminary version of this paper was delivered at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Classical Studies' Graduate Student Conference: The Popular in Classical Antiquity, I had not yet realized what the pods were. My primary impression was that they looked like green jalepeno peppers, but because those are a New World food, they would have been unknown to the Romans; therefore, I decided that they must have been "leaves" until reading Beschaouch, 2006a.

[220] Slim, 2004, p.112; Vismara, 2007, p.113; Bustamante, 2012, p.137

the powers of Medusa in order to dispel evil, [illustration 5] but also having the power of Bacchus / Dionysos: *mania*, the ability to induce madness.[221] Beschaouch has reconciled the connection of the owl and Minerva with the name of the Telegenii; he believes that the owl represents Minerva, the *genius* of Thysdrus, and that the name of the Telegenii (the Greek τῆλε tele + *genius*) is that of the *genius* from a distance.[222] This symbolism would have made an even deeper connection for the Telegenii of Thysdrus.

The owl is wearing a *toga contabulata,* the form of the *toga* with a wide band that was popular in the later Roman Empire.[223] However, the tunic usually worn under the *toga* is absent. During the late third-early fourth centuries CE, wearing two tunics beneath the *toga* came into fashion.[224] It seems significant that the owl is shown without a tunic, especially since the style when the mosaic was made was for two tunics to be worn. The *toga* and other features of the owl, such as the rounded eyes, represent the owl's humanity.[225] The owl may be interpreted as a Roman member of the elite whose frontal gaze is able to repel the power of the evil eye, unlike the other birds who are its victims.[226] Bustamante interprets the *toga* the owl wears as a *toga angusticlavia,* known for having more narrow "purple" stripes, and as the dress of the equestrian class.[227] However, the "purple" of the *clavus* in the owl's *toga* is rather wide, more like a *toga praetexta*, with its Tyrian purple (maroon or dark reddish-brown) stripe, indicating that he is of senatorial or priestly rank. The *toga* was the official dress for sacrifice in Roman religion.

The togate owl in the mosaic from Thysdrus might be a representation of a member of the elite, or possibly a freedman. A terracotta statuette of a Roman male in a *toga praetexta* from ancient Murecine (modern Moregine) near Pompeii has been suggested as an image of one of the *vicomagistri* due to its crude rendering and the conditions of its discovery[228] during salvage excavations in association with a wall painting of a sacrificial scene from a second-story of a building, likely an inn.[229] The *vicomagistri* were freedmen priests of the cult of the *Lares Compitales*, gods of the crossroads, who conducted sacrifices at crossroad shrines (*compitae*) during *Compitalia,* the crossroads

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[221] Bustamante, 2012, p.136. Bacchus / Dionysos was another important god for the Romans of Thysdrus; Slim, 2004, p.107 recalls many mosaics from the town have Dionysiac themes. Mercury, god of commerce, was the third important god of Thysdrus, presiding over commerce.
[222] Beschaouch, 2017, p.1337
[223] Vismara, 2007, p.112
[224] Croom, 2010, p.39. Croom gives the example of the *opus sectile* composition from Rome of Junius Bassus in a chariot, ca. 330-350 CE
[225] Bustamante, 2012, p.137
[226] Slim, 2004, p.112; Ben Khader, 2006, p.59; Bustamante, 2012, p.136; Bond, 2015; and Kruschwitz, 2015
[227] Bustamante, 2012, p.137
[228] For more on the terracotta see Guzzo, 2003 and Roberts, 2013.
[229] Guzzo, 2003, p.464). For more on the wall painting and the building's reconstruction, see Guzzo, 2003, Torelli, 2006, and Abate et al., 2011.

festival held in January.[230] *Vicomagistri* were in charge of neighbourhood policing and fire-fighting; in return for their services, they were allowed to wear the *toga praetexta* during the festival. There is evidence for *Compitalia* (listed as *ludi* or games) in the *Codex-Calendar of 354*,[231] but aspects of the holiday may have already been absorbed into the New Year's festival, the *Kalends* of January,[232] and freedman status only lasted for one generation- the children of freedmen are free. Regardless of the owl's class, it stands for a Roman citizen, one of the Telegenii, who is unconcerned with the jealousy of others, specifically, the Aucupi's and Mensuri's. The *toga* as the owl's form of dress refers to the religious aspects of belonging to a *sodalitas* and the mosaic's placement in the threshold of the bath keeps that jealousy at bay by not allowing evil to pass.

Most of the mosaic production in North Africa was intended for domestic spaces.[233] According to Ben Khader, the domestic sphere in Roman Africa is where "more than anywhere, mosaics expressed the tastes of the owners and thus reflect the trends of the period."[234] The third century CE was the height of mosaic production, with most examples coming from private homes.[235] Figural mosaics were typically found in the more important rooms of a residence, with the lesser rooms receiving geometric decoration.[236]

The houses of the non-elite of Thysdrus were located closer to the center of town, measuring from 130 to 160 square meters, and consisting of four to eight rooms around a central courtyard.[237] These houses were small and of modest decoration, with shards of pottery laid in mortar as the main form of flooring.[238] Rooms that faced out onto the streets, but also connected with the rest of the house, have been interpreted as shops or workshops.[239] A cistern in the courtyard was the house's water source, and if one room was larger than the others and with better quality floor decoration, it has been

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[230] For more on the *vicomagistri* see Clarke, 2003, Stek, 2009, Lott, 2011, and Flower, 2017. The *Vicomagistri Relief* in the Musei Vaticani is one of the most famous depictions of *vicomagistri*.

[231] This manuscript belongs to the Christian period and was commissioned by a Christian, Furius Dionysius Filocalus as a gift for another Christian, Valentinus. Salzman, 1990, pp.17–19 like Stern, 1981 before her, does not consider the *Calendar of 354* to be a pagan anachronism, but a record of the official state cults of Rome, from its pagan festivals to the imperial cult. Salzman, 1990, p.21 likens the manuscript to the *Projecta Casket* from the Esquiline Treasure in the British Museum, where pagan imagery has been employed for a Christian.

[232] Meslin, 1970 was the first to suggest a connection with the *Kalends* of January. Grig, 2016a, p.240 states that by Late Antiquity, *Compitalia* had lost its importance, and that it was the *Kalends* of January that would rival Saturnalia.

[233] Ben Khader, 2006, p.19

[234] Ben Khader, 2006, p.19

[235] Ben Khader 2006a: 19

[236] Ben Khader 2006a: 20

[237] House of Africa label, El Jem and Slim, 1996, p.66

[238] House of Africa label, El Jem

[239] House of Africa label, El Jem and Slim, 1996, p.66

interpreted as a reception room.[240] In this way, a house of a slightly better-off member of the non-elite mimicked that of the upper class.

Illustration 16: The House of Africa, ca. 170 century CE. Full-scale reconstruction, El Jem, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

[240] House of Africa label, El Jem

Illustration 17: *Mosaic of the Months,* late 2nd/ early 3rd century CE. (Entire mosaic with the location of the *January* panel) from room 6, the House of the Months in Thysdrus, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The largest houses of Thysdrus were found more towards the outskirts, where there was room to build dwellings reaching from 1120 to over 3000 square meters,[241] such as the ones preserved behind the El Jem Museum that were constructed during the height of the town's prosperity, the second and third centuries CE. The late second century CE House of Africa [illustration 16], now fully reconstructed near its original site[242] allows visitors to experience one of the homes of the town's elite as it would have appeared in antiquity. Like the smaller, more modest houses, these were arranged around an open

[241] House of Africa label, El Jem and Slim, 1996, p.68
[242] The original site of the House of Africa was next to the Baths of the Owl. See [illustration 4].

space, a garden, usually in the center, but the garden was surrounded by a peristyle.[243] Rooms that have traditionally been associated with entertaining and dining (*oeci, triclinia*), and sleeping (*cubicula*) have been identified, usually oriented toward the north and west, while service areas and secondary apartments were usually toward the south.[244] Shrines to the household gods (*lararia*) were placed in small rooms that were located off of the peristyle.[245]

The Mosaic of the Months [illustration 17] was discovered in room 6, a probable *cubiculum*, in the west wing of the House of the Months by Foucher in 1961.[246] The house was part of a larger, although only partially excavated complex near the Great Baths, built around a garden or central courtyard. The House of the Months possessed other rooms with mosaic floors, including a lavish one (room 3) depicting the Nine Muses, a dining room (*triclinium*) with a variation of the *Unswept Floor Mosaic* (*asarotos oikos*), and one (room 2) with "cushions" decoration and the symbol of the Telegenii.[247] Foucher dated the house to either the end of the second century CE or the beginning of the third century CE.[248] Lamps, or fragments of lamps, that were found beneath rooms 2 and 3 of the house may be dated stylistically up to the early third century CE.[249] This indicates that these rooms might have been the result of a later redecoration.

The *Unswept Floor Mosaic* in the House of the Months provides evidence for intervention between the house's residents and supernatural forces.[250] According to Pliny the Elder,[251] the original Hellenistic mosaic by Sosos of Pergamon depicted bits of food that had fallen from the dinner table as if they were purposefully left upon the floor. It was considered bad luck to remove the remains once they had fallen because what no longer belonged to a banquet for the living belonged to that of the dead.[252] The mosaic provided a way in which the dead could continue to receive their offerings via the pictorial symbols, since the mosaic covered the floor of the house, and the ground was the boundary between the world of the living and the underworld.[253] Here, we are met with another case of "like influencing like", where the images of the discarded food stand as replacements for the real things.

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[243] Slim, 1995, p.260
[244] Slim, 1996, pp.69–70
[245] Slim, 1995, p.260 and Slim, 1996, p.70
[246] Foucher, 1963, p.28
[247] Foucher, 1963, pp.27–28; Dunbabin, 1979, pp.124–125
[248] Foucher & Institut d'Archeologie Tunis 1963: 28 and Foucher, 2000: 65–66
[249] Dunbabin, 1979, p.31 and Foucher, 1963, pp.51–53
[250] Bailliot, 2019, p.184
[251] Pliny, *Natural History,* XXXVI.184. Dunbabin, 1999, p.270 notes that Sosos is the only mosaicist who Pliny names; nor does any other ancient author name artists working in mosaics. According to Dunbabin, this is because the medium was held in less esteem than painting and sculpture.
[252] Bailliot, 2019, p.184 citing Renard, 1954, pp.35–38; Deonna and Renard, 1961, pp.50–55
[253] Bailliot, 2019, p.184

The Mosaic of the Months [illustration 17] is the oldest surviving Roman illustrated calendar with a complete set of the months.[254] Although the portion of the mosaic containing the months is intact, there once was much more of the composition as indicated by the column of squares on the right, each containing non-figural designs, and the truncated second column of squares, where it is no longer possible to tell what was within each of the squares. The now-lost area may have originally contained illustrations of the labors of the months or signs of the zodiac, which may have been paired with the months. The preserved portion of the mosaic has an appearance much like a Persian carpet, with each square surrounded by lush vegetal design. The *Mosaic of the Months* was produced in a local workshop.[255] The hands of two craftsmen have been identified, with the so-called "apprentice" responsible for the panels (*emblemata*) of several months including *January*.[256] [illustration 2] It is the "apprentice's" more abstract style that has led to difficulties in this panel's interpretation.[257]

Most *emblemata* of the *Mosaic of the Months* depict religious scenes tied to festivals that characterized a typical Roman year, which began in January.[258] In the *January* panel, two men wearing hooded cloaks are embracing. [illustration 2] Foucher described the short white garment with a thin purple border that the men are wearing underneath the cloaks as the *angusticlavia,* which was associated with the equestrian or merchant class.[259] Both men are also wearing boots. What appears to be the bare legs of the two men was interpreted by Foucher as "beige stockings."[260] Yet, there is no differentiation between the flesh tones of the men's exposed body parts and their legs. The man on the left has darker hair and is wearing a reddish-colored cloak. The man on the right has lighter hair and is wearing a black cloak with a more brownish color on its underside. Because of their positioning, only one hand belonging to each figure can be seen.

Eithne Mary Eastman concluded that the man on the left is younger based on more gray tiles in the hair of the man on the right, the presence of "bushy eyebrows" in the same figure and a more "youthful" clean-shaven profile of the figure on the left.[261] However, it is unclear whether the supposed older figure is bearded because there is only a slight differentiation within the color of the tiles on the upper portion, which have a few more in the yellow-range, versus the lower portion of his face, which seem just a little more

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[254] Eastman, 2001, p.183. The mosaic from the House of the Calendar at Antioch is the oldest surviving calendar mosaic, dating to the second century CE, but it is now missing several months.
[255] Eastman, 1996, p.24, 2001, p.184
[256] Eastman, 2001, p.184
[257] Eastman, 2001, p.184
[258] The months of January and February were added by king Numa Pompilius to the Roman calendar that was believed to have been established by Romulus. Romulus' calendar began in March, at the start of spring. Remnants of this can be seen in the zodiac, which begins with Aries in late March. For more on the early calendar see Forsythe, 2012
[259] Foucher, 2000a, p.71
[260] Foucher, 2000a, p.71
[261] Eastman, 1996, p.193

gray. The difference in the ages of the figures might imply a father-son relationship or that of a patron-client.[262] Because the panel is only labeled with the name of the month, *Januarius,* it is unclear whether the figures' embrace is in celebration of the *Kalends* of January (the New Year) or *Compitalia*, the month's major holidays. Eastman states that two figures are expressing "New Year's good wishes," which will result in the younger figure kissing the older.[263]

If the holiday depicted within the panel is *Compitalia,* then there is a link to Fascinus, the divine phallus. The founding of *Compitalia* has been attributed to one of the kings of Rome from the sixth century BCE, Servius Tullius.[264] A version of the myth of the birth of Servius Tullius recorded by Pliny the Elder[265] describes the image of a phallus (Fascinus) suddenly appearing in the ashes of a hearth and then impregnating Ocrisia, the slave of Tanaquil, queen and wife of king Tarquinius Priscus. The story continues that after Servius Tullius' birth, a flame could be witnessed flickering around the child's head while he was sleeping, which was interpreted that Servius Tullius was fathered by a *Lar familiaris*. Pliny concludes that it was because of this that Servius Tullius instituted the games for *Compitalia* in honor of the *Lares* when he became king. Pliny's account equates Fascinus with that of the *Lares,* and the phallus, Fascinus' image, whose function is to protect and ward off evil, is welcome within the home.[266] Although the myth of Servius Tullius was set deep in Rome's past, the apotropaic power of the phallus did not lose its potency in the Late Empire.

As the myth of the birth of Servius Tullius demonstrates, Roman domestic spaces, as pointed out by Joanne Berry, were not "neutral or passive."[267] The threshold (*limen*) and the door (*ianua*) physically separated a house from the street in the same manner that fortifications defined the limits of a settlement. Thresholds, as already demonstrated, were important boundaries physically and spiritually. Pompeii provides evidence for locks and keys that might have been utilized at night even if the front doors were opened during the day; many Pompeian houses also had secondary doors in the entrance that that would have limited access to the house.[268] Shelley Hales has described the doors of Pompeian houses in terms of their ability to express the identity of the owner:

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[262] Eastman, 1996, p.193
[263] Eastman, 1996, p.192
[264] Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.14.2-4. More solid evidence for the celebration of *Compitalia* comes from the middle of the first century BCE, embroiled within the political turmoil of the Late Republic.
[265] Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXVI.70 also recounted in Alvar Nuño, 2011, p.117. Waites, 1920, p.247 records a similar variant from Plutarch where the mother of Romulus was a servant who is bedded by the "phallic Lar" in place of the king's daughter.
[266] Alvar Nuño, 2011, pp.117–118
[267] Berry, 2016, p.129. In addition to Berry's important article, other studies on boundaries in Roman (primarily domestic) architectural space include Grahame, 1999, Grahame, 2002, Platt, 2002, Lauritsen, 2011, Proudfoot, 2011, Proudfoot, 2013, and Stevens, 2017.
[268] Berry, 2016, p.131. For secondary doors see Proudfoot, 2013

For the homeowner, there appears to have been only one acceptable place for self-promotion in his façade. The door, as the only possible method of direct ingress, was the one component of the exterior façade that could be seen by passers-by as linking with the interior. This was the only spot in the house boundary where it was evident that there was a house behind. Every time the door opened, it afforded a glimpse into the homeowner's domestic world. The door was, therefore, an indisputable part of that world and an opportunity to impress. That Pompeians took this opportunity is easy to discern; enormous doorways were hung with great wooden doors fitted with bronze bolts, locks, and insignia. The threshold to the private was marked with great pomp in the realm of the public.[269]

In Thysdrus, even some of the smallest houses may have had more than one entrance.[270] The larger houses had their main entrance face the street, with a "first vestibule" that could flank street-facing shops that did not connect with the rest of the house.[271] Slim describes the "second vestibule" as the real place in the elite residences where the transition between the outside and inside occurred.[272] Unlike the Pompeian desire for a viewer on the street or at the threshold to see inside a well-appointed home when the door was open, those of Thysdrus were more closed off, with the "second vestibule" limiting what could be seen. Although Slim makes no mention of the reason for this architectural design, limiting the view of others would have been a preventative measure in keeping the envy and jealousy of the less fortunate from affecting the residents of the wealthy home.

The name for a door (*ianua*) is connected to Janus.[273] Janus was an Italic deity depicted with two faces, although rare examples with two heads exist; one face is more youthful and is associated with beginnings, while the other depicts old age and is associated with endings.[274] Like Janus, a door has two faces or sides: one looks outward to the street, and the other looks inward to the interior. As a god of beginnings, Janus was first among deities to receive prayers.[275] Ovid's *Fasti* opens with an invocation to Janus on the first (*Kalends*) of January, where the god likens himself to a house's door, where the outward

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[269] Hales, 2003, p.104. Further discussion of the issues embedded within the terms "public" and "private" can be found in works including Wallace-Hadrill 1988, Wallace-Hadrill 1994, Laurence / Wallace-Hadrill 1997, Riggsby 1997, Treggiari 1998, Zanker 2001, Cooper 2007, Gazda / Haeckl 2010, Bowes 2011, Anguissola 2012, Bowes 2015, Joshel / Petersen 2015, Parker 2015, Tuori et al. 2015, and Schörner 2017.
[270] Slim, 1996, p.66
[271] Slim, 1995, p.260
[272] Slim, 1995, p.260
[273] Mahon, 2003, p.59
[274] Mahon, 2003, p.58
[275] Mahon, 2003, p.58

face is described as looking towards the people, and the inward face is looking towards the *Lar,* one of the household gods.[276]

A slave (*ianitor*) could also exert control over who had the right to pass through a door of a house.[277] Here, the slave's door-keeping function is named after Janus, and in the *Fasti*, the god calls himself the door-keeper of the heavenly court (*caelestis ianitor aulae.*)[278] The fresco of *Orpheus and Eurydice in the Underworld* from Tomb 33 (the *Columbarium of Decimus Folius Mela)* of Ostia's Porta Laurentina necropolis, now in the Musei Vaticani, features a seated figure labeled "*iani*" for *ianitor*.[279] The artist has decided the *ianitor* is necessary for guarding the exit of the underworld, even though the watchdog Cerberus is still at his post, appearing to the left of the *ianitor*. If the homes of the elite had use of such slaves, why would one be denied Pluto, the lord of the dead, who was more concerned with his subjects attempting to escape rather than visitors entering his domain?[280] In the entrance (*fauces* or *vestibulum*) of a house [or second entrance in the case of Thysdrus], the powers of Janus met those of the *Lar familiaris*, the household god.

At the left in the *January* panel, is a table with offerings of foliage and fruit [illustration 18] supported by a base with a sculpted figure that has been identified by Eastman as one of the *Lares*[281] most likely due to the wreath on the figure's head and the positioning of its arms, which resemble the type of *Lar* called the Dancing *Lar*. The *Lares* were usually depicted as a pair of young men wearing short belted tunics and high boots,[282] often carrying an offering dish (*patera*) in one hand and a ritual vessel used for pouring liquid (*rhyton*) in the other. The Dancing *Lares* are always depicted as youths; one is not older than the other when they appear as pairs. This Dancing *Lares* type is associated with images of the *Lares Compitales* as well as the *Lares* of individual households. Context is, perhaps, one of the best ways that these two types of *Lares* can be distinguished in the statuettes.

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[276] Ovid, *Fasti* I.135-136. For Janus in the *Fasti* see Hardie, 1991

[277] Berry, 2016, pp.137–138 cites two inscriptions recording *ianitores* from Pompeii: *CIL* IV.1894 and *CIL* IV.1921 as well as from other sites.

[278] Ovid, *Fasti* I.139

[279] See Donati, 1998, p.61, Casagrande-Kim, 2012, pp.219, 322, and Ostia Antica,org's webpage: https://www.ostia-antica.org/dict/plnec/plnec.htm for more information and illustrations of this wall painting.

[280] In this wall painting, the still-alive Orpheus has already used his musical gifts to charm both Cerberus and the *ianitor* to enter the underworld in order to bring back his deceased wife Eurydice. It will be Orpheus' own undoing, not the fault of the guards, that will prevent Eurydice's return. The presence of the figure of Ocnus on the far right might be a reference to Polygnotos' painting of the underworld from the Lesche of the Knidians at Delphi, or another indication, along with Cerberus, Pluto, and Proserpina, that the scene is occurring in the realm of the dead.

[281] Eastman, 2001, p.184

[282] Sofroniew 2015: 35–37 describes the boots of the *Lares* as a typically South Italian style, which, along with the drinking equipment, she equates with a possible connection to Bacchus / Dionysos through South Italian connections, but she also does not rule out Etruscan influence.

Illustration 18: *January* from the *Mosaic of the Months,* late 2nd/ early 3rd century CE. (Detail- *monopodium*) from room 6, the House of the Months in Thysdrus, Sousse Museum, Sousse, Tunisia. Author's own photograph, June 2014

The relatively small size of the figure and the lack of details in the mosaic makes it difficult to determine if it is a *Lar*. The foliage is said to be from a laurel,[283] which furthers connections to *Compitalia*, for laurel is part of the iconography for the *Lares Compitales*, but the branches are too abstracted to conclude that they are anything more than generic

[283] Eastman, 1996, p.192

tree branches. The table, however, can be matched with single-footed marble tables (*monopodia*)[284] that were used as display pieces within the atrium of a *domus*, such as in Pompeii and Herculaneum, and may have held offerings for the household gods. Even if these tables might have been part of household cult, they usually do not depict the *Lares*, themselves. However, the imagery of Dancing *Lares* combined with tables (although not *monopodia*) can be found in some of the earliest material evidence for *Compitalia*: Republican-period wall paintings from Delos.[285] [illustrations 19 and 20]

Illustration 19: Wall painting from Delos with "Dancing *Lares*". Archaeological Museum of Delos, Delos, Greece. Author's own photograph, May 2014

[284] There are many examples of this type of table from the Vesuvian region as well as Gaul, Greece, and Asia Minor. *Monopodia* continue to be produced into the Christian period. For more on *monopodia* see Moss, 1988 and Feuser, 2013. For *trapezophora* and other tables in Greece and Rome, see Gill, 1974, Stephanidou-Tiveriou et al., 1985, Stephanidou-Tiveriou, 1993, and Cohon, 1995.
[285] Especially Delos Museum # B.17629 and # B.17626. For more on the paintings of Delos see Bulard, 1908, Hasenohr, 2003, and Flower, 2017.

Illustration 20: Wall painting from Delos with “Dancing *Lares*” (Detail: Offering Table). Archaeological Museum of Delos, Delos, Greece. Author’s own photograph, May 2014

Compitalia also featured the hanging of dolls made of wool for the free and balls of wool for slaves on doors and cross-roads shrines as offerings to the *Lares Compitales*. Wool, although a common material in antiquity, was considered lucky.[286] These offerings may have been in exchange for human sacrifices in the early history of the festival, or in other words, a form of magic to trick the deity into accepting the effigy rather than a human being. Like the *apotropaica* of the threshold mosaics discussed at the start of this paper, this is an illustration of the principal of "like influencing like." However, the *Lares* are benevolent, so there are problems with this theory.

Tiny "rag dolls" from the site of Karanis in Egypt are enigmatic artifacts that might have connections to magical or religious practices such as those during *Compitalia*. These "rag dolls" date to the 2nd-4th century CE and are composed of scraps of fabric pulled into a loop and then tied with a string.[287] One, nick-named "Scary Hair,"[288] has human hair

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[286] Holland, 1937, p.435. Because wool is a perishable organic material, its survival rate is low, yet, wool was one of the most accessible fibers for textile production. Ancient domestic spaces were populated with objects composed of materials that would have been prevalent in antiquity, such as wool and other natural fibers, wood, and basketry.

[287] For information on Karanis see Gazda, 1983 and Wilburn, 2018. More specifically about these "dolls": Thomas, 2001, pp.25–26, Johnson, 2003, Davis, 2015, and Roberts and Batkin-Hall, 2016. Johnson, 2003 is the most comprehensive, cataloguing the 19 examples of the "rag dolls" from the site.

[288] Kelsey Museum # AD. KM 7512

applied to it in addition to the wool and mud. Another,[289] has papyrus sheets underneath the cloth.[290] Only four "rag dolls" came from houses; the others were discovered in streets or away from architecture.[291] The one called "Scary Hair" was discovered in a house in association with other objects: ivory dice, a "doll" made of wood, and a terracotta figurine of Isis and her son Harpokrates.[292]

More recent work presents questions about "Scary Hair," including whether it and the others are actually dolls, whose hair was used to make it, or perhaps if it was a magical artifact, such as used in cursing.[293] After micro-CT scanning of several of the Karanis "rag dolls", it was revealed that one,[294]contained a bone 'head' decorated with eyes and eyebrows, animal fiber at the top of the bone 'head' (perhaps in imitation of hair), and linen wrapping.[295] The micro-CT scan confirmed that inside the linen wrapping was some other material, stated as possibly being wood, where incisions had been made.[296] Binding and cutting are ritual actions.

At the 2018 Archaeological Institute of America's Annual Meeting, Shannon Ness, a doctoral student at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, presented her unpublished paper, Karanis “Rag Dolls”: A New Interpretation. Ness believes that the "rag dolls" are "soothers," ancient pacifiers for infants and toddlers. According to Ness, as the child aged, the "soother" would have been kept as a memento and might have been personalized, such as in the case of "Scary Hair" where she suggests that the human hair could have been applied after the "doll"/ "soother" was no longer needed to be placed in the child's mouth to prevent crying or to relieve discomfort from teething. Citing 'rag bags' used in Russia, Ness described an example where a child was left with the "soother" in its mouth so long that it became moldy. I am in agreement with Ness that it seems doubtful that the Karanis "dolls" were toys, which, according to Ness, is how they are displayed in the Kelsey Museum. With the lack of inscriptions to assist in the interpretation of these artifacts, Ness' interpretation may be possible, but I believe it is more likely that these objects are religious in nature, either for magical purposes or as part of a ritual, such as in *Compitalia* or the *Argei*.[297]

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[289] Kelsey Museum # 26413
[290] Johnson, 2003
[291] Johnson, 2003
[292] Johnson, 2003. With a niche in an adjacent room to where # 7512 was found, Johnson may accept an interpretation as a toy or an object used in domestic rituals, but she posits that the Karanis "dolls" were used as amulets.
[293] Davis, 2015
[294] #1966.901.113
[295] Roberts and Batkin-Hall, 2016
[296] Roberts and Batkin-Hall, 2016.
[297] For more about the *Argei* see Clerici, 1942 and Graf 2000.

Conclusion

Although the *Mosaic of the Months* is older than the *Owl Mosaic*, the two are more than just floor decorations. It is highly likely that the Telegenii of Thysdrus commissioned the *Owl Mosaic*, but it is unclear whether the owner of the House of the Months was a member of the Telegenii or one of their fans despite the faction's symbol appearing in one room, and the House of the Months' location near the Great Baths. We do not know if the owner of the House of the Months even cared about what images were on his floors.[298] However, if the mosaic with the symbol of the Telegenii [illustration 11] in room 2 of the House of the Months was, in fact, a later addition to the house in the third century CE, it is possible that an original owner redecorated to reflect his allegiance to a *sodalitas* that was on the rise, or that it suggests a second owner who found expressing his loyalty to the Telegenii appropriate for making his own mark on the House of the Months. Placing room 2's mosaic in the House of the Months as a later addition more closely aligns it with the *Owl Mosaic*. Regardless of the date of room 2, the *Mosaic of the Months* remained in room 6, uncovered by later decoration, implying that it either suited the taste of a resident in the third century, or it was not worth the effort to remove. A version of the *Unswept Floor Mosaic* in a dining room, where images of discarded food serve to placate denizens of the underworld using the "like influencing like" magical paradigm is further proof of meaning beyond decoration in the House of the Months. In terms of its size and the lavishness of its mosaics, the House of the Months was a residence capable of attracting the envy of others.

January is just one of the twelve months that comprise the *Mosaic of the Months*, but January lies at the crossroads, a dangerous and magical place, between the old and new year, and the festivals for the month, *Compitalia* and the *Kalends* of January were considered popular. The *Lares*, themselves, bridged the boundaries between humanity and the "high" gods of state ritual, while the wool dolls offered to the *Lares Compitales* for *Compitalia* recall magical practices of substituting an image of something for the real thing, another instance of "like influences like." For the *Owl Mosaic*, the Telegenii might have been looked down upon by the imperial court in their early history, but by the third century CE, they transformed into a provincial elite, capable of attracting the evil eye, but also of turning that destructive power back upon their rivals. Both the *Owl Mosaic* and the January panel question our own conceptions of popular religion in the Roman Empire, or at least this one town in North Africa by examining the roles of religion,

[298] Eastman, 1996, p.24

magic, boundaries, and the social classes of those performing magical rites and/or popular religious practices.

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