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**READING SOCIAL RELATIONS FROM ROMAN AFRICAN  
MOSAICS – AN ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSE**

**Abstract**

The paper presents the diversity of Roman African society and the relations between different social groups by analysing the representations on the mosaics. It also analyses the manner of self-presentation of the landowners and their wives.

**Key words**

mosaics, Roman Africa, landlords, society

In the middle of second century AD a special type of art appeared in Rome's African provinces – figural mosaics. They are characterised by a special selection of themes, type of composition and use of a plan. Moreover, their narration creates continuous, living stories which are known for example from mythology or even private life of the Roman nobility. Such mosaics were displayed either in the context of public buildings, such as amphitheatres, or private estates (*villae*) of influential landowners. Among the mosaics from *villae*, those with scenes from private estates draw particular attention, as they present both landowners engaged in leisure characteristic for Roman nobility and other people who are working in the fields, seeing to animals or helping the landowners' wives with their toilet. They can be distinguished not only due to the type of their activities but also by virtue of proportions of their representations, the place they occupy in the composition or their general appearance (clothes, jewellery, etc.).

It is thus possible to distinguish 20 mosaics with 25 scenes with depictions of landowners and their wives. These works of art were discovered mostly on the territory of the erstwhile province of *Africa Proconsularis*, but there are singular examples from *Numidia*, *Mauretania* and *Tripolitania*, in present-day Tunisia, Algeria and Libya. They were created between second and the beginning of sixth century AD, since this form of art persisted even after the Vandal conquest<sup>1</sup>. These mosaics were generally discovered in the formal rooms, for example *triclinia* or *oeci*, which means that they were meant to be seen not only by members of the household, but by the guests of the landowners as well<sup>2</sup>.

Identifying people featured along landowners and their wives and the latter figures may be quite problematic, but it can be determined that when the architectural context of mosaics is considered. Members of the affluent strata distinguished among other people depicted in the scene by a specific pose; he or she wears very rich clothes with numerous ornaments or jewellery. Landowners and their wives are often surrounded by other people who could be their servants or hired workers; among other things, these are presented in smaller proportions or clothed differently, for example in short tunics without any ornaments.

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<sup>1</sup> B.H. Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest*, Cambridge 1954, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> E.K. Gazda, A.E. Haackl, *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, Ann Arbor 2010, p. 117.

There are six depictions presenting landowners' wives. The first and the most important example is the mosaic of Dominus Julius from Carthage (Fig. 1). The mosaic is dated to the end of the fourth century AD or to the beginning of the fifth century AD. There are two scenes with representations of Dominus Julius' wife. The first one is in the middle of the upper register. The scene features a lady who is sitting on a bench in the shade of cypresses and is fanning herself. On her both sides there are people who are approaching her and bringing gifts, probably the crops grown and little animals born on Dominus Julius' estate<sup>3</sup>. The important role of the lady is emphasised by her specific pose and by the orientation of people surrounding her. She is receiving the gifts, therefore her role in Dominus Julius' estate could have been very important<sup>4</sup>.

In the other scene of the same mosaic there is a similar representation. It is found in the lower register, on the left side. The lady of the estate is in the centre of the composition. She is leaning against a column and looking at herself in the little mirror held in her left hand. On her left side there is a woman with a little white box, the *pyxís*, probably made of ivory, containing jewellery or cosmetics<sup>5</sup>. In the lower part we can see the remnants of a depiction showing a person with three fishes. To the right from the lady there is a man with a basket full of roses. Dominus Julius' wife is wearing almost transparent clothes which accentuate her figure. Moreover, she is wearing a necklace, probably a golden one, with a dark greenish pendant. Her earrings match the pendant, and there is a wide pearl-covered band on her head. Thanks to her pose, opulent clothes and jewellery she resembles the goddess Venus, surrounded by cupids who help her with her toilet. The posture of the lady draws on the depictions of that very goddess, known from the Hellenistic world<sup>6</sup>.

There is another example of the landowner's wife being likened to Venus in a mosaic from Sidi Ghrib (Fig. 2), which was discovered at a private

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<sup>3</sup> K.M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa. Studies in Iconography and Patronage*, Oxford 1978, p. 120; A. Merlin *La mosaïque du seigneur Julius à Carthage*, *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques*, 1920, p. 108; T. Précheur-Canonge, *La vie rurale en Afrique romaine d'après les mosaïques*, Paris 1962, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> P. Veyne, *Les cadeaux des colons à leur propriétaire: la neuvième bucolique et le mausolée d'Igel*, *Revue archéologique* 2, 1981, p. 249.

<sup>5</sup> A.G. Hamman, *Życie codzienne w Afryce Północnej w czasach św. Augustyna*, transl. M. Stafiej-Wróblewska, E. Sieradzińska, Warsaw 1989, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> M. Yacoub, *Splendeurs des mosaïques de Tunisie*, Tunis 1995, p. 219.

Roman bath-house in one of the *vestibula*<sup>7</sup> and has been dated to the same period as Dominus Julius' mosaic. The lady is sitting in the centre of the scene. She is trying on an earring or dressing her hair. She is presented in larger proportions than her two servants who are standing on either side. One of these women, on the right, is holding a mirror and the second one – a case, probably with jewellery. The lady is wearing long, two-coloured tunic without sleeves. Moreover, she has got several bracelets, earrings and a necklace. Her Venus-like pose, the attire, the people and the objects that surround her indicate her high position. The best analogy for this scene is known from Lamta, Tunisia (Fig. 3). Venus is represented in the middle of this masterpiece. She is surrounded by two cupids: one with a mirror and the second with a case. The only difference is that Venus is represented naked, while the landowners' wives are shown in sumptuous clothing, though it needs to be noted that the is often transparent, so that people who saw the mosaic were able appraise the ladies' attractive figures. This iconographic allusion was used not only to emphasize the importance of landowners' wives through comparison to the goddess, but also to underline their femininity, beauty and the particular, image-related role in the estates.

Yet another representation of a landowner's wife is associated with farming or outdoor activities. It originates from Zliten, Libya<sup>8</sup>, where it was found in one of the rooms in private Roman *villa* and has been dated to the early third century AD. The scene is connected with the threshing of grain. In the foreground, one can see a woman who is sitting with her back to the viewer, under the tree, from where she supervises the work of five labourers. The lady is wearing a long tunic, one of her arms is bare. There is a striking difference between the lady, sitting comfortably and probably resting, and the depictions of the labourers who are working hard and are mostly naked. Outdoor activities can also be seen in a mosaic from Tabarka, dated to the end of fourth century AD or to beginning of fifth century AD (Fig. 4). There is a women on the left side, dressed in a long tunic with characteristic vertical stripes – *clavi*<sup>9</sup>, who is sitting under the tree and spinning. There are chickens next to her so probably the lady is also watching them.

The role of landowners' wives is not limited to resting in the shade of trees or doing simple grooming activities or typically female chores such as

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> Reproduction of this mosaic is not available.

<sup>9</sup> F. Baratte, Le vêtement dans l'antiquité tardive: rupture ou continuité?, *Antiquité Tardive* 12, 2004, p. 124.

spinning. They could even manage the estates instead of their husbands<sup>10</sup> or supervise the workers occasionally. Their high position and importance is emphasized by a clear allusion to the representations of goddess Venus. On the other hand, they usually remain in one position and perform no physical effort, which is why they appear passive. Juxtaposed with the activities of labourers and servants, their immobility can be treated as a symbol of their power, even though it was less substantial than the power of their husbands.

The landowners are represented in three thematically different types of scenes: hunt, departure for hunt or receiving the gifts; where venery scenes form an important thematic group of their depictions. Hunting iconography with the imagery of wild animals derives from the Hellenistic period<sup>11</sup>. The researchers distinguish two main iconographical types which probably were adopted by African artisans: the hunt for the Calydonian boar with the participation of Meleager (Fig. 5), who usually wears only a cape which floating in the wind, which symbolizes victory<sup>12</sup> as well as hunts of the Hellenistic kings, for example Alexander the Great (Fig. 6), featured astride, who in most cases chase lions or panthers. Such representations emphasize the *virtus*, the courage of men<sup>13</sup>. The same tendency may be observed in the depictions of landowners. They probably wanted to show themselves during their favourite entertainment<sup>14</sup> and highlight their courage and social standing by way of a mythological or historical allusion. Thanks to literary sources, such as writings of Saint Augustine, we know that hunting was very popular in Roman Africa<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, there is one inscription found at the forum of Timgad<sup>16</sup> with the text: VENARI LAVARI LUDERE RIDERE OCC EST VIVERE which means: *Hunt, bathe, play and laugh – that's life!* A number of hunt scenes follow the same pattern. The landowners are often surrounded by their servants or companions. Moreover, they are often situated in the centre of scenes and are the only ones who are fighting with wild, dangerous animals.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Veyne, *Les cadeaux*, p. 249.

<sup>11</sup> J. Aymard, *Essai sur les chasses romaines des origines à la fin du siècle des Antonins*, Paris 1951, p. 45; M. Blanchard-Lemée et al., *Mosaics of Roman Tunisia*, Tunis 1996, p. 178; K.M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics*, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> K.M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics*, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> M. Yacoub, *Splendeurs*, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Święty Augustyn, *O nauce chrześcijańskiej*, transl. J. Sulowski, Warszawa 1989, II, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> K.M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> CIL VIII 17938.

The first representation comes from Djemila, ancient *Cuicul*, in today's Algeria (Fig. 7). This mosaic was found at a Roman *villa*, probably in the *triclinium*<sup>17</sup> and it is dated to the fourth century AD. In the upper section there is a horseman who has just thrown his spear into the boar's side. He is shown in the centre of the composition, in a glorious pose with the arm outstretched backwards. He is wearing a short tunic and a cape which is floating in the wind. The next example is a mosaic from Cherchel, ancient *Caesarea*, Algeria, dated to the end of the fourth century AD (Fig. 8). The topmost part shows a hunter who has just thrown his spear into the sides of a deer and a lion. The animals are bleeding and they are probably close to death. The hunter is presented in the already mentioned, characteristic triumphal pose with one of his arms raised and extended backwards. He is wearing a short tunic and a red cape.

The third scene comes from Oudna, ancient *Uthina*, Tunisia (Fig. 9). The mosaic with this scene is dated to 200-220 AD<sup>18</sup>. The scene which draws attention is situated vertically, on the left side of the mosaic's layout. There are three horsemen on it, but only one of them is attacking a lioness with a spear. Moreover, he is presented in a pose alluding to the images of victorious commanders and he is in the middle of the scene. His companions are armed and well-dressed, which means they possess similarly high social position as the landowner, perhaps being his guests at the hunt.

Another example was discovered in Carthage and is dated to the Vandal period, i.e. the end of fifth century AD (Fig. 10)<sup>19</sup>. The horseman who is almost in the middle of this scene is chasing a hare with two dogs and a falcon. The fact that the mosaic includes depiction of this bird trying to catch the hare is quite puzzling in its uniqueness, since falconry is otherwise completely absent from the repertoire of African mosaics. Moreover, there is no evidence that falconry was popular in North Africa in the periods under discussion. The horseman is wearing a short tunic, trousers and a windblown cape. Depictions of hunting landowners are strikingly similar to one another and it is possible to find many common elements, for example characteristic poses or gestures. Generally, they engage in direct, close combat with wild animals or have just thrown their spears. Moreover, the protagonists assume

<sup>17</sup> J. Lassus, La salle à sept absides de Djemila-Cuicul, *Antiquités africaines* 5, 1971, p. 193.

<sup>18</sup> J.M. Blázquez Martínez, Representaciones de villas rústicas en mosaicos del norte de África et y de Hispania, [in:] B. Cabouret-Laurioux, Y. Le Bohec (eds.), *Visions de l'Occident romain: hommages à Yann Le Bohec*, 1, Paris 2012, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> M. Yacoub, *Splendeurs*, p. 253.

a particular pose: their right arm is straight, extended backwards and the fingers of the hand are outstretched – also a symbol of victory<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, this gesture was a powerful image in Roman imperial iconography, for example on emperor Galba's coin<sup>21</sup>. These details greatly emphasize the landowners' high standing in the Roman African society.

Representations of departures for hunts are thematically close to the previous iconographic type of scene. Landowners are riding horses, one of their arms is often raised. They mostly wear short, frequently ornamented tunics. Moreover, they have got companions who are on foot and who help them carry equipment useful in hunting, for example spears or coiled nets. The first example with this type of scene was discovered in *Bulla Regia*, Tunisia (Fig. 11). This mosaic was found in the *triclinium* of a Roman *villa*. The upper section features a horseman and his three companions who are steering his horse or carrying a large net. The horseman, unlike his companions, is well-dressed. The other example is exceptional. It originates from Henchir Toungar, ancient *Cincari*, Tunisia and it is dated to the middle of third century AD (Fig. 12). The upper frame shows two men: the landlord, on the left, is making a sacrifice at the altar. He is holding a spear or javelin and wearing a short tunic and a cape. The second person, the servant, is lacing his garters.

Landlords who are hunting or departing for hunts are often surrounded by their companions or specially hired aides and servants who help them. Their presence underscores the high position of the landowners, both through a contrast with the lower classes and by showing the affluent attire of the landowners' friends. The owners of *villae* are often presented in larger stature than their companions, for example in the mosaic from Henchir Toungar. This device helps not only to distinguish landowners from their servants, but also emphasizes their elevated status in the Roman African society<sup>22</sup>.

The last and the best known example which illustrates the high position and the power of landowners is a scene from the aforesaid complex mosaic

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<sup>20</sup> N. Abdelouahab, La mosaïque de la chasse de Chlef (Algérie): Une nouvelle lecture, *Africa Romana* 16, 4, 2004, p. 2316; M.L. Neira, La imagen en los mosaicos romanos como fuente documental acerca de las elites en el Imperio Romano. Claves para su interpretación, *Estudios da Língua(gem)* 6, 2009, pp. 11-53.

<sup>21</sup> RIC I 227 (R3)

<sup>22</sup> M.L. Neira, La imagen de la mujer en la Roma Imperial, [in:] X Coloquio Internacional de la Asociación Española de Investigación de Historia de las Mujeres: Representación, Construcción e Interpretación de la imagen visual de la mujer, Madrid 2003, p. 78.

composition of Dominus Julius from Carthage (Fig. 1). It is located in the lower register, on the right side. The lord is sitting on a bench, with a footstool under his feet, surrounded by trees. He is being approached from the front by a man carrying two water-birds, who presents the lord with a scroll; the letters inscribed on it could be the abbreviation of lord's name in dative – IV(LIO) DOM(INO)<sup>23</sup>, hence the name of the composition. Behind the lord there is a servant carrying a basket of grapes and holding a tiny hare. This scene – just as the other scenes on the same mosaic – spotlights the contrast between landowners and people who worked for them, epitomising the uneven share of power between the upper classes and the underprivileged in the African provinces of the Roman Empire.

The people surrounding the landowners and their wives are often presented in smaller proportions, wearing simple clothes without any ornaments, they are going on foot while the landowners are riding their horses. It is clear that they occupy lower positions in the hierarchy of the Roman African society. In those times, slavery was not all too popular on the estates in Roman Africa<sup>24</sup>, with the system called *colonus* functioning instead. The *coloni* were sharecroppers, paying back landlords with their crops, in return for use of their fields. The *coloni's* tenant-landlord relationship eventually degraded into one of debt and dependence. As a result, the *colonus* became a new type of land tenancy, in which the occupants were placed in a state between freedom and slavery<sup>25</sup>. The Dominus Julius mosaic features not only the *coloni* or servants, as they are described in literature, but also a messenger handing Dominus Julius a letter, probably sent by someone who managed the Dominus Julius' estate. The people surrounding the landowners who are hunting or departing for hunt could be also special, hired helpers<sup>26</sup>.

The scenes with representations of landowners and their wives play a special role both in Roman African art and society since, among other things, they evince the social stratification, characterised by a clear boundary between the nobility and the poor rural population. Landowners and their wives appear in poses drawing on the likenesses goddesses, mythological

<sup>23</sup> M. Yacoub, *Splendeurs*, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> G. Alföldy, *Historia społeczna starożytnego Rzymu*, transl. A. Gierlińska, Poznań 1991, p. 273; J. Kolendo, *Le colonat en Afrique sous le Haut-Empire*, Paris 1991, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> G. Alföldy, *Historia społeczna*, p. 245; G.C. Picard, *La Carthage de Saint Augustin*, Paris 1965, p. 154; C.R. Whittaker, *Landlords and warlords in the Later Roman World*, [in:] J. Rich, G. Shipley (eds.), *War and Society in the Roman World*, London-New York 1995, p. 281.

<sup>26</sup> K.M.D. Dunbabin, *The Mosaics*, p. 120-121; A. Merlin, *La mosaïque*, pp. 103-105.



heroes, Hellenistic kings or emperors, emphasizing their own high position and dignity. The manner of their depiction is akin to portraiture, with individual facial features, rich clothing and jewellery, even though the scenes in which they participate are quite alike and share many common elements. There is one common element which connects the depictions of the lords and ladies of the estates: they are usually presented during their free time, which means that they were able to do what they liked when their servants or rural workers were working for them. While the way men are portrayed seeks to be a genuine reflection of a gentleman's social aspirations and leisure activities, their wives are depicted according to the masculine elite discourse, in a somewhat ornamental function of a beautiful status symbol.

### **Summary**

In the second century AD, Roman Africa saw the emergence of a special form of provincial Roman art – figural mosaic. These mosaics, largely depicting scenes of everyday life, were displayed either in the context of public buildings or private estates of influential landowners. Those with the representations of landowners and their wives draw particular attention. The paper aims to show that the imagery featuring landowners and their wives alludes to the imperial, heroic and even divine iconographies through the choice of motifs, poses or costumes; once combined, they manifest their high position in the Roman African society.

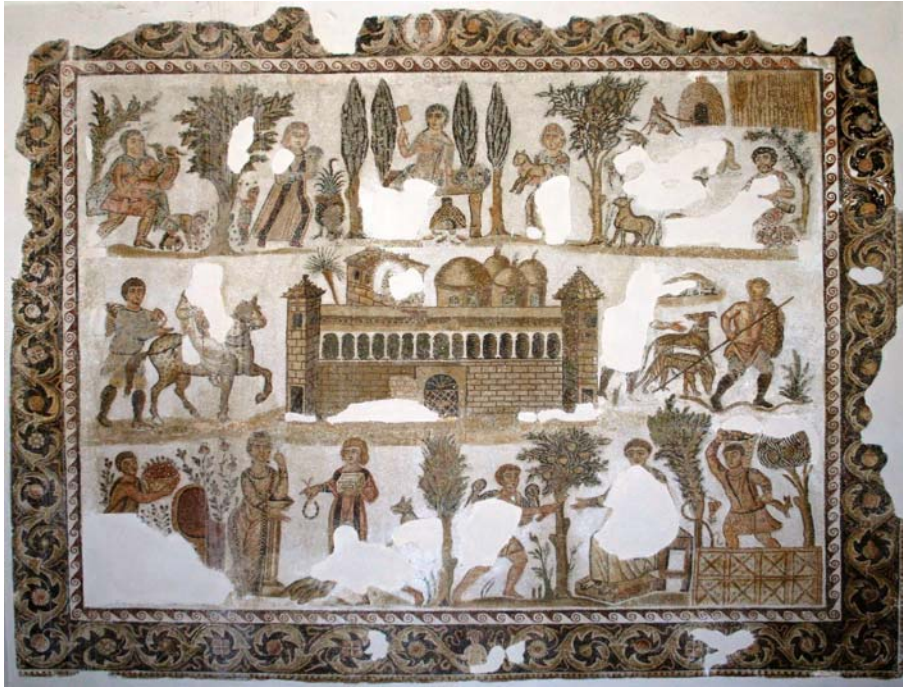


Fig. 1. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 2. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 3. M. Blanchard-Lemée et al., *Mosaics of Roman Tunisia*, Tunis 1996, fig. 105



Fig. 4. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 5. Public Domain [online]. Wikimedia [access: 2017-05-01]. Available at: <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Calydonian\\_hunt\\_Musei\\_Capitolini\\_MC917.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Calydonian_hunt_Musei_Capitolini_MC917.jpg)>



Fig. 6. Creative Commons, Egisto Sani [online]. Flickr [access: 2017-05-01]. Available at: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/69716881@N02/8227334235>>



Fig. 7. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 8. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 9. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 10. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 11. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



Fig. 12. Photo by Tadeusz Sarnowski



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