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elegasparini@hotmail.comFLOORS, ARCHITECTURAL ELEVATIONS, AND STATUARY IN LATE ANTIQUE RESIDENCES
FROM EGYPT, CYRENAICA, AND CYPRUS: SOME REMARKS¹

ABSTRACT

This paper is focused on the decoration of some late antique residences in Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Cyprus. All of them show common forms of self-presentation of urban elites across the eastern Mediterranean between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. The analysis is based on a global vision of social life in a world that was deeply influenced by a transition from old to new models and by forms of syncretism between various backgrounds which merged in new decorative systems. By recognising their owners' cultural environment, associations between décor and power can be elucidated in a comparative study of the main elements of these luxury residences. In this context, Christianity is one of the principal issues to be taken into account, along with deep pagan roots of the aristocratic *paideia* during the investigated

period. In fact, the specific choice of the iconographies in the mosaics or the subjects for the statues displayed in these houses can be understood only if contextualised against the spiritual life of the period. In the discussed residences, cultural identity is also manifested by forms of continuity in the architectural elevations. The fact that local traditions developed during the Hellenistic Period were still in use – both as reused building elements and as newly created decoration – can be interpreted as a manifestation of the antiquity and prestige of the families who owned the dwellings. These phenomena are studied through a review of the contexts and their comparative analysis in order to highlight similar developments and their meanings.

Keywords: late antique housing, eastern Mediterranean, elite identity, pagan and Christian aristocracies

Introduction

When one has a look at the history of residences in the eastern Mediterranean during late Antiquity, then the most immediate sensation to emerge is continuity, as if the material signs and ideas behind them were predefined by a deep groove of the vital past in terms of both local traditions and Graeco-Roman *koinè*.

Nevertheless, a historical analysis shows that the crucial changes that had affected the political and cultural situation were not without consequences. We are dealing with a time when the political and economic weight of the eastern part of the Empire increased as a result of

the foundation of Constantinople, the new capital, and its effects on the cultural level. Moreover, Christianity is one of the principal issues to be taken into account, especially by the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century.²

Nowadays, in general, the historical consensus about the end of paganism in late Antiquity is to consider the process 'as more of an internal evolution rather than as a violent extinction' and to believe that forms of survival existed even though paganism lost its public role.³ However, it seems that the disappearance of the Graeco-Roman civic cults had a fundamental role in the process which eventually led to the conversion of many members

¹ This paper is a part of the investigation carried out within the framework of the Project 'Residence as self-presentation of urban elites. Architecture and decoration of the House of Orpheus in *Nea Paphos*, the ancient capital of Cyprus' (National Science Centre in Poland 2017/27/B/HS3/01131) under the direction of

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² Bowes 2008; 2010; 2018.

³ Lavan 2011, XV–LVI; for regional studies, see Mulryan 2011.

of the urban elites, who, at that time, started to manifest their social role through the Christian faith.⁴

Therefore, the manifestation of identity that we find in luxury housing can be linked to an Empire-wide fashion – both in the towns and in the countryside – since the 4th century onwards, related to deep economic and political changes.⁵ In this respect, the residences have to be considered a ‘building-block’ of self-identity of late antique elites and not just a mirror of it.⁶ As a matter of fact, late antique housing resulted from a mixture of conscious or unconscious choices of the owners and what we could call the independent essence of the residences. This essence had many implications for the life of those who lived in them, as illustrated, for instance, by the role played by the antiquity and prestige of the families that owned the dwellings. This was one of the reasons why these residences continued to follow models established already during the early and mid-Imperial periods or even earlier, in the Hellenistic Period. Nevertheless, some aspects of this tradition were modified, implemented, or abandoned. Particularly between the end of the 5th and the 7th century, the building environments and the ancient towns themselves were changing, going through the processes of deconstruction, contraction, but also reorganisation in new, often poly-nucleated forms.⁷

Some remarks can be formulated by looking at a range of select case studies. The residences in the present study come from late antique Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Cyprus, *i.e.* regions which shared socio-cultural models, tastes, and habits between the 4th and 6th centuries AD due to their geographic vicinity to each other and their common past under the Ptolemaic and, later, the Roman rule.

Private architecture at *Salamis*: the *Huilerie*

At *Salamis*, Cyprus, the so-called *Huilerie* is a large *domus* in a residential area which saw a great growth in the second half of the 5th century (Fig. 1).⁸ However, excavations revealed the presence of a Hellenistic phase,

to which the entablatures with *travicello* modillions and other architectural elements reused in the walls should probably be linked.⁹

The Hellenistic language is still alive in the apsidal reception room in the north-eastern corner. The walls were still decorated in the tradition known from the Second Style architectural paintings. In fact, the colonnades on the wall were not real, but rendered in stucco, and entablatures showed *travicello* modillions.¹⁰ On the other hand, the usage of Corinthian-like capitals imitating late antique marble types¹¹ confirms the eclecticism of the owner who was not indifferent to the architectural tastes of his time.

The presence of a large reception room with an apse (Fig. 2) can be compared to the arrangement of the main wall in the *triclinium* of the House of Aion at *Nea Paphos* (Fig. 3).¹² The semi-circular niches, reminiscent of a long Egyptian tradition, from the housing in Marina el-Alamein to the Coptic monasteries, were particularly important in the reception room of the *Huilerie*: two of them flanked the entrance and the other two were placed opposite it, along the sides, while three windows were set in the apse.¹³

The Hellenistic scheme of the *oecus Aegyptius* is still alive in another hall on the upper storey, where Corinthian stucco pilasters were topped by a frieze with hunting scenes and an entablature with *travicello* modillions (Fig. 4). A series of arches were set between the pilasters: they were surmounted by arcuated lintels and another cornice with *travicello* modillions. The upper level was composed of fluted and spiral-fluted colonnettes supporting Corinthian-like capitals topped with another cornice with *travicello* modillions.¹⁴

Visual dialogue between various media: the Villa of Theseus

Architectural decoration is a good indicator of the uses and meanings of spaces, but it is worth noting that it was embedded in a broader visual dialogue between various media, such as mosaics, wall-paintings, marble

⁴ Cameron 2011.

⁵ On this topic, among others, see Ellis 1991; 1997; 2000; Gazda 1991; Wallace-Hadrill 1994; Christie, Loseby 1996; Baldini Lippolis 2001; Grassigli 2001; De Albentiis 2003; Sfameni 2006; Gasparini 2009; Bowes 2010; Tuori, Nissin 2015; Métraux 2018.

⁶ See Bowes 2018 (458–459), where the definition of the villa as a self-display of the owner is convincingly challenged.

⁷ As an example, see the transformations that occurred in housing at *Ptolemais* in Cyrenaica (Gasparini 2010; Żelazowski, Gasparini 2014).

⁸ Callot 1980; Argoud *et al.* 1980; Sodini 1997, 496–497; Baldini Lippolis 2001, 278–281.

⁹ Argoud *et al.* 1980, 28; Callot 1980, 342; Sodini 1997, 496.

¹⁰ Argoud *et al.* 1980, pl. XXIV c.

¹¹ Roux 1993, 203, fig. 4.

¹² See below.

¹³ Callot 1980, 343–344, figs 2–3.

¹⁴ Callot 1980, 345–346, 350, fig. 25.



Fig. 1. *Salamis*, the so-called *Huilerie*, a general plan (after Callot 1980, fig. 2a).

vener, statuary, textiles, and in transversal connections between the parts of the household.¹⁵

Ideological claims can be seen particularly clearly in the choice of specific iconographic themes for the mosaic floors whose meaning, beyond their merely decorative purpose, often indicated a hierarchical progression of rooms toward the heart of the complex.

Amongst the most common subjects and themes of the late antique domestic decorations one finds divinities, mythological figures, and heroes intended as allegories through which the owners wanted to underline their *virtus*, that is their moral values and culture. Widespread were also themes connected to the Dionysiac repertoire, which were often represented in the dining or living rooms – these themes became a convention synonymous with the ideals of hospitality and conviviality, for joy of life and earthly happiness.

If mosaics are one of the most explicit languages through which we can trace the communication choices of the owners, it seems appropriate to quote other residences in Cyprus where the prosperity of the towns from the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century is testified by a blooming period of figural mosaics.¹⁶ The phenomenon has raised the question of the existence of local workshops, which would have given rise to uniform production, perhaps starting from the arrival of mosaicists from abroad or through the continuation of a local tradition.¹⁷ The vitality of the classical past can be clearly identified in two rich residences of *Nea Paphos* investigated by the Polish Archaeological Mission: the Villa of Theseus and the House of Aion.¹⁸

These buildings are connected through their topographical proximity and share some chronological phases. Nevertheless, they also exhibit deep differences

¹⁵ About mosaics, see Bergmann 1994, 254. Less exploited is the informative potential of paintings, often due to their bad preservation. As an exception, the study of the paintings from the House of Aion can be mentioned (Jastrzębowska 2018, 527–597).

¹⁶ For a general overview on *Paphos* mosaics, see Daszewski, Michaelides 1988.

¹⁷ Michaelides 1987a, 3; 1987b.

¹⁸ Excavation reports were annually published in *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* and *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus*; then, since 1989 until the present day, in *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*. Lastly, a general overview can be found in Meyza *et al.* 2015. On the Villa of Theseus, see also Daszewski 1977; Medeksza 1992; on the House of Aion, see Mikocki 1992, 135–150. More generally, see Daszewski 1987; Christou 2008, 96–105.

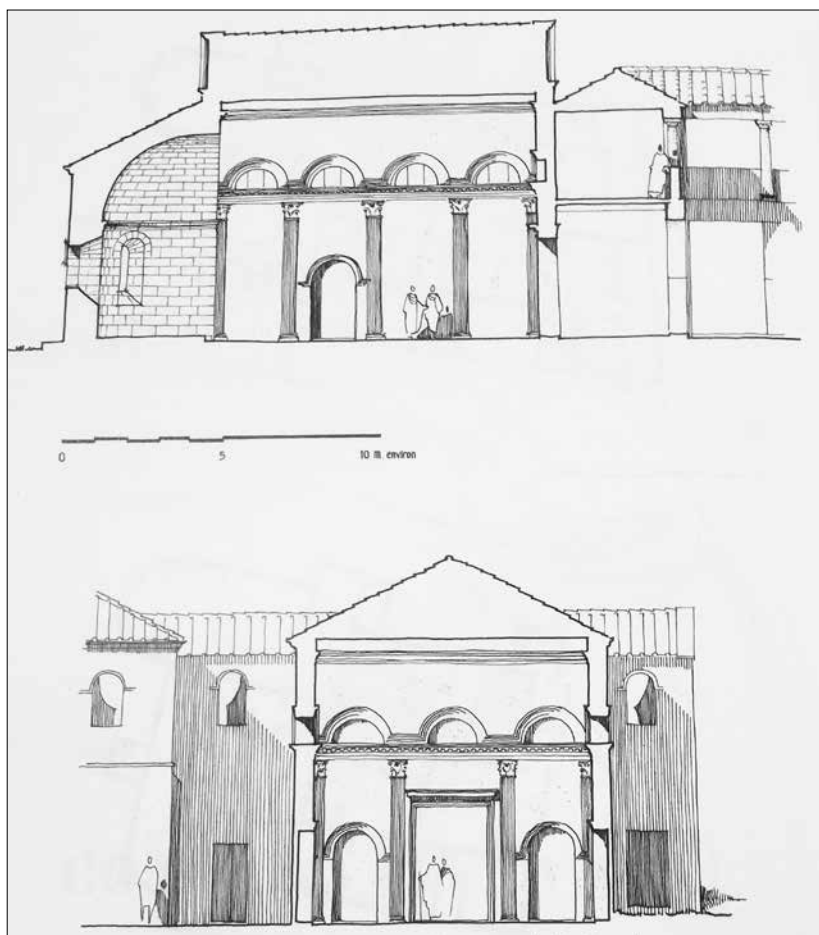


Fig. 2. *Huilerie*, sections of the apsed hall (after Callot 1980, fig. 3).

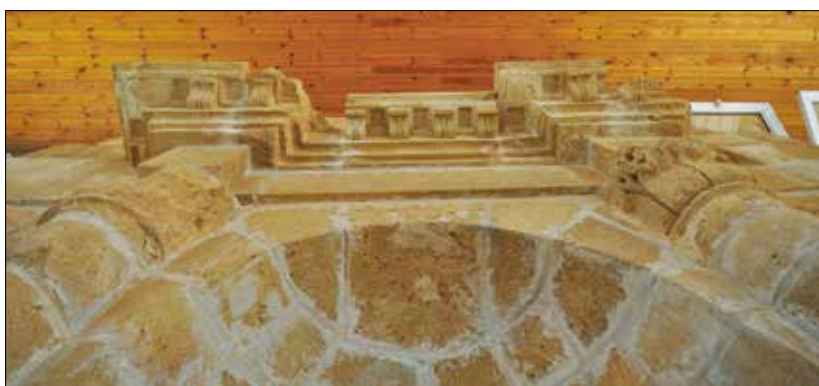


Fig. 3. *Nea Paphos*, House of Aion, the niche and entablature on the western wall seen from below (photo by E. Gasparini).

in the planimetric development, which in the case of the Villa of Theseus represents one of its most distinctive features, with its 120 × 80 m extension (Fig. 5).

The Villa of Theseus shows a complex history with several building phases until the end of the 5th century AD, on which we shall not dwell, and a continuity of exploitation until the beginning of the 7th century, but

it has been ascertained that at least the internal colonnade of *bigio lumachellato* shafts can be referred to its first phase.¹⁹ Very important is also the fact that its southern sector was developed on the remains of the so-called ‘Hellenistic’ House, which was still in use at the beginning of the 2nd century AD.²⁰ Here, we can recognise the widespread phenomenon of merging previous domestic

¹⁹ Meyza *et al.* 2008, 291. More recently, the history of studies has been recapitulated in Panayides 2016a, 228–229.

²⁰ For more on this building, see the Annual Reports in *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*.

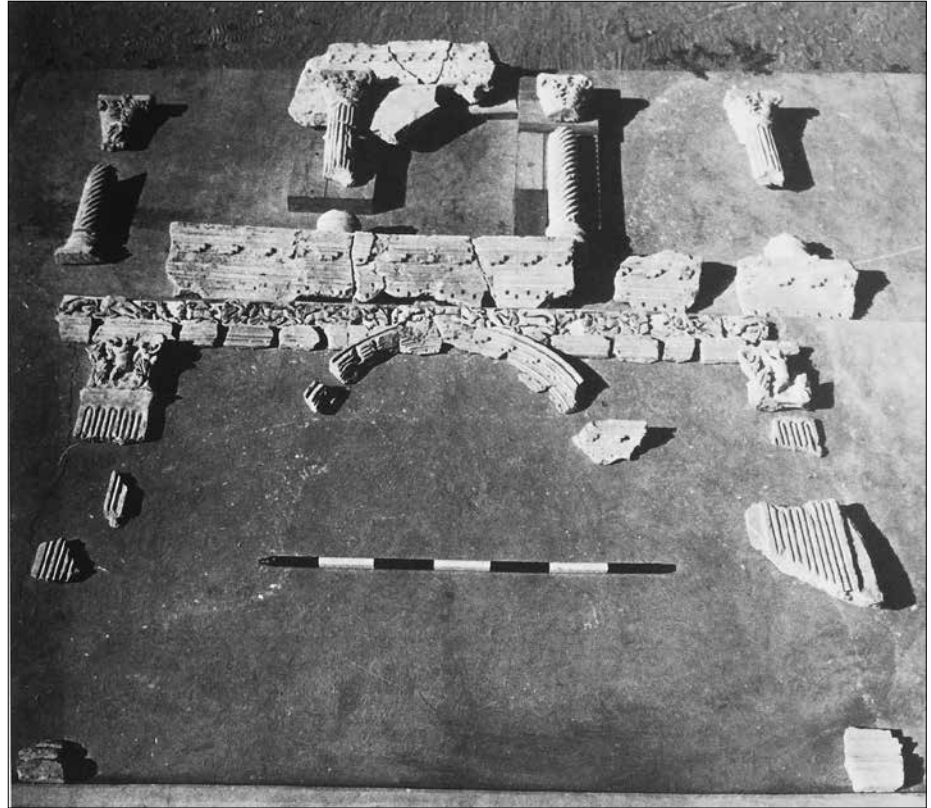


Fig. 4. *Huilerie*, the stucco elements from the walls of the upper-storey hall (after Callot 1980, fig. 25).



Fig. 5. *Nea Paphos*, Villa of Theseus, a general view from the north-eastern corner (photo by E. Gasparini).

units, which, together with the opposite case of subdivisions or the case of changing ownership, has been a part of the archaeological debate on the limits of properties in a given phase.²¹

The entrance to the Villa was marked by two Corinthian columns surmounted by a *tympanum*.²² Then, the typical forcess vestibule gave access to the atrium, which by that time can be seen as a sort of an architectural relict.

Identification of the function of the rooms is related to the general interpretation of this complex as a palace of a high-ranking official and maybe of the governor himself.²³ However, the idea that the owner was one of the major landlords of the island and that the series of reception halls were used for administration and audiences cannot be excluded.

Generally speaking, apart from the entrance to the east, we can identify a wide peristyle, whose quadrangular

sector measures 10.60 × 9.30 m, a public sector in its southern side arranged in a symmetrical fashion, a thermal complex in the south-eastern corner, *cubicula* and a dining room to the west, and a service area in the northern and the north-eastern sector.

The great reception hall can be identified in one of the interiors in the southern front, in a perfect alignment with the axis of the peristyle. Its apse, 8.80 m wide, is raised by a step above the rest of the room and is paved with reused marble slabs.²⁴ It can be interpreted as a space where the *dominus epiphania* had place, even if it is also possible to see it as a setting for banqueting with wooden *stibadia*.²⁵ Secondary reception halls had to be recognised in those on the sides and were preceded by antechambers and closed by apses or quadrangular *exedrae*. An apse is also present in the room measuring c. 6.0 × 5.50 m which closes the eastern side of the southern peristyle range. Its decoration comprised marble veneering on the walls



Fig. 6. *Nea Paphos*, Villa of Theseus, the mosaic of Theseus in the labyrinth (photo by E. Gasparini).

²¹ In regard to Roman Cyrenaica, the issue is discussed explicitly in Gasparini, Pensabene forthcoming. A similar approach should be developed for the Cypriot domestic architecture, for instance in the case of the so-called 'Hellenistic' House and the Early Roman House, for the House of Aion and the North-Eastern House at *Paphos*, or the House of the Gladiators and the House of the Apsed *Triclinium* at *Kourion*.

²² Meyza *et al.* 2008, 287, fig. 3.

²³ Daszewski argues that the presence of a statue of Aphrodite with a sword is an evidence of a syncretism with the Roman *Venus Victrix*, thus positing that the owner was an imperial official of the time of Marcus Aurelius or Septimius Severus; Daszewski 1982, 195–200. See also Panayides 2016a, 228–229.

²⁴ Daszewski 1972, 208–209.

²⁵ Sodini 1997, 493.

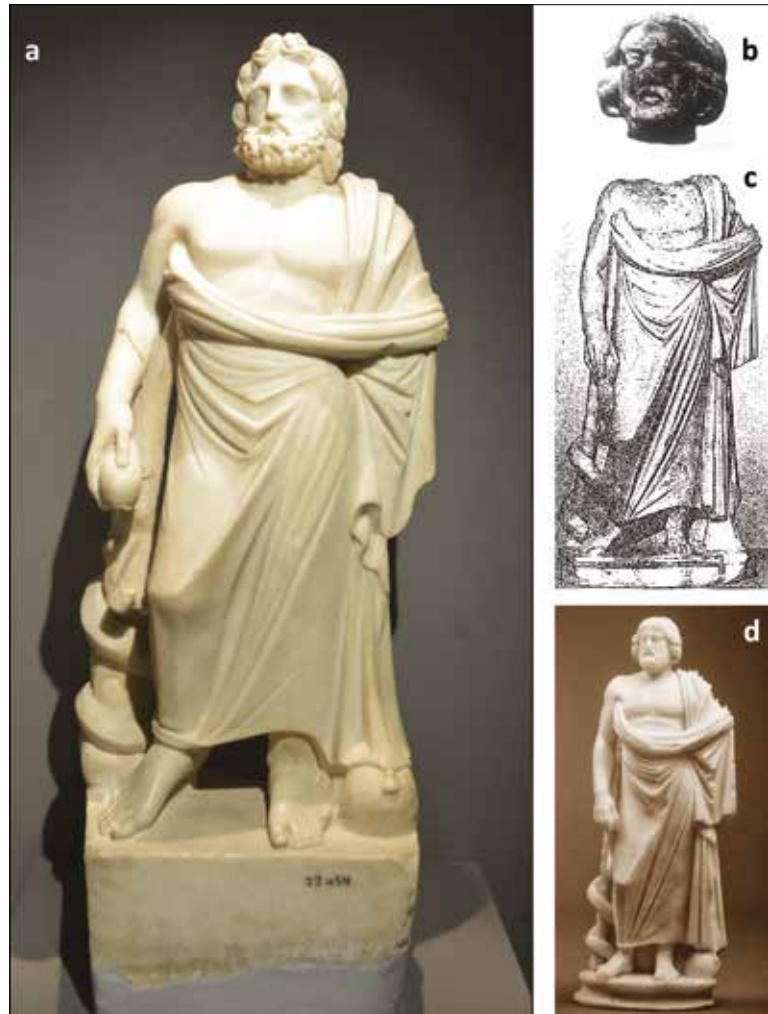


Fig. 7.a. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum, Asclepius from Sidi Bishr (Alexandria) (photo by P. Pensabene); b. Trier University, Archaeological Collection, the small head of Asclepius (after Grimm 1989, 178, fig. 5); c. Trier University, Archaeological Collection, the headless statuette of Asclepius (after Grimm 1989, 177, fig. 4); d. *Nea Paphos*, Villa of Theseus, the statuette of Asclepius (after Grimm 1989, 174, fig. 1).

and the figural mosaic dated to the end of the 3rd century which gave name to the residence (Fig. 6).

In the Villa of Theseus, an important collection came to light, consisting of more than twenty mythological statues and statuettes which refer to the traditional mythological background.²⁶ Initially dated to the end of the 2nd (as per Asclepius or Heracles) or the beginning of the 3rd century (as per Dionysus),²⁷ later they have been reconsidered in the light of new findings regarding the late antique statuary, especially in private contexts, and have been

dated to the 4th century.²⁸ They seem to be intended for an arrangement in niches or apses, and the thermal complex seems particularly appropriate for marine subjects.

We shall dwell on the Asclepius a little more, since, as already observed in the history of the studies, the parallel with an exemplar found in Alexandria, in the Villa of Sidi Bishr,²⁹ and with other fragmentary statuettes of Alexandrian provenance is really close (Fig. 7).³⁰ This association may well symbolise the vicinity and the circulation of ideas between the regions we are looking at here.³¹

²⁶ Daszewski 1982, 195 with previous bibliography. The subject is also widely discussed by Panayides; Panayides 2016a; 2016b.

²⁷ Daszewski 1968, 52–56, pl. XIII,6, XIV 1–6; 1976, pl. XXXVI, 1–4.

²⁸ Hannestad 1994; Bergmann 1999; Stirling 2005; Panayides 2016b.

²⁹ See below.

³⁰ Grimm 1989, 168–181. Despite some similarities, the dimensions of the mentioned sculptures vary significantly: the one

from Sidi Bishr is 118.5 cm high (without the base); the one from *Paphos* and the headless statuette from Trier are 48.0 cm high, while the head from Trier belongs to a statuette measuring 20.0 cm in height.

³¹ See Sirano 1994, 204–231 for a wider discussion on these statues and a chronology of the end of the 2nd century AD. The trade of statues matches the commercial links between these regions as highlighted in Marangou, Marchand 2009.



Fig. 8. *Nea Paphos*, House of Aion, the *triclinium*, a detail of the mosaic with the birth of Dionysus (photo by E. Gasparini).

Nea Paphos, Cyrene, Curium and Christianity

The iconographic repertoire of the decoration of *domus* and villas in the 4th and 5th centuries AD shows a clear prevalence of themes belonging to the Graeco-Roman figurative tradition, and perhaps in some cases symbolic and philosophical interpretations have to be presumed behind it. Conversely, figurative elements clearly referable to Christianity are rarer. Nevertheless, typically ‘pagan’ iconographies sometimes cohabit with Christian images and symbols, therefore putting the religious identity of the owners into question.³²

In the second half of the 4th century, Christianity was deeply rooted in Cyprus and big churches were under construction across the island. Nevertheless, in the *Life of Saint Epiphanius* pagans are often presented as members of the urban elites and stories of conversions are mentioned as well.³³

The strong presence of the pagan culture is testified especially by the learned mythological themes represented in mosaics and statuary displayed in the richest

dwelling. As an example, we can quote the fact that at the end of the 4th century in the Villa of Theseus mosaics, such as the one with Neptune and Amphitrite, were created or, like the mosaic of Theseus, restored.³⁴

The clearest evidence for how the rising Christian art drew inspiration from the pagan repertoire can be found in the mosaic floor of the *triclinium* of the House of Aion (Fig. 8). This piece of art has sparked a long discussion, which we are not going to follow here.³⁵ However, we can just mention that in this mosaic Hermes – and all the contemporary and succeeding Christian representations comparable to it – exhibits the Ptolemaic union of iconic and narrative art, thus being a legacy of, respectively, the Pharaonic and the Graeco-Roman traditions.³⁶

But we can also find some explicitly Christian mosaics, as in the House of Hesychius at *Cyrene*.³⁷ The southern and western peristyle ranges of this residence, dated to the late 4th–early 5th centuries AD, were paved with polychrome mosaics both geometric and figurative.³⁸ Together with the *opus sectile* in the northern range,³⁹ they are of great historical importance, because, thanks to the inscriptions and the mosaic figurations, it has been

³² Sfameni 2014, 99–113 and 151–186, with detailed bibliography.

³³ Hadjichristophi 2006, 207–216. For a summary on the spread of Christianity in Cyprus, see Deligiannakis 2018, 23–39; Michaelides 2018, 213–214.

³⁴ Daszewski 1985a, 285.

³⁵ See Daszewski *et al.* 1984; Daszewski 1984; 1985b; Deckers 1986; Balty 1995; Olszewski 2013; Bowersock 1990, 49–53; Quet 2006. The discussion is resumed by Michaelides (Michaelides 2018, 217–218). Lastly, see the interpretation in Musso, La Rocca 2018, 132–144.

³⁶ Musso, La Rocca 2018, 145. More observations have been proposed by Eugenio La Rocca during a conference held at the Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia in November 2017. On the general topic of ‘old images and new meanings’, see also Bisconti 2000; Török 2005. Finally, on late antique images, iconography, and style, see Kiilerich 2009; 2015.

³⁷ On topography and housing at *Cyrene* during late Antiquity see also Spinola 1996; Ermeti 1998; 2007.

³⁸ Alföldi Rosenbaum, Ward-Perkins 1980, 5; Bonacasa Carra 2005; 2009, 180; Venturini 2013, 44.

³⁹ Gasparini 2012.

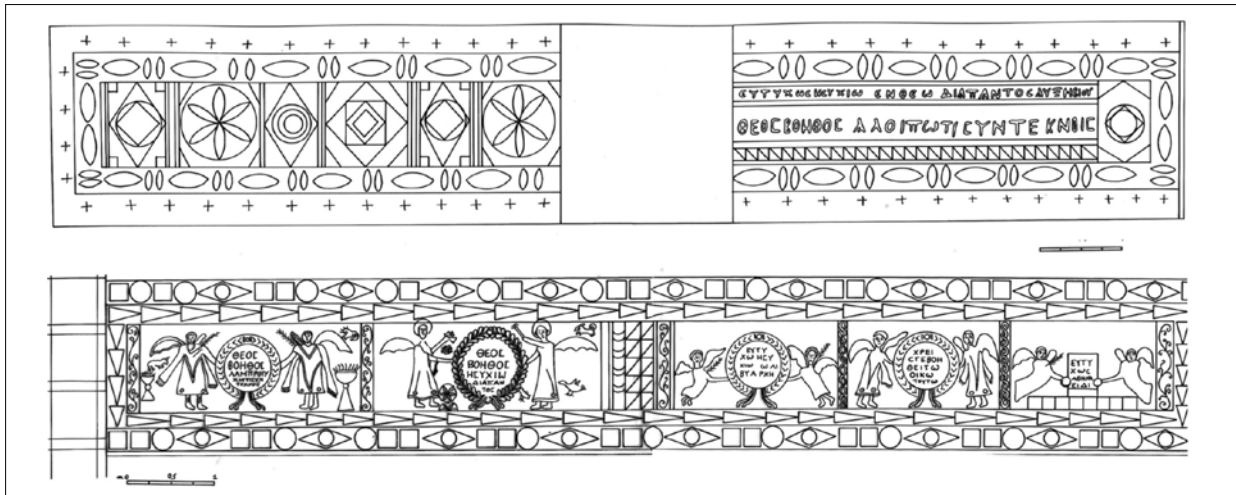


Fig. 9. *Cyrene*, House of Hesychius, the mosaics in the southern and western peristyle ranges (after Venturini 2013, pl. LXII).

possible to identify the owner of the building (Fig. 9). Hesychius was the progenitor of a Christian family and a member of the urban curial class. He held the office of Libiarches (Ἡσυχιωτῶ Λιβύραρχῃ), that is a great priest of *Libya Superior*, presiding over the provincial *koinon* as well as being in charge of conducting the imperial cult and organising *ludi* at the end of his office.⁴⁰

With the advent of Christianity under Theodosius, and even more so under Honorius and Arcadius, this position, which had survived as an archaism, had to be assumed by the new Christian clergy. The mosaics inform us about his wife, Alypo, and two sons, Lamprotyches and Athenais, while the fourth person, Esichios the Younger, could be the third child and is mentioned in the marble inscription with a typical good luck greeting of ἐντυχώς Ἡσυχωνέω on the *opus sectile* floor.⁴¹

This name corresponds to the one of the addressee of Letter 93 in the Correspondence of Synesios, the bishop of *Ptolemais* between the 4th and 5th centuries. Synesios and Hesychius were fellow students in Alexandria and both descended from wealthy Cyrenaican families.⁴²

The social and architectural context of this house is similar to that of the Annex of Eustolios in *Kourion*

(*Curium*).⁴³ The latter building, dated to between the 4th and 5th centuries, consists of more than thirty rooms and a bath (Fig. 10). The mosaics are as important as those of the above-mentioned Cyrenaican example, as they provide information on the identity of the founder and his social standing. Moreover, they are a clear testimony of how the Christian culture would approach the pagan iconographic language and transform it.

The complex underwent a late renovation during or immediately following the mid-5th century AD, when rooms were subdivided and two latrines were constructed in the western end of the reception hall.⁴⁴ It remained in use, likely as a public guest house, until the Arab raids in the 7th century AD. Epigraphic evidence, however, suggests that the structure served a more public function and was presumably intended to act as a replacement for the ruined public structures around the agora.⁴⁵

At the entrance to the dining room, we find an honorific mention about Eustolios as the one who brought ‘baths to the town’ (Fig. 11.a).⁴⁶ Moreover, at the southern end of the eastern portico, there is evidence for Christian worship: ‘In place of big stones and solid iron, gleaming bronze and even adamant, this house is girt by the much

⁴⁰ Roques 1987, 209–212.

⁴¹ *Syn. Epist.*, 9, par. 4–7; Goodchild 1971, 89–90; Reynolds 1959, 100–101, tav. VII, 2; Alföldi Rosenbaum, Ward-Perkins 1980, 150; Roques 1987, 209–212; Bonacasa Carra 2005; 2009.

⁴² Cultural links between late Roman Cyrenaica and Egypt find a parallel in commercial exchanges as attested in Mazou, Caillou 2012; Mazou 2017. For a broader economic framework about late antique Cyrenaica, see also Wilson 2001.

⁴³ Daniel 1938; De Coursey 1950; Wylde Swiny 1982, 132–139; Christou 1985; 1996, 26–33; Michaelides 1987a, 40–41; 2001, 316–319; lastly, see Mavrojannis 2019, 233–234.

⁴⁴ Wylde Swiny 1982, 133.

⁴⁵ Wylde Swiny 1982, 134; Costello 2014, 16. See also Sodini 1997, 495, who debates the domestic nature of the complex. Most recently, the public rather than private nature of the House-Annex of Eustolios has been discussed in Mavrojannis 2019, 234–236.

⁴⁶ Mitford 1971, 356–358, n. 204; Mitford’s interpretation has been strongly rejected in Bagnall, Drew-Bear 1973, 239–241. For the latest discussion, see Mavrojannis 2019, 238–239, 248–249.

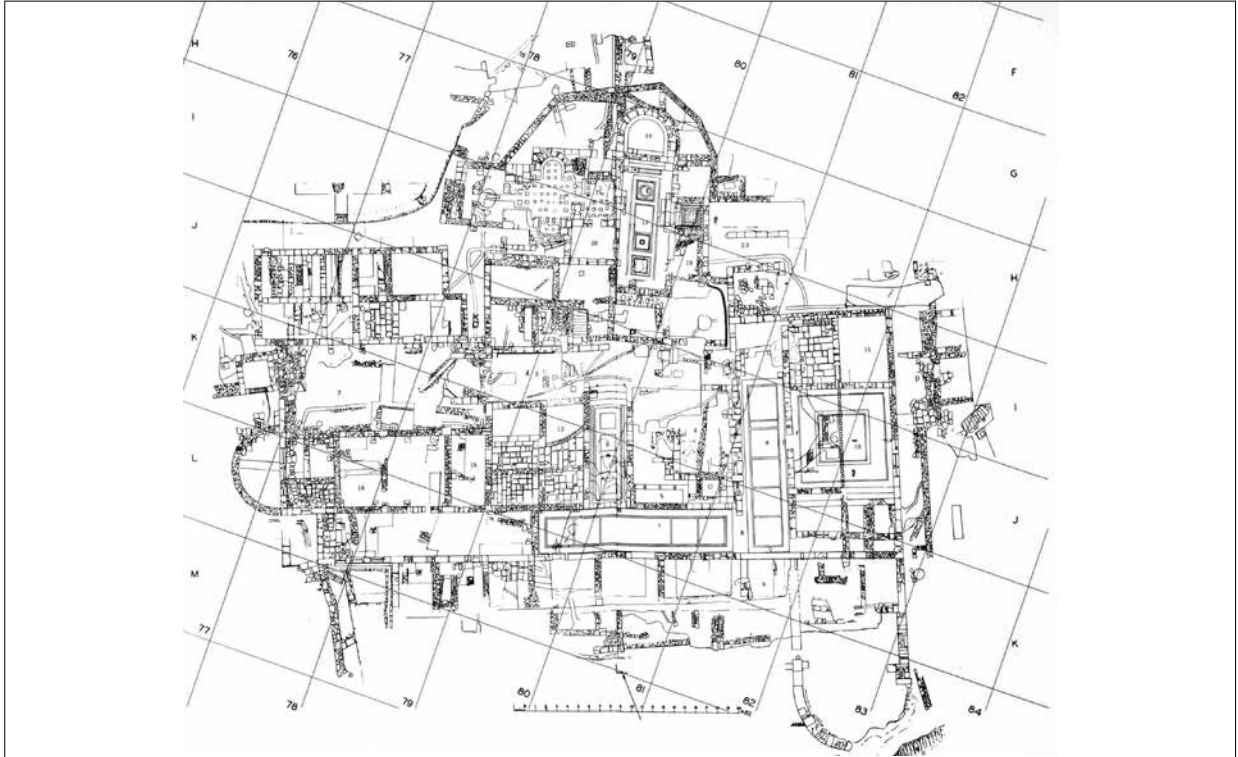


Fig. 10. *Kourion/Curium*, Annex of Eustolios, a general plan (after Mitford 1971, pl. 4).

venerated signs of Christ' (Fig. 11.b).⁴⁷ Lastly, before the entrance to the rooms in the southern wing, there is an invocation to Reverence, Temperance, and Obedience to the law, which thus should be seen as protecting the exedra and the hall.⁴⁸

The bath complex to the north has a large *frigidarium* flanked by two pools (one apsidal and the other rectangular) and by two *apodyteria*. In the *frigidarium*, an *opus sectile* and a mosaic pavement are preserved, which include a bust and an indication of the name of Ktisis, the allegorical representation of the power of creation – even Creation of the world – which could be read as an allusion to the foundation of the baths.⁴⁹

The mosaic inscriptions of this house inform us about Eustolios' belonging to the Christian community of *Kourion*,⁵⁰ but at the same time they paint a picture of a personality which had been deeply moulded by the pagan *paideia*, evidently still a part of the aristocratic education at the dawn of the 5th century.

Moreover, the public character that parts of late antique houses assumed in a Christian milieu has to be

interpreted as a charity action towards the local community. At Patras, in Greece, this is enhanced by the honorific inscription of Basilios Oxyliides that is dated to between the 4th and the 5th century. He is thanked because 'he built baths, which were a delight to all citizens and strangers' and because he offered to people 'banquets, gold and cloths' and goods from his estates. He opened his house for public receptions and 'people in return for his beneficence, chanted in his mansion all day and offered him gifts and erected a statue representing his image'.⁵¹

Statuary and *sectilia* in late antique housing: Alexandria and its surroundings

Another piece of evidence for the complexity of late antique society is the so-called 'international distribution of late antique mythological statuettes'.⁵² Over the last decades, this phenomenon has been better defined, with close attention paid to the decorative programmes

⁴⁷ Mitford 1971, 353–354, n. 202; Mavrojannis 2019, 246.

⁴⁸ Mitford 1971, 354–355, n. 203.

⁴⁹ Mitford 1971, 358–359, n. 205.

⁵⁰ Mavrojannis (2019, 242) states that 'the inscriptions of the "House of Eustolios" reveal the phase of consolidation of Christianity in Cyprus'.

⁵¹ Saradi 2018, 268, 270.

⁵² Stirling 2005, 165.



Fig. 11. Annex of Eustolios, the mosaic inscriptions: a. Dedication of the building to the town (after Mitford 1971, n. 204); b. Christian expression (after Mitford 1971, n. 202).

expressed through statuary collections composed of both late antique and older sculptures. In this respect, important issues are the modalities of burying and destruction of the statues, as they provide clues on their possible religious meaning and conflicts between Pagans and Christians.⁵³

Some information comes from the traces of residences, probably suburban villas, found in a peripheral section of ancient Alexandria, near the present Sidi Bishr – an area renowned for the findings of private houses from the Roman Period.⁵⁴ One of these has been documented almost solely through the discovery of its sculptures, which were collected and then probably buried to prevent their destruction.⁵⁵

This group, known as the ‘Mehamara group’, consists of thirteen objects. Ten of them are small-scale statues of deities (Aphrodite, Dionysus, Harpocrates, Asclepius, and Hygeia), a ‘pastiche’ reproduction of the god Mars or a portrait of a Hellenistic king in a retrospective style, personifications (Nilus, Euthenia), and two female portrait sculptures which can be linked to the family of the owner (Fig. 12). Finally, three remaining objects – the only ones not in white marble – are a table stand, a sphinx, and a small statue of Isis.

This collection reproduces divinities belonging mainly to the Graeco-Roman and Alexandrian pantheon, while only a minority belongs to the Egyptian one. It is evident that the owners of these houses had living

⁵³ On the topic of the attitudes toward mythological statues during late Antiquity, see the recent overview in Sfameni 2019, 227–236.

⁵⁴ Daszewski *et al.* 1990, 86–105.

⁵⁵ Gąssowska 1977, 99–118; Kristensen 2009; Pensabene, Gasparini 2018a, 101–108; 2019, 181–182.

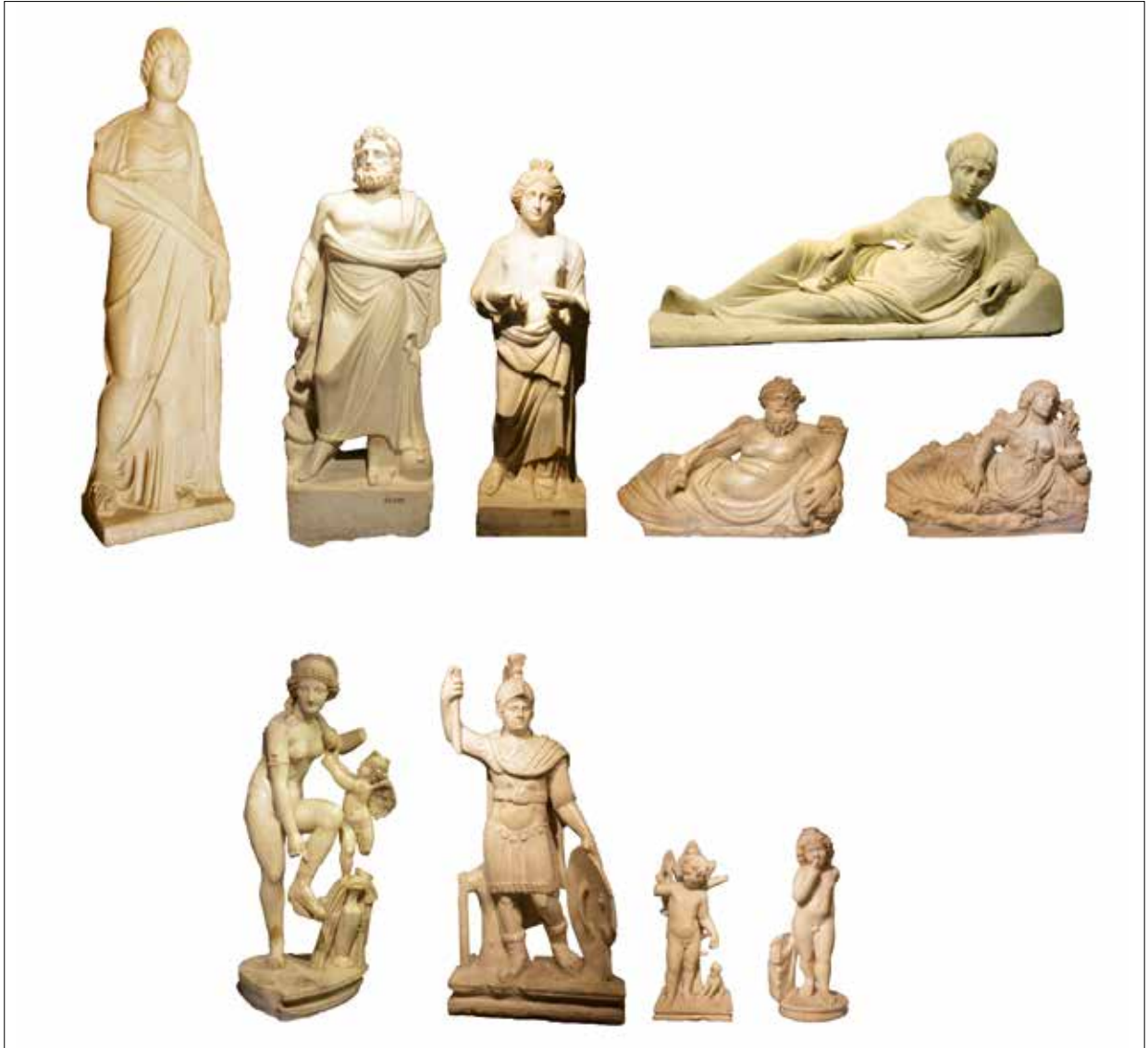


Fig. 12. Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum and Alexandria National Museum, the Mehamara group (photo by P. Pensabene).

habits firmly rooted in the Graeco-Roman culture, only partially influenced by the Egyptian tradition.⁵⁶ It has been already pointed out that they might have been high-level officials, but also *mercatores*, as can be inferred from the significant presence of imported marbles, which could be a part of return cargoes.⁵⁷

Overseas transports attest to the existence of maritime commercial routes along the Egyptian Mediterranean coast, as well as internal fluvial routes in connection with Mareotis Lake.

Two kilometres away from the lake shores, near the modern village of Hawariyah, there lies a complex, 1500 m² wide, discovered in the 1970s and immediately identified as a 5th/6th century AD villa.⁵⁸ The plan, arranged around a double peristyle court, still echoes Hellenistic Alexandria. But, at the same time, we must stress the centrality and the emphasis, in the space between the two peristyles, of a long church, which has been interpreted as a later addition resulting from a transformation of the building (Fig. 13).⁵⁹

⁵⁶ On housing and identity in late antique Egypt, see also Bagnall 1993; Alston 2002; Rowlandson 2013.

⁵⁷ Pensabene 2014, 571–591.

⁵⁸ El-Fakharani 1983. A synthesis is in Rodziewicz 2010, 69; more recently, the building has been subjected to a study; see Pensabene, Gasparini 2018b, 93–104.

⁵⁹ Rodziewicz 1983; 1988a; 1988b.

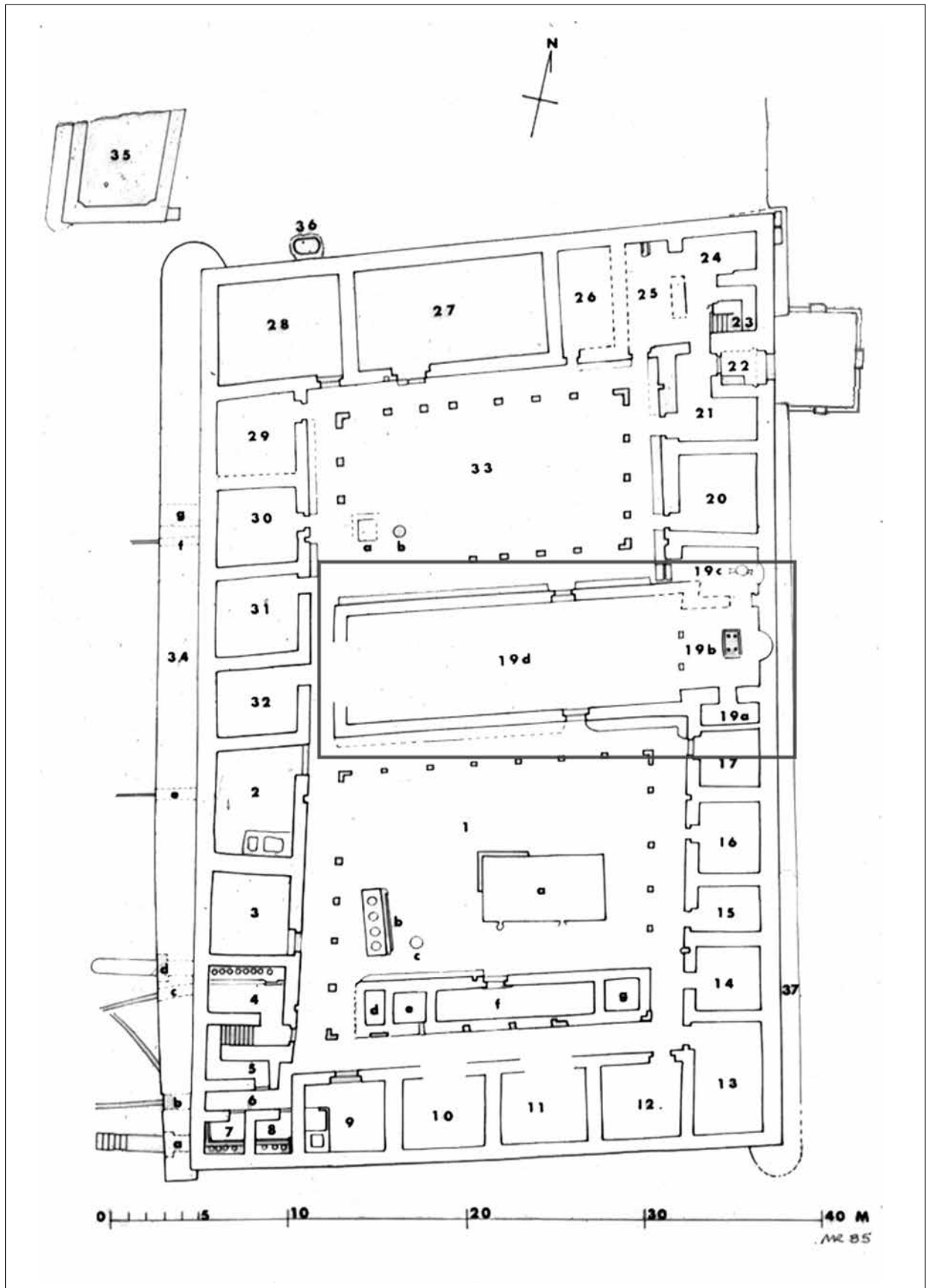


Fig. 13. Hawariyah (Mareotis, Egypt), the rural villa, a general plan; the localisation of the church is indicated with a rectangle (after Rodziewicz 1988a, 274, fig. 2).

This hall can be placed within a series of apsidal rooms which in late antique residences could combine the role of audience chambers and that of public meeting places, for instance for lectures and conferences, as exemplified by the functions of the halls of Auditoria at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria. A broad and blurred spectrum of purposes of such reception spaces can be traced also thanks to a passage in which St. Augustine explains that in some houses there were big halls which would host those who flocked to hear sermons of bishops visiting the towns.⁶⁰

This small Christian hall was decorated with a luxury *opus sectile* floor similar to those in the big Justinian basilicas at *Apollonia* and Ras el-Hilal in Cyrenaica. The pavement is composed of reused elements, which can be compared to marble floors from the mid-Imperial elite residential housing discovered at Kom el-Dikka.⁶¹

Conclusion

Concluding, this overview shows that during the last centuries of the Empire, and within the investigated area, the great prestige of the Hellenistic and Roman traditions was still influencing the elite residential housing. At *Salamis*, in the *Huilerie*, the architectural choices followed fashions rooted in the regional tradition and incorporated some newly-acquired elements. The classic repertoire of the mosaics and statuary, as highlighted by the finds from the Villa of Theseus at *Nea Paphos* and the Villa of Sidi Bishr at Alexandria, is still functioning as a medium expressing the living habits in the aristocratic *domus*.

Particularly, the Villa of Theseus witnesses all the crucial points of late antique urban residential housing in the quoted regions:

- forms of continuity of domestic installations from previous buildings from the late Hellenistic and early Imperial periods;
- recurring new elements within the houses and their symbolic and functional meanings;
- decorative displays composed of mosaic floors and marble elements, intended as statuary and wall veneering;
- distinction between public and private nature of living spaces;
- changes across time and the invasion of domestic space by agricultural and artisanal production.

At the same time, the dawn of the Christian iconography can be recognised in the youngest pagan images, as indicated by the mosaic in the *triclinium* of the House of Aion at *Nea Paphos*.

Christianity, as a social as well as religious phenomenon, played a crucial role in both biographies and houses of Eustolios and Hesychius, respectively at *Kourion* and *Cyrene*. However, even where a church appeared, as in the Villa at Hawariyah in Mareotis, the new canons of luxury housing coexisted with the Hellenistic heritage.⁶²

Therefore, during late Antiquity the elites of Egypt, Cyprus, and Cyrenaica, even if Christianised, clearly show the pagan roots of the aristocratic *paideia*. The transition from old to new models and the forms of syncretism between various backgrounds, merged in the new decorative systems, seem to be the features illustrating both the local developments and those which spanned the whole Mediterranean region. They reflect the owner's cultural environment and the spiritual life of the period.

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⁶⁰ Aug., *Epist.* 44,1. On the cultic use of the halls of *domus* and villas as well as on the origin of churches in residential buildings, see the recent syntheses in Sfameni 2014, 99–113; Bowes 2018, 453–464.

⁶¹ Rodziewicz 1991, 204–214; Rodziewicz 2002, 1–22. See Pensabene, Gasparini 2018b, 93–104 for a complete bibliography.

⁶² Other Egyptian examples of this phenomenon come from excavations of *Trimitis* in Dakhla Oasis (Boozer 2005; Alfarano 2018).

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