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ANTİK MOZAIK SEMPOZYUMU

16 – 20 EKİM 2009 BURSA, TÜRKİYE

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A "Portrait" of Book XII of the Aeneid: the Mosaic from the « House of the Medusa »
(Alter do Chão, Portugal)

Abstract
This paper addresses the study of a mosaic discovered in 2007 at the archaeological site of Alter do Chão, Portugal, whose central panel represents the penultimate scene narrated in the last Book of the Aeneid — a Roman epic composed by the poet Publius Vergilius Maro (70 BC — AD 19), at the request of Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus (63 BC — AD 14): it shows the very moment when Turnus, the Latin king of the Rutuli, kneels before Æneas, considered the precursor to the foundation of Rome (Vergil, Aeneid, XII, 926-950).

Keywords: Vergilius, Æneas, Turnus, mosaic, Abelterium, Portugal

Thou must always bear in mind these points: what is the nature of the whole and what is my nature; what relationship prevails between these two; what part of the whole am I whatever the whole may be; and may no one hinder thee from always acting and speaking out according to the nature of that of which thou are a part.

(Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, II.9)

This paper presents initial thoughts regarding the remarkable mosaic recently discovered in the so-called “House of the Medusa”, a rich Roman domus located in the ancient ciuitas of Abelterium. Although its planimetry has not yet been defined in its entirety, the architectural remains discovered suggest several phases of construction, as well as a continuous occupation that lasted until quite a late period.

Thus, although the archaeological intervention has not yet been completed and we have not yet broached the study of the domus and its remaining mosaics, we deduce that the mosaic pavement under discussion would probably have been part of a distinctive paving campaign from others found at this site. This perspective, which is still provisional, stems from some of the aspects we have been able to observe empirically: first, the

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different morphological and iconographic quality of the mosaics; secondly, the fact that the side corridors of the peristyle extend up to the top of the room, suggesting *a priori* that the construction of this large room, covering 53m², represents an intrusion into the area of the vestibule, which is contemporary with the Virgilian mosaic and, possibly, the nearby *stibadium.*

The theme of this mosaic was inspired by the *Aeneid* and, contrary to the story of Rome’s foundation (the She-wolf, *Romulus* and *Remus*), which is clearly Etruscan in origin and later became generalized, revisits the myth of *Aeneas and the Trojan Cycle.* This was the epic adventure immortalized by Vergil in his symbiotic poem:

«With Augusts, what the *princeps* wishes to be a Pax Augusta is established. Therein, erudition is encouraged, through men such as Pollio and Maecenas, and names such as Vitruvius, Titus Livius and the Greek Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Horace, Ovid, Porpertia and Virgil flourish, the latter composing the greatest work of propaganda of his Principate, which will justify the epithet of “second birth of Rome”: The *Aeneid*» (Rodrigues 2005: 326).

Actually, the myth – man’s common repository in historical time – leads us, step by step, to the primordial archetype, or, in other words, it impels the ascent to the divine. It is, therefore, with recourse to his redemptive action that the son of the goddess Aphrodite/Venus and mortal Anchises, the hero *Aeneas*, who is also a demigod, ascends to heaven and the gods descend upon earth, meddling in *Aeneas’s affairs*, somehow legitimizing his occupation of the Italian Peninsula and the subsequent expansion, that is, the constitution of the Empire.

**Iconographic Study**

This mosaic pavement covers an area that has been identified as a possible *triclinium*: this is a rectangular room with a mosaic consisting of five panels. The panel at the entrance is entirely covered by chess-board patterns of double-axes (Le Décor: n.º 221a); and the lateral panels are decorated with chess-board patterns with circles at the intersections (variant of Le Décor n.º 221a). The fourth panel, which covers the top of the room, displays an intricate and profuse geometric decoration, resembling model n.º 182d of the Le Décor.

The central emblem is surrounded by a wave band border in opposing colours (Le Décor: n.º 60d), an “aquatic” motif that provides a symbolic union between the two scenes portrayed in the figurative panel, which depicts the penultimate passage of the end of Vergil’s *Aeneid* (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, XII: 926-950): in the upper part, there is a depiction of the confrontation between the Trojan hero *Aeneas* and Turnus, the Italic King of the Rutulians, accompanied by their respective entourages; in the lower part, the personified representation of the two water courses that represent the geographical location of the site where the battle took place, namely, the beach of Ostia.

In the upper scene, conflict focuses on the opposing protagonists, immediately after *Aeneas* has subdued Turnus, as described by Virgil (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, XII: 880–926):

«In light of Turnus’s hesitation, *Aeneas* wields the fatal spear, choosing the appropriate moment with his glance, and, he hurls it from a distance with all his might. Stones projected by a ballista never roar in this way, thunder never rattles so strongly. Like a black whirlwind, the lance drove on, bearing cruel death along, and pierces the flank armour and the edge of the shield made of seven hides; harsh, it pierces through the middle of his thigh. When he is hit, Turnus, with all his bulk, falls to the ground on his knees».

Slightly offset to the left from the centre of the panel, the great *Aeneas*, shown in full frontal view, is clad in full armour and carries the weapons forged by Vulcan, assisted by the Cyclopes Pyracmon, Brontes and Steropes (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 419-462), at the request of Venus (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 377-418): greaves *made

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1 In this context, other initiates include, amongst others, Hercules in accomplishing the Twelve Labours or the election of Theseus to fight the Minotaur in the Labyrinth of Crete.
of electrum and refined gold» (Vergilius, Æneid, VIII: 600-603), which are outlined in grey with a yellow and white infill, showing the glimmer of the golden metal; a breastplate made of identical material but with a tinge of «blood-red bronze», «just like a cerulean cloud when it is set alight by the sun's rays and gleams in the distance» (Vergilius, Æneid, VIII: 600-643), which is profusely decorated, and its details are heightened with blue *tesserae* made from vitreous paste; underneath, he wore a short tunic made of thin cloth coloured in brown, red and white tones; *caligae* made of reddish leather strips; a spear and «deadly sword» (Vergilius, Æneid, VIII: 600-643), as suggested by the scabbard on the baldric, which is partially hidden; a helmet that is heightened with blue *tesserae*, which seems «magnificent with its crest, that vomits flames» (Vergilius, Æneid, VIII: 600-643), and has a waving plume torn by the dart hurled at him by Turnus (Vergilius, Æneid, XII: 461-510); and the shield, «well adjusted to his side» (Vergilius, Æneid, XII: 418-460), which stands out due to its size and centrality, attracting the eye of the viewer.

It should also be noted that, curiously, the vanishing point of this “pictorial” mosaic is based on the figure of Æneas, creating the optical illusion, when one enters the room, that the Trojan giant rises up from this mosaic and takes on a three dimensional incarnation, as if he were, in fact, in this very room joining in the conversation with the owners of the *domus* and, eventually, with their guests.

Contrary to the extensive and detailed Vergilian *ekphrasis* – which provided two rather different and more extensive, almost prophetic, descriptions of both sides of the shield, alluding to «the history of Italy and the triumphs of the
the callousness of pursed lips. The entire head is surrounded by wavy red and white hair with snakes emanating from it (most of these have now been lost, as may have been two small wings with which the Medusa is depicted in certain mosaics and sculptures). The closest known parallel for this type of representation of hair in Hispania can be found in a fragment from Vila Viçosa, which also depicts a figure with wavy locks, although these are more abundant and chromatically richer. In fact, the hair and serpents on the Medusa’s heads are usually dishevelled, and both may cover the entire head—as at Palencia and Tarragona—or the hair may be confined to the top of the head with a serpent extending on either side of the face, intertwining at the chin—as at Conimbriga and Italica. A variant has been found in Córdoba, where several Gorgons’ heads wearing Phrygian caps are placed in the corners of a mosaic that depicts the breast-feeding of the twins Romulus and Remus by the She-wolf. Set in this context, this rare detail added to the heads may allude to the important role played by Æneas’s troops in the foundation of Rome and, incidentally, allows the establishment of a connection with the Virgilian epic.

The depiction of the monster’s head on Æneas’s shield served the clearly apotropaic function of intimidating the enemy, since it was believed at the time that anyone who met its gaze would turn into stone.

Humiliated by his defeat, Turnus is depicted, in three-quarter view, kneeling at Æneas’s feet, supplicant, stretching out both hands to the hero, somewhat tense, or maybe even some pathos, as attested by his contracted muscles and accentuated by the shades of his skin tones. The Rutulian’s head is protected by a helmet, with details accentuated by blue vitreous tesserae, which is decorated with a white and crimson crest; over a similar tunic to that worn by the Trojan hero, he wears a breastplate «stiff with iron and white orichalcum, fitted his unerring sword and shield in position and the horns with their crimson crest. The sword had been wrought for his father Daunus by the god with the power of fire himself, and had been dipped, glowing, in the water of the River Styx» (Vergilius, Æneid, XII: 70-112). His
can touch you in any way – and you too had such a father in Anchises –, I beg of you to pity Daunus’s old age and return me or, if you will, my body stripped of life, to my own kin. You are the victor, and the Ausonians have seen me stretch out my hand in defeat. Lavinia is now your wife. Do not prolong your hatred any further » (Vergilius, Ἀeneid, XII: 418-460).

In this mosaic, Aeneas is portrayed during a moment of hesitation which reflects his inner struggle between the heroic honour of Pietas and the probity of Fides (Vergilius, Ἀeneid, X: 825-830) towards his friend Pallas, murdered by the Rutulian (Vergilius, Ἀeneid, X: 447-486). These antagonistic feelings are clearly conveyed through the hero’s tense expression and pale face.

This is, therefore, the key moment in the entire scene, which the person who commissioned the mosaic intended to capture, that is, a “portrait” of this reflective moment: when, at the crossroads of life, one’s own path is chosen, a path of no return that will determine the course of one’s own existence as a man, or, in other words, freewill.

«Aeneas, fierce in his armour, stood still, rolling his eyes to one side and the other, and he held back his right arm. The words were now beginning to discourage him and he became increasingly hesitant, when there appeared high on Turnus’s shoulder the fatal baldric, gleaming with its familiar studs» (Vergilius, Ἀeneid, XII: 418-460)³.

The different depictions of these two antagonistic characters in this mosaic (Aeneas the winner, stands, hesitant and thoughtful, and Turnus, defeated, kneels, supplicant and humiliated) provide an excellent representation of the hero and the anti-hero. The visual juxtaposition of both conjures up an image of tension that elicits a strong emotional response in the viewer (ekplexis) (Lombardo 2003, 133).

Three Phrygian warriors – allies of Troy and sharing a border with its territories – stand behind Aeneas, identified by their characteristic

³ They had only recovered Pallas’s spear and helmet, since Turnus, «as the victor, had seized the rest» (Idem, XI: 83-131).
golden helmets. Armed with spears and circular shields, they wear short tunics and pleated cloaks fastened with *fibulae*, as shown by the soldier depicted on the left. They also wear tight breeches that are profusely decorated with zigzagging, wave and meander geometric patterns, all in different colours, and wear leather *udones*. The most noticeable aspect of their expression is their large and lively eyes, oriental eyes that are morphologically distinct from Italic eyes:

«— Oh goddess, should I go on to tell everything from the very beginning, and if there were time to hear the history of our woes, the Morning Star would sooner close the Heavens and put the day to rest. Since we left ancient Troy, if perchance the name of Troy has reached your ears, having sailed across distant seas, we were driven to the Libyan coast by a whim of the storm. I am the pious Aeneas, and I carry with me on my fleet Penates snatched from the enemies, my reputation is known even in the heavens above. It is Italy I seek, my homeland, and I claim descent from almighty Jupiter. I sailed out to sea with twenty Phrygian ships, my mother goddess showing me the way, and obeying the divine order. Only seven remain, shattered by the waves and the Eurus» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, I: 361-400).

The Rutulians have narrower eyes and contemplate defeat with sadness. This feeling is betrayed not only by their facial expressions (arched eyebrows and down-turned corners of the mouth, these details being particularly emphasized in the case of the last soldier on the right), but also, by their downcast postures. These soldiers are armed with spears, swords and circular shields, wearing cloaks in disarray fastened by ostentatious *fibulae* over their breastplates, similar helmets to that of their king and *caligulae* made of leather strips.

Later on, Vergil ends his poem – in a moment that already lies outside the time frame captured in the “portrait” of the mosaic of *Abelerium* – revealing, at last, towards which side the Trojan hero’s heart was inclined:

«It was young Pallas’s belt, whom Turnus had defeated and knocked down with a wound and he wore it on his shoulders as an enemy trophy.

He, after seeing those spoils that reminded him of cruel grief, blazing with fury and extremely angry, said:

— Well shall you escape me, wearing the spoils of one who was my own? It is Pallas who sacrifices you with this blow, it is Pallas who makes you expiate your wrongs with your guilty blood!

Uttering these words, burning with rage, he plunges his sword deep into his chest. His body becomes stiff with the coldness of death; life, with a moan, flees, angrily, to the Shades» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, XII: 943-952).

Two aquatic deities are represented in the lower part of this composition, namely a marine deity on the right and a river deity on the left. They simultaneously represent all the Oceans and Rivers conspicuously mentioned throughout the *Aeneid* and, in particular, the Mediterranean Sea and the Tiber River, which denote the geographical

Detail of the Phrygian warriors, with characteristic curved helmets, decorative leggings, *udones* and expressive eyes.
iconographic model for the god Oceanus, which favoured the isomorphism of the human figure and reduced the animal component.

Flesh coloured tones were used for the character’s face and neck, showing great mastery of volumetric design, although the rest of the body is depicted in greenish-blue, suggesting, perhaps, that this figure is partially submerged in water. Crab pincers (crustacea, Decapoda, Brachyura) stick out of his temples and he has lobster antennae (crustacea, Decapoda, Palinura) on the forehead; streams of water trickle from the corner of his mouth – as in the representations of Oceanus from Chott Meriem (Archaeological Museum of Sousse – Tunisia) and from Carthago (British Museum–England); his actual chest, which has bluish-green algae- or seaweed-shaped mammary areolas with red nipples, squirts jets of the same liquid that splash lower down as they fall on the waves. We were unable to find a parallel for this last extremely realistic detail, which is clearly linked to fertility, in the bibliography consulted.

The god Oceanus, often depicted throughout the territory of Hispania, where, at the time, 18 representations in mosaics were already known (López Monteagudo 2006), is almost always represented by the head alone, seeming to emerge from the prime element. The only unequivocal full-length depiction could be found in the Cosmoligical Mosaic from Mérida (House of the Shipwrights, curiously also located in the Province of Lusitania (López Monteagudo 2006), which seems to be closely related to the models used in provinces outside the Iberian Peninsula, as attested by the mosaics from Tunis (Bardo Museum), Aquileia (Archaeological Museum of Aquileia) and Antioch (Antakya Museum, Turkey).

As in other known cases, the facial expression of the marine deity represented in the mosaic from Alter do Chão is emotionally absent, yet haughty, and his gaze is vague. In spite of the fact that he is facing the top left, he does not engage in the ongoing action. This may explain why this figure serves an essentially contextual rather than a narrative purpose. Such a characteristic – which is, in fact, shared by most marine divinities – may also symbolize the unstable and unpredictable “temperament” of the unfathomable and

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4. In the Greek Theogony, Oceanus was both a marine and river god. See Hesiod, Theogony, 960 and López Monteagudo 2006: 485–496.
vast oceans, that could be just as much beneficial and generous as harmful and devastating to humans, sometimes bringing calm moments which enabled the heroes’ crossings (assisting them, in these cases), and at other times storms and enemies that threatened their lives (acting as their adversaries, in these cases).

In Vergil’s epic, Æneas and his companions met the two facets of the Sea. Early in Book I, the poet explains that the Trojans and their allies were battered «on land and at sea due to the violence of the supreme gods, due to cruel Juno’s wrath» (Vergilius, Æneid, I: 3-4). In fact, they only reached Latium after wandering for several years, «driven by the Fates over all the seas» (Vergilius, Æneid, I: 27-38) and enduring the hardships of numerous and violent storms (Vergilius, Æneid, I: 65-124; III: 192-209; V: 1-31 e 696-697), although they were appeased by Neptune, the god who was the «Lord of the deep sea» (Vergilius, Æneid, V: 799) and provided assistance to heroes:

«Meanwhile, Neptune realised that the sea was churned, with loud uproar, that a storm had been triggered and that the waters welled from the depth of the seabed. Severely enraged, he raised his majestic face to the water’s surface, carefully gazing over the vast deep-sea. He sees Æneas’s fleet scattered across the sea, the Trojans being lashed by waves, and the plummeting sky. Juno’s wiles did not go unnoticed by her brother [Neptune], nor did her wrath. He calls before him the Eurus and the Zephyr, and then says to them: — […] say this to your king: control of the deep-sea and the fierce trident was given to me, by lot, and not to him. […]

Thus he spoke and, swifter than it can be said, he calms the swollen seas, dispels the gathered clouds, and brings back the sun. Cymothoe and Triton, resting on a rock, re-float the ships, Neptune himself raises them with his Trident, parts the vast quicksands, calms the sea and glides on light wheels over the surface of the waters» (Vergilius, Æneid, I: 125-147).

The Sea is a constant and inconstant presence throughout the entire epic. Æneas and his companions set off on a voyage across the sea to fulfil their destiny – which is also that of a people and the seeds of a new and prosperous Empire – and the sea sets the entire scenery for the epic, whether in the foreground or in the background. At a measured pace, from the first to the last Book, the Trojans and their Phrygian allies – led by Æneas, who took the lead, in a ship «adorned with two Phrygian lions on her prow» (Vergilius, Æneid, X: 154-189) – set sail into and return from the
seas, whether calm or rough, occasionally coasting along foreign lands where they find repose and delight (as in Libya, led by the enraptured Dido (Vergilius, Aeneid, I: 505-507, 149; IV: 1-277, p. 222-228), or in Sicily, governed by Acestes, a Dardanian (Vergilius, Aeneid, V: 45-48, 251), where part of the exhausted crew settled down (Vergilius, Aeneid, V: 939-942, 272, V: 1074-1084, 275 e 276, V: 1099-1102, 276 e V: 1144-1148, 277; III: 330-410, 202-204) or ordeals and threats (as in the Strophades of the Harpies (Vergilius, Aeneid, III: 909-1083, 215-220), in the lands of the Cyclopes (Pereira 2009: 290) and in Orcus, which is inhabited by all «the ills that afflict man» and by fearsome teratomorphs and hybrid monsters).

The Sea, thus, serves as an omnipresent element and, in particular, as an initiatory route for the founders of the future city that would eventually lead to the establishment of Rome since they have to undertake several labours along the way, resembling initiatic trials, which are overcome through battles or invocations and prayers, the consultation of oracles, by making sacrifices and vows to the gods, as well as renouncing love and obeying the will of the gods.

Along with his companions, Aeneas «endured all the seas and all the threats of the sky and oceans» (Vergilius, Aeneid, VI: 107-108) until, at last, he saw Latium (Vergilius, Aeneid, VII: 29) and moored at the beach at Ostia. The mouth of the Tiber River, the source of which is in Tuscan- ny (in Monte Fumaiolo, located in the Apennine Mountain Range), can be found precisely on this beach, which is lapped by the Mediterranean Sea.

The image of the river god appears on the lower left side of the mosaic, below Aeneas, almost symmetrically opposite to the marine deity, and also as a considerably large full-length portrait, shown in an identical pose and as an anthropomorphic figure, but with only the occasional juxtaposition of plant, and not zoomorphic, elements. It also stands apart from the Greek iconography for river deities – which, similarly to the god Oceanus, displayed a hybrid morphology, as shown by the various depictions of the god Achelous on Attic stamnoi –, and bears affinity with Roman iconography, in which the human figure prevailed. The depiction of this deity, named Tiberinus (Varro, De Lingua Latina, 5.71), represents a compromise between Vergil’s ekphrasis and Roman iconography. In fact, in Book VIII of the Aeneid, the epic poet described it as follows:

«Among the leafy branches of the poplars, he then seemed to see the god of the place himself rising, the gently flowing old Tiberinus, cloaked in a fine white linen mantle and with reeds on his hair [...] I am the cerulean Tiber, a river that is most dear to heaven, with my abundant flow I scour the riverbanks and cross fertile cultivated fields» (Vergilius, Aeneid, VIII: 31-33).

Following this description, the god is referred to as «horned river» (Vergilius, Aeneid, VIII: 75), a detail that bears witness to Vergil’s Greek reference source.

In fact, the figure representing the river in this mosaic actually displays certain traits that can be found in both the Vergilian text and Roman iconography: the human-like appearance, the reeds in his hair and the mantle. However, in regard to other aspects it eschews iconography conforming instead to the text and vice-versa. Thus, according to the text and contrary to the iconography, the figure holds a twig with his left hand that alludes to poplars (even though its shape is empirical and it serves as an image-sign⁸), instead of the usual reed, and the areola of his right breast looks like a bluish-green seaweed, a detail that alludes to the cerulean colour of the waters but

5 « [... the Centaurs and the double-shaped Scyllas, the hundredfold Boreas and the beast [Hydra] of Lerna, hissing horribly, the Chimaera armed with flames, the Gorgons and the Harpies, and the shape of a three-bodied shade [Geryon]» – Vergilius, Aeneid, VI: 286-294.

6 Vide, for example, Vergilius, Aeneid, VI: 27-67 e XII: 195-234.

7 See Aeneas's renunciation of Dido – Vergilius, Aeneid, IV: 286-705, 233-237 e 243-244.

8 The poplar tree belongs to the Salicaceae family and may be found on riverbanks. Although several species exist, each with its own specific characteristics, all have a thin and tall trunk, are deciduous trees and have a fan-like crown with leafy branches, which may sometimes be narrower and cover the entire tree trunk, or wider, covering only its top part (as seems to be the case in the example shown in the mosaic under study).
constitutes a most unusual hybridism in Latin imagery. On the other hand, according to Roman iconography and contrary to the text, the figure does not seem to have had a horn on the forehead and appears to be of adult age, but not elderly – in spite of the fact that the face has been completely destroyed –, since his strongly built body and, in particular, his dark hair, are inconsistent with the physiognomic traits of an elderly man; his mantle is also greenish-blue instead of being white and the sway of its pleats resembles a vigorous waterfall more than diaphanous linen fabric; moreover, similarly to the fountain divinities known as Naiad Nymphs, the river god is reclined instead of standing, resting his right arm on a pitcher from which water pours out.

This is a yellow vessel which has a tall and narrow neck, a semi-spherical body and no handles, clearly resembling the pitcher serving as an attribute of the god of the Euphrates River in the Turkish mosaic from Belkis, in Zeugma (ancient Seleukeia Euphrates), currently on display at the Gaziantep Museum. However, this form is uncommon amongst this type of objects and vaguely resembles Hellenistic lagynoi. In fact, dolia, or ollae – wide-mouthed jars, with a pyriform body, no handles, and a flat bottom, without a base – occur most frequently, as well as the lagoence – flagons with a narrow neck, wide mouth and spherical body, usually without a base.

The water that pours out from the vessel runs to the right side and its flow increases thereafter, precisely from the point where the marine deity appears in the composition.

Vergil highlights the god of the Tiber River as Æneas’s coadjutor and as the herald of his victory:

« thus he spoke, removing all his cares with these words:
– O hero of the race of the gods [...] o man long awaited on Laurentine soil and in Latin fields! Here is your home, this is the place of your household gods: do not wave, then, and don’t fear the threat of war – the gods’ wrath and anger has died away. And lest you think these are sleep’s idle fancies, under the oak trees on the shore you will find a huge sow, with her thirty newly farrowed piglets, a white sow, lying on the ground, with the white piglets around her teats. This shall be the place of your city, the end and the rightful rest from your labours; from this moment
onwards, when thirty years have passed, Ascanius will found the distinguished city of Alba – and I do not prophesy unsurely. I will now explain, in a few words, how you shall overcome obstacles and emerge a victor. » (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 33-75).

The protagonist of this classical epic called upon not only this river deity, but also the fount divinities that flow into him – all obvious personifications of aquatic forces on land – and asked them for protection through an appropriate ritual that attests to the hero’s devotion to the natural elements:

«[Aeneas] rising, looks towards the eastern rays of the heavenly Sun, and following the ritual, fills his cupped hands with water from the river and prays to heaven: – O nymphs, O Laurentine nymphs, who are the source of rivers, and you too, O Father Tiber, with your sacred stream, receive Aeneas and at last last shield him from danger» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 33-75).

Following this invocation, in exchange for the assistance of Tiberinus, Aeneas pledged his eternal gratitude and promised the future establishment of a cult dedicated to this god in particular:

«In any fountain your water runs, in any soil you flow, you who pity our trials, you will always be honoured by my tributes and celebrated with gifts [...] Be only favourable to me and reassert your will in a more visible manner» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 33-75).

Hearing the Trojan’s prayer, the god calmed the waters of the river and allowed the biremes in his fleet to cross it:

«During the entire night, the Tiber calmed its troubled course and flowing backwards with a calm wave, stopped flowing, gentle, so that his flat waters spread as in a calm lake or swamp, which would require little effort from the oarsmen. The ships soon sped along their course» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 76-116).

The god of the Tiber River began to be worshipped at an annual festival named *Tiberinalia*, which was celebrated during the time of the emperors Diocletian and Maximian, surely not only in recognition of this assistance, but also due to the important role played by the actual river itself in the subsistence of the capital of the Empire.

In this mosaic, both the marine and river deities function not only as symbolic spatial and contextual references from the last Book of the *Aeneid* but also for the entire epic and even the entire Roman Empire, since the latter was conquered not only by land but mainly by sea – as already suggested by the Virgilian foreboding pictorial description of Aeneas’s shield, which alluded to the Tiber River (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 644-670) (on one of the sides), to the Ionic and Red Seas (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 671-699) and the Nile, Euphrates and Rhine Rivers (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, VIII: 700-731) (on the other side). And the aquatic deities, amongst others, will surely not have been invoked by chance by the hero before going into the battle, in which he would defeat his opponent:

«I call upon fountains and rivers, upon all the gods of high heaven and all the divinities of the blue ocean» (Vergilius, *Aeneid*, XII: 152-194).

9 Cf. Le Gall 1953 and Salzman 1990: 156 and 164. According to Salzman, an incorrect analogy is sometimes made between the *Tiberinalia*, dedicated to Tiberinus, god of the Tiber River (Varro, *Lingua Latina*, 5.7.29-30 and 5-71), celebrated on August 17th, and the *Portunalia*, dedicated to Portunus, god of the Port of the Tiber River (Varro, *Lingua Latina*, 6.19-20), celebrated on December 8th and to whom the temple named Portus Tiberinus would be dedicated. Still according to the same author, the *Tiberinalia* is first mentioned in the Roman calendar of AD 354.
Places and landscapes are key elements in Vergil's work, particularly his epic narratives, in which the author resorts to a variety of literary devices. They are therefore directly involved with the characters and the geography, or, in other words, they take on symbiotic characteristics, actually interfering in the unfolding and outcome of the scenes. This systematic relationship between the spatial and landscape dimension and the psychological dimension of the characters, sometimes brings the space/landscape into the foreground, acting, de per si, as a matrix that regulates the action.

Such a stylistic resource, undoubtedly, represented a huge aesthetic innovation in classical literature, which has been referred to by Luís Cerqueira as the «invention of the symbolic landscape» (Cerqueira 2009: 139). A landscape that is sometimes calm, sometimes tumultuous, yet participatory and actuating, whose presence, sometimes, determines the actual unravelling of events. Since it is surely not a mere decorative complement of action, the landscape is regarded as a factor that should be taken into consideration in Vergil's work and other works that draw inspiration from it. Therefore, the humanised reference to the landscape extend in the lower part of the mosaic of Abelerium and the wavy band geometric motif surrounding the entire medallion, which is clearly associated with water, are also endowed with important symbolic significance, conveying ideas of equilibrium and harmony and contributing towards an emphasis on facts.

The Subjectivity of this Mosaic

Abelerium was located along the via Hadriana, mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary, whose most impressive stretch consisted of the bridge of "Ponte Formosa", on the way to Colonia Emerita Augusta, the Augustan capital of Lusitania. Mosaic workshops of high quality operated in this urbs at the time, capable of undertaking a work that required the precision and minuteness displayed in the central panel of the mosaic from the triclinium. In this context, the naturalism and volume of the drawn shapes stand out, as well as the play of chiaroscuro, the richness of the chromatic palette and the abundant use of tesserae made of vitreous paste. Consequently, and knowing that Merida was a fertile centre for the spread of models, this mosaic may eventually indicate the existence of a workshop that was capable of innovating at the request of a putative client, producing a work for which we have not yet found a global parallel.

This mosaic also betrays influences of various origins, mainly African and Oriental, so that the hypothesis that it was made by craftsmen from outside of Hispania should not be discarded, or we should even consider the possibility that this is an imported mosaic, although this may only be given due consideration upon completion of the laboratorial analysis of the materials that make up this work. However, as we stated at the beginning of this paper, this is simply an initial approach to the study of the mosaic from Alter do Chão, whose uniqueness we were unable to conceal from the scientific community, so that we may hopefully gather further contributions towards its study.

In fact there are few known mosaics with Vergilian themes and they normally depict other passages of the Aeneid, especially that which refers to the love affair between Aeneas and Dido – the Libyan queen whom the Trojan hero relinquished in order to fulfil his founding mission (Vergilius, Aeneid, I-IV) –, as may be seen, for example, in the crude mosaic from the Low Ham Roman villa (Somerset), dating to the mid-4th century. However, this Romano-British mosaic already shows a significant lack of knowledge regarding the epic poetry of Virgil since, surely due to the influence of stereotypes and the phenomenon of "contamination", Aeneas wears military attire but with a Phrygian cap. The same love theme also seems to occur more frequently in painting than the passage concerning Aeneas and Turnus, as attested by the Pompeian fresco from the House of the Citharist.

Although Vergilian themes are seldom depicted in mosaics, Homeric themes seem to be more abundant. Several examples alluding to the Iliad are known from Late-Imperial Hispania, and we may cite three mosaics amongst these because they seem more relevant in this context: those

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10 Concerning this issue utide, v.g., Caetano 2007.
from Cabezón del Pisuerga (Valladolid), the **villa** of Rielves (Toledo) (Blázquez 1994: 280) and Mérida. In the first case, three pairs of fighters wearing Roman clothes and Hellenistic helmets with a visor stand out. In spite of the level of destruction of the mosaic, an inscription in Greek, which can still be read in the upper part, identifies these characters as Glaucon and Diomedes, **Æneas** and Achilles, Ajax and Diomedes (Homer, *Iliad*, 6.120, 20.159 and 23.814); in the mosaic from Toledo, in turn, there are four fighters wearing helmets with crests, two of these still firstfighting while the other pair is already in the final stages of the fight. The Latin inscription, which has been partially destroyed, may also refer to a passage from the *Iliad* (Homer, *Iliad*, 6.119-236); with a closer philosophical breadth to the mosaic from Alter, one should note the **Mosaic of the Seven Sages** from Merida, in which the learned figures also discuss a passage from the *Iliad*, which is represented in the lower panel: *Achilles’ wrath*

> «Sing, o goddess, the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus (murderous!), that brought countless ills upon the Achaens hurling so many souls of brave heroes into Hades, leaving their bodies as carrion for dogs and birds of prey, the will of Zeus thus being fulfilled), from the moment when they first clashed, the son of Atreus, king of men, and the divine Achilles» (Homer, *Iliad*, 1-5).

There is an obvious psycho-philosophical parallelism between the **Mosaic of the Seven Sages** and the mosaic from Alter do Chão. However, if in the former we find the representation of the consummate wrath that Achilles controlled in the name of *Fides* towards his king Agamemnon, in the latter we find a representation of the moment immediately preceding the wrath of **Æneas**, that is, the moment in which the entire scene remains at a standstill while awaiting **Æneas**’s decision. In spite of being proud and victorious, **Æneas** appears to be consumed by *Pietas* and

hesitates over whether to spare his enemy’s life. Only later does he realise that Turnus is carrying the weapons of his friend Pallas and so decides to kill him by plunging his sword into Turnus’s chest, shouting that it is Pallas, and not him, who is killing him.

Turnus’s death thus becomes crucial for the pursuit of **Æneas**’s main goals, that is, the founding of a city that personifies *Fides* and *Concordia*¹², and the creation of the necessary conditions for the institution of a political-juridical order that might guarantee peace and stability after the many battles and adventures at sea — the place of the hero —, which took him to the mouth of the Tiber — the *locus* of his city.

This tension between emotions and human moral ideals finds a parallel in the characteristics of the forces of Nature, represented by the humanised figures of the River and the Sea, which are used to symbolize the geography of the location where the action unfolded. Such a confluence of tensions enables the harmony between Man and Nature to become clear, achieving universal balance. This balance between the elements is, in fact, one of the main pillars of Stoic philosophy, as handed down to us in his book *Meditations* by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the last of the princeps to espouse the fundamental principles of Stoicism:

> «In human life time is a point, a substance in flux, the dull sensation, the composition of the entire easily corruptible body, the soul in perpetual turmoil, fortune hard to divine and fame something obscure. In short, everything that belongs to the body resembles a river; what pertains to the soul is a vaporous dream; life is a war, an exile in a strange land: posthumous fame is the same as oblivion. What can conduct us in all of this? One thing alone, I think: philosophy. This consists in looking carefully after the inner god,

Roman virtue — *Pietas* — and *pius* is his most common epithet — Pereira 2009: 262. This virtue was highlighted by the author from among the main moral ideas and basic policies of the Romans. *Vide* Pereira 2009: 338-342.

¹² *Fides* and *Concordia* were also contemplated in the same manner by the same author. *Vide* Pereira 2009: 332-338 and 373-377.
free from violence and unharmed, enabling triumph over pleasures and sorrows, doing nothing without purpose, fleeing from falsehood and hypocrisy, without worrying that others do or do not do anything; and besides one should know how to accept all that happens and what one has been given by lot as originating from the same source, whatever it is, where he himself comes from; see it as nothing other than the dissolution of the elements of which each living being is made up of.

If the elements have nothing to fear in this transformation, why should one feel apprehensive about the transformation and dissolution of the whole? It is according to nature. Now nothing that is according to nature is evil» (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, II.17).

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In spite of the fact that we were unable to find any parallels for the mosaic from Alter do Chão in the bibliography consulted, it may surely be included in a “classicism resurgence” that would have emerged, in Lusitania also, between the end of the 3rd and the 4th century. In fact, this movement, apparently in countercurrent and especially considering the models then in fashion, namely *uenatio*, circus and hunting scenes, produced some of the most remarkable mosaics known to date: besides the aforementioned *Mosaic of the Seven Sages*, another mosaic from Mérida, which probably dates to the 3rd century (Blanco Freijedo 1978: 35-38 (n.° 17), fig. 1 and plan in fig. 7, láms. 28-39; Durão 1993: 145-156 (n.° 33), fig. 26, lám. XVIII; Lancha 1977: 223-229; Lancha 2002: 287), should also be noted, namely the famous Cosmological Mosaic from the House of the Mithraeum.

13 It should be noted, in this regard, that this phenomenon was not restricted to Lusitania, or even Hispania – an example being, among others, the mosaic of the *ocus of the ulla* of La Olmeda which depicts the final moment of Achilles’s stay in the court of King Lycomedes, on the island of Scyros –, but rather that it was a transversal “movement”, producing remarkable examples in other territories.

14 Expert opinion is currently divided in regard to the interpretation of this mosaic, some arguing for a Mythraic genesis, while others find an Orphic reading in it (cfr. Ribeiro, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, before heightening the historical process that culminated in the rise of another world view, it should be noted that Vergil, when he appropriated «a cosmic and historical continuity in which no principle prevails and in which contrasts become unified in a superior being» (Cerceira 2009: 144), showed, as we saw, that he was an advocate of Stoic principles. Moreover, it has been stressed that «an allegorical tradition that regards classical epic as the mythical travesty of natural truths originated in a Stoic environment» (Pereira 2009: 263). Therefore it does not seem strange that the writing of this Vergilian epic is a Latin confirmation of this feeling already expressed in the primordial Hesiodic Greek epic of Ulysses and that «the qualities of the Stoic hero in particular are prominent» (Pereira 2009: 263) in the actual figure of Æneas... Perhaps aware of these Stoic interpretations, and still seeming to embrace these principles, the educated and wealthy aristocrat from *Abeliterium* would have bequeathed evidence of his own moral values to posterity.

All these values are subject to recreations of several *topoi*, although these may be understood in the context of the syncretism of the classical *paideia* and its multiple cosmological philosophical currents – namely the Mithraic (*uido* note 67), Dionysiac* and, especially, Orphic* mysteries →,


16 We should note, in this context, the Orphic mosaics from Martim Gil (Borges 1986: 57-62 (n.° 14), est. XIV; Cristiano 1995; Maciel 1996: 147. This mosaic is also mentioned by several other authors, noting among these, Vasconcellos 1913: 492, fig. 257; Pinto 1934: 174; Chaves 1937: 21-23; Lacerda 1942; Cortez 1947: 62-65; Almeida 1962: 111-113; Oleiro 1965: 258; Correia 1972: 238; Borges 1986: 57-62, n.° 14; and Kuznetsova-Resende 2002: 289-290) and from Arneiro (Maciel 1996: 144-146; Martin 2002: 312-319; Borges 1986: 57-62 (n.° 14), est. XIV. Other authors mention this mosaic, namely: Martin 1857: 254; Vasconcellos 1913: 493, fig. 57; Pinto 1934: 169; Chaves 1937: 8; Lacerda 1942; Cortez 1947: 62-65; Almeida 1962: 111-113; and Oleiro 1965: 258), both from the 4th century, those from the *ulla* of Pesquero (Rúbio Muñoz 1988: 67-8), dating to the second half of the 4th century, and also that from Merida, of 3rd century date; in
whose remote origins found a living space in the age of the *new man*. This melting pot of culture and ancient knowledge was absorbed and adapted by Christian asceticism, which, while remembering ancient preferences, established its ideology and erected its own religious-symbolic building, namely the *Ecclesia*.

**Conclusion**

This is a rare mosaic not only due to the high technical and aesthetic accomplishment – as attested by the careful fashioning of the tesserae, the preparation of the bed upon which they were set, the naturalism apparent in the drawing, the accuracy of the anatomical proportions, the detailed depiction of the costumes and the physiognomic expressions, the varied palette, the simulation of volume through the mastery of chiaroscuro →, but also due to the richness of the materials employed – emphasis being given to the tonal range of the limestone and generous use of glass paste ←, and, above all, due to this approach to a Vergilian theme, for which there is as yet no known iconographic parallel either within or outside Roman Hispania.

As well as revealing the diligence and quality of the mosaics that executed the mosaic, this work also mirrors the level of erudition and economic power of the person who commissioned it, who was probably acquainted with – if not a follower of – Stoicism, and rather influential in the society (and perhaps in the politics) of the ancient *Ciuitas of Abelterium*.

The figurative and geometric motifs in this mosaic betray thoughtful and well-planned composition work. While these make, *per se*, an objective reference, allowing the immediate iconographic recognition of the scene as well as referencing it specifically in the literary plot, somewhat betraying the text’s metaphorical stylistic features and the psycho-philosophical profile of its author, their layout and spatial distribution are used as a visual communication tool which is adeptly used to emphasize the significance of the image. We therefore believe that the compositional ability of the workshop that produced this mosaic is also undeniable as attested in the careful articulation of the parts forming the whole, besides the plastic and technical qualities revealed in the flawless drawings, the varied chromatic scheme, the skilful volumetric semblance, the analytical richness when depicting the details of the clothing, and also the efficient management of different stone and glass materials, as well as the careful preparation of the bed and the laying of tesserae in *opus uermiculatum*, which are fashioned into more regular and smaller pieces filling in the mosaic figures, while the background is filled in with more freely and heterogeneously shaped pieces.¹⁷

The figurative imagery stands out due to the size and near-central position of the medallion in this mosaic, as well as the “sterile” nature of certain geometric elements – which lack symbolic value (despite their irrefutable technical and aesthetic importance) ←, and also due to the way in which the latter are arranged in the panels surrounding it. On the other hand, the “fertile” nature of other geometric motifs – as revealed by their clear symbolism – which were strategically placed framing the emblem, reinforce the significance of the scene represented, so that the viewer’s gaze focuses on their content. Indeed, while the former motifs form a sequential and repetitive filling-in pattern, so that the scene in which unique non-sequential and unrepeated elements prevail stands out, the latter function as a unifying reference, given that the wavy band pattern refers indirectly to the omnipresence of water in the epic poem and directly to aquatic deities, while the guilloche twisted rope motif symbolises the geographical unity of the future Empire, thus uniting graphically the images into which the composition is divided and subdivided:

- The first division is horizontal and includes an upper half, which depicts the warriors, and a lower half, dominated by the aquatic deities. This

¹⁷ We would like to note that in the space on the left side, between *Eneas* and the Tiber, there is a stretch with a group of smaller tesserae, possibly left over from the filling in of the figures and probably placed here because this was a peripheral area of the composition.
division establishes a symbolic separation between humans and gods and between discursive textual depictions and descriptive contextual depictions. In the former the characters are at a narrative impasse, marked by the hero’s hesitation and the expectation of the anti-hero, witnessed by their respective troops. This moment represents a standstill that is counterbalanced by the revolving effect provided by the circular shields; in the latter the figures remain still but the continued flow implicit in the running waters is maintained;

— The second division, which is a subdivision of the first division, is vertical and includes a left half, which depicts the victorious warriors led by the hero Æneas, and by the river deity, and a right half, that shows the losing warriors led by the anti-hero Turnus, and by the marine deity. The former symbolizes the supporting forces of the hero and the assurance of his victory, while the latter symbolizes the opposing forces and the work he will have to accomplish.

The visual and symbolic harmony of these four scenes is achieved externally by means of the guilloche and wavy band patterns, and internally, by the features of visual confluence placed at central points in each image: in the upper half, Æneas’s shield with the head of the Medusa, producing a concentric and apotropaic effect, and in the lower half, the mouth of the Tiber, marking the convergence of fluvial and maritime waters. This double union provides a cosmic balance of clear Stoic inspiration, between antagonistic forces and Man and the gods, which seems to favour Æneas’s ultimate objective, that is, the foundation of the city of Alba, in which Concordia will fluoresce, as is the will of the hero and the gods, due to an order based on Law – and no longer on recourse to weapons – and ruled by the unconditional Fides to the king.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Here we can find a veiled reference to the cessation of civil wars at the end of the Republic and the ascent of a princeps, in this case, Augustus, the actual founder of the Empire.
The Archeological Context of the «House of the Medusa»

The «House of the Medusa» is a Roman domus located in Abelterium (in the present-day region of Alto Alentejo, Portugal), a Roman ciuitas of Lusitania.

At present, a substantial part of the domus has been excavated, namely a large peristyle, an inner courtyard with a rectangular garden surrounded by three arched galleries, around which several rooms were arranged, namely the triclinium, the cubicula and other multipurpose rooms. What may have been a performance room was also uncovered during the archaeological campaigns.

The mosaic can be found in the triclinium, a room that could be reached through a garden aligned southeast/northwest, and was most probably entered through two main doors, which were used, by the dominus and his guests. Besides these, there were other, narrower, secondary entrances, located symmetrically in the corners of the room. These entrances, as well as the above-mentioned cubicula and other rooms, could be reached directly through the corridors.

The rooms in the north-east wing are well preserved allowing us to make a clear inference about the size of the rooms, paving and entrances, contrary to the south-west wing, where few structural remains have survived.

A large quadrangular room excavated in the north-east wing of the domus has been interpreted as a performance room. During excavation, a fountain was uncovered in the centre of this room and a large part of an apse was discovered opposite the entrance. A small rectangular annex was also found to the left of this room.

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