CHAPTER I

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL MOSAIC

The mosaic as it now appears has a long history which it may be useful to summarize. Originally it decorated the floor of an apsidal recess in the lower storey of the Archbishop’s Palace, now a seminary, behind S. Agapito at Palestrina, ancient Praeneste, lying in the Apennines 23 miles to the east of Rome. In antiquity this apse was treated as an artificial grotto-nymphaeum and formed part of a large hall (see figs. 1-5). The existence of the mosaic is on record from the later part of the 16th century.

Between 1624 and 1626 most of the mosaic was cut into sections and removed piecemeal, without a plan of the original being made, and was transported to Rome where it came into the possession of the Cardinal Francesco Barberini. Around 1630 water-colour copies were made of the various pieces for Cassiano dal Pozzo, a man with a strong antiquarian interest and one of the founders of the Accademia dei Lincei. Somewhat later the pieces were repaired by Giovanni Battista Calandra, the head of the mosaic works of St. Peter’s, and in 1640 they were returned to Palestrina. Upon arrival, however, the packing boxes were crushed and the pieces badly damaged. Calandra again restored them with the help of the Dal Pozzo copies, and reassembled them in an apse at the back of the hall in the Barberini Palace, possibly with the inclusion of fragments which had remained on the site. The mosaic remained in this condition until 1853 when it was once again brought to Rome to be restored and was returned to Palestrina in 1855. In the Second World War it was transported in sections to the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome. In 1952 these sections were consolidated. On this occasion the backing of the mosaic was stripped which enabled Aurigemma and Gullini to distinguish between the authentic and the restored parts. It must, however, be recognised that there are several smaller restored parts in the mosaic which could not be detected by examination of the backing since they apparently affected only the surface of the mosaic. There are also small parts of
authentic mosaic in seemingly wholly restored parts\textsuperscript{14}. After the consolidation the mosaic was returned to Palestrina, put back together and placed upright in the upper hall of the Palazzo Barberini, now the Museo Nazionale Prenestino\textsuperscript{15}.

The history of the mosaic shows that a considerable part of it has been restored. We may distinguish in the mosaic different parts according to the degree of authenticity. In the first place there are the authentic parts, most of which were copied by the Dal Pozzo artist. In the second place there are the restored parts which were based on the Dal Pozzo watercolours. Thirdly, there are parts which are not only newly made but which are probably also new in content, since they were made to connect the various sections to each other in the 1640 restoration. Furthermore, the Dal Pozzo artist copied some original parts which have not been preserved. The few parts which are original but were not copied by the Dal Pozzo artist may have remained \textit{in situ} until 1640\textsuperscript{16}. The completely new parts may also have been based on mosaic fragments which had remained \textit{in situ}. These parts, however, only show either simple landscape or water (cf. fig. 7).

As far as the composition is concerned, we must take into consideration the clearly stated fact that, strange as it may seem, no plan was made of the original mosaic when the larger fragments were lifted\textsuperscript{17}. This makes one wonder on what Calandra based his reconstruction. He may have inspected the remains in the cellar of the bishop's palace, but it will not have been easy to establish the original position of all the sections\textsuperscript{18}. It is possible that other drawings of the original mosaic existed, but no traces of these remain and if they existed they do not seem to have been used\textsuperscript{19}. However, the fact that the mosaic apparently consisted of two parts relating to the subject-matter, and the fact that several sections obviously were parts of larger blocks, does not leave much room for experimenting as we shall see below.

The mosaic is now 4,31 m deep and 5,85 m wide at the base. But the apse in which it originally lay is 4,35 m deep and 6,87 m wide at the base, so the original mosaic must have been 1 m wider and some parts must have been lost. The composition of the remaining parts was adapted to the shape of the apse in the hall of the Barberini Palace\textsuperscript{20}. Comparison with one of the Dal Pozzo copies shows that the part in the top left-hand corner, showing the snake and the \textit{thoantes}, originally formed one piece with the part