CHAPTER IV

INTERPRETATION

Ever since the Nile Mosaic became known, widely varying interpretations have been proposed. These range from a religious allegory, for example of Isis-Fortuna, to the representation of an historical event, such as the arrival of Augustus or Hadrian in Egypt, a topographical picture of Egypt or an exotic genre scene. Since these interpretations relate mainly to the lower half of the mosaic we shall consider them later on.

It has always been agreed that there is an essential difference in content between the upper and the lower half of the mosaic so that it actually consists of two parts. In the upper part we see a waste land consisting of sand, rocks and water, populated by a large number of wild African animals, mostly with their names inscribed, which are hunted by negroes. In the lower part we see various scenes from Egypt, such as banquets, religious ceremonies, hunting parties and fishermen, scattered among temples and dwellings of various kinds, all set in a landscape which abounds in water. It is, therefore, generally assumed that the lower part represents Egypt and the upper part Nubia, in the way of a pictorial map of the Nile valley rendered in a bird’s eye view and with the south at the top as was the custom in ancient maps.

The difference between the upper and lower part is unmistakable and we shall adhere to it in the following discussion.

Part 1. The upper part

The upper part of the Nile Mosaic is generally considered to represent Nubia or Aethiopia, the ‘land of the black people’. Aethiopia was the ancient name for that part of the African continent which lay below the first cataract at Assuan. It covered most of the Sudan and the northern part of modern Ethiopia or Abyssinia. This interpretation is based on the character of the landscape, which is different from that in the lower part, on the presence of Sudanese animals and negro hunters, and on the lack of buildings and other signs of civilisation. The landscape with
granite rocks and sandstone table-top hills, alternating with sandy plains, is indeed reminiscent of lower Nubia (cf. fig. 89).

While discussing the various animals, we have seen that only some of these had appeared in ancient Egyptian hunting scenes, which apart from occasional lions mainly show gazelles and buffaloes. Typically Sudanese animals like monkeys, leopards and giraffes appear in scenes which show Nubians bringing tribute; most of the animals, and especially characteristic Sudanese animals, such as the elephant and the rhinoceros, appear only in a painted frieze in a tomb at Marissa in Israel, which represents a hunting scene\(^4\). In that frieze the name of the location, Aethiopia, is also indicated. It is, therefore, of interest to consider this frieze more closely (figs. 56–65)\(^5\).

Marissa was under Ptolemaic control from 274 to 175 B.C. and the tomb decoration in question may certainly be dated before 196 B.C., and probably to the last quarter of the third century. The hunting scene appears on a frieze which runs along the two sides of a rectangular room above a row of loculi. We will begin with the right hand side of the right wall as seen from the entrance.

The frieze starts with a man blowing a long trumpet (fig. 57). He is dressed in a short sleeved chiton and *embades* and wears a wreath. Above him there was an inscription which possibly read ΣΑΛΠΙΓΚΤΗΣ, ‘trumpeter’. On his left there is a hunter sitting on a prancing horse. He is dressed in a short chiton, white cloak and darkred tight-fitting breeches. The horse has a rich saddle-cloth. Above the horseman there is an inscription which perhaps read ΠΠΠΟΣ ΑΙΒΑΝΟΥ ΤΟΥ ΠΠΠΑΡΧΟΥ, ‘the horse of Libanus the cavalry-commander’. Below the horse there is a hound with pointed ears and a collar\(^6\). The hunter points a long lance at a leopardess, which is in the act of springing at the hunter but has been hit in the chest by an arrow, and is being attacked by other hounds. Above her is the inscription ΠΑΡΔΑΛΟΣ. Behind the leopardess is a palm tree\(^7\). Behind the tree we see an animal which, as the mane and the plain yellow skin show, must be a lion in spite of the inscription above it which reads ΠΑΝΘΗΡΟΣ (fig. 58). The next part of the frieze was damaged by the enlargement of a niche and only a small part of the decoration remains. This includes a small piece of the hindquarters and long sweeping tail of a feline creature, again painted yellow, which suggests that this animal too was a lion\(^8\). It is followed by a large buffalo,