CHAPTER V

THE FUNCTION OF THE NILE MOSAIC

The Nile Mosaic is the earliest and most comprehensive example of an Egyptian scene to have survived from the Roman world\(^1\). We must, therefore, consider the question of the mosaic’s function. Why and how did it come to decorate a nymphaeum at Praeneste: did it have a specific religious meaning, in that it showed the blessed land of Isis to her devotees, or was it merely an exotic decoration?

This question can actually be applied to the whole genre of Egyptianising scenes in the Roman world and is one on which divergent opinions exist\(^2\). In the case of the Nile Mosaic the answer depends, in the first place, on the interpretation of the function of the building in which the mosaic was originally laid. The supposition that the lower complex at Praeneste was part of the sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia naturally led to a religious interpretation for the Nile Mosaic, since Isis could be identified with Tyche who as Tyche Protogeneia was the Greek counterpart of Fortuna Primigenia (cf. fig. 97). We have, however, already seen that most probably the lower complex was a group of public buildings on the forum of Praeneste, which had no connection with the real sanctuary of Fortuna above it\(^3\). The Nile Mosaic lay in a grotto-nymphaeum attached to a large hall which stood to the right of a basilica-like building. The Fish Mosaic occupied the position of a companion piece, being situated in a similar nymphaeum which was attached to an entrance court erected to the left of the basilica-like building (see fig. 2). Because the floors were under water these grotto-nymphaea would hardly have been suitable for ritual functions\(^4\).

Notwithstanding the severe damage which it has suffered, we may assume that the Fish Mosaic originally showed no more than a large fishing scene\(^5\). Such a marine scene may have alluded to Poseidon as well as to Aphrodite or Isis and Fortuna, so its symbolic value would have had a broad range. Fish and fishing scenes were popular subjects in general and especially in nymphaea and summer triclinia. It is difficult therefore to attribute
any specific religious meaning to the Fish Mosaic\(^6\). The two mosaics share the common factor that water plays an essential part in them, notably the Mediterranean sea and the flooded Nile. As such they were appropriate decorations for nymphaeae in which a shallow stream of water ran over the mosaics. In the one nymphaeum the spectator who looked into the water saw the sea with fish and fishermen, while in the other he saw the inundation of Egypt. The Nile Mosaic was adapted to the nymphaeum in a particularly subtle way. The rocky surface of the backwall, from which water seeped, passed into the rocky landscape of Nubia in the upper part of the mosaic, and from there the Nile sprang and flowed into the inundation scene in the front part\(^7\). Furthermore both mosaics depict a large number of animals, fish or fruits, and mankind profiting from these resources, thus illustrating the fertilising power of water. In more than one respect therefore these mosaics were appropriate decorations for a nymphaeum\(^8\).

In order to be able to ascertain whether it was the function of the Nile Mosaic to convey a specific religious message to the contemporary beholder, we must review the other Nilotic scenes which have been preserved from this early period.

The earliest Nilotic scene after the Nile Mosaic is the Nilotic mosaic frieze from the Casa del Fauno at Pompeii, which may be dated to c. 90–80 B.C. (fig. 28)\(^9\). This shows only fauna and flora. There is a crocodile, a mongoose and a cobra, while a hippopotamus raises its head from the water. There are ibises and various kinds of ducks. Flowers and buds of the Indian lotus and other waterplants rise from the water. We have already noted that several details show striking similarities with the Palestrina mosaic and that the respective artists must have used the same or similar models. On the other hand the picture is much simpler than the Nile Mosaic, because it shows no people or buildings. The Nilotic frieze from the Casa del Fauno originally decorated the threshold of the Alexander exedra which looked out on two peristyles and probably served as a summer triclinium. So the frieze’s function seems to have been mostly to provide an exotic decoration. Parts of a painted Nilotic frieze have been preserved in the atrium of the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii. This frieze, which may be dated to c. 70 B.C., ran along the upper part of the four walls and must have been of a considerable length. Regrettably only a few fragments have survived. They show pieces of land in