CHAPTER VII

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Problems of iconography

It is an intriguing problem how such comprehensive scenes as the Nile Mosaic and the Fish Mosaic came into being. Were they designed at Praeneste where the mosaics were made, or did the artists copy models? Since the typical Egyptian scenes could be seen in reality only in Egypt and since most of the Egyptian and Aethiopian animals were not imported to Italy until a later period, the artists of the Nile Mosaic must have worked from models1. The question is what these models looked like2. E.Q. Visconti suggested that the Nile Mosaic was an imitation of an Alexandrian carpet3. Another possibility is that it was inspired by the old Egyptian tradition of painting floors with garden scenes4. Maspero pointed out that there was a considerable resemblance between the Nile Mosaic and ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, which employ superposed registers to depict a range of scenes from daily life along the Nile including desert hunting scenes. The Nile Mosaic could reflect a large Egyptian scene of this kind5. Schmidt, on the other hand, assumed that the artists composed the mosaic by putting together several smaller scenes, a hippopotamus hunt for example, taken from painted panels or sketches and probably also from manuscript illustrations6. The use of illustrated texts for the composition of the mosaic has also been suggested by others7. Phillips essentially came to the same conclusion as Schmidt: the model for the Marissa frieze and the upper part of the Nile Mosaic was an illustrated description of an Aethiopian hunting scene, while the lower part was composed by putting together larger separate scenes8. Finally Steinmayer argues that both the upper and the lower part were based on illustrated texts9.

The models which have been proposed therefore range in character from one large complex scene, to a number of separate scenes and even to text illustrations. The last two proposals presuppose that the composition and the landscape of the Nile Mosaic were created largely by the mosaicists themselves as a unifying
background, because the models would have lacked the space for these elements.

*The models*

We have seen that the Nile Mosaic has close connections with ancient literary descriptions: the upper part with descriptions of Aethiopia, like the one by Agatharchides, and the lower part with descriptions of Egypt like that by Diodorus. Does this, then, imply that illustrated texts were used for the composition of the mosaic? This would presuppose a considerable intellectual effort on the part of the designers. Moreover, if we look at the mosaic we cannot fail to notice that even in its present fragmentary state it shows a coherent composition or, more precisely, two compositions, one in the upper and one in the lower half. The entire picture is represented as if the ground is tilted upwards, towards the horizon, which is positioned near the top of the mosaic, so that the spectator seems to look down from a high viewpoint, rather like a bird's-eye view. In this vast landscape setting the many human and animal figures are small in scale. In the lower part foreground and background are distinguished by means of a number of techniques. The structures, the animals and the human figures in the foreground are larger than those in the background, and the major structures, such as the pavilion complex and the Egyptian temple, are also rendered in a bird's-eye view. There are many receding lines which run to the upper right-hand side and which sometimes converge, as in the case of the pavilion. In the upper part perspective is indicated by the zigzag arrangement of the rocks, which rise on different levels between stretches of desert and water, and by the oblique lines which indicate the boundary between water and land. These complex backgrounds contain many details which characterise the environment. In the upper part there are typical Nubian rock formations and trees and shrubs, which form the background for the Aethiopian animals. In the lower part the flooded Nile is essential to set the scene. Moreover, we have seen that in the lower part the more important scenes were not isolated but were closely connected in regard to content and composition. In the original mosaic an oblique line seemingly connected the pavilion scene in the centre of the foreground with the Osiris