APPENDIX 18

POMPEIAN AND RELATED FISH MOSAICS (Ch. VI, n. 6)

There are four Pompeian fish mosaics which show striking similarities in composition and in the choice and the rendering of the fish, both to each other and to the Fish Mosaic of Palestrina. It is these similarities which reveal that all five mosaics were made by one group of artists using the same models\(^1\). They enable us to reconstruct a prototype in the form of a large fishing scene which showed a bird’s eye view of a bay surrounded by a rocky coast and populated by a large variety of accurately depicted fish and by fishermen. The character of this model has been preserved in the Fish Mosaic of Palestrina\(^2\). At Pompeii mosaic *emblemata* were commissioned to decorate the centres of floors, with similar scenes but of a much smaller size. About 100 B.C. the artists of the workshop created the fish mosaic of the Casa del Fauno by grouping a number of fish around a central group of an octopus struggling with a moray and a spiny lobster, an episode which in the Fish Mosaic of Palestrina is merely a detail of the marine fauna. In the process the landscape surrounding the bay was largely dispensed with\(^3\). This new composition with the central octopus group apparently became popular because it was repeated in other *emblemata* in Pompeii and elsewhere\(^4\). Some even smaller *emblemata* were made c. 90 – 70. Here the central octopus group was omitted and the decoration only consisted of a number of fish, which however still reproduced those of the earlier mosaics\(^5\). But the original composition of a fishing scene

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1 For the Pompeian fish mosaics see Meyboom 1977. The so-called mosaics A (from the Casa del Fauno) and B have recently been studied again from a zoological point of view by L. Capaldo, U. Moncharmont, Animali di ambiente marino in due mosaici Pompeiani, *RStPomp* 5 (1989) 55 ff., pls. 1b, 2b (col.). These authors suggest other identifications for some fish and the bird, which do not, however, affect the conclusions regarding the iconography drawn by me in 1977.

2 See Meyboom 1977, 65 ff., fig. 16; Ch. II, n. 7; Ch. VII, n. 12.

3 See Meyboom 1977, 51, mosaic A, 60 ff., figs. 1, 10, 16.

4 See Meyboom 1977, 51 f., fig. 2 , mosaic B from Pompeii VIII 2, 16, c. 90–80, and other examples considered below.

5 See Meyboom 1977, 52, 55, figs. 3, 4; mosaics C and D, from VII 4, 31,
in a bay was not forgotten: it appeared again in a mosaic from the same period but of unknown provenance which turned up at Naples shortly before the Second World War\(^6\). These fish mosaics did not remain restricted to Campania. In addition to the Fish Mosaic of Palestrina traces of similar mosaics have been found in Rome. These include fragments of a fish mosaic from near San Lorenzo in Panisperna which again seems to have shown a central octopus group\(^7\). Another fish mosaic, dated to c. 60 B.C., which has recently been found near the Via Sistina in Rome, shows a very strong likeness to the later Pompeian fish mosaics with regard to composition, the choice of the fish and the style\(^8\).

In a fish mosaic from Populonia, probably dating from the 2nd quarter of the 1st century B.C., now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the composition with the central octopus group and the same choice of fish can still be recognised in spite of the coarse execution. The same choice of fish recurs in another mosaic from Populonia, laid at the same time as the last and probably at the same site, i.e. a Roman villa, and which depicts a

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\(^6\) See Meyboom 1977, 60 ff., fig. 15; AA 1941, 583 ff., fig. 102.

\(^7\) See Meyboom 1977, 57, nn. 87–89; Gullini pl. VI (col.); NSc 1888, 437; BCom 1888, 263; M. Morricone Matini, Precisazioni sui mosaici di Quaderna e di San Lorenzo in Panisperna a Roma, AC 15 (1963) 233 ff., esp. 256 f. The central motif of the octopus group could have a relation with the fish mosaics of Pompeii and Palestrina. However, this motif seems to have been very popular and in the absence of clear similarities in composition its presence may be insignificant (see Meyboom 1977, 55 ff.; it is even found as a control-mark on Roman coins from the same period, see Ch. V, n. 43). Moreover, the style of this mosaic is very different from those of Palestrina and Pompeii (cf. Gullini pl. VI). Whereas the latter show bright blue, greenish and reddish colours, the fragments of the Roman mosaic show a large variety of tones of light and dark grey. In the Pompeii and Palestrina mosaics the fish are depicted in a very colourful manner but always in the same schematic position so that it seems as if the artists scrupulously copied their models. In the Roman mosaic the fish are depicted in a much more lively fashion and, owing to the many greyish and silvery tones, they really seem to swim and sparkle in the water. Altogether, this impressionistic style is very different from and actually far superior to that of the Pompeii and Palestrina mosaics. It is highly regrettable that the remains and the site of this important mosaic have not been better studied. The preserved fragments are not even mentioned in Helbig II, possibly because they were not on display but were kept in the director’s office of the Antiquarium Comunale.

\(^8\) See C. Fiorini, Edificio di età republicana in Via Sistina, Topografia Romana, Ricerche e discussioni; Quaderni di topografia antica X (1988) 45 ff.; pls. IIIa, IVb.