A LITERARY VIEW ON THE NILE MOSAIC AT PRAENESTE

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In 1995 Paul Meyboom’s large study of the Nile mosaic at Praeneste (Palestrina) was published.¹ In his description and interpretation of this unique floor-mosaic (fig. 1) Meyboom more than once referred to “the Roman beholder”, a category which consists of “the Roman aristocracy with its more general political, economic and cultural interests as well as the merchants with their commercial interest”.² Religious and touristic preferences of the public are also mentioned by Meyboom and he concludes: “The Palestrina mosaic has different meanings according to the interest and background of the beholder”. Obviously, in order to reconstruct the cultural background of this heterogeneous Roman public (its ‘Erwartungshorizont’—to use a key term of German ‘Rezeptionstheorie’), archaeologists have not only to use strictly material sources but also textual ones. In his article, entitled ‘La pompé di Tolomeo Filadelfo e il mosaico nilotico di Palestrina’,³ Coarelli argued for ‘uno strumentario interdisciplinare quanto più ampio possibile’ (225), combining archaeological and textual evidence. Nevertheless, although Hellenistic culture obviously is a Greco-Roman phenomenon and our Nile mosaic is situated not far from Rome, Coarelli mainly used Greek textual sources (especially Athenaeus and Strabo); in his notes I only found three brief references to resp. Cicero, Julius Caesar and Pliny. One perceives the same propensity for focussing on Greek texts and at the same time more or less neglecting Latin sources in the gold mines of Meyboom’s notes. In this paper I shall try to fill up this lacuna in the actual discussion on date, form and function of the Nile mosaic by concentrating on Latin textual evidence in order to find out whether Latin texts and the visual representation of the

¹ Meyboom, Nile Mosaic.
² Meyboom, Nile Mosaic 87.
mosaic can illuminate each other in the process of what has been called ‘die gegenseitige Erhellung der Künste’.

*Literary descriptions of the Nile and the Nile mosaic*

Firstly I present a collection of the continuous descriptions of the Nile (from sources to mouths) in Latin texts from the relevant periods, leaving aside the large number of very short references in only a couple of words to this river:4

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