

Achilles on Skyros in the *Emblema* from the House of Poseidon at Zeugma: Caracalla and the Power of Images

Zeugma'daki Poseidon Evi *Emblemasından* Skyros'taki Akhilleus: Caracalla ve Görüntülerin Gücü

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Abstract

This iconographic and iconological analysis has shown the existence of a long tradition about this subject, that is Achilles on Skyros in the emblema from the House of Poseidon at Zeugma. This tradition dates back to the 1st century AD and it concerns the Roman mosaic and painting. The model of Achilles on Skyros travelled from the West to the East, especially from Italy (Rome and Pompeii) towards the eastern part of the Roman Empire. This model arrived in Zeugma on the Euphrates at the beginning of the third century AD, under Caracalla (211-217 CE). The rich owner (dominus) and client of the Poseidon Villa was to be a high officer of Caracalla belonging to Legio IV Scythica or Parthica. In fact Zeugma became the settlement of this Roman legion and the outpost against the Parthians, above all during the reign of Septimius Severus (193-211 CE) and under his successor Caracalla. The dominus of the Poseidon Villa made the imperial propaganda his own by choosing the subject of Achilles on Skyros, which was very favourite by Caracalla on the ideological level, as the subject of Alexander the Great (Cfr. Cassius Dio, Herodian, Scriptores Historiae Augustae). The myth of Achilles on Skyros is very ancient (Cfr. Cypria, Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides) and privileged by Roman (Domus Aurea) and Pompeian painting and mosaic dating back to the emperor Nero, ardent admirer both Achilles and Alexander the Great, as Caracalla.

Keywords: Roman mosaic and painting, ideological analysis, Nero, Caracalla.

Öz

Bu ikonografik ve ikonolojik analiz, Poseidon Evi'nin emblemasında yer alan Skyros'taki Akhilleus betimi ile ilgili uzun bir geleneğin Zeugma'daki varlığını göstermektedir. Bu gelenek İS 1. yüzyıla kadar uzanır ve Roma mozaïği ve resmi ile ilgilidir. Skyros'taki Akhilleus betimi Batı'dan Doğu'ya, özellikle İtalya'dan (Roma ve Pompeii) Roma İmparatorluğu'nun doğu kısmına doğru yayılmıştır. Bu model, İS 3. yüzyılın başında Caracalla (211-217) döneminde Fırat üzerindeki Zeugma'ya ulaşmıştır. Poseidon Villası'nın zengin sahibi (dominus) ve müşterisi, Legio IV Scythica veya Parthica'ya bağlı Caracalla'nın yüksek bir memuru olacaktır. Aslında Zeugma, her şeyden önce Septimius Severus'un (193-211) ve onun halefi Caracalla'nın saltanatı sırasında, bu Roma lejyonunun yerleşim yeri ve Partlara karşı ileri bir karakol olmuştur. Poseidon Villası'nın sahibi, Büyük İskender'in durumunda olduğu gibi, Caracalla'nın ideolojik düzeyde çok sevdiği Skyros'taki Akhilleus temasını seçerek imparatorluk propagandasını kendine mal etmiştir (Örn. Cassius Dio, Herodian, Scriptores Historiae Augustae). Skyros'taki Akhilleus miti çok eskiye dayanmaktadır (Örn. Cypria, Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides) ve hem Roma (Domus Aurea) hem de Pompeii resim ve mozaïğinde, Caracalla gibi hem Akhilleus hem de Büyük İskender'in coşkulu bir hayranı olan imparator Nero'ya kadar uzanır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Roma mozaïği ve resmi, ideolojik analiz, Nero, Caracalla.

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The historical identity of Zeugma on the Euphrates, which was until then known as Belkis, was discovered in 1975 (Önal 2010: 9). The scientific research and excavations at Zeugma started with the intervention of the Gaziantep Museum¹. The work was supplemented by a French team in 1995, while the last phase of the rescue operation in 2000 was partly funded by the Packard Humanities Institute (PHI). Finally the restoration and conservation of mosaics have been done by the Rome-based Centro di Conservazione Archeologica (CCA) (Önal 2010: 9).

Zeugma, on the southern slopes of the Taurus and on the border with Syria, was destroyed and burned in AD 252-253 (Abadie-Reynal 2008: 103; Massara 2018: 157) or 256 by the Sassanid army of the King Shapur I. After the Sassanid destruction the city was not rebuilt and except for the damage due to fire and the collapsed roofs the mosaics have survived in almost pristine condition² (Önal 2010: 9).

Seleukos Nikator, one of the generals (*diadochi*) of Alexander the Great, founded in 300 BC the settlement, called as the Passageway, on the southern slopes of the Taurus and on the west bank rebuilt in order to protect and control the passage on the Euphrates River at this site, which was named after him as the Seleukeia (*Seleucia*) on the Euphrates and later Zeugma (bridge or link in ancient Greek: see Plin. nat. XXXIV, 43, 150)³. Seleukos I Nikator moreover founded a new settlement on the opposite bank called as Apameia, which he named after his wife Apame. Zeugma became a strong bridgehead for armies campaigning in the east, at first in the Hellenistic age and at a later time in the Roman period. With the extension of Roman power to the east towards the end of the first century BC, Zeugma began to serve as a base from which the Roman armies active beyond the Euphrates and the Tigris could be supplied against the Parthians. About the middle of the first century CE the site became a permanent garrison for the Roman Legio IV Scythica (Önal 2010: 9-10). The settlement of a Roman legion was a determining factor in the transformation of an otherwise crossing station settlement into a prosperous military, administrative and commercial centre, with a flow of high military officers and administrators. The Legio IV Scythica, also written as Legio III Scythica, founded by Marcus Antonius after 42 BC, for his campaign against the Parthian Empire, hence its other cognomen: Parthica, likely was still active in Syria in the early 5th century. Under the emperor Traianus, during the Parthian campaign (114-117), Zeugma was playing the role of the most important military logistic center besides Samosata and the Legio IV Scythica placed here enlarged its military bases. The importance of this Roman legion increased under the emperor Septimius Severus who waged war on the Parthians (197-198) from Zeugma. Finally Zeugma again was the logistic center of the Parthian campaign of the army under the command of the emperor Caracalla (216-217) (Ergeç et al. 2007: 17-21).

The Roman Villas of Zeugma, decorated with magnificent mosaics, were built on the slopes of the Belkis Tepe, forming the acropolis and facing the Euphrates

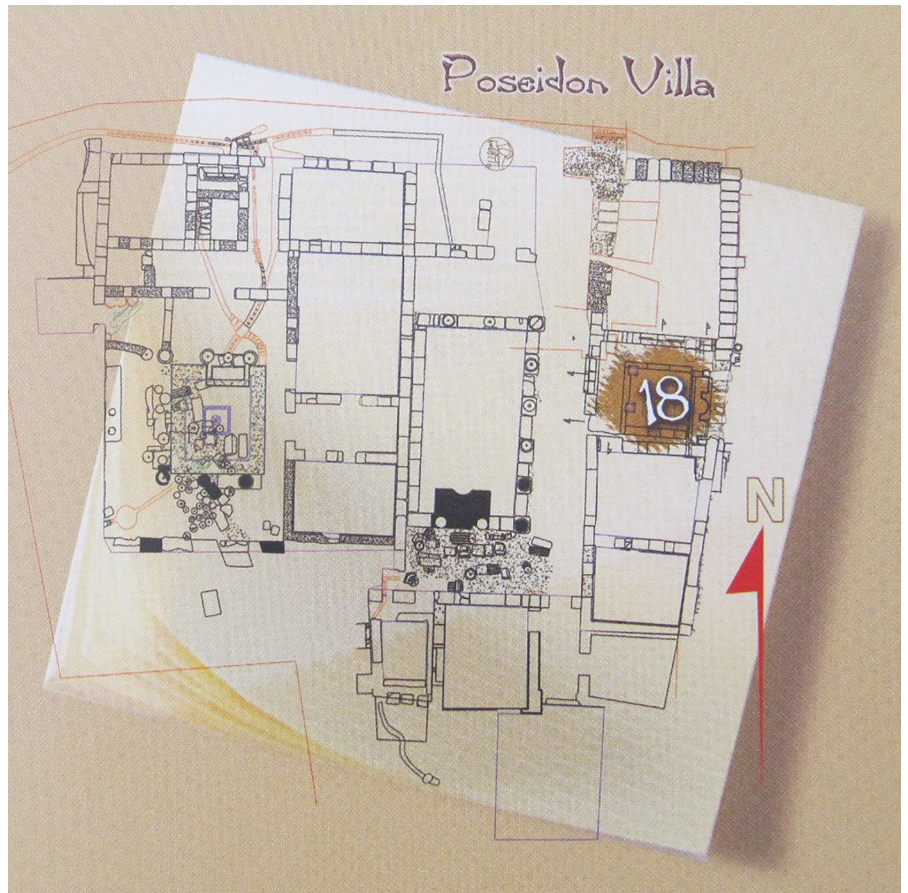
1 There was no information about the Zeugma villas until the first villa was discovered by the Gaziantep Museum in 1992. The plans of some of these buildings were revealed by being entirely excavated and some of the works were carried on as salvage excavations because of illegal digs. Some of the villas are the ones which were noticed due to the mosaic panels (*emblemata*) recovered in the last minute from the rising dam reservoir waters but the excavations of which could not be continued because of lack of time and the difficulty concerning the topography of the site.

2 The absence of plants in the arid climate of the region also played a role in the survival of the mosaics in very good condition.

3 Pliny the Elder remembers in this literary step the construction here of a pontoon bridge by Alexander the Great.

River. The slopes became the natural amphitheatre for building villas each of which was the representation of the ambition and ideology of the rich residents of Zeugma, especially at the end of the 2nd century CE and at the beginning of the third century CE (Ergeç et al. 2007: 34-35). In fact the mosaic decoration of these villas dates back to this period, as the decoration of the Poseidon Villa (Fig. 1), that was unearthed in 1999; the works were continued until the end of 2000, when the place was submerged in waters of the dam reservoir (Birecik Dam) (Ergeç et al. 2007: 99). The Poseidon Villa⁴, the most luxurious building, is one of the twin villas unearthed here, that must have belonged to people (*domini* commissioning the magnificent decoration) of high cultural and economic levels⁵, in this period, which can be called as the era of the villas, when the art of mosaics was at its peak.

Figure 1
The Poseidon Villa plan with the *impluvium*
18. Photo: According to Ergeç et al. 2007:
121.



The *emblema* of Achilles on Skyros (Fig. 2), made of local pebbles, was found during the salvage excavations carried out by the Gaziantep Museum in 1999 (Ergeç et al. 2007: 120-123; Önal 2010: 26-27). This mosaic, with the dimensions of 1.70 m x 1.70 m, was at the bottom of the pool with a waterspout (Fig. 3) in the *impluvium* (A2/P4 or 18)⁶ (Önal 2012: 67-68) of the Poseidon Villa. The

4 This is a structure found by chance in a pistachio orchard, which was expropriated, when the roots of the trees were being removed during the salvage excavations.

5 I agree with the hypothesis that eventually the idea of identifying the client *dominus* and his family with the gods, goddesses or the heroes, in the mythological scenes, is present in these *emblemata*. See Ergeç et al. 2007: 35. But this aim did not start to appear at this period, because it is much older in the classical antiquity. Cfr in this regard especially some Pompeian frescoes and mosaics of Third and Fourth Style.

6 This *impluvium* was in the eastern part of the house: it was in a room for internal distribution and circulation, in the *domus* public area. Moreover this room was equipped with a fountain on the eastern side and gave access to the large *peristylum* (A6/P9 or 16) in the western area of the villa; this *peristylum* was also embellished with a fountain on the southern side. See Abadie-Reynal 2008: 106.



Figure 2
Mosaic with Achilles on Skyros from the *impluvium* 18 of the Poseidon Villa. Photo: According to Önal 2010: 27.



Figure 3
The *impluvium* 18 with the floor mosaic on the excavation site. Photo: According to Ergeç et al. 2007: 121.

composition area in the form of a square is bordered with a ruffle pattern made by light and dark colored stones. The *emblema* represents the popular episode related to the myth concerning the Trojan War: the discovery of Achilles, disguised as a girl, by Odysseus in the palace of Lycomedes, king of Skyros. In the centre Achilles, still in a girl's clothes, is depicted advancing to his left (Fig. 4) and as holding a spear in his right hand and a shield in his left. His tunic leaves the right part of the torso and his right leg and foot naked (the foot with the vulnerable heel?), while the right shoe (*calceus*) is shown on the floor. In the centre of the composition area there is also Deidamia (Fig. 5) who is dressed in



Figure 4
Detail of Achilles in the centre of the floor mosaic from the Poseidon Villa. Photo: According to Önal 2010: 27.



Figure 5
Detail of Deidamia in the centre of the floor mosaic from the Poseidon Villa. Photo: According to Önal 2010: 27.

a sleeveless tunic and a mantle which envelops her upper body in a huge circle as if filled with the wind. It is the similar drapery that we can see about the same subject in some frescoes or mosaics, whose archetype dates back to the Hellenistic age: we remember in this regard the *Aura* representation in the Italic coroplastic art. The right arm of Deidamia, adorned by *armillae*, is extended towards Achilles as if to prevent him from joining the Achaean expedition. The princess is also adorned by a gold crown of Hellenistic style. To the left of the scene there is king Lycomedes, while to the right Odysseus is represented, both in the background (Fig. 2). King Lycomedes is depicted in rich clothes with a white band (*stephane*) on his head, symbol of his royalty; the pommel of his sword is in the form of a griffon's head, while Achilles has a sword with a pommel in the shape of a lion's head hanging on his right shoulder. To the right Odysseus, armed with a sword and dressed in white, is portrayed with the *pileus*, wearing his characteristic *exomis*; he moves off to the right, but looks back at Achilles encouraging him to follow. Behind him is a soldier wearing a helmet with cheek guards, military costume and short leather boots; maybe he (*Agyrtes*: cfr. Stat. Ach. I, 875-876)⁷ is in the act blowing a trumpet as arranged by Odysseus. In the background the king's daughters or palace women, one probably Deidamia's nurse, with a bodyguard behind Lycomedes, are shown. The scene takes place in a hall with an architectural style having columns with Doric capitals. This hall evokes the *pulpitum* and *scaenae frons* of an ancient theatre, as those of the Roman Theatre of Mérida in Spain, that was built in the years 16 to 15 BC. In fact the subjects of this myth, in the *emblema*, are moving as if on a stage: we have to remember about this the *Skyrioi* by Sophocles and

7 Stat. Ach. I, 875-876 : "... cum grande tuba sic iussus Agyrtes/insonuit..."

the *Skyrioi* by Euripides (Ghedini 1996: 689). Maybe the owner (the patron *dominus*) expressed his preferences about the classical theatre in this mosaic panel as a status symbol. There is another *emblema* (at the beginning of the 1st century BC) with a similar background, evoking a theatrical architecture, from the House of the Tragic Poet (Fig. 6) in Pompeii, now in the mosaics collection on display in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN) (Caso 2016: 620; De Caro 2019: 18, 22-23).



Figure 6

Emblema with a tragic poet from the *tablinum* of the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii (MANN, inv. 9986). Photo: According to Pappalardo - Ciardiello 2010: 188.

The myth of Achilles on Skyros was very successful in late antiquity and it is depicted for instance on mosaics from Palmyra, Pedrosa de la Vega, Sparta, Tipasa and Kourion (Kossatz-Deissmann 1981: 60 n. 120 n. 121 n. 124; 53 n. 93; Caso 2014: 546). It is found at least fifteen times on late antique mosaics dated from the 2nd to the 5th century CE. These mosaics are distributed fairly evenly between eastern and western regions of the Roman Empire, including North Africa (Delbarre et al. 2008: 36; Dunbabin 2018: 359). Two late mosaics, both dating from the end of the 2nd century CE, are very interesting about the classical theatre. The first panel comes from the antique city of Vienne (Vigenna), in Gaul, while the second mosaic comes from Orbe (Urba), in ancient Germany

(Germania Superior: Switzerland) (Delbarre et al. 2008: 37-38). These panels likely document a keen interest in the theatre, such as the mosaic from Zeugma, revealing the client's literary culture. On the pavement from Vienne the scene significantly gets organized differently: Odysseus and Agyrtes are on a wall in the background, Agyrtes is playing a trumpet, while Odysseus is lifting a *velarium*, revealing the group below in the foreground. In this group Achilles, always armed with his shield and his spear, takes place in the centre of the composition, surrounded by the daughters of king Lycomedes and in action on a kind of *pulpitum*. The mosaic from a *villa* in Orbe, similar to the pavement from Vienne about the composition, is divided in two pictures: in the upper picture we can see Odysseus and Agyrtes on a wall and, in the centre of the second board, appear Achilles and Deidamia. This mosaic was probably in the library of the *villa*, testifying the literary tastes of the owner (*dominus*). In both mosaics the wall in the background evokes a *scaenae frons* of a Roman theatre, while Odysseus, in an elevated position on the wall, is similar to a *deus ex machina*, especially in the pavement from Vienne: in fact he behaves like a *deus ex machina*, in this context, finally revealing Achilles. It is useful to remember the presence of two important Roman theatres at Vienne (an odeon is also attested here) and near Orbe at Aventicum. Therefore we may suppose the representation of plays, like tragedies, comedies and pantomimes too, related to the myth of Achilles on Skyros, in these theatres. We can also suppose a mutual influence between dramatic poetry and visual arts (mosaics) in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE both in the western (Vienne and Orbe) and eastern part (Zeugma) of the Roman Empire. The *domini* patrons likely were familiar with themes such as Achilles on Skyros and this knowledge will often have derived not only from works of literature (traditional drama), but especially from the repeated presentation of these themes by dancers of pantomime (Dunbabin 2004: 161-162). These mythological scenes are obviously in no sense rendered as they would have been represented in pantomime, with a single dancer performing a lot of roles; nor do any of them ever contain, in those media such as mosaic and painting, pantomime masks or identifiable costumes. It may be suggested that the artists or craftsmen of these scenes look beyond the actor and the performance, to portray the myth itself. We can observe this phenomenon above all in the mosaic from Zeugma: in this scene more than anywhere else the sacredness of the mythical tale predominates in a solemn atmosphere beyond the agitation of recognition.

The same subject was much appreciated in the Neronian age in *Latium et Campania*, that is the first *regio* of Italy at that time and dating back to the emperor Augustus. It is shown especially in a wall mosaic decorating the *cubiculum* (25) in the House of Apollo (Fig. 7) in Pompeii (Caso 2014: 543-546). In this context there is a greater synthesis: in fact we can see only Achilles in the centre, Deidamia to the left and Odysseus to the right. Moreover it seems that the scene is depicted outside the royal palace on a grassy lawn, according to a different version of the myth. It is possible to notice the impressionistic and quick rendering of this subject in the mosaic from Pompeii which is very different from the statuary rendering of the *emblema* from Zeugma. Above all we can observe Achilles revealed in more than a Pompeian fresco of Fourth Style, dating back to the Neronian age. These frescoes, now in the Pompeian painting collection on display in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN), come from the House of the Dioscuri (Fig. 8) (Bragantini 1993: 908, 910) and the House of Achilles (Bragantini 1999: 393), while two frescoes are *in situ*: the first in the House of the *Postumii* (Dickmann 1998: 513) and the second in the House of the *Vettii* (Sampaolo 1994: 566-567). It seems that these paintings,



Figure 7

Mosaic *in situ* with Achilles on Skyros: *cubiculum* (25) of the House of Apollo in Pompeii. Photo: According to Pappalardo - Ciardiello 2010: 202.

with the wall mosaic decorating the *cubiculum* (25) in the House of Apollo (Fig. 7), depend on a single model or prototype due to *Athenion* of Maroneia, whose peak dates back to 332-329 BC, according to Pliny the Elder (Plin. nat. XXXV, 134). I think that this archetype⁸, very popular because of the copies of Pompeian painting, characterized by an evident eclecticism, is independent of the prototype concerning the wonderful fresco, with the same subject of Achilles revealed, decorating the vault of the room (119) of the Neronian *Domus Aurea* (Fig. 9). In fact this painting involves the vigorous personality of an original painter (Fabullus? Cfr. Plin. nat. XXXV, 120)⁹ capable of innovation in the wake of Hellenistic tradition. In the centre the shape and the momentum of the Achilles body in heroic nudity (Fig. 10) evoke the naked bodies of some heroes depicted in the Hunt painting from the Royal Tomb of Philip II in Vergina (Saatsoglou-Paliadeli 2007: 50-52). We have to observe that the son of Peleus in the Neronian fresco, because of his statuary rendering and attitude, calls to mind Achilles revealed in the *emblema* from Zeugma, which is characterized by a similar composition. This mosaic is one of the finest concerning late antiquity and the myth of Achilles on Skyros, on our present knowledge (Dunbabin 2018: 359): it takes its place in the wake of Hellenistic tradition, a kind of perennial Hellenism, and as *emblema* decorating the floor of a private villa, this however reflects the official art style, that is the Severan art, still adhering to the canons of Hellenistic tradition, under the rule of emperor Caracalla. We can observe this adherence in the balance of the composition, with a rational structure, and in the sense of proportions, that is the same characteristics we can see in the

⁸ There was another archetype referring to Polygnotus of Thasos, according to Pausanias (Paus. I, 22, 6): Achilles, in a girl's clothes among the daughters of Lycomedes, was depicted without Odysseus in this painting. Odysseus, on the contrary, was present in Athenion's painting (Plin. nat. XXXV, 134), that is, in all likelihood, the model of the Pompeian frescoes. About the literary sources concerning the myth of Achilles on Skyros (Cypria, Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides, the *Achilleis* by Statius) see Ghedini 1996: 689.

⁹ Plin. nat. XXXV, 120: "... fuit et nuper gravis et severus idemque floridus ac timidus pictor Fabullus ..."

Figure 8

Fresco with Achilles on Skyros from the House of the Dioscuri in Pompeii (MANN, inv. 9110). Photo: According to Grasso 2009: 313.



Figure 9

Fresco with Achilles on Skyros from the *Domus Aurea* (119). Photo: According to Iacopi 1999: 60.





Figure 10
Detail of Achilles in heroic nudity in the fresco from the *Domus Aurea* (119). Photo: According to Iacopi 1999: 60.

magnificent fresco from the *Domus Aurea*, which is the peak of an iconographic and stylistic tradition reaching as far as Zeugma in the wake of official art through the ages. The outcomes are somewhat lower in another mosaic of the same subject. The panel has been found at Palmyra in the small peristyle of the House of Achilles and it is badly damaged but the names of several people are legible and the iconography is generally similar to the Zeugma mosaic; however there is not the same compositional harmony, whilst the *pathos* is greater, in a space with divergent bodies in action causing a dramatic *Spannung*; the date is probably slightly later, the mid third century CE (Delbarre et al. 2008: 36-37; Dunbabin 2018: 359).

The choice of the son of *Peleus* as the main subject in the *Domus Aurea* painting is not accidental. We know well the Neronian propensity for Achilles and consequently for Alexander the Great: this obeys a political and ideological program. Therefore it is possible to argue about *imitatio Achillis et Alexandri* by Nero (Caso 2014: 546-547). At the end of the 1st century the emperor Domitian also shared this imitation. Therefore Statius dedicated the *Achilleis*, his unfinished epic poem, to the emperor (95 CE).

The same *imitatio Achillis et Alexandri* concerns the emperor Caracalla, perhaps with greater awareness. It is well-known that his portraits are in accordance with the portraits of Alexander the Great (Felletti Maj 1959: 337), of which he had a boundless admiration, according to Dio Cassius and Herodian (Dio Cass. LXXVIII, 7-9, 1; Herodian. IV, 8, 1-2; Herodian. IV, 9, 3)¹⁰. Caracalla as Alexander visited and honored the tomb of Achilles, taking care to imitate the hero (Dio Cass. LXXVIII, 16,7; Herodian. IV, 8, 4-5), but above all he aspired to conquer the universal empire marching to the East on the traces of the Macedonian king. He also aspired to merge the East with the West (Herodian. IV, 10, 1-2). With this in mind Caracalla (216 CE) tried to marry the daughter of Artabanus V king of Parthia (Pagliaro 1929: 629), following the example of Alexander the Great (Galimberti 2019: 104-110, 149-154).

¹⁰ About the imitation of Alexander military exploits see also S. H. A. *Vita Ant. Car.* II, 1-2. Cfr. Ghedini 1984: 153.

The universal empire of Caracalla (Rinaldi Tufi 2001: 360-361) found a legal justification on the basis of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, also called the Edict of Caracalla, that was an edict issued on 11 July in 212 CE by the emperor Caracalla. It declared that all free men in the Roman Empire were to be given full Roman citizenship and that all free women in the Empire were to be given the same rights as Roman women, with the exception of the *dediticii* and freed slaves (Capocci 1930: 925-926; Galimberti 2019: 41-57). It must be recognized that in some respects the policy of Septimius and Caracalla was in fact a genuine confirmation of that of Hadrian. It is notorious that the legislation of the Empire was never more humane than in the age of the Severi. The great jurists of this time Papinian, Ulpian and Paulus were given a free hand to develop their favourite humanitarian ideas of equal law for everybody (Rostovtzeff 1926: 356, 368-369). It was a normal development, inaugurated by the civil wars and gradually worked out by one Roman emperor after another. Septimius took decisive steps in democratizing and provincializing the army and in giving a larger number of provincials access to administrative posts, but in principle he pursued a policy which had long ago been established by the rulers of the Empire. Caracalla continued resolutely the policy of his father, taking this to its extreme consequences. He consequently manifested an appreciable political sense beyond the strong shadows of his tyrannical and bloody personality, forever stained by crime of his brother Geta. In this perspective finds its place the Roman provinces mosaic from Zeugma, belonging to a villa or to a *thermae* building, that is to be referred, in my opinion, to the Caracalla age (211-217 CE) both from a stylistic and ideological point of view (Cfr. Massara 2018: 178, 180-181).¹¹

The emperor Caracalla, as a new Achilles and Alexander, had to love a lot the myth of Achilles on Skyros, because he saw, just like Nero, the triumph of warrior virtue and manhood in this mythical tale, which became even more important in the Severan age characterized by the military monarchy. Caracalla consequently had to promote this subject from an ideological perspective in the visual arts and probably in dramatic poetry. It is very likely that the *dominus* patron of the House of Poseidon was a senior army officer at Zeugma, occupying a key position in the Legio IV Scythica or Parthica. He expressed his wish to join the imperial propaganda encouraged by Caracalla, precisely through the choice of this particular subject, in the *emblema* of Achilles on Skyros, which evokes the ostentatious propensity of Caracalla for Achilles and consequently for Alexander the Great, that is for an ideal of immortal glory. Another mosaic is known at Zeugma, with the same subject of Achilles revealed (Fig. 11) (Ergeç et al. 2007: 212-215), but it is mostly damaged and of uncertain provenance (the House of Quintus? Dunbabin 2018: 359). This mosaic floor dates back to the end of the 2nd century CE and the beginning of the 3rd century CE and in all likelihood it refers to the age of Caracalla. Especially during the reign of this emperor, the Euphrates having become the tentative frontier line against the Parthians, Zeugma, the headquarters of the Legio IV Scythica or Parthica, realistically became the most important military base for the campaign against the Parthians (216-217). Perhaps Caracalla spent the last days of his life right in Zeugma. The *dominus* patron choice, about Achilles on Skyros from the House of Poseidon, calls to mind the similar choice referring to the *dominus* patron of the Roman Villa of La Olmeda at Pedrosa de la Vega. In this mosaic, decorating a *triclinium* and dating from the 4th century CE (Delbarre et al. 2008: 37, 39;

¹¹ D. Massara, against my view, dates back the Roman provinces mosaic to the age of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE) or to the reign of Commodus (180-192 CE). See Massara 2018: 178.



Figure 11
Mosaic floor with Achilles on Skyros from Zeugma. It is a panel of uncertain context.
Photo: According to Ergeç et al. 2007: 212.

Dunbabin 2018: 360) the son of Peleus stands in the centre of the composition like a titan, struggling to assert his identity as a male and a warrior against Deidamia and the other daughters of Lycomedes. In panel's rendering, with reminiscences of the Hellenistic baroque, the hero's victory over the enemy (female element) symbolizes the victory of the *kosmos* over the *chaos* and consequently the distinction and opposition of the sexes (Hes. theog., 116-153). On the iconological level it is possible to identify both a cosmological and a political-military significance, referring to the troubled historical context. In this time of crisis the *dominus* client by his choice expressed his adhesion to the state authority, that is to the emperor, who was the guarantor of order and stability (Neira Jiménez 2012: 97-98), possibly influencing the patrons options, in the same way as Caracalla about Zeugma.

In the *emblema* of Achilles on Skyros from the House of Poseidon (Fig. 2) the *dominus* client also expressed very well his aesthetic concepts and literary culture, in all likelihood concerning pantomime¹² and tragic poetry, with reference to the *Skyrioi* by Sophocles and the *Skyrioi* by Euripides. We can notice in this regard a possible reference to literary culture of Caracalla who quoted the Euripides lines by heart during banquets (Galimberti 2019: 17-28). We also know the remarkable literary and philosophical culture of his mother, Iulia Domna (Calza 1960: 922-923), who influenced the prince's education and was identified with Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great (Ghedini 1984: 152-153), sharing the son's ideology about this.

It is known the importance of water in the Roman villas at Zeugma. During the hot summers of the Euphrates valley, cooling in the villas was only possible by wetting the floors of the rooms (Ergeç et al. 2007: 34-35; Massara 2018: 180). The best option was laying the pebbles on the ground and obtaining a hard surface that would not be muddy. The system for this purpose was to make mosaics. Over time these floor mosaics, with the addition of fountains in the *peristylia* and *impluvia*, became a status symbol, especially because of the prevalence of fashions reflecting the Roman mentality, with particular reference to the western part of the empire. We have to remember about it the mosaics from the *impluvium* and the *peristylum* of the House of Poseidon, the first decorated with Achilles revealed (Fig. 3) and the second with the gods of

¹² The title of Achilles on Skyros was present as a pantomime on the list of works by Pseudo-Lucianus. See Neira Jiménez 2012: 98.

the sea: Poseidon, Okeanos and Tethys (Fig. 12); both rooms were equipped with a fountain. We also notice the mosaic, with the depiction of the river god Euphrates (Fig. 13) and water nymphs (Fig. 14), from the Euphrates Villa (Fig. 15) (Ergeç et al. 2007: 156-165): it is the floor mosaic of the shallow pool in the *impluvium* of the house.

Figure 12
Mosaic floor with Poseidon and marine deities in the *peristylum* of the Poseidon Villa on the excavation site. Photo: According to Ergeç et al. 2007: 111.



Figure 13
Mosaic panel, after restoration, with the river god Euphrates from the Euphrates Villa. Photo: According to Önal 2010: 48.



Figure 14
Detail of the water nymphs in the panel with the river god Euphrates. Photo: According to Önal 2010: 50.

There is to believe that, in the context concerning the *emblema* with Achilles on Skyros, moreover the water has a sacral value, with references to the mystery cult of Dionysus, that implies initiation ceremonies or rites of passage. On the iconographic and iconological level the Achilles bare foot is very interesting,



Figure 15
Detail of the river god Euphrates. Photo:
According to Önal 2010: 49.

with the matching shoe (*calceus*) (Heuzey 1890: 819; Goette 1988: 401-406) represented near Odysseus in the foreground. In fact Achilles revealed celebrates a passage rite, abandoning women's clothes and taking up arms (Brelich 1955-1957: 478-484). We have to remember about this two mosaics, dating from the 4th century CE: the first one from Tipasa and the second from Kourion (Balty 2013: 123-127). We can observe in both panels, characterized by the myth of Achilles on Skyros, the same detail, that is the sandal left in the foreground. The removed *calceus* calls to mind the abandoned sandal of Dionysus (Fig. 16) in the Pompeian fresco decorating the *oecus* (5) of the Villa of the Mysteries



Figure 16
The Dionysus *calceus* removed in the fresco
decorating the *oecus* (5) of the Villa of the
Mysteries in Pompeii. Photo: According to
Veyne 2016: 114.

(Veyne 2016: 113-116) and celebrating the wedding of Dionysus and Ariadne as a passage rite. Caracalla himself was very careful about the symbolic and sacral value of water, with special regard to Asclepius cult. It is known that Caracalla felt a great veneration for Asclepius (Galimberti 2019: 127-128), because of his poor health, and likely he had to go to natural springs around Zeugma (Abadie-Reynal 2008: 104)¹³, perhaps in the imminence of his brutal death at the hands of Opellius Macrinus, during the military campaign against the Parthians.

Beyond Asclepius, who is not directly present in the mosaics decorating the House of Poseidon, the predominant divinity is Dionysus in this decoration (Ergeç et al. 2007: 104-109, 128-131, 142-145), because the god is almost omnipresent. We have to highlight above all the panel with Dionysos, Skyrtos and Telete (Ergeç et al. 2007: 132-135), the daughter of Dionysus and especially the goddess who presided the Bacchic orgies, because she was destined by Dionysus to become a follower of himself. She was associated with nighttime festivities and ritual dances in honor of Dionysus, therefore the goddess has been interpreted as a *daimon* of initiation into the Bacchic rites. The choice of this subject probably is a profession of faith on the part of the *dominus* patron who commissioned it, as allusion to initiation and the mysteries play (Dunbabin 2008: 193). It is possible to observe about Telete the return of the feminine element in a context dominated and governed by Dionysus, the deity of opposite principles, ambiguous par excellence and giver of the lifeblood, that is the *ganos*. We have to remember, in connection with this, the fondness of Caracalla for Achilles, Alexander the Great and ultimately for Dionysus, the god who knows no bounds in his unstoppable march to the conquest of the East, just like in Caracalla's ambitions, shared once again by the *dominus* patron.

Concluding Thoughts

The unknown *dominus* client of the House of Poseidon had to be a very wealthy owner, because of the size and luxury of his villa, the most important on the slopes of the Belkis Tepe. Moreover he had to be a senior army officer belonging to the Legio IV Scythica or Parthica, which had been in place for a long time at Zeugma. The rich and powerful owner was most likely in the service of Caracalla, therefore he knew the emperor very well, whose propaganda, political and military intentions he shared, playing a fundamental role under the military monarchy of Caracalla, especially when Zeugma became the main base and the outpost of military operations against the Parthians (216-217). The making of the mosaic depicting Achilles on Skyros likely dates back to the reign of Caracalla (211-217), just before the military expedition against the Parthians. This *emblema* with Achilles revealed really symbolizes the exaltation of courage and virility and above all the victory of the *kosmos*, that is the emperor, over disorder and enemies, that is the *chaos*; it also evokes the recognition of the opposite sexes and the control of the masculine element (Achilles) over the feminine one (Deidamia and the other daughters of king Lycomedes) (cfr. the panel from the Roman Villa of La Olmeda at Pedrosa de La Vega). We have to remember in this regard the Caracalla's fondness both for Achilles and Alexander the Great and ultimately for Dionysus, the conqueror of the Orient, as Achilles and Alexander the Great, who became the main role models for the emperor before the expedition against the Parthians. The *dominus* patron shared both the ideological and aesthetic propaganda of Caracalla, securing his political

¹³ There are now two natural springs located northwest of Belkis-Zeugma; these springs must have fed the Roman villas of Zeugma.

and military support. On the iconological and aesthetic level he accomplished it through the precise choice of the myth of Achilles on Skyros, as another *dominus* client at Zeugma (the owner of the House of Quintus?) did in the same historical context.

The ideological and political manipulation of images by the emperor, about the myth of Achilles on Skyros, started in the age of Nero, who shared the same fondness both for Achilles and Alexander the Great (cfr. the magnificent fresco from the *Domus Aurea* and the mosaic and the frescoes from Pompeii) with Domitian and Caracalla. The Neronian fresco from the *Domus Aurea*, on a stylistic and compositional level, was the starting point of an artistic model, which through time reached Zeugma in the age of Caracalla. This happened in the wake of the Hellenistic tradition, especially evident in the mosaic from the House of Poseidon, superior in the rendering to other panels referring to the same subject in late antiquity (cfr. above all the panel from Palmyra).

The *dominus* patron of the House of Poseidon, who commissioned the *emblema* with Achilles revealed, shared a similar passion for dramatic poetry (Sophocles, Euripides) with Caracalla, whose erudition especially on Greek literature is known. In fact in this mosaic the scene takes place on a stage in a hall which evokes a theatre (*pulpitum* and *scaenae frons*), probably referring to the Skyrioi by Euripides or a pantomime. There are two mosaics with Achilles revealed, dating back to the end of the 2nd century CE, the first one from Vienne and the second from Orbe, characterized also in this case by an evident theatrical architecture.

Moreover the evocation of a passage rite is very interesting in this mosaic from Zeugma (cfr. the *calceus* removed, the abandonment of feminine clothing on hero's part, the presence of water or lifeblood, that is the Dionysian *ganos*). We have to remember, about the sandal left in the foreground, two panels, with Achilles on Skyros, dating back to the 4th century CE, the first one from Tipasa and the second from Kourion. But above all we have to remember the *calceus* removed of Dionysus in the Pompeian fresco decorating the *oecus* (5) of the Villa of the Mysteries. The Dionysian presence is once again dominant in the mosaics of the House of Poseidon at Zeugma, evoking the Caracalla's fondness, shared by the *dominus* patron, both for Achilles and Alexander the Great, who set out to conquer the East, carried away by the Dionysian enthusiasm, just like Caracalla on the eve of the military expedition against the Parthians.

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