

# About the Symbolism and Message of the Mosaic on the Floor of the Refectory Of The Episcopal Residence

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Among the many other mosaics in Heraclea, the mosaic on the floor of the room with the apse, the so called refectory of the Episcopal residence, dated from the second half of the VI Century, is also very impressive. This room, which covers a surface of around 100 m<sup>2</sup>, has a rectangular section which on the east side ends with an apse - semicircular on the inside and rectangular on the outside.



The mosaic in the apse is geometrical and consists of a semicircular zone with a so called "fish bone" decoration in a frame shaped as a rope, while the aisle mosaic is figural. The composition in the aisle consists of a rectangular zone and three frame zones. The rectangular zone is divided into four rectangular parts, which are also divided.

This time the issue of our presentation is not the exploration of the most famous mosaic presentations of the deer, doe, lion, bull, cheetah, fish, dolphin but of those less known but none the less challenging. It is a general conclusion that in the seemingly chaotic presentation of this composition there is in fact a perfect order. Nothing is accidental. Observing field by field, turning over and reading each composition of the Christian Universe, we conclude that the field pairs gradually move forward and upward. What is at the beginning is also at the end, and vice versa. The four middle fields point out the earthly disorder.

In three fields (at the beginning and at the end) of this mosaic the source of life, or immortality, or actually the source of youth if you prefer, is symbolically presented by the fountain among the pair of fawns, between a goose and peacock, between a bear and bull and two ducks. These presentations are quite often compared to the blood and water which spouted from Christ's wounds, which is said that Joseph of Arimathea collected in the Holy Grail. In this, we would say a composition of markedly naive art, special attention is drawn by the presentation of a winged monster - a dragon (among three dolphins, seven fishes, two ducks and two geese. The dragon, with its mouth wide open is pouncing on the fish. This dragon belongs to the so called mixed creatures: it has a goat's head, lion's body and paws, eagle's wings, elongated neck and tail like a snake, and a tripartite tail end like a dolphin. In the historic presentation the dragon mainly appears as a guardian of the hidden treasures, or a symbol of evil and of devilish endeavors. The dragon as a demonic symbol is identified with the snake. This identity is confirmed in Psalm No. 73.14. The crushed dragon heads and exterminated snakes represent Christ's victory over evil. The presentation of dragons is quite often applied in icon painting. Besides the well-known presentation of St. Michael and St. George it is worth mentioning the presentation of Christ crushing dragons under his feet. In the context of the above mentioned, in one of the fields of the northern half, the Psalm No. 73.13 is also symbolized: "Mine is a King who reigned before time was; here on earth he was the means to bring deliverance, to crush the power of the monster beneath its water". According to the book of the Prophet Isaiah (27.1) it is written "Hard and heavy and strong that sword is which the Lord carries; shall he not wreak his vengeance, in due time, upon the monstrous serpent that bars the gate, and the monstrous serpent coils up yonder; shall he not deal death to the great beast of the sea." Actually the Dragon epitomizes all evil which fights God, while the sea is the symbol of the gathering place of the dark creatures and base forces and it is only God's power which fights and beats them. Immediately opposite the northern half the presentation of the sea world continues.

The duck with spread wings in the middle of this sea world, standing with an impressive heraldic posture, is nothing other than a representation of the life energy- the harmony offered by Christianity. The same presentation is engraved on the cantharos of the first field on the southern half of the dining room. In two parallel fields (on the third row) of this mosaic there are two almost identical scenes of animals that hound and that are hounded. It is interesting to mention that the animals which are hounded belong to the so-called group of impure animals - actually animals which are not for eating. At the same time, according to the Third book of Moses (11, 5, 6, 7) the rabbit and the boar are branded as impure animals because they do not have a divided hoof or a deep cleft between two parts of the hoof (rabbit) and they do not ruminate (boar). The symbolic ambivalence of the rabbit in this composition is accented in the scene where it eats the grapes from the vine, which is a symbol of heavenly joy and Eucharist, of the blessed soul enjoying the fruits of heaven.

The wild boar is presented in the northern half of the dining room, in the third field. The wild boar is presented in the northern half of the dining room, in the third field. The boar is almost always a symbol of greed. Generally the boar is a symbol of the dark aspirations of all forms of nescience, greed, gluttony, and egoism. In connection with this worth we should not forget the evangelic parabola of pearls thrown before the boar (Matthew 7.6) an image of spiritual truths revealed to those who are not worthy of accepting them nor capable of comprehending them. As we already mentioned, in this composition animals which hound

and which are hounded are presented. The hounding animal in this case is the dog. Without doubt, there is no mythology in which the dog is not connected to death, hell, the underworld and invisible kingdoms.

In the diapason - context of the numerous presentations of the peripheral frame in 20 octagonal fields, interconnected with a cross shaped meander, between the scenes of fishes, dolphins, swamp birds, a partridge, a rabbit eating grapes and the dog, there is the presentation, which especially attracts our attention, of the cock, standing calmly and smelling a rose. This is a scene of a live cock which could not resist smelling the red rose, and bent down. The rose in the Christian icon painting is a goblet in which Christ's blood is preserved, actually it is a symbol of Christ's wounds, and the cock is the symbol of pride (it is also a positive symbol). Because of its authenticity and definition, this is considered one of the most successful presentations in this particular mosaic. An eternal statement is offered in its message: in front of God even the most proud bow in order to be part of God's nature.

One of the scenes of the mosaic in the dining room of the Episcopal Residence with the most narrative expression is the presentation of the bear and the bull in the north field next to God's spring. The bear is presented in a calm posture, beside its favorite fruit - the pear, and the little duck is unworriedly walking on its back. This is a picture of a previous presentation, one that can not be seen but it can be felt strongly. The irritated posture of the bear, because of its wild and rough nature is due most probably to the presence of the bull, which is taking a step back and has come not to do battle but to quench his thirst. We strongly feel the message that at the source of life there is room for every one, all that are thirsty drink from its water. All this is a true illustration of the Prophet Isaiah's book (11,7,9) (the part entitled "The Messiah and His Kingdom of Peace" which brings hope that there is room for every one in Heaven: "Cattle and bears all at pasture, their young ones lying down together, the lion eating straw like the ox. All over this mountain, my sanctuary, no hurt shall be done, no life taken. Deep as the waters that hide the sea-floor, knowledge of the Lord overspreading the world!"). Suddenly in the scenes of a pair of fawns in the first row, a pair of geese in the middle and a pair of peacocks by the source of life presented in the southern field of the dining room, the troubling scenes symbolizing the earthly chaos are gradually lost amid the accented composure of this composition. In fact with the symbolism of the Holy Kingdom we encircle this mosaic assemble, framed by the plaits of God's rope (Job 38, 4, 5).

While the mosaic of the narthex of the Great Basilica is a true masterpiece of the art of Early Christianity, the mosaic of the dining room of the Episcopal Residence, regarding its artistic value, is considered an average production of the floor mosaics of the VI Century. However, its significance does not lie in the artistic value but in its symbolism and the iconography arising from that symbolism which here is very strong and eloquent. Obviously the figural motifs, which here seem to be abstract and unreal, do not serve the aim of presenting but of marking and communicating. This mosaic is actually a visual testimony that all of us stand on the standing point where the present once stood.

At the end, it is worth concluding that the symbol as a universal language is the most effective means of communication between the centuries. We are convinced that it is only through discerning the meaning of the symbols of a people that we can come to essential

comprehension of its spirit, and illumination of the depths of its heart. All this can be accomplished only through perception.













