Revue d'Histoire Méditerranéenne. Vol. 8, n° 02. Juin 2026, p. 24 - 49

P-ISSN: 2716-764X, E-ISSN: 2716-7747

Reçu le : 28 – 03 - 2026	Accepté le : 13 – 06 - 2026	Publié le : 30 – 06 - 2026

Roman mosaics in Algeria and Portugal: Mediterranean similarities and divergences

Mosaïques romaines en Algérie et au Portugal: Convergences et divergences méditerranéennes

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Abstract:

The expansion of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the *Pax Romana* unified the regions of the *Mare Nostrum* under a single political authority, fostering a civic model based on the growth of *civitates*. This urbanization catalyst spurred unprecedented architectural development, driving a pervasive boom in mosaic decoration.

From the second century CE through Late Antiquity, mosaic became a primary decorative element across various architectural spaces, particularly within private contexts, facilitating the widespread dissemination of iconographic themes and geometric patterns in the Roman world.

Positioned historically as a 'commercial and cultural crossroads', modern-day Algeria and Portugal, formerly encompassing the Roman provinces of Mauretania, Numidia, Western *Proconsularis*, and *Lusitania*, share a rich mosaic heritage that reflects a common Mediterranean *koinê* and distinct regional influences.

To explore this shared heritage, this study conducts an iconographic and comparative analysis of four mythological themes common to both countries, using mosaics from the ancient Roman provinces of modern-day Algeria and Portugal. This approach allows us to examine how these recurring themes were interpreted differently, highlighting their integration into architectural spaces and revealing regional variations.

To address these issues, our paper investigates the iconographic connections between Algerian and Portuguese mosaics, identifying their shared attributes and regional specificities. It examines the architectural contexts of these pavements and evaluates the circulation and transmission of specific mosaic models between the North African and Lusitanian provinces. Resolving these core inquiries relies on a formalized comparative methodology. This framework comprises four consecutive analytical phases: a historiographical and literature review, a targeted iconographic and typological analysis, a cross-regional data synthesis, and an architectural contextualization.

By examining the technical and artistic execution of the selected mosaics, this paper indicates that the greatest concentration of the pavements discussed, from Algeria and Portugal, occurred within domestic-private spatial organization. Our comparative framework substantiates a high degree of artistic homogeneity between the Ancient Roman provinces of Algeria and Portugal, both in mythological themes and in compositional methodologies.

Ultimately, the iconographic and stylistic analysis reveals that despite a shared artistic repertoire, regional workshop practices in Ancient Algeria and Portugal retain distinct originalities, treating identical themes, as clearly attested by the North African scheme of the Dionysian triumph found in Hispania with local divergences, through unique, localized styles and applications.

Key words: Mosaic-Architectural context-Algeria/Portugal- Iconography

Le résumé

Avec l'émergence de l'empire romain, toutes les régions romanisées de cet espace maritime commun qu'est la *Mare Nostrum,* furent soumises à un même pouvoir politique et une même civilisation sous la bannière de la *Pax Romana*. Cet empire développa alors un modèle civique romain basé sur l'essor des *civitates*, ce qui entraîna un considérable essor de l'urbanisation, de l'architecture et donc du décor en mosaïque.

Dans ce monde romain, la généralisation de l'art musival entre le deuxième siècle et la période tardo-antique pour le décor d, espaces architecturaux varies, notamment domestiques, a grandement favorise la circulation transrégionale de répertoires ornementaux et de schémas de composition diversifiés.

C'est dans cet esprit « de carrefour commercial et culturel depuis l'Antiquité » que nous proposons cette approche qui rassemble deux pays (l'Algérie et le Portugal) réunis à l'époque antique sous l'égide de l'empire romain. Les décors en mosaïques de ces deux pays reflètent des influences culturelles et artistiques variées, parfois communes et d'autres fois différentes.

Pour explorer les jalons de ce patrimoine en décor mosaïqué indivis, la présente recherche examine, sous le prisme de l'iconographie comparée, quatre thèmes mythologiques attestes dans les deux espaces géographiques. L'examen de ces mosaïques, exhumées dans les anciennes provinces romaines d'Algérie et du Portugal, nous permet de cartographier les nuances exégétiques de répertoires pourtant communs, mettant ainsi en exergue leur contextualisation architecturale et leurs idiosyncrasies régionales.

Afin de répondre à ces interrogations, notre article examine les affinités iconographiques entre les mosaïques algériennes et portugaises sélectionnées, en dégageant leurs convergences stylistiques et leurs particularismes régionaux. L'étude interroge le contexte architectural de ces revêtements de sol en mosaïque tout en évaluant les phénomènes de transfert et de circulation de modèles spécifiques entre les provinces Nord Africaines et Lusitaniennes.

L'élucidation de ces problématiques nodales repose sur un protocole comparatif formalisé, structuré en quatre phases analytiques successives : un bilan historiographique et bibliographique, une analyse iconographique et typologique, une synthèse transrégionale des données, et enfin, une contextualisation architectonique.

En définitive, l'examen iconographique et stylistique de notre *corpus* démontre que, par-delà la possession d'un répertoire artistique commun, les ateliers régionaux de l'Algérie antique et du Portugal ont préservé une singulière autonomie plastique. L'interprétation de thèmes identiques - à l'instar du schéma Nord-Africain du Triomphe Dionysiaque, dont la diffusion en Hispanie, s'accompagne de divergences locales- s'effectue à travers des idiomes stylistiques uniques et des modes d'application propres à chaque aire géographique.

Mots clefs : Mosaïque- Contexte architectural-Algérie/Portugal-Iconographie

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Introduction:

The concept of the "Mediterranean", or more specifically the "Mediterranean basin", has long been the subject of debate and reflection on the uniqueness of this maritime region and the territories washed by this sea of passage, travel, and trade.

As the Roman Empire rose to power, all the regions of the Mare Nostrum that had been romanized came under the same political authority and shared civilization, united under the banner of the Pax Romana. This empire then developed a Roman civic model based on the growth of civitates, resulting in a tremendous boom in urbanization, architecture, and, consequently, mosaic decoration.

Indeed, the widespread use of mosaic decoration for the adornment of various architectural spaces, particularly private ones, from the second century onward through the late period, led to the circulation of countless themes and patterns, including geometrical compositions, floral motifs, and figurative scenes, throughout the Roman world. Although we can observe a common koine in the

mosaics unearthed in the various provinces of the empire, each province, regional area, and even each mosaic shows evidence of originality through a different way of treating the same theme or motif.

Drawing on the ancient history of this area as a 'commercial and cultural crossroads,' we present this reflection, which brings together the present-day countries of Algeria and Portugal, both of which were united under Roman rule. The two countries share a rich Roman history, and their mosaic designs reflect a variety of cultural and artistic influences, some shared and others distinct.

We have selected four mythological themes shared by both countries, found in mosaics from various Roman provinces, including Mauretania, Numidia, and Western Proconsular in Algeria, and Lusitania in Portugal. No further themes could be included due to the strict limits imposed by the journal's publication rules. We sought out common and recurring themes, as well as their relationship with the architectural contexts and the specific characteristics of their use in each province.

We have approached this issue by centering our thinking around the following questions:

-Is there any connection between the decorative repertoire of Algerian and Portuguese mosaics?

- What common features and distinctive characteristics do the mosaics in the two countries have?
- From which contexts do the majority of the Algerian and Portuguese pavements selected come?
- Were some mosaic models in circulation between the African and Lusitanian provinces?

Concerning the Roman province *Lusitania*, particularly *in the* Late Antiquity period, authors such as Lancha and Oliveira have highlighted the influence of North African mosaics on those from north and southern Portugal in their works (Lancha & André, 2000; Lancha & Oliveira, 2013). However, apart from these publications, which gave an important approach to the subject, there is a distinct lack of comprehensive or detailed comparative discussions on this axis, save for sporadic analytical remarks on specific pavements by Dunbabin (Dunbabin, 1978), Daszewski (Daszewski, 1977), and Ferdi (Ferdi, 2005).

To address these core questions, a formalized comparative methodology was developed, structured into four consecutive analytical phases:

- **Historiographical and Literature Review**: A comprehensive examination of the geographic and historical literature concerning both nations in antiquity, utilizing specialized publications on mosaic decoration across the western side of the Iberian Peninsula and the North African provinces (in modern-day Algeria) alongside established mosaic *corpora*.
- **Targeted Iconographic and Typological Analysis**: A systematic documentation and classification of the specific decorative repertoires, themes, and motifs featured on the selected mosaics from both countries.
- **Cross-Regional Data Synthesis**: A comparative analysis evaluating the collected iconographic data against variables such as geographic location, chronology, and workshop patterns to trace potential model circulations.
- **Architectural Contextualization**: An evaluation mapping the technical and artistic characteristics of the mosaics against their original functional spaces, distinguishing between urban *domus* and rural *villae* organizations.

This study compares Roman mosaics from Algeria and Portugal that share identical iconography. By compiling a synchronized dataset from both countries, our primary aim is to conduct a side-by-side visual and contextual analysis. This approach demonstrates how these common themes were interpreted differently, highlighting regional variations not only among different Roman provinces but also within the internal artistic traditions of each country.

When examining the Roman mosaics of Portugal, it is important to note that they are significantly fewer in number than those found in Algeria. This disparity stems not only from the substantial geographical difference between the two countries, but also from the historical vulnerability of Portuguese mosaics. In both urban and rural contexts, a large proportion of these

pavements were lost to a process of "cultural autophagy" driven by the successive occupations of the territory.

1. Geohistorical Framework and Connectivity:

To fully understand the artistic convergences between these two regions, it is necessary to establish the geohistorical framework that connects them. Although Portugal is situated on the western edge of the Iberian Peninsula and bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, this ocean connects directly to the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar. This maritime link has historically played a significant role in cultural and artistic exchanges between Southern Iberia and North Africa, including modern-day Algeria and Portugal. Consequently, while Portugal lacks direct Mediterranean shores, it lies inherently on the western periphery of the Mediterranean world, functioning as both an Atlantic and a Mediterranean land. As the internationally renowned Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro clearly states, the Portuguese regions south of the Douro River constitute the 'Mediterranean part 'of Portugal (Ribeiro,1987: 15).

The influence of North African civilisations is notably striking in this part of Portugal and continues to this day. It is obvious that this issue has been, also, well identified by two Portuguese archaeologists and historians Claudio Torres and Santiago Macias: « On both sides of the Mediterranean, in Southern Europe and the Maghreb, there is clear evidence of a single, ancient civilization, characterized by countless signs of continuity" and «The whole of Andalusia, particularly the *Gharb* region with its thriving coastal trade, is inextricably linked to the lands on the other side of the sea. From prehistoric times through to the Caliphate of Cordoba, this Maghreb *'Algarve'* has always been connected to Iberia, including the Roman and Visigothic periods. Not only has civilisation remained the same on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, but the possibility of a linguistic affinity between the two regions cannot be ruled out. "(Torres & Marcias, 1995: 153)

Given our deliberate decision to compare some figurative mosaics of Algeria with those of Portugal, we consider it important to provide these geographical and historical details, as Portugal was very much part of the Roman *Mare Nostrum*, despite its shores not being washed by it. We shall therefore see that the period corresponding to the development of the art of mosaic, both in Algeria and in Portugal, coincided with the spread of the Roman culture and the process of romanization across the Mediterranean region from the second to the fifth century. Hence, we will explore how artistic and cultural influences have spread and adapted through the Mediterranean area by examining a selection of decorative mosaic patterns common to both countries.

2. Labyrinth mosaics:

Countless images representing labyrinths can be seen over time. Mythical stories were preserved in the human imaginary, giving rise to the narratives of Homer, Apollodorus, and Vergil...

In mosaics from the Roman world, the Labyrinth is represented in the Western Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. As a symbol in pagan culture, the representation of the Labyrinth was later appropriated by Christianity, «uniting geographically distant cultures and territories, travelling through time and space, breaking down all borders and distances.» (Muscolino & Pessoa, 2019: 242). In different contexts, the struggle between **Theseus and the Minotaur**, often depicted inside or outside labyrinths, can serve as an example for humans: the *uirtus* of the hero defeating the evil.

Ultimately, the figuration of the Labyrinth is the path of Man's life in this world, with crossroads and dead ends, but also with the exits he can find, in the sense of overcoming his own self.

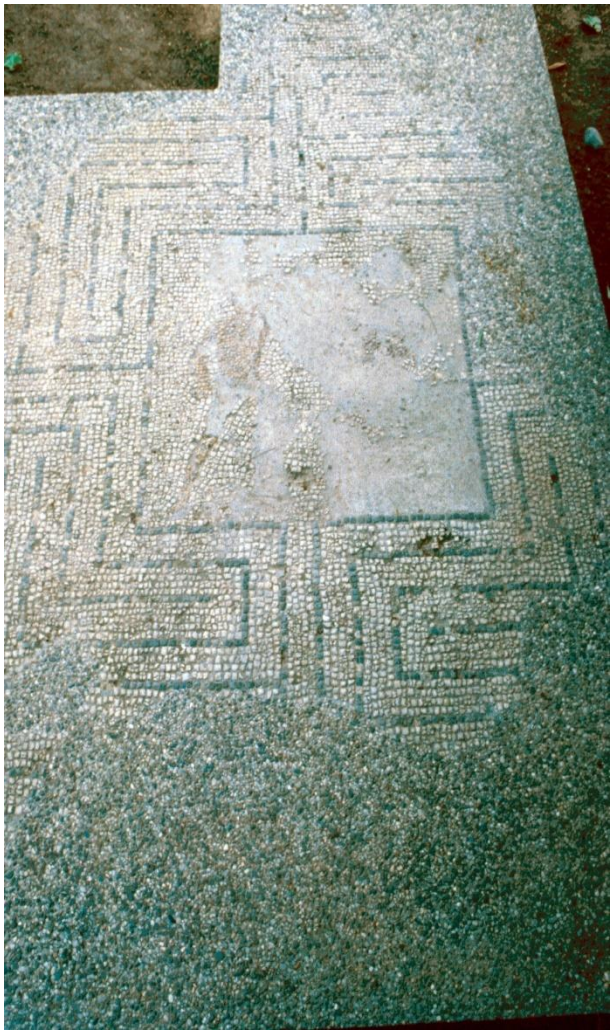
a. Algeria :

Concerning Roman mosaics from modern-day Algerian territory, we know four pavements[1] with the representation of the labyrinth:

One from **Cherchell (*Caesarea*)** (Fig. 1), the ancient capital of Caesarean Mauretania, where it adorned the entrance hall *vestibulum*, one of the city's largest peristyle houses (Leveau,1982: 136). The pavement, on display at the Museum of Cherchell in the mosaic park, depicts a square meander with return in four registers, such as the *Thuburbo Majus* model in Tunisia (Balmelle et Al, 2002: 325e, Alexander, Ben Abed et Al, 1980: 18A, pl 35) with a central panel showing **Theseus fighting the Minotaur**, measuring 1,80m on each side. The hero is presented standing, facing right and looking at his opponent, in a scene reminiscent of the Cyrene pavement in Libya (Mingazzini, 1966: 35-36). It has been dated to the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD (Daszewski, 1977:102. Ferdi, 2005: 150).

Figure 1.

Labyrinth of Caesarea



Source: Copyright NMC.

[1] The term **Mosaic** defines the decorative *medium* (*tesserae* embedded in mortar), whereas **Pavement** designates the architectural function as a floor, as opposed to wall (parietal) or vault mosaic.

The second mosaic from the same province was part of a vast composition measuring 33 by 14m overall (Berbrugger, 1856: 428), it was originally placed near the entrance of the nave of the Basilica of *St Reparatus* at **Chlef (*Castellum Tingitanum*)** located 179 km west of Cherchell. In this second example (Fig.2), the pavement features a word square panel that is not figurative but epigraphic, containing the words" *Sancta Ecclesia*" readable in multiple directions. Believers could easily understand this wordplay right from the entrance, and it therefore represented the ultimate goal to be achieved. This is one of the most significant early Christian mosaics (324 AD) in North Africa and the oldest Christianized adaptation of the Labyrinth theme. This "Christian" labyrinth «invites the believer to place their trust in the one path that will enable them to reach God and attain salvation." (Malek et Al, 2022: 58)

Figure 2.

Labyrinth of Castellum Tingitanum-Chlef.



Source: (Malek, 2022: 58)

One of the three remaining pavements that continue the pagan theme of the labyrinth is located in the Proconsular province, at Annaba- Hippone[2] (*Hippo-Regius*), where it decorated the *frigidarium* of the private baths in a luxurious house of the city (Marec, 1950: 101). It forms a rectangular labyrinth of four sections (6m x 5m) with Ariadne's yarn ending at a ball, an ashlar wall, a gate, and crenellations. In the panel at the center, only a bust of the mythical Minotaur, in black and white (Fig.3) (Balmelle et Al, 2002: 326a).

[2] The mosaic is *in situ*

Figure 3.
Labyrinth of Hippone



Source : (Marec 1950 : fig 54.)

The last two mosaics come from *Mauretania Caesariensis*: The public baths in the South-West of **Dellys (*Rusuccuru*)** were partially excavated in 1959, at which time a damaged pavement, dated to the 3rd-4th centuries, was revealed in the *frigidarium*. This labyrinth was simple, divided into four spiral-shaped sections and set against a geometric carpet pattern. The heart featured the scene of the battle between Theseus and the Minotaur (Zinai, 2014: pl XX fig 6).

Lastly, in the thermal baths in south-east **Tamenfoust (*Rusguniae*)** located 27km east of Algiers, a mosaic adorned the *frigidarium* (during the 3rd century)
(Zinai, 2014: 19 pl XXIV). The available description refers to a pseudo-labyrinth divided into 8 sectors, at the center stood a fruit tree instead of the mythical fight between Theseus and the Minotaur, as seen before. This new motif has been interpreted by Daszweski as a symbol of the difficulties of life, embodied by the winding paths of the meander leading to the desired end goal (Daszewski, 1977: 63).

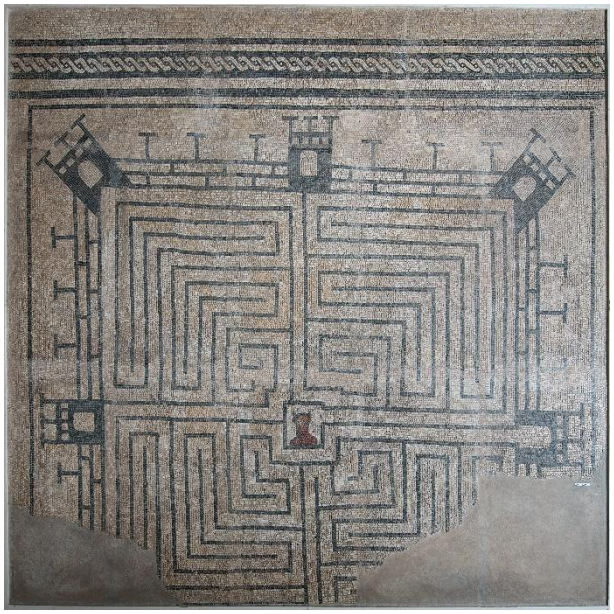
b. Portugal :

In Portugal, there are two mosaics from **Conimbriga** (*Conuentus Scallabitanus*), one *in situ* on the west wing of the *peristylum* of the "House of Fountains", and another, found in 1899 and displayed in the National Museum of Conimbriga. Another Labyrinth comes from the Torre de Palma *Villa* (*Conuentus Pacensis*).

The first pavement, on display in the museum (Oleiro, 1973: plate VI) (Fig.4), comes from the intramural area of the city. Although destroyed on one side, it is designed in an almost square shape measuring 3.40 m x 3.10 m, with the side of the central square featuring the Minotaur figure. The pavement presents four sections with a leftward curve to the center, delimited by an ashlar wall of two superimposed courses, one tower in each corner and one in the middle of each side, with four

rectangular windows and a round-arched doorway. The towers are crowned by three T-shaped merlons. The theme of the wall was particularly used by Roman artists, appearing in all provinces of the Empire, from the western ones to those of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa (Oleiro, 1973: 47-52). **The closest parallel found for this labyrinth is the one featured at Hippone, discussed above** (Oleiro, 1973: 57-58).

Figure 4.
Labyrinth. Conimbriga – National Museum Conimbriga



Source: Pessoa. Rodrigo, 2000: 16, n.3

The labyrinth, *in situ,* in the west wing of the peristyle of the "House of Fountains" of Conímbriga (Oleiro, 1992: 80-81, Pl. 25) (Fig.5) is located opposite the *uestibulum,* at the main entrance of the great *Domus.* It is quadrangular with four sections, developing leftward, outlined by black *tesserae* on a white background. The placement of this labyrinth in the west wing of the large peristyle, which corresponds to a social area of the *domus,* reinforces its prophylactic/apotropaic function. Curiously, the monster, with its eyes wide open, is facing inwards, either by chance or intentionally. The proposed dating for this labyrinth is the third quarter of the 3rd century
(Oleiro, 1992: 81).

Figure 5.
Labyrinth. Conimbriga – "House of Fountains", in situ.



Source: Oleiro, 1992: Pl.25.

The labyrinth theme also appears represented in the panel at the top of the mosaic that covered one of the largest rooms of the *Villa* of **Torre de Palma**, **Monforte** (*V. infra-Section* 3.2, the *Bacchic thiasos***)**.

Regarding the scenographic representation of the labyrinth, suggested only by a tower in the background, this representation seems to have no parallels in other mosaics dealing with the same theme. The figurative panel (Fig.6) is a regular square (1.25 m x 1.25 m), showing, in the foreground, the full-length figures of Theseus and the Minotaur, of considerable size at the moment when the hero subdues the monster, grabbing it by one of its horns and raising a *pedum* or a club to the height of its head, intending to deliver a final blow. The monster, with one knee on the ground, gripping Theseus's left leg with one hand in a last attempt to rise, has its head turned away from the hero, in an attitude of near submission.

For the dating of the mosaic, Lancha places it «in a pivotal period of History, situated precisely at the beginning of the 4th century, at the moment when a pagan elite exalts the values of classical culture, in the face of the new Christian power." (Lancha & Andre, 2000: 179-183; 212).

Figure 6.
Labyrinth of Torre di Palma.



Source : (Lancha & Andre, 2000 : Pl LXX, B.)

3. The Indian Triumph of Bacchus:

«Bacchus spent three years on his expedition to India and returned to Beotia laden with rich spoil. He was the first to receive the honor of the triumph, entering the city riding an Indian elephant."(Diodorus Siculus, Bib Hist: IV, 3). «You conquered the East as far as dark-skinned India, where the distant Ganges flows. (…) Your yoke weighs heavily on the necks of the pair of lynxes, resplendent in their colourful harnesses. Bacchantes and satyrs follow you along with the drunken old man who steadies his staggering body with his staff and can barely hold himself upright on the hunched back of the small donkey. Wherever you go, you hear the clamour of young women, and the cries of the women, the sound of tambourines struck by the palms of their hands, the hollow bronzes gongs, and the long boxwood flutes." (Ovide, Met: 19-20, 24-30) The theme of the Indian triumph in mosaic refers to the mythical return of the god Dionysus-Bacchus from his expedition to India. Its occurrence in mosaics, both from the West and the East, attests to the popularity of the god throughout the Roman Empire.

a. Algeria:

Among the African mosaics featuring the Dionysian triumph as the main subject, three originate from Algeria, or more precisely, from Mauretania province.

The first pavement, which features all the distinctive elements of an Indian triumph, is a unique design (Fig.7a-7b), without precedent anywhere in Africa[3], executed in a refined classical style, which was discovered in 1970 in the *triclinium* of a lavish *domus* at **Setif (*Sitifis)*** in the ancient province of *Mauretania Sitifensis.* A geometric carpet formed the setting for the Dionysian scene, which adorned a large triclinium measuring 8.90 by 6.20 metres in total. The "Triumph panel" is long and narrow (4.38 by 1.57m) and begins with a rich, distinctive border of acanthus scrolls in bloom, emerging from bearded, plant-like masks that frame scenes of Centauromachies (Blanchard-Lemée, 2005: 294-295). These bearded masks, rare in North Africa, were common on the East at Zeugma (Darmon, 2005: fig15a).

[3] This composition stands out for two primary reasons: the structural coherence of the Triclinium's iconographic program, particularly for the thematic alignment with the panel depicting the Calydonian boar hunt, located at the entrance, and the exceptional width of its decorative border featuring a rich acanthus scrollwork interwoven with Centauromachies scenes and foliate masks (Blanchard-Lemée, 2005: 299 and Darmon, 2011: fig 17).

Figure 7a:
Indian triumph of Bacchus. Sitifis.



Source: by the author

Figure 7b:

Detail. Sitifis.



Source : by the author

Dionysos appears youthful majestically standing in his divine chariot, which is drawn by two tigresses and led by the god Pan, accompanied by Victory who crowns him as usually represented. He is dressed in his sumptuous ceremonial robe the "*Bassara*", that is a long, eastern, red, flowing garment with decorative patterns, and his head is crowned with ivy and vine leaves. The procession, heading towards the entrance of the room, is led by Silenus, the pedagogue, who is depicted here with Socratic features-a far cry from the image of the drunken old man (Serradj-Hamza, 2023: 378). The members of the Thiasos – two Maenads, the *liknon* bearer, and the Satyrs- march solemnly before their god's chariot. In the left corner, the Maenad is shown dancing

ecstatically, admiringly gazing at her god, who shows a distant, wistful look, as if he were longing for the faraway lands of India that he had left behind (Serradj, 2021: 270). In the background, we can see the bound and humiliated royal captives with their two children, as well as the spoil of war from India with the exotic bestiary: camels, giraffe, lion, and elephant.

A classical depiction of Meleager's hunt for the Calydonian boar was also found on the T-shaped wall of the *triclinium.* This, along with the Dionysian panel, served to highlight the theme of divine victory over malevolent wilderness and his supremacy over barbarism
(Blanchard-Lemée, 2001: 541). The mosaic of *Sitifis* bears a strong resemblance to the Dionysian sarcophagi of the Severan period, sharing the same proportions and the arrangement of figures across three levels, as well as the clustering.
The Triumph of Sétif dates from the 4th century AD (Blanchard-Lemée, 2005: 299), when *Sitifis* was elevated to provincial capital city status.

The second Algerian" Indian triumph" comes from **Bethioua (*Portus Magnus*)** where it paved the floor of a more modest reception room adjoining a *triclinium*, which was adorned with other Dionysian scenes. The damaged pavement (2.25m x 2,50m) was restored and transported to the National Museum of Oran in 1885 (De La Blanchére, 1893: 70).

The triumphant god appears on his chariot drawn by a pair of tigers (Fig.8), followed by members of his cortege, with two important details not found in other classical models:

Figure 8:

Indian Triumph of Portus Magnus



Source : By the author

At the same time, he is flanked by both a winged Victory and Ariadne, whereas he usually appears with only one of them[4]. A depiction of the triumphant Dionysos, **haloed** and standing on his chariot has never before been recorded in Africa, except for one pavement at *Lambaesis* (Parrish, 1984: 69) in Algeria and another at *Thysdrus* in Tunisia (Dunbabin, 1978: Pl 68), which do not relate to the theme of the triumph. However, the victorious god with a nimbus around the head, can be seen on his chariot in the "House of the Dionysian Téléte" in *Zeugma*
(Darmon, 2005: 391 fig 13).

In the" Indian triumph" of Bethioua, the god is attended with other companions: On one side, a Bacchante plays the tambourine, while on the other, two Satyrs, armed with spears, Pan

[4] Apart from a missing mosaic from a tomb at *Cirta*, that might have shown the god standing between a Victory and her partner Ariadne (see Serradj-Hamza, 2023: fig 9).

and a Silenus reminiscent of the one in *Sitifis*, stand by. It is important to note that the prevalence of Dionysian motifs in the *triclinium* of Bethioua, as well as the Indian Triumph pavement, suggests an emphasis on Dionysus in the dweller's iconography, as is often the case in other African provinces[5]. The dating is around the early 4th century.

The last" **Triumph of Bacchus**" known in Algeria was uncovered in 1934 in a reception room that could be the *oecus* (Serradj, 2025: 344) measuring 7.50 by 4.30 metres in a *domus* of the western part of Cherchell (*Caesarea*), that opened directly onto an East-West Roman Street (Berard,1936: 53). It occupies only the late- 4th century pseudo-*emblema* (4.27m x 3.17m) which faced the front door of the room, enclosed in a rich and lush floral ornamental pattern that is intricately designed (Fig.9).

Figure 9:
Triumph of Bacchus. Cherchell



Source : By the author

This central panel features a minimalist depiction[6] of the victorious Bacchus riding alone on his chariot, drawn by two tigers. One of the felines is drinking wine from a krater, while a Satyr is behind the chariot, brandishing what appears to be a javelin. Admittedly, the scene of Caesarea does not contain all the hallmarks of an" Indian triumph" such as the crowded and festive procession, exotic animals, and Victory crowning the god…However, the *Bassara* god's attire depicted in this pavement (similar to the garment worn by the god of *Sitifis* and *Portus Magnus*) strongly points the Indian campaign and refers to the Lydian God *Bassareus* who conquered the eastern lands, given that India is quoted in ancient literature «...Bacchus set out from the West, arrived in India with a mighty army and travelled throughout the country."
(Diod Sic, Bib His: II,38).

b. Portugal:

One of the panels integrated into the mosaic that covered the vast *triclinium* of the *Villa* of Torre de Palma", Monforte, Portalegre, (*Conuentus Pacensis*), shows Bacchus and his *thiasos*.

[5] See (Serradj, 2025: 339-358).

[6] Bérard (Bérard, 1936: 14) and after Ferdi (Ferdi, 2005: 124) suggest that this analogy with minimalist composition can be seen in Hispania-Tarragona province where a Victory appears instead of a Satyr (Balil, 1965: 36 fig 8).

This room, opening to the north gallery of the peristyle, could be, apart from a *triclinium*, a reception room where some performances or pantomimes were staged after meals (Lancha & Andre, 2000: 157; 183).

It is a large rectangular carpet measuring 10.24 m x 6.35 m in its entirety, surrounded by a meander of 4-turn swastikas. (Fig.10) in five of the eight quadrangular panels of the mosaic field (a grid of bands), Bacchic scenes are represented. On the opposite side of the *thiasos*, in the entrance of the room, another rectangular panel depicts the nine Muses. At the top of the room, another panel depicts the **Labyrinth** (*V. supra*-Section 2.2, Labyrinths).

Figure 10 :
Bacchic thiasos. Villa of Torre de Palma –AML.



Source : Lancha & André, 2000 : Pl. LXV.

The Panel in which the "**Indian triumph of Bacchus**" is featured is rectangular, occupying the T-shaped bar around which the *lecti* were arranged. The *thiasos* is moving to the right, and the figures are distributed in two groups, to the left and right of the prominent figure of Pan. (Lancha & André, 2000: 197-205; 209).

We highlight the following details:

The chariot driven by a satyr[7], seen from the front, is pulled by two tigers with inside the chariot Bacchus with a Bacchante looking at him. Bacchus is crowned with ivy leaves, depicted naked, with a blue cloak over his shoulders, holding in his left hand a thyrsus with an unusual cross-shaped tip, and in his right hand an inverted krater, in the traditional iconographic type of the god.

The *thiasos* is composed of its usual elements, Bacchantes and satyrs, dancing and playing various instruments. Among them, a Maenad holds a basket (*liknon*) on her head, **strongly reminding us of the *liknophore* on the *Sitifis* mosaic in Algeria**. A gap on the top does not allow for precise identification of the object, which could be the mystical sieve according to Lancha (Lancha, 2002: 31). Two large vases and a tripod basin appear in an unbalanced position, as seen in the gold craters depicted on the mosaic of Setif.

Two unusual figures in the procession are depicted in the Torre de Palma *thiasos*: a young man with a tunic with a *pallium* and a young woman with a *velum* over her head, interpreted by

[7] The fact that Bacchus does not drive his own chariot, with a satyr acting as driver, is an isolated case compared to other mosaics examined, with the possible exception of the Triumph of Caesarea in Algeria which features a Satyr leading two tigers despite not being on the chariot.

Lancha as being the children of the Villa's owner, who was a follower of the cult of Bacchus (Lancha, 2002 : 37).

Regarding the dating of the mosaics of the *Villa* of Torre de Palma, J. Lancha points to a chronology situated either at the end of the 3rd century or at the beginning of the 4th century (295-330). (Lancha & André: 2000: 143; 212-213).

In present-day Portugal, no mosaics are known with this theme as developed as in the Torre de Palma panel. It appears, only "suggested", in a mosaic from the "***Villa* of Sta Vitória do Ameixial, Estremoz**" (*Conuentus Pacensis*) (*V. infra* "**Ulysses and the Sirens"**), with a panther drinking from a krater, and at the mosaic of the "House of Fountains", Conimbriga, paving a room open to the south courtyard, as the figure of a Silenus mounted on a donkey
(Oleiro, 1992: 98).

In addition to the pompa triumphalis featured in the Torre de Palma mosaic, mention must also be made of another Portuguese mosaic that also displays Bacchic iconography. It is a Bacchus representation, accompanied of a Maenad, featured in a panel at the pavement of an *exedra,* in the *pars urbana* of a *Villa* discovered in **Vale de Mouro, Coriscada-Meda, Guarda** (*Ciuitas Arauorum*).

Bacchus shows his classic attributes, worthy of note, his short *pardalis.* The god stands, holding the *thyrsus,* almost vertically, inside the car, pulled by two leopards, both of which are badly damaged. The Bacchante, standing beside the god in a similar static pose, holds up a torch, embodying «an allegorical role, a distant allusion to civilization's struggle against chaos and disorder".

The stylistic characteristics of the mosaic and the figures' background in scales, as seen in the Torre de Palma mosaics, suggest that it dates from the mid-4th century, «demonstrating the strong presence of paganism in this region of *Hispania."* (Coixao.et Al, 2016: 66-88).

4. Ulysses:

«The story of Ulysses and the Sirens is one of the best-known classical myths, enduring in the cultural memory to this day, both for the richness and vividness of its imagery and for the immediate resonance of the message it conveys regarding the human adventure. In this story, two narrative threads converge, both of which first appear in the epic poem "The Odyssey". Indeed, it is also in this poem that we find the first reference to the Sirens*."* (Maciel, 2008: 254).

Out on the open sea, on his return from the Trojan War, Ulysses tells his companions of the advice his friend, the sorceress Circe, had given to him: « First, she warned us to avoid the sound of the divinely inspired Sirens and their flower-strewn meadow. She said that only I should listen to them: you must bind me with rough ropes, so that I remain where I am, standing by the mast, and let the ropes be tied to the mast. And if I beg and command you to set me free, you must bind me with even more ropes. (…) Meanwhile, the well-built ship quickly reached the island of the two Sirens, for a favourable wind was blowing*." (*Homer, *Od,* XII: 158-167).

a. Algeria:

In 1940, a large peristyle *domus* was discovered in the centre of the modern town of Cherchell (*Caesarea*), presenting two *nymphaeum*-basins adorned with mosaics featuring two scenes: **Ulysses and the Sirens** and Triumph of Neptune with Nereids. The two fountain-basins that adorned the peristyle (DUNBABIN, 1978; 148) are on display at the National Museum of Cherchell (Fig.11).

Figure 11:
Ulysses and the Sirens of Caesarea.



Source : By the author

The one we are interested in illustrates an episode of Ulysses' journey and recalls a known Homeric scene with the Sirens following Circe's advice: «...Next you will come to the Sirens who beguile all men that approach them. Whoever encounters them unawares and listens to their voices will never joy at reaching home, his wife and children to greet him"
(Homer, Odysseus: XII, 36-110).

The side of the basin (over 2.60m diameter x 0.98m width (Ferdi, 1998:176) is covered with a polychrome mosaic depicting the following scene: In the center, a large sailing vessel with two masts at sea, with on board, Ulysses tied to the main mast, with two of his companions standing either side of him exactly as described by Homer (see above). Three large swimming dolphins surround the vessel in a sea depicted by straight lines made of glass *tesserae*. Three sirens with long, bird-like legs on the shore, are positioned on either side of the boat: on the right, the flute player is holding a flute, while the first figure, the "zitherist "on the left, is grasping the zither and the *plectrum*. This scene is unusual in that the sirens are scattered rather than being grouped on the shore as they usually are on similar mosaics.

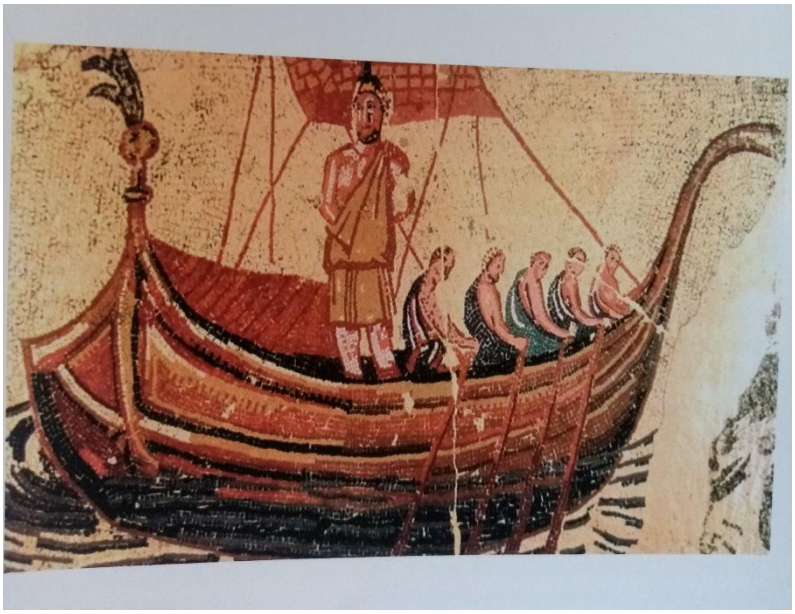
The depiction of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens of Caesarea (the sole known example in Algeria) **bears close similarities to the mosaic of Santa Vitoria do Ameixial in Portugal** (Poinssot, 1965: fig 5), in terms of both the overall scheme and the details of Ulysses' figure tied to the mast. Such late parallels are the only ones observed outside African provinces, in Lusitania, in addition to those featured in Tunisia in the mosaics of Thugga (Poinssot, 1965: pl 3) and Haidra (Baratte, 1974: fig 12). The mosaic has been dated to the 4th century (Ferdi, 2005: 177).

b. Portugal:

From Portugal, there is only one mosaic that refers to the episode from Homer's Odyssey: "Ulysses and the Sirens". This will also be the only example of this theme in the Roman mosaics of the Iberian Peninsula. It comes from the pavement of the *frigidarium* at the *thermae* of the *Villa* of Santa Vitória do Ameixial, Estremoz (*Conuentus Pacensis*), occupying part of the decoration on one of the side bands around the central part. The mosaic is housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Lisbon.

Alongside this depiction (Fig.12) are three sirens, each perched atop a rock, depicted with ales and bird legs, but with female faces and busts, evoking the Harpies, those fearsome birds.

Figure 12:
Ulysses. Villa of Sta Vitória do Ameixial – AML



Source : Maciel, 2008 : 263

Ulysses stands with his hands behind his back, supposedly tied to the mast at the bow of the ship, while the sailors at the stern, with their backs turned to him, row towards the island of the Sirens.

The depiction of the ship is unrealistic, looking like a «collage of elements arranged in reverse" (Alves, 1993/94: 259), or a combination of various observation points
(Torres & Carro, 1978: 97).

J. Maciel (2008) regards the entire image depicted as an "image-*signum*", a term proposed by A. Grabar (Grabar, 1979: 10-14), expressing the idea that a succinctly depicted scene suggests an entire story, myth, or ideology. Thus, in this mosaic's depiction, the story behind the image is much longer and «what the artist wanted to represent was not a ship but the story of Ulysses and the Sirens, as well as its meaning. (…) The scene's formal imperfections only serve to highlight its conceptual richness for that is the primary message the artist seeks to convey."

The author suggests that this example from Santa Vitória do Ameixial dates from after 330, extending into the 4th century. (Maciel, 2008: 262-264; 266).

5. Oceanus:

The Titan Oceanus, son of Heaven and Earth, was also the great River that encircled the Earth and divided it into two parts, the Earth being conceived as a great disc.

It is Hesiod, in the Theogony, who provides the most detailed account of Oceanus and his role as the creator of the other gods, as well as the myths concerning the origins of the Universe. Thus, as the progenitor of rivers: «…**Oceanus begot rivers** deep-eddying…the Nile, Alpheus, and Eridanus…" (Hesiod, Theogony: 133-138).

In Homer's epic poems, the references to Oceanus appear in various contexts. As the limit between the world of living and beyond, and the cosmic boundary river, when the Ulysses ship « reached **the shores of the Oceanus of deep currents** …" (Homer, Odyssey: XI, 13-14). As the primordial creator, also in (Iliad; XIV: 243-246), through the words of queen Hera: «Grant me love and desire, with which you subdue mortals and gods alike. I am off to the ends of fruitful earth, to visit **Oceanus**, **source of all the gods**. " (Homer, Iliad: XIV,135-223)

The diversity of Oceanus identity and functions, reflected in ancient literature and Greek mythology, has inspired a variety of depictions in roman mosaics: as river god, cosmic symbol containing and encircling the world, primordial force depending on context. Ocean

becomes especially relevant for mosaic pavements with expressive faces in borders, or in circular compositions from the end of the 2nd century (Dunbabin, 1978: 150).

a. Algeria:

To date, no fewer than nine representations of Oceanus have been identified in Algeria, spanning all the provinces. We will present the most representative ones:

Starting from **Cherchell** (***Caesarea*),** the Mauretanian capital, the "*Julii domus*" in the eastern part of the city had an apse-shaped banquet hall adorned with a square pavement featuring Ocean's head on its northern side (Leveau,1982: 112-fig2). This depiction[8] of the god alone belongs to the series of large heads with emphatic expressions found in Africa, as *Themetra*, Nabeul in Tunisia or *Lixus* in Morocco. Majestically, Ocean's mask of Cherchell (Fig.13) stands out against a light background in shades of ochre and pink, gazing fiercely and captivating the viewer. His forehead is surrounded by lobster-claws and antennae, and his lush, curly beard is green.

Figure 13 :

Ocean mosaic Caesarea.



Source: Copyright NMC. Inventory Number M28

In this late-fourth mosaic (Ferdi, 2005: 38); the god may invoke the "Primordial creator" endowed with great beneficent force, akin to the "Three Graces" bestowers of wealth, represented in the neighboring vestibule.

The second late fourth-century Ocean head was unearthed in 1852 and is believed to have once adorned the vestibule of a bathhouse (Berthrand, 1856: 123) at **Ain Temouchent-Setif** in the province of *Mauretania Sitifensis*. In a 4.18m by 3.59m panel (Fig.14), the whole height is occupied by an enormous floating head with the usual lobster-claw and antennae, and two small fishes springing from the corners of his mouth, with a strange wistful gaze. On both sides of the god, two naked Nereids symmetrically arranged: one riding a hippocamp and the other swimming beside a dolphin.

[8]On display in the Mosaic Garden of NMC.

Figure 14 :
Ocean mosaic of Ain Temouchent.

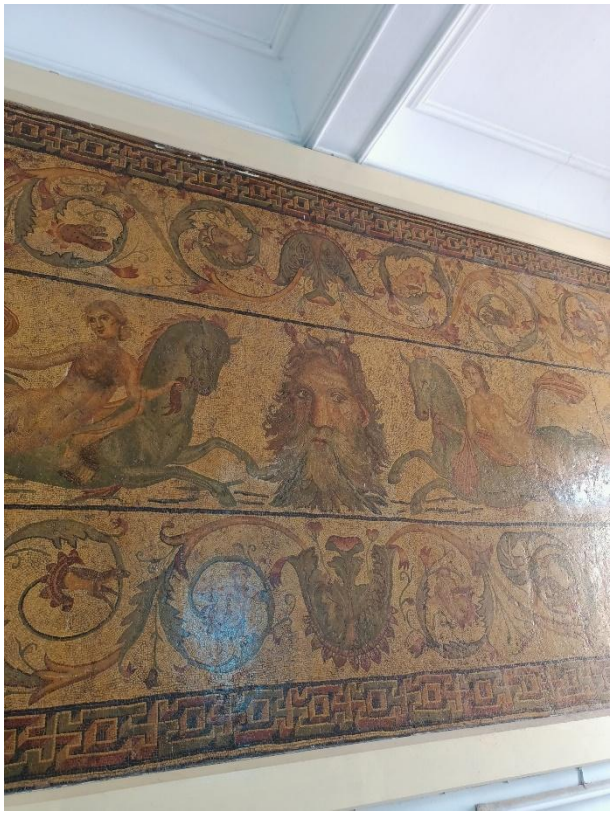


Source: Copyright NMAA.

At the bottom, a three-line Latin inscription that is a prophylactic formula over *Invida Pectora* and *Lingua Proterva*. This Oceanus mask is attributed with protective magical power against malevolent forces, emphasized by the inscription and the exaggeratedly wide eyes of the powerful god, ensuring the protection of the *domus*.

The third example is from **Béjaïa (*Saldae*)** in Mauretania, where it adorned a room in a bathhouse alongside a similar, badly damaged pavement (the first on display at Béjaïa town hall, Fig.15), the second at the National Museum of Antiquities of Algiers. In a border of acanthus scrolls populated by various animals and Erotes, Ocean's mask is rendered here in a somewhat naïve style, floating on waves and flanked by two Nereids and seahorses, as on Roman sarcophagi of the 3rd century (Dunbabin, 1978: 150).

Figure 15:
Ocean mosaic of Saldae.



Source: By the author

Other various representations of Ocean's mask are known in Algeria as border elements:

In a fourth-century pavement at the corners, wreathed in other marine figures in the triclinium of "*Isguntus* House" at **Annaba (*Hippo-Regius*),** with one distinctive feature: a seaweed beard (Ferdi, 1998: 26-27). Or as an acanthus-rinceau (Fig.16) within a border frieze of a large central panel featuring scenes of the loves of Jupiter at **Oued Agla-Bordj Bou Arreridj**, with the points of the beard and mustache springing to vegetal scrolls, associated with a naked child riding a dolphin (Ferdi,1998: 28-29).

Figure 16:
Ocean Mask-Mosaic of Jupiter's loves. Ouled Agla



Source: Copyright NMAA. Inventory Number IM20c. Ouled Agla

It is believed that, from the 3rd century onward, Ocean's heads positioned at the corners were seen as a benevolent and protective, and even more, as a magical image in the Ain Temouchent example.

b. Portugal:

"The Ocean Mosaic of Faro," displayed on a room's floor in the Municipal Museum of Faro, is the only known example from present-day Portugal, featuring a depiction of **Oceanus** in a central medallion. (Fig.17). (Lancha & Oliveira, 2013: 201-223; 527-532).

Figure 17:

Oceanus. Faro -Municipal Museum Faro.



Source : Mourão 2008: 124

The mosaic was discovered in the civilian centre of the Roman town, *Ossonoba* (Faro), an important hub linking Mediterranean and Atlantic trade routes, essential for the interchange of various products from across the Roman Empire. It could have paved one of the spaces in the public *thermae* or a room in a *schola*, the headquarters of a professional or religious association.

This is a large-scale mosaic (9. 40 x 3. 40m) featuring an inscription on a *tabula ansata*, bearing the names of the three citizens who commissioned the mosaic and offering the location where it was installed.

The centerpiece of the mosaic is the Oceanus mask, depicted within a circle inscribed within a square. On both sides of the square, a plant-based decoration unfolds.

(Correia. Wrench, 2005: 33-51).

In the central circle, Oceanus's mask features its traditional attributes with subtle, meticulous detail. The two small dolphins, beings of goodwill, resting on the god's shoulders and his intense gaze directed upwards to the left – *sinister* side – suggest that the figure serves as a prophylactic function.

The depiction of Oceanus in this mosaic, as a quintessential water deity, may be seen representing the patronage of a water cult in a city where the sea played an important rule. The citizens named in the inscription may have been associated with this cult. (Mourao, 2008: 122-125).

Both the background decoration of the mosaic, which draws its inspiration primarily from Byzacena mosaics of the Antonine-Severan period, and the stylistic analysis of the elements in the central panel, seem to indicate that this mosaic was produced by an itinerant workshop from North Africa, specifically from *Lyxus* or *Byzacena*. Given the stylistic characteristics and archaeological context of the mosaic, it can be dated to the late 2nd-early 3rd century.
(Lancha & Oliveira, 2013; 211-212: 223).

Conclusion:

Architectural Spatial Synthesis: Urban vs. Rural dynamics

Regarding the architectural context of the mosaics discussed in our article, the greatest concentration of the pavements from both Algeria and Portugal occurs within domestic-private spatial organization. The architectural layout on both sides of the Mediterranean varies widely, with the notable difference that Portugal encompasses both urban and rural settings (Villae-pars urbana), whereas Algerian mosaics come exclusively from urban areas (domus) featuring a vast majority of reception rooms (triclinia, oecus, exedra, banquet hall, vestibula). This domestic focus is closely matched by two major parallel examples in the peristyle: Ulysses in Algeria versus the Minotaur in Portugal. The civilian public context is also noted, with the public thermae and a schola serving as common spaces in both Mauretania (the labyrinth) and Lusitania (Ocean), alongside a unique religious space in Algeria, a Christian Basilica featuring a labyrinth scene.

Iconographic and Stylistic Analysis: Cross-Mediterranean Model Circulation

The popularity of certain themes, such as the "Triumph of Bacchus", particularly in Africa, may partly be due to the easy availability of patterns (Dunbabin, 1978: 182) that were in circulation throughout the empire, an analysis with which we fully agree. The North African scheme of the Dionysian triumph was clearly followed outside Africa, with a considerable number of examples in Hispania, including one coming from Portugal, despite local divergences. From a stylistic point of view, Lancha (Lancha, 2000: 175-205) has drawn a structural comparison between the Portuguese pavement of Torre de Palma and that of Portus Magnus in Algeria. Crucially, both mosaics date from the same late period.

Our comparative analysis identified other specific stylistic and compositional convergences between the Algerian and Portuguese "Dionysian Triumphs ":

- Compositional Symmetry: A char pulled by two tigers and moving to the right with the figures distributed in two groups, left and right, of the central figure of Pan. This feature (a pair of tigers) identified as the norm in Hispanic mosaics, is equally present on Algerian pavements at *Sitifis*, *Portus Magnus,* and *Caesarea*.
- Model Influences: The thiasos of Torre de Palma, the most complete of those carried out in the Iberian Peninsula with 16 characters, is highly likely based on an African model drawing structural inspiration from contemporary sarcophagus reliefs. This exact phenomenon is also observed in the Algerian "Dionysian Triumph of *Sitifis*", which features no fewer than 14 characters, not counting the animals.
- Panel Segmentation: The concept of combining separate mythological scenes arranged in disconnected panels juxtaposed above one another is shared between "Hercules Mosaic" at *Portus Magnus* (Algeria) and "Bacchus" at Torre de Palma (Portugal).

- Ornamental Isolation: The isolated head of Ocean placed at the center of a complex ornamental pattern is utilized symmetrically in both Algeria (*Caesarea* and *Saldae*) and Portugal (Ossonoba – Faro – *Conuentus Pacensis*).

Theoretical Implications: Convergence, divergence, and regional originality

In conclusion, our comparative framework demonstrates a high degree of artistic homogeneity between the Ancient Roman provinces of Algeria and Portugal regarding both the mythological themes and their compositional methodologies. When examining the spread of artistic influence across the Mediterranean basin, a comparative/stylistic analysis confirms that cohesive mosaic models were actively circulating between the southern and western shores of the sea.

Concurrently, substantial divergences emerged from this shared artistic model. While the Algerian mosaics developed exclusively within dense urban domus and prioritized complex civic or Christian contexts, the Portuguese counterparts showcased a distinct adaptation to rural *villae* environments. Furthermore, even when utilizing identical iconographic models, such as the "Dionysian triumphs", local workshops introduced significant regional variations in stylistic execution, compositional density, and structural framing. These divergences highlight the extraordinary creativity of the *pictores inaginarii* who, despite working from shared models, accomplished an enormous variety of highly original localized images.

Finally, the chronological synchronization of all analyzed mosaics, particularly within Late Antiquity, further reinforces the role of the Mediterranean as an integrated yet diverse zone of cultural and artistic convergence. Ultimately, this regional" musival" dialogue opens crucial avenues for future iconographical research. Rather than viewing these formal analogies as mere coincidences, they invite a broader investigation into the precise mobility of itinerant workshops and *Pictores immaginarii*, the potential trade routes of *libretti graphiques*, and the specific patronage networks that linked the Atlantic shores of Lusitania to the thriving urban centers of North Africa.

Abbreviations:

NMAA: National Museum of Antiquities of Algiers
NMC: National Museum of Cherchel
AML: Archaeological Museum Lisbon

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