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PHAEDRA AND HIPPOLYTUS MYTH RARE MOSAIC SCENCES IN MADABA-JORDAN

Mohammad Nassar^{1*}, Nizar Turshan², Bahaeddin Nassar³

¹School of Arts and Design, The University of Jordan, P.O. Box. 11942, Amman, Jordan.

²School of Archaeology and Tourism, The University of Jordan, P.O. Box. 11942 Amman, Jordan.

³School of Arts and Design, The University of Jordan, P.O. Box. 11942, Amman, Jordan.

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Corresponding Author: Nassar M
(m.nassar@ju.edu.jo)

ABSTRACT

This research examines the Greek myth concerning Hippolytus and his stepmother Phaedra, who accused him of trying to molest her. This myth has left clear echoes in art with all of the characters of the myth being represented in various works. The research includes a comprehensive study of the myth's representation in the mosaic art appearing in several places among others, the mosaic floor in Madaba in Jordan, is the only mosaic discovered in Jordan thus far. It should be noted that its representation in mosaics is relatively scarce, apart from those appearing in Cyprus, Antioch and Sheikh Zuweid in Egypt. It has been remarked that there are differences in the implementation of these mosaic paintings, due to differences in respective artistic orbits.

KEYWORDS: Madaba, Virgin Mary, Hippolytus, Phaedra, Mosaic, Myth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Madaba, which is approximately 30 km south of Amman, occupies a geographically important site in central Jordan, and consists of three main locations: Mount Nebo, Uyun Musa and Mukhayyat (Figures 1, 2). A history of the area comes down to us through the writings of the Romans and the Byzantines philosophers, among them, the Roman Ptolemaic and the Byzantine Asitvans (Nassar and Turshan 2012: 225-235; Piccirillo 1986; Spijckerman 1978: 180). Many travelers have visited Madaba and described the plan of the city, among them, Tristram, Schumacher, Musil and Father Manfredi (Musil 1907: 329-332-333; Metaxakis 1906: 139-157; Paulouskji and Kluge 1903: 79-157; Manfredi 1899: 150; Schumacher 1895: 113; Tristram 1873:113). During the Byzantine period, Madaba was notable for its many churches, reflecting efforts to spread Christianity in the Empire's Arab province (Devresse 1940: 220). The first scholar/European to visit the church during modern times was Germer-Durand, in 1887, Entering the semi darkness of the room, for the first time, he saw for the mosaic and inscriptions within the circular edifice. Returning there in 1892, Sejourne succeeded in copying with greater care the three inscriptions contained therein, and even photographed the central inscription.



Figure 1: Location of Madaba (Richard and Clark 2023).



Figure 2: Location of the Virgin Mary Church and Hippolytus Hall (Richard and Clark 2023).

The dating of its construction proposed by Séjourné (312 A.D.), was questioned by Michon and by Clermont-Ganneau, with the latter proposing rather the year 663 A.D. The inscriptions and a rough plan of the edifice were published once again in 1899, by don Manfredi, the Roman Catholic pastor of Madaba (Piddirillo 1980: 151-152; Leclercq 1931: 860-867; Miehon 1896: 263-267; Serjourné 1892: 638-644; Germer – Durand 1890: 286-287). In 1905, Metaxakis drew up an accurate plan of the church within the urban context of the city. In 1931, Leclercq prepared a synthesis research of the site. The sixth century mosaic pavements in the Hippolytus Hall in the church of the Virgin Mary at Madaba is one of the most important examples of art featuring the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus in central Jordan. Madaba is considered an important religious center in the Middle East due to its numerous churches that can trace their roots back to the Byzantine era. Because of this rich history, there has in recent times been a growing awareness among artists of this sacred city, which was visited by Pope John Paul II in the year 2000. Two-locations in the area of Madaba (Makawer and Mount Nebo) are among the five most important Christian pilgrimage sites in Jordan (Nassar et al. 2021: 1297-1308; Nassar 2013: 67-77). This article delves into the mythical story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, which adorns the floor of the Hippolytus Hall in the Virgin Mary Church (Figures 1,2, 3). The significance of this church lies in its portrayal of the legendary scene, unique during the Byzantine era, and its connection to Greek and Roman myths. The characters from these myths are depicted via several artistic mediums, as among them, ceramics, frescoes and mosaics.

2. I.THE MOSAICS OF THE HIPPOLYTUS HALL

The Hippolytus Hall is located under the floor of the Church of the Virgin, it would seem, over a Roman temple (Figs. 3, 4), and dates to the first half of the sixth century A.D. The mosaic floor was discovered at a depth of 1.30 cm, while digging under the floor of the Church of the Virgin in 1905. In 1982 and 1985, excavation work was carried out, with one of the most important results being the discovery of the floor of the rectangular Hippolytus hall; the eastern side is about 7.30 m wide, while the western and one is approximately 9.80 m wide (Piccirillo 1997:

64-66; 1982: 373-408). The floor is decorated with various mosaic decorations, and includes representations of living (human, animals, birds) and plant shapes, most of which are scrolls of acanthus leaves, in addition to various geometric shapes (Figures 4, 5). The floor is divided into three sections. The middle section, which represents the legendary of Phaedra and Hippolytus from Greek mythology, is the subject of this study.

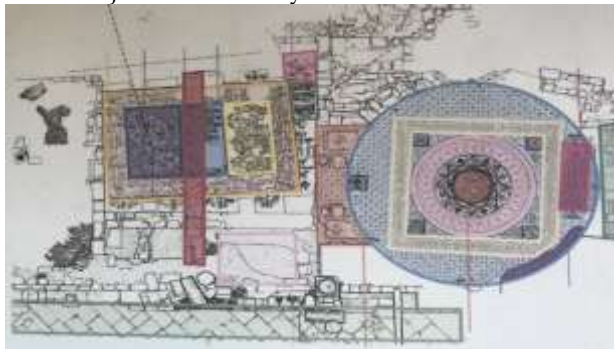


Figure 3: Plan of the Virgin Mary Church and Hippolytus Hall ((Author's photo from the site).



Figure 4: Mosaic Floor of the Hippolytus Hall -- The Church of the Virgin Mary (Author's photo).



Figure 5: Mosaic Floor of the Hippolytus Hall - The Church of the Virgin Mary (Author's photo).

Undoubtedly, visual arts play a pivotal role in illuminating scenes from everyday life within societies, something that is equally true of ancient

communities, even those that can be traced back to the prehistoric era. This is evident from cave paintings, such as those discovered in Chauvet, Lascaux and Altamira, as well as rock carvings found in Norway and other sites dating back to the Stone Ages. These depictions of daily existence, portraying activities like agriculture, hunting, warfare, and triumphs, would persist across various civilizations. From Pharaonic times, up through Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine civilizations, and then subsequently, in Islamic arts, such scenes have been depicted via diverse mediums, among them, frescoes, mosaics, and stone engravings, as well as via various applied arts using materials such as ivory, wood, and metal (Redondo 2016: 153-151; Pettitt 2015: 542-553; Alabouvette 2009: 55-60; Ruiz-Dale Guthrie 2006: 2; Lewis-Williams 2003: 191-194; Clottes 1996: 276-288; Bastian and Grand 1967). Our reason for focusing on the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus is that it holds great significance, both due to its importance and the scarcity of this particular mythological narrative. It appears to be the only mythological tale depicted on the floor of the Hippolytus Hall of the Church of the Virgin in Madaba from the Byzantine era. This underscores the enduring impact and continued adaptation of certain mythological stories across different cultures and epochs, such as highlight the universal aspects of human experiences captured in the visual arts. More broadly speaking, many themes have been executed in the region by artists from the Byzantine era. For instance, in addition to this legendary story, we find that of Daniel, which was executed on the mosaic floor of the Ya'amun Church (Turshan and Nassar 2011: 340-349; Nassar and Turshan 2012: 208-225; 2011: 27-49). The myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus is an ancient Greek tragedy revolving around the characters of Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, and Hippolytus, Theseus's son from a previous marriage. The story depicts a complex web of human conflictual themes, among them, forbidden love, revenge, jealousy, and betrayal. In the myth, Phaedra harbors a forbidden love for Hippolytus, Theseus's son. She struggles with intense inner conflict between her deep affection for Hippolytus and her sense of duty and morality. After Hippolytus rejects Phaedra's advances, she seeks revenge by falsely accusing him of attempting to rape her. Upon hearing these accusations, Theseus, Hippolytus's father, executes a severe punishment; he sends a woven rope dipped in poison to Hippolytus, who ultimately commits suicide out of a sense of false guilt. "Phaedra and Hippolytus" is considered a masterpiece of Greek classical literature, one that

explores complex moral and emotional themes in a profound and nuanced manner. The myth offers considerable insight regarding the nature of humanity, shedding light as it does on the contradictions and internal conflicts inherent in the human experience. This makes it a subject worthy of deeper analysis and study (Lattimore 1962: 5-18). This article focuses on the visual depiction of this Greek tragedy documented on the floor of Hippolytus's hall, together with the names of various people appearing in it, written in Greek. Many characters are depicted in this legendary scene, as among them, the handmaids (ΘΕΡΑΠΙΕΝΑΙ *Θεράπειναι*); Phaedra (ΦΑΙΔΡΑ *Φαίδρα*); the wet nurse (ΠΡΟΠΟΛΟΙ *Πρόπολοι*); ΓΕΡΕ[γέρε[α], meaning "gifts,"; the old man (that is, the falcon that is presented to Hippolytus) Hippolytus (ΙΠΠΟΛΥΤΟΣ *Ἰππόλυτος*); and the shepherd, or stable-boy (ΔΟΥΛΟΣ, *Δούλος*). While the picture of Hippolytus and the wet nurse has been destroyed, we nonetheless find their names alongside the image. Correspondingly, they are described along with the people appearing in the scene.

2.1. Characters from the Mythological Science of Phaedra and Hippolytus the Handmaids (Attendants), *Θεραπαιναι*

The handmaids stand to right side of Phaedra (Figure 6); their hair is held back by nets, and they wear sleeveless tunics and shawls. They seem to be looking at the man holding a falcon in his hand. It appears that the maid next to Phaedra is pointing with her left hand, extended behind Phaedra's neck, towards the falcon. Her right hand is close to Phaedra's hand. As for the other maid, she is looking forward and raising her right hand diagonally upward. It seems that the colors of the uniforms worn by the maids are similar to the colors of Phaedra's uniform.

2.2. PHEADRA (ΦΑΙΔΡΑ *Φαίδρα*)

Phaedra is depicted standing between the handmaids and the old man, and appears to be looking at the old man who is holding a falcon in his left hand, perhaps with the intention to hunt (Figure 6). The head of Phaedra is round, while the eyes are large and wide. Set on her head is a diadem with a pearl, that completes the headdress. She also wears an earring consisting of four pearls, while the neck appears to be adorned with two gold and pearl necklaces. She wears a bracelet on her left wrist. She is dressed in a sleeveless tunic, richly decorated at the neckline and mantle. Her left hand seems to be touching the tunic of the attendant next to her. The

colors are red, brown, and grey, set against a white background.



Figure 6: Scene Phaedra and Hippolytus-Hippolytus Hall (Author's photo).

2.3. OLD MAN ΓΕΡΕ γέρε [α]

The bearded falconer (Figures 4,5,6, 7) has a thick moustache, and round and bald head. His eyes are wide open, while his hair is cut short. He is standing between Phaedra and the wet nurse, and is holding up a falcon on his gloved left hand. His gaze is fixed on it, and he is apparently ready for the hunt. His right hand appears to be touching the hand of the wet nurse.

2.4. WET NURSE ΠΡΟΠΟΛΟΙ *Πρόπολοι*

The image of the wet nurse (Figures 4, 6, 7) was destroyed, such that only her name, her unbound hair, and part of her upturned hand remain. It seems that The wet nurse appears to be standing between Hippolytus and the falconer. Her right hand seems to be touching the right hand of the bearded falconer.



Figure 7: Old Man (The Bearded Falconer) Hippolytus Hall (Author's photo).

3. HIPPOLYTUS ΙΠΠΟΛΥΤΟΣ *Ἰππόλυτος*

Hippolytus (Figure 8) is, of course, the main character in the story. What remains of his picture is identifiable as him by his name, which is written in the upper part of the panel just under the frame.

Much of the picture, however, has been destroyed. He appears to be standing between the wet nurse and the shepherd (or stable boy).

3.1. The SHEPHERD (STABLE BOY) ΔΟΥΛΟΣ Δούλος

The shepherd (stable boy) (Figure 8) stands on the right side of the scene, next to Hippolytus, and is looking to the side. He appears to be holding the horse's reins in his left hand, while raising his right hand diagonally towards the horse. He has an oval haircut, and wears a short tunic tied around his waist. The colors are red, brown, grey, against a white background.



Figure 8: The shepherd (stable- boy), Hippolytus Hall (Author's photo)

4. II.II DISCUSSION AND COMPARISON STUDY

The visual scene of this legendary story is rare to this region, whose roots extend back to Greek civilization. The importance of the story lies in the fact that it is located under the floor of the church, apparently decorate the floor of one of the rooms of an earlier Roman building, as is sometimes the case with sites dating back to this era. Although comparative studies of this tragic story are rare, we find some examples that were executed on mosaic floors. The Phaedra and Hippolytus Story appears on the floor of the Sheikh Zuweid in North Sinai in Egypt. near where it borders the Gaza Strip (Figure 9). It dates back to the first half of the 5th century (Dalgıç 2015: 15-47; Mucznik 2011: 265-286; Bowersock 2006: 57, Pl. 2,18; Olszewski 2002: 45-61, pls. III-VI; López Monteagudo 1999: 35-60, fig. 6; Ovadia 1998: 383-394, figs. 1-4; Verreth 1997: 107-119; Clédar 1915). The panel consist of three subjects: A Dionysiac procession, a Nilotic theme, and finally the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, the subject of our study. Here, the panel depicts a mythological representation of Hippolytus and Phaedra situated between two inscriptions. The image illustrates the traditional version of the myth: the young hero

receives a letter telling him of his stepmother's love. The scene takes place in front of Theseus's home, and is marked by three trees of different sizes, and an aedicule, in which Phaedra is represented. Altogether, it features six mythological actors:

4.1. Phaedra

Phaedra is seated on a red seat with a high back, and armrests located inside towards the end of a portico (Figure 10). It seems came she is sitting in her palace and sending a love letter to her stepson Hippolytus via her servant Trovis. Above her head, her hair is in a bun; one each side though, it is wavy and falls to her neck. She is looking at Hippolytus, and is dressed in a gray tunic that has wide, medium-to-long sleeves decorated with red bands on the ends. The front of the chest (clavi) of the gray tunic also features red bands, which go down to the bottom. She leans with her right elbow against her right thigh, while her right hand touches her cheek and chin in a gesture of reflection. Her left arm rests on her thighs. Two thick bracelets adorn her wrists. She is wearing shoes that are executed in a very schematic way. Phaedra is framed by an architectural construction composed of two grey Corinthian columns on red bases. A single triangular pediment with two horn-shaped acroteria is placed on the capitals. Two curtains are suspended from a ringed rod that is fixed to the shafts of the columns between the two capitals.



Figure 9: The mosaic floor featuring Hippolytos and Phedra, Sheikh Zuweid.



Figure 10: Phedra- Sheikh Zuweid. A servant (Trovis)

The servant here appears old and stands looking at Hippolytus (Figure 11). She is dressed in a yellow tunic and her white hair is relatively short. In her right hand, she holds a black tablet in her right hand. On it is written the word Phaedra in white letters. She is passing the tablet to Hippolytus. The other arm is slightly bent.



Figure 11: A Servant (Trovis) - Sheikh Zuweid.

4.2. EROS

Eros is depicted as a winged bird facing forward (Figure 12). He is naked with small wings, and points at Hippolytus with his index finger. He flies above Phaedra's servant. He is depicted in profile, except for his head, which is facing forward. His hair is short, and he is looking at Hippolytus. In his left hand, he holds a bow and arrow. His legs are set slightly apart.



Figure 12: Eros - Sheikh Zuweid.

4.3. Hippolytus

Hippolytus stands between what appear to be two big palm trees in front of a small tree. There is a dog looking at him (Figure 13). Standing behind him are two hunting, while His eyes are fixed on Phaedra's servant, who seems to be giving him the message from Phaedra. His hair is curly and he wears a long-sleeved tunic decorated with two bands of yellow fabric and orbs applied to the shoulders, located at roughly the height of his thighs. His feet are set apart and shod with sandals fastened at the calves. He also wears a draped white cloak fastened by a fibula, which covers his chest, shoulder and left arm. He

takes the tablet brought by Phaedra's servant in his right hand. In his left hand, he holds a spear.



Figure 13: Hippolytus, Sheikh Zuweid.

Moreover, the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus also decorated at the mosaic pavement in the other location in the floor of Room 6 of House of Dionysus at Nea Paphos Archaeological Park, Cyprus (Figure 14), dating to the late 2nd - 3rd century AD (Ovadia et al. 1991: 181, 190; Daszewski and Michaelide 1988: 29-30, fig. 17; Michaelides 1987: 17, Pl.21; Nicolaou 1967: 68). The scene of the story consists of two central figures, we find Hippolytus standing to the left and Phaedra enthroned to the right. Phaedra, who is seated on a throne, is fully clothed in a mantle featuring yellow and brown folds. She wears a dress, with only the hem of her pink and red-brown chiton visible above her shoes. Her head, which is inclined toward Hippolytus, is covered in the back by a yellow and white veil. The front of her wavy coiffure is neatly parted in the middle and held in place by a white diadem. Apart from a chlamys over his shoulder and a lance, Hippolytus stands naked. He is to the right of Phaedra, with his dog. In his right hand, he holds the letter Phaedra has sent him via her servant. Behind Phaedra we see the winged Eros, holding the torch of love in his right hand and a bow in his left. In the upper right corner, a winged Eros tilts his head to the left, toward Phaedra.



Figure 14: Phaedra and Hippolytus, The House of Dionysus at Paphos Archaeological Park, Cyprus.

Another example depicting a scene from this legendary story can be found on the floor of the House of the Red at Antioch (Figure 15). It dates to

second quarter of the 2nd century Blázquez and Cabrero 2012: 52; Huskinson 2003: 134, 136, 139, 143; Dobbins 2000: 51-62; Kondoleon 1995: 40-42, 46, figs. 16, 17, 20; Levi 1947: 71-75, pl. 11b). The scene consists of four mythical characters, who decorate the paved floor: Phaedra is located to the left of the panel, and Hippolytus to the right. The nurse stands between them. To the right of Phaedra stands Aphrodite on a plinth. A letter lies on the ground by Hippolytus's feet. Phaedra is standing and looking at the nurse, and seems to be waiting for Hippolytus' reply to the letter. She is also wearing a long dress (mantle). The nurse is also wearing a long dress and has her right hand on Phaedra's left shoulder. Hippolytus is standing near the nurse and is looking at her. Under his feet is the letter, which seems to have fallen from him. He wears a long-sleeved tunic decorated with two bands of yellow fabric, and with orbs applied to the shoulders and at the height of his thighs. His feet are set apart and shod with sandals fastened to the calves, while his left hand holds a spear. It appears as if the tablet on the ground fell from his right hand.

The Madaba School appears more advanced, characterized by its abundance of churches and chapels with richly decorated mosaic floors, covering diverse themes including daily life, cities, and natural motifs. By contrast, the Sheikh Zuweid School seems less developed, with fewer mosaic sites and simpler artistic execution. This distinction highlights the unique artistic flourishing of Madaba during the Byzantine period."

"The choice to depict the Phaedra and Hippolytus myth within a Christian church may have held symbolic significance. The clergy could have intended it as a moral warning against forbidden passions and adultery, themes that resonate with Biblical teachings and Christian ethics of the Byzantine era."

Through this study, we find that the Madaba School is distinguished by the fact that it contains many buildings, including churches and chapels dating back to the Byzantine era, which contributed and helped it to be a unique artistic school in the region and neighboring regions and even beyond that. This is what we find through the mosaic floors that contain many topics, whether scenes from daily life or documentation of the cities that were in the region or geometric, animal and plant shapes that the artist employed through these mosaic floors in addition to this important and rare legend in the region, while it seems that the Sheikh Zuweid School is less advanced in the field of mosaic art due to the scarcity of buildings that contain mosaic floors.



Figure 15: Phaedra and Hippolytus, Antioch - House of the Red Pavement (Antakya Archaeology Museum).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This is the first time that this legend was depicted on a mosaic floor. It seems that the artist is familiar with this legend, which confirms his extensive knowledge of Greek mythology. Alternatively, he may have implemented it here only after hearing about the legend, or it may simply be that it was one of the more popular tales circulating in society at that time, such as led to it being embodied in mosaic art, a form of art that was especially prevalent in Jordan during this time. The artist's skill in presenting the legend in a realistic way, via a focus on artistic details, is evident in the implementation of this particular work of art. This is evident, for instance, in the expressions of the faces of the people depicted in the mosaic. When comparing the two paintings from Madaba from the time of Sheikh Zuwaïd, we find that the artists who executed the mosaic belong to two different artistic schools. The images of Phaedra in the two different paintings are completely different from one another. The Phaedra of the Madaba Mosaics School is more precise in the execution of the facial features and hair, for instance, although the two schools do seem to agree with respect to the use of the black and short color. The clothing in each is different, however. The Madaba Phaedra is distinguished by the presence of a pearl necklace on her chest, while the Sheikh Zuwaïd Phaedra is distinguished by the fact that she is sitting in what resembles a palace; more precisely, she sits between two columns and the triangular painting situated above her. The image of Hippolytus also different between the two schools, as are the rest of the characters in the two paintings in general. The most obvious observation is that the Madaba mosaic painting is of higher quality than the Sheikh Zuwaïd painting, in terms of execution and its precision in the use of colors. The artist of the Sheikh Zuwaïd

painting appears to be less skilled, although he does try to show a third dimension in his painting, which is something that the Madaba artist does not attempt. The two depictions of this legend are considered a rare, as they are the only such mosaics discovered so far, which indicates the importance of the legend in mosaic art. The other two examples, from Cyprus and Antioch, represent the same mythological figures, but with some differences in their execution. However, the focus in both examples seems to be on showing the subject of the letter, which is the main axis around which the myth is centered. It is noted that the Sheikh Zuweid mosaic represents the letter

containing Phaedra's claim that Hippolytus was molesting her and her demand that her father executes him. The Madaba mosaic does not show this letter, though likely this is due to the fact that some parts of the mosaic were destroyed, as we firmly believe that this letter was initially also present here.

In conclusion, the Madaba mosaic of Phaedra and Hippolytus represents a rare and unique example of mythological iconography in Jordan. Its quality, originality, and symbolic placement within a Christian church distinguish it as a significant contribution to the study of Byzantine art and cultural exchange in the Mediterranean."

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