

# **“Reason and Unreason at Olynthus”**

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## REASON AND UNREASON AT OLYNTHUS

The pebble mosaics at Olynthus present, in particularly splendid and concentrated form, a fundamental challenge to our understanding of Hellenic culture. The pavements display in one closely knit and coherent context, and in a deliberate and almost systematic way, a gamut of intellectual and psychological possibilities that, taken separately, might otherwise seem incomprehensible, if not indeed mutually exclusive<sup>1</sup>. Be it recalled that except for some minor indications of later occupation, which do not affect the argument here, a relatively narrow chronological framework is provided by the foundation of the city in 432 B.C. and its destruction by Philip of Macedon in 348 B.C.

### *Villa of Good Fortune*

The principal rooms consist of two pairs situated at the lateral corners of the courtyard, where they form similar and counter-balancing blocks (fig. 1). In both cases the visitor enters the first room from the courtyard and then proceeds internally to the second. The pavements have analogous, but significantly differentiated designs. The first room in each pair is uni-directional, in

the one case oriented inward toward the second room, in the other case oriented outward toward the entrance. The second room in both cases has a primary orientation toward the first, but includes also a framing surround, of figures in the first pair, words in the second, that makes it self-contained. It is clear that the rooms and their pavements were carefully planned, the two rooms in each pair in relation to one another, the two pairs in relation to one another, and all in relation to the spectator. Both blocks create a sense of progression toward a sort of inner sanctum, through complementary contrasts in design.

The pavements are also carefully planned thematically. On the left side, beautifully designed and drawn subjects from Classical mythology: in the first room Nereids mounted on sea-monsters bring new, victorious battle arms procured by Thetis for her son, Achilles, both identified by inscriptions (fig. 2, 1); in the second room, Dionysos drives his leopard-chariot, surrounded by a frieze of cavorting maenads and satyrs, all facing outward (fig. 2, 2). That these two seemingly disparate subjects were meaningfully related is evident from the fact that the same combination occurs on opposite sides of late 5<sup>th</sup> century red-figured vases<sup>2</sup>. In essence the subjects represent

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<sup>1</sup>The mosaics were excavated and published by ROBINSON 1934, and 1929-1952, II, V, VIII; the most

recent substantial discussion will be found in DUNBABIN, *Mos. Greek & Roman World*, p. 5-9, with bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> ROBINSON 1934, p. 508.

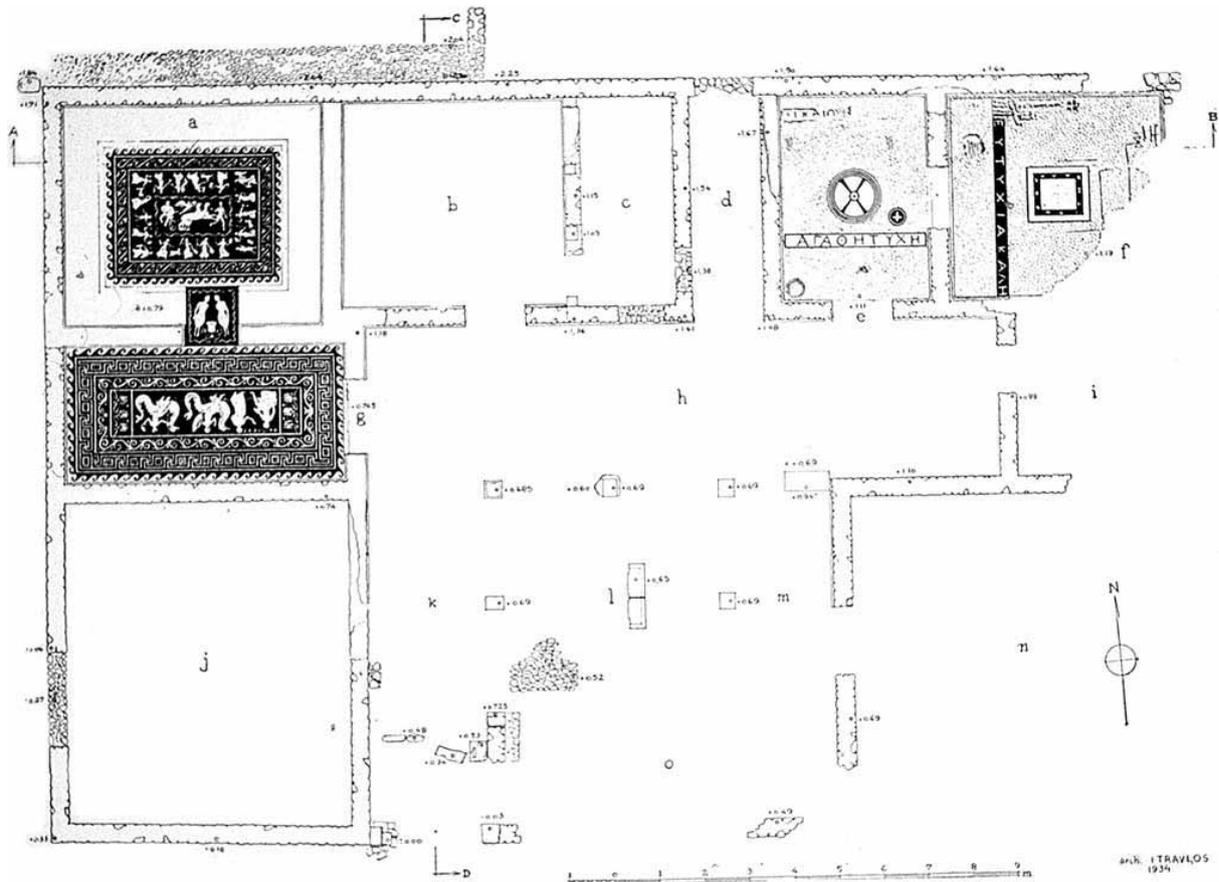


Fig. 1 – Olynthus, Villa of Good Fortune, plan (after ROBINSON 1934, fig. 1 p. 502).

complementary triumphal processions, eternal progressions toward happy ends, one referring to the earth, the other to the sea. (Thetis, granddaughter of Neptune and mother of Achilles, was, after all, a sea deity, who commanded the Nereids to transport the arms from Vulcan to her hero son.) The conjoining threshold mosaic of two Pans flanking a crater may be said to epitomize this mythological conjuncture of earthiness with liquidity, perhaps recalling in this context the Homeric metaphor of the “wine-dark sea” (fig. 2, 3).

At the opposite side of the house appear diametrically opposed, non-figured panels without borders, combining words and abstract, mostly well-known magical symbols. In the first room: ΑΓΑΘΗΤΥΧΗ (Good Fortune), with the wheel of good fortune, double-axes, swastikas, the letter A (fig. 3a).

In the second room: ΕΥΤΥΧΙΑ ΚΑΛΕ (Good Luck is Beautiful), with wheels, letters and other abstract signs (fig. 3b). Although the symbols are strewn about at random, there is a dominant structure analogous to the figurative scenes: the inscriptions are oriented to the entrance and there is a central “circumferential” motif, one circular, the other square, the latter with an inscription, ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ ΚΑΛΕ (Aphrodite is Beautiful), facing outward like the maenad-satyr frieze in the Dionysos pavement. The inscriptions are also presented as complementary contrasts: in the first room “Good Fortune” is black-on-white; in the second, both “Good Luck is Beautiful” and “Aphrodite is Beautiful” are white-on-black.

In sum, at one end the house exhibits the clear, predictable, narrative rationality that we normally associate with classical Greek



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Fig. 2 – 1, Achilles, Thetis, and Nereids mosaic; 2, Dionysiac procession mosaic; 3, Pans and Krater mosaic (after ROBINSON 1934, pls. XXX, XXIX, fig. 3 p. 509).

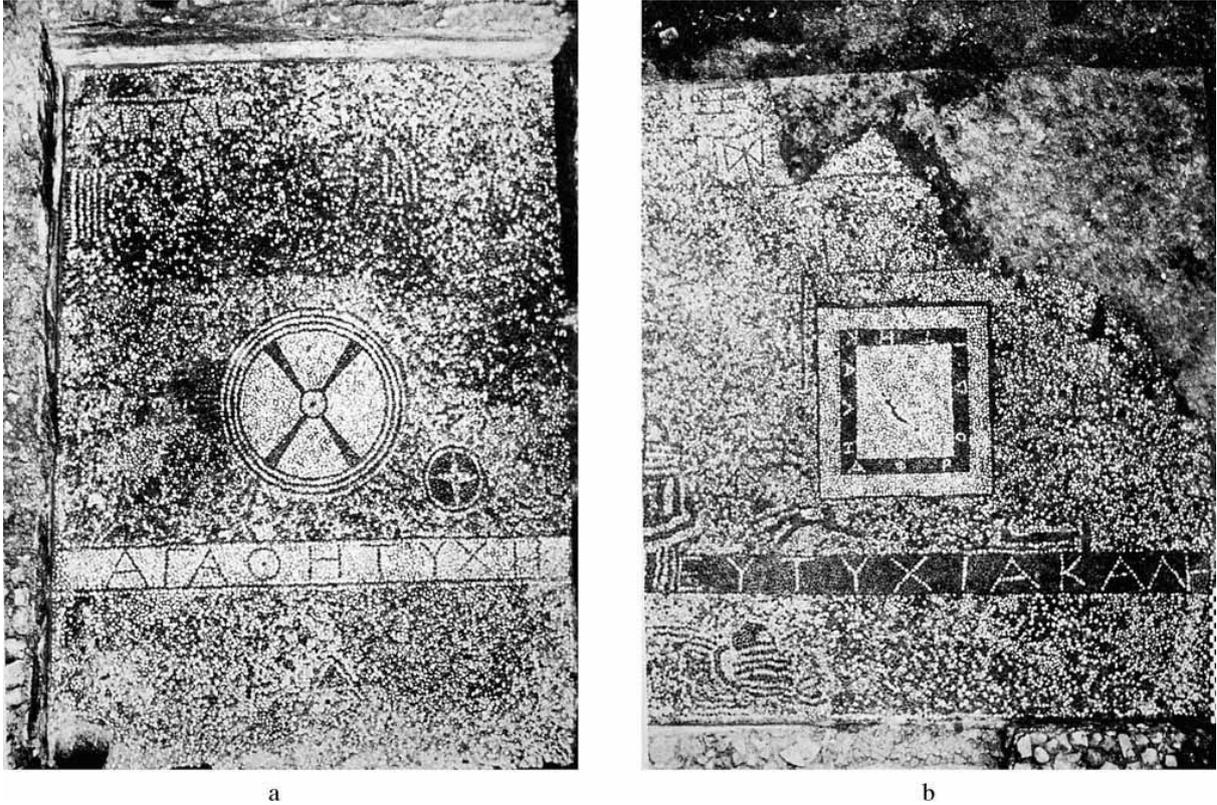


Fig. 3 – a, “Good Fortune” mosaic; b, “Good Luck is Beautiful” and “Aphrodite is Beautiful” mosaic (after ROBINSON 1934, fig. 2 p. 504).

culture. The theme is heroic, celebratory, and this-worldly. At the other end of the house rationality seems superimposed upon or conflated with an equal and opposite domain of irrationality, chance, and even the demonic: the words make sense but they refer to senseless chance, and allude implicitly to their unspoken opposites, ugliness and bad luck. What is remarkable here is the consonance between form and content, between image and meaning: the structure serves to define both in words and design the totally unstructured and un-designed realm of fate and mystical augury to which the *tyche* is subject. Furthermore, while the structural elements, the words and central motifs, seem to remain on the surface, the rest of the floor takes on the quality of a universe – that is, the third, other-worldly domain complementing and completing those of the land and sea represented in the opposite rooms – inhabited here not by

orderly human beings and animals, but by erratic, powerful signs of magical forces. The rational is represented rationally, the irrational is represented irrationally. Taken together, the pavements embody a sort of cosmology comprising the material and the immaterial, the seen and unseen aspects of the world.

#### *House A xi 9*

In a pavement in another house at Olynthus irrationality is the absolute rule: the entire floor consists of magical symbols distributed helter-skelter over the whole surface, or rather through the whole space (fig. 4). No rime or reason may be discerned, except the realization that here the unnamed and untamed spirits reign supreme. The design conveys its profound, disturbing meaning precisely by its absence of design. It is a well-known tradition in ancient



Fig. 4 – Olynthus, House A xi 9 : mosaic with occult symbols (after ROBINSON 1934, pl. XXXI, fig. 2 p. 504).

architectural decoration that the floor and the ceiling often reflect one another; here, like Alice's mirror, the pavement becomes a window to a scintillating spatial realm that seems to dwarf our own.

The Olynthus mosaics may thus be said to manifest in a profoundly revealing way the breadth of the Hellenic, or Hellenistic psyche,

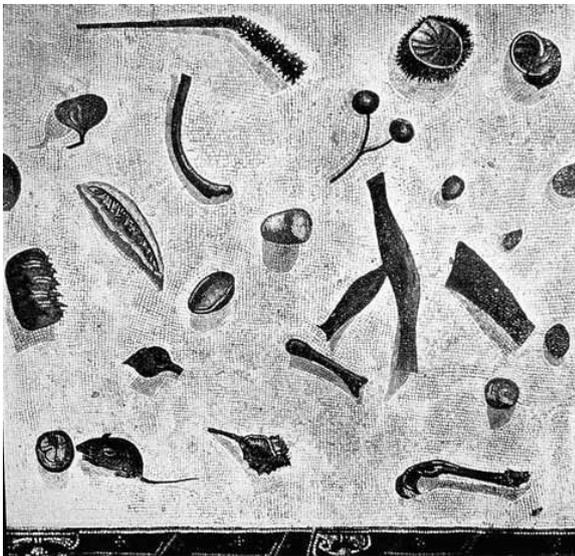


Fig. 5 – Vatican Museum, Rome : *Asarotos oikos* mosaic, signed by Heraklitos (photo : Museum).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the *asarotos* theme, with bibliography, see DUNBABIN, *Mos. Greek & Roman World*,

ranging between the reasonable, articulate world of nature and language, to the abstract, mysterious, supercharged intimation of chaos.

I believe these antipodes, instead of being largely juxtaposed, as at Olynthus, were actually merged in other contexts, as in the *asarotos oikos*, the unswept floor pavements, with which those at Olynthus have been compared, quite rightly, but also quite insufficiently, I think (fig. 5)<sup>3</sup>. Roger Hinks thought the *asarotos* theme in bad taste, literally and metaphorically, and “*un-Greek in spirit*”, reflecting “*some external influence*”. Such works are foreign to the “*logical and uniform evolution of the Greek visual sense*”<sup>4</sup>. On the contrary, in my view they are not only

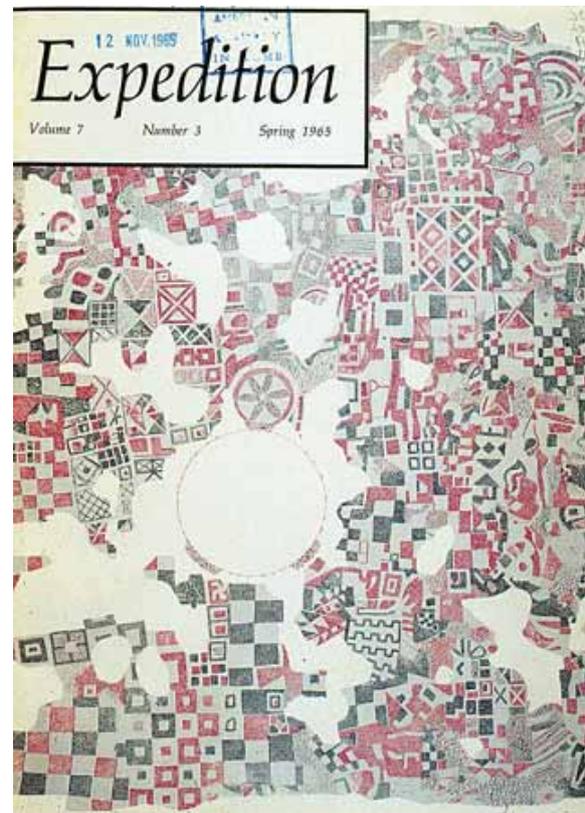


Fig. 6 – Gordion : mosaic with occult symbols. (after *Expedition*, VII/3, 1964-1965, cover illustration).

p. 26, fig. 9.

<sup>4</sup>HINKS 1933.



Fig. 7 – National Archeological Museum, Athens : altar from Epidaurus, front and side (photos : Museum).

comparable in design, but also in meaning, and thus reinforce one another as testimonies, not just to the compatibility, but also to the interdependence of reason and unreason in Hellenic, or Hellenistic, mentality.

Marcel Renard long ago made sense of the theme by citing a number of texts which described a commonly held superstition that it was forbidden to clean up the left-overs of a meal that had fallen to the floor because they served as sustenance to the spirits of the dead, who would take revenge upon the living if their needs were not satisfied<sup>5</sup>. Diogenes Laertes, citing Aristotle, reports this idea as one of the mystico-religious proscriptions of Pythagoras, and Pliny reports it as an ancient tradition. Pliny, *NH*, XXVIII, 26 : “It is supposed to be a most unlucky sign for the floor to be swept while a diner is leaving the banquet, or for a table or dumb-waiter to be removed while a guest is drinking” (*recedente aliquo ab epulis simul verri solum aut bibente conviva mensam vel repositorium tolli inauspicatissimum iudicatur*); XXVIII, 27 : “These customs were established by those of old, who believed that gods are present on all occasions and at all times, and therefore left them to us reconciled even in our faults” (*haec*

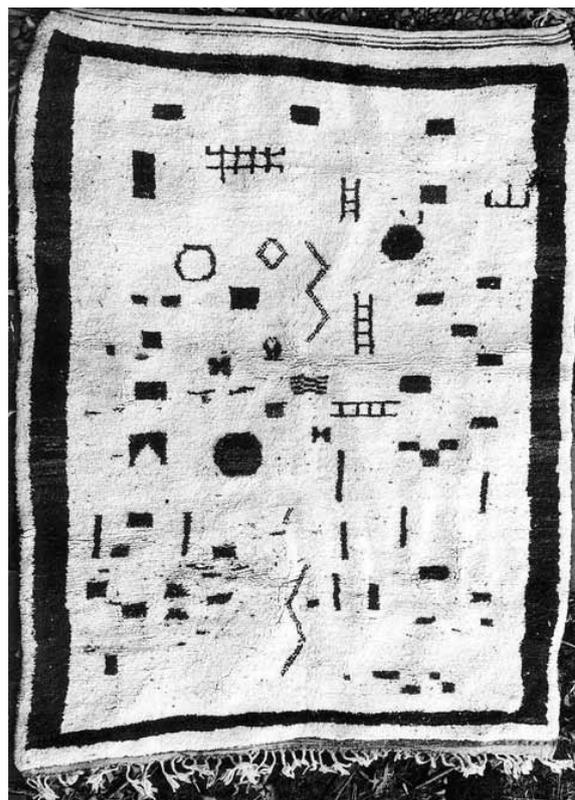


Fig. 8 – Modern carpet with occult symbols, from Marrakesh (collection of the author).

<sup>5</sup> RENARD 1956, followed by DEONNA, RENARD 1961.

*instituere illi qui omnibus negotiis horisque interesse credebant deos, et ideo placatos etiam vitiis nostris relinquerunt).*

The relevance of these texts has been questioned, mainly on the grounds that they speak of old, presumably outmoded practices of superstition<sup>6</sup>. I would argue, on the contrary, that precisely the vivid recollection of this apotropaic menace is what underlies and motivates the hallucinatory magic realism and illusionism of these images: the spirits take them for the real thing. On the point of recollection or re-evocation, I would only make three small comments. In my view, the very fact that the practices were regarded as ancient is evidence of their relevance to these later mosaic pavements that represent them. I call to witness what is by far the closest precedent for the Olynthus scatter-designs, a pebble mosaic from Gordion dating from the later 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., which displayed many of the same motifs in much the same way, including the uncanny chromatic interplay of positive and negative visual charges (fig. 6)<sup>7</sup>. The Olynthus mosaics include exactly the kind of archaistic reprise that Renard's texts would suggest. Secondly, I would point out that this kind of deliberate,

explicit, and knowing revival of ancient traditions is by no means unique: in fact, it is a characteristic of 4<sup>th</sup> century culture and there are many examples in art, as witness the late 4<sup>th</sup> century sculptured altar in Athens where the figures at the front are in "normal" 4<sup>th</sup> century style, while those at the sides are astonishingly accurate replications of archaic prototypes (fig. 7)<sup>8</sup>. The fact that the work is an altar also indicates that the juxtaposition has religious, indeed cultic associations. Finally, I must say that all we need do to understand this 4<sup>th</sup>-century recrudescence in what we imagine to be a more rational age, of ancient and what we imagine to be obsolete religious beliefs and practices, is to look around us: children who play trick or treat at Halloween, the feast of the dead, enact the same apotropaic extortion of nourishment in exchange for peace-of-mind; and what else is the great recrudescence of fundamentalism in many religions throughout the world that has come back to haunt us today? The design and motifs of the pavement of House A xi 9 at Olynthus are practically duplicated in a new Berber carpet purchased at Marrakesh in 1999 (fig. 8).

Irving LAVIN

## DISCUSSION

Pauline DONCEEL-VOÛTE: Concerning the "unreasonable" carpet: apotropaic motifs are indeed placed off-center, on different sides, or just around the corner, so as to catch the Evil Eye/*Invidus* unaware. These motifs function diversely: interlace motifs, solidly locked such as the Solomon knot, ensnare Evil; whereas crenelations in a border form a barrier. Quite different are the powerful actions to be expected from the representation of a Medusa head or a phallus. Here and there, accompanying inscriptions give some

sort of "directions for use". Indeed, one of the main iconological questions, over and over again, and in this case for your two carpets: how does the sign, or how do the images function, individually and syntactically?

Irving LAVIN: Yes, indeed, and the challenge lies in understanding how the illogic of these designs means to "Beat the Devil"!

Pauline DONCEEL-VOÛTE: Which is shown by the different meanings of the word «malin» in French!

<sup>6</sup> MEYER 1977, HAGENOW 1978.

<sup>7</sup> DUNBABIN, *Mos. Greek & Roman World*, p. 5; a copy of the mosaic is reproduced in color on the cover of the issue of *Expedition* with the original publication by

YOUNG 1964-1965.

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed this sort of archaism as part of a perennial dialogue between "alternate" cultures within the western tradition, in LAVIN 1990.

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