

Sara Ramey
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Allusion to Homer in the Mosaic of Odysseus and the Sirens from Dougga

One of the best classical depictions of Odysseus and the sirens, the third century CE mosaic from the Maison de Dionysos et d'Ulysse in Dougga (Tunisia), was found on the western side of a water basin across from the main triclinium.¹ 'Odysseus and the sirens' is a scene type identifiable by its essential iconography of a man tied to a mast. The mosaic from Dougga, constructed in fine *opus vermiculatum*, shows the mythological hero Odysseus bound to the mast of his ship at sea. Nearby on a shore, three sirens play instruments or sing while, on the left of the panel, a fisherman standing in an ornate ship holds up his catch. The mosaic illustrates Odysseus' encounter with the seductive sirens, a story told in Homer's *Odyssey*, though small details in the rendition differ from the textual account.² While this mosaic is unique for its place of prominence and thoughtful execution, its cultural significance can only be fully considered in the context of the peristyle's overall decorative scheme, which conveys a cohesive message about the patron's cultural knowledge and access to scarce resources.

A survey of mosaics in Roman North Africa shows that the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens at Dougga is not unique in its marine theme, scene type or placement on a water basin. In their studies, Margherita Carucci and Katherine Dunbabin recorded a combined total of 158 mosaics in and around basins and other water structures.³ Of those 158 mosaics, ninety-two depict scenes that Carucci or Dunbabin classifies as "marine," imagery conceptually connected to water, from depictions of waves to renditions of Neptune in non-oceanic contexts.⁴ Along with Neptune, Venus and Dionysus were also popular mythological figures in a marine context; the same basin at Dougga that contains the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens also contains, on the eastern side, a mosaic depiction of Dionysus punishing the Tyrrhenian pirates.⁵ Basins were a popular place for mosaics, including the side of a basin at Cherchel, which holds a close analogue to the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens at Dougga.⁶ If the placement of a mosaic on the side of a basin is common, then the marine theme of the Dougga mosaics is similarly ubiquitous. Of the forty-seven mosaics inside basins or fountains only, twenty-six are marked as marine-themed. Even the occurrence of the Odysseus and the sirens scene is not unique—there are eight mosaics in North Africa that depict either Odysseus with or without sirens, or sirens alone. While three of these mosaics depict sirens alone, the five that include Odysseus show him

¹ See Figure 1. Musée du Bardo inventory number A2884. LIMC online catalogue number 1643.

² *Odyssey* Book XII 36-200. Scenes from the *Iliad* are not depicted in the basins, peristyles or bathhouses of Roman North Africa. Odysseus and the sirens is the only scene type that appears in North African mosaics.

³ Margherita Carucci, *The Romano-African Domus*, especially pages 20-21, and Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, especially pages 248-278. Data on the mosaics is tabulated from references diffused throughout both books.

⁴ The other sixty-six non-marine mosaics Carucci and Dunbabin record divide into three other thematic categories. The decoration of thirty-six of the mosaics is primarily geometric, consisting of straight lines and shapes in a repeating pattern. These geometric mosaics are split between polychromatic and bi- or monochromatic schemes, indicating no particular tendency towards one chromatic style. The decoration of twenty-three of the mosaics is primarily vegetal: depictions of nonlinear plant imagery, four of which include animals in non-hunting contexts, especially birds. One of these sixty-six mosaics recorded in the vicinity of basins and water structures is a hunting scene. These categories sometimes overlap, such as one hunting scene in a fountain found in Carthage that features fowls as well as fishers (Dunbabin 253).

⁵ See Figure 2. The mosaic from Cherchel can also be seen on Dunbabin Plate VIII, Figure 16. The mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens can be found on Plate VIII, Figure 15, and Baratte Figure 13.

⁶ See Figure 3. Bovis 174.

tied to the mast of a ship, typically with sirens nearby, indicating that the scene is generic. In addition, at least five of the twenty-six recorded mosaics in basins and fountains include fishermen like the one on the left of the panel at Dougga.⁷ Therefore, the marine mosaic from Dougga is generic in that both the Odysseus and the sirens scene and the fisherman are repeated multiple times elsewhere with standardized features found in each instance.

The thematic repetition in the *Maison de Dionysos et d'Ulysse* at Dougga and other houses in North Africa suggests the desire for a coherent and visible decorative scheme.⁸ Two of the eight mosaics that depict Odysseus or sirens have unspecific find locations—those at Utica and Carthage—but the other six can be traced to specific areas of buildings.⁹ While it lacks Odysseus (likely due to damage), the mosaic of sirens at Oudhna's *Maison de Neptune* occurs on a threshold.¹⁰ In the adjacent oecus is a mosaic depiction of Neptune with various sea animals, surrounded by a vegetal pattern. The concurrence of marine mosaics is commonplace in North African buildings.¹¹ The marine themes naturally center on basins in courtyards due to the basins' function of water collection, so it is unsurprising that those mosaics of Odysseus and the sirens that can be traced to a particular area of the house are highly visible. While the mosaic at Oudhna was built along a threshold, the mosaic of sirens at Sousse was found in an oecus.¹² Dougga and Cherchel both feature mosaics of Odysseus and the sirens along basin rims. The last two, at Thaenae and Ammaedara, were placed into the floors of bathhouses.¹³ Each of these known locations is a well-traveled area of the building like the bathhouse floor or, as in the case of the basin mosaics, placed where visitors passing through the peristyle would see them. Not only were the mosaics located in highly visible areas, but there was a tendency for marine themes to continue beyond the peristyle. Coherent decorative schemes involved several mosaics placed where visitors could observe the unified theme.

While continuing the decorative marine theme, the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens at Dougga reflects thoughtful compositional choices designed to capture the fleeting attention of passersby. The panel itself is enormous, 140 by 353 centimeters or about 4.5 by 11.5 feet.¹⁴ Combined with its placement along the wall of a basin in sight of the doorway to the main triclinium, this size suggests the patron wanted visitors to notice the mosaic. The mosaicist draws the eye with several compositional choices. The ocean is indicated by straight lines of alternating blue tones under the ships with an edge of brown and yellow shoreline on the right. While the white of the upper half of the mosaic at first suggests sky above a horizon, the mosaicist places

⁷ Here, too, descriptions by Dunbabin and Carucci lack enough detail to be useful in identifying whether some mosaics include particular features like fishermen.

⁸ It is difficult to know who was responsible for the creation of the decorative scheme, whether the patron was intimately involved in the process, employed a designer, or allowed the mosaicist to choose.

⁹ The Utica mosaic can be found on Dunbabin 276 and Lafaye, et al. 929, i. The Carthage mosaic is found on Hinks XXXI.

¹⁰ See Figure 4. Dunbabin 267. LIMC online catalogue number 1576.

¹¹ Another example is the *Maison de Neptune* in Acholla, whose second-century CE mosaics in the oecus and basin are marine-themed (Dunbabin 248). This concurrence does not preclude the possibility of a single house having multiple themes in different areas—the *Maison de Neptune* at Acholla also features a mosaic of masks in Room H. Rather, rooms or clusters of rooms tend to share the same theme. Other themes may also carry across rooms, such as in Acholla's *Maison d'Asinius Rufinus*, whose vine-scrolls spill from a basin into a triclinium.

¹² See Figure 5. Foucher figure 57.119. LIMC online catalogue number 1553.

¹³ See Figure 6. The Thaenae mosaic can be found in Dunbabin plate IX. The Ammaedara mosaic can be found at Baratte figure 8 and LIMC online catalogue 492.

¹⁴ Pappalardo 245. The panel itself is missing its corners and much of the border (a wavelike pattern) but is mostly intact otherwise except for a patch of lost tesserae over the fisherman's hand.

jagged blue lines and fish to indicate the continuation of the water into the distance. The combination of solid water and zigzag lines in the sky suggests a receding ocean. If the mosaicist made the background solid blue like the sea beneath the ship's hull, much of the color contrast would be lost. The disadvantage to this method of depicting an ocean extending into the distance is a disjunction in styles. The zigzag lines begin abruptly above the ground line and disrupt the naturalism of the setting.¹⁵

The mosaicist chooses compositional emphasis over naturalism again when he depicts the figures in three clusters highlighted against a backdrop shared only by their cluster. Each of the ships defines a space in which the figures aboard can stand, with depth suggested by the truncation of limbs, like the fisherman's legs, which disappear below the side of his ship as he stands on deck. These frames cause the figures and objects to overlap in a confined space. Likewise, the rocks on the shore unite the third cluster, the sirens, against a common backdrop that is both spatially and chromatically distinct from the other clusters. The mosaicist focuses attention on each grouping of figures by minimizing distractions, like too-similar color tones or a cluttered panel. The contrast enables visitors to glance quickly at the mosaic and formulate an idea of its content.

Any close inspection of the mosaic's content would further impress on a visitor the fineness and expense of the mosaic, which reflect well on the taste and wealth of the patron. Both ships are depicted in an ornate style, highlighted with rich red and yellow tesserae and a miniature portrait on the side of Odysseus' ship. Odysseus' simple white tunic emphasizes the vulnerability of his exposed position tied to the mast. In contrast, his soldiers are protected from physical and mental attack by armor and ear plugs. They carry gleaming shields, as befit their status as warriors who fought in the Trojan War. Interestingly, none of the figures are overly muscled. Even Odysseus, also a warrior, has unarticulated limbs. The heads of the figures are rounded and large, perhaps to be better seen from a distance as visitors pass through the peristyle. What small details escape a passing glance can be better appreciated at leisure. The sails of Odysseus' ship are twisted as if being pushed by the wind, blowing him and his companions away from the temptation that awaits them on the shore. The figures are depicted in a variety of interesting poses.¹⁶ The rightmost siren reclines on a rock while the siren closest to the shore bends one knee. Odysseus stands with his hands pulled behind his back and the fisherman proudly lifts his catch aloft. These dynamic poses, along with the movement of fish jumping throughout the scene, are subtle enough not to be distracting but intriguing upon closer inspection. The mosaicist considered the best way to first capture attention through a striking composition and then how to hold attention with fine craftsmanship and interesting details.

Although small details differ between the account in Homer's *Odyssey* and this rendition, the unique iconography of a man tied to a mast increases the likelihood that the mosaic would be recognizable as a rendition of this moment in the story. The mosaicist depicts the moment when

¹⁵ While the setting is not entirely naturalistic, the shading of the mosaic is consistent with a light source—likely intended to be the sun—originating from the left side of the panel. Objects in the scene are shaded darker on the right and this shading is often subtle, following folds in the clothing, such as on the furry white shirt of the fisherman in the leftmost boat. The shields of the warriors in the larger ship are likewise shaded with curved lines of darker and lighter highlights, as occurs when light hits a metallic surface. Rather than outlining figures with dark stones, the mosaicist uses this detailed alteration of darkness and light to indicate contours.

¹⁶ All of the figures stand on one of four distinct planes of depth. The first includes the largest object in the scene, Odysseus' ship, and the siren reclining on the shore. The siren fully clothed in blue stands on an intermediate plane before the third plane, which includes the third siren—closest to the shoreline—and the fisherman's small boat. The rocks in the background suggest a fourth plane.

Odysseus faces death if he succumbs to the sirens' music. The stance of the lead siren on the shoreline suggests that music has been—or is about to be—played, and Odysseus is tempted. His men's eyes, however, stare towards the fisherman on the left of the panel rather than towards the sirens.¹⁷ In the text, Odysseus is described as being tied “upright against the mast.”¹⁸ The mosaic depiction is consistent with Odysseus' method of escape in the *Odyssey* and presumably his companions cannot hear the sirens because their ears are plugged with wax.¹⁹ The major narrative points of Odysseus' escape from the sirens are the same as those in Homer's *Odyssey*.

While many details included in the mosaic agree with details from the text, the only iconography really necessary to identify the scene as a depiction of Odysseus and the sirens is a man tied to a mast. Nowhere else in Roman art is the image of a man tied to a mast used as an identifying feature, and each of the five North African mosaic depictions that include Odysseus show him bound aboard his ship. The presence of sirens in all but one of the mosaics that also includes Odysseus at first suggests that sirens are part of the scene type's necessary iconography. However, sirens are depicted in three instances without Odysseus in North Africa.²⁰ Only Odysseus' ship survives in the fragmentary mosaic at Ammaedara but the scene type remains the same.²¹ Despite the lack of a description of sirens in Homer, art as early as the fifth century BCE depicted sirens as women with the attributes of birds, especially sticklike legs and wings.²² The mosaics at Oudhna and Sousse both depict a trio of sirens—one with a lyre, one with a double flute and one posed as if singing.²³ This tendency to depict sirens in trios carries into the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens at Dougga. All three of the sirens have the legs and wings of a bird. The siren on the far left holds a double flute while the siren on the far right holds a lyre. The middle siren curls one arm to her chest with her lips parted as if singing. While a description of sirens' instruments and birdlike features is not found in Homer, those characteristics appear in other texts by the fourth century CE.²⁴ The mosaic from Dougga depicts the sirens carrying a double flute and lyre with cloths draped over their waist while the middle siren is fully clothed. In the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens on a fountain rim at Cherchel, the sirens carrying the lyre and double flute are also partially clad while the siren who sings is fully clothed.²⁵ However, other mosaics like that at Sousse depict sirens without any clothing. The number, instruments and birdlike characteristics of the sirens are all part of the sirens' necessary iconography as mythological creatures. The sirens are identified separately from the scene type of Odysseus and the sirens, especially in mosaics where they alone appear, as in the medallions at Sousse. While a man tied to a mast is crucial to identifying a mosaic depiction of Odysseus and the sirens, the sirens themselves are not. The simplicity of this necessary iconography gives the scene the potential to be quickly identifiable by guests strolling through the peristyle.

The Odysseus and the sirens scene at Dougga is not merely convenient to the marine

¹⁷ Whether the men see the fisherman or are simply facing their direction of travel away from the shore is unclear.

¹⁸ Homer 12.51.

¹⁹ Another detail that differs from the text of Homer at 12.172 is that as Odysseus' company approaches the island, the sailors “with their planed oarboards whitened the water.” In the depiction, the oars of the ship lie still and wind is what carries the ship away from the island.

²⁰ In the mosaics from Sousse, Carthage and Oudhna, although the latter two are fragmentary.

²¹ See Figure 6 for an image of the mosaic from Ammaedara.

²² A fifth century BCE statuette of the birdlike siren can be found on the online LIMC, item 14656.

²³ See Figure 4 for a small image of the mosaic from Oudhna and Figure 5 for an image of the mosaic from Sousse.

²⁴ Hyginus in his *Fabulae* writes of the sirens, “Above their waist they were women but hens below” (number 254, page 254 of the *Anthology of Classical Myth*). This could be a case of artistic depictions filtering into literature rather than the other way around, though it is impossible to know for sure.

²⁵ See Figure 3 for an image of the mosaic from Cherchel.

theme, although it does fit into that theme, but also reflects the patron's desire to display cultural sophistication. Alan Cameron provides evidence for the widespread recognition of myths in educated, upper-class Roman circles. The patron's guests likely would have recognized the myth as a reference to Odysseus and the sirens, as "mythology became a part of literary culture, in effect a status marker."²⁶ Cameron gives the example of Calvisius Sabinus, who was criticized by Seneca in the first century CE because he had a bad memory for mythology. Sabinus kept bringing up misnamed heroes because, as Seneca writes, "this didn't stop him wanting to appear a man of culture."²⁷ Sabinus' desire to display his cultural sophistication was stronger than his fear of humiliation for getting the names wrong. Cameron argues that Seneca criticized people like Sabinus for misusing mythological references "precisely because they are core components of a literary culture dinned into any well-brought-up child."²⁸ The mark of a culturally sophisticated person was in part their ability to make mythological references. Cameron concludes that mythology was a shared language among the wealthy, as shown by the fourth-century politician, Prohaeresius, who, when asked to give an impromptu speech, filled his oratory with mythological references.²⁹ Cameron's observes that poetry with mythological themes became popular again in the third century.³⁰ This rise in popularity may account for the patron's choice to commission a mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens in the third century at Dougga. This spike in popularity may also explain the inclusion of a mosaic of Dionysus punishing the Tyrrhenian pirates on the opposite side of the basin; the mythological reference comes from a Homeric Hymn.³¹ Mythological themes that appeared in art, including mosaics, showed the patron to be cultured. Yet while myths were popular in the third century, it was not the exact text-to-art match of details that mattered but the most striking imagery from the textual account. As Cameron says, "the essence of many a myth was simply one vivid, memorable, often shocking detail: Oedipus marrying his mother..."³² The most striking image involved in the Odysseus and the sirens scene is Odysseus tied to a mast. This "shocking detail" comprises the scene type's essential iconography, the quickly-recognizable and well-known image that would have struck cultured visitors passing through the peristyle.

The iconography of marine mosaics is both relevant to placement in water structures and representative of scarce resources. Gifty Ako-Adounvo analyzes a mosaic of Neptune from La Chebba, concluding that "Neptune's popularity seems not to have stemmed from cult, but from his character as the chief marine deity whose providence had to be constantly invoked by the seafaring townsfolk of coastal North Africa, as a deity of the fresh waters so important to the province" (16). The decoration of a home with images of scarce resources suggested that the owner of the villa not only had access to those resources, but excess wealth to spend on commissioning mosaics of them. Ships are especially prominent in North African marine mosaics, as they represent access to water and fish, items that satisfy thirst and hunger but are rare in a desert environment. Odysseus' ship in the mosaic from Dougga is similar to one seen in a second century CE mosaic from La Chebba.³³ The scene in the mosaic from La Chebba is an emblemata-type square set in a vegetal and geometric carpet. Like the ship in the mosaic of

²⁶ Cameron 218.

²⁷ Quoted in Cameron 232.

²⁸ Cameron 232.

²⁹ Cameron 222.

³⁰ Cameron 221.

³¹ Ennaifer 73. See Figure 2 for an image of the mosaic of Dionysus punishing the Tyrrhenian pirates.

³² Cameron 238.

³³ See Figure 7. Online LIMC item 1594.

Odysseus and the sirens from Cherchel, the sail is truncated due to restrictions of space. Given more space on the side of the basin, the mosaic at Dougga includes two full sails. The fish in each of these mosaics—from Dougga, Cherchel and La Chebba—are of distinctly different species. In the mosaic from Dougga, the fisherman holds up a spindly crayfish while a gray fish swims in the upper left corner of the panel. Other fish in the scene include a brown fat-bellied specimen in the upper right corner and a pair of jumping blue fish in the bottom left. The variety of these fish, the prominent depiction of water and ships—along with other, vegetal mosaics in the surrounding peristyle—combine to emphasize a message of abundance.³⁴

The closest parallel in location and content to the mosaic from Dougga is that from Cherchel, which was also found in a basin. However, the Cherchel mosaic is rendered with larger tesserae in a plainer style, lacking the tiny portrait on the hull of the ship and other small details, and is also given less space, as shown by the necessary truncation of the sails. In contrast to the mosaics of Odysseus and the sirens found in domestic spaces, the mosaics at Ammaedara and Thaenae depict the scene as a small portion of a larger marine mosaic. The mosaics from Ammaedara and Thaenae are large fields crowded with mythological figures, including numerous generic figures like Tritons and Nereids.³⁵ The center of the mosaic from Thaenae is Aeon on a dolphin, not Odysseus and the sirens. The inclusion of numerous other figures suggests that in these public spaces, the Odysseus and the sirens scene was not individually significant but was part of a general theme of mythological marine references. The scene of Odysseus and the sirens could be replaced with Amphitrite or any other marine-based mythological figure and the mosaic would have the same effect. The mosaics from Dougga and Cherchel instead prominently display the scene of Odysseus and the sirens. This split in private versus public functions suggests that the owners of private domiciles like the *Maison de Dionysos et d'Ulysse* desired their mythological references to be immediately recognizable and appreciable.³⁶

The Odysseus and the sirens scene has frequently been taken to represent sin and sexual temptation. In the fourth century CE the bishop Ambrose writes that sirens are “figures of sensual pleasure, and which Christians ought to be taught to avoid.”³⁷ Ambrose interprets the allure of the sirens as sexual. Mythological scenes were often interpreted “as allegory (whether physical, spiritual, or moral) in the essayists and philosophers.”³⁸ Men of culture like philosophers were known to take myths as extended metaphors for situations encountered in life, so the possibility that guests at the *Maison de Dionysos et d'Ulysse* might have entertained an allegorical meaning for the mosaic is not farfetched. This scene from Homer had been interpreted as an allegory as early as the first century CE, when Heraclitus wrote, “Who listens to the Sirens, i.e., learns the many lessons of historical knowledge from every age?... Homer allegorizes shamelessness that takes many forms.”³⁹ Ambrose interprets the sirens’ temptation as

³⁴ While generic images of abundance like fish are included in all marine mosaics, the particular style of those images could be altered without changing their meaning. In the mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens from Dougga, the fisherman stands in a boat as colorful as the trireme of Odysseus.

³⁵ See Figure 6 for an image of the mosaic from Ammaedara.

³⁶ The separation of this scene type as occurring in either private or public spaces can help to identify the provenance of mosaics like that from Carthage. The mosaicist depicts three sirens on a shore, in a style reminiscent of the mosaics from Cherchel and Dougga. While Odysseus is absent from the fragments, his presence can be inferred based on the size of the figures of the panel, which are larger than those included in bathhouse mosaics.

³⁷ *Exposition of the Christian Faith, Book III, Chapter 1.*

³⁸ Cameron 217.

³⁹ *Homeric Problems* 70, page 120 of the *Anthology of Classical Myth*.

sexual but Heraclitus focuses on “shamelessness,” which stems from the desire for “historical” rather than sexual knowledge. Ambrose is motivated by a Christian ethos that rejects sin while Heraclitus is preoccupied by “many lessons of historical knowledge.” Heraclitus’ interpretation is closer to what Circe tells Odysseus in the *Odyssey*: that if he stays tied to the mast, he “can have joy in hearing the songs of the Sirens.”⁴⁰ Heraclitus interprets the “joy” of the sirens’ song to be the joy of learning about history, possibly because, as a student of history and philosophy, this knowledge represented his greatest delight. Ambrose dismisses the sirens as sexual temptresses but their song is more complex than that. The “joy” offered by the sirens is intriguingly ambiguous and may have heightened the desirability of depictions because of the interpretive challenge the scene presents to viewers. It is tempting to imagine dinner guests conversing over the allegorical implications of the scene they glimpsed in the peristyle. However, it is impossible to know the intentions of the patron, mosaicist or other interior decorator involved in the project. While marine imagery represents scarce resources and mythological references suggest cultural sophistication, the extent to which an allegorical interpretation was favored cannot be determined from the extant evidence.

The mosaic of Odysseus and the sirens from Dougga is set apart by its place of prominence and fine execution but ultimately cannot be considered independently of its surroundings. The scene type of Odysseus and the sirens, when displayed in a highly visible area of the peristyle, signaled to visitors the cultural knowledge of the patron. The quality of execution and size of the pictorial mosaic demonstrated the wealth of the owner, who could afford to pay for such lavish decorations. Guests likely would have recognized the unique iconography of the scene, a man tied to a mast, and linked the allusion to their sense of the patron’s cultural sophistication. The mosaic represents a deliberate effort to both continue the existing marine imagery of abundance and impress visitors with an expensive reference to a myth from Homer’s *Odyssey*.

⁴⁰ Homer 12.52.

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