

The Ptolemy Painting? Alexander's "right-hand man" and the origins of the Alexander Mosaic

Joshua J. Thomas

Institut für Klassische Archäologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
<joshua.thomas@lmu.de>

Abstract: This article revisits the origins of the Alexander Mosaic at Pompeii by focusing on the figure standing at Alexander's right hand. The starting point is Andreas Rumpf's suggestion that this "right-hand man" may be the patron of the original painting, who wished to advertise his own role in the represented battle. It is argued that Ptolemy I is perhaps the strongest candidate on historical grounds, and that interesting connections can be drawn between the mosaic and the historian Kleitarchos, who worked at the Ptolemaic court. Circumstantial support for a Ptolemaic connection is supplied by other finds from the House of the Faun, three of which are briefly re-examined.

Keywords: Alexander Mosaic, Hellenistic court painting, Ptolemy I Soter, Kleitarchos of Alexandria, House of the Faun

Alexander's right-hand man

The Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun at Pompeii is perhaps the most famous mosaic surviving from Antiquity, depicting Alexander the Great at the head of a cavalry charge, rushing into combat against Darius III and the Persian army.¹ Although the mosaic itself is dated to the early 1st c. BCE, it is almost universally held to be a copy of a lost battle painting of the Early Hellenistic period. Considerations in favor of this viewpoint include that the mosaic is executed in the four-color palette associated with the great painters of the 5th and 4th c. BCE; that the central figure scheme appears also on artifacts that predate the mosaic itself; and that the depicted militaria closely resemble real armor and military equipment of the late 4th c. BCE.

Much scholarship on the mosaic has focused on who commissioned the missing "source painting" on which it was modeled. An important contribution was made by Andreas Rumpf in 1962.² Rumpf fastened attention on a previously little-discussed aspect of the mosaic's iconography: the surviving sliver of a profile face adjacent to Alexander's right arm, belonging to a figure shown standing immediately behind the Macedonian king, his sarissa, and Boukephalos (Figs. 1–2). He recognized that this figure certainly represents a Macedonian and pointed out that "it is no coincidence that he is directly next to Alexander ... that he is shown helmetless, and that his facial features are worked through in detail."³ The importance of this "right-hand man" is further suggested by the fact that he fights on foot alongside cavalry in the Macedonian front line. This artificial placement serves to spotlight him in a striking way.

Rumpf identified the right-hand man as the patron of the missing source painting, who fought alongside Alexander at the represented battle, and who, at a later stage, wished to

¹ Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (MANN) inv. 10020. Discovered in 1831. Key studies include: Fuhrmann 1931; Hölscher 1973, 122–69; Andrae 1977; Nylander 1983; Stewart 1993, 130–50; Cohen 1997; Pfrommer 1998; Moreno 2000; Ehrhardt 2008; von Hase 2009.

² Rumpf 1962, 238–40.

³ Rumpf 1962, 239 (transl. author).



Fig. 1. Detail from the Alexander Mosaic, showing Alexander riding Boukephalos and the right-hand man standing directly at his side. MANN inv. 10020. (© Carole Raddato/Wikimedia Commons. The file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>]).



Fig. 2. Detail from the Alexander Mosaic, showing the right-hand man's portrait. MANN inv. 10020. (© Carole Raddato/Wikimedia Commons. The file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license [<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>]. Photo cropped by author.)

emphasize his special relationship with the king. These conditions best suit one of the protagonists in the power struggle that followed Alexander's death: a figure with the standing of Ptolemy I Soter, Seleukos I Nikator, or Lysimachos. Rumpf tentatively proposed, on iconographic grounds, that the figure might represent Ptolemy.

While several later studies agreed with Rumpf concerning the importance of the right-hand man, most were reluctant to address the question of his identity. An exception was Michel Pfrommer's monograph on the mosaic, published in 1998. Pfrommer likewise suggested that the source painting originated in a Ptolemaic milieu, and entertained the idea that the right-

The Ptolemy Painting?

hand man might represent Ptolemy.⁴ But he also argued that the painting was produced in a late 3rd- or 2nd-c. BCE context, and that it served as an allegory for Ptolemaic victories over the Seleukids in the Syrian Wars. This later chronology for the source painting has found few followers, with the result that some of Pfrommer's other important observations concerning the mosaic have been overlooked.

A different conclusion was reached by Bernard Andreae in 2004.⁵ Andreae agreed with Rumpf on the importance of Alexander's right-hand man, even stating that "the longer one thinks about it, the less one can avoid identifying this foot-soldier as the true protagonist of the entire picture."⁶ This assessment was again founded on the figure's sharp portrait physiognomy, his proximity to Alexander, and his important role within the battle narrative. Unlike Rumpf, however, Andreae doubted that this figure represented Ptolemy. Rather, he presented a series of iconographic and historical observations to identify the figure as Seleukos I Nikator, and proposed that this king might have commissioned the source painting following the Battle of Ipsos in 301 BCE.

In what follows, the right-hand man's identity will be re-evaluated. After a discussion of methodology, we will see that both Ptolemy and Seleukos are credible candidates from an iconographic point of view. The discussion will then highlight some points of intersection between the mosaic's iconography and our surviving textual accounts of the great pitched battles between Alexander and Darius. These points of intersection seem to hinge on the *History* of Alexander's campaigns composed by Kleitarchos of Alexandria, who worked at the Ptolemaic court. Attention will then turn to the mosaic's display context in the House of the Faun, which offers circumstantial support for the notion of Ptolemaic origins.

Methodology

Any attempt to identify the right-hand man should be set against previous attempts to identify particular figures in works of art associated with the era of Alexander and his successors. Several approaches have been employed in this context, sometimes with contested results. It will be useful to reflect briefly on these approaches, before outlining the method to be followed here.

A first approach involves connecting a work of art to a composition recorded in our surviving texts. An example is Michael Donderer's reading of a Roman mosaic from Sétif in Algeria depicting Meleager, Atalanta, and two companions hunting the Calydonian Boar.⁷ Donderer suggested that this mosaic may be a copy of the painting of Ptolemy hunting by Antiphilos of Naukratis, mentioned briefly by Pliny the Elder.⁸ According to this interpretation, Antiphilos chose to depict Ptolemy I Soter as Meleager, elevating the theme of the royal hunt to a heroic level. There are, however, difficulties with Donderer's reading. From a textual perspective, Pliny's two-word account of Antiphilos's painting is surely too brief to establish a firm connection with the mosaic. And, from an iconographic standpoint,

⁴ Pfrommer 1998, 101–3, 202–9.

⁵ Andreae 2004.

⁶ Andreae 2004, 75 (transl. author).

⁷ Donderer 1988, 791–99.

⁸ Plin. *HN* 35.138.

the subject of the mosaic seems mythological. As Michèle Blanchard-Lemée has argued, the mosaic should probably be dissociated from Antiphrilos's painting.⁹

A similar approach has often been applied to the Alexander Mosaic. Indeed, the composition is routinely identified as a copy of an Early Hellenistic court painting mentioned by Pliny the Elder: the battle of Alexander against Darius painted by Philoxenos of Eretria for King Kassandros of Macedonia.¹⁰ Again, however, the association is problematic. We have seen already that the right-hand man may be the patron of the source painting, who wished to commemorate his own involvement in Alexander's campaigns. This would rule out Kassandros, since he did not take part in the Persian expedition. Furthermore, Pliny's four-word description of Philoxenos's painting is again too brief to permit a connection with the mosaic, especially since two further paintings with similar subject matter are attested: a battle against the Persians painted by Aristeides of Thebes for Mnason of Elateia, mentioned also by Pliny;¹¹ and a Battle of Issos by Helen of Egypt, mentioned by Ptolemaios Chennos.¹² The dangers of associating the Alexander Mosaic with any one of these paintings over the others should be self-evident.

Different criteria have been used to identify figures in the painted frieze of Tomb II at Vergina, an original masterpiece of the 4th c. BCE.¹³ This composition depicts a group of 10 hunters and their dogs pursuing quarry in a (mostly) wild landscape. A hierarchy among the hunters is established by differences in costume, equipment, and the role that each plays in the hunt. Two lion-hunters have usually been identified as protagonists: the youthful rider in the center of the frieze and the bearded rider to the right of the lion readying his attack. Still, there remains no consensus concerning their specific identities. This lack of consensus is bound up with the broader controversy concerning the date of the tomb, and whether it was constructed for Philip II (assassinated in 336 BCE) or for Philip III Arrhidaios (d. 317 BCE). The bearded rider has been identified as Philip II or as Arrhidaios, while the younger rider has been identified variously as Alexander the Great, Arrhidaios, Kassandros, or Alexander IV.¹⁴ As will be clear from these competing interpretations, neither rider can be identified on objective grounds.

It is because of these difficulties that some commentators have approached the frieze from new directions. Particularly notable are studies by Ada Cohen and Hallie Franks.¹⁵ Both authors refuse to be drawn into questions such as the date of the tomb, the identity of the tomb occupants, or the precise identities of the hunters depicted in the frieze. Instead they demonstrate how the composition reflects the importance of communal hunting in elite Macedonian identity, irrespective of the precise personalities involved.

Given that this approach has been applied so productively to the Vergina frieze, any attempt to identify specific figures in the Alexander Mosaic might risk seeming *démodé*. There are, however, important differences between these compositions that justify the continued search for historical detail in the mosaic. We have seen already that none of the

⁹ Blanchard-Lemée 2005.

¹⁰ Plin. *HN* 35.110. Studies entertaining an association with Philoxenos include: Fuhrmann 1931, 203–27; Hölscher 1973, 147, 159–62, 170–71; Stewart 1993, 147–50; Scheibler 1994, 63.

¹¹ Plin. *HN* 35.99. For a recent attempt to link Aristeides's painting with the mosaic, see Saatsoglou-Paliadeli 2019.

¹² Phot. *Bibl. cod.* 190, 149b, lines 29–33.

¹³ Tomb II frieze: Saatsoglou-Paliadeli 2004; Franks 2012.

¹⁴ Summary of existing identifications: Cohen 2010, 261–69.

¹⁵ Cohen 2010, 237–97; Franks 2012.

figures in the Vergina frieze can be identified with confidence, whereas Alexander and Darius are recognizable in the mosaic. This brings us to a second difference, which concerns the historicity of the represented events. In the case of the Vergina frieze, it remains unclear whether a real, historical hunt is shown. Several factors contribute to this uncertainty, not least the nudity of many of the hunters. By contrast, a much stronger case can be made that the Alexander Mosaic depicts one of the great pitched battles during the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire. This is not to suggest that the composition aims at “factual” documentation of a specific battle in the manner of, say, a modern photograph. Rather, we should follow Tonio Hölscher in supposing that it reproduces the “conceptual reality” of the battle concerned.¹⁶ According to this view, the mosaic combines references to a specific historical event with broader ideological concerns and iconographic conventions borrowed from earlier Greek art. It is because of this comparatively tight historical context that questions of identification may be posed with the possibility of productive results.¹⁷

The continued value of this line of enquiry is demonstrated by William Wootton’s analysis of a mosaic from Palermo.¹⁸ This composition is likewise a later copy of an earlier court painting, and depicts a hunt featuring a protagonist on horseback aiming his spear at a lion. Whereas this lion-hunter had previously been identified as Krateros,¹⁹ Wootton argued for Alexander the Great.²⁰ From an iconographic perspective, the key is the off-center *anastolē* in the hunter’s hair, recalling this aspect of Alexander’s appearance. Further support is offered by the inclusion of a Persian hunter, since references to Persians at court are most frequent during Alexander’s reign. The following examination of the right-hand man will progress according to a similar logic, focusing first on iconographic and then on broader historical and contextual considerations.

The right-hand man’s portrait

We may first consider the right-hand man’s portrait in detail (Fig. 2). The figure wears a deep red kausia – the Macedonian national cap – on his head, and a pale red chlamys – a garment associated with hunting and warfare – around his shoulders. His face is not quite in full profile, since his left eyebrow, eyelid, and eyelashes are partly visible, but we still receive a strong impression of his distinctive physiognomy. His prominent nose has a slightly curving ridge ending in a straight tip. Beneath, he has a remarkably expressive mouth, with thick red lips slightly parted and turned down at the corners. In Hellenistic portrait vocabulary, this kind of mouth expressed positive qualities like energy, sympathy, and concern.²¹ A pocket of shadow beneath the lower lip suggests a prominent chin. The chin itself and the upper lip are rendered in darker tesserae than the nose, indicating a light growth of stubble. This is the five o’clock shadow of the tireless campaigner whose commitment to his military responsibilities means that he has no time to shave.

¹⁶ Hölscher 2018, 223–26.

¹⁷ Other types of historicity have sometimes been proposed. It has been suggested, for example, that the mosaic does not refer to a specific battle but presents a generalizing image of Alexander’s conquests: see, e.g., Ehrhardt 2008.

¹⁸ Wootton 2002.

¹⁹ See e.g., Fuhrmann 1931, 246–51.

²⁰ Wootton 2002, 272–74.

²¹ Smith 1988, 50.

Both Rumpf and Andreae attempted to identify the figure through comparison with Hellenistic royal portraits surviving in other media. Rumpf stated simply: “maybe I am wrong, but it [the portrait] reminds me of the coins of Ptolemy Soter.”²² Andreae, meanwhile, identified the figure as Seleukos based on comparisons with the bronze bust from the Villa of the Papyri and posthumous coin portraits minted by Philetairos of Pergamon. For Andreae, these portraits all share the same profile, seen most clearly in the shape of the nose, the form of the mouth, and the prominence of the chin.²³

While these physiognomic similarities are interesting, they are insufficient to support a firm identification of the right-hand man. This is because the figure’s portrait is not typologically connected to any of our surviving portraits of *either* Ptolemy I Soter *or* Seleukos I Nikator, in the sense of both being versions of the same original portrait type. That is, the portraits do not share a sufficient number of closely observed physiognomic details to indicate that they certainly represent the same person.²⁴ Still, this need not contradict the notion that the right-hand man represents a known historical figure. After all, Alexander’s own appearance in the mosaic differs sharply both from his posthumous coin portraits and from the late 4th-c. and early 3rd-c. BCE sculpted portraits surviving in the Roman copy record.

There is, then, no secure, scientific basis for identifying the right-hand man on iconographic grounds alone. The most we can say is that this figure’s mature, militaristic physiognomy would have been well suited to the representation of an experienced campaigner such as Ptolemy or Seleukos.

The Alexander Mosaic, Ptolemy, and Kleitarchos

The only other internal evidence that bears on the right-hand man’s identity is the wider battle narrative of the scene. Those who agree that the composition refers to a specific battle have favored two possibilities: Issos in 333 BCE or Gaugamela in 331 BCE. Both readings depend, to a large extent, on the ancient textual tradition surrounding these battles. While I find the interpretation as Issos more compelling, I do not wish to reopen the debate.²⁵ Rather, it will be useful here to highlight some striking connections between the right-hand man, the ancient texts describing Alexander’s victories over Darius, and the account of Alexander’s campaigns composed by Kleitarchos of Alexandria – a historian linked to the Ptolemaic court.

As the patron of the source painting, the right-hand man surely claimed to have fought *directly alongside* Alexander at whichever battle was represented in the composition. It may then be useful to search our textual accounts for evidence of such a claim. In the case of Seleukos, the search yields nothing: he is not mentioned by name in the accounts of Issos or Gaugamela, and appears in our histories only in 326 BCE, serving as commander of the Royal Hypaspists at the Battle of the Hydaspes.²⁶ The silence of the texts does not

²² Rumpf 1962, 239 (transl. author).

²³ Andreae 2004, 77.

²⁴ More fully on this criterion: Smith 1988, 3.

²⁵ Those who favor Gaugamela often point to Plutarch’s description of this battle. It is, however, possible that Plutarch recycled Kleitarchos’s account of Issos for his own account of Gaugamela. See further n. 30, below.

²⁶ Arr. *Anab.* 5.13.1, 4.

The Ptolemy Painting?

mean that Seleukos did not take part at Issos and Gaugamela, or that he could not claim at a later stage to have charged against Darius as Alexander's loyal wingman. It means simply that there is no hint of such a tradition in our sources. By contrast, we can be certain that Ptolemy actively claimed to have fought directly alongside Alexander at Issos.²⁷ This information is contained in Arrian's account of the battle's denouement:

Those of the Persians who died were Arsames, Rheomithres, and Atizytes, who were the leaders of the cavalry at the Granikos. Savakes the satrap of Egypt and Boubakes of the noble Persians also died. There were so many others – around 100,000 died, of which 10,000 were cavalry – that Ptolemy son of Lagos, who was then following together with Alexander [ἔυνεπισπόμενος τότε Ἀλεξάνδρῳ], says that they and their forces were pursuing Darius and when they came upon a ravine in their pursuit, crossed that ravine over the bodies of the dead.²⁸

The source for this passage is certainly Ptolemy's own *History* of Alexander's campaign, identified by Arrian elsewhere as one of two principal sources for his *Anabasis*.²⁹ That Ptolemy might have exaggerated his own contribution is suggested by the fact that none of the other surviving battle accounts mentions him in any capacity. But his claim to have fought directly alongside Alexander may have implications for the question of the right-hand man's identity, especially if Issos is indeed the represented battle.

There are also interesting connections between the iconography of the mosaic and the *History* of Alexander's campaigns composed by Kleitarchos of Alexandria. These emerge when we consider the battle narratives preserved in the so-called vulgate tradition, specifically the descriptions of Issos composed by Diodorus Siculus and Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Plutarch's account of Gaugamela.³⁰ These highly rhetorical battle narratives all work up the theme of Alexander's personal *aristeia* to maximum effect, and all incorporate a consistent and memorable set of rhetorical *topoi*. It has long been recognized that a striking number of these *topoi* find close visual analogues in the mosaic, and in the present context it will suffice to highlight just two key examples. First, Curtius's vivid description of Oxathres and other Persians positioning themselves between Darius and Alexander before being "slain by a noble death before the eyes of their king" intersects closely with the mosaic. Here we see two Persians throwing themselves in front of Darius's chariot: the nobleman dressed in yellow being skewered by Alexander, and a mounted Persian with a white headband around his head. Second, Curtius's reference to Darius escaping from the battlefield on "a horse that followed for that very purpose" explains the boldly foreshortened horse in rear view controlled by a dismounted Persian soldier on the mosaic. This is the spare horse that Darius will use to escape.

Such correspondences do not presuppose a direct relationship between the source painting and our texts, in the sense of one being modeled directly on the other. Rather,

²⁷ Recognized already by Pfrommer 1998, 207.

²⁸ Arr. *Anab.* 2.11.8 = BNJ 138 F6 (adapted from the Loeb translation by P. A. Brunt).

²⁹ Arr. *Anab.* 1 preface.

³⁰ Diod. Sic. 17.33.2–34.7; Curt. 3.11.1–13; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 33. How best to explain the similarities between Plutarch's account of Gaugamela and Diodoros's and Curtius's descriptions of Issos is under-investigated. A possible explanation is offered by Baynham 1993, 28: "Plutarch may have used the same source as Curtius for these colorful descriptive elements, but ascribed them not to Issus, but to Gaugamela, possibly in order to enhance the poignancy of the final battle."

they indicate that both the source painting and these textual accounts drew from a common rhetorical tradition concerning Alexander's epochal encounter(s) with Darius. This notion of a common rhetorical tradition is well established in scholarship on the mosaic.³¹ Less often discussed, in the specific context of the mosaic, are the conclusions that emerge from *Quellenforschung* of the texts preserving the tradition. Indeed, it may be significant that Diodoros's account of the central episode at Issos, Curtius's account of the central episode at Issos, and Plutarch's account of the central episode at Gaugamela are all thought to depend on Kleitarchos's *History*.³²

Until recently, it was almost universally held that Kleitarchos wrote in the generation or so following Alexander's campaigns: that is, during the late 4th or very early 3rd c. BCE. This orthodoxy has been challenged by the publication of a 1st- or 2nd-c. CE papyrus text from Oxyrhynchus (*P.Oxy* 4808), concerning Hellenistic historians.³³ The section on Kleitarchos records that this author served as royal tutor to Ptolemy IV Philopator (born ca. 244 BCE). If this is true, of course, Kleitarchos's *History* should be down-dated to the mid-3rd c. But other sources place Kleitarchos in the Early Hellenistic period,³⁴ and so some commentators have been reluctant to accept a lower date. It has been suggested, for instance, that the author of *P.Oxy* 4808 was simply mistaken;³⁵ that he accidentally conflated two Kleitarchoi;³⁶ or that Kleitarchos was actually tutor to an earlier Ptolemaic king.³⁷ Less controversial is where Kleitarchos composed his *History*, since other sources tie him to Alexandria.³⁸

It is surely because of this Alexandrian connection that Kleitarchos reserved special praise for Ptolemy in his *History*, even if his version of events did not always correspond with the version presented by Ptolemy himself.³⁹ Representative is Diodoros's description of Ptolemy's near-death experience when wounded by an arrow at Harmatelia in India, which certainly depends on Kleitarchos. Here we read that, "He [Ptolemy] was loved by all because of his character and his kindnesses to all, and he obtained a succor appropriate to his good deeds."⁴⁰ It would be interesting to know whether Kleitarchos enjoyed the direct patronage of a Ptolemaic king, as *P.Oxy* 4808 clearly suggests.

Viewed together, these three things – the common rhetorical tradition encompassed by the source painting and Kleitarchos's *History*, Kleitarchos's connections with Ptolemaic Alexandria, and his positive presentation of Ptolemy – support the view that the source painting might have been connected with Alexandria. Further support is supplied by the decoration of the House of the Faun, to which we may now turn.

³¹ Fundamental: Fuhrmann 1931, 148–72.

³² For this dependency, see Hammond 1983, 13–34 (Diodoros), 116–37 (Curtius); and Hammond 1993, 38–42, arguing persuasively that Plutarch's main source for Gaugamela was Kleitarchos rather than Kallisthenes of Olynthos.

³³ Beresford et al. 2007.

³⁴ *BNJ* 137 T 2, T 4.

³⁵ Lane Fox 2018, 95–99.

³⁶ Hutchinson 2013, 14 n. 17.

³⁷ Prandi 2012, 23 n. 38.

³⁸ Evidence collected by Prandi 1996, 66–68.

³⁹ Two divergences between the *Histories* of Kleitarchos and Ptolemy are known. A likely explanation is that Kleitarchos's *History* was written first: see Bosworth 1997, 214.

⁴⁰ Diod. Sic. 17.103.8 (Loeb transl. C. Bradford Welles). Recent commentary: Lane Fox 2015, 166–68.

The Ptolemy Painting?

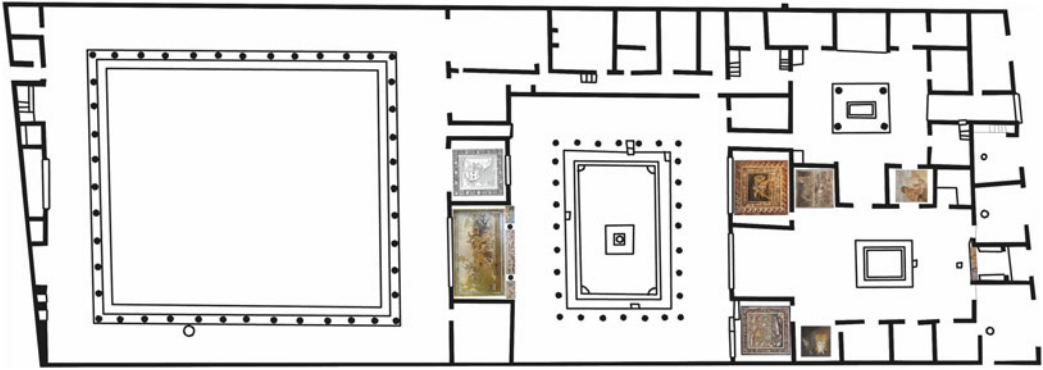


Fig. 3. Plan of the House of the Faun, with pictorial mosaics plotted in their original display contexts. (Photo montage by author, using a plan by Johannes Eber).

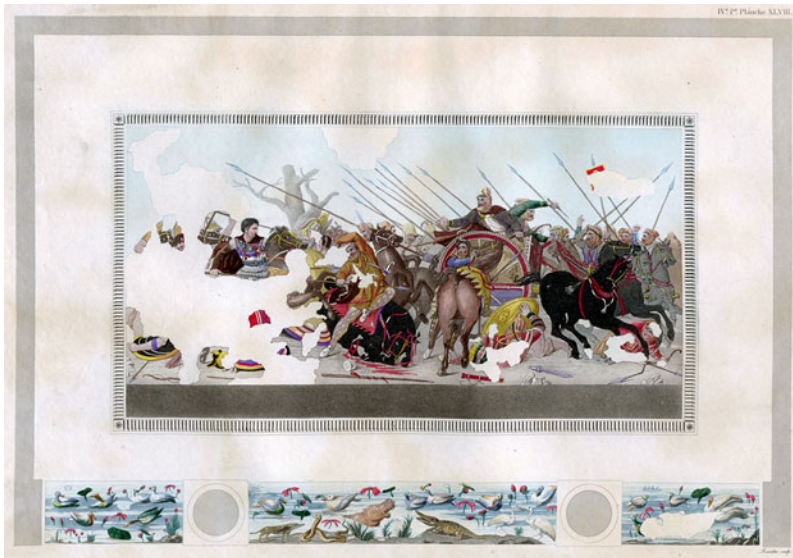


Fig. 4. Watercolor reproduction of the floor decoration of exedra 29 of the House of the Faun, featuring the Alexander Mosaic and the Nilotic triptych. (Mazois 1838, pl. 48.)

Ptolemaic connections in the House of the Faun

At first sight, it might seem difficult to envisage what the Alexander Mosaic's display context in the House of the Faun can contribute to our assessment of the right-hand man.⁴¹ After all, this Campanian townhouse was far removed in time and place from the Late Classical or Early Hellenistic milieu in which the source painting was conceived. It is significant, however, that several other mosaics from the house have iconography that can be connected to Alexandria and/or Egypt in some way. The Alexander Mosaic's juxtaposition with these pavements offers important circumstantial evidence for its possible Ptolemaic origins, a conclusion with implications for the identity of the right-hand man. Accordingly, it will be useful to survey briefly these Alexandrian connections.

⁴¹ Stimulating recent discussion of the house and its decoration: Haug 2020, 51–120.



Fig. 5. *Symplegma* mosaic from cubiculum 17 of the House of the Faun, h. 39.0 cm, w. 37.0 cm. MANN, inv. 27707. (© Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.)



Fig. 6. *Symplegma* mosaic from Thmuis (Tell Timai) in the Nile delta. Central panel h. 82.5 cm, w. 84.5 cm. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. 21738. (Photograph: André Pelle, © CEAlex Archives.)

Eight pictorial mosaics were laid in the House of the Faun as part of a major renovation program of the early 1st c. BCE (Fig. 3).⁴² As previous studies have recognized,⁴³ several have iconography linking them to Ptolemaic Egypt:

- A mosaic triptych depicting Egyptian animals in a swampy Nilotic landscape (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli [MANN] inv. 9990) decorated the threshold of the exedra containing the Alexander Mosaic (Fig. 4).⁴⁴ This composition surely carried a specifically Egyptian frame of reference.⁴⁵
- The emblema depicting an erotic encounter between a satyr and nymph laid in cubiculum 17 (MANN inv. 27707) reproduces precisely the same iconographic scheme as an earlier mosaic from Thmuis in the Nile delta (Figs. 5–6).⁴⁶ While it does not automatically follow that this scheme originated in an Egyptian milieu, this is an attractive possibility.
- The fish emblema in triclinium 12 (MANN inv. 9997) is typologically connected to a larger fish mosaic laid in the Antro delle Sorti at Praeneste. A series of iconographic and contextual considerations suggest that the Praeneste mosaic may be a later version of an Alexandrian original. Notably, it formed the sister-piece to the famous Nile Mosaic, decorating the same architectural complex.
- The emblema depicting a cat attacking a bird from ala 15 (Fig. 7; MANN inv. 9993) closely resembles statues with the same theme from Ptolemaic Egypt. As we shall shortly see,

⁴² For an overview of this renovation program, see Faber and Hoffmann 2009, 50–52.

⁴³ See especially: Parlasca 1975; Meyboom 1977; Meyboom 1995, 91–95; Daszewski 1985, 18–22; Daszewski 1998; Zevi 1998a; Zevi 1998b; Pfrommer 1998, 209–14; Pesando and Guidobaldi 2006, 43–53; Bergmann 2008; Guimier-Sorbets 2019, 182–97.

⁴⁴ The exedra's columns were painted brightly in red. For the suggestion that they evoked red porphyry, an Egyptian material, see Zevi 1998b, 98.

⁴⁵ On Aegyptiaca in Roman art, see e.g. Versluys 2002; Swetnam-Burland 2015; Barrett 2019.

⁴⁶ Thmuis symplegma: e.g. Daszewski 1985, 21–22, 160–63 cat. no. 40.



Fig. 7. *Emblema* from ala 15 of the House of the Faun, with split-level composition including the cat-and-bird motif, h. 51.0 cm, w. 57.0 cm. MANN, inv. 9993. (© Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.)



Fig. 8. Marble statue of a cat attacking a bird. Probably excavated in the Boubasteion at Naukratis, h. 23.0 cm, w. 12.0 cm, l. 49.5 cm. British Museum, inv. 1905,0612.5. (© Trustees of the British Museum.)

Exedra 29 and the Nilotic triptych

The Alexander Mosaic was laid in exedra 29, a large room opening off the north wing of the house's southern peristyle. As noted above, a second *opus vermiculatum* composition decorated the exedra's threshold: a triptych depicting Egyptian fauna in a Nilotic landscape (Fig. 3).⁴⁹ It has traditionally been held that these compositions were laid at different times, the Alexander Mosaic in ca. 110 BCE and the Nilotic triptych in ca. 80 BCE.⁵⁰ This view rests on the observation that the bases of the threshold columns were cut back to

recent excavations have shed new light on the significance of this subject in the Ptolemaic kingdom.

- The emblema in triclinium 14 depicting a tiger-riding putto (MANN inv. 9991) recalls limestone sculptures with comparable iconography from the Serapeion at Memphis. Here the case for a specifically Egyptian connection is less clear-cut, since the tiger-rider motif occurs elsewhere, notably on Delos.

An Alexandrian origin has also been envisaged for the bronze statue of a dancing satyr that stood in the property's Tuscan atrium, based on comparison with another bronze satyr said to be from Tanis in the northeast Nile delta.⁴⁷

It does not necessarily follow, of course, that all these compositions were understood in explicitly "Alexandrian" or "Egyptian" terms by viewers in the House of the Faun. Rather, we should be careful to distinguish between the "true" geographical origins of the motifs on the one hand, and the cultural associations that they carried for Italian viewers on the other. These may not have been identical.⁴⁸ Even so, it will be useful here to present three further observations that lend support to the notion of an Alexandrian connection in the house. Two stem from recent archaeological research in Pompeii and the Nile delta. The third concerns an important find from the house that has often been overlooked.

⁴⁷ Bergmann 2008, 119–24.

⁴⁸ Recently on this theme, see Menichetti 2020.

⁴⁹ Nilotic triptych: Barrett 2019, 232–49, with further references.

⁵⁰ So e.g. Meyboom 1995, 337–38 n. 9; Zevi 1998a, 43–45.

accommodate the panels of the triptych, and on a perception that the triptych is technically less accomplished than the Alexander Mosaic.

This relative chronology was cast into doubt by Faber and Hoffmann's reassessment of the house's stratigraphy, which showed that there is no hard archaeological data to suggest that the mosaics were laid at different times. The authors ask, "what kind of demanding and apparently economically highly potent client would have waited three decades for the completion of his project?"⁵¹ It is therefore likely that the mosaics were contemporary. We might imagine that the column bases were cut back simply because the triptych panels did not quite fit the available space. The stylistic and technical differences between the mosaics would then be determined not by a difference in chronology but by other factors: the available budget for each pavement, the technical ability of the mosaicists, the quality of the artists' models, and so on.

That the Alexander Mosaic and the Nilotic triptych were laid in the same room at the same time opens up the possibility that they were conceptually related in some way. It has been suggested recently that the triptych functioned in broad terms as "a geographic marker recalling Alexander's conquests."⁵² This is possible, but we should also entertain the prospect of a more direct connection, focused specifically on Ptolemaic Egypt.

The cat-and-bird emblema and the Alexandrian Boubasteion

The emblema from ala 15 stands out thanks to its unusual two-level composition (Fig. 7). The upper level depicts a cat pinning down a chicken with its left paw. This design was certainly borrowed from a lost archetype, since other mosaics with the same scheme have been found in Rome, Veii, Capri, Ampurias, and elsewhere.⁵³ The lower level depicts a still-life scene featuring two ducks (one with an Egyptian lotus in its beak), four passerines, and a selection of fish and shellfish. It may represent a well-stocked larder.

The cat-and-bird theme had a long pedigree in ancient visual culture, with examples surviving from Dynastic Egypt, Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece, and Etruscan Italy.⁵⁴ There are, however, strong grounds for supposing that the motif developed specifically Egyptian associations during Hellenistic times. Indeed, the House of the Faun emblema has often been compared to a marble cat-and-bird statue in the Cairo Museum, bought at Damanhur in the western Nile delta in 1895.⁵⁵ Recent research has demonstrated that this was one of seven marble cats found during illicit excavations at Naukratis in the 19th c. (another is illustrated in Fig. 8), and that further cat statues made from limestone and sandstone were excavated at the same time.⁵⁶ Among the finds was a base for a cat statue carrying a dedication to the goddess Boubastis,⁵⁷ the Hellenized version of the Egyptian cat goddess Bastet.

⁵¹ Faber and Hoffmann 2009, 107–8, with quotation at 108 (transl. author).

⁵² Barrett 2019, 239.

⁵³ Examples collected by Meyboom and Brouwer 2005.

⁵⁴ Tammisto 1997, 90–91, 301–2 nn.631–35.

⁵⁵ Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE31185. On this statue, see, e.g., Parlasca 1975, 365.

⁵⁶ Higgs and Thomas 2017.

⁵⁷ British Museum 1905,0612.20.

The Ptolemy Painting?



Fig. 9. Carnelian intaglio from the House of the Faun, with portrait of royal (?) figure wearing hemispherical hat and aegis, h. 2.24 cm, w. 1.71 cm. MANN, inv. 26766. (After Pannuti 1983, fig. 14. *Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.*)



Fig. 10. Clay seal impression from Edfu, depicting Ptolemy I Soter wearing kausia, diadem, and aegis. Allard Pierson Museum, inv. 8177-230. (Photo Allard Pierson – the Collections of the University of Amsterdam.)



Fig. 11. Clay seal impression from Edfu, depicting a Late Ptolemaic ruler wearing kausia, diadem, and aegis, h. 1.40 cm, w. 1.30 cm. Royal Ontario Museum, inv. 906.12.68. (Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, © ROM.)

Our knowledge of Boubastis in Hellenistic Egypt has been enhanced by the discovery of the Alexandrian Boubasteion during rescue excavations at Kom-el-Dikka in 2009–10.⁵⁸ The sanctuary was first founded in the late 4th or early 3rd c. BCE, but a series of six foundation plaques record a major renovation by Berenike II, sister-wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes.⁵⁹ This royal initiative accords well with the Canopus Decree of 238 BCE, which reveals that the Boubasteia was moved to coincide with the Euergesia, a Ptolemaic dynastic festival.⁶⁰ Excavations in the sanctuary uncovered a series of pits containing offerings that had been dedicated to Boubastis prior to burial. Three pits contained limestone and/or terracotta cat statuettes comparable to the examples from Naukratis: one with 50 limestone cats and 469 terracotta cat figurines; another with 106 limestone cats; and a third with 13 limestone cats. Many reproduce the cat-and-bird motif familiar from the House of the Faun emblema, further suggesting a specifically Egyptian connection.

A Hellenistic royal portrait?

A carnelian intaglio decorated with the bust of a male figure was excavated in the House of the Faun on March 4, 1831 (Fig. 9).⁶¹ The figure has portrait physiognomy and wears a flat hemispherical hat – either a petasos or a kausia – at the back of his head, with long curly

⁵⁸ Abd el-Maksoud et al. 2012; Abd el-Maksoud et al. 2018.

⁵⁹ SEG 64 1891–93.

⁶⁰ OGIS 56.

⁶¹ MANN inv. 26766. Pannuti 1983, 116 cat. 180; Zevi 1998a, 59.

locks emerging underneath. He also wears a scaly aegis in the manner of a chlamys, with a pair of serpents forming the upper hem.

Although the figure does not wear a diadem, the combination of long hair, portrait features and aegis brings to mind Hellenistic royal portraiture – and especially Ptolemaic portraiture, since the aegis was an indicator of power favored particularly by the Ptolemies in Hellenistic times.⁶² In addition to numismatic representations, we are reminded of the royal portraits found among the clay seal impressions at Edfu and Nea Paphos, several of which depict Ptolemaic rulers wearing the aegis together with a kausia pushed to the back of the head to accommodate a diadem just below (the so-called *kausia diadēmatophoros*; Figs. 10–11).⁶³ In the absence of a diadem, of course, any identification of the House of the Faun gem as a royal portrait remains conjectural. But given this *possible* royal connection, it is notable that intaglios were sometimes used in diplomatic exchanges between East and West in the Later Hellenistic period. For example, Plutarch records that Ptolemy IX Soter II presented a gold ring set with an emerald bearing his own portrait to L. Licinius Lucullus in 85 BCE.⁶⁴

The Ptolemy Painting?

The right-hand man in the Alexander Mosaic may never be identified with certainty. We have seen, however, that Ptolemy I Soter is a particularly attractive candidate, for three reasons. First, Ptolemy claimed to have fought directly alongside Alexander during at least one of his famous pitched battles against Darius. Second, the Alexander Mosaic – and so the source painting – incorporates many of the same rhetorical topoi as the *History* of Alexander's campaign written by Kleitarchos of Alexandria, who was connected to the Ptolemaic court. Third, several other works of art from the House of the Faun have Alexandrian and Egyptian connections. If this hypothesis is correct, the original “Ptolemy Painting” would have formed part of the extensive posthumous commemoration of Alexander orchestrated by Ptolemy I Soter.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Bert Smith for his feedback on an earlier draft, and to Catharine Lorber, Branko van Oppen de Ruiter, and Stelios Ieremias for helpful comments on iconographic matters. I would also like to thank two anonymous readers for their invaluable input.

References

- Abd el-Maksoud, M., A. Abd el-Fattah, and M. Seif el-Din. 2012. “La fouille du Boubasteion d’Alexandrie: Présentation préliminaire.” In *L’enfant et la mort dans l’Antiquité*. Vol. 3, *Le matériel associé aux tombes d’enfants*, ed. A. Hermay and C. Dubois, 427–46. Aix-en-Provence: Centre Camille Jullian.
- Abd el-Maksoud, M., A. Abd el-Fattah, and M. Seif el-Din. 2018. “The Early Greek presence in Alexandria.” In *Hellenistic Alexandria: Celebrating 24 Centuries. Papers Presented at the Conference Held on December 13–15 2017 at Acropolis Museum, Athens*, ed. C. S. Zerefos and M. B. Vardinoyannis, 51–60. Oxford: Archaeopress.

⁶² Lorber 2011.

⁶³ Ptolemaic seal portraits with aegis and kausia: Lorber 2011, 334–36; Kyrieles 2015, 21–22, 24–25; Lorber and van Oppen 2017, 82–83. I am grateful to Catharine Lorber for pointing out that the facial features of the figure on the carnelian are very similar to those of an aegis-wearing ruler depicted on silver tetradrachms minted on Cyprus late in the reign of Ptolemy IX Soter II.

⁶⁴ Plut. *Vit. Luc.* 3.1.

The Ptolemy Painting?

- Andreae, B. 1977. *Das Alexandermosaik aus Pompeji*. Recklinghausen: Bongers.
- Andreae, B. 2004. "Seleukos Nikator als Pezhetairos im Alexandermosaik." *RM* 111: 69–82.
- Barrett, C. E. 2019. *Domesticating Empire: Egyptian Landscapes in Pompeian Gardens*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Baynham, E. 1993. "Curtius Rufus and the Alexander Mosaic." In *Multarum artium scientia: A 'Chose' for R. Godfrey Tanner*, ed. H. Tarrant, R. Mackie, and K. Lee, 27–35. Prudentia Supplement 1993. Auckland: University of Auckland.
- Beresford, A. G., P. J. Parsons, and M. P. Pobjoy. 2007. "4808. On Hellenistic historians." In *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 71, ed. R. Hatzilambrou P. J. Parsons, and J. Chapa, 27–36. Graeco-Roman Memoirs 91. London: Egypt Exploration Society.
- Bergmann, M. 2008. "Zu den Tempelfassaden im Eingang der Casa del Fauno." In *Austausch und Inspiration. Kulturkontakt als Impuls architektonischer Innovation*, ed. F. Pirson and U. Wulf-Rheidt, 113–30. Mainz: von Zabern.
- Blanchard-Lemée, M. 2005. "Le triclinium à la mosaïque dionysiaque de Sétif (Algérie)." In *La mosaïque gréco-romain*, vol. 9, ed. H. Morlier, 291–301. Rome: École française de Rome.
- Bosworth, A. B. 1997. Review of Prandi 1996. *Histos* 1: 211–24.
- Cohen, A. 1997. *The Alexander Mosaic: Stories of Victory and Defeat*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A. 2010. *Art in the Era of Alexander the Great: Paradigms of Manhood and Their Cultural Traditions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Daszewski, W. A. 1985. *Corpus of Mosaics from Egypt*. Vol. 1, Hellenistic and Early Roman Period. Mainz: von Zabern.
- Daszewski, W. A. 1998. "Mosaics in Egypt and Italy: Reciprocal influence." In *L'Egitto in Italia dall'antichità al Medioevo*, ed. N. Bonacasa, 397–406. Rome: Consiglio nazionale delle ricerche.
- Donderer, M. 1988. "Dionysos und Ptolemaios Soter als Meleager: Zwei Gemälde des Antiphilos." In *Zu Alexander d. Gr. Festschrift G. Wirth zum 60. Geburtstag am 9.12.86*, ed. W. Will, 781–99. Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert.
- Ehrhardt, W. 2008. "Das Alexandermosaik oder: Wie authentisch muss eine historische Darstellung sein?" *RM* 114: 215–69.
- Faber, A., and A. Hoffmann. 2009. *Die Casa del Fauno in Pompeji (VI 12)*, vol. 1. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Franks, H. M. 2012. *Hunters, Heroes, Kings: The Frieze of Tomb II at Vergina*. Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens.
- Fuhrmann, H. 1931. *Philoxenos von Eretria. Archäologische Untersuchungen über zwei Alexandermosaik*. Göttingen: Dieterichschen Universitäts-Buchdruckerei W. Fr. Kaestner.
- Guimier-Sorbets, A.-M. 2019. *Mosaïques d'Alexandrie. Pavements d'Égypte grecque et romaine*. Alexandria: Centre d'études alexandrines.
- Hammond, N. G. L. 1983. *Three Historians of Alexander the Great: The So-Called Vulgate Authors, Diodorus, Justin, and Curtius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammond, N. G. L. 1993. *Sources for Alexander the Great: An Analysis of Plutarch's Life and Arrian's Anabasis Alexandrou*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Haug, A. 2020. *Decor-Räume in pompejanischen Stadthäusern: Ausstattungsstrategien und Rezeptionsformen*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Higgs, P., and R. Thomas. 2017. "Greek and Roman sculpture." In *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt*, by A. Villing, M. Bergeron, G. Bourogiannis, A. Johnston, F. Leclère, A. Masson, and Ross Thomas, 1–36. British Museum online research catalogue. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20190801123903/https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naukratis_greeks_in_egypt/material_culture_of_naukratis/greek_and_roman_sculpture.aspx.
- Hölscher, T. 1973. *Griechische Historienbilder des 5. und 4. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* Würzburg: K. Triltsch.
- Hölscher, T. 2018. *Visual Power in Ancient Greece and Rome: Between Art and Social Reality*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Hutchinson, G. O. 2013. *Greek to Latin: Frameworks and Contexts for Intertextuality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kyrieleis, H. 2015. *Hellenistische Herrscherporträts auf Siegelabdrücken aus Paphos (Paphos IV B)*. Wiesbaden: Reichert.
- Lane Fox, R. 2015. "King Ptolemy: Centre and periphery." In *East and West in the World Empire of Alexander: Essays in Honour of Brian Bosworth*, ed. P. Wheatley and E. Baynham, 163–95. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lane Fox, R. 2018. "POXY. 4808 and historians." In *The Historiography of Alexander the Great*, ed. K. Nawotka, R. Rollinger, J. Wiesehöfer, and A. Wojciechowska, 91–104. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Lorber, C. C. 2011. "Theos Aigiochos: The aegis in Ptolemaic portraits of divine rulers." In *More than Men, Less than Gods: Studies on Royal Cult and Imperial Worship: Proceedings of the International Colloquium Organized by the Belgian School at Athens (November 1–2, 2007)*, ed. P. P. Iossif, A. S. Chankowski, and C. C. Lorber, 293–356. Leuven: Peeters.
- Lorber, C. C., and B. F. van Oppen de Ruiter 2017. "Clay seal impressions from Ptolemaic Edfu." *NumAntCl* 46: 73–96.
- Mazois, C. F. 1838. *Les ruines de Pompéi*, vol. 4. Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie de Firmin Didot.
- Menichetti, M. 2020. "Imitatio Alexandri: Il 'nuovo mondo' della Casa del Fauno." *RStPomp* 31: 33–39.
- Meyboom, P. G. P. 1977. "I mosaici pompeiani con figure di pesci." *Meded* 39 (n.s. 4): 49–93.
- Meyboom, P. G. P. 1995. *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy*. Leiden: Brill.
- Meyboom, P. G. P., and H. Brouwer 2005. "Il gatto ladro a Leida." In *Omni pede stare. Saggi architettonici e circumvesuviani in memoriam Jos de Waele*, ed. J. de Waele, S. T. A. M. Mols, and E. M. Moormann, 228–42. Naples: Electa.
- Moreno, P. 2000. *Apelle. La battaglia d'Alessandro*. Milan: Skira.
- Nylander, C. 1983. "The standard of the Great King: A problem in the Alexander Mosaic." *OpRom* 14: 19–37.
- Pannuti, U. 1983. *Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli. Catalogo della collezione glittica*, vol. 1. Rome: Ist. Poligraf. e Zecca dello Stato.
- Parlasca, K. 1975. "Hellenistische und römische Mosaiken aus Ägypten." In *La mosaïque gréco-romaine II. II^e colloque int. pour l'étude de la mosaïque antique, Vienne, 30 août–4 septembre 1971*, ed. H. Stern and M. Le Glay, 363–69. Paris: A. & J. Picard.
- Pesando, F., and M. P. Guidobaldi 2006. *Gli 'ozi' di Ercole. Residenze di lusso a Pompei ed Ercolano*. Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider.
- Pfrommer, M. 1998. *Untersuchungen zur Chronologie und Komposition des Alexandermosaiks auf antiquarischer Grundlage*. Mainz: von Zabern.
- Prandi, L. 1996. *Fortuna e realtà dell'opera di Clitarco*. Stuttgart: F. Steiner.
- Prandi, L. 2012. "New evidence for the dating of Cleitarchus (POxy LXXI. 4808)?" *Histos* 6, 15–26.
- Rumpf, A. 1962. "Zum Alexander-Mosaik." *AM* 77: 229–41.
- Saatsoglou-Paliadeli, C. 2004. *Βεργίνα. Ο τάφος του Φιλίππου. Ἡ τοιχογραφία μὲ τὸ κυνήγι*. Athens: Hē en Athēnais Archaialogikē Hētaireia.
- Saatsoglou-Paliadeli, C. 2019. "The Alexander Mosaic and its lost original: A working hypothesis." In *Peri graphikēs. Pittori, tecniche, trattati, contesti tra testimonianze e ricezione*, ed. G. Adornato, E. Falaschi, and A. Poggio, 151–72. Milan: LED Edizioni universitarie di lettere economia diritto.
- Scheibler, I. 1994. *Griechische Malerei der Antike*. Munich: Beck.
- Smith, R. R. R. 1988. *Hellenistic Royal Portraits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, A. F. 1993. *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Swetnam-Burland, M. 2015. *Egypt in Italy: Visions of Egypt in Roman Imperial Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tammisto, A. 1997. *Birds in Mosaics: A Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics to the Early Augustan Age*. Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae.
- Versluys, M. J. 2002. *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt*. Leiden: Brill.
- von Hase, F.-W. 2009. "Das Alexandermosaik: Ein „Mosaikgemälde“ und seine Interpretationsprobleme." In *Alexander der Große und die Öffnung der Welt. Asiens Kulturen im Wandel*, ed. S. Hansen, A. Wiczorek, and M. Tellenbach, 67–76. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner.
- Wootton, W. 2002. "Another Alexander mosaic: Reconstructing the hunt mosaic from Palermo." *JRA* 15: 264–74.
- Zevi, F. 1998a. "Die Casa del Fauno in Pompeji und das Alexandermosaik." *RM* 105: 21–65.
- Zevi, F. 1998b. *I mosaici della Casa del Fauno a Pompei*. Naples: Archivio dell'arte.