

Name Labels on Late Antique Mosaics

Dr Ruth Leader was awarded a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship (1998–2001) to work on visual culture in late antiquity. Below, she describes the phenomenon of incorporating inscriptions and labelled figures personifying abstract concepts in the mosaics of the period, and considers their significance.

From the earliest literate cultures of the Ancient Near East, through Greek and Roman antiquity, into the Middle Ages and beyond, artists have chosen on occasion to incorporate text into visual images. One example of this is the mosaic pavements dating from the fourth to sixth centuries AD (in the period known as late antiquity), which have been discovered at sites in Cyprus, Syria and Turkey, whose distinguishing feature is that they label the figures represented on them with their names. Many of the figures labeled are characters from Greek mythology, but there are also a significant number of personifications of abstract concepts, such as Generosity, Enjoyment, Eternity, or Divine Birth. These are quite unusual figures in Graeco-Roman art, which appear for the first time in this period. In fact, it is the use of name-labels on these mosaics that allows the abstract personifications to be represented, since they are not easily assigned distinguishing attributes or props, as is traditionally the case with personifications in Graeco-Roman art. Thus both the use of name labels and the abstract personifications themselves seem to be a late antique phenomenon.

My interest in abstract personification on mosaics from the area that classical scholars refer to as ‘East Greece’ came about for two reasons. The phenomenon of labelling is an under-explored aspect of late antique mosaic production there.

Most scholars have barely commented on it, or have interpreted it rather negatively, as an example of the philistinism traditionally associated with late antiquity as a period of supposed cultural decline. One reason, therefore, for looking at the use of labelling in connection with the phenomenon of abstract personifications is to offer insights into the reason for its popularity in late antiquity. But there also seems to be a relationship between the use of name-labels on mosaics, and the cultural perspectives of the elite classes of the Roman empire in late antiquity, shaped in the main by their common education in grammar and rhetoric, which they designated *paideia*, a Greek term which referred equally to the educational process and the resulting normative cultural outlook. This relationship between *paideia* and visual culture has been the focus of my postdoctoral fellowship research; what follows is an example of how the two could interact.

Why were the prosperous citizens of the late antique cities of the Greek East so keen to see abstract personifications in particular on the floors of their homes? These mosaics were for the most part commissioned for public areas of a house: reception rooms and dining rooms, where they would be seen, and commented on by those who saw them. A number of Greek and Latin literary works, dating from the second to the early fifth century AD, attest to a well-established ideal of

Figure 1. Mosaic epigram in Room F of the ‘Late Roman Villa’ at Halicarnassos. Photo courtesy of B. Poulsen and S. Isages



educated and erudite conversation on literary and philosophical topics at the dinner table. Although the reality of many dinner parties in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean may only have distantly approached that ideal, the principle of convivial conversation where the host and his guests engaged in mutual displays of their education and culture – in other words, their *paideia* – was an accepted and well-established one. Art in the dining room – in the form of woven wall-hangings, or silver tableware, as much as floor mosaics or statues – could play a key role in stimulating the type of conversation that convention held to be desirable.

This brings us back to the issue of inscriptions, and the implications of their use on late antique mosaics. In addition to those mosaics which employ labels for their figures, there are a handful of mosaics from the Greek East which feature more extensive inscriptions. Perhaps the most interesting example is from a late antique villa in Halicarnassos (modern Bodrum in south-west Turkey), dated to the mid- or later half of the fifth century AD. This extensive building, still only partially excavated, contained a large, almost square, apsed room (dubbed room F by its excavators). Its mosaic floor incorporates a lengthy inscription written in elegiacs, and located on the edge of the main floor nearest the apse, so that it would be readable by someone facing the apse (Figure 1). The Greek text translates as follows:

Come hither and nod your approval
without delay with your bright shining eyes.
I present a
multiform body of stones laid in mosaics, a body
which skilful men
in spreading the floor made shine all over,
so that the richly wrought appearance of the
high-roofed building
shall make this city renowned in many places.
What before was in a miserable state Charidemos
raised
from the ground with toil and enormous expense.

Essentially it commemorates the laying of the floor (and possibly the building or restoration of the villa), but it is written in the elaborate poetic language which was much favoured in late antiquity for public honorific inscriptions, as well as private ones such as this. The inscription tells us little about Charidemos' parentage or the public offices he might have held, which three hundred

years earlier it would have done, pointing to a wider change in the object of erecting such inscriptions. These no longer aimed to convey information about an individual's rank and achievements, but to emphasize the literary culture of those on both sides of the transaction. The presence of an inscription in the Halicarnassos villa praising the owner for his magnanimity in beautifying the city with such a house, suggests that it must have been an important public room,



Figure 2. Medallion of Ktisis from Room 4 of the House of Ge and the Seasons, Antioch. Photo courtesy of Princeton University, Department of Archaeology.

probably an audience chamber or dining room. But it is not just the act of building or decorating itself that is emphasized – the choice of the language and the verse form marks out Charidemos as a man of *paideia*, while the ability of the inscription's readers (or hearers) to appreciate this confirms their status within the hierarchy of *paideia* as well.

Can a connection be made, however, between the use of abstract personifications and the display of *paideia* in the visual sphere? To explore this possibility I will focus on a single personification and her mosaic representation, that of Ktisis whose name means either Foundation or Acquisition (Figure 2). She – most abstract personifications are depicted as female – is one of the most frequently occurring abstractions in late antique mosaics discovered at the site of Antioch on the Orontes (on the Syrian/Turkish border), appearing in no less than four different mosaics, both combined with other personifications and alone. Her name evokes interesting parallels with honorific inscriptions, in which *ktistes*, or founder, is a standard term of praise for someone involved in

building activities. It is used, for example, to describe a local governor and benefactor of a fifth-century conversion into a fountain of the Agora Gate in Aphrodisias in Turkey. A late antique mosaic inscription in a bath building, possibly connected to the governor's palace in Caesarea Maritima in Palestine, expresses the wish that 'the years of the most glorious proconsul Andreas, devoted to building (*philoktistos*) be many'. And indeed the Halicarnassos inscription, while not using the word itself, nevertheless reinforces the idea that the act of using one's wealth for building continued to be highly thought of in late antiquity. In this context, one might argue that the primary sense of *Ktisis* in the Antioch mosaics was that of a personification of the act of foundation, which was one of the ways in which the late antique elite of cities such as Antioch and Aphrodisias displayed their position in the civic community. The meaning of acquisition must have been a secondary one, albeit as a necessary prerequisite to building. Why, however, does this concept appear as an abstract personification? It is here, I think, that we can usefully invoke *paideia*: *Ktisis* does not commemorate an individual patron's act of building, but represents the act of foundation personified. And since, in being a *philoktistos*, an individual did not simply erect buildings, but performed a social act which visibly reinforced his status in the community as a member of the elite, at the same time as it bolstered that community's

self-image, the image of *Ktisis* could be said to carry the weight of this complex network of social exchange and display. To represent *Ktisis* on one's floor did not so much commemorate a patron's actual or potential acts of benefaction. Rather it subsumed it into the culture of *paideia* that operated in the sphere of the public rooms of the patron's house, and acted as a sign that he recognized and understood the values at stake in the act of foundation. Just as the use of literary language in commemorative inscriptions served as a recognition on the part of both dedicators and dedicatee of their common cultural knowledge which bound them together as members of a single elite class, the use of the abstract personification added *paideia* to the values at stake in the act of foundation.

The use of inscriptions of all kinds – from simple labels to elaborate verses – in late antique mosaics can thus be seen to correspond to an increased need to display *paideia*, to inscribe it into the visual sphere, rather than leaving it ephemeral and spoken. This allows us to understand not only why the practice of putting name labels on mosaics may have developed when it did, but also to gain a greater insight into what those mosaics meant to those who commissioned and viewed them.

Dr Leader held her Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship at King's College London.