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# Idealization of the power of Hispanic elites through the representation of Hercules mosaics

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## Abstract

Hercules has been, without a doubt, one of the most revered mythological figures in the Greco-Roman world since the emergence of accounts of his exploits. Courage, bravery, and physical strength were some of the virtues associated with the hero, a reason which explains the adoption of his attributes in the official representations of emperors of the High Imperial era, such as Commodus, and the Low Imperial era, such as Maximian. The appeal radiated by the figure of Hercules also reached many Roman aristocrats, who held important public positions and spent their leisure time in retreat at their luxurious *villae* and *domus*. Evidence of this can be seen in the dissemination throughout the empire of mosaics with mythological representations of the hero.

In this work, we will review the mosaic representations of Hercules documented to date in the *villae* and *domus* spaces across the empire, to later focus on the *Hispania* case.

## Keywords

Hercules; Roman *villae*; *domus*; mythification; Late Antiquity; *Hispania*

## Introduction: Hercules and the mythology

Classic mythology has always played a leading role not only in ancient studies but also in later chronologies, even being present nowadays. The main object of this study is the famous Hercules. Named Heracles by the Greeks, he makes his first appearance in the early stories of Hesiod's tales, like his *Theogony*, thus establishing his role as a demigod.

His Greek name means “the glory of Hera”. The birth of our protagonist is the result of one of Zeus's adulterous relationships, one that motivated Hera's fury and pushed her to engender Hercules with Alcmena while posing as Amphitryon, her husband. Throughout his journey, Hercules endures a duality that separates him from the god-versus-man dynamic and which, in turn, confronts him with two worlds: on the one hand, the protection of Zeus and, on the other, the fury of Hera who puts obstacles in his way.

The symbolism of Hercules is clear: it represents the quest for virtue, strength of spirit and the impulse of civilization. That is why his representation overcomes chronological barriers and is capable of metamorphoses into various allegories, adapting himself to several concepts and periods. We find Hercules not only in Roman mosaics, the central subject of our study but also in medieval and modern iconographies represented on facades, decorative pieces or pavements. Therefore, it is logical to understand why the imitations of the figure of Hercules have been a recurring subject in Roman mosaics. The *possessors* of the *villae* or the owners of the *domus*, or the emperor Commodus among others, wanted to imitate his virtues by being represented as heroes themselves, thus idealizing the figure of Hercules as a symbol representing the decorations of their *villae*. The Herculean mosaics that are located in *Hispania* centre deal with the theme of three myths that we quote below. Hercules was known for the “12 labours,” or trials that he successfully faced and led to his divinization. The “12 labours of Hercules” (Loewen 1999: pp. 23–34), were the result of an outburst in which Hercules would kill his children. To purify himself, the Oracle of Delphi sends him to serve Eurystheus, king of Tiryns, for 12 years. Other narratives allude to the 12 works as a requirement for Hercules to free himself from Eurystheus's slavery and Hera's jealousy. At first, there should have been 10 tasks but, since on one occasion he was accompanied by his nephew Iolaus (it is said that he helped him in defeating the Hydra) and on another, while in Augeiae, he received payment for the work, although others say that the rivers Alfeios and Pineios helped, both challenges were not accepted and thus the penances became twelve.<sup>1</sup>

Another passage from the life of Hercules is found in the myth of the young Hylas, kidnapped by the water nymphs. Hylas was the son of Theiodamas, king of the Dryopes. He had participated in the expedition of the Argonauts under Jason's command. On this expedition, one day he went with a pitcher for water and the nymphs of the fountain, in love with him, sank him. As Hercules appears on the scene, worried, he went to look for him and, desperately, did not return to Argo's ship that would leave without him. In this tale, Hercules is not the protagonist, although his appearance in

1 About the myth of “12 labours of Hercules” see Padilla (1998); VVAA (2005: pp. 126–130); Peñalver (2018: pp. 163–181). The main descriptions of the labors of Hercules are found in Diodoro Siculo (D.S., IV, 8–39) and Apolodoro (Apollod., II, 8).

search of his friend denotes the virtues reflected in the iconography: courage, friendship and moral rectitude.

The drunk Hercules narrative seems to face a different subject than the previous two ones. Here, we can see the most human, wrong and hard part of Hercules. Hercules, drunk, raped Auge, who was to remain chaste as a priestess of Athena by design of Aleus, king of Tegea. The oracle of Delphi had told him that his daughter would kill her maternal uncles and for that reason, he consecrated her to the order of Athena. However, after the rape by Hercules, the fortune-teller gave birth to Telephus. From this point on, the different versions of the myth do not coincide, some saying that she was abandoned and adopted by the king of Corythus, while others maintain that she was sold, together with her mother, to the king of Teuthras in Mysia. Another version also tells of Telephus becoming king, by fulfilling the oracle's wish to kill his maternal uncles, Pereus and Hippothoon.

What is interesting here is the intoxicated and worldly vision of Hercules, as well as the demonstration of his virility by raping Auge and falling into worldliness when his true divine attributes were strength, power, lucidity Heracles/Hercules righteousness. There is no doubt that the narratives and representations of Heracles and Hercules take place throughout the classical Greco-Roman period, being in the middle of the 5th century BC, when the classical iconography, further adopted by the Romans, thanks to the works of Myron, Polykleitos and Scopas, is fixed: muscular, naked, standing, bearded or not, they will always carry his attributes. Even without exaggeration, we could say that the success of Hercules in the Roman world increases and strengthens his presence in the religious, literary and artistic life of the empire.

## 1. Hercules in the historical sources

The main aim of the work that has been carried out in preparing this paper is to analyze the representations of Hercules on the Hispanic mosaics, mainly at the *villae*, since the wealthy aristocratic residences which extend throughout the Roman Empire and that became more and more common from the third century on, are probably the type of archaeological site which provides the most information on the psychology of the wealthy Roman owners. As we will see below, the Hispanic mosaics with representations of myths of Hercules were located in contexts of the third and fourth centuries, so we will focus on sources from the late Roman period, as they are the ones that may bring us closer to the mentality of the elites who inhabited those villas. However, we will also analyze some previous testimonies, as in some cases they perfectly state some of the concepts that we want to highlight along with this communication.

The journeys of the Greek Heracles are known from sources written by authors such as Sophocles, Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, Apollodorus and Diodorus Siculus, whereas in Roman literature we must mention Ovid, Seneca, Livy and Virgil. The relevance of Hercules even survived the fall of the Roman Empire. Thus, Hercules penetrates the Late-ancient and Medieval Latin sources, notably highlighting the news of the 9th century,

thanks to the Carolingians (Pandiello 2012: pp. 68–69), avid translators of classical works or the texts of Photius.<sup>2</sup> Most of the texts about Hercules start surfacing at the beginning of the Visigothic kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

The virtues embodied by Hercules were quickly appreciated by the Roman emperors (Carlà-Uhink 2019). A good example is undoubtedly provided by Domitian: according to the testimony of the Bilbilitan poet Martial, the last of the Flavians erected a temple on the Appian Way dedicated to the hero and, furthermore, “he had deigned to lend his face to a statue of the great Hercules”.<sup>4</sup> Shortly after, the Hispanic poet recalls some of Hercules’ fatigue in a passage praising Domitian, in which he compares the actions of the hero to those of the emperor.<sup>5</sup> And he places the latter even above Hercules when he compares the hero’s fatigue with the circus shows organized by Domitian.<sup>6</sup>

In the controversial *Historia Augusta*, Hercules is frequently mentioned; for there were many emperors who, between the 2nd and 4th centuries, wanted to equate themselves to the hero, or were compared to him; Hadrian is said to have followed the example of Hercules starting in the Eleusinian mysteries;<sup>7</sup> The senate conferred on Commodus the title of Hercules, and he had statues erected with the characteristic attributes of the hero;<sup>8</sup> and Maximinus Thrax was equated with Hercules for his physique and strength.<sup>9</sup> Nor can we forget, during the tetrarchic period, the emperor Maximian, who made himself represent Hercules, adopting his attributes in any manifestation of imperial propaganda.

In the 4th century, coinciding with the maximum mosaics’ splendour of the Iberian Peninsula, Hercules will be remembered again by the hand of Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>10</sup> The Roman historian gives *Hispania* prominence being as land where Hercules killed the tyrants of Geryon and Taurisco who were oppressing *Hispania* and Gaul respectively.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, partly, because one of Hercules’ labours takes place in *Hispania*, the diffusion of his cult was very relevant, being the third, behind Jupiter and Mars, with special emphasis on Betic and Mediterranean territory, as well as with a third focus on the Duero (Oria 1997: pp. 143–151). When Ammianus Marcellinus came to praising the Emperor Julian, the Antiochene historian recounted that, while he was preparing a campaign against the Persians, letting himself be guided by omens, numerous criticisms were raised against him, who, nevertheless, “remained unshakable in the face of these secret intrigues, in a similar way to Hercules before the pygmies or before the rude Indian Thiodamas”.<sup>12</sup>

2 About Hercules myth on Medieval chronicles see Blanco (2019: pp. 140–148).

3 See reference 9.

4 Mart. *Epigrams*, IX, 64.

5 Mart. *Epigrams*, IX, 101.

6 Mart. *Epigrams*, V, 65.

7 *Hist. Aug.* Adrian, XIII, 1.

8 *Hist. Aug.* Commodus, VIII–IX.

9 *Hist. Aug.* Maximinus Thrax, IV, 9; VI, 9.

10 Even the poetry is inspired by Hercules, as is the case with the work of Magnus Ausonius alluding to the works of the hero: Auson. XXIV, 10 (THA II B. 130).

11 Amm. 15, 9, 6.

12 Amm. 22, 12, 4.

It is clear, therefore, that the figure of Hercules is used by several emperors in a chronological framework that extends between the 1st and 4th centuries AD, with the aim of highlighting certain virtues of the ruling emperor. In this sense, it should be noted that the force associated with the myth of the hero is the main characteristic that seems to attract the emperors when it comes to equating themselves to Hercules.

From the fourth century on, the strong advance of Christianity, protected by the legislation issued by the imperial chancellery, caused strong changes in the mentality of the late-ancient elites. Many members of the upper classes became Christianized, while others remained faithful to tradition, reacting to the collapse of their world and the deep-rooted customs that had accompanied Rome on its expansion. It will be at that juncture that, according to the works of some Christian apologists, the traditional myths of pagan culture are criticized or reinterpreted with a Christian understanding. They will be criticized or reinterpreted in a Christian key. It is worth remembering the testimony of Lactantius, who lived between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, and who represents some of the virtues associated with Hercules. The text of our interest belongs to his work *Divine Institutions*, on which Lactantius criticizes polytheism vehemently, defending the existence of a single God, the Christian one. And, when trying to refute the divine character attributed to some of the most revered beings during antiquity, Hercules is the first figure he analyses, proving the importance of the universe of gods and heroes celebrated in his time:

*But it is that even those great and wonderful deeds that he carried out, should not be considered such that they seem attributable to divine faculties. What is so extraordinary about defeating a lion and a wild boar, rejecting birds with arrows, removing a king's cattle from the stable, defeating the Amazons, stealing a belt, or killing wild horses together with their owner? These are actions, yes, of a strong man, but of a man. And the thing is that the things he overcame are fragile and mortal things.<sup>13</sup>*

In Lactancio's work a significant change is already noticed in the way of appraising the figure of Hercules; for the Christian apologist not only denies the divinity of the hero, but he also attacks his human condition, since he is not capable of controlling his passions, as a good Christian should do:

*(...) Dominating the spirit and curbing anger is typical of a strong man: this he has not done and never could (...). And it is that whoever defeats a lion should not be considered stronger than whoever defeats that violent and internal beast that is anger; nor more so who rejects rapacious birds than who represses their greedy passions; no more who defeats the Amazon fighter than whoever does it with pleasure, destroyer of modesty and fame; neither more so who removes manure from a stable than who expels from a heart vices that, being internal and proper, are more pernicious than those that can be avoided and prevented.<sup>14</sup>*

13 Lact. *Inst.* 1, 9, 2–3.

14 Lact. *Inst.* 1, 9, 4–5.

His argumentation leads Lactantius to conclude that “only one who is temperate, moderate and equanimous can be considered a strong man; and that if someone meditates what the works of God are, he will consider all these works that foolish men admire as ridiculous”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for the Christian apologist, Hercules’ victories over beasts and monsters are worthless, in comparison with a man’s victories over his own beasts, that is, his passions (Settis 1975: pp. 931–932). In the 5th century, the apothegms of Saint Anthony will insist on this idea, saying that the virtues of the spirit “give power over wild beasts” (Mortari 1997: p. 91).

Despite the Christian criticisms levelled against Hercules, also evidenced in Prudentius’s *Contra Symmachum*,<sup>16</sup> there were still many of who continued to worship Hercules in the fourth century, as shown by a passage of Saint Augustine, in an epistle addressed to the city of Suffectum, related to the controversy caused by the Christian attacks against the temple of the hero that rose in the North African city, and which resulted in the death of sixty Christians:

*There are still metals and no stones are missing, there are still different kinds of marble and artists abound. Your god is carved, turned and decorated with care. We will add the carmine, expressing the blush with which your rites may seem sacred. If you call Hercules yours, we will collect money together and we will buy you the god at your artist’s house. But give us back the souls that your hand ran over. We give you back your Hercules; return, instead, those numerous souls.*<sup>17</sup>

And in the year 393 AD, the restoration of the temple of Hercules in Ostia is attested (Boin 2010: p. 253), stating once again that the hero’s cult was still very much alive, even despite the spreading of Christianity.

Around the 5th century, Orosius in his *Historiae adversum paganos libri* only makes a timid allusion to Hercules in Hispania, and something similar will happen with Isidore of Seville, where Hercules is an addition to various topographical comments.<sup>18</sup> The writers of the 6th century, from the Eastern Roman Empire such as Stephen of Byzantium<sup>19</sup> and Priscian of Caesarea<sup>20</sup> again quote Hercules and their references seem to repeat events already told by older authors (Blanco 2019: pp. 139–140). But also, Hercules is named in the East, after the fall of the West, alluding to the limits of the columns of Hercules (in Gibraltar and Ceuta) as a possible way of expansion.

15 Lact. *Inst.* 1, 9, 6.

16 Prud. *c. Symm.* 1, 116–119: *Herculeus mollis pueri famosus amore ardor et in transtris iactata efferbuit Argo: nec maris erubuit Nemea sub pelle fovere concubitus et Hylan pereuntem quaerere caelebs.*

17 Aug. *Hippo Ep.* L.

18 Oros. *hist.* 1, 2, 7; *Is. syn.* XIV, 3, 18 and 4, 11.

19 Step. *Byz. Eth Iberia* (THA II B. 142-AT).

20 Prisc. XVI–XVII (THA II B. 143-A).

## 2. The Herculean mosaics: Imperial context

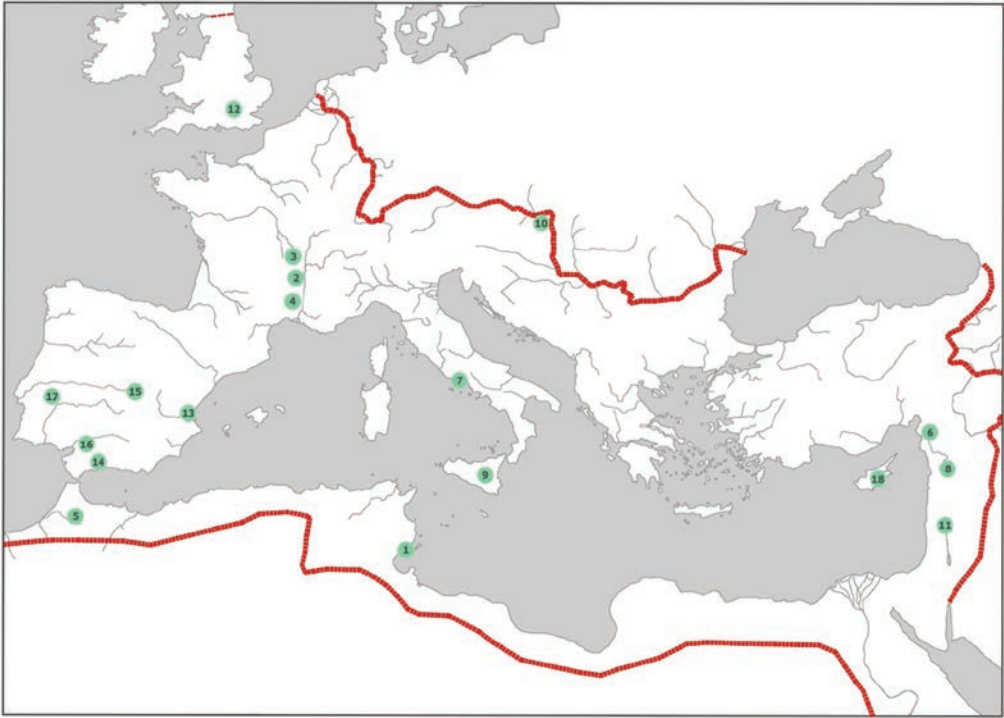
The dispersion of mosaics with representations of the hero distributed by the empire shows the strong roots of the myths related to Hercules in the Greco-Roman mental universe, which were also sculpted on numerous sarcophagi, such as that of Velletri, from the Hadrian period; that of the Palazzo Altamps, from the 3rd century; that of the Baths of Diocletian, from the middle of the second century; that of the Galleria Degli Uffizi from the second century; that of Pappa Tiberiopolis, Turkey, from the third century, or that of the British Museum, from the Via Appia, from the middle of the second century (Melero & Vargas 2017: p. 126).

Below we describe the representations of the examples located in the Roman Empire, analyzing the chronological evolution of the representations. Examples of Herculean representations also appear in North Africa, whose relationship with the Sicilian mosaics has always been revealed. At the house of Asinius Rufinus (Acholla, Tunisia), dating from the end of the second century, the twelve labours of the hero adorn the *triclinium* of the house of this important character who lived at the time of Commodus, and who perhaps wanted to show his loyalty to the reigning emperor who, as we have seen, was represented as Hercules. The hero does not appear in a battle against his enemies, isolated and alive, but does it not appear in the centre of the composition (Gozlan 1979: pp. 35–72; Peñalver 2018: p. 173). Again, in the *triclinium* of the “house of the labours of Hercules” in Volubilis (Morocco), dating from the beginning of the third century, the hero’s fatigue is represented, being present in the scenes, fighting against different monsters and without landscape that frames the compositions (Peñalver 2018: p. 173).

The twelve labours of the hero reappear in Gaul; specifically, in south-eastern France, with the same chronology of the Tunisian one, in this case in the Roman villa of Saint-Paul-Lès-Romans, from the late 2nd century AD. And it is a representation room again, probably a triclinium (Lavagne 1979: p. 271). Despite the poor degree of conservation, Hercules can be recognized fighting violently with the Nemean lion; Hercules and the Hydra of Lerna; Hercules and the Erymanthian Boar; Hercules and Ceryneian Hind; Hercules and the birds of Lake Stymphalia; Hercules and Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons; Hercules and the Augean stables; Hercules and the Cretan Bull; Hercules and the mares of Diomedes and Hercules and Geryon.

The eleventh and twelfth scenes have completely disappeared but based on the most common sequences which appeared on the mosaics of the same theme, it can be intuited that it would be Hercules and the Garden of the Hesperides and Hercules and Cerberus (Lavagne 1979: pp. 271–277). The last two scenes show Hercules and Antaeus and Hercules and the centaur. An enigmatic figure appears in the central part of the composition, perhaps representing Hades.





**Fig. 1.** Imperial Herculean mosaics cited in the text (D. Piay)

**Table 1.** Box with a compilation of the Hercules thematic mosaics around the whole Roman Empire

Nº	Situation	Topic	Chronology
1	Acholla (Tunisia)	Labours of Hercules	End II aC
2	Saint-Paul-Lès-Romans (France)	Labours of Hercules	II aC
3	Fourvière (Lyon, France)	Drunk Hercules	II aC
4	Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (France)	Hercules & Hesione	III aC
5	Volubilis (Morocco)	Labours of Hercules	Early III aC
6	Antioquia (Turkey)	Drunk Hercules	End II aC
7	Anzio (Italy)	Hercules & Aqueloo	End II aC–Early III aC
8	Homs (Siria)	Life of Hercules	III aC
9	Piazza Armerina, Sicilia (Italy)	Labours of Hercules	IV aC
10	Budapest (Hungary)	Hercules & Nessus	III aC
11	Sepphoris (Israel)	Drunk Hercules	III aC
12	British Museum (unknow origin)	Hercules & nymph & the Garden of the Hesperides	?
13	Liria, Valencia (Spain)	Labours of Hercules	III aC
14	Cártama, Málaga (Spain)	Labours of Hercules	III aC

Nº	Situation	Topic	Chronology
15	Carranque, Toledo (Spain)	The abduction of Hylas	IV aC
16	Itálica, Sevilla (Spain)	The abduction of Hylas	III aC
17	Torre de Palma (Portugal)	Hercules & Megara Drunk Hercules	IV aC
18	Larnaca (Cyprus)	Labours of Hercules	III aC

From the same century, we have one of the best-known defeats of Hercules represented in a mosaic preserved in the Gallo-Roman museum at Fourvière (Lyon), from Vienne. Wrapped in an exceptional geometric composition, an emblem represents the drunken and naked hero, who wields the nail with difficulty and is covered with the skin of the Nemean lion, and is supported by a young satyr and a Maenad, after losing the confrontation with Dionysus, between the two based on the ability to resist wine (Lancha 1981). The same episode in the life of the hero is represented in Sepphoris (Israel), on an early third-century mosaic, from a large house south of the Roman theatre. The figurative scenes, all of a Dionysian character, are developed on fourteen panels arranged around the central emblem, rectangular in shape, at which the drinking contest between Hercules and Dionysus is represented (López 1998: p. 204).

Reviewing other examples of the 2nd century, there is of the “drinking contest” between the hero and the god a mosaic documented at Antioch and is preserved today in the Worcester Art Museum (Massachusetts). The mosaic, from the second century, decorated in past a time classroom representing an Antiochian town; the scene shows Dionysus, god of wine, in the central part, showing his empty glass, while Hercules is still drinking. Silenus and Ampelos surround the god, evidencing their victory, while a young slave plays the aulos (Kondoleon 2005: pp. 178–181; Barsanti 2012: pp. 28–29).

From the so-called Villa of Nero in Anzio (Lazio, Italy) an exceptional mosaic (80m2 in size), in this case bichrome, provides us with a representation of another myth related to Hercules. Dating from the 3rd century, it can today be visited at the Museum of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome. In the central scene, the hero can be seen with the nail and the skin of the Nemean lion, after plucking a horn from Achelous, the river divinity who confronted the hero for the beautiful Deianira, and who succumbed to Hercules (Brandizzi 2000; Marzano 2007: p. 269).

Other less represented scenes are that of Hercules and Hesione, preserved on a mosaic from the middle of the third century, from Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, which immortalizes the moment at which the hero, within the skin of the Nemean lion over his shoulders and he nails it, delivers it, he took to Hesione by the hand, the daughter of the King of Troy Laomedon (Lavagne 1979: pp. 269–290); and one with the same dated, between the 3rd and 4th centuries, located in the Villa of Hermes in Budapest, which represents Hercules and Nessus. The moment immortalized in the mosaic is the one in which the hero is about to throw his poisoned arrow at the centaur, who tries to kidnap Deianira, Hercules’ wife (Wellner 1969: p. 245; Kiss 1973: p. 21).

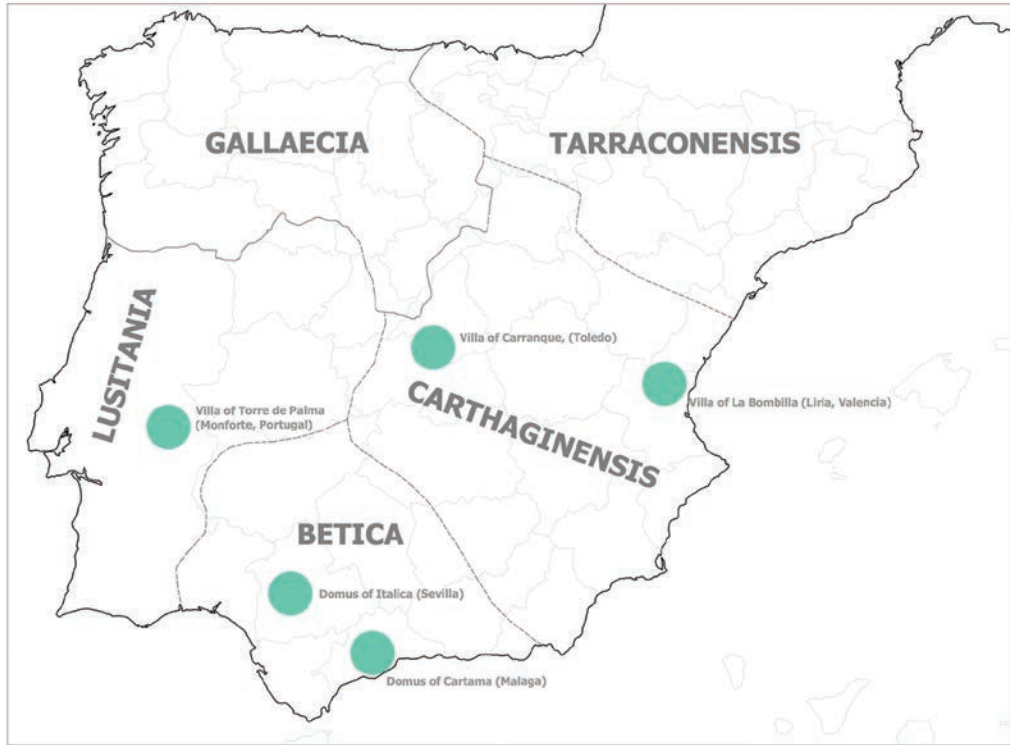
We cannot fail to mention here a parietal mosaic that represents different episodes in the life of Hercules, dated in the third century and discovered in the city of Homs



**Fig. 2.** Mosaic of Liria. Property of Archaeological National Museum of Spain

(Syria).<sup>21</sup> Is a 5 series depicting scenes from the life of Hercules which decorated the floors of depicting scenes. Its exceptional artistic quality, the impressionism and the realism of the scenes are striking. Among them, the first one stands out, in which the birth

21 Manar Al-Athar Project (2013).



**Fig. 3.** Hispanian Herculean mosaics cited in the text (D. Piay)

of the hero and his brother Iphicles can be seen. In the second representation, Hercules appears as an adult before Zeus, while in the fourth one it seems to recall the episode of the hero at the garden of the Hesperides.<sup>22</sup>

Among the mosaics, without a doubt, those of the Villa del Casale in Piazza Armerina (Sicily), dating from the 4th century, occupy a preferential place. In the trilobed banquet hall, located in the south-eastern side of the luxurious residence, the stone floors show a figurative catalogue, unfortunately incomplete, of Hercules' adversaries, who appear scattered, dead or dying, as if it were a battlefield. Among them can be identified the Nemean lion, Geryon, the Hydra of Lerna, the bull of Marathon, the Ceryneian Hind, Cerberus, the serpent of the Hesperides, but especially the Bistones knights and their ferocious horses. This last scene is one of the least represented among the toils of Hercules. Also, in the northern exedra the apotheosis of Hercules is represented, appearing as the victor and therefore admitted into Olympus and the scene depicting

<sup>22</sup> This mythological episode appears represented also on a mosaic of chronology and origin unknown today visible at the British Museum, where a scene of Hercules is depicted naked, with his club and the skin of the Nemean lion supported with his left arm. The hero appears with his muscles and in a belligerent attitude, brandishing his club with a threatening gesture towards a snake curled up to a tree in the garden of the Hesperides. On the right, a nymph watches the scene.

Hercules' participation in the battle against the giants cannot be forgotten (Settis 1975: pp. 965–967; Dunbabin 2002: pp. 163–137).

To date, there are not many mosaics located in the Iberian Peninsula in which representations of the hero appear. The most famous one is the one located in the town of La Bombilla (Liria, Valencia), currently preserved in the National Archaeological Museum (Madrid). It is a mosaic dating from the 3rd century, which perhaps adorned a cubiculum of a villa, although there is no definitive opinion on the matter (Peñalver 2018: pp. 164–168). It is divided into two areas: one with geometric decorations consisting of squares formed by contrasting black and white triangles; and a figurative field, made up of twelve paintings representing the Labours of Hercules around a central emblem, where Hercules and Omphale are represented, the queen of Lydia whom the hero had to serve as a slave for three years to purify the death of Iphitus. It is worth highlighting the change of dresses: Hercules appears with feminine clothes and attributes, while the sovereign adopts the characteristic attributes of the hero: the lion and the nail.

The narration begins in the lower left with the strangulation of the Nemean lion and continues with the episodes of the Hydra of Lerna, the Bull of Crete, the Garden of the Hesperides, the mares of Diomedes, the death of Geryon, the cleaning from the Augean stables, the capture of Cerberus, the Erymanthian Boar, the belt of Hippolyta, the Ceryneian Hind and, finally, the birds of Stymphalia. Except for the first two episodes, Hercules appears bearded; and, except in the first, with the chlamyd knotted around his neck and with his characteristic weapon, he nails it, either using it or placed freely in the field of the painting. Here, Hercules is represented beardless, and the ensemble, in general, loses volumetric representation, highlighting the illusionism of the figurative representations. Both, due to the same topic and the schematic style, this mosaic reminds us of that of Volubilis, although the composition and distribution of the scenes are different.

Greater difficulties are presented in the mosaic found in Cártama (Málaga) in 1858, whose hazardous history led to its disappearance, without its whereabouts being known to this day. This implies that its study must be carried out from drawings and old descriptions, from which it can be inferred that the mosaic was a part of a luxurious room, perhaps a triclinium, of a domus located within an urban context (Melero & Vargas 2017: p. 130). Like the Liria mosaic, the Cártama mosaic has also been dated to the 3rd century, at the late Severian period (Balil 1977: p. 378) although obviously, its disappearance leaves us with no choice but to base ourselves on the information provided by the authors who, in the past, dealt with of their study. More recent studies suggest that the mosaic could even be from the second century (Melero & Vargas 2017: p. 131).

Of interest for this work is the scene depicted on the stone pavement, the theme of which revolves around Hercules, once again representing the hero's twelve feats or *athloi*. In the central rectangle, there is a seated character, perhaps representing the Achelous River, which, as described by Sophocles in *The Trachiniae*, confronts Hercules. The reeds that can be seen behind the character point in this direction, the jug that is located behind the vegetation and the wound of the character on the right arm, from which blood flows (Melero & Vargas 2017: p. 123). Hercules would be represented on

the personification of the river, on a much larger scale than the rest of the figures in the mosaic. Although the scene has been almost completely lost, the nail can be sensed in the right hand, very common in the representations that have been preserved of the hero, even sculptural ones. Around the central rectangle there are twelve pictures of the same size, and even though the mosaic appeared quite destroyed, the following *athloi* of the hero can be detected: the Nemean lion, the Hydra of Lerna, the Ceryneian Hind, the Erymanthian Boar, the Hippolyta's belt, the Geryon's cattle; the Cerberus and the apples of the Hesperides. Hypothetical is the presence of Diomedes' mares, the birds of Lake Stymphalia, the Augean stables and the Cretan bull since they were no longer conserved when the descriptions of the mosaic were made (Melero & Vargas 2017: p. 124). As for the lower rectangle of this musical ensemble, the representation seems to



**Fig. 4.** The abduction of Hylas found in Italica. Property of Archaeological Museum of Sevilla

correspond to Hercules, intoxicated, after having rivalled Bacchus in capacity and endurance in drinking. The accompanying figure is possibly Dionysus (Melero & Vargas 2017: pp. 123–128). In opposition to the whole of Liria, in this case, the representation of the hero is triumphant, as in Piazza Armerina, unlike the representations of struggle, where the hero, in full fatigue, faces the various challenges imposed by Hera, and who preserved in the iconography of the mosaics of the Volubilis and Saint-Paul-Lès-Romans. The African influence, as with the Sicilian mosaics, is evident in this example from Cártama where we find a clear influence of the Acholla model. Interesting is the fact that in the case of Cártama, only the defeated fighters are represented, without the hero; that appeared in the case of Liria. The mosaic representations of Hercules found to date in Hispania are not limited only to the well-known works of the hero.

Another documented mythological scene in the peninsula in which Hercules reappears is the abduction of Hylas by the nymphs. Perhaps the best-known case is the one of Italica (Seville) where, at the beginning of the 3rd century, the room of a *domus*, perhaps a *cubiculum*, was paved with the dramatic scene (Mañas 2004: pp. 121–122). In the Italic case, Hylas stands in the centre of the composition, half-naked, with a cloak that hangs from his left shoulder. Three nymphs hold the hero by his legs and arm. The moment represented is very dramatic, as Hylas is about to disappear under the water. To the right appears the most exceptional feature of this mosaic, concerning other representations of this myth: the appearance of Hercules. The hero appears with his club raised and the hide of the Nemean lion wrapped around his left arm. His face denotes fear for the loss of his friend, to whom he tries to call out with his right arm raised. In the case of Hylas, given its location, outside of an environment of representation (Blázquez et al. 1986: pp. 105–106), and in a more intimate space, we must assume that his choice would not have a self-celebrating character of the virtues of the *dominus*. We are now in the private sphere, although the owner may have wanted to extol the value of friendship by deciding to include Hercules in the composition. What seems out of the question is the literary culture of the owner of the domus.

The abduction of Hylas reappears at the town of Carranque (Toledo), a rich residence from the 4th century that perhaps belonged to Maternus Cynegius,<sup>23</sup> a high official of the Theodosian court. In the well-known “mosaic of metamorphoses”, the scene of Hylas abducted by nymphs is repeated, forming part of a pavement in which other myths are also represented (Blázquez et al. 1986: p. 130; Fernández-Galiano 2001: pp. 25–34; Fernández-Galiano & Piraccini & Miranda & de Luna 2001: pp. 69–80; Patón 2001: pp. 81–92). In a lunette, Diana can be seen naked, accompanied by the nymphs, surprised by Actaeon, now turned into a tree; a second lunette represents Poseidon, metamorphosed into a horse, mounted by Eros, to possess the nymph Amymone, who appears half-naked and supported by an amphora; at the third lunette, the protagonists are Pyramus and Thisbe, dressed, fleeing walking with a tigress, on the right a young man dressed is transformed into a rock behind a bush; it is the fourth and last one who represents Hylas with the nymphs, but unlike the Italian case, and as usual, Hercules is not present. If

23 About the current discussion of the owner of the *villae* see: García Moreno (2001); Arce (2003: pp. 15–28); Bravo (2010: pp. 1167–1174).

we have decided to include the Carranque mosaic, it is because, although the hero does not appear at Hylas' scene, he does it in the composition as a whole, which shows four portraits in the corners: that of Athena, the Artemis, one missing, and Hercules himself, with the nail. The typically African style could remind us of the Tunisian and Moroccan examples. The abduction of Hylas is a specific theme recorded in Hispanic iconography and not repeated in any of the other 13 imperial examples.

Finally, we must mention the famous representation from the Constantinian period located at the Roman villa of Torre de Palma (Monforte, Portugal). The mosaic from the 4th century, to which we refer, has the particularity of including eleven mythological themes in the same mosaic. In one of them, Hercules is represented; the scene belongs to the cycle of Theban legends, and in it we can observe the moment described in the tragedy of Euripides when Hercules prepares to kill his wife Megara with the cudgel (Blázquez 1994: p. 291). Hercules is represented as half-naked, beardless and furious, together with his first wife, daughter of the king of Thebes, Creon (Blázquez et al. 1986: p. 126). This representation of Hercules beardless and *bibens* enjoyed great acceptance in ancient art. Accompanied by Silenus and Bacchante, he also appears in the aforementioned representation of Cártama. Next to Hercules, some children can be seen, in the attitude of one who asks for mercy (Heleno 1962: p. 330). Regarding the female representation, in addition to this Portuguese example, we find two more cases, where



**Fig 5.** Hercules *furens*. Villa de Torre de Palma (Monforte, Portugal).

Photo made by Carole Raddato.



Hercules shares the limelight in a similar composition with the case of Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux where Hesione and the nymph appear in the Garden of the Hesperides of the mosaic (from location and chronology unknown) from the British Museum.

Above this scene, there is another that represents Hercules drunk, Hercules *bibax*, so common in Roman times, muscular, naked and with his head adorned with leaves (same representation, although less complex and with fewer characters than the Vienne example). He is unbalanced, accompanied by a figure, probably Hermes, who supports him to prevent his fall. The choice of this representation by the *dominus* does not seem to obey the intention of making an apology for the physical strength of the hero, but to give relevance to his weaknesses, perhaps to highlight the moral aspect of his victory over vice and the conquest of happiness from one's own effort (Heleno 1962: pp. 328–329). In any case, the rich iconographic program of the Torre de Palma mosaic, in which the muses are represented; a Bacchic dinner, a silence, the maenads, Io and Argos, Apollo and Daphne, Hercules and Hermes, Medea, Hercules and Megara, the triumph of Bacchus, and Theseus and the Minotaur show the literary culture of the *dominus* and its predilection for mythological themes. As we have already mentioned, the representations of the hero seem to want to influence more on the moral aspects of Hercules than on those linked to his vigour and physical strength.

## Conclusions

We will never be able to question the owners of the luxurious dwellings that were adorned with mosaics with mythological representations of one of the most famous heroes of the classical world, the reasons that led them to choose certain scenes from Hercules. Nor can we learn from them if their motivations were solely aesthetic ones, or if they tried to provoke the admiration of those who visited their country estates or their houses in the city. But we may scrutinize the number of representations of the hero, investigate the preferred themes on the mosaics retrieved to the present time, verify the preference for their inclusion in representation rooms, and analyse the information provided by the classical sources that, in general, express the feelings and thoughts of those wealthy classes and those cultural elites who could afford the ornaments of their social condition. And we cannot doubt the literary culture of the owners, who undoubtedly knew and enjoyed the readings of the legends and myths which made up the mental universe of the classical world.

Herculean representations run through the entire geography of the empire and became widespread throughout the 1st century AD in sculptural works, parietal paintings, sarcophagi and mosaics. Analysing the current corpus of mosaics, the whole scene of the “12 labours of Hercules” with 7 examples, is undoubtedly the preferred subject for representations, but there is no shortage of examples of the hero's birth, or other episodes linked to his life such as the struggle with the god Dionysus, with the centaur Nessus, or the liberation of Hesione.<sup>24</sup>

24 It must be considered, however, that the set of mosaics with representations of myths linked to the figure

In 1st century AD Hispania, we also see the usual incorporation of mythological themes in the decorations of rich urban and country dwellings. The 2nd century witnessed a progressive growth in this type of representation, increasing even more during the third century, to which belong 3 of the Hispanic mosaics that we have analysed throughout this work (Carranque, Liria and Itálica). From the 4th century on, mythological representations, like other elements of classical culture, began to lose importance progressively, due to the increasing influence of Christianity but related with Hercules Hispanic representations we preserve the mosaic of Torre de Palma and Carranque. The process is excessively complex, and there are plenty of examples of the resistance of convinced pagan aristocrats, like Symmachus, who will rebel himself against the changes arising in society, as well as in collective mentalities, as a consequence of the progressive introduction of the new doctrine.

Among the most documented mythological scenes on Hispanic mosaics, we find the ones with the Olympian deities Jupiter and Neptune as protagonists; the Capitoline wolf and the twins; Medusa and Perseus; and an endless number of mythological beings from classical antiquity. Hercules, undoubtedly one of the most famous heroes of antiquity, has been documented to this date on five Hispanic mosaics of the 18 documented in an imperial context, located at urban domestic spaces and on rural estates. Except for the episodes of the hero's birth and death, the rest of the narratives that enhance the heroism and divinity of our character are all represented in the Hispanic examples. The themes preferred by the owners are the labours of Hercules, the abduction of Hylas, Hercules drunk, and Hercules and Megara. It is evident, therefore, that for the wealthy elites of the peninsula, Hercules represented a good example to transmit the virtues that they wanted to extol, documenting in this territory the greatest concentration of the representation of this hero; beyond the aesthetic pleasure of observing the mosaic representations that adorned his villa, the owner sought to extol his courage and strength, exhibiting himself before his guests in the presence of the hero whose virtues he wanted to imitate, and who had led Hercules to be worshiped as a God. In this way, they continued a long tradition, which had its roots in the past. Since the 1st century, the emperors are represented as bearing the attributes of the hero, turning the invincible Hercules into an icon to be emulated and an element of imperial propaganda. Thus, myth and politics go hand in hand. This quasi-divine exaltation of the emperor is passed on to the wealthy owners of urban and rural residences, wealthy patricians who also hold different positions of power.

The evolution of these representations is related to the configuration of the Hispania elites. They will be leading elites, linked to the sphere of power, which we must put in relation to these towns, where social promotion, and in particular for the Hispanic case, undoubtedly shows a desire for ostentation and self-representation. The relationship between the imperial court and the Hispanic elites are evident in the debate raised by Professor Bravo (2006: p. 27) although, already with Trajano a *cursus honorum* of Hispanic elites would be configured, in particular from the IV century with the figure of

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of Hercules continues to increase; Proof of this is the spectacular stone pavement recently documented in Larnaca (Cyprus), dating from the 3rd century, and which represents, once again, the hero's fatigues.

Theodosius, it seems that these elites would control up to 70% of Theodosian administrative positions (Bravo 2009: pp. 45–56).

The mobility of the elites to the rural environment led to a dynamization and growing vitality throughout Late Antiquity, manifesting itself in the large towns (Santana 2017: pp. 69–90), and it is that these provincial Roman elites will retain, with some exceptions, the Roman *status quo*, thus being necessary to maintain its local prestige, as the safest way to maintain its interests, represented in this case by the pavements in an architecture of power that reflects the areas of representation both in the domus and in the *villae* (Ruíz 2019: pp. 379–383). The abundant representation of mythology in the Late Antiquity Hispanic mosaics confirms that the Hispanic plantation owner maintained a good knowledge of classical mythology, not inferior to other religions of the Empire.

Thus, at their homes, the presence of Hercules is the highest representation of power and divinity. It is accompanied, almost always, by elements that show the virility and bravery of the hero, a powerful musculature, weapons, nails, or the lion's hide as a helmet. It is not surprising that the virtues of the hero were so appreciated by the elites since it was them that led him to become a god. The most chosen representation is that of Hercules *dexiomenos*, where he appears mature, bearded, and a shelf with a nail, except in the case of Liria, where the differences with the rest of Hispanic iconography mark a clear differentiation in the identity and intentionality of the owner. On the other hand, this famous scene from “the 12 labours of Hercules”, in the case of Cártama, represents the hero not fighting but already triumphant, coinciding with the iconography, also triumphant, of the aforementioned mosaic in Piazza Armerina. A representation that differs as indicated, with respect to Liria, where Hercules appears beardless, less muscular, which, despite representing the same iconography, could give rise to a very different intention of this owner. Likewise, the African influence in these representations seems to have been evident in the artistic influence of the Hispanic mosaics. There is no doubt that, paraphrasing Aghion & Barbillon & Lissarrague (2003): “Hercules is not only the symbol of physical strength, but also that of earthly glory”.

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