Roman Labyrinth Mosaics and the Experience of Motion

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In a letter written in 1917, Walter Benjamin speculated on the essential difference between painting and the other arts: "From the human point of view, the level of drawing is horizontal, that of painting, vertical. . . . A picture wants to be held vertically before the viewer." Benjamin had recently been reading the art historian Alois Riegl, specifically his Late Roman Arts Industry, from which he adopted the notion that works of art expressed their own sense of volition. As Benjamin later developed the idea, the viewing needs of the painting implied vertical placement, in emulation of a window, while other cultural forms—the architecture of the Paris arcades, graphics and drawings, written texts—are better seen as horizontal in nature, since they demand to be understood as a "cut" through the "world substance," a transverse section in which some kind of line is envisioned to move through and over the ground presupposed by the work. For Benjamin, such horizontal experience entails a radically different set of perceptions, for, instead of being taken in all at once, as a whole, the horizontal form is perceived in parts whose import must be reconstructed imaginatively by the viewer or reader. Fragments and discontinuity characterize the horizontal, whereas integration and transparency distinguish the vertical. Benjamin recognized the way such vertical orientation marked the modern epoch, from its art to the way it conceived the study of history, but he wished to propose other modes as alternatives to a modernism that had, by the 1920s, exhausted itself.

The study of Roman floor mosaics has traditionally been encumbered by the kind of myopia Benjamin describes in his distinction between vertical and horizontal forms of viewing: modern scholars have tended to regard mosaics as if they were paintings or were created in emulation of painting. The rise of easel painting in modern culture has installed an unconscious privileging of this visual medium above all others, with the result that the conditions of viewing attending a painting hung on a wall have become normative for the arts as a whole. The vertical bias has had several effects on our understanding of floor mosaics. First, it has been assumed that the aim of ancient mosaic designers was generally to imitate painting, that mosaics are (or attempt to be) essentially paintings in stone laid out on a floor. From this follows the almost universal practice of installing mosaics on museum walls, in conformity with the presentation of paintings. Conventions of Western perspective since the time of Leon Battista Alberti understood that a painting was made by an artist standing at a fixed point before it, and that a single, immobile point near the center of the work is the implicit location a viewer is supposed to reclaim in order to experience its spatial effects. This monocular perspective is replicated in the kind of still photography that most often presents such works in textbooks and other published studies. Scholars have complained that "[m]osaics are difficult to photograph even under good conditions: because of their size and situation, often only an oblique view is possible." Measured by the standards of wall painting, the Roman floor mosaic remains a fragment. Seen en face, from a fixed position, or judged by the standards of realism established for another medium, the mosaic is misread, and the proper experience of its viewing unduly constrained. As Benjamin might have put it, the floor mosaic wants to be regarded horizontally, not vertically.

The meaning of the Roman floor mosaic was inseparable from its experience as a tangible surface, one typically appreciated by an ambulatory viewer situated in and aware of a specific architectural setting. We need to rethink such mosaics as forms and materials underfoot and to examine them kinesthetically, as experiences that are by no means purely visual. Footsteps can define a place—even an imaginary place. The way that the labyrinth mosaics interact with the architecture and activities of the baths of North Africa from the late second to the early fourth century CE and with the viewer's ambulatory occupation of these spaces accounts for the popularity of the theme in such settings. The traversal of labyrinth mosaics in a bath context takes on a broader, metaphorical meaning, since the pavements were deliberately designed to blur the boundaries between life and myth. Myth offers a common realm available and accessible to all, and the labyrinth's iconography and mythography are particularly apposite in a bath context. As a floor decoration, the labyrinth can reinterpret the space it defines, and walking across these spaces helps to construct the bather as a heroic athlete.

Roman North Africa was one of the wealthiest regions of the empire in the second and third centuries CE, not least thanks to its major exports of grain and olive oil; as a result, these provinces are among the richest in surviving monuments. The first emperor from North Africa, Septimius Severus of Leptis Magna (in modern Libya), came to the throne in 193, and his dynasty held power until 235. In the provinces of North Africa, the great agonistic, Greek-style athletic contests were extremely popular, especially during the second, third, and fourth centuries, when the mosaics and bath buildings discussed here were made. Games and sporting events were staged on both the imperial and local levels, celebrating such municipal events as the dedication of bath buildings that still dot the landscape today.

Fifty-six known Roman floor mosaics represent the convolutions of the labyrinth. While the majority come from houses, fourteen labyrinth mosaics come from baths, and seven of these from baths in North Africa. Stories involving
The labyrinth appear in sources ranging from Herodotus to Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, and Apollodorus. Many narratives intersect at this motif: the pride of Minos, the lust of Pasiphae, the love of Ariadne, the cleverness of Daedalus, the tragedy of Icarus, the horror of the Minotaur, and the heroism of Theseus. But the bath mosaics highlight the athletic prowess of the hero Theseus.

The popularity of labyrinth mosaics has been ascribed variously to their gamelike aspect, their apotropaic nature, their near-abstract design that allows for infinite extension across a room of any size, their ability to reflect an elite Roman cultural status on viewers having the education to recognize the image and its multiple ramifications, their ability to represent to the Roman viewer the triumph of civilization over barbarism, and their image as a representation of the city itself. Yet, though it has been noted several times, no one has explained why the labyrinth mosaics were such a common theme in the baths of North Africa. Of the sixteen labyrinth mosaics in North Africa, seven adorned baths, but these images and their contexts have never been studied together.

Walking on the Labyrinth: Surface and Traversal

Floor mosaics require the beholder to think on his or her feet. Any pavement will probably be touched (even felt by unshod feet) at the same time that it is seen. This matters because the Greeks and Romans believed that vision itself was both haptic and optic. By a process of extromission, the eyes released rays that traveled out to touch the object in question and then came back to the eyes. Visuality was thus not anchored in the retina alone. Floor mosaics that imitate painting are not necessarily playing to the strengths of the mosaic medium; any illusion of deep perspective will always be mitigated by the pavement's tangible flatness and texture underfoot. Images presented on a surface with which the viewer has physical contact prompt the spectator at all times to acknowledge personal involvement with the creation of meaning. Especially effective in this light are mosaic compositions that endeavor to take into account the simultaneity—of horizontality and of verticality—built into any experience of a floor mosaic, where the image and any accompanying narrative are deployed at right angles to the standing viewer.

The schema and scale of the labyrinth story presented in Roman baths are specific to the medium of floor mosaics. Wall paintings of Theseus and the Minotaur, such as those surviving from the Vesuvian region, focus on the hero's victorious exit from the labyrinth: we see him outside. But the mosaics depict a wholly different moment in the narrative and spread out the patterns and convolutions of the labyrinth itself (Fig. 1). Such pavements, stretching across large rooms, rarely feature any of the ancillary characters (such as Ariadne and the crowds of onlookers and grateful Athenian children) who are often present in wall paintings. Instead, the floor mosaics showcase the architecture of the labyrinth and present a journey underfoot.

Because their narrative of journey unfolds across the surface of a floor, labyrinth mosaics are representations of spatial experience that unify art and architecture. The otherwise unremarkable action of walking cannot be taken for granted across these surfaces, since the mosaics call for immersion and immediacy on the part of the observer. The experience of mosaics thus involves a sort of phenomenological vision, prompting a larger cognitive, perceptual, retinal, and epistemological effort toward understanding. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the "lived perspective of the visible world in relation to our living body" provides an important model here, since he describes perception as "our kinaesthetic, prescientific lived-bodily presence to the world." As she actually treads on the images, the beholder is moved to become actively engaged in the narrative unfolding underfoot.

Roman baths are environments designed to serve and celebrate the human body; these are spaces created for rituals of great physicality. Observers experienced the labyrinth mosaics while also partaking of the social rituals of bathing. Bathers moved through different temperature zones, in and out of water of various temperatures, walked barefoot across cold
floors as well as room-temperature floors and other chambers with floors too hot to traverse without shoes. A heightened bodily awareness was stimulated by the highlighted physicality of the bathing experience itself. Some rooms would have been full of steam and dim light, others full of sunlight and the splash of water. A poem from the Latin Anthology even links the bodily pleasures of bathing and the mental pleasure provided by the decor of the bath itself.

Simply as a dynamic pattern of tight rhythmic lines, labyrinths are a pleasing visual decoration. The contrast between a violent and dangerous struggle (Theseus versus the Minotaur) and the pleasures of bathing was probably not lost on a Roman audience. Because the sea god Neptune clearly oversaw the watery realm of the bathhouse, a viewer confronted with a labyrinth mosaic might well remember the connection of Neptune to the Minotaur. Katherine Dunbabin has suggested that "the remarkable popularity of labyrinth designs for the decoration of rooms in or attached to baths, though perhaps in part intended for the entertainment of bathers who can puzzle out the maze while they relax, may also have been influenced by the notion that the wanderings of the maze baffle or distract the evil spirits or the malevolent gaze." Certainly, apotropaic resonance can be accepted as a reason for the popularity of this myth in this context.

More nuanced interpretations can be made, however, from analyses of labyrinths, taking into account their different settings in the bath, their relation to the surrounding architecture, and the imagery of the rest of the bathing ensemble, such as sculptural programs. Furthermore, the labyrinth mosaics make fresh sense when we situate them within their architectural settings. These pavements, themselves illustrating a journey, rely also on the physical movement of the beholder; while the realm of the mosaic begins at the entrance to the room, only an oblique view of the entire composition is available from that vantage point. The narrative will not culminate until one steps into and then through the room.

Labyrinth mosaics often present both a picture and a picture of a plan, as the mosaic from the Baths of Belalis Maior demonstrates (Figs. 1–3). The mosaic is still in situ, paving an unheated room in a small thermal establishment from the early fourth century. The labyrinth itself measures approximately 5% square yards (4.8 square meters). The outer part of the mosaic represents heavy masonry walls splaying out on all four sides, as if to hold the rest of the structure within the high circuit of the depicted walls reaching to the very walls of the room itself. A crenellated gate, one on each side of the room, punctuates each mosaic wall, represented as huge stone blocks laid in double courses. Only one gate, at bottom right, opens to reveal a single arched doorway in the heavy exterior wall offering access to the labyrinth's interior. This gate, though facing inward toward the labyrinth, corresponded with the actual opening into the room. The labyrinth would first be seen from the doorway of the room, by a beholder poised, perhaps between columns, looking into the room's southern half. The central image, however distant and oblique, would be oriented toward the oncoming viewer.

Within the fortress walls are walls again, but now they make no pretense to three-dimensionality and are rendered only as lines, black and red on white. It is a floor plan of the convolutions of a labyrinth, rendered on the floor of the Roman frigidarium, a cold room that is the traditional finishing point in the sequence of Roman bathing. Black and red lines representing walls on the Belalis mosaic create and traverse a winding pattern. Theseus finds the Minotaur in the labyrinth's innermost chamber, shown at the center of the mosaic and also the center of the frigidarium (note the ball of thread between Theseus's knees, Fig. 2). Even though beholders probably did not bother to follow the tortuous lines of the hero's path, they would have been aware of Theseus's monumental journey underfoot.

It is rare that entire large-scale mosaic floors bespeak a single narrative, though the labyrinth floors often do. More often, patterns and sets of figural scenes are collaged together. Multiple borders often frame mosaic pictures (emblemata), and these borders regularly tell their own ancillary stories. Even the massive floors of North African baths that are transformed by mosaics into spectacular and continuous expanses of the ocean show episodes from many different aquatic narratives taking place across the realm of the room. But the image within a labyrinth is not isolated by its immediate mosaic enframedment; the floor renders a single myth, and the contextualized emblems at its center shows the combat between hero and monster in the labyrinth's innermost chamber.

While the surrounding labyrinth is designed as if observed from overhead and in plan view, the combatants in the center are seen from the side and modeled to evoke three dimensions (Fig. 2). At the center of the floor mosaic, where Theseus and the Minotaur fill the available space, the tesserae are smaller and more colors are used. Because the fortress walls reach to the very walls of the room itself, the flat, horizontal floor mosaic reiterates the space of the room itself. In a dialogue of art and architecture, depicted walls meet actual walls; the very center of the labyrinth is also the center of the frigidarium. The viewer's movement across the space of the labyrinth provides the narrative links and thus the sense of common ground.
The play between two and three dimensions emerges as one aspect of this game, but it is not the one mentioned by the ancient sources. Pliny the Elder focused on a different kind of spatial complexity: the compression of extended space into a small area. The labyrinth, he wrote, contains passages "that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner." While Pliny's description highlights the role played by multiple doors to hinder physical navigation, it is a different confusion that accompanies the experience of a labyrinth mosaic. The floor itself is a wide, flat expanse, easy for any walker to traverse. But space is so visually compressed within the mosaic lines of the labyrinth floor that it is inevitably difficult (or even impossible) to follow any one pathway—with the eyes. And so, the spectator is optically lost, even though he is standing on an open floor. At Belalis Maior, the visual instability is heightened by the alternations of the red and black lines that compose the labyrinth, which shimmer and shift back and forth at every turn, blurring the distinction between figure and ground.

Scholars have wondered about the disjunction between the floor mosaics displaying unicursal labyrinths—those that offer only a single route forward, where in fact it would be completely impossible to lose your way—and the literary implications of a labyrinth as a maze in which one actually could get lost. These theories imagine the labyrinth as if scaled down and on paper; with a pen in hand, one surely could trace a unicursal path from beginning to end. By contrast, Roman labyrinth mosaics are not mazes to be followed physically. Indeed, only one (at Mactar, see below) is large enough for a person to follow its course, albeit in tight footsteps. These are instead visual mazes, and visually, across the floor of a Roman bathhouse, it is virtually impossible for the eye to stay the dizzying course. In every case, however, the beholder has only to take a few easy strides over the flat mosaic surface to reach the center of the labyrinth, which is usually also the center of the room. A terrible journey through high-walled corridors with no end in sight is compressed to a pattern of flat lines, and the center is gained easily. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur is, of course, a well-trodden path with positive outcomes. The frame of these mosaics, designed to imitate an enclosure of towering city walls, helps to simulate the deep view underfoot, but the epic journey is accomplished in abbreviated form, and the mythic protagonist easily handles the danger at the center. Nonetheless, the labyrinth design invites all who enter this space to give first-person attention to their movement, not just to walk unthinkingly across the monumental passages condensed underfoot.

**Baths of the Labyrinth, Thuburbo Maius: Theseus as Wrestler**

For too long, the study of labyrinth mosaics has focused exclusively on comparisons made within the mosaic corpus, and in nearly every case the study has remained divorced...
from any consideration of a broader architectural and social context. The size and dimensions of the labyrinth’s pictorial organization, so uncanny in book illustrations, nonetheless make perfect sense for the actual turning and moving viewers on the mosaic, enmeshed in the story told on its multiply oriented surface. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur gains new resonance when it is placed on the floor, in the path and as the path of its beholder in the Roman baths, a space designed as much for athletic activities as for cleansing and relaxing. Theseus, after all, did defeat the Minotaur in a wrestling match, and the hero is credited with laying down the rules of this sport. Though Hercules and Hermes are more commonly considered the patron gods of sporting events, the heroic combat of Theseus and the Minotaur was itself an athletic spectacle, and the pleasures of Roman baths certainly included sporting activities. In his otherwise magisterial 1977 study of labyrinth mosaics, Wiktor Daszewski erred when he ignored the “caractère sportif” of the Roman baths.

The majority of large-scale African baths contained facilities for exercise and combat sport: palaestrae surrounded by colonnaded courtyards. But smaller bathing establishments borrowed the agonistic imagery, even if they might not have offered exercise space within their walls. The high concentration of agonistic iconography in Roman baths signifies the sporting ambiance that dominated these buildings.

Many bathers exercised before bathing. We know from Roman authors—including Martial, Juvenal, and Seneca—that exercises such as weight lifting, ball play, and wrestling took place in the baths as a prelude to cleansing. Greek-style combat competitions (boxing, wrestling, athletic games) gained in popularity in proconsular Africa after the commencement of the Pythian Games in Carthage in the Severan era, as is attested by a rich epigraphic and iconographic record. Later sources, too, are perfectly clear on this point: a statue base from 378 CE from Sabratha (Libya), for example, lauds Flavius Vivius Benedictus for restoring the local baths and thereby restoring exercise to the people.

At the small Baths of the Labyrinth at Thuburbo Maius, late third to early fourth century, a mosaic of boxers decorated the center of the tepidarium floor (Fig. 4). Both boxers have their hands protected by tightly wrapped cestes, a Roman form of boxing gloves. While the younger man remains standing at right, the older man crouches in a defensive posture, bleeding after a heavy blow to the head. Inscriptions at other thermal establishments in the region tell us that boxing combats were offered, sometimes when the bath was dedicated. The Baths of the Labyrinth, barely more than 480 square yards (400 square meters) in size, lacked a palaestra, though archaeologists speculate that a basilical hall at the northwest may have fulfilled a sporting function.

Whether or not people actually exercised within these walls, the overall decor of the Baths of the Labyrinth aimed for an athletic ambiance, and I believe that the labyrinth mosaic adorning the adjacent frigidarium was another important part of this milieu (Fig. 5). The frigidarium itself is approximately 36 square yards (30 square meters) with two steps leading down to a single cold-water pool in one corner. The pool was paved with large tesserae in different colors laid in a random pattern, and this mosaic would have presented a scintillating, shimmering surface when seen underwater. In the normal course of events, the labyrinth and the frigidarium would be entered both before and after the beholder...
had spent some time contemplating and traversing the mosaic of boxers in the tepidarium.46

Although the labyrinth mosaic paving the floor of the frigidarium has been damaged, an interesting array of architectural structures still serves as its border: heavy masonry facades and black doorways seem to open onto cold, dark recesses beyond. Blank walls and multiple entrances must originally have gone completely around the edges of the Thuburbo labyrinth mosaic, presenting a host of gates and openings to the viewer enclosed within.

All these open doors recall Pliny the Elder’s description of an Egyptian labyrinth:

[It was] quite the most abnormal achievement on which man has spent his resources. [. . . This Egyptian labyrinth was the model for the one Daedalus built on Crete] containing passages that wind, advance and retreat in a bewilderingly intricate manner. It is not just a narrow strip of ground comprising many miles of “walks” or “rides” such as we see exemplified in our tessellated floors or in the ceremonial game played by our boys in the Campus Martius, but doors are let into the walls at frequent intervals to suggest deceptively the way ahead, and to force the visitor to go back upon the very same tracks that he has already followed in his wanderings. [. . . All are] alike in being roofed with vaults of carefully worked stone. There is a feature of the Egyptian labyrinth which I for my part find surprising, namely an entrance and columns made of Parian marble. The rest of the structure is of Aswan granite, the great blocks of which have been laid in such a way that even the lapse of the centuries cannot destroy them.57

With the multiple angles of viewing set up through the depicted architecture, the surface of the mosaic ceases to be a fixed and static picture and turns instead into a structure within which the viewer must circle around to see it from all sides and must look out at the multiple axes of the walls from within. Even a simple pattern (like that of the labyrinth’s black lines across the white ground) appears notably more dramatic and dynamic when seen from an oblique angle (Fig. 6).48

As at Belalis Maior, the heavy architectural exterior of the Thuburbo labyrinth mosaic gives way to an orderly delineation of the labyrinth’s interior walls. Again, the endlessly twisting hallway winds through all four quadrants of the labyrinth before opening onto the square field at the center (Fig. 7), where Theseus and the Minotaur appear amid the strewn human remains of the monster’s former victims: a head, a severed arm, a single foot, and what appears to be a leg bone bracket the combatants. On a sand-colored surface, Theseus lunges inward to kick or knee the Minotaur’s flank. The Minotaur, as Apollodorus said, had “the face of a bull, but the rest of him was human.”49 On one knee, the monster appears entirely at the hero’s mercy. Theseus has wrenched back his head by one horn, and though the Minotaur grabs Theseus’s elbow in futile protest, it is obvious that a blow from the hero’s curved stick (pedum) is about to dispatch the monster.

So far, there has been nothing to suggest this mosaic presents anything but a mythic, epic combat. But several details actually blur the line between sporting events held in the mythic and worldly realms. In the Roman context, the heavy athletic disciplines were wrestling, boxing, and the pankration, a brutal blend of wrestling and boxing. There were no weight classes in antiquity, and so these sports were not for small men. The advantage went to the heavier man in the struggle to throw his opponent off balance and to the ground.50 The boxes in the next room at Thuburbo Malus are both heavy, bulky men, and within the labyrinth, Theseus and the Minotaur are no lightweights, either. Both man and monster have similar physiques—thick arms and legs and matching pot bellies. Dio Chrysostom disparaged wrestlers as “pot-bellied bullies,” and in the second century Galen criticized them for their long meals and their practice of force-feeding themselves, all in order to get their weight up.51 On the Thuburbo mosaic, the decidedly human, nonheroic body type of Theseus blurs the boundary between mythic and everyday combatants.52

The fighting strategy employed by Theseus in the central scene is also copied from observations of contemporary sporting events like the pankration. “Turn your body sideways to your opponent and grip him by the head with your right hand,” directs a notation from a papyrus found in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus, giving instructions for wrestling practice.53 Though Theseus reserves his right hand for his pedum, he clearly has a firm grip on one horn of the immobilized Minotaur.

Plutarch describes the joy of King Minos when Theseus overcame the Cretan bull, father of the Minotaur, in a wrestling match at funeral games. Like Ariadne, who was watching, “Minos also was delighted with him, especially because he conquered Taurus in wrestling and disgraced him.”54 Apollodorus tells us that Theseus killed the Minotaur by smiting him with his fists, and Plutarch reveals that the hero’s journey into the labyrinth was undertaken “carrying no war-like weapon.”55 The pedum was Theseus’s only weapon besides his skill at fighting and his not inconsiderable bulk and strength.56

The Minotaur’s pose would have caused any Roman referee to yell out “Round over!” for touching one knee to the ground signaled a loss in the wrestling arena.57 Rather than
showing us an evenly matched pair of combatants at the outset of the contest, mosaic battles of Theseus and the Minotaur regularly show the man vanquishing the beast in a victory clearly marked by the pose of the Minotaur with his knee to the ground. This can be seen at Belalis Maior as well and on labyrinth mosaics from Roman sites around the Mediterranean.  

Other aspects of the Thuburbo mosaic find further parallels with everyday Roman sporting practice, including Theseus’s spiky, closely cropped hairstyle. Wrestlers, especially professionals, generally wore their hair short so as not to offer their opponents any long hair to grip and pull. Furthermore, Theseus is shown wearing a bulla or amulet on a red-brown cord around his neck, as are all four of the young boxers or wrestlers on a mosaic from Utica (modern Tunisia), late third to early fourth century (Fig. 8), as does the bath attendant labeled “Tite” in a mosaic from the late Roman villa at Piazza Armerina, Sicily.  

Regular bath goers, who doubtless came in all shapes and sizes, might well be undressed like Theseus and wearing such an amulet according to contemporary practice.  

As a matter of course in images of athletic contests, the older opponent tends to be vanquished by the younger. This happens in the boxing scene in the tepidarium at Thuburbo
Maius, where the bearded, older man is shown bleeding, the younger man upright and balanced on his toes after scoring a major hit (Fig. 4). While the boxers in the next room at Thuburbo Maius presented a blunt and even brutal portrait of human athletics, the wrestling match of Theseus and the Minotaur was of more heroic and mythical proportions. Theseus the athlete goes far toward explaining the popularity of the labyrinth in bath contexts. Hercules was also shown employing the poses and holds commonly used in the palaestra in epic wrestling matches against Antaeus, Achelous, Triton, and even the Nemean lion.62 We should add Theseus to this category of mythical-cum-Roman sportsmen.

**Baths at Hippo Regius: Minotaur as Athlete**

Mosaics of the labyrinth, depicted at a large scale in the realm of the Roman bath, and by extension their viewers acquire the semiotic status of performativity. Any image at the center of the labyrinth (and the center of the room) would not be legible at first glance, so a viewer looking in from any doorway would feel impelled to explore and traverse the labyrinth, like Theseus. The physical action of crossing these floors quickly embeds the observer within a mythic narrative.

The frigidarium of a small private bath in the center of Hippo Regius (in modern-day Algeria) must have been a spectacular place. Its construction and mosaics date from 150–200,63 and expensive slabs of marble covered the frigidarium walls. The cold plunge was also lined with marble and flanked by marble niches in which bathers could take their leisure. A massive black-and-white labyrinth mosaic paves the frigidarium floor, a space measuring nearly 7 feet 8 inches by 6 feet 7 inches (7 by 6 meters) (Fig. 9).64 Again, the mosaic displays a scene that must be experienced to be understood; the image on the far side would become visible only after several steps had been taken. The mosaic image would transport the viewer optically, even as his body was also in motion.

Heavy black walls, indicated in the mosaic as four courses high and topped by a rippling line of crenellations, entirely surround this labyrinth (Fig. 10). On the north side of the room, the fictive walls are pierced by a single gate through which a thick black line wends its way through the labyrinth’s interior. This line is the path taken by the thread of Ariadne, who fell in love with Theseus when she saw him in the wrestling match.65 Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread, one end of which he was to fasten to the lintel of the labyrinth door. Holding the ball in his hand, he was to unwind it while penetrating deeper and deeper into the labyrinth. The thread was not shown navigating the Thuburbo Maius mosaic (Fig. 7), and, while the labyrinth at Belalis Maior was designed in alternating lines of red and black, the ball of thread was featured only at the conclusion of the narrative in the central scene (Fig. 2). But here, at Hippo Regius, the thick line of the thread weaves throughout the entire room, between the thinner lines representing the labyrinth walls.66 The single, wide line of the thread and the multiple, thin lines of the walls appear serrated because the tesserae are set diagonally across the floor. This jagged line breaks up the monotony of the pattern and gives tautness to the separate elements.
The path of the thread culminates in the center with the large black ball of thread punching into the middle zone (Fig. 11). Here, a torso-length portrait of the Minotaur, rendered in gray, black, and white, already occupies this square area. Long eyelashes, pointed ears, a thickly muscled chest, and curving horns are all shown in some detail, and his head is turned slightly, almost coyly, away from the intruding ball of thread. The Minotaur's image recalls nothing so much as the bust-length mosaic portraits of heavyset athletes from the frigidarium of the Baths at Thapsus, the Antonine Baths in Carthage, and the exedrae of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome.67

At the small baths of Hippo Regius, this labyrinth mosaic has already been successfully traversed: the thread, borne through many winding corridors, has arrived at the center. Theseus, however, is nowhere to be seen, and the role of the hero is left to the beholder, who has also crossed the labyrinth. This gives us a clear instance of what Wolfgang Iser would have called a “constitutive blank.”68 What is missing from the scene (the hero/protagonist) prompts the viewer to accord special attention to his own status. The viewer has already assumed all the intermediary movement and expenditure of time and easily accomplished the laborious journey to the center of the labyrinth. When both Theseus and the Minotaur are represented, as at Belalis Maior and Thuburbo Maitus, the mosaic displays not an equal contest but a victory. No labyrinth mosaics ever show Theseus alone at the center, but at Hippo Regius, the Minotaur appears like an opponent, ready for the match and all comers.69

As Alois Riegl has written, “every work of art does presuppose the existence of a perceiving subject,”70 and here the beholder has stepped into the role of the hero since his own movement, both visual and physical, implicates him in the myth underfoot. The idea of mobility is already present in the work, as the arrival of the thread at the center demonstrates that a journey through the labyrinth has been accomplished. The Minotaur, at the center, must be mastered just as the labyrinth has been mastered. The Hippo Regius labyrinth transforms the motif from a visual game to something more like a physical event. Because the observer is situated within the setting of the labyrinth, he gains the status of a character in the drama underfoot, traveling within and along the course that must be experienced and apprehended.

The path for the feet alters what had been merely a game for the eyes. As the viewer moves from edge to center and the myriad paths underfoot are stepped on and over, great distances for the eye and the imagination are traversed in a few steps. It is the beholder who arrives at the center of the labyrinth, to be confronted by the representation of an adversary of mythic proportions. The heroic protagonist is not imaged, but the hero can still be understood as present, now in the body of the beholder.

A now-lost labyrinth mosaic from Pompeii offers an interesting early parallel to this process of interactive viewing (Fig. 12). Rather than a portrait of the Minotaur, that labyrinth had a helmet at its center, a point of confusion for every commentator.71 The situation becomes clearer when we think of Lucian's description of the method of drawing lots for the wrestling matchups at Olympia, which E. Norman Gardiner explained in 1905: "Lots marked in pairs with the letters of the alphabet in succession and corresponding to the number of competitors were thrown into a silver helmet sacred to that purpose from which each competitor in turn..."
drew a letter. In the same way, the Pompeian mosaic intimates an opponent waiting at the center of the mosaic: the as-yet-unknown adversary’s name will be drawn from the helmet. Again, the path across the mosaic stage embeds the beholder within the larger narrative and, again, in confrontation with an adversary.

The Great East Baths, Mactar: Path to the Palaestra

Just as mosaics are not freestanding works of art independent of the surrounding architecture, so their perception must also include the architecture the mosaics simultaneously define as a physical surface and reinvent with their visual imagery. Across the terrain of these labyrinth floors, it is the perceiving subject who finds, in the flat floor underfoot, a stage for a narrative that elevates his own movement and an invitation to synchronize his actions with the work of art. Visual perception is just one layer of this process of bodily perception and projection: depicted space complements and expands actual space via the introduction of history, imagination, and mythology. Motion is, once again, the key to the labyrinth mosaic of the Great East Baths at Mactar, and here again we encounter the unity of the work of art with the architecture and an invitation to interactive viewing.

Monumental, symmetrically planned, and dated to 199 CE by a dedicatory inscription, the establishment at Mactar is classed as an “imperial type” of thermae (Fig. 13). Perhaps the best-preserved Roman bathing edifice in North Africa, it retains many walls that rise to a height of several meters and often give an indication of the cross-vaulting that once soared overhead. Two internal palaestrae are surrounded on three sides by huge, U-shaped cross-vaulted ambulatories. The palaestrae are set on either side of the swimming pool, which opened to the countryside through five large windows.

Adjacent to each palaestra is a semicircular exedra. The floor of the northern hemicycle is entirely filled with a labyrinth mosaic in black, gray, and white (Fig. 14). The space of the exedra is a kind of pivot for circulation in various directions, which recalls the multiple curves of the labyrinth itself as well as Plutarch’s description of its “intricacies.” The exedra can be entered from five doors within its curved walls, and it gives onto the palaestra itself between six arched piers.

Only the thread of Ariadne delineates the wide paths of this mosaic labyrinth, which entirely fills the exedra. The thread begins to unwind from the central doorway at the back of the arc. The labyrinth culminates in a half circle abutting the marble lintel of the central door on the opposite side, which opens into the palaestra. Here the rigid line of thread breaks into loose curves, as if to show the last few feet unwound before the hero dropped the ball of thread on the floor to commence his battle with the Minotaur (Fig. 15).

At Mactar, the Minotaur is not shown, and neither is Theseus. We are left at the threshold with nothing but an image of a ball of thread on the ground and the insinuation of a larger, missing totality. Rather than rendering recessional space, this floor mosaic borrows from the space of the room to generate its illusions of three-dimensionality, projecting a winding image that claims to obey the same laws of gravity that govern the viewer. Such an “addition” to real space creates an ambient for arriving bathers and wrestlers to occupy and a space where the stage is set for narrative, but the main characters are unseen, or at least unseen in the art. The viewer’s entrance into the performance space outlined by the mosaic is, on one level, manifestly possible. The high socles or believable architectural forms that often occupy the foregrounds of Roman wall paintings are missing, as are the high walls that surround other mosaic labyrinths. The floor itself is bounded by high walls and multiple doorways, and the mo-
saic has usurped this entire space of considerable dimensions to evoke one story line of athletic heroism. At Mactar, the here and now can never be detached from this mosaic narrative.

One more step from the center of the Mactar labyrinth—in fact, the inevitable next step forward—puts the viewer on the threshold of the palaestra. Then a step down, and the beholder would gain the sand of the wrestling ring itself. Following a passage from Lucian, Ranon Katzoff posits that the *skamma* (wrestling ring) should be understood as "a small marked off terrace, perhaps somewhat raised or lowered, in the court, where the sand was piled for sand wrestling."78

Rather than providing a self-enclosed mythological narrative already populated by a full cast of characters, the Mactar mosaic is not an autonomous work of art. Following Riegl, the external unity between image and viewer can be understood as an "indispensable prerequisite and actual raison d'être" for a work of art.79 As both art and architecture, the Mactar labyrinth awaits the viewer's activation and animation because its completion relies on a beholding subject to take the stage it provides. The myth is no longer merely a prototype for human experience; it is now a call to specific action. The floor mosaic literally sets the stage for the viewer to occupy.

If the permanent exchange of different levels of perception is central to the function of many floor mosaics, it is essential here. The labyrinth culminates at the doorstep of the next room—the palaestra—rather than within the center of the room it adorns. There is nowhere else to go from this central threshold. The location of the labyrinth mosaic cannot be accidental: the invitation for the viewer to displace his own motion into the realm of myth is very clear. The labyrinth mosaic lacks even a black border on the edge to distinguish it from neighboring spaces, and this lack of visual resolution prompts the viewer to participate in the illusion fostered by the ongoing spectacle in adjacent spaces. This monumental mosaic is not a static given; we have no image of an event, and thus it is not possible to arrest the time of a recorded narrative. Rather, it is a precarious, moving image,
whose complete lack of borders encourages the blurring between the mythical realm of the floor and the activities taking place in reality.\textsuperscript{80}

Gilbert-Charles Picard believes that matches held in the great palaestra of Mactar were organized by notables and fought by professionals.\textsuperscript{81} Sand in the pit would have provided a smooth, soft surface on which athletes could be thrown in wrestling matches and not be injured when they hit the ground. This wrestling pit, surrounded by a U-shaped colonnade, is positioned as if at the center of the semicircular labyrinth of the exedra (Fig. 13). The labyrinth mosaic is itself a symbol of a challenge, and its presence in the baths would have lifted wrestling matches held there into the realm of mythological reenactment or, at least, provided appropriate and resonant mythological echoes.

A sculpted bas-relief nearly 6 feet 7 inches (2 meters) long also contributed to the sporting atmosphere of the Mactar baths (Fig. 16). It is not clear exactly from which part of the baths this relief came, but Picard suspects it would have been completed by another length of stone, and that the whole may well have decorated the upper zone of a niche holding a statue of a victorious athlete or donor.\textsuperscript{82} It displays six figures: a chubby figure at right holding a wreath has been identified as Eros;\textsuperscript{83} Hercules stands nearby with his ankles casually crossed and his club at his feet. Also visible is the skin of the Nemean lion, a beast strangled by means of a wrestling hold. Hercules’ heavy labors, including his defeat of Antaeus in wrestling, made him as natural a subject for the decor of Roman baths as Theseus. Next to the hero are two pairs of naked wrestlers. The first pair, one man shown flying through the air on the way to a tough fall, illustrates a dramatic throw. The arms and legs of the second pair are locked in combat: each man tries to trip the other and get him in a headlock at the same time. This relief easily conjoins human and divine athletics onto the same plane; the labyrinth mosaic should be classed as another of these links.

The labyrinth, location of an epic wrestling match involving the hero credited with laying down the rules of the sport, was just as fitting an adornment for a bath as a relief of Hercules, god of the palaestra. At the Mactar baths, architecture and decorative scheme collude to implicate the beholder in their surrounding narrative. It is not a static image of victory but, rather, a prompt toward participation that uses the mythic landscape underfoot and the beholder’s movement to activate an open doorway and the space beyond.

Wrestling with Myth

The labyrinth is an especially appropriate subject for a floor mosaic since it represents a journey that must itself be navigated in order to be seen and experienced. This can be a traversal shared between two realms: the viewer moves both across a room and into a myth. In the baths of Roman Africa, as bathers walked across mosaic images and patterns, the pavements’ epic images and complex designs became the stage for the viewer’s own actions. The pattern of the labyrinth implies movement, and it is essentially the construction of a spatial and temporal program. It scales up the architectural space it adorns by turning the floor surface into a vast plane of heroic enterprise, and the labyrinth mosaics play with the notion that the beholder might be transformed into a second hero merely by making the journey to the labyrinth’s center. Labyrinth mosaics invite the beholder’s movement to their centers, where the Minotaur awaits, whether in the form of an image or in the form of a human opponent in an impending wrestling match.

The depictions of Theseus and the Minotaur borrow much from the lived experience of the baths, and specifically their sporting ambiance. The poses and body types of the hero,
famous for his wrestling prowess, link him with living wrestlers and pancretists, whether bulky or ideal, and with portraits of athletes found in many Roman baths. The tangling of wrestling, the required twists and turns of the body, were compared by Catullus to the structure of the labyrinth itself, with the winding thread of Ariadne guiding Theseus from the "inextricable entanglement of the building."84 So, too, in the early Christian moralist Tertullian speaks of wrestling, he evokes the "binding twist" of the body and the "suppleness that eludes."85 The "many miles of walks or rides" that Pliny the Elder describes as compressed into tessellated floors of the labyrinth86 may also prompt a nexus between myth and current life, harking back to the leisurely strolls taken by bathers along the porticoes and through the long halls of the larger bath complexes, which often featured statues of Hercules, athletes, and even bulls.87

There can be little doubt that context makes meaning for the labyrinth mosaics, and vice versa: the labyrinths of the North African baths offered many prompts to blur athletic and heroic activity, sometimes, as at Mactar, even relying on the architecture of the space to provide doorways at once both actual and mythological. Labyrinth mosaics are representations of a spatial experience on whose surfaces the otherwise unremarkable action of walking cannot be taken for granted. In the realm of the Roman bath in North Africa, their traversal easily takes on metaphoric meaning, as mosaics energize lived spaces and the beholder's actual path and the horizon of myth are fused.

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Notes

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Michèle Blanchard-Lemée et al., Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia (New York: George Braziller, 1996), 190. See also nn. 40, 41 below.


2. Scholarly uneasiness with floor mosaics is surprising and long-lived: in 1919 Roger Ling described mosaics as "disturbing" and "uncomfortable" for modern viewers; Ling, Roman Painting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19–20. Seeking to furnish evidence for lost monumental paintings, scholars have long privileged figural mosaics: the most famous Roman floor mosaics are the so-called Bildmosaiken, "paintings in stone." See, for example, Bernard Arendase, Anähe Bildmosaiken (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2003); and Ada Cohen, The Alexander Mosaic: Stories of Victory and Defeat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Scholars who consider the narrative possibilities inherent in horizontal display and who consider nonfigurative mosaics have not assumed mosaics were created in imitation of paintings. See esp. John Clarke, Roman Black-and-White Figural Mosaics (New York: New York University Press, for the College Art Association of America, 1979); Christine Kondoleon, Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysos (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Ellen Swift, Style and Function in Roman Decoration: Living with Objects and Interiors (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); and Norman Bryson, Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). Bettina Bergmann considers the "inhabitant's supposed location in the room" when viewing circus mosaics such as the one from Piazza Armerina, Sicily, and another from a villa at Silin, Libya; Bergmann, "Pictorial Narratives of the Roman Circus," in Le cirque et son image, ed. J.-M. Rodoliz and J. Nélis-Clement (Bordeaux: Ausimus, 2009), esp. 371–76. In her monumental survey of Greek and Roman mosaics, Katherine M. D. Dunbabin notes that mosaics, given their durability, "offer an invaluable contribution to our knowledge . . . of major painting." She is, however, quick to point out that mosaics are a significant art form in their own right and it is hoopoe chefs who will render these statements unnecessary for future publications; Dunbabin, Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

3. Stephen Coas and David Neal, "Roman Mosaics," Current Archaeology 157 (May 1998): 18. These authors recommend that mosaics are best imaged by means of paintings, and indeed, painstaking watercolors of floor mosaics accompany their text.


5. There can be little doubt that context makes meaning for the labyrinth mosaics, and vice versa: the labyrinths of the North African baths offered many prompts to blur athletic and heroic activity, sometimes, as at Mactar, even relying on the architecture of the space to provide doorways at once both actual and mythological. Labyrinth mosaics are representations of a spatial experience on whose surfaces the otherwise unremarkable action of walking cannot be taken for granted. In the realm of the Roman bath in North Africa, their traversal easily takes on metaphoric meaning, as mosaics energize lived spaces and the beholder's actual path and the horizon of myth are fused.


7. In 1977 Witko A. Dazewski collected and published sixty-two Roman mosaics depicting themes of the labyrinth, from across the Roman world; Dazewski, La mosaique de Thesee: Etudes sur les mosaiques avec representations du labyrinthe, de Theseus et du Minotaure (Warsaw: PWN, Editions Scientifiques de Pologne, 1977). To these we can add the labyrinth mosaics from the Baths of Julia Memmia at Bulla Regia (Tunisia) and a small threshold labyrinth from a Roman house in second–third century CE Cominigutti (Portugal) featured in Dazewski's catalog, for a total of sixty-four labyrinth mosaics. The Baths of Julia Memmia have been most recently published by Roger Hanoune, "Décou du monument: Les pavements mosaiques," in Recherches archéologiques franceises dans le Maghreb, t. 1, Les sites archéologiques littorale et histoire urbaine, by Henri Broise and Yvon Thébert (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1993), 245–71. The Cominigutti threshold labyrinth is cat. no. 129 in Hermann Kern, Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings over 5,000 Years (Munich: Prestel, 2000), 91, with an earlier bibliography. It should be noted that Dazewski's catalog includes eight mosaics, probably all from houses, that show the combat between Theseus and the Minotaur without any enframing labyrinth surround. These eight mosaics all show interactions between hero and monster taking place outside the labyrinth, with the heavy walls and doors of the structure serving as a backdrop to the scene. I have omitted these from my calculations because they lack an associated labyrinth surround, hence my total of sixty.
inces in Syria, Egypt, Anatolia, Israel, and Palestine, there seem to be no labyrinth mosaics from any site farther east than Cyprus. Twenty-eight labyrinth mosaics have been published from houses and villas. About half of these mosaics are from North Africa, (seven of sixteen) come from baths. This is a striking preponderance of a theme already notably popular in North Africa. None of the seven labyrinth mosaics in Roman Iberia comes from baths, and only two of the seventeen surviving Italian labyrinth mosaics come from baths.

9. Herodotus, 2.48; Pliny, Natural History 36.86;90; Plutarch, Theseus esp. 15, 19, 21; Pausanias, 1.27.10; Apolloidorus, Bibliotheca 3.1.4 and Epitome, 1.7–10; and Strabo 8.6.2, among others.

10. Broise and Thebert, Recherches, 41: "This subject was often represented and seems to have been especially prized in the salles de nôtre des baths, where it constituted perhaps a sort of visual game" (my translation).


12. Daszewski, La mosaique de Thèeste, 95.

13. Ibid., 99.


16. I discuss only the four best-preserved examples of North African bath labyrinths here: Hippo Regius in Algeria, and Belgac Maior, Thuburbo Mauis, and Macar, all in Tunisia. The other three bath labyrinth mosaics come from Delya and Rugunnia (Algeria), and the Baths of Julua Memmis (Tunisia). To make a grand total of sixteen, the other nine North African labyrinths come from various settings: six from houses or villas in Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia (and none of these six are from baths), two from churches at sites in modern-day Algeria, and one from a tomb (Hadrumentum, Tunisia). Numbers are based on Daszewski, La mosaique de Thèeste, and Hansout, "Décou du monument." Hédi Slim, "La mosaique du labirinthe de Thydrus," Antiquités Africaines 15 (1980): 207–8, suggests that only six of the sixteen North African labyrinths are from baths, but he considers the Thuburbo labyrinth (Figs. 4 and 5) to be from a villa. This may be a domestic mosaic, but it is certainly from a bath suite.


18. Wall paintings at the Basilica of Herculaneum and the Houses of Mar

19. Clarke, in Roman Black-and-White Figural Mosaics, opened a discussion of the visitor’s relationship to the mosaic floor underfoot. He presented the concept of “kinaesthetic address,” which he defined as “the use of the figure to influence spectator motion” (1952, 41). Figures underfoot, he suggests, might prompt the walking viewer to go to the left, turn to the right, or continue through a nearby door, according to what he calls a “traffic-flow suggestion” (35). These concepts have been further elaborated by Ellen Smith, who studied geometric pavements, especially thresholds, and their use as apotropaic symbols and identifying markers for different rooms. See “Interior: Non-figurative Floor Mosaics and Other Domestic Decoration,” in Style and Function, 27–104.


22. While discussing the Hunting Baths of Leptis Magna, Fizreti Yegul suggests that the dramatic scenes of danger at the labyrinth mosaics might be understood as a "sight and mental, along the course of the hero’s journeys; O’Sullivan, Imagery and patterns in other types of settings, such as thresholds, can also be understood to have apotropaic resonance. See Swift, “Interior.” The idea of the labyrinth as a puzzle for the eyes, trapping the gaze, lent it considerable apotropaic power in the Roman world. Small labyrinths and knots, impossible to untangle, occasionally appeared at thresholds, where, it was hoped, one could bind envy and evil and prevent these forces from entering the house. On knots, see Eunice Maguire, Henry Maguire, and Maggie Duncan-Flowers, Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 22–44. On the “binding” language of Pausanias, Christophe Caron, “The Agnostic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in Magika Hiera, ed. Faroone and Dom Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3–52; and Katherine Dumbabin and Matthew W. Dickier, “Invidia numen: The Iconography of Phimones/Invidia in Graeco-Roman Art,” Jahrbücher für Antike und Christentum 26 (1985): 7–37. See also Pliny, Natural History 36.19.85, where he is careful to note that “We must not, comparing this last to what we see delineated in our mosaic pavement, or to the mazes found in fields for the amusement of children, suppose it to be a narrow promenade along which we may walk for many miles together; but we must picture to ourselves a building filled with numerous doors, and galleries which continually mislead the visitor, bringing him back, after all his wanderings, to the spot from which he first set out.” Pliny, Natural History, trans. D. E. Ellicholz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 340. It should be noted that the labyrinth mosaics were unisolated, offering only a single route forward and, thus, even if the single path might be difficult to follow with the eyes, their lack of “puzzle” would be easily apparent. Nonetheless, in each case, the visual scintillation of the pattern can impede optical clarity. See also n. 31 below, on mosaics of Medusa.

26. The parallel for this study can be found in the work of Timothy O’Sullivan, who examines the Odyssey Landscapes at the Vatican Museums) with attention to the painted portrait that surrounds the frescoes, allowing the beholder to “walk with Odysseus,” both physically and mentally, along the course of the hero’s journey. O’Sullivan, “Walking with Odysseus: The Portico Frame of the Odyssey Landscapes,” American Journal of Philology 128 (2007): 497–532.

27. The Baths of Theseus and the Minotaur at Belais Maior (Tunisia) were excavated in 1966–65 and are named after this mosaic. The baths have been published in Thébert, Théennes romaines, 192–33, with a schematic plan at pl. 35, 4. See also Ammar Mahjoubi, “Le thème du Labyrinthe et du Minotaure figuré sur une mosaique de Belais Maior (Henchir el-Fouarou)”, Africa (1969–70, published 1972): 355–50, and idem, Recherches d’histoire et d’archéologie à Henchir el-Fouarou (Tunisia) (Tunis: Publications de l’Université de Tunis, 1978), 209–26. According to Daszewski, La mosaique de Thèeste, 125, the mosaic is currently in a local storage house near the site. The labyrinth mosaic also features in Kern, Through the Labyrinth, 93, cat. no. 140. Mahjoubi refers to the mosaic as adorning the “House of Theseus and the Minotaur,” at Belais Maior, where only the bats survive. See Novello, Sette tematiche e committenze nelle abitazioni dell’Africa romana, 1 mosaic figurati (Fina: Fabrizio Serra, 2007), 225.


29. A floor mosaic of Theseus and the Minotaur from a Roman house in Gurgi, Libya (ca. 200) does not feature a labyrinth plan but shows a scene of the hero dragging the monster out the door of the labyrinth, under the watchful gaze of Ariadne. An adjacent vignette shows a still life of rabbit, chicken, and fruit. See Daszewski, La mosaique de Thèeste, 119–20, no. 45, pl. 36; and Kern, Through the Labyrinth, 101.

30. For one example, see the late third-century mosaic from the baths at Thina, Tunisia, where at least twenty marine narratives are collaged onto a single watery surface. See Nabila Jeddii, "Étude descriptive et

31. As with the many mosaics of Medusa, also a frequent feature in Roman baths, the nearly abstract pattern of most of the floor is also doing narrative work: manifesting the terrible power of her vision in a kaleidoscopic swirl of pattern around her head. See, for example, a second-century mosaic of Medusa from a tepidarium in Dar Zmelia, now in the Smithsonian Institution, Tunis. See also Louis Fischer, *Inscriptions des mosaiques: Sousse* (Tunis: Institut National d’Archéologie et Arts, 1960), 121–22, no. 57.374, pl. 67; Dunbabin, *Mosaiques of Roman North Africa*, 163 n. 149 and 271 n. 30b; and Carolyn McKeon, “The Iconography of the Coropus Medusa in Roman Mosaic” (*PhD diss.*, University of Michigan, 1983), 291–98, no. 64. Suzanne Germain, *Les mosaiques de Tingad* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1969), 90, notes that the design of such mosaics evokes Medusa’s aegis.

32. *Natural History* 36.19.85, trans. Eichholz, 67. Pliny is writing about a labyrinth in Egypt, which he declares to be still extant, and which assersts must have served as the model for Daedalus’s labyrinth in Crete. Pliny goes on to mention the many miles that are compressed by labyrinth mosaic floors and by the maze games played by boys running round in the Campus Martius.


34. The sensitive study of Roger Hanoune on the Baths of Julia Memmia is an exception; Hanoune, “Découvrir le monument.”


36. Daszewski, *Le mosaique de Thébais*, 94. In her magnificent article on bath decor from 1989, Dunbabin ("Baiarum Graeta Voluptatis," 24) explored the “world of beauty and luxury which lay at the heart of the bath aesthetic,” but she too knowingly left aside the sporting aspect of the baths.

37. Yegil (*Baths and Bathing*, 185, with sources) points out that these spaces were suitable not only for games and gymnastic performances but also for banquets. An honorific inscription from Africa praises a man who “gave banquet to the entire population and a gymnastic contest at the same spectacle he also showed boxers...” trans. Anne Mahoney, *Roman Sports and Spectacles: A Sourcebook* (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Publishing, 2001), 64. As noted by Mahoney, the date and the name of the host are unknown.

38. See also Thibert, *Thermes romains*, 67–68. For athletic scenes from baths in Italy, and suggestions of their appropriateness to the location, see Zahra Newby, “Greek Athletics as Roman Spectacle: The Mosaics from Ostia and Rome,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 70 (2002): 177–203, where she suggests that mosaic figures shown below living bathers “could serve as a model to which to aspire” (200).

39. According to Garth Fagan, Roman (men) embarked on the bathing process only “after a good sweat had been worked up”; Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 10. He is referring only to Roman men in this discussion. How Roman women, families, or children made use of baths, both public and private, has not yet been a topic of scholarly study.


42. Thibert, *Thermes romains*, 455, citing several third-century inscriptions, and see also his n. 55.

43. Ibid., 172. The smaller North African baths generally did not have pa-laestrae. See Yegil, *Baths and Bathing*, 186–87. This is the labyrinth mosaic thin classed as from a villa, rather than a bath; see n. 16 above.

44. The narrow threshold between the frigidarium and tepidarium was marked by a mosaic of sandals. See plan in Thibert, *Thermes romains*, pl. LVII, 3; and Alexander et al., *Thuburbo Maius*, 27 and pl. IX. Such a mosaic of footwear at a threshold certainly addresses a walking viewer, indicating that the temperature underfoot was about to change dramatically. At this point, precautionary measures would be taken to protect unshod feet from heated floors, or, conversely, bath sandals no longer needed could be taken off.


46. Such a perspectival illusion has been noted by Jean Lassus, discussing a mosaic of the Thermae of the Pugilists at Thina, as well as in the second-century mosaics of the Baths of Massongex in the Valais, Switzerland. See Jean-Paul Thuillier, *Le sport dans le monde romain* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1996), 141. The athlete portraits in the mosaics of the Baths of Carra-clude at Rome are another obvious parallel (see n. 67 below), as are the mosaic portraits of athletes from the Baths of Porta Marina, Ostia. Regarding a black-and-white mosaic from Ostia, being wrestlers, of athletes seeking to add strategic heft were said to gorge themselves on Redacker, *Die Thermae von Thina en Tunisie* (PhD diss., Université de Paris-IV Sorbonne, 1990); J. Thirion, “Un ensemble thermaux,” in *La mosaique Gréco-Romaine II*, ed. Henri Stern and Marcel Le Glay (Paris: A. & J. Picard, 1975), 357 and pl. CLIX, 1.


48. Such a mosaic of footwear at a threshold certainly addresses a walking viewer, indicating that the temperature underfoot was about to change dramatically. At this point, precautionary measures would be taken to protect unshod feet from heated floors, or, conversely, bath sandals no longer needed could be taken off.


50. *Exhortation for Medicine* 9–14. This is also, however, a reasonably apt description of the Minotaur’s diet. He is shown in some labyrinth mosaics (as at Thuburbo Maius) surrounded by the detritus of past victims, his own meals of flesh and blood.

51. Wolf Raeck has studied the late-antique trend of actualizing mythological scenes by using contemporary clothing and hairstyles for mythological characters in his book, *Das mythishafte mit klassischen Bildthemen* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1992). At Thuburbo Maius, Theseus’s bulla (amulet), his short hairstyle, the chunky body types of both figures, and the recognizable wrestling holds offer an updated version of the labryinth story. The body types are the typical Pugil Maior (see Fig. 2) is decidedly more heroic. The nonheroic body type is unusual for mosaics of Theseus—I know of only one addiotional example, from the Villa Domitila on the island of Giannutri, It-
62. Gardiner (“Wrestling” and “Wrestling [Continued]”) traces these wres-

61. Amulets appearing within mosaic images might echo the apotropaic

59. On wrestlers’ hairstyles, see Gardiner, “Wrestling,” 18, citing Philostra-

58. Of the sixty-two mosaics featured in Daszewski’s catalog, La mosaique de

57. For in-depth discussion of the rules of wrestling, see Gardiner, “Wres-


53. See Gardiner, “Wrestling (Continued),” 265, for discussion of the Oxy-


51. The mosaics of Piazza Armerina, including the bath attendants, are

50. Daszewski, La mosaique de Thésée, cat. no. 19, pl. 15.

49. See Khader, Image de pierre: La Tunisie en mosaique (Paris: Ars Latina, 2003),

48. The work of Zanker and Ewald (Mit Mythen Leben) on the ways Roman

47. A similar bust appears at the center of a labyrinth mosaic from a Ro-

46. Daszewski, La mosaique de Thésée, 101.


44. The athlete mosaics from Thapsus, from ca. 300, see Ben Abed-Ben

43. Of the sixty-two mosaics featured in Daszewski’s catalog, La mosaique de

42. The mosaics of Piazza Armerina, including the bath attendants, are

41. On wrestlers’ hairstyles, see Gardiner, “Wrestling,” 18, citing Philostra-

40. Gardiner (“Wrestling” and “Wrestling [Continued]”) traces these wres-

39. Of the sixty-two mosaics featured in Daszewski’s catalog, La mosaique de

38. This pavement, entirely black-and-white and dated to 150-200 CE,

37. There is no relation between the center motif and the geometric frame

36. Only a few mosaics show the thread traversing the path of the laby-

35. Both authors date the mosaic to ca. 50 CE, and Métraux (ibid., cat. no. 54). I have not been able to find a plan of the small


33. See Gardiner, “Wrestling (Continued),” 265-83; and Poliakoff, Combat Sports.


31. In Die Sammlung antiker Mosaiken in den Vatikanischen Museen by Klaus


29. In Conimbriga, Portugal (ibid., cat. nos. 46, 47). A vanquished and dy-

28. Some Examples from Roman Cemeteries,” in Burial, Society and Context

27. See Kern, Through the Labyrinth, cat. no. 160. Also Daszewski, La mosaique de

26. The mosaics of Piazza Armerina, including the bath attendants, are

25. Amulets (along with sources on the pankration. See also Poliakoff, Combat Sports, 54.


23. Some Examples from Roman Cemeteries,” in Burial, Society and Context


21. “La mosaique du labyrinthe,” 209 n. 1) suggested that in this case

20. See Daszewski, La mosaique de Thésée, cat. no. 7). Another, from a fourth-century church in Algeria, shows the thread
curling along to begin the journey, and then petering out quite soon

19. If the athlete mosaic from Thapsus, from ca. 300, see Ben Abed-Ben

18. The athlete mosaics from North Africa can be found at the Antonine Baths in Carthage and baths at the following sites: Rou Arskoub, Gafthia, Thina, Utica, Tebessa, Cher-

17. For the athlete mosaic from Thapsus, from ca. 300, see Ben Abed-Ben

16. Only a few mosaics show the thread traversing the path of the laby-

15. Only a few mosaics show the thread traversing the path of the laby-

14. Gardiner (“Wrestling” and “Wrestling [Continued]”) traces these wres-

13. See Gardiner, “Wrestling (Continued),” 265, for discussion of the Oxy-

12. Gardiner (“Wrestling” and “Wrestling [Continued]”) traces these wres-

11. This pavement, entirely black-and-white and dated to 150-200 CE,

10. Amulets appearing within mosaic images might echo the apotropaic

9. On wrestlers’ hairstyles, see Gardiner, “Wrestling,” 18, citing Philostra-

8. The athlete mosaics from North Africa can be found at the Antonine Baths in Carthage and baths at the following sites: Rou Arskoub, Gafthia, Thina, Utica, Tebessa, Cher-

7. For the athlete mosaic from Thapsus, from ca. 300, see Ben Abed-Ben

6. Only a few mosaics show the thread traversing the path of the laby-

5. Both authors date the mosaic to ca. 50 CE, and Métraux (ibid., cat. no. 54). I have not been able to find a plan of the small

4. Daszewski, La mosaique de Thésée, cat. no. 29.

3. Both authors date the mosaic to ca. 50 CE, and Métraux (ibid., cat. no. 54). I have not been able to find a plan of the small

2. The mosaics of Piazza Armerina, including the bath attendants, are

1. Both authors date the mosaic to ca. 50 CE, and Métraux (ibid., cat. no. 54). I have not been able to find a plan of the small

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sarcophagi encouraged identification of the self (and the deceased) with mythological figures is again a productive parallel here. See also Raeck, Modernisierte Mythen; and Newby, "Greek Athletics."

75. For the classification, see Yegül, Baths and Bathing, 186–217. For the architecture, Thébert, Thémes romains, 144–45. Also Gilbert-Charles Picard, "Les grands thermes à Macar,” Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 1972: 151–99; idem, "Les foulous de la mission franco-tunisienne à Macar en 1970–71: Les grands thermes orientaux,” Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, fasc. 8-B (1972): 149–53. Gilbert-Charles Picard et al., Recherches archéologiques franco-tunisiennes à Macar, vol. 1, La Maison de Venus (Rome: L’École Française de Rome, 1977), 29 n. 61, labels all the floor mosaics here as "nonfigural,” though, as we will see, this is not entirely the case. The authors also note the presence of numerous tesserae found in the excavations that reveal the vaults were once covered in mosaic, though of what subject we have no idea.

76. Fikret Yegül (personal communication) feels that these two palaestrae at Macar could well have been used for recreational athletics. The two open courtyards at the Great East Baths of Macar are repeatedly described as palaestrae. See Thébert, Thémes romains, 144; Broise and Thébert, Recherches; and Yegül, Baths and Bathing, 196–97.


78. Lucian, Anacharsis, or Athletics 2, secs. 1–2 and 28, have much discussion of mud and sand and men making themselves either muddy and slippery or sandy and gritty to evade the holds of their opponents. On locations for wrestling, see Ransom Katszoff, "Where Did the Greeks of the Roman Period Practice Wrestling?” American Journal of Archaeology 90 (1986): 437–40. "Why do you roll in the sand?” asks Tertullian in his attack on the vanity of the palaestra {De pallio 4). In a walkover in a palaestra, the victor was said to have won akonitei (without the dust). See Poliakoff, Combat Sports, 12 and 166 n. 14 with many sources on the origin of the term skamma. See also Gardiner, "Wrestling," 73–74, and "Wrestling (Continued),” 16–18. The sandy surface of the wrestling ground also recalls the single strip of setting given beneath the feet of the combatants pictured at the center of the Thuburbo labyrinth; this, too, was the color of sand.


80. A parallel to this fusion between decor and experience has been explored in the realm of Pompeian architecture and painting by Verity Platt, who explores images of Narcissus and Diana, among others, whose stories rely on water featuring as part of the beholder’s immediate ambient; Platt, "Viewing, Desiring, Believing: Confronting the Divine in a Pompeian House,” Art History 25, no. 1 (February 2002): 87–112. See also Newby, "Greek Athletics,“ on unbordered mosaics of human athletes in Roman baths, especially those deliberately placed in areas close to the palaestra to blur "the line between bathers and the mosaic figures” (191).

81. Gilbert-Charles Picard, "Un bas-relief agonistique à Macar,” Bulletin Archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, fasc. 18-B (1988): 99. But see n. 76 above, for Yegül’s willingness to interpret Macar’s two palaestrae as being appropriately scaled to recreational, rather than professional, athletics. Semipublic athletic competitions at baths (in Italy) are discussed by Newby, "Greek Athletics.

82. Picard, "Un bas-relief agonistique,” 98. See also Thébert, Thémes romains, 455, who says the scene on the bas-relief must have been continued on another block of stone.

83. For the connection between Eros and athletics, see Thomas F. Scanlon, Eros and Greek Athletics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).


86. Natural History 56.19.85.

87. As, for example, the Great Baths at Lambèse, Algeria. See J. Bayet, "Les musées historiques et scientifiques, fasc. 18-B (1988): 99. But see n. 76 above, for Yegül’s willingness to interpret Macar’s two palaestrae as being appropriately scaled to recreational, rather than professional, athletics. Semipublic athletic competitions at baths (in Italy) are discussed by Newby, "Greek Athletics.

88. For the connection between Eros and athletics, see Thomas F. Scanlon, Eros and Greek Athletics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).


91. Natural History 56.19.85.