



The arts past and present

The Shepherd

Catherine Parkinson

There are four sets of couples in this section of the mosaic. This one's quite a clear one. It's not fragmented. Could you tell me what's going on in this scene.?

Jessica Hughes, Classicist

Well that's actually a really interesting question because there's been some quite fierce debate about what this couple represents. What we can be relatively sure of is that she represents a water nymph because she's got the reeds in her hair, and he's resting on an overturned urn of water. He's a bit trickier to identify. But we can look at his iconography to give us some clues. So he's got the shepherd's crook. He's got a floppy red hat which was typical of the east of the empire and he's holding pipes. So he might be a shepherd.

For this reason people have thought that he might represent Paris, the Trojan prince. But other people more recently have proposed a different identification, as Attis. Who was also a mythological figure from the east. This has got more support because there's actually a painting from Pompeii, that shows a very similar scene but it gives us a detail that's missing here and that's a little knife in the hand of the male figure. And that's meant to refer to an episode in Attis's life where he actually castrates himself in a religious frenzy. So more people now are starting to think that this represents Attis and a nymph rather than Paris and a nymph.

Catherine Parkinson

So even though this is not fragmented, it's perfectly clear, we still can't be sure about interpreting what this mosaic is about.

Jessica Hughes

No. Unfortunately not. Because this sort of couple wearing similar costumes and holding similar attributes actually appears in very diverse narrative context from antiquity. People have taken this as evidence that craftsmen might have used pattern books and might have brought a pattern book to the villa owner, so that he could have chosen the sort of myths to decorate his house and so that would account for some of the standardisation of myths across the empire.

Catherine Parkinson

So maybe the local craftsman that was working on this mosaic wouldn't have actually known what the story was. What he was actually doing.

Jessica Hughes

No. possibly not. No.

Catherine Parkinson

That's actually very different from the way I work because I actually am the artist and the maker.