



## The arts past and present

### *The Cockheaded Man*

Catherine Parkinson

So what an extraordinary image this is. It reminds me of what you were saying earlier about the mosaics having layers and layers of meaning. And surely this one must have some deep symbolic significance.

Jessica Hughes, Classicist

Yes. Well it really is a fantastic mosaic altogether. This scene and this figure in particular are completely unique. This is a cock-headed man. And while we do have other hybrids in classical art, like the minotaur or the centaurs, we never see anything like this. So the question is 'How do we go about identifying a scene where there's no parallels?' A lot of people at this point resort to explaining it as some kind of religious ritual scene. They think that the image is so bizarre, so weird, that it can only be explained by saying it's something to do with the personal religious beliefs of the person that commissioned it. In this instance, this argument might get some support from the fact that this figure actually has parallels with other sorts of gods that were around at this time. There's one in particular Abraxas. Who does have the head of a cock and the body of a man? But he actually had snaky legs as well which we don't have here. There are other ways that you can explain images like this. People have noted recently for example, that the costume that this figure wears is very like the hunters in the amphitheatre for instance.

Catherine Parkinson

But why does he have a cock's head?

David Tomalin, Archaeologist

Yes. That's fascinated archaeologists and antiquarians ever since this figure was first found. One possibility is that it is a caricature. Perhaps it's Caesar Gallus. Gallus, the Latin word means cock. Caesar Gallus was a particularly cruel man. And it was said by his contemporaries that he wasted most of his time, watching unfairly matched gladiatorial shows. He even rigged them, so that there'd always be a loser and someone would die. So the connection of Gallus fits in very nicely with the other figures that we see in this panel, particularly the wild beasts. We also see these yellow bands here, which represent millet stalks. And this was something that the crowd would throw down into the amphitheatre during combat. I think some have suggested it was really to mop up the blood. To confirm what we're looking at, in the centre here, we have the porticus or entrance into the amphitheatre, from which the wild animals have entered. So whoever this cockerel-headed person is, perhaps the cruel Gallus himself. It rather looks as though he may be meeting his comeuppance, in the arena, that he so much loved.

Catherine Parkinson

I noticed when you were describing the mosaic, you described it almost as a caricature. And it's interesting, because I was thinking it's rather like a cartoon in the way that it's depicted. The style is really quite linear and there's no attempt at shading. And in that sense it's very different to the other mosaics here. And it does strike me as a very humorous image. And it reminds me of Bottom in fact, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It has that kind of feel to it. And maybe someone was just having some fun with this.

David Tomalin

Yes. I mean maybe it's like the sort of scenes that today we'd see as a political cartoon in a newspaper. Very much the same thing.