Narcissus the Hunter in the Mosaics of Antioch

Elizabeth M. Molacek

Among the hundreds of mosaic pavements discovered at Antioch-on-the-Orontes, a total of five represent Narcissus, the beautiful youth doomed to fall in love with his own reflection. The predominance of this subject is not entirely surprising since it is one of the most popular subjects in Roman visual culture. In his catalogue of the mosaics of ancient Antioch, Doro Levi suggests that Narcissus' frequent appearance should be attributed to his watery reflection due to the fact that Antioch was a "town so proud of its wealth of waters, springs, and baths."[1] The youth's association with water may account for his repeated appearance, but the present assessment recognizes a Narcissus that is unique to Antioch. In art of the Latin West from the first century BCE onwards, Narcissus has a highly standardized iconography that emphasizes his youthful appearance, the act of seeing his reflection, and his fate for eternity. His attributes, actions, and accompanying figures are rooted in mythological sources, primarily Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the mosaics of Antioch, however, Narcissus appears as a hunter—a role not emphasized in visual representations elsewhere. The Antiochene Narcissus adjusts and adapts the existing iconography to emphasize not the watery reflection, but the attributes and apparel of a virtuous hunter. Because hunting was a popular activity in Roman Antioch, the Narcissus mosaics present a picture of the way in which visual culture changes and adapts to its specific setting, in this case Antioch of the second to fourth centuries CE.

Cultural Context

Ancient Antioch, and its suburbs of Daphne and Seleucia Pieria, was located near the Orontes River at the base of Mount Silpius in modern Turkey. This location contributed to its immense prosperity in antiquity. Antioch was founded as the capital of the Hellenistic Seleucid kingdom in 300 BCE and remained a thriving city until the Romans took power in 64 BCE. Antioch became the capital of the Roman province of Syria; however, it was captured by the Arabs in 637 CE, bringing an end to almost a thousand years of occupation.[2] While its political history is simple to trace from the Hellenistic founding to the Arab sacking, Antioch's cultural identity is less transparent. The city was part of the Roman Empire for over five hundred years, but the inhabitants of Antioch did not immediately consider themselves Roman, identifying instead with their Hellenistic heritage. As was standard in the Greek East, the spoken language remained Greek even after Rome established control, and many traditions and social norms were deeply rooted in the Hellenistic culture.[3] Antioch was a hybrid of both eastern and western influences due to its location, Hellenistic history, and Near Eastern neighbors.

Since its excavation in the 1930s, the city has garnered attention for its stunning, polychrome mosaic pavements. Over three hundred mosaics, dating from the early second century to the early sixth century CE, were discovered primarily located in domestic spaces.[4] The mosaics adhere to the Hellenistic *emblemata* tradition with central figural scenes framed by borders. The subjects and themes are primarily drawn from classical mythology, and the compositions are naturalistically rendered in polychrome tesserae, often utilizing illusionistic devices in geometric borders. There were also regional features, such as Greek labels to identify figures and Persian or other Near Eastern motifs, including beribboned birds or other exotic animals such as lions and rams.[5]

The Reflective Narcissus

The primary source for the Narcissus myth is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written and widely distributed in the first

1 Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1940), 1:60; Christine Kondoleon, "Mosaics of Antioch," in *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City*, ed. Christine Kondoleon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 74.

2 Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 27-30; Graham Shipley, *The Greek World after Alexander, 323-30 B.C.* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 96, 288.

3 Michael Maas, "People and Identity in Roman Antioch," in Kondoleon, *Antioch* (see note 1), 14; Shipley, *Greek World*, 303.

4 William A. Campbell and Richard Stillwell, "The Mosaics," in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, III*, ed. Richard Stillwell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 171-219; Sheila Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988); Fatih Çimok, *Antioch Mosaics* (Istanbul: A Turizm Yayinlari, 2000).

5 Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 176-178; D.N. Wilber, "Iranian Motifs in Syrian Art," *Bulletin of the American Institute for Iranian Art and Archaeology* 5 (1937): 22-6; Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 1:358, plate LXXXXV, and 1:313-314, plate LXXb-c; Anna Gonosová, "Exotic Taste: The Lure of Sasanian Persia," in Kondoleon, *Antioch* (see note 1), 130-138.

century CE.[6] Versions of the story existed prior to Ovid's poem, but his account is the longest and most famous version, and its popularity prompted the prolific production of Narcissan visual imagery in a variety of media.[7] According to Ovid, the beautiful, young Narcissus hails from Boeotia and is known for rebuffing the affections of his many admirers. After scorning the nymph Echo, Narcissus is sentenced to the same fate: an eternity of unreturned love. One day while out hunting, Narcissus falls in love with his reflection at a spring. Unable to leave his own reflection, Narcissus dies and narcissus flowers grow in his body's place.

Narcissus' story was repeatedly portrayed by artists in the Latin West. Visual representations consistently focus on the theme of reflection, resulting in what Jaś Elsner has called the "reflective Narcissus" pose.[8] Narcissus sits in a pastoral setting, lounges by a pool of water, and leans his weight on his arm as he looks over his shoulder at his reflection in the water below.[9] Narcissus is either partially or fully nude, sometimes wears a crown of narcissus flowers, and is occasionally accompanied by either Eros or Echo. Examples of the reflective Narcissus abound in Roman freestanding sculpture and especially in painting of the first century CE, such as a fresco from the Casa di Marco Lucrezio Frontone at Pompeii from *c.* 62-79 CE (V.4.a; Figure 1).[10] Narcissus sits on a rock, leaning his weight on his left arm and crossing his legs in front of him. He looks down over his left shoulder toward a pond below him, where a reflection of his face is visible in the water. The figure is almost entirely naked, draped only in a purple garment that falls from his hips. He also wears a crown of narcissus flowers and holds a spear. Gazing at his own reflection, "he desires himself; he praises, and is himself what he praises."[11]

The Antiochene Narcissus

The five pavements of Narcissus come from suburban houses in Daphne and Seleucia Piera and are dated from the early second century CE to the fourth century CE. At Antioch, Narcissus maintains a relatively standardized iconography. In both the House of Narcissus (DH 21/22-H; early second century CE) and in the House of Menander (DY 17/18-H/I; late third century CE), Narcissus sits poised on a rock, gazing over his right shoulder towards his reflection in the pool of water located at his feet (Figures 2 and 3).[12] In the House of Menander, the area where Narcissus' reflection was located is destroyed. In both pavements, Narcissus sits alone, his head surrounded by a golden nimbus and his body partially draped by a garment. Behind him is a pastoral landscape indicated by sparse shrubbery and one leafless tree. The third pavement in which Narcissus is present is from the House of the Buffet Supper (DH 26/27-O; *c.* 250 CE; Figure 4). Narcissus again sits next to a pond, looking over his right shoulder at his reflection.[13] He is partially draped by a garment which displays his youthful, nude body, but this time he wears a *petasus*, or wide-brimmed hat, on his head. Narcissus is rarely shown wearing a *petasus*, which is normally reserved for Hermes or other travelers, but this detail may further indicate his position as a hunter or someone on the move.[14] Narcissus is again located in a pastoral landscape, but this time he is also accompanied by two figures: Echo, who is identified by a Greek inscription, ΗΧω, and Eros, who is denoted by his wings, bow, and arrow.[15]

These three Antiochene pavements depict the "reflective" Narcissus, but they also represent the youth as a hunter—an iconographic aspect not typically seen in Roman visual representations of Narcissus. In all three pavements, Narcissus carries a spear and wears a sword strapped across his chest. In the House of Menander pavement Narcissus also wears red laced buskins—calf-length boots appropriate for activities that involve walking distances, such as hunting. In the pavement from the House of the Buffet Supper, Narcissus' feet are not visible due to damage; however, Echo is dressed as a huntress. She wears high-laced buskins and carries a bow—a typical weapon of the Parthians and Persians, Antioch's neighbors to the east. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid identifies Narcissus as a hunter, yet visual representations rarely depict hunting attributes or focus on this aspect of the youth's identity. In the aforementioned wall painting from the Casa di Marco Lucrezio Frontone at Pompeii (Figure 1), Narcissus nonchalantly holds a spear, but his languid pose and lack of any other implements almost negate the weapon's implications.

Narcissus the hunter appears in two additional pavements at Antioch. In a pavement from the House of the Red Pavement (DH 26-M/N; third-fourth centuries CE), Narcissus

[6] Ov., *Met*. 3.340-510.

[7] An earlier version is Conan, *Narr*. 24 apud Phot., *Bibl.* 134b28-135a3, and a later version comes from Paus. 9.31.7-9.

[8] Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Roman Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 153.

[9] Birgitte Rafn, "Narkissos," *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*), VI (1992): nos. 704-711.

[10] *Pompei: pitture e mosaici* (hereafter cited as *PPM*), vol. 3 (Rome: Istituto della enciclopedia italiana, 1995), 1002-1005 ; W.J.T. Peters, *La casa di Marcus Lucretius Fronto a Pompei e le sue le pitture* (Amsterdam: Thesis Publishers, 1993); and Wolfgang Helbig, *Wandgemälde der vom Vesuv Verschütteten städte Campaniens* (Leipzig: Karl W. Hiersemann, 1868), nos. 1338-1367.

[11] Ov., *Met*. 3.424-425.

[12] Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 1:60-62, 200-201; Campbell and Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, III*, 183, plate 64.

[13] Campbell and Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, III*, 198, plate 72; Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 1:63, 136; and Çimok, *Antioch Mosaics*, 114-115.

[14] The only other example of Narcissus wearing a *petasus* is a later mosaic from the House of Dionysos at Nea Paphos, Cyprus dated to 250-300 CE. Rafn, "Narkissos," *LIMC*, VI (1992): no. 11.

[15] Jan Bazant and Erika Simon, "Echo," *LIMC*, III (1986): 49-56; Nicole Blanc and Françoise Gury, "Eros/Amor/Cupid," *LIMC*, III (1986): 640-644.

stands, crossing his left leg over his right leg in a casual pose (Figure 5).[16] He rests his right arm on his hip while holding a bow and quiver in his left hand. He is partially nude and wears a dark green mantle, as well as matching green buskins with red laces. He stands amidst a landscape, indicated by rocks and one tree on the left, with a pedestal to the right. Unlike the other pavements, there is neither a water source nor a reflection. The standing Narcissus is less common than the "reflective" Narcissus and was prevalent in statuary of the Hadrianic and Antonine periods.[17] The standing type usually depicts a youthful Narcissus, standing frontally and looking at his reflection in the water below—essentially transforming the earlier, lounging "reflective" Narcissus from a seated to a standing form. The House of the Red Pavement mosaic is largely adapted from the Hadrianic and Antonine formula: there is no water source, Narcissus does not stare down towards a reflection, and neither Echo nor Eros is present. Instead, this Narcissus actively holds his bow and quiver while he stands ready to embark on a hunt. Narcissus has been transformed into an active, assertive hunter. The previous connection to Ovid's myth is gone.

Narcissus's transformation into a hunter is most evident in the Megalopsychia pavement from the Yakto Complex (DY 17/18-H/I; fifth century CE) which associates the youth with other young heroes and the act of hunting (Figure 6).[18] At the center of the large rectangular pavement is a medallion in which is depicted a human head representing Megalopsychia, the personification of heroic virtues.[19] The central medallion is surrounded by a hunting scene, which is partitioned into six sections by giant trees. In each of the six partitions appears a famous Greek hero: Narcissus, Hippolytos, Acteon, Meleager, Adonis, and Teiresias. On the lower side of the mosaic, Narcissus is shown hunting a lion as he holds a spear and lunges forward, thrusting his weapon into the beast's breast (Figure 7). He wears a tunic and mantle, covering his entire body, and buskins. He twists his body forward so that his torso is almost entirely frontal; however, his youthful face remains in three-quarter profile. A tree and small flower are depicted beside him on the neutral background, perhaps indications of setting, but otherwise he is outside of his normal pastoral landscape. If not for the Greek inscription above his head, NAPKICOC, the figure would not be identifiable as Narcissus.

In the Megalopsychia pavement, Narcissus is situated outside of his usual pastoral landscape and does not look at his reflection. The pavement has no indication of his fate or the Ovidian narrative. The various hunters are somewhat visually interchangeable—they do not have unique iconographic features and are only identified by inscriptions. The pavement's composition emphasizes this visual congruity: while the other four Narcissus pavements adhere to the traditional *emblemata* form, this pavement has a carpet-style composition in which figures are evenly dispersed throughout the space while still maintaining a unified theme. The composition's large size and dispersed format attempts to harmonize and unify many figures, instead of focusing on any single figure. The carpet-style composition lessens the importance of individual narrative and relies solely on the subject of hunting.[20]

Hunting at Antioch

While the Megalopsychia pavement depicts Narcissus, it has more in common with a different group of Antiochene pavements: hunt scenes. Hunting scenes were popular subjects of Antiochene pavements beginning in the third quarter of the fifth century CE and were frequently found throughout the wider Syrian region during the fifth and sixth centuries CE.[21] The Megalopsychia pavement is one of the earliest hunting mosaics from Antioch.[22] Antiochene hunt scenes are similar in style and composition to that illustrated by the famous Worcester Hunt (Figure 8). At the center of the pavement stands a figure who is surrounded by seven additional hunters on foot and horseback. The anonymous, unlabelled hunters attack animals with spears, swords, and bows and arrows. The figures are oriented to each side of the rectangular pavement resulting in four different viewpoints. Irving Lavin has demonstrated that Antiochene and other Syrian hunt mosaics almost certainly derived from earlier mosaic traditions in Roman North Africa produced in the third century CE, which eventually made their way into workshops of the Latin West. These pavements consisted of dispersed polychrome figures, mostly anonymous hunters,

[16] Campbell and Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, III*, 197, plate 70; Çimok, *Antioch Mosaics*, 74-89; and Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*,1:89. Campbell and Stillwell identified this figure as Adonis in the excavation reports, while Levi later posited an identification as Narcissus. Currently, the mosaic is labeled as Apollo at Dumbarton Oaks.

[17] Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 1:62-63; Rafn, "Narkissos," *LIMC*, VI (1992): nos. 41-43. A standing Narcissus is also seen in a painting from Pompeii IX.3.5/24, but this figure lacks the hunting regalia and assertive posture of the present example. See *PPM*, vol. 9 (Rome: Instituto della encyclopedia italiana, 1999) 205.

[18] J. Lassus, "La mosaïque de Yakto," in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, I*, ed. G.W. Elderkin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1934), 119.

[19] For more on the Megalopsychia medallion see Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 1:338-9; Glanville Downey, "The Pagan Virtue of Megalopsychia in Byzantine Syria," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 76 (1945): 279-286.

[20] The only similar representation is a fourth-century CE Coptic textile. F. Barratte, "Heroes et Chasseures: La Tenture D'Artémis," *MonPiot* 67 (1985): fig. 12.

[21] For an Apamaean example, consult J. Balty, *La grande mosäique de chasse du Triclinos*, *Fouilles d'Apamee de Syrie, Miscellanea 2* (Brussels: Centre belge de recherches archéologiques à Apamée de Syrie, 1969).

[22] Irving Lavin, "The Hunting Mosaics of Antioch and Their Sources: A Study of Compositional Principles in the Development of Early Mediaeval Style," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 179-286.

on a neutral background.[23] Christine Kondoleon has suggested that Antiochene and Syrian hunt scenes draw their iconography and compositions from western sources but actually depict and commemorate contemporary, publicly staged wild beast hunts (*venationes*) in the city.[24] The hunt scenes reflect a popular, public activity.

Wild beast hunts were a form of Roman public spectacle during the Empire and were standard occurrences in any major city. As a particularly Roman form of entertainment that was generally housed in the amphitheater (a uniquely Roman form of architecture), wild beast hunts not only entertained the public crowds; the events also signaled the patron's and audience's Roman identity, especially in outlying areas of the Empire.[25] Antioch was known for its public entertainment scene following its Roman takeover in 64 BCE. In addition to the Greek-style Theater of Dionysos, an amphitheater was constructed in the first century BCE to accommodate Roman events such as wild beast hunts or gladiatorial games.[26] The Roman-style Theater of Olympian Zeus was also built at Daphne in the first century CE.[27] Public shows not only provided entertainment, but also demonstrated the individual benefactors' wealth and Antioch's prosperity. Writing in the fourth century CE, Libanius of Antioch recounts that animals and hunters were brought from afar to ensure interesting public games.[28] An amphitheater and its wild beast hunts would have emphasized Antioch's prosperity and increasingly Roman character.

Publicly staged entertainments, including wild beast hunts, were often partially or fully funded by individual members of society, and mosaic pavements could venerate both the event and the patron's generosity in funding the performance.[29] The Megalopsychia hunt scene almost certainly alludes to Antioch's embrace and enjoyment of publicly staged wild beast hunts, as well as the patron's role in production. An inscription in the topographical border surrounding the pavement names the patron, Ardaburius, and his munificence towards the city while serving as *magister militum per orientum* (commander in chief of the eastern areas) from 450-457 CE.[30] The same practice is seen in earlier North African mosaics, the best example being the well-known mosaic from Smirat, Tunisia, which depicts several performers surrounded by an inscription that praises the patron, Magerius, for paying the arena hunters double the sum they requested.[31] The Megalopsychia hunt scene, including Narcissus, represents the type of public event that Ardaburius could have sponsored and credits the patron for his generosity. Narcissus and his fellow hunters are the ideal performers—their place in the mosaic is no longer connected to myth. Katherine Dunbabin has gone so far as to suggest that his inscribed name is merely a stage name or arena name, meaning the label is completely divorced from the myth.[32]

Conclusion

Narcissus is represented in five Antiochene mosaic pavements with consistent iconography that emphasize his role as a hunter. Three of the five pavements maintain elements of the youth's standardized "reflective" type in which Narcissus gazes at his reflection in a pool of water; however, all five pavements adapt the youth's iconography to highlight his role as a hunter. Narcissus is not always engaged in the act of hunting, but wears hunter's attire: sword, spear, bow and arrow, and buskins. In the Megalopsychia pavement, Narcissus actively participates in a wild beast hunt, completely divorced from the earlier "reflective" pose.

Narcissus' highly standardized visual formula, which had been developed in the Latin West, was adjusted at Antioch to accommodate the city's changing culture and specific interests. While the Megalopsychia pavement refers directly to the publicly staged wild beast hunts with its dispersed depiction of hunters and prey, as well as a named patron, the other four mosaics more subtly indicate the cultural interest in hunting. The Antiochene Narcissus is not entirely disconnected from its Roman artistic models in the West, yet adjusts and adapts earlier forms.[33] The five depictions of Narcissus at Antioch are innovative, adaptive representations, crafted to reflect specific cultural values. The sword-bearing, buskins-wearing, spear-wielding Narcissus does not represent the metamorphosis told by Ovid, but instead commemorates the Antiochene interest in the spectacle of wild beast hunts.

The University of Virginia

23 Dunbabin, *Mosaics*, 112-114; and Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 50 (hereafter cited as *MRNA*); Lavin, "Hunting Mosaics," 204-206.

24 Kondoleon, *Antioch* (see note 1), 159.

25 Katherine Welch, *Roman Amphitheatre: From Its Origins to the Colosseum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Katherine Welch, "Negotiating Roman Spectacle Architecture in the Greek World: Athens and Corinth," in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 125-127.

26 Malal., *Chron*. 9.5.

27 Wilbur, "Theater at Daphne," in *Antioch-on-the-Orontes, II*, ed. Richard Stillwell (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 49-56.

28 Lib., *Or*. 22.

29 Richard Beacham, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 13-18; and T.D. Barnes, "Christians and the Theater," in *Roman Theater and Society*, ed. William Slater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 161-180.

30 Dunbabin, *Mosaics*, 165-168.

31 Dunbabin, *MRNA,* 67-9.

32 Ibid., 165.

33 The adaptation of mythology in the Greek East is seen elsewhere; consult Peter Knox, "Pyramus and Thisbe in Cyprus," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989): 315-328.

Figure 1. Fresco of Narcissus from the Casa di Marco Lucrezio Frontone, Pompeii (V.4.a), third quarter of the first century CE, fresco. Photo credit: Elizabeth M. Molacek.

Figure 2. Mosaic of Narcissus from the House of Narcissus, Antioch (DH 21/22-H), second century CE, stone and lime mortar, top 208.4 x 320.1 cm; bottom 144.8 x 320.1 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1938.710. Photo credit: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Figure 3. Mosaic of Narcissus from the House of Menander, Antioch, (DY 17/18-H/I), late third century CE, stone and lime mortar. Antakya Museum, 1008. Photo credit: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Figure 4. Mosaic of Narcissus, Echo, and Eros from the House of the Buffet Supper, Antioch (DH 26/27-O), c. 250 CE, stone and lime mortar, 358 x 349 cm. Antakya Museum, 938. Photo credit: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Figure 5. Mosaic of Narcissus from the House of Red Pavement, Antioch (DH 26-M/N), third-fourth centuries CE, glass, stone, and lime mortar, 144.78 x 93.98 cm. Dumbarton Oaks, BZ.1967.44.2a. Photo credit: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

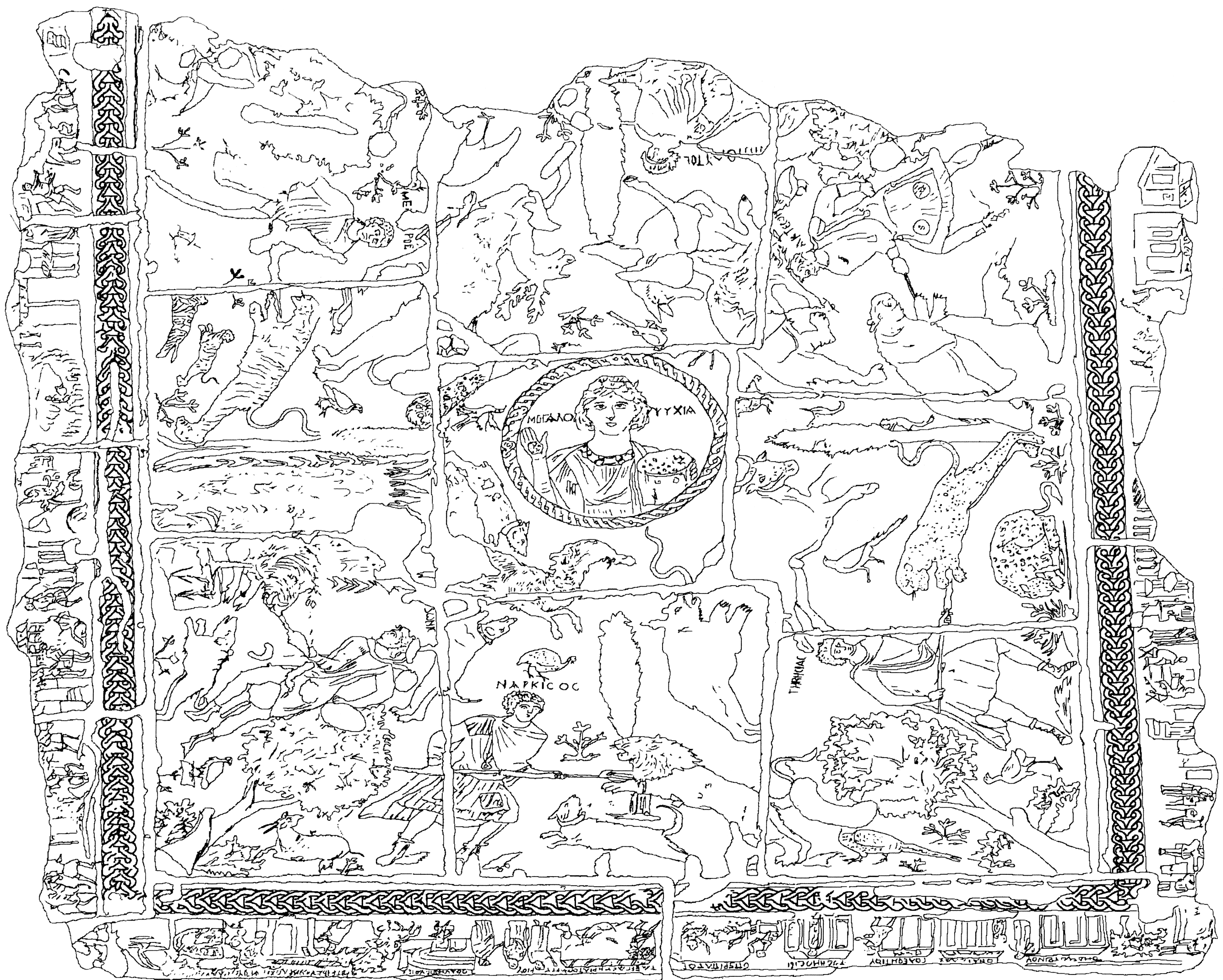

Figure 6. Megalopsychia Pavement, Yakto Complex (DY 17/18-H/I), fifth century CE, stone and lime mortar, 739 x 820 cm. Antakya Museum, 1016. Drawing by Daniel Weiss.

Figure 7. Detail of Narcissus from the Megalopsychia Pavement, Yakto Complex (DY 17/18-H/I). Antakya Museum, 1016. Photo credit: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

[*below*] Figure 8. Worcester Hunt Floor Mosaic, early 6th century CE, cubes of marble and limestone embedded in lime mortar, 625.8 x 716.2 cm. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, Excavation of Antioch and Vicinity funded by the bequests of the Reverend Dr. Austin S. Garver and Sarah C. Garver, 1936.30.