

Stigmata and the Cupids of Piazza Armerina

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Cupids depicted in the early fourth-century CE mosaics of the Roman villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily are marked with a V on their foreheads; this has been explained as a symbol connected to a workshop. I adduce evidence from Roman literature and from the artistic tradition of Cupid in Roman art that suggests the mark is, in fact, the stigma, a tattoo regularly applied by the Romans to people convicted of serious crimes. This adds a new iconographic component to the well-known artistic repertoire of Cupid Punished in Roman art. I suggest ways in which the motif may have functioned in the context of the iconography of the villa's mosaics.¹

INTRODUCTION

The mosaics of the great Roman villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily include a number of scenes populated by cupids engaged in various activities. Many of these cupids share a peculiar distinctive feature: their foreheads are marked by a symbol placed between and somewhat above their eyes, in the great majority of cases resembling the letter V. The symbol is most often executed in black tesserae, although lighter shades of brown are sometimes used. Similar forehead marking of cupids has also been observed in mosaics from North Africa. Wilson has suggested that although they appear “to have absolutely no iconographical significance,” these marks may be “a kind of trade-mark for one particular set of designers.”² The Piazza Armerina mosaics are widely agreed to have been created by a team of mosaicists who traveled to Sicily from North Africa in the early fourth century CE; the V, which also appears on cupids in some North African mosaics (see below) is one of Wilson's main arguments for an African origin for the mosaicists of Piazza Armerina.³ The cupid mosaics with the V markings are not understood as the products of a workshop distinct from that which created the remainder of the Piazza Armerina mosaics; the mosaics containing cupids do not differ significantly

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the *AJA*, Editor-in-Chief Jane B. Carter, and Michele George for their helpful comments. Thanks also to Dan Diffendale for permission to reproduce his photographs of the mosaics from the House of the Mosaic of Venus in Volubilis. Figures are my own unless otherwise noted.

² Wilson 2016, 129 (first quotation), and 1983, 67 (second quotation). This interpretation is followed by Dunbabin (1999, 139 n. 21), who calls these marks “evidently a workshop trick.” Salomonson (1965, 23) refers to these marks using the French word “tatouages” but without any further remarks on them (beyond their use as an indicator of chronology). Carandini et al. (1982, 290) observe the presence of the V marking but do not comment on it.

³ Wilson (1983, 67–68) states, “It is very widely agreed that the mosaics [of Piazza Armerina] should be attributed to one or more African workshops.” See also Dunbabin (1999, 137) and references cited there.

in style or technique from other mosaics in the villa. Rather, the entire group of Piazza Armerina mosaics is understood as the work of one group of mosaicists who marked their cupids (or most of them, at least) with a V. However, if this symbol were truly the mark of a workshop, we would expect to find it on other figures. We do not. This suggests that the V is not connected primarily to a workshop but rather to the figures on which it is represented: cupids.

I suggest that these marks in fact have an iconographic significance, one specifically connected to cupids. The purpose of this note is to contextualize these marked cupids in relation to the broader phenomenon of marked foreheads in Roman society and the iconography of cupids in Roman art. By so doing, I hope to shed light on what may have inspired the designers to adopt this unusual iconography, what the symbols may mean, and how this meaning may have affected the viewer of these artworks.

THE CUPIDS OF PIAZZA ARMERINA

Fourteen mosaic pavements in the villa at Piazza Armerina include representations of cupids. These figures are represented in the form of children, normally winged but not always. The cupid mosaics can be grouped into three broad categories: marine scenes (five in total, three of which have the theme of cupids fishing); contests or games (five mosaics); and grape harvests (four mosaics). These mosaics are concentrated in what appear to be the more private rooms of the villa. Especially notable is the total domination by cupid-themed pavements of the group of six rooms (fig. 1, Rooms 40b–45, following the numbering of Carandini et al.) south of the great apsidal hall that Wilson called “the private living suite of the owner and his family.”⁴ The semicircular entrance portico of this suite (Room 40b) is paved with a scene of cupids fishing; eight of the 14 bear a V symbol on their foreheads (fig. 2). This portico opens directly into an apsidal room (Room 41) decorated with a scene showing Arion, Nereids, and other sea creatures in a waterscape; all 16 cupids in this scene bear the V mark. The smaller, rectangular rooms to the north and south all have scenes of competition populated by cupids. To the north, Room 42 depicts a wrestling con-

test between Cupid and Pan;⁵ no figure in this scene is marked on the forehead. In the attached Room 43, however, the marking appears again (fig. 3). The theme of this room’s decoration is cupids hunting, though these childlike figures have no wings. Of the nine cupids here, three have V markings, three do not, two are depicted in side view with no marking visible, and one is damaged. In the first of the two rectangular rooms south of the portico (Room 44) is a mosaic showing a parody of a circus race, with chariots drawn by birds and driven by cupids (fig. 4). All eight childlike figures in this scene are wingless, but all have V marks on their foreheads. The attached Room 45 depicts a musical and acting contest; six figures are damaged, but each of the 10 undamaged figures has a forehead marking: nine a V and one a vertical gray line with a black dot. Two additional figures in the apse of the room who are weaving flower crowns also appear to be cupids and bear the V marking, even though they have female dress and hairstyle.

The other complex of cupid-themed rooms is found in the cubacula on the north and south sides of the oval peristyle in front of the triconch dining room in the southern part of the complex (see fig. 1, Rooms 47, 49, 51, and 52). On the north side, Rooms 47 and 49 both show scenes of a grape harvest carried out by winged cupids. In Room 47, three cupids are marked with a V and five with a dot, while at least three figures (and probably more) are damaged or destroyed. In the neighboring Room 49, there are six cupids marked with a V, one with a dot, and many damaged. To the south, Rooms 51 and 52 have decoration depicting a seascape with cupids fishing; many of the figures are damaged or destroyed, but each of the six remaining cupids has a V on its forehead. Cupids also appear in the vine scroll in the lower portion of the south apse of the triconch dining room itself, below the depiction of the punishment of Lycurgus (see fig. 1, Room 57e). These are the most eccentric of the villa’s cupids: all five have marked foreheads, two with a V, one with a U, one an X, and the last, who wears what appears to be a female hairstyle, is marked with an inverted V.⁶

⁵ I use “Cupid” where a single cupid figure is the focus and “a cupid” and “cupids” more generally, consistent with the Roman custom of referring to these winged companions of Venus as “cupido” and “cupidines.” See, e.g., Lewis and Short 1879, s.v. “cupido” II.A.2.

⁶ For a detail of the cupid with the X marking, see Wilson 1983, 66, fig. 45.

⁴ Wilson 1983, 27. Carandini et al. 1982 is the only comprehensively illustrated publication of the villa’s mosaics.

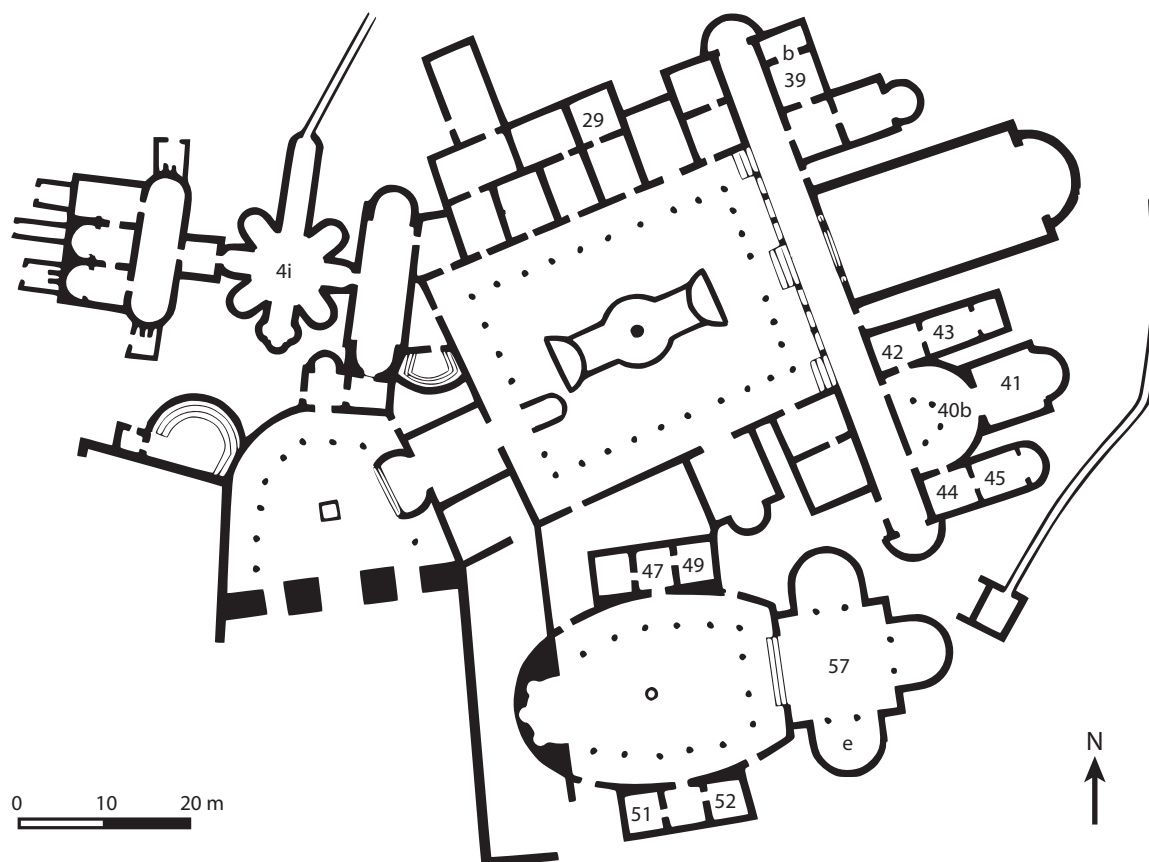


FIG. 1. Plan of the villa at Piazza Armerina with rooms discussed in the text numbered (after Carandini et al. 1982).



FIG. 2. Two cupids pulling in a fishing net, from the mosaic in Room 40b.



FIG. 3. A cupid from the hunt scene mosaic in Room 43.



FIG. 4. Two cupids from the mosaic in Room 44. One cupid drives a chariot pulled by a bird; the second runs alongside holding an amphora.

Only three other mosaics in the villa depict cupids. The most prominent is in the frigidarium of the baths (Room 4i). It contains a marine scene with cupids interspersed among various sea creatures; the mosaic is heavily damaged, but of the eight visible cupids, four have V marks on their foreheads while four do not. The mosaic in Room 29 (fig. 5) is a fishing scene entirely populated by cupids, nine of which have V marks, one a dot on the forehead, two have no mark, and two are damaged. Finally, a small threshold strip in the private quarters north of the great hall (see fig. 1, 39b) shows four children playing with balls; the two figures on the left have no marking, while the ones on the right have a single-tessera black dot. These figures are quite small (being sandwiched into a threshold no wider than the dividing wall), and it was probably not possible for the mosaicist to execute a full V.

It is clear that marked foreheads were the norm for cupids at the villa of Piazza Armerina. Six of the mosaics in which cupids appear are entirely dominated by forehead marks. No cupid mosaic other than the wrestling contest between Pan and Cupid in Room 42 is entirely without forehead marks; when marked and unmarked cupids appear in the same pavement, unmarked cupids never dominate. There appears to be no discernable pattern in iconography or depicted activity that dictates whether a cupid is marked on the forehead or not. It is important to emphasize that no



FIG. 5. Three cupids fishing, from the mosaic with a marine scene in Room 29.

other figures in the mosaics of Piazza Armerina have such marks on their foreheads. This suggests that the marks have something to do with the cupids themselves, something that explains why these marks appear only on cupids and not on other figures at the villa.

FOREHEAD MARKING IN ROMAN SOCIETY

For a Roman viewer, there could have been only one possible point of reference to furnish an interpretation of these marks on the foreheads of cupids. A range of literary evidence, drawn from sources as diverse as fiction and legal texts, makes it clear that humans with marked foreheads did exist in Roman society, and in very specific contexts only. These marked—in fact tattooed—people were slaves or criminals who had been convicted of a serious crime and sentenced to a degrading punishment. The main aspects of this practice and the evidence for it have been thoroughly discussed by Millar (punishment) and Jones (tattooing); I offer

just three prominent examples here.⁷ Perhaps the best-known is Lucius' description of the men working in a baker's mill in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (9.12): "O good Lord, what a sort of poor slaves were there; . . . all wore such ragged clothing that you might perceive through them all their naked bodies, their foreheads marked with letters [frontes litterati] and hair half-shaved and shackles on their legs. . . ."⁸ That Apuleius, a North African author writing a story set in Roman Greece, includes such a detail suggests that this custom was familiar to a broad audience.

Another well-known example is found in the *Satyricon* of Petronius (103–4). Aboard a ship, Eumolpus suggests a possible means of escape to Encolpius and Giton: "My slave, as you learned by his razor, is a barber. Let him shave the head of each of you this minute, and your eyebrows as well. Then I will come and mark your foreheads with some neat inscription, so that you will look like slaves punished with the stigmata. These letters [litterae] will divert inquisitive people's suspicions, and at the same time conceal your faces with the shadow of punishment." The narrator continues: "Eumolpus covered both our foreheads [frontes] with enormous letters [ingentibus litteris], and scrawled the usual mark of runaway slaves [notum fugitivorum epigramma] all over our faces with a generous hand."⁹ It is worthy of note that these marks are supposed by Eumolpus to function as a way of diverting attention, rather than attracting it. This is a further suggestion that such inscriptions were fairly common.

A third example, and evidence for what is probably the end of the practice, is found in the Theodosian law code in a constitution of Constantine (*CTh* 9.40.2): "If anyone has been condemned to a gladiatorial school or a mine in accordance with the seriousness of the crime in which he has been detected, let there on no account be marking on his face [minime in eius facie scribatur], since the penalty of his condemnation can be fulfilled merely by marking on the hands and calves, so that the face, which is formed in imitation of the divine beauty, may in no way be disfigured."¹⁰ This passage is also evidence for the application of tattooing as part of the

punishment of nonslaves who have been convicted of offenses punishable by the harshest of penalties.

THE PUNISHMENT OF CUPID

The sources cited above make it clear that, for the Romans, a forehead tattooed with letters (stigmata) was the sign of a punished slave or criminal. Accordingly, the V markings on the foreheads of cupids at Piazza Armerina could be interpreted as stigmata. This type of marking might at first glance seem out of place on the forehead of a cupid, a figure whose form resembles that of a child, but in fact it is not so unusual when considered in the context of the iconographic tradition of Cupid in Roman art—namely, a long Roman artistic tradition of depicting Cupid being punished. This has been treated in detail by George and, as in the case of the evidence for stigmata, I note only a few of the most relevant examples here.¹¹ A prominent manifestation of the genre is a much-copied statue type showing a child with an elaborate hairdo leaning against a tree trunk and rubbing one eye; his left ankle bears an iron fetter and two links of chain, which in turn are tied to a rope around his waist. A number of replicas of this type are known from Italy, and, although only one has wings, George finds the identification as Cupid Punished to be "plausible."¹² This is reinforced by the evidence of the painting of the Punishment of Cupid from the House of Cupid Punished at Pompeii (fig. 6). It shows one cupid in a rear view, right hand to his face, chained and carrying a hoe, being led by Nemesis toward Venus, who sits holding the cupid's bow and quiver in her lap while another cupid peers over her shoulder. As George points out, Cupid has not only been chained, but "has also been condemned to hard labour in the fields."¹³ This motif, a chained Cupid with a hoe, is also common on gems.¹⁴

Only in North Africa does the motif of the Punishment of Cupid appear in the repertoire of mosaics. There are three examples, all of which include the theme of a cupid beaten and one of which shows a further punishment. A mosaic from Thina shows a cupid, supported lengthwise by two of his brethren, beaten by Venus; a mosaic from Utica shows a kneeling

⁷ Millar 1984; Jones 1987.

⁸ Trans. Gaselee 1915, adapted. Gaselee interprets the lettered foreheads as brand marks, but as Jones (1987) makes clear, they are tattoos.

⁹ Trans. Rouse 1913, adapted.

¹⁰ Trans. F. Millar 1984, 128, with "mine" substituted for "metallum."

¹¹ George 2012.

¹² George 2012, 160–61.

¹³ George 2012, 161.

¹⁴ George 2012, 162.



FIG. 6. The Punishment of Cupid, wall painting from the House of Cupid Punished, Pompeii, first half of the first century CE (© Alfredo Dagli Orti / Art Resource, NY, ART580309).

cupid being beaten by two other cupids.¹⁵ The most remarkable is a pair of mosaic panels from the House of the Mosaic of Venus at Volubilis.¹⁶ The panels flank a larger panel depicting Hylas. One panel (fig. 7, top) shows a cupid standing, his hands bound behind his back by a garland of red flowers, which in turn is held by two more cupids, one to each side, who are beating their victim with what appear to be flower garlands.¹⁷ At the prisoner's feet lies the apparent cause of his punishment, a dead dove with an arrow in its breast. The other panel (see fig. 7, center and bottom) shows Cupid's ultimate fate. He stands bound to a stake, apparently in the amphitheater. A second cupid stands behind him, one hand grasping him by the hair, while a third cupid, at the left, opens a box from which the animal that will kill the unfortunate cupid emerges: a tortoise. This combination of elements (a bound pris-

oner, supported or pushed from behind by another figure while being attacked by a wild animal) is also found in the much more serious depictions of scenes from the amphitheater in other North African mosaics, where prisoners are shown attacked by lions and leopards.¹⁸

This is the artistic atmosphere, I suggest, in which the depictions of cupids with marked foreheads appeared. An iconographic tradition of Cupid Punished existed; these punishments extended to the most severe available under Roman law. In North Africa, from where the mosaicists who worked at Piazza Armerina almost certainly came, this iconography was employed in mosaic pavements. To this repertoire we should add the representation of cupids afflicted with the stigma, the forehead tattoo. As noted above, cupids with V marks on their foreheads do not only appear at Piazza Armerina; they also are found in mosaics in North Africa.¹⁹ For the North African mosaicist, to mark a cupid with the stigma was only the final logical step in the development of the iconography of Cupid Punished.

We are not told by any of our sources what was the content of actual stigmata. Petronius' story suggests a lengthy text, perhaps some version of the "hold me because I have escaped" text known from slave collars. The mark found in the mosaics, in the great majority of cases a V, does not suggest derivation from this text (it is not the beginning letter of any of the Latin words *tene me quia fugi* or similar found on collars) but rather something more specific. It should probably be interpreted as short for "Veneris," meaning "belonging to Venus." Of the exceptions to the V, the U mark is probably a cursive V, while the X may be a combination of a normal V above an inverted one. Dots are probably used in the threshold mosaic, as noted above, because the figures are too small to admit a full V, but in other cases this is not so, and an explanation is not easy to find.²⁰

¹⁸ For example at Zlitten (Dunbabin 1978, pl. 20) and El Djem (pl. 21).

¹⁹ For V-marked cupids in North African mosaics, see Salomonson 1965, pl. X, 1 and 2 (Carthage) and 3 (Hadrumantum), and Dunbabin 1978, pl. 36.94 (Sousse); Wilson 1983, 67–68.

²⁰ Another puzzling case is that of the only known non-cupid figure to be shown with a V marking on its forehead: the central personification of the hunt mosaic at Tellaro in Sicily (Wilson 2016, figs. 5.19, 6.1). The V shape is relatively small compared to that seen on cupids and is made of only three tesserae; perhaps it is intended to indicate a furrowed brow.

¹⁵ LIMC 3.1:952–1049, s.v. "Eros/Amor, Cupido," nos. 64 (Utica), 65 (Thina); see also George 2012, 162.

¹⁶ Lancha 1980, figs. 7, 8.

¹⁷ The thickness and reddish color of these objects suggest that they are garlands. For an example of such a garland in a North African mosaic, see Dunbabin 1999, pl. 18.



FIG. 7. Two mosaic panels showing the Punishment of Cupid, from the House of the Mosaic of Venus, Volubilis, Morocco, late second–early third century CE: *top*, two cupids beating a third; *center*, a cupid bound to a stake in the amphitheater; *bottom*, outline drawing of *center* (*top* and *center* courtesy D. Diffendale).

INTERPRETATION

Most of the cupids at Piazza Armerina are marked with a V on their foreheads, a phenomenon not shared with any other human or humanlike figures in the other mosaics of the villa. This symbol is most probably a depiction of the stigma, the tattooing of the forehead with letters recorded in various sources as the mark afflicted on both slaves and freemen convicted of serious crimes. This appears to represent a late-appearing component of the iconographic motif of the Punishment of Cupid in Roman art; however, it appears here alone, without any of the other established aspects of the punishment theme (labor, chains, whipping). Why does it appear at Piazza Armerina in such large numbers, and what did it mean to the Roman viewer? I suggest two explanations, possibly complementary, one to do with the broad concept of love and punishment in Roman thought, the other more specifically connected to the major iconographic theme of another group of Piazza Armerina mosaics.

The iconographic motif of the Punishment of Cupid appears to have originated in the Hellenistic period, but a distinctly Roman literary development of the early Augustan period lent the motif a deeper layer of significance for the Roman viewer.²¹ This was the literary notion of *servitium amoris*, “slavery of love,” developed by the elegists of the 30s–20s BCE and perhaps invented by Propertius; it was different from earlier Greek notions of master-slave relationships between lovers in that it emphasized not only the suffering of the lover but also the peculiarly slavish character of that suffering.²² In these poems, the lover is afflicted with all the degrading punishments that a slave might suffer: he is bound, chained, beaten, tortured, and burned. In one case, he is even inflicted with the stigma; thus

²¹ On the concept in the Hellenistic period, see Copley 1947, 285–90.

²² Copley 1947; on the development of the concept by Propertius, see Lyne 1979.

Propertius: “I who was lately counted among the happy lovers, must now wear the mark [notam] of shame in the register of your love.”²³ The concept of *servitium amoris* proved an enduring one in Roman culture: it is the main theme of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, for example, which incidentally contains, in the story of Cupid and Psyche, a specific narration of the disobedience and punishment of Cupid. There, Cupid, who is described as a rash boy who destroys all marriages and commits other disgraceful deeds unpunished (“impune,” Apul., *Met.* 4.30), is ordered by Venus to cause Psyche, who has usurped her role, to fall in love with the ugliest creature he can find. Instead, Cupid betrays Venus by disregarding her command: he wounds himself with his own arrow and causes himself to fall in love with Psyche (Apul., *Met.* 5.24). His punishment by Venus includes physical damage to his body—the shaving of his hair and the clipping of his wings (Apul., *Met.* 5.30). The theme of *servitium amoris* persists even in the late fourth-century poetry of Claudian.²⁴

The image of Cupid being punished has some interesting potential implications to a person imbued with the notion of the servile suffering of the lover. Cupid posed a danger to humans because of his role in inflicting *servitium amoris*. Part of the appeal of the Cupid Punished motif was almost certainly the depiction of Cupid paying a price similar to that which he inflicted on a person in love; that is to say, by his punishment, Cupid suffered as much as the human afflicted with love. A Roman viewer would presumably have felt some form of *schadenfreude* when viewing this motif. Perhaps there was also an apotropaic aspect to the stigmata. To the viewer, these marks would have been an instantly recognizable guarantee that these cupids had paid the price for their crimes; the message might also imply that they had learned their lesson and were no longer a threat to humans. One wonders if the sheer number of punished cupids in the Piazza Amerina pavements ever intrigued a viewer. Had so many cupids inflicted suffering on humans? And what of those few unmarked? Were they innocent, and were they still a threat?

In addition to their broad cultural significance, there may be a more specific reason why stigmatized cupids are so numerous in the Villa at Piazza Armerina, for they echo the main theme of one of the most important groups of mosaics in the villa, those of the triconch dining hall (see fig. 1, Room 57). Each of the three apses opening off the main area of the dining room contains a scene of punishment: in the south apse, Lycurgus is strangled by a vine after his attempted rape of Ambrosia; in the east, the giants are killed for rebelling against the gods; and, in the north, as recently shown by Pensabene and Barresi, Marsyas is about to be skinned alive after his contest with Apollo.²⁵ The theme that unites these mosaics is divine punishment of hubris.²⁶ Hubris is also the crime of which Cupid was guilty, by disobeying the command of Venus. His punishment, however, was different than that of the giants, Lycurgus, or Marsyas, in that he was physically damaged but survived. This parallel may offer an explanation for the origin of the V markings. We might, for example, imagine that the mosaicist, impressed by his patron’s novel choice for a dining room theme and knowing the story of the Punishment of Cupid, was inspired to suggest the novel device of the stigmatized cupids to extend this theme in the remainder of the villa. It is even possible that the motif was developed during the design or laying of the dining room mosaics: the five cupids in the border mosaic below the depiction of the punishment of Lycurgus each display a marked forehead. Not all of them are uniform, however; only two are marked with the V, and the others have U, X, or an upside-down V. Perhaps this is the first instance where the mosaic designer grappled with the concept of depicting the stigmata on the foreheads of cupids, and the variety seen here is the result of his experimentation; afterwards, the V was settled on as the standard marking.²⁷ This interpretation is especially appealing since the stigma is the only aspect of

²³ Prop. 1.18.7–8, trans. Goold, 1990. The word *nota* is used to refer to slave tattoos, e.g., Suet., *Calig.* 27: “deformatos . . . stigmatum notis.”

²⁴ On the *Metamorphoses* and elegy, see Hindermann 2010; on *servitium amoris* in Claudian, see Wasdin 2014, 51.

²⁵ Pensabene and Barresi 2017.

²⁶ See Wilson 2020. My thanks to Jane B. Carter for pointing out the significance of this theme.

²⁷ It is not possible to say whether this is the earliest dated example of the phenomenon, since the chronology of the North African parallels is imprecise (described as early fourth century CE by Wilson 1983, 67, 103 n. 41), as is that of the villa itself (generally described as first quarter of the fourth century: see Wilson 1983, 36–37; Dunbabin 1999, 132). That is to say, we cannot tell which mosaics with V-marked cupids came first, those at Piazza Armerina or those in North Africa.

the Punishment of Cupid motif that appears at Piazza Armerina. Its application may well have been an afterthought for the designers, whose primary interest was in creating marine or harvest scenes populated by cupids. Nonetheless, the stigmatized cupids still could have made a substantial contribution to a message that went beyond that of the genre scenes which they otherwise inhabited in the villa. While the dining room mosaics demonstrated the folly of hubris, the punished cupids not only echoed the theme but, by evoking the idea of *servitium amoris*, gave the human viewers something to which they could relate.

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