



MOSAICS FOR VCE CLASSICAL STUDIES 2010

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Mosaics, known as *opus tessellatum*, were made from *tesserae*, cubes, sometimes roughly, sometimes smoothly shaped and between 0.5 and 1.5 cm on average. Black, white and coloured marbles, other stones and tiles, clear coloured glass and opaque glass (*smalti*) were used. [At Piazza Armerina they have identified 21 different coloured stones and 16 different colours of clear or opaque glass.] They were set as closely together as possible in a bed of fresh, fine mortar on a firm base. When the mortar was set, the *tesserae* were grouted. The grouting was often painted. Once the grouting was set, the whole mosaic was cleaned and polished.

The earliest surviving mosaics from Olynthus in northern Greece date to the fourth century BC. There are fine examples to be seen both in situ and in the museum at Pella, Alexander the Great's capital in northern Greece, dating to the last half of the fourth century BC. These are made of river pebbles of varying sizes and use a limited range of colours, but are vivid and make use of shading. The best of these are Dionysus on a Panther and the Lion Hunt, which may well portray Alexander himself. There are also some to be found in the museum at Sparta, such as the portrait of Alcibiades, which date perhaps also to the fourth century BC. They clearly spread through the Hellenistic world and may have reached Sicily in the third century BC. They were certainly well established there by 100 BC. They began to be favoured by the Romans as a form of floor decoration at the time of the Second Style of wall-painting (80–15 BC). During the first century AD they became a popular form of decoration for walls and the vaults of ceilings, in many cases replacing wall-painting.

By the middle of the first century AD they had become the most popular form of decoration for both floors and walls. Decorative borders, such as the rope pattern, were placed round a central panel, which was often a copy of a painting. To copy paintings the mosaicist had to reduce the size of the *tesserae* to 4 mm or even 1 mm cubes. This was known as *opus vermiculatum*. They were remarkably skilful at copying the subtle shades of painting. Though it would seem almost impossible to portray detail in such a medium, fine detail is there in abundance – expression, shadow, light and dark, wisps of hair.

From 200 BC typical works were small panels about 40 cm square, known as *emblemata*. They could be made in workshops on trays or glued to a cloth on which the scene had been painted. The cloth and glue could be soaked off when they were ready to be placed in situ. Certainly there is evidence that they were prefabricated from the similarity of the borders and from what appear to be seams in the mosaics on the floors of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome.

As an art style they are exquisite. There is such a rich variety, which should be evident from the prescribed mosaics. They are found all over the Roman Empire and were clearly prized as works of art. Though the Roman Empire collapsed, mosaics continued as an art form in churches and basilicas, such as those at Ravenna and the Baptistery in Florence. That they have survived is due to the fact that they are so hardy and it was simpler to leave them in place than to dig them up. Many seem to have been imported into Italy, rather than being made there. The Romans seemed to like simple black motifs on a white background. Some of the best of these can be seen at Ostia, the port of ancient Rome. In the various baths the favoured design is of Neptune and sea monsters. In the Square of the Corporations, by the theatre, there are individual designs in the 'offices of the corporations' which portray a wide range of merchant vessels, images of the port's lighthouse and items traded. They also give us some of the sources of trade with Ostia. There are also many floors covered in simple black and white patterns or with the addition of purple, as in the Baths of Caracalla.

North Africa became a very important source of mosaics, following Hellenistic styles established in Antioch in the Middle East. A villa at Zliten had 24 *emblemata* in terracotta trays dating from about 100 AD. Clearly schools were established in Africa. The artists copied paintings and turned Roman black and white into polychrome. Greek mythology remained a popular theme, as did hunting scenes, of which over 100 have been recorded. Hunting scenes (the Great Hunt, the Small Hunt, children hunting) form part of the 3500 square metres of paving to be seen in the Villa Casale at Piazza Armerina in Sicily, which date to about 300 AD. Under an edict of Diocletian in 301 AD decorators (presumably painters and mosaicists) were to be paid 150 denarii per day, while builders were to be paid only 50. This certainly gave status to the artists. It is estimated that it would take six days to make one square metre of mosaic.

There are many excellent mosaics to be found in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples in the display on the first floor. They were removed from Pompeii and Herculaneum. In the Vatican Museums they are often underfoot, having been removed from their original situations within the city of Rome. They are to be found in villas in that damp outpost of the Roman Empire, Britain, where they were especially useful as the floors of baths placed over hypocausts.

THE PRESCRIBED MOSAICS

Mosaics from the National Archaeological Museum, Naples

The Battle of Issus from the exedra of the House of the Faun, Pompeii



This huge mosaic (approx. 3 m by 6 m) is the *pièce de résistance* of the Naples Museum. It is thought to represent the crucial moment in the Battle of Issus, 333 BC between Alexander the Great and Darius. It is perhaps a copy of a painting by Philoxenus of Eretria from about 300 BC. The mosaicist has made some errors (some horses are short of legs) and the perspective is not perfect, but this is carping criticism. Just imagine the size and difficulty of the task, and the time required to complete such a work in such small *tesserae*. The scene is the moment at which Darius, threatened by Alexander's attack, turns to flee the field of battle, thus starting the rout of his troops. The picture is vivid, dramatic, and full of emotion. In the background are the long Macedonian lances (the *sarissa*). The Persians are readily identified by their headdress. Alexander is shown on the left bareheaded and astride his horse, Bucephalus. The head is very similar to that in the Lion Hunt at Pella and to other portrayals of him. Look at the wealth of detail on his breastplate, especially the Gorgon's head in the centre, and the thongs used to tie it together. In his right hand he holds his lance, which he has driven through a trousered Persian, whose horse has collapsed beneath him. To the right Darius' four-horse chariot is being driven furiously away. Look at the expression on the driver's face and his use of the whip. Darius stretches out his right arm towards his injured companion with a look of concern on his face. On the ground, close to the wheel, a man crouches trying to use his shield to protect himself from the horses and the wheel. His face is reflected in the shield itself. Some see much symbolism in the bare tree in the background on the left. To some extent it does seem to mirror the positions and gestures of Darius and his driver. The simple border acts as an effective frame. Look at the intricacy of the work and the range of colours used.

The Actors from the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompeii

Some suggest that this is the preparation for a satyr play, because of the mask of a satyr (?) in the centre foreground. At the Great Dionysia in Athens each of three competing tragedians wrote a trilogy of tragedies and a short satyr play to be performed on one day. It could simply be the mask of an old man and bears some resemblance to the seated, bearded old man. Some suggest that this seated figure is Aeschylus himself, as there are similarities to surviving busts of the great tragic playwright. He is wearing a himation and sandals. On the left there appear to be two members of the chorus. They seem to be wearing feathered skirts and one seems to have a mask which might be a representation of a bird. This could suggest Aristophanes' famous comedy *Birds*. Others suggest that they are goat skins. The white mask of a woman in the foreground and the brown, bearded one of a man on the far right suggest tragedy. [Remember that all parts, including those of women, were played by men. Gender was determined by the mask and its colour – white for female and brown for male.] Clearly, however, they are dressing for a theatrical performance. Just left of centre the double flute player is warming up. He has a fine costume and a wreath on his head. The line below his nose is not a moustache, but the strap which helps keep the double flute in place. The figure behind him looks as if he might be holding a wax tablet. Perhaps he is checking that the actors are following the script. In the background another actor is being helped into his costume by a slave (?). His conical hat suggests that he may be a recently freed slave. The seated figure seems to be looking intently at the flautist and the members of the chorus. Perhaps he is giving them final instructions. The thin stick under his left arm seems to be too thin to be a walking stick. It looks more like the sticks shown on Greek vases used by trainers to chastise their athletes. In the background are Ionic columns festooned with shields, garlands and fillets (ribbons). At the top are vases and statuettes as a frieze. It is supported by Doric pilasters which frame the scene. The pilasters and the columns all seem to support the frieze, but seem to be on different planes. It is a lively scene, though a frozen moment in time. Note the wealth of detail contained in it and the excellent use of shadowing to suggest that the light is coming in from the right. It is approximately 60 cm square.

Death and the Wheel of Necessity from Pompeii

This apparently gruesome mosaic with its skull and toothy grin is deeply philosophical. The large central skull, which dominates the mosaic, is obviously symbolic of death which comes to us all. Beneath the skull is a brightly coloured butterfly, a creature of great beauty, whose life is very short. Beneath that is a wheel, a symbol of things that turn or move, such as time. It may be the wheel of fortune or of necessity. The skull is carefully balanced in the middle of an A-frame. On the left arm (as we look at it) are the belongings of a rich person – a purple cloak, a white scarf and a sceptre. On the right arm are the belongings of a poor person – a staff, a travelling bag and a simple cloak. The messages are many. Life is short and death inevitable. The world goes rolling on. There is a fine line between wealth and poverty. One's status can so easily change, especially from wealth and greatness to poverty. The long shadows suggest that the sun is setting.

Marine Still Life from Pompeii

This is a fine example of the effect which can be produced with a very limited range of colours. The wealth of detail is outstanding. The different sea creatures are clearly defined. You would see them today if you visited the fish market in modern Herculaneum. Central is the beady-eyed octopus with its writhing tentacles, one of which has grasped a crayfish. Clearly recognisable too are squid, eel, plaice, dog-fish, prawn and murex shell. Note the small bird on the rocky outcrop on the left. Still life painting was popular in Pompeii. There are several examples of mosaics of still life. It is about a metre square. There is a slide showing another one very similar to this one.

The Street Musicians from the Villa of Cicero, Pompeii

This is one of the few surviving mosaics which bear the signature of the mosaicist. He is Dioscourides of Samos, the Greek island just off the coast of Turkey. You can see his name in the top left corner in Greek capital letters [*ΔΙΟΣΚΟΥΡΙΔΗΣ ΣΑΜΙΟΣ ΕΠΟΙΗΣΕ* – Dioscourides of Samos made (it)]. Some suggest that this could be the name of the painter of the original or that of an original Greek mosaicist, whose work was copied by a Roman. The three musicians wear masks and may be part of a theatrical performance rather than just street musicians. The men are playing a tambourine and castanets, the woman a double flute. The figure on the right and the one in the centre seem to be dancing. The small figure on the left is probably a dwarf rather than a boy because there is a suggestion of a beard. Note the tiny size of the *tesserae*, the subtle colours of the clothing and the use of shadows. The mosaic (approx. 45 cm square) is dated to about 100 BC.

The Academy of Plato from a villa outside Pompeii

This tableau is set in a fine border of garlands of fruit and leaves as well as theatrical masks. Such elaborate borders were common. In the top right corner is a poor attempt to show a walled city. Is this meant to be Athens (as the Academy was outside the city on the road to Eleusis)? There are seven bearded figures, five seated on a curved bench and two standing. Note the variations in age and dress. The men are clearly individuals. Perspective is attempted by having the furthest figures higher up (a common feature of ancient art, c.f. Trajan's Column in Rome). The columns on the left are perhaps symbolic of the stoas under which philosophers met (hence the Stoics). Though seven might suggest the seven sages (wise men) of the ancient world, it is thought that the third figure from the left is Plato himself, pointing at a globe with a stick (see *Timaeus* re the globe). Note the different reactions to what he is saying. It is suggested that the figure on the extreme right is Aristotle, who broke away from his master's teaching. At the top is a sundial, thought to have been an invention of Anaximander. A sundial like this can be seen alongside the Temple of Apollo in Pompeii. Note the fine attention to detail and the use of shading. It is about 85 cm square.

The Mosaics from the Villa Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily

The Small Hunt



The largest of the rooms off the north corridor of the peristyle of the villa is thought to have been a living room for guests. It is about 7 m by 6 m. Its floor is almost perfectly preserved and, to my mind, is perhaps the best of the mosaics in the villa. The villa is usually crowded with tourists who shuffle along on raised walkways. It is often difficult to find enough time to appreciate all the detail. There are two excellent borders framing the scene. In the centre are two main scenes of the day's hunting – at the top the sacrifice to Diana, in the centre a barbecue lunch or picnic. In the latter the huntsmen sit in the shades of trees and an awning round a circular table, while slaves (including one black) are busy with the preparation and serving of the meal. Note the tethered horses.

The scene at the top shows a sacrifice at an altar for Diana, goddess of hunting. Her figure can be seen on top of the altar. The scene is especially important because of the figures portrayed. Salvatore Ciurca identifies the main figure in the sacrifice as Constantius Chlorus, the Caesar of the Emperor Maximianus, to whom the villa belonged. Beside him stands the future emperor, Constantine. The figure to the right holding a horse is Maxentius, the son of Maximianus, who was defeated by Constantine at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. Above this scene slaves are bringing hunting dogs to join the hunt.

The central scene is surrounded by vignettes which show various hunting scenes. Falconers with hawks watch birds in a tree. Slaves carry a netted wild boar. A man on horseback stabs at a hare with his hunting spear (*venabulum*). Other horsemen drive deer into a net. At the bottom right a companion rescues a fallen youth from a wild boar. The whole floor is alive with activity and takes the viewer through the whole day of the hunt. The detail and the use of colours are outstanding. It is a magnificent work of art.

The Ladies in Bikinis

This room (approx. 6 m by 5 m) lay between the peristyle and a courtyard, and abuts the long walkway known as the corridor of the Great Hunt. In the top left hand corner one of the figures is largely missing, but one can see the earlier geometric mosaic beneath. When you wanted to redecorate, you did not dig up the earlier floor, but simply laid a new one on top. The ladies are dressed in bikinis 1600 years before Berlei is supposed to have invented it. They are not dancing girls, as identified by Unit 4B of the Cambridge Latin Course, but are taking part in a variety of athletic activities. The lady at the top left could be seen running round the Tan with her weights any day, although weights were part of the long jump in the ancient Olympics. Next to her a lady prepares to throw a discus and two others are in a running race. On the lower panel, the two ladies on the right are playing beach volleyball. To their left are two winners. One has already been presented with her palm of victory and her floral crown. The other is about to be presented with hers. It is not clear what she is holding in her left hand. Is it a parasol? Or is it used in some form of gymnastics? Her prizes are being presented by an official wearing a diaphanous gown, which exposes one breast. On the face of it, the mosaic may seem very simple. Careful observation will show the individualism of the figures – their shapes, their postures, their positions, their faces and their hairstyles. The only thing that they have in common is their bikinis.

Odysseus (Ulysses) and the Cyclops, Polyphemus

This is the vestibule (approx. 6 m by 5 m) for two bedrooms in the owner's suite off the corridor of the Great Hunt. The mosaic shows one of the best known stories from mythology, the encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops as told by Homer in *Odyssey* Book 9. The Cyclops, Polyphemus, is seated on a huge rock in the centre of the cave, the rock of which arches over him. He is shown as a giant of a man, naked but for the skin over his shoulders. His bearded face is unusual in that it has three eyes. Salvatore Ciurca suggests that this may be because of a tradition that Thracian Cyclopes tattooed concentric circles on their foreheads in honour of the sun. Across his left thigh rests a ram with its entrails exposed. This is a little less disgusting than a portrayal of him eating one of Odysseus' men, as in the Homeric version. He stretches out his right hand towards Odysseus, who is offering him a giant-sized bowl of wine. Odysseus is clothed in a tunic with a magnificent red cape. He seems to have a smile on his face. Perhaps it is the smile of a man who is happy to outwit Polyphemus. Behind him two companions are already filling a second bowl. The foreground is completed with sheep and goats. This frozen moment in time is a lively scene which captures the essence of Homer's story. There is great detail and good use of colour and shading.

The Nilotic Landscape from Praeneste, near Rome

This huge mosaic (5.85 m by 4.31 m) covers a wall in the museum at Praeneste (ancient Palestrina) and came from the important sanctuary of Fortuna at the site. It is said to date from the second century BC. It has a vast wealth of detail. It shows the Nile flowing from distant mountains and in flood, as can be seen from the fact that buildings are surrounded by water. A range of vessels float on the water – an oared vessel, a merchant ship, and canoes. There are a range of buildings too. In the right of the middle register is a temple complex, which some identify as Abu Simbel. To its left is a building which looks remarkably like a modern church. Clearly some are public buildings, others private dwellings. In the foreground there is what looks like a temple with columns. An awning has been spread out and beneath it a group of people are holding a celebration. Animals, real, imaginary and mythical, dot the landscape. Some have been cut off on rocky outcrops by the rising waters, others are being hunted. Most have names alongside them in the Greek alphabet. Some of the hunters in the background are black-skinned to suggest that the scene is in Ethiopia where the Nile begins. The skill of the mosaicist/s is exceptional as the detail and the range of colours is outstanding. It is well worth making the special trip from Rome to see it.

Theatre Masks from the Capitoline Museum, Rome

The *tesserae* of this mosaic and its companion in the same room (doves drinking from a bowl) are so small that the mosaics seem to be paintings until one comes close to them. The picture is simple, yet brilliant. Two masks are propped against a wall on a small ledge. Behind them is a double flute. The white mask of the woman is thought to be that of a prostitute because of the orange ribbon in her hair, which is associated with prostitutes. The face is surrounded by elegant ringlets. Make-up seems to have been applied in the form of lipstick and eyebrow liner. In contrast to the fine features of this face is the brown ugliness of the satyr. The wide, smiling mouth is surrounded by beard and moustache and by a row of wrinkles. Above the mouth is an unattractive nose and very prominent eyebrows. His temples are wreathed with grapes and vine leaves. Their green is a vivid contrast to the orange-brown of his skin. Note the very effective use of shading. Note also the very effective way in which the mouths and the pupils of the eyes have been shown. You almost wait for the actor's own pupils and teeth to fill the spaces. It can probably be dated to the time of Hadrian.

The Triumph of Neptune from the Baths of Neptune at Ostia

The baths were completed in 139 AD. The floor (18 m by 12 m) is an excellent example of the grandeur of Roman black and white mosaics. Details of the figures are shown by thin white lines in rather similar style to the added detail in red-figure vase painting. In the centre Neptune is drawn by four prancing seahorses (*hippocamps*). He is surrounded by a procession on sea monsters, Nereids (sea nymphs) and Tritons (mermen), sea creatures, such as dolphins, some with cupids on their backs, and two men swimming freestyle beneath Neptune and his *hippocamps*. The style of the mosaic is simple, yet full of vitality. Though one's eye is drawn to the central image, the whole huge space is filled inside a plain border.

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