

Book Review - Kitap İncelemesi

Miguel PESSOA*

Corpus of the Roman Mosaics of the Conuentus Bracaraugustanus
 Coordination by Fátima Abraços, 276 pages, 143 colour & black and white pictures, with illustrative descriptions, a synoptic chart, 4 maps and bibliography, Lisbon: Centre for Historical Studies - Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, 2019, ISBN 978-989-5430413.

The text here published largely follows the presentation I did at the book launch on 26th June 2019, in the Auditorium of the National Library of Portugal.

It was with great honour and pleasure that I accepted the task of presenting the *Corpus* of the Roman Mosaics of the *Conuentus Bracaraugustanus*, with the coordination and authorship of Fátima Abraços. The book preparation also had the helpful collaboration of António Manuel de Carvalho Lima, Cátia Mourão, Filomena Limão, Licínia Wrench, Marcelo Mendes Pinto, Paulo Dórdio Gomes and Rui Lopes.

I began my presentation by reading the Preface written by Professor Manuel Justino Maciel, pages 9 and 10 of this *Corpus*:


“Whether or not mosaics are very significant in the lands of north-western Atlantic Hispania, whether or not there are more mosaics in the cities or in the *uillae*, the book, now published, will mark a step forward in addressing this interesting question.

The mosaic, called *opus tessellatum*, of *tessella*, the small stone cube that constitutes the tessellate, is one of the most subtle images of Romanization. After all, it reveals itself as a way of being and expressing the typical behaviours of Roman culture and art, so rich in meaning.

Ausónio, a poet that lived in the 4th century (310-395), said, “within a region between two great rivers, the opulent *Bracara* proudly reveals itself.” Between the two great rivers Douro and Minho, the rivers Ave, Cávado, Neiva and the then referred to as the river of oblivion, *Letes*, or Lima, were also referred to.

Suetonius says that Julius Caesar carried with him, during his campaigns, pavements of *opus tessellatum*, which he had set up in his tent. This behaviour is the first positive gesture of Roman civilization and the offers it presented to the peoples with whom it was in dispute. Hence, Seneca’s sentence: “*Ubi cumque uicit Romanus, habitat*” (“Wherever the Roman wins, there he dwells”), and there he reigns with his different elements of power, as it seems to be the case with the elaborate mosaic.

This point also reveals the importance of mosaic decoration in the *Conuentus Bracaraugustanus*, as the marbles were far away and the local granites and schists were near. Everything revolved around gold, its prospection, exploration and dispatch to the administrative centres under the surveillance of the *Legio Septima Gemina*. The same happens with Christianization, during which ruled the bishops without diocese, one of the many ways of controlling gold production.

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However, the *opus musiuum* was always present, as the significant “*Corpus*”, full of Roman character, here clearly reveals.

I met Maria de Fátima Abraços when I started my university teaching. By then, she was already interested in deepening her knowledge of Roman archaeology. Fátima progressively moved to the study of the Roman mosaic. I was the examiner of her doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon. Since then, the ties of scientific proximity with the Institute of Art History/ FCSH/ UNL have deepened within the scope of mosaic studies in Portugal, namely regarding the study of methodologies, a work from which resulted the preparation of this “*Corpus*”, now published.

This work has benefited from the collaboration of other researchers mentioned in this book. The collaboration of all authors has resulted in a model example of what scientific research in art history and archaeology can be in our country.

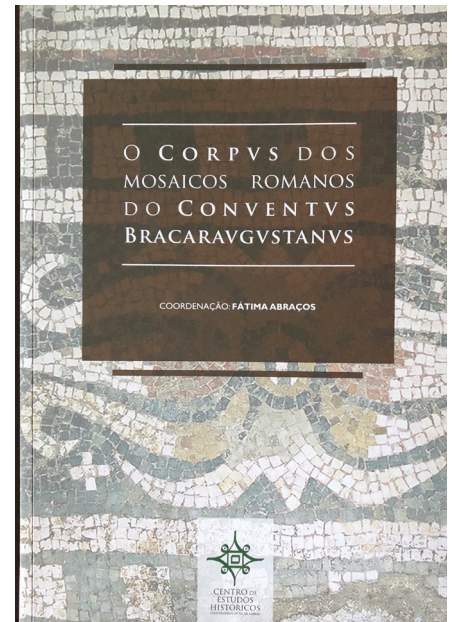
The mosaic “*Corpus*” of *Bracara Augusta* and its territory consists of two parts. In the first part, the circumstances of this research are displayed, namely the team that was constituted for the preparation of the edition, the sources, the methodologies, the limits of the *Conuentus*, and the archaeological and architectural contexts. In the second part, the model description sheet, the mosaics of *Bracara Augusta*, and the mosaics from outside the seat of the *Conuentus* area.

Congratulations to the author and her collaborators. Nevertheless, merit in particular must be given to Maria Fátima Abraços for the work accomplished. (End of quote).

I then proceeded to the presentation of the book, beginning with the analysis of the cover that reproduces a mosaic pavement from Tongobriga, discovered in the local church of Santa Maria, Marco de Canaveses. The graphic design was done by Álvaro Carrilho and the editor was the Centre for Historical Studies of the Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, under the coordination of its director, professor João Alves Dias; the graphic composition and layout were done by Ana Paula Silva, from the same Centre; the printing was done by Sersilito - Empresa Gráfica, Lda, from Gueifães, Maia, and the print run was of two hundred copies.

This volume is dedicated to the mosaics of the vast territory of the Portuguese part of the *Conuentus Bracaraugustanus*, and it brings together ninety-three (93) entries on mosaics from forty-six (46) archaeological sites. Twenty-four (24) of these sites are located in the urban area of *Bracara Augusta*; Six (6) are in the “Inner Axis of the *Conuentus*”, in the municipalities of Guimarães, Vizela, Felgueiras, Mondim de Basto, Vila Real de Trás os Montes, and Chaves; five (5) are in the “Atlantic Axis”, located in the municipalities of Matosinhos, Vila do Conde, Póvoa do Varzim and Vila Nova de Cerveira; eleven (11) are in the “Douro Axis”, in the municipalities of Porto, Paredes, Marco de Canaveses, Baião, Peso da Régua and Carraceda de Ansiães.

It is possible to state that the quality of the work presented is remarkable, both from the perspective of the mosaic study and the graphic presentation. This work is in itself an incentive for the construction of this series. In this sense, the Portuguese Association for the Study and Conservation of the Ancient Mosaic (APECMA) will make every effort possible to disseminate it, so that the preparation of new publications can be continued, taking into account the studies, particularly monographs and collections of mosaic sites, that are missing to cover the whole of the national territory.



It is also possible to verify that each archaeological site inserted in the *Corpus* of the Roman Mosaics of the *Conuentus Bracaraugustanus* is accompanied by its clear identification and the mosaics are studied within a coherent methodology, resulting from the many years of research, experimentation and improvement done by Fátima Abraços. Leading a large team, Fátima listened to archaeologists, art historians, conservator-restorers and safeguard plan managers. Without neglecting their artistic nature, the mosaics and other pavements are analysed as architectural elements with social and cultural significance, within the context of the city of *Bracara Augusta* as well as in their extension to the rural world near and far from the capital of the *Conuentus*.

We are dealing with a set of 93 mosaic pavements, organized in the form of clear and concise inventory sheets, with study items such as the laying technique and the execution strategy, the materials used and the colour palette. The inventory sheets also include information about the state of conservation and the restorations to which the mosaics were subjected throughout their existence. The mosaics were exhaustively analysed in their various aesthetic, technical, archaeological, architectural and cultural aspects. The detailed descriptions of the different mosaics, in a language according to international *corpora*, not only concern figurative mosaics, but especially the rest of the pavements whose geometrical and vegetal character has relegated them to the background since the moment of their discovery. The comparison with other mosaics from other locations, quite extensive (the approach to certain subjects reveals a particular attention and acuity), brings us to the unmistakable similarities with the mosaics of the contiguous *Conuentus*, while observing parallels in the Roman Empire and highlighting the identity of each mosaic when carrying out a comparative study. In some cases, the collection of information has made it possible to reconstruct decorations nearly impossible to decipher.

This work has the ability to make us reflect about this theme, travel from the Douro to the Atlantic, passing by the interior of the Minho region and, above all, feel the pulse of its capital city, *Bracara Augusta*.

In this book, as with good music, the notes are placed accurately in the right place. The coordinator's humility and intelligence allowed her to bring people and institutions together and make new partnerships and friendships.

This book is for us the script of Fátima Abraços's long journey, made during decades between Cerro da Vila and *Villa Cardílio*, Conímbriga and Rabaçal, Torre de Palma and São Cucufate, and many other places. At the same time, this book reflects a life committed to the future.

This book is also a love affair, a taste for sharing, friendship and camaraderie. The author's love for her country and her passion for bringing to light the mosaics here presented, which in many cases remained forgotten in the darkness of time.

It is important to understand the coordinator's point of view regarding the moral integrity and ethics of her work: for Fátima, it did not seem right to use the studies already done by her colleagues only in bibliographical references, hence her decision to create a team of collaborators. All those who responded to the request signed, individually or jointly, the different studies presented.

We can say that, with this editorial novelty, Portugal is no longer behind in the publication of the *Corpus* of Roman Mosaics of Portugal. As Fátima Abraços states on page 29 of this *Corpus*, "The number of volumes, already edited and in preparation, required for the publication of the *Corpus* of mosaics throughout the country, roughly corresponds to the estimate presented by Bairrão Oleiro

to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in a letter dated 23rd April 1991: *Conimbriga* will at least require the publication of another volume for the study and dissemination of mosaics from the Houses of Cantaber, the Skeletons and the Swastika and diverse findings. (...) Including these two volumes, I admit that for the *Escalabitano* Convent (roughly the area between the Tagus and the Douro) a minimum of 5 volumes can be provided; for the *Bracarense* (north of the Douro), 1 volume; and for the *Pacense* (south of the Tagus), (...) maybe six or seven”.

As we know, after a first volume presented by João Manuel Bairrão Oleiro, in 1992, a monograph dedicated to the mosaics of the “House of Fountains”, in Conímbriga, four new volumes were printed during the first and second decades of the 21st century : a new monograph was published in 2000, by Janine Lancha and Pierre André, dedicated to the mosaics of the *Villa* of Torre de Palma and another volume from the *Corpus*, dedicated to sites in eastern Algarve, by Janine Lancha and Cristina Oliveira, was published in 2013. In 2017, I published the *Corpus* of Mosaics from the Roman *Villa* of Rabaçal - Penela, a monograph about one of the three *Villae* with mosaics discovered in recent decades. The other two are the Roman *Villa* of Santiago da Guarda - Ansião and the Roman *Villa* of São Simão - Penela, in the territory of the *Ciuitas* of Conímbriga.

Now, to our great delight, we see the launch of the fifth volume of the *Corpus* of Roman Mosaics of Portugal. Fátima Abraços, with the collaboration of all authors and institutions, and the invaluable help of Salomão Ribeiro, named in the initial Acknowledgments, has done a remarkable job that makes everyone proud.



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