

# The Lod Mosaics: From Luxurious Roman Mansion to Catalyst for Urban and Social Change

## Lod Mozaikleri: Lüks Roma Konağından Kentsel ve Sosyal Değişimin Katalizörüne

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### Abstract

*In mid-2021, the Museum and Visitor Centre in the city of Lod, Israel, was inaugurated, housing the remains of the magnificent mosaics discovered in the city, to be finally exhibited to the public. This event, almost 25 years after the beginning of the sporadic excavations of the site by the IAA (Israel Antiquities Authority), seems an appropriate moment to briefly recapitulate on the findings, the history of the research and its scientific and, why not, communal significance. This spectacular site consists of a large Roman domus which includes a lavish colorful mosaic paving a large triclinium, that was exposed in the most prestigious museums in the world. Also includes a peristyle courtyard, and various rooms, all paved with luxurious mosaics. The project (excavated in 1996, 2009, 2014 and 2018) attracted the public attention and enjoyed from its beginning incessant media covering. The mosaics, which depict accurately figures from the animal kingdom, were built in the best style of the time, and boast influences from different parts of the empire.*


*The long process has by no means been simple and the difficulties have been numerous, starting with the chronic lack of funds to finance such a project, the initial resistance and distrust of the inhabitants of the neighborhood and the countless logistical, archaeological, and political impediments.*


*The article summarizes the archaeological findings at the mosaic, and also focuses on the process that went through the modest neighborhood that houses it, from the initial opposition and disbelief of the inhabitants towards the authorities to the recognition of the value of the antiquities. The article also reviews the approach to conservation, the philosophy behind the planning of the museum and the hope for integration into the community framework, to create a sense of belonging and local pride. Beyond its outstanding archaeological, artistic, and scientific value, the Lod mosaic, which began its life in the fourth century CE as part of an elitist and wealthy mansion, can today fulfil an important function as a catalyst for social change and improvement.*

**Keywords:** *Lod Mosaic, Diospolis, Visitors Center, Sinopia, marine scene.*

### Öz

*2021 yılının ortalarında, İsrail'in Lod kentinde şehirde keşfedilen muhteşem mozaikleri barındıran Müze ve Ziyaretçi Merkezi'nin açılışı yapılmış ve nihayet halka sergilenmeye başlanmıştır. IAA (İsrail Eski Eserler Kurumu) tarafından 25 yıldır aralıklı olarak sürdürülen kazılardan sonra, bu yayın, bulguları, araştırmanın tarihi ile bilimsel ve kamusal önemini genel olarak kısaca özetlemek için hazırlanmıştır. Bu muhteşem arkeolojik alan, dünyanın en prestijli müzelerinde sergilenen büyük bir triclinium'u döşeyen cömert renkli bir mozaik içeren büyük bir Roma domusundan oluşmaktadır. Ayrıca peristil avlusu ve tamamı lüks mozaiklerle döşenmiş çeşitli odalar barındırmaktadır. Proje (1996, 2009, 2014 ve 2018'de kazılmıştır) halkın dikkatini*

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*This article is dedicated to the memory of Miriam Avissar (Hamburg 1940-Jerusalem 2015), friend, colleague and first researcher of the Lod Mosaic.*

*çekmiş ve başından beri aralıksız medyada yer almasının keyfini çıkarmıştır. Hayvanlar aleminden figürleri doğru bir şekilde belirleyen mozaikler, zamanının en iyi tarzında işlenmiştir ve imparatorluğun farklı bölgelerinden gelen etkilere sahiptir.*

*Makalede, mozaik ve arkeolojik buluntuları özetlemekte, aynı zamanda mütevazı yerel halkın yetkililere karşı antik eserlerin değerine karşı gösterdikleri inançsızlıktan eserlerin değerini kabullenişlerine kadar geçen süreç de sunulmaktadır. Makale ayrıca koruma yaklaşımını, müzenin planlamasının ardındaki felsefeyi ve bir aidiyet duygusu ve yerel gurur yaratmak için topluluk çerçevesine uyum umudunu da gözden geçirmektedir. 4. yüzyılda seçkin ve zengin bir malikânenin parçası olarak yaşamına başlayan Lod Mozaïği, olağanüstü arkeolojik, sanatsal ve bilimsel değerinin ötesinde, bugün sosyal değişim ve gelişme için önemli bir katalizör işlevi görebilir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Lod Mozaïği, Diospolis, Ziyaretçi Merkezi, Sinopia, deniz sahnesi.

## Introduction

The Shelby White and Leon Levy Fund Museum and Visitor's Centre in Lod, Israel, housing the magnificent mosaics discovered in the city, will be inaugurated and opened to the public at the end of 2021, a quarter of a century after the first Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) excavations at the site. This is an appropriate occasion to summarize the finds and the history of research, as well as the scientific and communal significance of the mosaics.

The inauguration of the museum, built thanks to the generous support of the Shelby White and Leon Levy Fund, is the culmination of a long process that began in 1996 when infrastructure works stumbled on the first traces of what would later become known as the 'Lod Mosaic'. The mosaic was excavated successively in 1996, 2009, 2014 and 2018, from the original IAA excavations directed by Miriam Avissar until the latest excavations directed by Amir Gorzalczany.<sup>1</sup> The process has not been straightforward, and the numerous difficulties included the lack of funds to finance the project, the initial distrust and opposition of the local residents and innumerable logistical, archaeological, and political impediments.

The city of Lod (Hebrew: לוד ; Arabic: al-Ludd, اللد ; Latin: Lidda, Diospolis; Greek: Λύδδα, Διόσπολις, City of Zeus; Fig.1) is located in the coastal plain of Israel, c. 15 km southeast of Tel Aviv (Fig. 1); today it has a population of c. 77,000. Like other cities in Israel, including Ramla and Jaffa (Joppa), Jerusalem, Tiberias and Acre, it is a historic city with a rich cultural heritage, exemplified by archaeological remains dating back to the Neolithic period (Kaplan 1997; Gopher - Blockman 2004) and throughout history (Schwartz 1991: 2015). These cities, however, are living, expanding and developing entities, whose citizens have basic requirements, leading to a conflict between the preservation of the cultural heritage and the construction of housing and the maintenance of modern infrastructures. Consequently, development work in areas of potential

<sup>1</sup> The research of the Lod mosaic (2009, 2014 and 2018 seasons) was carried out under the auspices of the IAA and funded by the Shelby White and the Leon Levy Foundation. In addition to the directors, the participants included Uzi 'Ad, Hagit Torgë, Eriola Jakoel and Yossi Elisha (area supervisors), Assaf Peretz, Ataliá Fadida and Nikki Davidov (photography), Sky View (aerial photography), Peter Gendelman (area supervisor and ceramics), Donald Tzvi-Ariel (numismatics), Eli Bachar and Jonathan Amrani (administration), Ro'ee Liran, Rivka Mishayev (field plans), Natalia Zak (final plans), Anjelina Degot (GIS and maps). The conservation and removal of the mosaics was directed by Jaques Neguer and Ghaleb Abu-Dihab, and the mosaics were studied by Rina Talgam (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). The authors are deeply grateful for the cooperation of Liat Weinblum, Yossi Levy, Anan Azab, Idan Jonish, Israel Kornfeld, Doron-Ben-Ami, Durar Massarwa, Amit Shadman, Gideon Avni, Uzi Dahari, Hilla Berger (IAA), Eitan Ayalon (Eretz-Israel Museum), Ze'ev Weiss (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Bedouin workers from the village of Bir al-Maksur in the Lower Galilee also participated, as well as archaeology students from the Renmin University (Beijing-China) under the guidance of Wei Jian, through the Confucius Institute in Tel Aviv with the assistance of Ori Sela. We are grateful to the Municipality of Lod for its support, and to the residents of the Nevé Yara neighborhood for their patience and understanding. Figures 1–13, 18–19 are by courtesy of the IAA.

Figure 1  
Sites referred to in this research (Ram Shoeff after Angelina Dagot).

Figure 2  
Plan of the mansion excavated at Lod: The main triclinium excavated in 1996 by M. Avissar (1), the peristyle courtyard excavated in 2009 and 2014 by M. Avissar and A. Gorzalczany (2), and the small triclinium excavated in 2018 by A. Gorzalczany (3) (Natalia Zak).

heritage value is carried out with the archaeological supervision of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). This routine supervision work often exposes important archaeological finds that, as in this case, lead to archaeological salvage excavations.

The excavations at Lod were carried out in 1996, and renewed in 2009 (Avissar 1996; 1998; 1999; 2001; Bowersock et al. 2015), 2014 and 2018 (Gorzalczany 2015; 2016, 2018; 2019; forthcoming; Gorzalczany et al. 2016; 2020; Gorzalczany - Rosen 2018; 2019: figs. 2–3), exposing a luxurious mansion (*domus*) with a large reception room (*triclinium*) (Figs. 2:1; 3:1; 4-5) and a peristyle courtyard (Figs. 2:2; 3:2; 6), both paved with excellently preserved mosaic floors; the 2018

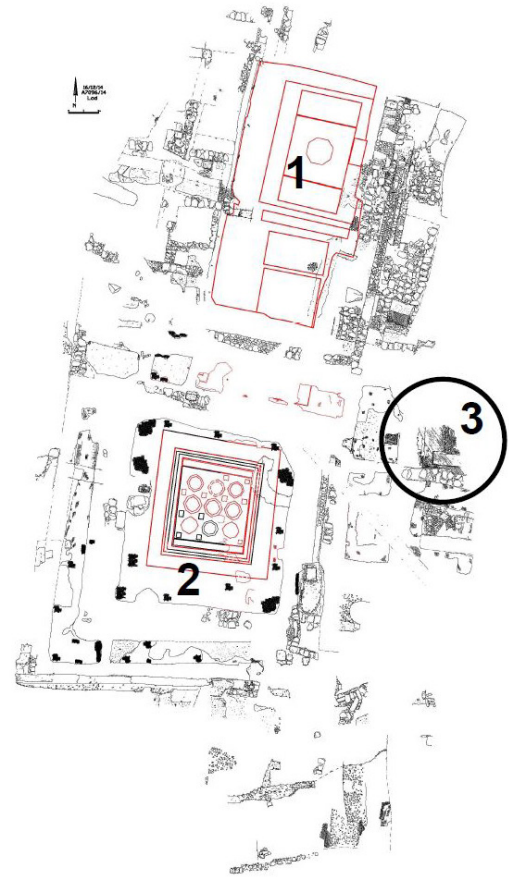
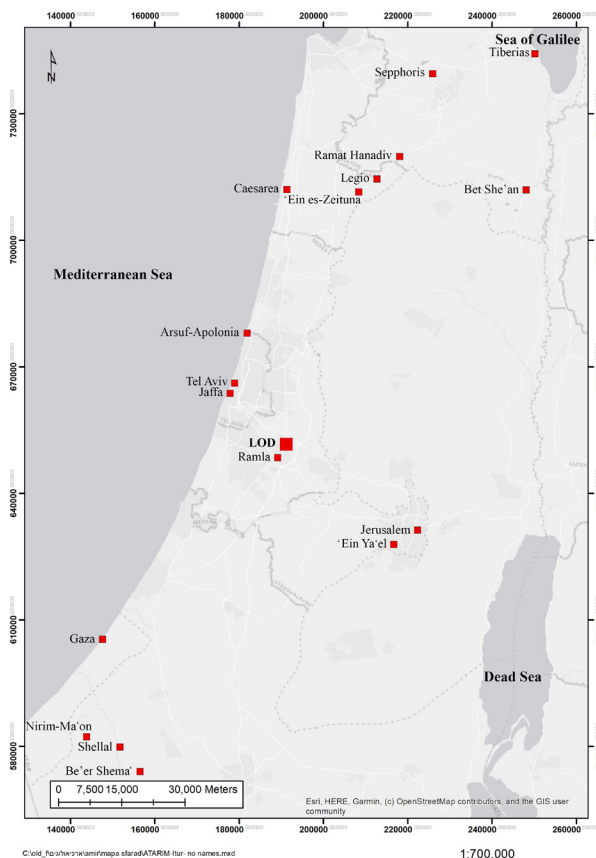


Figure 3  
Air photo of the excavations, view to the east, showing that the mosaic is located on the outskirts of the city. The photograph was taken at the end of the 2014 season. It shows the empty place of the mosaic of the main triclinium, at that time on display abroad (1), the still *in situ* peristyle courtyard (2), and the site of the small triclinium, at that time not yet excavated, as it was discovered in 2018. (3) (photo: Sky View).





Figure 4  
The main mosaic northern carpet (photo Nikki Davidov).

Figure 5  
The main mosaic, central panel (photo Nikki Davidov).

Figure 6  
The peristyle courtyard at the end of excavations in 2014, looking west (photo Assaf Peretz).



excavation season exposed an additional mosaic of this mansion (Figs. 2:3; 3:3; 7). In this article, we briefly describe the former two mosaics in the light of similar mosaics at sites in the Roman Empire, specifically in the southern Levant, and we present the third, more recently discovered mosaic in more detail (Gorzalczany 2015; Gorzalczany et al. 2016). Subsequently we consider the role of the new museum in the present-day city of Lod.

### Roman Villas and Mansions in the Southern Levant

Villas and mansions are characteristic forms of Roman private architecture, exhibiting luxurious examples of the different types (Percival 1988). Rural *villae rusticae* and *villae maritimae*, and the urban counterpart *domus*, dating between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, are found throughout the Roman Empire—in Italy (Graham 1966: 19–20; Ward-Perkins 1981: 210–212; Marzano 2007), North Africa (McKay 1975: 225–233), the Iberian Peninsula (Stephenson 2006), and

Figure 7

The eastern triclinium at the end of the excavations in 2018, looking north. In the lower right corner the remains of the pipe installed on the mosaic, without damaging it, can be seen (photo Nikki Davidov).



in Syria (Stilwell 1961; Kondoleon 2000: 51–61). Similar buildings have been uncovered in Israel and the southern Levant, for example, the maritime villa at Arsuf-Apollonia in the coastal plain (Roll - Tal 2008), a villa in Gaza (Humbert 2000: 117–119), the villa of 'Ein ez-Zeituna along the road from Caesarea Maritima to Legio in the Jezreel valley (Glick 2006; Milson 2006), the *villa rustica* at 'Ein Ya'el, near Jerusalem (Roussin 1995; Weksler-Bdolah 2007; Avner 2015), the *domus* of the Dioscuri' in Caesarea (Porath 2008: 1658; Gendelman and Gersht 2017) and the *villae rusticae* at Ramat Hanadiv (Hirschfeld – Birger-Calderon 1991), the luxurious mansion at Sepphoris in Lower Galilee (Talgam - Weiss 2004) and the impressive peristyle building in Jerusalem (Ben-Ami - Tchekhanovets 2019) (Fig. 1).

### The 1996 Excavation Season

The 1996 salvage excavation was initiated following the discovery of a colored mosaic whilst laying sewage pipes in the Lod Nevé Yaraq neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> The excavation revealed the central mosaic of the reception room (*triclinium*) of a Roman mansion dating from the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (9×17 m; Figs. 4; 5; Dunbabin 1994: 165–175; Bowersock et al. 2015). The mansion was located in a wealthy quarter of the Roman city of Lod Diospolis, previously known from a few small excavations that exposed sporadic archaeological remains, including some mosaics (Rosenberger - Shavit 1993; Yannai - Erlich 2015; for the history of Lod, see Oppenheimer 1988; Schwartz 1991: 2015). Although the archaeological potential of the area was known, the previous excavations were

<sup>2</sup> The 1996 excavation season was financed by the Municipality of Lod and directed by Miriam Avissar with the assistance of M. Margalit, Eli Goldin and M. Higgel (area supervisors), Moshe Biton (administration), Sando Mandrea, Clara Amit and Nikki Davidov (photography), Avraham Hagian, Israel Vatkin, Pavel Gertovsky and Tanya Kornfeld (field plans), and the IAA conservation team led by Jacques Neguer .

rescue projects, carried out after the chance discovery of archaeological remains and limited to the areas directly threatened by the development. The result was several individual small-scale projects lacking temporal and spatial continuity, thus precluding the appreciation of the extent and quality of the buried remains.<sup>3</sup> The present site is one of a few notable exceptions<sup>4</sup>, excavated extensively under the direction of Miriam Avissar in 1996 (Avissar 1998; 1999; 2008), jointly by Avissar and Gorzalczany in 2009, and by Gorzalczany in 2014 and 2018 (Talgam 2015b). The remains from the Roman period are presented and discussed here; the later remains from the Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman and British Mandate periods are not included.

The style of the main *triclinium* mosaic (9×17 m; Stratum VI) was analyzed methodically in depth and comprehensively published (Talgam 2015b), and given the quality and accuracy of her description it will only be discussed here briefly. It includes carpets with tesserae in 16 different colors, subdivided into different hues, including some glass tesserae, occasionally coated with a thin gold leaf gilding technique called gold gilded glass (Porath et al. 2006; Gorin-Rosen 2015). From the outset, the excavation and the mosaic received exceptional media and journalistic coverage thanks to the remarkable quality of the materials, the realism and perfection of the scenes, and the unusually good state of preservation.

The *triclinium* mosaic floor consists of two rectangular carpets -a northern and a southern one- separated by a narrow band of transverse mosaic. The northern carpet, set on a white background is subdivided into three panels, the northern panel designed of a geometric net comprising nine hexagons and two half-hexagons depicting fish, birds, and scenes of chase and animal combat in two rows, surrounded by a colored guilloche band. Six of the hexagons show terrestrial animals, and three of them display marine fauna, swimming, fighting or presented as fish in a wicker basket. The central panel consists of a central hexagonal medallion surrounded by a dodecagon (twelve-sided) frame. The band between the two polygons is composed of four groups of three adjacent triangles separated by four squares, all depicting fish, birds and hunting chase scenes, apart from the southern square which depicts a pair of felines -probably panthers- in antithetical composition on either side of a krater (Greek: κράτηρ) and climbing over it. The central hexagon, the most important focus of the composition, depicts a pair of male and female lions seated on opposite cliffs facing each other, separated by an intervening body of water. A sea monster (*ceto* or *ketos*, Greek: κῆτος) is visible in the water, with half its body emerging on the surface. A group of African animals at the foot of the cliffs comprises an elephant, a giraffe, a rhinoceros, a tiger and a bovine. The southern panel is a scene portraying a variety of scattered marine fauna in different activities and attitudes. The scene describes fish, some devouring each other, a dolphins, mullets, a snapper, a barracuda, mollusks and two merchant ships sailing in opposing directions, one with its sails billowing in the wind, while the other appears to be damaged. This detailed marine scene has been the subject of much discussion among scholars who evaluated the scene from different perspectives (Avissar 2001; Haddad - Avissar 2003; Rosen

3 According to the IAA archives, 61 archaeological excavations were carried out in Lod since the first seminal archaeological excavation at Lod in 1951 by Jacob Kaplan (1957), 57 by the IAA and the rest by other academic institutions; our thanks to Shahar Krispin, Inspector of Antiquities of the district for his kind assistance in data collection.

4 Other exceptions of medium- and large-scale explorations in the city were the excavations at Tel Lod (3,000 m<sup>2</sup>; see Yannai - Marder 2000; Yannai 2008), the community and educational excavation at the Khan el-Hilu caravanserai (see Gadot et al. 2008) and the late Ottoman period dwellings on Exodus Street (see Jakoel 2016).

2004; Friedman 2004; Gorzalczany - Rosen 2019; Haddad 2019; Gorzalczany et al. 2020). The southern carpet is subdivided into two panels, the northern one is enclosed in a double, braided motifs frame, portraying birds, perched on branches in an interwoven design, and the southern one, only partially preserved is formed by an intricate intertwining design of hexagons in which birds, fish and mythological creatures are depicted facing different directions. The panel is surrounded by a frame formed by braided stripes, which in turn is surrounded by a line of red rhomboids with a white center. These rhomboids stand out against a white background. Between the braided stripes and the mosaic, an internal frame can be distinguished, formed by a line of figures resembling beads separated from each other by thin spools. Scholars compared the mosaics stylistically to North African mosaics (Talgam - Weiss 2004: 14; Talgam 2015b: 79–89; compare Dunbabin 1978: 82, 260; pls. 72–73; Meyboom 1995: 43–50; pl. 6). After the excavation, the mosaic was exposed to the public for a few days and then covered up to protect it, awaiting a decision regarding its future. A heated debate ensued between those who demanded the immediate transfer of the mosaic to an existing museum to guarantee its preservation, and others who argued that the mosaic belonged to Lod and should remain in the neighborhood. The latter view eventually prevailed, and a decision was made to build a museum to house the mosaic on site in order to exhibit it to the general public. It was only in 2009 that the mosaic was removed to build the museum, this temporary removal facing strong opposition from the neighboring residents who mistrusted the authorities and feared that the mosaic would never be returned.

### The 2009 Excavation Season

The 2009 season focused on preparing the mosaic for temporal removal from the site. After cleaning, dismantling and carefully restoration by IAA conservationists (Fig. 8), the mosaic set out on a several-year long journey, during which it was exhibited in some of the most prestigious museums in the world, including the Louvre, the British Museum, the Altes Museum in Berlin (Fig. 9), the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Field Museum in Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia, the Frost Art Museum in Miami, the Legion of Honor Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco, the



Figure 8  
Specialized IAA personnel removing the mosaic in 2009, to be preserved and sent abroad (photo Amir Gorzalczany).



Figure 9  
The mosaic on temporary display in the Altes Museum, Berlin (photo Uwe Steinert).

Columbus Museum in Ohio, the Waddesdon Manor in Aylesbury, England, and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The careful dismantling of the mosaic to protect it whilst building the museum to house it, permitted the exhaustive study of the construction technique, whose *modus operandi* was systematically recreated. Among other critical examinations, the technique employed to build the foundation layer was studied, revealing that it consisted of several superimposed thick layers of stones of decreasing size. Two layers of *statumen* (a gravel bed and a layer of fist-size stones laid on rammed earth) were laid on the ground, followed by *rudus* (a thinner layer of thick mortar made of three parts gravel and one part lime), and finally the *nucleus* (layer of thin mortar, overlain by a fresh layer of mortar) to which the mosaic *tesserae* were stuck. Unexpectedly, footprints of the craftsmen, both barefoot and shod, were exposed imprinted in the still fresh mortar nucleus, directly below the mosaic tesserae (Fig. 10). Some very small footprints were also observed, either of a young apprentice or of a child who accompanied his father on a day's work (Talgam 2015b: 70; fig. 52). A clenched fist impression was possibly imprinted when a kneeling craftsman placing the *tesserae*, leaned on the ground to maintain his balance.



Figure 10  
Footprint of one of the artisans who worked on the mosaic, imprinted in the fresh mortar exposed after its removal in 2009 (photo Nikki Davidov).



Another interesting discovery made after the removal of the mosaic floor, was the outline of the sinopia drawn on the mortar to serve as a guide for the artist fixing the stones in place (Fig. 11; on sinopia in mosaic preparation see Robotti 1983). It is noteworthy that the sinopia included five different hues, attained with various mineral pigments. The investment of such effort in preparing the preliminary sketch is exceptional in mosaics of this nature, as the sketches are usually monochromatic in reddish or ochre tones; it may reflect the value attached to the mosaic. The unparalleled multi-colored sinopia outline of the mosaic aroused great interest, and it was studied intensively in collaboration with the University of Padua (Padova), Italy, whose laboratories identified the mineral pigments composing the colors: dark red ochre, yellow ochre, green earth, carbon black and cinnabar (Piovesani et al. 2012a; 2012b; 2014).

Figure 11  
Outline of the sinopia drawn in several hues on the mortar to serve as a guide for the artist, exposed in places where the tesserae were missing (photo Nikki Davidov).



### The 2014 Excavation Season

Shortage of funding and logistic problems, as well as the lack of a consensus between the authorities and the residents regarding the future of the mosaic, and even open antagonism to the construction of the museum, halted the venture for five years. It was only in 2014 that extensive excavations, involving the closure and deflection of the adjacent streets, exposed the additional southern and eastern parts of the mansion. The new excavations exposed a peristyle courtyard (11×13 m), south of the main triclinium, expanding the total north-south length of the mansion to c. 42 m. The peristyle floor was covered with a high-quality, colorful mosaic (Fig. 6), adorned with geometric network consisting of nine octagons portraying chase scenes, fish, a pair of birds standing on the rim of an amphora and a pair of birds on the sides of a basket. Between the octagons are formed squares and triangles that inhabit fish and birds (Fig. 12; Gorzalczy 2015; Gorzalczy et al. 2016: figs. 4–7; Gorzalczy - Rosen 2018). This mosaic, whose southwestern corner was just visible in the limited probing in 2009, represents an iconography and composition that was popular in North Africa (Africa Proconsularis), characterized by presenting the animal figures and scenes within geometrical networks, rather than in their natural landscape. The



Figure 12  
Archaeology students from the Renmin University in Beijing (RUC), China, cleaning the mosaic in the peristyle courtyard (photo Amir Gorzalczany).

networks and the compositions are geometric, or vegetal, and this representation is part of a trend that climaxed in the later Byzantine-period mosaics. Well-known mosaics displaying figures in populated vine or acanthus scrolls (Fig. 1) include the Bird Mosaic in Caesarea (Reich 1985: 206–212), and several buildings in the western Negev, including the Nirim-Ma'on synagogue (Avi-Yonah 1960; Barag 1993: 946) the Be'er Shema' church (Gazit - Lender 1991; 1993) and the Shellal church (Henderson 1985; 1988: 35–44; Trendall 1957: 13–14). Several mosaics in Jordan also feature this design as the Church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius, the Lower and Upper Chapels of the Priest John at Khirbat al-Mukhayat; the Church of the Deacon Thomas at 'Uyun Musa Valley; the Church of Bishop Segius and the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993: 164–165, 174, 176, 187, 234–235, 238–239 figs. 201–207, 230, 176, 237, 240, 242, 252–255, 263, 345). Most of these mosaics are characterized by the depiction of animals in vine scrolls, usually sprouting from a krater, amphora, or acanthus leaf as for example, in the mosaics in the funerary chapel of el-Hammam in Bet Shean (Avi-Yonah 1936: 14–17 pl. XIV–XV; Talgam 1998: pl. 2 above right), and the Armenian chapel in the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem (Narkiss 1979: 28 figs. 39–40; Talgam 1998: pl. 3 below right).

A noteworthy find in the 2014 season was a small part of an earlier non-figurative mosaic (Stratum VIII), dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, (Talgam 2015a; Gorzalczany 2015: 38, 41 fig. 17). This mosaic comprises geometric designs only, in red, white, and black, and is similar to a mosaic excavated nearby in the past (Yannai - Erlich 2015: 217–218). In addition, a small part of a stratigraphically higher, later mosaic, more poorly produced than the Roman-period mosaics, was attributed to Strata IV–III, and dated to the late Byzantine or Umayyad period (Gorzalczany et al. 2016: fig. 11). Other significant finds included the remains of a floor in *opus signinum* technique - manufactured from small broken pieces of tiles mixed with cement. Important epigraphic finds, including amphorae sherds with commercial inscriptions indicating their contents (*titulus pictus*), were recovered, as well as many pieces of colored stucco that decorated the walls of the building.

Several rooms were excavated in the eastern part of the site, including the

southwestern corner of a colorful mosaic of exceptional quality, the third mosaic at the site attributed to the Stratum VI mansion (Fig. 7). At the time, this mosaic could not be excavated as it was overlain by a functioning parking lot, and it was therefore covered over to preserve it.

### The 2018 Excavation Season

The mosaic corner discovered in 2014 was uncovered again, as were the stone walls delimiting it on the south and west (Fig. 7; Gorzalczy 2018). The walls were constructed of one or two rows of carved stones and were extant for a single course. It transpired that a modern sump pipeline had since been laid southeast–northwest through the excavation area only a few centimeters above the mosaic, fortunately not damaging it. Judging by the many *tesserae* in the backfill of the ditch, the pipe probably damaged a stratigraphically higher mosaic floor, possibly from the Byzantine or Early Islamic periods, when the site was still occupied, as was evident at better preserved areas of the site.

The room is part of the eastern wing of the mansion, and it is adorned with a high-quality white mosaic (*opus tessellatum*) floor with a multicolored quadrangular carpet/panel at its center, portraying figures from the animal and vegetal realm. The east–west length of the emblem is not certain as it extends beyond the excavation limits, but its style and symmetry indicate that it was square. The carpet is composed of high-quality, small *tesserae*, and is framed by several rows of black and white stones and outline three-strand guilloche on a black ground (Décor I: 122 pl. 72d) in various shades of red, yellow, black, and white. The composition consists of centralized pattern in a square: circle in the center surrounded by four lateral semicircles and four quarter – circles (quadrants) in the corners, forming concave quadrilaterals – made of simple guilloche (Décor II: 166, 224 pls. 356:c, 403:a). The central round medallion bordered by concentric red, black, and white circles of increasing size (outer circle diam. 1 m).

The carpet is decorated with marine fauna and birds, the central medallion depicting three different fish species swimming in opposite directions. The semicircles depict fish and dolphins, the quarter-medallions are adorned with birds, and birds perched on branches appear in the concave quadrilaterals. Similar fauna are frequent motifs in the other mosaics in the mansion, as, for example, in the peristyle courtyard (Gorzalczy et al. 2016: Fig. 7) and in the main *triclinium* (Avissar 1998; 1999). It is evident that the person who selected the subjects portrayed in the mosaics was attracted by marine and nautical motifs, including the detailed depictions of ships (Avissar 2001; Haddad - Avissar 2003; Rosen 2004; Friedman 2004; Gorzalczy - Rosen 2019; Gorzalczy et al. 2020).

The mosaic floor is made of various-sized tesserae, the smallest (0.8×0.8 cm) in the center, slightly larger (1×1 cm) in the semicircles, and still larger (1.2×1.2 cm) in the corners and the frame. The panel is surrounded by a white mosaic carpet, on whose southern side a rectangular area was demarcated by a three-row frame made of differently aligned tesserae (length 2.6 m, width at least 1 m). The frame may indicate the position of a *klinē* (κλίνη in Greek), a reception or banquet reclining couch (Dunbabin 1993; 1995; 2003; Hudson 2010). Reclining couches for diners were arranged on three sides of the room (hence *triclinium* from the Greek word τρικλίνιον, ‘three *klinē*’), the fourth side left free for serving the food and drink. This room was probably also a *triclinium*, of smaller proportions than the opulent one exposed in 1996, possibly for daily

use. This discovery modifies our understanding of the plan of the mansion, as it seems that the residential rooms (*cubicula*) either extended further east or occupied an upper story, and the mansion was thus larger than formerly thought. A *domus* of this type could have comprised several *triclinia*, for specific occasions. Regarding the layout and iconography in the panel, these motifs are not uncommon in the region, for example on the southwestern slope of Mount Zion in Jerusalem, south of the Church of St. Peter at Gallicantu (Fig. 1: 8; Avner 1994: 21\*). The two mosaics are analogous in size, composition, and iconographic themes, and they may even have been created by the same artisans. The only difference is that the Mount Zion mosaic exhibits the bust of a female figure in the central medallion, instead of the fish threesome at Lod. The figure is identified by the Greek letters ΓΗ (Ge) as Gaia or Gaea (Γαῖα), the primeval Greek deity of the earth (Terra of the Romans) and the ancestral mother of all life; the other motifs and fauna are almost identical, only with more birds than fish. The absence of human figures in all the mosaics uncovered to date in the Lod mansion has not been overlooked by researchers, and it is considered that this abstinence may have been ethnically, culturally, or religiously/ideologically motivated. In terms of style and composition, there are several parallels dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD in the Western Empire, for example, in Britain (Morgan 1886: 139; Smith 1975: 279–280 pls. 120–121; Neal 1981: 87 fig. 66), Germany (Hellenkemper-Salies 1983: 339 figs. 3, 4), the Balkans (Mano-Zissi 1965: 289 fig. 4.), Italy (Maioli 1983: 465, 470–471), France (Lancha 1983: 383, fig. 2) and Spain (Corpus España I: 32 n. 9 fig. 12; Corpus España III: 46 n. 23 fig. 89).

These preferences of the mansion residents reinforce the understanding that they had cultivated, sophisticated and cosmopolitan tastes with a predilection for various ornamental artistic styles syncretizing North African aesthetic influences and inspirations (Parrish 1984: 144–146 pl. 33), observed in the main *triclinium* mosaics and the peristyle courtyard (Talgam 2014: 69–70; Gorzalczany et al. 2016: figs. 4–7; Gorzalczany - Rosen 2018), together with western influences (Avner 1994: 21), observed in this mosaic.

Despite its limited size, the 2018 excavation significantly impacted our understanding of the splendid residential mansion at Lod. The finds raised new issues regarding the possible location of the residential and service areas in the so far unexcavated eastern wing, or on an upper story. Although the size of the complete architectural complex is not known, it clearly belonged to residents of a high socio-economic status who refurbished and enlarged it over several generations. We can affirm that the wing exposed in the 2018 excavation was also lavish and luxurious, reflecting the high standard of living and opulence enjoyed by the extremely well-to-do owners. The mosaics discovered in the house, and in adjacent houses in the past, indicate that this area of Roman Lod Diospolis was an affluent neighborhood of the wealthy, cultural, social, political, and economic elite. This heyday came to an end with the Muslim conquest, when the province of *Palaestina Prima* became the district of *Jund Filastīn*, and the new capital was constructed at Ramla during the Umayyad caliphate with the express purpose of substituting Lod as the center of trade and administration. Ramla was designated ‘the most beautiful of cities’ by the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasī (Shams al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Maqqdisī; c. 946–1000 AD); the voluntary or forced relocation of goldsmiths, craftsmen, and merchants from Lod to the new capital at Ramla weakened Lod and contributed to its decline, from which it never recuperated.

## The Mosaic and the Modern City of Lod

The Museum and Visitors' Centre is located within the present-day city of Lod, near one of its main eastern entrances. In the late Ottoman period, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lod was a small town (Fig. 13) with a mosque, a church and a *khan* (caravanserai), and it was characterized by narrow winding streets, dense crowded construction, and single or two-story stone houses. The unexposed mansion was in an agricultural area northeast of the town, adjacent to one of the unpaved roads that later became a main road of the city.

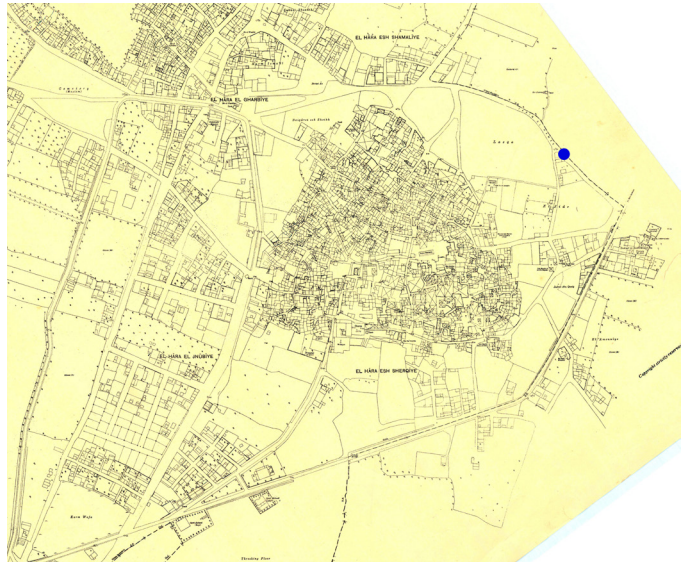
Figure 13

Lod is a small town in 1917, surrounded by agricultural fields. The mosaic site (marked in blue dot) is located outside the town to the northeast (source: Haifa University).

Figure 14

Lod development plan after the earthquake, in 1929. The city developed to the west and north. The mosaic site (marked in blue dot) remained outside the boundaries of the built area of the town (source: Israel State Archives).

In 1927, when Palestine was under the British Mandate (1917–1948), an earthquake destroyed large parts of Lod (Aloni 2007: 17; Zohar et al. 2016: 979; 2017: 5). Following the earthquake, the Mandate authorities rebuilt and expanded the town, mostly to the west and north, the mansion still beyond the town boundaries (Fig. 14). The new neighborhoods differed from the old town, being built according to principles of modern planning, whereby main and secondary streets, and the location of building plots were defined.



In the 1930s and 1940s, the town's eastern neighborhoods approached the mansion area (Fig. 15), only encompassing it with the development of the northern neighborhoods in the 1960s. Today, the mansion, and thus the new museum, lie in the heart of a residential neighborhood (Fig. 16). Its location near the entrance into the city, whilst also on the edge of the old town, makes the building a conspicuous landmark. The museum building is perceived and planned as a site of interest in itself, and also as a starting point for the visitor touring the historical monuments and attractions in the city, as the main sites are accessible by car or on foot (Fig. 17). The sites include the Ottoman and British Mandate *khan*, the Eastern Oil Press House (an industrial structure producing oil and other products derived from olives and sesame), the Great Mosque, the Church on the burial site of St. George, the Mandate Municipality building, the City Market and more. The planners aim to provide the visitors with an archaeological experience, placing the mosaic as the main focus of attraction and as a central asset of a diverse, multicultural urban space, rich in historical layers.



Figure 15  
The northeastern satellite neighborhood of Lod developed and “approached” the mosaic area (marked in blue dot) in 1946. However, it remained outside the city area (source: Survey of Israel).

Figure 16  
Only with the expansion of Lod’s built-up area to the north in the 1960s was the mosaic site (marked in blue dot) included within the city boundaries, as seen on this picture from 1965 (Source: Survey of Israel).

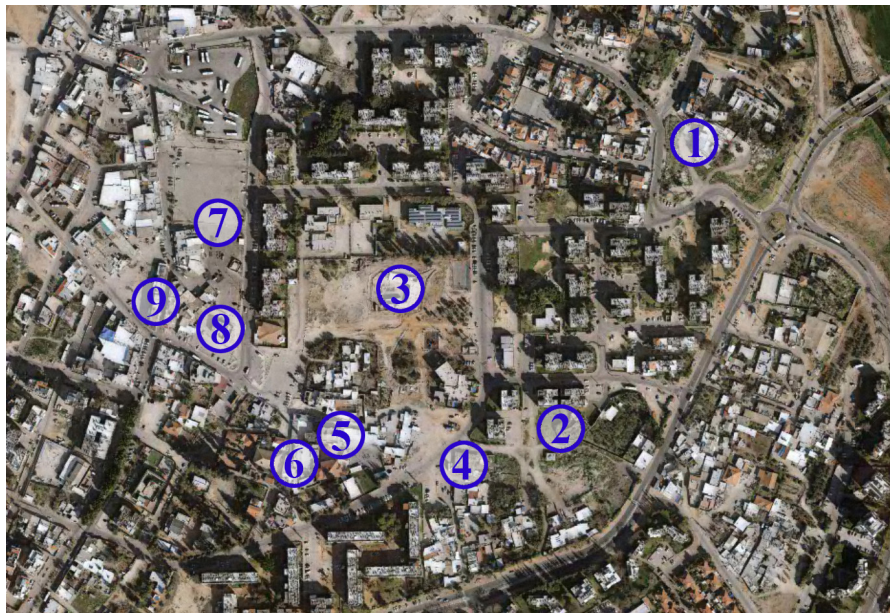


Figure 17  
Historical monuments in the Old City of Lod: 1 - Mosaic Museum, 2 - Eastern Olive Press, 3 - Khan, 4 - “House of Arches”, 5 - Church of St. George, 6 - Al-Omari Mosque, 7 - Central Market, 8 - Soap Factory, 9 - British Mandate Municipality (Ram Shoeff).

## The Museum Building

The design of the building (Fig. 18) was preceded by two planning stages. The original plan proposed after the mosaic was excavated in 1996, was not implemented due to budget constrictions. The second stage took place between 2009–2015, when the main mosaic was conserved in the IAA mosaic workshop and then sent on the worldwide exhibition tour. The new archaeological excavations carried out at the site led to updating the architectural design, adapting it to accommodate the new finds. In 2016, changes were made in the planning team to advance the planning and execution of the project, which was completed in 2021.

The concepts guiding the planning process included the construction of a building as an urban landmark, the inclusion of public open areas, the presentation of the mosaics in their original context, and the use of technology to enable the visitor to interact with the display and encounter a rich experience.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The description of the planning process of the museum building is based on an unpublished article by Ra’anán Kislev of the IAA, former director of the Conservation Department, who led the planning and construction process of the museum; we are grateful for his permission to use the material.

Figure 18

IAA staff putting in place one of the mosaic panels in the new museum, shortly before its opening to the public (Photo Amir Gorzalczany).



A large plaza ascends gradually from the street to the front of the museum building. The building façade's glass walls allow the visitor a view of the interior before entering the building. The architectural concept conveys a feeling of the Roman domus that stood here, by a modern interpretation of the historical space, and by combining various building materials that express and enhance the connection between modern architecture and the archeological remains. Inside the building, the central mosaic may be viewed from different angles and elevations. The peristyle mosaic to its south is an open space (Fig. 19), enabling the visitor to walk on it and experience its primary function as a courtyard floor; other smaller mosaics are displayed on the interior walls of the building. The visitor is encouraged to research the mosaics by means of an interactive exhibition that emphasizes the central mosaic as a work of art with extraordinary aesthetic values and as a historical element linked to the rich history of Lod.

Figure 19

View of the central room of the museum, with the mosaic ready for exhibition. In the background, you can see through the window the open space that houses the mosaic of the peristyle courtyard (Photo Ram Shoeff).



### The Future of the Mosaic

In May 2021, rioting in several of the Jewish-Arab mixed towns in Israel, led to severe clashes in Lod, in the course of which people were wounded and property was damaged. The glass walls of the museum were shattered, and the foyer was

partially burnt; fortunately, the mosaics were not damaged. The building that was envisioned as a house for all and as a symbol of integration and cooperation, became a victim of polarization and intolerance.

Notwithstanding these traumatic events, we consider that the Lod mosaic, can now more than ever, play a leading role as a catalyst for a process of urban, economic, and social change and improvement, unquestionably needed in the city. The mosaic, created 1600 years ago as the luxurious floor in an affluent Roman mansion, bears the intrinsic potential to become an attraction center for research, education, and economic development, while contributing to deepening the ties between the neighborhood residents and the city, encouraging respect, local pride, and identification with the historical heritage. We can only hope that the museum, built primarily for the city, will achieve its role as a bond between the population groups of Lod, and between the residents and their local historical past. It is up to us all to turn this potential into reality.

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