

## Unique Representation of a Mosaics Craftsman in a Roman Pavement from the Ancient Province *Syria*

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*The subject of this paper is the study of the figured representation of a mosaics-craftsman in a fragmentary pavement, preserved in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Of unknown provenance, apparently comes from the territory of ancient Syria in the Eastern Roman Empire.*

*Such representation is a hapax, not only in the Roman mosaics of Syria, but also in the corpus of Roman Empire, since, although several mosaic inscriptions in some pavements, which show the name of the mosaic artisans and / or different names for different functions of the trades related to the development of mosaics, and even the reference to the workshop, who were teachers or members of his team of craftsmen, the figured representation of a mosaicist, in the instant to be doing his work, is truly unique.*

**Keywords:** mosaic, mosaics-craftsman, Syria, Eastern Roman Empire, Late Antiquity.

When in 1998 I had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, I could see between the collections of exposed mosaics a fragment with the figure of a man represented at the instant of having, hammer in hand, the *tesserae* of a mosaic. Years later, when tackling a study on the jobs of artists and artisans in the roman mosaics<sup>1</sup>, checked its absence in the bibliography, nevertheless extensive and prolix on the subject, and put me in contact with the director of the Classical Antiquities Department in the Danish Museum, Dr. John Lund, who, to my questions<sup>2</sup> about the origin of the fragment, kindly answered me.

To judge by the transmitted information, the mosaic with Inv. Nr. 15121 (Figure 1), which depicts to sitting craftsman with a hammer was acquired by the National Museum in 1973 from an art dealer in Beirut, and it was published by Peter Pentz (Pentz 1992: 47 it notice 141 and 148 fig. 14), with a brief reference to its advanced chronology, around the “6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD”, but unfortunately without information about its provenance.

The lack of information on the mosaic, the iconographic program and the architectural context to the that corresponded does not subtract however value to the fragment conserved in Copenhagen, since this contains the unique representation, seems to be, of an artisan of mosaics documented in the roman mosaics, not only of the territory of the ancient *Syria*, pertaining in the “6<sup>th</sup> century AD” to the Eastern Roman Empire, but also of the *corpus* of all the Empire, was of full imperial period or already very advanced the Late Antiquity.

To this respect, seems obvious to remember, that in spite of its certainly exceptional character sure enough some artists and some artisans, went *pictores*, teachers of a workshop or *technites* of very diverse denomination<sup>3</sup>, had left proof of their name by means of a inscription on the mosaic<sup>4</sup> (Balmelle - Darmon 1986: 235-248; Donderer 1989;

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“This work is result of my research in the project “Producción y Comercio de mosaicos romanos de la Bética” (HAR 2010-18594), funded by the CICYT of the MICINN, currently MINECO.

1 First for a entitled conference «El oficio del artista: talleres de mosaístas y vida cotidiana», *Vivir en Roma*, Mérida, UNED-Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, 1-4 July 2008; then to the XVIII *Convegno Internazionale su L’Africa Romana* in December 2008, limited the study to the territory of the former provinces of North Africa (Neira 2010: 485-499).

2 In an e-mail to Prof. Lund, I said “I’m working about the craftsmen of mosaics from the Roman North Africa to the next *Convegno Internazionale di Studi su L’Africa Romana* Olbia (10-14 Dezember, 2008) and to approach the study of Parallels in the Pavements from others roman provinces, I remember seeing a roman mosaic from the near-east provinces in the National Museum of Denmark, perhaps from Danish Excavations on Syria in the 1930s, with a craftsmans representation, at that moment to be *tessellatum opus* with surfacing. It was, when, in the 1997, I had fortune to visit The National Museum of Denmark. Still I have photographs but unfortunately I have not got information about special architectural, their origin and context. Would you be like so kind as to help me?”

3 Not only explicitly but also implicitly judging by the use of different verbs to describe the work in an inscription (Balmelle - Darmon 1986: 235-253; Bruneau 1988: 33-34; Donderer 1989: 13-35).

4 On the different reasons throughout the history of the various operating in Hellenistic and later *tessellatum opus* in imperial times, with particular impact from the Lower Empire, have led to the inclusion of a inscription as a signature of the artist or the artisan, and even of the workshop (Balmelle



Figure 1  
Fragment of mosaic with the representation of a mosaics-craftsman, preserved in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. Photo: Luz Neira.

Dunbabin 1999: 269-278), and however this designation, as a signature, never had appeared accompanied by the depiction of the mosaic craftsman in the widest sense of the term.

Until the consideration in the present paper of the Syrian fragment conserved in the National Museum of Denmark, the only representation known of artisans of mosaics was the documented in a famous relief from *Ostia* of the “4<sup>th</sup> century AD” (Robotti 1983: 311-314, pl. CCI, 1), that, evoking the profession of the deceased, decorated the grave of a mosaic teacher (Lavagne 2001: 104-105). The fragmentary relief (Figure 2), conserved in the Museum degli Scavi from Ostia (inv. Nr. 132), it shows the work of several members of a workshop, of the that stand out in first plane the two artisans seated on big stones to way of seat, one in front of another, seen of profile, that have been attracted at the instant of cutting the cubes on a block, a sort of anvil, with a sharp hammer, a “martelina”, having beside his legs the one of the right, of greater age to judge by his mature and beard appearance, a big basket, perhaps of elements partly trimmed before being turned into cubes; while in second plane other two men have been represented, involving both on his shoulders to the back a sack with the predictably allocated materials to the fragmentation, lime or puzzolana or marble dust for the mortar bed<sup>5</sup>, at the instant of accessing in direction leftwards to the extreme, not seen, of the place, according to the explicit indication of a young man, who, in addition to carrying an object on the left, raises his right hand with an unequivocal gesture, perhaps the chief of the workshop (Robotti 1983: 311-314), also in case the deceased for whose grave was made the stele (Lavagne 2001: 104).

- Darmon 1986: 247-248; Donderer 1989: 45-47; Neira 2003-2004: 85-139, esp. 98; Neira 2010: 497-499).

5 It was initially thought (Robotti 1983: 313) that the sacks would have contained the *tesserae*.

Figure 2  
Relief from *Ostia*.  
Photo: after H. Lavagne.



The object in question, “an instrument which, according to the hypothesis of Lavagne (Lavagne 2001: 104), may serve to enter the *tesserae* in the mortar bed”, that is, to embed the tiles after completing the latest available at the layer of the bed, is my opinion a pestle, a masher, a *pistillum*, an instrument attached to *mortarium*<sup>6</sup>, which among many other uses<sup>7</sup> can be interpreted as “a receptacle for grinding” and just as the “product of having crushed or ground” thing, resulting in close relation to the mosaics the known name of mortar bed. In this sense must to be remembered the mortars in bronze made to grind and mix with the *pistillum* marble or lime and sand used to manufacture binders or plaster construction, such as stucco, construction (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* XXXVI, 53) and, in this line, the used to crush materials, lime and pozzolan or marble dust, destined to form the bed of mortar, which is finally deposited the *tessellae*, reportedly well known of Vitruvius (*De arch.* VII,12; VIII,7).

In addition to the exceptional visual documentation that this relief shows us about the organization and division of the work in an *officina* of mosaics, with the image of several members, the cutting action of for obtaining of the *tessellae* and the representation of instruments as the “martelina” and a sort of anvil and of objects as the big basket and the necessary sacks for the supply of materials, the appearance of the artisans, a ancient and beard man in front of a youngster and without beard, could allude as it already suggested Lavagne to the kinship between a father and a son, in reply to the revitalization that, in front of the risk of disappearance of determinate jobs, would have supposed the Constantine’s edict in 337, with the exemption of the fulfillment of the public service to all the artists and artisans, between them the *musivarii* and *tessellarii*, engaged in transmitting the job to their descendants<sup>8</sup>.

6 It must be remembered that the mortar as a utensil used to convert powder various chemicals, etc. usually prepared by a rule of materials such as wood, stone, metal or porcelain vessel by way of concave (Daremberg-Saglio: s.v “mortarium”).

7 See its use in medicine, one of the earliest documents is the Ebers Papyrus, dating from “1550 B.C.” and the Old Testament (Numbers 11:8 and Proverbs 27:22). Also in the preparation of drugs for therapeutic effect in the Roman orbit, Iuvenal (*Sat.* VII, 170: *et quae iam ueteres sanant mortaria caecos* (and the mortar to cure the blind and old men).

8 Also contained in the *Cod Theod.* XIII, 4,2 *In excusationibus artificum*, maintained with some changes in *Cod Iust X*, 66, 1 (Dunbabin 1999: 276).

In this line, it should be mentioned the reproduction of the same diagram in the figures of the porters, young and without beard the first, elder and with beard the second, giving the impression to having pretended show until the last consequences the fulfillment of a measure, evidently absurd in the case of the porters, as it is to suppose that, even in a favorable context to the education and transmission of the jobs in the breast of the family, would be the youngest men, in so much stronger, the designated for the involve and the transfer and of sacks.

Still, to this respect, calls the attention the man that has been identified like boss or teacher of the workshop<sup>9</sup> when appearing with the arm and the hand in high, indicating to the porters the place to which have to direct with the sacks, with an attitude certainly of control, although he carries a *pistillum*, an typical instrument of the works in the preparation of mosaics, insert in the group of workers. Neither his dress, nor his hair, nor his young and bearded figure denotes substantial differences with the rest, and even this same youth seems to move him away of the archetypisch image of the teacher, being able to even give the impression to treat of another member more than the workshop. In spite of these considerations and of the problem that involves the fragmented character of the relief, the contemplation of the scene, with the contrast, on the one hand, between the represented in the same instant to be working and, by another, the character in attitude leader, with an instrument perhaps in so much sufficiently representative image of a job<sup>10</sup> - but not at instant of using - induces to decant us finally by its identification like the boss of the workshop, perhaps, in virtue of the funerary context of the relief and of the period, the same of the Constantine's edict, the son of the deceased, who was dedicated the relief.

Even in relation with this relief has been suggested that the scene does not pass in a place that by the absence of vaults and of walls could identify like the seat of the workshop, contributing to the theory that very probably the members of an *officina* displaced with the material, installed in the residence or the place of the *dominus* that had commissioned the work during the time of execution and manufactured the mosaics *in situ*, subject on which, exceptions such as the preparation and transfer even by ship of some *emblemata*, exist besides numerous literary (Bruneau 1988: 3-73; Sfameni 2006) and archaeological testimonies (Darmon 1980: 79; Robotti 1983: 311-314; Balmelle - Darmon 1986: 239-240; Pessoa 1989: 23-28; Lancha 1994: 133). *Pistillum* identification and its relationship with the bags of material so confirms, while the porters would have been represented at the time of hauling the material to proceed, through the key's insertion of the *pistillum*, to the development of the mortar bed, - before or after using the *pistillum*? - a task that is registered so inexcusable to the architectural context. Nevertheless, and although this was not an obstacle to the theory about the work *in situ* of the mosaic craftsmen, is to signal that the scene in question sure enough does not evoke a venue, but neither a *domus* in the urban or rural field neither of course the room to pavement, where is to suppose yes there would have been ceilings and walls, perhaps, between other reasons, because the tasks represented in the relief, those that suppose the supply and the storage of the material and the cut for the obtaining of the *tessellae*, had to carry out in dependencies located in the vicinity of the rooms to decorate and pavement (Balmelle - Darmon 1986: 239, note 27).

<sup>9</sup> Identification that should be discarded to judge by his position in the background, in the opinion of Dunbabin (Dunbabin 1999: 281, note 14).

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, it should be emphasized the importance of the mosaic floor bed, because, as experts in conservation and restoration say "for obtaining a resistant pavement depends on its proper preparation. It is not surprising therefore that an instrument dedicated to this work, fundamental and yet invaluable after the completion of the mosaic had been chosen to be carried by the head of the workshop.

The fragment conserved in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen shows us like novelty the figure of an only mosaicist, seated and seen of profile in a similar position to the young and no beard craftsman of the relief from Ostia, perhaps on a less high seat that seems to guess?, with the even more curved back and the head to in front, although in his right hand, in place of a sharp hammer of spiky extremes, a *martelina*, on a block, a sort of anvil, fist a hammer of blunt extremes, in a destined position to the action repeated of enter in depth the *tessellae*, after having on the layer of mortar bed.

It is well known that the variety of hammers, under different denominations of the *malleus*, *marcellus*, *martiolus*, *martellus*, were used in various trades and tasks in the Roman world. Similar to the fragment exhibited in Copenhagen, with two blunt ends, are documented, among others, some findings of Roman hammers, even in the absence obviously the wooden handle, and the representation of two in the fragmentary floor of a room attached to the building of a Christian basilica in Oued Rmel in the region of Zaghuan (Tunisia), around the “V century AD” (Daremborg-Saglio: *musivum opus*; Slim 1994: 152-154), where, despite the shortcomings, can still be seen (Figure 3) in three records the work of several operators with characteristics different tools tasks necessary for the construction of the basilica itself, and in this context, a hammer in the upper register and the other in the lower register, and a scene in the middle of two men represented at the time of being made a bed of mortar, after allegedly crushed material, now in a bag from one of them pour the mixture, and near two big bowls, perhaps *mortaria* as instruments, with two handles<sup>11</sup>.

Also, new, yet to be mentioned under the wreath on the central register a damaged figure of another man, whose curved shape, also on a kind of cushion that serves as a seat, play the same position of the artisans in the relief from Ostia and the fragment of Copenhagen, which leads us to identify it as representation a dedicated craftsman well to obtain the *tessellae* either to the pavement itself.

In Copenhagen it treats of an only scene, since the man, mature and bearded, with a short dress like the most elderly of the porters of the relief in marble but without sleeves, has been attracted in full task, with the work half, that is to say, after having willing first and ensured afterwards with the hammer the *tessellae* of a great part, but to fault of other smaller zones that still remained him for covering for the ending of the work, as it gives off of the curious representation of this fragment.

In this sense, it is to signal, on the row of a line of black *tessellae* that edge to way of frame the corresponding fragment probably to an angle of the mosaic field, by the form in straight angle that continues in five convex sides, the disposal in the two straight sides and in two of the convex, those that appear to the left and in the top of the figure, of three lines of red *tessellae*, absent even in the others two convex sides, while the mosaic’s artisan encourages in completing a third, with the three lines of red *tesellae* only until the half, with his right foot on the zone even for covering.

The form of the compartment, a combination of square sides and convex sides, in which it inscribes the figure of the man, his own representation of profile and the quoted disposal of the *tessellae* like reflection of a task in course produce an effect that of subtle way suggests the paving and, to the time, also the decoration of walls and vaults, and like detail even more worthy to review, in front of the

<sup>11</sup> Like documented also in a Egyptian painting on the tomb of Rameses III at Thebes (Daremborg-Saglio, s.v. “mortarium”).



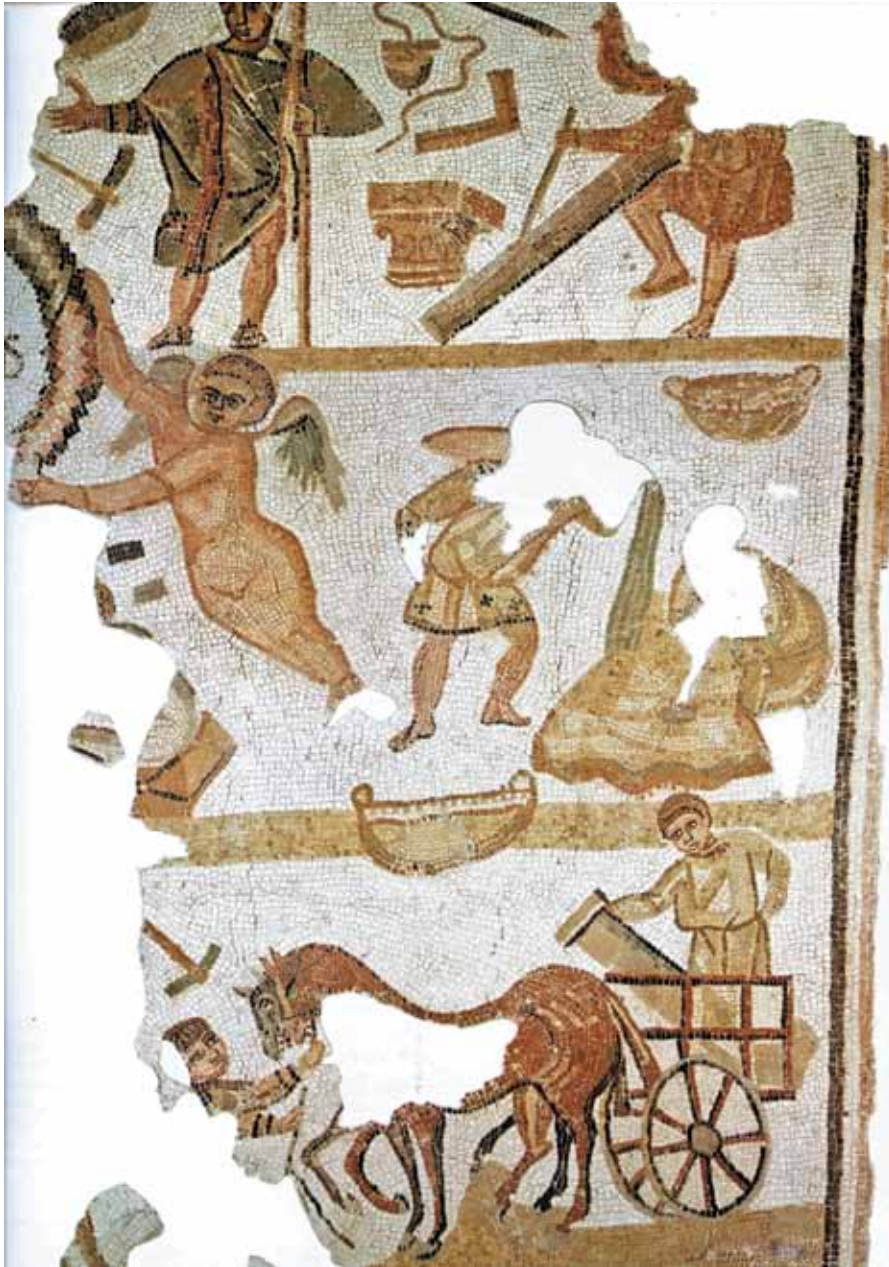


Figure 3  
Fragmentary floor from Oued  
Rmel in the region of Zaghouan  
(Tunisia), in Bardo Museum.  
Photo: after M. Fantar.

depiction of an only man, the execution of these tasks to hands of a same artist or artisan.

In some way arguing, to my view, by a distinction that, at least in the period of the Diocletian's edict, would reside more in the capacity of creation and in the faculty to trace the master lines of the decorative reasons on the one hand, the one of the *μουσιαρσιος κεντητησ* in Greek, *musiuarius* in Latin, and the skill to carry to the practice this decoration, according to the precise lines of the placing of the *tessellae*, the one of the *ψηφοθετησ* in Greek, *tessellarius* in Latin, in narrow relation with the *compositio* and the *ordinatio* mentioned later by Saint Augustine (*De ordine*, 1, 2) when referring to the technique of preparation of the mosaics<sup>12</sup>, and in the line attributed to Demetrios and Epiphanes by a inscription

12 On this issue about the meaning of used terms in the *Edictum de pretiis maximis rerum venalium*, debated without agreement, some researchers suggest the distinction between specialized mosaicists walls and ceilings and flooring specialists (Lavagne 1977/78: 432-439; Lancha 1994: 127-132),

in the mosaic of a Christian building of Thebes (Greece) (Donderer 1989: A 10), and no so much in a specialisation in walls and vaults or in pavements; although the fact that both denominations, *musivarius* and *tessellarius*, purchased an official tone when appearing in the quoted edict would not involve necessarily the only and exclusive diffusion of his use, what would explain in the breast of different traditions and habits the use of other synonymous verbs like *pingere* to refer to the work of the *musivarius*<sup>13</sup>. In this line, although the edict limits to the billed of two categories in the execution of the mosaics, seems obvious to suspect that in the practice would have existed a greater diversity of capacities and tasks, being probably very complex to establish the differentiation between them and, to the time, the paradox, according to the circumstances, of able artisans to do of *musivarii* and *tessellarii*<sup>14</sup>.

Returning to the man of our fragment, a *tessellarius* in virtue of the hammer with which has been represented to enter in depth the *tessellae*, even more striking is the hat that carries. It could suppose that it treats of a hat used by the mosaicists to protect the head and the hair of the dust generated when executing his work. However, against of this theory, members of the workshop in the relief from Ostia – whether carriers or those represented in action to cut *tessellae* not wear hats or any head protection. Or perhaps was more typical of the oriental mosaicists of later period and of those devoted also to the *tessellatum* of walls and vaults?

Arrived to this point, ask us which would have been the reason that in the context of the “6<sup>th</sup> century AD” induced to the representation of the mosaicist, only in the roman mosaics, especially if we take into account that the scene of the relief would have been inserted in a funerary context to evoke possibly the profession of the deceased and perhaps the transmission of the job to the descendants. It is to suppose that, even not knowing the architectural context and its functionality, was allocated to signal the work of paving and parietal decoration in the group of a building and, in narrow connection, the work of the mosaicist through the clearest example of the *tessellarius*<sup>15</sup>, as it appreciates in the increase of inscriptions with the signature of the mosaicists in the mosaics of the Christian churches and, presumably to imitation, in the synagogues during the Byzantine period, from “the 5<sup>th</sup> century V until the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD” in Palestinian, Transjordan and Syria (Piccirillo 1989: 155-157; Dunbabin 1999: 273; Doncel Voûte 1988), as we have also seen purpose mosaic Oued Rmel, Zaghouan (Tunisia) in an early Christian basilica of the *pars occidentalis*.

Nevertheless, going back to the bonnet, the true is that it remembers at first sight to a *pilos*, a *pileus*, a sure sign of Roman Republican free status, perhaps also to a species of socket and even to the turban carried by some men in the representations of members of a same family in the funerary mosaics of Edessa (Piccirillo 1989; Salman 2008: 123-139, figs. 6-18).

In any one of these cases, the representations of bearers of a *pilos*, a helmet or a turban answer usually to mythological heroes or real men of rank and influence in the society of his period, especially in the case of the pertaining men to distinguished families represented in the quoted mosaics tied to a funerary context in Edessa.

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while others shy away from this division, focusing more on the skill of the operator and the skill of posador of *tessellae* either in walls or floors (Bruneau 1988: 33-34; Balmelle, Darmon 1986: 242-246).

13 About the used verbs in Greek and Latin, in different parts of the Empire and at so different periods (Donderer 1989: 13-32).

14 As the known case of *Sabinianus Senurianus* (Donderer 1989: A 82; Neira 2010: 491).

15 Recall the effect of the exemptions in *Cod. Iust.*, cited above.

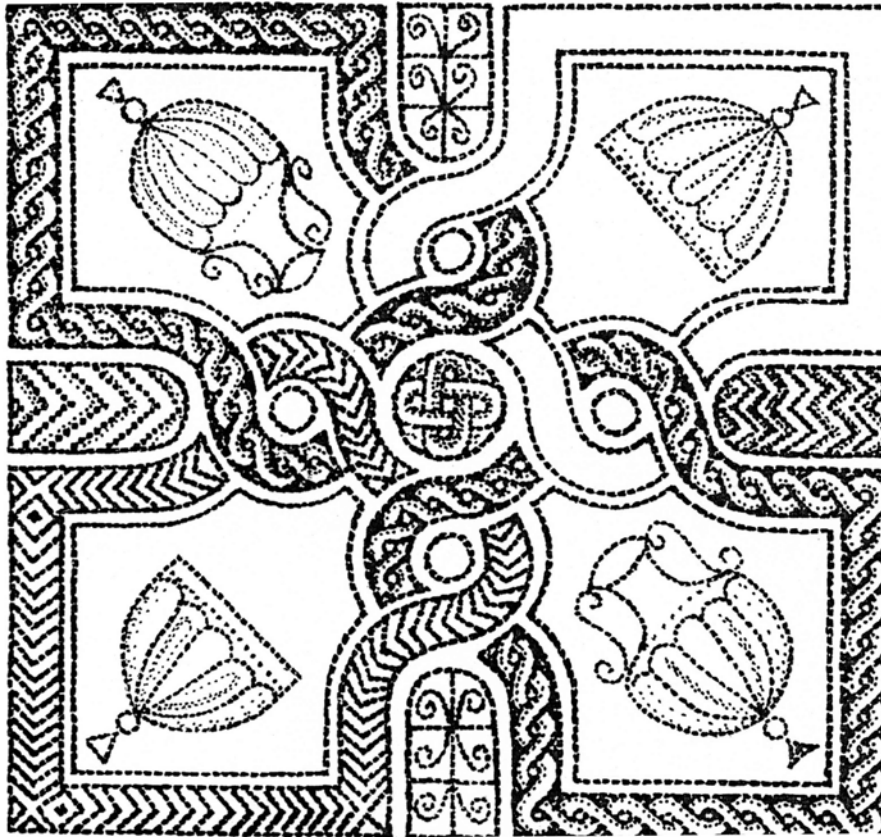


Figure 4  
Jerade, after Pauline Doncel-Voûte.

It would be, in this sense, the *pilos* an indication of the influential position of the represented under the iconography of a mosaicist<sup>16</sup>, a *tessellarius*, perhaps the donor that made possible the paving, perhaps also the decoration of walls and vaults of the building where found the fragmented mosaic conserved in Copenhagen.

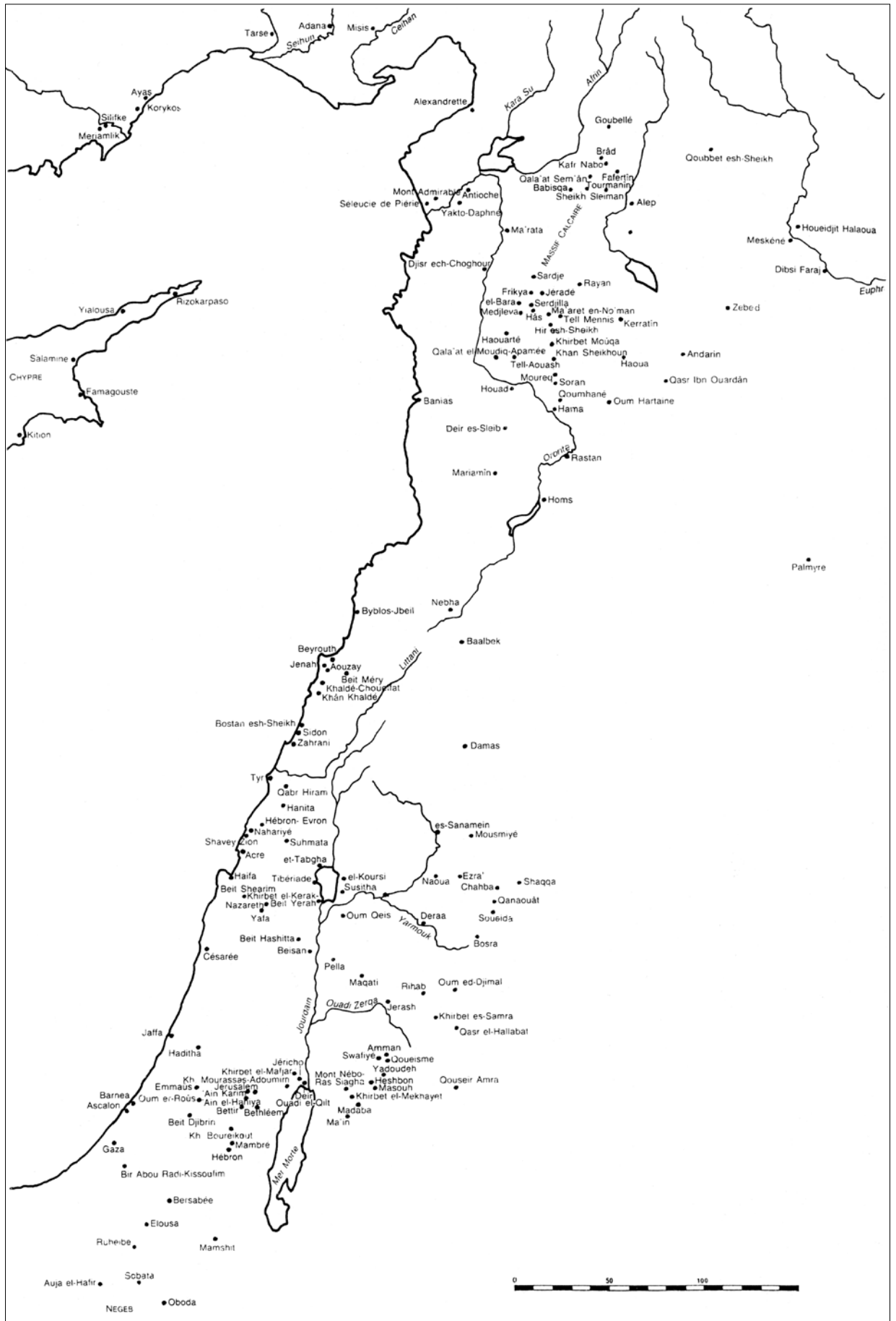
In this respect, is precise to remember again in the mosaics of the oriental zone in the Byzantine Empire the increasing peak of donors and beneficiaries of the Church, remarkable worshipper and clergymen that appear in numerous inscriptions, sometimes also in figural representations, leaving proof of his sponsorship (Doncel Voûte 1988; Piccirillo 1989; Dunbabin 1999), by what would not be odd to find, in a similar line to the representations of placing of the first present stone in the iconography of the disposal of the first nail in the ceremonies of inauguration and symbolic rites of foundation, the same representation of these donors, under the symbolic figure of the mosaicist, with a factitive sense.

This hypothesis does not reduce in any way the documentary value of the representation, or the consideration and the importance of the activities of the mosaics craftsmen or of the represented instrument. It would come anyway to reinforce the significance of said activity and the consideration of artists and artisans, in so much worthy work of which boast by means of a so explicit image like sponsors and donors in a very favorable context, between the Roman Empire of Orient and the Byzantine, to these demonstrations for the construction, decoration and consecration of churches.

<sup>16</sup> It is to signal also that he wears *exomis*, a Greek tunic used originally by workers, with which usually appears disguised *Odysseus*.

Figure 5  
Map showing the location  
of Jerade (Syria)





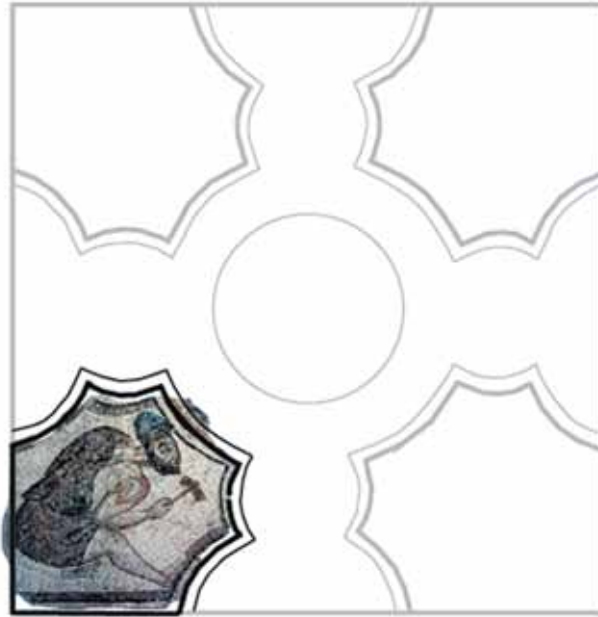


Figure 6  
Reconstitution proposed by Luz Neira.  
Drawing by Jesús Bermejo

Not in vain the geometrical compartment of our fragment answers to one of the angles of a mosaic field, whose form remembers, according to my way to see, to the resultant of that type of centralized pattern in a square and around a circle, of 4 lateral arches interlooped tangentially with the central circle, forming corner polygons (here in simple guilloche, chevrons and monochrome bands (Décor II: 366), decorated nevertheless with *craterae* and galled glasses, that documents in the hall's pavement of the *martyrium* of a church around the "5<sup>th</sup> century AD" in Jéradé (Figure 4) (Doncel Voûte 1988: 151-154, figs. 123, 125), in a zone, north of the current Syrian, of whose territorial radius of influence could presuppose the origin of the mosaic (Figure 5).

It would be missing, nevertheless, the inscription of the donor with the explicit dedication that put of self-evident the name of who would have made possible with his generosity and commitment a work of such scope like that pavement, of the that so only has conserved the small exposed fragment in the National Museum of Denmark. Precisely the fragmentary state, hardly a corner of the mosaic field (Figure 6), prevents us confirm this hypothesis.

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