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OFFPRINT / AYRIBAŞIM

JMR

Volume 12

2019

Bursa Uludağ University Press
Bursa Uludağ University Mosaic Research Center
Series - 3
JMR - 12

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JMR is published each year in November.

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Journal of Mosaic Research

ISSN 1309-047X

E-ISSN 2619-9165

Printed by / Baskı

12.matbaa

İbrahim Karaoğlanoğlu Cad. No: 35 Kat: 1
34418 Seyrantepe / Kağıthane-İstanbul
Tel: +90 212 281 25 80; www.onikincimatbaa.com
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Address / Adres:

Bursa Uludağ University / Bursa Uludağ Üniversitesi
Faculty of Art and Sciences / Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi
Department of Archaeology / Arkeoloji Bölümü
16059 - Nilüfer / BURSA - TÜRKİYE

Tel & Fax: + 90 224 2941892

E.mail: mosaicsjournal@gmail.com
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Book Review - Kitap İncelemesi

Maja KRAMER*

Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos del Conventus Astigitanus, Sebastián Vargas Vázquez, 342 pages, 92 figures, 89 plates, bibliography. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 13, 2016, £60,00, ISBN 978-1-78491 273 4.

Geometric compositions together with decorative elements are by far the most common motifs on Roman mosaics, but nevertheless the least documented and studied. Fortunately, this unbalance is changing and the author's second publication on the subject is not only an important contribution, but a possible paradigm changer in the field. The book presents an innovative approach and independent reading, which combined with substantial results takes a significant step towards greater understanding of the conceiving and the making of geometric compositions on Roman mosaic floors. At the centre of the study are the remarkable construction drawings of the geometric compositions found on mosaics recovered so far in one of the more prosperous areas of Roman Spain, Conventus Astigitanus, the largest of the four Conventus in Baetica. Written in Spanish, the book comprises, apart from a summary in English, an introduction, eight chapters including figures and colour plates, and a bibliography. The author's comprehensive introduction presents the scope, the central themes and the setting of this volume as the second part of an ambitious project encompassing geometric mosaics throughout the region of Baetica. The intention is to gradually expand the investigation, the first step in the project, covering the geometric mosaics in Colonia Augusta Firm Astigi, capital of Conventus Astigitanus, was published in 2014 (S. Vargas Vázquez, *Diseños de los mosaicos geométricos a Écija* (Sevilla)).

The present study partly overlaps the first, but it also has a broader thrust as it sets out to become a reference work. The idea is to not only analyse the geometric-mathematical genesis and development of the designs, but to focus on the mosaic craftsmen and their role during the process. It is the outcome of their skills that is seen in the advanced, aesthetic and ever-changing features of the geometric forms and compositions. This viewpoint centres indirectly on the mosaic craft in general, as the geometric knowledge constituted the heart of the professional know-how of every workshop. It is an ambitious approach which makes the book worthy of a detailed account of its method, accessible organization and broad perspective.

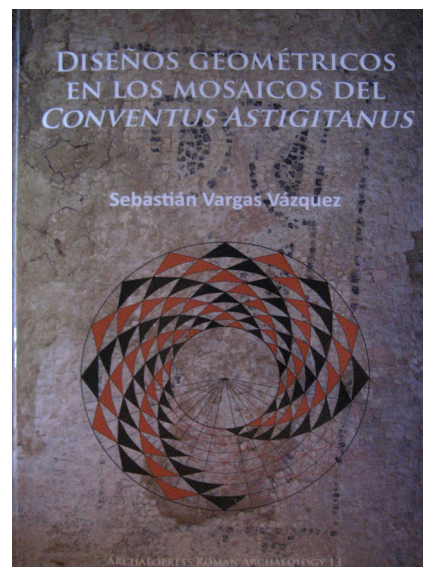
Chapter One ("Objectives, organization and methodology") (the following titles are the reviewer's translation) outlines the methodologic framework and presents an initial objective of revising the information on the geometric mosaics in the Conventus Astigitanus available to this date, irrespective of whether earlier published or not. The study's focus, however, is to analyse each major basic design presented in the form of graphics (Auto CAD) to search for mechanisms of their formation and development. The turn in the investigation, the author explains, occurs due to the difficulty to obtain photos of a sufficiently good quality to work with, it became necessary to collect all available information of each geometric composition in order to reconstruct them from the base. As a result, it was found that proportions appeared to be more meaningful than exact measurements for specific mosaics. A decision was taken to reconstruct the geometric designs with ideal measurements. Consequently, a new work model was developed, which proved to be central to the outcome of the project and possibly vital for future studies.

* Maja Kramer, Hagens stationsväg 24 426 71 Västra Frölunda, Sweden. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2864-9878>.
E-mail: maja.kramer.gbg@gmail.com

Chapter Two (“Historic context”) provides a well-thought focus on the economy as the engine behind the rich presence of mosaics in the province of Baetica. As a major production centre for particularly the triad of oil, grain, and wine, but also for livestock, salt, wood and mining, the province had developed trade relations with the inland, along the coast and abroad (expressly with Ostia and Rome). Divided into four Conventus, there were geographical reasons why Conventus Astigitanus with its natural boundaries had a financial advantage. Throughout the extended and fertile plains with a large production of olive oil linked to the many villas, there was an initial cultural and social rise during the first and second centuries AD, followed by a second in the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries AD. The wealth generated buildings of great luxury where sumptuous mosaic floors, both figurative and geometric, constituted a substantial part of competition for social display. Those found so far, probably constitute only a fraction of the actual production.

Chapter Three (“Current state of research”) is divided into three sections, where the first contains a comprehensive overview of the field of geometric mosaics. Well related to the approach of this study, it considers both general publications and more specific works of the Iberian Peninsula. In addition to the main works in the field, such as Salies, G., *Untersuchungen zu den geometrischen Gliederungsschemata römischer Mosaiken*, 1974, Ovadiah, A., *Geometric and Floral patterns in Ancient Mosaics from the Classical Period to the Age of Augustus*, 1980, Balmelle, C. et al., *Le décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine*, 1985 and 2002, other contributions of lesser scale, but equally important, are mentioned together with some basic work in *opus sectile*. In spite of these contributions and an increasing interest in the field, the summary reveals how little has been devoted the genre. Moreover, as the author underlines, this is a disproportionate ratio compared to the general importance of geometry, e.g. in surveying, engineering, architecture and aesthetic decoration. It constitutes an important heritage that provides insight into the Roman world’s thinking and imagination. The second section treats Conventus Astigitanus where there are huge gaps in knowledge in sharp contrast to the amount of geometric mosaics found, which is a reason why this study only considers new and well-documented finds, with a majority emanating from villas. The third section focuses on Spain; it considers previous reasoning about the mosaic crafts and the workshops, including the question of collections of cartoons as a recurring theme. As it is rightly pointed out, usually based on figurative motifs, many of the earlier voiced views are not founded on firm enough ground. In recent years, however, a shift has occurred largely due to carefully documented archaeological finds, which have been able to provide more solid information about the working process.

Chapter Four (“Catalogue”) presents a part of the large, by the author named opened, catalogue (including the earlier publication on the capital Ecija (Vargas 2014). It is designed to continuously include new geometric mosaics; the intention set to establish a base for further investigations. Here it presents, together with excellent photos (or drawings), 89 of the 135 geometric compositions from the total of 204 mosaic floors excavated in Conventus Astigitanus. Clearly arranged and easy to use, the information follows the geographical location, organized by urban or rural setting, which makes it easy to locate; an important feature of a catalogue. Geometric patterns are included irrespective of whether they were the main motive, a secondary panel, a border or whether it concerns a floor where figurative motifs have served as the focal point; but elements of pure decoration are excluded. However, as the focus of this study only encompasses



the basic structure of the compositions, in chapter five (“Geometric design”) and chapter six (“Analysis of drawings”), none of these parts are graphically represented or analysed; a work intended for future publications.

Chapter Five (“Geometric design”), the first of the two core chapters, is organized as a directory of construction drawings of the larger geometric panels presented in chapter four. Through the drawings, the author clarifies the repertoire of geometric structures along with a discussion on the creative process. First, each pattern is deconstructed to its simplest form and the compositions are categorized according to their dominant geometric form into twelve groups, A to L. These range from simple to complex structures with variations and subdivisions, such as linear (A), circular (B) (largest with 24 models), triangular (C), square (D) (second largest with 20 models), hexagonal (E) and so on. In the next step they are reconstructed in various stages of development, including altogether eleven intermediate phases not yet found in the material. This is a particularly fortunate undertaking as it illustrates the possible continuum of forms to be invented, developed and varied in the geometrical procedure. Here the author has found an excellent means to expose the numerous possibilities of varying the basic structures of the geometric compositions we see in almost every Roman mosaic. Next follows the different possible proceedings under each main group; first by a verbal description, then by graphic illustrations. The geometrical-mathematical procedure by compass and ruler is described first; the method of using horizontal, vertical and oblique helplines made on the surface follows and finally the real short-cut, which is maybe the most common way to reproduce a number of the frequent geometric shapes, by using templates. Applied directly on the floor, they could quickly generate a number of different compositions. Here a circle or a square, but also hexagons, octagons, meanders and swastikas, as well as some other more complex geometrical bases such as 12-angled, four-angled stars, and stars of rhombs were used.

In chapter Six (“Analysis of designs”) the author sets out a comprehensive analysis and assesses the construction drawings in Chapter five, and how they relate to each other. The first section (“Ideas of the development of designs”) recapitulates the geometric forms while showing their diversity. Most important here are the multiple outcomes that the graphic reconstructions have generated. The author points out that they were unexpected, but then again, some of the most fruitful results of the study. For instance, the study shows that a number of variations could have been created directly on the floor by only minor modifications of dimensions and colour, creating great visual effects; e.g. by just changing the colour of one row of tesserae in each template.

The second section (“Basic of geometric constructions”) begins with the definition of a geometric construction as “the basic structure of lines required to develop a pattern”. Through skilfully made graphics, the author demonstrates the amazing findings when what seemed very different patterns were discovered to originate from the same geometrical base, starting from e.g. a square or a circle, through small modifications of proportions, lines, curves, and colours. This practice also concerns the elaborated and catching three-dimensional and optical effects of movement and ambiguity, starting from e.g. hexagons, and cubes, that occur when the eye is fooled by even slight shifts between different viewpoints in attempts to create coherence and meaning. The author actually mentions this sophisticated visual play as a parallel to the Optic Art of the 1960s, which seems convincing.

The last section (“Templates”) considers tools and shortcuts used by the

craftsmen. In the absence of clear-cut evidence of readymade forms, i.e. templates, there is, however, strong both empirical and logical argument for their use, provided by the mosaics themselves. First the author refers to the frequent examples, when for example geometric shapes are abruptly cut along a border in an obvious lack of re-adaptation of the pattern to a particular space. The important question of why this negligence was allowed to pass immediately leads to a second and more interesting issue; how the planning and practice of mosaics generally was conducted, and by which standards. There are also logical arguments, as new variations could quickly and easily be made, for example by simply turning the horizontal-vertical axis. As the mosaic craft is very time-consuming and one can assume that the mosaic workshops used strategies to save time, effort and energy, the use of templates seems unavoidable to explain the large amount of areas covered. As the author reiterates, the craftsmen were subordinated to the principles of efficiency and profitability just as any craft today. This is an analogy that works and is a weighty reason that is often overlooked. However, as the study shows, there are many skilfully planned, sometimes perfectly calculated and executed, complex geometric designs, including the secondary panels. This gives good reasons to believe that individual mosaic masters and mosaic workshops in Conventus Astigitanus necessarily mastered geometry, and advanced geometry too.

Chapter Seven (“Mosaic workshops and craftsmen”), divided into six sections, is a wide-ranging chapter which focuses on the existence of collections of cartoons or pattern books. To begin with, an informative overview summarizes what is known of the mosaic craft from the existing, but scarce, written and pictorial sources. The first section (“Evidence of the mosaics from Conventus Astigitanus”), describes the large variations of the material; from perfectly constructed, to ordinarily or even poorly made mosaics. Some flaws are, as the author points out, startling and show that when it comes to technique, the performance was never standardized. For instance, several otherwise perfectly - executed mosaics show surprisingly deficient preparation (e.g. pp. 294-5, fig. 65, Mosaic of the Nereids in Ecija).

The second section (“The use of pattern books”), is short, but treats one of the book’s most interesting topics. As in the case of the ready-made templates, the lack of written sources and concrete tangible traces are arguments against the presence of physical pattern collections. Few doubt that there was a widespread visual legacy, memorized both unconsciously and consciously, all around the Mediterranean during the Roman period. The question how it was transmitted into visual art is another matter. The author gives convincing proof that physical cartoons constituted an indispensable working tool for mosaic makers, and the catalogue of astonishing construction drawings in the book shows how diversity necessarily was created. This is especially clear when it comes to the creation of optical effects. An example which illustrates both the consciousness of the craftsmen and their decisive use of cartoons in this way is the Mosaic of Oceanus/Neptune of Santa Maria de Antequera (pp.60-61, 300, plate 18). The common motif with three-dimensional cubes (p. 237, Design E3) surrounding the personification of Oceanus/Neptune has been turned 90 degrees in order to create a stunning effect of waves and moving water, an illusion fitting for an aquatic motif.

The following three sections (“Driving agents of a mosaic workshop”, “Tesserae”, “The adaptation of the geometric designs on mosaics”) overlap. The focus is on the unique information from the area; for instance, in the Villa Fuente

Alamo (pp. 302-303, figs. 77-81), particularly illustrative examples occur. Some of the secondary rank decorative elements of two geometric compositions are demonstrably performed very differently. A couple of the forms are professionally made by a sure hand and have obviously served as display examples for less skilled apprentices. Otherwise, in Conventus Astigitanus there is a wide spectrum ranging from quite shoddily made, to exceptionally well-made mosaics in terms of geometric complexity and practical performance.

The last section (“Identification of workshops”) addresses the ever present but elusive theme of how to identify workshops within a certain area. More interesting are the results from the area’s many villas as most of the mosaics found in the Conventus Astigitanus, until now, come from these major agricultural units scattered across the countryside. In essence, dated to a later period than the heyday of the city of Ecija (with its first peak in the second century AD), the late villas in the area are from the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth centuries AD, which contradicts that the skill of the craft was on drastic decline during this period. Some of them show independent choices, while others are more similar. However, almost each one exhibits a consistent ichnographically implemented programme with individual characteristics clearly made by the same workshop.

In chapter Eight (“Conclusion”), the author readdresses the themes outlined in the beginning of the volume and summarises the most important conclusions.

To conclude, this rich book is a genuine eye opener that considerably broadens our understanding of the construction of geometric design on Roman mosaics. The insight of the complexity of the patterns, their often prime role on the mosaic and the extraordinary craftsmanship behind their materialisation lead positively to a revalorisation. One of the most inspiring results of the book actually concerns the evidential grounds delivered for suggesting a rethinking of the supposed low standing of the highly skilled and professional *Musivarii*. This happily coincides with a general trend in classical studies to broaden the, until now, rather restrained view on social status in the Roman society as limited to the legally established social categories. Subsequently, there has also been an increased focus on the link between professionalism and esteem. All in all, it is hard to imagine any future study in the field that would not take this empiric and meticulous investigation into account. One could hope for a publication in English, as the Spanish limits its promulgation.

