

# The Late Roman Mosaics from the Villa of Pont del Treball Digne, Barcelona

## Barcelona, Pont del Treball Digne Villası'ndan Geç Roma Mozaikleri

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### Abstract

*The construction of the new La Sagrera high-speed rail line station in Barcelona revealed a new archaeological site whose remains were identified as a roman villa. The studies undertaken have allowed the foundation of the settlement to be dated to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and to identify different building and refurbishment phases. The most important transformation of the pars urbana was undertaken in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. We attest the creation of new living spaces dedicated mainly to the social functions of the villa and the representation of the dominus. A new decorative programme was also implemented at this time. It included two mosaic and opus sectile floors and marble wall linings. This process of enriching the domestic space took place in parallel with similar refurbishment programmes documented in the roman town of Barcino. The aim of this study is to conduct the compositional analysis of these late pavements. Moreover, some chronological appreciations about the pavements construction can be made, due to ceramic studies.*

**Keywords:** Roman villae, mosaic, opus sectile, geometric patterns, krater.

### Öz

*Barcelona'daki yeni La Sagrera hızlı tren hattı istasyonunun inşaatı, kalıntıları bir Roma villası olarak tanımlanan yeni bir arkeolojik alanı ortaya çıkarmıştır. Yapılan çalışmalar, yerleşimin temelini MÖ 1. yüzyılın ilk yarısına tarihlendirilmesine ve farklı inşaat ve tadilat aşamalarının belirlenmesine olanak sağlamıştır. Pars urbana'nın en önemli dönüşümü dördüncü yüzyılın sonlarında gerçekleştirilmiştir. Özellikle villanın sosyal işlevlerine ve dominusun temsiline adanmış yeni yaşam alanlarının yaratıldığını onaylamamız mümkündür. Bu sırada yeni bir dekoratif program da uygulanmıştır. Bu program iki mozaik ile opus sectile zemin ve mermer duvar kaplamaları içermektedir. Ev alanını zenginleştirme süreci, Roma kasabası Barcino'da belgelenen benzer yenileme programlarına paralel olarak gerçekleşmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, bu geç dönem döşemelerin kompozisyon analizini yapmaktır. Ayrıca, seramik çalışmaları ışığında döşeme yapımı ile ilgili kronolojik değerlendirmeler de yapılabilmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Roma villaları, mozaik, opus sectile, geometrik desenler, krater.

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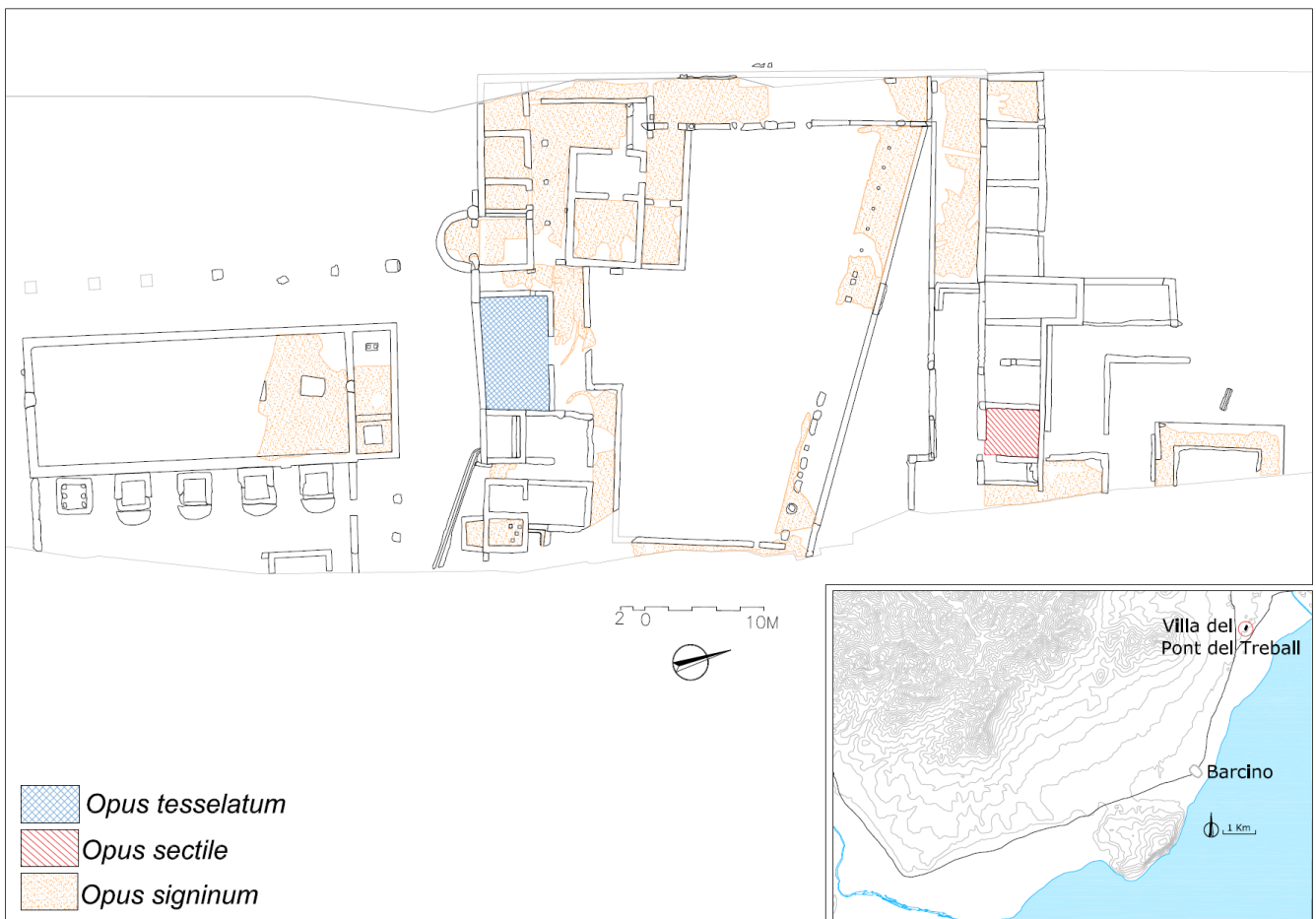
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In 2011 the remains of a very promising archaeological site were discovered during construction of the new La Sagrera high-speed rail line station in Barcelona (Spain). Subsequent excavations revealed structures from the Iberian period and a Roman establishment with an evolutionary sequence spanning many centuries (Alcubierre 2012; Alcubierre et al. 2014; Alcubierre et al. 2016; Alcubierre et al. 2021). The Roman levels were identified as the remains of an imposing peri-urban establishment situated 5 km from the Roman colony of *Barcino* (Fig. 1). This *villa* was 170 m from the branch of the *Via Augusta* that ran along the coast, i.e. the stretch that in Augustan times deviated from the original route to go through *Barcino*, after having passed through Iluro and Baetulo. It was therefore an important hub between the three most important urban areas in the region. The establishment was also near the former estuary of the River Besós –now a delta– with excellent alluvial land for crop growing, marshes and lagoons suitable for animal husbandry, and wooded areas. All these possibilities were no doubt important factors in the decision to build a villa there (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 167-168). A total area of 10,423 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated during the various campaigns undertaken between 2011 and 2019. Unfortunately, it was not possible to preserve the remains as they were not compatible with railway construction project.

Figure 1  
Plan of the Villa of Pont del Treball Digne (s. IV). Insert shows the location of the mosaics. In the corner, map of the situation of the archaeological next to Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain). Elaboration: Technical staff.



The studies undertaken to date have allowed the foundation of the Roman settlement to be dated to the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 167) It was probably established at the same time as the territory assigned to the colony of *Barcino* was being organised, although there are some doubts

as to the chronological correlation between the town and the villa, as the earliest levels of the latter appear to be somewhat prior to the town's foundation.

The earliest remains identified correspond to the villa's *pars fructuaria*. However, between 10 BC and 15 AD we find a fully defined residential area or *pars urbana* (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 168). The residential building was distributed around two open spaces that organised the domestic area and the internal circulation: a large peristyle and a second smaller courtyard, probably corresponding to a *hortus*. Despite the precariousness of the remains corresponding to this phase, the existence of a heated room and abundant pieces of mural painting and *crustae marmorae* lead us to believe that the owners of this villa were very wealthy. The villa's productive area during this architectural phase consisted of a series of buildings devoted to winemaking.

Between 70 and 90 AD, the original production structures were replaced by a large *torcularium* with six presses that can be interpreted as a large-scale wine production facility. This building would have remained in operation until the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century (Alcubierre et al. 2021:172). The impetus of the winemaking business is reflected in the villa's *pars urbana* which, from that time on, went through successive stages of monumentalisation. (Alcubierre et al. 2016: 364-371; 2021: 168-171).

In the transition from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the peristyle underwent considerable changes with the construction of a building consisting of a room with a square ground plan and an entrance antechamber that occupied the previous open space in the southwestern corner of the peristyle. Its construction and decorative characteristics lead us to believe that it was a unique entity (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 168). A small private *balneum* was also built and subsequently modified.

However, it was in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and more specifically around 370-380 AD, that the most important refurbishment was undertaken in the residential part of the villa, leading to its period of maximum architectural and decorative splendour.

In this phase, the residential area continued to be organised around the two aforementioned open areas (Fig. 1). At this time we attest the creation of new living spaces dedicated mainly to the social functions of the villa and the representation of the *dominus*. These included new porticos, a *viridarium* and a thermal baths complex that partially occupied the peristyle area. Also at this time, large, planimetrically outstanding rooms were built. Between them there was a space headed by an *exedra* raised above the rest of the circulation level (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 170-171). A new decorative programme was also implemented at this time. It included two mosaic and *opus sectile* floors and marble wall linings. This process of enriching the domestic space took place in parallel with similar programmes documented in the town of *Barcino*. There we attest a renewed protagonism of the residential areas and considerable construction and ornamental dynamism in some domestic spaces, such as the *domus* in Carrer d'Avinyó (Villardel i Fernández 2008) or Carrer de la Fruita (Fumanal et al. 2011). The architectural transformations in the villa have been analysed in detail in recent publications (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 169). In this study we will focus on the decorative modifications to the large reception rooms that particularly involved the floors, as we will see below.

However, this important refurbishment that enriched the architecture and decoration of the villa did not last for long and further major changes were made to it over the following decades (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 172-173). By the mid-5<sup>th</sup>

century the traditional production structures had been demolished and the living and representation rooms were being used to house production facilities and storage areas associated with cereal farming, a new activity for the villa. At the same time, new rooms were built, or the existing ones were modified. Thus, some areas that had once been clearly residential or even representational were occupied by utilitarian spaces such as kilns, stores and silos. All this reflects a change in the economic vocation of the agrarian structure and a turning point in the rural settlement pattern.

### The Late-Phase Representation Rooms and Their Floors

In this paper, we are referring to the floors from the late phase, given that evidence for those of the first building phase is very sparse. Nevertheless, despite the impossibility of contextualising those data, we can underline that more than 1500 vitreous paste tesserae were found preserved. They were dispersed throughout the different rooms, along with numerous remains of hexagonal (Fig. 2a) and triangular white marble plaques (Fig. 2b) that probably correspond to the same early building phase. The dating appears to be coherent, given the evidence of floors from the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century with the same design preserved in Empúries (Pérez Olmedo 1997: 117-118 n. 71 pl. XXI) and Carthago Nova (Pérez Olmedo 1997: 144-145, 150 ns. 97 and 101 pl. XXXII).

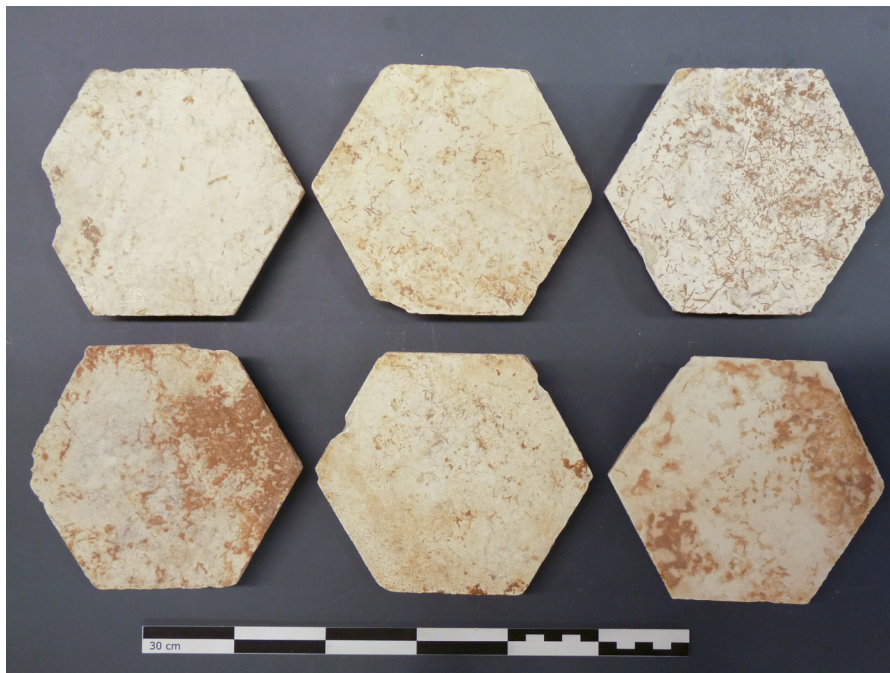


Figure 2a  
Hexagonal white marble plaques, probably of a lost *opus sectile* pavement from the early building phase (s. I). Photo: Daniel Alcubierre and Jordi Ardiaca.

The architectural transformation of the villa's late phase dated by ceramological studies to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century appears to be linked mainly to *opus signinum* flooring in most of the rooms. However, as mentioned above, the floors of two of the representation rooms also had decorative paving. (Alcubierre et al. 2016: 365-370). Such a small number of mosaics could perhaps be due to the fact that the villa's refurbishment remained uncompleted.

The first was an *opus sectile* floor that was completely robbed out in antiquity. It covered a 3.91 x 4.37 m room that was accessed via a distribution area that connected it to the portico of the southern peristyle. At that time this area was rebuilt and widened, giving it the appearance of a vestibule and making it an important space in the planimetry of the reception room. (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 169).

Figure 2b  
Triangular white marble plaques probably of a lost *opus sectile* pavement from the early building phase (s. I). Photo: Daniel Alcubierre and Jordi Ardiaca.



The early plundering of the marble paving plaques means that we can now only see the remains of the floor preparation consisting of a layer of lime mortar, fine-grained aggregates, lime nodules and crushed pottery (Alcubierre et al. 2016: 369). However, the imprints of some of the marble plaques can be appreciated on the mortar. Likewise, on the preparation level it is possible to see pottery fragments in a radial pattern, as is habitual in the square modules, as can be appreciated in Maison de la Cascade in Útica (Corpus Tunisie I: 1 n. 27 pls. VII, XLV), as well as marble *crustae* for levelling and supporting the flooring. It is possible to reconstruct the basic paving design by studying the aforementioned imprints and preparatory plaques, according to a well-established methodology verified by research (Guidobaldi 1994).

The remains reveal that there was an *opus sectile* floor with a discontinuous design and two modular combinations that formed a paving with a T+U-shaped decorative pattern (Fig. 3). This composition allows us to interpret it as a *triclinium* floor, in the same way as other examples of *opus sectile* with a U-shaped design are traditionally considered to be from *triclina*. This is the case of the Iberian *opera sectilia* found in Calle Ronda de Tejares 25 (Córdoba) (Gutiérrez Deza 2007: 92-94) or Cabrils (Barcelona) (Pérez Olmedo 1997: 29-91 n. 35 fig. 24). This interpretation of the room as a *triclinium* is further confirmed by the position of this representation area in what is believed to have been the main wing of the villa (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 160).

Most of the surface (U) is decorated with a combination of square plaques (2 x 2 Roman feet) and rectangular plaques (2 x 1 feet) attached to each side of the squares. In the corner there are small squares (1 x 1 foot). These three types of geometric pieces would have formed part of a *modulo quadrato reticolare* (3 x 3 feet) according to Guidobaldi's classification (Guidobaldi 1985: 196-200). On one side of the floor there are two rows of these four modules, with intersections of small squares. On the other side there is only one of these rows of four modules, making the central decoration appear slightly displaced. Here the existing remains show that there were seven rows of four-square modules (Q) (1 x 1 foot).



Figure 3  
*Opus sectile*. Remains of the floor preparation and marble *crustae* imprints. Photo by Global Mediterrània. Design: Daniel Alcubierre.

The reticular square module layout was a long-standing decorative scheme. The earliest examples date from the Augustan period and it achieved a new peak of popularity in late antiquity (Guidobaldi 1985: 230). Two of the most representative examples from that time can be found in two examples coming from Ostia: the *domus* del Tempio Rotondo (Becatti 1961: 22 n. 31 22 pl. CCVI) and the *domus* della *Fortuna Annonaria* (Becatti 1961: 217-218 n. 409 pl. CCVI) both dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The *opus sectile* can be added to the marble floors preserved in late antiquity domestic spaces in the urban *Barcino* area, such as in the *domus* of Carrer d'Avinyó (Villardel i Fernández 2008: 68-69) and Carrer de la Fruita (Martín et al. 2000: 284), and the *triclinium* in the suburban *domus* of Carrer de l'Alguer in Tarraco (Macías – Puche 1997: 149-155).

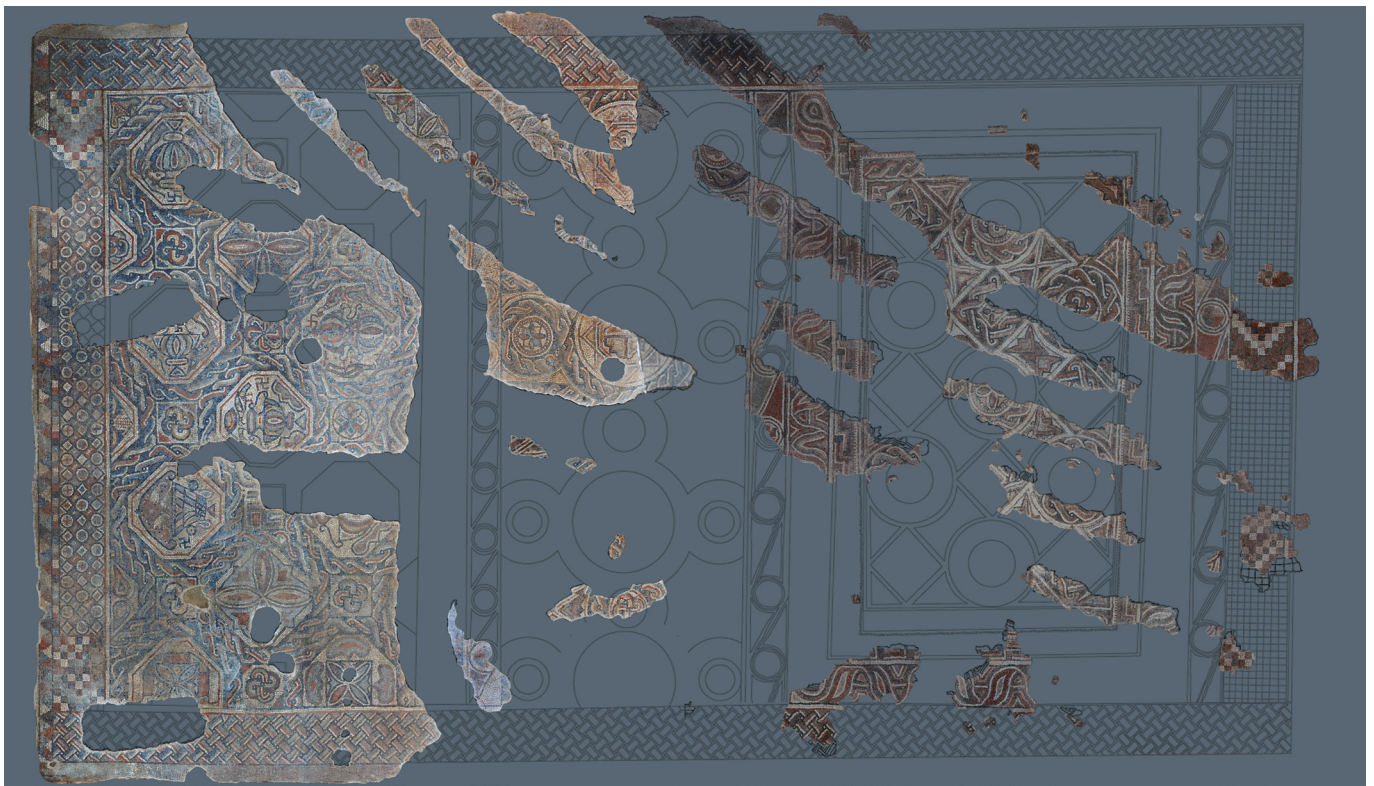
Not a single piece was found that would indicate the varieties of marble used for this paving, leading us to believe that it had been systematically robbed out. Nevertheless, the previous analysed remains show the presence of an *opus sectile* floor that combined small and medium-sized modules, which was very common in private buildings. In this case, the paving shows the decorative importance given to this domestic space.

The most imposing of the villa's representation rooms was on the other side of the peristyle, occupying more than 50 m<sup>2</sup> between the *balneum* and the apse-shaped *oecus*. It formed part of the major refurbishment of the villa and its construction meant the loss of part of the peristyle area (Alcubierre et al. 2021: 170). It can be dated by the presence of an important pottery assemblage in the preparatory strata and levelling fill of the earlier peristyle walls. The construction of the

room can be dated to between the years 320/325 (by the presence of TSAD H59, H61A and imitation of H61 sherds) and 400 (by TS Lucente Lamboglia 2/37 and TSAD H61A). However, the preparation of the *opus signinum* corresponding to the first phase of the room's paving offers a chronological fork based on TSAD H58B (290-375 AD). This pottery assemblage gives a date of between 320/325 and 375 AD for the room's construction. A few years later (around 380), the mosaic was installed as part of the major refurbishment of the villa.

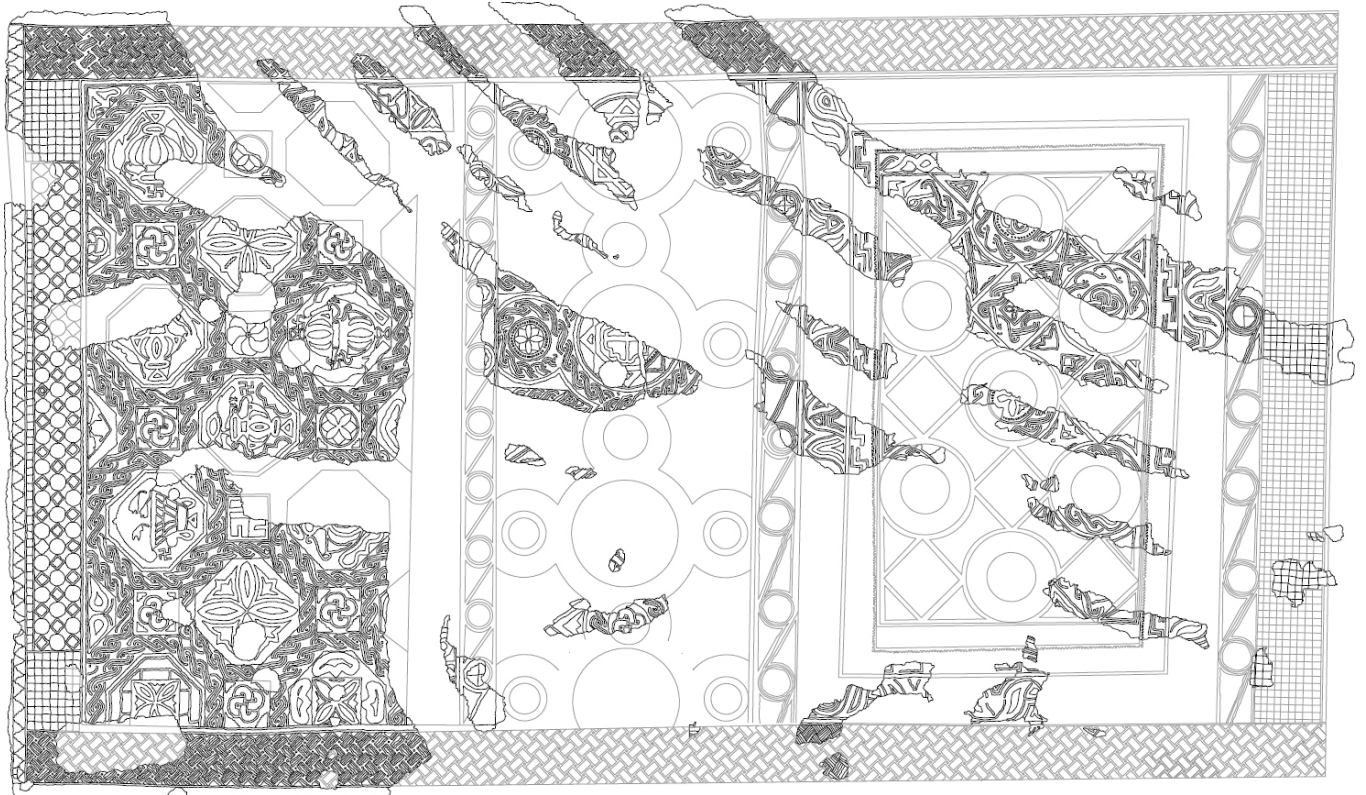
The mosaic (9.95 x 5.25 m) had been severely affected by modern agricultural work that had caused large voids on its surface, with approximately one third of it missing when it was found (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, the preserved fragments and the graphic restitution give us a rough idea of its geometric and decorative structure. It is currently in the Barcelona Museum of History's Conservation and Restoration Centre (Zona Franca).

Figure 4  
Mosaic preserved fragments.  
Photo: Global Mediterrània.  
Design: Àlvar Mailan.



Thanks to the existing remains we can envisage a rectangular mosaic that covered the whole room and consisted of three juxtaposed carpets separated by wide decorated bands (Fig. 5). Around the exterior of the whole mosaic is a narrow row in reddish tones and undecorated. Successively, on the longer sides of the mosaic there is a band with a multi-strand guilloche motif clearly inspired by a textile design.

On the shorter sides of the mosaic, different ornamental bands can be seen. On the east side, consecutively, a saw-tooth pattern of equilateral triangles row; outlined squares row, and finally, a narrow band divided in three different areas. The central biggest one is decorated with tangent outlined circles and poised squares. The smaller parts in both of its sides preserve a simple square decoration. However, the different colour palette used in each of them gives an entirely different appearance. The band on the west side is only partially preserved, and some remains with a chess polychrome pattern are preserved.



The room was entered from the middle of one of the longer sides of the mosaic (north) giving onto the central pattern. This is a polychrome grid pattern of circles of alternate sizes in simple guilloche interlaced tangentially, forming irregular concave octagonal compartments. The same composition can be seen in late-period Roman mosaics such as that of the dome in the Mausoleum of Santa Constanza in Rome (dated with precision to between 337 and 351) and the *Dulcitus* mosaic in the Villa of Ramalete in Navarra (late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Corpus España VII: 69-72, n. 45 pl. 39). The visible remains of the two largest circles that preserve their decoration have an eight-pointed star composition. Inside they are decorated respectively with an eight-ringed loop and a quatrefoil. Also preserved are the remains of two decorations in the smaller circles depicting eight-petalled flowers.

The eastern carpet is better preserved. Bordered by the central pattern, it has a line of adjoining squares with different decorations, some of which we can only surmise today as stylized flowers and Solomon's knots. The main decorative scheme is an orthogonal pattern of adjacent irregular octagons, forming squares. This composition was repeated profusely during late antiquity throughout the Hispanic provinces. Examples can be found at Cuevas de Soria (Corpus España VI: 62 n. 54 pl. 25; 102-105 n. 66 pl. 15), Rielves in Toledo (Corpus España V: 70), Villa del Prado in Valladolid (Corpus España XI: 56-57 n. 23 pl. 22), and Polígono del Arca in Castro del Río, Córdoba (Vargas Vázquez 2016: 143-144 n.19A.7 pl. 66C-D) all from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. On this occasion, the geometric figures are traced out by means of a double braid that endows the design with great density. Each of the eleven octagons has a different decoration, either figurative or with stylised vegetation. None of them is identical.

There are six octagons with the remains of figurative decorations depicting six vessels arranged in different orientations in such a way that they can be viewed from different angles in the room. There are two types of vases (Fig. 6). One

Figure 5  
Mosaic graphic restitution.  
Design: Àlvar Mailan.



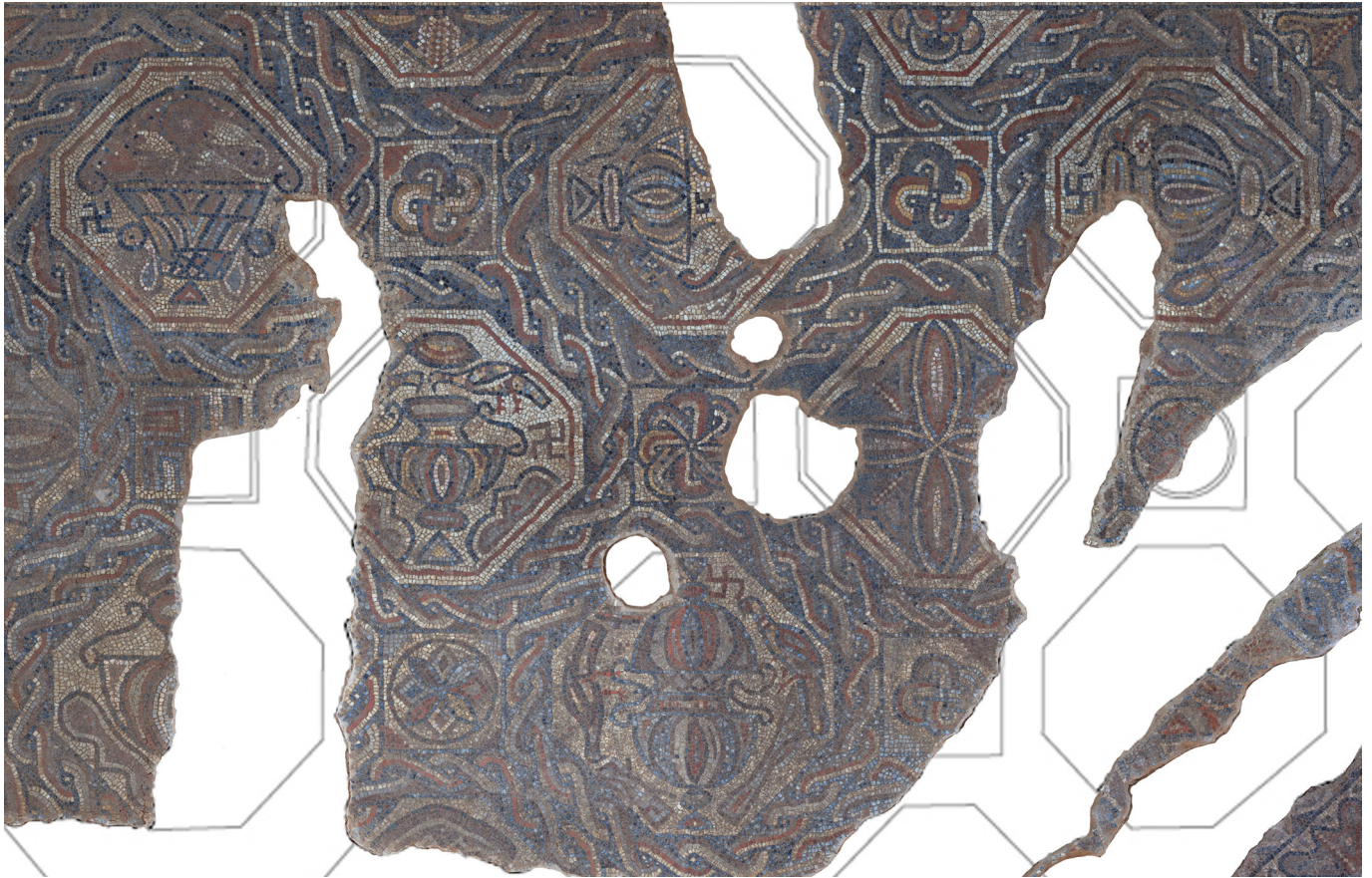


Figure 6  
Details of the vases in the mosaic.  
Photo: Global Mediterrània.

of them, a unique example, is basket-shaped vessel with a triangular foot and small circular handles with stripes as hangers, as some representations of baskets in mosaics show. Swastikas flank the vessel on both sides. The peculiarity lies in the fact that the krater is covered with a large bowl-shaped lid with sides expanding as scroll-like ornaments, and a central knob. Some flowers and other round-shaped objects can be hardly identified inside.

The other four have can be easily identified as kraters. They have a foot consisting of a triangle and ovoidal button, a large semispherical gadrooned body, a cylindrical top that opens up into a wide oval-shaped mouth, and S-shaped handles. They all correspond to Limaô's Type IV (Limaô 2011: 570), although there are some differences in their modelling. They are very characteristic of the late period and parallels can be found in the central medallion in the Villa of Ramalete in Navarra (Corpus España VII: 69-73, n. 45, pl. 39) or the kraters depicted in various mosaics in the Villa of Almenara de Adaja (Corpus España XI: 19-23 ns. 5 and 6 pls. 7, 8) or Villa del Prado (Corpus España XI: 53-56 n. 22 pls. 20, 39; 57-60 n. 24 pl. 39) both in Valladolid. They can also be found in Vega de Granada (Vargas Vázquez 2016: 88 n.10A.5 pl. 35A-B) from *Baetica*. From north to south, the first of the kraters presents a vegetal decoration on both sides with a swastika over it; the second decoration is also vegetal on both sides; and the third depicts two birds in a symmetrical position drinking from the mouth of the krater. The fourth presents a gap in which it is not possible to perceive this type of decoration. The fifth medallion has not one but two kraters with their mouths facing each other and a dove on the opposite sides of each of them.

It is worth delving a little deeper into the decorative use of the kraters on this floor. As is well known, the krater was ubiquitous in Roman mosaics from the Republican period to late antiquity. This profusion is associated in principle with

its Bacchic qualities and therefore its nature as a benefactory element. However, it appears to have progressively gained in autonomy to become a prophylactic element in itself, which is why it often shares space with other traditional protective symbols such as swastikas (Campbell 1994: 293).

In addition to the typology of the kraters, also particularly interesting is the twin image of the krater in one of the octagons. This complex opposing image visually seems to present both sides of a krater, by using a deep-rooted method. López Monteagudo shows through diverse examples how mosaic art attempted to depict antithetical images (mainly of Bacchus in his juvenile and mature periods, very common in bifrontal sculptural *hermae*) in the same way as in free-standing statues. In other words, presenting the obverse and the reverse of the same figure. According to López Monteagudo, mosaic artists achieved this by using a pictorial technique that consisted of creating a single image by turning both sides in such a way that a different face is observed from each side (López Monteagudo 2008).

In the case of the twin vessel in the Pont de Treball mosaic, it is possible that the two kraters were depicted with the same intention: an attempt to offer two perspectives of a single vessel employing the same visual mechanism and joining them at the top. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that two doves are depicted on each of the kraters in symmetrical and opposing positions. In other words, the intention was actually to depict the same dove on each of its sides.

On the edges of all the kraters there are reclining birds. Albeit remotely, these birds in an attitude of going to drink from a large vessel of wine are possibly a legacy of a very ancient pictorial scheme created, according to Pliny (Plin.nat. 36, 184), by the Greek mosaic artist Sosus of Pergamon that was subsequently widely reproduced in mosaics and paintings (Tammisto 1997: 74). The original depicted three doves drinking from a bowl of water. It subsequently underwent multiple variations up to late antiquity when the doves (one, two or three) started to be depicted drinking from wine kraters.

The five octagons that are still visible and not decorated with vessels contain four-petalled flowers, each of them different from the others.

The third of the carpets borders the central design on its western side. It is separated from it by a wide band of spaced alternately inverted calices framed by alternately reversed oblique Ss, although their fragmentary condition means they cannot be distinguished with complete clarity. This band is on three sides of the third carpet. It is followed by a fringe with an irregular simple meander. The design continues with a grid of circles and poised squares, forming bobbins. This is a very common motif on the Iberian Peninsula in the late period that can also be found in mosaics from the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> centuries at Cardajimeño in Burgos (Corpus España XII: 29 n. 11 pl. 14), Villa del Prado in Valladolid (Corpus España XI: 53-56 n. 22 pl. 21), Campo de Villavidiel in León (Corpus España X: 23-24 n. 6 pl. 6) in Puente Genil (Vargas Vázquez 2016: 182 n.20A20 pl. 86F-G) and in some other late roman sites, particularly in northern Meseta. Although we can only see a few remains, the decoration of this carpet appears well defined. The squares surrounded by braids are decorated with a square and a four-petalled flower inside. The circles are traced out by braids with Solomon's knots or lanceolate four petalled flowers. The rectangles on the long concave sides are decorated with squares and two denticulate triangles.

This carpet is interrupted at the top and bottom by small strips whose only purpose is to connect it to the fringe to avoid continuing the decoration and

leaving it incomplete as it had no room to develop.

The data appear to indicate that in this case we find ourselves looking at the mosaic of a large reception room whose tripartite division resembles others that were designed to make a deep impression to the visitor. Other Spanish examples can be found at Villa del Prado (Corpus España XI: 48-53, 82 n. 21 pl. 8), Carranque (Mañas 2016: 163 fig. 3) or the Villa du Palat à Sant Emilion in France (Balmelle 2001: n. 50) all of them dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century. This division into carpets in a large room is also typical of that period in late antiquity and is perhaps related to a metonymical approach with the carpets that would have covered many of these large rooms in the late period, as they would have had to be covered by a juxtaposition of mosaic carpets. Many of the rooms that today we find paved with *opus signinum* were probably once covered with carpets, perhaps because the villa's refurbishment remained uncompleted. Indeed, the whole mosaic has the appearance of a heavy carpet with clear textile inspiration. The variegation of the motifs is clear, leaving only a small connecting strip undecorated and producing the effect known as *horror vacui*. Bands and decorated strips multiplied, reducing empty spaces to a minimum. Secondary ornamentation filled all corners of the paving. As a whole it resembles a floor from one of the grand *villae* of the land-owning classes on the northern Meseta or in Navarra, with which they share a common language in both their composition and their decorative and symbolic repertory, which is characterised by prophylactic elements such as swastikas, Solomon's knots, double-eight knots and kraters. This is the characteristic decorative language of late antiquity that is shared by this spectacular floor.

As a final appreciation, we can highlight the wide range of colours used on the mosaic. They are provided by fourteen different types of tesserae, eleven stone and three ceramic, with abundant tones of black, grey, green and red. Petrographic studies using a stereoscopic microscope (CetecPatrimoni) have confirmed a local origin for most of the tesserae (Alcubierre et al. 2016: 367).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, *Barcino* was a centre of religious power (an episcopal see) and a prosperous and commercially active town, as recent archaeological research in the city had pointed out (Martín et al. 2000; Fumanal et al. 2011). As increasing research in the territory is showing, the suburbs also manifested that prosperity, which at that time was still related to viticulture. The different *villae* were heavily involved in intensive grape and wine production and were gradually monumentalised in taking advantage of the wealth generated. In particular, we can document in various residential complexes the multiplication of reception rooms and a considerable investment in decoration, as occurred at the same time in other areas of the Iberian Peninsula (Mañas Romero 2008: 99).

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