

The Lost Mosaic of the ex Via del Littorio in Ortigia (Syracuse)

Ortigia'daki (Siraküza) Eski Via del Littorio'nun Kayıp Mozaığı

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Abstract

The oldest residential area of Syracuse is located in Ortigia, in the center of the island the excavations of the 19th century brought to light luxurious Roman houses with mosaic floors and opus sectile of a certain value. In the years 1927-1928, during the construction of the new Banco di Sicilia building, in Piazza Archimede, several walls emerged that also extended to the further north area, corresponding to Via del Littorio, today's Corso Matteotti. Between 1934 and 1936, during the construction works, with the demolition of the old houses, in Via del Littorio and nearby, several sections of aqueducts and ruins of Roman houses were discovered and at about 10 m to the south, at the intersection with Via Giusto Monaco (ex S. Cristoforo), other wall structures and a portion of a large polychrome mosaic (2 x 2 m) with an emblema which represented Venus and Cupid dated to the "very late imperial age". At the time of discovery, the mosaic was detached, as the publisher informs us, but currently the exact location is unknown and it is not recorded in the inventories, it is probably located in one of the museum external deposits. Here is proposed a reinterpretation of the mosaic, based on the details given by the discoverer (Cultrera 1940) and the analysis of the graphic and photographic material provided to me by the Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Siracusa.

Keywords: Sicily, Syracuse, ex Via del Littorio in Ortigia, luxurious Roman domus, Late Antique mosaics.

Öz

Siraküza'nın (Syracuse) en eski yerleşim bölgesi, adanın merkezindeki Ortigia'da yer almaktadır ve burada 19. yüzyılda yapılan kazılarda mozaik zeminli ve dikkate değer opus sectileli lüks Roma evleri gün ışığına çıkarılmıştır. 1927-1928 yıllarında, Piazza Archimede'deki yeni Banco di Sicilia binasının inşası sırasında, bugünün Corso Matteotti'si olan Via del Littorio'ya tekabül eden daha kuzeydeki alana uzanan birkaç duvar ortaya çıkmıştır. 1934 ve 1936 yılları arasında, Via del Littorio ve civarındaki eski evlerin yıkılması çalışmaları sırasında, su kemerlerinin çeşitli bölümleri ve Roma evlerinin kalıntıları keşfedildi ve yaklaşık 10 m güneyde, Via Giusto Monaco (eski S. Cristoforo) ile kesişim noktasında, diğer duvar yapıları ve Venüs ve Cupid'i temsil eden bir embleması olan büyük bir polikrom mozaığın (2 x 2 m) bir kısmı tespit edilerek "çok geç imparatorluk çağı"na tarihlendirilmiştir. Keşif sırasında, yayınlayanın bildirdiği gibi mozaik yerinden sökülüştür, ancak şu anda tam yeri bilinmemektedir; envanterlerde kayıtlı değildir ve muhtemelen müzenin dış depolarından birinde olmalıdır. Burada, keşfeden kişi (Cultrera 1940) tarafından verilen ayrıntılara ve Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. tarafından sağlanan grafik ve fotoğraflık materyalin analizine dayalı olarak mozaığın yeni bir yorumu önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sicilya, Siraküza, Ortigia'daki eski Via del Littorio, lüks Roma domusu, Geç Antik mozaikler.

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The oldest residential district of Syracuse was Ortigia, formed since the Greek-archaic Age of a orthogonal urban plan, of which tracts of a *decumanus* were identified by P. Orsi, G. Cultrera and later P. Pelagatti at the intersection of Via Maestranza and Via Roma and *stenopoi*, aligning in the east-west direction at a distance of 25 m. from each other. They were traced in the Prefecture courtyard near Via Roma that continues in via del Consiglio Regionale, inside the convent of Montevergini and to east of Palazzo Montalto, which delimit residential blocks of m. 25 x 75; the successive levels of use were overlaid onto the above mentioned archaic trackways that follows the current routes (Zirone 2005: 152-160). In the island heart, in Piazza Archimede, the XIX century excavations brought to light luxurious Roman houses with many mosaic floors in *tessellatum* and in *opus sectile* of certain value (Voza 1980-81: 680-685; Bejor 1986: 509 n. 445; Zirone 2005: 152-153).

In the years 1927-1928, during the intense construction activities of the new Banco di Sicilia palace in Piazza Archimede, several and not specified walls emerged, which also interested the northernmost area, corresponding to Via del Littorio (Zirone 2005: 152). The street, today's Corso Matteotti, built according to the bank, starts from Piazza E. Pancali and leading right to the northwestern corner of Piazza Archimede. Between 1934 and 1936, during some construction works and after the demolition of the old houses in Via del Littorio and nearby, several traits of aqueducts and houses ruins were discovered. There were mostly foundation walls, whose orientation corresponded to the topographical plan, probably orthogonal, of the ancient city (Cultrera 1940: 199-214, 220-221). Within the same street, about 10 m. to south from the intersection with the Via Giusto Monaco (ex S. Cristoforo) (Zirone 2005: 153), where a stretch of wall was identified, other structures walls and a portion of a large polychrome mosaic were found by Soprintendenza alle Antichità di Siracusa, under the direction of the archaeologist G. Cultrera (Cultrera 1940: 213, 221-224).

Given the few published excavation data, we know that the walls were dated within the III-IV century AD. They had different orientation than the others found nearby and the floor decorated with mosaic was placed at a higher level (Cultrera 1940: 213, 221).

Most likely the mosaic is located in one of the external warehouses of the Soprintendenza BB. CC. AA. di Siracusa. At the time of discovery, as the publisher informs us, the mosaic was detached, but currently the exact location is unknown, and it does not seem to be recorded in the inventories (unknown inventory number).

In the carton 8 of the container 52/1, containing the photo of the mosaic, identified by the Archivio Fotografico della Regia Soprintendenza alle Antichità di Siracusa, it is showed "room XII", probably in reference to the room of the first Museo Civico of Piazza Duomo, in which it was to be exposed.

In the current contribution, in fact, an accurate description of the mosaic is given, based not only on the details that the discoverer Cultrera gave (Cultrera 1940: 221-224), but also on the analysis of the graphic and photographic material supplied to me by the Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Siracusa¹.

From the mosaic pavement, that must have belonged to a large quadrangular

¹ I take the opportunity to thank the Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Siracusa for the active and punctual collaboration, in the person of Dr. Daniela Marino of the section Servizi Ausiliari Sicilia, who searched the documentation in the Archivio Fotografico e Disegni with extreme patience, and that has worked with a spirit of collaboration for the selection and sharing of the material by planning virtual meetings.



Figure 1
Ortigia (SR), ex via del Littorio (current Corso Matteotti). Mosaic with *Venus* and *Cupid* (Container 52/1, carton 8, Photograph 1590B from the Archivio Fotografico, Soprintendenza BB. CC. AA. di Siracusa).

room, a portion (Fig. 1) was brought to light of dimensions m. 2 x 2 (Cultrera 1940: 222 fig. 28). The mosaic presented, within a red meandering frame, a network composition of groups of four ellipses arranged in a cross around a circle forming quadrilobes with concave squares in the resulting spaces (compared *Décor* I: 253). In the center, there should have been one or more *emblemata*, since the found *emblemata* was placed in a decentralized position with respect to the composition (Cultrera 1940: 223-224). The vegetal and floral motifs within the circles and ellipses were surrounded by dentil cornices: the circles were filled by bilobed flowers with petals around a cross, while the ellipses contained different elongated vegetal motifs. In the exceeding concave squares there were composite flowers of four tapering petals and four small trifold lotuses (*Décor* II: 268a).

The *emblemata* measured m. 0.70 x 0.70 and was framed by a wide band with simple-turn of current wave pattern (*Décor* I: 101b) with red color on white background (Cultrera 1940: 222 -223). At the time of detachment, the *emblemata* was damaged, so part of the representation was lost, and the two preserved figures were identified with *Venus* and *Cupid* (Cultrera 1940: 223). The goddess is represented in the center, standing with a gray *nimbus*, adorned with jewelry and dressed by a mantle that left her bust uncovered and that held with her left hand to cover her pubis, while the right arm was raised, probably in the act of holding the mirror. To the right of *Venus* there was a naked and winged boy, also with jewelry of which a red necklace with pendant, who carried an object (jewelry box?). Cultrera indicates blue and gold glass tiles used to highlight the jewelry (Cultrera 1940: 223).

Symmetrically, in the missing left side, as shown from the drawing of R. Carta² (Fig. 2), there should have been another amorino, both portrayed in the guise of servants for the toilet of the goddess *Venus*; hypothesis that seems plausible also for the presence in the background, behind the boy, of a table with an open-shaped vessel and a drape-separè in the upper right corner.

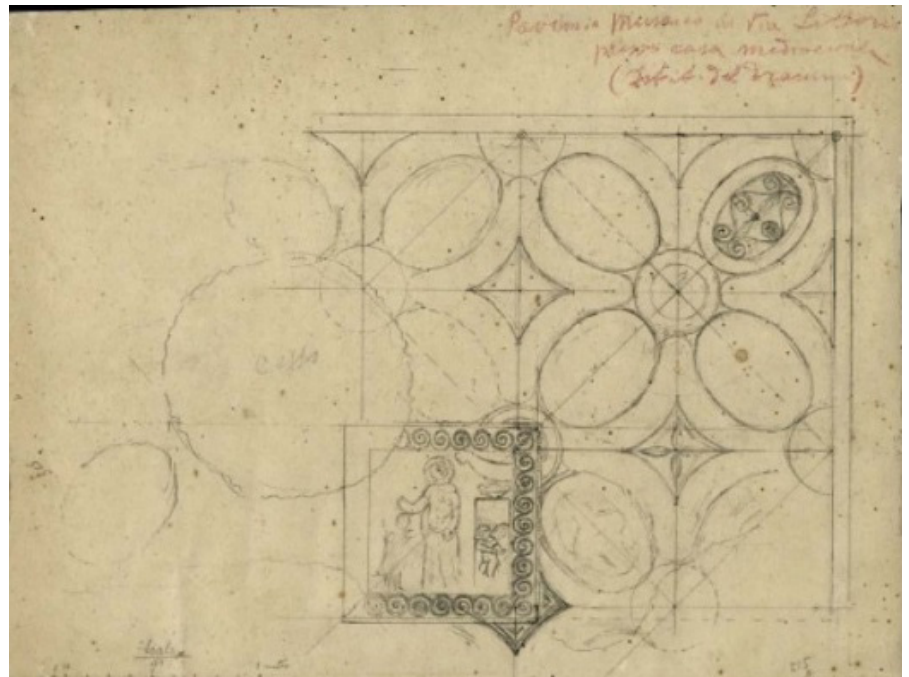


Figure 2
Ortigia (SR), ex via del Littorio (current Corso Matteotti). Drawing of the mosaic with *Venus* and *Cupid* by R. Carta (Cassettera A, cassetto 2 from the Archivio Disegni, Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Siracusa).

2 In the drawing found in Cassettera A, cassetto 2 of the Archivio Disegni, Soprintendenza BB.CC.AA. di Siracusa, it reads in red the record "Mosaic floor in Via Littorio/ near medieval house/Istituto del Dramma", the latter corresponding to the present Istituto nazionale del dramma antico (also known by the acronym INDA).

The discoverer dated the mosaic to the “very late imperial age”, without any specification (Cultrera 1940: 224). Wilson and Von Boeselager, based on stylistic comparisons with North African examples, dated the artifact between the late II and early III centuries AD (Wilson 1982: 416-417; Von Boeselager 1983: 149-154). It is interesting the comparison identified from Wilson with the triumphant *Venus* represented between two women centaurs in the mosaic coming from the locality of Elles, in the Kef, dated to the III century AD, and exhibited at the Bardo Museum in Tunis (Wilson 1982: 416-417).

Even the composition of the mosaic field finds close similarities with the Tunisian mosaics dated between the end of the II and the III century, including the two mosaics of the house of Ferjani kacem in El Jem (Wilson 1982: 416-417; Vitale 2004: 482 note 18) and another one from Smirat, exposed to the Museum of Sousse, consisting of a quadrilobes composition and a central figured panel, dated to the second twenty-fifth of the III century (Ibba - Teatini 2017: 228 fig. 2, 229, 256).

The so-called “cushion composition” has ancient origin, it is presented in the table 253 of the *Décor* by many variants, consisting of a four ellipses motif arranged to shape a cross and forming many quadrilobes with concave squares/octagons in the resulting spaces. The scholar Vitale includes the mosaic in question in the list of the first Sicilian mosaics with this scheme and dates it at the beginning of the III century; she observes that the composition was born in the north-east of Tunisia between the end of the II and the first decades of the III century, and that would have arrived in northern Italy, later in Albania and at the end of the III century in Spain (Vitale 2004: 482 and note 18). In my opinion, it could be considered a slight delay of this compositional solution in Sicily, as documented by the mosaic of the passage room leading to the apse room of Piazza Armerina thermal baths (Fig. 3), dated to the beginning of the IV century, extremely similar to ours.



Figure 3
Piazza Armerina (EN), contrada Casale.
Thermal baths. Mosaic of the passage room
to the apse room of the Piazza Armerina
baths (Carandini et al. 1982: F. LIV fig.
132).

The structural elements, such as the different orientation of the walls, the highest quota of the mosaic concerning the found adjacent structures, as well as the fact that the *emblema* is decentralized compared to the entire mosaic composition, suggest that the artefact is more recent. Moreover, this observation agrees with what was supposed by the epigraphist Manganaro, according to whom the floor belonged to a thermal room of the IV century AD (Manganaro 1965: 208-210). Manganaro refers to a honorary Greek inscription found in the square Largo XXV Luglio (in the past Largo XXVIII Ottobre), about 200 m away from the discovery place of the discussed mosaic, which was made - according to his interpretation - by the city to celebrate the client of a thermal complex (Manganaro 1965: 208-210).

The room had to be small and quadrangular shaped, perhaps used as a dressing room (*apodyterium*) of the female bath section as suggested by the subject and some distinctive objects (mirror, jewels, basin and the ointment or jewellery casket-box) that are closely related to the intimacy and the toilette of the *mundus muliebris*. The iconography of the standing *Venus Pudica*, depicted with the attributes of toilettries, is widespread in Pompeian paintings that decorated the workshops facades, public spaces of the *domus* such as *lararia*, *peristilia*, *tablinia* and rarely *cubicula*. In our case, *Venus* is represented after bathing, in a closed and reserved room, which is rich in details including the drape-separated and the unusual voluminous ablution basin that refers to the use of water. Such elements could induce to interpret it as a female living room, intimate and private, before bathing. This is a pure hypothesis considering that only a part of the presented mosaic has been brought to light. As previously discussed, it presents an *emblema* that is out of center with respect to the saved part, therefore the entire mosaic should have had other figurative panels. The small size of the mosaic portion as well as the absence of a complete perimetral frame and the comparison with similar examples, lead us to agree with Cultrera's proposal about the presence of four *emblemata* (Cultrera 1940: 223-224), according to a compositional scheme conforming to classical criteria of symmetry, balance and proportion. One of these panels could have represented the *dominus*, in view of the celebratory self-representation of the aristocratic elite, so that *Venus* could be interpreted as the deified personification of the *domina*, following the iconographic tradition and the ideology of power in Late Antiquity.

Several mosaic floors propose this classic iconography, among the oldest panels similar to ours there is the one from Thuburbo Maius (Tunisia), now in the Bardo Museum, which represents the toilette of *Venus* with Cupids (III century AD); the later one, dated to the V century, comes from the baths of the Roman villa in Alassa, now in the Archaeological Museum of Limassol (Cyprus), with the bathing goddess and a winged Eros holding a mirror. Contemporary to the latter is the Italian panel of "*Venus* in front of the mirror", found in the *domus* of Palazzo Gioia in Rimini, kept in the Museo della Città "Luigi Tonini", in which the protagonist is no longer *Venus*, but the hostess, half naked among the draperies of the curtains. Oriental influences are not excluded, finding strict comparisons with the central panel of a mosaic, dated around the II century AD, preserved in the Patras Archaeological Museum, comes from a Roman villa located at Psila Alonia Square, in the centre of Patras (Greece). The *emblema*, at the center of a geometric composition, represents *Venus* with a halo holding a mirror in her right hand and a winged Eros kneeling before her. Even here on the right there is a table on which there is an open precious jewellery box, above there are a pair of doves, symbol of marital fidelity. Behind the goddess a tapered column with a hanging curtain that would suggest a peristyle. During

a reworking of the mosaic in the early Christian times - as indicated by the museum signage - the lower part of the naked body of *Venus* was covered in a yellow cloth. The *emblema* of Patras as that of Ortigia, therefore, would have been reused and readapted for a long period of time according to the widespread practice in Late Antiquity.

Among the most representative materials, identified along Via del Littorio and in the immediate vicinity, were reported “fragment of Doric frieze, of Ionic dentil cornices, a Corinthian marble column capital of the Roman Age, bust of a woman statue with drapery referable to a Roman copy of post-fidiac sculpture, a Greek dedicatory inscription to a doctor, and one in Latin of III-IV century AD, which commemorates the restoration of the *praetorium* by Fl. Gelasio Busiride” (Zirone 2005: 153-154). Cultrera points out that in the dirt around the mosaic were found fragments of oil lamps and pottery dated from the Proto-Corinthian to the Late Italic Age (Cultrera 1940: 215-216).

The graphic and photographic materials have been very helpful, but hopefully that the supervisory officials will find the mosaic and that the archaeological excavations in the area will start again. Only in this way my interpretative proposal and those highlighted by the scholars can be confirmed. The idea of a reuse of the *emblema* with *Venus* and Cupid is reliable, as well as the possibility of a delay of the African motif employed in the field of the mosaic, which probably arrived in Sicily at the end of the III - early IV century AD, after all the North African influence reached its peak in the IV-V century.

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