

# Floral and Geometrical Motives of the Pavement Mosaics in East and West. The Example of the Roman *Villa* of Abicada

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*Even if the figurative mosaics are usually the ones to catch the attention of the archeologists and the public, we cannot deny the meaning of the geometrical and the floral motives for the study of the mosaics landscape in the roman world. The combination of the different motives, the colors chosen for each motive and their combination can help to identify the influences that determined the making of the pavements. East and West of the Roman Empire are no exceptions to this phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** Mosaics, decorative discourse, influences, east and west, floral and geometrical motives.

First of all I would like to thank the organiser of the 5. Symposium on Mosaics and the city of Kahramanmaraş for their friendly hospitality with which they welcomed the participants here and for such an enriching meeting.

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The title of my presentation - *The roman villa of Abicada (Portugal) - Reflections on floral and geometrical motifs in floor mosaics in East and West*, –covers but one aspect of a much more detailed and complex analysis, linking mutual interferences and influences between east and west in the mosaics sector during the era of the Roman Empire. It is indeed a very complex and comprehensive analysis and would go beyond the scope and time available for this presentation. I shall therefore limit myself to outlining the salient points of this analysis.

The questions that I would like to share with you briefly today touch the evolution of art of mosaic in these two zones of the Empire:

- From a chronological point of view, can similarities be found between the developments of flooring layouts at both ends of the Mediterranean?
- If not, can distinct elements be found which may be particular to either the province of Hispania or Syria?
- If that is the case, are there any clear influences of one region on another?
- What's the role of geometric mosaics and any vegetable fill elements in either region?

When comparing the development of the mosaic art in Syria and Hispania, it shows that there are relatively few common elements.

Furthermore, based on the mosaics discovered to date, a very early stylistic influence of Rome on Hispanic floorings can be noted. Although there was a native tradition of pebble mosaics between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. (Castulo, Jáen), the first floors influenced by Italy emerge very early on, especially in Neapolis (Ampurias), where we find black and white floorings in all-over patterns. Later, in 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D, this type of mosaic also appears in Baetule (Badelona) and Barcino (Barcelona). During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century they appear in more remote places such as Augusta Emerita and on the coasts of Baetica.

In principle, it can be said that it is at this stage that themes and specific treatments of that area of the empire start to appear in the Hispanic mosaics, in parallel to the use of classic themes such as for example, the maritime *Thiasos*. In reality, during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, we see the development of what later became the characteristics specific to Hispanic mosaics: little coloured elements are introduced to black and white mosaics (Figure 1), a development

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Figure 1  
Itálica, House of Neptune.  
Foto: ©MJ.Duran Kremer



Figure 2  
Alcolea del Río.  
Foto: ©MJ Duran Kremer

that continues throughout the following centuries and can still be found as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.. Used with preference in geometric mosaics, it is found in many cases of four colour technique, where Red and Ochre are used together with Black and White, creating very clearly defined shapes, without any shading of the colour tones. Through the frequent use of geometric designs for mosaic floorings of the “all over” type as well as the subdivision of the decorative space into small “frames” created by the geometric design itself (and into which figurative themes can be inserted) – the mosaic landscape in Hispania is clearly defined through the different variants of the geometric base designs (Figure 2).

This does not however mean that Hispanic mosaics were limited to this technique – quite the contrary: the taste for the polychrome develops strongly, from a chronological point of view leading to a parallel existence of two techniques, sometimes in the same house, sometimes even within the same floor mosaic



Figure 3  
*Villa* Cardálio (Torres Novas),  
 room H. Foto: ©MJ Duran Kremer

(Figure 3). The central panel, where it exists, is generally geometric, often with one or several figurative. The figurative themes favoured in Hispania are, without doubt, influenced by African themes: hunting scenes, scenes depicting every day activities, the rural environment and the concept of Time in various meanings (seasons, the time, eternity).

In parallel to this decorative discourse, we also find in Hispania some rare examples of another type of iconographic and schematic floor layout, with characteristics much closer to Hellenistic tradition: such as the mosaic of Ampuria depicting the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aulis, accompanied by her father Agamemnon, seen by the seer Calchas and Odysseus and the cosmological mosaic of the *Casa del Mitreo* in Mérida. Referring to the mosaic at Mérida, Dunbabin stated, that “*What is certain is that the work is unique in Spain, both in iconography and in style. Equally certainly he must have come from the eastern Mediterranean, most likely from Syria, where large picture-mosaics of this sort were being produced in the second and third centuries*” (Dunbabin 1999: 150).

Another example of this influence is without doubt the mosaic in Alter-do-Chão, discovered in 2008 and presented at the XI Colóquio Internacional AIEMA that took place in Bursa.

Unfortunately, we cannot yet access the pictures of this mosaic with the exception of those few published in the daily press<sup>1</sup> (Figure 4). However, only a detailed documentation of the mosaic will be able to confirm this initial observation.

In both mosaics, the central composition is surrounded by tapestry decorated with geometric motifs in all-over style: In the case of Mérida, with black and white geometric patterns (stars with 4 lozenges, defining small squares decorated with rosettas and inverted squares with convex sides and rosettas, all symmetrically aligned).

In this floor mosaic, the vegetable element is introduced in two ways: stylised as decoration of the geometric motifs and, at the same time, in a naturalistic style in the form of *acanthus* in the two upper corners of the central panel. By creating a rounded arch in the composition, these panels underline the impression of the “window-in-the-floor” style, so particular especially in the mythological

<sup>1</sup> As informed by the Archeologist of the City Council of Alter-do-Chão, the publication of the Catalogue of the Interpretative Center is expected in the course of 2011, with the photos of all pavements.





Figure 4  
Alter do Chão. Foto: ©Press



Figure 5  
Rabaçal. Foto: © Delfim Ferreira

representations in Syrian mosaics. In the case of Alter-do-Chão, and save an error of judgment resulting from the poor quality photographs, the panels with geometric motifs that frame the central composition, display marked polychromies and filling the entire area. At least one of these panels displays also a geometric layout with lozenge shape stars, in this instance with 8 tips and probably arranged in an eight-lozenge star pattern.

Another mosaic, found in the roman *villa* of Rabaçal (Pessoa 2005, 12, fig. 4) (Figure 5), may also be included in this group of mosaics eventually. It is currently the subject of the PhD thesis of our colleague Miguel Pessoa and due to be published soon. We shall then be able to confirm or dismiss the hypothesis of a stylistic influence from the Eastern Mediterranean on this important set of floor mosaics, unparalleled to date in Portugal, even if they were without any doubt laid down by a regional – if not even local – workshop.

For its part, the mosaic landscape of Syria exhibits a very distinctive evolution. With clear Hellenistic influence, the floor mosaics only rarely show elements that point towards an Italian influence. It has to be noted however, that due to the pictorial and iconographic richness of the mosaics of Antiochia and Shabba-Philippolis in particular, the geometric mosaics in those same sites have not been studied much<sup>2</sup> so that my analysis should and will be reviewed once I will have been able to access those mosaics as well.

<sup>2</sup> didn't till now have access to publications of the geometric mosaics of roman *Syria*.

In contrast to Hispania, the most representative of Syrian floor mosaics of that period show figurative scenes with mythological motifs, largely in a “*window-on-a floor*” layout: the figures are positioned either in a landscape or surrounded by architectural elements. The endeavour to achieve three dimensionality is not only characterised by the putting of the figures in perspective but also through the use of very small dimensioned *tesserae* in various colours. The vegetable elements are naturalistic in style, executed with great expertise and using a large variety of colours. Whilst at the during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. the known geometric mosaics are based on the relatively simple underlying geometric layouts, they are nevertheless subject to the same rules of polychromy and three dimensionality. The mosaic of Antioch, *House of Drinking Contest*, depicting the drinking contest between Dionysus and Heracles (Dunbabin 1999: 164, fig. 167), is a good example of this phenomenon: the main panel, using the “window-on-the-floor” technique and displaying a marked three dimensionality, is surrounded by a large sash of geometric polychrome mosaics in a eight-lozenge star grid pattern. Indeed, this mosaic is the first occurrence of what would later become a dominating feature of Syrian mosaics during the 4<sup>th</sup> century and which Levi (Levi 1947: 226-56, pls. LII-LXI, CLX-CLXII) classified as the “rainbow style”: the geometrical motifs are no longer delineated by one or more lines of same coloured tesserae; instead tesserae of varying colours are placed diagonally, giving the impression that colours run into each other. This style dominates in mosaics during the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, at which time we also start seeing the repeated use of the same geometric layout to cover large surfaces, sometimes with the placement of a central medallion. Perspective and three dimensionality start losing their importance and the decorative discourse starts partially aligning with the style that has been in existence in Hispania for some centuries.

In order to better explain the evolution discovered in both Syrian and Hispanic mosaics, we should keep in mind the application of a group of geometric layouts – the eight-lozenge star grid pattern, considered by G. Salies to be probably the only geometric layout created specifically for floor mosaics (Salies 1974: 94). In its basic form, the eight-lozenge star grid pattern emerges mainly in all-over layouts. It develops early and gives origin to both, more complex geometric grid patterns as well as the utilisation of single elements to form the basis of a centralised emblematic motif. A comparison of this geometric layout between East and West Mediterranean allows us to exemplify the stylistic treatment of the floorings in either region.

Two good examples of the two interpretations and executions of the same geometric layout are the *triclinium* mosaic in the *House of Drinking Contest* and the new mosaic of the *Colónia Patrícia* in Corduba (Figure 6).

With regards to the floor mosaics found in Portugal – and due to the limited amount of time available I shall restrict myself to those – only those found in Cetóbriga (Figure 7) and Conimbriga (Figure 8) display a richer polychromy. Albeit that they are late examples, they do display perspective and three dimensionality. However, the treatment given to the filling of the different geometric elements (lozenges, squares, rectangles and triangles) differs greatly from the Syrian mosaics. The floral elements used are stylised geometric flowers in the case of Cetóbriga, whilst isolated cordiform and geometrised flowers as well as little *rosettes* can be found in another mosaic of Conimbriga (Figure 9). The mosaic panel from Alter-do-Chão can unfortunately not be covered in this analysis due to a lack of documentation. However, there are strong indications that it too was executed in a perspective style very similar to that found in Syrian mosaics.





Figure 6  
Mosaic of Corduba.  
Foto: © Francesc – J. de Rueda Roigé



Figure 7  
Cetóbriga. Foto: © L. Wrench  
and J. Soares

The group of mosaics from the roman *villa* of Abicada, can be considered as representatives for the co-existence of two Hispanic artistic strands referred to above: side by side we find mosaics that differ from pure monochrome (black/white) technique (Figure 10) to the richness of polychromy and filling motifs (Figure 11), from the use of the “four colour technique” to mosaics in all-over-pattern of the peristyle and going through the different stages of colour being introduced in mosaics (Figure 12). The mosaics of remaining rooms are severely damaged which is why I have not included them in this analysis. All indicates though that they followed the same *koïne* of Hispanic mosaics.

Whilst the floor mosaic in the mäander room was executed in a pure black and white technique, the geometric layout in so called room G (Figure 12) is done in black and white, without filling out of the stars themselves, but introducing polychromy in the almost exclusively floral fill elements: single cordiform flowers, fusiform leaves, tendrils as well as plane *peltæ*. The polychromy is faint, tinged using different shades of the same colour tone.





Figure 8  
Conímbriga, mosaic 9. Foto: ©Corpus  
dos Mosaicos de Portugal, Pl. 37



Figure 9  
Conímbriga. Foto MJ. Duran Kremer©

Figure 10  
Abicada. Foto IPPAR©



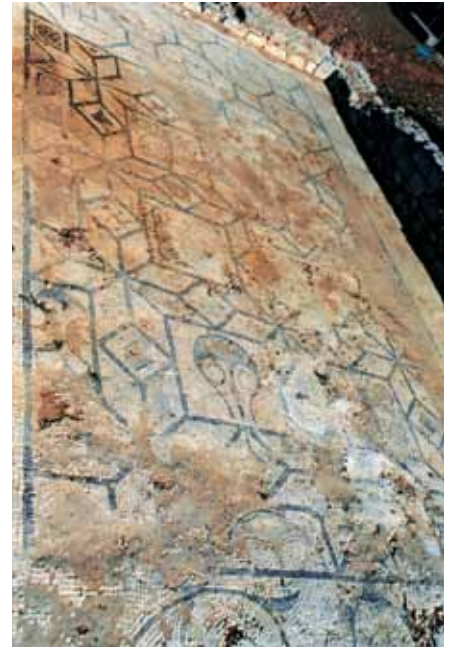


Figure 11  
Abicada, room F.  
Foto: ©MJ Duran Kremer

Figure 12  
Abicada, room G.  
Foto: ©MJ. Duran Kremer



Figure 13  
Abicada, room C3. Foto: ©IPPAR



Figure 14  
Cerro da Vila.  
Foto: ©MJ Duran Kremer



Figure 15  
Milreu. Foto: ©MJ Duran Kremer



Figure 16  
Milreu. Foto: © MJ Duran Kremer





Figure 17  
Milreu. Foto: ©MJ. Duran Kremer



Figure 18  
Milreu. Foto: ©MJ. Duran Kremer

The all-over pattern covering the peristyle and corridor/hall to the rooms G and H was done using a nuanced four-colour technique (Duran Kremer 2008: fig. 3, 4.).

In room C3 the polychromy is re-inforced again with a greater variety of fill elements (Figure 13): the losange stars have been coloured using simple alternating colour, without shading, preventing any individual star standing out in perspective. Viewed as a whole however, the composition shows movement and three dimensionality. To highlight here is that the entire floor is done in a geometric pattern with the exception of crocket of great beauty.

Of further note is also the perfect symmetry in both rooms, a characteristic that by the way can be found both in the architecture and the layout as well as the decorative finish of all rooms in the *villa*, based on what we can verify based on



the remaining mosaics. We find the same decorative discourse in the floor mosaics of Milreu and Cerro da Vila, as I presented at the XI. Colloquia AIEMA in Bursa.

It is significant that a large number of mosaics from the Algarve (southern Portugal) are based on the eight lozenge star grid pattern in one of its variations, but always following the principle of the monochrome black and white composition, with a greater or lesser introduction of colour elements. As examples of that I would like to mention *Cerro da Vila* (Figure 14) and the roman *villa* of *Milreu* (Figure 15). The latter, more known internationally for its fish figure mosaics, has several mosaics that are positioned on a direct line between *Abicada* and *Cerro de Villa* (figs. 16 – 18).

To conclude this short presentation, it is possible to identify the existence of mutual influences, albeit adapted to space and time in which they are found: the use of mythological themes in the roman Hispania, whilst not very numerous most certainly originating from the East Mediterranean where they dominated the mosaic landscape; the use of a geometric pattern in floor mosaics, common in the West but only popularised as a theme in the East from the 4<sup>th</sup> century; a differentiated treatment of vegetable elements, either naturalistic or schematic on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Without doubt did not only existing commercial relationships in the Mediterranean contribute to this but also the existence of travelling artists and the existence of sketch books: choices made from these models by both the villa's owner and the artists themselves on either side of the Mediterranean, is testimony to the coherent regional development of this art across the centuries.

In my view, a more detailed study on the subject would be of great interest to the study of reciprocal influences in the field of mosaic art – a subject which I am committed to pursuing over the coming years.

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