

East Meets West: The Perspective in Roman Mosaics

Doğu Batı ile Buluşuyor: Roma Mozaiklerindeki Perspektif

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Abstract

The introduction of “perspective” or “third dimension” in the realization of Roman mosaic floors was, from the beginning, subject to a different interpretation in different regions of the Roman Empire.

As part of the RoGeMoPorTur project (East meets West. Investigating the reciprocal influence of east and west in the roman geometric mosaics of Portugal and Turkey. A comparative study), which focuses on the process of designing and building geometric mosaics from its inception to the final product allowing the identification of discrete stylistic influences between the eastern and western shores of the Mediterranean, the rendering of “perspective” plays an important role.

With a few chosen examples the eastern stylistic influences can be clearly identified in some mosaics found in the current territory of Portugal and their connection with the socio-cultural level of the commissioning owner.

Keywords: *Perspective, painting, mosaics, east and west*

Özet

Başlangıcından itibaren “Perspektif” veya “üçüncü boyutun” Roma mozaik zeminlerinde uygulanması, Roma İmparatorluğunun farklı bölgelerinde farklı yorumlamalara tabi olmuştur. Akdeniz’in doğu ve batı kıyıları arasındaki farklı stil etkilerinin tanımlanmasına izin veren ve başlangıcından nihai ürüne kadar olan süreçte geometrik mozaiklerin tasarlanması ve yapılmasına odaklanan RoGeMoPorTur projesi kapsamında (Doğu Batıyla Buluşuyor; Doğunun ve Batının Portekiz ve Türkiye’ye ait Roma geometrik mozaikleri üzerine karşılıklı etkisinin araştırılması. Karşılaştırmalı bir çalışma), “perspektifin” ifade edilmesi önemli bir rol oynar.

Seçilmiş olan birkaç örnek yardımıyla doğunun stil etkileri ile sosyokültürel seviye ile bağlantı, Portekiz’in şu andaki kara sınırları içinde bulunan bazı mozaiklerde net bir şekilde tespit edilebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Perspektif, boyama, mozaikler, doğu ve batı*

In the frame of the international project RoGeMoPorTur (East meets West. Investigating the reciprocal influence of east and west in the Roman Geometric Mosaics of Portugal and Turkey. A comparative study), the question of the introduction of the third dimension or perspective in the design and manufacture of mosaic floors has been present since the beginning of the work¹.

When analyzing the aspect “perspective” or “representation of the third dimension” in the field of the art history of the antiquity we refer, in most cases, to painting, as we found it specially in Pompeii, or as it has come to us, for example, through mosaic floors commonly accepted as “copying” or “rendering” famous Hellenistic painting².

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¹ Being the coordinator of the project, I have the great opportunity of working with a most expert team both from Portugal as from Turkey, this led by Professor Mustafa Şahin.

² This is the case, for example, of the mosaic of Alexander from the Casa del Fauno, in Pompeii, which copies a famous Hellenistic painting, signed either by Philoxenus or by Aristeides of Thebes.

We know, however, that perspective was created long before. In Athens black figure vases from the late 7th (as, for example, by the *Nessos painter* or by the *Gorgo painter*) as well in the red figure vases from the late 6th century, 1st quarter of the 5th century BC, we met already what could be considered as an attempt to introduce the perspective in the representation, as the cup of the Epidromos painter (Boardmann 1975: 125 Fig. 187) or the Kalpis of the Tyszkiewicz painter (Boardmann 1975: 147 Fig. 114). Although they cannot be regarded as belonging to the group of the most representative painters of that time (such as Andokides, Euthymides and first of all Kleophrades) they are considered as being the first vase painters to try to give up the representation of faces in profile, introducing the frontal view in his compositions, a fundamental element for the introduction of perspective in a composition.

It is with the introduction of the representation of divine scenes on vase painting that the perspective finds its way and allows the introduction of the “third dimension” into the decoration. The definition of foreground and background in the compositions of this time is obtained by placing the figures in levels one before another, and by the introduction of movement in the upper and lower body, creating an optical illusion of depth in the linearity. With these representations a new assertion of space and surface takes place. A new assertion which is not limited to vase painting but also makes his entrance in pebble mosaics, as we can see in the lion hunt, in Pella (Dunbabin 1999: 12 Fig. 9, late 4th B.C.). From this moment on the rendering of perspective becomes crucial for a realistic representation of scenes, mainly linked to Greek mythology, both in painting and in the mosaic art³.

To develop here a detailed analysis of the different stages of introduction of perspective in Greek and Roman mosaics would certainly be of great interest but would go beyond the objectives of this intervention. However, we can say that the analysis of its evolution allows us to affirm that it is precisely the classical and pre classical Greece who laid the foundations of the use of spatial perspective as part of the decoration of a surface, starting a development process that would certainly reach its peak in the Hellenistic period, first of all in the mosaic pavements of Pergamon (Plin.nat., XXXV, 36, 184, to Sosos von Pergamon).

In order to identify the different geographical influences in the mosaic floors in the frame of the RoGeMoPorTur project, we were led to define the different ways of representing perspective and classify them following this definition.

I. The “in depth perspective” (mostly on figuratively mosaics)

If we consider the definition of perspective articulated by Erwin Panofsky (Panofsky 1927), a composition can only be considered to be an illusionistic “picture” or an “image” when not only the objects taken individually are presented in “reduced form”, but also the whole composition becomes simultaneously a “window” through which we think to be looking into the represented space. In doing so, the decorated surface is no longer perceived as such: it is just the material basis needed for the building of an illusionistic composition. The

³ According to Plinius the Old we know that the rendering of perspective was not unknown between the painters of the 5th century B.C., as he comments in his *Naturalis historia* when describing the contest between both well known painters Parrhasius and Zeuxis: “*Descendisse Parrhasius in certamen cum Zeuxide traditur et, cum ille de-tulisset uvas pictas tanto successu, ut in scaenam aves advolarent, ipse de-tulisse linteum pictum ita veritate repraesentata, ut Zeuxis avium iudicio tumens flagitaret tandem re-moto linteo ostendi picturam atque intellectu errore concederet palmam ingenio pudore, quoniam ipse aves fefellisset, Parrhasius autem se artificem*” (Plin.nat., XXXV, 36, 55).



Figure 1
Pasiphaë-Daidalos.
Zeugma, Poseidon villa.
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observer is placed so to say at “the proscenium arch” where he is suggested a tridimensional vision to the outside of the room where he stays.

The in-depth perspective dominates the figured compositions of mosaics on the east Mediterranean, where Greek influence remained long after the final conquest of the Greek world by the Roman armies in 30 BC (Fig. 1).

It is in Turkey where we find the greatest number of ornamental mosaic floors whose discourse is based on this concept of perspective. One obvious result, if we consider that it is precisely in the northern region of the Roman province of Syria - now Turkey - where the Hellenistic influence was maintained for a longer period, relegating the italic influence to a negligible level. They are, mostly, representations of mythological scenes, conceived as paintings, where the characters are realistically reproduced and placed in the proper way to the environment of the action. The picture thus achieved, is, in most cases, inserted in a geometric (Dunbabin 1999: Fig. 165), floral (Dunbabin 1999: Fig. 166) or architectural (Dunbabin 1999: Fig. 167) frame, always following the composition principle of a “window-on-the-floor”.

In today’s Portuguese territory we have not till now found any pavement whose decorative scheme could be surely identified as belonging to this perspective scheme. Nevertheless, and in our view, the mosaic of Aeneas found some years ago in Alter do Chão⁴ (Fig. 2) can probably be included in this group. However, a more specific analysis of the perspective scheme in this mosaic will be first possible after the publication of the villa.

⁴ *Civitas of Abeltherium, Conventus Emeritensis, Lusitania, Hispania.*

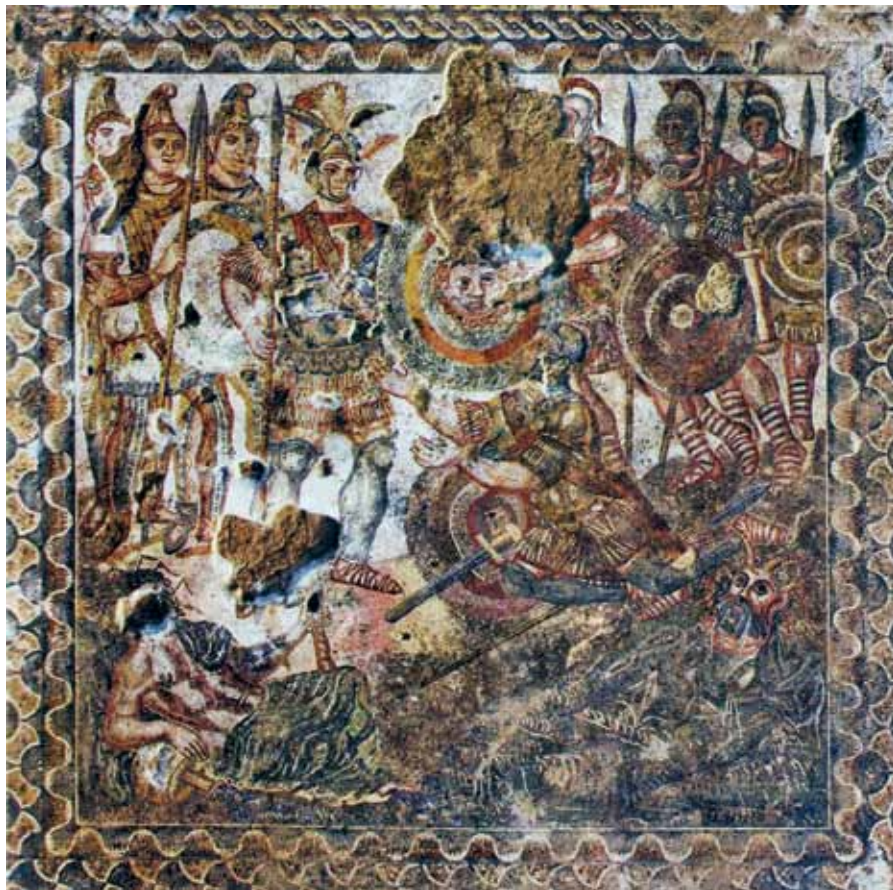


Figure 2
Alter do Chão.
(© Câmara Municipal
de Alter do Chão)



Figure 3
La Olmeda.
(© Palenciaturismo.es)

The second example of a composition in perspective belonging to this group was also found in the Lusitania, in the Roman villa of La Olmeda⁵ (Fig. 3). Albeit with a later chronology than the mosaics of Antioch and Zeugma (this pavement has been dated at the end of the 4th century AD), the structural syntax of the composition fulfills all the requirements foreseen in Panofsky's definition of perspective.

II. The “volumetric perspective” (mostly on geometric mosaics)

Applied almost exclusively on geometric patterns, this representation is based on a differentiated concept of the role of the surface to be decorated. While in the in-depth perspective the surface is in the foreground, being a starting point for an optical illusion of depth, **when representing a volumetric perspective** the surface is considered as the basis over which the composition is constructed. From there, the craftsman or artist works forward, using forms ordered in accordance with pre fixed geometric schemes, thus introducing an optical illusion of volume directed to the observer.

The repetitive use of elementary geometric shapes, combined together according to a pre - defined scheme for the preparation of compositions with a “volumetric perspective”, required almost automatically its use as an all over pattern. Even if they still obey the “classic” composition scheme of concentric bands of motives, some mosaics from *Pergamon (Mysia)*, in the modern territory of Turkey, dated from the 2nd and 1st century B.C, shows already the introduction of the volumetric perspective also as an all-over pattern (Scheibelreiter 2007: 166 Fig. 4).

An example for how the use of a simple geometric shape in different colours can bring movement and perspective to a mosaic pavement is the “consoles” pattern.

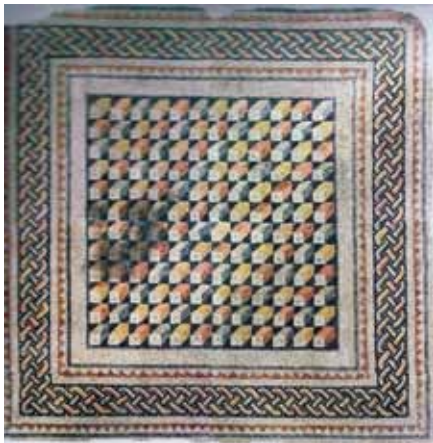


Figure 4
Roman bath. Zeugma.
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Starting with a system of simple grids placed diagonally and ortogonally, and using a single geometric pattern - in this case a parallelogram - the mosaist can construct a series of decorative compositions as all over patterns either using only two colors - black and white – or different colours (Fig. 4). In both cases it is possible to introduce a volumetric perspective in the composition, a perspective often enhanced by the use of other patterns in order to fill the spaces created by the geometric structure chosen. Another motive very early used for the rendering of the volumetric perspective was the meander. As a decorative pattern already used in the Greek black figure vases from the 6th century BC, the meander remained present for many centuries in the decoration of mosaic floors, following the artistic evolution and adapting to regional and artistic specificities of different times.

One of the earliest examples of volumetric perspective is the meander from Mosaic V from the Palace on the Acropolis of Pergamon, today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin (Fig. 5). This mosaic shows the artist's signature of Hephaestion and is dated on the 2nd century BC. Linear in its original design, the meander gains in body and volume through the use of light and shadows, the light and dark tones that define the movement of the meander, leaving a glimpse here and there on the dark base on which it was built and thereby achieving a perfect optical illusion of the third dimension.

As we have stated above, the Greek artistic tradition remained dominant in this region of the Roman Empire for several centuries. During this time, the mosaic floors went on being conceived and built using three-dimensional effects and

⁵ Pedrosa de la Vega (Palencia).



Figure 5
Pergamon.
(© Duran-Kremer)



Figure 6
Return of Dionysos.
Zeugma, Poseidon *villa*.
(© Shot by SERTAC Bil. Egt. Ilet.
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showing a rich polychromy - even when using patterns common to the west Mediterranean (for example, the stars of diamonds, used as an all - over pattern). This is the case of the mosaic of Pasiphae – Daidalos (Fig. 1) or the Return of Dionysos from India (Fig. 6), from the same villa. Also here the volumetric perspective is underlined by the inserting of the same pattern (the diamond) on the face of the parallelepiped, by the use of different patterns for the upper face, for the small squares and for the squares between the eight-pointed stars and the lateral rectangles. This volumetric perspective is even underlined by the representation of consoles in a volumetric perspective on the lateral rectangles.

The analysis of the evolution of the concept of perspective allows us to conclude that, for centuries, the different approaches to perspective have been kept alive and been used at the same time. The mosaic in the *triclinium* of the *villa of Poseidon* (end of the 2nd CE) illustrates perfectly this phenomenon (Fig. 7). On the same floor we find three different interpretations of perspective:

- The representation of Pasiphae and Daidalos was designed and implemented as a perspective in depth, bringing together all the stylistic elements needed for this optical illusion (Fig. 1);
- The representation of the return of Dionysos from India was conceived and developed in a full descriptive linear style (Fig. 6). It almost could have been inspired by a painting of a Greek vase from classical times: the figures move in a vacuum, as if modeled on a uniform basis, using overlapping levels as a single element of dialogue among them;
- Both compositions are integrated into a geometric surface decoration built in the emphasis of volumetric perspective (Fig. 7).

Turning now to the analysis of the mosaics in the actual territory of Portugal we find a very different artistic landscape. In fact, and although the geometric patterns are, for the most part, the same as found in the floors of Antioch and Zeugma, there is a strong influence of the “two toned principle” in the decorative syntax. The different interpretation of the same motive used as an all-over decoration in “in depth”, volumetric or linear perspective can be best illustrated by the geometric pattern of the eight-pointed star.



Figure 7
Triclinium, Zeugma, Poseidon villa.
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Figure 8
villa cardilio, Torres Novas.
(© Duran-Kremer)

In the territory of today's Portugal and in general throughout *Hispania*, the use of this geometric scheme as decoration in all-over pattern is very common: here only a few chosen examples.

- from *villa cardilio*, Torres Novas, as a composition exclusively in black and white, which delimits a central rug (Fig. 8),
- on a central rug, repeating a variant of the geometric scheme, but introducing the “polychromic principle” in the composition (Fig. 8),
- from Conimbriga, the same decorative speech, as in the first example, but with the introduction of polychromy. In this case the volumetric view is almost completely replaced by a substantially linear decorative syntax (Bairrão Oleiro 1992: pl. 37);
- from Abicada (Algarve), where we find it in two pavements, one almost exclusively in black and white, the other introducing different polychromic stylistic elements, but where white and black are still the dominant colors (Duran Kremer 2007: 218 Fig. 5; 220 Fig. 8).

Figure 9
Triclinium, Rabaçal.
(© Delfim Ferreira)



- To the same group belong some floors of Milreu, also in the Algarve (Duran Kremer 2009: 357 Fig. 10).

These are only a few illustrative examples of the mosaic art generally existing in the most western part of Mediterranean: with a strong italic influence first, later on, about the 3rd century DC, seeing the North African tendencies influence more and more the land owners in the choice of the iconographic programs for the decoration of their *villae*.

However, the artistic influences of the East Mediterranean didn't spare Lusitanian territory. In the roman *villa* of Rabaçal these influence is clearly visible in the mosaic "seasons mosaic" (Fig. 9). Although almost destroyed, the image decorating the central panel shows a chariot pulled by 4 horses, represented facing the observer. Due to the poor state of conservation it is impossible to say with certainty which of the three different interpretations of perspective was used here. However, the consoles pattern of the central panel and the meander connecting all the panels with different representations in this mosaic shows the influence of the artistic tendencies present in the East Mediterranean.

East meets West. Investigating the reciprocal influence of east and west in the Roman Geometric Mosaics of Portugal and Turkey. A comparative study.

Under this title we started two years ago an international project aiming to identify and clarify the way artistic tendencies went through in order to arrive and set up from one side to the other side of the *mare nostrum*: The analysis of the rendering of perspective is without doubt one of the basic instruments needed to achieve this goal.



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