

The Mosaic Production of Augusta Emerita (Merida)

Augusta Emerita'nın (Merida) Mozaik Üretimi

José María ALVAREZ MARTINEZ*

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Abstract

The archaeological site of the ancient colonia Augusta Emerita (Merida, Spain), offers one of the most spectacular mosaics sets in the Roman West. However, a study in detail about the mosaic production of Merida is still necessary, which should consider its workshops as well as the evolution of both the techniques and the style. This paper aims to offer an overview about how Emeritensian workshops, itinerant or not, evolved from the end of the 1st century AD to the 5th century AD.

Keywords: Roman Hispania, Emerita Augusta, mosaic workshops, iconography, Mediterranean influences.

Öz

Antik colonia Augusta Emerita (Merida, İspanya) kenti, Roma İmparatorluğu'nun batısında yer alan önemli mozaik gruplarından birini göstermektedir. Ancak, Merida'daki mozaik üretimi ile ilgili olarak hem atölyelerin hem de tekniklerin ve stillerin gelişimleri göz önünde bulundurularak detaylı bir çalışma yapılması gerekmektedir. Bu makale, gezici ya da gezici olmayan Emerita atölyelerinin, İS 1. yüzyılın sonundan İS 5. yüzyıl'a kadar olan süreçteki gelişimleri ile ilgili genel bir değerlendirme yapmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Roma Dönemi'nde Hispania, Emerita Augusta, mozaik atölyeleri, ikonografi, Akdeniz etkisi.

The archaeological site of Merida, ancient *colonia Augusta Emerita*¹, offers one of the most spectacular mosaics sets in the Roman West, arousing the interest of many scholars² (Fig. 1).

Even if there are remarkable synthetic publications, such as those of Antonio Blanco Freijero, Alberto Balil (1967: 117-129; 1973: 277-280) and Lancha (1990: 275-291), a study in detail about the mosaic production of Merida is still necessary, which should consider its workshops as well as the evolution of both the techniques and the style.

Nevertheless, it is possible to offer an overview about how Emeritensian workshops, itinerant or not, evolved from the end of the 1st century AD to the 5th century AD. Technical analysis of the Emeritensian floors betray rather interesting data about, for instance, their material, which was predominantly local in provenience (Fig. 2). A similar uniformity can be seen in their stylistic evolution, not only because of the chosen scenes, but especially because of their personal way in which they were made.

* José M^a Álvarez Martínez, Director, Museo Nacional de Arte Romano C/ José Ramón Mélida, s/n, 06800 Mérida.
E-mail: josemaria.alvarez@mcu.es

¹ More than 130 mosaics, most of them fragments, have been recorded since the 19th century until the present day. During the last decade new mosaics have been discovered, such as those from the 'Asamblea de Extremadura' (Palma 2005) and the mosaico of Opora in the 'Calle Sagasta' (see López Monteagudo 2006-2007). With regard to the studies about the *colonia Augusta Emerita* there is a good amount of bibliography. Its references have been collected, until the year 2010, in Velázquez Jiménez 2011. After this, new titles have been published. Among all of them, stand out: Álvarez Martínez - Nogales Basarrate 2003; Dupré Raventós (ed.) 2004; Nogales Basarrate (ed.) 2005.

² The bibliography about the Emeritensian mosaic production is abundant (see Velázquez Jiménez 2011: 191-209 n° 742-832), although most of the works use to deal with it in a general way, including other materials, such as stucco and painting. Besides the recent discoveries, few in fact, the mosaics set of Merida is gathered in two catalogues: Blanco Freijeiro 1978; Álvarez Martínez 1990a.



Figure 1
Ideal restitution of the *colonia Augusta Emerita*, according to Álvarez y Nogales. Jean-Claude Golvin del.



Figure 2
Detail of the mosaics of the villa of "Las Tiendas".

The mosaic technique changed in each period. First of all, during the 1st century AD and in most of the 2nd one, there are several examples of the bichrome technique, combining black and white colours with their respective shades (Fig. 3). This can be seen in several mosaics, such as "Casa de la Torre del Agua" (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 45 n° 40-42 pl. 75a, b) or those from the "Casa-Basílica (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 46 n° 44 pl. 80a; 46-47 n° 46 pls. 81b, 82a, b, 83a). Moreover, even if few examples are preserved, it must be noted the existence in this first



Figure 3
Mosaic of *Baritto* with bichrome technique.

Figure 4
Mosaic of the “kidnap of Europe”:
bichrome and polychrome
technique.



period of pavements made in *opus signinum*, which mixed mortar and brick either in small fragments or crushed; *tesselae* creating different compositions as ornament were included in this type of mosaics *tesselae* creating different compositions as ornament (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 48 n° 53 pls. 85a, b).

Later, in the 2nd century AD, a new way of making mosaics, the polychrome technique, arrived to the *Colonia*. This was the predominant technique until the end of the mosaic production in Merida. That does not mean that the previous bichrome technique was totally abandoned. In fact, examples of bichrome mosaics appear in some moments, such as an specific period that can be framed between the Antonine dynasty and the first decades of the 3rd century AD, when the craftsmen of Augusta Emerita alternated both techniques in an almost perfect combination (Fig. 4).

Regarding the North-African influences of either the Emeritensian or the Hispanic workshops, there is a good amount of bibliography that defends such influence, sometimes without strong arguments enough.

In Merida, both the schemes and the motifs used from the beginning of the mosaic production clearly betray an Italic influence, just like the rest of the Western part of the empire. Sometimes, the compositions are themselves a clear reflect of

well-known Italic examples. This influence, as we said, can be tracked all around the Roman West; for instance, the Emeritensian pavements show similarities with others from Gaul.

Those Italic peculiarities become visible in the black and white pavements, in both their motifs and their schemes that, even if Hellenistic in origin, were re-elaborated in the Italic peninsula, spreading from there to the aforementioned Western regions. This is quite revealing in the figurative scenes, such as the mosaic of the 'Calle Sagasta' with the representation of a Nile landscape that includes pygmies and animals, which shows a strong influence from well-known mosaics of Ostia (Becatti 1961: n° 213 113-114 pls. CXV, CXVI, CXVII; n° 74: 59-60, pl. CXVIII; n° 289: 151-152 pls. CXVII, CXIX, CXX, CXXI) (Fig. 5), also similar to the border of another mosaic from Italica (Seville) that frames the representation of Neptune and his entourage (Blanco Freijeiro - Luzón Nogué 1974: 41-46).



Figure 5
Mosaics from Merida with
pygmies scenes.

In the Western workshops, the Italic influence, or dependence, was a constant until the last productions. Nevertheless, other artistic streams arrived. It is the case of both North African and Eastern trends that became visible at the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century AD³. In the case of the Emeritensian mosaics, this is especially true for some Eastern features that display an irrefutable pictorial illusion. The pavement of the villa of 'Las Tiendas' is a clear example of this; it shows a horseman pursuing a feline in a swift race, at full gallop, in the same way that some compositions from Antioch (Levi 1947: 226 pls. LII, LVII; 363 fig. 151 pl. 90; López Monteagudo 1991: 498). An echo of this can be seen in the hunting scenes at the villa of 'La Olmeda', in the Castilian plateau (Palol-Cortés 1974: 82) (Fig. 6).

With regard to the presence of 'African' features in the Emeritensian mosaics, those appears in both hunting and marine scenes. With few exceptions (Fernández-Galiano 1984b: 111) most of the authors considers strong such a North-African influence in the Hispanic mosaics; however, from our point of view, it has been overvalued. Considering the evidence, we believe (Álvarez Martínez 1997: 39-50) that the North-African influence, visible in the late antique period, is clear in the funerary mosaics, but, for the rest, it has come into question. Certainly, some African influences could be recorded, such influences seem to belong to a common root originated in the Italic peninsula. Taking all of this into account, we should think in a cultural *koiné*, more than specific influences, for the Western Mediterranean in the last centuries of the empire (Carandini 1962: 234).

Thanks to the good preservation of several pavements, we know the names of some mosaic makers (mosaicists) that worked in the *colonia Augusta Emerita*. One of them named *Paternos* (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 27 n° 2), a Greek, or Eastern, name; maybe he was a freedman (Lancha 1990: 288; Donderer 1989: A77 pl. 45, 1). Probably, other craftsmen from the East settled in Merida. *Seleucus* and *Anthus* (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 31 n° 9) shared the same origin as well, and, according to Lancha (Lancha 1990: 288-289; Donderer 1989: A83: 105-106 pl. 48) they were itinerant artisans that left proof of their name in the Nile mosaic, together with the name of the town where they worked, *colonia Augusta Emerita* (C.A.E.). Both artisans would have been freedmen as well (Fig. 7).

³ Regarding the Eastern influences in the Hispanic mosaic production see: Fernández Galiano 1984a: 418-420.



Figure 6
Mosaic of the hunter from the villa
of "Las Tiendas".

Figure 7
Sign of the craftsmen (mosaic
makers) *Seleucus et Anthus*.



Figure 8
Mosaic signed by *Baritto*.

Another craftsman, *Baritto*, seems to have been an slave (Blanco Freijeiro 1978 n° 5: 28-29; Donderer 1989: A50, 86-87 pls. 29, 3, 30). *Baritto* signed an excellent mosaic decorated with marine fauna (Fig. 8). There is another name, *Felix*, in this mosaic. According to Donderer, *Felix* could be another mosaic maker too (Donderer 1989: A50 49, 87).



Figure 9
Sign of the artisan *Annibonius*.

Annius Ponius, who signed the mosaic of *Bacchus* and *Ariadne* in *Naxos* (Fig. 9), is rather famous in the bibliography. His name is still controversial. *Annius Ponius* is the traditional interpretation. Nevertheless, after the clarification of Mayer (Mayer 1996: 101-104; Donderer 1989: A47:84-85), *Annibonius* seems to be more convincing and real. *Annibonius* was, probably, Greek in origin, and, as Lancha has proposed (Lancha 1990: 289), a freedman as well.

Last but not least, *Dexter* was another craftsman that worked in the territory of the *colonia*. He was the author of a modest pavement that decorated one of the rooms of a *villa* found in the village of Puebla de la Calzada (Donderer 1989: A55 89 pl. 33, 1, Lancha 1990: 288; Álvarez Martínez 1995: 211-219).

The variety of iconographic motifs offered by the mosaics of Merida is quite remarkable. It is possible to perceive the fashionable style in each period, as well as both the ideology and the symbolism they also expressed. Now, we will analyze those most relevant, and repeated motifs, in the Emeritensian repertory.

Probably, the theme of *Orpheus* and the animals charmed by the sounds of his *lyre* was one of the most loved topics for that society. In fact, five pavements with such iconography have been found both in the *colonia* and its nearest territory (Álvarez Martínez 1990b: 29-58) (Fig. 10). Other theme usually repeated, probably because of its symbolic meaning, is the representation of the *Seasons* and their annual cycle, which produced welfare (Álvarez Martínez 1976: 453-454, 458) (Fig 11). The *Seasons* used to be represented as female figures (Blanco Freijeiro 1978 n° 9 pls. 14, 16) except by the examples of the so-called 'Cosmic Mosaic', which we will refer later (the *Seasons* are represented by teenagers). It is also different the case of the *villa* of 'Panes Perdidos', near the village of Solana de los Barros. There, the *Season* is an allegoric representation of a winged *Eros* (Álvarez Martínez – Nogales Basarrate 1994-95: 97 pl. 13, 1).

The *Bacchus*' cycle was also one of the favourites compositions along the different periods. Before us appear scenes of the *thiasos*, the *Dionysian* entourage, full of movement and frenzy, with dancing *maenads* and *satires* playing the *siringa*, always presided by the figure of the god (Álvarez Martínez 1990 a n° 16: 94-95). Even if many mosaics reproduce this topic (Blázquez 1984: 69), the most representative Emeritensian mosaic with *Bacchus*' cycle is the one signed by

Figure 10
Emeritensian Mosaic with the
theme of Orpheus.



Annibonius. This mosaic tells the known episode when Bacchus meets Ariadne in the Island of Naxos, once she was abandoned by Theseus (Fig. 12)⁴.

The Egyptomania in the Roman art was a very dilated phenomenon⁵, which arose several times although without the strength of its first moment, immediately after the conquest of Egypt in the 1st century BC. Taking this into account, the Egyptian themes also appear in the Emeritensian mosaics, specially the daily-life scenes of pygmies, such as, for instance, their never-ending disputes with the cranes in the marsh of the Nile, but also fighting against the crocodiles, or transporting goods in their small ships (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: n° 9: 30-32; Álvarez Martínez 1990a: n° 3: 40-41) (Fig. 13).

The Hispanic hobby of hunting is well referred by the Classic sources, and this interest has a correlation in the mosaics and the abundance of representations with hunting character⁶.

In one of the *villae* of the surrounding area of the *colonia*, called 'Las Tiendas', appeared the hunting scenes aforementioned. In one of them, in the middle of a landscape of hills, there is a hunter, probably the landowner of the *fundus*,

⁴ This mosaic has been analyzed many times. Among the most remarkable works, beside the aforementioned of Mayer, stand out: Blanco Freijeiro 1952: 310-316; García y Bellido 1965: 197-207; Kuznetsova-Resende 1997: 31-38.

⁵ About the Nile's themes, there is abundant bibliography that collects both the most singular and representative scenes made in every type of material: mosaic, paintings, sculpture, etc. A rather suitable panorama about this kind of representations related to Egypt in Versluys 2002.

⁶ Among the numerous bibliography related to the hunting representations in the Iberian peninsula, stands out the work of López Monteagudo 1991: 491-512.

who is bravely lancing a wild-boar, after a fierce hand to hand, in the same way that Xenophon wrote in his 'The Art of Hunting' (Álvarez Martínez 1976: n° 7: 452-456) (Fig. 14). Also, in a kind of *paradeisos*, the impulsive figure of a horseman appears right in the moment of lancing a feline, hunted after a swift race (Álvarez Martínez 1976: 451-452). The symbolism of this topic was close related to the exaltation of the *virtus* of that society. This provoked its development; it was repeated in other pavements, for instance in the *villa* of the 'Panes Perdidos' (Álvarez Martínez - Nogales Basarrate 1994-95: 95-96, 100), with a clearly allegoric sense, or in the mosaic discovered in Merida, in 'Calle Holguín' ('Holguin street'), where a hunter named *Marianus* appears with his horse, *Pafius*, proudly posing with his trophy, a dead deer, in the background that was not well made (Álvarez Martínez 1990a: n° 14: 79 ss.) (Fig. 15).



Figure 11
Representation of Autumnus. Mosaic of the villa of "Las Tiendas".



Figure 12
Mosaic with the representation of Bacchus and Ariadne met at Naxos.



Figure 13
Scene of a crane captured by a pygmy in an Emeritensian mosaic.



Figure 14
Mosaic of the “hunting of wild-boar”.
Roman villa of “Las Tiendas”.

The circus games, so popular throughout the empire and with a very special meaning in its last centuries, were quite appreciated in Merida as well⁷.

The pictorial examples that an Emeritensian house offered once (Nogales Basarrate 2000) have been completed with an interesting iconography in which appears both winners horsemen, whose names are respectively *Paulus* and *Marcianus* (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: n° 43: 45-46 pls. 76-79) (Fig. 16).

⁷ An overview about the *ludi romani* in *Augusta Emerita* in Nogales Basarrate 2000. *Espectáculos en Augusta Emerita*. Monografías emeritenses, 5. Badajoz 2000. About the mosaics with motifs of Roman games: J. M. Álvarez Martínez - T. Nogales Basarrate.



Figure 15
Mosaic with the representation
of the *dominus Marianus*.

With regard to the representation of the Mythology, some of them already mentioned, besides a known representation of the 'kidnap of Europe' (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: n° 4: 28 pl. 5), stands out the fragment of a famous scene of the fierce fight of the Corinthian hero Bellerophon against the chimera (Álvarez Martínez 1992: 19-24).

Moreover, we can find the representation of the nine muses coming back again to the mosaic with scenes of the Nile. Its central section shows some mythological features related to the intellectual and philosophical world, which is another important iconographic repertory in the Emeritensian productions: on its surface, divided through the use of a compass, appears, inside a central circle, the image of a poet enclosed by the muses, framed in semicircles, with their characteristic attributes (Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 31) (Fig. 17).

Nonetheless, in this sense, among the Emeritensian mosaics the most important one is the so-called mosaic of 'the seven wise-men'. It was found, together with the pavement with hunting and circus scenes, in the aforementioned house of the 'calle Holguín'. This mosaic shows a meeting of the Greek seven wise-men, all of them identified with their names written in Greek. They has been represented according to the traditional model, seated in a reflexive attitude, thinking about a known episode of the war of Troy: the anger of Achilles (Álvarez Martínez 1988: 99-120)⁸ (Fig. 18).

⁸ Other scholars have shown interesting points of view about this pavement that complete and nuance what has been said before: Quet 1987: 47-55; Lancha 1997: n° 106: 218-223; Olszewski 2000: 37-46.



Figure 16
The horseman *Marcianus*.

The Cosmologic Mosaic

An exceptional case, among the Emeritensian mosaic productions, is the so-called Cosmologic mosaic, which was discovered in the 'Casa del Mitreo' ('House of the Mithraeum'). Very few pieces like this pavement have really awakened such an interest. Due to this, the bibliography about it is so abundant⁹. However, depending the authors, the interpretations are varied.

The high quality of the craftsman can be seen in the composition, which is so elegant and beautiful; it seems to create descend diagonals from the right to the left, keeping the proportions according to the space (Fig. 19).

⁹ Besides the mentioned works of García Sandoval and Blanco Freijeiro, see Álvarez Martínez 1996. Also, the contributions of Picard are rather interesting; see Picard 1975:119-124; Alföldi 1979; Quet 1981; Lancha 1983: 17-68; Musso 1984: 151-190; Blázquez 1986: 89-100; Foucher 1986: 131-140; Fernández Galiano 1989-1990: 173-182; Alföldi Rosenbaum 1994: 255-274.



Figure 17
Emeritensian mosaic with several scenes, some with an intellectual character.



Figure 18
Mosaic of the "seven wise-men".

Above, the group is presided by a triad composed by the Time, *Saeculum*, and his children: the Sky, *Caelum*, and the Chaos, *Chaos*, all of them in seated attitude. The throne where the Sky puts its feet is supported by the shoulders of the Pole. The Titans are together with them, the children of the Sky and the Earth: the Pole, *Polum*, and the Thunder, *Tonitrum*, with a shaft of lightning in its hand. Flanking these figures, appear the Winds *Notus* and *Zephyrus* (Fig. 20), bearing *Nubs* and *Nebula*, personified by two naked young girls with a cloak in their hands. On the right, the figure of another Wind, *Boreas*, can be appreciated, while regarding the fourth one, *Eurus*, only its name is preserved.

Spectacular because of its beauty is the representation of the Sun, *Oriens*, on its brilliant chariot run by white steeds, and represented in the way of the Greek charioteer, with a large tunic. Its forehead offers an halo from which arise the



Figure 20
Detail of the
Cosmologic with
representation of
Nubes and *Notus*.

lightning. On the opposite, *Occasus* appears naked on its back, driving a *biga*. Together with this representation, there is a man, the personification of the Mountains, *Mons*, that holds on its lap an almost slept figure that represents the Snow, *Nix*.

Most of the central part of this picture is lost, although there is a quite convincing restitution proposed by Musso. Here can be seen the Nature, *Natura*, semi-naked, with a cloak and adorned with jewellery. The centre of the mosaic was presided by the figure of *Aion*, *Aeternitas*, partially lost but well analyzed by Alföldi-Rosenbaum. Probably, it hold the Zodiac ring, crossed by the Seasons that passed through it in their slow annual run. Regarding the Seasons, only it is preserved the figure of *Ver* (the tag with its name is lost), *Aestas*, the Summer, represented by a child with a bundle of corn-ears, and, partially, the arm of Autumn, *Autumnus*, that holds grapes.

Below, between the green and blue background, the aquatic personifications are predominant. The big rivers, such as the Nile, *Nilus*, and the Euphrates, *Euphrates*, are represented according to the traditional fluvial iconography. They give way to the central figure, which is unfortunately lost. Nevertheless, its name is preserved, *Portus*, a seaport that was identified by Antonio Blanco as *Portus Ostiensis*. Next to it, other figures personify marine elements, such as Lighthouse, *Pharus*, a young with a torch in its hand, or *Nauigia*, the Navigation, *Copiae*, the Abundance, and the beautiful representation of *Tranquillitas*, the Calm of the Sea that promotes the Navigation. It appears close to the old Ocean, *Occeanus*, with its hair adorned with the characteristics pincers of the crab; Ocean also holds a marine snake in the right hand and its trident on its lap.

Everything is perfect in this composition: the drawn quality, the shades of the Human body, the proportions... the different elements of the Nature, personified by the described figures... Also, all of them identified respectively thanks to the tags written in a good Classic Latin, framed by their own context and with their respective attributes. Everything is an allegory with Hellenistic roots; it is the way of explaining, easily, the natural phenomena. The background is the most beautiful possible, and this beauty is still more evident in the section devoted to the aquatic representations, where the tonality of the sea, sometimes bluish, other greenish, is perfectly captured by means of glass paste *tesselae*.

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