

A Re-examination of a Mosaic from Bulgaria Representing Medusa, the Winds, and Other Figures

Bulgaristan'da Medusa, Rüzgârlar ve Diğer Figürleri Tasvir Eden Bir Mozağin Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

David PARRISH*

(Received 26 November 2024, accepted after revision 01 October 2025)

Abstract

This article is a sequel to an earlier article of mine in JMR 15, 2020, dealing with mosaic imagery of figural content in Room 10 of the Villa Armira, an aristocratic residence of the Roman imperial era located in southeastern Bulgaria. The present study examines the large pavement of Antonine date decorating a different space in that building, Room 6, which was identified as a triclinium by the excavator, J. Mladenova. Various features of this mosaic's iconography, first described and interpreted by Mladenova and later reaffirmed by G. Kabakchieva, are looked at afresh, in order to clarify their significance and to place this work of art in a broad art historical context. Comparisons are made with mosaic pavements and sculptural reliefs drawn from the eastern and western parts of the empire. Topics investigated include imagery of Medusa, the winds, the seasons, and a few animals, as well as profile heads of young men and women of uncertain meaning. Possible identifications of the latter individuals include household gods, the Penates, or geographic personifications of the region where the mosaic was made. This discussion also relates the design and figural content of the mosaic to the social function of Room 6, and helps confirm the pavement's date.

Keywords: Villa Armira, triclinium, Medusa, winds, seasons, Penates, geographic personifications.

Öz

Bu makale, 2020 yılında JMR 15'te yayımlanan ve Roma İmparatorluk Dönemi'nin aristokratik bir konutu olan Bulgaristan'ın güneydoğusundaki Villa Armira'nın 10 numaralı odasındaki figürlü mozaik tasvirlerini ele alan önceki çalışmanın devamıdır. Mevcut çalışma, hafır J. Mladenova tarafından triclinium (ziyafet salonu) olarak tanımlanan 6 numaralı odayı süsleyen Antoninler Dönemi'ne ait geniş taban mozağını incelemektedir. Bu mozağın ikonografisine dair Mladenova tarafından ilk kez yapılan ve daha sonra G. Kabakchieva tarafından da teyit edilen tanım ve yorumlar; eserin anlamını netleştirmek ve onu daha geniş bir sanat tarihi bağlamına yerleştirmek amacıyla yeniden ele alınmıştır.

Araştırmada, İmparatorluğun hem doğu hem batı kesimlerinden alınan mozaik döşemeler ve kabartma heykel örnekleriyle karşılaştırmalar yapılmıştır. İncelenen konular arasında Medusa, rüzgârlar, mevsimler ve bazı hayvan tasvirleri ile anlamı kesinleşmemiş genç kadın ve erkek profilleri yer almaktadır. Bu portrelerin olası yorumları arasında ev tanrıları (Penates) ya da mozağın üretildiği bölgeyi simgeleyen coğrafi kişileştirmeler bulunmaktadır. Tartışma, ayrıca mozağın tasarımını ve figürlü içeriğini 6 numaralı odanın toplumsal işleviyle ilişkilendirmekte ve mozaik döşemenin tarihlendirilmesini desteklemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Villa Armira, triclinium, Medusa, rüzgârlar, mevsimler, Penates, coğrafi kişileştirmeler.

* David Parrish, School of Design, Art, and Performance, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4076-362X>. E-mail: dparrish@purdue.edu

As a complement to Catherine Balmelle's great expertise and passionate interest in mosaics of the western Roman empire, the present article focuses attention on mosaic art in the Roman east, specifically the region of ancient Thrace or modern Bulgaria. I shall discuss one pavement in the *Villa Armira* (located near Ivailovgrad in southeastern Bulgaria), a well preserved aristocratic residence of peristyle type, built in stages primarily during the 2nd century AD and yielding numerous mosaics (Fig. 1, architectural plan of the *villa*). This building was excavated by Janka Mladenova in the 1960s and subsequently very successfully restored, with a further renovation being conducted currently (on the *villa*'s architecture, see Mladenova 1991). The mosaics were originally published by the excavator (see especially Mladenova 1983), and there have followed several other studies of these works by G. Kabakchieva (Kabakchieva 2012: 20-37; 2019a and b: 47-59), J. Valeva (Valeva 2015), and myself (Parrish 2020). Of the two figural mosaics in this ensemble, it is the very large pavement in Room 6, located on the building's east side and identified as a *triclinium* that concerns us here. It dates to the *villa*'s latest construction phase in the Antonine era, as suggested by archaeological evidence, and this room became the building's principal social space. The mosaic floor (see Kabakchieva 2019b: 54-55 fig. 1) (Fig. 2), which remains *in situ* and measures 10.90 x 11.64 m, represents Medusa, the winds, the seasons, and other figures. The pavement is made of mainly dark

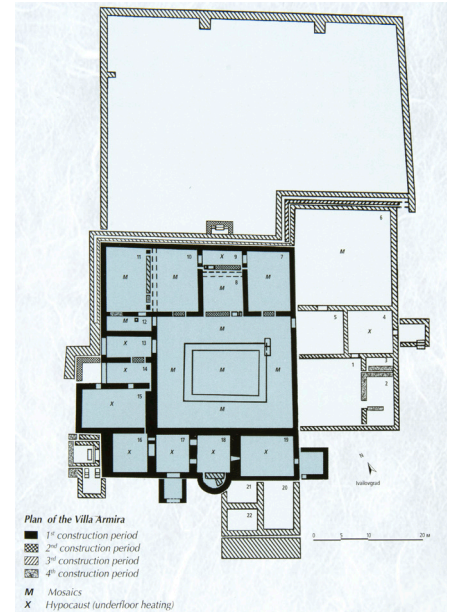


Figure 1
Architectural plan of *Villa Armira*. Source: Kabakchieva 2012: illus. on 13.

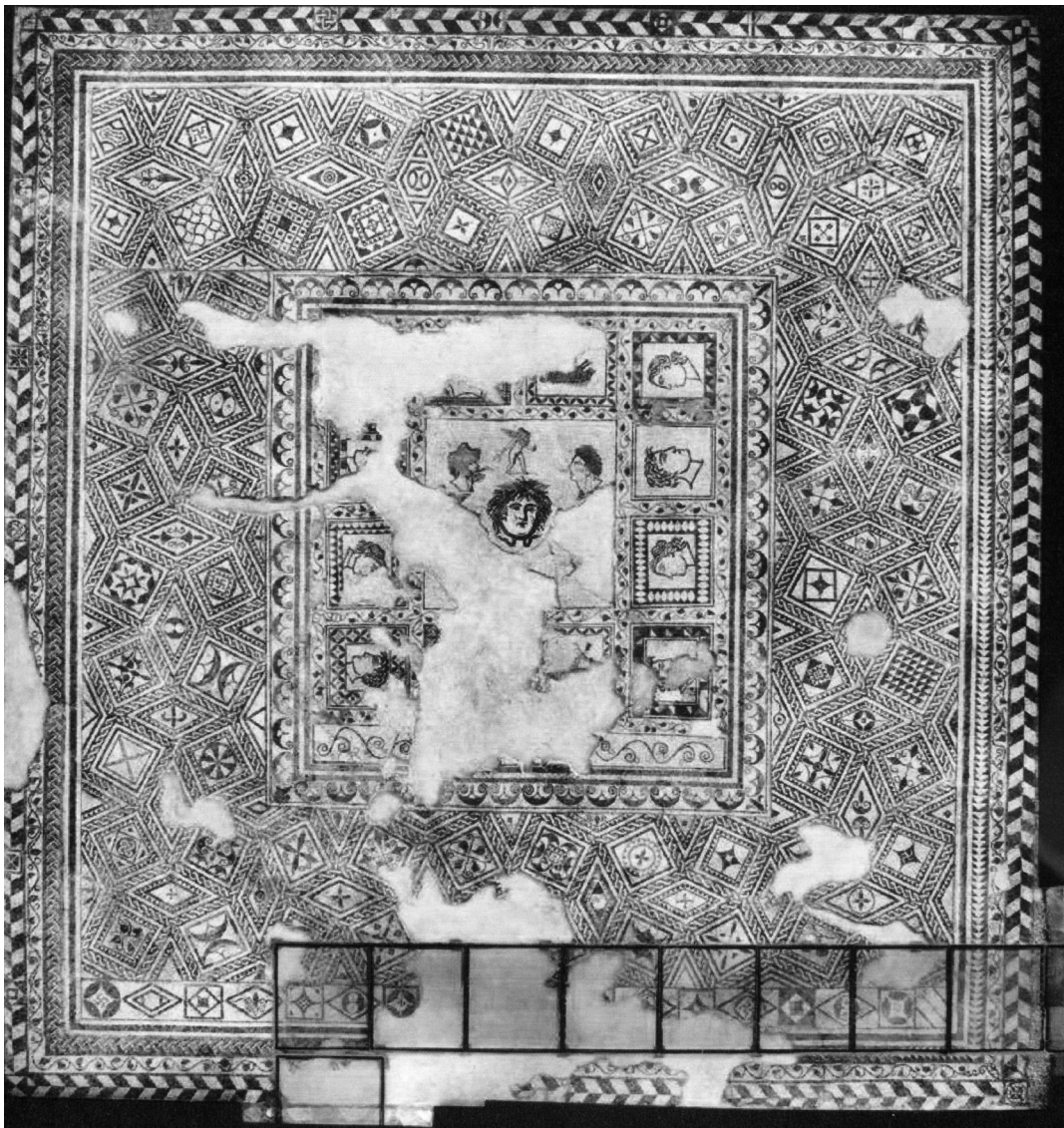


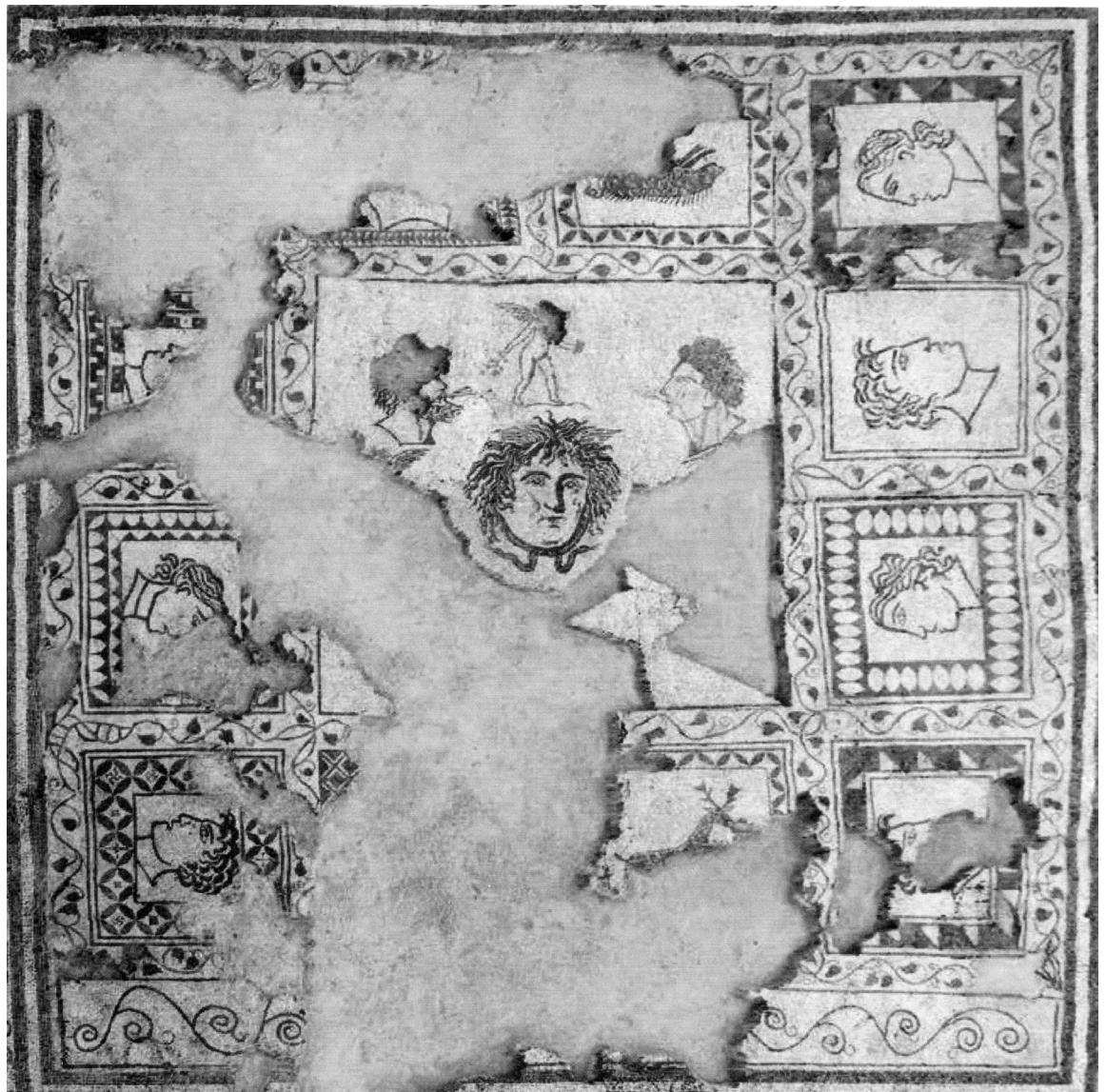
Figure 2
Villa Armira. Mosaic in Room 6, Overall view. Source: Kabakchieva 2019b: fig. 1 on 53. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Photo: Ivan Ivanov, Deyan Nedyalkov (NICH).

grey and white tesserae with several color highlights, and approximately two-thirds of the original surface is preserved. My intention is to describe and analyze the pavement, clarifying a few important aspects of the imagery, and to place this monument in a larger art historical context, while indicating the direction of future research about it.

Within a border formed by an ivy vine, a few geometric frames, and black filets, the pavement field is divided into two concentric sections of square shape, both a wide outer section of geometric design and an inner section or *pseudoemblema* of figural content, enclosed by a frieze of twelve panels. The geometric section, shaped by an energetic guilloche band, consists of an orthogonal pattern of adjacent lozenges and squares (Décor I: pl. 161a) that appears dense, because the units have inner frames and contain assorted ornamental motifs. This section very likely was reserved for the placement of *lecti* or couches for banqueters on three sides, while the fourth or south side may have been used for food service and performances by entertainers.

We shall now examine the figural imagery of the mosaic's central section more closely (Kabakchieva 2019b: 55-56 fig. 2) (Fig. 3). It is focused upon a large, striking head of Medusa which is turned slightly in three-quarter view to our

Figure 3
Mosaic in Room 6, Detail of Central section with figural images. Source: Kabakchieva 2019b: fig. 2 on 56. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Photo: Ivan Ivanov, Deyan Nedyalkov (NICH).



right, diverting the monster's fateful glance (Kabakchieva 2019b: 57 fig. 3) (Fig. 4). This figure type has a deep symbolic meaning rooted in Greek religion and social experience, eloquently explained by J.-P. Vernant (see Vernant 1991: especially 134-138). The head of Medusa in the Bulgarian mosaic exhibits wings on her head, blondish spreading hair knotted above, full cheeks, a strong penetrating glance, red lips, and a round chin, with a pair of snakes tied around her neck. To the immediate right and left of Medusa at a slightly raised level appear two inward-facing heads of young and old winds, seen in profile view and blowing air (Kabakchieva 2019b: 57 fig. 4) (Fig. 5, the young wind). Two additional winds located below the first pair are now missing. Between the winds around Medusa stood four small, young, winged male personifications of the seasons, of whom only autumn, directly above the Gorgon, survives, and he bears a basket of fruit (Mladenova 1983: 160, 163 fig. 12) (Fig. 6). For a more complete view of this central portion of the mosaic, when all four winds and all four seasons were preserved, see the archival photographs reproduced in Valeva 2015: figs. 5, 6; the latter is a detail of spring.

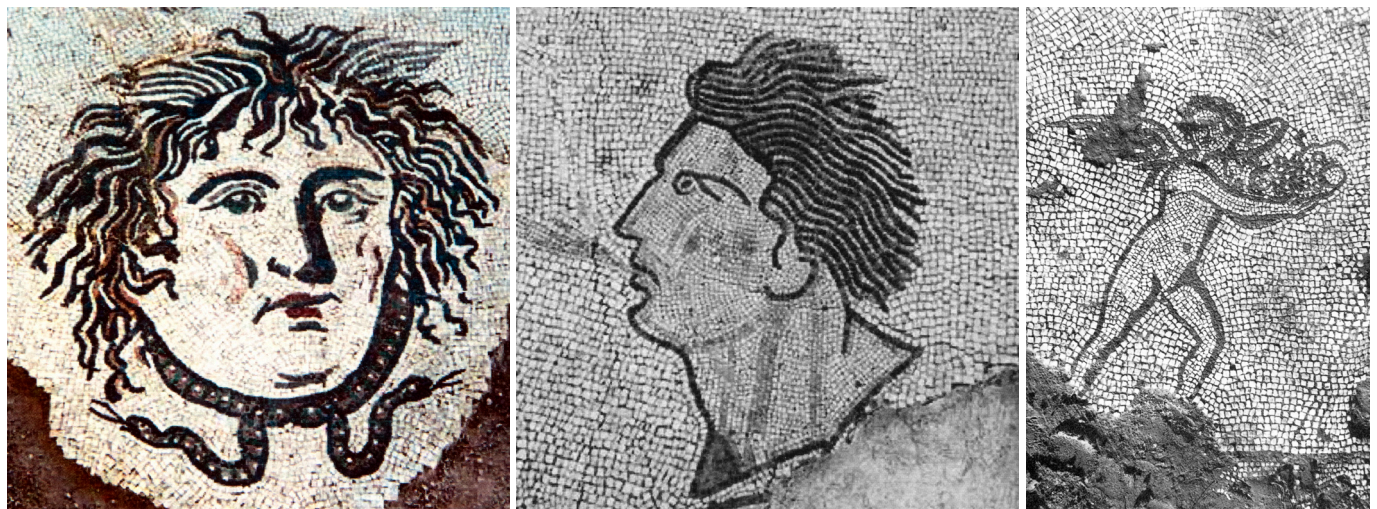


Figure 4

Mosaic in Room 6, Detail of Medusa. Source: Kabakchieva 2019b: fig. 3 on 57. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Figure 5

Mosaic in Room 6, Detail of young wind. Source: Kabakchieva 2019b: fig. 4 on 58. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

Figure 6

Mosaic in Room 6. Detail of autumn season. Source: Mladenova 1983: fig. 12 on 163.

We next refer to the twelve square panels framing the *pseudoemblema*. Eight of the panels, aligned vertically on the left and right (Kabakchieva 2019b: 57-58 fig. 5), contain profile heads of mature males and females who are simply drawn and turned outward from the center (Fig. 7, a detail of two of the heads). They are generic-looking, non-individualized figures, whom J. Mladenova identified as satyrs and maenads (Mladenova 1983: 160) and who, with the seasons, were understood to promote worldly prosperity and happiness under the auspices of Medusa; this identification of the heads is shared by G. Kabakchieva (Kabakchieva 2019b: 57). The problem with calling them satyrs and maenads is that they have no Dionysiac attributes, such as wreathes or an accompanying *pedum*, features that can be observed, for example, in a mosaic from *Ulpia Oescus* (Kabakchieva 2019c: 67 fig. 4) showing a satyr head with such features (Fig. 8). A different, intriguing suggestion, proposed by V. Popova in a personal, unpublished comment, is that the profile figures in Room 6 of the *Villa Armira* represent household gods or Penates associated with the family living in this home. Yet another possibility is to identify the profile heads in this pavement as allegorical figures, personifications of geographic features, such as territories in the region around the *Villa Armira* (female) and local rivers (male). In this context, one can compare the Bulgarian figures to heads of Roman provinces

Figure 7

Mosaic in Room 6, Detail of male and female profile heads. Source: Kabakchieva 2019b: fig. 5 on 58. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.



(two of those provinces, Egypt and Africa, are shown here) illustrated in a mosaic of early imperial date from Ostia (Fig. 9; see Becatti 1961: 46-47 no. 68 fig. 14 in text, drawing of entire mosaic; pl. CXXII, top, central portion of the pavement's left side). That mosaic, dated to 40-50 AD, was found in baths under the Street of the Fire Brigade in Ostia, and it also includes winds, as discussed more fully below. This iconographic question regarding the Bulgarian floor remains unresolved at present. Finally, there are noted in the mosaic of Room 6 the four additional square panels directly above and below Medusa containing outward-turned animals, a partially preserved wild boar above and a deer below. Both quadrupeds may be seasonally related.



Figure 8 (left)

Mosaic from *Ulpia Oescus*, Detail of satyr head. Source: Kabakchieva 2019c: fig. 4 on 67. Copyright. National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Science.



Figure 9 (right)

Ostia. Mosaic with winds and personifications of imperial provinces, left half of central portion. Source Becatti 1961: pl. LXXII, top.

Let us now examine the figural imagery in Room 6 in more detail, beginning with Medusa. Depictions of the head of Medusa as *apotropaia* in private homes became popular in Roman mosaics during the 2nd century AD and continued to be represented in later times. An early example is a Gorgoneion (Fig. 10) included among many other panels of mythological content, together with family portraits, in the mosaic of Hadrianic date ornamenting Room 10 of the *Villa Armira* (see Parrish 2020: 233 panel 27 fig. 20). That Gorgon occupies a panel at one end of a row of panels in a compositional grid and looks to the right. Multiple Gorgoneia of the 2nd and 3rd centuries also were found in Ostia, and they appear finely drawn in black and white centralized designs of square shape or within a spreading vegetal pattern. Examples include pavements from

the Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne (ca.120-130 AD. Becatti 1961: 154-155 no. 292 pls. LXXVII-LXXVIII,a), the House of *Apuleius* (early 2nd century; Becatti 1961: 89-90 no. 153 pl, LXX,b), and the House of the Gorgons, with two separate Medusa mosaics (3rd century; Becatti 1961: 25 nos. 41-42 pl. LXXII).



Figure 10
Villa Armira. Mosaic in Room 10, Detail of
Medusa. Source: Parrish 2020: fig. 20.

Many other mosaics from the Roman east and west, assigned to the 2nd century and later, depict the head of Medusa in a shield (see the repertory of such images compiled by V. Vassal in an article to appear in the forthcoming acts of the AIEMA colloquium held in Sofia in 2024). An excellent example is a pavement from Rome of the first half of the 2nd century, now kept in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Fig. 11 of this article; Belis 2016: 6-7 no. 1 fig. 1, illus. on cover; for the shield pattern, see *Décor II*: pl. 327,b). It shows a polychrome Gorgon within a shield of black and white triangles. The figure has tousled hair and a pair of snakes around her neck, as she looks to one side. This mosaic is one of a pair of pavements of very similar arrangement, each with a head of Medusa, placed in adjacent rooms of the same *domus* (for the companion floor, cf. Belis 2016: 8-9 fig. 2). Roman mosaics elsewhere display shields with other patterns, such as a series of curvilinear triangles (cf. a floor in the House of the Red Pavement at Antioch, Levi 1947: 88 pls. XIV,a; XCVI,a; the design occurs in *Décor II*: pl. 329,c). Especially popular elsewhere is a shield of scales or half-scales as seen in examples from Alexandria, beginning in the Hellenistic period (Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 74 no. 16 figs. 56-58). Another attractive Alexandrian example of this type, dated to the 2nd century AD, once ornamented a theater rather than a home (Guimier-Sorbets 2019: 76-77 no. 18 figs. 60-61, frontispiece). It depicts Medusa in a shield of brightly colored half-scales, with the shadow of one snake cast upon her cheek (Fig. 12). We also cite a related Thracian work, a quite well-preserved pavement decorating the *triclinium* of the House of Antiope in

Figure 11
Rome. Mosaic with head of Medusa. Source:
Belis 2016: fig. 1.



Figure 12
Alexandria. Mosaic with head of Medusa. Source:
Guimier-Sorbets 2019: fig. 60.



ancient *Marcianopolis* (modern Devnya) (Fig. 13). This mosaic (Pillinger et al. 2016: 60, 65 figs. 67-69), previously assigned to the late 3rd to early 4th centuries AD, should be redated to the early 3rd century, a revision to be published in Volume II of the *Corpus of the Mosaics of Bulgaria*. The head of Medusa in the *Marcianopolis* floor has a rather full face and animated expression, and she turns her head leftward. The surrounding shield displays a pattern of black and white half-scales. This Medusa and several mosaic counterparts can be compared to contemporary Roman relief sculpture, such as sarcophagi from Asia Minor of the later 2nd and early 3rd centuries (cf. a Proconnesian garland sarcophagus with Gorgoneia of Severan date, McCann 1979: 30-33 no. 2 fig. 23). Similar in manner, but showing a more dramatic expression, are the Medusa reliefs embellishing the Severan Forum at *Leptis Magna* (Caffarelli - Caputo 1966: 94 figs. 116-119) and the related medallions of somewhat earlier date in the Sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma (Akurgal 1970: 231 pl. 74,a).

Figure 13
Marcianopolis, House of Antiope, Mosaic
with Gorgoneion. Source: Photo courtesy of
V. Popova.



The result of this discussion is to help explain the artistic context and distinctive presentation of the Gorgoneion in the mosaic in Room 6 of the *Villa Armira*. Its boldness of execution and emotional intensity vividly reflect contemporary stylistic currents regarding Gorgoneia, whereas the square format of the Thracian image contrasts with shield designs favored for this subject in mosaics

at many other sites in the Roman east and west. Also noteworthy is the particular combination of iconographic features found in this *Villa Armira* floor.

Our analysis now turns to the other types of figures illustrated in the central section of the mosaic in Room 6, that is, the winds, seasons, and animals. An important artistic prototype among mosaic representations of the winds, showing them as paired heads, young and beardless versus older and bearded in profile view, is the black and white pavement with this subject from Ostia cited above (Fig. 9). The four winds in that complete example may represent the major winds of Greco-Roman tradition, namely, *Boreas*, *Notos*, *Euros*, and *Zephyros*, which also may be true for the entire set of winds depicted in Room 6 of the *Villa Armira*, when its pavement was intact. An artistic parallel can be drawn with the allegorical mosaic of Aion, Ge, the seasons, and other figures of 3rd-century date from *Shahba-Philippopolis* (see Balty 1977: 28-29 no. 9 pl. on 29; Dunbabin 1999: 166, 168-169 fig. 174) (Fig. 14). In that work's celestial zone appear winged heads of winds in profile view labeled in Greek. *Boreas* and *Notos*, located on the mosaic's upper left side, are reproduced here, and both are beardless (Fig.15). Other Roman mosaics represent the winds as full-length nude figures with wings in their hair, as evident in the Cosmological Mosaic of later 2nd-century date at Mérida. In that example, the four canonical winds are identified by their Latin names and appear bearded (Quet 1981: 119-120 pls. II-III, VI; Honikel 2021: 204 fig. 4). A Hellenistic precedent for the latter imagery occurs in sculptural relief form on the Tower of the Winds or *horologion* in Athens, which illustrates eight winds as full-length, draped individuals with varied attributes (Camp 2001:176-180 figs. 173-174). Thus the winds in the pavement of Room 6 in the *Villa Armira* clearly belong to an iconographic trend extending over several centuries, and the most direct artistic influence on the Thracian example may have been pavements of Roman Italy.

Figure 14
Shahba-Philippopolis, Allegorical Mosaic with Aion, Ge, the seasons and other figures, Overall view. Source: <https://bornindamascus.blogspot.com/2017/11/a-mosaic-from-philippopolis.html>



Figure 15
Shahba-Philippopolis, Allegorical Mosaic, Detail of celestial zone, left side. Source: Close-up of Fig. 14 of this article.



Of particular interest in the mosaic of Room 6 in the *Villa Armira* are the figures of seasons. Youthful males representing the times of year began to appear in both Roman sculpture and mosaics in the 2nd century AD, and they had varied associations. On official monuments, such as triumphal arches, including the Arch of Trajan at Benevento (see Brilliant 1967: 115 figs. 45-46) and the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum (Brilliant 1967: 115-120 pls. 38-40), the seasons allude to the universal happiness and prosperity or *Felicitas Temporum* brought by the emperor's victory in war (on this subject, linked to the notion of a Golden Age, see Hanfmann 1951: 163-184). The seasons, finely carved and well preserved on the Severan arch in Rome, are personified by winged boys with appropriate attributes. On 2nd-century sarcophagi, young males of seasonal content initially appeared as putti carrying garlands of fruits, symbolizing pleasure in the afterlife and the constantly renewed cycle of time. By the 3rd century, standing young seasons on funerary monuments were sometimes associated with a deity such as Dionysus, as seen on the elegant Badminton Sarcophagus of mid-3rd-century date, kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (McCann 1979: 94-106 no. 17 fig. 109).

A parallel, yet separate development occurred in mosaics, with the seasons first represented by standing female personifications or Horae, on occasion accompanied by children referring to seasonal crops or *karpoi*, as viewed in the Mosaic of Aion and the Seasons from Silin (Mahjoub 1983: 302 col. pl. 17 after 148; Dunbabin 1999: 122 fig. 126), dated to the late 2nd-century. Aion, a figure symbolizing eternity or cyclical time, assures unending natural wealth. In a different pavement, the allegorical mosaic from *Shahba-Philippopolis* cited above, putti are detached from Aion and female seasons and gather around the seated Ge in the pavement's lower central zone (Fig. 14). Alternatively, some young males of seasonal significance were represented as realistic laborers harvesting the produce of their times of the year alongside female personifications. A fine example is the Mosaic of Neptune and the Seasons of Antonine date from La Chebba, showing Neptune as a triumphant central figure (Parrish 1984: 201-204 no. 49 pls. 66,b-68; for other examples of seasonal laborers, especially on sarcophagi, cf. Hanfmann 1951: 174-181 nos. 445-504). By the later 2nd and early 3rd centuries, young males in mosaics also personified the seasons by themselves, as depicted both in the mosaic from the *Villa Armira* (Fig. 6), and in a pavement adorning the Schola del Traiano in Ostia (Becatti 1961: 200-201 no. 379 pls. LXXXVIII-LXXXIX), the latter of which is assigned to the reign of Septimius Severus. Similarly, in mosaics from Antioch of the first half of the 3rd century, young males alone represent the times of year, as can be seen in examples from the House of the Red Pavement (Levi 1947: 85-87, pl. XLII,b-e; see Fig. 16 depicting summer), and from the House of the Drinking Contest (Levi 1947: 161-162 pl. XXXII,a-d). The putto representing autumn in the mosaic of Room 6 (Fig. 6) takes its place within this iconographic development. Moreover, young male seasons remained popular in Roman mosaics to the end of the 3rd century and beyond, as we observe in a pavement from Haïdra (Parrish 1984: 190-193 no. 44 pls. 59,b-61), which displays seasonal putti in plant sprays placed diagonally around young Aion.

One additional aspect of the mosaic from the *Villa Armira* to comment upon briefly is the two preserved animals in that pavement's central section, a boar and a deer. The boar is definitely seasonally related, since boars are customarily hunted in winter (cf. the boar linked to winter in the mosaic from La Chebba cited previously). It also is possible that the deer in the *Villa Armira* pavement alludes to hunts in autumn, when that type of chase is common (for detailed imagery

Figure 16
Antioch, House of the Red Pavement, Season
mosaic, Detail of summer. Source: Pamir
2015: fig. on 65.



about deer hunting, see a pavement from Lillebonne, Balmelle - Darmon 2017: 186-188 figs. 237-238). If correct, this interpretation would echo the presence of quadrupeds of seasonal meaning in the corners of the Medusa mosaic from *Marcianopolis* (Pillinger et al. 2015: 60 figs. 70-71) (Fig.13). The two preserved fauna in that work are a lion for summer and a leopard for autumn, the latter referring to Dionysus. Yet other sorts of quadrupeds occur in the mosaic with seasons from the Scola del Traiano in Ostia (Becatti 1961: 200 no. 373 pl. LXXXVIII, bottom). Overall, the animals in the pavement of Room 6 in the *Villa Armira* mirror the broader theme of earthly abundance and universal well-being celebrated in that mosaic.

In conclusion, our investigation of the mosaic decorating Room 6 in the *Villa Armira* has clarified various features of the pavement's imagery and interpreted them within a broad art historical context. We can better appreciate how the mosaicist combined influences from the Roman east and west and created an imaginative, original design with a clear message. The pavement's special combination of elements very effectively invokes good fortune under the beneficent protection of its central figure, and it also may make local geographic references. The present study also reaffirms the mosaic's date in the Antonine era, when pavement art in ancient Thrace was in full bloom.

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