

# Rustical Villa Lifestyle in Roman Mosaic Art

## Roma Mozaik Sanatında Rustik Villa Yaşam Tarzı

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### Abstract


Mosaic art emerged as one of the most prominent artistic media of the Roman period, reflecting the transformations in social and cultural life. While many of the themes recall earlier decorative traditions, such as those found on ceramics, from the 2nd century AD onwards a distinctive genre developed, focusing on the representation of the rustic lifestyle. This imagery was closely associated with the idealized model of aristocratic rural life, which centered on villa estates (*villae rusticae*) situated outside the urban sphere. In these mosaics, rural activities, particularly agriculture, animal husbandry, and related productive practices are the principal subjects. Scenes frequently depict the herding of livestock, the harvesting and collection of agricultural produce, and other aspects of estate management. Figures such as villa owners, estate stewards, and dependent laborers are also integral elements, often arranged in hierarchical compositions that mirror the social order of the countryside. The villa itself is typically represented as the focal backdrop, around which these activities are organized, thereby underscoring its role as both the physical and symbolic center of rural life. The earliest examples of this rustic imagery are attested along the North African coast, where they appear in mosaic pavements of the imperial period. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, this visual repertoire spread eastward across the Mediterranean, reaching regions such as Anatolia. The mosaics of *villae rusticae* not only illustrate the ideals of rural aristocratic life but also provide valuable evidence for the integration of these estates into the wider networks of production and trade that sustained the Roman imperial economy.

**Keywords:** Villa Rustica, rural life, production, Roman Mosaics, North Africa, Levant, Anatolia.

### Öz

Mozaik sanatı Roma Çağı'nın değişen yaşam dinamikleri içinde belki de en popüler sanat ve zanaat dalı olmuştur. Betimlenen konular genel olarak aslında önceki yüzyıllarda örneğin seramikler üzerinde görülen konularla benzeştir. Fakat, Roma Çağı'nda olgunlaşan ve çok popüler olan rustik yaşam tarzı farklı bir stil olarak kendini İS 2. yüzyıldan itibaren mozaik sanatında belirgin bir biçimde gösterir. Şehirden uzaktaki aristokratik kırsal yaşam modeli rustik villalar etrafında şekillenir. Zengin villa sahipleri çiftliklerindeki kırsal yaşamı oturdukları villaların mozaiklerine de yansıtılmışlardır. Betimlenen sahnelerde tarım, hayvancılık ve diğer üretim faaliyetleri ile ilgili konular vardır. Sahnelerde güdülen hayvanların yanı sıra toplanan zirai ürünler ön plandadır. Bununla birlikte kırsal yaşam modeliyle ilişkili villa sahipleri, kahyalar ve serfler de bu sahnelerin önemli figürlerindedir. Sahnelerin odak noktası ise arkada betimlenen villa yapılarıdır. Tüm faaliyetlerin bu villalar etrafında gerçekleştiği görülür. Roma İmparatorluk Çağı'nın bu yeni rustik aristokratik yaşam biçiminin mozaikler üzerine yansıtılması ilk defa Kuzey Afrika kıyılarında kendini gösterir. Modanın İS 4. yüzyıldan sonra kıyı şeridinden doğuya doğru yayıldığı ve Anadolu'ya kadar ulaştığı anlaşılır. Özellikle Akdeniz'in etrafında konumlanan Villa Rusticalar ve rustik hayatın betimlendiği mozaikler dönemin üretim ve ticaret ağıyla da bir bütündür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Villa Rustica, kırsal yaşam, üretim, Roma Mozaikleri, Kuzey Afrika, Levant, Anadolu.

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Floor mosaics, whose origins are generally traced back to prehistoric times, continued to develop throughout successive periods of history. The earliest examples can be observed in Neolithic settlements such as Körtiktepe and Çayönü, where rounded floor stones first appear. Following these, the beginnings of true mosaic art are associated with Mesopotamia, specifically Uruk (Üstüner 2002: 7-9). Although further traces of mosaic usage are encountered in later periods, particularly in Anatolia, it was during the Roman era that the art form reached its full maturity and became established as an aristocratic fashion throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. In this period, mosaics were produced in a variety of genres, including geometric compositions, floral motifs, and mythological scenes. Another, less frequently preferred yet noteworthy theme is the depiction of *villa rustica* life. These representations should be regarded as a distinct style or genre within Roman mosaic art, since, as the examples examined in this study demonstrate, they exhibit specific and parallel iconography. The aim of this article is to examine the culture of the *villa rustica*, which held a significant place in the Roman world, and to determine how this cultural phenomenon was transmitted into mosaic art as a style/genre.

### Concept of Villa Rustica / Villae Rusticae in the Roman Age

The concept of the *villa rustica* was first articulated by Marcus Porcius Cato (c. 150 BC). In his treatise, Cato emphasized that the ideal farmhouse should be situated in close proximity to the city, the sea, or a river, and also near a major thoroughfare, so that surplus produce could be marketed with ease. He further stated that the *villa rustica* complex should include storage buildings, stables for animals, wine and oil cellars, outbuildings for stewards and slaves responsible for managing the estate, as well as guest rooms for visitors from the city (Cato agr. I, XIV, XV). Marcus Terentius Varro (27 BC) provides comparable information regarding this concept. According to him, storage facilities such as wine cellars and granaries needed to be adapted to the size of the estate and its anticipated yield. Beyond their agricultural utility, these villas also functioned as summer residences for members of the elite (Varro rust. XIII.6).

Columella (4 - c. 70 AD) categorized villas into three types: *villa rustica*, *villa urbana*, and *villa fructuaria* (Colum. I.6). The *villa rustica* –the rural villa– comprised not only the main residential building but also all associated facilities. These included barns and warehouses linked to agricultural production, workshops dedicated to craft and industrial activities, and even necropoleis (Ürkmez – Akın-Ürkmez 2017: 110-111). Particularly from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC onwards, rural villas became fashionable in Italy. Over time, they transcended the format of the farmhouse and developed into settlements equipped with many of the comforts of urban life. Constructed on flat lands outside city limits, these villas gained increasing popularity in Rome, especially due to their potential for unrestricted expansion (Sarkowicz 2003: 77-78).

At the beginning of the Roman imperial period, the market economy expanded considerably, with goods produced throughout the Mediterranean widely exchanged. Production sites located in the hinterlands of urban centers played a significant role in sustaining this economy (Temin 2001: 177). Coastal cities functioned primarily as hubs for trade and marketing, while rural settlements became the principal production centers. This dynamic revealed two defining features of *villae rusticae*: firstly, their proximity to urban centers, typically located along main routes at an average distance of around 30 km (White 1970: 50); and secondly, their composition of multiple functional structures (Bowden et al. 2004: 380; Kehoe 2006: 300; Finley 2007: 121). A case in point is the Nif

Villa, situated roughly 30 km from the port city of Smyrna, which, consistent with these observations, comprises numerous architectural components.

All free Roman citizens possessed the right to build a villa, depending on their economic means. Landowners typically divided their lives between their estates and the city. They employed as many laborers as necessary, depending on the scale of production (White 1970: 179). Most often, they resided on their estates only during the harvest season, while otherwise living in urban centers. The management of the estate was entrusted to the *vilicus* (Rivet 1970: 179). Agricultural production was carried out by serfs, who occupied a semi-servile status. Unlike traditional slaves, serfs could not be bought or sold, and they were allowed to retain a portion of their produce. These individuals, who lived under the authority of the landowner, were typically settled in villages attached to villas (Kazhdan 1991: 1877). This socio-economic system, closely linked to the Roman aristocracy, began to take shape in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, particularly in connection with the Tetrarchic reforms of Emperor Diocletian (284-305 AD) (Tekin 2008: 289). By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, this new aristocracy, formed by powerful and wealthy families, became a defining feature of Roman social and economic life. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onward, the growing demand for labor on estates gave rise to two distinct working classes: individuals who were technically free and liable to taxation but became bound to the landowner whenever the land they worked changed ownership, and those who remained unfree slaves (Rice 2002: 172-175).

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD witnessed the height of rural settlement development. A farmers' law was even codified for these estates, where grain, olive oil, and wine were the primary agricultural products. During this period, while urban centers experienced decline, rural settlements grew significantly in population and productivity, in some cases surpassing smaller towns in both size and demographic scale. These rural centers were not inhabited solely by agricultural laborers but also by craftsmen who were economically dependent on the landowner. Alongside agricultural goods, products such as ceramics, glass, and textiles were also manufactured in these contexts (Ceylan 2009: 45-55; Ürkmez – Akın-Ürkmez 2017: 112-113).

The most comprehensive studies on rural life in the ancient Mediterranean have been conducted in Cilicia. Archaeological investigations in this region have demonstrated that rural settlements were typically centered around a farmhouse. Between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, these establishments became increasingly complex, incorporating multiple residences, workshops, storage facilities, and cemeteries. By Late Antiquity, many of these farms had developed into substantial settlements, often featuring a centrally located church (Aydinoğlu 1999: 155–169; Aydınoğlu 2010: 243–282). Excavations carried out in 2012 near Nif, in the Kemalpaşa district of İzmir, revealed a villa rustica. Continued excavations in 2013 brought to light workshops and a necropolis associated with this Roman villa. Analysis of grave contexts indicates the existence of rural life in the area from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. While the evidence from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries points to a modest lifestyle, finds dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD indicate a prosperous phase of occupation. Among the significant remains was a large circular furnace, most likely used for glass production. Grave findings further attest to a densely inhabited settlement, with a lot of burials belonging to serfs employed at the villa (Ürkmez – Akın-Ürkmez 2017).

The Ulucak 476 Villa (Fig. 1), which constitutes the central element of the Nif/Ulucak complex, appears to have belonged to a Roman aristocrat, as evidenced by its elaborate floor mosaics. These mosaics feature both geometric patterns

and depictions of animals. Scholars working on the site have suggested a date in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Tok vd. 2013: 59), although we propose a somewhat earlier date, in the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Ürkmez – Akın-Ürkmez 2017: 121). It is particularly noteworthy that, despite the intensity of villa rustica life at this site, this rural lifestyle is not reflected in the mosaics. However, elsewhere in the Roman world, mosaic art does explicitly depict the villa rustica lifestyle as a distinct iconographic theme, as will be discussed in the following section.

### Roman Mosaics Depicting Rustical Villa Lifestyle

According to current data, the earliest mosaic example of rustic life in the ancient Mediterranean world was found in Algeria. This mosaic, discovered in 1925 during the excavations at Glénat and today preserved in the Cherchell Archaeological Museum, is dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD<sup>1</sup> (Ferdj 2006: 1; Mallon 2021: 14 fig. 5). The composition is divided into three panels, each depicting agricultural activities. In the upper and central panels, oxen are shown plowing the soil, while in the lower panel, beneath a vine pergola, workers dig the earth. However, there is no villa structure represented within these scenes. For this reason, the mosaic cannot be considered the earliest example of the villa rustica lifestyle, although it clearly constitutes the basis for this genre (Fig. 2).

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.musee-cherchell.dz/Anglais/collections\\_mosaiques.html](https://www.musee-cherchell.dz/Anglais/collections_mosaiques.html) (15.06.2025).

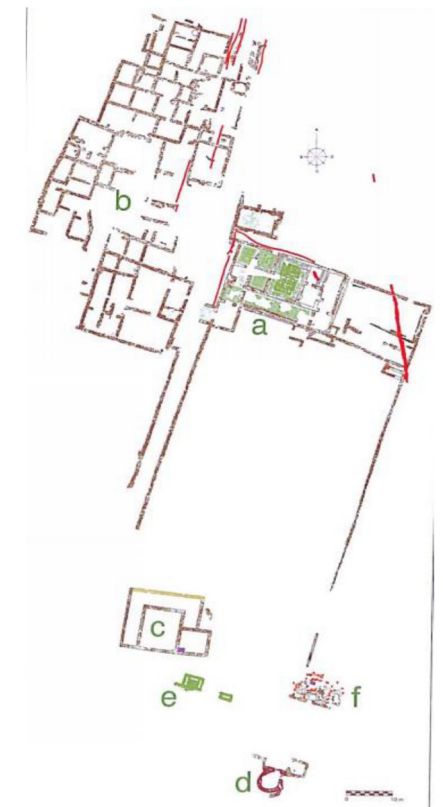
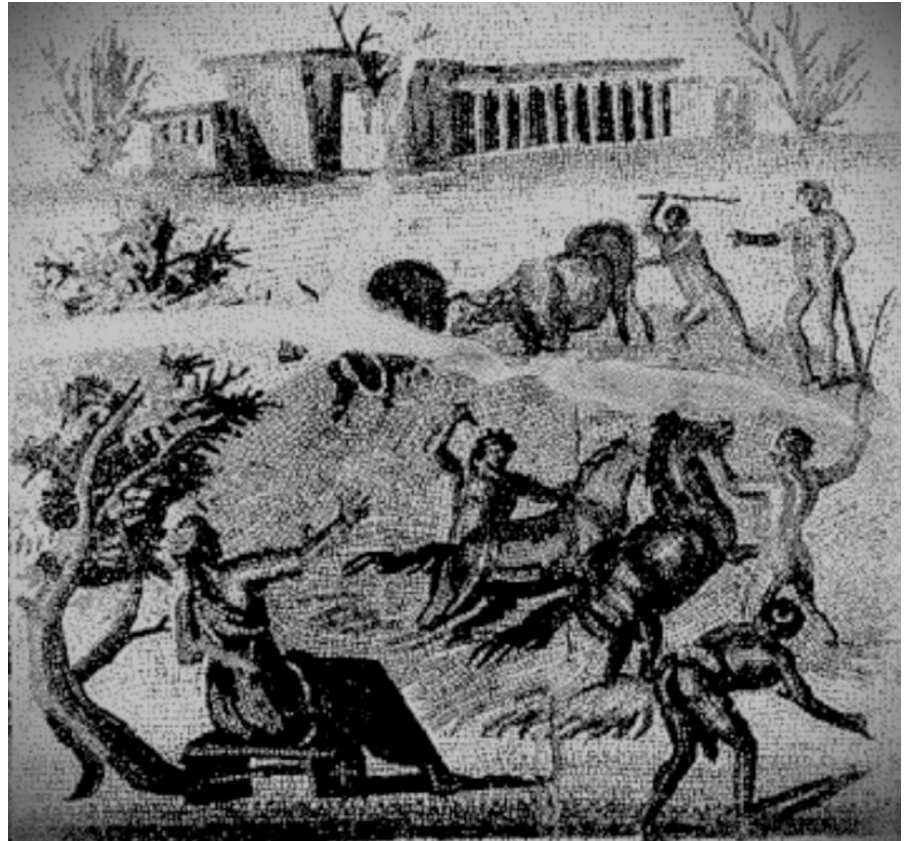


Figure 1  
Plan of Nif/Ulucak Rural Villa (*Villae Rusticae*) (Ürkmez - Akın-Ürkmez 2017 res. 3). a- Central Villa, b- Serf shelters, workshops and stables, c- Large warehouse, d- Large oven, e/f- Serf graves.

Figure 2  
Mosaic from Cherchell /Algeria, Mallon 2021: fig. 5 (by changing), [https://www.musee-cherchell.dz/Anglais/collections\\_mosaiques.html](https://www.musee-cherchell.dz/Anglais/collections_mosaiques.html) (15.06.2025).

The floor mosaics of the Zliten villa in Libya may be regarded as the first true example of this style. The mosaic, now housed in the Bordeaux Museum and dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Dunbabin 1978: pl. XXXVI, 96), depicts a large rural villa as the background of the scene. In front of the villa, a vivid representation of villa rustica life unfolds. A figure seated in the shade of a tree and giving hand signals to his attendants is probably the villa owner. Meanwhile, serfs, who use horses and oxen for plowing, strike the animals harshly with sticks. The figure standing beside them and leaning on a staff is most likely the steward, or vilicus (Fig. 3).

Figure 3  
Mosaic from Zliten/Libya, Dunbabin 1978:  
pl. XXXVI, 96 (by changing).



The Dominus Julius Mosaic from Carthage, Tunisia, dated to the late 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, is another important example. The building depicted in the middle panel dominates the composition, while rural life in North Africa is represented across three sections (Dunbabin 1978: pl. XLIII, 109; Mallon 2021: 15 fig. 6). In the upper panel, a woman reclines on a kline, cooling herself with a fan. This figure must be the villa's mistress. Around her stand attendants holding various animals. Farm workers are arranged in a row to present the produce and livestock of the estate to their noble mistress. The male figure mounted on a horse on both sides of the villa in the central panel, depicted as a hunter accompanied by an attendant, is most probably the villa's master. In the lower panel, the villa-owning couple sit opposite each other, while the surrounding serfs simultaneously labor and serve them produce (Fig. 4).

The Tabarka floor mosaic in Tunisia, today preserved in the Bordeaux Museum and dated to the late 4<sup>th</sup>–early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, also provides an illustrative case. The scene is dominated by a Roman villa (Dunbabin 1978: pl. XLIV, 111; Mallon 2021: 16 fig. 7). On the right side of the building, a horse is tied near surrounding trees and bushes, evoking an everyday moment of rural life. On the left, a woman, seated beneath a tree and leaning against a divan, spins yarn.



Based on her attire, she is likely either the lady of the villa or the wife of the vilicus. The yarn she spins must have been produced from sheep raised on the estate, traces of which can be seen grazing at the bottom of the panel (Fig. 5).



Figure 4  
Mosaic from Carthage/Tunisia, Dunbabin 1978: pl. XLIII, 109; Mallon 2021: fig.6, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Dominus-Julius-Mosaic-Carthage-Tunisia-late-fourth-century-CE-Source-Boyd\\_fig5\\_365894834](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Dominus-Julius-Mosaic-Carthage-Tunisia-late-fourth-century-CE-Source-Boyd_fig5_365894834) (15.06.2025).

Figure 5  
Mosaic from Tabarka/Tunisia, Dunbabin 1978: Pl. XLIV, 111; Mallon 2021: 16 fig.7 (by changing), <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/rural-villa-mosaic-from-thabraca-tabarka-tunisia-roman-news-photo/567934501> (15.06.2025).

Scenes of rustic life associated with villas also appear in the Northern Levant and Anatolia. In the mosaics of the Constantinian Villa at Antiocheia/Daphne, now displayed in the Louvre Museum and dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, serfs are again depicted as central figures (Stillwel 1938: 198; Levi 1947: 226–253, 611 pl. LIX). In the K floor mosaic, a serf is shown milking a goat in front of a villa. On floor E, a shepherd drives animals with a staff in his hand, while in mosaic A, another shepherd blows a horn, calling out to goats scattered in the surroundings (Fig. 6).

Figure 6  
Mosaic from Antiocheia/Türkiye, Levi 1947:  
LIX a, b, c. (by combining).



Another significant center in which villa rustica life was represented is Germanicia. A mosaic known as “the Mosaic of Life,” discovered in 2007 in the city center of Kahramanmaraş during rescue excavations, belongs to a rustic villa and is dated to between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Ersoy 2010: 185; Küçükdağlı 2012: 97; Ersoy 2017: 114-223). The polychrome mosaic, divided into three panels and framed by a double border, takes rural life as its central theme. Although Ersoy, who first published the mosaic, interpreted the upper panel as a hunting scene, the composition in fact depicts a comprehensive villa rustica lifestyle. On the far right, a villa worker in a green tunic carries a basket on his back while chasing birds away from a fruit tree with a stick. To the left,

another serf in a red cloak holds a partridge-like bird in his hand. Other animals include deer drinking water, a swan, a rooster, a partridge, and several dogs. In the background stand two villa complexes, though their inscriptions are partially illegible due to poor preservation. In the middle panel, the main figure is a serf wearing a himation and a red cloak, holding a staff and accompanied by a shepherd dog. He herds oxen grazing among fruit trees. Two villas appear again in the background, one inscribed with the name MANXICI, likely the owner's name. In the lower panel, small livestock graze beneath oak and pine trees, with villas once more depicted in the background; one bears the inscription ΚΟΧΑΙΑ, which must also denote ownership (Fig. 7).

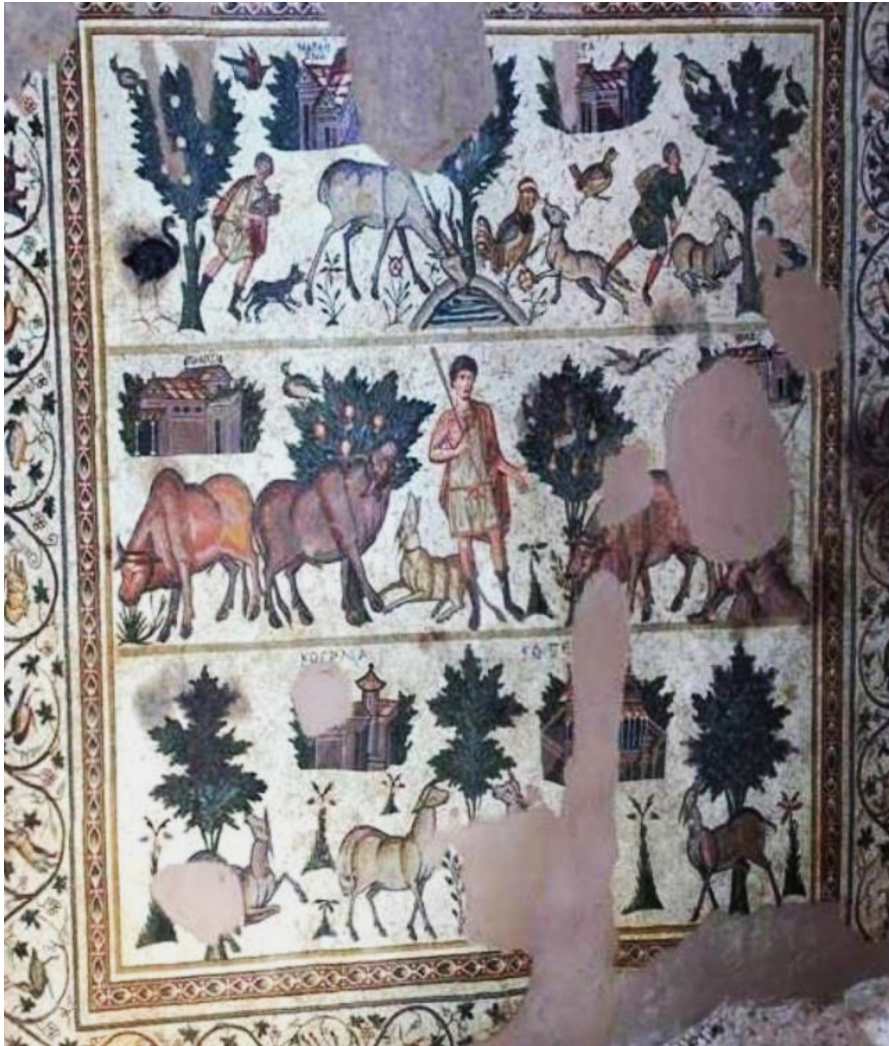
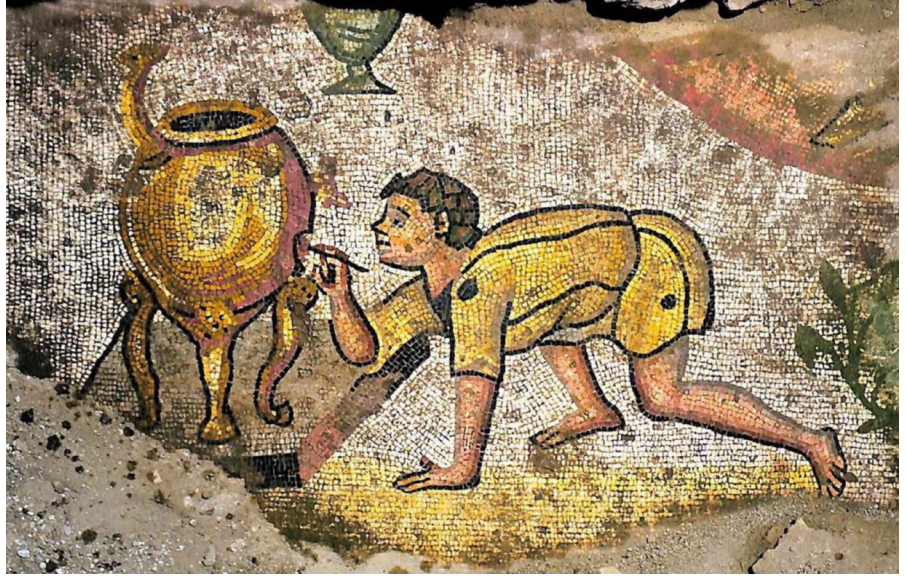


Figure 7  
The mosaic of life from Germanicia/ Türkiye, Ersoy 2017: 115 (by changing), <https://turkishmuseums.com/Uploads/M%C3%BCze/Dosya/fc19fd96-612b-4304-8df4-0944a6936bf7.pdf> (15.06.2025).

Germanicia has also yielded mosaics depicting natural life without villa structures, consisting mainly of wild animal representations (Dumankaya 2018: 12 fig. 5). Another noteworthy discovery is the so-called “Ceramic Master Mosaic,” which demonstrates that villa rustica life encompassed not only animal husbandry and agriculture but also crafts. The scene shows a serf painting a large pithos, placed on three legs, with a brush in his hand (Ersoy 2017: 239-242). This composition highlights the diversity of rural production, extending beyond farming to include artisanal activities such as ceramic making (Fig. 8).

Depictions of rural life are also found in the Adriatic region, on the opposite side of the Mediterranean. The Arapaj mosaic near Durrës, dating to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, although not featuring villa structures, vividly presents a rustic scene

Figure 8  
Ceramic Master Mosaic from Germanicia/  
Türkiye, Ersoy: 2010: 206 (by changing),  
<https://www.marasaktif.com/dulkadiroglu-haberleri/okay-sehrin-tum-dinamikleri-germanicia-icin-bir-araya-gelmeli-h34752.html> (15.06.2025).



(Omari 2012: 118 fig. 3; Raynaud – İslami 2015: 109 fig. 6). On the left, a serf sits on a rock, holding a staff in his right hand and resting his chin on his left, in a pensive pose, while a shepherd dog barks in front of him. Another serf holds a rope in his hand, attempting to catch a horse crouching at his feet and following him attentively. Across the stage, goats graze and horses run freely, animating the rural landscape (Fig. 9).

Figure 9  
Arapaj mosaic near Durrës/ Adriatic, Omari  
2012: 118 fig.3 (by changing).



## Conclusion

The representation of everyday life in a rustic villa is generally not considered a 'style' but rather as a collection of 'themes' depicting rural activities (Dunbabin 1999: 118-119). However, it may be suggested that the Villa Rustica genre can be regarded as an iconographic style in mosaic art, reflecting the cultural and social identity of the Roman aristocracy. Roman nobles residing in rural villas chose to display the rural lifestyle of the estates they owned and managed, perhaps as a source of pride, through the mosaics that decorated their residences. The common feature of the mosaics examined is the emphasis on the wealth and prosperity of the villa owners. In all these scenes, the villa buildings that constitute the core of the *Villa Rustica* lifestyle are prominently depicted. Surrounding these structures

are cultivated lands, herded animals, fruit-bearing trees, and servant laborers, together with their stewards, all engaged in the daily rhythms of agricultural life and activity.

The earliest attestations of this iconographic program representing the rural lifestyle on mosaics are observed in North Africa during the 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. From the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, this stylistic expression appears in southeastern Anatolia, while the examples from the Adriatic region indicate that the fashion reached southeastern Europe only in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. In other words, it can be argued that this genre or style was primarily adopted in coastal regions of the Mediterranean (Fig. 10). This phenomenon may be related to the circulation and export of agricultural products through maritime trade. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the Mediterranean coastline was not exclusively characterized by villas of this type; rather, their representation reflects a conscious choice in accordance with the prevailing fashions of the period.



Figure 10  
Regions where rustic lifestyle is depicted on mosaics / Google Maps.

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