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Some Considerations on the Interplay Composition - Surface

Etkileşim Kompozisyonu Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler - Yüzey

Maria de Jesus DURAN KREMER*

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Abstract

When analysing different floors of Roman mosaic, it must be noted that the choice of the iconographic program for the decoration of one or more spaces in the same building follows, in general, the guidelines given by the commissioner of the work according to his preferences or the objectives of representativeness that he hopes to achieve through that program.

However, the adaptation of the chosen composition to the surface to be decorated is surely up to the mosaic artists. According to their expertise and probably also to the budget allocated to the work, they will adapt the composition as a whole and the integrated patterns (present therein) to the measurements of the surface to be decorated.

The analysis of these elements is mainly decisive in the study of pavements with compositions based on geometric schemes.

Keywords: Roman mosaic, composition, style, patterns, space planning.

Öz

Roma mozaiklerinin farklı döşemeleri analiz edilirken, aynı yapıda bulunan bir veya daha fazla mekânın dekorasyonu için ikonografik program seçiminin, genel olarak, çalışma sorumlusu tarafından kendi tercihlerine göre veya bu dekorasyon programı aracılığıyla gerçekleştirmeyi umduğu temsillere göre yapıldığına dikkat edilmelidir.

Bununla birlikte, seçilen kompozisyonun dekore edilecek yüzeye uygulanışı kesinlikle mozaik sanatçılarına bağlıdır. Muhtemelen işe tahsis edilen bütçeye ve uzmanlıklarına göre, kompozisyonu bir bütün olarak ve entegre desenleri (orada mevcut olan) dekore edilecek yüzeyin ölçümlerine uyarlayacaklardır.

Bu öğelerin analizi, geometrik şemalara dayanan kompozisyonlardan oluşan döşemelerin çalışmasında esas olarak belirleyicidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Roma mozaiği, kompozisyon, stil, desenler, alan planlaması.

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Although in the past geometric compositions have been relegated to the background in relation to figurative compositions, their significance for the understanding of the evolution of artistic currents, of themes that are often millenary, of the miscegenation of Cultures, has been recognized by an increasing number of researchers, giving rise to a new perception of this type of decoration.

The analysis of style and patterns of the mosaics in Portugal, which had already been initiated, was integrated in the scope of the project RoGeMoPorTur¹, *conditio sine qua non* for a possible identification of, among other aspects, local, regional or itinerant mosaic workshops, of cultural influences, of artistic currents in the choice of the type of pavement decoration by the commissioner of the work, of the identification of the interpretation given to this or that motif at local or regional level.

Thus, in a first moment, it is necessary to individualize the “vision” present in the spirit of the commissioner of the work. He is the main figure in this phase of the mosaic production: his vision of the decoration of the floor(s) of one or all the rooms of the property to be decorated, be it a *domus* or a *villa*, is undoubtedly the result of his training and personal experience, of what he got to know in other parts of the Empire, of the priority given to different themes either linked to mythology, domestic scenes, to the most relevant activity of the commissioner of the work or for the region where he lives, or finally to his social status.

However, this type of analysis must be closely linked to the spatial ordering scheme of the surface to be decorated according to the chosen composition.

One of the most interesting characteristics of the analysis of a mosaic floor is, without a doubt, the choice made by the person in charge of the work for the insertion of the composition in the surface of the room, in order to, although respecting the original concept of the composition, fill the entire surface to be decorated, no matter how irregular it may be. Having already been addressed in detail in the past (Baum-vom Felde 2003: 51-60), it is a first step towards the identification of the working method of a workshop.

We know today that “it was found in the archaeological excavations” that “the execution of the Vitruvian norm is rarely proven” (regarding the construction of the support for the mosaic pavement) and that “...each workshop was adapted to the terrain and also, it is assumed, to the budget that was available to carry out the work” (Campos Carrasco et al. 2008: 14). In our opinion, this is an equally valid assumption, for the reordering of the patterns and motifs of a mosaic composition, in order to fill the space at your disposal.

Thus, when determining the type of solution chosen for the ordering of the surface to be decorated, the mosaic artist is immediately confronted with another question: the adaptation of the chosen geometric scheme to the actual dimensions of the pavement for which it is intended. A question that, in general, is not raised when a figurative decoration with mythological scenes, hunting, etc., is chosen: Here the decoration allows a very open dialogue with the surface, an adaptation to the limits of the scene pre-defined by the frame that delimits the composition. In the case of geometric schemes, however, this dialogue between decoration and the surface to be decorated would require, in certain cases, an adaptation of the individual geometric elements as a whole and a new calculation of the dimensions of each one of them - a calculation to be made again for

¹ RoGeMoPorTur. East meets West: investigating the reciprocal influence of East and West in the Roman geometric mosaics of Portugal and Turkey. A comparative study.

each of the floors to be decorated, which also implies an adaptation of the base grid drawn on the nucleus and from which all the other motifs evolve.

Not doing that, the mosaicist has to find a solution, on a case-by-case basis, that allows him to fill the residual space without disturbing the overall syntax. Thus, in a first step, the mosaic artist determines the dimensions and the placement of the frame for the overall composition, delimiting from the first moment the dimensions of the interior space intended for the “carpet” or “carpets” to be executed in mosaic. In general, the frame is centred in relation to the walls of the room, using, in most cases, a uniform decoration for the space between the frame itself and the walls. The “interior” decoration of the frame may consist of a surface decoration, often distributed over two or more mosaic carpets according to the final use for which the room is intended. Then, when the composition “on the ground” is completed, the mosaic artist has to decide which strategy to follow to finish off one or more sides of the composition.

In the territory of Lusitania that we analyse today, there are several examples of different approaches and solutions to this dilemma.

I) Prolongation of Existing Patterns in the Composition, Possibly with a Modification of the Original Form

One of the examples we have in Portugal is in room C3 of the Roman *villa* of Abicada (plan: Duran Kremer 2008: 213-222) (Fig. 1). The composition consists of a main carpet in an eight-pointed star of lozenges system (Salies 1974: Rautensternsystem IV), and a narrower carpet in an hexagon system (Salies 1974: Hexagonsystem II).

Figure 1
Mosaic, room C3 (*villa romana da Abicada*).
© MJ Duran Kremer



The analysis of the first carpet shows us a careful, orthogonal composition, in which the bottom geometric scheme was used not only as an ordering element of the composition but also and above all as an independent decorative element. The geometric shape of the lozenge mosaic tiles that form the eight-pointed stars (in black on a white background) is repeated within the lozenges themselves, however, introducing the polychrome on a uniform white background. In the squares formed by the longer sides of two stars, two different motifs were inserted, distributed symmetrically following the diagonals of the composition. In the smaller squares formed by the tips of the stars, a single motif was used (the concave, inverted square), which was given a differentiated polychrome treatment from square to square. The squares and rectangles formed by the external delimitation of the composition are filled with isosceles triangles in black on a white background (Décor I: pl. 29i). The lateral rectangles are filled by a lozenge with circles inscribed in opposition of colours.

Of a qualitatively high execution, this carpet limits to the north, with a second bichrome carpet, (black and white), where the geometric scheme is the only decorative element. The carpet is also carefully executed and is to be classed part in the Italian tradition of *black and white* style mosaics (Fig. 2).



Figure 2
Room C3. Detail.
© MJ Duran Kremer

The mosaic in room C3 is a clear example of the choice made at the level of the decorative syntax: for the execution of the mosaic, the base tile was used with pre-fixed dimensions and that, most probably, was used by the mosaic artist for a first structuring of the surface to be decorated (“on the mortar of the nucleus beneath there are two sets of preparatory lines. First a grid, orthogonal and diagonal, was incised into the surface of the mortar with a sharp instrument; this permitted the overall construction of the pattern” Dunbabin 1999: 283). It is likely that, according to the expertise of the mosaic artists and the budget allocated to the work to be carried out, this grid would or would not be adapted to the actual dimensions of the final pavement.

In the case of room C3, there was no adaptation, at least as far as the second carpet is concerned: beginning from the lower right corner to the left and north the motif of the hexagons and lozenges is cut off on the left side of the carpet, not respecting the principles of symmetry present on the main carpet. In the same way, the hexagons of the last row next to the frame are unfinished and two of their sides are extended until touching the black line that constitutes the delimitation of the composition (Fig. 2).

Similar examples can be found in Conimbriga (for example, Correia 2013: 269 fig. 126) or on the carpet B of the peristyle of *villa Cardilio* (Duran Kremer 1999: fig. B2, B4), next to the delimitation of the composition for the garden (we will mention here only some mosaics as examples, chosen from the numerous existing examples).

Still in the Roman *villa* of Abicada we find similar situations in two other rooms: room G and room C4 (plan: Duran Kremer 2008: 213-222). However, here, either because a new calculation of the base grid was carried out, or because the dimensions of the surface to be decorated and the chosen composition were more adequately adapted to the existing grid, there was no need to change the patterns (of part) of the composition.

II) Cutting-off of Existing Patterns in the Composition, Possibly with Modification of the Original Motif

One of the best-known examples is, without a doubt, the mosaic of the winning horses of Torre da Palma (Lancha - André 2000: Estampa LXXXIX). An orthogonal composition of divided meanders of inverted return swastikas, forming squares between them (Décor I: pl. 194c), it is a dense, elaborate composition, designed to highlight the five winning horses, inscribed in the squares placed diagonally: “in this mosaic of the Villa de Torre de Palma, the theme has lost its special connotation and is presented as a mere ornamental framework of figurative representation” (Alves 2002: 81). This goal is achieved by leaving no free spaces other than those of the “frames” in which the horses’ representations are inserted, so that the observer is led to concentrate on the images of the horses.

Thus, it is easy to overlook the fact that the patterns in the last row (meanders with a central rectangle filled with geometric motifs) are incomplete, cut by the outer frame of the mosaic. The fact that this part of the composition is separated from the first one by a row of black tesserae may allow it to be interpreted as a second carpet, independent of the first. However, the cut of the motif remains a clear sign of the use of pre-calculated base squares applied indiscriminately by the workshop responsible for the execution of the mosaic.

Other examples on Portuguese territory can be found in Conimbriga (Correia 2013: print XI) and, although humbler in its making and impact, in the A carpet of the peristyle of *villa cardilio*, next to the delimitation of the composition for the garden (Duran Kremer 1999: vol. III fig. A2, A8).

III) Duplication of the Patterns Already Present in the Composition

The duplication of patterns already present in the composition is unfrequently used as a solution for filling a “space” left empty by the composition, between the composition itself and its frame. It can only be used when the duplication of the subject fits perfectly in the space to be decorated.

As far as we know, there is only one example in Portugal to date: the floor of the G room of *villa cardilio* (Fig. 3), certainly the most emblematic and also the best known of all the floors of this Roman *villa*. After having been studied in depth in the past (Duran Kremer 1999), (the duplication of patterns) continues to be the object of differentiated research, not only because we find ourselves - with the exception of room H (Duran Kremer: 1999 fig. H 4-13).- facing a coherent iconographic programme in itself, but also and above all because the development of scientific research on mosaics and the discovery of new floors in Portugal require a further deepening of interpretative analyses.

Figure 3
Mosaic, room G (*villa cardilio*, Torres Novas). © MJ Duran Kremer



In the case of the floor of room G (Fig. 3) we are dealing with a mosaic designed in detail as a bearer of a message that, in addition to being understood by all those who had access to it, was aimed at being perennial, i.e. conveying its message also to future generations².

² The different patterns filling the inscribed squares and their message have been analysed in detail in: Duran Kremer 1999: 8-121; Duran Kremer 2005: 189-202..

The stylistic analysis of the mosaic in room G showed clearly that we are dealing with a mosaic workshop not necessarily local but certainly regional, for which the execution of geometric compositions was not of any difficulty, however complex it was, as can easily be seen by the expertise in the execution of the mosaics of the peristyle, especially the carpet E (Duran Kremer 1999) (Fig. 4) and F (Duran Kremer 1999) (Fig. 5). A skill, however, that certainly did not extend to figurative representations.

Figure 4
Mosaic E (*villa cardilio*, Torres Novas).
© MJ Duran Kremer



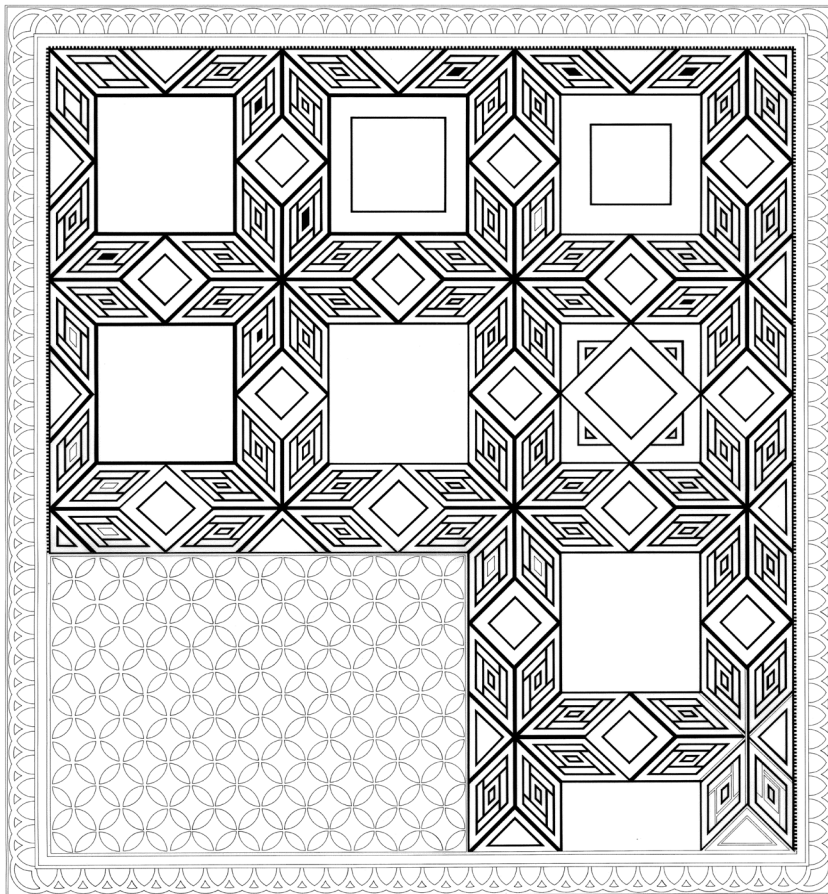
As in the previous examples, the previous definition of the composition frame can also be seen as determining the placement of the mosaic, the dimensions of which clearly delimit the surface reserved for the chosen composition. However, and despite the meaning and relief assumed by the narrative discourse inherent to the floor of room G, there was no adaptation of the base grid to the surface to be decorated and to the chosen geometrical scheme (Salies 1974:

Rautensternsystem Ia) (Fig. 6). The use of a wider grid, which would have allowed the geometric scheme to be placed, without cuts or spaces to be filled in between it and the frame, would have had a positive impact, at least in terms of filling the square with busts, *kantharoi* and *falcula* (Figs. 3, 7): The iconographic programme chosen, requiring the placement of these symbols in a single square, could have been executed in a larger “space”, without the final frame seeming narrow and having overlapping patterns (Fig. 4).

However, the mosaic artists’ execution capacity has allowed to find a solution that fits perfectly in the overall composition: by filling in the “interval” space that ends the pavement laterally (on the right in the diagram in Fig. 6) with an almost complete line of eight-pointed stars (the two side diamonds are replaced by triangles), the decorative syntax of the pavement remains unchanged. Moreover, the concentration of the messages inscribed on the three main squares (Duran Kremer 1999: fig. G1, G2, G3, G4) is, optically, greater, catching the observer’s attention. The fact that the geometric composition next to the wall opposite the peristyle partially ends with a cut of the patterns further accentuates the endeavour to find the most integrative solution possible for the composition as a whole.



Figure 5
Mosaic F (*villa cardilio*, Torres Novas).
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Figure 6
Geometrical scheme (*villa cardilio*,
Torres Novas). © MJ Duran Kremer

Figure 7
Panel with busts (*villa cardilio*, Torres
Novas). © MJ Duran Kremer



IV) Insertion of a New Pattern, not yet Present in the Composition

It is in the Roman villa of Milreu (Oliveira 2010: 35-175) that we will find a different dialectic in relation to the surface to be decorated and the type of solutions found for the problems that the chosen composition and its relationship with the architecture of the room may raise (Fig. 8).



Figure 8
Mosaic (Milreu, *in situ*).
© Photograph T. Hauschild

Also, in this type of arrangement of the decoration on the surface to be worked, the mosaic artist determines, in a first step, the dimensions and placement of the frame (which, in this case, consists of an edge that frames the entire composition) delimiting the dimensions of the interior space intended for the two main “carpets”. However, the space left blank by the non-adaptation of the base grid and, consequently, of the chosen geometric scheme (Oliveira 2010: 117) (Salies 1974: Octogonsystem VI) was filled by a new linear motif (straight triangles - Décor I: pl. 11d), without any relation to the motifs/patterns and compositions

of any of the carpets. A probably random choice, made according to the dimensions of the grid - base and the space to be filled.

From this brief analysis of some of the mosaic floors existing in Portugal, it can certainly be concluded that, among the various aspects to be taken into account when identifying styles and artistic influences in Roman mosaic floors, the strategy followed in adapting (or not adapting) the geometric scheme to the surface for whose decoration it was chosen, can and should be one of the factors to take into account when trying to identify individual workshops and their presence in a given region or Province of the Roman Empire.

A study that will have to go through an analysis extended to other Provinces allowing, if not the finding of common denominators, at least the elaboration of common lines of action to the *ars musiva* in the Roman Empire: a task that we hope to develop in the framework of the *RoGeMoPorTur. East meets West: Investigating the Reciprocal Influence of East and West in the Roman Geometric Mosaics of Portugal and Turkey. A comparative study.*

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