

6-2016

# Modern Interpretations of Ancient Roman Mosaics

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MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF ANCIENT ROMAN MOSAICS

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Classics

UNION COLLEGE

MARCH, 2016

## ABSTRACT

PASTORE, EMILY Modern Interpretations of Ancient Roman Mosaics.  
Department of Classics March 2016

Ancient Roman mosaics have much to offer the modern viewer. This thesis takes into account modern archaeology and conservation techniques in studying and classifying these works of art. Since the thesis is focused on comparing the histories of and the mosaics found in the Ancient Roman port cities of Populonia and Ostia, it begins with the historical background of both cities. With close ties to the sea and to various religious cults, both cities held much in common, which can be seen in the mosaics they designed. I then discuss mosaic conservation and classification techniques in chapters two and three. In the fourth and final chapter I concentrate on the mythological and cult representations portrayed in the mosaics in these port cities, in particular those representations associated with the sea.

Much of the research for this thesis was conducted at the archaeological and historic sites discussed. In the summer of 2015 I worked on the archaeological site at Poggio del Molino, in Populonia, Italy; thus I have examined most of the mosaics discussed first hand. I first chose the mosaics that I discuss based on those that I visited or worked with in Populonia and Ostia, then later expanded my list to include other related examples from both areas. In addition to the mosaics themselves I used my field journal as a major source in this research. My field journal contains the notes from various talks, lessons, tours, and training sessions that I attended while researching at the site, and was invaluable while writing this thesis. I also used various secondary sources that can be viewed in the bibliography.

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## Introduction

In the summer of 2015 I conducted research in association with Archeodig and the University of Florence at an excavation at Poggio del Molino in Populonia, Italy. Archeodig, an archaeological field school established in 2008, focuses on understanding the settled areas of coastal Etruria:

[The excavation site at Poggio del Molino] extends over the northern and eastern slopes of a promontory that acts as a watershed between the beach of Rimigliano in the north, the Gulf of Baratti to the south and to the northern boundary of the town of Piombino (Livorno). The Roman structures are located on a plateau at about 20 meters above sea level, which dominates in the west, the stretch of sea between San Vincenzo and the Isle of Elba and the metalliferous hills and the plains of Campiglia lagoon to the east.<sup>1</sup>

The site was originally an Etruscan fortress built to protect against pirates, then in the first century C.E. it became a farm that produced *garum*, a type of gourmet fish sauce. In the middle of the second century C.E. it became a maritime villa with adjoining bathhouse. In the villa, a central garden area is surrounded by living spaces, namely *cubicula* and dining rooms, which contain mosaic floors and painted walls. The bathhouse is in the Northeast section of the site, overlooking the sea. Poggio del Molino

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<sup>1</sup> Archeodig (web).

is located in Populonia. Throughout much of its early history, Populonia's economy was based on smelting the iron from Elba Island.<sup>2</sup>

In the center of the mosaic from one of the *cubicula* of this villa is the face of the gorgon Medusa. Although the mosaic is currently covered to prevent damage, the iconic figure is recognizable by a halo of snake hair. The other excavated mosaics are strictly geometric in type.<sup>3</sup>

My archaeological research with the University of Florence was conducted at Poggio Del Molino in the stratigraphic method. The theory behind this method is that the older the layer is, the further below the surface it will be, and that the more recent the layer is, the closer to the surface it will be. Therefore, in order to perceive the story of a site, each layer is removed individually. Layers are identified by color, content, and consistency.<sup>4</sup> The stratigraphic method allows archaeologists to assign relative dates to layers and the objects found in them. For example, we uncovered many fragments of African *Sigillata*, or African Red Slip, and since African *Sigillata* was only traded to that part of Italy after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE any layer closer to the surface from one with fragments must be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE or later.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Archeodig (web).

<sup>3</sup> Pastore 24.

<sup>4</sup> Pastore 24. These "Three C's" are the mantra of stratigraphic archeology. If one or more of these changes while excavating, it is considered a new layer and is documented accordingly. Color refers to the color of the soil, i.e. red, brown, yellow, burnt-black, etc. Content refers to what is within the layer, i.e. roof tiles, pottery shards, bone fragments, pebbles, rocks, etc. Consistency refers to the texture of the soil, i.e. sandy, clay-like, hard, etc. Not only are these categories used to differentiate between layers, but they are also used to tell the story of the site. A layer made of fire-blackened roof tiles tells the story of a fire that destroyed the building, and the layer of packed down soil and flooring above that tells the story of reconstruction.

<sup>5</sup> Pastore 27.

I worked in the Southeast section of the Roman villa where it is suspected there was a stable for animals or a storage room. Over the course of my research period we removed approximately five feet of soil. At this point, the story of this area of the site is as follows. A small two-roomed structure was built adjacent to the preexisting walls of the Etruscan fortress. There was a period of destruction, and the roof collapsed. The remains were covered with a layer of dirt and the site was transformed into a single room. There were also several large pilasters built at this stage. Then followed two periods of destruction and building, during which the roof collapsed twice with evidence of burning and the burned layer was once again covered with soil and rebuilt.<sup>6</sup>

There were multiple sites under excavation in the area at this time, including the acropolis and necropolis in Populonia. In addition to my research at Poggio Del Molino, I visited both of these sites and the associated museums. The acropolis is characterized by Roman temples and a road leading to the villa of a religious leader. The home housed two beautiful floor mosaics. The first, *Il Mosaico dei Pesci*, depicts a variety of sea creatures, a shipwreck, and the dove of Venus, which now resides in the Museo Archeologico del Territorio di Populonia. The second shows representations of slaves of the cult of Isis, a popular mystery cult in the Roman Empire. Nearby, the necropolis is home to the Etruscan tombs once hidden beneath mountains of iron slag, the byproduct of iron smelting.

My research also took me to Ostia Antica in Rome and Caesarea in Israel.<sup>7</sup> Ostia is a veritable treasure trove of mosaics. Mosaics pave the floors throughout the city, and

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<sup>6</sup> Pastore 47.

<sup>7</sup> Caesarea Maritima is an incredibly interesting town with a wealth of history and various examples of floor mosaics. It was built by Herod the Great and was a port city of the



they have everything from simple geometric or floral patterns to intricate figure mosaics depicting mythological characters such as Neptune, Dionysus, Medusa, and others.

Ancient Roman mosaics have much to offer the modern viewer. This thesis aims to take into account modern archaeology and conservation techniques in studying and classifying these works of art, and it is focused on comparing the histories of and the mosaics found in the Ancient Roman port cities of Populonia and Ostia. With close ties to the sea and to various religious cults, both cities held much in common, which can be seen in the mosaics they designed. To begin, I will discuss the historical background of each city. Then, in chapter two I will consider mosaic conservation techniques, specifically in reference to the mosaics found in these cities. In chapter three I focus on the classification of mosaics, again referring to specific examples. Finally, narrowing the scope solely to the figure mosaics located at these sites, in the fourth chapter I discuss religion and mythology and the roles they played in influencing the depictions we find on these mosaics.

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Roman Empire. While I originally planned to discuss this city in addition to Populonia and Ostia, it has since become clear that there is not sufficient source material discussing the mosaics from the Roman period. The most well-preserved and documented mosaic is the Bird Mosaic. It is actually located outside of the city proper and was built during the Byzantine period, and thus does not provide much additional insight to the focus of this thesis.

## Chapter 1

### Historical Background

The regions of Populonia and Ostia are Ancient Roman port cities that have been inhabited since prehistoric times. The coastal cities have much in common, from similar histories to similar representations in mosaics.

Populonia has a long history. In addition to evidence of prehistoric inhabitation, a village was founded in the Late Bronze Age, between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This Etruscan village is associated with a large necropolis, wherein approximately “fifty globular or biconical urns” have been found. During the Iron Age most of the settlements were concentrated near and around the Gulf of Baratti.<sup>8</sup>

Above, at Poggio del Molino, consistent inhabitation did not occur until the first century BCE. At which point, a fortress was built. The fortress, approximately 55 x 56 square meters, was constructed to protect the channel that led to the lake of Rimigliano from pirates.<sup>9</sup> The lake was an important resource as it was used to harvest salt and fish.<sup>10</sup> To call pirates a problem during this time of Rome’s history would be a gross understatement. As Plutarch writes in his *Life of Pompey*, “This [piratic] power extended

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<sup>8</sup> Megale 901.

<sup>9</sup> Archeodig (web)

<sup>10</sup> Megale 903.

its operations over the whole of our Mediterranean Sea, making it un-navigable and closed to all commerce.”<sup>11</sup> Thus it was necessary for fortified structures to protect the coastal trade routes in the area until Pompey eliminated the threat.

Once the pirates were eradicated, the fortress housed two very different trades. On the one hand smelting the iron mined on Elba Island and on the other hand producing the luxury condiment *garum*. Iron smelting is defined as “the melting of [iron] ore to separate its metallic contents.”<sup>12</sup> Ancient iron smelting processes were inefficient when compared to modern practices, only obtaining a small percentage of iron from the iron ore. The byproduct of the ancient practice is iron slag, or *scoria*. As more iron was produced, the iron slag built up, eventually covering the Etruscan necropolis. The necropolis was rediscovered when Italy’s need for iron during the Second World War led them to re-process the ancient iron slag. The *scoria* was removed, but several tombs were destroyed in the process.<sup>13</sup> It was not until much later that the area was appropriately surveyed and excavated:

The first systematic surveys of the area were conducted in the early seventies by volunteers of the Archaeological Association of Piombino and, between 1984 and 1988, a team of archaeologists of the University of Florence, led by Professor Vincenzo Saladino, undertook the first stratigraphic excavation of the settlement.<sup>14</sup>

After 1988 however, the excavation was abandoned until 2008.

After twenty years of interruption, beginning in 2008 a new season of archaeological excavations started: the research project is directed by the Superintendence for Archaeological Heritage of Tuscany in

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<sup>11</sup> Plutarch XXV.1.

<sup>12</sup> Lopez 109.

<sup>13</sup> Camilli (talk).

<sup>14</sup> Megale 901.

collaboration with the University of Florence, and coordinated on the field by a team of archaeologists from the Archeodig project.<sup>15</sup>

The excavations conducted by these two groups provided evidence that during the Punic Wars, Populonia supplied the bulk of the iron for Scipio's army. Of the iron slag covering the necropolis, one third of it was produced at the same time the tombs were built. The remaining two thirds of the *scoria* were produced in the span of two years, completely covering the tombs. The sheer quantity of iron produced in this time caused a total economic collapse after the Punic Wars were ended, as there was no longer such a desperate demand for the iron. The economy turned towards agriculture, and the settlement at Poggio del Molino began producing *garum*.<sup>16</sup>

*Garum* was a luxury food item of the Roman Empire. As it is described by Toussaint-Samat:

...Garum was one of the great gastronomic passions of Rome, the basic seasoning used in its cookery, the supreme condiment. In fact the Romans had a mania for it. Scarcely a Roman recipe fails to mention garum.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Toussaint-Samat describes:

Garum was a sauce made of the intestines of mackerel or anchovies, macerated in salt and then left out in the sun until the mixture had completely decomposed, or rather had digested itself by the action of the fish's own intestinal microbes. Carefully calculated amounts of concentrated decoctions of aromatic herbs were added. Then a very fine strainer was plunged into the vessel containing the mixture to collect the syrupy, strongly flavored liquid. The garum was ladled out and left to mature.<sup>18</sup>

At Poggio del Molino, five tanks called *cetaria* have been excavated. These *cetaria* were used to make and store the *garum* as it underwent its decomposition. The exterior of the

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<sup>15</sup> Megale 901.

<sup>16</sup> Camilli (talk).

<sup>17</sup> Toussaint-Samat 338.

<sup>18</sup> Toussaint-Samat 338.

structures is made of limestone, while the interior is lined with *cocciopesto*, a type of waterproof plaster.<sup>19</sup> Although current excavations are not complete, it is estimated that the *cetaria* are “likely to be dated between the half of the 1st century BCE and the first imperial age.”<sup>20</sup>

About halfway through the second century CE the farm became a maritime villa. As with many villas of the time, at the center of Poggio del Molino was a garden, surrounded by columns.<sup>21</sup> Around the outside of the garden were living spaces: a bathhouse derived from the *cetaria*, a servants’ area, a kitchen, and cubicula with mosaic floors. Many of the walls are the same as were constructed during the stage when it was a fortress, although the inhabitants also expanded beyond them. The current archaeological excavations are focused on the time when Poggio del Molino was home to this villa, and in particular, on the mosaics that cover the floors of the cubicula.<sup>22</sup>

For the most part, the mosaics at Poggio del Molino display geometric patterns. However, there is one important exception in the largest excavated room where the center of the mosaic is the face of the gorgon, Medusa. Additionally, at the Roman acropolis there are two intricate mosaics, both located in the ancient home of a religious dignitary. The first features the dove of Venus watching over a shipwreck and a myriad of sea creatures. The second features a ring of wealthy slaves dedicated to the goddess Isis, who is associated with Venus.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Megale 902.

<sup>20</sup> Megale 903.

<sup>21</sup> Boëthius 187.

<sup>22</sup> Pastore 24.

<sup>23</sup> Pastore 38.

Ostia, or Ostia Antica as it is now known, also has a long and interesting history. At its founding, Ostia was little more than a village harvesting salt where the Tiber river meets the sea. While originally a settlement of Veii, it was quickly overtaken by the Romans due to its incredibly advantageous location.

[Ostia] was built at the mouth of the Tiber, fifteen miles from Rome, and therein lies her importance. Inland Rome, growing in power and population, came to depend increasingly on imports from overseas; these imports passed through Ostia and so up river to Rome. Ostia, Rome's harbour town, grew with the growth of Rome...the site on which Roman Ostia developed was first occupied in the fourth century B.C. The primary function of this settlement was to defend the coast, but her position dictated a change of emphasis when Roman power was fully established. Situated at the mouth of the Tiber, she became inevitably Rome's harbour town.<sup>24</sup>

Similar to the fortress at Poggio del Molino, a once small settlement was fortified as the seas became increasingly treacherous. Ostia's fortifications grew and during the Punic wars it served as a naval base.<sup>25</sup> "The colony is thus seen as little more than a strongly fortified camp, built in the angle between coast and river, standing back from, but commanding both...their main function was to defend the coastline and river mouth."<sup>26</sup>

Unlike Populonia, however, Ostia maintained a strong presence after the wars. Within the next century it would become a large town and Rome's commercial harbor. "This development is the indirect result of the social and economic changes that followed the long struggle with Hannibal."<sup>27</sup> With the end of the war came an influx of migrants and foreign slaves to Rome. The rising population needed to be fed, and Rome's

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<sup>24</sup> Meiggs 1, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Meiggs 25.

<sup>26</sup> Meiggs 23.

<sup>27</sup> Meiggs 27.

domestic grain supplies were already insufficient to feed their own people. Ostia served as a link to the corn supplies in the provinces Sicily and Sardinia.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout its history, Ostia was closely tied to the events of the city of Rome. Civil wars, civic unrest, and both domestic and foreign problems had big impacts on the port city. For example, during the civil war between the Sullans and the Marians, Ostia's importance made it a target. Marius seized the city and plundered it. Three years later Sulla's forces were instructed to take Ostia if they could not take Rome. Ostia was the breadbasket of Rome, thus whichever side held Ostia controlled Rome's food supply. According to Meiggs, Sulla later built walls to protect the vulnerable city as well as keep it under strict Roman watch.<sup>29</sup> However, according to archeological evidence the wall was built by Cicero and Clodius in the middle of the first century BCE.<sup>30</sup>

It was in Rome's best interest to keep Ostia prosperous. Thus it is unsurprising that many emperors made frequent and expensive contributions to the city. For example, Trajan expanded the harbor so that it would attract more merchants from the East. The expanded harbor was also much safer as it provided better protection from sudden storms. Claudius and Nero spent much time in the city and also made many improvements to it. In particular Nero had grand plans to build a canal between Ostia and Rome that would have made trade even more efficient, though he died before it came to be. Despite the time spent in the city by those emperors, after the harbor was built no real rebuilding was done until the first half of the second century, when the policies of Domitian came into

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<sup>28</sup> Meiggs 28.

<sup>29</sup> Meiggs 34-36.

<sup>30</sup> Boin 27.

full effect. During this “Domitianic phase” the Baths of Neptune were begun, and were completed just after Hadrian’s death.<sup>31</sup>

However, in the late second century CE the economy of Ostia, as well as many parts of the Empire, began to decline. In the third century, things grew only worse.

The period that followed the Severan dynasty was nearly fatal to the Empire. Revolt or assassination became normal means to power, and emperors succeeded with bewildering rapidity... this half-century of imperial disintegration brought acute distress to Ostia.<sup>32</sup>

In looking at the repairs made in the third and fourth centuries it is clear just how tough times had become. “When marble paving has to be restored gaps are filled by inscriptions from cemeteries or public places. Where mosaics have been worn away no attempt is made to preserve the design; odd pieces of marble are reused for the purpose.”<sup>33</sup> By the end of the fourth and the fifth century “Ostia was a decaying city.”<sup>34</sup> As Boin put it, “Life at Ostia ended not with a Vesuvian bang but with a whimper.”<sup>35</sup> Even through the ninth century CE the city remained occupied, if barely.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the slow, torturous decline of the city, its mosaics are still incredible to see to this day. Most notably, the depiction of Neptune and Amphitrite meeting for their wedding in the Baths of Neptune and Venus riding a shell in the House of the Dioscuri. There are also many others such as The Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne – where there is a depiction of a gorgon’s head – countless geometric mosaics, and the omnipresent marine creatures that can be found throughout the city.

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<sup>31</sup> Meiggs 62-65, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Meiggs 83.

<sup>33</sup> Meiggs 94.

<sup>34</sup> Meiggs 97.

<sup>35</sup> Boin 2.

<sup>36</sup> Boin 2.



The depictions in mosaics are not chosen lightly. Walls can be repainted, furniture can be refurbished or moved, but mosaics by nature are designed to last forever. Therefore, the types of representations found in mosaics can say a lot about the social atmosphere of the time when it was commissioned; due to the perpetual nature of mosaics, the depictions chosen needed to be very important. In Populonia and Ostia there are many examples of mosaics related to religion and to the sea.

Religious cults played a major role in both Populonia and Ostia, which can be seen in their respective mosaics. As Boin puts it: “The centrality of imperial cult devotion, ritual, and sacrifice during the third century cannot be overlooked. It had become an integral part of civic life in the cities and provinces of the empire since the first century.”<sup>37</sup> Aside from strictly imperial cults, mosaics in the two cities have representations of religious cults. In Populonia there is the mosaic with representations of the cult of Isis while in Ostia, sanctuaries of the cult of Mithras “were especially popular in Ostia in the second and third centuries” and they were often decorated with floor mosaics.<sup>38</sup>

Both Populonia and Ostia were intimately connected to the sea throughout their histories, from harvesting salt to defending against pirates to being a hub for trading. Therefore it is natural that many of the myths represented in the mosaics of these regions were related to the sea. Additionally, in both areas similar mythological figures are depicted, both the goddess Venus and the gorgon Medusa are featured figures. The history of these cities provides the context for the mosaics that will be observed in this text.

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<sup>37</sup> Boin 89.

<sup>38</sup> Pastore 35; Dunbabin 62.

## Chapter 2

### Mosaic Conservation

When studying ancient mosaics it is vital to take conservation techniques into consideration. In my research, I have divided conservation into two main parts: preservation and restoration. Preservationists and restorers have the unique task of maintaining the mosaics as the original mosaicists intended them to be. Preservation is the process by which an artifact is protected from changes or deterioration, it is a process meant to keep the object in a state of equilibrium. Restoration is different in that it is a process during which restorers make changes to the artifact in order to reestablish its original form. Both preservation and restoration are prevalent in Populonia, at Poggio del Molino and the Acropolis.<sup>39</sup> Preservation and restoration work hand in hand with archaeology and excavation.

Over the past forty years, conservation has developed from a simple craft into an integrated part of archaeology. It demands not only a high degree of manual dexterity but also an understanding of the processes and preoccupations of modern archaeology, a knowledge of material science and early technology, combined with an aesthetic sense.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Although the mosaics at Ostia Antica were also preserved and restored, this chapter focuses solely on those found in Populonia because the research I conducted on site focused on these, namely the mosaic in the *cubicula* at Poggio del Molino and the *Mosaico dei Pesci* at the Acropolis.

<sup>40</sup> Cronyn 8.

Many things can affect artifacts. Some of these destructive agents are water, oxygen, acidity/alkalinity, salts, temperature, overburden, and organisms. Water can activate agents of decay or cause erosion. The presence of oxygen leads to oxidation and rusting, and allows aerobic organisms to survive. Acidity/alkalinity can increase the rate of decay and decrease the stability of materials. A buildup or crystallization of salts can break up porous materials or cause discoloration. Recurring freeze and thaw cycles causes frost damage, and warm temperatures increase organism activity. Heavy buildings, objects, or soil can overburden a mosaic, causing a deformed shape. “The effect of organisms on materials, [is] known as biodeterioration.”<sup>41</sup> Organisms break down materials to provide food sources and habitats, and can also cause discoloration by pigments from waste.<sup>42</sup>

Preservation, or stabilization, “aims to interfere in the least possible way with the archaeological evidence.”<sup>43</sup> There are two types of stabilization, active and passive. Passive stabilization creates “acceptable physical and chemical equilibria simply by manipulating the normal constituents of the environment without adding alien chemicals to the material.”<sup>44</sup> That is to say, using factors such as temperature, light, water, and other naturally occurring elements to prevent deterioration. Active stabilization on the other hand, attempts “either to remove destructive agents from the material with chemicals or to introduce preservative compounds into the material.”<sup>45</sup> Active stabilization can seem

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<sup>41</sup> Cronyn 24.

<sup>42</sup> Cronyn 18-24.

<sup>43</sup> Cronyn 9.

<sup>44</sup> Cronyn 69.

<sup>45</sup> Cronyn 69.

more invasive and less reversible, but it is necessary in instances where the materials is at a risk of damage or complete loss.

The most passive form of preservation in the case of mosaics seems almost counterintuitive. Soil can be a destructive agent, but it can also be used to protect against other destructive agents, therefore in some cases it is best to leave a mosaic *in situ* and cover it with soil. At Poggio del Molino, the Gorgon Mosaic is currently preserved in this way:<sup>46</sup>

Damage upon excavation caused by dehydration and light can be prevented simply by controlling these elements immediately. If lifting followed by continued control is not envisaged within a matter of months, the site must be backfilled to prevent inevitable deterioration.<sup>47</sup>

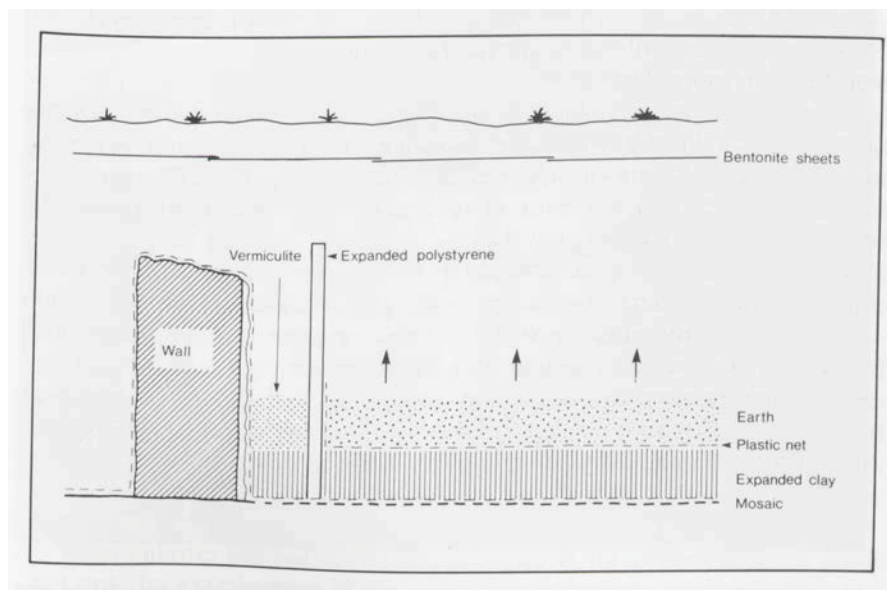


Figure 1. The suggested way to backfill a mosaic to prevent deterioration. Cronyn 123.

Pictured is a diagram of one method of backfilling. The Gorgon Mosaic will eventually be re-excavated and restored completely, but until that time it will remain backfilled to remain better protected.

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<sup>46</sup> Pastore 24.

<sup>47</sup> Cronyn 123.

Active stabilization can mean a lot of different things, but in terms of mosaics the most important one is arguably the idea of lifting. Sometimes leaving a mosaic *in situ* is not a viable option, and it must be removed. One way of lifting a mosaic is through Directly Adhering Supports.

...these are stuck directly onto the object. This means that great care must be taken that they are only used for artefacts from which they can be removed and to which they do no damage. Also the choice of adhesive is problematic and thus this method is only used by specialists. An example of a direct support is in the lifting of a mosaic where the robust surface of the tesserae can be stuck directly to a fabric; polyvinyl acetate emulsion and cotton sheeting are used...<sup>48</sup>

At the Acropolis in Populonia, the *Mosaico dei Pesci* was lifted and now resides at the Archeological Museum of the Territory of Populonia.<sup>49</sup>

Restoration is the next step in the conservation process. In the case of mosaics, restoration involves recreating the images and patterns once depicted on them.<sup>50</sup> The *Mosaico dei Pesci* is particularly interesting because of the vast restorations that took place. Much of the piece was highly damaged, as can be seen in these figures.

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<sup>48</sup> Cronyn 51.

<sup>49</sup> Parchi della val di cornia (web).

<sup>50</sup> Pastore 38.



Figure 2. The mosaic as it was before restoration. De Tommaso 8.



Figure 3. The mosaic after a complete restoration. De Tommaso 9.

In order to achieve so successful a restoration, it is important for the restorers to understand the composition of the mosaic, and to choose the same type of stone to make the tesserae if the originals cannot be reused. With this mosaic the stones used were: basalt, serpentinite, marble, and limestone.<sup>51</sup>

The restorations that took place at Poggio del Molino were not as extensive. The biggest problem at this site was disruption. The disruptions were caused by tree roots running beneath the mosaics, holes made in the floor when a Christian altar was installed, and the moving of walls and thresholds as the rooms changed function.<sup>52</sup> At Poggio del Molino, Archeodig worked in conjunction with RavennAntica, a foundation based in

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<sup>51</sup> De Tommaso 25.

<sup>52</sup> Pastore 39.

Ravenna. “The objectives of the foundation are: guarantee proper conservation and public enjoyment of the cultural heritage conferred and/or conceded or in use.”<sup>53</sup> The ultimate goal of the site at Poggio del Molino is to become a tourist site, so over the course of the excavation period, the restorers from RavennAntica worked with students from the University of Florence to restore two of the floor mosaics on site.<sup>54</sup> When conducting archeological excavations, partnerships between groups like Archeodig and RavennAntica make issues of conservation easier because the conservation process can be conducted at the same time as excavation.

The *cubicula* that the restorers worked in did not need extensive work seen in the *Mosaico dei Pesci*, but they did require a lesser form of active stabilization. Nearby trees were cut down, herbicides used to prevent further growth, and chemicals were used to stop the disintegration of the mosaics. In particular, restorative work was necessary where the mosaics had begun to come apart due to the disruptions.<sup>55</sup>

The UKIC (The United Kingdom Institute of Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works) divides the material from an excavation into five categories:

1. Display conservation – further cleaning, additional restoration, and cosmetic treatment may be required in addition to category 2.
2. Full conservation – work is understood to include photography, x-radiography, examination and investigation, cleaning, active stabilization, and certain reconstruction. Appropriate analytical information to be provided where required.
3. Partial conservation – will include work in category 4 and a high degree of cleaning with or without active stabilization. This category may include reassembly of broken or detached fragments but not reconstruction of missing areas.

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<sup>53</sup> RavennAntica Constitution Article 1 Section 3, original Italian: “Gli scopi della Fondazione sono: garantire un’adeguata conservazione e fruizione pubblica dei beni culturali conferiti e/o dati in concessione o in uso.”

<sup>54</sup> Pastore 39.

<sup>55</sup> Pastore 39.



4. Minimal conservation – this category includes ‘first-aid’, x-radiography and photography, the minimum amount of investigative cleaning, and suitable packaging or repackaging for stable storage.
5. No conservation – no work of any kind is undertaken by the laboratory except for handling and checking.<sup>56</sup>

This system of categorization encompasses all materials from an archeological excavation, including objects, but is also applicable to mosaics. The *Mosaico dei Pesci* clearly fits into the first category, display conservation. Even after the larger restoration was completed, further cleaning and restoration was required before it could be displayed in the Archeological Park Museum.<sup>57</sup> The *cubicula* mosaics fall into the third category, partial conservation. While there was some reconstruction of missing areas, the focus was on stabilization, preventing further disintegration.<sup>58</sup>

Conservation techniques are important to understand when studying ancient mosaics, as the techniques used often bring in modern technology or foreign substances to an otherwise original piece of work. In order to accurately study mosaics it is important to recognize what has been worked on and in what way.

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<sup>56</sup> Cronyn 12.

<sup>57</sup> De Tommaso 8, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Pastore 39.

### Chapter 3

#### Classifying Mosaics

Mosaics can be classified in three main ways: technique, composition, and typology. The technique refers to how the mosaics were created: the layers used, the way the designs were placed, and where the mosaic was located. Composition is the materials used in the creation of the designs. Typology is what the design portrays: geometric shapes, floral or vegetal designs, or figures.

The craftsmen of mosaics “and all those who earned their living with their hands tended to be lumped together by the predominantly upper-class writers as an inferior category of society.”<sup>59</sup> Mosaicists were in the same pay grade as stonemasons, carpenters, wagon-makers, blacksmiths, and bakers, while painters were much better paid.<sup>60</sup> This is due partly to the fact that the work produced was essentially a part of the architecture of a building. Most of the information on the techniques of the craftsmen has been compiled by studying the physical mosaics themselves and from tidbits from the works of Pliny or

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<sup>59</sup> Dunbabin 269.

<sup>60</sup> Dunbabin 277.

Vitruvius.<sup>61</sup> In general however, there are very few records of the techniques they used, and even fewer records of the names of the mosaicists.<sup>62</sup>

Mosaics are defined by how they are made; therefore understanding the techniques used to build mosaics is a vital part of understanding mosaics as a whole.<sup>63</sup> Two broad categories for mosaics are *opus tessellatum* and *opus musum*.<sup>64</sup> The first refers to mosaics that decorated the floors and the second to mosaics that decorated walls. All of the mosaics that are discussed in the following pages are designated *opus tessellatum* as they all served as floors in buildings.<sup>65</sup> Other sources have differing classifications. Fischer describes three types: *opus signinum*: the simplest type comprised of varied stone and pottery but with no particular design, *opus tessellatum*, the most common type with *tesserae* placed in straight or curved lines, and *opus vermiculatum*, with smaller *tesserae* placed in in “an arrangement dictated by the shapes of the figures.”<sup>66</sup>

The foundation built beneath the mosaics were a vital part in making certain that the floor remained functional, that is to say flat and even. Vitruvius describes the ideal template for a foundation of mosaics. First there is a layer of “fist-sized stones” called the *statumen*, then a layer of a mix of rubble and lime called the *rudus*, then a layer of “a

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<sup>61</sup> Ling 11 and Dunbabin 269.

<sup>62</sup> Dunbabin 269.

<sup>63</sup> Differences are often classified by the *tesserae*. *Tesserae* are the pieces of stone, glass, and other materials used to make the designs in mosaics, which will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>64</sup> Ling 7.

<sup>65</sup> Another type of mosaic, *opus sectile* is very beautiful. It is comprised not of *tesserae* but of larger pieces cut to the desired shape and fitted together without showing the grout between the pieces. Although lovely and an important aspect of the history of mosaics, there are no examples of *opus sectile* discussed in this text.

<sup>66</sup> Fischer 46.

finer mortar mixed with three parts of crushed tile or potsherds to one of lime” called the *nucleus*, on top of which the *tesserae* are placed. Vitruvius goes into great detail, even specifically denoting how deep each layer should be.<sup>67</sup> Of course, this was an ideal often not followed; layers were combined, are otherwise indiscernible, vary in depth from the ideal, or are missing altogether.<sup>68</sup>

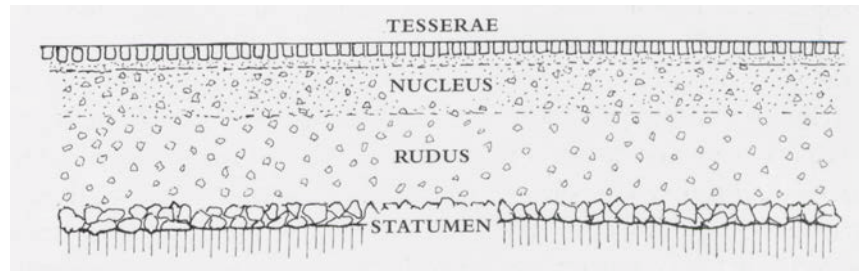


Figure 4. Vitruvius’s layers according to Ling, page 11.

Mosaics, it would seem, were created *in situ*, or on site with the exception of some medallions called *emblema*. An *emblema*, or insert, was prepared independently on tiles or trays and placed into the mosaic as one piece.<sup>69</sup> *Emblema* were clearly assembled elsewhere and brought to the site completed, but other parts of the mosaic? There are differing opinions as to whether all mosaics were created directly or if some were created indirectly. Direct setting refers to the technique of placing *tesserae* directly into the mortar while the indirect or reverse system refers to first gluing *tesserae* upside down on a paper or sheet with the pattern inverted, then flipping and pressing the whole thing into the mortar and peeling away the backing.<sup>70</sup> The system of direct setting is more intuitive, and was clearly used by ancient mosaicists; preliminary guidelines to be followed were

<sup>67</sup> Ling 11.

<sup>68</sup> Dunbabin 281-282.

<sup>69</sup> Ling 14.

<sup>70</sup> Fischer 146.

scored into the surface or were painted onto the mortar.<sup>71</sup> There is an argument that ancient Romans also used indirect setting, the common modern practice. According to Albert Ippel, strange inconsistencies in the Pompeian Alexander mosaic in the House of the Faun are due to the mosaic being assembled independently in sections and joined incorrectly, although Fischer states that the system was almost definitely not used, and if it had been, it would be more likely to have been for simpler patterns, to make the process more efficient.<sup>72</sup> According to Roger Ling, it is likely that only *emblema* were prefabricated in this way.<sup>73</sup> Dunbabin refutes Ippel's Alexander mosaic claims on the grounds that indirect setting requires such careful preparation that mistakes as are seen in that mosaic are actually much less likely to occur.<sup>74</sup> Yet, Dunbabin also cites examples where it is likely that the indirect method was used. For example, it has been proven that the panels mosaic of the Months at Thysdrus were "laid in thin layers of mortar and set into the previously made frame, where wooden bars had been set around the spaces to receive them."<sup>75</sup> Also, it has been proven that *opus sectile* was often manufactured in this indirect method. Although there is no proof that the same method was applied to mosaics, there is also not enough evidence to disprove it, and thus, "the question must remain open."<sup>76</sup> Clearly, there are many questions yet to be answered in regard to the technique of Roman mosaics.

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<sup>71</sup> Dunbabin 282.

<sup>72</sup> Fischer 46. Some of the inconsistencies Ippel cites are: broken lines in a lance, a three-legged horse, a strangely located striped horse's leg and hoof elsewhere in the mosaic, etc.

<sup>73</sup> Ling 14.

<sup>74</sup> Dunbabin 43.

<sup>75</sup> Dunbabin 289.

<sup>76</sup> Dunbabin 289.

The composition of mosaics can vary. The earliest mosaics were composed of pebbles. These pebble mosaics were common in Greece, and indeed persisted through antiquity for roads and other non-decorative pavements.<sup>77</sup> This is not to say that pebble mosaics were not sophisticated, as many fifth and fourth centuries BCE mosaics are incredibly detailed and serve as the basis of the varied typology discussed later in this chapter.<sup>78</sup> Later pebble mosaics used increasingly smaller pebbles, from the nearly fist-sized stones at Olynthos to the half-inch or less pebbles at Pella.<sup>79</sup> In an effort to become even more precise, *tesserae* were created.

*Tesserae* were a major innovation in the art of mosaics. Pebbles were cut and chiseled for the most detailed parts of mosaics, such as the eyes, to achieve greater precision. Seeing as cut stones have a broader range in color and much greater precision, this practice soon spread, evolving from mixing pebbles and cut pieces to chip-pavements formed entirely of unshaped chips of marble and rock.<sup>80</sup> Chiseling stones to standardized sizes made the overall piece more level, precise, and attractive.<sup>81</sup> The individual *tessera* is a small cube of cut or chiseled marble or rock, ranging in size from approximately two square centimeters to one square millimeter.<sup>82</sup>

An advantage of the *tesserae* was, of course, the enormous range of colors. Pebble mosaics were limited mainly to whites, blacks, reds, and browns, but cut stone opened the possibilities to almost any color. For the most part the stones used in mosaics were from local regions, limestone in particular was popular as well as terracotta and marble,

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<sup>77</sup> Ling 9.

<sup>78</sup> Dunbabin 1-16.

<sup>79</sup> Fischer 41.

<sup>80</sup> Dunbabin 20.

<sup>81</sup> Fischer 42.

<sup>82</sup> Fischer 142.

“Studies in Britain have shown that on most sites the stones used were local, often available within a few kilometers, or if not, were common building stones.”<sup>83</sup> Mosaicists used the colors that were available to them, and were somewhat limited by the local geological features, hence why in areas where green stone is uncommon, foliage is represented in greys, blues, and reds. Greens and blues were especially difficult to find, and to accommodate this glass *tesserae* called *smalti* could be used. While it is more common to find *smalti* in wall mosaics, where they cannot be crushed underfoot, they are found in floor mosaics as well.<sup>84</sup> Even using local stone, polychrome mosaics were expensive, and by the first century BCE,

Mosaic had become so popular as a floor-covering that there was a need for a less expensive type, and the solution was to cut the polychrome multiplicity of *tesserae* down to black (basalt) and white (marble or limestone).<sup>85</sup>

This became a staple of Roman mosaics until the third century CE, and most of them are devoid of all color, especially in Ostia.

The black-and-white style is, of course, more limited – or rather, more disciplined – in its means of expression...yet it does not confine itself to flat profile but uses the graphic means of internal white lines in a simple and powerful manner.<sup>86</sup>

Black and white mosaics are generally characterized by black designs on a white background, utilizing white lines to denote features in the black designs, which leads to the final point of classifying mosaics, typology.

There are three types of designs in Roman mosaics: geometric, floral or vegetal, and figure mosaics. The simplest of these is the geometric mosaic. Shapes, often repeated

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<sup>83</sup> Dunbabin 280.

<sup>84</sup> Dunbabin 280.

<sup>85</sup> Fischer 54.

<sup>86</sup> Fischer 54.

throughout the work, characterize geometric mosaics.<sup>87</sup> A few common shapes or patterns used were the wave-crest, the meander, the fret border, the triangle border, the cable, and the guilloche band.<sup>88</sup>

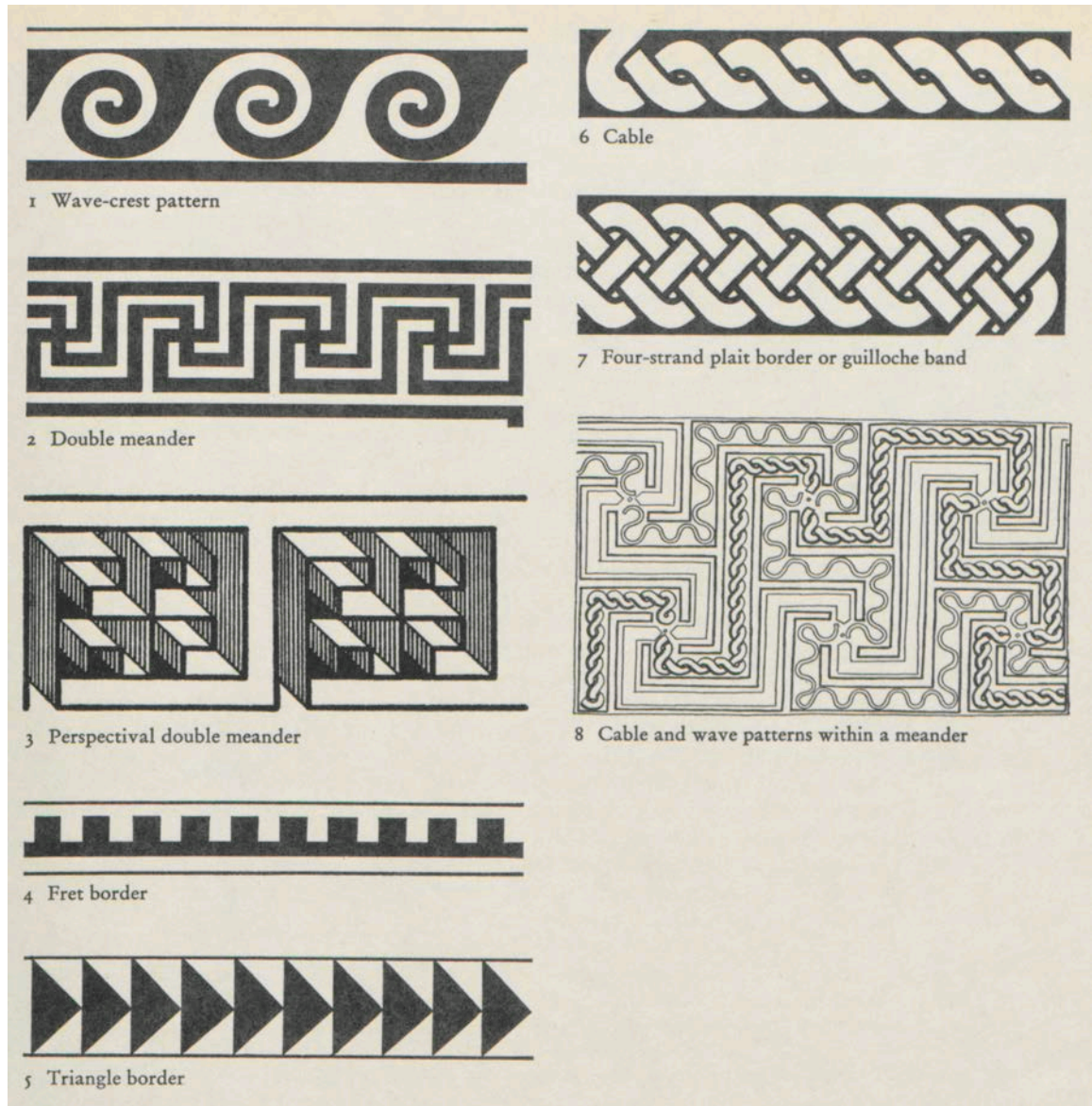


Figure 5. Some geometric patterns according to Fischer, page 47.

<sup>87</sup> Dunbabin 293.

<sup>88</sup> Fischer 47.



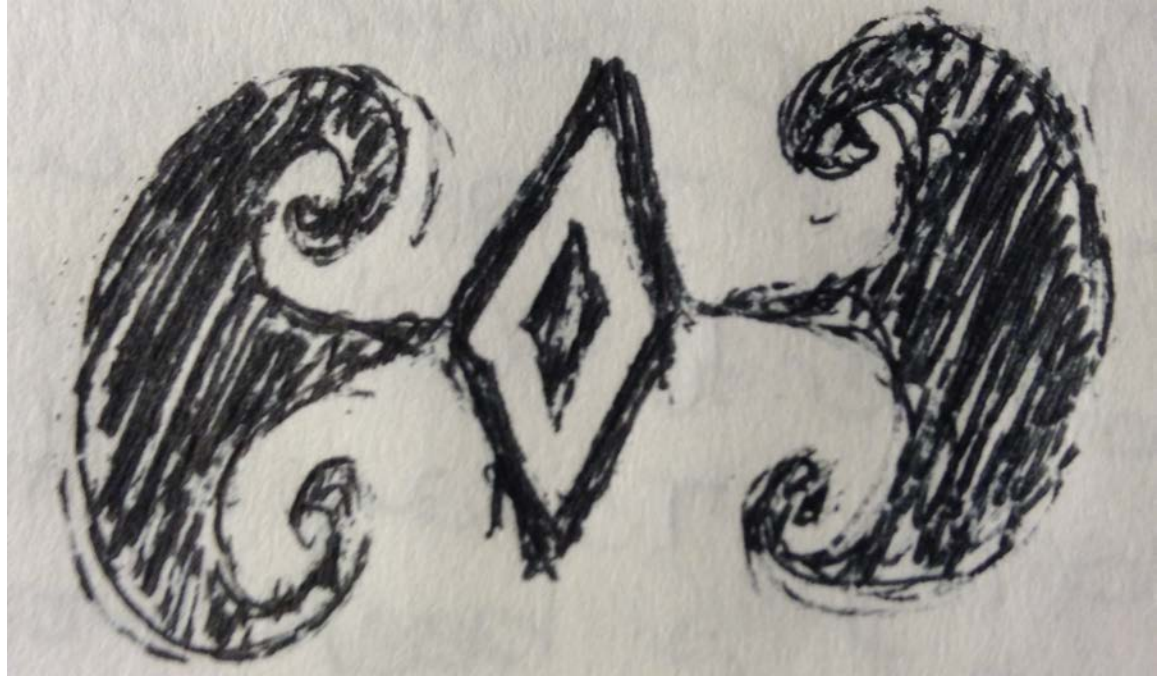


Figure 6. Sketch of a section of the geometric pattern found in one of the *cubicula* at Poggio del Molino. Pastore 29.

Floral-vegetal designs, as the name denotes, are based on nature. “One of the commonest of all vegetal designs was the rinceau or running scroll. It may be clearly identified as vine, ivy, or acanthus...”<sup>89</sup> While both geometric and floral mosaics are at their base fairly simple, the mosaicists combined different patterns to create incredibly complex designs.

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<sup>89</sup> Dunbabin 297.

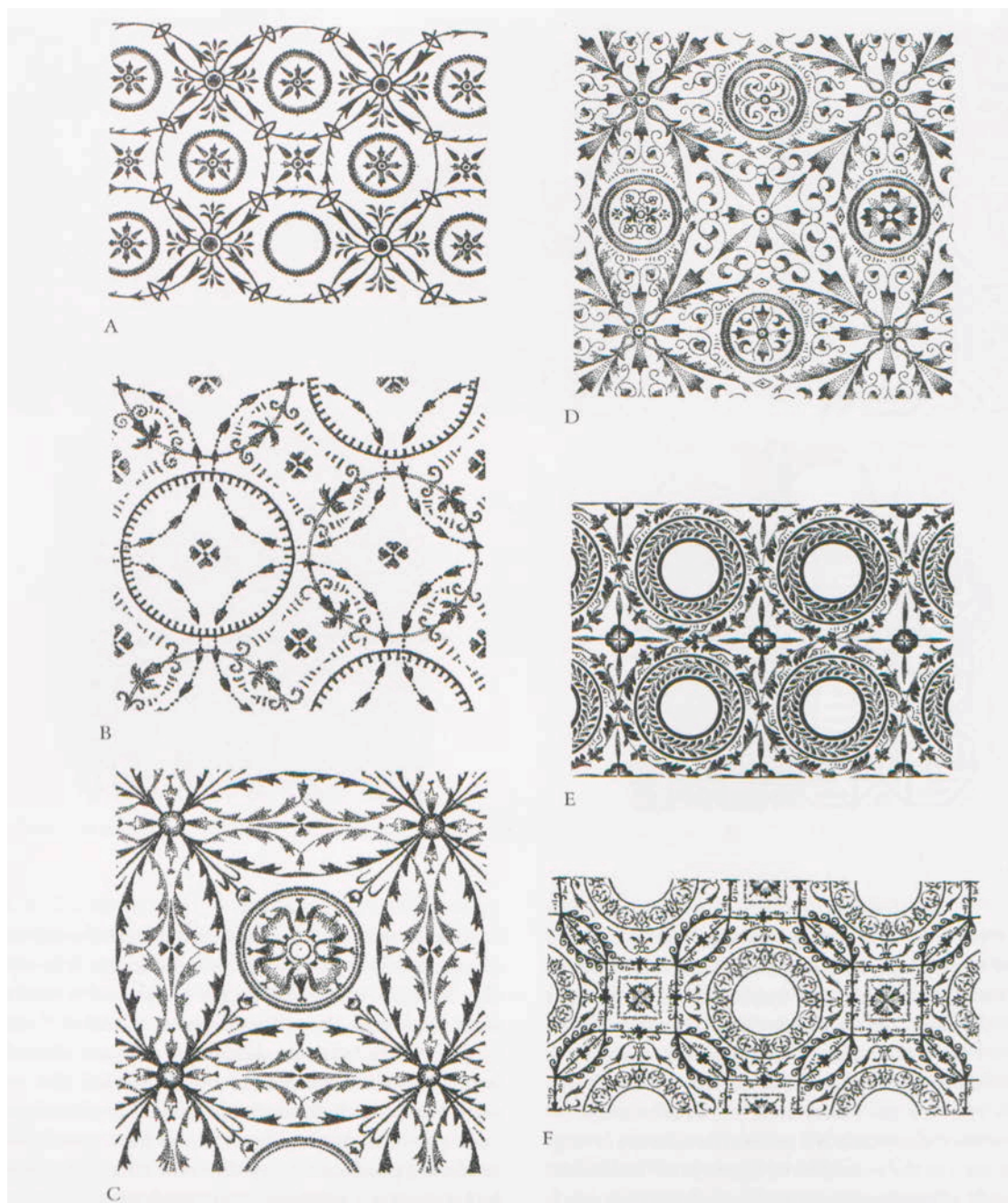


Figure 7. Some examples of floral/vegetal designs. Dunbabin 296.

Figure mosaics encompass all of the people and things represented in mosaics, everything from fruit baskets to ships to gods and goddesses falls under the umbrella of figure mosaics.<sup>90</sup>

These characterizations are not absolute, for although some mosaics are strictly one or another, others mix and match geometric shapes with floral designs, and both of those types play fundamental roles in figure mosaics as borders.

In Populonia, there are several mosaics. Currently excavated at the archeological site at Poggio del Molino there are three black and white geometric mosaics and a polychrome figure mosaic featuring the head of a gorgon.<sup>91</sup> At the acropolis of Populonia, there are two polychrome figure mosaics. One depicts a shipwreck surrounded by marine creatures and the dove of Venus; the other depicts wealthy slaves from the cult of Isis and incorporates geometric designs.<sup>92</sup>

In the ancient city of Ostia, there are hundreds of mosaics, which cannot all be described in this text. The mosaics I am most interested in are located in the Baths of Neptune, the Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne, and the House of the Dioscuri. The Baths of Neptune contain an immense black and white figure mosaic depicting Neptune surrounded by marine creatures both real and mythological, riding to meet his bride-to-be, Amphitrite.<sup>93</sup> The Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne houses an incredibly complex mosaic combining all three typologies, portraying the god, Ariadne and other Bacchic figures watching Pan and Eros in a wrestling match, encircled by floral designs and a

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<sup>90</sup> Dunbabin 298.

<sup>91</sup> The typology of the gorgon in Roman mosaic is further broken down in chapter 4. Also see Figure 15.

<sup>92</sup> See Figures 18 and 11, respectively.

<sup>93</sup> See Figure 9.

geometric border, within which are several gorgon heads.<sup>94</sup> In the House of the Dioscuri there is a figure mosaic showing a marine scene, with Venus riding a shell in the center, surrounded by a geometric border.<sup>95</sup>

Mosaics can be classified in many ways. It is important to understand how they were designed and built and with what materials when studying Roman mosaics, especially in conjunction with an understanding of conservation techniques. During restoration, new elements are added to an ancient work, thus the restorer must have an expertise in ancient techniques and materials in addition to modern ones. As modern scholars and researchers it is equally vital to take into account the possibility of modern changes, mistakes, or misinterpretations when examining a preserved or restored mosaic. These are easiest to assess if the researcher also understands classification techniques.

While a basic understanding of classification and restoration techniques is essential to glean the most accurate information from a mosaic, most mosaics are named and remembered based not on what type of stone was used or whether they are black-and-white or polychrome, but based on what is represented in them. Figure mosaics in particular are often characterized by what they depict. Religion played a major role in the designs chosen. Mythological and mystery cult-related figures and symbols were common subjects of mosaics.

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<sup>94</sup> See Figure 8.

<sup>95</sup> Dunbabin 61-64. Also see Figure 14.





Figure 8. The mosaic from the Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne. Dunbabin 63.



Figure 9. The mosaic from the Baths of Neptune, depicting the sea-god Neptune riding to meet his bride Amphitrite. Dunbabin 63

## Chapter 4

### Mythological and Cult Representations in Mosaics

The figures represented in ancient figure mosaics were often inspired by religious stories and practices. This can be seen in both Populonia and Ostia, where mythological figures and mystery cult symbols are depicted in mosaics. With such close ties to the sea in both port cities, it is unsurprising that many of the myths and mystery cults represented are also related to the sea.

In addition to the more standard Olympian gods such as Jupiter, Neptune, and Juno, ancient Roman religion also included various cults. Some of these cults were foreign and mystical, such as the cults of Isis and Mithras. These two in particular were widespread throughout the empire. Although mystery cults are often studied in relation to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, they existed well before, “Isis, for example, was established before 88 BCE in the port cities of Pompeii, Puteoli, and Ostia.”<sup>96</sup>

The cult of Isis worshipped the Egyptian goddess Isis. According to Takacs, “Isis is one of the most important deities in the Egyptian pantheon. The hieroglyph for her name was the throne, and she was portrayed with a headdress in the shape of a

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<sup>96</sup> Takacs 4559.

throne.”<sup>97</sup> Isis was said to be the daughter of Geb and Nut, the Earth and the Sky. She was married to her brother Osiris and their son was Horus; their siblings and rivals were Seth and Nephthys. When Seth cut Osiris into pieces and scattered them across Egypt, Isis found each part and put him back together. She was associated with healing and childbirth.<sup>98</sup> Isis, as the goddess worshiped in the Roman Empire, was also associated with water. “In Roman times, temples of Isis (*Isea*) were most often found...in an aqueous area in the vicinity of a river, an important water source, a marsh, or a port.”<sup>99</sup> Thus it makes sense that the port cities of Populonia and Ostia would have representations of the goddess in their mosaics.

In Populonia, there is a mosaic that the head of the Poggio del Molino archeological dig site, Carolina Megale, called the “Slave Mosaic.”<sup>100</sup> This Mosaic is located at the Acropolis, and is described like this:

il mosaico è caratterizzato da una vivace policromia ottenuta con l'impiego di tessere nere, grigie, verdi, azzurre, gialle, rosse, e arancioni su un fondo bianco. Gran parte del tappeto musivo è occupato da una decorazione costituita da elementi disposti a cornici concentriche. All'interno vi è un fiore con dodici petali bianchi separati da triangoli di vari colori; tutt'intorno corre un bordo di tessere arancioni, circondato a sua volta da una fascia con coppie di delfini affrontati, da un secondo bordo di tessere arancioni, da una fascia con un motivo a onde correnti e da un ultimo bordo di tessere arancioni...Diverso è invece il caso delle altre due raffigurazioni che completano la decorazione del mosaico. Si tratta dei busti di profilo di due personaggi dai tratti negroidi...<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Takacs 4558.

<sup>98</sup> Takacs 4558.

<sup>99</sup> Takacs 4560.

<sup>100</sup> Pastore 38.

<sup>101</sup> De Tommaso 26-27.

As can be inferred from the above text, this is a polychrome mosaic combining both geometric and figure mosaic typology. According to Megale, this mosaic depicts wealthy slaves who were most likely servants of the cult of Isis.<sup>102</sup>

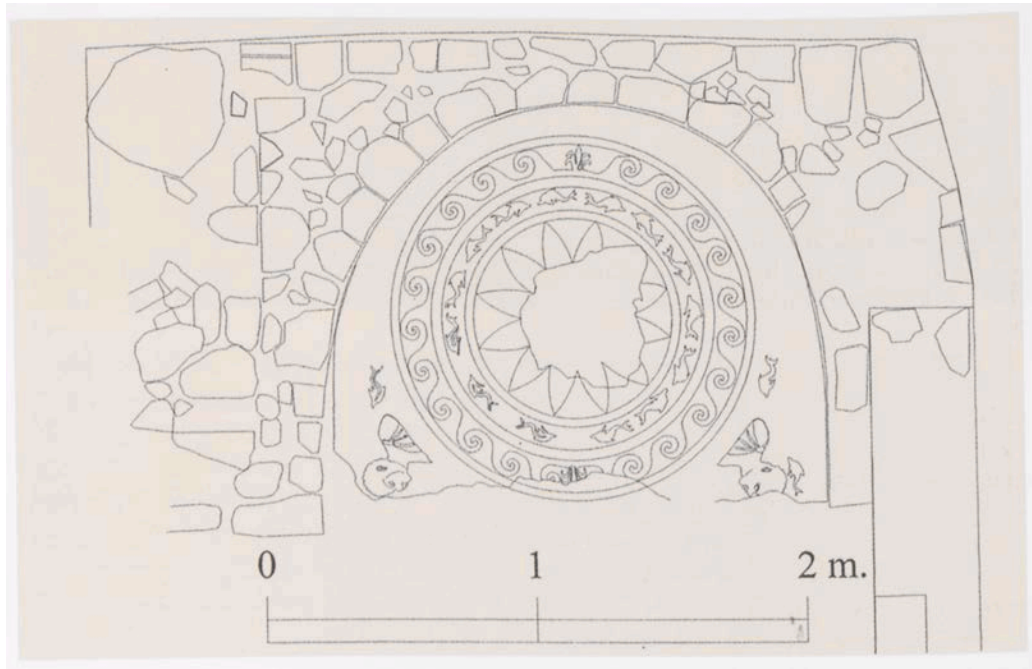


Figure 10. A drawn schematic depicting the “Slave Mosaic”. De Tommaso 26.

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<sup>102</sup> Pastore 38.





Figure 11. A photo showcasing the colors and designs of the “Slave Mosaic”. De Tommaso 27.

The cult of Isis was similar to other mystery cults in that it had a specific initiation ceremony. As Takacs describes:

The preparations of an initiate included abstinence and purification. The initiate (*mystes*) experienced death and through it achieved new life. In contrast to public cults, social standing did not translate to a comparable position in the hierarchy of this mystery cult.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, the cult of Mithras had an initiation ceremony relating to the death and resurrection of the initiate. The cult of Mithras is based on a Persian religion worshipping the sun god Mithras. The most well known element of the belief system of this cult is that the god Mithras slaughtered a bull and feasted on the meat, providing an example for the sacrifices performed by the members of the cult.<sup>104</sup> In Ostia, “to judge by the evidence that has survived, the cults of Cybele and of the Egyptian gods [such as Isis] enjoyed

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<sup>103</sup> Takacs 4560.

<sup>104</sup> Gordon 6088-6093.

their widest support in Ostia from the Antonine to the Severan periods: by the later third century the religion of Mithras seems to have eclipsed them in popularity.”<sup>105</sup>

The temples of the cult of Mithras tended to be caves, or at least designed to seem like caves. Beck quotes Porphyry’s *De antro* 6, saying, “Similarly, the Persians call the place a cave where they introduce an initiate to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend and go back again.”<sup>106</sup> Dunbabin also references this when describing the temples excavated in Ostia, “At least sixteen are known, mostly long narrow vaulted rooms, imitating an underground cave, lined on two sides with benches and with an altar at the end.”<sup>107</sup> The symbolism of the cave is important, as “The intent of the Mithraeum’s design is to enable initiation into a mystery.”<sup>108</sup> This can be seen particularly well with a Mithraeum in Ostia, known as the Mithraeum of Seven Spheres. Similar to the others in Ostia it is a long, narrow room, however the central passage is also paved with mosaic in the shape of seven spheres. Each sphere represents a stage of initiation and one of seven heavenly gates, through which each initiate must go in order to become a member. At the entrance is depicted a dagger, presumably representing the one Mithras used to kill the bull.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Meiggs 370.

<sup>106</sup> Beck 41.

<sup>107</sup> Dunbabin 63.

<sup>108</sup> Beck 17.

<sup>109</sup> Dunbabin 63-64.

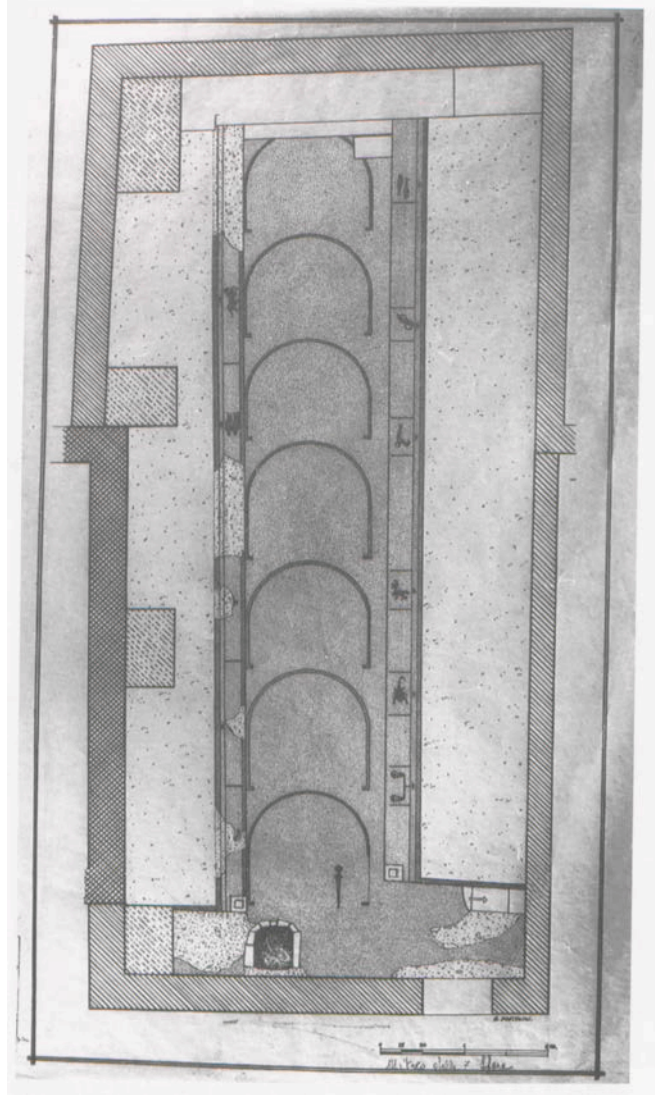


Figure 12. A schematic drawing of the Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres. Dunbabin 66.

Aside from cult symbols and representation, figure mosaics often depict more mainstream mythological figures.<sup>110</sup> For example, Venus, Neptune and Amphitrite, and the gorgon Medusa are all represented in the port cities of Populonia and Ostia.

<sup>110</sup> Many different myths are represented in mosaics; take for example the “Mosaic of Zeus and Ganymede” on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This polychrome figure mosaic depicts a Roman interpretation of the popular scene of Zeus appearing as an eagle to Ganymede.

Venus is the Roman Olympian goddess of love, and she is also seen as a patron goddess of Rome, having led her son Aeneas to the land that would become Rome after the fall of Troy, and whose descendants would become the rulers of the Empire. Born from the blood of her castrated father, Uranus, and the sea foam, Venus is also intrinsically associated with the sea. Depictions of Venus are very common throughout the Roman Empire. In Populonia, the best example is found in the *Mosaico dei Pesci*. Most of the mosaic is various examples of marine life, however in the bottom left corner of the pavement there is a shipwreck. Next to the shipwreck there is an image that at first glance appears to be a clam. When turned upside down, it becomes clear that this is also a dove, the symbol of Venus. The sailors reach out to the dove, which according to De Tommaso is bringing them salvation from the shipwreck.<sup>111</sup>



Figure 13. A close up view of the shipwreck scene, with the dove in the top right corner. De Tommaso 13.

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<sup>111</sup> De Tommaso 15-16.

Representations of Venus are also present in Ostia. In the House of Dioscuri there are polychrome mosaics, one of the few buildings that strays from the black-and-white mosaic standard that Ostia held. “A third [mosaic in the house is] an all-over marine scene, with Venus riding in her shell at the centre of Tritons, Nereids, and sea-monsters. This last is composed in a way similar to the black-and-white marine scenes, with the figures arranged freely in a ring around the central group, against a sea rendered by groups of broken grey and black lines...”<sup>112</sup>

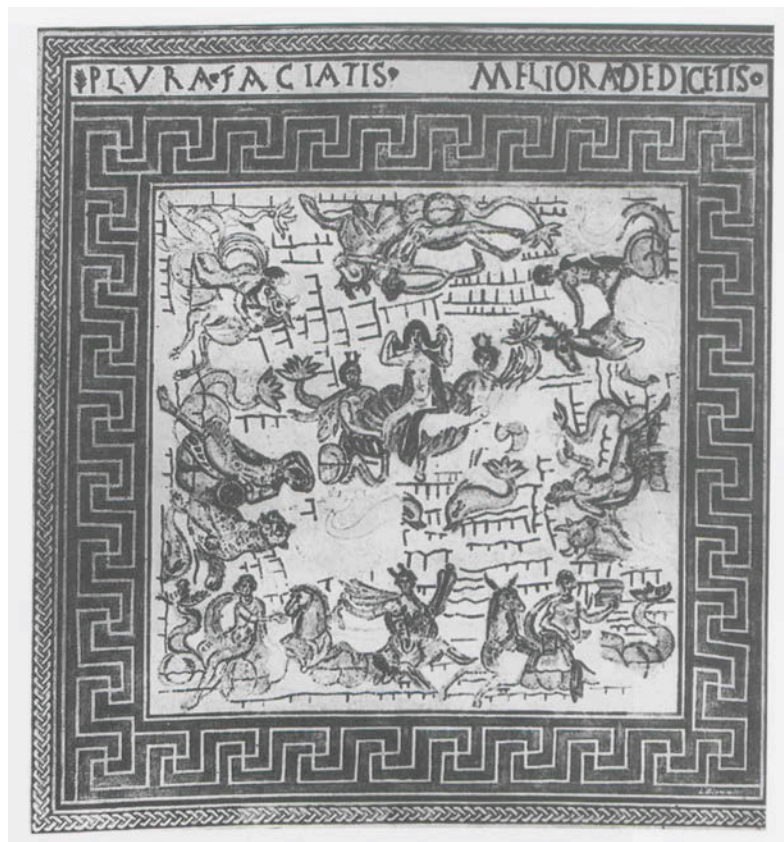


Figure 14. A drawing depicting the Venus mosaic from the House of Dioscuri Dunbabin 67.

The symbolism of Venus riding on a shell is most famous perhaps in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, but obviously a very common one throughout history. It is generally

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<sup>112</sup> Dunbabin 64.



associated with her birth; she rode the shell to the coast after being born from the sea foam.

Of course, no discussion of Roman mythology relating to the sea would be complete without Neptune, the lord of the sea himself.<sup>113</sup> According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Amphitrite was a Nereid that Neptune chose to be his bride when he saw her and her sisters dancing. She attempted to escape by going to Atlas, but was captured by one of Neptune's dolphins and brought back to marry him.<sup>114</sup> In Ostia, the baths of Neptune are a massive bath complex, with black-and-white figure mosaics depicting Neptune and his bride, Amphitrite. Mythological sea monsters such as ichthyocentaurs, Nereids, and Erotes surround Neptune in one room as he drives a team of seahorses, and Amphitrite rides to meet him, led by Eros in the adjacent room.<sup>115</sup>

Although Neptune is not directly represented in Populonia, he is involved in the myth of the gorgon Medusa. Medusa is a fascinating figure of mythology. A well-known story, her face is portrayed repeatedly throughout the Roman Empire as a way to ward off evil. According to McKeon: "Roman writers for the most part perpetuated traditional Greek tales associated with the creature Medusa. Usually identified as the offspring of sea deities, Medusa was one of three gorgon sisters as well as the consort of Poseidon and the mother of Pegasus and Chrysaor."<sup>116</sup> As the story goes, Medusa was once very beautiful, with especially lovely hair, and Neptune fell madly in lust with her. He raped her in the temple of Minerva, who, horrified by the act, turned the beautiful girl into a monster

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<sup>113</sup> Although an important deity in ancient religion, there is only a passing mention here, as there is no true comparison for this piece to be seen in Populonia.

<sup>114</sup> Doniger "Amphitrite" in *Encyclopedia Britannica* 144.

<sup>115</sup> Dunbabin 61.

<sup>116</sup> McKeon 10.

with snake tresses and a gaze that turned mortals into stone.<sup>117</sup> Perseus was later sent to kill her. Ovid tells us the tale from Perseus's point of view, the hero who slayed her:

Gorgoneas tetigisse domos passimque per agros  
perque vias vidisse hominum simulacra ferarumque  
in silicem ex ipsis visa conversa Medusa.  
se tamen horrendae clipei, quem laeva gerebat,  
aere repperusso formam adspexisse Medusae,  
dumque gravis somnus colubrasque ipsamque tenebat,  
eripuisse caput collo; pennisque fugacem  
Pegason et fratrem matris de sanguine natos.<sup>118</sup>

Which in English translates to:

On all sides through the fields and along the ways he saw the forms of men and beasts changed into stone by one look at Medusa's face. But he himself had looked upon the image of that dread face reflected from the bright bronze shield his left hand bore; and while deep sleep held fast both the snakes and her who wore them, he smote her head clean from her neck, and from the blood of his mother swift-winged Pegasus and his brother sprang.<sup>119</sup>

The severed head maintained some power, and was able to petrify the giant, Atlas, and anything else that looked directly into its eyes. Minerva eventually put the severed head onto her shield to harness this power.

A plethora of mosaics and other forms of art portray the gorgon, it was an incredibly popular myth to immortalize in paint, stone, or tesserae. In mosaics, McKeon identifies three types of gorgons represented: the Archaic type, the Middle type, and the Beautiful type. The Archaic type is characterized by a round frontal face, lion-like features, protruding eyes, tongue out, and tightly curled hair without snakes. Occasionally it is represented with a body, but mostly just the head is shown. The Middle type is characterized by becoming less lion-like and feral, instead using grotesquely distorted

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<sup>117</sup> Ovid IV.790-803.

<sup>118</sup> Ovid IV.778-786.

<sup>119</sup> Ovid IV.778-786.

human facial features, and this is when the snake hair was introduced. These two types were meant to repulse and repel evil. The third type, however, is quite different. While the Beautiful type does have the iconic snake hair, it also has a beautiful face.<sup>120</sup> In the case of the Beautiful type, “The image of the Medusa head may have continued to be thought of as an averter of evil, but more by its powers of attraction than of repulsion. In other words this gorgoneion of comely countenance may have been believed to lure a potential threat with her beauty and then to petrify with a single glance, thus eradicating the evil influence.”<sup>121</sup>

McKeon further breaks down the Beautiful type of gorgoneion into different categories. There is the Oblique/Oval-faced type, the Oblique/Round-faced type, the Merged Pose type, the Frontal/Oval-faced type, and the Frontal/Round-faced type.<sup>122</sup> With its beautiful, human features, serene expression, forehead wings, and snake tresses, the gorgon mosaic at Poggio del Molino fits nicely into the Frontal/Round-faced type of Beautiful gorgoneia. This image is portrayed in the villa at Poggio del Molino, in the largest *cubiculum*, it was most likely meant to serve as a way to protect the sleepers from evil.

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<sup>120</sup> McKeon 12-14.

<sup>121</sup> McKeon 15.

<sup>122</sup> McKeon 34-42.



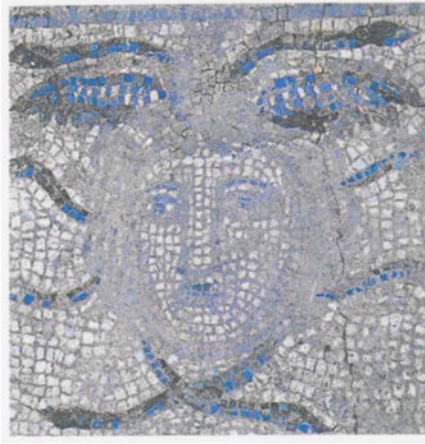


Figure 15. The gorgoneia depicted in the *cubiculum* at Poggio del Molino.  
De Tommaso 29.

In Ostia there are many examples of gorgoneia. The mosaic in the Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne represents several gorgons, all of which fall into the Oblique/Oval-faced type of Beautiful gorgoneia due to their anxious facial expressions, oval to square shaped heads, and tight knit wavy hair.<sup>123</sup> The gorgoneia in the Insula del'Aquila of Ostia fall into the same category, with broader chins.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, the gorgoneia in the House of Apuleius would be characterized as within the Oblique/Oval-faced type.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> McKeon 34.

<sup>124</sup> McKeon 35.

<sup>125</sup> Dunbabin 293.

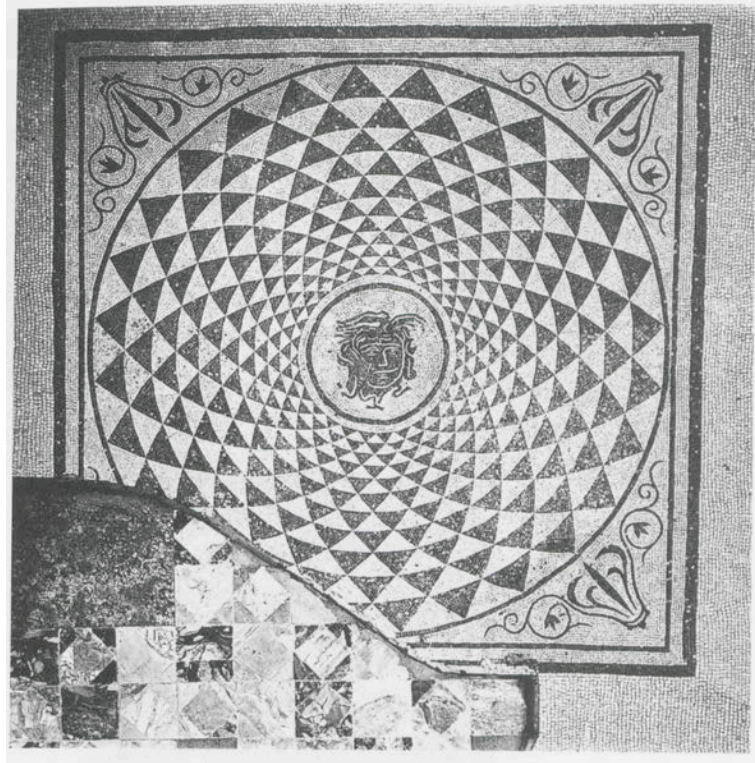


Figure 16. Gorgon mosaic in the House of Apuleius, interestingly it is superimposed on an earlier opus sectile floor. Dunbabin 293.

The myths represented in mosaics are not random or chosen on a whim. Thus what the mosaicists chose to portray says a lot about what was important to the city they worked in. In each of these cities, the bulk of the figure mosaics had connections to the sea or religion or both

## Conclusion

It is tempting to look at Ancient Roman mosaics and try to see them as the Romans saw them, to interpret them as we think they might interpret them. However, when looking at mosaics it is vital to consider them from a modern perspective.

In each of these cities, Populonia and Ostia, the mosaics have existed for centuries, and yet we know very little about them from an ancient perspective. How did the ancients classify mosaics? What did they associate specifically with the figures represented in them? When answering these questions researches must take into account the elements discussed in this thesis. How modern scholars classify mosaics could differ from how the ancients did. As far as ancient sources go, the best idea we can get concerning classification is from Vitruvius, who only discusses foundations of mosaics. The classifications we give mosaics, figure versus geometric or the typology of gorgoneia, are most likely different then how ancient people would have classified them.

Conservation is a delicate art, a balance of ancient and modern perspectives. When studying conservation, it is important to note both aspects. Firstly, floor mosaics were just that: floors. They were walked on, things were dropped on them, buildings were built over them or collapsed on them, and as such they were damaged, even in ancient times when they were new. Ancient repairs can be seen in Ostia, in particular where it

was too expensive to recreate the pattern and they were filled in with either plain cement or *opus signinum*. Secondly, in the modern era, conservation is used to protect these mosaics and to restore them to their original state, but conservation techniques have changed over time and the very act of conservation fundamentally changes the existing mosaic. As Fischer puts it: “Where the base of the mosaic is crumbling, a total overhaul is necessary. Injections of liquid cement are now obsolete as they tend to endanger a mural by making it unduly heavy.”<sup>126</sup> In my opinion this type of major restoration project alters the integrity of a mosaic, at least in the sense that it is no longer what it originally was. Restoration is incredibly important, and without it we would not be able to experience the ancient world as much as we can, but modern alterations must be taken into account when studying mosaics. It is the same in situations such as for the *Mosaico dei Pesci*. The reconstruction was beautifully done, but it is important to realize that the mosaic on display is not the same as the one originally crafted, and while restorers specifically chose tesserae of the same type and color, they are different.

When studying these mosaics, we must look at them through a modern perspective, because that is what we concretely have. That is not to say that we cannot learn from these works, just that they must be viewed through a modern lens. The mosaics in Populonia and Ostia tell us a lot about what was important to the people who created or commissioned them, especially the intrinsic connection to the sea present in both cities.

Conducting archeological research brought me up close and personal with these works, and there is no better way to study them. Seeing the care and precision groups

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<sup>126</sup> Fischer 148.

such as Archeodig and RavennAntica give to their work is truly inspiring. It is because of groups like them that we can study ancient homes and art.

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