

AN OVERVIEW OF MOSAICS IN ROMAN GAUL

BALMELLE (C.), DARMON (J.-P.) *La mosaïque dans les Gaules romaines*. Pp. 359, b/w & colour ills, colour maps. Paris: Éditions Picard, 2017. Cased, €59. ISBN: 978-2-7084-1031-2.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X18001452

This volume is a welcome addition to scholarship on ancient mosaics, bringing an important corpus into focus through the judicious illustration and discussion of the finest examples of mosaics from all parts of Roman Gaul. The volume focuses on the study of these mosaics in their historical and architectural contexts, and represents the results of the most recent research, discoveries and approaches to the study of ancient mosaics. Written by two specialists whose experience in the field lends them perfectly to the present task, the work reads beautifully with a conformity of style that is rare in a team project. Whereas scholarly works on mosaics tend to be extremely general or extremely specific, this book is a refreshing compromise between the two approaches that sacrifices neither the bigger picture nor detail, rendering it useful to a broad group of readers. B. and D. have undertaken an ambitious project, with exemplary results.

Throughout, the discussion is lively though succinct, and pleasantly readable. The authors write in a very accessible style, and seamlessly engage in discussion of examples from different areas of Roman Gaul during the major periods they have delineated, to offer a comprehensive look at the surviving material evidence. The volume is organised chronologically, with a thematic chapter at both the beginning and the end.

Chapter 1, 'The Worksite', explores technical considerations in the construction and laying of mosaics. It starts by examining Gallo-Roman mosaics within their architectural contexts, and also contextualises them in terms of other types of flooring techniques, both luxury and utilitarian, reflecting hierarchy of space. The chapter provides a historical overview of forms, motifs, colours and locations of mosaics within domestic, public and religious structures as well as a thorough introduction to important and well-preserved sites and structures across Roman Gaul: the impressive number of examples discussed allows the reader to become familiar with the corpus very quickly.

Chapter 1 also includes a useful discussion of the ancient artisans and their craft, based on material remains such as objects and equipment (e.g. discs of coloured glass) as well as imagery related to the making of mosaics. Technical processes such as the preparatory work of laying out designs as well as the hierarchical roles within, and the functioning of, a mosaic workshop are discussed in detail. This reviewer found it useful to have such information presented in the first chapter rather than the last, where it often appears in English-language books on Roman mosaics. However, the chapter is missing a discussion and graphics related to sublevels and foundations: more indication about the stratigraphy of Gallo-Roman mosaics would have allowed readers to compare construction techniques here with those of other regions of the Roman world.

Chapter 2, 'Origines et premiers développements (IV^e siècle av. J.-C.–1^{er} siècle ap. J.-C.)', starts with a review of the earliest decorative floors in Gaul. The authors attribute the arrival of tessellated surfaces in the area to Greek influence at the colony of *Massalia* (modern Marseille), where the earliest examples so far have been discovered (c. 200 BC). Fuller evidence comes later from the same site, with substantial examples dated 50 BC–AD 50. Some of the earliest examples show, as at Rome, a combination of mortared floors (similar to *opus signinum*) with tesserae of limited colours (mostly earth tones and white) placed to create geometric patterns such as meanders, rosettes, lozenges, waves and simple lines; early figural motifs include dolphins and griffins. Other examples show

areas of tessellated work arranged centrally: early *emblemata*. By the end of the first century BC, there is strong evidence for the presence of Italic craftsmen in Roman Gaul, such as polychromy with as many as six colours and more sophisticated designs as well as use of *trompe l'œil* patterns so beloved by the Romans, a higher number and more complicated use of linear motifs (e.g. wave, meander, plait and ivy, among others) and silhouette figures. By the first decades AD, the authors suggest, mosaics in Roman Gaul show full influence from Italy in terms of conservative designs, small tesserae and impressive workmanship, with parallels in Augustan Rome (e.g. acanthus scrolls).

In the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods, the floors tend to be organised more evenly in grid compositions, covered completely in fully polychrome mosaics consisting of repeated ornamental coffers (filled with simple repetitive designs or, increasingly, figural motifs), divided by bands, with decorative *emblemata* in the centre. Evident at this time, too, is a full adoption of the Roman repertoire of motifs, many with political connotations (such as centaurs, candelabra and vines), revealing a connection with imperial Rome.

Chapter 3, 'Essor de la mosaïque gallo-romaine (II^e siècle-milieu du III^e siècle ap. J.-C.)', investigates the mosaics of this spectacular high point, which coincided with a flurry of building activity across Roman Gaul. The discussion of artisans and patrons demonstrates that the larger cities showed the most complex and sophisticated – and expensive – floors. Across *Gallia Narbonensis* (south-eastern Gaul), for example, numerous *opus sectile* floors indicate the wealth of the homeowners. The authors furthermore suggest that the town of *Vienna* (modern Wien) was a centre of mosaic production, with specialised artisan teams that may have travelled to other towns for work, spreading a 'Viennese school' of mosaic style.

A survey of developments and examples across Gaul at the time reveals that black-and-white schemes adopt some colour, while geometric forms flourish, and there is greater variety overall than ever before. The old shapes are joined by hexagons, circles, diamonds, octagons, shield-patterns, lozenges, crescents and ellipses (among others), all ornamented with meander and wave patterns and floral designs. Also noteworthy is the introduction of polychrome plaits to delineate panels, as well as the greater profusion of subsidiary ornamentation throughout the pictorial field.

The figural designs at the centre of the coffered fields become more diverse in subject (including many Greek and Roman mythological scenes and characters) and more carefully rendered, with smaller tesserae and greater attention to details such as contour, shading and perspective. Additions to the figural repertoire include the seasons, athletes, hunters, still-life scenes, cupids, studies of faunal species, Dionysiac and theatre imagery, Orpheus, the Labours of Hercules, orators and thinkers, pedagogues, muses, gladiators, circus imagery and scenes of rural life. Wine imagery, including ivy, the vine and vessels such as *kantharoi*, continue to be popular border motifs. The complexity with which these mosaics are rendered is truly impressive, and examples from this period rival the best mosaics from other centres, including Roman Africa and the capital itself.

Chapter 4, 'L'Antiquité tardive (milieu du III^e siècle–VI^e siècle)', is organised both geographically and topographically, considering urban settlements and rural villas separately. This chapter is particularly fascinating, as it begins with the study of mosaics at *Augusta Treverorum* (modern Trier, Germany), which was home to several Roman emperors during this period. Here once again, the authors masterfully blend comprehensive treatment with detailed discussion of the evidence.

There is a remarkable continuity of motifs from the previous period: literary and mythological figures, circus racers, geometric patterns and vegetal designs remain the most popular, despite the affirmation of Christianity and the rise of powerful bishops who commissioned mosaic-covered walls. The most significant developments occur in the

south-west (*Gallia Aquitania*), which sees its most vibrant period yet. Here luxurious villa sites and public urban structures proliferate, offering large gathering and reception spaces as canvases for the mosaicist's art (e.g. depicting large fruit trees). This period is marked by an evident stylistic *koiné* linking Gaul to Africa (e.g. frequent depiction of Oceanus) and the eastern Mediterranean (e.g. introduction of adjacent hexagons and octagons), tangibly demonstrating the political, economic and social prominence of Gaul in the greater Roman world.

The fifth and final chapter, 'La mosaïque, document d'histoire sociale', is an interesting and useful conclusion to the volume. The most significant contribution is the discussion of the evidence for the presence of Italic mosaicists in Gaul, working both individually and in teams, and stylistic comparisons suggesting that some artisans plied their trade over considerable distances. By the second century AD, certain stylistic touches can be identified as 'signatures' of individual workshops whose reach and popularity can be roughly gauged. The final sections, on mosaics as reflections of the aristocrats who commissioned them for public and private spaces and their semantic meanings, explores connections between social rank, iconography and location in the unique context of Greco-Roman culture transplanted to Gaul.

The volume includes a full glossary of technical and Latin terms, a helpful topographical index and a vast and impressively up-to-date bibliography. It also contains a large removable map of Roman Gaul, which indicates the main settlements and sites, provincial boundaries and topographical relief. The map is quite pleasing in terms of colours and format, though it would have benefited greatly from a reference grid and short-form gazetteer, so that a site mentioned in the book may be quickly located.

Physically, the book is stunning, with excellent paper and image quality, and pleasant and readable font and line spacing. The proofreading and editing are exceptional, and this volume is clearly a best effort on the part of everyone involved in its creation. No detail has been spared, as the full-colour plates used throughout document the mosaics impeccably. The photographs are a welcome combination of close-ups of important details and full views, and the computer-enhanced images are tastefully restrained. There is also good use of digital recreations and physical models, which are among the best and most detailed this reviewer has seen. Line drawings are clear and comprehensive while remaining lively and pleasing to the eye. One practical note about the images is that it would have been highly useful, throughout the book, to be more uniform in including dates in the captions.

This volume is a much-needed and very welcome addition to the corpus of scholarship on mosaics in the ancient world and should be considered necessary reading for anyone studying Roman mosaics. It provides a comprehensive and in-depth view of the artisans and mosaics of an important area of the Roman empire close to the capital and explores the influence of the latter on the former, while focusing too on the continuation of regional styles. It should become the example for future projects documenting mosaics in other areas of the Roman world.

The price of this magnificent book is so modest that it is surprising. This volume will be a valuable addition to research libraries as well as the small but precious personal libraries of students and scholars.

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