

ASPRM

free leaflet

Association for the Study and Preservation
of Roman Mosaics www.asprom.org

Membership: 10 Gilkes Yard, Banbury, Oxon, OX16 9GF

An Introduction to Romano-British Mosaics

Mosaic floors made of small cubes (*tesserae*) were introduced to Britain by the Romans. Soon after the Roman invasion in 43 CE, craftsmen arrived from overseas to lay mosaics in rich people's houses. Mosaics were made throughout the Roman period, until about 400 CE, ranging from simple geometric patterns to sophisticated designs with human and animal figures. Buried by the debris of buildings which collapsed upon them, they remained undiscovered until the 17th century CE and later. Sadly, many of the 2000 known mosaics are now destroyed or lost, leaving just a small, precious number to be seen in museums and on sites today.

Designing a mosaic

Pattern-books may have been used by clients to choose their preferred designs, and by mosaicists to execute the work. These could have been made of parchment, papyrus, or thin pieces of wood. It is thought that groups of mosaicists were based around London and major towns such as St Albans, Colchester, Cirencester and Dorchester, each with their own distinctive designs. The more artistic figured work may have been prefabricated by master mosaicists and brought to the site to be inserted into the design, with less skilled or apprentice craftsmen filling in the background. Surrounding border areas are often plain, with larger tesserae.

Method of manufacture

Most raw materials were local. They included limestone (grey or brown), old red sandstone (purplish-brown), sandstone (yellow tones), Purbeck marble (dark blues), Kimmeridge shale (black or dark grey), and hard chalk (white and cream), with the addition of pottery and tile (red and yellow). Coloured glass was also used on rare occasions to enliven figures. Materials were first sawn or chopped into sticks, and then cut into small cubes. These tesserae were then set in mortar on a rubble or hard natural base. Finally, the floor was polished by being vigorously rubbed with large stones and abrasive.

First century: foreign fashions

The earliest mosaics surviving in Britain are from the bath-house of the legionary fortress at Exeter (55–60 CE). However, the best first-century mosaics can be seen in the Palace at Fishbourne, near Chichester; they have elaborate black and white geometric designs, imitating fashions from Italy and France. There are also some coloured mosaics at Fishbourne and a few other sites.

Second century: local development

As Britain became more Romanised and wealthy, mosaics became more popular, and mosaicists developed more complex and colourful designs, often based on grids of octagons, rectangles or circles. Many mosaics of this period were made for houses in prosperous towns such as London, St Albans, Colchester, Leicester, and Silchester near Reading.

Third century: decline

Inflation and anarchy in Britain and the Empire reversed the building boom, and few mosaics were made. However, perhaps as a result of rich entrepreneurs fleeing from barbarian raids into Gaul, new wealthy landowners appeared at the end of the century, helping to lift Britain out of recession.

Fourth century: golden age

From about 300 CE, there was a great revival of mosaics, especially in south and south-west England, both in country villas, like Bignor in West Sussex, and in towns, such as Dorchester and Cirencester. A number of centres of mosaic production sprang up, which can be recognised by their distinctive designs and motifs. A **Central Southern Group**, perhaps based in Winchester, produced mostly geometric mosaics, in Berkshire, Hampshire and West Sussex. Further north-west, mosaicists around **Cirencester** made several exceptional mosaics showing the Greek musician Orpheus playing his lyre and charming wild beasts, who circle around him. The great Orpheus pavement at Woodchester, Gloucestershire, at almost 15 m square, is one of the largest Roman mosaics known north of the Alps. Craftsmen in the **Dorchester** area created many mosaics with mythological and marine scenes, but their most famous work, from Hinton St Mary, has a central figure who is identified by some as Christ. By contrast, the **Midland Group** preferred geometric designs with elaborate interlaced octagons, circles, lozenges (diamonds) and stars. A northern group, perhaps based at **Brough-on-Humber**, Yorkshire, specialised in radial schemes, such as those from Horkstow and Brantingham. However, towards the end of the fourth century, decline again set in, and no mosaics are known dating after about 400 CE.

Mosaic designs

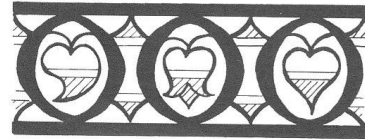
Most mosaics show only geometric patterns and plant motifs, but a significant minority include human and animal forms. These are often the ones lifted for display in museums. One popular theme, often found in baths, is fish and sea-creatures surrounding **Neptune**, god of the sea, with his trident, and crab or lobster claws growing from his head. **Dolphins** are often connected with a **cantharus** (two-handed wine-cup). Stylised **ivy** or **vine scrolls** twine around many panels, with **grapes**, **peacocks** and other **birds** in amongst them. Exotic **animals** such as lions, tigers and elephants appear on the **Orpheus** mosaics. Corner busts often represent the four **Seasons** or **Winds**, with appropriate attributes. Other figures include **Bacchus**, god of wine, crowned with leaves; **Mercury**, messenger of the gods, with his *caduceus*, a serpent-entwined staff; the Gorgon **Medusa**, with snakes in her hair; **Triton**, son of Neptune, part man, part fish; and **Venus**, goddess of love and beauty, mother of Cupid, often with a sea-shell. Classical themes were much in demand to show off the owner's learning and taste. Some later mosaics have **Christian** symbols, including the **Chi-Rho**, and perhaps also a **pomegranate** (eternal life), **cup** (chalice) and **fish**.

Popular motifs

These are some of the most common patterns and objects:



acanthus scroll



cornice



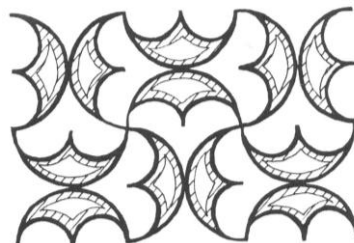
stylised ivy scroll



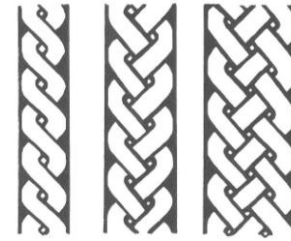
undulating scroll with flowers



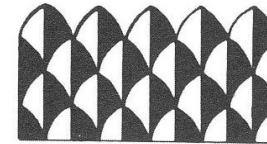
intersecting circles



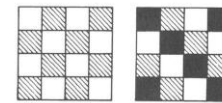
running peltae



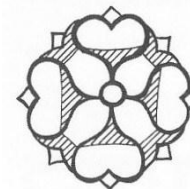
guilloche



scale pattern



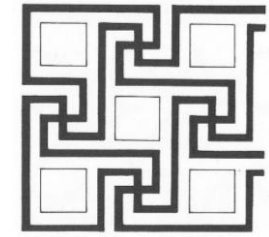
chequers



stylised flower



cantharus (wine-cup)



swastika-meander



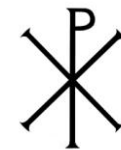
latchkey meander



wave-crest



swastika-peltae (with knot in centre)



Chi-Rho
(first two letters of 'Christ' in Greek)

Further information

This leaflet can only provide a brief introduction to the wonderful world of mosaics from Roman Britain. For more information, plus a list of museums and sites where you can see Roman mosaics, please visit www.asprom.org.