

Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos del Conventus Astigitanus

By Sebastián Vargas Vázquez

2016. OXFORD: ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

348 PP. 170 COLOUR ILLUS.

ISBN: 9781784912734

REVIEWED BY RUBÉN MONTOYA GONZÁLEZ

School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester

The publication of *Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos del Conventus Astigitanus*, based on Vargas's PhD thesis, constitutes a novel approach to the analysis of mosaics from one of the four *conventi iuridici* which composed the Hispano-Romano province of Baetica. This book complements a previous volume published by the same author: *Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos de Écija (Sevilla)* (2014). The author fulfils the aim of providing an updated overview of the mosaics from that region; his study contributes to the long tradition of studies on Hispano-Roman mosaics and spends much effort exhaustively analyzing the geometric ones, an aspect traditionally disregarded by Spanish scholars.

The attention paid to mosaics within wider socio-economic contexts in the initial sections of the volume is worth noting. In some cases this relates to the nature of figurative representations of productive activities, which have archaeological evidence (page 15). However, the volume would have benefited further from a different organization of the initial chapters (for example: historical background, literature review and methodology) to clearly introduce and identify the need to carry out a study of geometric mosaics. Although the geographic delimitation of the work coincides with the boundaries of the *Conventus Astigitanus*, the author consistently indicates that such limits are conventional and did not affect the mobility of craftsmen (page 12). Vargas argues that the traditional attribution of mosaics to chronologies based on stylistic analysis has its limitations, instead proposing the creation of a corpus containing only mosaics with reliable chronologies (page 9).

A detailed description and thorough analysis of mosaics is presented in a catalogue in Chapter Four. Although the author aims to provide the basis for a com-

pletely open catalogue (page 4), only selected examples are included due to the length of the book (page 34). In defence of the author it must be noted that in some cases data has been excluded because, for instance, it has not been possible to document it due to its fragmented and limited inventory, such as in the villa of Alcaparral (Casariche, Sevilla) (pages 50–55). Examples from *Astigi* (Écija), the capital of the *Conventus Astigitanus*, are not included in the catalogue because the same author published them in a previous volume (Vargas 2014). Mosaics lacking geometric compositions have also been excluded and continuous references to another general gazetteer (not listed) are made throughout the work (pages 34, 272). Because of that, in some cases it is not clear whether or not a site contains only one mosaic or more (page 35). Such exclusive criteria restricts a complete comprehension of data. This could have been overcome by including a list of mosaics by type of building and from the other two catalogues mentioned.

The elaborate description of each mosaic within the gazetteer is accompanied by several entries providing useful information on location, type of associated architectural space, chronology, discovery, bibliography, etc. The author's observations on antique restorations of some of the mosaics are worth noting (pages 66, 135). The quality of the images is very good. However, the catalogue contains some inconsistencies: for instance, the site of Pedrera (Sevilla) is presented as an urban site (page 35), while it was interpreted as a villa (Taller de Arqueología de Pedrera 1998). In the villa baths of Herrera (Sevilla), the author has not documented the functionality of one of the spaces, whilst it has been repeatedly identified as a latrine (Vera Fernández 2013-2014: 162, 165). In addition, the extent to which functions attributed to some spaces are dependent upon ancient textual sources stands out; considering the paucity of reliable information about the spatial layout of villas within classical sources, it seems inconsistent to use Latin terms to attribute functions (Chavarría 2005: 535, n. 18; Allison 2001: 186). Besides that, the catalogue provides the fundamentals upon which further research can be built, and it reflects the arduous work of analyzing Hispano-Roman mosaics.

Chapters Five and Six are dedicated to the meticulous description and analysis of the layout of geometric designs from the examples inventoried, excluding complex and simple geometric figures from borders and other spaces (page 198). An interesting addition to the classification of mosaics is presented by the author in the form of 87 different designs classified in 12 groups; it is worth noting he includes another 11 designs not found in the *conventus*

Astigitanus to facilitate the comprehension of those catalogued. However, continuous references in Chapter Five to examples from *Astigi* (not listed in this volume) are found. Complementary drawings allow an accurate understanding of the construction of designs, presented from simple to complex.

As one of the conclusions, Vargas identifies that circular-based designs are the most common in the *conventus Astigitanus*, followed by the quadrangular ones and, in small numbers, by octagonal designs and other motifs (page 320). The author's comments on the chronological use of such designs are worth noting (pages 272–275). Through their analysis, he consistently approaches the process of elaboration of complex geometric designs (page 275), the use of templates when displaying mosaics (pages 285–290) or the use of geometric designs in secondary camps of pavements through which associated architectural spaces have been identified as *cubicula* or *triclinia* (page 288).

Mosaic workshops and artisans are introduced in pages 28–32 and thoroughly discussed in Chapter Seven. It must be noted that the author's considerations on the manufacture of mosaics in this section are not solely dependent upon textual sources, since he highlights the rich and complex diversity of archaeological evidence in this region (page 294). He is able to demonstrate that the display of mosaics in country villas is characterized by its heterogeneity, and that it was not influenced by tendencies evidenced in the capital of the *Conventus Astigitanus*, and lasted until the beginning of the fifth century AD (pages 310, 319). An interesting part of this section includes comments on people involved in the manufacture of mosaics, highlighting the identification of different hands in the display of several of them in villa of Fuente Álamo (Puente Genil, Córdoba) (pages 301–304); accurate considerations regarding the production of tesserae made by a workshop in the villa of Estación (Antequera, Málaga [page 306]) are also worth noting.

In terms of workshops, Vargas critiques the unique existence of the so-called *Escuela del Guadalquivir*, identified and named by Mañas (2011: 635–641), arguing for a revision of such an interpretation and pointing out other studies which have shown clear differences among the main three mosaic centres of the Baetica province (Italica, Córdoba, and Écija [page 31, n. 201]). Although the author states that the combination of *opus figlinum* and *opus tessellatum* in the Baetica province could be read in terms of regional identity (page 7, n. 13) or fashion (page 305), further commenting on the possible existence of dif-

ferent workshops, their character and the geography(ies) or regional style(s) would have benefited the book. Finally, in this section there is a lack of reference to the risk implied when applying the modern term of workshop or school to the Roman World, an aspect cautiously considered by other authors (Allison 1991; Guardia 1992: 431; Mañas 2010: 120, n. 681; Scott 2000: 27).

Above all, this book represents an accurate overview of geometric mosaics from the *Conventus Astigitanus* and should be treated as such. Vargas's work makes a substantial quantity and quality of data available. It approaches issues surrounding the study of mosaics in that region and provides novel quantitative data on the use of geometric designs in the examples catalogued. It also establishes the basis upon which to build further studies in the Baetica province or other parts of Hispania, especially regarding the catalogue and the existence of different workshops and regional style(s). The potential offered by a regional study of geometric mosaics, which has traditionally been disregarded by Spanish scholarship, appears clear from this book.

References

- Allison, P.M. 1991. 'Workshops' and 'patternbooks'. Akten des 4. Internationalen Kolloquium zur römischen Wandmalerei in Köln, Sept. 1989. *Kolner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 24: 79–84.
- Allison, P.M. 2001. Using the Material and Written Sources: Turn of the Millennium Approaches to Roman Domestic Space. *American Journal of Archaeology* 105: 181–208.
- Chavarría, A. 2005. Villas in Hispania during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries. In K. Bowes and M. Kulikowski (eds), *Hispania in Late Antiquity. Current Perspectives*. The Medieval and Early Modern Iberian World. Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 518–555.
- Guardia, M. 1992. *Los mosaicos de la Antigüedad Tardía en Hispania. Estudios de Iconografía*. Barcelona: PPU, Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias.
- Mañas, I. 2010. *Pavimentos decorativos de Itálica (Santiponce, Sevilla): un estudio arqueológico*. BAR International Series 2081. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Mañas, I. 2011. La creación de la escuela musivaria del Guadalquivir: modelos itálicos e interpretación regional. In T. Nogales and I. Roda (eds), *Roma y las provincias: modelo y difusión II*. Roma: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 635–641.
- Scott, S. 2000. *Art and Society in Fourth-Century Britain*. Oxford University School of Archaeology Monograph 53. Oxford: Oxbow.

- Taller de Arqueología de Pedrera. 1998. Intervención arqueológica de urgencia. Villa romana de “Las Huertas” (Pedrera, Sevilla). In J. Envina, I. García, J.C. Mejías and M. Rosa (eds), Pedrera: Recuperación de nuestra memoria colectiva. Sevilla: Edita Mosaico (available online: http://ilusionismosocial.org/pluginfile.php/261/mod_resource/content/6/PEDRERA%20HISTORIA%20ORAL.pdf, accessed on 14 March 2017).
- Vargas, S. 2014. *Diseños geométricos en los mosaicos de Écija (Sevilla)*. BAR International Series 2654. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Vera, A. 2013-2014. Análisis funcional y puesta en valor del conjunto termal de Herrera (Sevilla). *Romula* 12-13: 155–182.