

The agonistic mosaic in the Villa of Lucius Verus and the Capitolia of Rome

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The 3rd-c. interventions in the Villa of Lucius Verus on the *Via Cassia* included the laying of a black-and-white mosaic in the irregular space 32 in Sector D, which forms a passage or vestibule between exedra 24/25 to the north and the small baths (41-48) to the south (fig. 1).¹ The mosaic shows a series of figures and small groups; most are athletes of various sorts, but they also include musicians, comic and tragic actors, and a prize-table with crowns or wreaths and busts of the three Capitoline deities, as well as other figures whose identification is sometimes not immediately obvious (fig. 2). The combination of athletic, musical and theatrical events is the characteristic mark of a Greek *agon*; the mosaic therefore takes its place among a small group of monuments that portray such *agones*. As a detailed description of the mosaic was presented by E. Caserta in *NSc* 22 (2010-11),² the object of the present article is to place the mosaic in the context of related monuments, discuss the more problematic figures, and consider iconographic parallels which not only help to clarify some of the problems but can also indicate the artistic context within which its designer was working. Finally, it will consider the overall interpretation of the mosaic and its relationship to the agonistic culture of Rome in the 3rd c. A.D.

The *agones gymnikoi*, *mousikoi* (or *thymelikoi*) and *skēnikoi* were the central feature of the festivals known by a variety of titles such as sacred, eiselastic, oecumenical; by the 2nd and 3rd c. A.D., these festivals were widespread throughout the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman Empire.³ Although they were rarer in the Latin-speaking West, important festivals of this type were found in Italy, N Africa and Gaul.⁴ At Rome, the greatest of them, the *Capitolia* in honour of Jupiter Capitolinus, was founded by Domitian in 86 and held every 4 years until its disappearance perhaps as late as the early 5th c.; it ranked as the equal of the great traditional festivals that made up the élite 'circuit' (*periodos*).⁵ It was the only festival

1 See Caserta above p. 188; ead. 2012, 134-37. The mosaic is a later addition to the original building of the second half of the 2nd c.; archaeological evidence provides only very broad termini for its laying. Greater precision is provided by the two togate men who wear the contabulate form of the toga, first attested under Severus Alexander (see *infra* n.59). The figure style conforms to that characteristic of the black-and-white mosaics of Rome and vicinity in the 3rd c., with the internal white lines tending towards abstraction (cf. Becatti 1961, 336-52); some of the nude athletes show a network of white lines almost completely unrelated to anatomical reality (e.g., figs. 7-8). A date in the second to third quarter of the 3rd c. seems most plausible on stylistic grounds.

2 Primary publication Caserta 2012, especially 137-55 on the mosaic; also ead. 2010; Bohne 2011, 429-33 K 56*. I discuss the mosaic more briefly in Dunbabin forthcoming, in the context of the imagery of Greek festivals in the Roman world; the present study develops and extends some of the conclusions reached there.

3 Among the numerous studies of agonistic festivals see Klose 2005; van Nijf 2001; Leschhorn 1998; Robert 1984; for a recent survey see Chaniotis 2011, especially 21-27, with extensive bibliography. The hippic contests in such festivals do not concern me here, and were rarely represented in the art of the Roman period; cf. *infra* n.75.

4 Caldelli 1993; Mann 2002, 139-41; Robert 1982, 231-35, on the festivals of Carthage; Caldelli 1997, on *Gallia Narbonensis*.

5 Caldelli 1993; Rieger 1999. The *periodos* traditionally comprised the Olympia, Pythia, Isthmia and Nemea, together with the Heraia or *Aspis* at Argos for the musical/dramatic contests; under