

Figuring out the facts: calculating mosaic labour times in 4th-c. A.D. Britain

Will Wootton

In the study of the British countryside in the 4th c. A.D. villas have formed a central component.¹ Their decoration features highly in the scholarship, the tessellated floors cited as evidence for the spending patterns and status claims of a wealthy élite.² This élite's desire to spend its surplus funds on lavish interiors created a "boom" in mosaic production, which some scholars have associated with a "flight of capital" from the Continent in the late 3rd c. or others simply with the increasing prosperity of landowners during the 4th c.³

My aim is to consider this period from the viewpoint of the makers, the individuals and teams responsible for producing the mosaics, those who directly experienced and responded to the changing demand. By quantifying the labour required to make mosaic floors, I attempt to offer a better understanding of the size and nature of the craft, and a different perspective on its operation within Britain.

Mosaics and the artistic economy

A greater appreciation of the economics of production offers distinctive insights into the working lives and organisational modes of craftsmen who remain little known.⁴ D. J. Smith's work revolutionised the study of mosaics in Britain in the 1960s but his and his followers' groupings of similar motifs and layouts continue to feature prominently in the scholarship without further discussion of alternative meanings for the patterns of correspondence.⁵ With a better understanding of working times, it is possible to consider the

Frequently cited abbreviations:

RMB I = D. S. Neal and S. R. Cosh, *Roman mosaics of Britain*. Volume I: *Northern Britain incorporating the Midlands and East Anglia* (London 2002).

RMB II = S. R. Cosh and D. S. Neal, *Roman mosaics of Britain*. Volume II: *South-West Britain* (London 2005).

RMB III = D. S. Neal and S. R. Cosh, *Roman mosaics of Britain*. Volume III: *South-East Britain* (London 2009).

RMB IV = S. R. Cosh and D. S. Neal, *Roman mosaics of Britain*. Volume IV: *Western Britain* (London 2010).

1 Some would argue that they have received too much attention: see D. J. Mattingly, *An imperial possession: Britain in the Roman Empire* (London 2006) 367.

2 See R. Ling, "Mosaics in Roman Britain: discoveries and research since 1945," *Britannia* 28 (1997) 259-95 for a bibliography of the 20th-c. scholarship, and the *Bulletin d'Information de l'Association Internationale pour l'Etude de la Mosaique Antique* for more recent publications.

3 D. J. Smith, "The mosaic pavements," in A. L. F. Rivet (ed.), *The Roman villa in Britain* (London 1969) 78 and 113-19; J. T. Smith, "Flight of capital or flight of fancy," *OJA* 2 (1983) 225-37. For a brief overview, see S. Esmonde Cleary, "Britain in the fourth century," in M. Todd (ed.), *A companion to Roman Britain* (Oxford 2004) 409-27.

4 Unlike elsewhere in the empire, there are few examples of inscribed mosaics in Britain, whether naming the maker (what we might call a "signature") or donor/dedicator. For the surviving evidence for Britain see R. Ling, "Inscriptions on Romano-British mosaics and wall-paintings," *Britannia* 38 (2007) at 65-69; otherwise M. Donderer, *Die Mosaizisten der Antike und ihre wirtschaftliche und soziale Stellung: eine Quellenstudie* (Erlangen 1989); id., *Die Mosaizisten der Antike II. Epigraphische Quellen — Neufunde und Nachträge* (Erlangen 2008).

5 Ling (supra n.2) 264-69. For references to Smith's work, see *ibid.* nos. 24-26, 29-30 on p. 286. For the more recent scholarship, consult S. R. Cosh, "Mosaic schools, *officinae* and groups in