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 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.
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 — Neufinde 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