

Another Alexander mosaic: reconstructing the Hunt mosaic from Palermo

William Wootton

In 1904, a mosaic representing a hunt scene was found in House B in the Piazza della Vittoria in the centre of modern Palermo.¹ The results of the excavations were published in 1921 by E. Gabrici.² In 1931 H. Fuhrmann included an analysis and reconstruction of the mosaic in his book on the painter Philoxenos of Eretria.³ Work on both the context of the house and the mosaic has continued, confirming that House B was a richly-decorated Hellenistic house situated close to the E wall of the old town of Panormus.⁴ In this article I will re-assess Fuhrmann's reconstruction and subsequent interpretations. After describing the mosaic in detail, I will present and explain a new reconstruction.

Description of the mosaic (figs. 1-3)

The Hunt mosaic was found set centrally in a large room (r) to the north of the peristyle (figs. 1 and 6).⁵ The main picture of the mosaic (205 x 174 cm) is framed by two bands, the inner black and the outer white. An intricate floral border comes next, then a band of white tesserae set at a 45° angle, and an outer frame consisting of two parallel black bands with a white one running through the middle. An adjusting border of white tesserae, also set at a 45° angle, runs up to the base of the walls.

The practice of setting the borders on an angle is common in the western Mediterranean and rare in the East.⁶ Taken together with the *opus sectile* mosaic spanning the threshold between this room and the portico, Room r belongs to a distinctly western trend of floor decoration.⁷ No lead strips are used in either the figural composition or the borders. It has been proposed that the craftsmen could have been from Alexandria.⁸ However, both design and technique show strong parallels with Pompeian examples and perhaps suggest the work of a local craftsmen or one from Campania.⁹

An important technical point is the seam visible c.4 cm out from the floral border (fig. 7). It consists of an expanse of grout where the white tesserae are not closely packed. It was probably the result either of two different phases of laying or of a division of work between the adjusting border and the more intricate work demanded by the floral border and central picture.¹⁰ Both the central panel and floral border were created in what modern scholars call *opus vermiculatum*, the most refined kind of *opus tessellatum*. The size of the tesserae varies from c.2 mm square for the figural elements to c.6 for the sections of landscape. The white, black and grey tesserae are marble, the yellow are a local silicate stone, while some of the red ones are terracotta.¹¹ One or two rows of tesserae are used to outline each of the figures or objects. The main scene is set against a grey background made up of tesserae varying from 3 to 10 mm square.

The overall effect of the mosaic is highly pictorial. It uses sophisticated artistic effects such as highlights, chiaroscuro and a single light source to create a three-dimensional scene on a flat surface.¹² This is done with

1 The most recent publications are Boeselager 1983, 47-55, and Di Stefano 1997, which includes detailed references to the excavations and a brief summary of events surrounding the find.

2 Gabrici 1921.

3 Fuhrmann 1931, 228-70.

4 See Wilson 1990, 23-24; Di Stefano 1997, 11-13. At the time of writing, House B was undergoing further exploration. For further comparanda to House B, see the recent excavations from Pergamon: V. Wulf, *Die Stadtgrabung: Die hellenistischen und römischen Wohnhäuser von Pergamon* (AvP XV.3, 1999).

5 The only two published plans can be found in Gabrici 1921, pl. 1, and Di Stefano 1997, fig. 8.

6 For comparative studies of floors from the eastern and western Mediterranean, see Joyce 1979 and Westgate 2000.

7 See Boeselager 1983, pl.X.20; for the use of such threshold mosaics, see Westgate 2000, 256-62.

8 Di Stefano 1997, 9 and 14.

9 Wilson 1990, 31.

10 Generally on mosaic techniques and production, see Dunbabin 1999, 279-90; Ling (ed.) 2000, 78-90; Westgate 2000, 272-73.

11 Di Stefano 1997, 10.

12 Bandinelli 1980.