

ROMAN MOSAICS



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Roman mosaics are decorative artworks composed of tesserae — small, colored cubes of stone, glass, or ceramic — set into wet mortar to form images, patterns, and scenes. These mosaics adorned floors, walls, and vaults in private homes as well as public buildings, often depicting historical events, mythological narratives, or everyday life. Durable and expressive, they became widespread throughout the Roman Empire.

The earliest Roman mosaics (3rd–2nd century BCE) consisted mainly of pebble constructions with simple black-and-white motifs, reflecting Greek and Hellenistic precedents. During the 1st century BCE, *opus tessellatum* mosaics were introduced. These employed cut tesserae to create mythological and figurative scenes, while central panels (*emblemata*) were executed in the highly refined technique called *opus vermiculatum*.

In the Early Imperial Period (1st century CE), this art form proliferated in both private and public architecture. By the 2nd century, polychrome (multicolored) mosaics became widespread. Regional mosaic styles began to develop in the 3rd century, culminating in a peak of sophistication during the Late Imperial Period (4th century CE).

MOSAICS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE COMPLEX

Private part of the Imperial Palace Complex in Sirmium (Loc. 1a) is in the center of Sremska Mitrovica, within the old historic city core. Since it was founded in 1957, during the numerous archaeological campaigns, the part of the palace complex around the rectangular courtyard was explored, together with the premises decorated with mosaics, frescoes, stone architectural elements and radiant underfloor heating system (*hypocaust*). Parts of the imperial palace (on the area of 20 ha) were also discovered in nearby localities. The entire complex with several construction phases dates from the end of 3rd and 4th century which corresponds with the period of greatest prosperity of the Late Roman town of Sirmium. 16 different mosaic pavements were found on this site. Mosaic floors were situated in almost all the rooms around inner courtyard of the palace on two or three levels of these premises. Their remains relate to three major construction phases of the complex.

All the mosaics were made using *opus tessellatum* technique. Their substructure consisted of four layers, which was common during the Roman period. White, ochre, blue, navy, yellow tesserae were used for surface decoration. Like the patterns on the other mosaic surfaces from palatial complexes in Serbia, all the polychrome geometric motifs belong to the traditional models of the Roman mosaics.

They are organized in single carpets outlined with curbs. Their composition consists of square nets, octagons, hexagons, rhombs and flowing meander set on the white background. Curbs consist of rows of rectangular bands with additional motifs of meanders and swastika ornaments, strip with branches, rows of diagonally placed rectangles, or a motif of flowing meander with styled rosettes. All the mosaics are divided into three groups according to their context and chronological determination.

Sirmium



MOSAIC WITH REPRESENTATION OF GOD MERCURY

This mosaic can be attributed to the first construction phase of the imperial palace in Sirmium. Among all the mosaics found on the site, it is one of the most attractive and the only figural mosaic found in Sirmium so far. It was found on level C in room 16 on the remains of the old defensive southern wall of Sirmium that was used during 2nd and 3rd century. The wall was demolished for the purpose of imperial complex construction.

This unique piece of art is partly preserved. It consists of the composition of 12 hexagonal fields with triangles among them. The composition is bound by three different bands: a strip with interweaving, flowing meander and a strip with stylized leaves motives.

The bust of the god Mercury is preserved in one of the twelve hexagonal fields. The entire mosaic is a kind of calendar. It is assumed that each of the fields was adorned with representations of each month of the year. Different from the other mosaics, it was done according to Hellenic standards, with colorful stone tesserae and glass paste with traces of golden leaves on the top of some of them.

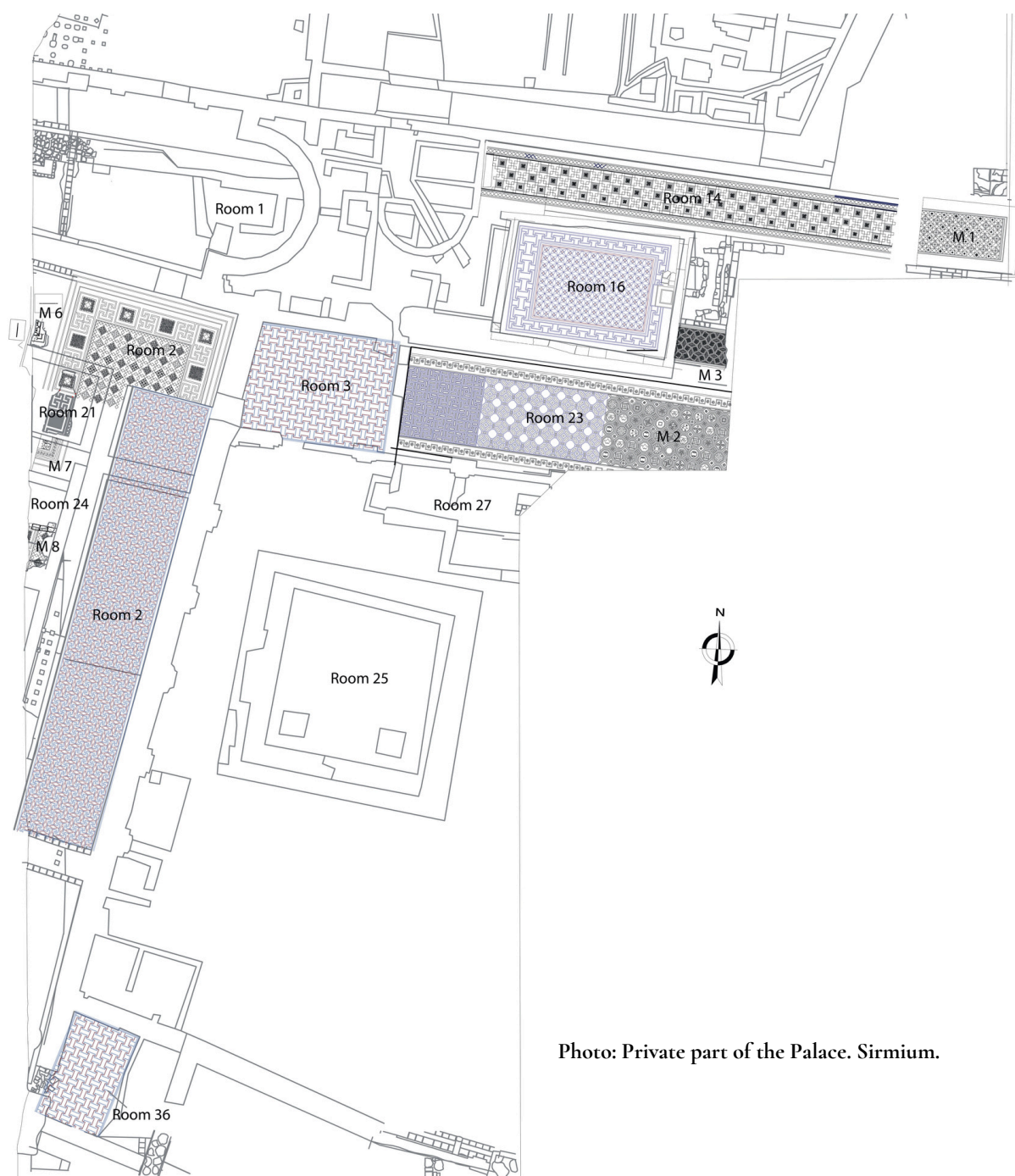


Photo: Private part of the Palace. Sirmium.

Photo: Mercury mosaic. Sirmium.





Photos: Lorenzo Plana Torres -National Museum of Roman Art.Mérida.



Ruta Vía de la Plata

The Ruta Vía de la Plata is a cultural and tourist itinerary founded upon a communication corridor of protohistoric origin, later provided with infrastructure by the Romans through the construction of several Roman roads. Along this route we can find various examples of mosaics, such as those described below.

MOSAIC WITH THE SCENE OF BACCHUS AND ARIADNE - WORKSHOP OF ANNIUS PONIUS

Mérida, Extremadura, Ruta Vía
de la Plata - Spain

Discovered around 1910 near the present-day RENFE railway station in the city of Mérida (ancient *Augusta Emerita*), this mosaic panel would have been part of a polychrome pavement from the Late Roman period. The panel depicts a scene from the myth recounted by Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History*, Book V, 51) and Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 10, 29, 4): the god Bacchus arrives on the island of Naxos with his entourage—represented by a satyr, a cheetah, and a maenad—to meet the Cretan princess Ariadne, who had been abandoned there by the hero Theseus at the command of the gods. Ariadne is shown wearing a rich garment, notable for its glass-paste inlays that enhance its brilliance, although the expression of her figure—apparently in a state of drowsiness—suggests a clear indifference to the advances of Bacchus and his companions.

In the upper left corner of the scene appears a Latin inscription: *EX OFFICINA ANNIPONI* ("From the workshop of Annius Ponius"). According to scholars such as A. García y Bellido, this name is possibly of Greek origin (*Πόννος*), suggesting the probable arrival of an Eastern craftsman at a time when mosaic pavement production was in decline in Hispania.

As for the dating of the mosaic, although a coin from the Constantinian dynasty (dating to the first half of the 4th century) was found embedded in the mortar, the style of the mosaic—characterized by the *asàrotos oikos* ("unswept floor") technique, frontal figures, and expressive almond-shaped eyes—would more likely place it in the 6th century, according to parallels found in Italy and Israel.



MOSAIC FROM THE ROMAN VILLA OF REQUEJO

Zamora. Castilla y León. Ruta
Vía de la Plata. Spain

The discovery of the Roman villa
of Requejo in Santa Cristina de la
Polvorosa (Zamora) took place in
1978 as a result of a flood of the
Órbigo River.

Its excavation, carried out in the
early 1980's, brought to light the
finest collection of geometric
pavements in the province of
Zamora, most of which are
preserved in the Museum of
Zamora, with two of them now
integrated into its permanent
exhibition.

From the great mosaic —which
would have belonged to the main
room of the manor house in this
late Roman agricultural estate—
the central motif is displayed on

the wall of Room III: a sequence
of successive square and circular
figures provides the framework
for a complex and intricate
composition, combining
geometric elements with some
vegetal and figurative motifs (the
corner kraters, unfortunately
largely lost).

In it, one can recognize African
and Eastern influences, in
keeping with the ornamental
traditions that prevailed
throughout the Mediterranean
world during the final stages of
the Empire.



MOSAIC FROM THE ROMAN VILLA OF VERANES

Gijón, Asturias, Ruta Vía de la Plata. Spain

In the mid-fourth century, the third architectural project of the Roman villa of Veranes (Gijón, Asturias) was carried out, giving the complex, in general terms, the monumental appearance that has survived to the present day.

Without a doubt, within this major construction phase, the most monumental and original structure of the complex was the great *oecus* that occupied the third terrace of the eastern sector of the villa.

In this area, a series of rooms of palatial dimensions were built, covering a surface of just over 440 m², forming a complex system of chambers at different levels that served as an excellent setting for

the ceremonies and acts of representation of the master of the house.

This great *oecus* or reception hall preserves remains of its mosaic carpet, measuring 9.20 meters on each side, featuring geometric motifs whose decorative field is framed by two ornamental frets and a three-strand braid. The mosaic presents an orthogonal composition formed by octagons, crosses, and hexagons. This design had already appeared in the cryptoporticus of Diocletian's Palace in Split and was very common during the 4th century AD. It is widely documented throughout the Iberian Peninsula in the main rooms of Late Roman rural houses, although mosaic pavements with these designs are also found in urban contexts.



Photo: Veranes Roman Villa Museum.



Veranes Mosaic. Photo: Fernando Gil.