

A Roman Mosaic Unearthed in Armazéns Sommer (Lisbon). Archaeology and Iconography

Armazéns Sommer'de (Lizbon) Açığa Çıkarılan Roma Mozaığı. Arkeoloji ve İkonografi

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Abstract

Aiming the construction of a new hotel (Hotel Cais de Santarém) using the previous basement of the large storage known as Sommer, located in Rua Cais de Santarém, n°s 40 up to 64, and limited by Rua de São João da Praça northwards and by Travessa de São João da Praça eastwards, in the city of Lisbon, a large amount of archaeological contexts were uncovered that uniquely illustrate the stratification of the city of Lisbon between the Iron Age and the first half of the 20th century. Concerning Roman urban contexts was found a domus with rooms well preserved with painted walls plaster and a pavement covered with mosaic. In this paper the authors will present the monument and further discussions will take place on excavation levels, iconographic and architectural features.

Keywords: *Olisipo, mosaic, Venus, architecture, iconography.*

Öz

Lizbon kentinde, Rua Cais de Santarém'de, 40-64 numaralı parseller arasında, kuzeyde Rua de São João da Praça ve doğuda Travessa de São João da Praça ile sınırlanan alanda, Sommer olarak bilinen eski ve oldukça geniş bir deponun temelleri üzerine inşa edilmesi planlanan Cais de Santarém isimli yeni bir otel çalışmaları esnasında, Demir Çağı'ndan başlayarak 20. yüzyılın ilk yarısına kadar uzanan geniş bir zaman dilimini kapsayan ve Lizbon kentinin zaman içerisindeki gelişimini benzersiz bir şekilde gözler önüne seren arkeolojik tabakalanma tespit edilmiştir. Roma kent konseptine ilişkin olarak iyi korunmuş odalara, boyalı duvar plasterlerine ve mozaik döşemesine sahip bir domus tespit edilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, söz konusu yapı tanıtılacak olup, kazı çalışmaları, tabakalanma, mimari ve ikonografik özellikler tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Olisipo, mozaik, Venüs, mimari, ikonografi.*

1. Introduction¹

Two major archaeological campaigns were carried out in the larger old storage house known as Armazéns Sommer under the responsibility of Ana Gomes between 2004 and 2005 (First phase) and one second phase, under the supervision of the Neoépica Lda archaeologists Ricardo Ávila Ribeiro, Nuno Neto, Paulo Rebelo and Miguel Rocha, later on in 2014 and 2015.

The archaeological works, led the team of archaeologists to found in the layers unearthed evidences of a continuous occupation revealing different cultures, ways of living that shaped Lisbon from early seventh century BC to the 20th century AD.

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Figure 1
Location of The Armazéns Sommer
in Lisbon (inside green frame)
(Google Earth).

2. Location

The old building where the Armazéns Sommer is located, at present time, on Rua Cais de Santarém, running from number 40 up to 64, in the parish of Santa Maria Maior in Lisbon, along the right bank of the river Tejo in a distance near 90 m, nowadays.

Settlers, of different archaeological epochs, created platforms of urban occupation adapted to their living and to the conditions in the steep north- south of the hill. In view of the archaeological finds was possible infer, the occupation/ living since the Iron Age. With the assets obtained, from the excavations in these older strata, it was easy to ascertain this kind of strategy used by the former settlers, which prevailed later on in Roman, Medieval times, and even nowadays (Fig. 1).

3. Archaeological Context

In 1997 took place the first archaeological field works which were stopped due to technical reasons. Seven years later (2004) a new archaeological interventions took place for two consecutive years, scientific conducted by Ana Gomes (Gomes 2004; 2005) resulting in a large amount of structures, with special emphasis, to the Roman defensive structures such as: some part of the imperial wall and parts of the late Roman wall, with chronologies of the 1st century AD for the former and, 4th /5th century to the second (Gaspar – Gomes 2007: 693-694). During this phase was discovered on an upper level, a well preserved urban Roman complex, with a slab pavement providing access to a fountain and to a well-cistern.

The last archaeological works were carried out under scientific responsibility of Neoépica Limited uncovered a strong, completed and very complex view of the site, with a large occupational area, crossing different chronological times and with different degrees of occupations and destructions.

Figure 2
Roman domus – excavating
abandonment strata.



A small archaeological survey was carried in the Roman *domus* area, in 2004, with conserved walls, 2.75 m height, with scraps of painted plaster and a mosaic floor decorated with heart shaped motifs and peltas in white and black *tesserae* (Gomes 2004). This was the second Roman mosaic floor unearthed and found in Olisipo *in situ*. In 1991 in an archaeological survey at Rua dos Correiros (Lisbon) had been found the first polychrome geometric mosaic associated, by the archaeologists, with Roman baths, dated by stylistic parallels from the second half of the 3rd AD (Amaro – Caetano 1993-1994; Caetano 2001).

4. Spaces Definition and Archaeological Interpretation

During the archaeological excavation of the *domus* were identified a total number of four different compartments in different grade of decay. For a better understanding of their study and presentation they will be numbered from West to East (Fig. 3).

There is also a strong possibility that the area excavated was a ground level building. The North wall was the limit of compartments 2 and 3 (with number 4 at least on the corner) was built and supported by the geological outcrop.

Compartment 1, was identical built and supported by the geological substratum. Some archaeological vestiges were found and gave a mere suggestion and identification of it. These changes happened due building works that occurred in Late Roman, Medieval and in modern ages.

4.1. Compartment 1

It is a triangular small room, suggesting the use of a small recess, building technique so much in use by the Roman house builders having in mind an extra space for stowage, *latrinae*, or for the *lararium*.

As compartment 2 it was affected by the building, in modern times, of the southward very thick wall. At the western vertical projection were found preserved “islands” of the walls coating made of white plaster without decoration,

Pavement used in this room was made in white compact, not very thick, mortar, over the geological substratum.

4.2. Compartment 2

The functionality of this space and its interpretation will allow us to understand how all compartments were in connection with it due to three main factors: the better grade of conservation, the presence of the Venus mosaic and the painted walls.

Panels disposition inside the mosaic can offer hypotheses for a better study and at some time offer a more detailed analysis aiming a sound interpretation how the space was organized. The entrance to the room was located south, and was trim down when it was built a modern wall this fact was based on a pillar, found during the archaeological works, and aiming to provide the division between compartments 2 and 3 but also as an aperture that enable the entrance to compartment 2. The shattered panel, decorated with “plants and floral motifs” standing, by the pillar, looks as an architectural testimony of the recess and the passage to another room, *atrium* or the corridor, to reach compartment 2. It is likewise important to know how the correlation with compartment 1, as long, as we guess that the access to reach this compartment 2 must be through the “plants and flowers” room. The wall that defines compartments 1 and 2 ends the access with a doorframe. We did not found other entrance to the compartment 1 but in case of a possibility of that existence it would be located southwards. Therefore this simple entrance by the “mosaic room” was certainly due by the dimensions and importance of this little space.

Concerning the mosaic panels, the site of the rectangular decorated mosaic with the mills of peltas at the very end of the room, and the panel of Venus, located near the entrance, acting as an invitation figure to the room’s atmosphere, can be compared with a mosaic from Mérida in Casa del Mítreo known as the Mosaico Cosmológico.

This example shows at the end of the room one rectangular panel with geometric motifs while the cosmological mosaic is located close to the unique entrance enclosed by two longitudinal panels decorated with the repetition of the same geometric motives.

Compartment 2 was a private room with no entrance, because archaeological speaking we did not find any traces of communication facilities with compartment 3, in view of these facts we probably classify the room/compartment as the *tablinum* of this *domus*.

The quality of this mosaic, the decoration complexity, the excellent skills used in the central *emblema*, the small size of *tesserae* and the materials applied, are very strong reasons for we consider the owner, the *dominus*, a man of social and economic power but particularly aware of the importance of the architectural design of the house. We can conclude - A private space, “par excellence”, for business and entertainment at same time.

The access, although in ruin, to the *tablinum*, it would be done through the *atrium* just as it happens in Mérida or by the *peristylum*, that was been affected, by the lowering of the ground in modern ages, it means when the construction of the wall that damaged the southern *domus* structures.

Severe remodelling of this compartment in the 3rd or in the 4th century occurred interfering to its functionality. The changes are highly notorious concerning the

mural paintings using now sober colours and changes in the panels from possible figurative pictures, to geometric models much more easy to paint. These transformations are also evident on the floor level, where an *opus segmentatum* surface, probably, erasing the existent polychromatic and mythological mosaic.

4.3. Compartment 3

We had strong difficulties to understand the functionality of this room as long as it was a compartment paved with a mosaic that no longer exist, however the spatial structuring allows some interpretative analyse. The only way-in, would be through the eastern door that accesses to compartment 4. The division between compartments 3 and 2 was made by a thin wall in *opus latericium* – measuring less than 0,30 m thickness and identified in the collapsed debris of the destruction and abandonment levels (Fig. 2).

In the pavement is clearly marked in all extension with lumps of mortar with the imprints where *lateris* were located as well as imprints on the paintings that covered the North wall. During the excavations it was not found any passage that could link the two spaces. This is a small room with an area of 16 square meters. However we think that it could have been a room with some significance due to the vestiges of *opus tessellatum*, pavement, found. Maybe, it is a *cubiculum* par excellence for private occasions.

4.4. Compartment 4

The excavations were inconclusive in this space as long as we could not found the area involved nor any trace of decoration or any built additional elements but a door that made the separation with compartment 3. We came to the conclusion that it developed eastward to the next building due the fact of being supported by the wall that divide compartments 3 and 4 and by the door.

Figure 3
Roman domus view of painted
plasters and pavement with mosaic.
Indication of the four compartments.



5. The Building Phases

The archaeological works allow us to establish a number of building phases to the *domus* through the identification and overlapping layers on the wall paintings and from the identification of floors or their remains or namely in an extra analyse on compartment 2 and 3. No materials related to the *domus* construction moments were identified, but associated with the moments of destruction and abandonment.

5.1. Phase I – mid 2nd century AD

Strong evidences let us conclude that in this period they started building the *domus*. The Venus mosaic was constructed upon a layer of *opus signinum* directly applied over the outcrop in compartment 2, as well as, the mosaic decorated with phytomorphic motifs located next to the south entrance, with the same decorative motifs. The archaeological levels sequence of the NW corner was disturbed by the opening, of a pit/silo in medieval times – on the side wall of the opening we were able to notice that the mosaic is over a water proof stratum of *opus signinum* directly over the geological crop without any other pavement under it.

In compartment 3, where it was used the same building technique, we just discovered the geometric mosaic. We had found *tesserae* in the outline near the “step”, as well as close the North wall and mainly hundreds of single *tesserae* in deposit [923] finally groups of *tesserae* with geometric decoration. The stone (“step”) alignment belongs to this moment. We could notice very easy that the step is slightly overlapping the mosaic however we are sure that the mosaic does not extend under the “step” and even less under compartment 2’s mosaic. So, we came to the conclusion that there was since the beginning, a differentiation concerning space availability and not an after procedure of space division, idea given by the wall in *opus latericium* that stands there. The main question without any possible answer until now is to know if the existence of the wall is prior to the build the space or if the “step”, visible today, was a mere step allowing the way in between two thresholds. The presence of paint over the imprints of *lateris*



Figure 4
North wall painted plasters

in the division wall led us to think that for a while there was no wall at all, only the “step” that made the separation between the two spaces. However the arrays of the *tesserae* in the Venus mosaic end in the “step” zone let us think that they are against something that no longer exist, we mean the *opus latericium wall*. The original first painting limit of the walls are quite similar concerning these two floors: there were at North and East walls red panels with a marbled veneering plinth that covered both sides of the door and we are sure that the same happened with the western wall of compartment 3, although we did not find *in situ* any mark of this limit. To this same moment must belong the large fragments of panels painted in red Pompeian framed white found among the debris associated to the wall *lateres*. Some very large panels fragments were found over the pavement untouched since their fall proving that the mosaics were part of the initial decoration together with the red panels, with the marbled veneering plinth and with a probable panel figurative due the fact that among the abandonment deposit and near the North wall, we found fragments painted in black and sky blue colors as well as some depicted fragments, although damaged by the Modern palace's courtyard foundations and also in the NW corner by a Medieval pit (Fig. 4).

According to the chronologies pointed out by the mosaic and the paintings, this phase seems to have been executed in the middle of the 2nd century AD.

5.2. Phase II – 3rd or 4th Century

During the 3rd century or maybe in the 4th century AD some grate building alterations took place. When the two compartments were clear from the debris we could notice that the compartment 2 suffered more alterations than compartment 3.

In compartment 2, the mosaic was covered by a layer of white mortar of different thickness (in some zones very thick) and composition, aiming to cover it for a construction of a different pavement. So a new *opus segmentatum* pavement was built. No marble fragments or objects were found *in situ*, during the excavations, however they were quite noticeable, due to different types of marks and imprints in the mortars. In the abandonment levels excavated were found large quantities of little polygonal flakes of different colours and shapes some with white mortar beneath.

In the walls, the figurative motifs, the red panels and the marbled veneering plinth were changed by panels with white background surround by red frames with red and black geometric motifs that happened either in the North wall or in the West wall.

Concerning compartment 3 the only detected alteration, was located in the window area where, during this phase, was built a little wall covered with a plain white plaster. This little wall veiled partially the remnant painting of the pillar. During this phase the mosaic remained unchanged and used until the very last moment of the abandonment of the house.

Summarizing, during this second phase and within compartment 2, the *opus segmentatum* pavement that covered the mosaic will coexist with the geometric panels of the walls, while in compartment 3 the mosaic continues articulated with the red panels.

Phase III – Abandonment and destruction – 4th - 5th centuries.

Archaeological speaking there is a great possibility that the moment for the abandonment and destruction was due to the building of the Late Roman Wall as it was confirmed in some other interventions where the foundations of the wall were found.

The deposit excavated, level of destruction of compartment 2, revealed very compact green clays, building material, namely *lateres* and mortars with some domestic and storage ceramics in small pieces, and a large quantity of wall painted plaster fragments and a huge quantity of broken marble plaques that covered the *opus segmentatum* Venus mosaic in all area.

We found in this deposit, the debris of *lateres* of the dividing wall that collapsed simultaneously.

The deposit of the abandonment of compartment 3 is essentially very alike to the deposit described *supra* however the green clays were less compacted, with large quantities of chalk and mortar, and painted sherds of lesser dimensions (mostly less than 10 cm), also large quantities of single *tesserae* and also groups of two or three and, sometimes large fragments of the mosaic. We assume that the green clay deposit appeared in the compartment 3 was a dumping pit needed for the opening areas to build the foundations of the southern Wall.



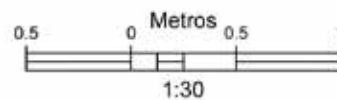
6. The mosaic pavement

The pavement mosaic is rectangular in its form longer by the N-S side and it is surrounded by a pave decorated by a sequence of ivy leaves. A third of the northern *opus*, is filled by the multiplication of eight peltas column (E-W) four times (N-S) suggesting the whirling constant movement of mill having a Solomon knot as central decoration. The central motif is facing south and it is framed by a curve guilloche.

Two fillets one white and a the other black framed a large circle that it is subdivided by a braid of two cables creating a decorative space for seven hexagon with the inner with figurative decoration while the other six around it, are decorated with medallions with different decorations. Four of them are decorated with fleuron with assorted leaves, to obtain a combination to form a six pointed star. The last two medallions have the same decoration - six pointed star by using a geometric technique of joining two equilateral triangles alternating in colour

Figure 5
Mosaic in excavation

Figure 6
Panels in the West room



- one red the other blue. We must highlighted from this decorative composition the central hexagon decorated with the figure of a naked Venus, with her left arm resting in something difficult to define (we guess probably an oar) while with the right hand she lacing/unlacing the sandal on the left foot, sheltered by a great shell (Fig. 8).

Technically speaking the contour and the padding of Venus was made with *tesserae* averaging 20mm. The shell was depicted with *tesserae* of equal dimensions. In the contour and the scallops of the shell were used dark blue *tesserae* alternating with lighter hue colour suggesting the concavities of the scallop (Figs. 7-8).

The Venus mosaic has parallels in Itálica - Spain, in El-Djem - Tunisia, and in Rimini - Italy. For us, the mosaic from Itálica known has “the mosaic from the



Figure 7
Mosaic *emblema*.

house of the planetary” shows a composition that can be compared with the mosaic from Armazéns Sommer due the similarity between the two. Inside a limiting large circle other seven smaller circles, framed by hexagons, decorated with busts of Roman divinities depicting the observable Astros, with naked eye, while Venus is depicted in the *emblema*. Venus or *dies veneris* was the last day of the week, surrounded by the others from left to right (Saturn, Sol, Luna, Mars, Mercury and Jupiter). It is datable from the second half of the second-century AD (Manas Romero 2009: 191-194). Other parallel was found in the House of Africa in Thysdrus El Djem, North Africa with the same chronology and geometric composition although the Roman deities no longer exist being substituted by allegories to the Roman provinces.

When we compare the Mosaic of Venus with the mosaics indicated supra concerning their “pattern” and their “finishing” we considered that it had been done with less detail special regarding the central *emblema*, with the image of Venus and, moreover a poor space organization of the mosaic although the size of the *tesserae* are smaller, average 20 mm and the use of diversified building materials.

As long as it was used only one row of *tesserae* to define the face contours and as well as the body, the trace of the figure is less neat, and there is also a lack of depth and shading effects at same time. However there is a special concerning with the back stage scallop shell where they used a variety of coloured ceramic and vitreous, representing the water element.

Figure 8
Detail of the *emblema* motif.



In Itálica (Spain) the representations of the figures were done with extremely care concerning the face details, the hair and garments, and with great deal of expertise in the use of the light and shade and depth. The same happens with El-Djem mosaic. The human images as well as vegetalistic elements and frames are larger when compared with the *Olisipo* mosaic.

The mosaic located at the Armazéns Sommer, although using a similar decoration programme as the one applied at “*casa del planetário*”, found a proper new esthetical composition different from this Spanish mosaic. Instead of using a same scale to represent the seven stars/deities, six periphery representations were erased and replaced by vegetalistic and geometric medallions a much more easy composition to achieve. However, the Venus *emblema* remains acquiring now a new dynamic. A whole body figure is depicted, reporting to an iconography with ancient roots, dating back to Hellenistic times and prevailing through Classic times. The image of Venus tying/untying, her sandal is well known in all sort of History of Art with a special emphasis in statues and statuettes. One perfect example of a statue of Venus of the 3rd century AD was unearthed in the Roman *villa* at Quinta das Longas in the actual Portuguese territory (Basarrate et al. 2002: 126-128).

Hypothetical speaking we can propose that is no more than one of the oldest epithets of the Deity, The Aphrodite Euploia, of the Good Journey (Rosenzweig 2004: 90) the protector of the Seafarers. This theory is based on the fact that in this representation the goddess lean her left arm on an identified brown element in an oblique position that goes right under the left elbow to the centre of the representation that could be an oar (a Goddess personal attribute that sometimes is present in some statuary). Also in the Roman villa at Quinta da Longas was found a marble fragment possible belonging to a rudder wich was part of the decoration of a destroyed *nymphaeum* (Basarrate et al. 2002: 124). The work of the mosaicist reveals the originality of bringing together in the same program three iconographic episodes related to Venus: (i) her presence in the Planetário mosaic, (ii) the tying/untying the sandal (iii) finally by the scenographic framing related to her birth, the great shell as in exemplified the mosaic of the Birth of

Venus in the Cártama's mosaic in Málaga (San Nicolás Pedraz 1994: 395) thus making this mosaic an unique apology to the multiple faces of the deity.

7. Conclusion

We came to the conclusion how the mosaic pavement, under study, reflects such strong cosmopolitan and stylistic interchanges, between the city of *Olisipo* and the rest of the Roman Empire.

Here the “classical” elements come together as the use of peltas, filiforms with ivy leaves, the use of braids and curved centre guilloche and the application of geometric stars and triangles in the filling of compositional spaces, appear mixed with new southern inputs, based on a program developed on a honeycomb system inscribed within a large circumference. Polychromy (moderate) is common to the whole theme, the use of the two-wire braid as a hexagons defining element, the figuration based in technical and plastic simplicity, represents itself however, expressive by the use of dark lines in the minimalist contours, without recourse to *degradé*. The mosaic pavement from the Antigos Armazéns Sommer due to its high degree of conservation, and by the richness of its decoration will be able to provide some more information for the study of the Roman mosaics in the Iberian Peninsula. An “extra hand” for enduring the construction of the Corpus of the Roman mosaics found in the Western provinces of the Empire.

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