

The *Cosmological Mosaic* in Mérida, Spain: Preserving Pagan Roman Tradition Through Art

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The *Cosmological Mosaic*, a Roman imperial period mosaic found in Mérida in western Spain, has been the subject of inquiry for numerous archaeologists and art historians since its excavation in the 1960s. Though a large portion is no longer extant, there is much to be gleaned about this mosaic through the stylistic, scientific, historical, political, and religious contexts in which it finds itself. The visual resemblance to other mosaics in the Middle East and North Africa show that this work was invested with connections and interests spanning across the large empire. This view is supported by the elements of astronomy found in the work and how they relate to the possibility of an abundantly prosperous society. With this, one may deduce what exactly would have occupied the missing portion of the mosaic. The time period in which the mosaic was likely constructed provides insight into the political climate of the era, which then reveals the possibility of religious motivation for installing the mosaic in its space. Here, I intertwine all of these factors to speculate on the significance of the *Cosmological Mosaic*, not only in terms of broader history of art, but for the motivations of its ancient Roman owner as well.

The remains of houses across the Ancient Roman Empire display the conditions of their time and reflect the attitudes of the people who inhabited them. The *House of the Mithraeum*, a Roman imperial period house in Mérida, Spain, is no exception. The decorations in this space allude to contemporary commerce, science, and ideologies, and in the Roman world, such a house was a useful tool for displaying the affluence and education of an elite individual to his guests. Here I focus on the room adorned with an immense and remarkable *Cosmological Mosaic*, describe it in detail, and consider its context in the house within the broader history of art. I will then argue that the subject matter of the mosaic reflects an interconnected Roman culture, the valued knowledge and nature of astronomy, and an allegorical interpretation from developing imperial Roman traditions. After providing these characteristics, I conclude that if we are correct in dating the site to the fourth century, we may understand the *Cosmological Mosaic* as an educational tool for preserving pagan Roman traditions.

The *House of the Mithraeum* was first unearthed in June of 1964 by Eugenio García Sandoval, who published his findings in 1969.¹ He unearthed an L-shaped house featuring a large assortment of rooms serving a variety of purposes (fig. 1). The most spectacular part, though, is the cosmological floor mosaic found just inside the entrance to the house (fig. 2). Although a large portion of the work has not been preserved, one can still make out a large part of the subjects and the overall

theme of the composition. Black and white geometrically patterned mosaics frame the central figural region of the mosaic, and this marks where furniture would have been placed.² There are 435 2x5 mm tessellae per square decimeter in the figural area of the mosaic,³ proof of the dexterity required to craft the polychromatic mosaic. With a spectrum of greens, violets, and blues, viewers are given a glimpse into the iridescent realm of the forces of nature.⁴

The imagery of the *Cosmological Mosaic* depicts a complex and richly detailed scene of mythological figures representing the elements and conventions of Roman culture stratified into three distinguishable layers. The semi-circular top portion of this mosaic depicts the celestial realm, all labeled by name in Latin. Directly under the arch sit SAECULUM, the embodiment of lifetime; CAELUM, father of the Gods; and CHAOS, from whom everything originates (Fig. 3). Farther down are figures representing the procession of days: HELIOS brings in the morning sun, ORIENS brings noon, and SELENE brings in the moon. Interspersed amongst them are NOTVS and BOREAS, representing the cardinal winds.⁵ In this celestial scene the use of *velificatio* in the billowing garment that frames the embracing figures NVBS and NOTVS encourages the viewer to imagine howling and turbulent winds, an energy that is perpetuated by the rearing heads of the stallions in the *quadriga* of Helios (fig. 4).

In the center of the composition is the earthly

realm. Presiding over this section is NATVRA, mother of everything on Earth's surface. She too is rendered with the use of *velificatio*, but here, her deep green fabric draws attention to her as the most important extant figure in this section of the mosaic (fig. 5). Remnants of AVTVMNVS and AESTAS suggest that the four seasons would have been depicted if the mosaic were fully intact. The missing sections in this layer will be discussed in great detail later. Also important in this scene, because they make reference to the large Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, are NILVS and EVPHRATES, representing Egypt and Syria, respectively. The great Egyptian port town of Alexandria may be represented, too, as Sandoval argues, by the figure PORTVS.⁶ This will later be useful in understanding who constructed the *Cosmological Mosaic* and the where we ought to look to see influences imbued in the production of this work.

The bottom portion of the mosaic depicts OCEANVS ruling over the waters, and proceeding from him is a court of marine deities (fig. 6).⁷ The scene is almost psychedelic, with rich purple, blue, and green hues reflecting the ebb and flow of waters in which these figures are found. Particularly in the remains of this section, taking a step away from the subject matter of the work, one can notice the virtuoso technique used in creating this masterfully detailed mosaic. The musculature of OCEANVS is rendered by the use of light and shadow, and he holds a conch while the figure TRANQVILLATAS longingly looks back at him. Dolphins also populate the scene, and are rendered in great detail with series multi-colored tiles providing a shimmering effect. The figures COPIAE and NAVIGIA, signifying abundance and navigation, allude to the maritime culture of the Roman Empire.⁸ This is furthered with the inclusion of small figures rowing on their backs, which makes reference to human activities like fishing or sailing.

Now that we have a general idea of the imagery of the *Cosmological Mosaic*, let us situate the site within the larger artistic, scientific, and historical context of the Roman Empire. Artistically, the polychromy and the manner used to render figures display a diffusion of artistic styles across a connected Roman Empire. Sandoval argues that mosaicists from two different provinces completed the work. In addition to the use of vast range of colors, according to him, the serene figures in the upper two sections show a direct influence of the smooth contours used in Hellenizing styles that permeated in places like Susa and Tunis in North Africa.⁹

The gaiety and liveliness of figures like NVBS,

NOTVS, and NATVRA in these two scenes furthers this point in contrast to the veristic and static rendering of the seated deity, OCEANVS, in the bottom portion of the mosaic. These differences make Sandoval conclude that a Syrian craftsman completed the bottom layer of the work.¹⁰ The distinction between the two hands of the craftsmen is further evidenced by the two different methods of rendering shadow. The top two scenes use lines to create shading, whereas the bottom section employs a method of pointillism.¹¹ Although at least two different people, perhaps hailing from different parts of the empire constructed the work, the unity of the mosaic is maintained despite their stylistic differences, suggesting that they likely worked together.¹² With all this considered, we may conclude that the *Cosmological Mosaic* is the product of a diffusion and then synthesis of exotic Eastern styles in the West.

Concerning science, the celestial layer and the figure that probably occupied the missing part of the mosaic refers to astronomy and its revolutionary effects on the ancient world. First, the spread of astronomy radically transformed the understanding of the Earth's position in the cosmos.¹³ Where ignorance of astronomy had permitted the thought that the Earth was at the center of the orbits of the moon and sun, by making reference the shifting constellations of the Zodiac, this Hellenistic science gave a more accurate picture of Earth's movement amongst celestial bodies, and thereby, its place within the cosmos.¹⁴ This idea was not new, however, and dated back to the fifth century BC when Parmenides understood that the stars were fixed in a way that required the planet to be round. This fixed-position of the stars, understood as the Zodiac, was described as circular in their rotation.¹⁵ This discussion of astronomy, particularly the Zodiac, is also pertinent for understanding what figure occupied the missing center area of the mosaic.

The Zodiac serves as a useful transition to a discussion of what exactly occupied the missing portion of the *Cosmological Mosaic*, an issue that has perplexed scholars since the discovery of the *House of the Mithraeum*. The most important missing figure would have occupied the center of the mosaic, and the only remnants alluding to who was depicted are the top of a head and the three letters: AET.¹⁶ This area of the mosaic is adjacent to the two extant seasons, AVTVMNVS and AESTAS, which in addition to the remaining letters lead Freijeiro to conclude that the missing figure is AETERNITAS, the embodiment of time.¹⁷

Freijeiro brings up the Mosaic of Shabha, now

housed in the Damascus National Museum in Syria, as an analogous work depicting the four seasons, though in this instance as men and not labeled individually (fig. 7).¹⁸ In this Hellenizing mosaic, Aion, the Greek version of AETERNITAS, wears a large diadem, sits in front of the seasons and an agricultural scene, and holds a circular object depicting the zodiac in his right hand.¹⁹ We may also notice other the similar composition of the two works, where both depict a densely populated and energetic scene, and figures representing elements like the wind are present. The mosaic of Aion at Silin in North Africa also depicts the deity, but here holding the wheel of the zodiac while the four seasons pass through it accompanied by *putti* bearing their representative fruits (fig. 8).²⁰ This also allows us to infer that embodiments of winter and spring would be in the missing portion of the *Cosmological Mosaic*. Katherine Dunbabin says that allegories and personifications of abstract concepts, like time in the case of Aión, began appearing in Syria in the late third century, and remained popular for the next two hundred years.²¹

In the expansive Roman Empire, connectivity and mobility were vital components of sustaining society. We have already seen this to some extent with regards to Syrian and North African craftsmen being employed in Spain. The imagery of the *Cosmological Mosaic* itself, however, exhibits this concept as well. Antonio Freijeiro describes the mosaic as exemplifying the “harmonic symphony” and cooperation of the elements necessary for preserving the abundance of the empire,²² a contention that is only supported by the agricultural regularity afforded by the cyclical passing of the seasons depicted in the center of the mosaic’s composition. Abundance is also exhibited by including the figural representations of the Nile and the Euphrates, which exemplify fertility and agricultural production.²³ Janine Lancha agrees, arguing that the mosaic expresses the confidence of an elevated social class, while simultaneously rooting its security in historically cemented ideologies that respected the elements.²⁴

These cemented ideologies help us understand the historical context surrounding the *Cosmological Mosaic*. Historian Javier Arce narrows the date of the work to during an intellectual flourishing in the province of Hispania.²⁵ He attributes the owner of the house as someone appointed to a prominent government position by the emperor Julian, likely Flavius Sallustius, Vicar of Hispania between 360 and 361.²⁶ Such a person would embody the allegory of this mosaic as an important, cultured, intellectual, philosophical, and religious man living in the capitol of a Roman province, all while hoping to conserve

the foundations of a traditionally Roman life. The rise of Constantine the Great as the first Christian emperor in the early fourth-century immediately threatened pagan traditions through the proliferation of another religion. Historian Peter Brown argues that during the time of Julian some twenty years after Constantine’s ascent, governments in the provinces were being dissolved in response to the recent past and officials hailing from Rome proper were instated in their place. These new leaders feared their authority being so far-flung from the heart of the empire, so they compensated in other ways.²⁷ Though the monumental centers maintained by the former local governments soon decayed, the private homes of the new imperial councilors during the fourth-century were enlarged and resplendently decorated.²⁸ Arce believes that the function of the room containing the *Cosmological Mosaic* must have been as a *tablinum*, or a sort of personal office used to greet guests and clients as they entered the home, and the mosaic itself, with all its labeling and allegory, likely served as a convenient tool for educating visitors to the prosperity of this new leader’s pagan world.²⁹

Arce’s discussion of the purpose of the *Cosmological Mosaic* as an educational tool has bearing on how we ought to interpret the function of this work within its historical context. In the fourth century, Christianity was seen as a threat to Roman traditions. Brown argues that for political leaders during the reign of the last pagan emperor, Julian, loyalty to the government demanded loyalty to the Gods, and there existed a fear that if the Christian religion were to spread, pagan temples would fall and the honor of the pagan religion would deteriorate.³⁰ With this fear of preserving the traditional Roman way of life, it is unsurprising that in Emerita Augusta, Julian’s inner-circles sought to maintain this tradition by cultivating a world ultimately consisting of polytheists.³¹ This meant denying Christians any means for developing an artistic and cultural identity, an effort that Julian undertook when he forbade their teaching of the classics, implying “a pagan monopoly on secular culture.”³² This “pagan monopoly” ultimately failed and lay-Christians were eventually educated in the classics, as evidenced by the elements of the culture and aesthetics they later developed.³³

Though this effort failed, we may still hypothesize the role the *Cosmological Mosaic* played in fourth century Emerita Augusta. In a society where elite individuals saw their way of life to be threatened by a new religion that sought to reappropriate Roman traditions as their own, the *Cosmological Mosaic* and its abundant, clearly pagan iconography acts as a tool for preservation. In depicting

the abundance of the earth under the dominion of clearly pagan representation of elemental forces and cultural practices, there seems to be a claim that the abundance of the empire, as Lancha has noted, is rooted in cemented pagan ideologies.³⁴ By labeling a multitude of figures celebrating the abundance of the earth under pagan Roman dominion, I believe the *Cosmological Mosaic* was meant to express desired ideologies in an accessible fashion in hopes of preserving the Roman tradition and abundance of a pagan life for future generations.

Though we are limited in asserting too much about the *Cosmological Mosaic*, this magnificent work of art does not exist in isolation, and we may still look to other sources to better understand its artistic and historical context. First, we can recognize the way the Roman Empire was conceived by some inhabitants: a plentiful world cultivated by the unity and benevolence of pagan elemental deities. Second, we may draw upon similar mosaics to not only understand the origins of those who likely created the *Cosmological Mosaic*, but to also contemplate what figures have been lost over time. This has allowed me to conclude that the mosaic featured the figure AETERNITAS, the embodiment of time, in its center. With all this considered, we are able to make informed speculation as to why the *Cosmological Mosaic* was created, and why it was valuable for its owner. For me, the mosaic serves as an educational tool with all its labeling, a tool that may be understood as a measure to prevent the demise of a quickly dying pagan tradition.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Floor Plan, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain
Personal photograph, taken at site. Excavated by Eugenio García Sandoval.

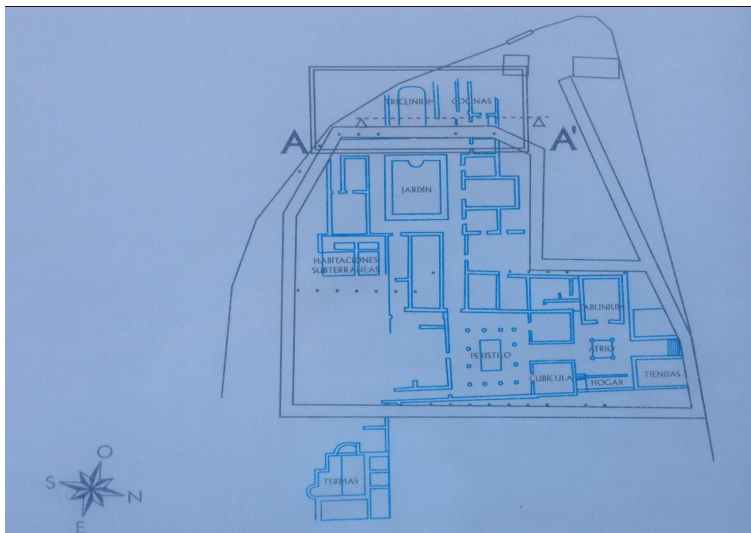


Figure 2: *Cosmological Mosaic*, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain. Personal photograph.



Figure 3: Saeculum, Caelum, and Chaos, *Cosmological Mosaic*, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain. Personal photograph.



Figure 4: NVBS, NOTVS, and Helios, *Cosmological Mosaic*, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain. Personal photograph.



Figure 5: Natura, *Cosmological Mosaic*, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain.
URL=<http://www.flickr.com/photos/87501929@N06/9064143603/in/photolist-eNY76Z-eNY1y2-ePahvo-ePatXA-eNY2Bv-ePaspE-eNXXfD-eNXNgr-d2r8rE-d2r7h5-d2r8aY-d2r7Mw-d2r7Yb-d2r745-d2r6vY-d2r8jN-d2r6EE-d2r7qE-d2r7A5-d2r6Rj-d2r6nL-d2r6gs-d2rex9-d2r5V7-d2r5Cd-d2r68w-d2rdYy-d2r5Mw-d2r5rC-d2remA-8omaqG-arTuug-8EuwlU-aLDzkP-aLDA9R-f5quJn-f5qzpg-aLDCM8-f5F5vA-f5EX6d-aLDBxH-aLDCSp-f5FcKN-8WFx4F-9jpKWt-9jsQc9-9jpLsi-9jpM1v-9jpJWB-9jpMxF-9jpKtx>



Figure 6: Oceanus, *Cosmological Mosaic*, House of the Mithraeum, Mérida, Spain. Personal photograph.



Figure 7: Shabha-Philippopolis, allegorical mosaic of Aion. Damascus, Syria.
URL = http://www.pbase.com/dosseman_syria/image/111983225



Figure 8: Silin, villa, mosaic of Aion and the Seasons, Libya
URL = <http://www.flickr.com/photos/82822788@N00/705554555/in/photolist-25m9MH>



ENDNOTES

- 1 Eugenio García Sandoval, "El mosaico Cosmológico de Mérida," *Boletín del Seminario de Estudios de Arte y Arqueología: BSAA*, 34-35 (1969).
- 2 The convention of using geometric patterns surrounding figural mosaics as markers for furniture placement has been discussed frequently throughout our course.
- 3 Sandoval, 15.
- 4 Sandoval, 15.
- 5 Sandoval, 14.
- 6 Sandoval, 15.
- 7 Sandoval, 15-16.
- 8 Sandoval, 16.
- 9 Sandoval, 15.
- 10 Sandoval, 16.
- 11 Sandoval, 15.
- 12 Sandoval, 15.
- 13 Antonio Blanco Freijeiro, "El Mosaico de Mérida con alegoría del saeculum aureum," *Estudios sobre el mundo helenístico*. Edited by J. Alsina Clota et al. (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1971), 158.
- 14 Charles H. Kahn, "On Early Greek Astronomy," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90, (1970), 106.
- 15 Kahn, 107.
- 16 Freijeiro, 166.
- 17 Freijeiro, 166.
- 18 Freijeiro, 165.
- 19 Freijeiro, 166.
- 20 Katherine Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 122.
- 21 Dunbabin, 168.
- 22 Freijeiro, 177.
- 23 Freijeiro, 165.
- 24 Lancha, 192.
- 25 Arce, 107.
- 26 Arce, 101.
- 27 Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 22-23.
- 28 S.J. Keay, *Roman Spain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 185.
- 29 Arce, 103.
- 30 Brown, 76.
- 31 Arce, 104.
- 32 Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.
- 33 Cameron, 7.
- 34 Lancha, 192.

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