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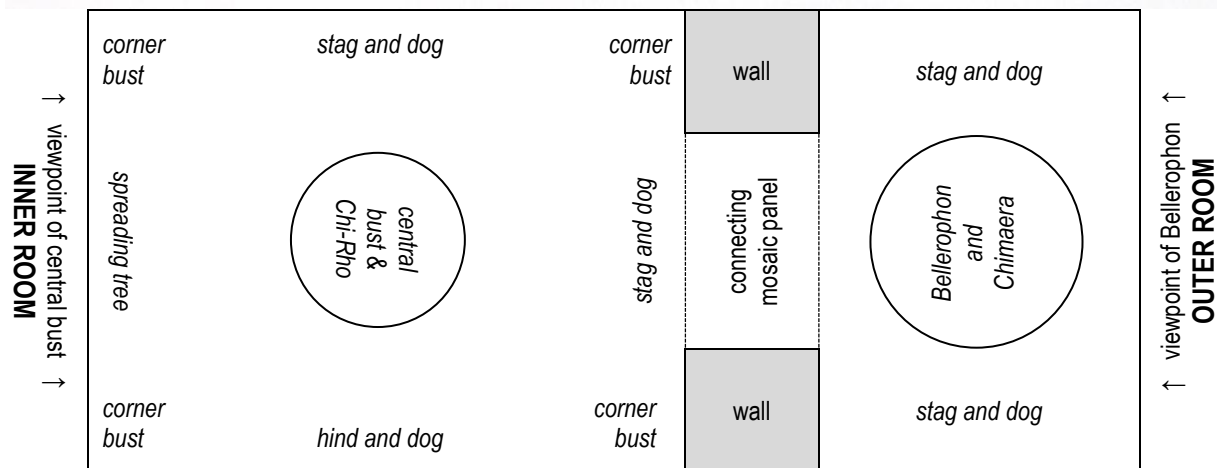
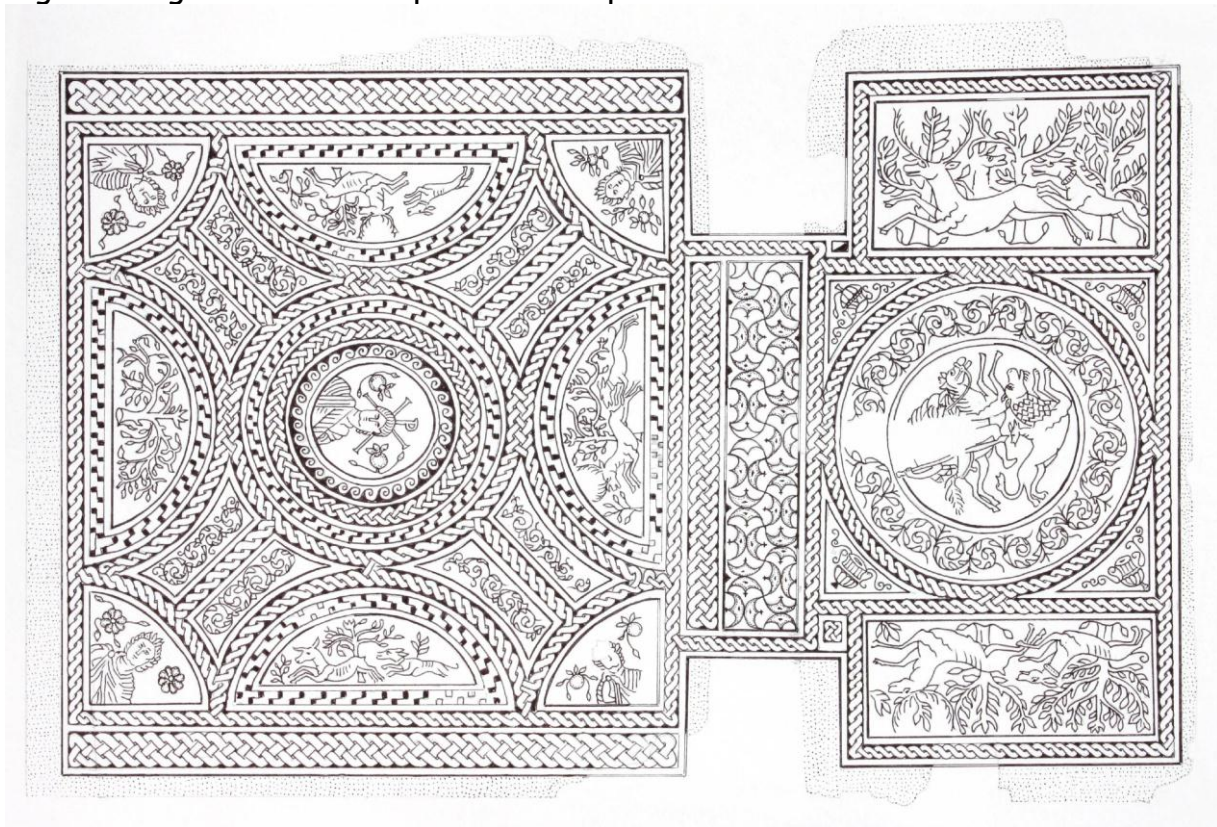
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BRITISH MUSEUM - HINTON ST MARY MOSAIC

2013 marks the **50th anniversary** of the accidental discovery of this remarkable mosaic, which is often regarded as the most important and interesting mosaic pavement found so far in Roman Britain. It was purchased by the British Museum in 1965 and was displayed as a complete floor from then until 1997. Sadly today only the bust from the central roundel, which may be the earliest representation of Christ, is on view to the public, in a display case in the middle of room 49. The rest of this large mosaic is in storage. It is greatly to be hoped that the whole floor will be displayed again in the near future.

This handout is offered to the general viewer as an introduction and to explain some of its features. If you wish to explore the mosaic in more depth, you can find suggestions for reading on our website or that of the British Museum.

Drawing and diagram of the complete mosaic pavement



THE CENTRAL ROUNDEL FROM THE INNER ROOM

What is significant about the roundel and its bust?



- This is the only part of the mosaic that is on view in room 49.
- The rest is in store in sections at the British Museum.
- It is regarded as the most important part of the mosaic because it may be the earliest known portrayal of Christ in Britain or the Roman Empire.
- The image occupies the position in the design where a pagan god or goddess is often shown, but in this roundel the male bust is depicted with the Greek letters X and P (Chi and Rho) behind his head.
- These are the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek, and they combine to make a symbol known as a Chi-Rho.
- To the left and right of the head are two pomegranates, which are symbols of immortality.
- The image is surrounded by a circle of wave-crest pattern and three other borders, which give it added prominence and emphasis.

Why do some scholars think this roundel shows Christ?

- The man wears the tunic and *pallium* (cloak) as in other early depictions of Christ, and has the Chi-Rho symbol behind him.
- Christianity became the official state religion after 312 CE when the Emperor Constantine saw a vision of the cross before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. He adopted the Chi-Rho (which was already in use as a cavalry standard of the Roman army) as a Christian symbol, but also continued pagan practices.
- The Chi-Rho appears on various items from later Roman Britain, such as coins, spoons, silver objects, lead tanks, wall plaster, and mosaic floors.
- Some people consider that the busts of men in the corners might represent the Four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Two are flanked by pomegranates.
- The mosaic includes various subjects and decorative features with pagan origins which were later adapted by mosaicists to portray Christian ideas and meanings. The catacombs in Rome reveal examples of this practice. For example:
- The pomegranates could represent the Christian promise of eternal life.
- The spreading tree in the semi-circular panel may represent the Tree of Life as in the biblical text.
- The woodland scenes in the semi-circular and rectangular panels could even be seen as depicting Paradise or Heaven.
- The damaged **outer room roundel** (see diagram on the first page), which depicts the pagan hero Bellerophon overcoming the three-headed monster Chimaera, could be viewed as Good triumphing over Evil (God over Satan). This image appears on at least three seemingly Christian sites in Britain. It evolved eventually into the story of St George slaying the Dragon, a theme which is commonly seen on wall paintings in medieval churches.
- The *kanthari* (wine-cups) in the corners of the outer room may symbolise the Eucharist.
- The villa owner may have accepted Christianity as another cult and continued to worship pagan gods as well as Christ. People had a different mindset in those days, and some new Christians may have been reluctant to abandon pagan gods.
- If it is Christ, it is perhaps the earliest known representation of Christ and is usually thought to be the only one on a mosaic floor in the Roman Empire.

Who else could the figure be?

- Some people believe the bust is a **Christian Emperor** such as Constantine or Magnentius. However, there are no emblems to indicate a particular Emperor, and it is unlikely that an image of the Emperor would be included on the floor for anyone to walk over. However, it was common for pagan gods to be shown on mosaic floors.
- If it is meant to be an Emperor, it may be **Constantine**, who might have been regarded as a cult figure in Britain. The army proclaimed him Emperor in York in 306 CE. The four corner busts could then be seen as the four illustrious sons of Constantine, which would strengthen the belief that the main bust is an imperial presence.
- Alternatively, it may represent the Emperor **Magnentius**, who is known to have had supporters among the elite in Britain. Magnentius' coins of 353 CE show him with the same hairstyle, staring eyes, and cleft chin as the face on the mosaic, and they also have the Chi-Rho symbol on the reverse side. Such a coin has been found in a grave near Hinton St Mary.
- Some people have also suggested that the figure might represent the **Christian villa owner** himself, in which case the four corner busts might represent his family or his ancestors.

THE MOSAIC FLOOR AS A WHOLE

Accidental discovery

- This large mosaic pavement, dating to the middle of the 4th century CE, was found in 1963, when a post-hole was being dug by village blacksmith Walter White in the field behind his forge.
- The site has not been fully excavated and today no building remains are visible. The room is thought to be at the north end of the east wing of a Roman courtyard villa, probably the centre of a farming estate.
- The mosaic covered the floor of a large double room divided by two short cross-walls. The side walls were demolished in post-Roman times. The corridors leading to the room were not securely located, although traces were seen.

How was the mosaic made?

- The mosaic was made by a group of mosaicists who operated in the area around Dorchester.
- There are various errors in the laying-out of the pavement and in the geometric patterns, especially the bands of *gilloche* (twisted plait), which might indicate that parts of the mosaic were prefabricated in a workshop and taken to the site to be set into the floor; however, they may simply be the result of miscalculations made during the process of laying the design directly on the floor.
- The mosaic is mostly made from local yellow, brown, dark grey, and white stones and pieces of red tile, all set in mortar.
- It is very similar in design to a mosaic floor at Frampton, Dorset, which also depicts Bellerophon and the Chi-Rho.

Orientation of the room areas (*see diagram on the first page*)

- The outer room mosaic measures about 5 m by 2.4 m and the inner room mosaic about 5.2 m by 4.5 m.
- On entering the first, **outer room**, the visitor would have set eyes upon the central roundel with Bellerophon (hero from Corinth tasked with killing the Chimaera) riding on Pegasus (winged horse) and about to spear the Chimaera (monster with a lion's head, a goat's head on its back, and a tail ending in a serpent's head).
- A panel on either side shows collared dogs hunting stags in woods. These two panels face inwards towards the roundel.
- A rectangular **connecting panel** between the two rooms has a pattern of running *peltae* (stylised semi-circular shields).
- Facing the visitor beyond, in the **inner room**, is a semi-circular panel with a collared dog chasing a stag. Two further similar scenes, with dogs chasing a stag and a hind, appear in the semi-circular side panels, facing outwards towards the walls.
- In the four corners, facing outwards, are busts of men with red cloaks, disproportionately small arms, and hair standing on end, two with pomegranates and two with rosettes by their heads. They could represent the pagan Four Winds, without their conches (shells used as trumpets), or, as suggested above, the Four Evangelists, or four family members.
- Both the central roundel with the male bust and Chi-Rho and a semi-circular panel showing a spreading tree face away from the incoming visitor and towards the far end of the room.

What was the function of the different room areas?

- The design of the mosaic and the orientation of the scenes can help us to reconstruct how the room was used.
- The **inner room** could have been an audience chamber where the owner sat or stood at the far end, with the bust and spreading tree facing towards him. Visitors entering the outer room would see Bellerophon the right way up.
- Visitors could either have waited in the **outer room** and viewed the hunting dogs facing towards them, or crossed it, being suitably impressed, before being introduced to the owner, for whom the central bust was the right way up.
- The owner, his family, or guests could have sat around the walls in the inner room, with the hunting dogs facing them.
- Similar rooms divided into two unequal areas at other sites are often identified as dining rooms, but if this was the case, parts of the figured scenes on the mosaic would have been covered by furniture.
- Hinton St Mary could mean a 'farmstead belonging to a religious community'. Was this inner room in fact a place for early Christian prayer and worship?

If you would like to find out more, there are plenty of books and other sources of information available, including books on sale in the British Museum bookshops. To see a list of other museums and sites displaying Romano-British mosaics, or to find out about joining ASPROM, please visit our website at: www.asprom.org.