



# ASPROM

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**Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics**

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## ***ROMANO-BRITISH MOSAICS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM***

Eight mosaics are displayed in the Roman Britain gallery (room 49), ranging from whole floors to small fragments. Seven are mounted on the walls and give the impression of wall pictures rather than the floor surfaces they actually were. They mostly date from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. All except the Hinton St Mary mosaic were excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using enthusiastic but rough-and-ready Victorian techniques. Artists meticulously recorded mosaics as they were uncovered, which means that there is still a visual record of mosaic pavements long lost to history. What remains has often been subjected to heavy Victorian restoration. In a side cabinet are 20 large stone *tesserae* (cubes) from Uley, Gloucestershire, once part of a floor surface. Roman floors varied from beaten earth, timber, concrete and mortar, through to simple or elaborate mosaics using stone, brick, tile, and glass tesserae; the choice of flooring and the quality of the design depended on the function of the room and on how much the customer could afford to pay. There are also several mosaics from other parts of the Roman Empire on display in the Museum, in room 70 and on the north staircase.

### **LEADENHALL STREET, LONDON - roundel with Bacchus**

#### *Where did it come from?*

- The mosaic was discovered in 1803 by workers on the site of the East India Company and was lifted in sections.
- These sections were ruined by being left outdoors and only four fragments came to the Museum in 1880.
- This roundel was the centrepiece of a 3.4 m square geometric mosaic within a 4.95 m square room.

#### *What's it all about?*

- A nude Bacchus (Roman god of wine and son of Jupiter) rides on the back of a tigress.
- He wears a wreath of ivy leaves and holds his drinking-cup and *thyrsus* (wand tipped with leaves).
- The tigress turns her head while about to move forward, her tail curling in the air, giving a sense of life and movement.
- Colours are reds and browns, outlined in heavy black, on a white background. Beige lines indicate shadows.
- Edging the roundel is a wavy ribbon of a single row of black tesserae twisting round a single row of red tesserae.
- Because of Bacchus' association with wine, he was a popular subject for dining rooms.

#### *What do I need to know?*

- The date of this mosaic roundel is uncertain, but is probably 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.
- Heavy Victorian restoration has led to some distortion in the upper part, and polishing gives its present shiny appearance.
- Bacchus rides a tigress rather than his usual spotted leopard, which reminds us of the myth that the god visited India.
- His wreath and cloak have blue and green glass pieces, probably cut from bottles. Imported marble is also used.

### **BANK OF ENGLAND, LONDON - first Romano-British mosaic acquired by the Museum**

#### *Where did it come from?*

- This small square mosaic was discovered in 1805 lying some 3.5 m under the Bank site.
- It was given by the Governors and Directors of the Bank of England to the Museum in 1806.
- It dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE and comes from the floor of a small square room in a Roman house.

#### *What's it all about?*

- The mosaic had a wide outer border of large red tesserae, with an inner frame of 5 rows of smaller white tesserae.
- The next border is a band of 3-strand guilloche (twisted plait) in small black, red, yellow, and white tesserae.
- In the central square is a circle outlined in black, containing a cross design formed by leaves of acanthus (a prickly plant).
- In the four spandrels (corners of the square outside the circle) are lotus flowers with red tips.

#### *What do I need to know?*

- The cross design is a striking pattern which inspired many designers, including the Victorian tile company Copeland.
- The sophisticated design suggests that cosmopolitan Roman London demanded and attracted the best mosaicists.

## WOODCHESTER, GLOUCESTERSHIRE - fragment from the Great Orpheus mosaic

### *Where did it come from?*

- The fragment is part of a large mosaic depicting Orpheus charming the animals with his music, which lies under the churchyard at North Woodchester. It was first recorded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Gravediggers working in the churchyard badly damaged the mosaic over the years.
- The mosaic, also called the “Great Pavement”, was fully excavated and drawn in 1722, and again in 1793 by the antiquarian Samuel Lysons, who presented this small fragment to the Museum in 1808.
- The mosaic was in the grandest room of a huge villa that had at least 64 rooms and numerous mosaics. The room had four columns supporting the roof, and perhaps an octagonal pool and fountain at its centre.

### *What's it all about?*

- Around the pool is a frieze of birds with Orpheus (a legendary Greek poet) playing on his golden lyre.
- Eleven beasts then parade in another circle, including an elephant and a griffin. They are wonderfully alive and colourful.
- The animals are enclosed by a scroll of acanthus (prickly plant) issuing from the head of Neptune or Oceanus (Roman god of the sea), who has red crab claws growing from his head. The scroll consists of 40 swirls of acanthus, with tightly curled tendrils; the fragment is one of these swirls.

### *What do I need to know?*

- The “Great Pavement” is nearly 15 m square, the largest mosaic found in Britain, and perhaps in northern Europe.
- This is the only fragment on public display; the remainder lies buried at Woodchester. It was last uncovered in 1973.
- The figure of Orpheus and the central part have been destroyed, but some of the birds and most of the beasts survive.
- Orpheus was a favourite theme of a group of mosaicists who worked in western England, perhaps centred in Cirencester, who probably made this floor around 325 CE.
- The mosaic's bright colours and tiny tesserae arranged in neat patterns denote high-quality work.

## WITHINGTON, GLOUCESTERSHIRE - panel with sea-god

### *Where did it come from?*

- The mosaic was one of several in a villa discovered in 1811, which were drawn by the antiquarian Samuel Lysons.
- A long rectangular room was paved with five mosaic panels. The largest square panel contained Orpheus and beasts.
- The other four panels were irregular rectangles, inserted by different mosaicists at a later date, when the room was extended.
- One rectangular panel and three other sections (now in store) were saved and donated to the Museum by Henry Brooke in 1812.
- Excavations in 2006 revealed a larger villa complex extending eastwards, dated to the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### *What's it all about?*

- Neptune or Oceanus (Roman god of the sea) has red crab claws growing from his head and holds a trident (three-pronged spear). Two dolphins sprout from his beard on either side.
- Alongside him are two further dolphins and two sea-beasts. Trees and flowers fill the remaining space.

### *What do I need to know?*

- The dolphins coloured in red/beige/dark grey tesserae have outlined eyes giving them a dramatic look.
- The outer border has a single row of dark grey wave-crest pattern, which continues the theme of the sea.
- The upside-down sea-beasts suggest viewing from different angles, as do the beasts surrounding Orpheus.

## ABBOTS ANN, HAMPSHIRE - square fragment with central decoration

### *Where did it come from?*

- The mosaic was in a Roman villa, excavated in 1854, which had four rooms laid with mosaic floors.
- Three fragments, dated to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, were saved and given to the Museum in 1854 by Thomas Best.

### *What's it all about?*

- This fragment was originally in the middle of one of the mosaics and was surrounded by larger red and white tesserae.
- The outer dark grey and white circles have tesserae getting smaller in size towards the middle.
- A band of 2-strand guilloche (twisted plait) in small red, white, and dark grey tesserae encloses the innermost roundel.
- At the centre is a small spoked wheel motif connected to four petals, red at the base with white tips, from which issue black tendrils connecting with a further four smaller leaves.

### *What do I need to know?*

- The mosaic floor had a common geometric design, incorporating large tesserae in red, white, and dark grey.
- Its simple style and basic colour scheme perhaps reflect the modest means of the owner.

## THRUXTON, HAMPSHIRE - mosaic pavement with strip of Latin names

### *Where did it come from?*

- A Roman building dated to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE was unearthed in 1823, revealing a good-quality mosaic floor.
- John Lickman made watercolour paintings of the mosaic before it was covered over again.
- Plough damage led to its lifting and presentation to the Museum by the Hospital of St John, Winchester, in 1899.
- Much of the mosaic has been destroyed, including the central roundel, which depicted Bacchus (the Roman god of wine and son of Jupiter) riding on a tiny leopard.

### *What's it all about?*

- The outer border is a red meander pattern of swastikas alternating with rectangles containing lozenges (diamonds).
- Inside the square, bands of guilloche (twisted plait) outline a circle and divide it into eight panels, each containing a man's head. One wears a 'Phrygian' cap (pointed hat with top pulled over). Grey tendrils sprout from under their chins.
- These heads possibly represent spirits of the trees or the woods, or drinking companions of Bacchus.
- In the four *spandrels* (corners of the square outside the circle) are busts of the four Seasons, shaded in brown, with foliage sprouting from their shoulders. At the top left is Winter, wearing a hood, and the other two heads are Spring and Summer, with flowers in their hair; Autumn, at the bottom left, has been destroyed.

### *What do I need to know?*

- Originally there were Latin inscriptions in panels on two sides of the mosaic, but the lower one has been destroyed.
- The top inscription, in alternate red and grey letters, reads QVINTVS NATALIVS NATALINVS ET BODENI ('Quintus Natalius Natalinus and Bodeni'). Scholars cannot agree what this means: was Quintus Natalius Natalinus the owner of the villa, or the craftsman who made the mosaic? Who were the Bodeni — workers, people connected with the villa, or ancestors of the owner? Or was Bodeni an alternative name for Quintus Natalius Natalinus ('also known as Bodeni')?

## HEMSWORTH, DORSET - part of a large room-sized mosaic pavement with apse

### *Where did it come from?*

- Several mosaics from a large villa dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE were found near Hemsworth in 1831, but were reburied.
- Excavations in 1908 revealed 15 mosaic pavements, but most of them had been destroyed by ploughing.
- This mosaic, given to the Museum by Lord Alington in 1908, was in the apse (semi-circular end) of a large room.
- It was heavily restored and wall-mounted in over 50 sections. In the 1990s modern cleaning and conservation techniques revealed its original colours and removed defects. Missing areas were filled with a sand-based filler.

### *What's it all about?*

- Venus (Roman goddess of love and beauty) stands in front of a red and grey scallop shell, her robe folded behind her.
- Although only two legs survive, we can tell it is Venus because she was born from the sea foam and is often shown nude with a sea-shell. Two nearby leaves perhaps represent lotus-leaf fans wafting her ashore on the breeze.
- Semi-circular bands of wave-crest pattern (for the sea) and guilloche (twisted plait) enclose the central image.
- A wide outer border has a frieze of five curly dolphins with fancy tails, made in greys and red, with white tesserae in their eyes bringing them to life. Accompanying them are smaller fish and shellfish.
- Across the bottom edge is a partially destroyed panel with various fish.

### *What do I need to know?*

- Why are there so many mosaics of fish and sea creatures, other than in the more appropriate bath houses?
- Neptune or Oceanus, who appears on two of the other mosaics in room 49, was the god who could command the sea and control storms and winds, with his trident (three-pronged spear). He was therefore seen as a powerful god of fertility, encouraging growth in plants and living things. Venus is also a goddess of fertility.
- The mosaic was probably made by a group of mosaicists centred on Dorchester, who specialised in marine subjects.
- In addition, the Romans were very fond of eating all kinds of fish, shellfish, fish sauce, and above all oysters.

## HINTON ST MARY, DORSET - central roundel with head in front of Chi-Rho symbol

This is perhaps the earliest known representation of Christ, and is usually thought to be the only one found on a mosaic floor in the Roman Empire. *Please see the separate ASPROM handout on this important mosaic.*

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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](http://www.asprom.org).