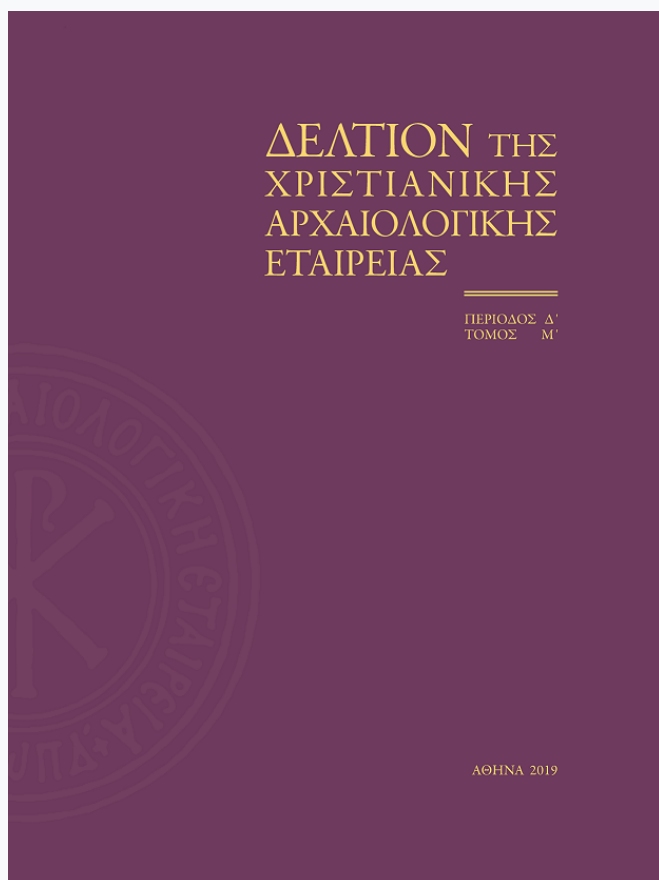


## Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας

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Panayota Assimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα των παλαιοχριστιανικών ψηφιδωτών δαπέδων της Ελλάδος*, III.2. *Τα ψηφιδωτά δάπεδα της Μακεδονίας και της Θράκης* [*Corpus of the Early Christian Mosaic Pavements of Greece*, III.2. *The Mosaic Pavements of Macedonia and Thrace*] (Byzantine Monuments 18) published by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki / Centre for Byzantine Research and the National Bank Cultural Foundation, Parts A and B, Thessaloniki 2017, 624 + 660 pp., 566 mostly colour pls and maps, bibliography, indexes (in Greek with a preface, an introduction, and a list of plates in English). ISBN: 978-618-83505-0-2, ISSN: 1791-9630.

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN RIGHTLY STATED that mosaics resemble carpets. This was certainly the intention of the ancient mosaicist(s) who sought to create the illusion that the floors were covered with coloured carpets, as Michael Rostovtzeff, the Russian historian, wrote: ‘... I have already spoken of the wonderful remains of mosaic, those stone carpets which covered the floors and walls’<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the mosaic pavement too should be considered as a substitute for carpets, which were no doubt much more expensive and certainly wore out more quickly. This approach is appropriate to the two rich volumes on the Mosaic Pavements of Macedonia and Thrace (except for Thessaloniki) by Professor Emerita Panayota Assimakopoulou-Atzaka of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. This recent work is a continuation of her previous studies on mosaic pavements from the Peloponnese, central Greece and Thessaloniki<sup>2</sup>.

The first volume consists in a long and detailed discussion, ‘an extensive compositional section’ (pp. 59-222), engaging with the pebble mosaics of the late Classical and Hellenistic periods (pp. 59-63), followed by the *opus tessellatum* mosaics created in the Roman Imperial era (from the 1st to the end of the 3rd century CE) (pp. 63-99) and the mosaic floors from the beginning of the 4th century CE to the end of Late Antiquity (pp. 99-222). The latter are the main aim of the publication, which according to the author is ‘an attempt, with the help of iconographic analysis of the mosaics, to demonstrate the role of Macedonia and



<sup>1</sup> See M. Rostovtzeff, ‘Ancient Decorative Wall-Painting’, *Journal of Hellenistic Studies*, XXXIX (1919), 146. O. M. Dalton is of the opinion that the origin of all mosaics should be sought in the imitation of carpets, see E. W. Anthony, *A History of Mosaics*, Boston 1935 (New York 1968), 27.

<sup>2</sup> P. Assimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Corpus of the Early Christian Mosaic Pavements of Greece*, II. *Peloponnese and Central Greece* (Byzantine Monuments 7), Thessaloniki 1987 (in Greek). Eadem, *Corpus of the Early Christian Mosaic Pavements of Greece. The Mosaic Pavements of Macedonia and Thrace*, III.1. *The Mosaic Pavements of Thessaloniki* (Byzantine Monuments 9), Thessaloniki 1998 (in Greek).

Thrace in the evolution of mosaic decoration in the wider region of Eastern Illyricum, and ascertain the extent of influence exerted on it by the productions of both Eastern and Western parts of the Empire’ (p. 37). The author rightly claims that ‘Many finds of recent years throughout the Greek territory present common characteristics with the Italian mosaics, and western influences should no longer be considered to be minimal or totally casual’ (p. 64).

Two catalogues, presenting the *opus tessellatum* mosaics (Catalogue I) and the pavements composed of asymmetrical

marble or stone *tesserae* (Catalogue II), follow the discussion, presenting and describing in detail the rich mosaic pavements (pp. 225-472). A third catalogue, as an appendix, with supplementary information on Roman mosaics, both known and unknown in the scientific literature, and relating to *opus sectile* or inlays, together with a mention of 'traces of a mosaic pavement in a Middle Byzantine basilica', ends the descriptive part of this volume (pp. 475-502). These three essential catalogues form the core of the work and the basis for the comparative study, as well as for the artistic and iconographic analyses of the material (pp. 99-222). A thematic table, a rich bibliography in Greek and other languages, and two indices end this volume (pp. 503-623). The author presents accurate descriptions and reliable iconographic and compositional analyses of the mosaic pavements, discovered in the above-mentioned regions.

The author's work, spreading over many years of research, has yielded a rich and varied repertoire of mosaic floors in northern Greece. Such floors decorated a variety of religious and secular buildings and complexes: ecclesiastical buildings (basilical churches, bishops' palaces, *martyria*, baptistery), private houses, public buildings, cultic edifices, agricultural villas, bath-houses, undefined structures, etc.

The varied number of compositions in the mosaic pavements, featuring geometric and floral patterns and figurative representations, indicates both the personal taste and aesthetic approach of the patron(s) and the ability of the artisan(s) to compete with the inlay work and achieve appropriate results. The geometric compositions are very dominant in these pavements, executed with precision and reminiscent of carpet-like work. The artistic quality of the floral patterns and figurative representations, however, is not uniform. Some are rendered in a three-dimensional approach, as for example a figure of a woman (*choregos*?) (Pls 55 α, γ, 57 α, β), Leda and the swan (Pls 94, 564 α), a personification of the River Echedoros (Pl. 98), a bust of a winged woman, probably the personification of a season (Pl. 536 ε), a head of Medusa (Pl. 545 γ, δ) and various animals (Pls 552-555). Most of them, however, are rendered in two-dimensional (stylized, flat and schematic) representation, such as the scene of the fishing (Pl. 203 α) and so on. These artistic differences indicate not only the varying artistic abilities of the artisan(s), but also the existence of independent local workshops, which were active at various sites all over Macedonia and Thrace in the Early Byzantine period. It also seems plausible that the repeated patterns,

motifs and representations in the discussed mosaics indicate that the artisan(s) referred to pattern books for the decoration of the pavements.

It should be noted that in the figurative mosaics, images of birds, especially the peacock, of fish (in some cases in *chiastic* form – Pls 334 α, γ, 336 α, β, δ, 337 β, γ) and of various animals, as for example boars, cocks, dogs, gazelles, horse, lions, stags, etc., appear repeatedly in religious and secular buildings. All these may have had a symbolic and/or allegorical significance, particularly when the mosaic decorated an ecclesiastical building<sup>3</sup>. Two depictions deserve special attention (a) the peacock, symbolizing eternal life and the resurrection of the believer, as well as immortality or the ever-vigilant Church, the grace of the sacrament and heavenly glory, and (b) the images of two peacocks or two gazelles or two deer / stags, flanking an amphora or a fountain, symbolizing the end of days and Paradise.

Together, the two volumes offer a panoramic view from both the textual and visual aspects, with the qualitative illustrative material, incorporated in the second volume, adding a significant visual dimension to the text, complementing and illuminating it in many facets.

The primary achievement of this two-volume publication lies in the accurate, reliable and scholarly presentation of the mosaic pavements. Assimakopoulou-Atzaka has succeeded in synthesizing the large body of data and present it in a coherent way. The author displays a methodological approach, examining and analysing the mosaic pavements and their motifs carefully and extensively.

Assimakopoulou-Atzaka's book is a welcome publication and a valuable contribution to the study of ancient mosaic art in general and to the Late Antique (Early Christian) mosaic art in particular. The scholarship displayed in this two-volume work fulfils the expectations it raises, and will undoubtedly arouse the interest and curiosity of scholars and students in art history and archaeology, as well as in other related fields.

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<sup>3</sup> For the symbolic / allegorical significance of birds and animals, see, for example, A. Ovadiah and S. Mucznik, 'The Early Byzantine Architectural Complex and Its Figurative Mosaic Pavement in Caesarea Maritima – A Reconsideration', *Liber Annuus* 67 (2017), 397-426.