

Zeitschrift: Cahiers d'archéologie romande
Herausgeber: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise
Band: 86 (2001)

Artikel: Speaking mosaics
Autor: Notermans, Angelique
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835760>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 02.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Speaking Mosaics¹

Angelique NOTERMANS

Mosaics have always attracted the attention of archaeologists. At first, only iconographic and chronological issues were considered, but recently the function of mosaics and their architectonic context have also become a subject of research. Katherine Dunbabin's study on mosaics of Roman North Africa is illustrative of this development. In her preface the author states : "...in the main part of the book I have concentrated on a study of the classes of subject-matter used on the figured mosaics. These are discussed with especial emphasis on those mosaics which were used to serve a particular function, either connected with the social and civic interests of those who commissioned them, or with religious or superstitious purposes". She also states : "It is true that the direct intervention of the patron is only occasionally explicitly documented, and a line can seldom be drawn clearly between the operation of workshop traditions and of specific commissions ; but the cumulative effect of the changes in subject-matter on the pavements studied leaves little doubt of the decisive part played by the patrons in the choice of themes"².

There is one particular group of mosaics in which the influence of the patron can be detected relatively easily. These are the so-called speaking mosaics, which combine pictures with texts. Through these texts ancient man speaks, as it were, directly to us. They are one of the main sources of information on the function of mosaics and the intentions of the commissioner. The inscription is added for a special purpose and gives us the opportunity to uncover the messages the commissioner left behind for the ancient spectator. Therefore, it is hard to believe that mosaics with inscriptions have never been studied as a separate category and that the coherence between text and image has been neglected thus far.

In 1988 Philippe Bruneau made an attempt to subdivide the texts on mosaics into different categories. Basing his case on the nature of the text, he distinguishes two groups :

- texts which relate to the floor or the mosaic, such as signatures and dedications ;
- texts which do not relate to the floor or the mosaic but to other things : names of people portrayed, invocations, advertisements, invitations, wishes and grave-inscriptions³. It is clear that this classification is inadequate, because in the second category a great variety of texts are lumped together. The function of the text is also neglected. Furthermore, the relationship

¹ This paper is a brief outline of my research project on speaking mosaics at the Department of Classical Studies at the Catholic University Nijmegen. In this research different aspects of these mosaics are considered : on the one hand the function of picture, text, and picture-text combination, and on the other hand the regional, chronological, architectonic and social context.

² K. DUNBABIN, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, Oxford 1978, p. vii.

³ Ph. BRUNEAU, "Philologie Mosaïstique", *JS*, 1988, p. 12-3.

between text and image is far more important than whether or not a text relates to the floor or the mosaic.

This paper will therefore focus on the following issues :

- the role an inscription can play in uncovering the function of speaking mosaics and the intention of the commissioner ;
- the relationship between the function of a mosaic and its position in a house.

In short, can we say that speaking mosaics speak for themselves ?

The function of the mosaic and the intention of the commissioner

Before defining the function of a mosaic and the intention of the patron, we first have to establish whether he had any influence at all in decorating the floors in his house. Some scholars state that the mosaicist was the only one who determined what was depicted on the floors. They point to the existence of example-books and a stock repertory. Others give all the credit to the patron, but it seems unlikely that he controlled the decoration of every floor in the house. However, the great originality of subject or composition in some mosaics may have been determined by the patron and inspired by everyday life⁴. An excellent example is the Magerius-mosaic from Smirat in Tunisia (pl. 1). The mosaic's most prominent feature is its great originality of composition. Combat between venatores and leopards is depicted. In the centre we see a boy with a tray in his hands, flanked by the goddess Diana and Dionysos, god of wine and ecstasy. On his tray, the boy carries four bags of money, each containing 1000 denarii. As has been pointed out by Azedine Beschaouch, the key to the correct interpretation of this mosaic is the inscription on both sides of the boy. The text relates to games that were organised by Magerius for his fellow-citizens as a *munus*⁵. Magerius himself is depicted in the right upper corner as a richly dressed figure with a staff. Of course Magerius wanted to keep the memory of his benefaction alive. He himself probably dictated the inscription and told the mosaicist exactly what the mosaic should look like. This illustrates clearly that the patron could convey a specific message by choosing a picture and adding an inscription.

The intended functions of speaking mosaics can best be illustrated with some other examples. A mosaic in the Villa of Maternus in Carranque (Spain) shows a mythological theme⁶ (pl. 2). In the left upper corner a naked man is portrayed wearing a helmet, shield and spear,

⁴ K. DUNBABIN, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, Oxford 1978, p. 24 ; C. KONDOLEON, "Signs of Privilege and Pleasure", in E. GAZDA (ed), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere*, Michigan 1991, p. 105.

⁵ The inscription reads : "Per curionem dictum : domini mei, ut Telegen[i] pro leopardo meritum habeant vestri favoris, donate eis denarios quingentos. Adclamatum est : exemplo tuo munus sic discant futuri audiant praeteriti unde tale quando tale exemplo quaestorum munus edes de re tua munus edes [i]sta dies. Magerius donat. Hoc est habere hoc est posse hoc est ia[m] nox est ia[m] munere tuo saccis missos". On the interpretation : A. BESCHAOUCH, "La mosaïque de chasse à l'amphithéâtre découverte à Smirat en Tunisie", *CRAI*, 1966, p. 134-157.

⁶ D. FERNANDEZ-GALIANO, "The Villa of Maternus at Carranque", in *CMGR* V/1, Bath 1987 (1994), p. 199-210.

which identify him as Mars. He is accompanied by a woman who is trying to direct his attention to the action in the right half of the mosaic. There a hunting scene is depicted : a naked youth is fighting a raging boar. In the lower part of the mosaic we see two hunting dogs, indicated as Leander and Titurus. Depicted is the myth of Adonis, the handsome youth who was loved by Venus and was killed during a hunting party. Some scholars think that this mosaic has a symbolic and funerary meaning⁷, but in my opinion another interpretation is preferable. The addition of named dogs is very intriguing. Although these animals do not play a role in the myth, their appearance is understandable if one considers that hunting dogs were part of the standard repertory of hunting scenes which could be added at will for decorative purposes. It is more difficult to explain why the names of the dogs are included. In my opinion this is a sign of the influence of the commissioner. Here we have what Wulf Raeck calls a "modernisierte Mythe"⁸. A classical, standard mythological scene is transformed and updated with contemporary elements. The commissioner wanted to have his favourite dogs portrayed to commemorate them. One may even go further by suggesting that the patron wanted to be identified with the naked youth. This identification must emphasize his heroism⁹.

Another example is the mosaic from Sousse in Tunisia, which depicts the Roman poet Vergil, flanked by Clio and Melpomene, muses of historiography and tragedy. In his lap the poet has a scroll with a quotation from his famous masterpiece, the Aeneid. In this mosaic, like many others, the literary connotation is evident : the patron wanted to express his erudition and extent of civilization. The above examples show that at least a considerable number of the speaking mosaics were intended to impress the viewer. The commissioner could achieve this in many ways. To emphasize his wealth, he could depict his country estate or the games he had paid for. By means of literary scenes he could show his erudition. In other examples patrons had themselves depicted during hunting-parties, to show that they were among the elite. The inscriptions illustrate and clarify the commissioner's intentions.

⁷ D. FERNANDEZ-GALIANO, B. PATON LORCA, C. BATALLA CARCHENILLA, "Mosaicos de la villa de Carranque : un programa iconográfico", in *CMGR VI*, Palencia-Mérida 1990 (1994), p. 317-326. In this article the mosaic is interpreted in this way : "La despedida de Venus y Adoni es uno de los temas literarios y míticos que tratan de amor de la diosa o heroína por el joven cazador, come en el caso de Meleagro e Hipólito, en el que se produce la muerte del joven, dando lugar a una metamorfosis abierta a una interpretación simbólico provista de una vaga esperanza en la resurrección y en la nueva vida" and "...Adonis, en la mitología grecorromana, es el ejemplo prototípico del dios que resucita cíclicamente, y no puede excluirse que haya sido elegido precisamente por este carácter funerario" (p. 324). In some cases the funerary character of the myth of Adonis is evident, for example on sarcophagi. Here the theme is particularly fit because of its connotation of hope for resurrection and a new life.

⁸ W. RAECK, *Modernisierte Mythen. Zum Umgang der Spätantike mit klassischen Bildthemen*, Stuttgart 1992.

⁹ In my opinion, this mosaic can be compared with mosaics with hunting scenes in which patrons are depicted during a hunting party together with their hunting dogs. These dogs are often named. Many examples are known, for example the hunting mosaic from the Edifice des Asclepieia in Althiburus. In these mosaics the commissioners wanted to show their virtue and status. Such a message is more fit for a reception room than funerary symbolism.

The position of speaking mosaics in the house

Did the intention to impress visitors influence the location of speaking mosaics within the house? If so, what types of rooms in a Roman house did contain speaking mosaics? To be able to formulate an answer to these questions, it is necessary briefly to look into the function of the different rooms within the house. Vitruvius, a Roman architect, wrote a book on architecture in which he mentions the different types of rooms in a Roman house. He distinguishes between *propria loca patribus familiarum* (rooms intended for the owner and his family) and rooms that are *communia cum extraneis* (common to both family and outsiders)¹⁰. By this, the author does not mean a strict division between private rooms, exclusively for the family, and public rooms, accessible for visitors. The key-word in this passage is *invitatis* (persons invited). A difference has to be made between uninvited visitors and invited guests. Uninvited people were only given access to the relatively public parts of the house lying close to the entrance, while invited guests (mostly good friends of the family) had also access to the more private rooms that are situated further in the house. Thus a division can be made between rooms that are public, semi-public and private.

In what type of rooms were speaking mosaics placed? Research on this subject is hampered by the fact that our knowledge about the floorplan of houses in which mosaics are found is often scanty. Excavation reports and plans are often lacking, and even if the house in which a mosaic was discovered is known, the exact position of the mosaic remains often uncertain. However, when a floorplan is known, the placement of the room, its size and shape, and sometimes occasional finds can give a clue about the function of a room which contained a speaking mosaic.

The Carranque mosaic, with the myth of Adonis, comes from the oecus of the villa, the main reception hall where important guests were received. Many other speaking mosaics are located in the oecus or the triclinium of houses. Both reception hall and dining room were relatively public rooms, which were accessible to visitors: a perfect place for a message. Another type of room that was very suitable for speaking mosaics, is the entrance. This is a public room par excellence: every visitor who wanted to enter the house, had to pass through this room. If we examine the corpus of speaking mosaics, it is evident that the intention of speaking mosaics to give a message to the spectator had its influence on their location: they

¹⁰ VITRUVIUS, *De Architectura*, VI, 5, 1. The translation of this passage is: "After setting the positions of the rooms with regard to the quarters of the sky, we must next consider the principles for the construction of those apartments in private houses which are meant for the householders themselves (*propria loca patribus familiarum*), and those which are to be shared in common with outsiders (*communia cum extraneis*). The private rooms are those which nobody has the right to enter without an invitation, such as bedrooms, dining rooms, bathrooms, and all others used for similar purposes. The common rooms are those which any of the people have a perfect right to enter, even without an invitation: that is, entrance courts, *cavaedia*, peristyles, and all intended for similar purposes".

were placed in rooms that were accessible to visitors, the people for whom the message was intended.

In conclusion, speaking mosaics should not be neglected in the study of the function of mosaics and the intention of the commissioner. They must be studied as a separate group and in a broader context. It is clear that speaking mosaics are often intended to impress visitors : the commissioner wanted to display his wealth, possessions, benefactions and status. This intention influenced the location of the mosaics in the house. They are found in the more public rooms, such as entrances, reception rooms and dining-rooms, which were accessible to visitors, the people the patron wanted to impress. Finally, the greater importance of speaking mosaics lies in the fact that the inscription is usually a valuable key to understanding the mosaic. Therefore, it is very likely that speaking mosaics can in turn help us to interpret non-speaking mosaics. In short, speaking mosaics speak for themselves and others.

DISCUSSION

Pauline **Donceel-Voûte** : You have, I suppose, established different categories of contents and chosen examples of only 3 of them. The question of function is essential. For example, what would be the use of the simple "identification tag" on the mythological figures : for the education of the family ? or again of the visitors ?...

Wiktor **Daszewski** : I think that all figured mosaics and those containing inscriptions are "speaking" mosaics. What is to be found is the subject of the message - a direct one, "propagandist", glorifying or commemorating the owner, or is it an indirect message showing his culture or wealth etc. by means of the decoration of his house ?

Guy **Métraux** : I agree with Professor Daszewski that the term "speaking mosaics" may be too narrow, especially when, along with the inscriptions and myths, portraits of patrons were included. The mosaic from Sousse of Vergil with Clio and Melpomene may not merely show the commissioner's high culture, but may also show the commissioner as Vergil - the face is not that of the sculptural type of Vergil and seems more like a late antique portrait. I cite as evidence that Sidonius Apollinaris pays his literary friends the heartiest compliments in the worst possible taste, saying that their literary productions make them into Vergils, Horaces, etc. In addition, his poem on the *Burgum* of Pontius Leontius describes portraits of the owner and his wife included in the wall paintings of mythological scenes.



Pl. 1- Magerius mosaic, Smirat (Photo A. Notermans)



Pl. 2.-Adonis mosaic, Carranque (Photo FERNÁNDEZ-GALIANO, 1994)