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# THE MOSAIC PAVEMENTS IN PHILIPPOPOLIS AND AUGUSTA TRAIANA FROM CONSTANTINE I TILL THEODOSIUS I.

## A SHORT REVIEW

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### REZUMAT: PAVIMENTE CU MOZAIC ÎN PHILIPPOLIS ȘI AUGUSTA TRAIANA DE LA CONSTANTIN I LA TEODOSIU I. O SCURTĂ TRECERE ÎN REVISTĂ

Articolul de față se concentrează asupra evoluției artei mozaicului între Constantin I și Teodosius I în Tracia, pe baza exemplurilor oferite de cele două centre urbane din provincie: *Philippopolis*, capitala provinciei, și *Augusta Traiana*. Pavimentele cu mozaic au fost folosite pentru a înfrumuseța atât clădirile private, cât și cele publice, atât laice, cât și religioase, în cazul bazilicilor creștine - fie construite *ex novo*, fie încorporate în complexele existente. Multe aspecte au fost deja discutate în recent publicatul *Corpus der Spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens: Wien* (Pillinger, R., Lirsch, A., Popova, V. (Hrsgs.)) și, prin urmare, articolul de față reprezintă un pas înainte în studiul acestei probleme. Evoluția artei mozaicului în ambele orașe ar trebui privită în contextul discursului „creștini – necreștini” și „ariani - ortodocși”, iar unele mozaicuri pot fi legate de evenimente istorice specifice, ceea ce este foarte rar în antichitatea târzie. Evenimentul în cauză este marșul noului împărat Iulian, în 361/362, de la Naissus la Constantinopol, care, în drumul său, se pare că s-a oprit în regiune pentru o perioadă de timp și a dus o politică de restaurare a vechilor temple, culte și asociații, precum și a trecutului prestigios al imperiului. Se pare că politica sa religioasă a avut un impact uriaș asupra vieții unor orașe prin care a trecut în drumul său spre Constantinopol, cum ar fi *Serdica* și *Philippopolis*, iar pavimentul cu mozaic din *Philippopolis* oferă un indiciu în acest sens. Prezența imperială a fost un catalizator pentru inițiative similare și în alte centre urbane din provincia Tracia, cum ar fi, de exemplu, *Augusta Traiana*. De asemenea, ele arată că problema adeviziunii la confesiunea ariană a comunității creștine din *Philippopolis* și *Augusta Traiana* este mult mai complexă decât se credea până acum și că, de fapt, comunitățile ariene nu erau omogene.

### ABSTRACT:

The present article focuses on the development of the mosaic art between the time of Constantine I and Theodosius I in Thrace based on the examples provided by the two urban centres in the province: the provincial capital *Philippopolis* and *Augusta Traiana*. The mosaic pavements were used to embellish private as well as public buildings, secular as well as religious in the term of the Christian basilicas – either built *ex novo* or incorporated into the existing complexes. Many of the questions had already been discussed in the recently published *Corpus der Spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens: Wien* (Pillinger, R., Lirsch, A., Popova, V. (Hrsgs.)) and therefore the present article is a further step into the study of the matter. The development of the mosaic art in both cities should be considered into the discourse ‘Christians – non – Christians’, as well as ‘Arians – Orthodox’, and some of them may be linked with specific historical events which is very rare in the Late antiquity. The event under question is the march of the new emperor Julian in 361/362 on his way from Naissus to Constantinople, who seems to have resided in the region for some time and pursued the policy of restoration of the old temples, cults and associations as well as the prestigious past of the empire. It seems that his religious policy made a huge impact on the life of some cities that he reached on his way to Constantinople such as *Serdica* and *Philippopolis* and the mosaic pavements in *Philippopolis* provide a clue for this. The imperial presence was a catalyst also for similar initiatives in other urban centres in the province of Thrace such as for example *Augusta Traiana*. They also reveal that the question of the Arianic nature of the Christian community in *Philippopolis* and *Augusta Traiana* is far more complex than previously thought and in fact, the Arianic communities were not homogenous.

CUVINTE CHEIE: paviment cu mozaic, Iulian, restaurare, creștinism, arianism, Tracia

KEYWORDS: mosaic pavements, Julian, restoration, Christianity, Arianism, Thrace

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The edict of Galerius issued in 311 AD and the physical presence of Constantine I in his battle with Licinius I were among the important circumstances that allowed the Christianity to enter into the visible world of the Late Antique province of Thrace. Being tolerated by the victorious emperor helped to speed up the Christianisation mainly of the urban areas of the topography, which was more rapidly advanced when compared to the neighbouring regions, and even the centuries-old traditions were disregarded and even interrupted. The *pomerium* of the provincial capital Philippopolis filled with Christian burials is a good example<sup>1</sup> along with the construction of visible Christian churches and martyria. To conclude, however, that the cult of Christos gained primary importance at that time and during the rule of Constantine's immediate successors would be misleading. The cases such as the *pomerium* in Philippopolis that was turned into a Christian burial place were not present on a huge scale and prevailing, and should be linked presumably with sporadic initiatives of the local Christian community that had the support of the passing emperor and therefore were decisions *ad hoc*. The Thracian metropolis, along with Constantinople, are the only cities where the disrespect of the *pomerium* tradition has been shown and therefore it cannot be accepted as one of the main features of the Christianisation of the urban topography. It was not until the middle of the century with the construction of the monumental Christian basilicas such as for example the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis when the Christianity became more visible in the urban topography. These basilicas were probably built with the assistance of the imperial authorities which also includes providing the area for the construction, and in the case of Philippopolis at the very heart of the provincial capital<sup>2</sup>. It is still unclear how this process went in the other urban centre of Augusta Traiana due to the level of research on this topic and lack of any substantial archaeological data, but it is suggested that a part of the *thermae-gymnasium* was turned into a Christian church in the middle/second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup> which for now is the only Christian church known from the period that we are dealing with in this study. Although the first Christians entered Thrace in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and later in the second half of 3<sup>rd</sup> – first half of 4<sup>th</sup> century through migrants from Syria and Asia, the Christianity did not rapidly advance until the time of Theodosius I either in urban or rural topographical context. Indeed, the Christian communities increased their role in the local community as marked by the monumental Christian basilicas, but still, the non-Christian traditions were quite strong not only among the common people, but also among the aristocratic elite. Also, the main temples still existed and functioned, at least until the time of Theodosius I. The process of Christianisation of the Thracian society was long and complex.

It is now well-established that the mosaic decoration becomes one of the most important forms of art in Late Antique/Early Byzantine period. Thrace was not an exception and the recently published Corpus of the Late Antique and Early Christian mosaics found in Bulgaria reveals this clearly<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the examples discussed there allow certain dynamics in the development of the mosaic art, and especially in the 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, to be observed on the mosaic pavements that were connected with the process of Christianisation of the local society as well as with some political and religious events in the region. This may be for example the case with *Eirene* mosaic from Philippopolis<sup>5</sup>. We may expect, however, that the study of the mosaic pavements in Thrace should take into consideration the discourse 'Arians – Orthodox' as well as in 4<sup>th</sup> century AD Thrace was the arena of controversy among the provincial and civic elites. It is beyond doubt that this kind of study in Late antique province of Thrace is possible based on the examples that are provided by the two major urban centers in the province – the provincial capital Philippopolis and the second city – that of Augusta Traiana (Fig. 1.). Both cities have a distinctive Roman past and retained their status of distinguished cultural and trade centres in the Late Antiquity. This was particularly visible in relation to the elites which reflected on their importance in the Late antiquity and influenced the process of institutionalising of the Christian Church with the Philippopolitan bishop becoming metropolitan as the bishop of the provincial capital and the Beroean as the head of an autonomous archiepiscopate. The mosaic pavement art drastically changed in both centres in the last two decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century with the desire to abolish any non-Christian representations and motifs in public and private buildings at the time of Theodosius I and Arcadius<sup>6</sup>. The main aim of this study is to present as much as possible the development of the mosaic pavement art in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana from the time of Constantine I till the time of Theodosius I, i.e. in those turbulent years that created the base of the art of the last two decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> century – the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century. For the purpose of this study, a short synopsis of the mosaic pavements of that period discovered in both cities is necessary.

<sup>1</sup> On the *pomerium* – see Topalilov 2021, 115-117.

<sup>2</sup> See for this in Topalilov 2021, 119-121.

<sup>3</sup> Popova 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> On the *Eirene* mosaic and its interpretation – see Bospachieva 2003, 83-105; Valeva 2011, 36-41; Kolarova and Bospachieva 2014, 210-226; Pillinger et al. 2016, 174-198; Topalilov 2018a, 273-285; Ivanov 2019, 79-89; Popova 2021, 299-324.

<sup>6</sup> See Topalilov 2022.

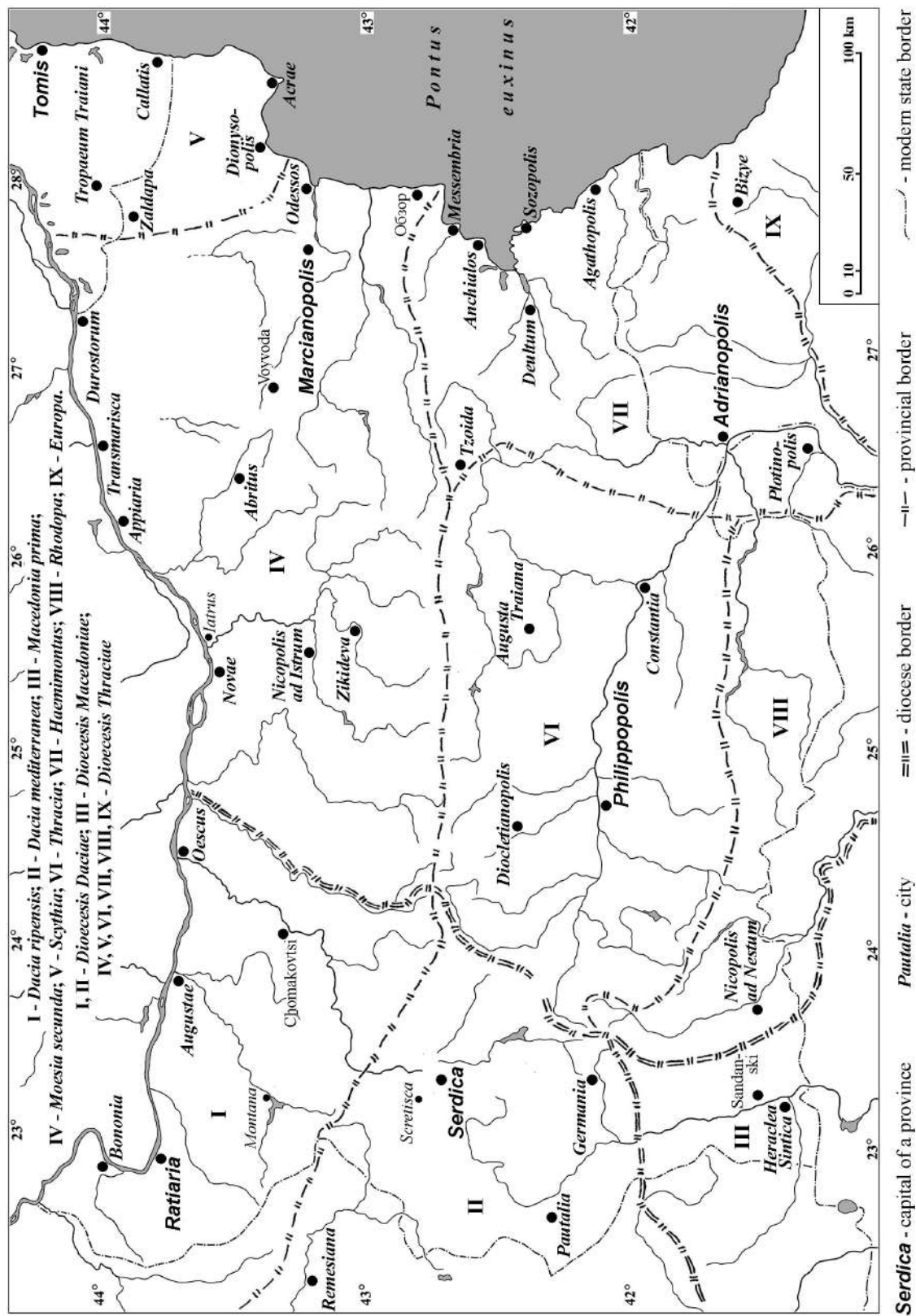


Fig. 1. Map of the Late antique provinces in Thrace (Dintchev 2021, 37, fig. 2).

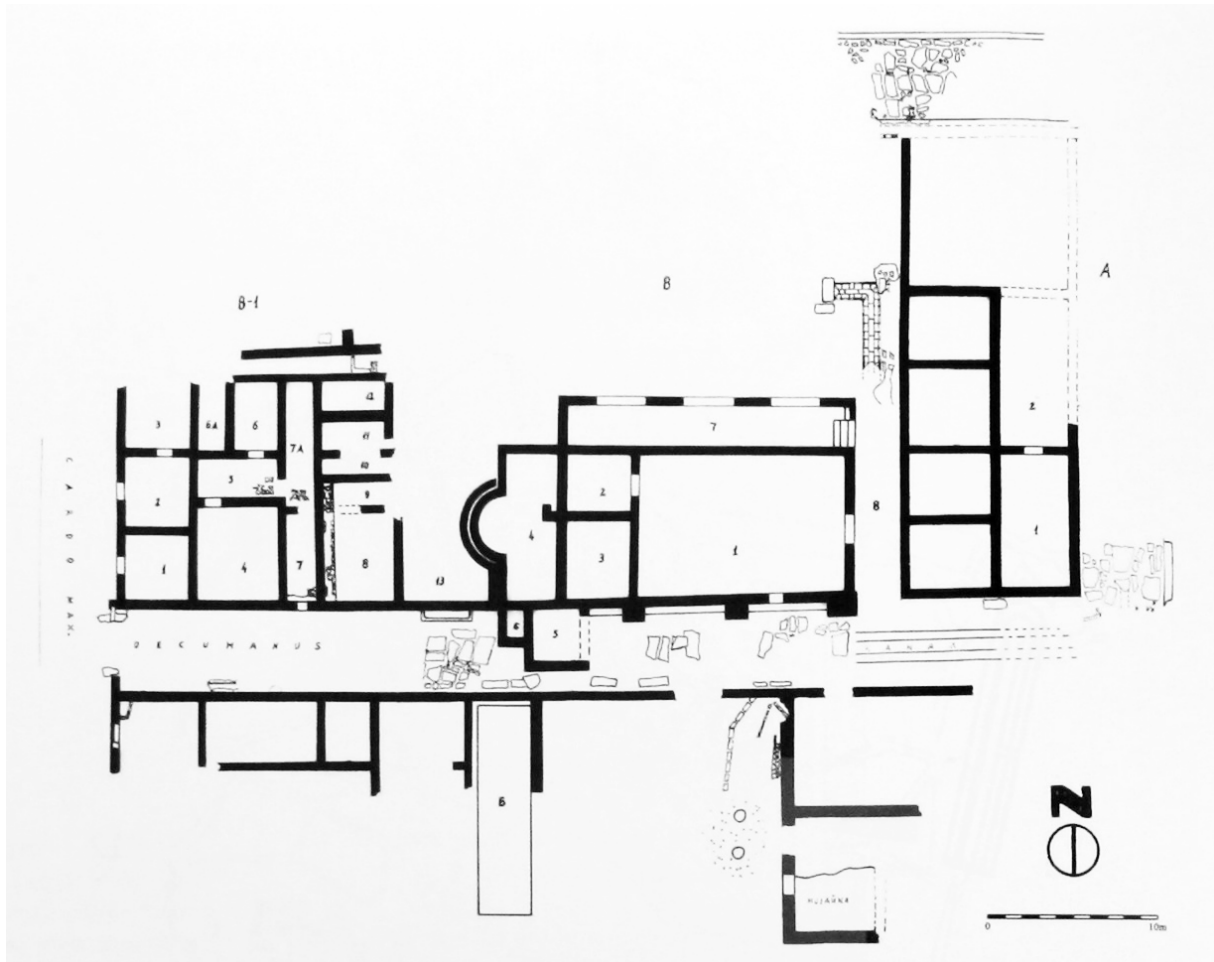


Fig. 2. The layout of the so-called “Residential house” in Plovdiv (Kesyakova 2009, 147, fig. 2).

The archaeological excavations in Plovdiv reveal that among the most distinguished *domus* in Philippopolis in the beginning / first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was that which enclosed an entire insula eastward of the agora (Fig. 2). The complex is called ‘Residential house’ of Philippopolis and it is a peristyle organized complex (*domus*) (67/32 m) located eastward of the agora along *cardo maximus* and along the *decumanus* that enclosed from the south the Metropolitan basilica. It is assumed that at the beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> c. the complex undergone significant transformation with the establishment of a new imposing official part whose focus was upon the huge reception hall (13/9 m) (*aula*) and the *triclinium* marked by *stibadium* and heated by hypocaust. The *decumanus* that flanks the complex and *aula* respectively from the south was shut up at the crossroad with the *cardo maximus* by a monumental entrance<sup>7</sup> and was turned into a distinct antechamber (vestibule) of the *aula* which may be deduced by masonry benches located on the north side of the street. By this, it becomes an integral part of the complex, which is interpreted as *praetorium* or *palatium*<sup>8</sup>.

In a certain period of time, the *aula* and one of the smaller rooms attached to it were embellished with mosaic pavements. The mosaic in the *aula* is in *opus tessellatum*, geometric with naturalistically and vividly executed figural motifs, such as birds surrounded by branches, *kantharoi*, fruit baskets and fruits as well as geometric pictorial elements such as squares, stylized rosettes, wreaths with hangings with a relief effect and shields with a swirl effect as well as diamonds, inscribed into the geometric scheme of intersections of *scutae* (Fig. 3) while in the attached room the iconography is entirely figural with central circle medallion and possibly a bird on a globe within it surrounded by four panels with full fruit baskets and birds richly coloured (Fig. 4)<sup>9</sup>. The suggested date of the mosaics is the first half of 4<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>10</sup>, and more precisely the time of Constantine I (306-337)<sup>11</sup>, a date which has

<sup>7</sup> Kesyakova 2008, 238-240.

<sup>8</sup> Dinchev 2002, 216, 224, n. 36.

<sup>9</sup> On the building – see Kesyakova 2008; on the mosaics – see Kesyakova 2009; Pillinger et al. 2016, 164-169.

<sup>10</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Kesyakova 2009, 138





*Fig. 3. The mosaic pavement of the aula of the so-called "Residential house" in Plovdiv (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 113, Abb. 303).*



*Fig. 4. The mosaic pavement of the triclinium of the so-called "Residential house" in Plovdiv (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 114, Abb. 307).*

been accepted in the literature<sup>12</sup>. If this date is correct, it is very tempting to see in this complex the *praetorium* or *palatium* of the provincial governor of Thrace whose office was established in Philippopolis with the completion of the Diocletianic's administrative reforms.

Before going further on studying the mosaic pavement, a comment is worth to be made on the enclosing of the *decumanus* that framed the complex from the south. Indeed, this type of practice was familiar in late antique Philippopolis, though not on a huge scale, but it usually happened in the late 4<sup>th</sup> c. at the earliest, if not in the first half – middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. In most, it was until the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century when Philippopolis kept its street – grid almost intact, not only in the city-center, but elsewhere. The only case attested so far before the late 4<sup>th</sup> century is the construction of the Metropolitan basilica that enclosed much more than an insular space. Otherwise, archaeology so far does not provide any evidence for closing the streets in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, moreover at its beginning when the urban traditions of the Roman period were still alive. I am therefore inclined to assume that the closure of the *decumanus* and turning it into a type of vestibule of the *aula* should have been done in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest, and most probably *ca.* middle of the century, when the city recovered from the Hunnic invasions in the 40s of 5<sup>th</sup> century.

The date proposed for the construction of the mosaic pavements is also disputable. Thus, based on the dissemination of the *scutae* pattern, M. Bospachieva deduced that the mosaic under question, with the respective mosaic panels from *domus Eirene* and the synagogue, show a close resemblance and therefore should be dated to the beginning or middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>. I find the scepticism expressed justified, but the dates proposed and the methodology used are inappropriate to my mind, moreover the proposed parallel with the Synagogue mosaic is incorrect as already noted by E. Kesjakova<sup>14</sup>. My arguments on the later date of the mosaic pavements of the *domus* under consideration are grounded on the use of some specific elements and the mosaic style itself as well as the observations made by the excavator. For example, the use of the 'rainbow style' in the *scutae* pattern and the manner of executing the birds can hardly explain a date earlier than the second decade of 5<sup>th</sup> c. Some of the ornamental motifs such as for example the complicated rosette with four single and double leaves respectively forming the Maltese cross and executed in 'Rainbow style' find their distinctive parallels in the fifth- century mosaics from the *domus Eirene*<sup>15</sup> and it is even suggested by E. Kesjakova based on style and technique that the mosaics in both *domus* are analogous and were made by the same local mosaic atelier with a very close date<sup>16</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that the analogous mosaic pavements in the *domus Eirene* belong to that period which is dated to the end of the second quarter of 5<sup>th</sup> c. at the earliest.

This date, however, should not be applied to all of the mosaics under consideration. A recent study reveals that in many cases the mosaic pavements that embellished the *aulae* of distinguished members of the local elite, as well as the mosaic floor of the Metropolitan basilica, served as an inspiration to the decoration of other *aulae* in Philippopolis regardless of the specifics of the iconography. A good example is the decoration of the *aula* of the 6<sup>th</sup> century the iconography of whose mosaic pavement was inspired most probably by the mosaic pavement that embellished the *diakonikon* (*skeuphylakion*?) of the Metropolitan basilica, with very slight changes<sup>17</sup>. In our case, the importance that gained *domus Eirene* when turned into *domus episcopalis* (*Episcopoion*) was undisputable and presumably played an important role on the development of the iconography of the mosaic pavements in Philippopolis at that time. Given all this, I would not be surprised if the so-called 'Residential house' in Philippopolis, in fact, had received its mosaic pavement decoration in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the mosaics from *domus Eirene* are dated. The mosaic iconography, as well as the style of the mosaic pavement of the *aula* of the *domus* in Philippopolis, may be easily understood within the *Korvī*, which is expressed through the common style which was dominating in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. A.D. around eastern Mediterranean.

As it is also the time when the *aula* received its vestibule, we may assume that in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, ie. in the period of recovering the city from the Huns' invasions, Philippopolis had received a new *domus*, richly decorated with mosaic pavement and gypsum plaster *aula*, which, I still find difficult to interpret as *praetorium*/*palatium*; it was the time when shutting up the streets was not unfamiliar practice any more. If, however, we

<sup>12</sup> See for example Bospachieva 2005, 53.

<sup>13</sup> Bospachieva 2001, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Kesjakova 2009, 138.

<sup>15</sup> See for the comparison in Kolarova – Bospachieva 2014, 292.

<sup>16</sup> Kesjakova 2009, 138-139: "In terms of style, the mosaics from Eirene and the Residence are actually very similar and can be defined as analogous. Moreover, they are made by the same atelier ... Very close in style and dating is the mosaic from Eirene, which can be attributed to the middle or second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century ... The style of the mosaic from the small room of the Residence shows a close resemblance to the mosaic in the reception hall, as well as to the mosaics in the Eirene building. It seems that the mosaics from the Eirene building and the Residence are made by the same Philippopolitan atelier, which has left the features of its style and technique."

<sup>17</sup> Topalilov 2021, 312-314.



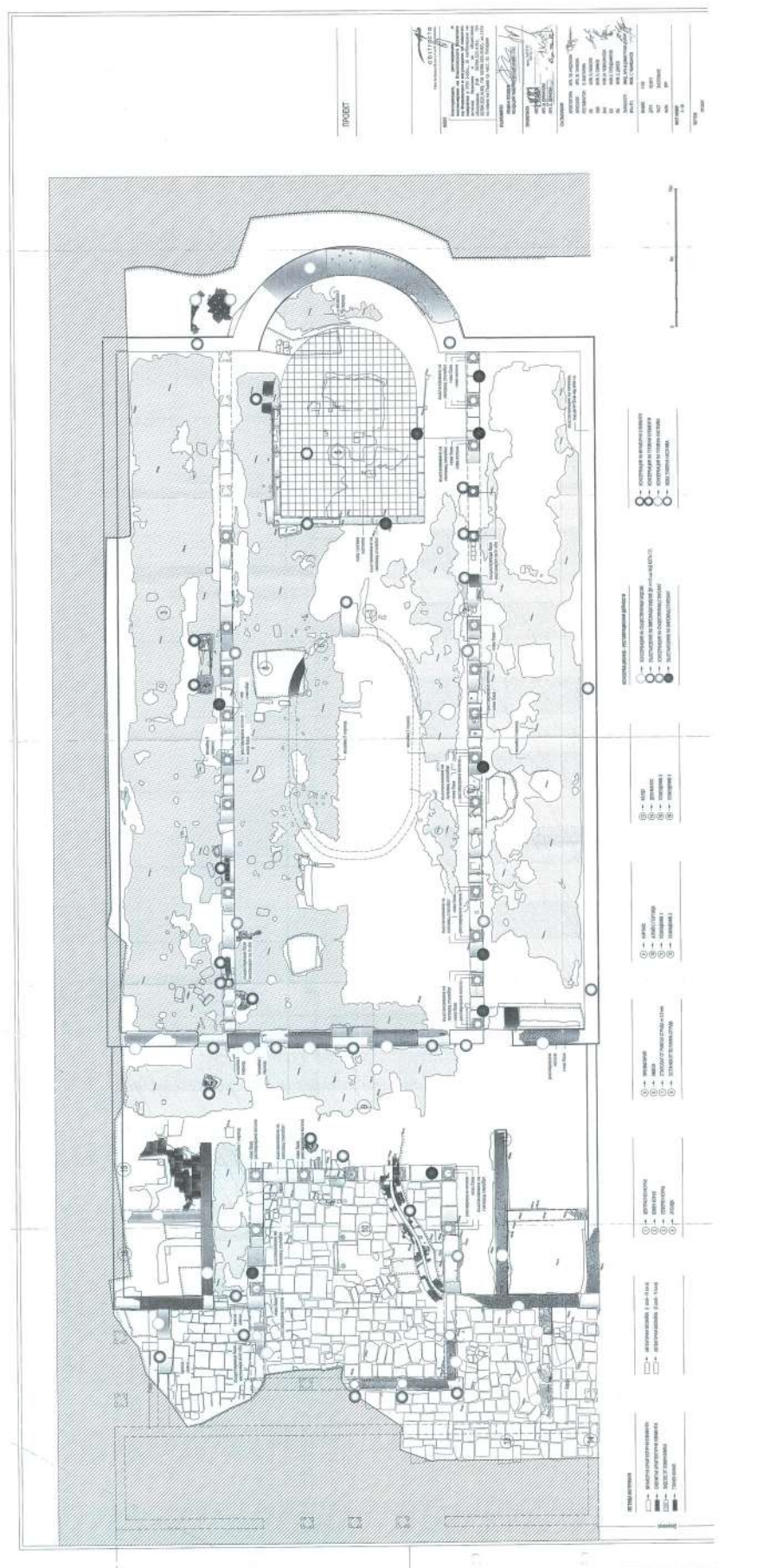


Fig. 5. General layout of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis, Thrace (after Tankova 2017, 324, fig. 1).

accept for a moment that this *domus* was in fact a *praetorium/palatium*, it sheds some light on an urbanistic issue concerning the shift of the palace of the provincial governor to that part of the city which remains not well fortified when compared with the former Acropolis (Three hills) that has been fortified at that time as well. Therefore, the study of mosaic pavements that decorated the *aula* and the room attached to the 'Residential house' are beyond the scope of this study.

In the time of Constantius II most probably the Metropolitan basilica was completed. The basilica has a specific for Thracian architectural plan with naos, exonarthex and atrium, surrounded on two sides by colonnades with two rooms behind on the northern and southern site respectively, and another one from east which was part of the exonarthex (Fig. 5). The specificity of the plan is due to the strong influence that exercised Rome in the church architecture in Thracian at that time, directly or most probably via the emperor. The first floor of the complex was not mosaic, but in *opus signinum*. It is suggested, however, that in the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. the nave received its mosaic pavement<sup>18</sup>. The mosaics are unpublished, but it is clear that it is a geometric carpet of looped circles with a huge inner field inscribed, framed with a wide bordure with a wave pattern and another geometric scheme of intersecting octagons inside. It seems that the mosaic floor had an *emblema* of which only the geometric bordure survived (Fig. 6)<sup>19</sup>. The colours are humble: yellow, black, and white, and the geometric patterns are bigger than usual in size (Fig. 7). This style is known as the 'puristic' style in the mosaic iconography and it was created due to the need of the Christians to abandon the use of any motifs that may be linked with the non-Christians, including the figural ones, and the need of covering the huge space in the enormous Christian basilicas, e.g., the Philippopolis Metropolitan basilica<sup>20</sup>. The mosaic iconography of the nave is very distinctive and cannot be compared to that in the south side aisle which is also geometric, but filled with vivid and picturesque colour scale: yellow and orange, blue and nuances, white, brown, green, red, black. The construction inscription in the middle with the name of the Metropolitan [---]κιανοῦ (probably [Μα]ρκιανοῦ) or [Λου]κιανοῦ) dates the mosaic in the side aisles at the early years of Theodosius I (Fig. 8)<sup>21</sup>.

Among the most picturesque mosaic floors in Late antique Philippopolis is that with the marine scene that decorates an *aula* of a *domus*, located in the southern outskirts of the Three hills, along the decumanus that incorporated *via diagonalis* within the limits of the city. The mosaic pavement consists of a geometric carpet and an *emblema* in the middle made in *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* respectively (Fig. 9). The main feature of the mosaic is the colour scale which is among the most extensive in the mosaics in Late antique Thracian as well as a genuine *emblema*. The carpet which is framed by a space filled with white ivy tendrils with heart-shaped leaves on a black background, consists of a bordure with a black meandering swastika, followed on the eastern side by alternating, opposite, white and black triangles, and the inner field which consists of a composition of rhombuses, squares, equilateral and isosceles triangles, which form octagons touching one another at the obtuse angles of the rhombuses or intersecting sixteen-corners, each developing from a four-pointed star and the *emblema*. The emblem itself is framed by a guilloche and contains a Mediterranean water landscape with a corresponding fauna and flora such as a pike, a swordfish, a dolphin, a moray eel, snails, mussels, molluscs, crabs, wine-red corals and pipefish and sea urchins. A *putti* riding a dolphin is presented as well. A single, pointed dorsal fin also protrudes from the water. In the right corner of the panel, at a high position is presented a small boat moving to the left with a wind-blown sail and a youthful male figure sitting in the boat (Fig. 10)<sup>22</sup>.

The mosaic pavement is specific not only because of its colour scale, but also because of its iconography and the Sea scene which as a whole are very rarely presented on the mosaic pavements in Thracian and the Balkan peninsula as a whole<sup>23</sup>. It is not our intention here to deal with the scene in detail as it will be done elsewhere, but some questions need discussion among which is that of the date of the mosaic pavement itself. Thus, it is suggested that its date varies between the middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> – middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>, the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>, or the end of 4<sup>th</sup> - beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup> or even early 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>. Given the fact that the mosaic carpet was copied most probably from the *apoditerium* of the located in close proximity so-called "East *thermae*"<sup>28</sup> we should date the marine mosaic not later than the Theodosian I' time when the thermal complex lost its primary functions

<sup>18</sup> Popova 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Kantareva et al. 2021, 23-34.

<sup>20</sup> See most recently in Popova 2022.

<sup>21</sup> On the inscription – see Sharankov 2016, 971-972.

<sup>22</sup> On the full description of the mosaic – see Pillinger et al. 2016, 220-226.

<sup>23</sup> On the other case in Thracian – see Pillinger et al. 2016, 125-131; on the Balkan Peninsula – see Kokini 2016, 89-124.

<sup>24</sup> Koranda 1990, 67-70; Koranda 1991/1992, 97-98, Abb. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 227.

<sup>26</sup> Tankova 1980, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Valeva 1995, 262.

<sup>28</sup> Topalilov 2016, 183-185.



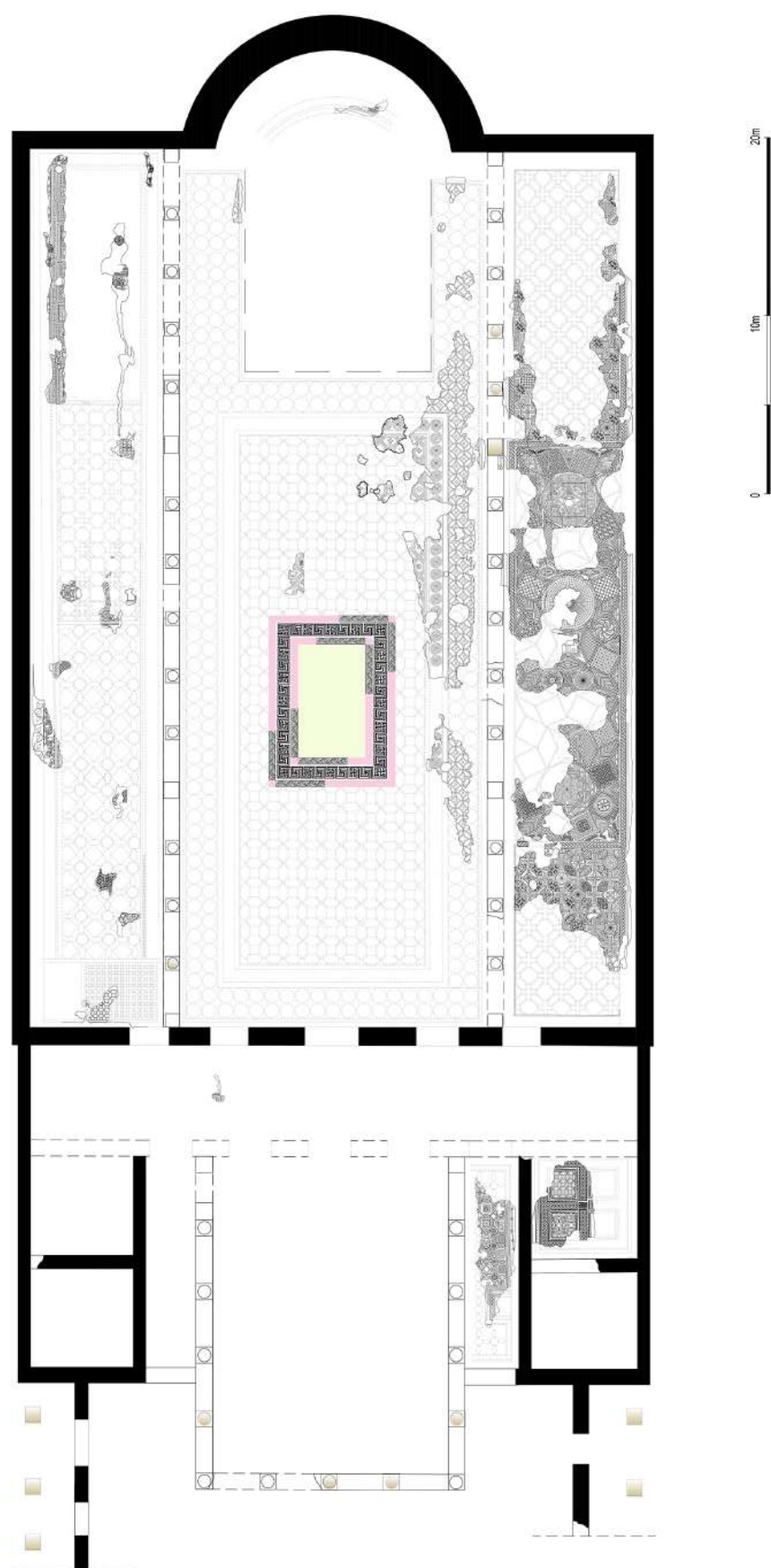


Fig. 6. Fig. 2. The first mosaic pavement of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis (after Kantareva et al. 2021, 27, fig. 4).

and even was partly dismantled<sup>29</sup>. I would propose a date of *ca.* middle – third quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> century based on the specifics of the colour scale used which one would not find used in the rest known so far mosaic pavements from Philippopolis – either public or private dated to the second half – end of 4<sup>th</sup> century.

It is suggested that the style of the mosaic is typical for the mosaic pavements in Egypt, Syria or North Africa which implies that the Philippopolitan mosaic was made by a travelling mosaicist from the Eastern Mediterranean or North Africa<sup>30</sup>. This may be so for the *emblema* image which indeed with its iconography and nature as a genuine *emblema*, is not to be found elsewhere at that time in Philippopolis. I believe, however, that the similarity in the combination of frame, bordure and the same filling of the inner field of the geometric carpet between this mosaic pavement and that of the *apoditerium* in the Eastern *thermae* would reveal that it was this local thermal pattern that was used as a prototype or even for inspiration for the geometric carpet of the marine mosaic rather than mosaic pavements from, for example, Northern Africa (Tunisia), Italy and Sicily (Piazza Armerina), Asia Minor etc. as some details may reveal<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, this iconography is typical for the thermal mosaic pavements during the Roman period as well, linked with Bacchus and Hercules<sup>32</sup>. I would therefore regard this mosaic as a good example of a symbiosis of non-local motives and some patterns with locals, executed by a travelling mosaicist.

As mentioned above, the mosaic iconography differs significantly from that known from the other mosaic pavements in Philippopolis, although not many are known from the period and those of later time were subjugated to different tastes and purposes. Indeed, it may reveal the foreign origin of the mosaicist but says nothing specifically on the origin of the owner of the *domus*: was he an Eastern as the mosaicist which may define his taste? The quality of the mosaic execution as well as the abundance of the colours used suggest that he was among the wealthiest members of the municipal (and provincial?) elite who could afford the import of such expensive materials and the use of the services of highly expensive travelling mosaicists. He is very likely to be a rich merchant of Syrian or Asianic origin who are well attested in Thrace and Philippopolis in the epigraphic monuments in the late antique period and especially in the 4-5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>33</sup>. The colour abundance is characteristic for the Constantinopolitan mosaic pavements which, however, did not play at that time such a role as it was about half a century later. Therefore, I would not be surprised if in this case, two countrymen met in Philippopolis – one of them a wealthy merchant and the other – a travelling

<sup>29</sup> On the end of the *thermae* – see Bospatchieva 2002, 301-305.

<sup>30</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 225-226.

<sup>31</sup> See the analysis in Pillinger et al. 2016, 225-226.

<sup>32</sup> Kokini 2016, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Beševliev 1964, 207, 210



Fig. 7. The mosaic pavement in the nave (archive: E. Kantareva – Decheva).





Fig. 8. The tabula ansata in the southern aisle of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis (after <https://mosaictourplovdiv.balkanheritage.org/en/the-episcopal-basilica-en/>; last consulted on 8 January 2022).



Fig. 9. The mosaic pavement of the aula of the domus located in the southern outskirts of the Three hills in Philippopolis (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 161, Abb. 417).





Fig. 10. The emblema of the marine mosaic (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 162, Abb. 418).

mosaicist which impacted on the iconography of the mosaic pavement crucially. This may also explain the existence of the genuine *emblema* in the time when its elimination had already started, but was far from a complete abandoning yet.

It is clear that the iconography of the mosaic pavement is secular. Nothing of it can be linked with the Christianity, despite the fact that the marine iconography in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century gained Christian connotations, and not surprisingly in a later period a Christian cross was incised in one of the walls of the room<sup>34</sup>. Based on examples from Greece, it is suggested that these kinds of scenes are related to these deities that bring the fertility<sup>35</sup> and therefore we are dealing here with a wishful mosaic which may reveal the nature of the owner of the house as a landowner who



Fig. 11. The fragment of the mosaic pavement from the unexcavated building in the eastern suburbs of Philippopolis (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 187, Abb. 483).

<sup>34</sup> Pillinger et al. 1999, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Kokini 2016, 89-90.

by this mosaic wishes and probably asks gods for fertility of his lands and abundance of the harvest as well. Similar wish may be found in the neighbouring mosaic pavement in *domus Eirene*, if the interpretation proposed – either religious or political, is correct.

To the end of the period under consideration is dated a polychrome mosaic pavement in *opus tessellatum* of which only six small fragments were discovered (Fig. 11). The building is located in the eastern suburbs of the city, just off the curtain wall and its purpose remains unclear as no archaeological excavation has ever been done. It is suggested that there were areas of rectangular panels filled with geometric motifs such as scale patterns, interloped circles, zig-zagging lines etc. The colours attested are white, ochre, green, brick-red, black, sandstone, gneiss and ceramics and the mosaic is dated between 360 – 380 AD and belongs to the strictly geometric phase of the aniconic or puristic style<sup>36</sup>. The use of the ‘rainbow’ style that is observed in some of the patterns that fill the panels, however, may suggest a bit later date which would refer to decoration of a Christian church, *intra muros*, which remains undiscovered.

These are the mosaic pavements from Philippopolis that may be attributed to the period prior to Theodosius I from the time of late Tetrarchy. Indeed, some mosaics in the thermal complexes are dated to the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but the recent analyses imply their earlier date<sup>37</sup>. If, however, some of them did point to the beginning / first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century such as for example the mosaic in room 9 in the Western *thermae* or the mosaic pavements in the Eastern *thermae*, they should be studied in the context of the mosaic pavements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and therefore are not eligible for this study. Some of the repairs from the mosaic pavements might have been made at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, such as for example that in room 9 as it uses also yellow and red tesserae in contrast to the white-and-black original mosaic, but these fragments are small in size and quantity and the information they provide is limited. Nonetheless, they show the full geometrization of the mosaic pavements in the public buildings in terms of the baths in Philippopolis that gained acceptance at the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> – the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The examples of mosaic pavements known from Augusta Traiana from the period under consideration are not numerous and belong to public as well as private buildings.

Among the public buildings that might have had mosaic pavement one would note the Christian basilica in the vestibule of the thermal complex situated near the SW gate of the city on the way coming from Philippopolis<sup>38</sup>. In some studies, however, the construction of the mosaic pavement is dated to the first half / middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>39</sup> while the transformation of the vestibule into a Christian church with the construction of altar and *synthronon* on the mosaic pavement is dated in the middle of that century<sup>40</sup>. The small fragment of the polychrome mosaic that is preserved, made in *opus tessellatum*, reveals that the geometric style prevailed. In the two niches to the north, the mosaic area is filled with a scale ornament, while to the south – by diamonds and a *cantharos* with tendrils coming out of it. In the two rectangular niches along the south wall of the vestibule, ivy leaves (in the east) and a Solomon’s knot are depicted, while in the north – a diamond ending with *peltae*. The area in the front of the exedras and the niches are decorated with a band with an orthogonal composition of non-touching *peltae* four around a square, and a swastika meander bordure (Fig. 12; Fig. 13)<sup>41</sup>. The individual schemes and patterns may find parallels in other Christian temples, but also in public complexes such as for example villas and even in the palace of Galerius in Thessalonica in the Northern Balkans. Those dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century derived mostly from the western and middle part of the Balkans; the composition under consideration is the most eastward example for that century<sup>42</sup>. As a whole, the overall composition finds parallels in North Africa, Italy and Spain from the late 2nd century onward and therefore may reveal the western influence over the mosaic pavement in the Thracian city<sup>43</sup>. A typical pattern for the Christian basilica decoration, however, may be observed in the iconography, viz. the scale pattern which for obvious reasons usually decorate the apse or conch of the Christian church. I am therefore inclined to accept the synchronism between the construction of the Christian church and that of the mosaic pavement which in the latest publications is dated to the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 263-264.

<sup>37</sup> See Pillinger et al. 2016, 250-254; 265-269.

<sup>38</sup> On the thermal complex and its interpretation as *thermae* – *gymnasion* – see Popova 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Kalchev 2009, 90.

<sup>40</sup> Nikolov 1987, 106, Fig. 23.

<sup>41</sup> For full description of the mosaic – see Pillinger et al. 2016, 122-123; Kamisheva and Karamanova-Zlatkova 2017, 169-180.

<sup>42</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 123-124.

<sup>43</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 124: ‘Orthogonale Kompositionen aus vier um ein Zentralmotiv – einem Quadrat oder Kreis – angeordneten Peltenvierpässen wurden ab dem späten 2. Jh. sehr häufig in Nordafrika, Italien und Spanien verlegt und gelten somit als charakteristisch für westliche Mosaikpavimente.’

<sup>44</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 125.



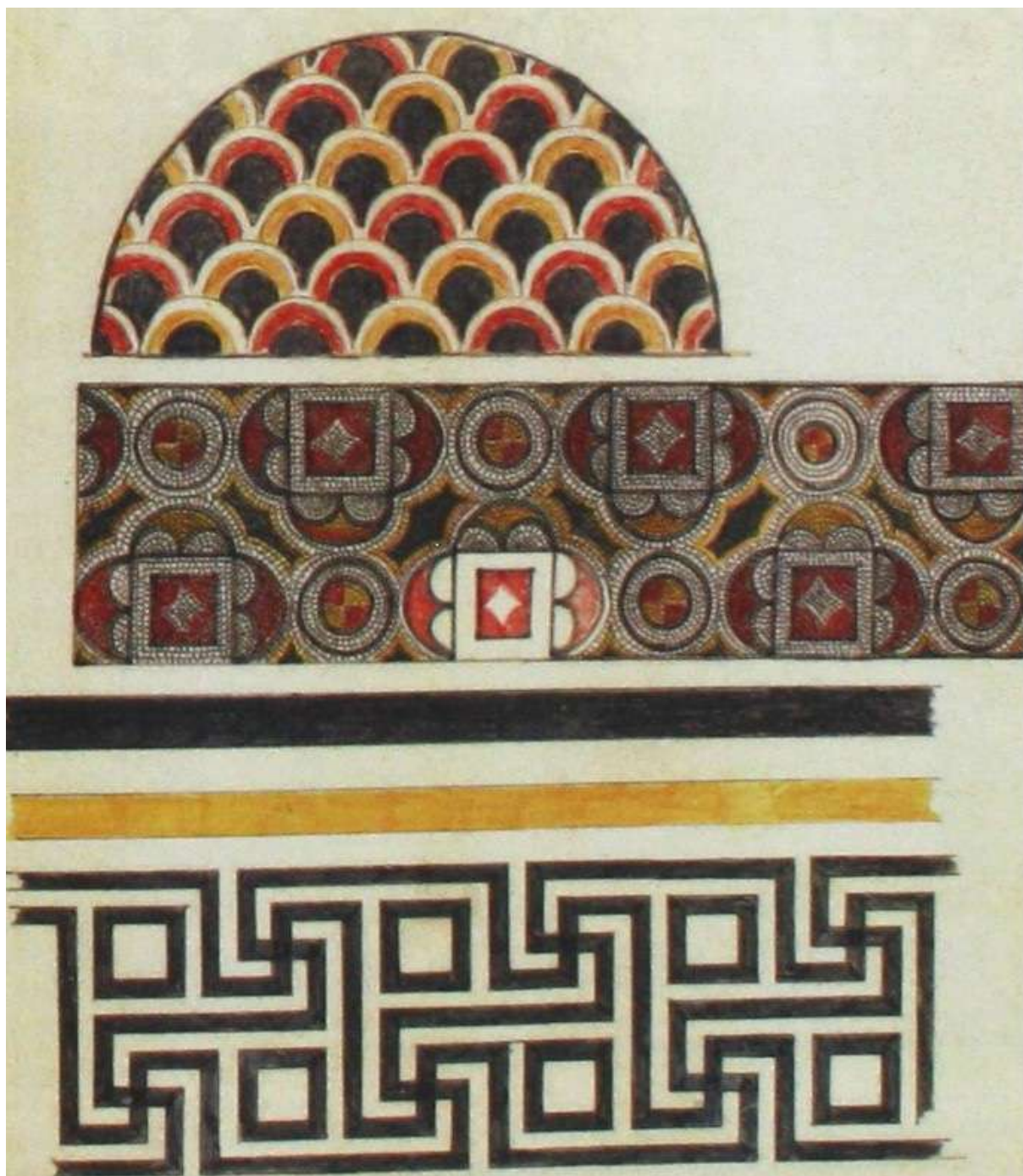


Fig. 12. The mosaic pavement of the Christian church that was inserted into the vestibule of the *thermae-gymnasion* in Augusta Traiana (Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 71, Abb. 201).

The complex with its *auditorium* that was attached south to it and the area around which even used to be identified for some time as ‘forum’ is of great interest for studying of many aspects of the municipal life in Augusta Traiana such as for example the entertainment at the *agonai*, *munera*, the worship of the imperial cult etc.<sup>45</sup>. It is even assumed that this open area was the place where the imperial *adventus* was celebrated for Constantine I and Constantius II<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> They are discussed most recently in Popova 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Popova 2017, 79-80.





Fig. 13. The mosaic pavement of the Christian church that was inserted into the vestibule of the *thermae-gymnasion* in Augusta Traiana (Kamisheva and Karamanova-Zlatkova 2017, fig. 20).

The construction of the Christian church within the thermal complex is not unusual and this church is regarded as the first Christian basilica in the city. If the complex was turned into bishopric as it is suggested<sup>47</sup> I would assume this building rather as the Episcopal chapel and therefore the first Christian basilica in Augusta Traiana has not been found yet. If, however, the place of the so-called 'forum' was also used for *munera*, the church may be linked with the arena and served as martyrial. Until the whole uncovering of the complex, many of the questions will remain unanswered. The mosaic pavement and the western influence on the iconography I believe imply the Episcopal nature of the church either as its chapel or basilica.

The next example of the mosaic art in Augusta Traiana comes from a *domus* which is located in the centre of the city and comprises of half of an *insula* and cover an area of ca. 1600 sq m. It is a peristyle house with the one of the

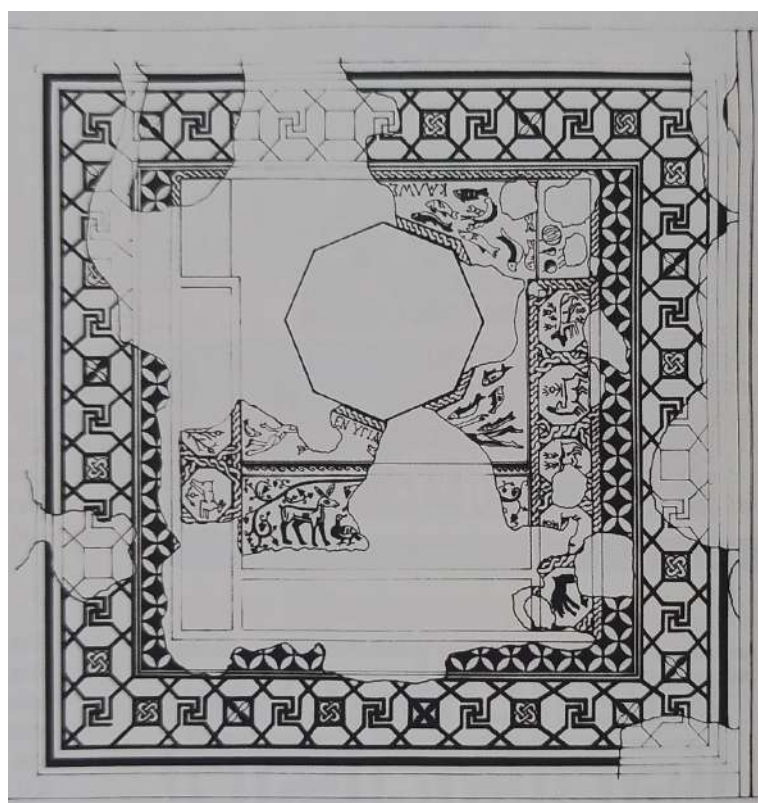


Fig. 14. The mosaic pavement of aula of the *domus* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 72, Abb. 203).

<sup>47</sup> Popova 2017, 81-82.



Fig. 15. The mosaic pavement of aula of the domus in Augusta Traiana, intra muros  
(after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 73, Abb. 204).

room (8,80/8,80 m) around the courtyard identified as *tablinum* which is decorated with mosaic pavement (Fig. 14). The house was built in the first half/middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but the decoration of the *tablinum* with the mosaic pavement is assigned to a period of reconstruction and repairs that is dated to the second quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>48</sup>. I would not be surprised if all the refreshment and embellishment of the *domus* was in fact connected with a change of the owner and his desire to show off to the local society.

The *tablinum* along the mosaic pavement was also decorated with an octagonal *piscina* in the very centre (Fig. 15). Although it had suffered enormously later, the iconography of the mosaic is clear as a whole. The border which is irregular on the sides consists of ivy tendrils, followed by a band of an orthogonal composition of intersecting octagons with centers filled with Solomon's knots, swastika meander and four-leaf rosettes and the hexagons with cross rosettes checkerboard pattern, ivy leaves, and attributes of deities and mythological figures such as a cornucopia, a caduceus, a club and a *sistrum*, as well as pictorial elements such as stylized amphorae, *kantharoi*, and glass drinking vessels. The *emblema* has a frame on three sides filled with a series of intersecting circles, followed by a polychrome guilloche and an orthogonal composition of octagons and squares. The octagons are filled with wild animals chasing animals depicted such as a dog, a rabbit, a bear, an ox, a boar and a deer with plants

<sup>48</sup> Nikolov 1965, 3, 15; Kalchev 2009, 71, 74.





Fig. 16. The frame of the emblem of the aula of the domus in Augusta Traiana, intra muros (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 78, Abb. 220).

behind them, while the squares – with vegetables and fruit such as cucumbers or bottle gourds, grapes, apples, pears, pomegranates and melons as well as flowers (Fig. 16). This band frames the emblem from three sides, with the exclusion of the northern. The emblem itself is divided into two areas, with the rectangular sections: the northern which houses the tiled *piscina* in the centre and filled with real and mythological sea creatures such as various species of fish, a crab and two Nereids, depicted in the north-east and north-west corners. The marine life is highly stylized, but rendered in rich polychromy (Fig. 17). Two inscriptions around the piscine welcome the guests of the house owner and made a wish to them, both dated to 4<sup>th</sup> century given the palaeography.

In the southern part of the *emblem*, although very fragmentary preserved, the scene *fons vitae* can be recognized due to the preservation of the amphora or hydria in the centre of the panel with sprawling vine tendrils, with differently coloured leaves and grapes and a doe standing beneath, but turned to the centre, and a duck moving towards it (Fig. 18)<sup>49</sup>.

It is suggested that the mosaic represents a full cosmogonic scene: the water world in the centre, and around it on eastern and western side is framed by the presentation of the terrestrial sphere with the fruits and animals that symbolize also the hospitality (*xenia*) and the years' seasons presented by a couple of animals. It is also assumed that the *fons vitae* scene that symbolizes the Heaven with the Eden/Paradise is the oldest known so far such scene in the mosaic pavements in Thrace and derived from the Jewish art. Some other elements, however, refer to paganism (cornucopia, the club, the caduceus and the *sistrum*) and Christianity (crosses and cups with wine)(Figs. 19, 20) with the use of old pagan symbols of the Eastern art that now bear new meanings referring to scenes in the Old and New Testament<sup>50</sup>. So, in this case we are dealing with a syncretic work of possibly late antique Jewish, early Christian and pagan pictorial motifs that mark the transitional period of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>51</sup>. As a direct parallel in terms of iconography and the profane, architectural context is found in the floor mosaic from the *triclinium*

<sup>49</sup> For the full description of the mosaic pavement – see Pillinger et al. 2016, 125-129.

<sup>50</sup> Popova-Moroz 1987, 10, 12; Kalchev 2009, 73-74; Popova 2016, 169-170.

<sup>51</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 129-130.





*Fig. 17. The marine panel of the mosaic pavement of the aula of the domus in Augusta Traiana, intra muros (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 77, Abb. 215).*



*Fig. 18. The fons vitae scene of the mosaic pavement of the aula of the domus in Augusta Traiana, intra muros (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 79, Abb. 224).*





Fig. 19. The Christian cross embodied into the bordure of the mosaic of an aula in a domus in Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 75, Abb. 209).

in the so-called House of Psalms or Polycharmos Palace in Stobi<sup>52</sup>. The cosmogonic composition, however, refers to Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine<sup>53</sup>. The *fons vitae* scene reveals the religiosity of the owner of the *domus* as a Christian and he was identified as a wealthy merchant who settled in Augusta Traiana at the end of Tetrarchy<sup>54</sup>.

Another mosaic pavement that should be attributed to the group of mosaics from the period under consideration in Augusta Traiana and has no yet any parallels with the mosaics in Thrace is that in a *domus* located at the very centre of the late antique city presenting the Dionysian *Thiasos* (Fig. 21). Although the mosaic pavement has been partly uncovered in two archaeological campaigns, it is clear that it consists of an *emblema* in the centre, just off an octagonal *piscina*, on geometrical background in several panels of which four are discovered and framed by several borders with schematic four-leaf rosettes followed by a wave pattern. The *piscina* is also included into a rectangular panel with possibly large kantharos from which two symmetrical vine tendrils with grapes and leaves sprout at the four



Fig. 20. The cup with wine embodied into the bordure of the mosaic of an aula in a domus in Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 76, Abb. 212).

<sup>52</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 129.

<sup>53</sup> Popova 2016, 170.

<sup>54</sup> Popova 2016, 170.





Fig. 21. The discovered mosaic pavement of the *tablinum* from Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 105, Abb. 290).

corners. The geometric panels are filled with guilloché and circle medallions inscribed into square with those preserved consisting of a wreath composition which includes an octagon with an enclosed swirl motif and a polychrome shield of triangles with a clockwise swirling effect. The *emblema* itself consists of a frieze depicting the procession (Θίασος) of the god Dionysus, which is surrounded by a laurel garland. As the panel is partially uncovered, some of the participants in the procession – including perhaps the deity himself – is still awaiting its excavation. The excavated area presents three Dionysian figures: two maenads, dressed in chitons, holding rattling instruments (*krotala*) in both hands, dancing to a satyr also shown in the so-called hurling step (Fig. 22). He wears a cloak made of leopard skin and is crowned with a green laurel wreath and holds a shepherd's staff (*pedum*) raised in his left hand. It remains unclear if the *emblema* depicts the triumph of Dionysus or his hierogamy with Ariadne, but the satyr is identified as the young plump satyr Skirtos (Σκυρτός) serving the drunken Dionysus. Although the images are made in high-quality and in rich polychromy, the arms and hands are sketchy and anatomically incorrect. Direct parallels of the figures presented are found in the mosaics from the Eastern Mediterranean such as the residential building in Sheikh Zouède from northern Sinai/Egypt and the floor mosaic from the *triclinium* in the so-called Falconer's House in Argos. The specific iconography of Skirtos with a leopard skin or nebris (hide of a deer calf), a laurel wreath and *pedum* goes back to the Hellenistic sculptor Toinias from Sicyon, who worked around 200 BC. This allows to be concluded with a good reason given also the archaeological context and the date of the closest parallels known that the mosaic pavement in Augusta Traiana should be dated to the time of Emperor Julian II Apostate (361-363) when a revival of mythological and other Greek-Hellenistic content is detectable in the Syrian region. It led to the possibility that the owner of the *domus* was Syrian and for this reason he entrusted a traveling Syrian workshop that was active in the city to create the mosaic with the Dionysian *Thiasos* depiction, which is the only one known in present-day Bulgaria<sup>55</sup>. Whether this iconography would indicate the great popularity of the Dionysus cult at that time in the city is unclear due to the lack of any other evidence for this. If the origin of the *domus* is Syrian as suggested, it makes the things more unclear as it could be the case of only a personal attitude and desire. With its iconography but also special richness of colour such as white, ochre, light blue, pink, dark red, turquoise and dark gray, each in several shades and the blue and red alone in six shades each, this mosaic is unique for the Late antique Thrace and can be compared only to the marine mosaic in Philippopolis discussed above.

To the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century are dated the mosaic pavements that embellish a room (*apodyterium*) and a corridor that are part of a private bath that is located at the southern part of the city (Fig. 23). The mosaics are badly damaged in ancient and modern time, but it is clear that they are geometric with a wave with ivy tendril, guilloché and imposed octagons in the frame and composition with a cross pattern composed of octagons with four adjoining hexagonal and cross-shaped panels on each side. The octagons are filled with eight-lobed rosette, a network of a

<sup>55</sup> See all the discussion and full description of the mosaic pavement in Pillinger et al. 2016, 152-159.





Fig. 22. The emblem of the mosaic pavement of the tablinum from Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 107, Abb. 294).

square and a curved square, four *peltae* around a circle, a looped cross etc., the equal-armed crosses are decorated in two ways: with a braided cross and a complex geometric motif and the hexagons in a multitude of geometric pictorial elements. The colours used are white, grey-blue, ochre, yellow, red, light-grey, and blue<sup>56</sup>.

After this short synopsis some observations which are preliminary may be done. It seems that in both cities since the second half of 3<sup>rd</sup> century a full geometrization of the iconography of the mosaic pavements in the thermal complexes was implemented to the contrary of these from the time of the Antonines. This geometrization continued through the whole 4<sup>th</sup> century as various patches of the mosaic floor in these complexes indicate. It seems that at least in Philippopolis some specific geometric schemes become peculiar for the thermal complexes as it might be the case with DG I, Pl. 186b–c for example.

The full geometrization of the thermal mosaics, however, did not confine within the limits of the public baths only, but also spread on the private ones. For example, one would not find in the mosaic iconography of the private baths these birds that had embellished the private *thermae* in Philippopolis in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Quite on the contrary, in both cities, the mosaic pavements in the private baths contain geometric iconography in 4<sup>th</sup> century with a multitude of geometric pictorial elements and motifs.

The marine mosaic in Philippopolis allows the assumption that in some cases the thermal mosaics might have even provided the type of iconography for the private *domus*. In this particular case, I would suggest the use of this particular geometric scheme due to the image of the *emblemata* that presents Mediterranean water landscape and such a 'marine' geometric background would be appropriate. The dark colour of the tesserae that fulfill the geometric carpet is in line with the dark blue water in the *emblemata* and provide the perfect background for it. It should be emphasized that these cases are specific and should not be accepted as a rule.

<sup>56</sup> Kalchev 2009, 80-84; Pillinger et al. 2016, 135-138.



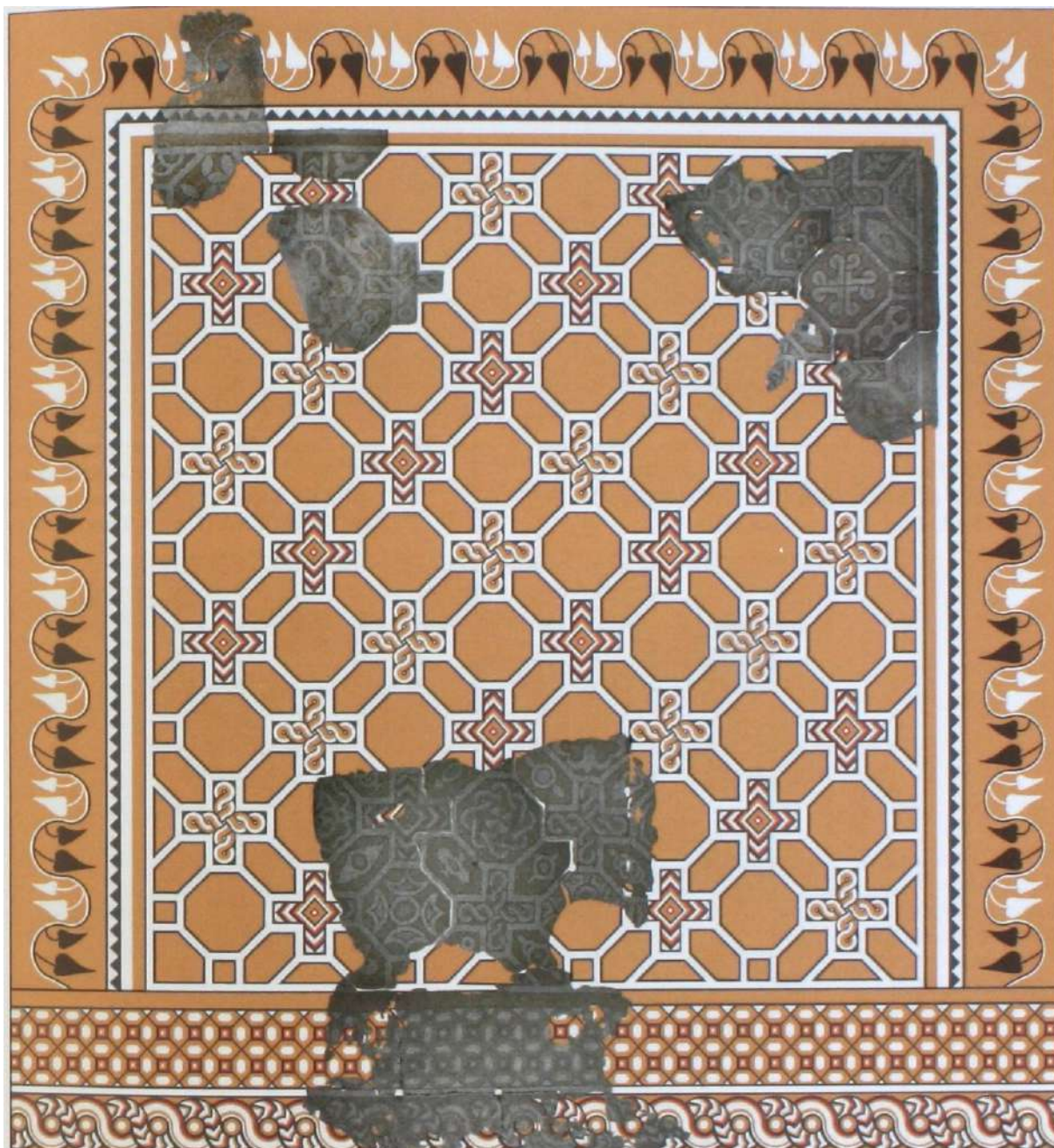


Fig. 23. The mosaic pavement of the apodyterum in the bath complex in Augusta Traiana (after Pillinger et al. 2016, Taf. 85, Abb. 238).

It seems that through the century the thermal type of geometric mosaics undergone certain changes in term of colours as that in Augusta Traiana from the second half of the century reveals. The solid use of ochre in this very mosaic attributes it to the group of mosaic pavements in the city that are dated to the last decades of 4<sup>th</sup> century – the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century and especially that of the extramural *episcopeion*<sup>57</sup>. The difference between them is the full geometrization of the latter (puristic style).

Given the geometrization of the iconography of the mosaic pavement of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis, it is very tempting to assume that it was in fact the continuation of the practice that had been established in the other public buildings such as the thermal complexes for example. It should be logical given the huge area that should be covered by mosaic pavement and the new role of the floor pavement that is not now the primary decoration in the Christian basilicas. Accordingly, the colour scale is limited and the use of vivid and picturesque colours is avoided. In fact, the use of this style and iconography in the Christian buildings continued in the last quarter

<sup>57</sup> On the mosaic pavement – see Kalchev 2009, 160-163; Pillinger et al. 2016. On the interpretation – see Topalilov 2022.



of 4<sup>th</sup> – the first quarter/half of 5<sup>th</sup> century when it was replaced by figural mosaics. When some other motifs are used, they concern those that are closely linked with the Christianity such as cantharoses, cups etc. trying to avoid any association with the pagan past. Given this observation, the use of the *emblema* seems rather unusual in the case of the Metropolitan basilica and it seems to be a kind of an ‘archaism’. It reveals also the preservation of the old traditions in the *metropolis Thraciae* and the incapability of the Christians to break with their non-Christian heritage, or at least with that one in Philippopolis in the third quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> century. This is not surprising, given the centuries cultural heritage that Philippopolis had until that time, being the cultural centre of the province of Thrace since 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

It is suggested that the use of geometric and ornamental patterns is in line with a negative attitude to the images or its limitations among the Arians accepting only the representation of the Cross and the Bible<sup>58</sup>. As Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana were assumed as Arianic centres along with the great concentration of Goths Arians living in Thrace, this suggestion seems logical. The case with the emblem in the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis, however, if it really belongs to that mosaic pavement, may cast doubt on this hypothesis. Besides, the full geometrization of the mosaic iconography finds its completion in the time of Theodosius I when it is observed that processes *contra arianos* were taking place in Thrace<sup>59</sup>. The triumph of the aniconic iconography of the mosaic pavements may be linked with the final overcoming of the classical traditions in the cities in Thrace under consideration and the settlement of migrants from the East that bear the primary Early Christian art. The use of the vivid and picturesque colours as well as the diversity in geometric and ornamental patterns in the side aisles of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis dated to the early Theodosian time implies that the process is more complex than previously thought and still needs its answers. If the aniconic, puristic style, is linked with the Arianism, it seems rather weird its mass use in the time of Theodosius I in the main church buildings in Augusta Traiana. Quite on the contrary in Philippopolis, it has been abandoned, at least at its primary range of colours. Otherwise, we should assume that the Arians preserved their positions and importance in Augusta Traiana in the time of Theodosius I and Arcadius and even later, which, however, to my mind is unlikely.

Quite different are the mosaic pavements that embellished the houses of the common Christians. The example from Augusta Traiana from the first half of 4<sup>th</sup> century is in sharp contrast with the iconography which the mosaic pavements of the Christians buildings used. It is more vivid, picturesque and full with various type of figural scenes that had nothing to do with the strict geometrization of the mosaic decoration of the Christian buildings. The Christian symbols, although discrete, are visible, and the scenes provide clues for their Christian interpretations. Indeed, the possible Syrian origin of the owner of the house combined with the ethnicity of the mosaicist may explain the specifics that are not to be found yet among the other mosaic pavements in Thrace. The late Tetrarchy and the years of Constantius II, however, when the mosaic pavement should be dated is the period of the Arianic Beroe (Augusta Traiana) where the Orthodox pope Liberius was expelled by Constantius II to. Certainly, we cannot assume that the Arianic communities in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana were homogenous and some groups of Orthodox Christians might have existed as would be revealed by the rich decoration of the *aula (tablinum)* of the *domus* of the probably Syrian merchant. Along the Christian context, however, the mosaic may be regarded in the non-Christian context as well with the image of *xenia* and the marine scene that symbolize the hospitality and prosperity of the owner. This, with the discretely presented specific Christian symbols, allowed him to play an important role in both Christian and non-Christian communities in the city. As a real merchant he cannot ignore either religious community.

The mosaic pavements in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana may have reflected a historical event. Indeed, this is very rare in the late antique mosaic art, but in Thrace it would not be unique. Thus, it is suggested that the mosaic that embellishes the *aula* of *domus Eirene* in Philippopolis may have shown the wish of the owner for peace in Thrace after the ‘Gothic wars’ of 80s of 4<sup>th</sup> century or in the Christian Church concerning the discourse ‘Arians-Orthodox’ in term of the Second Ecumenical council that was held in Constantinople in 381 AD<sup>60</sup>. In our case the mosaics that might have reflected a historical events are those mosaics in both cities that are dated *ca.* middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The written sources simply mention that Julian passed through Thrace on his way to Constantinople, obviously using the state road *uia diagonalis/militaris*. The milestones discovered along the road between Naissus and Philippopolis reveals that his presence in the region was not just a march of the new emperor to reach Constantinople at the beginning of 362 AD. In fact, these milestones witness the close ties between the new emperor and the cities as the milestones ‘served as mini-monuments to convey his legitimacy, authority, and prestige’<sup>61</sup>. The emperor

<sup>58</sup> Popova 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Topalilov 2020.

<sup>60</sup> See above note 5.

<sup>61</sup> Moysés 2019, 524. On these milestones – see also Sharankov 2019, 41-70.

seems to have resided for some time in the region and the cities such as Serdica for example expressed their loyalty to him by setting the milestones whose inscriptions are ‘a powerful message of political support for the emperor in the region’<sup>62</sup>. To this city we can add also Naissus and Philippopolis. Zosimus says that the emperor courted the goodwill of all cities (πάσας . . . τὰς πόλεις) he entered on his way<sup>63</sup>, and among his deed one would probably find the restoration of a temple, cult, and/or office associated with traditional worship which is presented as the restoration of the city/state to its former majesty and prestige, as well as the civic revenues<sup>64</sup>. The text of the milestone implies that some of his actions should be regarded as a response to a civic petition<sup>65</sup>. On the other hand, ‘by erecting a series of milestones dedicated to Julian as sole Augustus, Serdica promoted him to the inhabitants of Dacia Mediterranea and to those who traveled through Illyricum and Thrace as a legitimate emperor who had acted appropriately on their behalf *recuperata re publica*’<sup>66</sup>. As mentioned above, Philippopolis and Naissus should also be added to Serdica as they were major points of his march through the region.

It is very tempting to study the mosaic pavement from Augusta Traiana presenting in the genuine *emblema* the Dionysian *Thiasos* in this historical context as already proposed by V. Popova. The characters as well the style and manner they are presented recall the production and statues of the Hellenistic sculptor Toinias from Sicyon (3<sup>rd</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) as shown already which, however, is without any doubt a deliberate study of the past. The uniqueness of this iconography among the mosaics in Thrace reveals the lack of any traditions in this aspect as well. So, I would not be surprised if at the time of Julian’s stay in the region the religious association of the Dionysian cult was restored in Augusta Traiana and the mosaic pavement under consideration not only mark the event, but also recognizes the owner of the *domus* as one of most the important members of the association itself.

The inscription that concerns the Dionysian association in Philippopolis and was found at the Metropolitan basilica<sup>67</sup> may refer to a similar case. Its inclusion as a *spolia* in the pavement of the atrium may show the eventual Christian triumph over this association that was restored by Julian.

The religious policy of Julian which concerns the restoration of the old temples, cults and associations as M. Moyses correctly observed had started already during the emperor’s march on the Balkans in late 361/early 362 AD<sup>68</sup>. This restoration, however, also included the restoration of the prestigious past of the empire. I believe that this may find expression in another mosaic pavement that was found in Philippopolis – that of the marine. Indeed, the iconography does not provide an argument for deliberate study of the past within the restoration activity of the emperor, but as it has already been suggested that some of the specifics of the mosaic find parallels in the Hellenistic and imperial time<sup>69</sup>, which, however, is not crucial for this study. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of the iconography, the style and the abundance of colours used, the proposed date of the mosaic pavement in the middle-third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the entire pagan character of the iconography, give me a reason to link the construction of this mosaic pavement with the emperor’s policy of restoration during his stay in Philippopolis and immediately after that. In fact, the emperor’s stay in Philippopolis was a catalyst for the revival of the old tradition of Eumolpus as the legendary founder of Philippopolis. It is assumed that the installation of his myth and cult as such was the response of the local municipal elite to the ideological war that ‘raged’ among the cities in Thrace and particularly between Philippopolis and Perinthos and its subordinate – Hadrianopolis in late 2<sup>nd</sup> – beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup> century of most ‘Attic’ past<sup>70</sup>.

These are certainly not all of the processes that concern somehow the development of the mosaic art in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana in the period between the late Tetrarchy and Theodosian time. Undoubtedly, many questions still remain unanswered while others have not been asked yet. In fact, at the present level of study due to various reasons and mostly on the lack of direct or not yet identified as such evidence, the study of these issues is very limited, so I hope that this small contribution may shed some light on the problems of that period.

<sup>62</sup> Moyses 2019, 525.

<sup>63</sup> Zosimos, 3.10.4.

<sup>64</sup> Moyses 2019, 538 (in the case with Serdica).

<sup>65</sup> Moyses 2019, 543.

<sup>66</sup> Moyses 2019, 543.

<sup>67</sup> See on the inscription <https://www.monitor.bg/bg/a/view/nadpis-v-chest-na-bog-dionis-otkriha-na-goljamata-bazilika-170332>.

<sup>68</sup> Moyses 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Pillinger et al. 2016, 224.

<sup>70</sup> Topalilov 2018b.



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