



Summary :

Mosaics of high artistic quality were discovered during excavations in the town of Ephesus, both in public and in private buildings of the Roman period and Early Christian church buildings. The iconography of rooms in private houses includes black and white and multicoloured geometric motifs as well as scenes with mythological representations. Similar geometric decorations can also be found in the three-aisled basilicas of the same era. Generally, the existing mosaic decoration in Ephesus relates stylistically with equivalent decorations in the western Mediterranean and reflects the collective prosperity of the era.

Date

Roman period

Geographical Location

Ephesus

1. Mosaics in public and private buildings

Rich mosaic decorations survive in the two large building islets (“insulae”) discovered south of the [Couretes Street](#) in [Ephesus](#).¹ Situated in the center of the Hellenistic and Roman town, they were developed in three successive embankments. Building islet 1 includes six houses but only one contains surviving mosaic decoration (e 1-6), while building islet 2 includes seven houses (I-VII), of which five are decorated with mosaics. The construction of the building islet 1 has six building phases, from the 1st century BC to the beginning of the 7th century AD., during which period it underwent significant changes, as a result of the earthquakes which hit the town. The same dating had been suggested for building islet 2. Excavations which took place after 1995 however showed that after the destructive earthquake which hit during the reign of [Gallienus](#) (262 AD) these houses were abandoned for a period of time; several generations later some areas of the islet were systematically rebuilt.²

2. Geometric motifs

A particular characteristic of these mosaics are the geometric, black and white motifs, examples of which can be found in both building islet 1 (rooms e 1-3, 370-420 AD), and in building islet 2 (house I: rooms 1-6, late 1st century AD, rooms A-B of house I, house II: rooms 14, 18, house V: room 9, late 2nd-mid 3rd century AD, house I: rooms 10a and b, house II: rooms 17, 19-20, 24, 26, 27, 28, house III: room 16b, 370-420 AD).

The four-leafed ornament appears already from the 2nd century AD, but presents greater diversity from the 3rd century AD onwards. In its simplest version it appears in rooms C, 2, 10b of house I and 14, 18 of house II as a frame for the central mosaic composition or as the interior of square divides. Something also seen during the 4th century AD, more often in the western rather than the eastern section of the Roman Empire, is the placement of the ornament in the divides of a web motif, such as in room 26 (last quarter of the 4th century) of house II (building islet 2). Generally, the four-leafed ornament in the mosaics of Ephesus presents minimal morphological variations. So, the mosaic which decorates room 1 of house I (late 1st century AD) does not present important differences in relation to the mosaics of Medusa and [Dionysus](#) in room 16a of house III, which date from the second quarter of the 5th century.

Regarding the web motif (“scutulatum”), the mosaics of Ephesus have been influenced more from the West rather than the East. In early mosaics, the web ornament is used rarely and appears as a decorative frame for the main representation (building islet 2: room 9 of house IV), but later it gains primary significance and covers the entire available space (building islet 1: room e 3, insula 2: rooms 17 and 26 of house II, A-B of house I, 16b of house III).



Another known late Roman motif which appears at the end of the 4th century, that of the inter-joined circles which form four leafed shapes which frame a cross shaped ornament, found in room 10a of house I and in room 24, house II's **triclinium**. A variation of the motif which dates from the Severan dynasty (first quarter of the 3rd century), decorates the north **stoa** of the peristyle courtyard of house II (room 23).

The mosaic representing the lion (room 17) in house III and in room 19 of house II bears the motif of the continuous octagons with variations of cruciform ornaments within them and triangles tangent to their sides, while squares cover the gaps between them. Room 14 of house II is decorated with smaller and larger squares on their sides which bear cruciform ornaments in their interior. These five variations date from the late 4th and early 5th century. The evolution of the late antique interchange between upright and slanting squares which bear cruciform ornaments in their center, is clearly seen in rooms 6 (1st century AD), 1, in the vestibule ("vestibulum"), 1 (first quarter of the 3rd century) and 10b (end of the 4th century).

In comparison to the black and white mosaic compositions, the number of multicoloured geometric mosaics is smaller. Among the oldest are the crescent-shield shapes with a Solomon node in their center (rooms C of house I and B/17 of house III), which present similarities with another mosaic revealed in the vestibule of the temple of Hestia Voulea in the town's **agora**, which according to an inscription dates from the end of the 3rd-beginning of the 4th century AD. The tricoloured abacus motif in room 25 of house V possibly dates from the 3rd century.

The rest of the compositions date from the late 4th century. Two different variations of square motifs decorate the peristyle of houses I and II of building islet 2 (rooms 2 and 22). The continuous lines of octagons with triangles attached to their sides and squares or triangles in their interior, which decorate the floors of rooms 2 and 11 of house I, as well as the multicoloured four leaves on the south stoa of the peristyle of house II, also date from the 4th century AD.

The fact that the majority of the mosaics date from the last quarter of the 4th century AD and later is explained by the intense building activity during the period which followed the powerful earthquake between 358 and 368 AD. Typologically the geometric motifs are closer connected to the mosaic compositions of the western Mediterranean. Judging, however, from the colourfulness which distinguishes the mosaic compositions of the provinces of the Roman Mediterranean, one would expect a comparable variety on the western coast of the eastern empire. Here, however, as it is also evident from examples from [Sardis](#), [Smyrna](#), [Pergamum](#), [Miletos](#), [Didyma](#) and [Erythrae](#), simpler forms are found. This does not mean that quality was of lesser importance in these areas. On the contrary, the mosaics of Ephesus surpass the level of simple craftsmanship and present artistic autonomy and high level aesthetics.

3. Mosaics with mythological representations

Of interest are also the mosaic compositions which represent mythological figures. These mosaics, which date from the end of the 4th - beginning of the 5th century, are located in the south stoa of the peristyle courtyard of house II (SR/22: Amphitrite of sea horse and Triton), in niche D (Dionysus and Ariadne in circular frame decorated with rich vine branches full of grapes, winged [Eros](#) riding on a chariot drawn by panthers, further down a pair of peacocks pecking a garland) and in the two niches of the triclinium (SR/24) of house II. The portraits of Dionysus and Medusa in room 16a and the lion in room 17 of house III are decorated with multicoloured tesserae which create shading. These mosaics are not only a sign of the social welfare which prevailed in Ephesus at the end of antiquity but are also examples of the high artistic quality during this age. These representations reveal the abilities of a well trained and independent artist whose prototypes must be sought in equivalents in the Italian West rather than the East.

Mosaics with representations of mythological figures have also been revealed in the triclinium of a house known as "paediskeion" (brothel).³ In this area representations of the four seasons which date from the second half of the 3rd century have been also uncovered. A colourful mosaic depicting a symposium scene which dates from the end of the 3rd - beginning of the 4th century AD, was revealed to the west of this area.



4. The “stoa of the alytarches”

On the north façade of the building islet 1, in front of a row of ten taverns with arched roofing, is the “stoa of the alytarches”, which is divided into two levels of unequal height.⁴ The floor of the stoa is covered by twelve multicoloured, mainly geometrical mosaic compositions (squares, meanders, chainlike braids, interconnected circles which form four-leafed ornaments, squares which contain circles with a representation of a “pinecone” formed by triangles, crosses within octagons, rhomboids), which are framed by plant or geometric ornaments. Their dating is aided both by other mosaics found in Ephesus and by others discovered in the broader Aegean area.⁵ Stylistic similarities exist between the mosaic which decorates the south stoa in front of the [Varius baths](#) and of that which decorates the floor of the stoa on the western side of the baths. Similarities regarding the materials, the colour gradation and the decorative motifs exist between the mosaics of a building found along the street which leads to [Magnesia ad Maeandrum](#), the [gymnasium of Vedius](#) (hall IIIa, stoa) and the north hall of the [gymnasium of the theater](#). Thus, the dating suggested for the mosaics of the stoa is the end of the 5th century and could be extended up to the early Justinian period.

5. Early Christian church mosaics

As mentioned above, mosaics have been also used to decorate several early Christian churches. Rich mosaic decoration was brought to light by excavations in the pre-Justinian [basilica](#) of St. John, the floor of the narthex of the church of the Panagia (first half of the 5th century), the [three-aisled basilica](#) next to the eastern gymnasium and in the church of the Seven Sleepers on the eastern slope of Panayir Dağ which dates from the end of the 4th century AD, during the reign of Theodosius I (346-395 AD). The latter has mosaics with geometric black and white designs (web ornament with cross in the center, rows of squares placed on their sides, interconnected octagons).⁶ From a stylistic and technical point of view, these mosaics can be compared to the mosaic decoration of house II in building islet 2, which dates from the late 4th century, after the earthquake which hit between 358 and 368 AD. Geometric floor decoration, which stylistically relates to that of the narthex of the church of the Panagia belongs to another basilica revealed during the construction of a hotel in Ephesus.⁷

1. The initial name of this residential block was “Embolos”. See Jobst, W., “Römische Mosaiken aus Ephesos I. Die Hanghäuser des Embolos”, *Forschungen in Ephesos VIII/2* (Wien 1977).

2. See reports in *ÖJh* since 1995.

3. Jobst, W., “Das öffentliche Freudenhaus in Ephesos”, *ÖJh* 51 (1976-1977), p. 61-84.

4. See Lang-Auinger, C., “Hanghaus 1 in Ephesos: Der Baubefund”, *Forschungen in Ephesos VIII/3* (Wien 1996), p. 31.

5. Jobst, W., “Römische Mosaiken aus Ephesos I. Die Hanghäuser des Embolos”, *Forschungen in Ephesos VIII/2* (Wien 1977), p. 33-34.

6. Jobst, W., “Zur Bestattungskirche der Schläfer in Ephesos”, *ÖJh* 50 (1972-1975), p. 171-180.

7. Jobst, W., “Römische Mosaiken in Ephesos”, *The Proceeding of the Xth International Congress of Classical Archaeology, Ankara-Izmir 23-30/IX/1973, II* (Ankara 1978), p. 657-658.

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Glossary :

	alytarches, the
Head of the "alytae". He was responsible for the observance of order during Olympic games. Concerning hierarchy, he was placed after the "ellanodikai".	
	basilica
In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.	
	stoa, portico, the
A long building with a roof supported by one or two colonnades parallel to its back wall.	
	three-aisled basilica
An oblong type of church internally divided into three aisles: the middle and the two side aisles. The middle aisle is often lighted by an elevated clerestory. In the Early Byzantine years this type of church had huge dimensions.	
	triclinium
Hall for symposia where three anaklintra were placed around the three sides of a square table. During the Late Roman period it was the main reception area of both houses and palaces (the term is maintained in the Byzantine era).	