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Cover illustration: Meleager mosaic from San Pedro de Arroyo, Spain (after Cabero Piquero 2011).

Back cover: Mosaic floor with wrestlers scene, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Archivio Fotografia del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, R. 1899.

# The unpublished mosaics in the Caseggiato dei Lottatori, Ostia (Italy), and the final phases of the building

Martina Marano

This paper presents and analyses the third- and fourth-century-AD mosaic floors of the so-called Caseggiato dei Lottatori in Ostia (V, III, 1; Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Little attention has been paid to the caseggiato<sup>2</sup> in the archaeological literature and in particular to its black-and-white mosaics, which are completely unpublished despite being preserved *in situ*.<sup>3</sup>

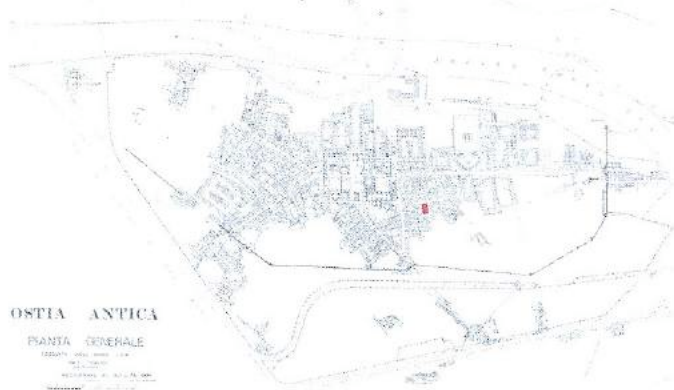


Figure 1. Plan of Ostia showing the location of Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Archivio Disegni del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, inv. 11689.

## Background

In antiquity, Ostia was a Roman commercial town, both the harbour and gateway to Rome.<sup>4</sup> Today, Ostia Antica is one of the most important archaeological sites in Italy, only 30 km from Rome, rightly famous for the well-preserved ruins and mosaic pavements. The first *colonia* of the *Urbs*, founded (according to the literary sources) in the seventh century BC by the fourth king of Rome Ancus Marcius,<sup>5</sup> had a long period of occupation until the end of the fifth century AD, when Visigoths and Vandals threatened its security.<sup>6</sup> Its geographical position at the mouth of the river Tiber (*ostium* means literally mouth) resulted in the town growing in size and importance very quickly. In the first and second centuries AD the construction of the imperial ports increased the commercial role of the first *colonia*, making it the primary storage location for goods and merchandise destined for Rome.<sup>7</sup> Hadrian's reign was particularly important for Ostia, because of the town's rapid expansion.<sup>8</sup> In fact, during his reign, many of Ostia's neighbourhoods were rebuilt and new multi-storey buildings, or *insulae*, appeared, changing the urban landscape.<sup>9</sup> The Caseggiato dei Lottatori was built at this time, the first half of the second century AD. The building is considered to be the seat of a guild (*schola*). It was constructed in *opus testaceum*,<sup>10</sup> and the ground floor is almost perfectly preserved.<sup>11</sup>

The caseggiato and its mosaic floors were unearthed in 1938–9 during the large-scale excavations in Ostia promoted by the fascist regime on the occasion of the E42, the Esposizione

Universale di Roma, that should have been held in 1942 but cancelled due to the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> Immediately after its discovery, the walls of the building were largely restored (the '*restauri mimetici*'),<sup>13</sup> but there is no available evidence concerning the restoration of the mosaic pavements. In 1975, some investigations were made under the mosaics by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici di Ostia in order to reconstruct the building history of the caseggiato.<sup>14</sup> These excavations also provided information about the preparatory layers of the *tessellata*. From 1975 to 1981 the mosaics received some restoration work, which included the complete detachment of the *tesserae* from the original support and their reinstallation on panels.<sup>15</sup>

The Caseggiato dei Lottatori is situated in the north end of a rectangular-shaped block, called V, III and bordered by four streets (Fig. 2).<sup>16</sup> The building is rectangular in plan and entered from Via della Fortuna Annonaria (the main entrance), Via della Casa del Pozzo (a secondary entrance) and Via delle Ermette (with two secondary entrances). On the south side, it meets an older building V, III, 2.<sup>17</sup> The vestibule of the caseggiato (Fig. 3, Room 1) has independent shops on either side (Fig. 3, Rooms 2, 3) and leads to a central courtyard with a basin and a porticus of six columns (Fig. 3, Room 4).<sup>18</sup> Opposite the main entrance is a good-sized room, probably the main room (Fig. 3, Room 6), flanked by two halls (*alae*) of almost identical size (Fig. 3, Rooms 5 and 7). The main room is aligned with the vestibule and the central courtyard. It was interpreted by Hermansen as a "*tablinum*-type sanctuary", a room with wide doors along the walls, and possibly dedicated to the divinities protecting the college.<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the third century AD, the building was restored, probably after an earthquake, and new black-and-white mosaic pavements were laid.<sup>20</sup> It seems likely that in this same phase, the side doors of the main room were blocked in order to reinforce the walls supporting the upper stories and a staircase was added in the north-east corner of the courtyard (Fig. 3, Room 10). The mosaic with the wrestlers scene in the vestibule, from which derives the name of the caseggiato, can be attributed to this phase (Fig. 4).<sup>21</sup> There were further important changes at the end of the third century or beginning of the fourth century AD, when the floor level in the east side of the building was raised by an average of ca. 30 cm. On this occasion, four new rooms in *opus vittatum mixtum* were arranged against the east wall (Fig. 3, Rooms 5a, 5b, 8, 9).<sup>22</sup> As Pavolini has said, we do not know if the caseggiato was still a *schola* during this phase or if its function had changed.<sup>23</sup> Rooms 8 and 9 opened onto the courtyard and were connected to each other by a door. Another connecting

doorway (now restored) is visible between Rooms 5a and 5b. The space between Rooms 5a and 8 was occupied by a corridor that leads from Via delle Ermette to the courtyard of the caseggiato (Fig. 3, Room 13). In this phase, modifications also occurred in Room 6. The main entrance connecting with the courtyard was made narrower and a new door was cut into the east wall to open into Room 5b.

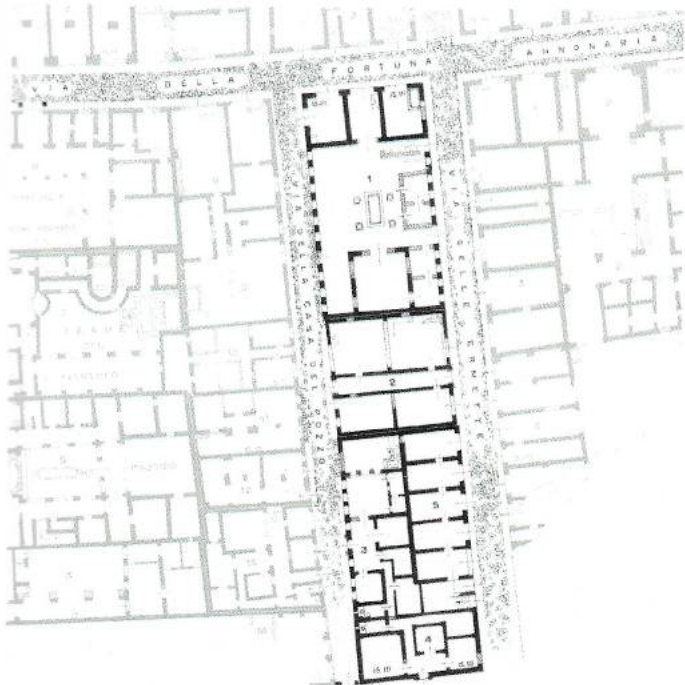


Figure 2. Plan of block V, III in Ostia. After Calza *et al.* 1953.

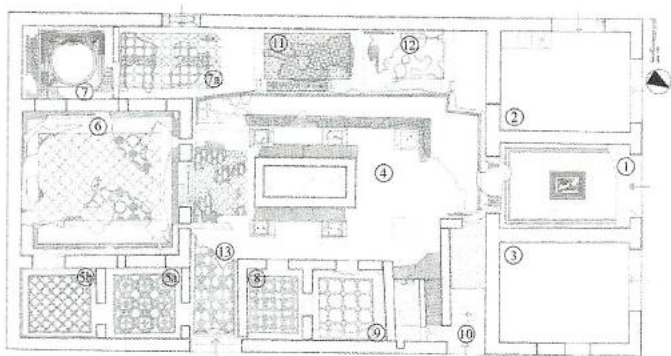


Figure 3. Plan of the Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Drawn by M.A. Ricciardi; Archivio Disegni del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, inv. 6446.

This new layout also required the creation of new geometric black-and-white floor mosaics, which are the focus of this article (Fig. 5). The preparatory layers of these pavements, except for Room 6, are composed (starting with the lowest) by a layer (ca. 10-15 cm thick) of lime with an aggregate of large tufa rocks and tiles (no traces of potsherds have been found); a layer (ca. 3.0-4.5 cm thick) of lime with an aggregate of broken bricks, pozzolana and plaster fragments; a hard setting layer (c. 1.5-2.0 cm thick) of lime with a fine aggregate. The *tesserae* range from square to rectangular and measure ca. 1.0-1.5 cm in the field and c. 1.5-2.0 cm in the borders along the walls. In all the rooms, the geometric fields are not perfectly centred, therefore, the borders of each mosaic are different in

size. It is also the case that black *tesserae* occur at random in the white compartments of the mosaics and vice-versa.



Figure 4. Mosaic floor with wrestlers scene, Vestibule 1, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Archivio Fotografico del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, R. 1899.

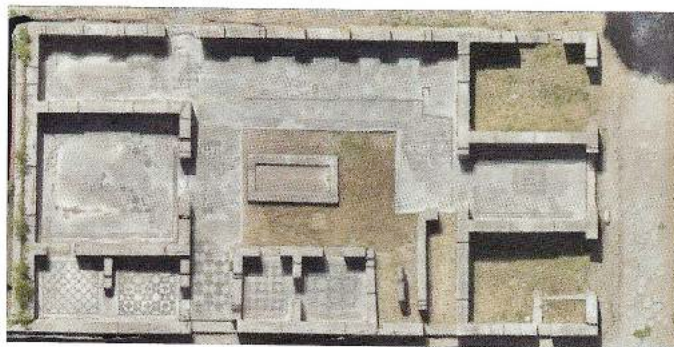


Figure 5. Orthophotoplan of Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Realized by G. Luglio and M. Marano.



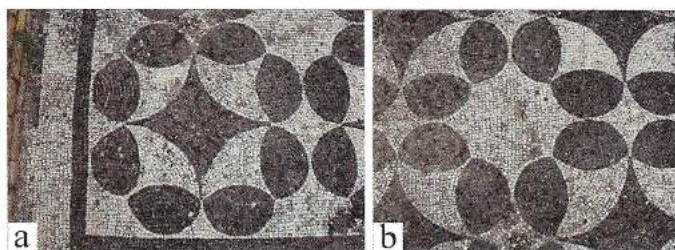
Figure 6. Mosaic in Room 5a, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.

### Description of the mosaic floors

The pavement in Room 5a consists of an orthogonal pattern of tangent bi-concave squares bordered by semi-circles,

forming poised concave and bi-concave squares, the colours counterchanged (Figs. 6-7).<sup>24</sup> The field is surrounded by a black band and a white border; on the east and west sides of the mosaic, the white border has more black *tesserae* creating the effect of a second black band (Fig. 7a). The *tessellatum* is closely related to the decoration in Room E of the *Schola del Traiano* in Ostia, from which it differs only in the presence of black poised concave squares inscribed into the larger bi-concave squares. Becatti dates the mosaic of *Schola del Traiano* to the third century AD, but recent studies have shown that the pavement can be dated between the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century AD.<sup>25</sup> Comparison can also be made with the mosaic from Piazza Raudusculana in Rome, which presents a more simple scheme.<sup>26</sup>

The mosaic floor of Room 5b is characterized by an orthogonal pattern of tangent squares and quatrefoils composed by four spindles; together, they form irregular hexagonal compartments (with only four concave sides), the colours counterchanged (Fig. 8).<sup>27</sup> The field is bordered by a black band and a white border. Another black band lies along the walls of the room. In Ostia the combination of squares and quatrefoils is attested from the second century AD (Room 9 of *Insula delle Ierodule*)<sup>28</sup> and occurs also in Late Antiquity, as the *Domus delle Colonne* reveals (fourth century AD).<sup>29</sup> A similar scheme with poised concave squares and quatrefoils inscribed into a square has been found in El Jem (Tunisia), which can be dated to the third century AD.<sup>30</sup>



Figures 7a and b. Details of mosaic in Room 5a, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photographs: author.



Figure 8. Mosaic in Room 5b, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.

The mosaic in Room 8 consists of an orthogonal pattern of tangent saltires of opposed axes around a square, forming large concave squares and spindles, the colours counter-

changed (Fig. 9).<sup>31</sup> The field is bordered by a black triple filet and a white border. A very similar composition occurs in the *Insula del Viridario* in Ostia, which Becatti dates to the middle of the third century AD,<sup>32</sup> and a number of variations are also attested in Ostia during the same century, as shown by the pavement of the Corridor E of the *Domus di Apuleio*.<sup>33</sup>

The mosaic in Room 9 presents an orthogonal pattern of intersecting large circles composed of eight spindles, creating the effect of small circles of four spindles and forming concave octagons and concave squares, the colours counterchanged (Fig. 10).<sup>34</sup> The field is surrounded by a black double filet and a white border; on the north side of the mosaic, the border presents a mixture of white and black *tesserae* forming an irregular chequerboard. A similar mosaic occurs in Room 7a of the same building but with a more simple scheme based on tangent spindles and circles (beginning of third century AD; Fig. 11).<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note this scheme is attested in Ostia since the second century AD (Room 5 of *Insula delle Ierodule*).<sup>36</sup>



Figure 9. Mosaic in Room 8, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 10. Mosaic in Room 9 of Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.

The design of the mosaic in Corridor 13 is a bichrome orthogonal pattern of adjacent alternating vertical and horizontal pairs of opposed scales arranged to form double axes, the colours counterchanged (Fig. 12).<sup>37</sup> The mosaic is bordered by a black triple filet and a white border.<sup>38</sup> This scheme oc-

curs in Roman mosaics of the second century AD becoming popular during the third century AD.<sup>39</sup> Comparisons can be made with the mosaic of Portico O of the *Domus Fulminata* in Ostia, which is dated by Becarti to the first half of the third century AD.<sup>40</sup> As a parallel it is possible to cite the mosaic of *Atticus*, found in Rome in 1926, and datable to the beginning of the third century AD.<sup>41</sup> Variations of this scheme were particularly common in Ostia in the middle of the third century AD.<sup>42</sup>

The *tessellatum* of Room 6 retains a part of a mosaic that had previously decorated the room at the beginning of the third century AD.<sup>43</sup> Only the east side of this earlier mosaic was preserved and presents a simple decoration of two black bands on a white ground with parallel rows of *tesserae* (Fig. 13).<sup>44</sup> A diagonal black band is visible at the north-east corner of the mosaic and a black simple filet follows the walls of the room. This pavement contains *tesserae* of very different dimensions, varying from a few millimetres to ca. 1.0-1.5 cm (Fig. 14, on the right).

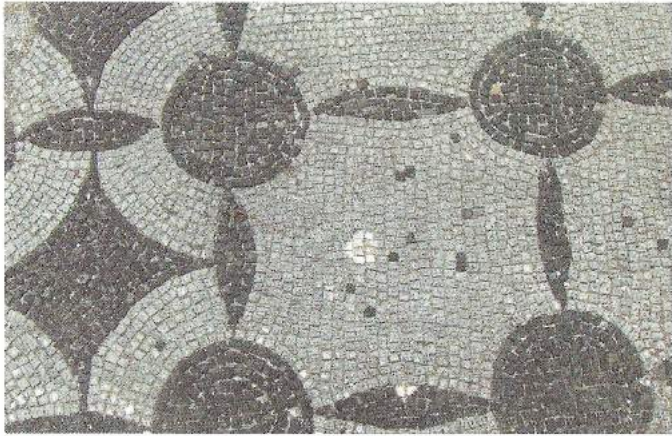


Figure 11. Detail of mosaic in Room 7a, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 12. Mosaic in Corridor 13, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.

The renovated section of the mosaic is at the same level as the previous one but is unfortunately in very poor condition today. This, however, does not prevent us from reconstructing the missing parts of the geometric scheme: it consists of an orthogonal pattern of tangent circles and poised squares with bi-concave sides, forming double-axes with bi-convex ends, the colours counterchanged (Fig. 15).<sup>45</sup> The circles contain white poised squares and concave hexagons, except along the east side of the mosaic where the motifs are absent (Fig. 16). Only one poised square with bi-concave sides contains a white triangular decoration, found at the southwest corner of the room (Fig. 17). The field is surrounded by a black simple filet (south and west sides) and by a white triple filet (east side; the north filet is missing).<sup>46</sup> The border is white with a black band along the walls. The new threshold combines travertine blocks, marble slabs and a black-and-white mosaic<sup>47</sup> with a stylized *tabula ansata*<sup>48</sup> (Fig. 18).

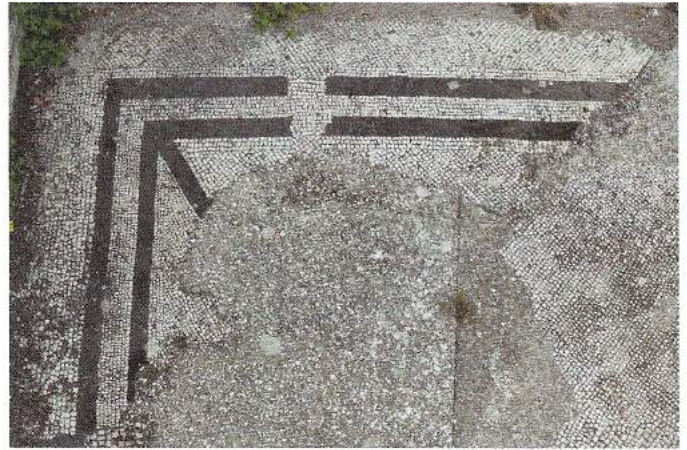


Figure 13. Detail of mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 14. Detail of mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiate dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 15. Mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 16. Detail of mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.



Figure 17. Detail of mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiato dei Lottatori, detail of the *in situ* mosaic floor. Photograph: author.

This mosaic is very similar to the floor in the Terme del Foro in Ostia (the *salone bipartito*), which is dated to the beginning of the third century AD.<sup>49</sup> The combination of circles and poised squares with concave sides occurs from the second century AD<sup>50</sup> and becomes common during the third and fourth centuries AD, as shown in Room A of the *Domus* di Amore e Psiche in Ostia.<sup>51</sup> Under this floor, fragments of

an Hadrianic *tessellatum* were found in 1975. According to the excavation reports,<sup>52</sup> both mosaics – the one of the third century AD and the one of the third to fourth century AD – were laid directly above the Hadrianic one without any preparatory layers. The *tesserae* were simply inserted into a thin bedding layer (ca. 2.0-6.5 cm thick) covering the earlier *tessellatum*.



Figure 18. Detail of mosaic in Room 6, Caseggiato dei Lottatori. Photograph: author.

## Conclusions

The archaeological excavations undertaken in 1975 in the Caseggiato dei Lottatori have shown that the mosaic floors of Rooms 5a, 5b, 8, 9 and Corridor 13 are related to the walls in *opus vittatum mixtum* and were mostly laid on bedding layers made up of plaster fragments, tufa pieces and potsherds.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the potsherds could not be found in the archaeological deposits of the Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica. Without these, the only way to determine the chronology of this building phase is to assess the technique of the walls and the mosaic decoration. Both provide a date towards the end of the third century AD and the beginning of the fourth century AD.<sup>54</sup>

The Caseggiato dei Lottatori is particularly significant because it demonstrates once more the importance of mosaic studies. Even if the geometric designs do not help identify the function of the rooms, they are crucial in better understanding the final building phase of the caseggiato. Late Antiquity in Ostia is a very complex period, characterized by the abandonment of several parts of the town coupled with the reorganization and the reoccupation of entire complexes and buildings, often transformed into prestigious *domus*.<sup>55</sup> Having lost all stratigraphic data, largely removed by E42 archaeologists, the mosaics of the Caseggiato dei Lottatori, along with the associated architectural structures, are very important witnesses to the vitality of the building during the Late Empire.

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## Notes

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2. 'Caseggiato' is defined as a multi-storey building block often with apartments on the upper floors.
3. Only brief mention of the mosaic with the wrestlers scene, from which derives the name of the caseggiato, can be found: Pavolini 1986, 243, fig. 104; Floriani Squarciapino 1988, 170-1, fn. 12; Pratesi 1989, 16; Newby 2002, 193-4, fig. 7; Newby 2005, 59, fn. 62; Pavolini 2006, 223. The study of all the mosaics in the building constituted part of my PhD Thesis (Il c.d. Caseggiato dei Lottatori e l'isolato V, III di Ostia: analisi delle trasformazioni edilizie, PhD Thesis, Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, 2017) and will soon be published.
4. Descœudres 2001.
5. It is important to note that no archaeological traces of the 7th C. BC survive in Ostia. The earliest remains are dated to the 4th c. BC (Martin 1996; DeLaine 2016, 417-9).
6. The arrival of the Visigoths and Vandals did not mean that Ostia was suddenly abandoned. In fact, archaeological evidence of the 6th C. AD has been found in the centre of the town (in the Forum), as A. Gering has recently demonstrated (Gering 2014). We also know that in the 9th C. AD Ostia was attacked by the Saracens and the last inhabitants found shelter in *Gregoriopolis*, the town built by pope Gregory IV to the east of the ancient city (Pavolini 2006, 20-39).
7. Vitelli 1980; Rickman 2002; Viriout 2003. For the imperial ports see Keay and Paroli 2011.
8. For the boom phenomenon see Heinzelmann 2002.
9. DeLaine 2002; DeLaine 2012, 332-40.
10. The *opus testaceum* is an ancient Roman technique of construction where the walls have a brick facing and a core of rubble concrete (DeLaine 2001, 93-4; Adam 2005, 289-301).
11. The caseggiato is called a *domus* in Scavi di Ostia I (Calza *et al.* 1953, 232, 236). In 1981, G. Hermansen identified it as a guild-seat and considered the whole of block V, III as "a guild complex in Via della Fortuna Annonaria" (Hermansen 1981, 76-77, 113-5). Subsequently Pavolini, on the basis of the mosaic with the wrestlers scene, assumed that the caseggiato was the guild-seat of a wrestlers' college (Pavolini 2006, 223). In recent years, the building has been briefly discussed by H. Stöger in relation to Ostia's *scholae* (Stöger 2009; Stöger 2011, 227-228). The interpretation as a guild-seat is due to the plan of the caseggiato, characterized by four entrances opening to the exterior and a possible sanctuary (the main room) to the rear (Hermansen 1981, 77).
12. ACS, E42, Servizi Tecnici, b. 426, f. 6598. For the E42 excavations see Santa Maria Scrinari 1987.
13. In the last century most of Ostian buildings were restored in a 'mimetic' fashion, reusing ancient bricks and tufa blocks found during the archaeological excavations (Rinaldi 2015).
14. For the excavation report see Archivio Giornali di Scavo del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, vol. 155. A first analysis of the architectural structures found in these excavation trenches is being prepared for publication (Marano forthcoming).
15. The *lacunae* have been filled with modern grey cement (Mannucci 1988, 485).
16. The block V, III is enclosed by the Via della Fortuna Annonaria to the north, the Via delle Ermette to the east, the Via della Casa del Pozzo to the west and an unnamed street to the south.
17. The building V, III, 2 was probably built during the reign of Trajan (Calza *et al.* 1953, 235).
18. Only five travertine bases of the columns are preserved in the courtyard.
19. Hermansen 1981, 77. The author observed other sanctuaries of the same style at Ostia, such as those in the Sede degli Augustali, the Caserma dei Vigili and the Caseggiato dei Triclini.
20. Ancient sources tell us about three violent earthquakes occurring in Rome and its environs respectively in 191/2 AD, 217 AD and 223 AD, but it is currently impossible to establish which of these earthquakes was responsible for the damage identified in the building (Guidoboni 1989, 604-5).
21. The wrestlers are identified by two Latin inscriptions. The first can be read as *Artemi(dorus)*, while the second is less clear and probably refers to *Sacam*. For a different interpretation of the second name (as *Sacal*), see Newby 2002, 193-4; Pavolini 2006, 223.
22. *Opus vittatum mixtum* is a type of masonry formed by alternating courses of brick and tufa blocks. The core is still made with rubble and mortar (DeLaine 2001, 94; Adam 2005, 280-8).
23. Pavolini 2006, 223.
24. Becatti 1961, 201-2. Dimensions of bi-concave squares: ca. 60 cm per side; dimensions of poised bi-concave squares: ca. 40 cm per side. Dimensions of Room 5a: ca. 3.50 x 3.4

Fig. 16. It is for this reason that M.A. Ricciardi separated two mosaics in her building plan (Fig. 3), considering the white triple filet to belong to a second pavement. However, accepting the variation of *tessera* size during the 3rd c. AD, we can also assume that the white triple filet is merely a decorative element of the first mosaic. In this case, the gap between the two mosaics might in fact be due to the use of differently-sized *tesserae*. This hypothesis is supported by the similar manufacture of the single and triple filets (Fig. 13; I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion). Without further evidence, it is impossible to assign the filet to a specific mosaic and to draw the boundaries between first and second pavement.

47. It cannot be determined if the marble slabs are related to this phase or to most recent building activity. Modern restorations (1975-1981) do not help because what we can see today is the result of invasive and unrecorded interventions.
48. The *tabula ansata* is a tablet with dovetail handles. It often appears on Ostian mosaics and contains inscriptions (Becatti 1961, Cn. 78, pl. CXCII; Cn. 85, pl. CLXXV; Cn. 100, pl. CLXXVI).
49. Becatti 1961, Cn. 37, pl. L.

50. Barbera and Paris 1996, 78-80.

51. Becatti 1961, Cn. 46, pl. 50.

52. Archivio Giornali di Scavo del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica, vol. 155.

53. The excavations reported differences in Room 6, where the 3rd- and 4th-c.-AD mosaic floor was discovered immediately above the 2nd-c.-AD pavement. Consequently, the final *tessellatum* of Room 6 sits at a lower level (ca. 3.30 m a.s.l.) than those of Rooms 5a, 5b, 8 and 9 (ca. 3.60 m a.s.l.).

54. In the west wall of Room 8 there is a reused brick with a stamp dated to ca. 120 AD (LSO 30=CIL XV 12; Steinby 1974-75, 26). For a systematic dating of late-antique masonry structures in Rome and Ostia, see Heres 1982.

55. DeLaine 2012, 344-9; Pavolini 2016a; Pavolini 2016b, 222-8 with bibliography. The best preserved residential buildings of this period in *Regio V* are the well-known Domus della Fortuna Annonaria and Domus del Protiro (Boersma 1985).

## 'To the beasts!' Recontextualising the Sollertiana Domus amphitheatre scene

Vanda Strachan

In the courtyard of the archaeological museum in El Jem (Tunisia), ancient Thysdrus, there hangs an unusual mosaic (Fig. 1). It was discovered in the 1960 excavations of the town's south-west quarter by a team of French archaeologists led by Louis Foucher.<sup>1</sup> Found in the ruins of a late second-century Roman house known as the 'Sollertiana Domus', it depicts a bleak scene of *ludi meridiani*, the midday spectacles at which prisoners were publicly executed in the arena, often by wild beasts.<sup>2</sup> The mosaic has largely been passed over by scholarship. This must be due in part to its unfortunate state of repair. The right side is destroyed and what is extant has undergone extensive restoration.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the graphic imagery itself seems often to compel scholars to distance themselves from rather than empathize with ancient viewers. Nevertheless, the extreme violence of the scene has ensured that it appears in many publications wishing to illustrate the horror of the games, the barbarity of Roman sport, or the courage of Christian martyrs. While it certainly may be evocative of these things for a modern viewer, the glossy pages of a book or the wall of a museum are far removed from the context in which the mosaic was originally experienced. What follows is an attempt to situate the mosaic in its artistic, archaeological, and socio-historical contexts. The aim is twofold: first, to show that the Sollertiana *ad bestias* mosaic does not fit with the usual rubric of amphitheatre mosaics by which it is usually explained; and secondly, to offer an alternative interpretation, which, although only hypothetical, better explains the unusual imagery. Whether or not this new interpretation is correct, it will be shown that much has fallen through the cracks as a result of over-simple categorization.



Figure 1. The *ad bestias* mosaic, *tablinum* XXIV, west gallery, Sollertiana Domus. Late 2nd-early 3rd century AD. Source: [http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus\\_images/arenaexecution\\_mosaic.jpg](http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/arenaexecution_mosaic.jpg) (accessed 01.10.17).

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