

Book Review – Kitap İncelemesi

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A Mosaic Menagerie: Creatures of Land, Sea and Sky in Romano-British Mosaics, Patricia Witts, 266 pages, b/w and colour illustrations, Oxford: BAR British Series 625, 2016, £53.00, ISBN 978-1-4073-1541-6.

One of the more attractive features of mosaic pavements in Roman Britain - as indeed in other parts of the Roman Empire - is the profusion of animals that inhabit the various fields. In her excellent new monograph, Patricia Witts reviews and analyses all known specimens of this “mosaic menagerie”. Her agenda is made clear from the start. “Seemingly overlooked as a subject of serious study, these appealing creatures were more than mere decoration or a convenient way of filling space. They are usually chosen with care and offer insights into the overall iconography of the pavements in which they appear.” I would argue for a more flexible position: sometimes the fauna were highly meaningful (as in pavements showing beasts parading around Orpheus), sometimes they were more generally relevant (as in the marine fauna of mosaics in bath-suites), sometimes they were stock fillers chosen from a decorative repertoire. But this is a matter of opinion, and Witts presents her case persuasively and with exemplary thoroughness.

The nucleus of the study is a catalogue of 140 mosaics in which animals occur (pp. 147-210). Accompanied, wherever possible, by illustrations (often, alas, too small for the relevant details to be deciphered), this catalogue benefits from the completion of the Neal and Cosh corpus *Roman Mosaics of Britain* (2002-2010) in being able to dispense with full descriptions; instead, it merely summarises the part played by animals in each case and provides a bibliography “listing works that concern the animals and / or provide factual information about the mosaic” (here one may question the author’s policy of including even minimal references, since the result is a welter of information through which it is difficult to navigate - some selectivity might have helped the reader).

Following the catalogue comes a series of appendices which break down the material statistically. Appendix 1 lists the different species by the mosaics in which they appear. Appendix 2, conversely, groups the mosaics according to the types of animals represented. Appendix 3 lists examples of wave-pattern borders in animal mosaics (these are significant, Witts believes, because such borders may allude to water and thus connect with depictions of aquatic creatures). Appendix 4 lists Romano-British Orpheus mosaics, and Appendix 5, finally, gives a useful review of the dating evidence for all the 140 mosaics in the data-base.

So much for the raw material. The “meat” of the volume comes in the nine chapters of the main text (pp. 1-146), and particularly the three pairs of chapters which divide the livestock into creatures of the land (quadrupeds and snakes: chapters 2 and 3), creatures of the sea (chapters 4 and 5), and creatures of the air (birds: chapters 6 and 7). In each case the first chapter is devoted to identifying species (where possible), the second to analysing the role and form of the representations - number of depictions; whether alive, dead or injured; gender; setting; associated objects and inscriptions; whether ridden; pose; orientation, etc. And in each case the twin chapters are followed by an excellent section of photographic close-ups of individual creatures, arranged by species. Drawing together the various strands, Chapter 8 compares the creatures of land, sea and sky, focusing *inter alia* on the Orpheus mosaics for which Britain is famed and on what else is notable, unusual or absent in Romano-British animal mosaics; and Chapter 9 discusses the role and meaning of the animals, looking at the iconographical context, the geographical distribution, and the relation between subject-matter and room-function.

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Witts has, over the years, made an enormous contribution to iconographic studies in Romano-British mosaics through a series of articles on individual problems. So far her only work of synthesis has been her popular account *Mosaics in Roman Britain: Stories in Stone* (2005). With the volume under review, however, she breaks new ground. *A Mosaic Menagerie* is a much more substantial achievement: it displays mastery of a range of tools and techniques (not least, species classification); it is admirably consistent in its interpretations; it is commendably cautious in its responses to some of the more esoteric readings that have been suggested by others; and it is scrupulously fair in its presentation of rival views. It also offers numerous neat observations, for example on the regional differences in the treatment of certain subjects (such as the creatures in Orpheus mosaics) and their appropriateness for particular contexts (the dead bird of Winter at Brading may refer to local hunting of wild-fowl in what is a marshy terrain).

Naturally enough, there are issues on which the reviewer would beg to disagree. One such concerns the Aldborough lion (pp. 132-3). It is difficult to believe that an isolated lion, “peacefully recumbent” under a tree, should be interpreted as the lion of Nemea. Of the comparanda cited, the example at Piazza Armerina is hardly a “close parallel” since it is not recumbent and is in a killing field occupied by the corpses of monsters vanquished by Heracles, whilst the recumbent lion from Cártama is similarly identified by being associated with depictions of the hero’s defeated adversaries. At Aldborough there is no such aid to recognition.

It is also possible to query some of the bases of Witts’ classifications. I find it problematic, for instance, to think of conch-shells used as trumpets, or scallop-shells serving as design-elements in semi-circular fields or quadrants, as representations of marine fauna; after all, the creatures in question are not merely dead but have become divorced from their casings. However, this takes us into the realms of hair-splitting: Witts has had to make certain choices, and, as already stated, she is consistent in her allegiance to these choices.

One slightly more serious lapse of understanding. On p. 6 Witts refers to a comment by the reviewer (“it is rarely possible to compare the themes of wall-paintings and a mosaic pavement in a given room”: see N. Davey and R. Ling, *Wall-Painting in Roman Britain* [1982] 45) as implying a general lack of correspondence between the repertoires of wall-painting and mosaics. This is the result of a misapprehension. The point of my comment was to draw attention to the poor survival rate of wall-plaster and the consequent difficulty of making comparisons with mosaics in the same rooms. In fact, if more wall-paintings had been preserved, we might well have been able to discern a degree of similarity between the subjects favoured by the two media.

All quibbles apart, this is a splendid publication. What is more, it maintains impressive standards of editing. There is a noteworthy dearth of misprints and typing errors, and the multiple citations of the 443 illustrations are invariably accurate. The index, too, is meticulous, remarkably error-free, and a highly useful resource. We must congratulate the author on a *tour de force* and wish her all speed in the production of her projected companion volume on Britain’s mythological mosaics.

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