

The Late 4th - Early 5th c. Mosaic Pavements in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana in Thrace

Trakya'daki Philippopolis ve Augusta Traiana'dan Geç 4. - Erken 5. Yüzyıla Tarihlenen Mozaik Döşemeler

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the mosaic pavements that embellished the public buildings, semi-public and private houses between the 80s of 4th c. and the first two decades of 5th c. in the two most important cities in late antique province of Thrace - Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana that are unearthed so far. This was a period of great significance for the mosaic development in both cities which though developed in different way until that time, were now united with the use of the full geometrization. Although already entered in the private mosaic pavements in Thrace in the time of the Tetrarchy, the full geometric composition did not receive wide acceptance in the aulæ of the private houses and the figural compositions with real emblema or pseudo-emblem are persistent. The inclusion of the Christianity into the new imperial ideology in the time of Theodosius I and Arcadius and the establishment of the symphonia between the State and Church reflected on the importance of the Christian bishop, but also impacted on the stylistic development of the mosaic art in both cities with the abrupt abandonment of any other compositions and motifs than the geometric in order to avoid any link with the paganism and its art. The examples studied reveal that the full, 'orthodox' geometric composition and motifs, with humble colouring, were distributed in the private houses of the Christian clergy, while these geometric mosaics with the inclusion of few specific symbols – in the Christian basilicas, related to the liturgical need. It is without any doubt that the mosaic pavements in the Christian basilicas inspired the mosaic pavement decoration of the aulæ of the elites in both cities since the middle of 5th c. onward and therefore the Christianity dominating the official and private culture. At last, but not at least are the figural compositions that with the inclusion of specific Christian symbols gained Christian connotation. The present study reveals the still underestimated importance of the mosaic pavements for the study of the development of the political process in Thrace in the Late antiquity and link them with specific historical events as it is attested also elsewhere.

Keywords: Christianity, geometrization, mosaic pavement, aula, palatium.

Öz

Bu makale, Trakya'nın şimdiye kadar ortaya çıkarılmış Geç Antik Çağ'daki en önemli iki kenti Philippopolis ve Augusta Traiana'da 80'li yıllarda bulunan ve 4. yüzyıl ile 5. yüzyılın ilk yirmi yılına tarihlenen kamu binaları ile yarı resmi ve özel konutları süsleyen mozaik döşemeleri ele almaktadır. Bu, o zamana kadar farklı şekillerde gelişmiş, ancak bahsi geçen dönemde tam geometrik motif kullanımı ile karakterize olan her iki şehirde de mozaik gelişimi için çok önemli bir dönemdir. Trakya'daki özel mozaik döşemelere Tetrarşi döneminden itibaren rastlanılmasına rağmen, tam geometrik kompozisyon özel evlerin aulalarında geniş kabul görmemiştir ve gerçek amblemli veya sahte amblemli figürlü kompozisyonlarla karşılaşılmaktadır. I. Theodosius ve Arcadius döneminde Hristiyanlığın yeni imparatorluk ideolojisine dahil edilmesi ve Devlet ile Kilise arasında

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uyumun sağlanması, Hristiyan piskoposunun önemini yansıttığı gibi, aynı zamanda paganizm ve sanatı ile herhangi bir bağlantıdan kaçınmak için geometrik öğeler dışındaki diğer kompozisyon ve motiflerin aniden terk edilmesiyle her iki şehirde de mozaik sanatının üslup gelişimi etkilenmiştir. İncelenen örnekler, mütevazı renklere sahip, tam, 'ortodoks' geometrik kompozisyon ve motiflerin Hristiyan din adamlarının özel evlerine dağıtıldığını, birkaç özel sembolün dahil edildiği bu geometrik mozaiklerin - litürjik bir gereksinim olarak Hristiyan bazilikalarında, Hristiyanlık ile ilgili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Hiç şüphe yok ki, Hristiyan bazilikalarındaki mozaik döşemeler, 5. yüzyılın ortalarından itibaren her iki şehirdeki seçkinlerin aulalarının mozaik döşeme süslemelerine ilham kaynağı olmuştur. Dolayısıyla resmi ve özel kültüre Hristiyanlık hakimdir. Sonucusu ama en önemlisi de, belirli Hristiyan sembollerinin dahil edilmesiyle birlikte Hristiyan çağrışımlı kazanılan figürlü kompozisyonlardır. Bu çalışma, Geç Antik Çağ'da Trakya'daki siyasi sürecin gelişiminin incelenmesi için mozaik döşemelerin hala hafife alınan önemini ortaya koymakta ve başka yerlerde de kantlandığı gibi bunları belirli tarihsel olaylarla ilişkilendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hristiyanlık, geometrizasyon, mozaik döşeme, aula, palatium.

With the completion of the administrative reform undertaken by Diocletian at the end of 3rd c., the old province of *Thracia* was split into six new provinces, the centre of which was the new late antique province of *Thrace* (Fig. 1). It consists of at least five major urban centers, two of which with clear Roman

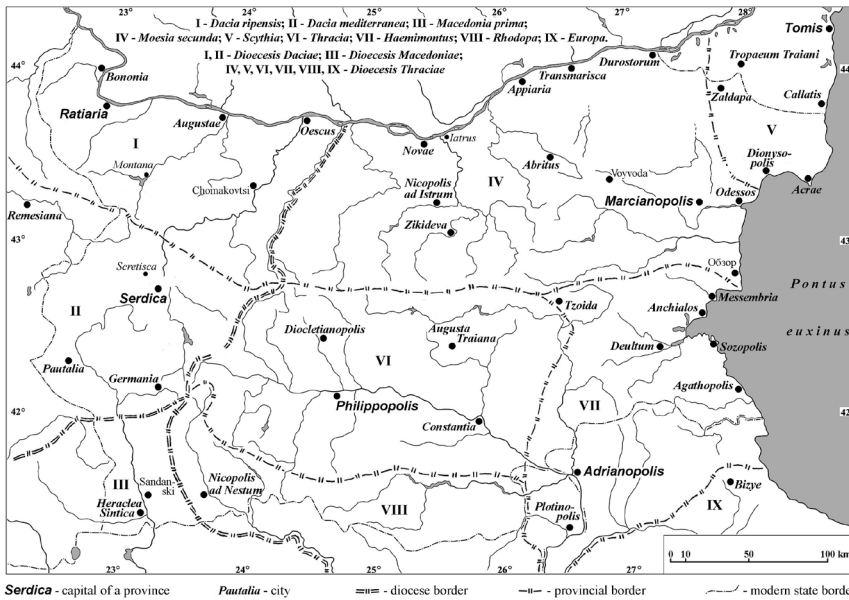


Figure 1
Map of the Late antique provinces in Thrace
(Dintchev 2021: 37 fig. 2).

past – Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana (Beroe), both of which retained their importance with Philippopolis established as a provincial capital. Unsurprisingly, Philippopolis is mentioned in the written sources with Serdica as ‘civitates amplas et nobiles’ (Amm. Marcellinus 21.10.3). This seems also to have reflected on the status of the Christian leaders because the Philippopolitan bishop became metropolitan, while the Beroean bishop became the head of an autonomous archiepiscopate. Both cities also retained their status as cultural and trade centers with elites that preserved at least until the time of Theodosius I the pagan traditions expressed in one way or another, e.g., the mosaic pavements.¹ This should not be surprising as it is clear that the one of the most effective material manifestation of the wealthy class of the cities were the vast and richly decorated with mosaic pavements rooms of the public and private buildings. In fact, it may be assumed that the mosaic pavements become one of the most distinguished features of the late antique society in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana when compared with the other urban centers and elites in Thrace as we

¹ On this attitude attested by Ammianus Marcellinus about the revival of the myth of the mythical founder – see Topalilov 2018a. On the mosaic pavements as mediator for these beliefs in Augusta Traiana – see the study of V. Popova and M. Kamisheva in Pillinger et al. 2016: 157-158.

can conclude from the numerous mosaic pavements discovered so far (they are all published and discussed most recently in Pillinger et al. 2016: 122-270). Based on the local traditions, the development of the mosaic art in these cities had its own path. Despite this, however, a certain common layer in the heterogeneous mosaic production in both cities may be observed whose beginning may be dated to the later years of Theodosius I's rule and its completed form to the early years of Theodosius II at the latest, viz. the second decade of 5th c. after which, with very rare exceptions, the development of the mosaic art in both cities followed an almost identical way. It is therefore the goal of this paper to study the nature of this layer and the possible grounds for this.

The mosaic art in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana in the period under consideration had a great base to develop upon from the time of Principate and the Tetrarchy onward. The examples, although not numerous, show the use of both geometric and figural compositions with clearly attested Italic and North African influence, respectively. Both types of mosaic composition gained acceptance in the private as well as the public buildings in black-and-white as well as in polychrome style. A preference of the geometric mosaics in the decoration of the public buildings and the figural – in the private houses may be observed. In fact, the figural mosaic composition that embellished a room in the public building such as the so-called Western *Thermae* in Philippopolis is the only one dated to the middle of 2nd c.; the mosaic pavements of the so-called Eastern *Thermae* dated to the beginning of 3rd c., seem to be entirely geometric. As for the private houses, with one exception up to now in Philippopolis - the *domus* that was found on 'Knyaz Tseretelev Str 10/10a' and it is assumed to be that of a curial (Pillinger et al. 2016: 252-254), they were decorated with figural mosaics. Not much changed initially in 4th c., but at the second quarter of the century at earliest, certain Christian symbols were embedded in the bordure of the mosaic compositions as revealed by the mosaic from Augusta Traiana that embellished the *aula* of possibly a wealthy merchant from Asia Minor who settled in the city.² Such cases are, however, still very rare, and this is the only one known from both cities. The figural mosaic pavements are made in *opus tessallatum* and *opus vermiculatum* and are characterized with abundance of colours and motifs – figural, ornamental, geometric and floral with the use of the real *emblema* or in most of the cases – of the pseudo-emblem, filled with either Christian or non-Christian scenes made in the traditional mosaic repertoire. Such is for example the Dionysian *thiasos* (Θίασος) scene found in Augusta Traiana or the Mediterranean water landscape with corresponding fauna and flora and the boat with two cupids on the real *emblema* mosaic in Philippopolis. These monuments are among the most distinguished in Thrace, the first one dated to the time of emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus (known as Julian the Apostate in Christian tradition (361-363), and related to the revival of pagan mythological and other Greek-Hellenistic content in the Syrian region (Pillinger et al. 2016: 152-159). If the date is correct, it may suggest that in this case we may be dealing with one of the rare cases when a certain historical event may have found its place in the art. Although under discussion, the date of the marine mosaic is most likely close to that and therefore will not be included in the present study.³

2 On the building found on 'Gen. Stoletov Str' in Stara Zagora – see most recently Kalchev 1992, 53; Ivanov 2012: 485; On the mosaic – see Kalchev 2009: 70-74; Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-131; Popova 2016: 170; Popova 2018: 149.

3 The marine mosaic in Philippopolis is dated between the middle of 3rd – middle of 4th c. (Koranda 1990: 67–70; Koranda 1991/1992: 97-98), at the second half of 4th c. (Pillinger et al. 2016: 227), at the end of 4th- beginning of 5th c. (Tankova 1980: 34) or early 5th c. (Valeva 1995: 262).

The geometric compositions continued its use in the public buildings such as the *thermae*, some of which were partly repaired during that period, and which might have provided some inspiration for the mosaic geometric carpet in the private houses as a case in Philippopolis may reveal (Topalilov 2016). At that time, however, the geometrization entered the mosaic pavements of the Christian basilicas as the case with the *thermae-gymnasion* partly transformed into a Christian basilica in the middle – second half of 4th c. in Augusta Traiana shows (Popova 2017: 81).⁴ They are characterized by a modest colour scale and the mosaic pavement has not become yet an essential decoration of the Christian basilicas.

These cases clearly reveal that until the time of Theodosius I and possibly the first years of his rule the geometric composition had gained less acceptance in the mosaic pavements of the private houses in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana, and the figural compositions are still favored despite the fact that the entire geometric composition had already entered other kinds of public houses such as for example the *aula* of the so-called Constantinian imperial villa near Serdica (Dinchev 2003). It seems that the *aulae* of the similar complexes in Thrace such as the *praetorium/palatium* of the provincial governor in Philippopolis and the city's governor in Augusta Traiana remained without mosaic pavement decoration.⁵

The complexity of the processes with the weaving together of various styles, including the official imperial, personal preferences, religiosity, as well as the skillfulness of the mosaicists, combined with the wealth of the owner of the *domus*, have produced an amalgam of different in style and iconography mosaic pavements with a vast number of diversity among them. The Episcopal (Metropolitan) basilica in Philippopolis may provide an example for this with the insertion of a kind of *emblema* in the nave (see on bordure of the *emblema* – Kantareva-Decheva et al. 2021) if this mosaic pavement belonged to the Christian basilica at all, and not to the previous pagan building. It is without any doubt that some of the owners of these *domus* were distinguished members of the local provincial elite, and some of them might have also belonged to the newly established senate in Constantinople which also gives an artistic inspiration for the development of the mosaic art in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana.⁶

The archaeological excavations in Plovdiv and Augusta Traiana unearthed numerous mosaic pavements that are dated to a period of four decades between the 80s of 4th c. and 20s of 5th c. revealing a certain period of flourishing of the mosaic industry and the next examples will make this clear.

Among the most important cases of that time which is still unparalleled in the

4 On the mosaic pavements of the *thermae-gymnasion* – see most recently in Pillinger et al. 2016: 122-125; Kamisheva - Karamanova-Zlatkova 2017: 169-180.

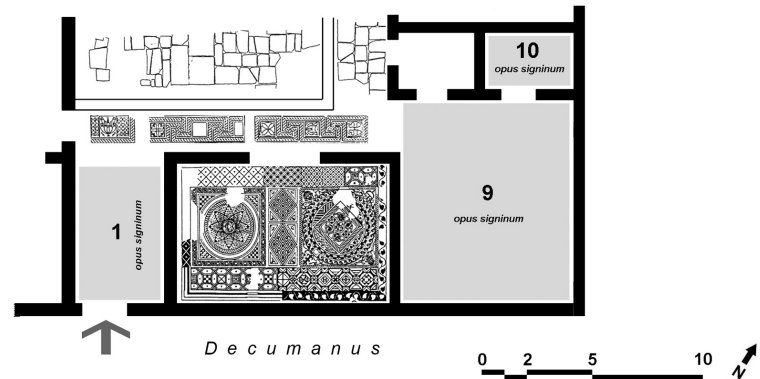
5 A complex that is a peristyle-organized and enclosed a whole insula (67/32 m) located between the agora and the Episcopal complex along *cardo maximus* westward and along southward the *decumanus* that enclosed from south the Metropolitan basilica was significantly transformed in the beginning of 4th c. with the establishment of a new imposing official part with a huge reception hall (13/9 m) (*aula*) and *triclinium* with *stibadium* heated by hypocaust. The *decumanus* that flanks the *aula* from south was shut up in the cross with the *cardo maximus* by a monumental entrance (Kesyakova 2008: 238-240). It is assumed that by this the street was turned into a distinct antechamber (vestibule) of the *aula* as may be also deduced by masonry benches on the north side. The complex is interpreted as *praetorium* or *palatium* (Dinchev 2002: 216, 224 n. 36). Possibly, at the middle-third quarter of 5th c. the *aula* and one of the room attached received mosaic pavements – on the description of the pavements – see Kesyakova 2009: 137-162; Pillinger et al. 2016; on the new date – see Topalilov 2022.

6 The development of the mosaic art in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana between the Tetrarchy and Theodoisan time has been studied most recently in Topalilov 2022.

mosaic production of the Late Antique Philippopolis, excluding the mosaics of the Metropolitan basilica from the middle-third quarter of 5th c., is the mosaic pavement that embellished the *aula* of the peristyle organized house known as '*domus Eirene*' (Fig. 2). It has enclosed a whole insula located some 30 m

Figure 2

Domus Eirene: the first period of the mosaic pavements (after <https://mosaictourplovdiv.balkanheritage.org/en/ancient-residential-building-%d0%b5irene-en/>, last consulted on 14 January 2022).



northward to the entrance of the Metropolitan basilica of which the official part was unearthed. As the mosaic pavements in *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* have already been a matter of several studies since its publication, I am not going into detail here with their description and problems.⁷ It is assumed that at the beginning of 80s of 4th c. the main room of the uncovered part of the *domus*, room 3, received its mosaic pavement with two panels – east and west, surrounded from north, west and south by a wide bordure. The composition is geometric with dominating ornamental and geometric motifs, but a figural image is also included. Thus, the eastern panel consists of the image of the head of the personification Eirene inserted into an octagon. At the corners two *kantharoi* and geometric ornaments are cited. The other panel consists of a kantharos full of water, with a floral motif coming out in the center; all the rest are geometric elements. The head of the personification is presented with slightly asymmetric nimbus. Although the existence of two panels, it is clear that the focus of the mosaic lays on the image of Eirene that was turned to the entrance from the peristyle courtyard, which may be secondary. Both images enable to identify the room as multifunctional *triclinium*, incorporating the function of reception hall (*aula*) in the Eirene area. At the end of 4th – beginning of 5th c. a transformation was done with the construction of a new *triclinium* with *stibadium* eastward and the room 3 become solely the reception hall. Within a few decades, ca. 40s of 5th c. it is assumed that the *aula* was embellished with an octagonal piscine (Pillinger et al. 2016: 184). The image of Eirene was subjugated into *interpretatio christiana* (Bospachieva 2003: 86; Pillinger et al. 2016: 182-184), although the cross-like element is in fact an essential element of the personification's diadem, and the nimbus was known and used earlier for non-Christian personages (Topalilov 2018b: 280-282). I believe that with the construction of a direct link between the entrance of the complex and that of the Metropolitan basilica by a special *cardo* regardless the existing urban infrastructure (on the *cardo* – Kesyakova 1989: 120), the *domus Eirene* in fact was transformed at that time at the latest into *domus episcopalis*.⁸ The new *domus* has no parallel in term of its lavish mosaic

⁷ On the mosaic pavements – see Bospachieva 2003: 83–105; Valeva 2011: 36–41; Bospachieva – Kolarova 2014: 210–226; Pillinger et al. 2016: 174–198; Topalilov 2018b: 273–285; Ivanov 2019: 79–89; Popova 2021: 299–324.

⁸ The interpretation of *domus Eirene* as *domus episcopalis* has been questioned recently due to the significant distance between the domus and the Metropolitan basilica – see Dinchev 2020: 215 n. 4. Indeed, the distance is not like the other similar examples, but in the Philippopolitan case one

decoration when compared with the other *domus* found so far in Philippopolis, although not interpreted as *praetorium* or *palatium*.

In sharp contrast in composition, style and colour abundance are the other mosaic pavements from Philippopolis that are dated to the time under question. One of them embellished a building that is located on the Three hills, specifically on Dzambaz tepe, just over the theater and dominated the city's landscape. Although the area excavated and therefore the mosaic uncovered is very small (3/2 m), it is clear that the composition is geometric composed by a grid of bands with circles inscribed, creating the pattern of bobbins (Décor I: pl. 144e) (Fig. 3). The border is a two-strand braided ribbon, while the inner fields are filled with a pointed square pattern, a large rosette and a bulbous vase with vine tendrils probably growing out. The individual elements are imprecise and careless, but the colour scale is specific, made up of pastel shades, that can only be found on the present mosaic: white, lilac, red, ochre-colored, brown-green and black. It is assumed that the mosaic belongs to an Early Christian basilica which finds also arguments in the architecture decoration discovered on the site (Борушарова 1960: 166, fig. 3). The date proposed varies between second half/late 4th c. – first half of 5th c. (Koranda 1991/1992: 86; Pillinger et al. 2016: 249). The archaeological evidence concerning the end of the Acropolis that is linked with the construction of this basilica supports the later date (Topalilov 2021: 130-135).



Figure 3
The mosaic pavement of the basilica on Dzambaz tepe (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 180 Abb. 464).

At least one mosaic pavement in Philippopolis is analogous to this by style and colour density. It covered the floor of the reception hall (*aula*) with *stibadium* in a courtyard – organized *domus* south of the Metropolitan basilica which replaced an earlier building made of bricks. The latest coins found in the latter of 364-378 provide a certain *terminus post quem* for the construction of the new *domus* and the mosaic pavement.⁹

The mosaic which is still unpublished, is made in *opus tessellatum* and consists of entirely geometric composition of one wide bordure and an additional sector in the *stibadium* (Fig. 4). The bordure is filled with round-tongued guilloche (Décor I: pl. 75) and panel with the grid of bands with circles inscribed creating

should have in mind the construction of the *cardo* that provided the direct link between the *domus* and the Metropolitan basilica located some 110 m southward as well as the density of urbanization in the center of the provincial capital that limited the perspective of the construction of the 'typical' Episcopal residence immediately next to the basilica.

⁹ On the results of the archaeological excavations at the site 'Leonardo da Vinci Str. 13' – see Bozhinova - Stanev 2020: 787-791; Bozhinova - Topalilov 2021.

Figure 4

The mosaic pavement of the *domus* located in the southern quarters of Philippopolis at modern 'Leonardo da Vinci Str. 13' (Bozhinova - Stanev 2020: 788 fig. 3).

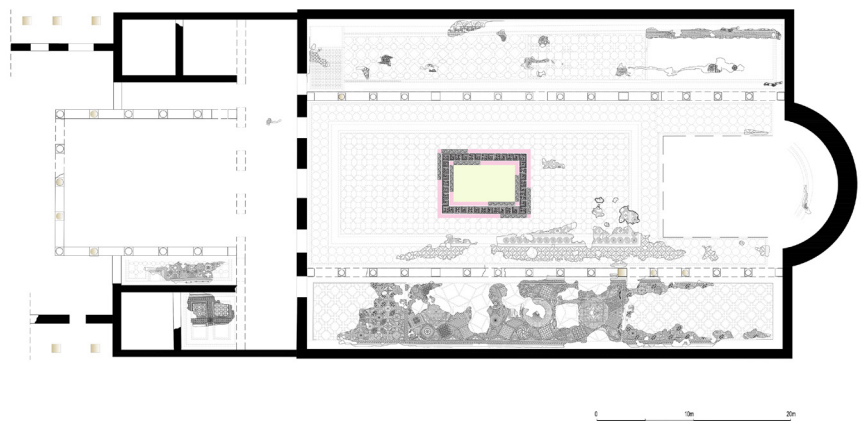


the pattern of bobbins (Décor I: pl. 144e-variant). In the inner squares a highly stylized four-leaf colored rosette with an X-shaped center is inserted. The mosaic in the apse consists entirely of a diagonal lattice. The colour scale is limited, using white, navy and dark blue, green, black, yellow and red tesserae. The execution is inaccurate, the schemes are poorly proportioned and composed, as if the usual tools for the case were not used. Given the close similarities with the mosaic pavement at Dzambaz tepe, the date proposed for this is the beginning of 5th c.

Besides, the aforementioned basilica, the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis also was embellished with a mosaic floor at that time (Fig. 5). Although some details are published and the vast mosaic pavements still await its full publication, it is clear that the composition was geometric, filled with non-figurative motifs with an exception – that of the *tabula ansata* in the south aisle that is flanked by vases, those beneath the tabula with stylized vines coming out. The photos published reveal that the mosaic pavement has a large scale of colour abundance (Fig. 6).¹⁰

Figure 5

The first mosaic pavement of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis (after Kantareva – Decheva et al. 2021: 27 fig. 4).



Several are the mosaic pavements known from Augusta Traiana dated to the period under consideration. As one of the most impressive building in the city not only in that period, is the huge *domus* located *extra muros* and identified as *villa suburbana* (Fig. 7). Although not entirely unearthed, it is clear that it was a

¹⁰ On the earlier mosaic pavements of the Metropolitan basilica – see most recently in Kesyakova et al. 2011: 176, 191-192, 198; Pillinger et al. 2016: 201-203; Kantareva-Decheva et al. 2021.



Figure 6
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).

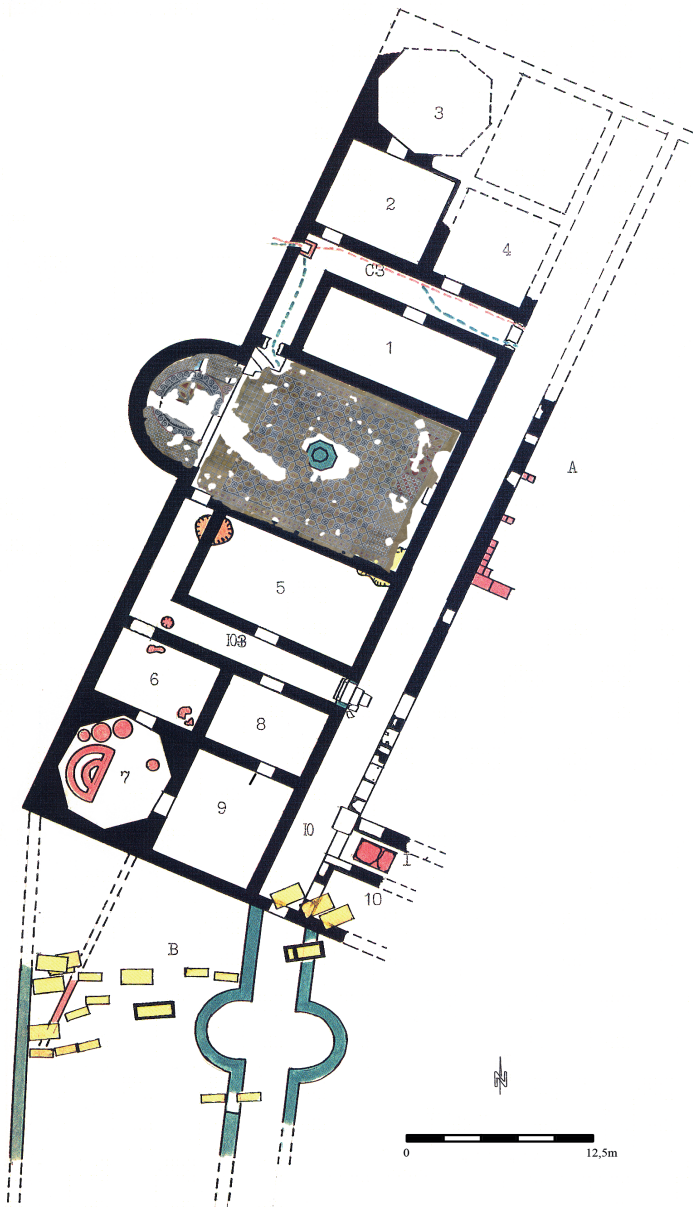


Figure 7
The *palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *extra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 108 Abb. 296).

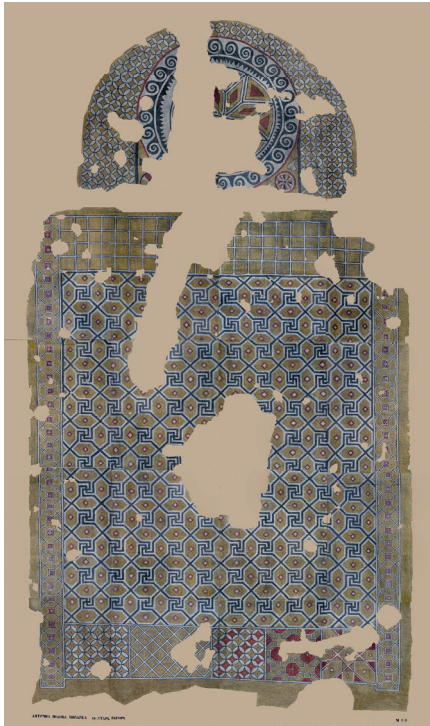


Figure 8
The *aula* of the *palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *extra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 109 Abb. 297).

huge peristyle complex of ca. 3000 m sq whose main room (*aula*) was lavishly decorated with mosaic pavement and wall paintings at the end of 4th c.¹¹ The mosaic is strictly geometric by which this iconography is clearly distinguishable from that used in the rest of the mosaic pavements in the city at that time, which enclose also non-geometric elements, and rarely figural. It should be stressed that such a geometric iconography is not to be found elsewhere so far in Augusta Traiana. The mosaic pavement in the 20 m-long *aula* (15 x 10.80 m and the apse with 5 x 4 m) is executed in *opus tessellatum* with an outlined orthogonal pattern of irregular octagons intersecting and adjacent to shorter sides, making swastika-meander in the center (Décor I: pl. 171d) surrounded by a bordure in various width and a composition of geometric schemes. The mosaic in the *stibadium* (apse) consists of a large circle with a central eight-pointed star made up of eight diamonds, surrounded by two bordures filled with triangular and wave patterns respectively.¹² The colours used are white, ocher, dark red, blue-gray and black, and yellow of which the yellow is predominant (Fig. 8). The complex is interpreted as *praetorium* or *palatium* (Dinchev 2002: 216). The archaeology reveals that soon after the embellishment of the *aula*, the hall was turned into a Christian church at the beginning of 5th c. with the construction of *synthronon* in the *stibadium* that was turned into an basilica's apse, the fulfillment of the piscine in the center of the room and the establishment of the *cancelli* and certain repairment of the mosaic pavement (Kalchev 2009: 87).

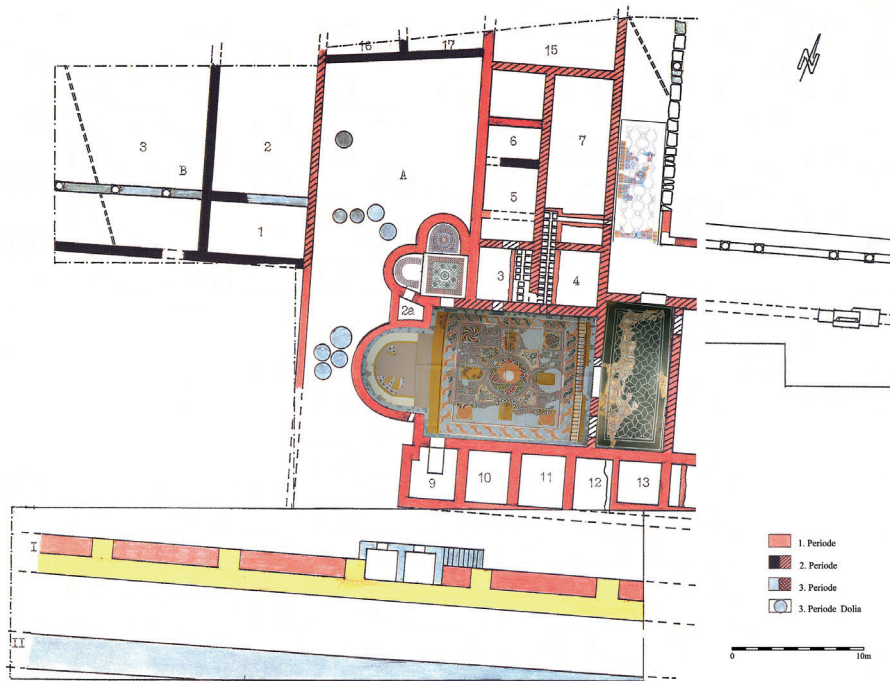
Unlike this mosaic are the others known from Augusta Traiana that have less geometrization in their composition. An example for this are the mosaic pavements that embellished several rooms in another *domus* of this rank, also interpreted as *praetorium* or *palatium* – that located in the SW corner of the city, *intra muros*, partly preserved now under the modern Post office (Dinchev 2002: 216). As the previous *domus*, this was also a peristyle complex with possibly ca. 3200 m sq of which one-third has been excavated, precisely the inner courtyard surrounded by a monumental portico and the official part of the complex with the reception hall, reduced two-conch *triclinium* as well as antechamber (*vestibulum*) of the *aula* (Fig. 9). It is assumed that the complex was built at the beginning of 4th c. and was in usage at least until the middle/end of 5th c. with the *aula* and the *triclinium* received mosaic floors at the end of 4th c. and the reception hall also with marble cladding.¹³ The mosaics have been made in *opus tessellatum*, *opus vermiculatum* and *opus sectile* and already described and commented in details in the recent Corpus on the Late antique and Early Christian mosaics in Bulgaria as well as some additional articles and therefore no extensional description is required (Kalchev 2009: 74-80; Pillinger et al. 2016: 138-147;).

Undoubtedly, the core of the complex was the apsidal hall (*aula*) (12.40 × 10 m) that was embellished with mosaic pavements covering ca. 131,5 m² (Fig. 10). The central composition consists of a circle enclosed in a square with U-shaped arcades on four sides and four adjacent angles in the corners. The circle was filled with a scale pattern, horseshoe-shaped elements with vine with grapes, vegetal elements, tree of life framed by two birds, and fruit basket with apples and a plant with two grain stalks and two ducks, and the strip of the square – with swastika-meander knots with inscribed circular motifs in the corners of

11 On the building – see Kalchev 1992: 53; 68; Dinchev 2002: 211-212, 223 n. 17; Kalchev 2009: 86-87.

12 On the detailed description of the mosaic pavement – see Kalchev 2009: 86-89; Pillinger et al. 2016: 160-163.

13 On the building – see Kalchev 1992: 53; Dinchev 2002, 212; Kalchev 2009: 74-75; On the interpretation of the rooms – see Dinchev 2002: 212. The mosaic pavements covering the vestibule and the northern portico should be dated to a much later period, ca. the middle-third quarter of 5th c.



the field. The four pentagonal spandrels formed between the central medallion and the U-shaped elements in the axes have *kantharoi* with two symmetrical vines sprouting out and a bird sits on each of its oppositely arranged handles. The panel is framed by a bordure with laurel ribbons, and a second frame with a row of arcades on the west. As for the mosaic in the apse, here one encounters a geometric mosaic composition with vegetable and triangular or trapezoidal elements.

The mosaic in *opus sectile* embellishing the *triclinium* (3.10 × 3.15 m) has a geometric composition with a central medallion and two narrow bands: the outer border consists of two rows of cruciforms, while the inside – of squares placed on top of each other with two alternating, geometric filling motifs. The motif of the outer band decorates also the conches. The mosaic is made of white marble, red terracotta plates, and green breccia.

In a later period, the mosaic pavements extended to the south portico as well, consisting of interlooped tangentially small and big circles, forming irregular concave octagons filled with geometric motifs, and various birds turned towards a fruit-bearing plant respectively. A white songbird is inscribed on a medallion (Fig. 11).

The mosaics are dated to 80s of 4th c. (Kalchev 2009: 80) or at the end of 4th c. (Pillinger et al. 2016: 147) and the complex is identified as the *praetorium* or *palatium* of the ‘governor of the city’ in 4th – 5th c.¹⁴ or of the local bishop (Yankov 1993: 145-146).

The images inserted into the U-elements are interpreted as the four seasons, and the fields enclosed between these elements containing floral motifs as well as the stylized arcade presented into the entrance bordure (the *peltae* element) (Fig. 12) create the illusion of a rich garden or park (Valeva 2011: 45). Recently, however, another interpretation is proposed revealing the Christian meaning of the composition. Thus, the images of plants and fruits flanked by two birds that are enclosed into the U-shaped elements are interpreted as *fons vitae* and related

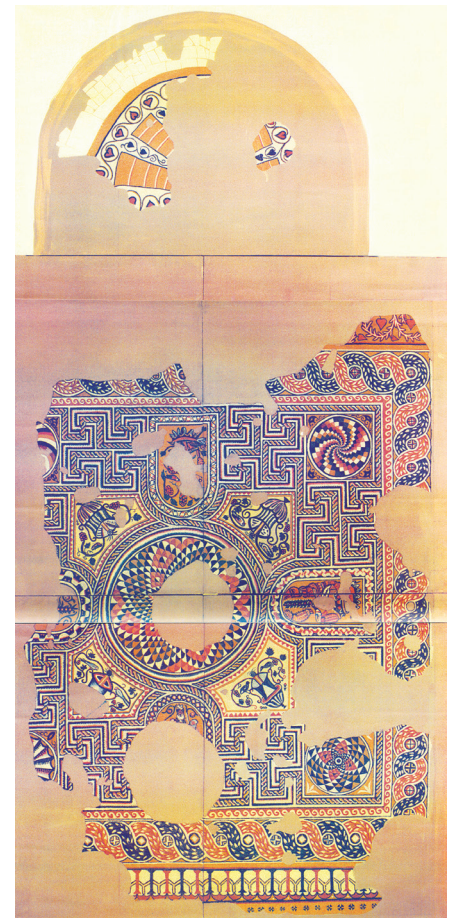


Figure 9
The *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros*, now under the modern Post office (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 88 Abb. 245).

Figure 10
The *aula* of the *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 89 Abb. 246).

¹⁴ On the interpretation as *praetorium* or *palatium* – see Dinchev 2002: 216. On the interpretation of the complex as the *domus* of the ‘governor’ of the city – see Kalchev 1992: 53.



Figure 11
The later dated mosaic pavement in the portico of the inner courtyard of the *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 100 Abb. 274).



Figure 12
The mosaic pavement of *aula* of the *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros* (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf.90 Abb. 247).

to the Christianity (Pillinger et al. 2016, 141). Three of the vases also represent the *fons vitae*. As a Christian fountain of life are interpreted the scenes that are enclosed in the pentagonal panels (formed between the U-shaped elements with the *kantharoi* and the flower stalks and vines and the two flanking birds), and it is suggested that the overall composition could have a Christian connotation and can be interpreted as a representation of the paradise garden (Pillinger et al. 2016: 142) with the fountain of life symbolizing the heaven with the Eden (Popova 2016: 168). It is most likely that in this iconography are implemented the seasonal motifs combined with Early Christian elements. The mosaic finds a kind of parallel in an earlier seasonal mosaic attested in Augusta Traiana, that of the *domus* from the beginning of 4th c. which also has a Christian connotation with the image of *fons vitae* in the form of scene with deers and flowers and other strictly Christian symbols such as the *kantharos* full of wine, and the several crosses scattered on the mosaic border (Fig. 13). It is very tempting to

Figure 13
The Christian cross embodied into the bordure of the mosaic of an *aula* in a *domus* in Augusta Traiana discovered on 'Gen Stoletov Str No. 117' (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 75 Abb. 209).



see in the U-cross composition in the *aula* a cross-shaped element inscribed into a square with therefore Christian connotation, but it should be noted that this composition is to be found in Early Christian basilicas as well as private houses (Raynaud 1996). It seems, however, that its beginning should be sought in Syria in late 4th c. and given the proposed date the mosaic in Augusta Traiana would be among the earliest examples of its spreading in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans and may reveal the origin of the owner of the *domus* from Syria. It seems, however, that its beginning should be sought in Syria in the late 4th c. and given the proposed date the mosaic in Augusta Traiana would be among the earliest examples of its spreading in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans and may reveal the origin of the owner of the *domus* from Syria.

The mosaic pavement of one more *villa urbana* has been dated to the period under consideration.¹⁵ It is also a peristyle house, partly discovered, with one of the rooms around decorated with mosaic pavement. The complex enclosed partly or entirely an insula framed from the east by *cardo maximus*. The mosaic is partly preserved in the southern part of the room and consists of a geometric composition of adjacent octagons forming small squares (Décor I: pl. 163b). The octagons are filled with geometric motifs, but also with figural ones such as a duck, a jug with a volute-shaped handle, a kantharos and a wicker basket with fruit. More representations (figures) are placed in the irregular hexagons: pairs of fruits (apples and pears), a hammer and two braids (Kalchev 2009: 84-86; Pillinger et al. 2016: 150-151) (Fig. 14). Based on the parallels, the mosaic is dated to early 5th c. (Kalchev 2009: 86; Pillinger et al. 2016: 151), but it is very likely that the date is later – ca. middle or even third quarter of 5th century.



Figure 14
The *aula* of *villa urbana* in Augusta Traiana discovered on 'Ruski Blvd. No 51' (after Pillinger et al. 2016: Taf. 103 Abb. 283).

Another mosaic that belongs to this time is the one which covered the floor of a partly discovered *villa suburbana*, located *extra muros* near the modern 'Ayazmoto', of which only a small fragment has been preserved (Fig. 15). It is laid in *opus tessallatum* with white, black, brick red (light and dark red), ocher and light blue tesserae, with geometric and stylized vegetable motifs visible. The inner border consists of a composition of overlapping octagons, with a four-leaf, light blue and dark red contoured cross rosette. A distinguishing feature of the mosaic is the huge stylization of the motifs, including flowers in the form

¹⁵ The archaeological site is known as 'Ruski Blvd No. 51' in Stara Zagora.

Figure 15

A fragment of a mosaic pavement from *villa suburbana* near Augusta Traiana (modern 'Ayazmoto') (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 107 Abb. 295).



of dark red, cross-shaped objects (Pillinger et al. 2016: 159). The mosaic is dated generally to 4-5th c., and compared with the mosaic that covered the floor of the *aula* in the *villa suburbana*, presented above, indicating the work of a certain mosaic atelier in Augusta Traiana (Pillinger et al. 2016: 160). But the highly stylized manner calls this proposition under question as although strictly geometric, the manner of execution of the mosaic in the *aula* as well as the style is more refined, and refers to a different execution and style. I would hardly believe that the reception hall of a certain *praetorium* or *palatium* would have been decorated by a city's modest mosaic atelier while the rest of the houses in Augusta Traiana, including the private ones, used more qualified mosaic ateliers. It may be supposed that the mosaic pavement under consideration should be dated to the beginning of 5th c. as the mosaic is not entirely geometric, but with the inclusion of floral motives as well.

After this short introduction some observations may be ascertained on the development of the mosaic art during the period under consideration in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana. First, it should be underlined that at that time still the 'classical' mosaic construction techniques such as *opus tessellatum*, *opus vermiculatum* and *opus sectile* continued to be in use, with the latter two rarely. The *opus vermiculatum* mosaics are dated to the earlier years of the time of Theodosius I and may belong to stylistic development of the mosaic art of the pre-Theodosian time that continued till a certain point during Theodosian reign.¹⁶

At this point, however, a significant change is attested in the decoration of the

¹⁶ A special study on the use of *opus vermiculatum* in the mosaic pavements in Late Antique Thrace will be made by the author.

mosaic pavements in both cities with the abandonment of the figural and similar representational motifs and elements alike and the preference of the entirely geometric compositions and elements. This geometrization, however, should not be regarded as a part of the process with the geometrization of the mosaic compositions in Thrace which began at the time of the Tetrarchy, but it seems to be a consequence of a certain historical event that happened in the time of Theodosius I and Arcadius with the new role that Christianity gained at that time as an essential part of the new imperial ideology and the *symphonia* proclaimed between the empire and Christian Orthodox church. As already suggested, the absence of figurative images should be accepted as an attempt of the Christians to drop the pagan figural traditions in mosaics and concentrate only on the Early Christian separate representations, scenes and symbols (Popova-Moroz 1987a; Popova-Moroz 1987b; Caraher 2003), although the process seems to be more complex, as the Christians continued to use old schemes and motifs to give a Christian connotation to the composition (Popova 2018: 140) and the mosaic pavements in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana are the material manifestation for this. A study of them reveals that at least three groups of mosaic compositions common for both cities may be distinguished.

The first group consists of mosaic pavements in an entirely geometric composition that decorate the Christian basilicas and some *aulae* of the private houses, although some of the latter may be interpreted as public as well. Two main sub-styles can be established – the one with entire homogenous geometrization in composition and motifs that may be called ‘orthodox’ geometric style, and the other with entirely geometric composition and motifs, but with the inclusion of few specific figural elements inserted on specific places of the building. The mosaic pavements that embellished the *aulae* of the *praetorium/palatium* located *extra muros* Augusta Traiana and that of the *domus* in the southern quarters of Philippopolis are the most significant examples of the ‘orthodox’ geometrization style, and the only so far discovered, which reveals that this style had not received wide acceptance on the mosaic pavements of the reception halls in both cities. Indeed, this may be due to the stage of studying the mosaic iconography and some future discovered mosaics will deny or prove this.

The case in Augusta Traiana is of particular interest given the importance of the complex as a whole. It should be underlined that this mosaic composition and style is in sharp contrast to the figural mosaic that embellished the *aula* of the other synchronous and similarly identified as *praetorium* or *palatium* complex in the city, the *intra muros*. The transformation of the reception hall into a Christian church shortly after the beginning of 5th c. raises the question of the interpretation of this complex as the *palatium* of the local Christian archbishop, which may also shed some light on the origin of composition of the mosaic pavement itself. The humble and light colour scale as well as the geometric monotones in the mosaic pavement differentiate from the geometric carpet that had been used till that time full of geometric motifs and a certain colour diversity and may refer to the creation of a new sub-style that given the nature of the owner of the complex should have been deliberately sought. If so, this case is clearly attesting an example for the desire of the Christians to drop as much as possible and when possible the pagan figurative tradition in the mosaics. One should also recall in this case the plain burials of the Christians and their bishops at that time and may see also the abandonment of the figural and colourful mosaic style in terms of the will of the Christians to live in a more modest manner.

The interpretation of this *villa suburbana* as the *palatium* of the Christian

archbishop may be also deduced from the subsequent construction activity within the complex, obviously in ruins, in the middle of 5th c. with the construction of a Christian church in the courtyard and the development of a necropolis around (Kalchev 1992: 53; 68; Kalchev 2009: 86-87) revealing the importance of place for the local Christians. This type of activity is similar to those attested at the conch-martyrium located near the East gate of the city after the Hunnic invasions in 40s of 5th c. with the transformation of the martyrium into martyrial basilica and the spread of burials *ad sanctos* (on the complex – see Pilinger 1991; Nikolov - Buyukliev 1992; Kalchev 1992: 53-54). It remains unclear, however, if the date is correct, why the *aula* was turned into a Christian basilica very shortly after being decorated with mosaic pavement and since when the complex itself was the archbishopric *palatium*?

The interpretation proposed raises another question – that of the establishment of a new *Episcopoeion* at the last quarter of 5th c. to the contrary of the previous, Arianic one, a type of replacement which is also attested in Philippopolis. It may be, however, simply the redecoration of the Arianic *episcopoeion* as a part of a program aiming at the transformation of the complex into Orthodoxy or even the establishment of a secondary archbishopric residence on the place probably donated to the Christian Church by a wealthy member of its community and local urban elite. The transformation of the *aula* at the beginning of 5th c. itself may indicate the establishment of an imposing bishopric chapel. This may be true if the complex remained as *Episcopoeion* at that time. It is very tempting, however, to assume that with the transformation of the *aula* the whole complex also underwent significant changes being transformed into a Christian monastery of which the old *aula* become the *catholicon*, and which may have been mentioned in the written sources for the end of 4th c. (Yankov 1993: 139) The burials *ad sanctos* that are attested around the later basilica built in the courtyard in ca. middle of 5th c. reveal the basilica as martyrial. Nonetheless, this example indicates the spread of the *full* geometrization in the mosaic pavements of the reception halls of the *domus* of the high Christian clergy at the end of 4th c. onward and may be regarded as a distinctive mark for the importance of the owner at the Christian church. One more such example is known – that of an *aula* of a *domus* in Philippopolis whose owner was obviously with more limited material opportunities as we may deduce from the caliber of the *aula* and the quality of the mosaic pavement itself. In this case, we should see him as a high-ranking Christian clergy or a highly-Christianized member of the urban elite who followed strictly the abandonment of the old figural and other pagan traditions in the art not only because of the abandonment of the pagan symbols, but also of the desire to live instead in a lavish life, in a more ascetic, godly manner.

The second style in the geometric mosaic compositions comprises of two groups of mosaics with the use of a limited number of specific figures, such as vases, rosettes, leaves and the scene of 'The Fountain of life' (*fons vitae*). They are inserted in definite and specific places (on this – see Popova 2016; Popova 2018). During the period under consideration, the known cases of the first group derive from the Christian basilicas: one of the best examples is the described already mosaic *tabula ansata* from the south aisle of the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis revealing a strong Christian symbolism. As Popova has observed, the figures inserted in this type of mosaic mark significant for the liturgical rites places in the Early Christian basilicas which reasonably shows the organic tie between the liturgy and the new mosaic pavement decoration whose focus was on the rites (Popova 2018: 140). Not surprisingly, this type of iconography is to be found in the Christian basilicas alone and only later moved to other Christian

buildings such as the *martyria* for example, but again liturgical, and still not in the private houses. It is without doubt that the development of the geometric composition in the late 4th – beginning of 5th c. should be clearly linked to the Christianization of the mosaic art (not only in the Christian buildings) which goes in line with the new role that the Christianity gained under the rule of Theodosius I and Arcadius as an essential part of the new imperial ideology and the *symphonia* established between the state, the emperor and the Christian god. For the first time it was attested in 394 with the active participation of the Christian clergy into the preparation for the Theodosian war against Eugenius and Arbogast to the West. Thus, the emperor and his army left the Kampos under the psalms sang by the Christian clergy.

The second group of mosaic pavements that is also connected with the Christianization of the society and the municipal and provincial elite in Thrace consists of a kind of hybrid mosaic art – the geometric base with the inclusion of figures and Christian symbols or scenes that allow the indisputable Christian interpretation of the mosaic composition. It should be underlined that the Christian symbols appeared in the private as well as public buildings (see the examples in Asimakopoulou-Atzaka 2017). Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana present significant examples in this group such as possibly the *domus Eirene* (*domus episcopalis*) in Philippopolis and the complex identified as *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana, *intra muros*. These pavements are in sharp contrast to those in the first group with its exuberant colour scale, unprecedented and unparalleled at that time not only in both cities, but in the province as a whole. Both mosaics find strong parallels in the Eastern Mediterranean, and might had been made by travelling mosaicists as for instance that the one who has made the Eirene mosaic is assumed to have come from the island of Cos. These mosaic pavements, however, clearly link the owners of both complexes to the Eastern Mediterranean, and especially Syria, where the seasonal scenes and personifications gained wide acceptance in the mosaic art (see in Balty 1995) which also influenced the mosaic art in the island of Cos (on the mosaics in Cos – see most recently in De Matteis 2004). If this is so, given the tied links between the Syrian and Thracian high clergy known we may suppose that both *domus* were owned by members of the Syrian high clergy, most probably bishops. This fits well with the Arianic period for which such tied links are attested in the written sources, but unfits with the date proposed for both mosaics in post-Arianic period, ie. the time of Theodosius I and early Arcadius.

Unlike the case with *domus Eirene* whose interpretation as *domus episcopalis* at the end of 4th c. at the latest does not raise any objections among the prevailing number of the scholars, the interpretation of the *praetorium/palatium* in Augusta Traiana as such is still under discussion. As noted above, the interpretation of the complex varies from that of the palace of the city's governor and of the Christian bishop as both interpretations remain unjustified. Indeed, the Christian interpretation of the mosaic composition may imply the latter possibility, but up to now we have no other similar complex discovered to compare with in Thrace. The possible interpretation of the complex *extra muros* as the *Episcopeion* or as a secondary archbishopric residence with its specific mosaic decoration¹⁷ makes me more inclined to the interpretation of the *praetorium/palatium* initially as the complex of the city's governor or of a distinguished member of the local municipal elite that become at that time the archbishop. The lavish decoration of the mosaic pavements that embellish private houses with figures, high

17 This idea was kindly shared with me by V. Popova to whom I express my sincere gratitude.

quality style, and colour abundance is not typical for the mosaic pavements that embellished the Christian clergy' space at that time which are humbler, plain, and even ascetic. Thus, at the end of 4th – first half of 5th c. the secular mosaic compositions are with broader context and motifs than the Christian basilica's. The change in the Christian mosaics in this aspect may be clearly observed in Augusta Traiana itself with a mosaic pavement that is dated to the second quarter of 4th c. and is linked to a wealthy merchant possibly coming from Syria (on the mosaic and interpretation – see Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-131; Popova 2016: 166-170; Popova 2018: 149).

In the middle-third quarter of 5th c. some parts of the *praetorium/palatium* such as the vestibule of the reception hall and two *portici* received new mosaic floors. The iconography of the mosaic pavement in the vestibule is strictly geometric with pattern of staggered rows of superimposed groups of three adjacent lozenges, forming squares (Décor I: pl. 161f). The elements that fill the spaces are non-figural. On the entrance area to the *aula* an inscription reads: ΥΓΙΕΝΩ[Σ Ε]ΛΘΕ (Enter healthy!).

The mosaic pavement in the western portico is also a geometric composition, which is primarily reminiscent of the mosaic in the *vestibulum*, but with the inclusion of elements found in the mosaic in the *aula* among which are for example the *peltae* arcades as well as water-filled *kantharos* surrounded by vine leaves. A goblet filled with four-leaf rosettes is among the specific elements. All of the mosaics described so far have the same colouring in white, ochre, dark red, light blue and blue-gray mosaic stones.

The eastern portico also received mosaic floor whose decorative scheme consists of a geometric base filled with organic and floral motifs, i.e. breaking up the solidity of the style, is to be observed in various Christian basilicas dated to that time, and the most important among them – the Metropolitan basilica in Philippopolis. The new mosaic pavements covered the area that was exposed to the guests of the *domus* who they reached the *aula* through the decorated vestibule and *portici*. I believe that this reconstruction clearly reveals the increasing of the importance of the owner of the *domus* and coincides in time with the abandonment of the extramural residence and may therefore be in a direct link. If so, it is plausible to suggest that the Christian archbishop who moved inside the curtain walls of the city after the destruction of his extramural residence by the Huns might had settled in the *praetorium/palatium* under consideration. If so, this complex may be also interpreted as the new *Episcopoeion* established in the middle of 5th c. The case with the prevailing number of similarities in the mosaic compositions of the Christian basilicas and secular houses in the middle – third quarter of 5th c., with certain distinction in some specific figures, is significant and shows that at that time it was the mosaic pavement of the basilica that served for inspiration in the mosaic pavements composition that embellished the *aulae* of secular buildings. Good examples for this are the new mosaic pavements in *domus Eirene* and that of the so-called 'Residence' in Philippopolis (Fig. 16) compared with the mosaic pavements of the Metropolitan basilica of second half of 5th c., a practice which continued in the next century (see Topalilov 2020: 271-275).

The third group of mosaic pavements consists of 'dissidents' mosaic pavements that preserved the mosaic iconography in the entirely old pagan figural tradition. These mosaics are rare in that period, and it may be only one of the mosaic pavements discovered so far in both cities that belong to this group – the marine mosaic in Philippopolis if the mosaic pavement is dated to that period at all. If,



Figure 16

The mosaic pavement of the *aula* of the so-called 'Residence' in Philippopolis (after Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 113 Abb. 303).

however, the marine mosaic should be dated to the end of 4th c. which seems unlikely to me I would link it to the process that undergone at that moment attested in Rome and the western part of the empire with the revival and manifestation of the old pagan traditions by some members of the senatorial elite in the last decades of that century. Our case may refer to such instances in Thrace and Philippopolis, and one should recall the *Passio* of St. Theodota that was possibly compiled at the end of 4th c. in which Philippopolis is mentioned as the 'city of Apollo' (on the *Passio* – see Sharankov 2015).

The processes observed in the mosaic art are not unique for Thrace, but clearly demonstrate the certain change that is to be observed in the mosaic art with the new role of the Christianity in the political life of the empire. This change is so abrupt and overwhelming that that even unified the mosaic art in both cities although so different in its development and the non-acceptance of the geometrization as a whole until that time in the private houses. The new mosaics lost its colour abundance and become in a sense even ascetic, especially those decorated the Christian buildings. By the end of the 4th c., however, under the Syrian influence the mosaics become more vividly, more picturesque, but despite this and the insertion of various figural and floral motifs and ornaments, the mosaics in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana never fled away from the geometric base of their mosaic pavements till the end of the antiquity. Unlike Syria and even Continental Greece and Constantinople, Thrace did not accept the figural mosaics in such a great scale any more, and the geometric composition remained as central. The time of the figural mosaics such as that in Augusta Traiana of the merchant or second quarter of 4th c. and the marine one in Philippopolis from the 60s of 4th c. has been passed.

Certainly, these are not all the questions that the mosaic pavements in Philippopolis and Augusta Traiana raise. It is my hope, however, that this short review would provoke the interest not only of the art historians, but also other scholars that study other aspects of the ancient life as the importance of these and other mosaic pavements as well should not be confined within the limits of the iconography, style, patterns, and manner of construction, as some of the articles in the recently published Corpus on the Late antique and Early Christian mosaics from Bulgaria reveals (Pillinger et al. 2016). Instead, the mosaic pavements should be studied

in a broader context with their place in the life of the owner of the *domus*, and therefore their importance for the society or at least a part of its elite. In fact, in those mosaics that embellish the private *aulae*, one would get the rare chance to come across the informal manifestation of the personal preference and attitude of the owner of the *domus* to the world and the processes, which makes those type of sources, although still underestimated in this aspect, as one of most important for study of those societies with scanty written evidence available. It is without any doubt that the importance of the mosaic pavements discussed above should not be confined only for those two cities, but also the region, and in several cases – even Constantinople which seems to have impacted these processes as well. These mosaics clearly reveal the domination of the Christianity in the public and private culture of the aristocratic elite in Thrace at that time.

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