

MOSAICS IN BRITANNIA



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Stephen R. Cosh

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Cover: The Orpheus panel from Newton St Loe (detail of painting by SRC).

Back cover: Frampton hunting frieze (detail of an engraving by Samuel Lysons).

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Author's note

My first experience of Roman mosaics, as far as I remember, was being taken by my parents to see Brading Roman villa on the Isle of Wight, and at that time the pavements were displayed *in situ* within a rather ramshackle structure of corrugated iron. Although the old cover-building probably did not impress my ten-year-old self, the mosaics certainly did. I was hooked, and rather feeble attempts at mosaic pictures followed, really taking off after completing my university dissertation on Roman Hampshire. One early attempt was of the Oceanus mosaic from Verulamium, made by cutting out many thousand tesserae from coloured paper and sticking them onto a measured drawing; rather indulgently, I have used it for Figure 4.5 in this book. Understandably I never repeated that extremely laborious and fiddly process. Having been involved with the excavation of Sparsholt villa, just west of Winchester, it was perhaps inevitable that my first 'professional-looking' tessera-by-tessera painting at tenth scale should be of the principal mosaic at that site (Figure 5.14). In this I was following the technique used by David S. Neal, with whom I later had the privilege of working for thirty-five years on the Romano-British mosaic corpus. Having also written dozens of articles and completed hundreds of drawings and paintings, it behoves me to produce a general work to inflict upon the archaeological world and the general reader.

With such an attractive aspect of archaeology, this is obviously not the first book devoted to the Roman mosaics in Britain. There have been several of a more popular nature published in the last fifty years or so, predictably all with very similar (or, indeed, the same) titles. However, although the ones cited here are fine works, they are selective in what they cover and largely illustrated with monochrome images. Patricia Witts' excellent *Mosaics in Roman Britain: Stories in Stone* (Witts 2005) focuses on the figured pavements; Anne Rainey's *Mosaics in Roman Britain* is a very brief and sparsely illustrated catalogue of pavements found up to its date of publication (Rainey 1973); David Neal's *Roman Mosaics in Britain: an introduction to their schemes and a catalogue of paintings*, is just what its subtitle states (Neal 1981); Peter Johnson's *Romano-British Mosaics* is a short but good history of the mosaics, concentrating on the work of different groups of mosaicists (Johnson 1982); Michael Dawson's *Spectacle and Display: a modern history of Britain's mosaic pavements* concerns itself with the fate of mosaics following their discovery (Dawson 2021); Anthony Beeson's *Roman Mosaics in Britain*, is more comprehensive, but is a slim volume and, although it has many illustrations in colour, they are often far too small (Beeson 2022). On the other hand, *Roman Mosaics of Britain*, the corpus of Romano-British mosaics, which I compiled, wrote and illustrated in collaboration with David S. Neal, includes every mosaic in Britain, but takes up five large (and expensive) volumes (Volume III in two parts) (Neal and Cosh 2002 and 2009, and Cosh and Neal 2005, 2010 and 2024). What is required is a happy medium. The present book is intended to be a distillation of that massive work and my numerous articles on various aspects of Romano-British mosaics, hopefully in a more readable form – and, of course, will include the work of many other scholars on the subject. Inevitably, not all Romano-British mosaics can be included, and, for anyone who wishes to delve more deeply, reference can be made to the volumes of the Romano-British mosaic corpus.

Most works on mosaics, and indeed their display, concentrate on them as ancient works of art – the earliest sophisticated art in Britain – but they should also be regarded as decorative floors of rooms, mainly in country villa residences and town houses; each mosaic is connected with the room's function and as part of a suite of rooms. Obviously those depicting figures from mythology, sporting activities, and so on hog the limelight, and will not be pushed out of it here. From illustrations in general works on Roman Britain, one might imagine that all mosaics were figured, but in fact they form a small percentage of the total, so the 'boring geometric' pavements, as I have heard them being referred to, should not be ignored, not only for the patterns they employ, but also how the design was created. These and other aspects will be covered in the following chapters. To avoid being the fifth book called *Roman Mosaics in Britain*, I have chosen to call this book, *Mosaics in Britannia*, which, of course, conveys precisely the same idea.

This work is the culmination of several decades of research, over the course of which I have received help from numerous individuals and institutions, too many to name. I am very grateful to them all. I particularly wish to thank David Neal and Luigi Thompson for generously giving permission for their superb artwork to be included. Thanks are also due to the staff of Archaeopress and especially Robin Orlić for typesetting and designing the book so ably.