

ROMAN MOSAICS ACROSS THE EMPIRE

Mosaics decorated luxurious domestic and public buildings across the broad expanse of the Roman Empire. Intricate patterns and figural compositions were created by setting tesserae—small pieces of stone or glass—into floors and walls. Scenes from mythology, daily life, nature, and spectacles in the arena enlivened interior spaces and reflected the cultural ambitions of wealthy patrons. Introduced by itinerant craftsmen, mosaic techniques and designs spread widely throughout the provinces, leading to the establishment of local workshops and a variety of regional styles.

Dating from the second through the sixth century A.D., the works in this exhibition exemplify Roman mosaic production from its center in Italy to major workshops in North Africa, southern Gaul (present-day France), and ancient Syria (present-day Turkey and modern Syria). Recovered from various archaeological contexts, the mosaics on view provide a glimpse into the richly embellished architecture of the ancient world.

Unless otherwise noted, all works are drawn from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum.





ITALY

The mosaics of Italy first appeared in the late second century B.C. under the influence of an earlier Greek style of pictorial mosaic, in which narrative themes were presented in detailed, colorful compositions that imitated the effects of wall painting. By the end of the first century B.C., a tremendous expansion in the use of mosaics resulted in a wide variety of types that ranged from vibrant figural scenes to black-and-white ornamental patterns. With this increase in production, workshops multiplied not only within Italy but also in the Roman provinces. A rising popularity of the black-and-white style in Italy in the first and second centuries A.D. had a particularly strong impact on mosaic designs in North Africa and Gaul. Around the beginning of the fourth century A.D., however, provincial workshops exerted a profound influence in Italy, even in Rome itself, bringing a new preference for large-scale scenes of the hunt or the arena to luxurious Italian villas.



Medusa, Roman, from Rome, Italy, A.D. 1st-2nd, stone. The J. Paul Getty Museum. On view in the Auditorium lobby.

Elaborate geometric designs, such as the curvilinear pattern of triangles encircling Medusa in this mosaic, were typical of the black-and-white style in Italy in the first and second centuries A.D.



Map of Italy with the findspot of *Bear Hunt* highlighted in red

THE BEAR HUNT MOSAIC

The enormous Roman floor mosaic featured in this gallery was discovered in 1901 in a vineyard near Lago di Lucrino in Baiae, just west of Naples. Italian officials working for the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, suggested that it might have adorned the main room of a bath complex, but it is equally possible that it decorated a private villa overlooking the bay. The museum in Naples declined to acquire the mosaic at the time, and it was never fully excavated. Parts of the floor were finally removed in 1906 but languished in storage until 1929, when they were sold to an Italian collector. Twenty-three panels, measuring over twenty-eight feet wide when assembled, were acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1971. Four additional panels (three pictured on the wall at left) are now in the Naples museum.



Reconstruction of the Getty Museum's *Bear Hunt* panels

This composite image shows all twenty-three of the Getty's *Bear Hunt* panels, including border fragments not on display. Archaeologists who saw the mosaic in situ when it was discovered estimated its full original width to be at least forty feet. The floor's unusual shape, with extended, angled corners, suggests that it occupied a space between two oval rooms, such as those found in baths and reception halls.

HUNTING AND THE ARENA

The killing of wild animals was a feature of entertainment in the Roman arena. Mosaics highlight the aristocratic taste for violent animal combats, gladiatorial contests between men and beasts, and *venationes*—staged hunts that recalled hunting in nature, a traditional pastime of the elite. Members of the privileged class frequently contributed to the funding of these spectacles as a way of displaying financial generosity and social status. Scenes of trapping or slaying animals were therefore fitting subjects for mosaic floors in luxurious private villas. They frequently decorated reception areas and *triclinia* (dining rooms), spaces in which the owner could entertain and impress guests with his wealth, prestige, and artistic preferences.

The scale and frequency of arena events generated an empire-wide industry of capturing and training native animals as well as exotic species that were often transported from great distances. Some of the most extravagant staged hunts occurred at the dedication of the Colosseum in Rome by the emperor Titus in A.D. 80, when according to the ancient biographer Suetonius, “five thousand wild beasts of every kind [were exhibited] in a single day.”

SYRIA

Roman mosaic production in ancient Syria evolved directly from earlier Greek traditions, in which extremely detailed pictorial mosaics imitated wall paintings.

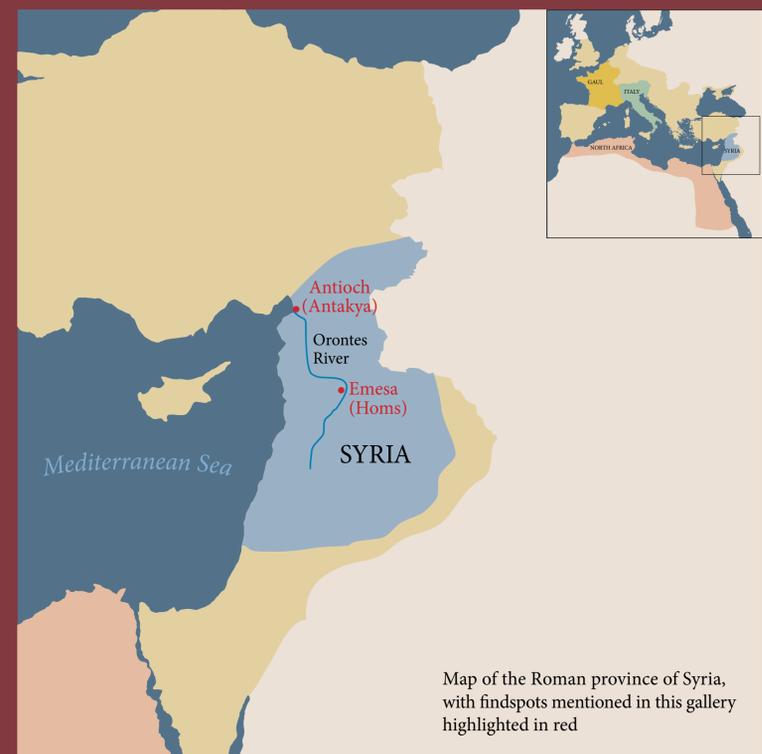


The Removal of Briseis, Roman, probably from Antioch, Syria (present-day Antakya, Turkey), A.D. 100–200, stone and glass. The J. Paul Getty Museum. On view in Gallery 110.

In a scene from Homer's *Iliad*, the hero Achilles sits dejectedly on a throne as his concubine Briseis is given over to King Agamemnon. Probably the product of a workshop in the vicinity of Antioch, this panel reflects the Greek tradition of painterly, narrative mosaics.

The influence of Greek art and a preference for subjects from classical mythology dominated Syrian mosaics well into the Christian period. By the fifth century A.D., however, the prominence of large-scale narrative themes diminished in favor of smaller figural subjects set within abstract designs. Pavements from the Bath of Apolausis at Antioch (present-day Antakya, Turkey) exemplify this style, in which busts of divinities and modest animal scenes are framed by elaborate decorative patterns. At the same time, a new repertoire of imagery developed to fit the needs of a

growing number of churches established throughout the region. Vegetal elements such as the scrolling vine were depicted around an assortment of animals—lions, bulls, peacocks, and other birds—alluding to the Christian vision of paradise.

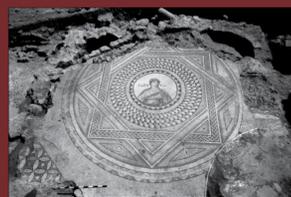


Map of the Roman province of Syria, with findspots mentioned in this gallery highlighted in red

THE EXCAVATIONS AT ANTIOCH

Founded around 300 B.C., Antioch (present-day Antakya, Turkey) was one of the most important political and cultural centers of the Greek East and became one of the greatest metropolises of the Roman Empire. During excavations in 1932–39 at Antioch, its wealthy suburb of Daphne, and its port of Seleucia Pieria, archaeologists unearthed over three hundred mosaic pavements dating from the second to the sixth century A.D. While the majority decorated private villas, some adorned public buildings such as bath complexes, for which Antioch was renowned in antiquity. Abundant water sources—the Mediterranean Sea, the Orontes River, and natural springs and pools at Daphne known for their restorative properties—greatly enhanced the city's reputation for a luxurious quality of life. Lavish mosaics in the Bath of Apolausis depicted busts of the female personifications Apolausis (Enjoyment) and Soteria (Salvation), reflecting the beneficial effects of bathing. The central room in the complex, an octagonal space featuring the mosaic of Soteria, served not only as a *frigidarium* (cold-water bath) but also as a place for gathering and entertainment.

The excavation images at right are courtesy of the Antioch Expedition Archives, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.



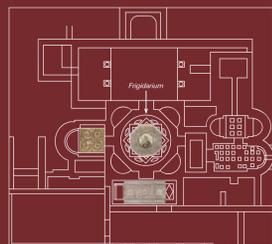
The mosaic depicting Soteria (about A.D. 400), shown in situ during excavation



View of the Bath of Apolausis during excavation, with Mount Silpius in the background



The mosaic depicting Apolausis (about A.D. 400), shown in situ during excavation



Floor plan of the Bath of Apolausis, showing the locations of the excavated mosaics



The mosaic displayed in the center of this gallery, shown in situ during excavation together with the mosaics of Apolausis and Soteria

ANIMALS IN SYRIAN CHURCH MOSAICS

Animals, both real and fantastic, dominate the imagery of fifth- and sixth-century A.D. Syrian church mosaics, referring to the Christian notion of paradise. Arranged freely across the floor, they are typically shown walking or standing among small landscape elements or scrolling vines. They are occasionally paired in lively chase scenes, such as the common motif of a lion pursuing a bull. The majority of beasts can be read simply as representing the great variety of creation's living beings.



Left: Cock, Bird, Pheasant, Bull, and Deer with a Vine-Scroll Pattern. Right: Amphora, Doves, and Peacocks. Roman, from Syria, A.D. 450–462, stone. Courtesy of the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Gift of Jonathan Morse, 1972.19–20

These two mosaic panels are more-complete versions of the animal compositions typical of Syrian church floors.

Peacocks, however, had a special significance. Sacred to the Roman goddess Juno, they were sometimes kept in her sanctuaries, where they acquired a symbolic connection with immortality and

apotheosis (elevation to divine status). In early Christian art and literature, peacocks were considered among the most spectacular creatures on earth, and Saint Augustine noted the belief that their flesh was incorruptible. They usually took a prominent position in church mosaics, often paired in a symmetrical arrangement that distinguished them from other animals.

GAUL

One of the first areas of Gaul to be incorporated into the Roman Empire was the southern province of Gallia Narbonensis (in present-day France). The earliest mosaics in the region date to the late first and early second centuries A.D. and were influenced by contemporary Italian traditions—specifically, the black-and-white style with geometric patterns. Local craftsmen soon integrated their own designs and themes to create distinctive Gallo-Roman styles. By the middle of the second century A.D., the main centers of mosaic production



Orpheus and the Animals (on view nearby) exemplifies the “multiple decor” style. In this 1958 photo, the mosaic is shown with part of its original black-and-white border, installed in the Getty Villa’s Ranch House.

in Gaul operated in the upper Rhône River valley at Lugdunum (present-day Lyon) and around Vienne, especially in its suburb of Saint-Romain-en-Gal. Characteristic of these workshops was the “multiple decor” design, with individual figures or scenes isolated within a grid-like framework. The cities farther south, such as Villelaure, were dependent primarily on the workshops

of Aquae Sextiae (present-day Aix-en-Provence), which developed a more conservative tradition of white floors outlined by simple black borders. Select mosaics from this area, found almost exclusively in wealthy villas, included colorful central panels with detailed figural scenes illustrating episodes from mythology and literature.



Map of the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis, with the findspots of mosaics in this gallery highlighted in red

THE VILLA AT VILLELAURE

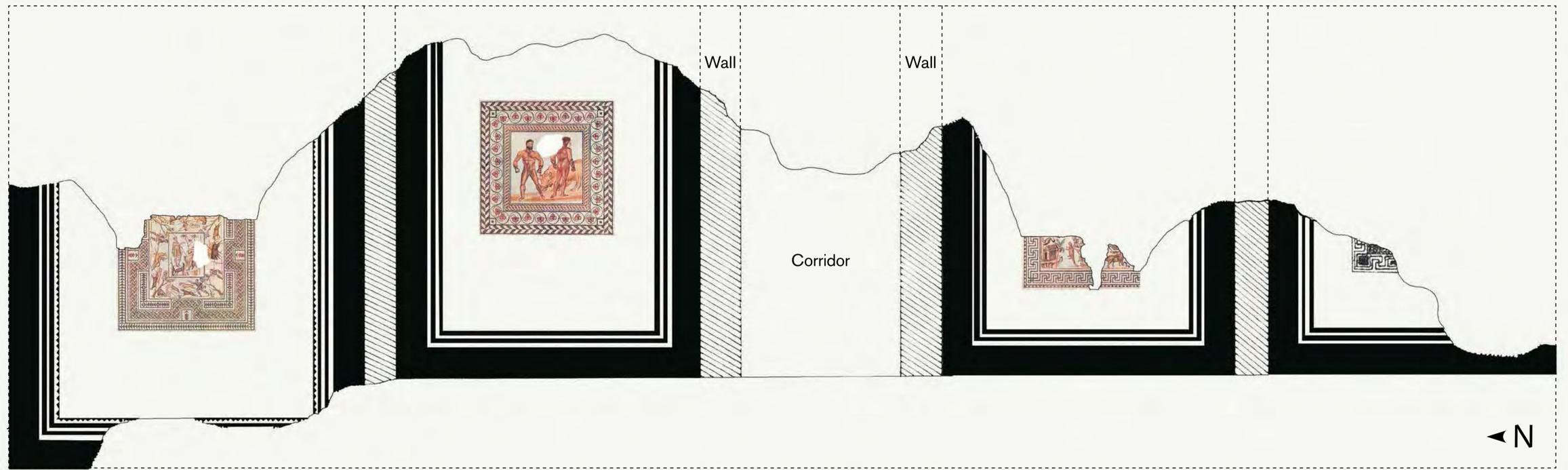
Excavations in 1900 near the modern town of Villelaure, in the Vaucluse region of Provence, unearthed a suite of four adjacent rooms in a wealthy second-century A.D. Gallo-Roman villa (see the floor plan at right). Each room was paved with a mosaic featuring a central panel inside a white field with black borders. Two of the works on view in this gallery—*Diana and Callisto Surrounded by a Hunt* and *Combat between Dares and Entellus*—decorated rooms on one side of a corridor. The central panels in the rooms opposite were more fragmentary and are now lost. One of them depicted a Nile landscape with a temple and an ibis on a cliff, an armed figure in a boat attacking a crocodile, and a hippopotamus at the base of a second cliff. All that remained of the fourth panel was a corner of the geometric border.



Courtesy of the association of Villa Laurus en Luberon. Photo by Marielle Jouval

The mosaic found in 2006, shown in situ during excavation

The exact location of the rooms excavated in 1900 is uncertain. New investigations in 2006 unearthed additional foundations of the villa, with both residential and agricultural quarters. At this time a fifth mosaic was discovered, preserving the lower section of a male figure wearing shoes and a cloak (see left).



Excavation plan of four rooms in the villa at Villelaure
 This floor plan shows the fragmentary state of the mosaic pavements when the four rooms were excavated in 1900. The plan is derived from the original excavation drawing made by L.-H. Labande, with the addition of watercolors of the central panels painted by Henri Nodet in 1903.
 Drawing based on R. Prudhomme after L.-H. Labande

Excavation plan of four rooms in the villa at Villelaure

This floor plan shows the fragmentary state of the mosaic pavements when the four rooms were excavated in 1900. The plan is derived from the original excavation drawing made by L.-H. Labande, with the addition of watercolors of the central panels painted by Henri Nodet in 1903.

Drawing based on R. Prudhomme after L.-H. Labande

PRESERVING THE SITE AT VILLELAURE

The site of the Gallo-Roman villa at Villelaure, where two of the mosaics displayed in this gallery were excavated in 1900, has been threatened by modern construction. In 2006 the local communities, including the villages of Villelaure, Lauris, and Ansouis, intervened to preserve the area. The association of Villa Laurus en Luberon



Images courtesy of the association of Villa Laurus en Luberon. Photos by Michel Prunier (top) and Lionel Guin (bottom)

Views of the towns of Lauris (top) and Ansouis (bottom)

organized a diagnostic survey to assess the archaeological site. Subsequent excavations under the auspices of the Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives uncovered additional foundations of the villa. In conjunction with these investigations, the association initiated a project to transform the nearby eighteenth-century Château Verdet Kleber into a museum and workshop for the study of ancient mosaics.

MYTHOLOGICAL SUBJECTS IN GAUL

The mosaics from the villa at Saint-Romain-en-Gal where *Orpheus and the Animals* (at left) was found were inspired by Greek mythological themes that were represented in mosaics throughout the Roman Empire. In addition to Orpheus, images of Dionysos and Hylas (see below) adorned adjacent rooms of the villa.



Silvanus with Dionysos and His Followers, Gallo-Roman, from Saint-Romain-en-Gal, France, A.D. 150–200, stone and glass. Courtesy of the British Museum (1913.1013.1) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The central image—now a modern restoration depicting Silvanus—originally represented Dionysos with a staff and a wine vessel. The corners contain busts of Silenos and a maenad, Pan and a maenad, a satyr, and Dionysos.



Hylas and the Nymphs, Gallo-Roman, from Saint-Romain-en-Gal, France, A.D. 150–200, stone and glass. Courtesy of the Musée de Saint-Romain-en-Gal. Photo by Vassil [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons

The youth Hylas is shown holding a pitcher between two nymphs. According to Greek myth, he sailed on the expedition of the Argonauts and was carried off by nymphs while drawing water from a spring.

In contrast, the mosaics from the villa at Villelaure displayed in this gallery illustrate highly distinctive themes. One depicts an episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the moment Diana confronts the nymph Callisto for betraying her vow of chastity, a scene that has no known counterparts in Roman mosaics. Another represents the boxing match between Dares and Entellus described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which appears in four other mosaics from Aix and the vicinity but nowhere outside Gaul. These uncommon images seem to indicate a local preference associated with this particular area, perhaps intended to emphasize the patron's awareness of Roman literature and culture.

NORTH AFRICA

More mosaics have been found at sites in the ancient Roman provinces of North Africa than anywhere else in the empire, especially in the prosperous agricultural region of Africa Proconsularis (present-day northern Tunisia, northeastern Algeria, and western Libya). Although the region was conquered by the Romans in the mid-second century B.C., Rome's influence on the local culture was not dominant until the second century A.D., when the area became a primary source of grain for Italy and a source of wealth for Romans in North Africa. Reflecting this increasing affluence, a growing number of public buildings and private villas were adorned with ornate mosaic pavements. The earliest floors copied the black-and-white patterns prevalent in Italy and were likely the work of itinerant craftsmen. The local style soon diverged from contemporary Italian trends, particularly in the use of vibrant colors for pictorial scenes and decorative designs. Displaying painterly, finely detailed compositions, North African mosaics often feature images of hunting, animal combat, and daily life.

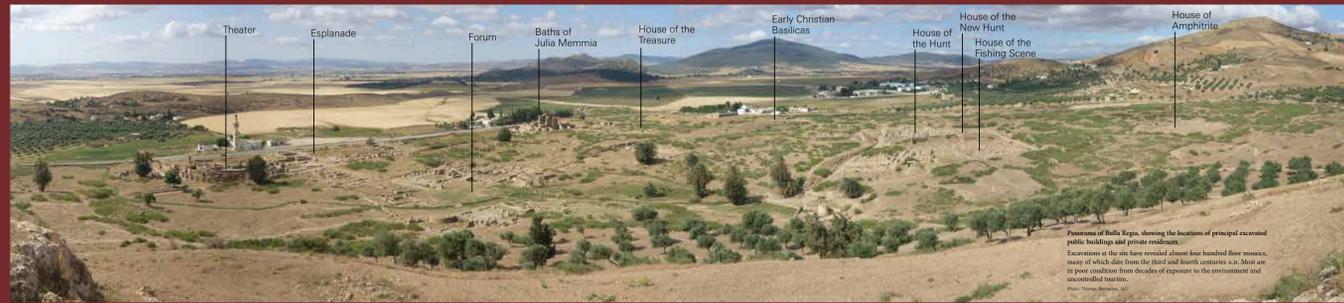


CONSERVATION AT BULLA REGIA

The Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), in collaboration with the Institut National du Patrimoine of Tunisia (INP) and World Monuments Fund, is leading a project at the archaeological site of Bulla Regia in present-day Tunisia, North Africa. It has two main components: the complete conservation of the House of the Hunt, one of the most significant private residences at the site; and a conservation and maintenance plan for the nearly four hundred mosaics excavated throughout the site over the past century. The plan calls for selected mosaics to be stabilized and presented to the public, and for others to be reburied for their protection. The work at Bulla Regia is supported in part through the generosity of the GCI Council.

The Bulla Regia project serves as a large-scale example of best practice for in situ conservation, which can be adapted at similar sites in Tunisia and other countries. It is part of the MOSAIKON initiative, which aims to improve the conservation and management of mosaics in the Mediterranean region, especially in North Africa and the Middle East.

The MOSAIKON initiative is a partnership of the Getty Conservation Institute, the Getty Foundation, the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, and the International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics.



Panorama of Bulla Regia, showing the locations of principal excavated public buildings and private residences.
Excavations at the site have revealed almost four hundred four mosaics, many of which date from the third and fourth centuries A.D. Most are in poor condition from decades of exposure to the environment and uncontrolled tourism.
Photo: Thomas Brinkman, GCI



Subterranean rooms in the House of the Hunt (left) and the House of Amphitrite (right).
Some of the more elaborate two-story Roman houses have a subterranean level that is unique to Bulla Regia. The underground rooms that are still enclosed by walls and ceilings contain several of the best preserved mosaics at the site. As part of the new mosaic management approach, visitors will be prevented from walking directly on the mosaics. This measure will protect the fragile pavements, while still allowing visitors to experience their beauty in the original settings.



GCI conservators photographing mosaics as part of a rapid survey.
A first step in the conservation planning process was the development of an intensive rapid survey method to quickly inventory, photograph, and collect data on each mosaic, recording its current condition, archaeological and artistic value, and degree of exposure to the elements. The completion and analysis of this data provide an assessment rating for each conservator, which facilitates decision making and short- and long-term planning. The range of interventions includes reburial, the construction of decks, and regular maintenance of mosaics left exposed.



Section drawings of mosaic reburial techniques using different materials (left), a recent reburial in progress (right).
Many of the mosaics currently exposed to the elements are located in areas that are not generally visited by tourists or are just easily accessible. The majority of these pavements will be reburied and then returned to their long-term preservation and protection. Reburial is a critical component in planning for the future conservation of Bulla Regia, taking into account the site's available human and financial resources, which need to be carefully managed.



Local conservation technicians working at Bulla Regia.
In 2009 a training program for in situ mosaic conservation technicians was initiated by the GCI and the INP in Tunisia. Now, through MOSAIKON, it has expanded to include participants from Morocco, Libya, and Algeria. This program provides the skills necessary to document mosaics, record their conditions and treatments, and stabilize and maintain them on a daily basis. The training emphasizes preventive interventions such as controlling vegetation and rainwater drainage, as well as reburial.



GIS (geographical information system) site plan, with the locations of excavated mosaics indicated in blue.

This material was published in 2016 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Roman Mosaics across the Empire*, opening March 30, 2016, at the Getty Villa.

To cite this essay we suggest using:

Roman Mosaics across the Empire, published online 2016, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/roman_mosaics