

A NEWFOUND LATE ROMAN MOSAIC FROM SERDICA

The archaeological site “West Gate of Serdica” is located in the central part of modern city of Sofia, the Bulgarian capital. This area has been densely overbuilt in the period after the Liberation (1878) and the building works destroyed a large part of the cultural deposit. The bombing of Sofia during the World War II also caused heavy damages.

The site has been first excavated between 1974 and 1980 by the team from the History Museum of Sofia under the leadership of Magdalina Stancheva (archaeologist and expert in museum studies). These excavations revealed remains from buildings and activities performed in the area during the Medieval and Ottoman periods. The main effort in the excavations was the Roman city and aimed at unearthing the gate and the northern gate tower, the defensive wall situated to the north and the triangular tower from which the defensive wall deviated to the northeast and reached the Northern City Gate. A *protehyzma* was traced out. There is only one building *extra muros* excavated in front of *protehyzma*, and was defined by the archaeologists as a customs building. One of the main city sewers running under *Decumanus Maximus* outside the gate was also unearthed¹.

The resumed archaeological excavations were undertaken in 2011, in connection with forthcoming project for conservation and restoration of the West Gate of Serdica and is still going on (2014). The research team consists of archaeologists from “St. Kliment Ohridski” University of Sofia, National Institute of Archaeology with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Municipality Cultural Institute with Sofia Museum of History together with students, PhD students, volunteers and other experts².

During the restored investigation of the site in 2012 and 2013 were found parts of polychromous floor mosaic from late roman period³.

¹ М. Станчева, *Западната порта на Сердика*, София 3, 1983, 13; К. Рогова, *Митническата сграда при западната стена*, София 13, 1983, 30

² И. Борисова-Кацарова, А. Аладжов, *Археологическо проучване на обект „Западна порта на Сердика“*, Археологически открития и разкопки за 2011 г. С. 2012, 322-325; И. Борисова-Кацарова, А. Аладжов, *Археологическо проучване на обект „Западна порта на Сердика“*, Археологически открития и разкопки за 2012 г., С. 2013, 293-297.

³ I. Borisova-Katsarova, A. Aladzov, S. Goryanova, *The Western Gate of Serdica*,



Fig. 1. General photo view of the site.

Сл. 1. Општи изглед налазишта

Location of the mosaic.

The mosaic is situated in monumental building uncovered in the period 1974-1980, during the first excavations at the place (which remains unfinished) and was defined as a basilica⁴. The structure is located in North-West part of the fortified area of Serdica (Fig. 1, 2). It has several construction phases whose precise dating is imminent. Three periods are clearly distinguished so far – the early 4th century AD, 4th - 5th c. and 6th – the beginning of 7th c., when the building, together with a large part of the city, was destroyed, probably by an earthquake. At the time of its construction the building was more than 30 m wide. There is no information about its length because the larger part is under the modern street to the east. It seems that the mosaic floor is connected to the first period. It is interesting to mention that about 120 m to the east a large apsis (8 m large) was unearthed at the site excavated in connection with the construction of one of the metro stations in Sofia⁵. But we still can't accept that it is a part of the same building.

Archaeological excavations 2011/2012, Sofia 2012 (brochure), 18-20; I. Borisova-Katsarova, A. Aladzov, S. Goryanova, *The Western Gate of Serdica*, Archaeological excavations 2013. Sofia, 2013 (brochure), 20-29; И. Борисова-Кацарова, А. Аладжов, *Новооткрита късноантична мозайка от Сердика (Предварителни наблюдения)*, Международна конференция „Антични мозайки и кариери“ (International Conference „Ancient Mosaics and quarries“), 18. 10. 2013 г., София, Нов Български Университет (in print).

⁴ М. Станчева, *Разкопки в София*, Археологически открития и разкопки през 1978, XXIV Национална конференция гр. Пазарджик (резюмета на докладите), София 1979, 93.

⁵ М. Иванов, *Археологическо проучване през 2011 г. на обект „Метростанция 8-II, гр. София, централен сектор. Античен период*, Археологически открития и разкопки за 2011 г., София 2012, 317.

About 40 m² of mosaic floor was uncovered – 21 m length and 1,90 m width in the western part of the building and about 7 m² in so called Sector East.

Sector East is located outside the main archaeological site, in a private property that we had a chance to investigate thanks to the good will of the owner.

The ornamental compositions are orientated North - South in the Western sector and east - west in the eastern one. There are no traces about the plan of the western part of the building so we could suggest it was a part of some kind of antechamber (narthex?). The other

fragment of mosaic floor was uncovered about 10-15 m east. A single pedestal, probably for a column, drop a hint at the internal division of the space. The hollows and damages in the mosaic suggests the existence of a stone wall underneath the mosaic floor with east-west direction part of which is the pedestal (stylobate) and other one with north-south direction which investigation is forthcoming. These suggest that the space was probably divided into separate naves.

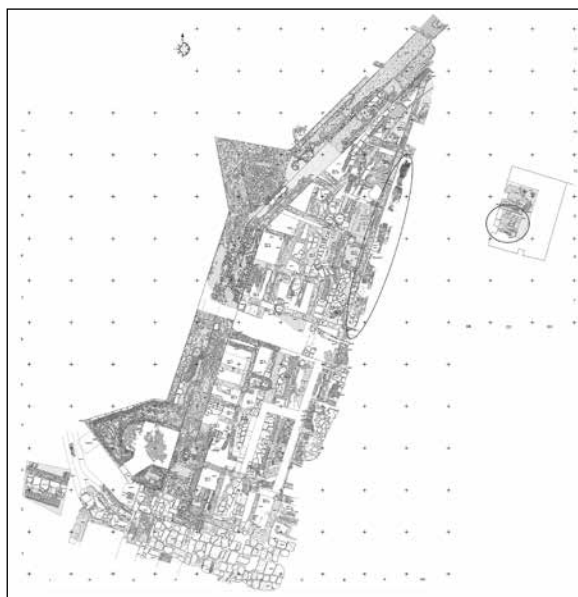


Fig. 2. The location of the mosaics within the general plan of the excavations.

Сл. 2. Место мозаика у општем изгледу испитиваног налазишта

Description of the mosaic panels

The decoration on the floor in the western part of the building consisted of three panels, different in size and decoration with geometrical patterns in *opus tessellatum* (Fig. 3). They are limited with a band of three consequent stripes, different in width, and designed with tesserae with different colours. It is preserved in different scale in the separate sectors of the mosaic. The best preserved parts of it consists of 12 rows of green tesserae, triple fillet of white tesserae⁶ and two fillet of blue-gray tesserae⁷.

⁶ C. Balmelle, Blanchard-Lemee M., Christophe J., Darmon J.-P., Guimier-Sorbets A.-M., Lanagne H., Prudhomme R., Stern H, *Le Décor géométrique de la Mosaïque romaine. I Répertoire graphique et descriptif des compositions linéaires et isotropes*, Paris 1985, pl. 1, t.

⁷ *Ibid.* pl. 1, i.



Fig. 3. The northern carpet.

Сл. 3. Северни регистар

The colours used are in various shades of blue/gray, red, brown, ochre, yellow, green, and they wonderfully stand out over the white background.

The northern carpet is about 6, 5 m long (Fig. 4).

The main elements that create the composition are intersecting circles. The intersection, the arrangement and the selection of the various colours and shades of the tesserae form different patterns: Maltese cross, two concave squares with different size (one inscribed into another) and petals forming a rosette. The circles are not delineated with continuous outline, thus forming the petals of the rosettes. The bars of the crosses form the bigger concave lozenges. The final design consists of alternating and merging motifs creating an impression of a kaleidoscope image. The scheme is close to those presented in Ballmelle et al., pl. 238, a, b, but the used colours are four that makes the

composition even more polychromous while the quoted ones are bichrome and trichrome⁸

The size of the cubes vary from 0, 02 до 1, 00/1, 5 cm. The form in most of the cases is tetragonal (square, lozenge, trapezium) but there are some with triangle shape (no bigger than 0, 02 m, used for filling the spaces with corresponding shape). The outline of the rosette's petals were made with one row cubes in dark blue colour. The interior is filled with brown, in some cases purple shade, tesserae and in other cases – with various shades of blue - gray. In southern part of the panel with intersecting circles some of the petals were completely made of blue tesserae but others are without outline.

The inscribed concave lozenges were made of tesserae in various shades of brown – light ochre, light brown, brown, red-brown.

The rest spaces and the background were filled with white cubes.

It seems that the arrangement of the cubes first follows the shape of the separate elements – the cross, petals, lozenge and later these forms were filled. Similarly it is obvious some adherence to the shape of the circle – different colours follow probably initially put concentrically lines.

On 6.50 m far from the north end of the mosaic there is a damaged area (1. 40 m long) caused by a modern construction. But in the very southwest end of this panel there is the beginning of the next one. A diagonal line of two rows gray-blue tesserae has been preserved.

⁸ *Ibid.* pl. 238, a, b

After the damaged area the mosaic panel continues to the south with a consecution of geometric patterns with different number of sides (the middle carpet) (Fig. 5, 6). The panel is 12 m long. It is an outlined lattice-pattern of large oblong (irregular) hexagons, intersecting and forming lozenges and smaller regular hexagons adjacent on the sides. In each of the smaller hexagons, there is an inscribed concentric hexagon and a lozenge.



Fig. 4. The northern carpet (detail).

Сл. 4. Северни регистар, детаљ

The main hexagons are outlined with double fillet of blue cubes. The composition is limited on both sides by the same border as the panel with the circles. The band of two rows of blue tesserae in the west crosses the line of the hexagons thus forming consecution of adjacent pentagons while at the east there are triangles. The next consecutions of adjacent regular hexagons are separated by lines of adjacent on the apex elongated lozenges.

In the consecution of pentagons the inner field is filled with red-brown cubes. The smaller inscribed lozenges were not outlined but were made of light tesserae – white, light gray/blue, dove-colored. In the south end of the panel there are two inscribed hexagons in which the smaller lozenges are missing by some reason.

Next comes the first (western) consecution of adjacent on the apex lozenges. They were formed by the intersection of the bigger hexagons, respectively limited by the double fillet of blue cubes and were filled with ochre, light and darker brown tesserae. One of the lozenges in the southern part of the panel is filled with red-brown tesserae.

In the western consecution of hexagons the smaller inscribed hexagons and quadrangles were outlined by one row dark blue cubes. The inner part of the latest is filled with light tesserae – white, light blue, dove-colored.

The next line of lozenges is equal to those already described. Here also some of the lozenges were filled mostly with red-brown tesserae. However the eastern consecution of hexagons is different from the western one. The inner inscribed hexagons were filled with dark brown and red-brown tesserae. The other elements are the same as those in the western row. Next follows the third band of lozenges, double fillet blue cubes and a border of four rows with white tesserae. In separate sections of the decorated area were preserved three rows of dark red/purple cubes from an unknown composition.

The form and the size of the tesserae are the same as in previous pattern. The arrangement of the cubes follows the outline of the geometrical shapes.

The only surviving piece of the last panel (the southern one) is small and very poorly preserved (Fig. 7).



Fig. 5. The middle carpet

Сл. 5. Средишњи регистар

The border is the same as in other described panels – 12 rows of greenish tesserae, triple filet of white and double filet of blue tesserae. The composition is a lattice pattern of oblong octagons adjacent and intersecting on the sides (forming pentagons and squares with small inscribed lozenges). It is followed by a row of oblong hexagons adjacent on the apex⁹. The main shapes were outlined with double filet with white tesserae.

The last pentagons were filled mostly with red-brown tesserae but single cubes in ochre and blue/gray are also to be found. The squares between the pentagons are in various shades of blue and the inner lozenges are white with a single blue cube in the centrum. The elongated hexagons are in ochre.

The coloring of the mosaic differs in every panel. The outlines of the pattern stand out against the white background of the northernmost one. The intensity of colours increases to the south, and the southernmost panel is expressively polychromatic.

The compositions on the mosaic panels in the eastern sector (the inner part of the building) differ from the ones described above with one exception (Fig. 8). From the south there is a stone wall which is removed and leveled up in antiquity to the point that is lower than the level of the mosaic floor. The floor mosaic probably had a 0.20 m wide border which did not survive. It is followed by a 0.60 m wide outlined lattice pattern of oblong hexagons intersecting (forming pentagons and adjacent lozenges) similar to the pattern of the middle panel in the western part of the building. The pentagons were filled with light purple (pink), blue/gray, ochre tesserae. The lozenges are predominantly ochre but pink are also to be found. This pattern is followed by 0.10 m wide three strand border – double filet of dark grey tesserae¹⁰, four rows of white¹¹ and single line of dark gray tesserae¹². There is a row of triangles adjacent on the side to the bases of this border, part of the previous composition. The next composition was laid on the stylobate of the hall and followed the inner constructive partition. It is a 0.70 m wide band of chessboard pattern (four rows). The stepped rows of squares are outlined by different colours: dark gray, ochre, pale pink, purple, white. The desired effect was probably a gradation from lighter to darker shades¹³.

⁹ Balmelle et al. Op. cit., pl. 172, a or pl. 169, d, e.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pl. 1, i

¹¹ *Ibid.* pl. 1, y

¹² *Ibid.* pl. 1, a

¹³ *Ibid.* pl. 8, b

To the north, the chessboard-pattern is bordered by the same three strand border identical to the one to the south. The border is followed by a polychrome three strand guilloche 0.32 m wide. It is outlined with dark grey tesserae. Each strand is in different colour, shaded from light to dark¹⁴ in various shades of pink, blue and ochre. In each strand there is also the effect of graduation from lighter to darker shades. To the north there is a three strand border made from white and dark



Fig. 6. The middle carpet (detail)

Сл. 6. Средишњи регистар, детаљ

tesserae identical to that to the south. The next pattern was probably situated closer to the central panel which has not been unearthed yet.

An outlined polychrome pattern of alternating triangles and adjacent lozenges enclosed alternating quadrangle patterns (lozenges and rectangles) with separate motifs – a Solomon knot¹⁵ within the lozenge and a guilloche¹⁶ in the rectangle. The triangles are adjacent to the border of the pattern. It seems that smaller inscribed triangles and semicircles were alternating within them.

Materials and technique.

The mosaic was made of tesserae cut from rocks within the immediate surroundings of Serdica: Cretaceous limestones and marls, andesites and tuffs, Triassic dolomites, marbles and sandstones, Precambrian shales.

The mosaic was composited by naturally coloured tesserae. Tesserae in white and shades of gray were made of white marble, gray and dark gray limestone and dolomite. Of marls, sandstones and argillites were made ochre and reddish tesserae, from tuffs and andesite – gray/blue and green, from marble – pink one. For violet tesserae were used volcanic rocks – rhyolites and tuffs. Soft types of rocks were used for easy handling of tesserae. The only exceptions were the marbles and dolomites¹⁷.

The cubes were laid in thin layer of lime – about 1-1.5 cm. There is a layer of mortar underneath with still uncertain thickness, mixed with small pebbles

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pl. 72, d

¹⁵ C. Balmelle, Blanchard-Lemee M., Darmon J.-P., Gozlan S., Raynaud M.-P, *Le Décor géométrique de la Mosaïque romaine. II Répertoire graphique et descriptive des décors centres*, Paris 2002, 42;

¹⁶ Ballmele et al. 1985, *op. cit.*, pl. 182, d.

¹⁷ The materials for the tesserae were determined by Dr. Andrei Aladjov, co-director of the excavations.



Fig. 7. The southern carpet

Сл. 7. Јужни регистар



Fig. 8. The mosaic in the Eastern sector

Сл. 8. Мозаик у источном сектору

end shreds of bricks and tiles (nucleus). According to the preliminary observations in this case the statumen is missing, also the rudus, because the mosaic floor was laid not over the ground but over earlier architectural structures.

It seems that in some cases the technical implementation of the mosaic is somewhat careless. For example within two of the hexagons in the western part of the building the inscribed lozenges are missing. Sometimes the straight lines are not strictly fulfilled. In some cases the colouring is broken by using tesserae with different colour – for example among the pink tesserae of the chessboard pattern there are single blue and red tesserae; among the light blue/gray – dark one and the opposite; in the western part of the mosaic some of the lozenges are with different colour than the rest in the composition. Some of these “faults” could not be accidental but were made in pursuing of some special visual effects (Fig. 9). Anyway it doesn’t disturb the overall harmony and effect of the pattern and the colouring of the mosaic.

Parallels

The decoration style of the mosaic from the archaeological site “The West Gate of Serdica”, the colouring, the pattern and composition, are comparable to other mosaics found in Serdica and its vicinity during this time. Some elements have their similarities at many sites in the Roman Empire and quite broad dating but the whole composition doesn’t have exact parallel.

Mosaics with geometrical pattern and same kind of colouring and technique were found in Sofia in the so called Constantine palace¹⁸ and in the vicinity - Philipovtci¹⁹, Kostinbrod²⁰.

¹⁸ М. Станчева, *София от древността до наши дни*. София, 2009, 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 69-72.

²⁰ В. Динчев, *Късноримската резиденция SCRETISCA и ранновизантийското селище КРАТИСКАРА. Археологическото проучване в м. Градището край гр. Костинб-*

There are some similarities with mosaics from Philipopolis²¹, Pautalia²², Montana²³ Augusta Traiana²⁴.

But the closest parallels concern the floor mosaics from the residential palaces of the Emperor Constantine in Mediana (near the present - day town of Nish in Serbia), of Emperor Galerius in Romuliana (near the present - day town of Zajecar in Serbia) and in Thessaloniki (Greece), the palace of Emperor Diokletian in Spalato (the present - day town of Split in Croatia), dated back to the first half of the 4th century²⁵.



Fig. 9. The mosaic in the Eastern sector (detail)

Сл. 9. Мозаик у источном сектору, детаљ

In Mediana, in the perisyle villa we may see the lattice-pattern of elongated adjacent hexagons, forming smaller regular hexagons and pentagons at the border. Here in the centrum of the regular hexagons there are circles instead of quadrangles²⁶. There is a lattice - pattern of hexagons, forming pentagons and lozenges also in Spalato, as well as chessboard pattern with graduation of the coloring. The chessboard pattern could be seen in Tesseloniki and Felix Romuliana, as well as the triple guilloche. In Felix Romuliana and Sirmium there is also a Solomon knot but in Romuliana the colors are more vivid.

As I already mentioned the geometrical pattern was quite popular in the mosaic art from 4th century and especially from 5th and 6th century throughout the Eastern Roman Empire as well as in the West one. In most of the examples the pattern combines many other motifs – animal's, floral', human images. In our case not all the parts of the building are investigated and we don't know how the entire decoration looks like. We do believe that future excavations at the place will bring us new information.

род през 1990-1994 г., Разкопки и проучвания XXX, С. 2003, 8-10 with reff.

²¹ Е. Кесякова, *Мозайки от резиденцията на Филипопол*, Годишник на регионален археологически музей, Пловдив, т. XI, Пловдив 2009, 137-162.

²² В. Кацарова, *Пауталия и нейната територия I – VI в*, Велико Търново 2005, 125-130 with reff.

²³ М. Марков, *Антична мозайка от вила I край Монтана*, Международна конференция „Антични мозайки и кариери“, 18. 10. 2013 г., София, Нов Български Университет. In print.

²⁴ М. Камишева, Р. Караманова, *Мозайка в термите на Августа Траяна*, Международна конференция „Антични мозайки и кариери“, 18. 10. 2013 г., София, Нов Български Университет. In print.

²⁵ R. Kolarik, *Late Antique Floor Mosaics In The Balkans.* - Симпозијум „Ниш и Византија“, Ниш 3-5 јуни 2005, Зборник Ниш и Византија IV, pp. 159-178., Ниш 2006, 160-177.

²⁶ Г. Јеремин, *Мозаици Медијане – нека разматрања*, Симпозијум „Ниш и Византија“, Ниш 3-5 јуни 2005, Зборник Ниш и Византија IV, Ниш 2006, 149.

Dating.

In the southern part of the western sector of the structure could be observed a complicated stratigraphy which suggests some reconstructions in the inner space of the building in short time. Right above the mosaic floor there is a dark, probably leveling layer, mixed with debris from the next mortar floor. Above the mosaic was found a coin dated back in the first half but not later than the middle of 4th century. The coins found in the next (upper) layers were dated back to the middle and in the second half of the 4th century.

The stratigraphy in the eastern sector is different but again above the mosaic there are a layer of debris. A coin was found beneath the mosaic floor and it was dated back to the first half of the 4th century. The coins from upper layers were also dated back after the middle of the 4th century. The preliminary observation over the rest of the archaeological finds - mostly pottery and glass shards, show that it belongs to the same chronological framework.

According to the decoration style and the discovered archaeological artifacts we believe that the floor mosaic was laid in the period from the first half of the 4th until the mid-4th century AD during the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great and his direct descendants. It was used for a few decades only and after the mid-4th century, the internal space of the building has been reconstructed and the mosaic was buried.

It worth mentioning that all parallels of this floor mosaic, dated back to the first half of the 4th century, were found in luxury buildings, interpreted as residences (palaces). It can be assumed that at the beginning, the building, provisionally named until now "Basilica", had similar representative functions. Such assumption is also supported by the fact that in various periods of their reigns, the above mentioned emperors resided in Serdica. It seems probable that this led to the construction of luxury buildings in the city, decorated according to standard schemes.

It seems probable that in a later period, in the late 4th or the 5th century, the building was transformed into a Christian basilica after a considerable reconstruction.

The newly discovered floor mosaic adds another detail to the already known splendor of the city beloved by the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire.

Илијана Борисова-Кацарова НОВООТКРИВЕНИ ПОЗНОРИМСКИ МОЗАИК ИЗ СЕРДИКЕ

Током краћих археолошких испитивања предузетих 2012. године код Западне капије Сердикe (Софија, Бугарска) откривен је део полихромног подног мозаика. Мозаик се налази у монументалној грађевини за коју се првобитно сматрало да је имала намену базилике. Орнаментални образац мозаика састоји се од неколико регистара са геометријским мотивима изведених техником *opus tessellatum*. Претпоставља се да је мозаик из прве половине IV века н.е. Врло вероватно је реч о мозаику који се првобитно налазио у грађевини резиденцијалног карактера, потом претворена у базилику.