Rarity and diversity – London’s Roman mosaics

David Neal and Stephen Cosh have reached the London stage in their marathon undertaking to publish every known Romano-British mosaic. Their latest book reveals how the number, quality and date of the surviving mosaics set London and the south-east apart from the rest of Britain. Christopher Catling looks at their findings.

Because it lies closest to continental Europe, the south-east was the first area to come into contact with Roman culture, and is richest in early mosaics. Economically the south-east is different too: the second century was a period of great affluence, and the fourth century one of decline. This is reflected in the disproportionately high number of second-century pavements compared with other parts of Britain, and fewer that are datable to the fourth century.

Within an already unusual region, London is even more distinctive. In this thriving mercantile city, land was at a premium and luxurious townhouses are rare. More typical is the strip house, set at right angles to the street. The working end, consisting of shop and store, opened onto a street colonnade, while an alley along one side of the property gave access to small private rooms extending towards the rear of the plot. Floors of beaten earth or mortar are more common than mosaics. Where mosaics are found, they are smaller and plainer than provincial counterparts, with simple geometric or floral designs.

Early rarities that set London apart
The earliest of London’s surviving mosaics is a very rare example of a mixture of pink opus signinum, made from lime, water and crushed tile, into which is set a grid of mosaic roundels and crossetts. The style is so antique that the authors have to go back to Republican-era Reims for a parallel, though the London example, found at Watling Court, remarkably dates from the first or second century AD. An adjacent Watling Court property has another early mosaic unique for Britain, consisting of a band of elongated black and white isosceles triangles above an elaborate plant-based scroll issuing from a stylised vessel, again in grey on a white background.

Monument Street has Britain’s only mosaic inscription recording the gift of a mosaic to a public building. We do not know precisely which building it was – but in Ostia, where such inscriptions are more common, they are used as a form of advertising. Merchants trading in a market hall paid for prominently sited mosaics as a sign of civic virtue that also acted as a shop sign. In the case of the London example, the Monument Street fish market is the nearest and most likely candidate.

Variety in the second century
In the second century, London’s mosaics become more interesting, with four examples of the style of mosaic consisting of nine square panels featuring real and fabulous animals – a marine beast from Birchin...
As the name suggests, sarcophagi were not in the third century but augmented effectively ceased to be used as luxury dwellings by the time the decline of the region’s villas, many of which had been affected by economic malaise and political instability. Evidence of this can be found in the instability that was experienced by the time London’s largest mosaic was laid in Old Broad Street, some time after 350 AD. This mosaic so closely matches a mosaic of similar date from Lopen in the Low Countries that it is clear that important London commissions were being fulfilled by mosaicists from well outside the region by the mid-fourth century. What survives of that mosaic is now in the British Museum: its central roundel is a powerful composition representing Bacchus reclining on the back of an animated tigress. This exceptional mosaic was probably executed by a team from the Londinian Acanthus officina in the third century but augmented by a mosaicist commissioned from the continent to execute the central figure – someone who brought not only exceptional skill, but also the glass tesserae that are unparalleled in Britain in such quantity, but common in the mosaics of Trier and Cologne.

Antiquarian records
London is also distinguished in having some of the earliest records of mosaics to be found anywhere in Britain. The earliest known depiction is that of a fragment of Bush Lane mosaic in Aubrey’s manuscript version of Monumenta Britannica, now in the Bodleian Library. Reproduced in this volume, it is a scientifically observed and precise cube by cube drawing, setting a standard that many subsequent antiquarian artists were to follow, including, of course, David Neal and Stephen Cosh, whose gouache paintings fill these corpus volumes with fresh jewel-like colours.

Roman Mosaics of Britain Volume III by David Neal and Stephen Cosh is published by the Society of Antiquaries and available from Oxbow Books, 10 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EW, oxbowbooks.com/bookinfo.cfm/ID/84246.