

PRESENTATION REPORT

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“Conservation and Display of Three Mosaics in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria”

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By the

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**Conservation and Display of Three Mosaics in the Greco-Roman Museum in
Alexandria, Egypt**

By

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Themes reflected in the paper are:

- Background and scope of the project.
- The decision-making process and rationale for choices.
- A case study in the conservation of three mosaics in the Greco-Roman museum in Alexandria.

Framework of the Funding

The funding granted to the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) called the Egyptian Antiquities Project (EAP) is for the “preservation of Egyptian antiquities” and is not a comprehensive urban upgrade or social development program. Thus cultural heritage preservation projects are its mandate. During its life we have conducted over fifty conservation projects.

An overall structure for making decisions was established among 1) the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the donor of the large Egyptian Antiquities Project fund, and 2) the Government of Egypt’s Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), our partners in all our work. Under this structure, ARCE internally reviewed cycles of possible projects and then discussed them in principle with the SCA before submitting them to a USAID committee.

Theory and Practice of the Decision-Making Process:

Participation with Parties:

With this framework of funding and structure for decision-making established, we proceeded in close co-operation with Egyptian antiquities authorities on the national and local level in order to best define a project.

National Level: This mosaic project grew out of such a process because while we were discussing specific project proposals with a committee formed by and chaired by the Secretary-General of the SCA, he suggested we consider conducting some projects in Alexandria, in order to provide geographical representation in Egypt's second largest city.

Regional Level: Accordingly, several of us on our team traveled to the Greco Roman museum in Alexandria to meet with the museum director and her staff. Responsibility for all of Alexandria antiquities rests with this position. Following a discussion in her office, we were taken on a visit to see and review their conservation priorities. After the visit, we wrote a report recommending that we concentrate on the conservation of several mosaics in the Greco-Roman museum. They were chosen, rather than other sites, because 1) their conservation would not only preserve the mosaics, but allow one of them to be put on public display for the first time since its discovery in 1929, 2) the largest mosaic had been in storeroom for decades. Not only was it hidden away from public view but also it took up enormous space (4x5) meters on the floor, this preventing the use of this space for other projects, 3) this also gave us an opportunity to introduce new materials, such as aerolam, into Egypt's technology, 4) we would be able to work with conservators with the museum so they could benefit from the application of

these materials and conservation methodology, 5) additionally, since the museum is one of the most visited antiquities sites in Alexandria, we believed that more people would be able to view them and benefit from our intervention, 6) conversely, the other sites we reviewed would not be significantly enhanced by conservation interventions.

The principle of presentation was very important because we believe that, wherever possible, our conservation work should result in objects and sites that would be of enjoyment to a wide range of visitors. If appropriate conservation can result in additional appropriate visitation, so much the better. In that way the public has a chance to see more and the country can derive an economic benefit from the visitation. We believe that monuments should pay for themselves, wherever possible.

So, to sum up, our decision-making process involved a wide range. On the national level, we reviewed the priorities of the SCA. On the regional level, we recommended sites that could be preserved successfully. On the local level, we were very concerned that presentation of the mosaics would follow and we also believed that Egyptian conservators should be participants in the project. Finally, the process came full circle because, according to normal procedure, we approached the SCA Permanent Committee on a national level, with a proposal for final approval for the project.

Case Study in Conservation

Now, with this commentary on the decision-making process, I wish to describe the project implementation.

Neither the US (because of scarcity of mosaics) nor Egypt has a large corps of mosaics conservators, (partly because the Greco-Roman period is overshadowed by pharonic and Islamic art and architecture.) Where are the best mosaics conservators? In

those countries where mosaics are numerous and play an important role in visible and visited cultural (and even spiritual) heritage. And so, we found an Italian national who is a champion. Father Michele Piccirillo of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum has long been a central figure in the mosaics of Jordan where he has already performed lasting service and projects, particularly in Madaba. He graciously and selflessly agreed to assist us in finding and directing a team of professional mosaics conservators to conduct this project. Led by Franco Sciorilli, the team was composed of Mario Arangio, Marco Venturi and Antonio Vaccalluzzo, who worked in collaboration with Egyptian colleagues Amira Abu Bakr, Mohamed Badr and Sameh Abdel Hamed. Renowned expert Wiktor A. Daszweski provided an updated commentary on the pieces, which he had originally described in his *Corpus of Egyptian Mosaics*. Father Antonio Raimundo coordinated logistics and oversaw expenditures.

Conservation Procedures

Once the team was assembled, members arrived in Alexandria in the winter of 2002 to perform initial work. I should add here that the involvement of another entity was crucial. Douglas Haldane of INA-Egypt had received two grants from us and had, in a creative adaptive re-use project, established a conservation lab for submerged artifacts from existing out-buildings at a villa belonging to the uncle of King Farouk (and now the SCA's maritime museum). He and Adel Farouk provided physical space at the lab and liaison services. Each mosaic was lifted from the Greco-Roman Museum and brought to this lab for the majority of the conservation work. Only the final touches were performed back on-site in the museum itself.

The conservation of these mosaics exemplifies the ARCE-EAP ethical and technical approach, which is to present only primary material and not to introduce new illustration for which there is no evidence. The team employed a non-invasive approach that would restore only original material, and replace missing pieces not with hypothetical imagery but with lime mortar in a neutral color.

When the conservation project started, various elements of degradation were evident. Earlier conservation had used materials relevant to the time, including cement for the bedding. Some of the cement had washed over the tesserae, obscuring the tesserae. So in principle, the cement needed to be removed and replaced. It is very difficult to remove, requiring harsh mechanical means that can stress the surfaces. Modern techniques for embedding mosaic works employ instead lighter, synthetic substances that are all relatively easy to remove should the need arise. Also, atmospheric particulates had accumulated on the mosaic's surface, and cracks and fissures were evident over the entire panel.

Similar, basic procedures were carried out on the three mosaics during the course of each conservation, with some variations where conditions warranted different treatment. For each mosaic, the first step was to carefully wash the surfaces with distilled water to remove accumulated surface particulates. After the initial washing, each mosaic was photographed for documentation, and then traced on mylar sheets, recording the existing tesserae as well as the areas where they were missing (*lacunae*). Then the preparations were made for resetting each mosaic in new, inert beddings. The Berenike mosaic required more attention at this stage. It had been covered with two layers of facing cloth and resin were removed using brushes, cotton balls and dental picks. Dust

and calcareous sediments had amalgamated with the resin, resulting in very tough crusts throughout the panel. These crusts were removed mechanically, using a vibrating engraver, hammer and chisels, dental picks, and a micro-sandblasting machine operated at low pressure.

First, two layers of cloth were glued to the mosaic surfaces with warm animal glue (vinyl joiner glue was used on the Berenike). When the cloth dried, the panel was turned over to expose the back of the old cement bedding. Incisions were made in a checkerboard pattern in the cement, which was then extracted square by square with a hammer and chisel. Then the new support bed was prepared with boards made of Aerolam. The boards were spread with a layer of stone grit to provide an adhesion surface for the mosaic pieces. The mosaic, still held together by the cloth, was then re-laid over the new bed onto a new mortar composed of water, acrylic, sand, stone powder and hydraulic lime. Two different mortar mixtures were used for the Berenike, the first with the addition of glass powder. Foam was incorporated into the first mortar in order to reduce the weight of the panel, because out of the three mosaics it is the only that hangs on the wall.

After the mortar had set (an interval of several hours), the cloth was removed from the mosaic's surface and a preliminary removal of the glue adhering to the tesserae undertaken. After the mortar had dried completely, the surfaces were brushed, washed and gently sandblasted to remove all traces of glue.

After the remounting, prior restorations became more evident on both the Stag Hunt and the Alphios mosaics. At some point after the Stag Hunt's removal from its original context in the early twentieth century, lacunae and voids had been partially filled

with stone tesserae fixed in a black cement mortar, which was visible in the interstices between the tesserae. In some instances the tesserae were entirely engulfed by the mortar. This mortar was removed during the conservation using a vibrating engraver, microdrills, and chisels. The freed interstices were filled using a liquid, lime-based mortar.

Painted stucco tesserae that had been inserted in the Alphios mosaic to replace missing originals in the area of the inscription were removed and replaced with stone tesserae, similar in color to the originals, but cut in half and laid in below level to differentiate them visually from their context. Lacunae were filled using a hydraulic lime mortar, compatible in grain and color with the bedding and interstitial mortar.

Finally, the three mosaics were photographed and re-installed in the exhibition rooms of the Greco-Roman Museum, and inaugurated at a ceremony in August 2004. These fine works, linked to the artistic style of Hellenistic pavements from northern Greece and part of a corpus of elegant architectural decoration that gained repute throughout the Mediterranean world, are displayed in a position of prominence in the city of their origin.

1. The Stag Hunt, 290-260 BC

The Stag Hunt Mosaic was discovered by Evaristo Breccia on the site of a Greco-Roman-era villa in Shatby, in Alexandria in 1921. This outstanding rectangular mosaic measures 523 by 397 cm, and is composed of a central scene framed with a serpentine ivy border and surrounded by a frieze of fourteen realistic and mythological beasts. A panel set off-center along one side, delineated by a meander punctuated with stars and rosettes, possibly indicates where a threshold might have lain. Although most of the rendering is in tesserae, Daszweski considers the pavement a pebble-style mosaic because of the flowing, rather than rectilinear, placement of the stone pieces.

The narrative scene depicts three Erotes (youthful winged love gods) felling a stag. It reminds one of the mythological story of Diana and Actaeon. The representation in tesserae of the wild boars, lions, griffins, gazelles, leopards and bull is expressive and rhythmic; the Erotes figures are portrayed in postures reminiscent of dancing, characteristic of the Alexandria style of the period, which followed a lively Dionysian aesthetic.

Details are impressive. The Erotes wear gold bracelets and diadems. Special shaped stones, not tessera, are used for noses and fingertips. The animals claws, eyeballs and fangs are emphasized. Lead is used to delineate such features as muscles and contours.

After the mosaic was discovered and excavated, it was removed from the site. The pavement was in relatively good condition, except for the almost total obliteration of one of the Erotes figures, which had apparently been caused by digging that had occurred centuries before. It was laid into a 6 cm-thick cement bed, reinforced by steel mesh and steel rods. The Stag Hunt was briefly displayed in a room within the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria until it was moved to the museum's storage area, where it had lain for eighty years.

2. Berenike portrait of 300-275 BC inserted into frame of ca. 250-225 BC

This circular mosaic panel, 146 cm in diameter, most probably depicts Queen Berenike II, wife of Ptolemy III, wearing military attire with marine motifs. Her ship headdress flanked by dolphins, the anchor-shaped fibula on her shoulder, and her regal bearing have suggested that she is portrayed as the protector and personification of Alexandria (another suggested interpretation is that her headdress commemorates one of

her husband's naval victories.) This type of portrait mosaic is known as an emblema, which would have been set into a field or border of tiles on the floor that created a large frame around the image. Emblemata of significant personages were produced by artists; perhaps even royal, workshops in Alexandria for export, since they were of a portable size, and some were apparently created by artists of some reputation- another Berenike portrait also found at Thmuis and now in the Greco-Roman Museum was made and signed by its creator Sophilos.

Alphios and Arethusa, 3rd century AD

The record is not clear about where the Alphios and Arethusa mosaic was discovered; some have said in Dakhalia, Mansoura in 1912, while others claim Tell Timai. The rectangular panel, once part of a larger pavement, measures 157 by 90 cm. It depicts the pursuit of the water nymph Arethusa by the river god Alphios, a well-known myth and an appropriate decorative theme for a Nile-side villa.

Evaluation of the Process and Case Study

The decision-making process was necessary to be able to elicit and respond to the requests of the SCA. By talking to all parties and seeking their views, all those engaged in the ultimate project had shared in the decision and all had some stake in its success. Summary of Conservation

The mosaics were in relatively good condition despite areas where tesserae were missing. They had suffered from extensive soiling and some earlier unsuccessful conservation attempts, which compromised their long-term safety. Thorough cleaning and consolidation revealed fine nuances of coloration, contouring, and shading in the images, all the more remarkable for their being rendered in cubes and pieces of stone and

terracotta, and pebbles (with the occasional addition of lead strips to refine a contour). The colors are now brighter, and the three works have been mounted on Acrolam and are in appropriate protective frames. The subtle gradations and pointillistic effects achieved by the artists are now again almost as clearly visible as when the carpet-like floors were originally created two thousand years ago in luxurious villas. The renowned mosaic scholar Dr. W. A. Daszweski noted in a commentary on the restorations, “The mosaics, especially the Stag Hunt and the Berenike III medallion, had been very fine before, but now they are splendid. The pleasing aesthetic effect is sure to be appreciated by tourists and interested scholars alike.”

Participation

The museum conservators who worked on the project received hands-on experience to complement their own training and they have gone on to perform further work on a regional level. We are fortunate enough to have Madam Amira Abu Bakr and Mohamed Badr with us at this conference.

The Berenice and Alphius mosaics are back in the same positions in the Museum as before conservation. The Stag Hunt however occupies a prominent position on the floor of a main hall and is a real centerpiece of the museum because of its dynamism, vividness, and beautiful colors. In general we are all pleased to have played a role in conserving these mosaics and returning them to a place of pride for Alexandria.