



The Rudston mosaics

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The Rudston Mosaics

Mosaics have been found in two separate buildings at the Roman villa of Rudston.

Building 1

So-called Building 1, on the east of the site and measuring roughly 11m x 30m, was comprised of a range of 3 rooms of unknown function in the northern half, linked by an L-shaped corridor, and a small heated bath suite to the south, possibly fed in part by a wide, deep well to the immediate west of the building.

The building was first excavated in 1933-36 and then re-examined in 1962-63 (Stead 1980: 3); however, its chronology and use remain unclear. Based on pottery and coins recovered from the well outside the it, Stead argued that the building was most likely constructed in the late 3rd century, and that the baths – although not necessarily the building – were out of use by c. 330 (Stead 1980: 9). This chronology has been broadly accepted by Neal and Cosh (2002: 362). The dating evidence from Building 1 itself is extraordinarily slight, but the few recorded coins, although lacking in precise find-spots, do not contradict Stead's proposed chronology.

In its final phase the building contained at least three mosaics (Neal and Cosh 143.2-3 and 143.5). In addition, there is at least one mosaic from an earlier phase (Neal and Cosh 143.4), which was then overlaid by 143.5.

Building 8

Even less is known about the function and chronology of Building 8, located to the north-west of Building 1. Only a small portion of the building has been uncovered, during trial-trenching in 1971-72, and no dating evidence was found by the excavators (Stead 1980: 32-33). The excavated area consists of two rooms and part of a third, forming a roughly T-shaped plan measuring around 10m x 10m. The full extent of the building is unknown. Both of the fully excavated rooms, Rooms 1 and 2, contained mosaics; the third, partially excavated room had evidence of a hypocaust.

The Building 1 Mosaics

Room 2 of Building 1 contains one of the most well-known and idiosyncratic mosaics in the province, the Rudston Venus Mosaic (Richmond 1933: 4-6; Neal and Cosh 143.2). The mosaic consists of a square flanked by two rectangular panels, although the westernmost panel is largely destroyed. The surviving panel shows the bust of a deity holding a caduceus, with vines emerging from rather schematic *canthari* on either side. The central square, outlined in guilloche, has animals contained in guilloched semi-circles along each side: clockwise from top, there is a leopard with a circular object, possibly a shield, a bull labelled 'TAURUS OMICIDA' with a stick topped by a crescent above him, a lion transfixed by a spear, labelled '[LEO] F[L]AMMEFER', and a stag surrounded by stylized trees (I cautiously accept Wilson (2003)'s reading of F[L]AMMEFER instead of the previously suggested F[R]AMMEFER). In the corners of the squares between these animals are birds with round fruit most closely resembling pomegranates. At the centre of the square is a circle enclosing an image of Venus, who holds a small round object, probably fruit again, in her right hand, with a mirror by her left hand. At her right is a Triton holding a torch. Both figures have been shaped with little regard for correct proportion. Venus' body is curvaceous and bottom-heavy, and her hair wild and abundant. In the interspaces between the semi-circles and the central

circle are figures, apparently nude. Clockwise from the upper left is a spear-bearing figure, possibly female, with pronounced nipples and red *tesserae* in the pubic area, a figure with no attributes, and finally a man holding a long whip or piece of rope; the final figure has not survived. These figures have been interpreted as *bestiarii*, in keeping with the amphitheatre motif suggested by the animals.

It has been noted by many that several elements of the iconography of the Venus Mosaic can be traced directly to North Africa (Smith in Stead 1980: 135; Smith 1987: 13; Johnston 1987: 12-13; Johnston 1994: 297; Neal and Cosh 2002: 355). In particular, the crescent-on-a-stick above the bull is a symbol associated with a family of *venatores* called the Telegenii (Dunbabin 1988: 78 *passim*). Named amphitheatre animals are also found most frequently in North Africa, and indeed our one other example of an animal called OMICIDA is to be found on a mosaic from Carthage, where a bear is so labeled (Ben Abed-Ben Khader 1999: 140 (Cat. No. 161); Plates LX, LXI and LXXXVIII).

The Rudston Venus mosaic is defined, then, by two principal characteristics: 1) strong evidence of a North African source for much of its iconography and 2) distortions and deviations, almost certainly unintentional, from classical standards. When taken together, these two characteristics raise some thought-provoking points about the spread and transformation of images in the Roman provinces.

It has long been assumed that the presence of similar motifs or image-types across wide geographical areas can be explained by mosaicists' use of copy-books containing standard designs (Toynbee 1964: 10-11, 230; Neal and Cosh 2002: 14-15). This general model has also been applied specifically to Rudston; it has been argued that the artisan(s) who laid the Rudston Venus mosaic must have been using a copy-book which contained designs which either directly or ultimately originated in North Africa (Johnston 1987: 13; Smith 2005: 12).

The problem with this model, however, is how we explain the fact that, within Britain, these North African elements appear nowhere else besides Rudston. It is not only that specific iconographical elements such as the crescent-on-a-stick are unknown at other Romano-British sites. There is very little evidence that North African styles or themes were at all familiar to British mosaicists as a whole; at the most, their influence is a very indirect one (the examples of possible North African influence cited by Johnston (1994) are on the whole unconvincing). And yet at Rudston we see not merely a general impression of African-ness, but in fact unequivocal, direct, imitation. Are we to assume that a copy-book containing North African designs reached the artisan responsible for designing the Rudston mosaic, and reached him alone? Such an explanation seems untenable. It is perhaps conceivable that a highly specialized or skilled elite workshop may have obtained designs not available to others in the province. But it cannot be denied that the man or men who laid this mosaic were not at the top of their profession, nor were they situated in a particularly cosmopolitan or connected part of the province, and it stretches credibility to argue that they had access to radically different sources of material that had somehow bypassed the rest of the artistic community in Britain.

A possible alternative is that the North African elements stem from the experience of the patron, rather than the artist. It is marginally more conceivable that the owner of a villa such as Rudston could have been personally acquainted with North African material, either because he was an immigrant to Britain or because he had travelled to North Africa himself: Carthage and its environs, after all, was one of the commercial hubs of the Roman Empire. While Rudston is hardly the largest or the most elaborate of

villas, it is still nonetheless a residence for a wealthy elite: even the relatively small portion of the site which has been excavated has produced not only several figural mosaics, but also extensive evidence of wall-paintings (Liversidge in Stead 1980: 139-145). Might the owner of such a place, traveling abroad, have scribbled down some designs he saw and then commissioned a mosaic incorporating them on his return? Although unlikely, it is perhaps marginally more likely than the copy-book scenario, and the specificity of the Rudston iconography strongly argues that the *someone* involved in the mosaic's creation had direct contact with North African models.

I do not want to push this too far. It is impossible, for instance, to argue that our hypothetical villa-owner might have seen the mosaic from the Maison du Paon in Carthage, which depicts the amphitheatre scene with the bear named OMICIDA. However, Carthage, because of its size and importance, is surely the most likely destination for anyone traveling to North Africa from Britain, and is not only the site of the sole instance of OMICIDA, but is also probably the home of the Telegenii, whose symbol appears at Rudston (Dunbabin 1978: 79). We could, then, tentatively suggest that, whoever it was, whether patron or artist, who carried these designs back to Yorkshire, they were likely carrying them from Carthage. If the patron, then perhaps we can see in his choice a desire to link himself to broader cultural trends. This abstract goal may have, in his eyes, trumped the concrete fact of the clumsiness of his mosaicist's depictions; Millett has argued for a similar interpretation for the lack of classicism in earlier Romano-British art (Millett 1990: 112-117).

This incompetency, to put it frankly, is the other aspect of the Rudston mosaic that is worthy of discussion. Here I differ with, for instance, Martin Henig, who clearly sees limited opportunity for insight in this "one-off from an obscure studio", laid 'by a mosaicist who was simply a bungling and incompetent draughtsman' (Henig 2009: 599; Henig 1995: 101). Incompetent he may have been, but in his very mistakes we can gain insight into processes for the transmutation of classical imagery in provincial settings (Johns 2003: 22-23). Scholars in recent years have quite rightly emphasized that deviation by provincial artists from 'standard' iconography or style does not necessarily represent a misreading of the original, but rather can be a conscious re-invention, or hybridization between imported and 'native' traditions (e.g. Webster 1997). Nonetheless, it seems clear that at Rudston we are indeed witnessing 'errors', but errors that also point to a certain familiarity with classical iconographic tropes. Thus, the bust framed by vines in the long rectangular panel almost certainly is intended to depict Mercury; the caduceus is unmistakable. Yet, the god's winged cap has been transformed into sprays of vegetation. Meanwhile, the triton's torch is also not standard iconography, but its shape and positioning strongly resembles that of the elongated conch shell such figures usually carry. In both these cases, then, we appear to have a mosaicist either recalling from memory representations of Mercury and Tritons which he has seen, or possibly copying them from a model such as a copy-book, but through either faulty memory or faulty reading of the model, he has re-interpreted key attributes. The attributes are not muddled or unidentifiable, but rather replaced by other common motifs. This demonstrates that the mosaicist was not merely blindly copying, but instead actively interpreting the images he was imitating, even though that interpretation resulted in error. This process could perhaps be compared to that of a literate copyist of a manuscript, introducing errors into the text through modification of unfamiliar words or grammatical structures into familiar ones – a common phenomenon in the manuscript tradition of classical texts. Another example of this may

be the stylized trees that surround the stag. Stags are common on scenes of amphitheatre hunts, and the other three animals on the mosaic are clearly placed in an amphitheatre setting. Our stag, however, appears to have escaped from the amphitheatre back to the woods, perhaps because the mosaicist did not recognize that it should be linked to the other three animals, and instead placed it in a more familiar (for the mosaicist) habitat, inadvertently destroying the coherency of the amphitheatre motif.

The two other mosaics from Building 1 are less complex. The first (Cosh and Neal 143.3) displays a geometric design incorporating motifs common in the province. The second (Cosh and Neal 143.5), of which about half remains, was placed in the bath suite and displays a marine scene; part of what appears to be a bust of Oceanus remains in the centre. Such scenes are known from mosaics across the empire. Wilson has argued that here too we can see a North African influence, since Oceanus is frequently found in aquatic scenes there (Wilson 2006: 302). The connection, however, seems harder to prove than in the case of the Venus mosaic, since depictions of Oceanus in such scenes are hardly limited to North Africa, as Wilson himself acknowledges, and indeed appear elsewhere in Roman Britain in other media; the Great Dish from the Mildenhall Treasure is an obvious example.

The Mosaics of Building 8

Both fully excavated rooms of Building 8 possessed mosaic floors. Room 1 contained Mosaic 143.6, a geometric design in red, white, and brown measuring 2.18 m². Room 2, measuring 9.15m x 4.35m, contained a large mosaic consisting of three panels. The first panel, 2.82 m², is almost completely destroyed, but enough remains, including evidence of guidelines in the bedding mortar, to show that its basic design was an octagon within a circle within a square. Three small figures dressed in long robes survive in the space between the circle and square in the left-hand corner; based on parallels with their size and clothing, Witts has argued that they are likely to be figures in a hunting scene (Witts 1999: 4-5).

Below this mosaic is a rectangular panel (2.37m x 1.07m) depicting a *cantharus* flanked by two leopards. The final panel, 3m², shows at its centre a victorious charioteer riding in a *quadriga*. Busts of the Four Seasons fill the corners (Winter is almost entirely destroyed), and birds with fruit stand in the rectangular spaces between the Seasons.

The workmanship of these mosaics is notably higher than that displayed in Building 1, both in terms of the basic draughtsmanship and the use of *tesserae* to convey shading and detail; this is particularly evident in the depictions of the charioteer and the Four Seasons. We are definitely dealing with a different set of craftsmen here.

Although the Four Seasons were a very popular motif on mosaics across the Empire – possibly due to the convenience of their number for a four-corner mosaic floor – it is important to note that the Seasons at Rudston are firmly within a British iconographical tradition. This is most clearly seen in the rake carried by Autumn, which, as Ling has shown, is a motif unique to Britain (Ling 1983: 15-16).

Meanwhile, the Victorious Charioteer is a relatively rare motif. The only other known example from Britain was on a mosaic, now lost, at Colerne in Wiltshire (Neal and Cosh 240.1). Dunbabin, writing in 1982, was able to find 28 examples from across the empire (Dunbabin 1982: 87-89). Charioteers displayed frontally, as at Rudston, were even more rare; in addition to Rudston, two are known from Trier, three from Italy, two

from Spain, and at least 5 in North Africa (Dunbabin 1982: 72-73). Of these, by far the closest parallels to Rudston are the mosaic of the charioteer Polydus from Trier (Dunbabin cat. no. 25; Hoffman, Hupe and Goethert cat. no. 161) and the mosaic of the charioteers Marcianus and Paulus at Merida (Dunbabin cat. no. 12; Blanco Freijeiro cat. no. 43). Both were found in urban domestic contexts; the Trier mosaic has been dated stratigraphically to the middle of the third century, and the Merida mosaic stylistically to the second half of the fourth (Hoffman, Hupe and Goethert 1999: 168; Blanco Freijeiro 1978: 45). The Rudston mosaic strongly resembles them both in terms of general composition and specific iconography; we can cautiously assume that the models from which the Rudston charioteer was drawn were circulating in the western provinces at least from the third century onwards.

Other Evidence of Mosaics at Rudston

In addition to the mosaics from Buildings 1 and 8, piles of loose, sorted, *tesserae* have been found in two different locations on the site. In Building 3, the 'Workshop', *tesserae* were found along the western wall, organized by size and colour into six heaps (Stead 1980: 13). Another pile of around 1700 unsorted *tesserae*, predominantly sandstone, was found in Building 7 (Stead 1980: 18-19). Both buildings seem to have been utilitarian in use, with extensive evidence for hearths, of unknown purpose, in Building 3, and a possible corn-drying kiln in Building 7 (Stead 1980: 10-11, 19). It is most likely, therefore, that the *tesserae* found in these locations were surplus stock for mosaics laid elsewhere on the site, and kept possibly in anticipation of future repairs. Evidence for the re-use or retention of *tesserae* has been noted at several other sites in Britain, and, as Wootton has pointed out, strongly suggests that *tesserae* were generally being produced on-site (Wootton 2012: 151-153). In the case of Rudston, it should be noted that the colours of the hoarded *tesserae* do not make an exact match with the colours of the known mosaics, and therefore they imply that there are still mosaics yet to be found at the villa – an unsurprising conclusion, given, for instance, that Building 8 remains largely unexcavated.

The Mosaics from Rudston: General Remarks

To sum up, we have two sets of mosaics in two different buildings at Rudston, which display very different types of engagement with mosaic art. The Venus Mosaic shows an almost complete indifference to the proportions of the human – or triton – form, although in its artistic defence the human figures, despite their plasticine bodies, ape-like proportions, and occasionally missing fingers, possess a surprising degree of motion and vigour. Meanwhile, the lines of the animals, in particular the leopard and the bull, are almost impressive, with the pleasing curves of the leopard creating an impression of feline grace and the sharp angles of the bull successfully evoking his brute strength – although his tail is perhaps rather less effectively rendered. There is in fact a great deal here to captivate the viewer. Although, as I have discussed, the craftsman very obviously had a limited understanding of the models upon which he drew, he did not give up when confronted by the incomprehensible, but sought to interpret it in light of what he did know. He may have been 'wrong', as in the case of Mercury's leaves or Triton's torch, but he was not lacking in creativity.

His ignorance of such basic iconographic norms as Mercury's winged helmet makes it all the more interesting that his direct models must have come from North Africa. The designer of the Charioteer Mosaic makes no such errors in iconography, but he is clearly embedded in more local networks for the transmission of imagery; even if the image of

the Charioteer itself probably arrived from overseas, the mosaicist was aware of and using motifs developed by insular workshops, as shown by the attributes he chose for his Seasons. The competency and the connections of the artisans responsible for these mosaics are, perhaps, in fact correlated. If the artisan responsible for the Venus Mosaic was an amateur or a highly unskilled professional, as his work may imply, it is then not surprising that he was cut off from or unacquainted with the artistic trends developed by the workshops in the rest of the province; however he came across the North African motifs, whether via his patron, as I have cautiously suggested, or some other route, he represents an evolutionary dead-end, as it were. Meanwhile, the higher technical competence of the Charioteer Mosaic strongly suggests that its creator was trained in his discipline, and thus it is unsurprising that its design shows evidence of his exposure to wider British trends.

What we certainly should not do is yield to the temptation to reconstruct a consistent meaning either for each individual building's mosaics, or for the mosaics from Rudston generally. Johnston, for example, has endeavoured to present a 'coherent interpretation' for the Venus Mosaic, arguing that it represents the triumph of 'the radiant, transcendent figure of Love' over the 'baser elements in humankind'; he even reads the Triton's torch as symbolizing the 'life-enhancing power of Love' (Johnston 1987: 11, 15, 14). Such a tortuous explanation, however, is surely over-sophisticated, and ignores the processes of transmutation through error that are evidently at play here. Meanwhile, arguments that named animals in mosaics must be representations of real-life creatures owned or supported by the villa owner are patently unrealistic (e.g. Ling 2007: 87). As for Building 8, it does seem that the image of the victorious charioteer over time became a generalized symbol of success and good fortune (Dunbabin 1982: 65). Ling, *contra* Dunbabin (1983), has argued that a cosmological interpretation may be assigned to the combination of the charioteer and the four seasons at Rudston, with the charioteer either playing the role of Sol or creating an connection between the turning of the year and the circular track of the race-course (Ling 1983: 18-19). The more sophisticated nature of the Charioteer design, and the evidence that its mosaicist had a better understanding of iconography, does perhaps render a symbolic interpretation here more valid than for the Venus mosaic. However, it does not seem necessary or indeed valid to argue, as some have, that the mosaics from Building 1 and Building 8 should be read in conjunction with each other, in particular that they reveal a particular preoccupation with popular sports (Johnston 1987: 11). Both the amphitheatre and the circus are common themes, and it is also important to remember that we almost certainly have not uncovered all the mosaics of Rudston, and that any new discoveries are likely to destroy a site-wide synthesis based on our current biased sample. Moreover, both the social and chronological contexts of Buildings 1 and 8 are clearly different, and should not be elided into one model.

Which came first? There is almost no dating evidence in either case, but Neal and Cosh are almost certainly correct to date the mosaics of Building 1 to the late third or early fourth century, i.e. contemporary with the rest of the building, in opposition to Smith in Stead 1980, who, contrary to the archaeological evidence, chose to date the Building 1 mosaics on stylistic grounds to the late 4th century at the earliest (Neal and Cosh 2002: 362; Smith in Stead 1980: 137). Neal and Cosh then go on to suggest that the Building 8 mosaics are likely to be later than those of Building 1, although their grounds are unclear (Neal and Cosh 2002: 362). However, given the 3rd century date of the Trier charioteer mosaic, a date based on archaeological rather than stylistic considerations, I

might be inclined to suggest the opposite: i.e. that the Charioteer Mosaic is earlier than the Venus Mosaic. Without further excavation in Building 8, however, the question will remain open.

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