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FLOOR MOSAICS FROM THE TERRITORY OF ROMAN PROVINCE MOESIA

PODLAHOVÉ MOZAIKY Z ÚZEMÍ ŘÍMSKÉ PROVINCE MOESIE

**Abstract**

This article deals with floor mosaics from the territory of Roman province Moesia. The term Moesia is used in this article only as a geographical definition for the territory of today's Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria. First, it summarizes the artistic technique as such. The following text describes the types of mosaics. The main part of the article deals with the examples of floor mosaics from the individual sites in the territory of Roman province Moesia and their ideological patterns.

**Keywords**

Floor mosaics, Moesia, Roman Empire, Byzantine period.

**Abstrakt**

Práce se věnuje podlahovým mozaikám z území bývalé římské provincie Moesie. Termín Moesie je používán v této práci výhradně jako zeměpisná definice pro území dnešního Srbska, Kosova a Bulharska. Nejdříve je shrnuta tato umělecká technika jako taková. Dále jsou popsány druhy mozaik. Hlavní část práce se zabývá podlahovými mozaikami z jednotlivých lokalit a jejich ideovými vzory.

**Klíčová slova**

Podlahové mozaiky, Moesie, doba římská, byzantské období.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Moesia* is geographically located in Serbia, Kosovo and Bulgaria today (fig. 13). *Domitian* divided the province into two parts in 85 AD - *Moesia Superior (Moesis Margensis)* to the west, is a mountainous area rich in minerals and precious metals. *Moesia Inferior*, in the east, lies on fertile plains where cereals are grown, there are plenty of farms and good pasture for livestock [14]. The article aims to contribute to understanding the origin of ideological patterns used on the floor mosaics in the territory of Roman province *Moesia*.

## 2 THE METHODS OF CONSTRUCTION OF FLOOR MOSAIC

There are two techniques to make mosaics – *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum*. The first one employs larger terracotta or mineral stones tesseras (size above 1 cm<sup>2</sup>). The second one is applied for figured compositions – tesseras are smaller. The *opus sectile* technique uses large tiles of marble or other stone and form complex geometrical compositions. Often it is the case of *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* applied in combination. Pebble mosaics involved a cement floor with pieces of pottery, mosaic cubes and coloured marbles inserted into it. Decorative borders, such as the rope pattern, were placed round a central panel, which was often a copy of a painting. From 2<sup>nd</sup> century

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BC are known panels about 40 cm<sup>2</sup>, called *emblemata*. They could be made in workshops on trays or glued to a cloth on which the scene had been painted. Under an edict of *Diocletian* in 301 AD decorators were to be paid 150 denarii per day, while builders were to be paid only 50. This certainly gave status to the artists. It is estimated that it would take 6 days to make 1 m<sup>2</sup> of mosaic [13].



Fig. 1: Graphic reproduction of mosaic stratigraphy adapted from ancient literary. 1) *Statumen* - Layer which is made of large stones laid on the ground. This layer only exists if the mosaic has been constructed on a natural soil. 2) *Rudus* - Layer which is spread over the *statumen*. This layer is made of a lime mortar with large aggregates. 3) *Nucleus* - Layer which is spread over the *rudus* in a thinner layer. The *nucleus* is made of a mortar with fine aggregates. 4) Bedding layer - Layer of mortar which is very rich in lime, and thinly applied in small sections over the *nucleus*. Tesserae are inserted in this layer before the mortar sets. 5) *Tessellatum* - Layer which constitutes the mosaic surface and is composed of tesserae and mortar filling the interstices between them [13].

### 3 FLOOR MOSAICS FROM THE AREA OF INTEREST

#### 3.1 Villa Armira

The site *Villa Armira* is situated in the Eastern Rhodopes (fig. 13), North from the town Ivaylovgrad (Bulgaria). The place is named after the *Armira* River. *Villa Armira* is exposed on a slant South slope on the left bank of the river. The ancient *villa Armira* was discovered in 1964. The building of the villa is related to the time of the Roman emperors *Trajan* (98-117 AD) and *Hadrian* (117-138 AD). The villa prospered for about three centuries and was burnt and looted during the war between the Romans and the Goths in 376-378 AD. The marble palace of the owners was most probably burnt down after the battle at *Hadrianopolis* on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 378 AD [6].



Fig. 2: Part of the mosaic with the portrait of villa Armira's owner and his children [6].

In the room No. 10 there are portraits of a middle-aged bearded man with an earring in one ear and the frail figures of two children, a boy and a girl, on the mosaic (fig. 2). Their bodies are naked and bear the signs of *rachitis*. The absence of the image of the woman (the wife and mother) is probably due to her early death, maybe at childbirth. The man from the portrait has the features of a man from the eastern Roman provinces Syria or Palestine. Maybe he came to the region as the son-in-law in the family of the *Armira villa* owners and his wife died at childbirth. This foreigner was only one of owners from the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. The origin of the founder of the ancient

*villa Armira* was either a direct representative of the Thracian aristocracy or an heir of a Thracian para-dynast from the lower Arda (ancient *Arpesos*) river valley. In any case, he was a well-educated man with the legal status of a Roman citizen [5].

### 3.2 Marcianopolis

The Roman town *Marcianopolis* (fig. 13) was the capital of the Province *Moesia Secunda*, it was built by the springs of the Devnya river and was named after the emperor's (*Marcus Ulpius Traianus*; 98-117 AD) sister *Marciana*. The Museum of Mosaics in Devnya (Varna province, Bulgaria) is standing on the ancient foundations of the building „House of Antiope“ with the early Byzantine mosaics from *Marcianopolis*, which was built at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> - the beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> century (the time of Constantine The Great) and existed until the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The mosaics were made in techniques *opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* out of small cubeshaped stones (tesseras) of marble, limestone, baked clay and coloured glass (smalta) [15].

1) The *Gorgon Medusa* floor mosaic (fig. 3) covers the living-room and dining room (*triclinium*) and represent the shield of the goddess *Pallas Athena* decorated with the head of *Gorgon Medusa*. It was intended to ward the evil away and to petrify ill-wishers with terrifying appearance and freezing gaze (*apotropaion*).



Fig. 3: Marcianopolis, Medusa mosaic detail (left), Ganymede and the eagle mosaic detail (middle) and Pannonian volutes mosaic detail (right) [15].

2) The *Satyr* and *Antiope* floor mosaic in the bedroom (*cubiculum*) depicting one of love affairs of *Zeus*. The nymph *Antiope* was seduced by *Zeus*, who had changed into the looks of a young *satyr* (creature personifying the animal fertility). The mosaic is accompanied by two inscriptions in Ancient Greek - ΣΑΤΥΡΟΣ (*satyr*) and ΑΝΤΙΟΠΗ (*Antiope*).

3) The *Ganymede* and the eagle floor mosaic (fig. 3) in the reception hall (*oecus*). *Ganymede*, the son of the Trojan king *Tros* and the nymph *Callirhoe*, was the most handsome of all mortals. *Zeus*, assuming the shape of an eagle, abducted him and took him to *Olympus* to be the mortal cup-bearer for the gods. *Tros*, *Ganymede*'s father, was given magnificent horses.

4) The seasons floor mosaic in the women's apartments (*gynaeece*). A circular emblem of figured type is inscribed into a rectangular frame of geometric ornaments. A rooster picking at grapes, birds and a pair of Roman sandals are depicted in the empty spaces. The corners of the ornamental frame display the allegories of the four seasons with their attributes. The Bust of Autumn is well preserved – personified by a young woman in a gold-woven gown.

5) The Pannonian volutes mosaic (fig. 3) was discovered in a building of unknown use. The decoration of the mosaic consists of repeated geometric patterns in four colour [15].

### 3.3 Felix Romuliana

Roman imperial city *Felix Romuliana* is located in eastern Serbia (fig. 13), 11 km from Zaječar (Serbia) and nearby village Gamzigrad (2 km). *Felix Romuliana* is a fortified palace and a memorial complex of the Roman emperor from the time of the Tetrarchy, *Gaius Valerius Galerius Maximianus*. He built a palace for himself and his mother *Romula* after whom it is called - *Felix Romuliana*. It was built between 297 and 311 AD, and intended to be the residence of the emperor after the *vincenalia* and his withdrawal from the throne. The ceremony of *vincenalia* was a part of the

ideological programme of the Tetrarchy that anticipated the emperor's withdrawal from the throne after his 20 year reign [12]. Life in *Felix Romuliana* can be divided into 2 horizons: the 1<sup>st</sup> horizon of construction of the *Galerius*' palace, from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> horizon of the Late Roman fortification from the last decades of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. After *Galerius*'s death, the complex was inhabited by common people. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, at the time of *Justinian*, *Romuliana* was renovated. Being exposed to numerous attacks of the Avars and the Slavs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the complex was abandoned. According to the archaeological data, Gamzigrad was revived as a fortified Slav settlement in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD [11].



Fig. 4: Felix Romuliana, detail of mosaic in south hallway (left); Thessaloniki, north peristyle, detail of south corridor mosaic (right) [7].

The south hallway is divided into 3 carpets by braid borders. The lateral carpets have patterns of meanders, octagons with circles decorated with knots, geometricized wine scrolls, and waves similar to the decoration in Thessaloniki (fig. 4). The central carpet contains smaller panels of geometric decoration. The patterns intersecting dodecagons forming squares and triangles around hexagons and stars of eight diamonds connected with squares - to a labyrinth, surrounded by a crenellated wall, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, which has the starting point and the anti-clockwise direction to the centre (Fig. 5) [12]. The filling elements include illusionistic motifs - twisted ribbon and rainbow cable. The rainbow style is characteristic for the eastern half of the Empire [7].



Fig. 5: Felix Romuliana, mosaic in south hallway (left) [7] and detail of labyrinth mosaic (right) [12].

Two apsidal rooms have figured panels combined with geometric mosaics and in one case *opus sectile*. The hunting scenes (fig. 6) were framed with braid, the group of figural scenes surrounded by a meander in perspective and flanked by a geometric design of intersecting circles. The glass meanders in perspective have illusionistic effects. An apsidal reception room had a figural panel depicting *Dionysus* seated in front of a leopard (fig. 6). The figural mosaics are isolated against a white ground. Faces have a slight three-quarter angle; shadows beneath the chins and eyes are delicately indicated with slightly darker tones of tesserae. The hair falls freely in wisps [7]. The rest of the room had geometric mosaics comparable with the south hallway. It seems that the complex was built and decorated within a short time, this means that differences among the mosaics are not chronologically significant, but maybe explain the status of the rooms.

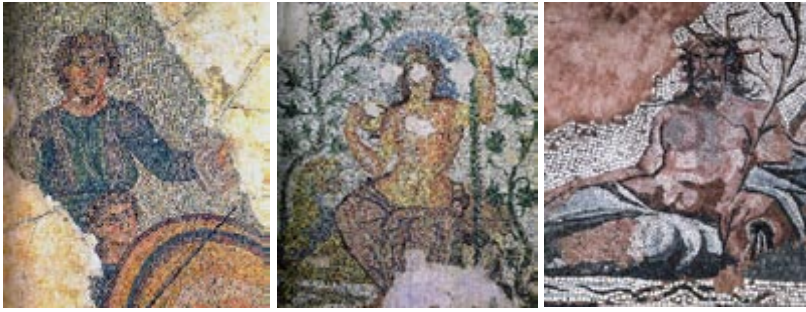


Fig. 6: Felix Romuliana, detail of hunters (left), and Dionysus (middle). Mediana-villa with peristyle, detail of river god (right) [7].

The mosaics in *Galerius's* palace display a symbolical connection with the ideological concept of the palace. There is a massive temple of *Jupiter*, and public rooms including a small baths complex and an elegant *triclinium* decorated with mosaics, the most striking of which features *Bacchus* riding a tiger. Maybe *Dionysus*, who conquered India, symbolize *Galerius* great victory over Persia [8]. It would seem plausible that *Galerius* brought artists from Thessaloniki, where his imperial palace was located, to the place where he built a complex for him and his mother.

### 3.4 Naissus

City of Nis (Serbia), antique *Naissus*, was located in the center of the Roman province *Moesia Superior* (fig. 13), at the crossroads of major antique roads. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD *Naissus* was one of the four largest cities in *Dardania* (the district called *Dardania* in *Moesia Superior*, was formed into a province by *Diocletian*, with the capital at *Naissus*) [14]. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD *Naissus* belonged to the province *Dacia Mediterranea*. In this period the city became the residence of Constantine the Great, who was born on the territory of *Naissus*, ruled from 306 AD to 337 AD. The greatest merit to the increase of number of luxury buildings is attributed to his stays in *Naissus* [9].



Fig. 7: Mediana-villa with peristyle, triclinium (left). Sirmium, mosaic of Imperial Bath (right) [7].

The ancient settlement *Mediana* was located in the eastern suburb of the Roman *Naissus* and it is his best-preserved part from the late Roman period. The site dates to the reign of Constantine the Great [9]. The mosaic in the *triclinium's* central hexagonal space of the peristyle villa at *Mediana* is filled alternately with ribbon and braid and centered with rosette designs (fig. 7) [7]. A mosaic from the Large Bath at *Sirmium* (fig. 7) is similar to the floor of the *Mediana triclinium*, it may be a contemporary product of the same workshop.

The mosaics of the apsidal room are damaged; a winged head of *Medusa* set into a geometric pattern survives. Three sides of the peristyle have geometric patterns extended to cover long hallways, while in the center of the north corridor panels of geometric mosaics (fig. 8) flank a central figural composition. The figure panel depicts a mythological scene, maybe *Leda* and the swan, but only parts of a mosaic are preserved [7]. Notice, that a reclining river god (fig. 6) has the same curving patches of color as the *Romuliana Dionysus*. But the similarities between these *Mediana* and *Romuliana* mosaics make it unlikely because they are too far removed from each other in date.



Fig. 8: Mediana-villa with peristyle, north corridor mosaic (left). Sirmium, two layers of mosaic [7].

There is a pattern of a grid of diamonds with squares between their lateral points bordered by an organic vine scroll, eastern of the figure panel (fig. 8). The outlines of the diamonds are repeated and laid in 2 colors - shading. The filling motifs in the diamonds include grids, inscribed circles with crosslets, and irregular curvilinear elements [7]. The pattern is seen also in the Palace of *Galerius* in Thessaloniki (fig. 4), although the filling motifs of *Mediana* are more complex.

It is more than evident that the *triclinium* mosaics may have been laid by mosaicists who worked at *Sirmium*. The peristyle mosaics have coloristic effects comparable to mosaics of Thessaloniki and *Romuliana*. The river god from *Mediana* shows similarities in style to mosaics from *Romuliana* and Thessaloniki. Mosaic workshops in Thessaloniki played an influential role in mosaics farther inland.

In the place of the ambo of early Christian basilica a mosaic representation of Christ's monogram was found. There is a very unfavorable microclimate, which makes it completely inaccessible to visitors. Floor mosaics from *Naissus* are not adequately protected and presented. The only permanent shelter is built above a *triclinium* mosaics of the Villa with peristyle at *Mediana*, the temporary shelters are built above mosaics of early Christian basilica with the monogram of Christ. The rest of more than 900m<sup>2</sup> of floor mosaic is covered by sand and not presented in any way [9].

### 3.5 Sirmium

Various rulers, *Diocletian*, *Galerius*, *Licinius* and *Constantine* among others, resided at *Sirmium* (Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia; fig. 13) in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the early 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In the Palace, in a hallway 50 m long, 2 layers of partially preserved mosaic have been discovered (fig. 8). The later mosaic is more homogenous and less complex in design than the earlier mosaic it replaced. This upper mosaic has a pattern of meanders and lozenges. The color scheme comprise black, red and light brown; the tesserae are coarse. It is possible that the floor dates to 308-316 AD, at the time when *Licinius* made his headquarters in *Sirmium* [7].

### 3.6 Caričin Grad

Caričin grad is actually *Iustiniana Prima* (Lebane, Serbia; fig. 13), built with the aim of raising the remote village of *Taurision* (the birthplace of *Justinian I*), into the rank of cities of the highest imperial dignity-the seat of the prefect of the *Illyricum* praetory and the newly established archbishopric with jurisdiction over *Dacia* and *Macedonia Secunda*. Caričin grad was populated during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The early-Byzantine southern basilica (an area of 45x20 m) is a monumental three-nave building with a transept and an apse on the eastern side, as well as a open-type narthex, an atrium with an ablative well and two side parakleses on the western side (fig. 9). On the right column of the tribilon at the entrance from the narthex into the middle nave was discovered a monogram of Byzantine emperor *Justinian I* (527-565 AD) [10].

The floor mosaic (fig. 9) of the central nave is formed in the shape of three rectangular areas running in the east-west direction. The middle area is covered by a motif of stylized palmettos. The left rectangle make up a lunar and solar emblems - a personification of good and evil and their struggle with temptations, with the goal of saving the human soul, and through the ancient symbols to mark paganism as a sin, which wholly agrees with *Justinian's* policy of "introducing the only true faith". The right rectangle depicts birds, plants and communion chalices as "heaven on earth accessible to the believer." Next to the five-piece ambo a mosaic is depicting a young shepherd

driving three sheep in front of him toward a simple building in the higher right corner. The zone in front of the altar, is represented by a man is fighting a bear, and on the other side above the gentle shepherd is running a spear through a lion rearing on its hind legs [10]. David's battle with the bear, is the prototype of Christ's victory over the forces of darkness.

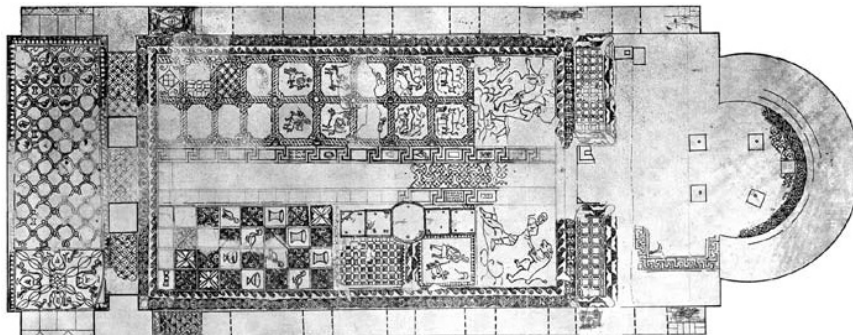


Fig. 9: Caričin grad, mosaic in the southern basilica [10].

By edict of *Theodosius II* of 427 AD, was forbidden to paint Christ and Saints on floors, which would expose them to desecration by the feet of faithful. The mosaic segment of the southern basilica represent a shepherd, but not the Good Shepherd Christ (fig. 10). In Christianity, the shepherd is a divinely anointed master and leader of the flock: the ruler, the priest or the representative of Christ. This shepherd is a prefiguration of the shepherd-king David - personification of a ruler and priest in the sense of a people's shepherd according to the will of God [10].



Fig. 10: Caričin grad, shepherd from the southern basilica (left). Rome, shepherd from Titulus' lamp (right) [10].

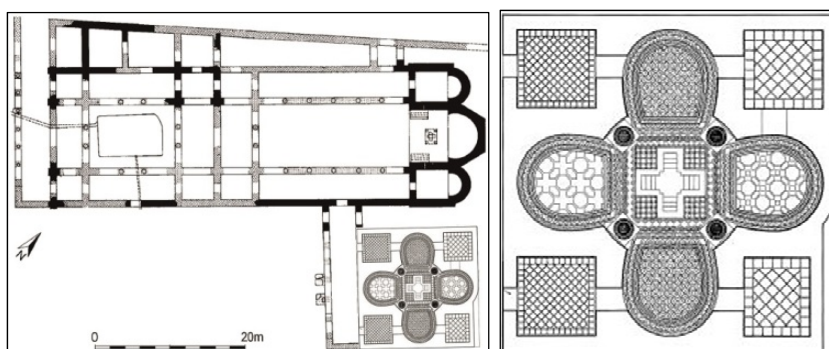


Fig. 11: Caričin grad, plan of the Episcopal Basilica (left) and plan of the baptistery (right) [3].

The baptistery in Caričin Grad was built along the southern wall of the episcopal basilica but was not organically connected to it (fig. 11). The connecting element was the portico, built along the western façade. The baptistery is a building on a square ground plan with slightly reduced dimensions in south-eastern compartment. The central inner space consisted of four conches shaped like horseshoes, with vaults in the upper zone. In the centre was a cruciform piscine. The floors were

covered with mosaics from glass paste [3]. In the northern and southern conches were geometrical ornaments and in the eastern and western conches, were plant and zoomorphic presentations - an octopus, a deer, a rabbit, a foal, a ram and a butterfly. Baptistery with a piscine was intended for baptising adult catechumens, which was performed by immersion.

### 3.7 Ulpiana-Justiniana Secunda

*Ulpiana* is the Roman and Early Byzantine settlement. Belonging to ancient *Dardania* and placed near the important via *Lissus – Naissus*, it became one of the main cities of the province *Moesia Superior*. *Ulpiana* (fig. 13) is located 9 km south-east from Prishtinë/Priština (Kosovo). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the city became a *municipium*. From the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, *Ulpiana* was attacked by northern tribes and then again by the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Huns and Gets). In 472 AD it was destroyed by *Theodoric*. The city was destroyed also in 518 AD by an earthquake. Emperor *Justinian* the Great rebuilt it and renamed it *Iustiniana Secunda*. The *Ulpiana* complex is composed of fortress (*castrum*), city, northern, western and southern necropolis, tumulus „Arat e Cerkezit/Čerkesko Polje“ and tumulus „Cernica“. The *Ulpiana* mosaics are earlier date in comparison with the one from *Vindenis* (fig. 13). From the northern necropolis are parts of the floor of the memorial building with preserved traces of a votive inscription, while in the northern and southern parts of the town have been found floors of luxurious buildings. Their common feature is simple geometric ornamentation and poorer workmanship. An exception to this is the panel (in one of the rooms of the building in the southern part of the town) with representations of birds, a cock, a hen, and a peacock, in separate fields, very deftly depicted by means of multicoloured stone, glass and few gilded cubes [2].

### 3.8 Nerodimlje/Nerodime

In 1988, at the village of Nerodimlje/Nerodime (today's Kosovo; fig. 13) were discovered a villa complex with *thermae* that was constructed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and reconstructions were conducted during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century AD [2]. The floor mosaic (fig. 12) from the 4<sup>th</sup> or at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century was discovered within a rectangular room with an apse (*triclinium*) [1]. In the western part the mosaic shows 7 arcades, and in all of them 7 figures together with inscriptions identifying them as the seven wise men of antiquity [4]. This mosaic is the most beautiful example of artistic creation in these areas during the Early Byzantine period. M. Berisha based on the floor mosaic composition looking the analogy with the floor mosaic of the *Heraclea Lyncestis martyrrium* in Macedonia and the *Lin Basilica martyrrium* in Albania [1]. The rest of room was decorated with mosaics in a square patchwork of rosetta and cross motifs. The *frigidarium* contained mosaics with figures of nude females (probably nymphs) and a head of a deity with a wreath in hand. According to M. A. Janković mosaics were made in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, long after the building of the baths [4].



Fig. 12: Nerodimlje/Nerodime, mosaic in triclinium (left [4], middle and right [1]).

### 3.9 Vindenis

The settlement and roman road station *Vindenis* is situated near the village Glavnik/Gillamnik (fig. 13), 5 km southeast of Podujevo/Podujevë (eastern Kosovo) on the right bank of Lab/Llap river. The ancient *Via Lissus-Naissus* roman road was a diagonal route, connecting the central Balkans region with the Adriatic coast, which passed through *Vindenis*. Archaeological investigations identified a geometrical mosaic with a rectangular field in the center, in which *Orpheus* (fig. 13) with



his flute is represented, surrounded by wild animals bewitched by the sound of the melody he is playing. This scene, executed in multicoloured cubes, confirms high artistry and workmanship of its author, it may have been the creation of an experienced mosaic maker who worked in one of the artistic centres in the eastern part of the Empire at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century [14].

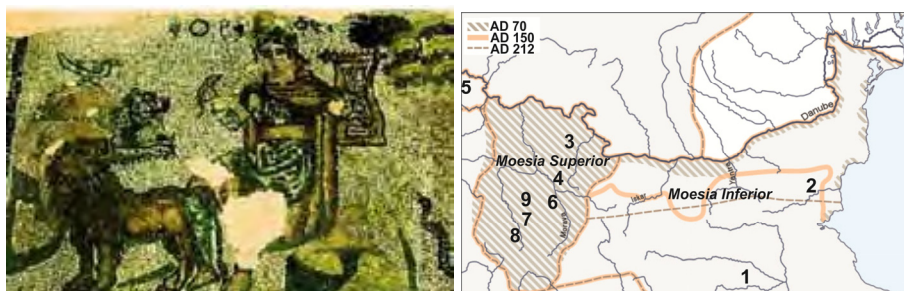


Fig. 13: Vindenis, mosaic of Orpheus (left [1]); Map of province Moesia with sites of interest: 1) villa Armira, 2) Marcianopolis, 3) Felix Romuliana, 4) Naissus, 5) Sirmium, 6) Caričin Grad, 7) Ulpiana, 8) Nerodimlje/Nerodime, 9) Vindenis (right)

#### 4 CONCLUSION

This review contributes to the understanding of the origins of ideological patterns used on the floor mosaics in the province *Moesia*. The article demonstrates that under the patronage of the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD rulers and their officials, mosaics with geometric patterns were adapted to monumental spaces. The geometric carpets that resulted reinforce the concept of a mosaic floor as a 2D surface, was dominant floor mosaic design in the later 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Such all-over designs had a long history in the western part of the Empire. The lack of previous tradition of floor mosaics in this region during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD, make these mosaics more significant. The location of the province between the eastern and western halves of the Empire also led to the influences of regional styles. There is a distinction between the floors with a western approach seen at Split, *Sirmium* and in the *triclinium* at *Mediana* and the eastern approach in Thessaloniki, *Felix Romuliana* and the peristyle at *Mediana*. The quality of the mosaics from *Sirmium*, *Felix Romuliana* and *Mediana* reflects the wealth and importance of the region during the Tetrarchy and decades under Constantine and his dynasty. The comparison of the floor mosaics at *Ulpiana* and at villas at *Vindenis* and *Nerodimlje/Nerodime* indicate that the aspect of artistic creativity was also represented in these areas - executed after established clichés and repeating 2D ornamental patterns composed after traditional ones, they do not differ much from other contemporary floor mosaics. This text was written under the cooperation of the author with German colleagues from Roman-Germanic Commission of German Archaeological Institute on the project „Die kaiserzeitlich-spätromische Stadt Ulpiana bei Gračanica, Kosovo“, which leads to revision of an earlier state of knowledge and new research provided answers to some previously neglected issues.

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