



Summary :

A large number of Roman mosaics have been unearthed *in situ* at Aphrodisias. They were crafted following the opus sectile and opus tessellatum techniques. These mosaics incorporate mainly non-representational geometric themes, although they do include some pictorial representations, repeating earlier motifs found in other areas of the Roman world.

Date

Hellenistic, Roman, Early Christian periods

Geographical Location

Aphrodisias, Caria

1. Hellenistic Period

A very small percentage of the mosaics found in [Aphrodisias](#) belongs to the [Hellenistic period](#); most of them are dated to the Roman and Early Christian periods.

A mosaic discovered *in situ* under the Roman [Temple of Aphrodite](#) originates from a building earlier than the Roman temple and is dated to the first half of the 3rd cent. BC. This structure was possibly related to the cult of the goddess. This mosaic is made up of polygonal and some almost square tesserae of white, blue-black and red colour. It survives in a fragmentary state, thus we cannot make a full appreciation of its decoration. It preserves sections of a wave motif and a formation that probably depicts a dolphin's tale or the front legs of an animal.¹ These clues have led to the hypothesis that it depicted a marine-life theme, highly appropriate for the cult of [Aphrodite](#), a goddess who, according to legend, had emerged from the foam of the sea.²

2. Roman Period

The Roman floors that have been unearthed in Aphrodisias were crafted in the [opus tessellatum](#) and [opus sectile](#) techniques.

The opus sectile mosaics usually cover surfaces of auxiliary spaces. They are decorated with motifs lacking precision in design and are simple compared to the opus tessellatum decoration, due to the limitations of that technique. The material used for the opus sectile floors is marble, sometimes combined with limestone. The decoration consists of pieces cut in various geometric shapes (e.g. squares, triangles, lozenges, hexagons), which are usually combined to create a pattern of larger arrangements. One of the most intriguing patterns was discovered on the floor of a [bath complex](#) next to the [theatre](#), the so-called Aula Termale (late 2nd/early 3rd cent. AD). This floor consists of rectangular grids, some of which bear chequered decoration, while shields composed of concentric rows of curvilinear triangles are inscribed in others. Elongated pieces of white marble have been inserted between the edges of these grids.

The majority of the opus tessellatum mosaics contain geometrical motifs; their austere design and the regularity of the formations are typical of the Roman production. Some of them feature more colours than others; all, however, are multi-coloured, a telling characteristic of [Late Roman mosaics](#). Not one opus tessellatum mosaic dating to the 3rd century has been discovered so far. It is believed that this is due to a period of economic decline starting in c.250.³

3. Early Christian period

The political stability and the resurgence of the economy during the period of [Constantine](#)'s reign are reflected in the increased number of [mosaics](#) dating to the mid and late 4th century. Furthermore, the two earthquakes that occurred during this century, in 358 and 365 more specifically, certainly occasioned a wave of building activity, which would explain the significant number of mosaics dating to the second half of the 4th century.



The decoration of the opus tessellatum mosaics is dominated by non-representational themes, either individual motifs or bands of repeating motifs running along the surface of the floor. There are, however, a few pictorial depictions, the themes of which are largely found elsewhere too. One of them decorates the circumference of the pool in the North Room in the so-called 'Complex of the North Shrine' (350-375). Only a small section of the pictorial depiction survives: it consists of the personification of the four Seasons placed inside medallions which cover the four corners of the floor. More specifically, a section of the Summer's hair survives, with wheat strands springing from the head. Notwithstanding the partial survival of the depiction, the existence of similar compositions has allowed the identification of the mosaic's theme.⁴

Another even more popular motif, the hunting theme, featuring human hunters or animal predators, appears repeatedly on the adorned floors of Aphrodisias. In the North Room of the North Shrine Complex the depiction of a hunter attacking a lion with his spear has been unearthed. The depiction of a single hunter attacking his prey is very common in the mosaics of western Asia Minor. Generally speaking, the depictions of hunting are considered representations of bravery, hunting skills and are indirect markers of social and financial rank.

In the South Room of the Tetracylon house (early 5th century) an opus tessellatum mosaic came to light: it encompasses four depictions of a hunt framed in rectangular borders: (a) a lion against a bull, (b) a tigress against a snake, (c) a hound, a hare and a hawk (this is probably a scene depicting the training of a hunting hawk), (d) a feline (leopard?) against an animal with cloven hoofs (deer?). A typical characteristic of these scenes is the lack of any elements representing the natural surroundings. The undulating spiral of leaves, which frames two of them, is purely decorative in nature, for its size is disproportionately larger to that of the figures. Furthermore, its undulating shape follows the curve created by the figures, accentuating the rendering of their motion.

The most original depiction found on an Aphrodisias floor comes from a building in Area 1 (second quarter of the 2nd century AD). It preserves the upper torso of a female figure, over which an inscription reads 'ΤΑΛΗΝΗ' (=serenity). On the left of this figure we can discern the start of another inscription: 'ΑΦ...' (a possible reference to goddess Aphrodite), while on its right we have the last letter of a third inscription: '...Σ'. This mosaic is reminiscent of a depiction featuring the figures of Oceanus and Galene discovered in Merida.⁵ At any rate, irrespective of the identity of the third figure in this depiction, we can safely assume that this is a representation of an abstract notion, of serenity and calmness, and not a narrative scene.

1. Campbell, S., *The Mosaics of Aphrodisias in Caria* (Subsidia Mediaevalia 18, Corpus of Mosaics in Turkey, Toronto 1991), pp. 5-7.

2. For the Late Antique mosaics featuring Aphrodite see Dunbabin, K., *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa. Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (Oxford 1978), pp. 154-158.

3. Roueché, C., *Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity* (London 1989), p. 24.

4. See Parrish, D., *Season Mosaics of Roman North Africa* (Rome 1984), tables 18a, 33, 54b, 57b, 59a, 59b, 69b, 73a-b, 78, 86a-b.

5. Quet, M.-H., *La Mosaïque cosmologique de Merida* (Paris 1981), pp. 21, 24, table 1.

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Glossary :

	opus sectile, the
Technique of floor or wall decoration. Thin pieces of polychrome marble are carved or joined so that a decorative motif could be depicted.	
	opus tessellatum, the
The mosaic art for Romans. Its domination spans a period from Hellenistic till Byzantine times. These mosaics consist of small and equal in size stone, clay or glass colourful tesserae.	