Management and Preservation of Mosaics in Syria: Between Theory and Practice

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Syria is a repository for a phenomenal catalogue of cultural heritage which includes a unique and rich corpus of mosaics. There are literally thousands of square metres of Classical and Byzantine-period mosaic pavements in Syria which come from public buildings, churches and private houses. Although some can still be seen in situ, many more have been lifted and even more still lie safely buried in the ground undisturbed. Of these only a few are on public display in museums, whereas the vast majority are housed in storerooms and await conservation. Yet today this corpus presents a daunting challenge in terms of conservation and preservation where traditional tried and tested methods are not always viable. This paper aims to outline current conservation strategies in Syria today and make the case for a multidisciplinary approach in dealing with what is now becoming an “old problem”.

Therefore, it is of vital importance that the management of mosaics and archaeological sites rich with mosaic floors become part of a common strategy of cooperation between the institutional partners and local stakeholders. One of the hoped-for outcomes of the programmes outlined in this paper is to present the Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) with a new strategic approach which aims at improving the integrated management of the mosaic corpus in Syria as well as the sites in which they are discovered.

Although the current recommended treatment of choice is to preserve mosaics in situ whenever possible, in Syria the treatment of choice for the majority of new mosaic discoveries is removal. The main reason for this is the lack of available resources to provide physical protection either in the form of structures to protect the mosaics from the elements or guards to prevent theft or vandalism. The result of this policy is that over a period of 40–50 years Syria has managed to acquire a backlog of un-restored mosaics amounting to a recently revised figure in excess of 6,000 square metres and growing as new discoveries are made every year.

The overwhelming majority of these removed and un-restored mosaics are stored in very poor conditions where they are subject to sustained mechanical damage caused by long term exposure to physical/mechanical abuse, dust and damp/humid conditions (fig. 1). Furthermore, quite often the related documentation is missing, incomplete or unreliable.
This continued practice of removal and storage in unsuitable conditions has led to the accumulation of a backlog which has reached crisis proportions in terms of preservation, restoration and storage. Should this practice be permitted to continue unchecked, a point will be reached where only drastic solutions will be viable. This would include the halt of all excavations (of sites which may produce mosaics) until this backlog is reduced to manageable levels and would permit only rescue or salvage excavations. Although such a strategy is undesirable, it may become a reality unless action is taken immediately to control this spiralling backlog of un-restored mosaics.

Until very recently, the restoration techniques which have been used may be described at best as old-fashioned. Such techniques involve the use of concrete cement poured on a metal/iron frame. The mosaic carpet is unrolled over the drying cement surface and imbedded into it. The surface is then cleaned using turpentine or similar petroleum-based chemicals in order to dissolve the remnants of the rubber-based adhesive and polished with an abrasive power tool. The larger mosaics are often laid out in segments and then put together like a jigsaw puzzle (fig. 2).

The question that remains unanswered here, however, is why the commonest method of mosaic management in Syria is removal rather than preservation in situ? This is even more perplexing when one considers the promising example of in situ preservation in the museum of Shahba. At the archaeological site of Shahba-Philippopolis a villa was discovered with a number of important mosaics covering its floors. This unusual find prompted DGAM to preserve and display them in situ by constructing a permanent structure over them which now constitutes the museum of Shahba.

The answer lies in the inherent problems associated with in situ preservation, which from a Syrian perspective is (mistakenly) considered the greater of two evils. The most often cited reason for removal is protection from unauthorised removal or vandalism. On archaeological sites this threat to mosaics is prominent due to the lack of funds for the construction of permanent and secure structures and/or for the appointment of guards to protect them. The financial inability and lack of commitment to provide long term care and maintenance for in situ restored mosaics and any encasing structures acts as a further deterrent against in situ restoration (Al-Azm, 2004).

In order to tackle the problems of continual removal, poor storage conditions and inappropriate conservation outlined above, a multidisciplinary approach is being proposed. This approach aims to involve local stakeholders and professionals at all levels. It is hoped that through such an approach a better understanding of the causes of these underlying problems and a more effective means of dealing with them will emerge. More importantly, a national