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Contents

Editorial Jane Chick	2
Epic Tales from Roman Somerset. The Deciphering and Subsequent Lifting of the Dido and Aeneas Mosaic from Low Ham Roman Villa Steve Minnitt, Roger H Leech and Stephen R Cosh with the assistance of Jessica Holmes	3
The Roman Mosaics Lifted by the Firm of W. Clarke, Llandaff Michael Statham and Stephen R Cosh	12
A Lost Mosaic Panel from the Spoonley Wood Roman Villa Stephen R Cosh, Michael Dawson, Valerie Hotchkiss and Bonnie Wheeler	21
The East Malling Mosaic Floor Stephen Clifton	26
A New Digital Reconstruction of the Large Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya Marie-S�raphine Forray	32
York’s Hunger Games: Images of Roman Spectacles on Mosaics in Northern Britain Jeremy Rossiter	42
What Makes a Mosaic Roman? The Practical Rules Behind Ancient Design and Craftsmanship Lawrence Payne	49
Review: <i>Roman Identity and Lived Religion. Baptismal Art in Late Antiquity</i> by Stefanie Lenk Jane Chick	54
Review: <i>A Mosaic of Recollections: Memoirs of an Archaeologist</i> by David S Neal Stephen R Cosh	56

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Front Cover: The Low Ham Mosaic. South West Heritage Trust.
Inside Covers: Reconstruction of the large mosaic pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Marie-S raphine Forray.

Editorial

Jane Chick

Another year, another *Mosaic*! This year's edition revisits some well-known and much-loved sites in the UK, wanders off to North Africa and also looks at the way Roman mosaics were composed and the working practices of mosaicists.

The first three articles in this edition are all concerned with the removal and display of mosaics.

The first article, a collaborative work by Steve Minnitt, Roger Leech and Stephen Cosh, deals with the Dido and Aeneas mosaic from the Roman villa at Low Ham. The paper complements and elaborates a forthcoming major volume on past and recent work at Low Ham Roman Villa, the publication of which was supported by a grant from ASPROM.

In the next article Michael Statham and Stephen Cosh present new information gleaned from the archives of the building firm, W. Clarke, Llandaff, Cardiff, about the lifting and displaying of Roman mosaics. This article is particularly interesting coming so close on the heels of an article in last year's journal about similar work carried out by The Marble Mosaic Company in Bristol.

A lost mosaic pavement from Spoonley Wood Roman Villa is the topic of an article by Michael Dawson, Stephen Cosh, Valerie Hotchkiss and Bonnie Wheeler. The villa, discovered in 1877, was not adequately conserved and fell into a ruinous state. By the 1970s the mosaics were considered lost, that is, until a small panel depicting a Season turned up in Texas USA.

A report by Stephen Clifton on the investigations by the Maidstone Area Archaeological Group at East Malling in Kent is the focus of the next contribution. It details how, in February 2024, excavations revealed a black and white mosaic under an allotment plot.

For our next contribution we move to North Africa and the mosaic pavement at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya. Marie-S raphine Forray tells us how and why she, together with students and staff at Strasbourg University, staged an exhibition featuring a reconstruction of the pavement. The end result reunited the panels with their borders and allowed visitors to actually walk over the images, rather than looking at them on the walls of the museum.

Mosaics depicting images of Roman spectacles take centre stage in Jeremy Rossiter's article. Although the mosaics from Rudston and Horkstow are the focus of this paper, the North African theme continues with comparisons between these mosaics and objects from Tunisia and Libya.

The next contribution by Lawrence Payne shifts the focus from specific mosaics to Roman mosaicists. It looks at different conventions followed by mosaicists and discusses how the craftsmen learnt their trade and passed on their knowledge.

This edition of *Mosaic* ends with two book reviews. The first is a review for *Roman Identity and Lived Religion. Baptismal Art in Late Antiquity* by Stefanie Lenk. The book considers what the mosaics paving Late Antique baptisteries can tell us about the people who commissioned and used these buildings. It provides valuable information about some less well documented sites in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, as well as some more well-known baptisteries in Italy.

The second is less a review and more an appreciation of the work – and indeed the book's author. *A Mosaic of Recollections. David S. Neal: Memoirs of an Archaeologist* is an autobiography giving readers an insight into the life, work and many achievements of David Neal. David has been a member of ASPROM since its inception in 1978. He served on the committee for many years, for several of which he was Vice-Chairman.

Epic Tales from Roman Somerset. The Deciphering and Subsequent Lifting of the Dido and Aeneas Mosaic from Low Ham Roman Villa

Steve Minnitt, Roger H Leech and Stephen R Cosh with the assistance of Jessica Holmes

A major volume on past and recent work on the site of Low Ham villa is to be published in 2025: Roberts, D., Leech, R. H. and Cubitt R.S., *The Romano-British villa and prehistoric settlement at Low Ham, Somerset*. Research Report of the Society of Antiquaries of London No. 85. This paper complements and elaborates that work with specific reference to the Dido and Aeneas mosaic.



Fig. 1: The Low Ham mosaic. South West Heritage Trust.

Discovery and interpreting the mosaic

It is always fascinating to hear about the circumstances of an important mosaic's discovery. The recent example of the Trojan War mosaic from Ketton, Rutland, in 2020 has been well documented, particularly in the press and other media.

A farmer noticed cropmarks and stray pottery in one of his fields when a family walk was diverted because of angry bees, after which his son exposed a third of one side of the mosaic.¹ The initial finding of the Bellerophon and Pelops mosaic

Erratum

Mosaic 51, pp 3-7 'The Marble Mosaic Company' by Stephen Maddalena and Stephen R Cosh. On p.7 Emma Stewart should read Emma Stuart.

from Boxford, West Berkshire, in 2017 is also of interest. Quite unexpectedly, as there was no trace of mosaics or mention of tesserae during excavations of the villa in the nineteenth century, the diggers hit upon the surface of a mosaic, revealing one of what were later recognised as Telamons (architectural supports in the form of men). At first, this was thought to be the only figured panel until what appeared to be a foot was noticed in one corner, which later proved to belong to Hercules slaying a Centaur.² These two spectacular mosaics, unearthed within three years of each other, were by far the most significant mosaics found since the famous Hinton St Mary ‘Christ’ mosaic in 1963. This had been encountered when a post-hole was being dug for a washing line behind the village smithy. The presence of a Chi-Rho symbol – the first two letters of Christ in Greek – superimposed by the head of a young man, suggested that the central bust was Christ. The complete room was excavated in 1964 and the mosaic was lifted and removed to the British Museum the following year, having been purchased from the property-owner and finder, Mr White. (See *Mosaic* 45, 2018, entirely devoted to the Hinton St Mary mosaic).

The most noteworthy discovery before that was the Dido and Aeneas mosaic from Low Ham, Somerset, which was fully exposed in 1946. It has four rectangular panels around a central octagon containing a depiction of Venus, each illustrating incidents in their story as recounted by Virgil in his *Aeneid* (Fig. 1). The panels have been discussed at length elsewhere, but essentially, they show: the arrival of Aeneas’ fleet in Carthage; the meeting between the Trojan, Aeneas, accompanied by his son, Ascanius, and Dido, queen of Carthage, with Venus in attendance; the three main characters on horseback taking part in a hunt; and Dido and Aeneas locked in an embrace during the hunt.³

Credit for the discovery of the Dido and Aeneas mosaic must go to seventeen-year-old Lionel Walrond, then living at Glebe Farm, in nearby Pitney. Lionel had been orphaned at the age of four and was brought up by his uncle and aunts, but he was a clever lad, educated at Huish’s Grammar School, Taunton. On leaving school aged sixteen he seemed destined for a life labouring on his uncle’s dairy farm. However, he had an interest in archaeology and became a member of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, and two important Roman discoveries he made in the area changed the course of his life and added greatly to our knowledge of Roman Somerset. The first was the well-preserved octagonal basin surrounded by a frieze of fishes at Lufton, near Yeovil, in Somerset. In April 1945, a young friend of his, K. C. J. Hill, noticed something from his tractor while ploughing an old pasture at Lufton Manor Farm to the north of the village, which he thought might be of interest to Lionel. Lionel invited archaeologist, Stephen Dewar (1892-1976), to visit the site and the existence of the Roman villa was established. The opulent bath-house was excavated between 1946 and 1952, directed by Leonard and Nora Hayward, with ‘expert advice and friendly encouragement’ from C. A. Ralegh Radford.⁴

Soon after, and fired with the enthusiasm of youth, Lionel realised the potential of a site even closer to his home. He had noticed in a back issue of the *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* that a local farmer, Herbert Cook, coincidentally also of Manor Farm, but at Low Ham, less than 2km from Lionel’s home, had donated to the Somerset County Museum, Taunton, a fragment of a Roman box-flue tile (with finger print) found at a depth of almost a metre in 1938. It transpired that this was unearthed during the burial of a dead sheep.⁵ Lionel asked for permission to survey the site for a good spot to dig, and on 6 October 1945, aided by a couple of friends and, once again, the more experienced Stephen Dewar, a trial trench was opened. According to Lionel’s account, they had stopped during the afternoon for a flask of tea when they noticed that, with the raking sunlight drying the bottom of the trench, tessellation was visible. They soon found that they had revealed the depiction of a horse’s head, which later proved to belong to the one ridden by Aeneas.⁶ Dewar would take the credit for this. In the following year he wrote a note, apparently correcting a volunteer: ‘I went over to Low Ham, and LW +2 and I dug a hole some 10 yds W. of the sheep burial. The trowel that struck the mosaic was mine. This hole was dug under my guidance...’.⁷

The site was excavated between 1946-1948 with Stephen Dewar as site director and the more eminent archaeologist, C. A. Ralegh Radford, as consultant. The latter would produce annual reports in the *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*.⁸ The Dido and Aeneas mosaic was soon completely exposed, along with the square piscina (cold-water bath). Apparently, Radford first visited the site on 4 May as reported in the *Bristol Evening News* and the *Western Gazette* on 8 May, the same day that the find was mentioned on the BBC news. The site was opened to the public from April until the excavations were closed down in late August, attracting much attention from the local press.

And what became of Lionel Walrond, after his largely unacknowledged discovery of the Dido and Aeneas mosaic? Fortunately, he did not have to endure a life in farming, but was able to pursue his interest in the past. In 1955 he moved to Stroud to become curator of the museum there, a position in which he remained for 37 years. He was also an author of works on vernacular architecture in the area. He died aged 92 in 2020.

Dewar’s notes for October 1945 to June 1948 shed light on the order in which the mosaic panels at Low Ham were uncovered.⁹ In October 1945, the whole of the panel depicting the hunt was exposed. The excavation also extended eastwards and located the patterned section. Headley Davies, manager of Shapwick Wireless Station, who had made some site drawings, arrived at 15.30 on 20 October, the final day of the excavation, by which time the site had been backfilled. So as not to disappoint Davies, Dewar agreed that another small trench to the south of the hunting scene should be opened.

This revealed a group of four figures. Dewar thought that because of the Phrygian caps, there was a Mithraic connection.

Further excavations took place in February 1946, when the four figures were fully exposed. Dewar thought the figure, now identified as Venus, to be either a female or a eunuch. He saw a link between the standing figure on the left and the middle horseman, on account of their Phrygian caps. Having exposed the four standing figures, Dewar’s interpretation now moved from Mithras to Cybele, the Great Mother of the Gods, or Cybele and Attis. This was based primarily on the ornament worn by Venus. In a letter dated 23 February 1946 to Harold St George Gray, Dewar states ‘I have quite abandoned the original idea that the mosaic has any reference to Alexander the Great. I think however it probably will prove connected with the cult of Cybele & Attis.’¹⁰

Next to be exposed was the central panel. It was thought that the middle figure might be the same character as the naked figure in the panel of four standing figures. There is a question mark following the word female indicating that he was not totally convinced of the gender. Dewar thought that the two small figures on the central panel might be cherubs. He describes the one on Venus’s right as perhaps holding a torch or five-tailed scourge, seeming to be riding on a large snake and to ‘wear a somewhat devilish expression of countenance’.

By mid-April 1946, the panel with the ships had been uncovered. Achates is described by Dewar as ‘a figure apparently on his back on shore lying on his spear, one hand grasping a circlet or wreath which is also held by the man in the nearest boat’. On 16 and 17 April, the final panel was exposed. Dewar noted ‘part of this contains what appears to be the tree of life... [and] the figures of a man and woman embracing’. By the end of April 1946, the whole mosaic had been exposed, and by early May the cold plunge bath adjacent to the mosaic had been revealed.

The identification of the subject of the mosaic pavement became a matter of national interest following the publicity given to the discovery in newspapers across Britain, notably following the publication of the *Illustrated London News* on 11 May 1946 (Fig. 2), when it appeared on the front page. It was subsequently featured in issues on 25 May under the headline ‘Mosaics at Low Ham Roman villa, further beauties revealed’ and on 17 August 1946 headed ‘The Low Ham Roman Bath: Pictures Showing the Latest Discoveries’. The text for all articles was provided by Radford. The mosaic also featured in a Pathé News film (see www.britishpathe.com), then an essential component of cinema shows throughout the country. The film was first broadcast on 27 May 1946 but no attempt was made to interpret the scenes.

The *Illustrated London News* for 11 May sheds light on the process of understanding the scenes depicted in the mosaic. The panel with the three horse riders is described as ‘A youth in oriental costume and Phrygian cap, the leading horseman.

He may be the same as the youth shown in the panel of four figures’. Although not identified, links were beginning to be made between figures in different panels. The middle horse rider is described as ‘clad in tight-fitting oriental costume, with Phrygian cap and cloak streaming in the wind’. The third is ‘Wearing helmet, boots and a chlamys floating in the wind... he and the central figure have been tentatively identified with the two men fighting’. The central panel is ‘a woman with two cupids’, described as ‘a naked lady with jewelled head-dress, holding a cloak behind her, with Cupids on either side with torches, one raised the other lowered’.

Radford had views on the interpretation of the mosaic panels before the Dido and Aeneas narrative was identified. In a report on the 1946 excavations, he describes the figure in the central panel as ‘ready for the bath’.¹¹ About the group of four figures he wrote ‘to the left two men in tunics and Phrygian caps standing leaning on their spears; to the right stand two women, the first with close fitting jacket and dress and jewelled headdress followed by an attendant wrapped in a cloak who holds her finger to her lips as though whispering to the lady in front’. On the riders he wrote ‘The first rider dashed on looking ahead, while the second gazes anxiously back towards his companion... Finally in the small panel next to the bath we have two figures, apparently the second and third of the riders locked close together, in a landscape of trees’.

In another brief report written around the same time Radford wrote ‘[it] has a central panel with a nude woman holding her cloak behind her and flanked by cupids holding torches. The small panel towards the basin shows two men fighting



Fig. 2: The front page of the *Illustrated London News*, 11 May 1946.

between conventional trees. The corresponding panel contains an unidentified scene with an old man, a youth and two female figures.’¹²

Newspaper reports are helpful in documenting the process of interpretation and draw upon comments made by Dewar and Radford. The earliest press coverage was in the *Somerset County Herald and Taunton Courier* for 20 April 1946. The article concentrated on the horsemen, who were described as being in oriental costume, and it was noted that the scene was ‘probably drawn from a cycle of one of the Eastern religions which spread through the Western provinces during the late Roman period’. There was a longer article in the *Somerset County Herald and Taunton Courier* for 11 May 1946, in which Radford describes the mosaic as showing ‘some classical myth which cannot yet be identified’. Denman records that discussions took place on 16 May 1946 about the interpretation of the scenes in the mosaic, when it was felt that it might feature Perseus. Dewar’s notes show that by early May his thoughts on the interpretation of the mosaic were turning to Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the possibility that one of the figures was Palinurus, helmsman and navigator on Aeneas’ ship, though he had not yet deciphered the mosaic as a whole as the story of Dido and Aeneas.¹³

Despite being fully uncovered in April 1946 and receiving much attention, the identity of the figures on the pavement remained uncertain for over three months. The issue was resolved when it was reported in the *Somerset County Gazette* on 3 August that it represented the tale of Dido and Aeneas. As Radford stated the following year: ‘A comparison of the details with the text and with other ancient illustrations, in particular in *Codex Vaticanus Latinus No. 3225* of circa AD 400, leaves no doubt that the story represented the fatal love of Dido and Aeneas, a theme, so Macrobius tells us (*Saturnalia* V, 17, 5), popular with painters and sculptors’. This identification has never been doubted and, if proof were needed, a panel with a similar scene showing three riders participating in a hunt was uncovered in a villa at Kadirli, Turkey in 2015. As at Low Ham, it features a man and a boy wearing Phrygian caps, and a woman, all on horseback, accompanied by inscriptions naming the three protagonists as Dido, Aeneas and Ascanius.¹⁴

The first public announcement that the mosaic portrayed Dido and Aeneas appeared in a short article in the *Western Gazette* for 2 August 1946. The following day the *Somerset County Herald and Taunton Courier* reported that the mosaic ‘can now be identified with reasonable certainty’ as portraying Dido and Aeneas. The third *Illustrated London News* article, published on 17 August 1946, reported that the mosaic represented the story of Dido and Aeneas. In a lecture to the Roman Society in April 1947 Radford attributed the identification of the story as being Dido and Aeneas to Dewar with help from a Mr Granville Conway and a Mr Matthews.¹⁵

The *Somerset County Herald* and *Taunton Courier* attempted to sum up the excitement of the mosaic’s discovery on 26

October 1946: ‘It would not be putting it too strongly to say that the classical and archaeological world, and to some extent the British public itself, has been stirred to the depths of its cool marrow’.

Preservation of the mosaic – problems and solutions

The possibility of the villa and its mosaics being preserved for posterity and for presentation to the public was considered from the very commencement of the excavations in 1946. Advice to the Ministry of Works on the scheduling and preservation of archaeological sites was provided by the Ancient Monuments Board. On 12 August 1946 the Assistant Secretary to the Board, the distinguished Latinist Dr Frederick Raby, was amongst the first to consider such issues, enquiring as to ‘what are plans for roofing over and preservation?’¹⁶ Radford’s initial proposal, relayed to Bryan St John O’Neil, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, in August 1946, was to frame a project for the removal of the mosaics to the Somerset County Museum, but a month later, writing to Raby, he was suggesting that acquisition of the site might be considered: ‘Personally I should like to see the Ministry acquire several typical Roman villas and to lay them out properly for the public’.¹⁷ Discussions between Radford and Baillie Reynolds of the Inspectorate on the feasibility of acquisition continued into 1947, with Radford first discussing the possibility of the site becoming a guardianship monument in July. The response of the Cook brothers, owners of the site, was initially positive, possibly helped by Radford’s proposal that part of the purchase price would be raised locally, a suggestion that made for further complications in the discussions between the inspectors and their Ministry of Works and Treasury paymasters. The amount of public funding required to purchase the land depended on the area needed, which was not known at the time, so the decision was postponed until the extent of the villa could be determined during the excavations of 1948. On 19 August 1948 Baillie Reynolds was able to report that he had been informed by Radford that the extent of the villa was determined or ‘pretty well fixed’. However, just two days later he was to hear from Radford that the Cooks did not wish to sell.¹⁸

I saw the two Cooks the day before I left Low Ham. Our interview was cordial but fruitless. I outlined what it was that the Ministry would be willing to take and stated that I should be prepared with the assistance of local bodies interested to raise such purchase price as might be agreed upon. Mr Lionel Cook, who manages the business affairs of the family said that he had no desire to sell and his brother, possibly with a slight reluctance, agreed. I then thought it fair to say that as I understood the law the Ministry had power to purchase compulsorily if it thought fit, but without giving any indication of the possible view of the Ministry. Their reaction was that if the Government insisted that was that but that they were not going to bother about the matter till it arose.

Radford’s view was that compulsory purchase would be counter-productive: ‘If the Cooks are to be rewarded for their assistance by having applied the Ministry’s powers of



Fig. 3: Drying the mosaic prior to lifting in 1953. The process took 3 to 4 days. Somerset Archives DD/X/SOM/60.

compulsory purchase, the next mosaic which is found in similar circumstances will be wrecked before any archaeologist has seen it’.¹⁹ However, there was one positive outcome, ‘the Cooks stated that they were willing for the Virgilian Mosaic to be removed to a museum. I know that Taunton is interested. Would the Ministry agree to this course? If so, the matter can be raised at a meeting of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society’s Council’.²⁰

Discussions on the merits of preservation in situ, or whether to move the Dido and Aeneas mosaic to Somerset County Museum, continued. Harold St George Gray, secretary of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society and curator of their museum, thought that further attempts to purchase the site would be ‘useless’, and that the mosaic should be moved to the museum, where an available space had been identified.²¹ Not all were in agreement, and in September 1948 Chief Inspector St John O’Neil gave his succinct summary of the situation.²²

I have not seen the Low Ham villa but from the accounts of acknowledged authorities I conclude that it is of very great archaeological and general interest, in other words it is a site which should be preserved and should be accessible to all. The mosaics are objects of interest in themselves, but so is the rest of the villa, and the former are of double interest from being in situ. Away from the site they will be just like a carpet ignored by all but a few instead of [being] the pièce de résistance. We should therefore strain every nerve to obtain the whole villa and preserve it open to the public.

While Radford remained convinced that removal to the museum was the best option, those in the Ministry continued to explore the option of compulsory purchase, with Baillie Reynolds expressing the belief that the present farmers would not last more than 40 years, ‘a short period in the history of the pavement’.²³

In 1953 the issue was resolved when the Cook family donated the mosaic to the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for display in their museum in Taunton. Offers of financial support were received from a number of organisations and, crucially, the Ancient Monuments Board gave its approval.

The lifting is described in detail in Roberts, Leech and Cubitt,²⁴ and Maddalena and Cosh.²⁵ The process was perhaps more fraught than has been realised. Roger Roberts, the foster son of Ron Sansome, the then curator of the Somerset County Museum, witnessed part of the lifting of the mosaic. Although told to stay away while his father was visiting the site, he did approach unnoticed and got a sense of what was happening. He described the occasion as unforgettable. All was not peace and calm, instead he remembered it as a time of ‘high drama, rows, almost fisticuffs!’²⁶

The removal of the Dido and Aeneas mosaic to Taunton marked Radford’s last involvement at Low Ham, reported on in the summary of the archaeological work undertaken in 1953.



Fig. 4: The panels were laid face down on boards in preparation for their journey to Bristol. Significant damage can be seen on this section of mosaic. C. A. Raleigh Radford is the figure on the left. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

The remarkable Virgilian mosaic pavement depicting illustrations of Book IV of the Aeneid found in 1945 at Low Ham (JRS XXVI, 142, pl. XI) has been relaid in the Great Hall of Taunton Castle, which now forms the main room of the Somerset County Museum.

After lifting the pavement there was revealed beneath it an earlier plunge bath some 10 ft. square. This had been levelled and filled with rubbish, over which the mortar bedding of the pavement was laid. The earlier bath appears to belong to the third building period, dated to c. A.D. 330, so that the mosaic can hardly have been laid before the middle of the fourth century. Information from Mr. C. A. Raleigh Radford.²⁷

The lifting of the mosaic was recorded photographically with Radford reporting to Baillie Reynolds on the success of the operation in March 1954: 'Low Ham mosaic down... am remaining on premises and have the full account down'.²⁸ As the months passed, officials were pressing for Radford's report. In January 1956 R. Gilyard Beer quoted Radford as saying 'the final report is on the waiting list of the Society of Antiquaries for publication. The delay is likely to be at least 2 years'.²⁹ No report or record of the features discovered during lifting of the mosaic has been traced.

Removal of the mosaic to the Somerset County Museum

The Marble Mosaic Company Ltd of Bristol was appointed to carry out the removal of the Dido and Aeneas mosaic, scheduled for September 1953. The mosaic was exposed but heavy rain presented a problem and it was felt that the mosaic had to be dry for the lifting process to be successful. Consideration was given to delaying the work until 1954, but the likely additional costs of doing this were a concern. Aware that the RAF had used portable drying equipment after the east coast floods in the Spring of 1953, curator R. C. Sansome approached RAF Merryfield to ask whether they were able to assist. The commanding officer immediately agreed to help and within two hours a hot air blower and RAF personnel were on their way to Low Ham. Drying took three to four days (Fig. 3), and the mosaic was lifted in September as planned (Figs. 4 and 5). The Marble Mosaic Company Ltd quoted £250 to lift the mosaic, take it to



Fig. 5: The sections were rolled on to drums in readiness for transport. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

Bristol, lay it on reinforced concrete and deliver it to the Somerset County Museum. Further restorative work, at a cost of £162.10s.0d, seems to have related mainly to damage sustained during the lifting rather than historic damage to the mosaic.³⁰ Damage can be seen in Figure 4. Grants towards the cost of the work were received from the Pilgrim, Carnegie and Dulverton Trusts and from the Meade-King Fund.³¹

Timing was ideal. The Great Hall of Taunton Castle, the main gallery of the Somerset County Museum, was undergoing a major refurbishment in 1953 and the mosaic became a focal point of the new layout. An ambitious plan was devised by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society to display the Dido and Aeneas mosaic as the primary focus in the reconfiguration of the Great Hall. It was placed on the floor and could be viewed from the relocated great staircase, recently rescued from the vicarage of St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol that had been devastated in a Luftwaffe's raid in 1941 (Fig. 6). A small guide booklet to the mosaic written by Dewar and Radford was published in 1954. It mentions only Dewar as responsible for the 'small excavation' of 1945, Walrond is ignored.³²

In 1953, advice was followed regarding not making the mosaic a permanent fixture in case there was ever a need to move it. The panels were simply laid on the floor. This was fortunate as by 1958 there were concerns about its location. It was considered regrettable that it had been separated from the main archaeological collections and that it took up such a large area of floor in the Great Hall when the space was much needed for new display cases.³³ Re-siting the mosaic posed a problem. There was nowhere with sufficient floor space, nor was there a large enough wall to take the mosaic in its entirety. Consideration was given to separating the panels and displaying them as a sequential narrative. However, a solution was found that maintained the mosaic's integrity. The Upper Wyndham Gallery, which was built in the 1930s and housed the archaeological collections, was extended, and the ceiling of the extension set higher than the rest of the gallery so that the figured mosaic could be installed vertically. The patterned section was laid horizontally at its base. It cost £85.10.0d to

move and install the mosaic in its new position. The work was completed by December 1959.

Although now in the museum, the mosaic still remained under threat from damage. In December 1967, a Christopher Passmore was placed on probation for two years by Taunton Borough Magistrates for malicious damage done to the mosaic. Exact details of the damage are unclear but it was covered in national newspapers, including *The Times* on 3 December 1970, which provoked letters of concern from Lionel Walrond and Jocelyn Toynbee, a leading British scholar in Roman artistic studies and who is recorded in the visitors' book as having seen the excavations in progress in June 1947.

There was a proposal in 1978 by Frank Cottrill, former curator of Winchester City Museums, for the mosaic to be redisplayed on the grounds that: 'The basic need is to lay the whole floor horizontally, with a raised walkway on all sides of sufficient width to allow for convenient viewing by parties as well as by individual visitors. This would necessitate a new building, either an annexe to the present one or standing independently'. His letter to Philip Stevens, County Museums Officer, goes on to recommend forms of interpretation,

finishing with the statement that it would fit well with plans to commemorate the bimillenary of Virgil's death in 1982. Radford was approached about the idea of a new building, but he urged caution in view of the historic nature of Taunton Castle. Professor A. L. F. Rivet, on behalf of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, supported the proposal to redisplay the mosaic but emphasised that the Society had no funds to contribute towards it. The idea ultimately proved too complex at a time when public finances were limited.³⁴

The mosaic remained in its 1959 location until it was returned to the Great Hall, very close to its original position, during the museum's major refurbishment and its reopening as the Museum of Somerset in 2011. The removal of the panels and their re-installation was undertaken by Cliveden Conservation in 2008. The process was fraught because, while there were detailed drawings of the 1959 building extension, there was no record of how the mosaic had been installed and attached to the wall. A metal detector and Ferroskan survey were both successful in identifying metal reinforcements within the concrete backing, but neither could deduce the wall-fixing method. Further attempts to identify these were made using a flexiscope in the accessible



Fig. 6: The newly arrived mosaic on the floor of the Great Hall of the Somerset County Museum in 1953. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

space behind the mosaic, but to no avail. With relatively little information, the process of dismantling went ahead. It emerged that the panels were restrained by very modest aluminium cramps and that all the weight was born by the panels themselves. The figured mosaic, which had a combined thickness of tesserae and backing concrete, weighed a total of 2410 kg, with the largest panel, of two ships and Achates, weighing 500 kg. The mosaic was laid in its new location in 2010 during the fit-out stage of the Museum of Somerset



Fig. 7: The Low Ham mosaic in its current position in the Museum of Somerset, Taunton. By kind permission of Roger Leech.

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Rachel Cubitt of Historic England for pulling together submissions to the Society of Antiquaries volume that, for reasons of space, could not be included and which form the basis of this paper, Jessica Holmes, post-graduate student of the Department of Archaeology, University of Southampton, for detailed cataloguing of the files in the National Archives (see below under Primary Sources), Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society for allowing the use of photographs in their collection and staff of Somerset Archives and Local History for providing access to documents and publications.

(Fig. 7). A full conservation report describing the mosaic’s dismantling, packaging and storage off site was written by Brian Bentley of Cliveden Conservation in 2008.³⁵ The treatment report, written in 2010 by Andrew Hebden of Cliveden Conservation, records the mosaic’s reinstallation in the museum.³⁶ Copies of both reports are held by the South West Heritage Trust Museums Service. As a result of all this work, the mosaic can now be seen and touched at ground level and viewed from above on three sides.

Somerset Archives (SRO):
A/AHA/3/1 Volume of notes, drawings, newspaper cuttings and photographs relating to excavations at the Low Ham Villa site in 1946 entitled ‘An Amateur’s Log of visits paid to the Low Ham Villa during the first summer’s Dig’. 1946–48.
DD SAS A/DWX Correspondence, accounts and other office papers, photographs, drawings, prints and maps. Includes Dewar’s notebook. Items in the collection of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. Not individually sub-numbered.
Historic England Archives, Swindon (HEA):
HEA RAD 01/22/01 which includes much correspondence from/to C. A. Raleigh Radford.

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Notes

¹ Browning et al 2014, 8; Cosh and Neal 2022.
² Cosh and Neal 2024, 161-73.
³ Roberts, Leech and Cubitt 2025, 67-84; Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic II, 207.1.
⁴ Hayward 1952, 91; Cosh and Neal 2005, Mosaic II, 208.1-208.11.
⁵ Gray 1939, 77.
⁶ This information was in an obituary written by Walrond’s great nephew published in the *Museums Journal* 18 September 2020.
⁷ In the Denman Low Ham diary: SRO A/AHA/3/1: Volume of notes, drawings, newspaper cuttings and photographs relating to excavations at the Low Ham Villa site in 1946 created by W. B. Denman of Yeovil entitled ‘An Amateur’s Log of visits paid to the LOW HAM VILLA during the first Summer’s Dig’.

⁸ Radford 1946, 1947a, 1947b and 1948.
⁹ SRO DD SAS A/DWX.
¹⁰ SRO DD SAS A/DWX.
¹¹ Radford 1946, 4.
¹² SRO DD SAS A/DWX.
¹³ SRO DD SAS A/DWX.
¹⁴ Cosh and Neal 2024, 13-14, Fig 10.
¹⁵ SRO SAS M/3959 no. 3.
¹⁶ TNA Work 14/2004/13.
¹⁷ TNA Work 14/2004/25–27.
¹⁸ TNA Work 14/2004/151.
¹⁹ TNA Work 14/2004/151.
²⁰ TNA Work 14/2004/151.
²¹ TNA Work 14/2004/157.
²² TNA Work/14/2004/165.
²³ TNA Work 14/2004/11.

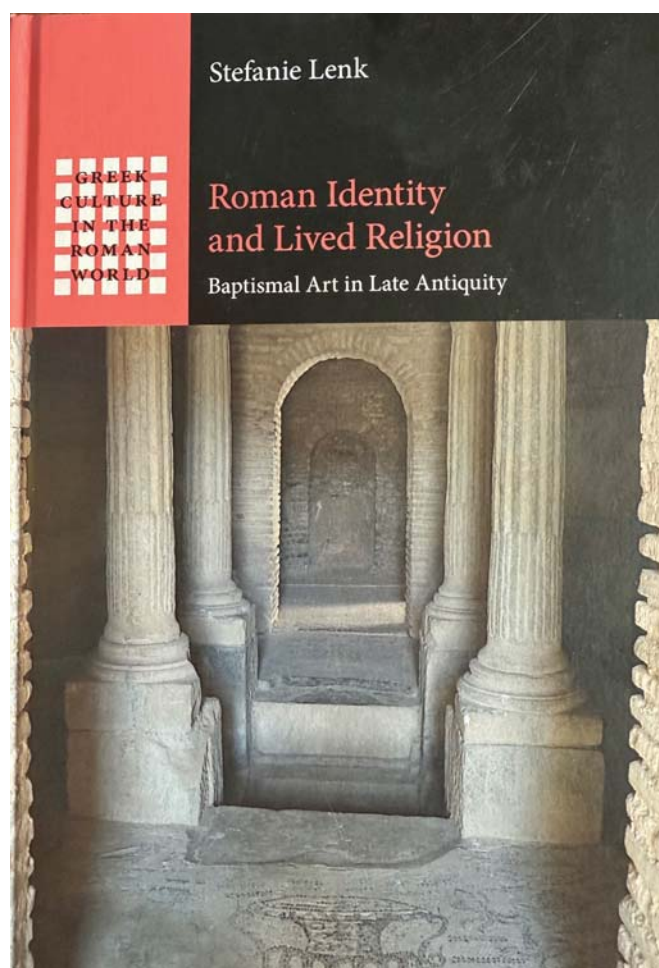
²⁴ Roberts, Leech and Cubitt 2025, 67-84.
²⁵ Maddalena and Cosh 2024.
²⁶ Roger Roberts pers. Comm. 2013 to SM.
²⁷ Wright 1954, 99–100.
²⁸ TNA Work 14/2003/107–8.
²⁹ TNA Work 14/2003/107–8.
³⁰ Maddalena and Cosh 2024, 6.
³¹ SANHS Report of the Building Sub Committee, September 1952, ‘B’ in File AA71158/2A, in pocket of papers following TNA Work 14/2004/107.
³² Radford and Dewar 1954.
³³ Minutes of SANHS Council for 3 Oct 1958.
³⁴ Somerset County Museum Low Ham History file.
³⁵ Bentley 2008.
³⁶ Hebden 2010.



Review: *Roman Identity and Lived Religion. Baptismal Art in Late Antiquity* by Stefanie Lenk

Cambridge University Press, 2025. 248 pages, 101 illustrations. ISBN: 978-1009408653

Jane Chick



This book explores the impact of popular Roman culture on the identity of Christians from the fifth to the seventh century in the Mediterranean region. It starts from the viewpoint that Christian baptism is central to Christian identity and that the way baptisteries were decorated can tell us much about how communities related to Christianity and perceived their place in the Late Antique world. The book focuses on case studies from North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula and Italy.

The preface offers an insight into Stefanie Lenk's own experience of identity formation. Born in East Berlin about a year before the wall came down, she belongs to the first generation of Germans from East Germany who were raised in a reunited Germany. And yet she, and many of her peer group, still identify more strongly as East German than as German. This experience has influenced her understanding of why Christians in Late Antiquity regularly used Roman iconography in the decoration of their buildings and incorporated Roman rituals into their religious lives. Roman culture remained an important part of their Christian identity.

The introduction sets out the issues addressed in the book. It discusses which baptisteries are used as case studies – and why – and gives some background to the study of baptismal art in Late Antiquity. It also makes it clear that the author's main interest is the lived practice of religion and that she allows visual evidence, rather than texts and doctrinal ambitions, to take the lead.

The first section of the book concentrates on the baptistery in the Christian complex of Cuicul, Numidia (modern Djémila in north-eastern Algeria). It includes very useful discussions about the layout of the whole complex, why it might have been built the way it was and who is likely to have visited the site and worshipped there. The baptistery was built between the late fourth and early fifth century. The mosaic pavement in the ambulatory features stars, ivy leaves and swastikas. The mosaic in the central rotunda that surrounds the font includes a large variety of sea creatures, four ornamental shrubs and four large kantharoi. Inside the font are fragments of an inscription, fish and a swastika (the last added by restorers in the twentieth century). The decoration is very similar to that found in elite Roman villas. It does not include anything that can be seen as contentious for a Christian setting, but even though some of the motifs can be interpreted as having Christian meaning, none of the extant imagery marks the space as specifically and unequivocally Christian.

Another feature of the baptistery is that it is attached to a small Roman bath house through which baptisands entered the baptismal chamber. Although possibly a pragmatic arrangement that allowed neophytes to wash before entering the font, it is also reminiscent of Roman religious worship. Lenk suggests that the architecture makes preliminary washing part of the rite of baptism.

Despite much harsh criticism of domestic luxury and pagan rituals by Late Antique clerics, Cuicul's Christian community imported Roman visual culture into their ecclesiastical buildings and maintained Roman customs in their 'lived religion'. Lenk concludes that this speaks of their regard for and identification with Roman traditions.

The second section looks at baptisteries decorated with imagery inspired by Roman culture, for example, mythology and circus games.

At Henchir el Koucha in Africa Proconsularis (modern day Tunisia) a mosaic featuring a pair of horses with neckbands is positioned by what is thought to have been an original entrance into the baptistery. Lenk makes the point that horses are rarely depicted in baptisteries. There follows an in-depth study of Roman and late antique images of pairs of horses, concluding that the pair at Henchir el Koucha are typologically similar to depictions of racehorses from previous centuries. Christian writers condemned the entertainments of the Roman circus and those about to be baptised had to renounce the pomp associated with such spectacles, and yet at Henchir el Koucha baptisands entering the baptismal chamber passed over a scene possibly associated with the circus. This choice of imagery, which could be seen as an example of visual culture compromising official doctrine, offers an insight into how important traditional Roman culture was to the local community.

The next case study illustrates the use of mythological images in a Christian setting. At Myrtilis Iulia (now Mértola in Portugal), in a space which may have been a baptistery, are the remains of a mosaic pavement depicting Bellerophon killing the chimaera. Scenes such as these commonly appeared in elite villas and would have had strong affiliations with Roman culture. When found in Christian settings, efforts are always made to explain them as harbouring Christian meaning – the fight of good against evil, for example – or as purely secular images used to demonstrate paideia. Lenk does not argue against these interpretations, but she also sees them as a way for a Christian community to

display their commitment to classical Graeco-Roman culture. There follows a valuable discussion about the site at Mértola, which includes the possible North African origin of the mosaics and the use of the Bellerophon scene in both Christian and Graeco-Roman settings.

In the baptistery at the Villa Rustica at Milreu/Esó, also in Portugal, existing pre-Christian mosaics of marine friezes, with hybrid sea creatures and tritons, were integrated into the baptistery. Such creatures are largely absent from newly built churches in the region, which raises the question of whether the inclusion of the mythological marine scene was simply pragmatic. Lenk points out that the baptistery could have been constructed elsewhere on the site – in a position more in keeping with other ecclesiastical complexes in the region – and that the baptistery may have been purposefully sited to include the friezes because Milreu's Christians found them appealing and were keen to integrate their pre-Christian heritage into the self-image of the community.

The final section of the book moves to Ravenna and includes a history of both the Orthodox and Arian baptisteries and their cupola mosaics. There is a particular focus on the personifications of the River Jordan and a more general discussion about the iconographical traditions of river personifications. Lenk then explores whether the differences in the way Jordan is depicted in the two cupolas demonstrates diverse attitudes to pre-Christian classical heritage.

From the fifth to the seventh century almost everyone in the Mediterranean region was Christian, but it seems that the 'lived religion' often deviated from officially accepted ideas. Texts from that time make it clear that Roman culture should no longer have a place in the lives of Christians and yet the visual and material evidence tell a different story. This book challenges the view that Christianity was the defining force in identity formation by demonstrating that Roman heritage was an essential part of Christian self-perception. Christians wanted to make clear a continued attachment to the Roman world and the art and architecture discussed in the case studies affirm that Roman culture was an integral part of the communities' sense of Christianity.

This book highlights the need for the close investigation of art and architecture to broaden our understanding of Late Antiquity. Reading the visual and material evidence offers different perspectives than text-based studies when trying to ascertain how Christian communities actually lived.



