

PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION OF MOSAICS AT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

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Abstracts

The state of preservation of mosaics in Mediterranean countries can be described by adjectives that range from 'terrible' to 'catastrophic'. This article tries to analyze the problem and proposes some solutions. The problem can be solved only by developing a program of planning and safekeeping, i.e. by affirming the concept of preventive conservation. Such an approach cannot be improvised: it can only develop as the result of a careful educational process that will effectively train future archaeologists and administrators.

Lo stato di conservazione del patrimonio musivo dei paesi mediterranei può essere descritto con aggettivi che vanno dal 'pessimo' al 'catastrofico'. In questo scritto si tenta un'analisi del problema e si traggono alcune conclusioni propositive. La soluzione del problema potrà avvenire solo attraverso lo sviluppo di una cultura della programmazione e della protezione, ovvero attraverso la maturazione di una idea di prevenzione. E questo non può essere improvvisato: deve essere il frutto di un lungo processo educativo, da realizzare attraverso la formazione degli archeologi e degli amministratori del futuro.

The state of preservation of mosaics in Mediterranean countries can be described by adjectives that range from 'terrible' to 'catastrophic'. Facts speak for themselves: all we need to do is look around. We would do better to speak of a state of general disaster. In Rome, during a recent ICCROM conference¹, attended by several Soprintendenza

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¹ 'Conservation in archaeological sites. Techniques, strategies and means: the case of mosaics', Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Soprintendenza archeologica per l'Etruria Meridionale. ICCROM Conference, Rome, 30.11.1992. Published in: *International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics*, 'Newsletter n.9', CNR, Rome, 1992.

officials, professors, and restorers, there was an attempt to define the terms of the problem of safekeeping of mosaics. Among the various themes that were discussed, an analysis of the general situation led to the identification of the multiple causes that are at the root of the problem. I will briefly consider some of these: inadequate conservation measures in relation to deterioration factors; the difficulty in conserving mosaics both *in situ* and in museums; the common practice of erroneous restorations; the lack of information and documentation on the mosaic patrimony; the lack of administrative planning for archaeological areas; visitors' indiscriminate access to mosaic floors; the lack of cooperation among archaeologists and restorers on the subject of safeguarding the mosaic patrimony; the lack of planning for the development of archaeological sites. We could continue like this indefinitely but the description of the situation would nevertheless be incomplete. I would like to consider carefully the situation I have just described. In the following pages I will not single out for description one mosaic or one restoration, nor will I present a conservation project. I will instead propose some observations on the general problem of safekeeping. Specifically I want to present an analysis of the problem by defining a few simple, yet hopefully clear 'reference points'. Some proposals will conclude the presentation.

Let us begin with the first reference point: **there is a problem in the safekeeping of mosaics**. This might seem a generic statement, but it is certainly true and reflects the real condition of mosaics. Let us consider this statement as a starting point in our attempt to gain insight into the problem. To do so we have already used data, gathered in a questionnaire that was distributed to students in a course on the safekeeping of archaeological sites with mosaic floors.² The students, all professional in the field, were asked to list in order of importance the principal causes of deterioration of archaeological mosaics.³ The results have emphasized an extremely interesting fact: the importance of the human factor among the causes of deterioration. The number one enemy of the mosaic floor is not nature with its salts, plants and rain: the first enemy is the peculiar character of human activities. A more in depth analysis of the data showed something even more interesting: among the various groups of people – farmers, soldiers, builders, polluters, thieves – one in particular is extremely active, directly or indirectly, in the deteriorating process of mosaics: those who are institutionally responsible for the safekeeping of mosaics. Their attempts at conservation are often either flawed or incomplete.

In our attempt to characterize the situation and to obtain simple and clear statements related to established facts, we can in fact state that **the conservation of mosaics has been until now completely inefficient**. Let us see what practical procedures have been adopted in the past and which are still in use today.

² 'Primo Corso Internazionale per la Salvaguardia del Mosaico Archeologico', Rome, September-October 1990, organized by ICCROM and ICR; coordinated by A. Melucco; G. de Guichen, R. Nardi.

³ A. Melucco, R. Nardi, G. de Guichen, 'Conservation of Archaeological Mosaics: the State of the Problem in the Light of a Recent International Course', in *Atti della Conferenza Triennale dell'International Committee for the Conservation of Mosaics*, Palencia, 1990. In print.

First option: the mosaic is ignored. Second option: the mosaic is not ignored but conservation problems are ignored. The mosaic is studied, in some rare, fortunate cases it is published and some limited, often harmful, 'cosmetic' interventions are carried out for the benefit of the photo publication. In other instances the mosaic is restored, meaning that it is physically transported to several possible destinations: display at the site or elsewhere, abandonment in storage, or consignment to other imaginative situations that I don't even want to consider.

In all of this the final result is damage to the mosaic, theft, destruction of the archaeological context, destruction of stratigraphy, loss of historical significance.

Only rarely is the mosaic treated not as a single object, but as part of the archaeological context and is consolidated *in situ*. When this does occur, however, consecutive protective and maintenance measures are overlooked and the result is the deterioration of the artifact.

Even more rarely is the mosaic documented, studied, published and covered.

As we can see, extremely different measures have been and continue to be implemented to answer the need of mosaic conservation. These approaches have nonetheless one element in common: improvisation and lack of coordinated intervention plans. From here we derive a third 'reference point': **lack of planning in the safekeeping of mosaics.**

Not even specialized literature on the subject has dealt with this bleak situation: a survey of mosaic literature of the last ten years⁴ shows that very few texts discuss issues related to safekeeping and maintenance. The majority of texts discuss art historical issues and 'heavy' restoration, such as removal. This is not surprising because when dealing with the deterioration of cultural heritage, a long series of misunderstandings has led us to associate deterioration with restoration or, even better, with missed opportunities for restoration. Mosaics do not escape this pattern. Restoration alone cannot solve the problems caused by poor management of a site. Mosaics have been transformed into public footpaths through walls and shrubbery; heaps of mosaics have been removed from archaeological contexts and dumped into storage; thefts occur daily at sites which are not sufficiently protected.

We could go on indefinitely and always reach the same conclusion: restoration has nothing to do with all of this. The association that occurs automatically in our mind is in fact a misunderstanding: a misunderstanding that derives from disinformation on the issues involved and that is caused by the inaccuracy and partial education that each of us receives during our academic career.

To understand the reasons behind such a dramatic situation it is sufficient to consider how the problem has been approached so far. For each mosaic that is restored there are hundreds that are abandoned, without necessarily making a distinction between published and unpublished mosaics.

⁴ R. Nardi, "Critical review of the specialized literature in mosaic conservation", *Ibidem*.

But also in the case of restored mosaics things do not run too smoothly, for the economic and cultural price to pay is too high. From a cultural point of view restoration almost always means removal and the consequent destruction of stratigraphy, archaeological context and historical data. From an economic point of view, the costs of each restoration project are enough to deplete the already limited resources of administrations, drastically limiting interventions at other sites.

Let us consider a practical example. Restoration by detachment can require an overall cost that becomes a significant financial burden when we consider the total amount of square meters involved. The estimate does not even include protective measures and didactic arrangements that will of course require further costs.

If the same amount was invested in protective measures, it would be possible to deal with a much larger number of mosaics and, most important, to find long term solutions to the problems of safekeeping. The 'aesthetic' result might turn out to be less effective, yet the outcome would be the preservation of the mosaic, of context, of stratigraphy and of historical data. Furthermore there would be an opportunity for future 'aesthetic' restorations.

Thus we derive another fixed point: **for each square meter of mosaic that is restored there are tens that are not protected.**

Let us review in an orderly fashion the issues involved and try to find answers to the following questions, so that we might be able to suggest a solution to the present situation.

Can we divide a monument into 'materials' and 'meaning', into 'aesthetic value' and 'historical significance'? Should we decide to treasure the mosaic floor and sacrifice stratigraphy? Can we keep photographs and archeological interpretations and permit the destruction of material evidence (i.e. the mosaic)? Even though this is exactly what happens on a daily basis, the answer to all of the above questions is definitely no.

Can we ignore the fact that hundreds of mosaics that have already been excavated and restored still need to be studied, published and given optimal treatment? At the same time can we continue to produce new material by excavating sites that are not threatened by emergency situations, thus adding new problems to a dramatic situation? Can we continue to invest the little money available into isolated and expensive 'aesthetic' restorations, while leaving all other mosaics in a state of complete abandonment?

In how many cases can we realistically expect to find a rare, brilliant government employee with a spontaneous initiative?

The last question allows us to add another fixed point to our list: **the response to a serious problem must be systematic and planned.**

Going back to the data gathered in the questionnaire we were discussing previously, we will recall the great effect that the human factor has on the state of preservation: erroneous interventions, lack of maintenance, lack of protection from climatic factors, visitors' abuse, theft, vandalism, lack or inefficiency of security systems. So we have another reference point: **man is the principal cause of deterioration**; both when he acts directly and produces damage, or when he acts passively and does not apply preventive measures. A logical consequence of this statement is the fact that if we were able to limit

the damages related to human activity, we could easily solve the problem of safekeeping. We can thus explain the importance of presenting such an argument to archaeologists and art historians: the solution of the problem can be reached only by developing a system of planning and safekeeping and by recognizing the concept of preventive action. Such a development cannot be improvised: it has to be the result of a long educational process that can only occur in the training of future archaeologists and administrators. The amount of time that this process will inevitably require should certainly not impede this evolution: sometimes results happen sooner than what is expected; furthermore, the fear of effectively dealing with problems from the beginning has been the principal cause of the haphazard approaches that are currently causing so much damage.

The solution to the problem of safekeeping cannot be found in technical approaches (one kind of restoration as opposed to another): the solution must come from a cultural approach. This can be achieved through adequate education of all aspects of the problem, structured in specialized training programs. Since training is the responsibility of archaeologists, historians and scholars, the sense of my argument becomes clear: the solution to the systematic destruction of mosaics is the training of a new generation of archaeologists and administrators. Such a solution can occur without further social costs, for training is a right that is acknowledged and certainly guaranteed by our societies: this very lack of additional costs is ultimately the strong point of this proposal. It will be necessary to modify some training programs, to add specific, relevant topics to the course programs of specialized schools and institutions: risk analysis in relation to the causes of deterioration of the cultural heritage; techniques in problem solving; operational planning; project management. When such topics become part of the professional qualifications of those responsible for managing our cultural heritage, we will have solved the problem of its conservation. If we were to end this article with a sentence that summarizes the sense of my observations, we could write: **training is the true measure of preventive conservation.**