

# CONSERVATION OF THE 'PROCESSION OF DIONYSOS' MOSAIC FROM STARA ZAGORA, BULGARIA

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The mosaic when it was revealed in 2009 (Archive of Regional Museum of History - Stara Zagora)



The considerable weight of the fragments had caused significant deformation of the working tables



Stage of removal of facing



Preparation for fixing fragment to new support



Cleaning process

Entitled the 'Procession of Dionysos' after the emblem's theme, the mosaic was discovered during rescue archaeological excavations in Stara Zagora, Bulgaria (seasons of 2009-2011). The mosaic once covered the floor of the reception room of a rich private dwelling (first half of 4 c. AD), in the middle of which there was a pool with running water (piscina) lined with white marble. The northern part of the room and more than half of the mosaic remain uncovered. In 2011 the mosaic was detached from the terrain by an initial conservation team and its fragments stored in the museum's depot. In 2014 Rest Art Association's conservation team was commissioned by the Regional Museum of History to 'continue' the conservation process and to display the mosaic on the floor of the only suitable museum's room. All the 38 fragments (with a total area of some 30 m<sup>2</sup>) were transported to the association's workroom in Sofia. The grave condition of the fragments and the lack of comprehensive records faced the team with complex conservation problems.

The exceptionally solid structure and binding between the mosaic layers were among the reasons which led to serious damages in the process of detachment. Loss of tesserae, sections with detachment between facing and the mosaic surface, and fragmented tesserae along the fragment borders. The loss of cohesion of tesserae surfaces made of weaker types of stone is also a grave problem. The original mortar, 8 to 10 cm thick, was thinned by mechanical means because of its excessive durability. This approach permitted maximum preservation of the original nucleus and the bedding layer of the tesserae.

The mosaic fragments were transferred on aluminum honeycomb sandwich panels and the adhesion was achieved with foaming epoxy system. To avoid direct contact between the resin and the back of the tesserae in the sections lacking nucleus, new mortar was laid, consisting of lime, sand, ground pottery and addition of hydraulic lime.

The removal of the facing revealed the actual condition of the mosaic surface. In most sections, it was extremely incrustated. There was serious color and structure alteration in the tesserae in the areas subject to fire in the past. After the removal of the remaining adhesive facing, the team went on to consolidate the tesserae with loss of surface cohesion. Particular attention was paid to the smalt tesserae used to make the emblem of the mosaic. Sadly, their structure was not consolidated before the mosaic was detached from the terrain and most of them were in a deplorable condition.

To restore the original colors of the mosaic, the surface was cleaned at several stages. Initially, the surfaces were treated for removal of extraneous substances by the application of distilled water wrapping, followed with mechanical removal and thinning.

Reconstructions in the damaged zones were not made in order to preserve the authentic view of the mosaic in which it was discovered during the archaeological excavations. Single reconstructions were made along the edging of the fragments where most of the tesserae were destroyed in the process of defragmentation of the mosaic when it was detached. The 'Procession of Dionysos' mosaic is now displayed in Stara Zagora Regional Museum of History. Thanks to the project, financially supported by the American Research Center in Sofia, the exhibition of a mosaic of such a dimension in a museum became possible for the first time in Bulgaria.



The mosaic fragments as displayed temporarily

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