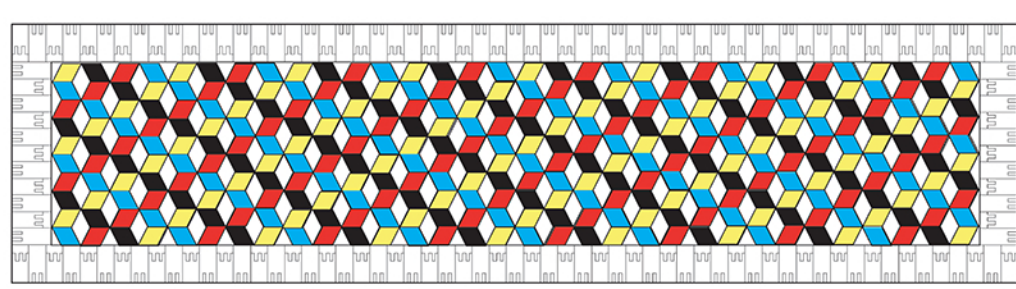


# A MOSAIC FROM THMUIS, EGYPT: Continuation of a conservation project and complementary observations on the constituent materials.

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This *opus tessellatum* dated to the 2nd century BC was discovered at the beginning of the 20th century on a site in the Nile Delta. The mosaic is today part of the collections of the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria. The Egyptian Supreme Council for Antiquities commissioned the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEAlex-CNRS) to undertake its restoration. An initial operation was conducted in 2013 to “de-restore” a previous attachment of reinforced cement and to transfer the *tessellatum* onto a new support. Concurrently, a series of examinations led to the identification of the materials used in the work and revealed in particular the presence of lead strips, traces of ancient painting and of Egyptian blue. The addition of colours to enrich the classic composition of trichromatic cubes in perspective superimposed a slanting grid-pattern that created a new motif. This mosaic was clearly of major interest in terms of the materials and procedures employed in a pavement of the Hellenistic era, and at the same time it faced a serious problem of preservation. In 2015, a second campaign looked at the essential steps required for enhancing the state of this exceptional mosaic. As part of a collaborative project with the workshop of the Musée Départemental Arles Antique, Marion Rapilliard spent three months in Alexandria to work alongside Hanaa Tawfick.

Work was begun on the surface in 2013, but it was then interrupted because of difficulties in cleaning. It appeared that during restoration undertaken at the beginning of the 20th century in the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria a cement wash had been applied over all the *tessellatum* in order to render the surface uniform. The task became that of finding a cleaning method that would remedy this loss of legibility while ensuring the preservation of the traces of paint on the pavement.

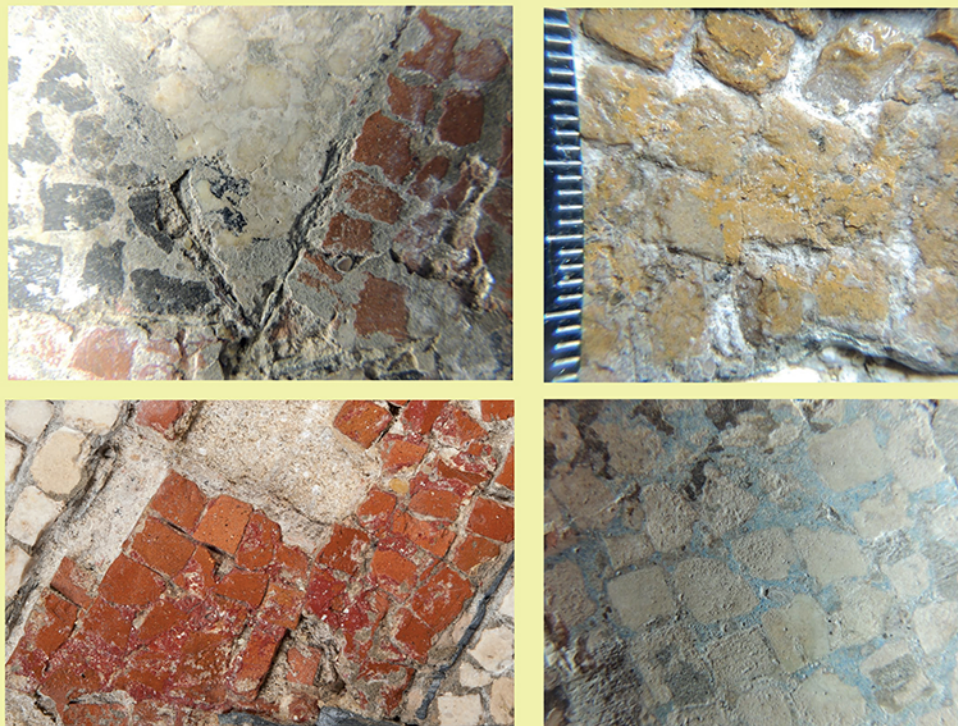
Thus, the operations conducted in 2015 had to establish a protocol for cleaning the *tessellatum* that would take into account several constraints:

- the fragility of the material and the presence of traces of ancient paint
- the tools and means available
- the limited time period of the restoration programme (3 months)

When faced with the impossibility of completely eliminating the cement without causing damage to the pavement, it was judged necessary to “qualify” the aim of cleaning by attempting to harmonise the *tessellatum* and to reduce the visual impact of the cement where it appeared the most intrusive. In order to find the correct balance between the removal of a modern material and the preservation of ancient materials, we had to work with a simple, precise and perfectly manageable tool. Thus we set about the removal of the cement using a scalpel so that we could adapt all actions to the particularities of the *tessellatum*. The level of cleaning was adjusted on those parts of the decoration that held traces of paint and faïence tesserae. The cleaning process continued until what was considered a satisfactory stage for a good reading of the decoration.



Detail of pavement before and after removal of the cement



Traces of polychromy on the tesserae and the joints



Modern rhomb: white stone

Ancient blue rhombs: faïence and paint

Modern lead strip

Ancient lead strips



Modern repairs of the cubes (purple zones)

The next stage of the preservation-restoration protocol consisted in:

- rectifying faults in the flatness of the *tessellatum*
- filling lacunae using a mortar
- consolidating the most fragile tesserae
- ensuring the finishing of the support for museum presentation.

Thus, in the perspective of a museum presentation of the cube mosaic, we had to deal with the problem of cleaning by adapting our intervention methods to the context and the available technical means.

More precise observations were made during this very gradual and fine cleaning process that revealed evidence of the use of faïence tesserae. This intervention also led to further consideration of the preserved traces of paint, evidence of a pictorial technique that originally extended across all of the work. Thus, we understand better how in this panel colour is rendered both by the material of the tesserae (stone and faïence) and by the addition of paint and coloured mortar.

Moreover, these observations revealed the nature and extent of the restorations performed at the beginning of the 20th century:

- In the cube motif, certain blue rhombs, where the faïence was particularly badly preserved, were redone with white stone tesserae.
- Certain lacunae were refilled with coloured stone tesserae but without the addition of paint.
- More surprising is that the modern lead strips were replacements for now disappeared ancient strips.
- The outer band decorated with light red on white crenelated towers, which is of unequal width on the different edges, seems to be for the most part modern.