

The mosaic of the room C6 of the “House of Cantaber”, Conimbriga. Past, present and prospects in the future.

Our study presents the condition of conservation of the different fragments of a mosaic, which covered the *cenatio* C6 of the “House of Cantaber” in Conimbriga, Portugal



Fig. 1 - Location of Conimbriga in Hispania

The first surveys for the recognition of the Roman city of Conimbriga began in 1899, thanks to the monetary support of the Queen of Portugal, D. Amélia de Orléans e Bragança. She offered 200,000 réis to the Archeology Section of the Coimbra Institute. These surveys were carried out in the areas indicated in figure 2 with brick colour.



Fig. 2 - The overlapping of the plan, where we can see the room C6 of “House of Cantaber”. It coincides with surveys points of 1899. [Painter Daniel Ribeiro Sanches (1922-1982)]. (Ana Patrícia Claro Ribeiro in *Geometrias*, plan nº 12, 2006)

During these surveys were discovered 4 mosaics, which were removed and consolidated on a Paris plaster support in 1899 and they were exhibited in the Museum of Archeology of the Institute of Coimbra created in 1874, and later, in 1912, conceded to the National Museum Machado de Castro, in Coimbra.



Fig. 3 - Location of House of Cantaber, Conimbriga (Google earth).

In 1961, they were transferred to the Monographic Museum of Conimbriga, where they were exposed after the restructuring of the support according to the method of consolidation with reinforced concrete (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - Here, we can see 2 fragments of mosaics in the Museum of Conimbriga discovered in the surveys in 1899 (©MMC).



Fig. 5 - Mosaic exposed on the floor of the Museum of Conimbriga (fig. 4) This part of the mosaic was exposed on the floor of one of the rooms (fig. 4). In the last remodeling, which began in 1975, the mosaics were removed and exposed on plates of reinforced concrete, near the entrance of the ruins (figs. 11 and 17).

From this mosaic exposed on the floor of the Museum of Conimbriga was removed a fragment (77x77cm) and was offered, in 1899, to Queen D. Amélia de Orléans e Bragança by the Archeology Section of the Institute of Coimbra, as a form of thanks for moral and material support to archaeological exploration in 1899, in Conimbriga. This fragment was taken to Lisbon to the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, a royal residence, and it remained there until today. In 2004, we visited the Museum of Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, in Lisbon and confirmed that the mosaic was in the reserve in very good condition.



Figs. 6 and 7 - The fragment of the mosaic (77x77cm) offered to the Queen, in 1899 (front and back).



Fig. 8 - The dedication to the Queen with gold letters engraved on porcelain.

So, the mosaic that covered the same floor (room C6) of “House of Cantaber” was fragmented and distributed by different environments and exposed in different contexts. Now, we will try to analyse the conservation of each fragment.

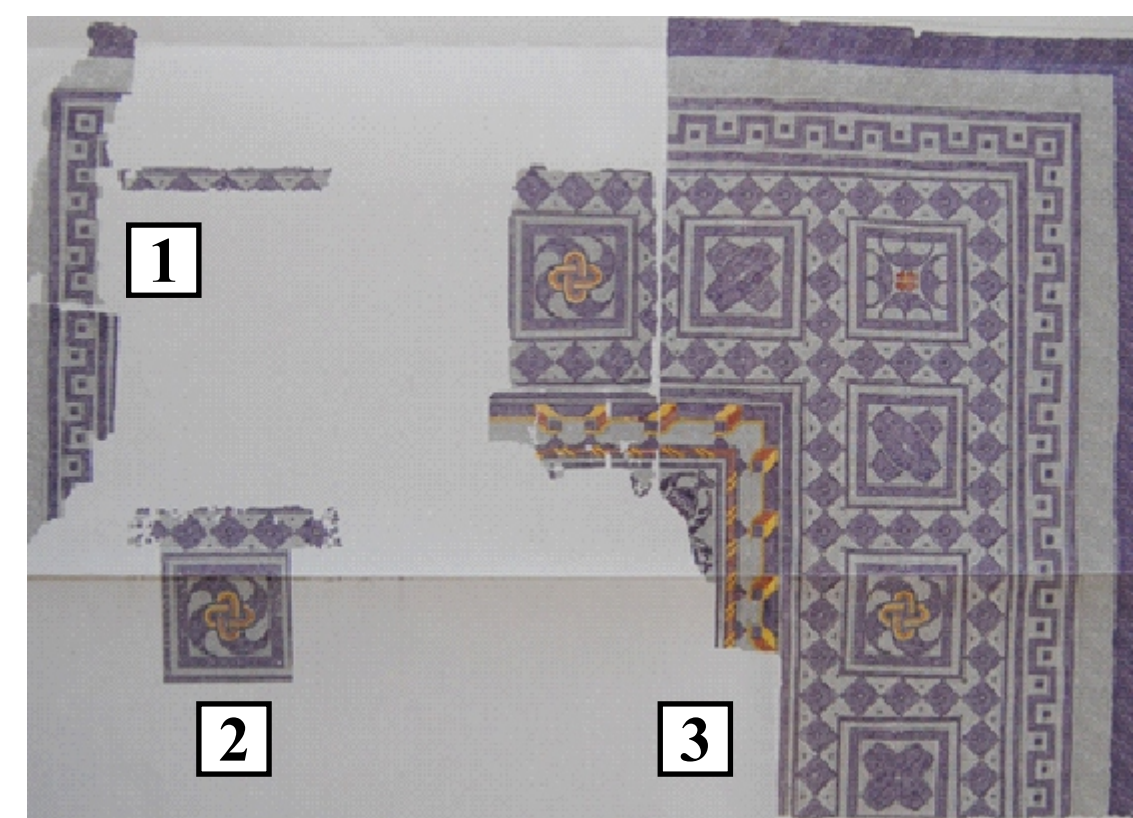


Fig. 9 - Fragment of mosaic of the room C6 of the “House of Cantaber” (Reconstitution, designed by Architect Ana Patrícia Claro Ribeiro).

1 - Fragment *in situ*; 2 - fragment offered to the Queen (1899); 3 - in 1961, the fragment 3 was displayed in the Museum of Conimbriga and since 1975 is exposed at the entrance of the ruins.



Fig. 10 - we can see the fragment 1 of the mosaic of the room C6 of the “House of Cantaber” *in situ* (see fig. 9). The photo shows the frame of the mosaic that covered the room C6, still *in situ*, and confirms that the mosaic belongs to this room, because there isn't other mosaic decorated with an identical frame. In the 80s this fragment of mosaic, that was *in situ*, it was raised and placed on support of reinforced cement and continues in the room C6. ©MMC



Fig. 11 - The largest piece of mosaic has been, since the last remodeling of the Museum (1975), at the entrance of the ruins of Conimbriga. (fragment 3, fig. 9). ©MMC

The state of conservation of the mosaic offered to the Queen, in 1899 - (Museum of the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, Royal Residence, in Lisboa - MPNA)

In February 2017, we returned to the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda to observe this mosaic. We found it on a table with the broken wooden frame and in very poor state of conservation.



Fig. 12 - The mosaic on a table with the wooden frame broken.

This fragment of the mosaic has recently undergone a strong mechanical action by shock that was caused by an inadvertent fall, in the reserve of the Museum, where it is deposited.

As a result of this fall, it was possible to observe the fragment and its support, and to evaluate its state of conservation, as well as the construction process and the materials used to offer it to the Queen D. Amélia, in 1899.



Fig. 13 - Aspect of the mosaic offered to the Queen in 1899, now in 2017.

The mosaic was placed in a layer of plaster of Paris and framed in brown frame reinforced with slats of this material arranged in the front part, in a scheme in crosses. Immediately we see the deep breakage of the *tesselatum* in about a quarter of the geometric composition and a slit that crosses it diagonally in almost the totality of its surface area, considerably affecting its conservation and presentation. Hundreds of white and black *tesselae* have been lost, and many others are in the process of stripping the gypsum support. This fragment of mosaic is in danger of total loss if the measures necessary to restore its physical and formal integrity are not carried out.



Fig. 14 - Another aspect of the mosaic offered to the Queen.



Fig. 15 - Aspect of the back of the mosaic offered to the Queen, now in 2017

The state of conservation of the mosaic “exposed” at the entrance of the ruins. Some pathologies.

The shrubs that flank the mosaic to the south, shade for most of the day, making the environment humid, which allows the growth of plants in the cuts of the mosaics and favors the development of biological colonies of the type fungi, lichens and algae on the surface of the mosaic. The lack of light obscures the reading of the compositions and patterns.



Fig. 16 - Here, we can see the location of the fragment of the mosaic 3 (see fig. 9), since the last remodeling of the Museum, at the entrance of the ruins.



Fig. 17 - Aspect of the mosaic 3 (see fig.9) at the entrance of the ruins.

These mosaics have been for forty years under these conditions of exposure, subject to the harshness of the climate and the effect of thermal gradients. The mosaic shows symptoms of deterioration which, in combination with the intrinsic behavior of the building materials, especially the volumetric deformability characteristic of each of the plates that constitute it, resulted in undifferentiated movements in the mosaic and, consequently, in the development of cracking.



Fig.18 - Fragment of the mosaic 3 (detail).

These pathologies are mostly confined to the joints that the various sections of the assembly form together. The capacity of the concrete system applied to the mosaic to ensure the conservation of the *tesselatum* begins to be increasingly reduced, jeopardizing the durability of the pavement.

When the system contains iron rods, the oxidation of the metal results in strong mechanical stresses that give rise to cracks, lines of rupture and bursting in the *tesselatum*.

On the other hand, the deterioration of mortars with Portland cement causes the development of alkaline substances that normally effloresces the mosaic surface forming concretions. These, in turn, constitute a substrate that encourages the colonization of organic matter.

It is necessary to re-evaluate the possible interactions between the limestone and the concrete system applied to the pavements, which, after 60 years is approaching its useful life, so that, in advance, ways of action are solved for the good conservation of this and others mosaics of Conimbriga.

If the conditions are created to receive the fragments, how can we regroup them to return to the place of origin?

This mosaic of the room C6, since it was discovered in the nineteenth century has been the target of several amputations and transfers. With the return of the panel offered to the Queen and the fragments that are deposited in the room C6, we can gather them and proceed to its replacement or in the Museum, when its next remodeling, or their repositioning *in situ*, after probing or total excavation made in the “House of Cantaber” and confirming this origin of this mosaic, it should return to the place of origin and pave the room, according to the reconstitution. It would be an opportunity to carry out a profound conservation and restoration intervention at a time when such a procedure becomes urgent as this mosaic is in the process of advanced deterioration.



Fig. 19 - Some fragments of the mosaic that covered the room C6

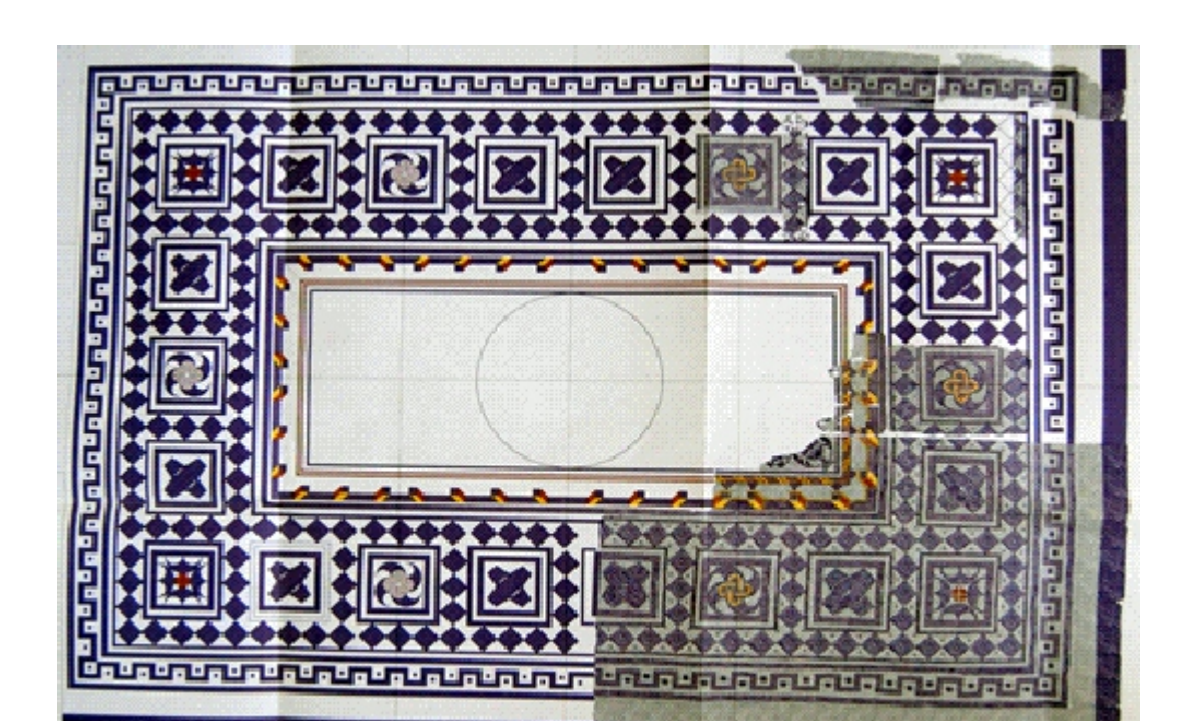


Fig. 20 - Reconstitution of the mosaic (Ana Patrícia Ribeiro, Geometrias, 2006). ©AMMC

Thus, all of its support would be replaced in all the plates that were the object of intervention with concrete and in the fragment offered to the Queen and would be placed in light synthetic support, valuing its preservation and presentation and designing the possibility of its assembly can be carried out either in outdoor or indoor environment, allowing its use in temporary exhibition.

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