

**Zeitschrift:** Cahiers d'archéologie romande  
**Herausgeber:** Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise  
**Band:** 85 (2001)

**Artikel:** Roman mosaics in Crete : workshops or itinerant craftspeople  
**Autor:** Sweetman, Rebecca  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-836072>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 30.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Roman Mosaics in Crete : Workshops or Itinerant Craftspeople<sup>1</sup>

Rebecca SWEETMAN

Roman Crete remains a largely neglected area in terms of archaeological and historical research. Although this is changing, past excavators were often determined to reach prehistoric levels, often at the expense of historic levels above. Although they are increasing in particular through the work of Stavroula Markoulaki<sup>2</sup>, there are still only around 65 mosaics of Hellenistic and Roman Imperial date that are sufficiently well preserved to allow detailed study. To these we can add a further 45 mosaics dated to the Early Christian period. The evidence for the study of Roman mosaics in Crete is therefore limited. There are many other fragments, but their poor preservation makes it difficult to use them constructively in a survey such as this. Also it must be emphasised that the work being carried out on Roman Crete is more or less limited to key areas such as Kastelli and Chania in the West and Knossos, Gortyn and more recently Chersonisos in the Central part of the island (ill. 1).

Two main problems exist when it comes to a discussion of the mosaics of Crete and in particular the craftspeople responsible for laying them. The first is that the mosaic sample size in any given area and period is not large enough to establish reasonable conclusions with certainty. The second problem is that a large proportion of the mosaics discovered in Crete was discovered by accident or through rescue excavation, and so an exact context and date is uncertain for many of them. Only a few sites have been excavated systematically, such as the Villa Dionysus at Knossos (now being studied by Sara Paton) and the Health Centre mosaics from Kastelli (excavated by Stavroula Markoulaki<sup>3</sup>). If more information becomes available through the publication of

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank W. Bowden, M. Boyd and S. Paton for comments and valuable discussion on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks to the Managing Council of the British School at Athens for permission to publish photos from the British School Archive and to M. Cogzell for her help in their location.

<sup>2</sup> Σ. ΜΑΡΚΟΥΛΑΚΗ, "Οι Ωρες οὐ Εποχὺςσε Ψηφιδωτῇ ἀπὴ το Καστὺλλι Κισ μου", *Κρητικῇ Εστῶα* 1, 1987, p. 33-58

*eadem*, "Προφστορικὺς καὶ Κλασικὺς Αρχιῆτητες", *Κρητικῇ Εστῶα* 2, 1988, p. 283-284

*eadem*, "Αρχαιολογικὺς εῤῥησεις 1987", *Κρητικῇ Εστῶα* 3, 1989/90, p. 252-254

*eadem*, "ΚΕ Εφορεῶα Προφστορικῶν καὶ κλασικῶν Αρχαιοτήτων", *A. Delt B* ii 42, 1987, p. 558-563

*eadem*, "Ψηφιδωτ "Οικῶας Διονῖσου" Στο Μουσείο Χανῶων ἡ ὑΠεπραγμὺνα του ΣΤ' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικοῦ Συνεδρῶου", Τομος Α' (Χανι 424-430 Αυγοῖστου 1986)], 1990, p. 49-463 (Χανι )

S. MARKOULAKI, "A season mosaic in west Crete", in *CMGR VI* (Palencia-Mérida 1990), C.M. BATALLA (ed.), 1997, p. 179-186.

<sup>3</sup> ΜΑΡΚΟΥΛΑΚΗ, *supra* note 2 : 1987.



excavation material we will be able to discuss the social, cultural and artistic milieu of the mosaics of Crete with more confidence.

There is, however, enough evidence, particularly in those key areas mentioned, to begin to ask pertinent questions. Is there a specific 'Cretan style' of mosaic at any period? Where did the influences for the style of mosaics come from and who, moreover, was responsible for their creation? Was mosaic production workshop based, or did it involve itinerant craftspeople?

There is a Cretan style of mosaic, but it is by no means a conventional style. The majority of figured mosaics, with few exceptions, are inscribed within a grid pattern arrangement. Usually there is a central panel, depicting either a portrait or an action scene. This is framed within a grid, and is often accompanied by subsidiary panels and/or filling motifs. The majority of themes depicted are mythological subjects, of which Dionysiac scenes are the most popular. Around a quarter of the figured scenes depict Dionysus, including both static portraits of the god and his followers such as the *Oecus* mosaic from the Villa Dionysus (ill. 2), dated to the mid 2nd century AD, and scenes from particular myths, such as the mosaic depicting the rescue of Ariadne at Naxos by Dionysus now in the Chania museum<sup>4</sup>. There are other mythological scenes from the standard repertoire such as scenes of Poseidon and Amymone from Chania<sup>5</sup> and the newly discovered mosaic depicting Orpheus and the Animals from Kastelli<sup>6</sup>.

There are, however, no scenes from the circus or amphitheatre and few hunt representations, with the exceptions of the Lappa mosaic tenuously dated to the 5th century AD<sup>7</sup> and the Kastelli Health Centre mosaic from Room 1 dated to the middle of the 3rd century AD<sup>8</sup>. The latter example depicts the scene in a small panel, and clearly differs from the great hunt scenes so popular in North Africa and seen also in the Villa at Piazza Armerina, Sicily<sup>9</sup>. There is only one mosaic that depicts a scene from the gymnasium. This comes from the new excavations of Roman Knossos and although it is severely damaged, the upper parts of the two boxing figures are clearly recognisable<sup>10</sup>.

The geometric mosaics in Crete are either small mosaics, such as the Geometric mosaic from the Villa Dionysus at Knossos, dated to the end of the 1st century AD or the beginning of the 2nd century AD, or alternatively, are framed within some kind of grid like the figured mosaics, as in the

<sup>4</sup> ΜΑΡΚΟΥΛΑΚΗ, *supra* note 2 : 1990, ill. 58.

<sup>5</sup> F. BERTI, "Poseidon ed Amymone. Un Mosaico Romano di Chania", *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene* 50-51, 1972-73, p. 451-465 ill. 1.

<sup>6</sup> To date this mosaic has not been published in full. However there is reference to it by M. ΑΝΔΡΕΑΔΑΚΗ-ΒΛΑΖΑΚΗ, *Ἡ Αρχαιολογικὴ Εἰδησίς* 1989-91, *Κρητικὴ Ἑστῶς* 4, 1991/1993, p. 227-229.

<sup>7</sup> Σ. ΠΕΛΕΚΑΝΙΔΗΣ, *Σύνταγμα τῆν Παλαιοχριστιανικῶν Ψηφιδωτῶν Δαπήδων Τές Ἑλλάδος*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1988, p. 118, ill. 91a-c.

<sup>8</sup> ΜΑΡΚΟΥΛΑΚΗ, *supra* note 1 : 1987.

<sup>9</sup> R.J.A. WILSON, *Piazza Armerina*, London 1983, ill. 11 & 12.

<sup>10</sup> *BSA Annual Report of the Managing Committee for the session 1994-95*, 19.



example in the Odeon Room XI from Gortyn<sup>11</sup>, dating from the mid 2nd century AD to the early 3rd century AD. This style is very different from the Italian type of mosaic carpet style popular in many other parts of the empire.

There would appear to be little development of specific geometric motifs or even grids discernible in Crete from the end of the 1st century AD to the 4th century AD. There is no particular Cretan form of geometric element, and none that would link the mosaics of the island to anywhere else in the empire. There is just a general range of very common geometric motifs such as variations of guilloche (ill. 5) and (ill. 4), wave scroll, intersecting circles and swastika meander.

The scope of themes in the figured pavements is limited to mythological scenes and only a few other generic depictions. There is a staidness about the mosaics in their apparent lack of development and even the artistic revival of the second half of the 2nd century AD that affected mainland Greece does not seem to have had any influence on the mosaics of Crete<sup>12</sup>. Technically Cretan mosaics compare well with those on the mainland, but their subject matter is limited and there is little thematic or schematic development through time. Although the Cretan mosaics compare well in terms of the quality with the Greek mosaics, it is clear that the subject matter is limited with a discernible lack of development of themes and schemes in the mosaics over time. Although some later mosaics show greater skill in terms of execution than earlier ones, this is not attributable to the development of a Cretan style. The mosaics discovered so far indicate that there was a tradition of adhering to the Hellenistic method of presenting mosaics : that is through use of grids and central figured panels.

This absence of stylistic developments, the narrow range of the iconography and the limited skills demonstrated could therefore seem to initially indicate that it is unlikely that there could have been a well-established school of mosaicists on the island.

As there was no substantial tradition of laying of mosaic pavements in the Late Hellenistic and early Imperial times in the Eastern empire, particularly in Greece, one has to look for possible external influences on Cretan mosaics. Having said that, there would appear to be no direct origin of the style of Cretan mosaics, which seem to display elements of mosaic styles from all areas of the empire. There are unquestionable elements of mainland Greek mosaics visible in various Cretan mosaics, such as the prolonged use of central figured panels surrounded by geometric borders and the use of similar iconographic themes such as the rescue of Ariadne by Dionysus at Naxos. Similar themes, geometric grids and designs of mosaics can be seen elsewhere, in particular from areas such as Cyprus, Antioch and Cyrenaica and even as far away as Britain. It is, however,

---

<sup>11</sup> L. PERNIER, "L'Odeum, nell' Agora, di Gortina Presso il Leteo", *Annuario della Regia Scuola Archeologica di Atene* VIII-IX, 1925-1926, p. 1-69.

<sup>12</sup> G. HELLENKEMPER SALES, "Römische Mosaiken in Griechenland", *Bonner Jahrbücher* 186, 1986, p. 280.



unlikely that any of these areas could be a candidate for the direct source and inspiration for Cretan mosaics. Equally, it is clear that there was very little influence from areas such as North Africa and Italy. There are no specific geometric motifs common to these areas and Crete and as yet no black and white floor mosaics in the Italian style well known at Pompeii, Ostia and elsewhere have been discovered on the island. Hellenkemper Salies<sup>13</sup> argues that the 'Two Panelled'<sup>14</sup> and the 'Lion and the Centaur'<sup>15</sup> mosaics from Kastelli have narrow relations to the Italian black and white style of the 2nd century AD. However it is clear from the example of these two mosaics that although they may have elements of an external style, the use of grids to divide up the mosaics remains strong and therefore remain somewhat 'Cretan' in character. The only North African influences apparent in Cretan mosaics are those manifested in very small elements of the overall design such as the border consisting of the hunt scene from Kastelli Kissamos, and the wild animals (such as the Tigers and Gazelles) in the corners of the Dionysus and Ariadne mosaic in Chania. These elements can probably be explained through the existence of pattern books and perhaps specifically a 'filler' type pattern book.

When it comes to the question of the craftspeople behind the creation of the mosaics of Crete there are many possible answers. In the absence of further material, the identity of these people and the sources of their inspiration for particular types of mosaics is open for debate. For this paper I would like in particular to concentrate on the area of Knossos-Iraklion and then present briefly some thoughts regarding the other main areas of Gortyn and the Kastelli-Chania region.

One of the earliest surviving mosaics, the Apollinaris mosaic, comes from the town of Knossos and has been dated to the early part of the 2nd century AD. It is an important mosaic, not only because of its style but because it was signed as ΑΠΟΛΛΙΝΑΡΙΣ ΕΠΟΙΕΙ<sup>16</sup> (ill. 8) suggesting that the artist who created the mosaic was Greek, but not necessarily Cretan. Although the mosaic uses a fairly standard repertoire of both figurative designs and geometric motifs, there is little in it that could compare with the slightly later mosaics of the Villa Dionysus, particularly as regards the miniature, almost cartoon-like depictions of the central figures.

There are three phases of mosaics in the Villa Dionysus. The first, dating to the late first century AD is difficult to assess as there is so little to the mosaic. However, three floors that date to the middle of the 2nd century AD (Antonine period), have so many similarities that it seems likely that the same craftspeople were involved in their construction (ill. 2, ill. 3, ill. 4). Certainly the date and theme of the mosaics would make this very likely. However there are other factors to be considered here. The evidence we have for the development of the *colonia* of Knossos would

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. 267-269.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, ill. 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, ill. 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> *AR*, 1951, pl. VII.



suggest that there is unlikely to have been sufficient demand for a full time mosaic workshop in the area of Knossos in the first half of the 2nd century AD. Only the three Villa Dionysus mosaics (mid 2nd century AD) and the Apollinaris mosaic (dated to the turn of the 2nd century AD) are known in the Knossos-Iraklion region. There may, of course, be others as yet undiscovered but taking into account the likely extent of Romanisation in Crete at this time it is unlikely that there would have been a workshop established in the region as early as the 2nd century. So the question remains, where did the craftspeople come from ? Since foreign regional styles are not visible in the three mosaics, it seems likely that itinerant craftspeople were responsible for them. It seems that the most likely answer is that there were itinerant craftspeople whose own particular style owed little to their contemporaries at work in the region. These craftspeople may have come over from either mainland Greece or Cyrenaica. It may even have been the case that there was sufficient work in the laying of the three Villa Dionysus pavements to allow the establishment of a semi-permanent workshop in middle of the 2nd century AD. Perhaps only one or two craftspeople were commissioned to work on the *domus*, and they trained some locals to help them. It is likely that these itinerant craftspeople used pattern books, at least for the geometric decoration.

One thing all three mosaics have in common is that they do not quite correspond to the size of the room in which they were laid. This is clearly indicated by the extra borders of either chevrons or (ill. 3), stepped squares (ill. 2 & 4) that were laid around all three mosaics. This suggests that parts of the mosaics (such as the central figures) may have been prefabricated, and they were brought into Crete along with a mosaicist to lay them. This would suggest that the craftspeople who were brought from elsewhere to lay the floor did not have the exact measurements of the rooms and had to compensate by adding extra designs on site. It is also possible that the craftspeople responsible for the pavements were working strictly from a pattern book and they lacked the necessary skill to adapt the patterns to the size of the room.

If one compares mosaics of the same period from outside the Knossos-Iraklion region, there are few obvious similarities between the Villa Dionysus mosaics and any others such as those from Kastelli and Chania, which would also tend to indicate that there was no full time workshop established on Crete in the middle of the 2nd century AD.

There is however a striking difference in the final phase mosaics of the Villa Dionysus. These mosaics belong to the Late Antonine phase of the late 2nd century AD (ill. 6)<sup>17</sup>. The 'Three-part' mosaic fits the room perfectly, suggesting that it must have been laid tessera by tessera *in situ*. The colours of the central panel match those of the surrounding decoration and the size of the tesserae varies little between geometric decoration and figurative. There are several mosaics dating to the

---

<sup>17</sup> There is a mosaic which once depicted Medusa and the Four Seasons, now quite damaged, which may belong in date between the two main groups of the mid 2nd and the late 2nd AD.



second half of the 2nd century AD in the Knossos-Iraklion region, among which are the newly discovered Iraklion mosaics, located just behind the Iraklion museum, and the Theodosius mosaic (ill. 7). The Theodosius mosaic and the 'Three-part' mosaic share two clear stylistic similarities in terms of the same use of colours and the design of the leaf scroll surround. Although the Iraklion mosaics have yet to be published, there appear to be several comparisons that can be drawn between this group of five mosaics and those at Knossos. For example, one of the mosaics demonstrates the same kind of net pattern as in the 'Three-Part' mosaic while another shows the same kind of leaf scroll. There is also an acanthus scroll used in one of the Iraklion mosaics similar to the one in the 'Three Part' mosaic. The shared use of these elements between these three groups of mosaics (the Villa Dionysus, Theodosius and the Iraklion group) is difficult to dismiss as coincidence. There is also a possibility that there were villas waiting to have their floors decorated at the time of the late 2nd century destruction of Knossos. The house of the Diamond Frescos, as its name suggests, had very fine frescos on the walls but the most peculiar floors of pink plaster and in other areas rough cobbling. The total lack of pottery in the house suggests that it was never occupied. It was suggested by the excavator that the poor quality of the floors in comparison with the otherwise lavish decoration of the house suggests that it was waiting to have its proper floors, possibly mosaic laid, when it was destroyed by the same earthquake that destroyed the Villa Dionysus<sup>18</sup>.

Although there are too few mosaics known to establish with certainty the existence of a workshop during the latter half of the 2nd century AD based in Knossos, the secondary evidence such as the size of Knossos, the basilica, theatre and numerous houses dating from this period, suggests that the existence of at least one mosaic *officina* in the town at this period is a strong possibility.

Let us now turn briefly to the published mosaics from Gortyn. There is evidence for only a handful of mosaics from this city and these are mostly geometric in design which is surprising given that Gortyn was the capital of the province. On the basis of the drawings published at the turn of the century, it would seem that there is at least one mosaic which has been dated to the end of the 2nd century AD from the Odeon at Gortyn<sup>19</sup> with elements of grid and geometric decoration similar to those of the late 2nd century AD group from the Knossos-Iraklion region. There is the same kind of leaf scroll extending around the border of the mosaic as there is in the Theodosius mosaic and the 'Three Part' mosaic (ill. 7 & 6). There are also the remains of what would appear to be a central panel depicting two rectangles bordering a central square, just as the central panels in the 'Three Part' mosaic. Although the similarities between the Gortyn mosaic and the Knossos-Iraklion mosaic may

<sup>18</sup> L.H. SACKETT (ed.), *Knossos From Greek city to Roman colony Excavations at the Unexplored Mansion*, ABSA Supp. 12, London 1992, p. 37-47.

<sup>19</sup> PERNIER, *supra* note 11, ill. 62.



not be significant, they could be the first indications for a workshop on the island in the late 2nd AD which served both Knossos-Iraklion and Gortyn.

The areas of Chania and Kastelli differ substantially from the Knossos-Iraklion area. Of the three mosaics on display in the Archaeological museum of Chania the Dionysus and Ariadne mosaic and that of the Dionysiac scenes<sup>20</sup> were both discovered in the same villa, while the third, the Poseidon and Amymone mosaic, was discovered elsewhere but dates to the same period as the first two : that of the early to mid 3rd century AD. The smaller details of the two mosaics such as the facial features of the figures demonstrate significant similarities, such as the rendering of the noses, the squinty eyebrows and the cloaks. The suggestion must be that the same craftsman or people were responsible for the creation of these two mosaics. The case of the mosaic of Dionysiac scenes from the *triclinium* of the house of Dionysus (which also contained the mosaics of Dionysus and Ariadne) is less straightforward. Here the figured decoration is limited but there are certain similarities with the other two mosaics. The fact that the geometric decoration on all three mosaics is very different does pose something of a problem. However, it could be explained by the possibility that there was a single master craftsman working on the figurative parts of the mosaics and others on the geometric parts, or simply indicate the patrons' desire for variety. There are many other mosaics in the area of Chania, for example that from the Kapetanaki plot<sup>21</sup> and the 'Inscribed fragment'<sup>22</sup>. None of the other mosaics (fragmentary as they are) would seem to show any relation to the Chania museum examples or each other.

Regarding the Kastelli region, many mosaics have been brought to light in recent times through the work of Stavroula Markoulaki. These mosaics for the most part remain unpublished, but we know that there is quite a number of mosaics dating to the mid 3rd century AD. In particular there is a group of mosaics of very high standard known as the 'Health Centre' mosaics. The quality of the mosaics and the fact that there are so many in the area could indicate that there was a workshop of mosaicists established in Kastelli in the 3rd century AD. It is also possible that this school served the needs of the area of Chania. Certainly there are parallels between these mosaics and the House of Dionysus mosaics from Chania ; for example the grid type of two intersecting squares within a circle surrounding the Dionysus and Ariadne mosaic is similar to that surrounding a Dionysiac scene from the 'Health Centre' mosaics. The particular type of guilloche (similar to 'Polychrome entwined symmetrically shaded band of S-forms')<sup>23</sup> used in the subsidiary panels of the *triclinium* mosaic is almost identical to that in another of the 'Health centre' mosaics. However, the use of grid to display the mosaic in at least one example would suggest that the craftspeople had

<sup>20</sup> ΜΑΡΚΟΥΛΑΚΗ, *supra* note 2 : 1990, ill. 62.

<sup>21</sup> Γ. ΤΖΕΔΑΚΗΣ, *A.Delt* 33, 1978, p. 368-369, ill. 190 b.

<sup>22</sup> Γ. ΤΖΕΔΑΚΗΣ, *A.Delt* 25, 1970, p. 467-468, ill. 409 a-c.

<sup>23</sup> C. BALMELLE *et al.*, *Le Décor Géométrique de la Mosaïque Gréco-Romaine*, Paris 1985, p. 67, ill. e.



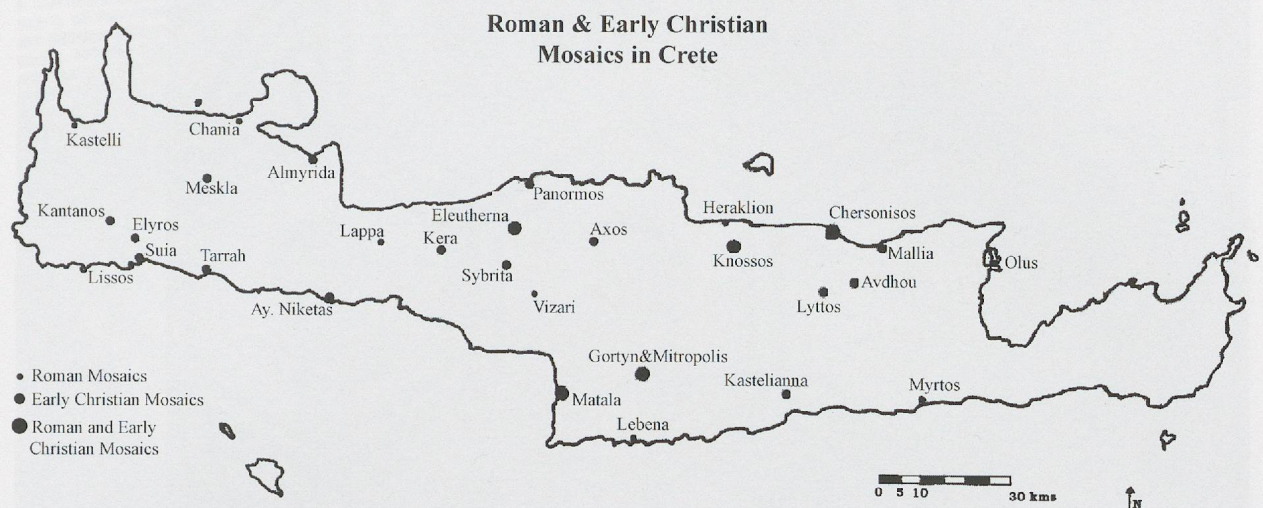
looked to earlier mosaics for inspiration. There are many other mosaics from the area, including a fine second half of the 2nd century AD example of a Horae mosaic<sup>24</sup>; there are others dating to the 3rd century depicting geometric designs and Dionysiac scenes. However, in light of their poor condition and the absence of publication, it would be unwise to make any judgements about them at present.

These then are the possibilities for the organisation of the craftspeople responsible for the Roman mosaics of Crete. I would suggest on the basis of the evidence available, that up until the mid 2nd AD there were only itinerant mosaicists coming to the island on demand. Subsequently there appears to have been a change with the possible establishment of a workshop in the Knossos-Iraklion region in the latter half of the 2nd century AD and later still a workshop in the Chania-Kastelli region in the 3rd century AD. Although the evidence for craftspeople is scanty in the earlier period, it is clear that there was a radical change when Christianity reached the island, when there is definite evidence for the first time that there was a workshop of mosaicists established on the island.

Despite the limitations of the evidence, the study of Roman mosaics provides us with good evidence to reflect on society in the Roman period, in particular in areas such as Crete where historical and literary evidence is so limited. I hope to develop this aspect of my work elsewhere.

<sup>24</sup> MAPKOYAAKH, *supra* note 2, ill. 14-20.





i) Map of Crete showing distribution of Mosaics : Roman and Early Christian



ii) *Oecus* Mosaic from the Villa Dionysus, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)





iii) Dionysiac Followers mosaic from the Villa Dionysus, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)



iv) Dionysus and four Seasons mosaic from the Villa Dionysus, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)



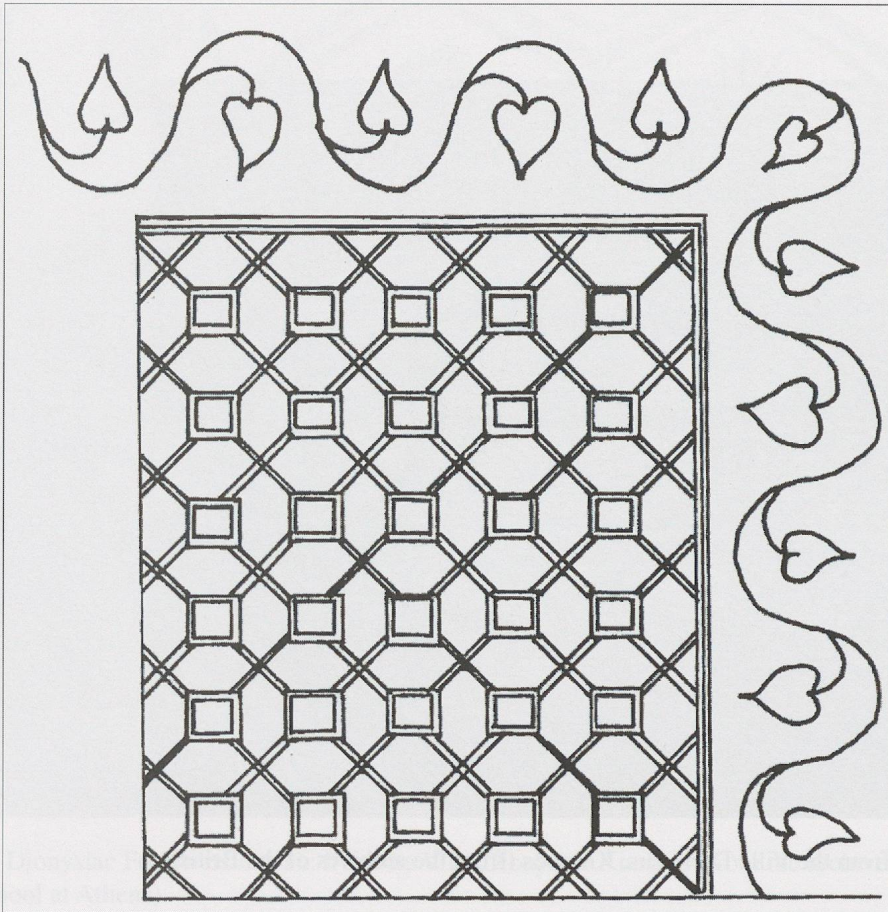


v) Medusa and Seasons mosaic from the Villa Dionysus, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)

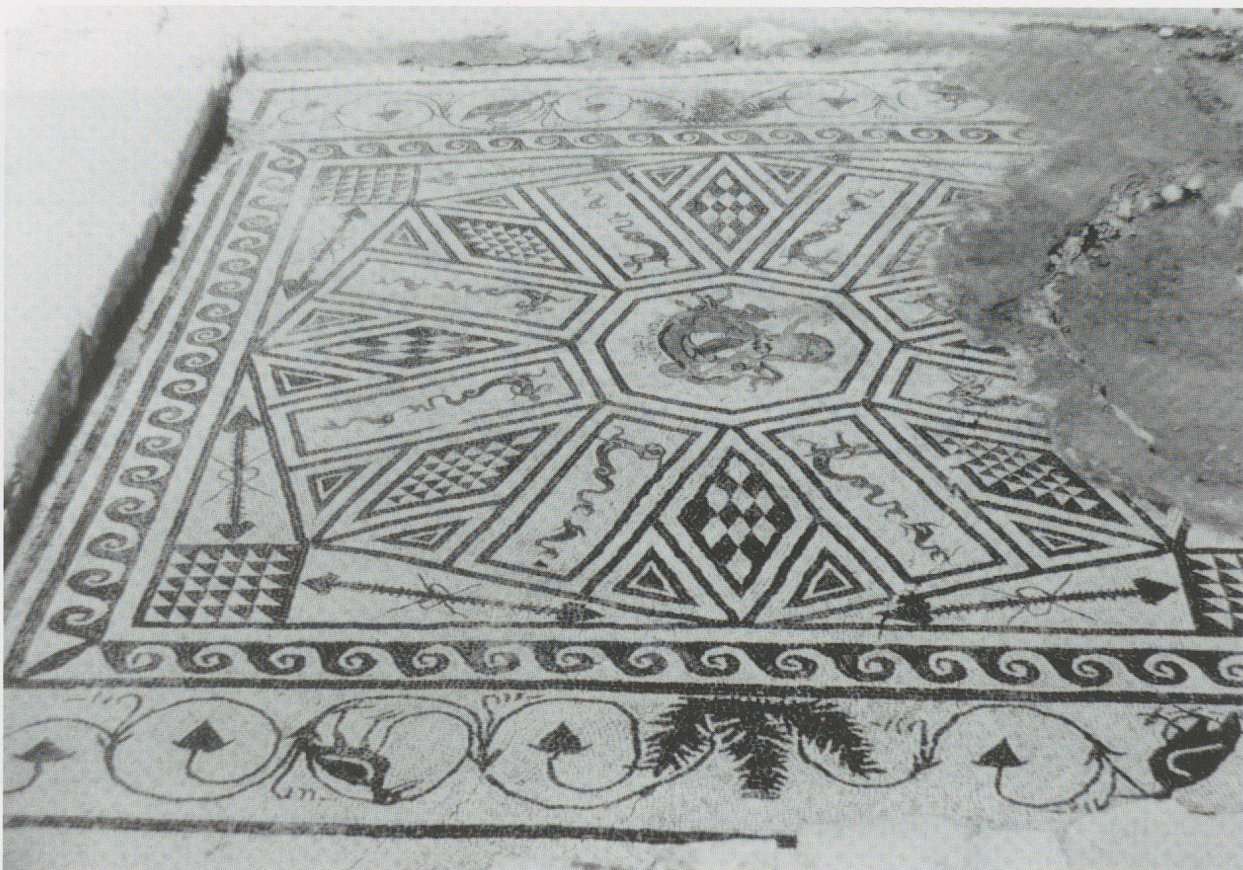


vi) The Three Part mosaic from the Villa Dionysus, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)





vii) The Theodosius mosaic, Knossos (reproduction of drawing by Piet de Jong from the Knossos Daybook, 21st January 1950)



viii) The Apollinaris Mosaic, Knossos (from the archives of the British School at Athens)