

**Zeitschrift:** Cahiers d'archéologie romande  
**Herausgeber:** Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise  
**Band:** 86 (2001)  
  
**Artikel:** Two leopards flanking a krater, Part I  
**Autor:** Zwirn, Stephen R.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-835732>

### **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:** 29.12.2025

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

## Two Leopards flanking a Krater, Part I<sup>1</sup>

Stephen R. ZWIRN

My interest in the image of two leopards flanking a krater began after examining a unique gold bracelet in the Byzantine Collection at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 1). It is designed as two leopards, joined at their hind legs by a clasp, that leap upwards and seem to support an openwork bezel with a high, vessel-like setting. The bracelet was acquired in Paris in 1938, and said to have come from Egypt. It was published in several Dumbarton Oaks Handbooks and treated at length by Marvin Ross in 1965<sup>2</sup>. Ross dated the bracelet in the early seventh century. Despite its high quality and fine condition, this bracelet has not been included in any subsequent study of early Byzantine art or jewelry.

Ross identified the animals as panthers, but cited no other representations of opposed panthers in Roman, late antique, or early Byzantine art; nor did he mention the strong iconographic association of panthers with Bacchus. When discussing the motif of two opposed animals in jewelry, Ross mentioned only one ring, a gold ring with a *solidus* of the emperor Leo supported by rabbits, in the British Museum<sup>3</sup>. Surprising is the fact that he did not mention another ring with opposed leopards, in the Walters Art Gallery (Baltimore), that he knew quite well, having published it on two previous occasions<sup>4</sup>. The bezel of the ring is made up of two leaping leopards supporting an intaglio with Victoria, and dated to the fourth century.

Because the image of opposed leopards on the Dumbarton Oaks bracelet is not unique, I wondered if, in fact, it had a traceable iconographic history. My research is an attempt to fill in the background of the bracelet and the Walters Art Gallery ring, and thereby situate these luxury objects within their late Roman and possibly early Byzantine cultural context. My work has been a hunt for images of opposed leopards, which, when completed, might be considered antecedents or sources of inspiration for the gold jewelry.

However, I did not find pairs of leopards facing, moving or leaping towards each other without something in between them, like the jewelry. Consistently the pairs of panthers facing each other, whether striding, jumping or sitting, were separated by a krater. The panther was a

---

<sup>1</sup> Because of limitations of space, this essay presents only the mosaic evidence discussed at the *Colloque*. The remaining data will be published as Part II elsewhere. Panther and leopard are used interchangeably in English, and will be so used in this study.

<sup>2</sup> M.C. ROSS, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, II, *Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period*, Washington, D.C. 1965, no. 47, pl. 38.

<sup>3</sup> O.M. DALTON, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East... of the British Museum*, London 1901, no. 210, pl. IV.

<sup>4</sup> M.C. ROSS, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, exh. cat. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 1947, no. 506, called Byzantine, 5th-6th century, and *idem*, "Notes on Byzantine Gold and Silversmith's Work", *JWAG* 18, 1955, p. 65. The ring has subsequently been published in *Jewelry, Ancient to Modern*, New York, Baltimore 1979, no. 425, and K. WEITZMANN ed., *Age of Spirituality*, exh. cat. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1979, no. 278 (K.R. BROWN).



well established part of the repertory of Bacchus in Roman art. By combining the panthers with a krater, the image as a Bacchic reference was reinforced. The question of whether this motif served only as an allusion to Bacchus, or carried other meaning(s) for its contemporary viewers can only be answered after all the examples of the image are collected—establishing where and how the motif was used.

The largest category in which the motif of leopards flanking a krater appears is in mosaics. The examples are widely distributed over the western half of the Roman Empire, and the following list, presented in chronological order, uses dates given them by the excavators or the scholars who have published them.

1. Silchester (Hampshire), England : the description of a badly damaged mosaic floor in a Roman house includes the following : “Fragments of the long panel on the side . . . show that probably each of the similar spaces was filled by an ornamental composition apparently composed of two panthers supporting a vase or some such object between them.”<sup>5</sup> On the chromolithograph in the publication, part of one panther, in a sitting position, and the scrolls of a vine are reproduced clearly. Although described as a panther, no spots appear on the reproduction. We must reserve final judgement, although the sitting position does resemble the panthers in Nîmes (see No. 3, below), and the vine in the field recalls vines seen on the mosaics in Sousse (No. 6, below) and Littlecote Park (No. 10, below). The excavator dated the mosaic to ca. 80-90, based on comparisons with decorative motifs in Pompeii. A date in the late first or during the early second century is plausible.

2. Ptolemais, in ancient Cyrenaica (Fig. 2) : the *emblema* in a *triclinium* (room 14) in the building designated the Villa<sup>6</sup>. The diners inside the room would have faced the *emblema* and seen what we cannot in the black and white reproduction—that there were vine scrolls at the top of the panel and that the krater is filled with wine, indicated by red tesserae. The villa and its mosaics are dated to the late 1st century.

3. Nîmes (Fig. 3) : in a corridor of the peristyle of a house in front of the entrance to an exedra room is a panel showing two black leopards with white spots<sup>7</sup>. The leopards are shown as though seated on their haunches to either side of the krater. Although ungainly, this pose was used elsewhere, and can therefore be considered a variation. The mosaic is dated to the first half of the 2nd century.

4. Sant’Antioco (Sulci), Sardinia (Fig. 4) : the *emblema* with our motif was in a small room, the context of which was not recoverable<sup>8</sup>. Ruins in the immediate area included column

<sup>5</sup> G.E. FOX, “Notes on the remains of an early house found in the courtyard of House No. 2, Insula XIX”, in W.H. ST. JOHN HOPE and G.E. FOX, “Excavations on the site of the Roman city of Silchester, Hants, in 1898”, *Archaeologia* 56/2, 1899, p. 246. I thank Patricia Witts for this reference and for generously sharing her knowledge of mosaics in England with me.

<sup>6</sup> C.H. KRAELING *et al.*, *Ptolemais : City of the Libyan Pentapolis*, Chicago 1962, p. 128-130, 242-244, pl. LIX, C.

<sup>7</sup> To be published in M. MONTEIL, L. SAUVAGE *et al.*, *Le Quartier antique des Bénédictins à Nîmes*.

<sup>8</sup> S. ANGIOLILLO, *Mosaici antichi in Italia : Sardinia*, Rome 1981, no. 65, pl. 42. The dimensions of the room are reported to have been “quasi due metri di lato” and of the mosaic : 1,60 x 1,50 m.



bases and some wall foundations one meter thick. From the krater, filled to overflowing with water, indicated by blue tesserae, grows a vine that seems to have both ivy and grapevine leaves growing from it. The doubled reference, as to be expected, is to Bacchus. The mosaic is placed in the second century.

5. Cirencester, Gloucestershire, England (Fig. 5) : the existence of a fragmentary floor mosaic, whose design was divided into different geometrical shapes, is preserved in an antiquarian's painting<sup>9</sup>. In a semi-circular compartment along one side are the "remains of a *cantharus* between two confronted quadrupeds"<sup>10</sup>. In all likelihood, though without certainty, these were leopards. The mosaic is dated to the 2nd century<sup>11</sup>.

6. Sousse, Tunisia (Fig. 6) : the mosaic is a threshold panel to the *oecus* in the House of Sorothus, dated to the late 2nd century<sup>12</sup>. The published drawing shows spotted animals, which I accept as panthers, in contrast to the text which mentions a tiger and a tigress. There is also a vine-stock that grows out of the corner and develops toward the krater.

7. Sparta, Greece (Fig. 7) : a mosaic discovered in the vicinity of other mosaics, which seem to form a complex of structures, has been dated into the 3rd century<sup>13</sup>.

8. Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, southern France (Fig. 8) : also placed in the 3rd century, the mosaic is now, for the most part, lost<sup>14</sup>. The leopards and krater panel seemingly served as a threshold into a large room with Hercules and Hesione in the center. Opposite the leopards is what could well have been a second threshold (?) with dolphins flanking a krater. The combined use of leopards and dolphins occurs on two related monuments, a sarcophagus in Verona<sup>15</sup>, where leopards appear on the front and dolphins appear on both ends of the lid (without a krater between them<sup>16</sup>), and on the mosaic at Littlecote Park (No. 10, below). The Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux mosaic, like those in Sardinia and Sparta, lacks an architectural context, so that the function of the room could not be determined.

<sup>9</sup> D.J. SMITH, "Roman Mosaics in Britain before the Fourth Century", in *La Mosaïque gréco-romaine* II, Paris 1975, pl. CXI. Again I express my indebtedness to Patricia Witts for pointing out this mosaic.

<sup>10</sup> SMITH, p. 280. Although not illustrated, this mosaic is mentioned in A. MC WHIRR, *Cirencester Excavations III, Houses in Roman Cirencester*, Cirencester 1986, p. 247, Insula X, para. 3, and p. 256, no. 51. I thank Patricia Witts for this reference.

<sup>11</sup> SMITH, p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> L. FOUCHER, *Inventaire des mosaïques, Feuille no 57 de l'Atlas archéologique, Sousse*, Tunis 1960, p. 56, no. 57.18, pl. 28.

<sup>13</sup> C.A. CHRESTOS, "Anaskaphi kai ereunai eis periochen tes Spartes", *Archaiologikon Deltion* 19, Part B 1, 1964, p. 137f., pl. 137b. I owe this reference to the kindness of Anastasia Panagiotopoulou; G. DAUX, "Chronique des fouilles 1965", *BCH* 90. 2, 1966, p. 796, fig. 6.

<sup>14</sup> H. LAVAGNE, *Recueil général des mosaïques de la Gaule* III. 1, *Province de Narbonnaise, Partie centrale* (X<sup>e</sup> Supplément à Gallia), Paris 1979, p. 100, no. 118, pl. 42, 43. The part of the mosaic that survives is in the Musée Calvet, Avignon.

<sup>15</sup> Verona, Museo Maffeiano, 114 in F. MATZ, *Die dionysischen Sarkophage* II (ASR 4), Berlin 1968, no. 83, pl. 106, 1, 2, pl. 107, 1, 2, pl. 108, 1 and Beilage 32, 2-4.

<sup>16</sup> LAVAGNE, p. 111, mentions instances where two dolphins are represented with a krater between them.



9. Rudston Villa, Humberside, England (Fig. 9): dated to the early 4th century is a threshold panel in House 2<sup>17</sup>. This structure was L-shaped with a mosaic in each of its three rooms *en suite*: Room 1, a geometric mosaic; Room 2, a mosaic with compartments filled with human figures; the threshold panel with leopards and krater oriented to those entering Room 3, the largest room; Room 3, a mosaic representing a victorious charioteer in his quadriga, oriented to those on the far side of the room, framed by the Seasons and birds.

10. Littlecote Park, Wiltshire, England (Fig. 10): a mosaic discovered in the eighteenth century, and re-excavated in 1978, was the pavement of a large rectangular room which ended with a triconch<sup>18</sup>. The leopards and krater panel is situated at the end of the rectangular room near the triconch, and is placed so as to be seen from the trilobed space. At the far end of this room is another panel with two composite animals, having the foreparts of leopards and the bodies of fish flanking a krater, and dolphins swimming toward the far corners of the panel. In the leopard panel, a leafy plant grows out of the krater and what appears to be an ivy vine curls its way behind and above the leopards. The pavement is dated ca. 360 or shortly after.

11. Complutum (modern Alcalá de Henares), province of Madrid, Spain (Fig. 11): an elaborate mosaic in the *triclinium* of a large villa has two panels with the leopards and krater motif<sup>19</sup>. They flank a rather stilted image of the drunken Bacchus. Along the lower edge of these panels is a scene of grape-pressing, and the four Seasons are placed in a panel that lays between the entryway and the main *triclinium* group. The mosaic has been dated to the late 4th or early 5th century.

In review of the mosaic evidence, the motif of two leopards flanking a krater is attested in eleven instances from the late 1st century to the end of the 4th or early 5th century. The density is greatest from the period covering the late 1st through the late 2nd century: Silchester, Ptolemais, Nîmes, S. Antioco, Cirencester and Sousse (Nos. 1 - 6). Two mosaics are attributed to the 3rd century: Sparta and Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (Nos. 7 and 8). Finally, the period between the early 4th and the early 5th century contains three mosaics: Rudston Villa, Littlecote Park and Complutum (Nos. 9 - 11).

In terms of geographical distribution, England has the most examples with four (No. 1, Silchester, No. 5, Cirencester, No. 9, Rudston Villa and No. 10, Littlecote Park), although the earlier two are separated by approximately two centuries from the later two. Southern France has two examples (No. 3, Nîmes and No. 8, Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux) which may be dated as much as one century apart—perhaps slightly more or slightly less. Approximately the same

<sup>17</sup> D.J. SMITH, *The Roman Mosaics from Rudston, Brantingham and Horkstow*, Kingston upon Hull 1976, p. 5-11, esp. p. 6, fig. 2, pl. 1.

<sup>18</sup> B. WALTERS, "The 'Orpheus' mosaic in Littlecote Park, England", in *III Colloquio Internazionale sul Mosaico Antico* (1984), p. 433-42. The mosaic was restored after its recent excavation using both ancient and modern terra-cotta tesserae based on an eighteenth century engraving by George Vertue. David Johnson and Patricia Witts have my thanks for bringing this mosaic to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> D. FERNÁNDEZ-GALIANO, *Complutum II. Mosaicos*, Madrid 1984, p. 149, 168-171, fig. 10 (p. 153), pl. 82, 83, 86, 87, 88.



difference in time may be assumed for the two mosaics in North Africa (No. 2, Ptolemais and No. 6, Sousse). This overview of the distribution of the motif leaves out of account the isolated instances in Sardinia (No. 4, S. Antioco) and the Peloponnesos (No. 7, Sparta).

There are two deductions that can be drawn from this information : 1) the motif was used at sites spread over a large part of the western Roman Empire, without any definite pattern of distribution (except for the four tantalizing occurrences in England); and 2) in terms of chronology, the early period (late 1st - early 2nd century) is the densest. After this the 4th - 5th century with three instances demonstrate that the motif was used, sparsely but continuously, during that period. In the third century there are only two examples.

In terms of function, where it can be identified, there is some diversity. Use in a *triclinium*, two : No. 2, Ptolemais and No. 11, Complutum ; use as a threshold panel or to mark the entrance into a room, five : No. 3, Nîmes, No. 6, Sousse, No. 8, Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux, No. 9, Rudston Villa, and No. 10, Littlecote Park<sup>20</sup>. Use as the main or subsidiary decoration in a room, though the main purpose of the room cannot be determined, 3 : No. 1, Silchester, No. 4, S. Antioco, No. 7, Sparta. These data show that this emblem of Bacchus was adapted to different locations and functions.

The gold bracelet at Dumbarton Oaks (Fig. 1), the design of which I believe is derived from the two leopards and krater emblem, would be removed by two centuries from the latest probable date of the mosaic evidence. I can say at this time that the evidence of all other examples of the two leopards and krater motif fall within the same overall span of time as the mosaics, approximately from the second half of the first century to the first half of the fifth century. For this reason, I propose to redate the bracelet to the late fourth or early fifth century. The argument for this earlier date is based on a review of all the related evidence, the rest of which—sarcophagi, jewelry and silver tableware—will be presented and discussed, along with a consideration of the meaning of this Bacchic emblem, in Part II of this study.

---

<sup>20</sup> The two leopards and krater panel, although architecturally part of the large rectangular room, would have served as a threshold panel into this room for those leaving the triconch unit. The threshold itself is covered with a zig-zag pattern, but the leopards and krater panel uses approximately the same dimensions, thus associated with it in effect.



## DISCUSSION

Noël **Duval** : Je félicite M. Zwirn de sa longue enquête à travers les siècles et les matières. Je suggère que l'objet ajouré de Petroasa puisse être une lampe (peut-être le haut d'un lampadaire), analogue à des fonds de *polycandela* ou à des lampes suspendues (comme celles du trésor de Sion), ou plutôt des supports de lampes en verre. Pour les origines, il faudrait tenir compte de la tradition iranienne (parthe et sassanide) où les panthères et léopards ne sont pas rares et des exemples d'argenterie de l'Antiquité tardive ("amphores" ou *cenoches*) avec des anses du même type. La datation de certaines mosaïques invoquées a été largement remise en cause et le regroupement à la fin de l'antiquité est plus net qu'il n'apparaît. La signification dionysiaque spécifique de ce motif peut être mise en doute comme pour tous les motifs avec cratère et animaux affrontés qui sont une koinè du décor de tapis de seuil, en particulier dans les triclinia mais aussi dans les églises (on pense aussi au type du cratère avec lions affrontés à l'entrée de la grande église du groupe épiscopal de Djemila). C'est un vieux débat qu'on a ouvert autrefois quand on voulait voir un motif chrétien dans le cratère représenté sur les mosaïques privées, ou dionysiaque pour le cratère illustré dans les églises, et qui semblait un peu oublié. Faut-il le rouvrir ?

Stephen **Zwirn** : I thank Mr Duval for his comments. His observation concerning the Petroasa objects is very attractive, but there are problems with it. The hanging lamps I know all have suspension rings or brackets for the chains - but the gold Petroasa objects do not. Furthermore, no hanging lamps, to my knowledge, have three-dimensional handles like the leopards ; there are holes in the tops of the leopards heads, but suspension from two points is not stable - so on this account again I do not think these objects would have been suspended. That they might have had a glass liner is, however, quite possible. You are certainly correct in mentioning the fact that symmetrically confronted animals have a long tradition. But that tradition, because it is transcultural, must be seen not as a series of adaptations ; the placement of the images, the types of animals used ; the use of protomes or whole animals must in each case be taken into consideration, to avoid an essentialist interpretation. My aim was to isolate one strand of a complex tradition and seek its meaning within the scope of one culture. Mr Duval is quite right to allude to the wealth and variety of this image type through the centuries, from Roman into Early Christian times. I think my contribution throws some light onto that chapter of Art history, by pointing out that this motif - two leopards and a krater - had a life from the first century A.C. to the early fifth century - after which, as far as I know, it does not continue. I think it may have been just because of the Bacchic source of the motif that it was no longer acceptable in a Christian context, where a wide variety of animals, including the peacock which had been used in



pagan contexts, could be adopted. I do not know of any confronted animal images with a krater in a Christian context before the early fifth Century.

Elena **Kouvshinova** : Even now in the Russian orthodox church after the confirmation the confirmed person drinks water with wine from such a cup. This tradition comes from Byzantine Empire.

Asher **Ovadiah** : In order to have a solid basis to prove the symbolic, allegorical and apotropaic aspects of leaping leopards in Roman and early Christian art, it is necessary to have literary sources, which recall this type of scene. If not, it is difficult to develop the above mentioned aspects concerning the scene under discussion.

Stephen **Zwirn** : It was one of my aims to point out that an image, like the one I was discussing - artificially constructed as a visual emblem - alerted the viewer to a meaning beyond its most obvious Bacchic reference. In this case, I do consider the inscription on the gold ring in Trier a text. On the ring the wish is personalized, but I would like to think that this was the message being conveyed through the other examples I have shown.

Jean-Pierre **Darmon** : Merci de cette excellente étude, où vous démontrez le caractère bénéfique de ce motif des léopards rampants affrontés de part et d'autre d'un cratère sur tous les supports et à toutes les époques de culture romaine. Ne pensez-vous pas qu'il faudrait rattacher cette valeur bénéfique au caractère dionysiaque des deux composantes de ce motif, qui, à elles seules, évoquent fortement la présence du dieu dont elles sont les symboles, comme vous l'avez très bien montré dans votre communication au colloque de Tunis ? En ce qui concerne les mosaïques, ne pensez-vous pas qu'il faudrait aussi les mettre parfois en liaison avec la fonction de convivialité (banquets) assurée par les salles qu'elles ornent ou dont elles ornent les seuils ?

Stephen **Zwirn** : Thank you for these observations, and the extremely apt reminder. I do, fundamentally, agree with you, but my emphasis - perhaps made too strongly - was on the meaning of the motif as a sign separable from its source within the Bacchic repertory. I would think that there was always a Bacchic reference (allusion, or sense) embedded in the motif, but that its generalized cultural meaning might at times supercede that reference. This can only be a surmise, and I would not admit this **visual** emblem - not based on any narrative text - could ever be fully understood without knowing its Bacchic origin. As for the place of its use, there are only two instances among the mosaics (Ptolemaïs and Complutum) that are triclinia, and four where the motif served as an entry or threshold image (Nîmes, Sousse, Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux and Rudston). I do not find the leopards and krater motif enough of an indication to



make the deduction of what happened in the room - except insofar as to presume that the host wished well for himself and his guests.

Fig. 3. Nimes, Quarter des Bains, *Donus* to north (see also the original Service of Nimes, courtesy of J. P. Darmon)





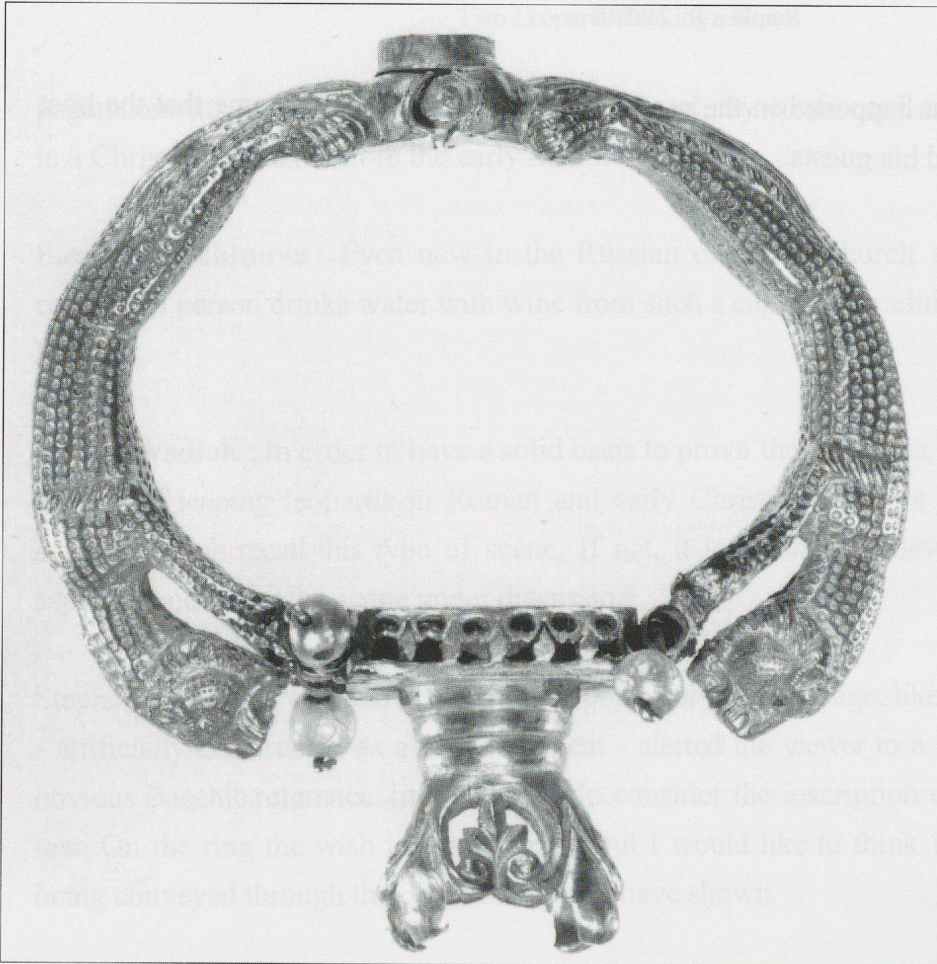


Fig. 1. Gold bracelet (Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.)



Fig. 2. Ptolemais, *Triclinium* mosaic (Room 14, the Villa) (after KRAELING, *Ptolemais*)





Fig. 3. Nîmes, Quartier des Bénédictins, *Domus A*, north gallery (Archeological Service of Nîmes ; courtesy of J.-P. Darmon)



Fig. 4. S. Antioco (Sulci), Sardinia (after ANGIOLILLO, *Mosaici. . . Sardinia*)





Fig. 5. Cirencester (after SMITH in *La Mosaique gréco-romaine II*)

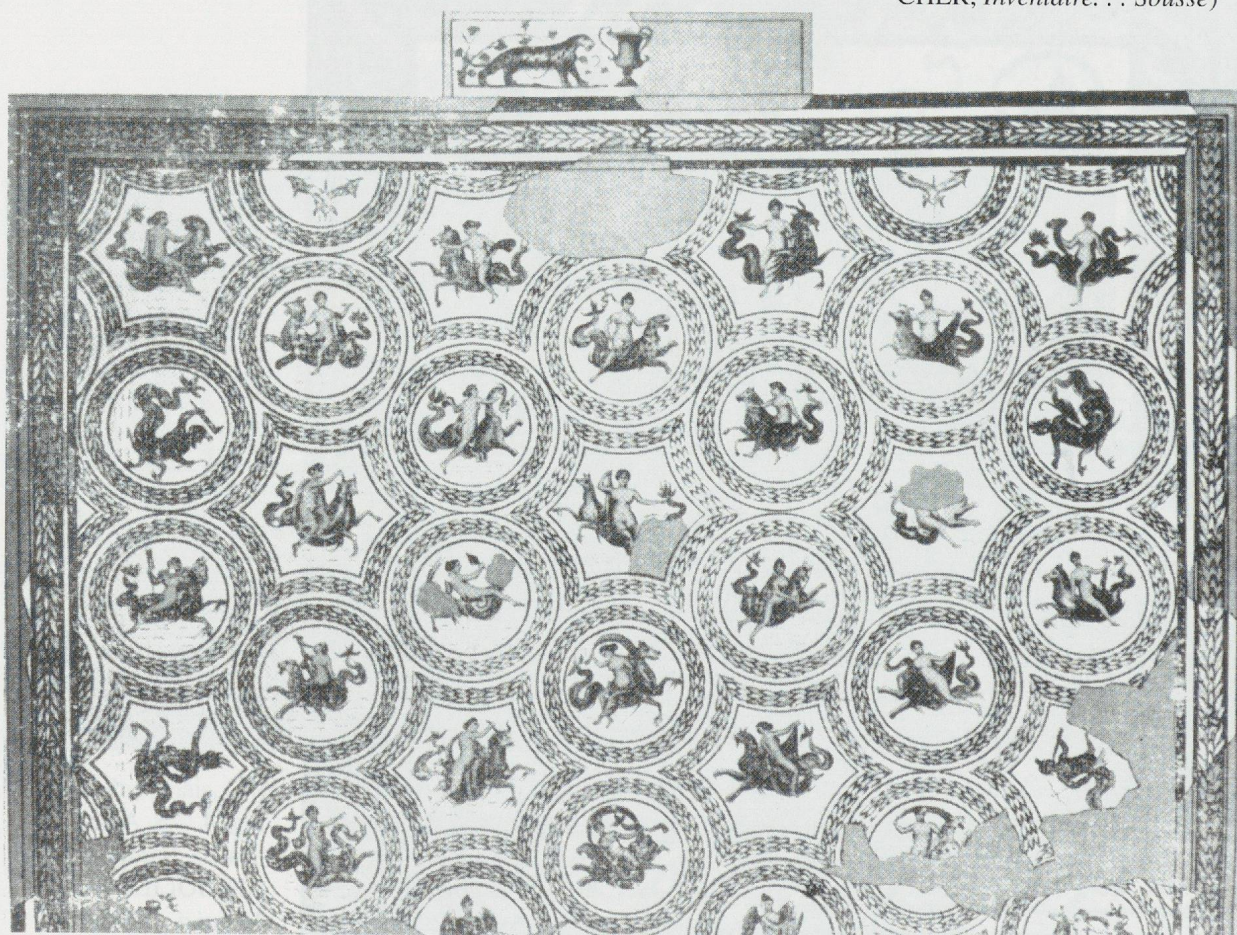


Fig. 6. Sousse (after FOUCHER, *Inventaire. . . Sousse*)





Fig. 7. Sparta (after DAUX, *BCH* 90. 2)

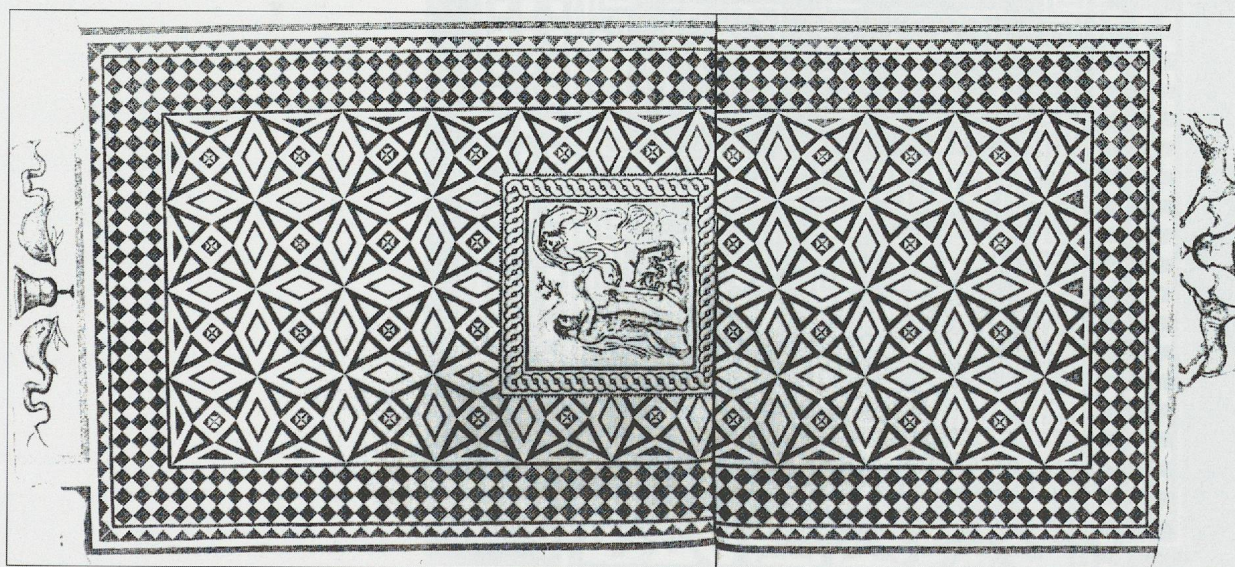


Fig. 8. Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux (after LAVAGNE, *Recueil général*, III, 1)



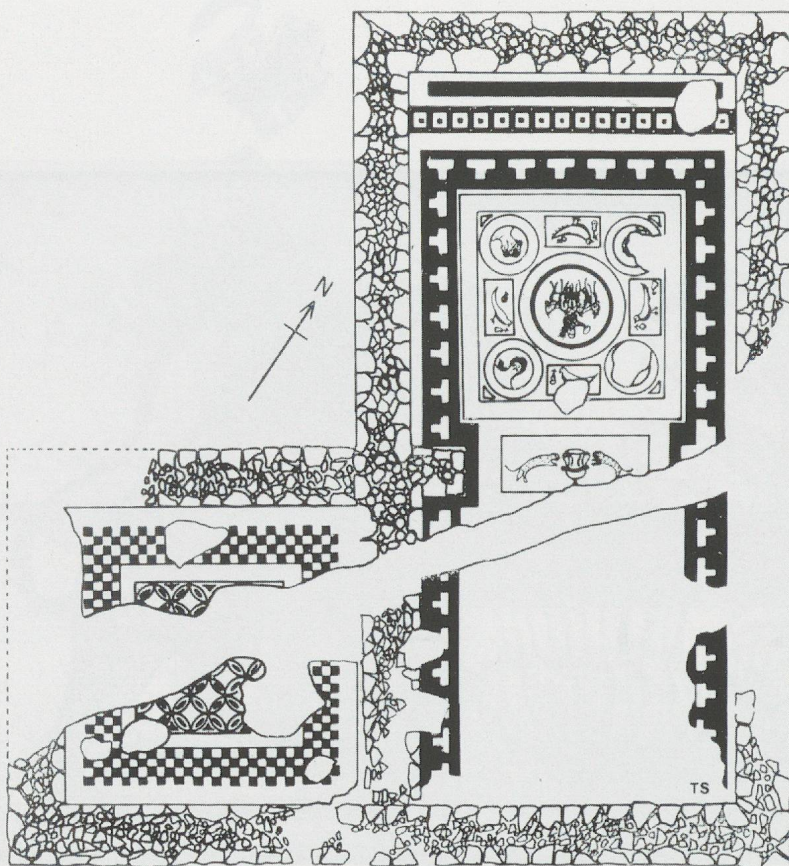


Fig. 9. Rudston Villa (after SMITH, *The Roman Mosaics from Rudston. . .*)



Fig. 10. Littlecote Park (after WALTERS in *III Colloquio Internaz. sul Mosaico antico*)





Fig. 11. Complutum, Casa de Baco (after FERNÁNDEZ-GALIANO, *Complutum II*)