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OLD AND NEW ASPECTS OF THE ICONOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION OF THE DIRKE MOSAIC OF AQUINCUM

Anita KIRCHHOF¹ 

The so-called Dirke Mosaic Building, named after the central mythological scene of the mosaic that decorates one of its rooms, is located in the residential area of the city magistrates in the northeastern part of the Civilian Town at Aquincum. The depiction of the punishment of Dirke, known throughout the Roman Empire, was a popular theme in both small-scale, large-scale, and monumental art. The central mythological scene of the mosaic is inseparable from its context. The study overviews the composition and function of the depictions of the figural emblem and the pictorial band framing it considering literary sources and similar decorative elements appearing in works of other arts (architecture, painting, and stone carving), while also providing new information on the function and dating of the room.

Az aquincumi polgárváros északkeleti részében, a városi előjárók lakónegyedében található az úgynevezett Dirke mozaikos épület, amely nevét az egyik helyiségét díszítő mozaik központi mitológiai jelenetéről kapta. Dirke bűnhődésének ábrázolása kedvelt témája volt mind a római kisművészetek tömegtermékeinek, mind a nagy- és monumentális művészeti ágak alkotásainak. A mozaik központi mitológiai jelenetét azonban nem lehet önmagában, kontextusából kiemelve tárgyalni. A tanulmány, a figurális embléma-, és az azt övező képszalag ábrázolásait a kompozíció és funkció összefüggéseiben-, valamint az irodalmi források felhasználása mellett, más művészeti ágak, mint például az építészet, festészet, kőfaragás emlékein is megjelenő díszítőelemek párhuzamaival együtt vizsgálja, továbbá a helyiség funkciójára és keltezésére vonatkozóan is új információkkal szolgál.

Keywords: Aquincum, Dirke, Dirce, mosaic, Nymphaeum, Roman bath, spring, fountain, pelte, Roman garden, garden representation

Kulcsszavak: Aquincum, Dirke, Dirce, mozaik, nymphaeum, római kori fürdő, forrás, szökőkút, pelta, római kori kert, kertábrázolás

The art collection of C. Asinius Pollio (Hoffmann 2015, 127–139) held a representation of Dirke, which he considered, drawing on Pliny, to be the work of the sculptors Apollonius of Tralles and Tauriscus of Rhodes. This group of sculptures depicted Amphion and Zethus, Antiope's twin sons, conceived by Zeus and Dirke, who was captured and tied to a wild bull to be strangled. Pliny also mentions the rope with which Dirke was probably tied to the bull (Pliny NH 36, 34) (Fig. 1).

The so-called Farnese Bull statue group, found in the gymnasium of the Baths of Caracalla in 1546¹ (Winckelmann 1885, VI. 52, VII. 205; Müller 1830, §. 157; Navenne 1914, 451–454; De Caro 2001, 334)

has been associated with the Dirke sculpture by the Rhodian sculptors mentioned by Pliny. This Hellenistic group of sculptures is regarded by some scholars as original, while others believe it to be a Roman copy, either made during the Julio-Claudian or, more likely, the Severan Era (Potts 1980, 156, Pl. 21b; De Caro 2001, 334). The copy retains the pyramidal composition of the original sculpture but includes additional elements, such as Antiope and a shepherd impersonating Mount Cithaeron (De Caro 2001, 334). The Hellenistic Period is characterised by similar groups of sculptures with multiple figures, also known as narrative groups (Boardman 2016, 555) because they tell a story. In the composition in

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Fig. 1. The Farnese Bull statue group in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples

1. kép. A Farnese-bika szoborcsoport a Nápolyi Nemzeti Régészeti Múzeumban

https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farnese-bika#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Farnese_Bull_MAN_Napoli_Inv6002_n07.jpg; Marie-Lan Nguyen (2011)

focus, the artists have captured the climax of Dirke's story, the moment that best suggests the beginnings and her future atonement for her evil deeds.

The story of Dirke and Antiope is attested in several different sources differing in details.² According to the myth, Zeus took the form of a satyr and seduced Antiope, the daughter of the king of Thebes (the daughter of the Theban king Nycteus or the river god Asopus and Polyxo), impregnating her with twin boys. Her father, enraged, tried to kill his daughter but failed. On his deathbed, he begged his brother Lycus to carry out the punishment. Antiope, however, fled to the king Epopeus/Epaphos of Sicyon, who married her. His uncle, however, went to fetch her and, after killing the king of Sicyon, forcibly took her back to Thebes. Antiope, shackled, gave birth to twins, Amphion the musician and Zethus the ox-hair, on Mount Cithaeron. The newborns were left alone on the mountain at the command of Lycos, but the shepherd Ordion found and raised them.

Meanwhile, Antiope was perpetually tormented by Dirke, the king's jealous wife. After a long time, Antiope managed to escape and found Zethus, from

whom she sought refuge, but he took her for a fugitive and chased her away. Dirke soon found him and dragged him back to the city. After learning of what had happened, Ordion informed the twins of their divine origin, also revealing the identity of their real mother. The twins then murdered Lycus, and had his wife, Dirke, tied to a bull's horn and thrown into a dungeon. In the aftermath of the story, Antiope incited her children to murder, and Dionysus drove her mad. Phocos (the grandson of Sisyphus) later cured and married her (Belfiore 2008, Antiope, Dirke, 78, 173).

The popularity of Euripides' *Antiope* endured from the Late Republican Period until the mid-1st century AD (Leach 1986, 161). Based on numerous theatrical performances and literary versions, the story of Dirke was part of popular culture; however, these renderings did not directly inspire the depiction of Dirke's punishment (Joyce 2001, 223).

Several depictions of said theme are attested in the Roman Empire. Their origins and variations can be traced back to Greek and Hellenistic prefigurations, as well as Etruscan urn reliefs (LIMC Dirke 8–10, 10a). The compositional solutions in Greek prefigurations of mythological themes can be reconstructed from surviving vase paintings (LIMC Dirke 4–6; Heger 1986: LIMC III–1–2, Dirke, 635–644, Pl. 504–507, Dirke 8–41; online: <https://weblimc.org/>) and other Hellenistic works, mostly preserved in Roman copies. Roman period objects depicting Dirke's punishment range from small artworks, such as gems (*intaglios* and *cameos*) and ringstones, to mass-produced items of everyday life, including coins and lamps (LIMC Dirke 24–38). (For example, Akrasos [Lydia, Asia Minor]: Alföldi, Alföldi 1976, no. 66, 157, 7; Forsyth 1981, 81–82, Fig. 3; Mosch 2005, 169, No. 2). Among the great arts, the theme appears in murals, mosaics, sculptures, and reliefs (LIMC Dirke 7, 11–42, uncertain 43–44).

Depictions of the story first appeared on products of vase painters in the southern Greek regions of Italy during the 4th century BC.³ In the compositions of these vase paintings, Dirke is depicted lying under a bull.

All five known Dirke urns attested in 200–75 BC come from Volterra. (Van der Meer 1977–1978, 57–98, Pl. 99–131.) The Etruscan relief stone urns feature 'mixed' scenes: the capturing of the bull on Mount Chithaeron with Dirke and Lycos appearing left of the scene (LIMC Dirke 8), dated to 120–110 BC. The other composition depicts the charging bull,



Fig. 2. Dirke's punishment. Roman wall painting in House of the Vettii in Pompeii (Pompeii VI.15.1)

2. kép. Dirke bűnhődésének ábrázolása Pompeiben a Vettiusok házának falfestményén

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirce#/media/File:Zetoyanfion.jpg>

also appearing on the carving of LIMC Dirke 10: Dirke half-kneeling below, leaning on her left hand and raising her right one, with a twin standing on each side, and Antiope (Guarnacci Museum in Volterra: 359).

Small art pieces – gems, ringstones, lamps, and coins – also come with two different scenes. One depicts the galloping bull with Dirke under it, tied to it; this version also occurs on Greek vase paintings from the 1st century BC (LIMC Dirke 24–26). Other gems, coins, medallions, and a lamp from the Roman Imperial Period feature a prancing bull with a twin on each side and Dirke lying or kneeling in the foreground, tied to the bull (LIMC Dirke 27–38).⁴ Lajos Nagy traced back the depiction on the Aquileian gem from the Augustan Period (LIMC Dirke 28) to a standardised image identical to the one appearing on a find from Aquincum (Nagy 1943, 98). It is important to note that in *intaglios* the negative image was carved into the stone (Gesztelyi 1998, 48), thus, the imprint may serve as a basis for comparison.

The earliest painted representation from the Late Roman Period is known from the *columbarium* of the Villa Pamphili in Rome. Like the Etruscan urns, it has a funerary context (LIMC Dirke 11) (Jahn 1857; Bendinelli 1941, 1–4, 10–12, Pl. 4; Hausmann 1958, 50–72, Pls. 53–57; Joyce 2001, 228). Wall paintings with illustrations of the story are known in greater numbers from the towns around Mount Vesuvius (LIMC Dirke 11–18). The painted versions



Fig. 3. Dirke's punishment. Detail of Roman wall painting on the west wall of the House of Argus / House of Perseus and Medusa in Herculaneum (Herculaneum II.2.)

Photo courtesy of Michael Binns. October 2014.

3. kép. Dirke bűnhődésének ábrázolása a herculaneumi Argos vagy Perseus és Medusa házának nyugati falán lévő falfestményen, részlet (Herculaneum II.2.)

<https://herculaneum.uk/Ins%202/Herculaneum%202%2002%20p2.htm>

do not feature a uniform pattern and are likely drawing on pre-existing designs. These images depict the prelude to the plot with the capture of Dirke (LIMC Dirke 11, 13); the 'calm' scene before the bull's departure when Dirke had already been tied up and the bull is standing on the ground on all fours (LIMC Dirke 12, 16); the well-known tying scene, popular in the Imperial Period, with the wild bull prancing and the twins trying to restrain him for the short time it takes to tie Dirke to him; and the image of the already galloping, chased bull with the tied-up Dirke (LIMC Dirke 13, 14, 18). The composition of the *emblema* of the Aquincum mosaic (LIMC Dirke 21) depicts the twins about to tie Dirke to the wild bull prancing between them. Compositionwise, its best analogies are a mural in the House of the Vettii, dated AD 69–79 (LIMC Dirke 15, Pompeii VI. 15.1) and, despite the opposite-than-usual movement of the bull, the highly worn Fourth Style mural in the House of Argus or House of Perseus and Medusa in Herculaneum (LIMC Dirke 17, Herculaneum II. 2; Peters 1963, 127–128; Cerulli Irelli 1971, 29–30, Pl. 9.1) (Figs. 2–3).

Roman Period mosaics also highlight different parts of the story. A mid-2nd-century AD mosaic in Ecija shows the bull running with Dirke (LIMC Dirke 19; CMRE IV. 10, 25–30, Láms. 7–9; Blázquez



Fig. 4. Dirke's punishment. Roman mosaic in Pula
4. kép. Dirké bűnődésének ábrázolása a pulai mozaikon
<https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Dircepularp.jpg>

et al. 1986, 119, Fig. 31; CMRE XIV.1, 35–37, Figs. 1–2; García Dils de la Vega 2015, 287), while the 2nd-century AD *emblemata* of the Sagunto mosaic (Balil 2009, 265–274) also depicts a twisted-bodied, perhaps supplicating, Dirke (LIMC Dirke 20) in a composition similar to that of the Aquincum version. The Adana mosaic (LIMC Dirke 22) is probably drawing on a different model: it includes a half-reclining young man on the left in the foreground, leaning on

his right hand, trying to pull Dirke by her hair to the bull in the background and tie her to it with a rope. Amphion and Zethus are symmetrically arranged; altogether, the composition of the figural scene may be a mirror version of that in the mosaic in Aquincum 130 and the well-known Dirke compositions from the Roman Era (including details like the body position of the figure on the left, the direction of the bull, and the head position of the figure on the right (the similarity with the Aquincum mosaic has been previously noted by Penedo 2010, 1308).

Despite some additional space-filling elements, the 3rd-century AD Dirke mosaic from Pula (LIMC Dirke 23) (Mlakar 1962, 440–444, 449–450, Pls. V–VI; Rnjak 1979, No. 78; Girardi-Jurkić 1983, 169–170, Figs. 1–2; Meder 2003, 55–56, Taf. 17. 3; Taf. 18. 1; Lachin 2005, 339, Abb. 2–3) can also be linked to the find from Aquincum drawing on its composition, including the figures' postures and head positions, the bull's prancing posture, and the direction in which it leaps (Fig. 4). The position of the hand of the female figure in the foreground is surprising in this arrangement, but the way she moves is not unique, as the same can be observed in scenes representing the bull galloping through Dirke (see, for example, the mosaic LIMC Dirke 19 from Écija Dirke or the wall paintings LIMC Dirke 14, Pompeii, VII 2, 25 and LIMC Dirke 13, Pompeii IX, 13, 1–3). Moreover, Dirke's extended arms link all figures in the scene, which may also hint at a sculptural group prefiguration.

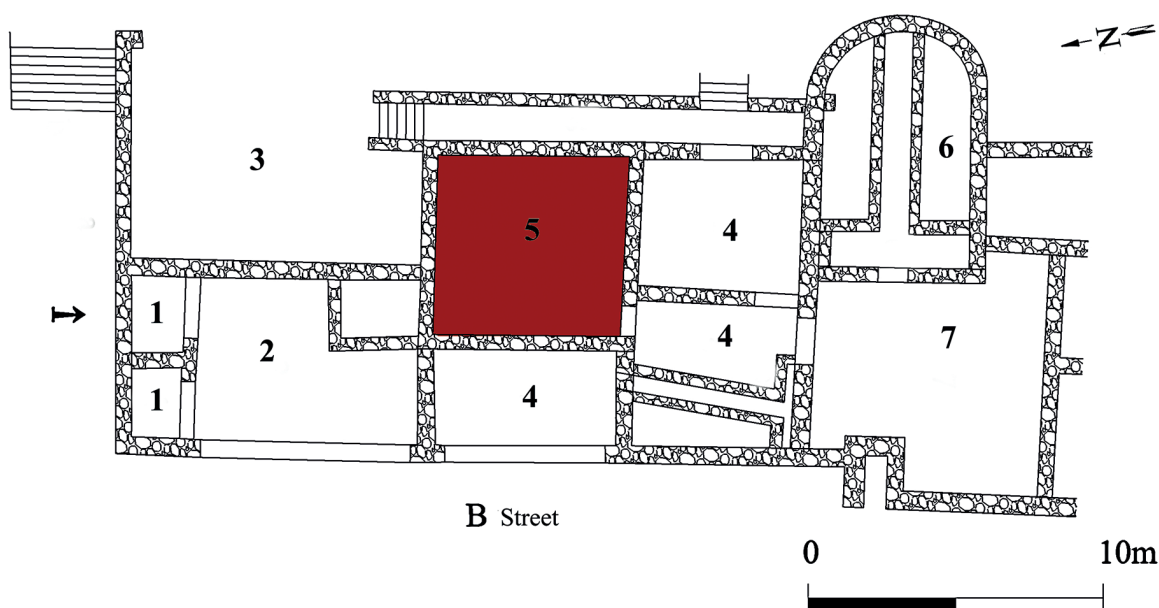


Fig. 5. Ground plan of the House of the Dirce Mosaic in Aquincum (Building XXI) (after Zsidi 2024, 99)
5. kép. Az aquincumi úgynevezett Dirké Mozaik Házának alaprajza (XXI. épület) (Zsidi 2024, 99 alapján)



Fig. 6. The Dirke mosaic in the previous exhibition 1955–1987 (Photo Collection of the Aquincum Museum: 03815)
 6. kép. A Dirké mozaik az 1955–1987 közti kiállításban (Az Aquincumi Múzeum Archív Fotógyűjteménye: 03815)

Among the fragments of analogous sculptural and relief works (LIMC Dirke 7, 39–42), the Farnese Bull sculptural group (LIMC Dirke 7) stands out, the composition of which provided Lajos Nagy with immense aid in identifying and reconstructing the scene depicted on the highly incomplete *emblema* of the Aquincum mosaic (Nagy 1925, 59–66, Figs. 1–2; Wellner 1962, 15) (Fig. 1).

The Dirke mosaic in Aquincum

Dirke's Punishment was a popular and widespread theme throughout the Roman Empire. It was depicted on a wide variety of media and also appeared in a border province, such as Pannonia. The pattern of the mosaic and the geometric composition surrounding it were chosen from a pattern book; its occurrence in a room related to bathing was likely a deliberate choice, while the colours reflect the taste of the period.

Research history of the Dirke mosaic, its building, and the function of the building (Aquincum Civilian Town, Building XXI)

Close to the centre of the Civilian Town of Aquincum, in the residential area of the town magistrates

is a large, richly furnished private house, one of the representative rooms of which is decorated with a mosaic floor depicting Dirke's punishment (Fig. 5). The full size of the building to which the corridor belongs is unknown as it has not been fully excavated (Kirchhof 2025, 269–271). Entrance was through the north *porticus* (1), behind which lay a foyer (2) and, likely, an *atrium* (3). The corridor led from the *atrium* directly to the apsidal room (6). Behind the *atrium* stood a larger room with the Dirke mosaic (5), enclosed by slightly smaller rooms, one of which was heated by a channel (4). The heated room connected the mosaic room and the (also heated) apsidal one, which had a semicircular part with a decorative fountain (*nymphaeum*) (6). According to another interpretation, the semicircular room was a pool of the house's private bath. The parts of the building south of these rooms, which also included a paved courtyard (7), are believed to have been used for commercial purposes (Zsidi 2002, 78; Zsidi 2024, 99–101).

Very little is known about the excavation and removal of the mosaic floor. Bálint Kuzsinszky's brief comment indicates that the mosaic was unearthed in a rescue excavation⁵ in the late 19th century.⁶ In 1936–37, Lajos Nagy conducted a control survey in and around the then-presumed findspot to deter-



Fig. 7. Detail of the sketch of fragments of the Dirke mosaic from Aquincum (1986)
(Drawing Archive of the Aquincum Museum)

7. kép. Az aquincumi Dirke mozaik rajzának részlete (1986) (Aquincumi Múzeum Rajztár)

mine the location where the mosaic had been found (no record was made about it, but K. Póczy mentions it in his excavation diary: BTM Archaeological Archive 19–73). Lajos Nagy was the first to identify the mythological scene in the mosaic, publishing his findings on the *emblema* in 1943. During or after the excavation, the mosaic was embedded in concrete and placed in a temporary wooden shelter (No. V) erected on the site of the ruin (Wellner 1962, 14). Later, it was moved to the exhibition hall, rebuilt in 1955–56, where it remained until the building was demolished in 1986–87 (Fig. 6).⁷

A sketch of the mosaic was created in 1986, before its removal (Figs. 7, 23) (Drawing Archive of the Aquincum Museum). Following excavations led by Klára Póczy (Póczy, Hajnóczy 1976, 112/b, 424, Figs. 326–329), a new protective building was erected, drawing on plans by Gyula Hajnóczy, over the findspot of the mosaic in 1972, with the intention of displaying it in its original place; however, it was not transported there eventually. In 2024, the protective building housing the Dirke mosaic featured a small mosaic exhibition revolving around the mythological scene in the recently restored central field.⁸ This exhibition, entitled *Tiny Stones – Colorful Flooring*, *The Most Beautiful Aquincum Mosaic Floors of the*

Last 130 Years, also marked the 130th anniversary of the opening of the Aquincum Museum (Kirchhof 2025a, 242–271).

The composition of the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum

The basic scheme of the mosaic is centralised except for an orthogonal pattern of tangent pelte motifs in and around a square, four lateral pelves, and four spindles in the corners (Balmelle et al. 2002, Pl. 403/b). The central mythological scene cannot be meaningfully interpreted in isolation from its frame, as it forms an integral composition with the images in the band immediately surrounding it and the next one, which includes a coiffure-like pattern consisting of small squares with pelte and spindle motifs (Fig. 8).

The surviving parts of the mythological scene – the posture and position of Amphion and Zethus, the clearly identifiable details of the bull at points where one would expect to find them drawing on the presumed composition, and the position of the woman's head in the lower zone of the image – all suggest that the highly fragmentary central image depicts Dirke's punishment. Together with the guilloche pattern framing the field, about 30% of the figural scene, the original size of which Lajos Nagy



Fig. 8. Colour drawing of the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum. Drawing of the original fragments of the *emblem*:

A. Kirchhof, T. Lajtos; photo of the fragments: S. Imre-Horváth (after Nagy 1943, 80, Fig. 1)

8. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaikról készült színes rekonstrukciós rajz, az embléma eredeti töredékeiről készült felvételekkel, Kirchhof A.; Lajtos T.; Fotó: Imre-Horváth S.

(Nagy 1943, 80, 1. kép alapján)

estimated to have been about 150×150 cm or 5×5 Roman feet⁹ – has survived.¹⁰ The central focal point of the triangular composition could be the head of the prancing bull, the posture of which could be reconstructed from its leg above the belly or in the chest area of the young man on the right. Based on analogies,¹¹ the body position of the young man on the left is akin to that of the young man holding the bull or tying Dirke to it in other representations of

Dirke's punishment. Unfortunately, only the head or possibly the arm next to it and some parts of a textile (perhaps the female figure's dress) are recognisable in the bottom zone of the composition (Fig. 9).

Already in his 1925 article, Lajos Nagy drew a parallel between the figural scene in the mosaic and the Farnese Bull. (Nagy 1925, 60; Nagy 1943, 94) This group of statues can still be considered one of the closest analogies to the scene in the mosaic in focus,



Fig. 9. Fragments of the *emblema* of the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum (after Nagy 1943, 88, Fig. 10)
 9. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaik emblémájának töredékei (Nagy 1943, 88, 10. kép alapján)

the image in the *emblema* of which is a deliberate attempt to create a three-dimensional representation of the figural composition, as evident from details that suggest the composition to be a flat rendering of a Hellenistic sculptural group. These representation types may spread in pattern books throughout the Roman Empire. The fact that the background of the image is decorated with simple white tiles and does not depict landscapes or includes, other background motifs may also be indicative of the image being such a copy. Lajos Nagy reconstructed the silhouette of the ground; the steep rocks of Mount Cithaeron are more likely to have been represented there. The reconstruction of the right hand of the female figure

is most likely accurate; however, drawing on analogies (the compositional features of the Hellenistic sculpture group and the depiction in the Pula mosaic), the position of the left hand may have differed from the way Lajos Nagy reconstructed it. Based on some interconnected details viewed from diverse angles, Dirke's left hand could have been approaching or embracing the left leg of the young man on the right, or leaning on the ground, as in similar representations.

The figurative *emblema* is enclosed by a narrow band of bicolour (red and yellow) guilloche pattern against a blue background. Its corners are 'reinforced' from outside with L-shaped fields with dis-

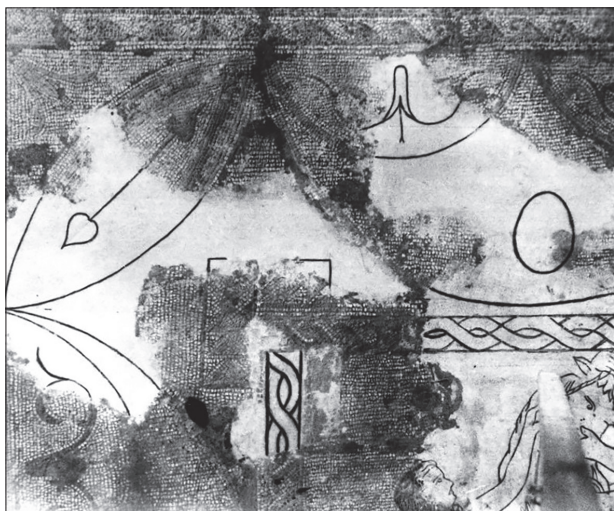


Fig. 10. Pattern in the outer side of a corner of the *emblema* in the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum (Photo Collection of the Aquincum Museum: A_1060)

10. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaik emblémájának sarokdíszítése (Az Aquincumi Múzeum Archiv Fotógyűjteménye: A_1060)

similar decoration: of the two remaining fields, one is decorated with a lozenge and triangle pattern and the other with an irregular chessboard pattern (Figs. 10–11). The fragment has yet to be restored, and, therefore, the design can only be inferred from old photographs.

Originally, the four L-shaped fields at the corners may have had identical triangular patterns. They could be stylised representations of architectural elements, such as the pillars of a peristyle, or symbolise other additional elements.¹² The chessboard pattern is highly likely to mark some ancient mosaic repair, as it is unlikely that the pattern was laid faultily when the mosaic was made or that two so different patterns were composed in an otherwise axially symmetrical arrangement within an otherwise regular geometric composition. Therefore, the chessboard pattern is more likely a result of later repair.¹³

Next, an elaborately adorned two Roman feet wide band (around 60–62 cm) encircles the central field. It is decorated with outward-facing white pelves (Amazon shields) with light blue edges, each as wide as the side of the central square and featuring, in an alternating arrangement, a comic or a tragic mask in its centre, set against a white background (Figs. 12–13). The tragedy mask is one Roman foot long (including the tethering teeth). The size of the tesserae ranges from 3 × 2 mm to 6 × 5 mm.

The outer arches of the pelves and the corners of the square frame are decorated with gracefully



Fig. 11. Chessboard-like pattern in the outer side of another corner of the *emblema* in the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum (Photographic Collection of the Aquincum Museum: A_1062)

11. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaik emblémájának sarokrészét díszítő sakktáblaminta (Az Aquincumi Múzeum Archiv Fotógyűjteménye: A_1062)

curved volute-like, scrolling floral ornaments in yellow, red, and blue. (The corner area bordered by the spindle pattern depicts three-leaved, sedge-like plants.) Almond-shaped fields decorated with yellow stucco (dentil) patterns set against a white background connect the tips of the pelves; each is adorned with a simple red floral motif concluding in a pair of heart-shaped, ivy-like leaves and two symmetrically placed leaves in the centre (the pattern is reminiscent of the one described in Blanchard et al. 1973, 118).

The innermost frame band (the one with the pelves) is enclosed by three Roman-palm-wide bands engirded by a simple strip. The innermost one is decorated with a red-and-yellow guilloche pattern against a blue background (Balmelle et al. 1985, I. 70/d, width: 7.4–8 cm), the middle one by a red wave pattern ('running dog') set against a white background (Balmelle et al. 1985, I. 101/a, width: 7 cm, one element is 11 cm long), while the outermost by a zigzag motif (Blanchard et al. 1973, 161) with a white inner and a red outer side (width: 8 cm, or 14 cm including the red strips along the two sides of the specimen; length of a red triangle: 14 cm). The triple frame is similar to the multi-band frame of the so-called 'Animal Mosaic' in Búvár-Folyamőr Streets, where a staircase effect was created using simple stripes and by directing the elements in the triangular decorative band sideways rather than inwards (Parragi 1991, 199–203, 206, Pl. 3, 207, Pl. 4, 208, Pl. 5, 214, Pl. 11, 215, Pl. 12; Kirchhof 2025b, 262–263).



Fig. 12. Tragic mask in the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum
(Photo: P. Komjáthy)

12. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaik tragikus maszkábrázolása (Fotó: Komjáthy P.)

In the case of the Dirke mosaic, the triangles and the nested frames and bands were applied to direct the viewer's attention towards the central mythological scene, while the narrow, step-like bands created a podium-like effect for the elaborately adorned, meticulously crafted band of images surrounding the central *emblema*.

The next wide band outwards includes geometric patterns set against a white background. It was made of significantly bigger mosaic tiles¹⁴ than the central *emblema* and the surrounding bands.¹⁵ This band is decorated with alternating lozenges and rectangles¹⁶ with a red and yellow outline. The two Roman-foot-wide lozenges touch both edges of the band, while the one Roman-foot-wide squares join it with a red line triangle on either side. Three motifs alternate in the squares:¹⁷ a stylised four-petalled rosette in yellow, a pair of red pelves with their backs towards each other, and a Solomon's knot with yellow, red, and white stripes against a red background.¹⁸ A red square is positioned at the centre of each lozenge

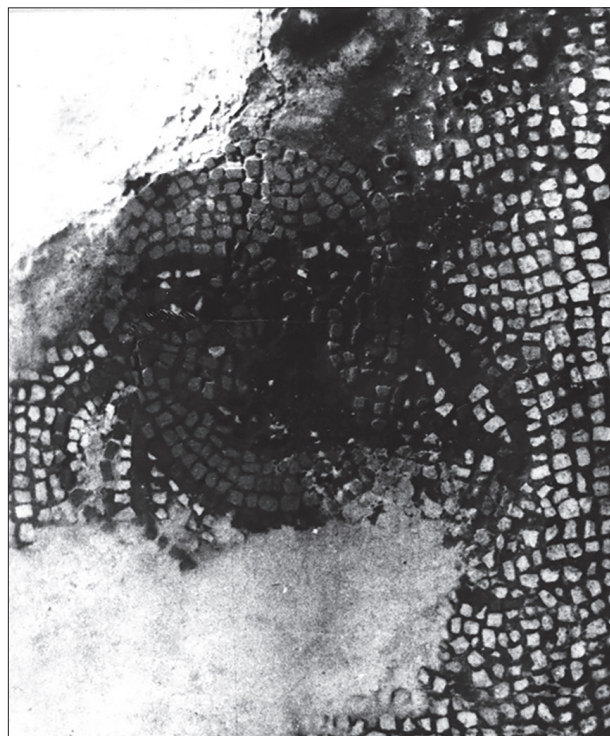


Fig. 13. Comic mask in the Dirke mosaic in Aquincum
(Photo Collection of the Aquincum Museum, A_1139)

13. kép. Az aquincumi Dirké mozaik komikus maszkábrázolása (Az Aquincumi Múzeum Archív Fotógyűjteménye: A_1139)

decorated with a checkerboard pattern. The inner sides of the geometric elements in the field of vision, visible to the observer and falling within the strip of the picture, are only decorated with the yellow two-line pattern. Besides, half-lozenges fill the space on the two sides of the lozenges and squares, creating a star-like effect in red. Different colours were used to create a coffered-like impression through a play of light and shadow.

Another surrounds this band: the outermost one, with a red outline set against a white background. It is decorated with a yellow zigzag where every line is a pair of spindles (Balmelle et al. 1985, I. 45/j). Beyond this frame, the floor of the room is covered with monochrome white *tesserae*.

The colours of the stones in the mosaic floor are subdued, and the range of colours used decreases outwards from the central field with the mythological scene; in parallel, the size of the *tesserae* increases. Except for the masks, the innermost band surrounding the central mythological scene only contains red, yellow, and blue; the geometric frame in the middle comprises a combination of only two colours; and finally, only one colour, yellow, dominates the outer-



Fig. 14. Fountain of Dirce, Thebes, Greece, painting by Skene James, 1838–1845

14. kép. A görögországi Thébaiban található Dirké forrásról készült festmény, Skene James, 1838–1845
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fountain_of_Dirce,_Thebes_-_Skene_James_-_1838-1845.jpg

most band. The background of the mosaic is white; only the guilloche frame around the innermost band has a dark blue background. The blue eyes are surprising, but the choice may be understood considering the function of the room and the building and its association with water and springs – a *nymphaeum*.¹⁹

What does the mythological punishment of Dirke on Mount Cithaeron have to do with water?

We know from the story that after Dirke died, her body was thrown into a spring, which was subsequently named Dirke Spring. In another version, Dionysos turned the place where she died on Mount Cithaeron – or her body itself – into a spring, because she had been a devoted follower of his during her life (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 7). The spring is also considered a symbol of Thébai (also the name of a city-state comprised of several allied *polises*) and is often used to refer to the city itself (Virgil, *Eclogues* 2; Statius, *Thébaïs* 1.152). Not only a spring but also a small river or stream preserves Dirke's name in the city of Thebes (Pausanias 9.25.3; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 555). Some sources also refer to her as a fountain (Euripides, *Phoenissae* 69, 100; Strabo, *Geography* 8.7.5). Pentheus sarcophagus from the Antonine Era presumably depicts Dirke as a

fountain (LIMC Dirke 44; Joyce 2001, 224). Dirke was a Naiad *nymph*, and her figure was probably identified with the *nymph* Derketis. There is still a so-called Dirke Spring near Thebes in Boeotia today (Fig. 14). The waters of the spring were consecrated to the god Dionysus.²⁰ Depictions of Dirke often show Dionysian paraphernalia, most often masks and *kantharoi*. The masks displayed in the Aquincum mosaics are also symbols of the god Dionysus, the patron of theatre (Belfiore 2008, 170, Dionysus). The identification of Dirke as a *nymph* and a spring is the reason why the famous Farnese Bull was displayed in the Baths of Caracalla in Rome.

What does the depiction of Dirke in the Aquincum mosaic have to do with water and springs?

The composition of the elaborately adorned strip of images surrounding the mythological scene in the Aquincum mosaic is not unique; its parallels can be found in other mosaics and murals in a similar or simplified arrangement. It is also interesting to note that this pattern appears in works of architecture, which may help interpret the motifs and the mosaic and identify their function. The so-called Fountain with a Peltae Motif in the Domus Augustana (Sojc

2012) has a structure similar to the strip of images surrounding the central field in the Aquincum mosaic (Fig. 15).

According to recent research, the ‘Pelte Nymphaeum’ of the Domus Augustana on Palatine Hill was created during the reign of Hadrian by transforming a rectangular basin with a rectangular island built in the Vespasian Era (Schmölder, Veit 2012, 208–210). The results of mortar tests also confirm this dating (Schmölder et al. 2012, 219–227). The large peristyle courtyard, with its fountain and luxuriously decorated rooms surrounding it, was part of the emperor’s private apartments on the lower level of Domitian’s palace. The fountain represents a spring. Originally, Amazon statues, doubling as gargoyles, are believed to have stood in its four corners.²¹ A similar but smaller pool with a pelte-shaped central fountain and an internal garden along the Via Latina is thought to have belonged to a roadside mansion.²² The surface between the geometric patterns on the so-called Pastas Mosaic from the Iasos site in Turkey, dating to the late 1st–early 2nd century AD, is decorated with black arches set against a white background (Scheibelreiter, Gail 2011, 286, Figs. 321, 326). In overall effect, the simple curvilinear pattern is similar to the architectural solutions mentioned above. The association of the Iasi mosaic with water is corroborated by varied depictions of dolphins in the outer frame.

The representations in the *emblema* and the innermost framing band of the Aquincum mosaic are closely related. As it was mentioned above, Dirke’s remains were thrown into the river by Lycos or the twins or, as a source suggests, Dionysus turned her body into a spring or caused a spring forth at the place of her death, which was then named after her (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 7; Pausanias 9.25.3; Euripides, *Hippolytus* 555). The act of throwing her into the river brought order and calm to the turbulent political life of Thébai (Joyce 2001, 224), and the area (of the river or spring) was seen as an idyllic place free from the strife that disturbed its peace during her life (Joyce 2001, 223–224). The spring is a symbol of the avenging of Dirke’s sins through death by the bull²³ (some scholars have suggested that the animal is Dionysus himself; see Joyce 2001, 226) and the subsequent calming down and purification, as symbolised by the Farnese sculptural group and similar compositions in murals and mosaics.

The innermost band framing the central scene of the Aquincum mosaic (the one with the pelte



Fig. 15. The Pelte Fountain in the Domus Augustana in Rome

15. kép. Rómában a Domus Augustana úgynevezett Pelta szökőkútja

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domus_Augustana#/media/File:Domus_Augustana.JPG



Fig. 16. Wall paintings originating from the Roman fort at Echzell, located along the Upper Germanic-Raetian Limes, are on display as part of the permanent exhibition at the Saalburg Roman Fort Museum

16. kép. Az echzelli limes tábor falfestményei, a saalburgi tábor állandó kiállításán

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_richly_decorated_triclinium_%28officer%E2%80%99s_dining_room%29,_the_most_complete_Roman_wall-painting_of_all_the_limes_found_in_the_Limes_fort_at_Echzell,_Saalburg_Roman_Fort,_Limes_Germanicus,_Germania_%28Germany%29_%287957553396%29.jpg

motifs and masks) represents some kind of fountain (likely an indoor garden fountain); its details, including the vegetal ornamentation (water lilies and aquatic plants), support this interpretation. The scene of Dirke’s punishment, depicted in the centre of the fountain, was deliberately chosen as a kind of



Fig. 17. *Opus signinum* floor in Pompeii (Pompeii VIII.2.13)

17. kép. Hasonló geometrikus díszítésű *opus signinum* padló Pompeiiből (Pompeii VIII.2.13)

<https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R8/8%2002%2013.htm>



Fig. 18. Roman mosaic with the head of Medusa from the House of the Vestals / House of Ione (Pompeii VI.1.7), The National Archaeological Museum of Naples

18. kép. A Vesta-szüzek házának Medusa-fejjel díszített mozaikpadlója Pompeiiből (Pompeii VI.1.7), Nápolyi Nemzeti Régészeti Múzeum

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naples_Archaeology_Museum_\(5914218077\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naples_Archaeology_Museum_(5914218077).jpg)

spring or a reference to the creation of one; however, it also signifies a new starting point, a new beginning, renewal, or a new origin. The theatrical masks in the composition are a reference to Dirke's strong attachment to the god Dionysus. The building with the apsidal room and the Dirke mosaic is considered a *nymphaeum* or bath, for which the depicted scene is well-suited. A life-size marble statue was also

found on the terrazzo floor of the apse.²⁴ The central mythological scene of the mosaic also has a metaphorical meaning: a kind of liberation from torment, torture, which can be interpreted as liberation from the physical pains of illness, since the story ends with the death of Dirke, who tortured Antiope both physically and mentally. The decoration surrounding the central scene refers to a spring (often depicted as a fountain), which can also be interpreted as a healing spring. The building probably played a prominent role in the life of the city from the 2nd century AD onwards, as evidenced by the elaborately adorned, colourful, meticulously crafted mosaic and the man-sized marble statue.

The use of the pelte as a decorative motif in architecture, on mosaics, and wall-paintings suggests a 2nd-century AD dating – and indeed, almost all stone carvings with a pelte motif in Aquincum can be dated to the 2nd century AD.²⁵

Further analogies and associated spatial functions of the geometric elements in the Aquincum mosaic

Patterns used in mosaics and murals were disseminated in pattern books throughout the Roman Empire; therefore, mosaics and wall paintings often feature similar motifs or entire compositional schemes. (Dunbabin 2012, 241, 327–328; Ling 1991, 67, 218–220).

The pattern of the innermost framing band of the central field also appears on wall paintings, for example, the mural of Castra of Echzell, a limes fortress from ca. AD 180 (Fig. 16; Schleiermacher 1987, 213–218; Schleiermacher 1991, 96–120; Fuchs 2017, 483–488). The square central fields with mythological scenes at eye level in the mural decorating the side wall were similarly enclosed by pelves. Two of the depictions are linked to Cretan mythology, depicting the stories of Theseus and the Minotaur, as well as Daedalus and Icarus.²⁶ Another interesting feature of this mural is that the panels are surrounded by painted columns in the foreground, giving the viewer the impression of a peristyle, as if looking onto an inner garden enclosed by columns. The green background of the marbled yellow pelves may also symbolise the vegetation of the garden, while the blue background of the mythological scenes may be associated with water and was chosen to represent a garden pool. Water is a key detail in the story of Daedalus and Icarus, while in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, Poseidon (Neptune), Sea God and



Fig. 19. A Roman mosaic in Aquileia featuring a similar geometric design

19. kép. Hasonló geometrikus mintával díszített aquileiai mozaikpadló

https://stock.adobe.com/fr/search?k=aquileia&asset_id=1083553972

father of Theseus, may possibly be linked to water. In this context, the marbled peltes may also be interpreted as ‘islands’ in a garden pool. The room decorated with marble peltes is thought to have functioned as a bedroom or *triclinium* in the house of an official. (Schleiermacher 1987, 213–218; Schleier-

macher 1991, 96–120; Fuchs, 2017, 483–488) However, in my opinion, the mural’s theme, composition, and the associations of the pelte motif also suggest a connection with a bath. Also, the central mythological scenes may be interpreted as two-dimensional renderings of groups of sculptures.

The antecedents of the mosaic composition are also found in the form of black semicircles set against a white background on a threshold in Pompeii (Aoyagi, Pappalardo 2006, 54). Another example from the same site, an *opus signinum* floor, includes a complex pattern with white pelte motifs in a terrazzo base. This mosaic is part of the *vestibulum* of House of Championnet II (Fig. 17; Pompeii VIII.2.13; Blake 1930, 31, 118, Pl. 5, tav. 4; PPM VIII, 1998, 71; Zahn 1842–1944, Taf. 96). Still from Pompeii, a bichrome (black and white) square mosaic panel from the mid-1st century AD can be mentioned. It has an inner guilloche frame around the central field and a round *emblema* at the centre with the head of Medusa in colour, enclosed by four peltes and shells in each corner (Fig. 18; House of the Vestal Virgins, Pompeii VI.1.7, 23; PPM IV, 18, Fig. 28; Balmelle et al. 1985, I, 70c; Pagano 2006, 82; PAH 1.2.24 and Addendum 40; Pisapia, Stefani 2024, 639, Fig. 3).

The main elements of the composition are a square field with a round, square, or polygonal *emblema*, or a rotated square field (see, e.g., the mosaic from Antioch in Syria).²⁷ The round *emblema* in the bichrome (black *tesserae* set against a white background) mosaic from Aquileia, dated to the 1st–2nd



Fig. 20. Mosaic floor with comparable geometric ornamentation from the Eno Bellis Archaeological Museum

20. kép. Hasonló geometrikus mintával díszített mozaikpadló az Eno Bellis Régészeti Múzeumból

“Su autorizzazione del Ministero della Cultura – Soprintendenza archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per l’area metropolitana di Venezia e le province di Belluno, Padova e Treviso – Riproduzione vietata,,



Fig. 21. A Roman mosaic with a geometric design from the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester
21. kép. A dorchesteri Dorset Megyei Múzeum geometrikus mintájú mozaikja

<http://www.thejoyofshards.co.uk/visits/southtrip/dorchmus.shtml>

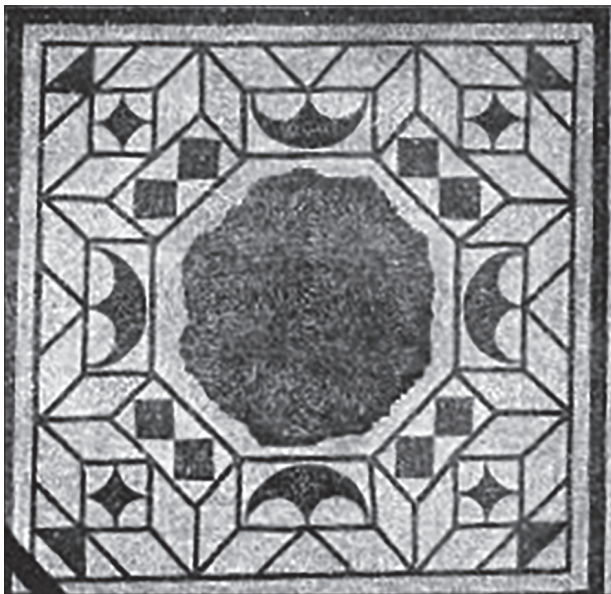


Fig. 22. Roman mosaic from Room F in the House of Apuleius (Ostia II.8.5)

22. kép. Az ostiai Apuleius házában az F helyiség mozaikja
<https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio2/8/8-5.htm>

century AD, is enclosed by four peltae and quarter-circles with representations of three-leaf plants in the four corners, like in the Aquincum mosaic (Fig. 19; Donderer 1986, Pl. 25. 2; Ghedini, Novello 2014, 10). A *kantharos*, the symbol of Dionysus, is depicted in the round *emblema* at the centre of the square field of the composition. The spaces between the arms of the peltae are also decorated with black, concave lozenge-shaped motives.

The closest analogue to the composition of the Aquincum mosaic is one from Oderzo, currently in the Museo Archeologico Eno Bellis in northeastern Italy. The large mosaic includes an ensemble of four black-lined *emblemas* with various Dionysian masks, each enclosed by four peltae, set against a white background (Fig. 20; Inv. 146175; Site: Via San Martino, Oderzo [TV]; Baggio 1976, 144–145, Scheda 39). The bichrome (black and white) composition in the square field of a mosaic from Durnovaria, the present Dorchester, is very simple: it includes two facing peltae forming a round central *emblema*, outward-facing peltae along the sides, and simple leaves filling the space in the corners (Fig. 21). This mosaic, probably dating from the 1st–2nd century AD, decorated the bath of a Roman villa (Johnson 1987, 16, No. 21).

Another mosaic in the House of Apuleius in Ostia includes a mosaic field with an octagonal central *emblema*, once depicting a charioteer and similar peltae along the four sides of the central field (Fig. 22; Ostia II.8.5; Pasini 2017.).

Other black-and-white compositions in square fields with semicircular arcs surrounding a circular central *emblema* with sea creatures (Blanchard et al. 1973, 568) are also known from the *triclinium* of the House of Tragic Poet (Pompeii VI.8.3–5; PPM IV, 565) and the *tepidarium* of the House of the Centenary; the latter includes a schematic composition with black double arcs (Pompeii IX.8.3–7; PPM IX, 1084). The pattern is also characterised by double black arcs and multiple contours.

A similar, simple composition featuring only semicircular motifs can be observed on numerous mosaics from various provinces of the Roman Empire, dating between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD.

The 1st–2nd-century AD examples include a colour mosaic in the *triclinium* of the villa of Saint-Laurent-d'Agny in Gaul, excavated between 2009 and 2010. It has a square *emblema* containing a bust holding a *thyrsus* in a square field. Along the sides of the emblem, alternating semicircles of floral ornamentation and swirl patterns are depicted, with a mask in each of the four corners. This mosaic, which combines Bacchic elements, was dated to the first half of the 1st century AD (Poux et al. 2024, Fig. 6, 326–328). Another mosaic from Saint-Romain-en-Gal (also in Gaul), dated to AD 100–150, includes Hylas and the Nymphs. It has a similar composition, with semicircular arches with shells around the central mythological scene and *kantharoi* in the corners



Fig. 23. Compilation of the surviving drawings of the Dirce mosaic from Aquincum. Image compiled in 2025 by Anita Kirchhof and Tamás Lajtos, using photographs taken by Péter Komjáthy of the original archival drawings (Inv. nos. 24.734–24.771/2016) preserved in the Drawing Archive of the Aquincum Museum

23. kép. Az aquincumi Dirke mozaikról fennmaradt rajzok összeállítása, amelyet az Aquincumi Múzeum Rajztárában őrzött 24.734–24.771/2016 alapján készített: Kirchhof Anita–Lajtos Tamás, Fotó: Komjáthy Péter

(Lancha 1977, 124). Dating from the mid-2nd century AD, the round central and outer semicircular fields of the Cupid on a Dolphin Mosaic in the Fishbourne Roman Palace in Chichester feature sea creatures and hippocampi, while the quarter-circular fields in the corners depict shells (Johnson 1987, 28, Pl. 18). Two more late 2nd-century AD mosaics with a square central field, semicircular arcs at the sides, and no separate fields in the corners are known from Britannia.

Several more examples are attested in mosaics in Boca di Rio in Portugal (Teichner, Mañas Romero 2018, Figs. 3–4, Fig. 6; da Veiga 1910, 3B, 3C and, as a smaller repeating pattern, Teichner, Mañas Romero 2018, Figs. 11–12). Also, relatively large mosaics with a round central field, semicircular arches at the sides, and quarter-circles in the corners, filling almost the whole space are known from Hispania; e.g., the wolf mother with the child Romulus and Remus in Alcolea, dating from the 2nd century AD (Blazquez

1981, 43–46, 124, no. 23, Fig. 22, Lam. 32–4, 89), the mosaic of the Abduction of Ganymede from Italica (Garcia y Bellido 1960, 134, Lam. 14.2), the Medusa, waterfowl, and floral ornamentation in the panels of a similar composition from Marbella (Blazquez 1981, 124, Fig. 22, Lam. 67, A–B). Two mosaics from Imhofstöckl, now in the Salzburg Museum, represent a simpler version they feature a square and a rounded square *emblema*, respectively, with simple semicircles instead of pelves (Jobst 1985, Taf. 6). Another late 2nd-century AD mosaic from Vienna also has a square frame, a round central *emblema* with the representation of the Ocean God, large dolphins on the sides of the square, and smaller quartercircular arcs in the corners (Lancha 1981a, No 277; Lancha 1981b, 84; Helly, Clément 2024, 288, Fig. 3).

The simple geometrical version with semicircles remained in fashion after the 2nd century and was still popular in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, while the decorative bands delimiting the picture fields became more detailed and multiplied with time. Examples include the Lion and Stag mosaic of Verulamium (AD 150–300), which includes image fields enclosed by a multi-band frame, and the Wrestling Cupids mosaic in Colchester (Johnson 1987, 18–20, Pls. 6–8). The square central field in the mosaic floor of one of the rooms of the Villa de Materna in Caranque, Hispania was divided into smaller ones, with a round one in the centre, semicircular ones on the sides, and square ones in the corners. The images depict scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV. 2), with the busts of prominent figures appearing in the corners (Penedo 2024, 503, Fig. 3).

The frames of the round central and additional semicircular image fields in the Dionysus Mosaic in Trier, dated to the mid-3rd century AD, are already multi-band and more elaborate; the composition is completed by a threshold pattern comprised of rotating and repeating pelves at the entrance to the room (Hoffmann 1999, 50–53, Cat. 13).

The round central and semicircular additional image fields of the Hunting Dogs Mosaic in Corinium, Britain, feature diverse multi-band frames; furthermore, the scenes and decorations within the fields are also varied (Buckman, Newmarch 1850, 35–37, Pl. VI; for mosaics with a similar composition in Britain, see also Smith 1975, 279, Pl. CXIX. 2–CXXII).

A mosaic depicting Orpheus was discovered in the bath of a villa excavated at Yvonand-La Baumaz in Germania Superior in 1778; however, it was damaged and the local removed it; thus, it survived only

in drawings (Watercolour by M. de Hennezel). The unity of the round central and semicircular additional image fields in this mosaic was broken at the corners by square fields surrounded by a guilloche pattern (Delbarre, Bärtschi 2014, 282).

The room that houses the mosaic with a round *emblema* and semicircular arcs in the Roman domus in Lod (Diospolis) in Israel, excavated in 2018, is thought to be a *triclinium* (Gorzalczy 2019, 236–248, Figs. 10–17).

The structure of the highly fragmentary geometric mosaic floor decorating Mosaic Room 2 of the so-called Odeion-*Hanghaus* in Ephesus, of which only a quartercircular corner field and the stub of a semicircular arc next to it have survived, probably also followed the same compositional scheme (Eichler 1962, 40; Scheibelreiter, Gail 2011, Kat. 38, 253, 542, Abb. 193–194). V. M. Strocka suggested a dating later than AD 300 for this mosaic (Strocka 1995, 86). Another mosaic with a similar geometric pattern, featuring a round central field, semicircles at the sides, and quarter-circles in the corners, is known from Durnovaria (Dorchester), Colliton Park; it dates back to the 4th century AD. All of its fields have guilloche frames, and the central pattern is enclosed by a bichrome border with red patterns set against a white background (Johnson 1987, 47).

Conclusions

The so-called Dirke Mosaic Building, named after the central mythological scene in the mosaic that decorates one of its rooms, stands in the northeastern part of the city of Aquincum, in the residential area of the city magistrates. Dirke's punishment was a popular theme in small, large, and monumental art throughout the Roman Empire. The central mythological scene of the mosaic in focus is inseparable from the rest of the composition.

It is possible that the theme became widely known through Euripides' *Antiope*, a now-lost play surviving only in later prose summaries (Kannicht 2004, TrGF 5/1–2; Ritoók 2007, 61–66).²⁸ The oldest depictions of Dirke's punishment are attested in products of Greek vase painters in Italy.

The Greek depictions capture a different part of the story than the scenes appearing on artefacts from the Roman Imperial Period. Etruscan depictions and Early Roman murals represent a kind of transition between the two styles, often resulting in renderings that blend elements from both.

Roman wall painting relied on copying Greek (Hellenistic) models and patterns for a long time. However, a prototype from the Hellenistic Period of the Farnese Bull indicates that the version serving as an inspiration for the composition gradually gained ground from that time. The change took place roughly in the Augustan Era, as later, triangular compositions with a prancing bull in the centre, the twins on either side, and Dirke in front of them became predominant. This composition has its variations, but the characters are constant. The purpose of singling out this moment of the tragedy was not to foreshadow a sad outcome but to prophesy a new beginning, the emergence of a peaceful world without abuse. After Dirke's death, her body was thrown into a river, and a spring and a river were named after her; besides, she was considered a nymph. That linked the composition to *nymphaea*, and that is why this theme was so popular in Roman baths: like her death, these institutions have offered (and still provide) peace, renewal, and tranquillity.

As for the function of the building, it was suggested earlier that it could serve as a *nymphaeum* and/or a bathhouse, which the pattern of the innermost framing band (a fountain or a symbolical spring) suits excellently. The central figural scene may also represent a metaphor of relief from sickness and physical pain, or even a healing spring.

The innermost framing band, featuring peltes and masks, imitates a garden pool, a common indoor element of *peristylia* or *viridaria*. Moreover, the central and exterior framing bands create the impression of a raised podium. The central image is a two-dimensional rendering of a group of sculptures originally situated at the centre of a real garden pool, likely inspired by Hellenistic precedents.

The masks are theatrical props representing the god Dionysus/Bacchus (Paus. 9.17.6), who was worshipped and venerated by Dirke more than any other deity. Attributes of Dionysus appear in almost all similar compositions. Based on the parallels of the composition and the pelte motifs, the mosaic could be dated to the early 2nd century AD (despite not being made of black and white tesserae but dominated by red and yellow). The red-and-yellow combination is a characteristic feature of Flavian and Antoninian Era murals, especially the latter (Ling 1991, 176, 187–188; red and yellow compositions were dominant from the beginning of the early Antoninian Era until the 3rd century AD, see Mielsch 2001, 105; Willburger 2004, 55), which is important in this case because the outer frame includes this colour combination. Completing red and yellow compositions with blue elements was also characteristic of the Antoninian Era,²⁹ as was the insertion of small, detailed, individual motifs, such as masks in the fields (Mielsch 2001, 105) and the elaborate geometric patterns, including the almond-shaped image fields, the multi-band frame with a guilloche, a running dog, and a zigzag pattern. The composition of the frame also suggests an early 2nd-century AD dating. The richness of detail, however, does not exclude the possibility that the mosaic was made in the early 3rd century AD, although the variety of colours is reduced and the combination of red and green colours predominates the linear patterns (Ling 1991, 188; Mielsch 2001, 112–118). Every detail of the mosaic was meticulously measured and laid out with the greatest precision. The use of Roman palms and Roman feet as units of measurement is evident in the dimensions. A regular overall effect pleasing to the eye has been achieved by maintaining proportions and repeating them in an axially symmetrical manner (Fig. 23).

Notes

- 1 Currently in the collection of National Archaeological Museum of Naples (Inv. No. 6002).
- 2 Antiope: Homer, *Odyssey* 11.260; Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1.735; Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.5.5; 3.10.1; 10.1; The tragic story of Antiope was presented by Euripides (Euripides, *Antiope*), Marcus Pacuvius, and Livius Andronicus in their plays, but these have not survived (Fragments of Euripides' drama are known through Caius Iulius Hyginus, the Apollodoric *Bibliotheca*, and Apollonius Rhodius); Hygi-

nus, *Fabulae* 7. 1; 8.1; 9.1; 155.2; Nonnus of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca* 31.216–218; Mythographi Vaticani 1.96; 3.15.11–18; Pausanias, *Hellados periégésis* (Description of Greece) 1.2.1; 9.17.6; M. Tullius Cicero, *de Natura Deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods) 3.21.54; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 4.28.4; Plutarch, *Theseus* 26–28; Statius, *Thebais* 7.296.

Dirke: Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.5.5; Lucian, Lucius, or the Ass 23; Pseudo-Stesichorus 222.B.220; Plutarch, *Demetrius* 45.5; Plutarch, Daimon of Socrates

- V/578.B; Pausanias, *Hellados periégésis* (Description of Greece) 9.25.3; 9.17.4–7, Propertius 2.15.11–42; Virgil, *Eclogues* 2; McClure 2011, 58–81.
- 3 The Polycoro Painter of Lucania, ca. 400–390 BC: Trendall 1989, 22, 42, Fig. 29; LCS 1967, 58, 288 Pl. 27, 4; the Darius Painter of Apulia, ca. 340–320 BC: Trendall 1978, 482–508; Trendall 1989, 261, Pl. 211, and on vases by Dirke Painter, c. 380–370 BC, working in Syracuse, Sicily: LCS 1967, 203, 27; Enthousiasmas 1986, 163–165, Figs. 7–9; Trendall, Cambitoglou 1991, 163, no. 318a; LIMC Dirke 4–6.
 - 4 LIMC Dirke 27: Early Imperial; 28: Augustan; 29: Imperial; 30–33: undated; lamp 34: Augustan; coins: 35–36: Severan; 37–38: second half of the 4th century AD, 5th century AD.
 - 5 Kuzsinszky 1924, 27; Kuzsinszky 1933, 32; Kuzsinszky 1934, 58; Nagy 1925, 51, footnote 2; Pfuhl 1926, 227–228; Nagy 1942, 598–599, Pl. XC. 1–2; Nagy 1943, 80; Wellner 1962, 14–17, Figs. 16–17; Kiss 1973, No. 12, 19–20, Pl. IV. 1–2; Kirchhof 2025, 269–271. The first mention of the mosaic is in Bálint Kuzsinszky's *Aquincum*, published in 1924 (Kuzsinszky 1924, 27; Kuzsinszky 1934, 58. In his brief note, B. Kuzsinszky mentions the mosaic as a relic that was picked up during an earlier excavation and relocated to wooden shelter No. V amidst the ruins around the museum. It must have been removed sometime in the late 1800s or early 1900s because, as B. Kuzsinszky says, it could not be kept there (i.e. in its original location in the lobby of the museum building). Presumably, the mosaic was embedded in concrete when it was excavated. Nagy 1943, 101, footnote 11 mentions that János Szilágyi, the museum director at the time, had the mosaic reconstructed based on his drawing, published in 1925. We know from István Wellner that the places of the missing mosaic tiles were filled with cement and the outlines of the completed picture were drawn into that surface (Wellner 1962, 15). The concrete reinforcement on the back was removed at the order of Klára Póczy by conservators János Illés and his wife Róza Szentesi, between 1968 and 1986. Since then, the pieces of the mosaic have been stored in the museum's storeroom.
 - 6 There is no record of the date of the excavation, but it is estimated to have been carried out between 1890 and 1922.
 - 7 Around 1986, conservators János Illés and his wife Róza Szentesi removed the concrete layer. A preliminary restoration plan of the work has survived (Illés 1968).
 - 8 János Illés and his wife, Róza Szentesi, removed the mosaic and cleaned the tiles from the mortar between 1972 and 1982. This work is known from a conservation plan (Illés 1968). In preparation for his MA dissertation, Sven Trommer (Trommer 2003) partially restored the fragments of the mosaic's *emblema* under the supervision of conservator István Bóna in 2003. In 2017, the Aquincum Museum submitted a grant proposal that included a conservation plan for the mosaic, by conservator Brigitta Mária Kürtösi. The plan was later published in an article (Kürtösi 2017). The museum had the first opportunity to complete the restoration of the *emblema*, a project abandoned in 2003, on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the Aquincum Museum's opening in 2024. The reconstructed *emblema* was put on display in its original place in the so-called House of the Dirke Mosaic for the first time. Restoration and completion were carried out by Brigitta Mária Kürtösi based on the completion attempt by Lajos Nagy, summarising her work in a comprehensive documentation (Kürtösi 2024; Kirchhof 2025, 269–271).
 - 9 After the excavation, Lajos Nagy was the first to assess the depiction of the mosaic (Nagy 1925, 51–66; Nagy 1942, 598–599, 90, Pls. 1–2; Nagy 1943, 77–102). He gave the overall size of the mosaic as 6.13×5.82 metres (Nagy 1925, 52, footnote 1).
 - 10 The size of the *tesserae* in the emblem are: red ones: average 5×7 mm; yellow ones: 5×5 mm; brown ones: 7×6 mm; black ones: 7×7 – 5×3 mm.
 - 11 For example, the figure in the Farnese Bull sculpture group (LIMC Dirke 7), the body position of the figure in the mural of the House of the Vettii (LIMC Dirke 15), that of the figure in the Sagunto mosaic (LIMC Dirke 20) and of the figure on the left side in the Pula mosaic (LIMC Dirke 23), the figure on the lamp from Sousse (LIMC Dirke 34), a Roman bronze sculpture in the British Museum (LIMC Dirke 41), and representations in gems (LIMC Dirke 28–30, 33).
 - 12 The corner fragment of the mosaic may even include the two-dimensional rendering of the supporting columns of a pavilion, which served to protect a group of sculptures in the middle of a garden pool. Pavilions are a common architectural feature in the surviving garden pools in Pompeii; see, for example, the wall paintings in Room D and the Garden Room L in the House of M. Loreius Tiburtinus, Pompeii II.2.2 (Jashemski, Jashemski 1979, 46–47; Jashemski 1993, 82–83; Price, Van Buren 1935, 151–153, Pl. 11–13).
 - 13 This can only be seen clearly after the mosaic had been restored. The cutout mosaic 'islands', now covered with gauze and glue, sometimes with plaster, each contain only a few details of the original frame. Restoration is progressing depending on the museum's financial resources.
 - 14 Mosaic grains size in the outer frame: 1.5×1 cm on average.
 - 15 Mosaic grains size in the inner frame: 5 – 6×7 – 8 mm. Blue stitching: 5 – 6×7 mm, while the red stitching is slightly larger, 8×8 mm.

- 16 The width of the image band was 70 cm inside the red band and 75–76 cm including the red frame.
- 17 The sides of the squares, including the yellow border, were each one Roman foot long. The frame excluded, the field with the white background measured 23 × 23 cm or 33–35 cm with the red border.
- 18 The sizes of the smaller tiles in the motifs within the squares are: white, 8 mm × 1 cm red, 8 mm × 9 mm; yellow, 8 mm × 1 cm; and 1 × 1.1 cm.
- 19 More information on the raw materials used can be obtained through an analysis of the mosaic grains' materials. The red ones seem to be bricks.
- 20 <https://www.theoi.com/Nymphe/NympheDirke.html>
- 21 https://roman-gardens.github.io/province/italia/rome/regio_x_palatium/domus_augustana/
- 22 https://madainproject.com/content/media/collect/locanda_albergo_sull_antica_via_latina_pelte_fontana_5645122.jpg
- 23 The epithet *Eleuthereus* ['the One who Frees'] of the god Dionysus, the liberator of man from troubles and sorrows, also refers to that (Pausanias I. 20. § 2, 38. § 8; Plutarchos, *Quaestiones Romanae* 101). The form *Eleutherius* was certainly used in the meaning 'liberator', but it also occurs as a surname of Zeus (Plutarchos, *Quaestiones Convivales* or *Symposiacs* VII. in fin.; Pindaros, *Olympian Odes*, Odes XII. 1; Strab. IX. p. 412; Tacitus, *Annales* XV. 64). <https://www.theoi.com/Cult/DionysosTitles.html>
- 24 Zsidi 2002, 78; Zsidi 2024, 100. Unfortunately, the statue can no longer be found in Aquincum Museum Stone Collection, and it cannot be identified; no picture of it has survived. Special thanks to Tibor Budai-Balogh and Boglárka Fábíán for their help in searching for it.
- 25 The pelte pair motif was in fashion in Aquincum, appearing on military carvings from the late Hadri-

- anic Era onwards and reaching its peak of popularity under Antoninus Pius; it remained in use, albeit with decreasing frequency, in the Severan Era. It also adorns sarcophagi dated to AD 180–270 (personal communication by Tibor Budai-Balogh; I am grateful to him for the information on the use of the pelte motif on stone carvings in Aquincum: Budai-Balogh 2023, 51–98; an extended version of the article is in preparation in *Carnuntum Jahrbuch*; see also Nagy 1928, 68–95). The pelte motif was also used in small arts, appearing on metal artefacts (Nagy 1928, 93–94; Budai-Balogh 2023, 77) and in pairs on an openwork gold ring (Gesztelyi 1998, Fig. 40, 142, 40). An openwork bronze mount formed by four pelte motifs and a pelte-shaped opening between them is known from the *Symphorus Mithraeum* in the Civilian Town of Aquincum (Zsidi 2018, 37, Fig. 41); besides, the motif can also be found on belt buckles and horse harness ornaments (Zsidi 2009, 118–119, Cat. 392–395, 414).
- 26 A representation of Hercules and Fortuna on the same side wall has also been reconstructed. However, this painting was omitted from the set of analogies as it does not include a pelte frame.
- 27 Mosaic *emblema* with pelves along the sides of the lozenge-shaped central field; 3rd century AD, Graphic Arts Collection of Princeton University. <https://graphicarts.princeton.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/158/2016/07/classics6.jpg>
- 28 Fragments from Euripides' drama are known from the works of Caius Iulius Hyginus, the Apollodoric Bibliotheca, and Apollonius Rhodius.
- 29 Red-and-yellow surfaces with a blue frame are known in the House of the Painted Ceiling in Ostia (II.6.5–6); see Mielsch 2001, 102, Fig. 119.

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AZ AQUINCUMI DIRKÉ MOZAIK IKONOGRÁFIAI ÉRTELMEZÉSÉNEK RÉGI ÉS ÚJ ASPEKTUSAI

Összefoglalás

Az aquincumi polgárváros északkeleti részében, a városi előjárók lakónegyedében található az úgynevezett Dirké mozaikos épület, amely nevét az egyik helyiségét díszítő mozaik központi mitológiai jelenetéről kapta. A Római Birodalom területén Dirké bűnhődésének ábrázolása egyaránt kedvelt témája volt mind a kisművészetek tömegtermékeinek, mind a nagy- és monumentális művészeti ágak alkotásainak. A mozaik központi mitológiai

jelenetét azonban nem lehet önmagában, kontextusából kiemelve tárgyalni.

A mítosz feltehetően Euripides Antiopé című drámájával – a mű nem maradt fenn, csak tartalmi kivonatokból ismerjük – kapott nagyobb figyelmet. Dirké bűnhődésének kompozíciója az itáliai görög vázafestők termékein jelenik meg először. A görög ábrázolások a történet más részletét ragadták meg, mint a római császárkorból ismert jelenetek.

Az átmenet, azaz a történet két különböző képi megfogalmazása, az etruszk ábrázolásokon és a kora római falfestészetben figyelhető meg párhuzamosan. Ez utóbbi hosszú ideig támaszkodott a görög és hellenisztikus előképek és minták másolására. Bár a Farnese-bika (Smith 1991, 108), hellenisztikus időszakra keltezett előképe alapján, az inspirációt adó megfogalmazás már ettől az időszaktól kezdve fokozatosan egyre nagyobb teret nyert. A váltás nagyjából Augustus időszakára tehető, amely korszaktól kezdve az általunk ismert háromszögbe rendezett kompozíció közepén az ágaskodó bikával, kétoldalt az ikrekkel és előttük Dirkével válik egyeduralkodóvá. Az ábrázolásnak előfordulnak változatai, de a szereplők állandóak. Ennek a tragédiával végződő pillanatnak a kiragadása valójában már nem a szomorú végkifejlet előrevetítése volt a célja, hanem egy új kezdet, egy bántalmazás nélküli nyugodt „világ„ létrejöttének jövődölését jelentette. Dirkét halála után folyóba vetették, róla forrást, folyót is elneveztek, illetve *nymphá*-nak is tartották. Így kapcsolódott a kompozíció *nymphaeum*okhoz, és ezért volt közkedvelt az ábrázolása a római kori fürdőkben. Halálával nyugalmat, megújulást, békességet ígért és hozott el, amit maguk a fürdők is biztosítottak, biztosítanak a mai napig az emberek számára.

Az aquincumi Dirké mozaikos épület apszisos helyiségének funkciója kapcsán már korábban felmerült a *nymphaeum*ként és/vagy fürdőként való azonosítása. A szomszédos mozaik emblémáját övező, geometrikus mintákkal, peltákkal és maszkokkal díszített képszalag is ezt az elméletet igazolja, mert egy kerti medencét vagy szökőkutat utánoz. Házon belül általában *peristylum*okban vagy *viridarium*okban létesítettek hasonló szökőkutakat. A képszalagot kívülről övező különböző díszítősávok megemelt pódium hatását keltik a szemlélőben. A mozaik egy valós kerti medence közepén elhelyezett, valószínűleg hellenisztikus előképek alapján készült, eredetileg körüljárható szoborcsoport síkábrázolása. A maszkok, Dirké által minden más istenségnél

jobban imádott és tisztelt Dionysos/Bacchus (Paus. 9.17.6) isten színházi kellékei. Dionysosra utaló attribútumok szinte minden Dirkével kapcsolatba hozható kompozícióban megjelentek. A pelta motívum és a kompozíció párhuzamai alapján a mozaik Kr. u. 2. század elejére keltezhető, bár a padlódíszítés nem bikróm, fekete-fehér *tesserae*ből készült, mégis csupán két szín, a vörös és sárga használata dominál a külső geometrikus keret motívumaiban. Ugyanennek a két színnek az együttes használata a falfestészetben a Flavius- és Antoninus kor egyik jellegzetes vonása volt, amely az Antoninusok alatt vált általánosabbá (Ling 1991, 176, 187–188: a kora Antoninus kor kezdetétől a Kr. u. 3 századig, vörös-sárga színek domináltak: Mielsch 2001, 105; Willburger 2004, 55). A vörös és sárga mellett a kék szín is jelen volt az Antoninus kori falfestészetben. A képmezőkben elhelyezett kis, részletgazdag, önálló motívumok, mint például a maszkok szintén ennek a korszaknak voltak a jellemzői.

A mozaikot keretdíszítésének kompozíciója a Kr. u. 2. század elejére-, színhasználata és a geometrikus díszű felületek részletgazdag kidolgozása, így a mandulaforma, a többsávú keretmotívum (fonat – futó kutya – farkasfog díszítés) és a köztük kialakult képmezőkben elhelyezett önálló maszkok használata mind az Antoninus korra keltezi. A részletgazdagság miatt viszont nem zárható ki a 3. század eleji készítés sem, bár a színskála változatossága ekkor már csökken, és inkább a vörös-zöld színek kombinációja dominál a lineáris jellegű festményeknél. (Ling 1991, 188; Mielsch 2001, 112–118.)

A mozaik minden részletét a legapróbb pontossággal kimérték és szabályszerűen készítették el. A méretek esetében a római tenyér, római láb használata egyértelműen észrevehető és mérhető, ugyanakkor azok sokszorozásával alkottak nagyobb képmezőket. A méretarányok megtartásával és tengelyesen szimmetrikus ismétlésével egy szabályos, szemnek kellemes összhatást értek el.