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Remarks on Three Sectile Pavements in Greece

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REMARKS ON THREE SECTILE PAVEMENTS IN GREECE.

(PLATE XV.)

A COMPLETE, or nearly complete, pavement of *opus sectile*, that is, a pavement of variously shaped slabs of ornamental marbles laid in a pattern, is one of the rarest remains of classical antiquity. In the whole of Italy not a single complete pavement of that description is believed to exist, with the exception, of course, of the pavement of the Pantheon in Rome, and one or two insignificant examples at Pompeii; so that we have to judge of the extent to which the beauties of pattern, colour, and execution were carried in this class of decoration from remains seldom containing more than a few superficial feet, and consider ourselves fortunate that so much is left. A large and very fine piece has, it is true, been recently uncovered in the Forum of Nerva; but as it is at present unprotected from the weather and, moreover, used (with the permission of the municipality of Rome) as an asylum for stray cats, it will not be long before it is disintegrated by damp and frost.

The reason for this general destruction is to be found in the great value of the material of which the pavements were composed.

No one who has had occasion to examine Italian works on classical archæology and topography, published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can have failed to note the frequency with which they record the complete spoliation, if not destruction, of buildings practically intact at the time of their discovery. With the exception of statues and busts—and not always of these—every piece of marble discovered seems either to have gone into the kiln, or to have been carried away to be re-cut and re-used for ornamental purposes. The rare

marbles which so profusely adorn the seventeenth and eighteenth century churches, chapels, and altars of Rome are derived from the wall-linings and pavements of ancient temples, palaces and baths.

Thus it has happened that in Italy hardly a morsel of the costly and varied pavements and wall-linings, which added such beauty of rich colour and varied ornament to the structures of ancient Rome, is still in existence; though in one or two places, it may be noted, where the floor-covering itself has disappeared, we can trace the pattern formed by the slabs from the marks of their joints left on the concrete bed on which they were laid.

In Greece, however, the exploitation of ancient materials has not taken place to the same extent, and it is thus that, while such pavements must have been infinitely rarer there than in Italy, there are still comparatively perfect examples left in sites from which, had they been in Italy, they would long since have disappeared. These pavements are:—in the pavement of the Theatre of Dionysos at Athens; the large fragment of Roman pavement at the entrance to the Temple of Zeus at Olympia; and the pavement of the Odeum of Herodes Atticus at Athens.

As these pavements do not seem to have attracted much attention owing, no doubt, to the superior attraction—from the point of view of purely Greek archæology—of the buildings in which they are placed, I venture to think that the publication here of a measured drawing of that of the Theatre of Dionysos (Plate XV.), together with a few remarks upon the subject of sectile pavements in general, may be of interest. And I particularly wish to say that as, in measuring, I made a note of what slabs were missing or badly damaged, I hope this drawing may be of interest as a record of the state of preservation of this pavement early in the year 1897.*

I.—PAVEMENT OF THEATRE OF DIONYSOS.

This pavement of the Theatre of Dionysos is probably, with the exception of that of the Pantheon (and also, it must be added, that of

* Dörpfeld, *Gr. Theater*, p. 91, refers to a coloured drawing by A. Winkler of this pavement published by Chr. Kirchhoff in a *Programm* of the Altona Christianeum for 1885. This publication is not in the library of the British Museum, and is practically inaccessible to English readers.

the Odeum of Herodes Atticus, which is merely a plain chequered pavement), the best specimen of a sectile pavement which has come down to us.

Some of the slabs and smaller pieces are missing, however, and where the largest gaps have been left, the empty places have at one time or another been filled up with tiles and broken pieces of white marble slabs, or merely with tiles alone (see A & B on plan). Besides the fact that a number of slabs have disappeared, I cannot help fancying that at one point, C on plan, a tract of the central portion, which is formed of small lozenges (called by Vitruvius *scutulæ*), must, at some time or another, have been taken up and carelessly re-laid, as—though none of the lozenges are actually missing at this point—white lozenges are found where coloured ones should be, and one or two coloured lozenges are out of place. Possibly a gap has been filled up with loose lozenges from other parts of the pavement. There are still a few loose ones lying about.

The coloured marbles, it should be noticed, have been very much bleached by the action of the weather, and this makes it very difficult to distinguish between the different marbles when actually standing on the pavement itself, as one must perforce in measuring it. From the higher seats of the theatre, the pattern shows out distinctly enough; and while I was engaged in measuring, a chance shower of rain brought out the colours quite clearly for a while.

The marbles used are—plain white marble; a bluish-veined marble, Hymettian, so far as I could ascertain; splendidly marked cipollino, green-veined bands on a yellowish ground; a red-veined (on white) marble, which I cannot identify; and four small triangular pieces of affricano, which occur near the corners of the great central lozenge.

The great central lozenge, or rhombus, of the pattern is entirely filled with small lozenges of white, blue-veined, and red-veined marble and cipollino, there being thirty-one lozenges to each side of the great central lozenge; the blue-veined marble and the cipollino seem to be used indifferently in the coloured bands, and must, consequently, I suppose, have been of much the same "value" as regards tone, though they differ in tint. Now, as has already been remarked, they are so bleached that it is a matter of difficulty to distinguish between them. In the

centre, the lozenges are replaced by slabs of white marble, five in number, namely, four triangular pieces and an oblong piece in the middle forming an inner rhombus with sides about 4 feet long. This central oblong slab has a circular sinking in it 20 inches in diameter.

The total number of lozenges forming the great rhombus was originally 936, and they are so laid as to form a kind of fret pattern on a white ground. It is worthy of remark that almost this identical fret is to be found in an *opus signinum* pavement at Pompeii, which has just been published by Mr. J. C. Watt in his *Examples of Greek and Pompeian Decorative Work*, the upper figure of Plate XL.

It will be noticed, on looking at the plan, that the transverse lines of the pavement are not quite parallel with the front wall of the stage, and that on one side (the east), the slabs which run at right angles to the transverse bands become narrower as they approach the stage.

The cipollino, as has already been said, is remarkable for the splendour of its colour and markings; and, indeed, the marbles employed in this pavement, and the richer marbles at Olympia, are extraordinary in this respect. They are remarkable also for their thickness; a very desirable quality in marble or alabaster slabs, as, if the slabs are used thin, the colour of the marble is apt to be affected by that of the ground on which it is laid. It is not easy, of course, to tell what thicknesses were generally used in marble pavements, as those of which any fragments are left generally have their edges made up solid with other materials in order to preserve them if *in situ*, or, in some cases, have been re-laid in the floors of museums; while, where the slabs have been taken away altogether, and there is nothing left but the bed on which they were laid, their thickness can only be ascertained if the slabs happen to have left a mark against a wall or plinth, or unless some step or border remains which shows their former thickness. Of course, where slabs were of great extent, as, for instance, in the Pantheon, where there are discs 10 feet in diameter in the portico, and 7 feet in diameter in the interior, and many oblong slabs 2 feet 9 inches by 4 feet 10 inches, a certain thickness is necessary to make the slabs portable with some degree of safety; but in this pavement a large proportion of the slabs average 3 feet by 2 feet. In the Calidarium of the Baths of Caracalla a few discs of grey granite exist *in situ*, and a

fragment of one of these, which is lying loose, is 3 inches thick. In Hadrian's villa, on the other hand, where there was at one time a vast extent of porticoes, courts, and apartments paved with choice marbles, such remains as are left show us that the slabs, not many of which are more than 2 feet 2 inches square, and many of which are much smaller, can hardly have exceeded $\frac{5}{8}$ inch to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in thickness. In the Theatre of Dionysos, however, one of the blue-veined slabs (to which I have drawn attention on the plan), which is only 3 feet 2 inches by 2 feet 6 inches, is from 6 inches to 8 inches thick, the under side being left very rough, while those of Hadrian's villa are quite smooth. Other slabs I noticed about 5 inches thick, and a loose lozenge which I measured was of the same thickness.

II.—TEMPLE OF ZEUS AT OLYMPIA.

The pavement here is very incomplete, but still a large piece remains in fairly good condition; it is very remarkable for the costly nature and magnificent quality of the materials and their lavish application. It is, of course, very accurately given in Curtius and Adler's *Olympia, Tafelband* i., Pl. 8.; a certain number of slabs have disappeared since their drawing was made. The hexagons (*favi*) are of oriental alabaster, the rare *alabastro dorato a nuvole*, white and yellow, like cream and honey mixed, beautifully waved, and though only $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, are from 3 inches to 5 inches thick. Nearly the whole of the east entrance to the temple, at least within the colonnade and between the columns *in antis*, up to the cella wall, must have been covered with this honeycomb pattern in alabaster, bordered on the side towards the steps by bands formed of splendidly marked pavonazzetto, black marble (of a shaly texture), and rosso antico. These slabs are now very much broken; their average thickness is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches to 3 inches.

The triangular spaces left between the hexagons where they abut against the black edging were not filled in, it should be remarked, with triangles of similar alabaster, but with pieces of rosso antico; two tiny fragments alone remain to attest this.

As the pavement approaches the columns *in antis* the hexagons are replaced by squares (*abaci*) of alabaster, about $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches square; these

are carried right up to the columns, and cut to fit into the flutes. As the slabs are missing between the point where the hexagons leave off and the squares appear, and as no marks are here left on the bed to show the form of the slabs, it is impossible to ascertain how they were joined, or if a border came between them. It is to be presumed, however that they were divided by a strip of marble of some kind, since between the columns *in antis*, close to that on the north side, the floor seems to have been laid with lozenges (*scutulæ*) of pavonazzo, of which two only now remain *in situ*, though there are marks of the border, $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, which divided these lozenges from the alabaster squares.

A great number of hexagons and one or two half-hexagons of alabaster; of lozenges of pavonazzetto, and some fragments of fine cipollino—the place of which in this pavement I have not been able to ascertain—are lying about loose, chiefly on the south side of the temple near the east end.

It is worthy of note, while speaking of the Roman coloured pavement, that the cella of the temple contains the remains of the original pavement of black marble with its raised border of white marble; probably the only example of a Greek temple paved with any other material than white marble or plain stone. This is the pavement in front of the chryselephantine statue, which Pausanias tells us was kept flooded with oil; the effect of this must have been to give it the appearance of being very highly polished, and to make it reflect the image like a looking-glass.

III.—THE ODEUM OF HERODES ATTICUS AT ATHENS.

This pavement is in a very complete state of preservation, but is not very remarkable either for its materials or its pattern. I saw it at a great disadvantage, as at the time of my visit it was covered with a thin layer of half-dry mud. The pavement consists entirely of 2-foot square diamonds of cipollino and white marble alternated; the slabs are well cut and closely laid. Where I was able to measure them they were $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches to 2 inches thick.

A note may be added here on the advisability of measuring Roman pavements, whether mosaic or sectile, in English feet and inches.

The Roman foot so nearly coincides with the modern English, that the various dimensions of the parts of such pavements will be found to coincide surprisingly with our measure. This greatly facilitates the work of measurement, especially when time is an object, by providing an easy multiple; it also helps the analysis of the various patterns and the detection of any correspondence between their various parts.

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