Cultural Imperialism at the Borders of Empire: The Case of the "Villa of the Amazons" in Edessa[1]

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Introduction

In 2006 the remains of a villa and a bath complex, both with large expanses of mosaic still *in situ*, were discovered in the course of a construction programme in the Haleplibahçe (Aleppo Gardens) area of Şanliurfa, ancient Edessa, in southeast Turkey. Since the author's visit to the site in 2012, this area has now been incorporated in the new Şanliurfa Archaeology and Mosaic Museum, a flagship regional project that is intended to rival the primacy of the nearby Gaziantep Museum which was built to display the mosaics recovered from Zeugma ahead of that site's inundation as part of a dam project. This article presents an exploration and contextualistation of the mosaics of the villa[2] within the wider cultural movements of this frontier region in the sixth century, specifically with regard to the events of the reign of the Emperor Justinian (527-565 CE).

As the capital of the province of Osrhoene, Edessa was the centre of the regional Byzantine military and administrative apparatus and yet the veneer of Byzantine society was only superficial. The territory had stood for centuries at the intersection of various spheres of cultural influence and the sixth century CE was to prove no different as the city and its hinterland were sporadically caught up in the ongoing wars between the Byzantine and Persian Empires. However by the reign of Jusinian it was impossible to ignore the rifts within local society as Edessa and its hinterland

resolutely refused to accept the Christological definition promulgated by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE and remained firmly miaphysite in doctrinal terms. This situation made it increasingly clear that any staff sent from Constantinople to secure the eastern flank from Persian incursions were likely to be at odds with the local population theologically and that this could be expected to cause a certain *froideur* between the administrators and high-ranking military officials and the native residents of the city.

The Location of the 'Villa of the Amazons'

Whilst at first sight the valley to the east of the walled city of Edessa appears to have been a tranquil and fertile area, in this case appearences were extremely deceptive. The reason that this apparently good land was left largely untouched in antiquity was due to the unpredictability of the river Daişan. It ran to the north of the valley and would periodically swell with flash floods resulting in catastrophic damage and loss of life; the *Chronicle of Edessa* records these disasters as occurring approximately once every century in November 201, May 303, March 413 and April 525.[3] The waters would sweep down the valley to the west of the city, whose walls ran along the top of a rocky outcrop, and turn east into the narrow corridor at the south of the city. This area abutted the royal gardens at the bottom of the citadel and was was where the wealthiest and most influential residents of the city lived as they dwelt in close proxmity to the source of the springs that were revered by the populace. In the aftermath of the great flood of 525 CE, Procopius reported that the Emperor Justinian ordered the building of a dam to the north west of the city to divert the waters to the north and east of Edessa and to prevent future loss of life and property.[4]

To turn to the villa, now known widely as the Villa of the Amazons for reasons that will soon be made clear, we must consider why a wealthy citizen would wish to live in an area long known to have been a flood plain. Given the historical floods listed above, it is immediately clear that the construction of the villa must most logically have occurred after the building of the new dam. In this period there would have been renewed confidence that the diversion of the Daişan protected the western side of the city. Of course we must also question why a wealthy patron would choose to live outside the city walls rather than in the "high street"[5] in the south of the walled city where the most influential residents of the city are recorded as having their residences. Here we need once again to return to the history of Edessa: In the years following 525 the city was firmly and directly ruled from Constantinople due to its strategic value in the ongoing hostilities between the Byzantine and Persian Empires and this would tie in with suggestions that the Villa of the Amazons was built for a high-ranking Byzantine official. To construct a residence in the Haleplibahçe area fits this hypothesis for a number of reasons; the location shows a patriotic faith in the efficacy of Justinian's dam and his army by suggesting that the patron did not fear the advance of the Persians. By living outside the wall and eschewing the wealthy districts of the city centre the occupant was putting a physical and psychological distance between himself and the local population and this difference is also clearly signalled by the cultural and artistic influences displayed in the mosaics, which will be discussed below. It must also be added that, although the commercial excavation of the quarter has not been systematic, the modern construction works that unearthed the Villa of the Amazons have been extensive and no similar residences have been found in its close vicinity. This suggests that this villa stood some distance from other

dwellings and, as yet, no similar building has been discovered in the environs of the city.

Of course, although there was no longer a threat from the water, in 543 the city was besieged by a Persian army led by Khusro the Sassanian Shah. The events of this campaign were recounted soon afterwards by Procopius,[6] who significantly fails to mention the story recorded by later writers that the city was saved by the miraculous intervention of the celebrated *acheiropoietos* image of Christ, but concentrates solely on the tactical success of the Byzantine garrison and how the success was so convincing that it paved the way for a five year truce in 545 CE[7]

Taking this conjunction of well-attested events together, it therefore seems likely that the villa was constructed around the middle of the sixth century CE in a period when Justinian's engineers were perceived to have solved the problem of the city flooding with the construction of a dam and a project to redirect the waters of the Daişan. In addition the fact that the city had withstood assaults by the Persians on several occasions in the first half of the century without succumbing, as well as the indication that there appears to have been confidence that the terms of the 545 treaty would keep the Persians away for some years, then the mid-sixth century seems the most probable time for the construction of this significant private estate; a date that fits well with the stylistic elements of the mosaics themselves as we shall see in the discussion that follows.

The Mosaics of the 'Villa of the Amazons'

The Villa of the Amazons takes its modern appellation from the large chamber that dominates the western wing of the dwelling. Its floor surface measures 3.91m by 9.02m[8] and is covered by one large scene bordered by garlands interspersed with *putti*, animals and faces in the corners that are too naturalistic to be interpreted as theatrical masks. The mosaic depicts an animal hunt and four female figures, two standing and two riding horses, who are shown fighting an array of wild animals whilst dressed in masculine short tunics and cloaks with Phrygian caps. If the fact that they are all baring their right breast were not enough evidence, it is made clear to the viewer that these women are Amazonian queens by the Greek inscriptions beside them. The names of Hippolyta and Melanippe are clearly visible whilst that of Thermodosa is damaged, with only the first three characters of her name still extant. The fourth figure has lost her inscription entirely but has been widely accepted as representing Penthesileia[9]. The four Amazons are battling lions and leopards but the mosaicist has taken the opportunity to demonstrate his facility with a variety of flora and fauna by including hunting dogs, an ostrich and a waterfowl perched on a boulder, as well as fruit trees and grasses to add an element of spatial depth to the scene.

The execution of the panel is clearly the work of a master mosaicist as the tesserae used are much smaller and more varied in colour than those employed in the mosaics in the smaller chambers of the villa. The work is also of a higher quality than in the other two large public spaces of the home; the mosaic showing the *Life of Achilles* (see below) and the central, severely damaged, chamber of the villa with remnants of wildfowl and water plants. Therefore although the complex has certain elements suggesting a continuity of decoration throughout, such as the fish-scale or fan-shaped

background present on all mosaics, it is clear that certain rooms were prioritised and worked on by a master craftsman and other chambers were designed by apprentices or less accomplished artisans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it appears that the more public rooms of the dwelling received more attention than the smaller, private, subsidary chambers.

To the north and south of the large Amazon chamber were small square rooms of 3-4m squared that had outer borders of geometric designs with an inner framing of foliate garland (north) or an interlace pattern (south) enclosing a central field with a small heart-shaped motif and then a central panel of a lion (north) or a tiger (south). These were accessed from the Amazon room and were obviously more private spaces, which, as mentioned above, may account for why the householder did not feel it necessary to have the same degree of artistry used for these floors.

To the east of this area the central chamber, which acted as an atrium although it is impossible to see now whether or not it contained an impluvium, is largely destroyed. However, whilst the extant mosaic fragments are not of the same quality as those in the Amazon chamber, they are still the work of a competent artisan and compare favourably with material in Constantinople and Antioch of the same era. However the closest parallel can perhaps be found in the *Noah's Ark* mosaic found in Misis (ancient Mopsuestia) and now displayed in Misis Mosaic Museum. The mosaic is the later of two discovered in the town depicting this subject, and has been assigned a range of dates between the second half of the fifth century and the Justinianic era. Although it was originally believed to have been part of a martyrium it is now generally believed to have been a pavement within a synagogue.[10]

On either side of this central room/atrium are two narrow chambers with a raised dais and geometric monochrome mosaic flooring, which appear to have been matching triclinia to the north and south of the villa. The two side rooms to the south have been completely destroyed but to the north is a perfectly preserved image of *Ktisis* ("Possession" or "Foundation") and in the chamber directly north of her is a panel of a black youth leading a zebra. *Ktisis* is depicted along with other personifications such as *Ananeosis* ("Renewal") and *Ge* (the Earth) in Antioch and these mosaics have been dated to the fifth century, which could suggest that the workshop which undertook the work on the villa came from that city rather than Constantinople. This would make sense in that Antioch was considerably nearer than the capital and the literary evidence of the time suggests that there was regular contact between the two cities. However *Ktisis* was a relatively well known motif in the early Byzantine period and other examples (to name just a few) are known at Kourion, Cyprus, the Qasr Libya Museum, Libya and there is a poorly provenanced example dated to the first half of the sixth century in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The depiction of *Ktisis* in Edessa differs from that in Antioch in that she is seated on an impressive imperial-looking throne not unlike the impressive architectural constructions used to emphasise the significance of the *Theotokos* in later Byzantine art, although both mosaics show her dressed as a notable of the imperial court and have her wearing a gold coronet adorned with pearls and other gems.

Beside her in the next room the scene of the youth with the zebra is noteworthy for showing the zebra in a relatively accurate manner and the youth as an ordinary figure in an orange sarong-like garment. There is none of the exaggeration of features that

can be found in some antique representations of Africans[11] and both the boy and the animal are shown in a naturalistic manner that aims at a true likeness rather than a caricature signalling an "exotic" image. This suggests that the artist came from a cosmopolitan milieu and was familiar both with unusual animals and with slaves of African origin – again suggesting that craftsmen had been imported from either Constantinople or Antioch, although in this case the former seems slightly more likely given that Antioch had declined by this period and was not as wealthy as it had been in earlier eras. The image of the zebra is certainly more realistic and skillfully portrayed than the nearest comparable example, which is a zebra depicted in the bottom of a mosaic dated 531 discovered beneath a late sixth century mosaic at the Sanctuary of Moses at Mount Nebo, Jordan. The Jordanian example is executed in a far cruder style and in both colour and physionomy the animal in question appears a great deal closer to a donkey than it does to a zebra.[12]

East of the central chamber, and flanked to the south by the two destroyed chambers and to the north by *Ktisis* and the boy with the zebra, is a large rectangular room that appears to have had a east-facing outlook towards the western city wall and the tombs beneath it. This space is less well preserved than that of the Amazons, but the fragments that remain show that it was executed by a master of a calibre only marginally less accomplished than that of the Amazon mosaicist. This corridor-like chamber is 33.24m long by 4.53m wide[13] and from south to north tells the story of Achilles. Although the pavement has suffered severe damage in places, a series of scenes are still comprehensible beginning with Achilles as a baby with his nurse and then Thetis dipping the child in the river Styx; this is followed by Thetis and an adolescent Achilles, the Fates, Achilles with Cheiron and further scenes involving

Thetis and a head labelled Odysseus near the northern end of the chamber. The individual elements of the story are divided within the wider plane of the pavement through the device of fruit trees or architectural elements, and the whole mosaic is enclosed within a sophisticated frame predominantly featuring galloping horses, although one building and some humans are also featured.

Naturally Achilles was a popular choice of subject matter for ancient mosaics and an image of Achilles with Briseis was found in the House of Aion in Antioch[14] and another of him on Skyros from Zeugma is now displayed in the Gaziantep Mosaic Museum[15] to name but two that have been found in the region around Şanliurfa/Edessa. The Achilles pavement in the Villa of the Amazons, like those discovered in Antioch and Zeugma mentioned above, is executed in a style typical of Romano-Byzantine mosaicists and fits neatly into a wider narrative of Hellenistic art-historical discourse, as do all the mosaics of the complex, but as will be seen below, this is far from usual in this geographical location and it is this very conformity with the norms of Constantinopolitan art and iconography that raises more questions than it answers.

The Edessene Style of Mosaics: Semitic influences at the boundaries of empire

To place the villa firmly in its wider context it is necessary to note that, with the exception of some fragments in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem labelled in Greek and Syriac, all inscriptions known from Edessene mosaics discovered thus far have been in Syriac; the mono-lingual Greek labels in the Villa of the Amazon mark a decisive break with this practice. The other issue to bear in mind is that other than an

animal mosaic in the Şanliurfa Museum and the unknown provenance of the Israeli fragments[16], all other Edessene mosaics recorded thus far have come from funerary contexts and therefore we have little comparable data taken from domestic sources.

As John Healey has pointed out, there is a dearth of scholarly material exploring the genre of Edessene mosaics from an Art Historical perspective.[17] In the debate over the provenance and rightful ownership of the mosaic of *Orpheus Taming Wild Animals*, which was donated to the Dallas Museum of Art in 2000, and was recently returned to Turkey when it was donated to the new Şanliurfa Archaeology and Mosaic Museum, it was his epigraphic analysis that supported the assertion that the mosaic originated in Edessa or the immediate environs of that city.[18] There are still a number of mosaics in museum collections or private hands that are without doubt from the region, but that are awaiting a serious study of their iconography and their origins.

All of which brings us to the series of panels now in the Bible Lands Museum[19] in Jerusalem, which were published by Balty and Briqel Chatonnet in 2000 but which have otherwise seemed to slip under the radar of many who work in the field of Syriac Studies. As mentioned above, these scenes are in many ways atypical of the majority of Edessene mosaics in that they are not definitively linked to a funerary context. There are six panels in all; one a complex allegorical scene featuring Prometheus and five showing various epic scenes. The latter include a panel of Briseis and servants and another image of Achilles and Patroclus. Obviously these mosaics are significantly earlier than those in the Villa of the Amazons, dating from the third century, but as Balty and Briquel Chatonnet point out they demonstrate the duality of Edessene culture.[20] As a notable centre for manuscript production and

particularly of translation, there is nothing unusual in the adoption of Hellenistic imagery by the native Semitic-speaking population. The true significance of these mosaics lies in the fact that, as mentioned above, the vast majority of Edessene mosaics still extant come from funerary contexts so that with the exception of a few damaged scenes formerly housed in the old Şanliurfa municipal museum, the panels in Israel and the Villa of the Amazons provide the only examples of mosaics from a domestic context – albeit that the two groups were executed some three hundred years apart.

What is perhaps most significant about the Bible Lands panels is that stylistically they are clearly Semitic in origin. Even if they had not possessed Syriac inscriptions to put their origins beyond doubt, the execution of the figures with heavy black lines outlining each face and around the figures' large almond-shaped eyes that stare out from beneath heavy black brows, attests to an Edessene provenance. In addition the folds of the drapery of the figures is relatively crude and schematic when compared with the fludity of the cloaks of the (later) Amazons, but is directly comparable with the robes of the woman to the right of the large funerary scene in Şanliurfa Museum. These panels in Israel clearly demonstrate that there was a tradition of domestic mosaic decoration in Edessa to rival the production of funerary mosaics, but that the haphazard nature of survivals from the past in a continuously inhabited city means that thus far no third-century private villas have been discovered and excavated.

As mentioned above, the scenes demonstrate the essential duality of Edessene culture in the third century by depicting scenes from Classical Greek literary sources in a strong regional idiom that drew upon the influence of artistic styles from eastern

cultural centres such as Palmyra, rather than taking its lead from Antioch as a bastion of Hellenistic visual culture. The hierarchical arrangement of figures with their front-facing postures, even when their faces are looking sideways in a three-quarter view, recalls the funerary reliefs of Palmyrene tombs or the paintings of the Tomb of the Three Brothers in Palmyra more than it does contemporary mosaics from Antioch. Obviously the relative dearth of comparative material from Edessa makes it difficult for us to draw any firm conclusions about the evolution of art in the region, but nevertheless when we look at the development of comparative material from other artistic centres in this region we do not see radical stylistic transformations occurring. In fact, although we must acknowledge the uncertainty over its exact place of origin, if we were to look for a direct line of transmission of Edessene art down to the sixth century then it is clear that the Rabbula Gospels fit this category far more satisfactorily than the Villa of the Amazons. The same almond-shaped eyes and relative rigidity of the drapery, as well as a continuing preponderance of figures presented frontally suggests that this manuscript represents the evolution of Edessene art from the earlier forms represented by the mosaics discussed above. It is certainly too great a leap to suggest that the scenes in the Bible Lands Museum were in some way the ancestors of the Amazon mosaic.

This all brings us back to the arguments surrounding the location of the villa, which strongly suggest that we are dealing with a dwelling built for a senior Byzantine offical, rather than for a local dignatory. Everything about the mosaics of the Villa of the Amazons suggests that they were executed by artisans from Antioch, or possibly from Constantinople itself; this work was carried out to a high technical and artistic level in a manner that is clearly a direct descendant of Hellenistic visual art. By no

stretch of the imagination can these mosaics be seen as part of the regional visual idiom and this brings us back to the question of who the patron for this project may have been.

Conclusion

Naturally in an article of this length there is not enough space to explore these issues in full, this is very much a preliminary discussion of these questions. However it seems on a balance of probabilities that the "Villa of the Amazons", as it has become known, was likely to have been the residence of a Byzantine governor imposed on the local population from Constantinople. For the reasons outlined above, the most convincing date for the villa appears to be post 525 CE and the catastrophic flood of that year and most probably after the failed Persian siege of 543 CE.

This is an example of an expensive and sophisticated decorative scheme that hearkened back to a glorious classical past and, as this Hellenistic inspiration was alien to the native Edessenes who had their own distinctive Mesopotamian culture, it strongly suggests that not only was the patron a wealthy Byzantine official but that he also commissioned artisans from a centre of Greek culture. We know that mosaic ateliers were still producing high-quality work in Antioch during this period and so it seems probable that the workmen came from that city, although we cannot rule out definitively the suggestion that they came with their patron from Constantinople.

Lack of space has prevented the inclusion of a consideration of the theological controversies of the time, but when we consider that Justinian spent much of his reign

attempting to resolve the theological rift caused by the Council of Chalcedon and we take into account that Edessa was a centre of miaphysite thought, then it may not be too far a stretch to see how a governor dispatched from the capital could have used the construction of his residence to make a statement about Constantinopolitan cultural norms. The Mesopotamian culture of Edessa had been tainted in the eyes of the capital by its association with heretical views and the pointed use of more centralised and imperially sanctioned forms of visual culture may have been intended to send out a clear message of the primacy of Constantinople over more ancient, but weaker, city states such as that of Edessa. Miaphysite doctrine was strongly associated with Osrhoene and Syria and it seems clear that the building of the villa was intended to send out a strong message concerning the powerful reach of Justinian and his officials even at the furthest reaches of his empire.

Here we must return to the discussion at the beginning of this article once again and underline that the physical placement of the villa suggests that there was a deliberate decision by the owner of the villa to distance himself from the populace of the city by eschewing the traditionally fashionable district to live in by the holy springs, but instead making a statement of trust in Justinian by building the complex west of the city walls in a notorious flood plain. This act was an affirmation in the efficacy of Justinian's engineers as it demonstrated a faith that further floods would be averted, but it also spoke of a confidence in imperial foreign policy as the siting of the villa implied that a Persian invasion did not seem a pressing or credible threat at the time that the estate was built.

Finally in its splendid isolation the flaunting of an imperial visual aesthetic can be read not only as a statement of fashion, but also as a rebuke to the perceived provincial attitudes of the local population who, in the opinion of the imperial court, were not only unfashionable, but also endangering their immortal souls due to their continued attachment to a rival doctrinal point of view.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] The field work that this article is based upon was carried out as part of the research for the *Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity* project that has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 312602.

[2] The bath complex is decorated with standard geometric motifs that will not be discussed in this article.

[3] J.B. Segal, *Edessa. The Blessed City*, 2nd Edition, Gorgias Press; Piscataway, NJ, 2001, p.24, p.124

[4] Procopius, *Buildings* 2.7

[5] J.B. Segal, *Edessa. The Blessed City*, p.21

[6] Procopius, *Wars* 2.26 & 2.27

[7] Procopius, *Wars* 2.28

[8]Hasan Karabulut, Mehmet Önal, & Nedim Dervişoğlu, *Haleplibahçe Mozaikleri, Şanliurfa/Edessa*, Arkeoloji Ve Sanat Yayinlari; Istanbul, 2011, p.55

[9] Karabulut, Önal, & Dervişoğlu, *Haleplibahçe Mozaikleri*, p.61

[10] Rachel Hachili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends: Selected* Studies, Brill 7 Boston; Leiden, 2009, pp.67ff.

[11] For example the neck of a grey ware bottle in the Manchester Museum (Acc. No. 11153) shows busts of male and female black African figures in which their facial features are so exaggerated that the museum inventory description suggests that the faces may represent theatrical masks rather than be intended as portraits.

[12] For a discussion of the mosaic pavements of Mount Nebo see Michele Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, American Center of Oriental Research; Amman, 1993

[13] Karabulut, Önal, & Dervişoğlu, *Haleplibahçe Mozaikleri*, p.23

[14] "Detail of mosaic floor with Achilles and Briseis. Not raised…" *Archaeological Archives*, accessed October 11, 2016, http://vrc.princeton.edu/archives/items/show/17756.

[15] Rifat Ergeç (ed), *Belkis/Zeugma and Its Mosaics*, Sanko; Istanbul, 2011, p.120ff.

[16] Nevertheless their execution and the epigraphy of the Syriac inscriptions attest to an origin in Edessa, or failing that from the immediate vicinity of that city.

[17] John J. Healey, pers. comm.

[18] John F. Healey, 'A New Syriac Mosaic Inscription', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 51:2 (2006), pp.313-327 see also Emma Loosley, 'The Material Culture of the Syrian Peoples in Late Antiquity and the Evidence for Syrian Wall Paintings' in Daniel King (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Syriac World*, forthcoming

[19] Thanks are due to my research associate Dr Lucy Redfearn (formerly O'Connor) for obtaining photographs of these mosaics for me whilst undertaking fieldwork in Israel.

[20] Janine Balty & Françoise Briquel Chatonnet, 'Nouvelles mosaïques inscrites d'Osrhoène' *Monuments et Mémoires, Fondation Eugène Piot* 79 (2000), pp. 31-72, p.71