





The British
Museum

Powerful Symbol of a Society in Transition

THE HINTON ST MARY MOSAIC

Object in Focus ITP
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The Hinton St Mary Mosaic, discovered in 1963 in Dorset, England, is among the most important Roman mosaics in Britain. A chance find by a local blacksmith, it immediately attracted attention for its craftsmanship and possible Christian symbolism.

Measuring about 8 by 5 meters, the mosaic was part of a richly decorated Roman building, likely a villa, dating from around 330 to 430 CE. Its central image depicts a male figure with the Chi-Rho (☩), an early Christian symbol, leading some to believe it represents Jesus Christ, while others suggest a Roman emperor or the villa's owner. Surrounding imagery includes mythological scenes, such as Bellerophon slaying the Chimera, nature motifs and symbolic figures in the corners—possibly the four winds or the four evangelists.

In 1965, the British Museum acquired the mosaic and moved it to London, where its central section is now on display. Recent excavations and modern research revealed multiple structures and boundary walls at the excavation site, challenging earlier ideas that the mosaic adorned a single large villa.

The mosaic remains a key artifact for exploring fusion of Roman, pagan, and Christian identities in late Roman Britain and broader themes of religion, power, continuity, and change during this period.

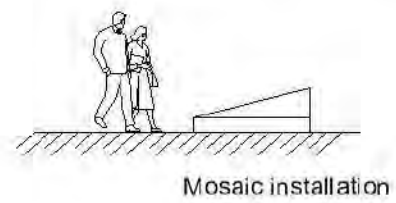
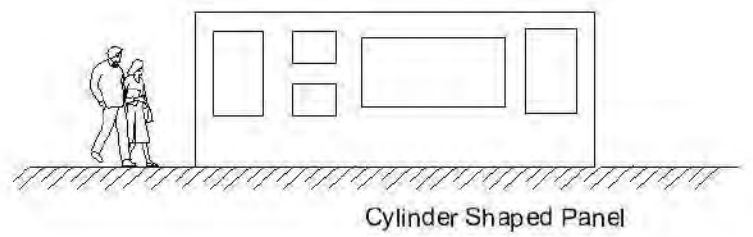
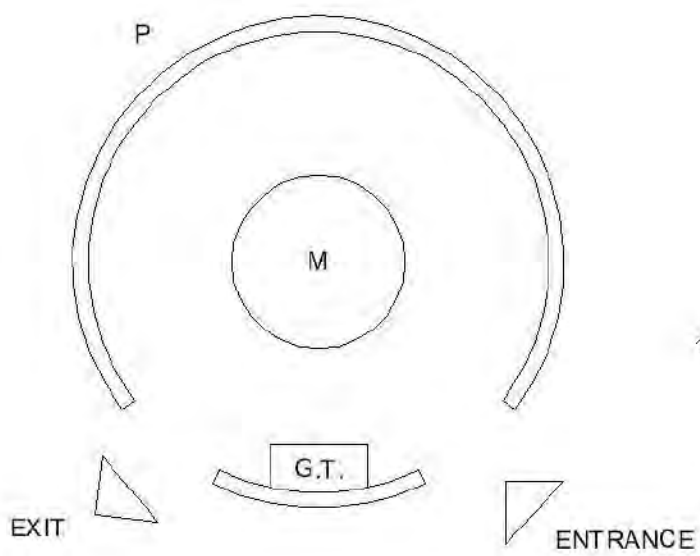
A world in transition - The Hinton St Mary Mosaic

This portrait is possibly the earliest known mosaic depiction of Christ. It formed the central part of a larger Late Roman mosaic floor (early 4th century CE) from a villa uncovered in the British town of Dorset. Behind the figure appears the Chi-Rho (☩), a sacred symbol of early Christianity. Other decorative themes in the mosaic include Bellerophon, Pegasus and Chimaera. The fact that Christian and pagan elements appear together reflects the transitional, hybrid character of the period.

Britain / Romano-British period (43 CE to circa 410 CE) / Hinton St Mary, Dorset / stone and ceramic / 1965,0409.1







M: Mosaic
 G.T.: Game Table
 P: Cylinder Shaped Panel

WHO is WHO

Identifying figures in ancient art is often a puzzle. Archaeologists study details, compare them with other artworks and use historical knowledge to suggest who they might be. But experts don't always agree.

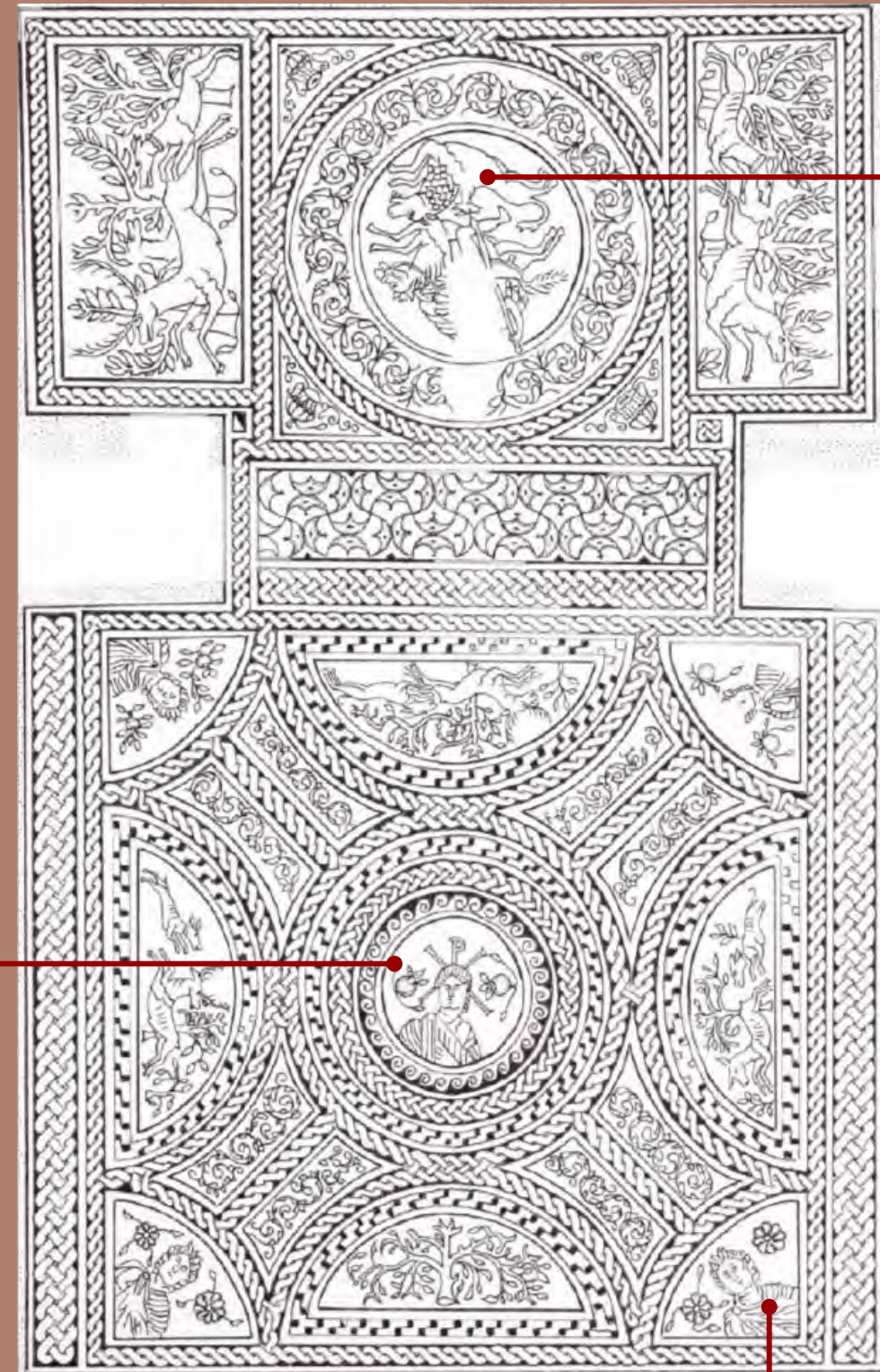
In the Hinton St Mary mosaic, the central figure's identity is still debated. Different scholars have proposed different interpretations. No single answer has been proven, and we may never know for sure—though future discoveries could provide new evidence.

However, most scholars agree that this mosaic combines pagan and Christian imagery, illustrating a period of cultural transition in the ancient world and the ongoing connection between traditions.

Here you can explore some of the most popular interpretations of the figures in the mosaic, and the clues that support them.

Portrait of a man dressed in a tunic and cloak, shown with the Chi-Rho symbol, formed by the first two letters of Christ in Greek, behind his head. He is flanked by pomegranates, symbols of immortality. Positioned where pagan gods were typically depicted in Roman mosaics, it is according to some the earliest known mosaic portrayal of Christ. Others interpret the figure as a Christian emperor, such as Constantine or Magnentius, based on coins iconography. Others suggest it may represent the Christian villa owner himself.

The mosaic as a whole blends pagan imagery with Christian symbolism, reflecting a period of religious transition and the coexistence of old and new beliefs.



Bellerophon, riding the winged horse Pegasus, spears Chimæra. This scene is seen by some as a classic Greek myth, while others interpret it as pagan imagery adapted during Christianity's rise to symbolize the triumph of good over evil. The scene is thought to have inspired the later depictions of St. George slaying the Dragon, a common motif in medieval church art.

In Roman mosaics the four male figures in the corners usually represented the four winds. It has been suggested that here they might represent the Four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It has also been proposed that these might be the sons of Emperor Constantine.

A SHORT HISTORY

The mosaic floor was made by craftsmen who worked around Dorchester. It is made from local brown, yellow, dark grey and white stones and pieces of red tile, set in mortar. It was probably made in parts in a workshop and then the pieces were transported and set in the floor. In the Roman time, mosaics decorated the floors, walls, and ceilings of villas, baths, and public buildings. They depicted strict black-and-white geometric compositions but also scenes from mythology, hunting, and daily life. The Romans adopted Greek traditions but brought mosaic art to new technical and artistic heights. They introduced stone and glass cubes — tesserae — allowing the creation of complex multicoloured images.

Byzantine culture, where it flourished as radiant wall panels made of smalti and gold. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, mosaics were used mainly in church decoration. When and where was the last time you saw a mosaic?



marble



limestone



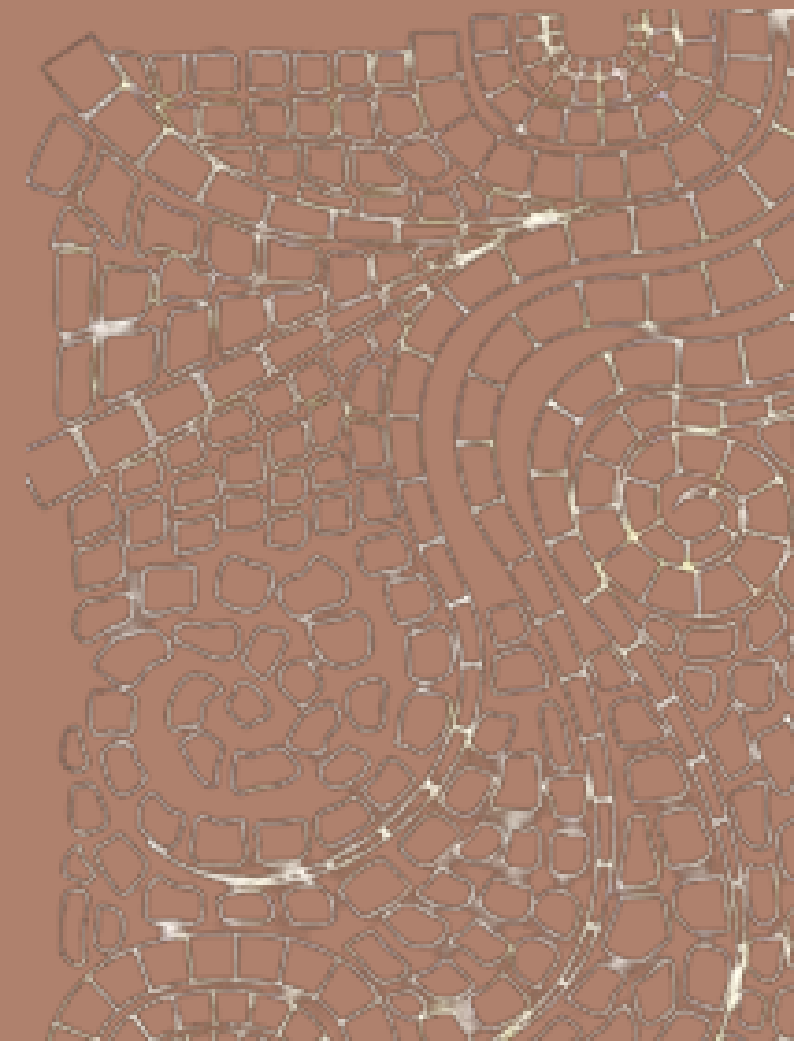
smalti



ceramics



roof tile



FROM THE SITE TO THE MUSEUM

In 1963, in the village of Hinton St Mary in Dorset, England a local blacksmith, Mr. White, was digging behind his workshop when he saw small, colored stones (tesserae) placed in a pattern. He had seen Roman mosaics during the war in North Africa and understood that this was something important. After the discovery, a teacher named Pat Moody came with students to help. Experts from the Dorset County Museum also joined. A young artist named David Neal made drawings of the mosaic. In 1965, the British Museum bought the mosaic and moved it to London. The main circle (roundel) of the mosaic was shown in the museum.

Since 2012 new research and excavations were conducted on the site the site where the mosaic was found bringing to light new findings about the type of the building that the mosaic decorated

* This information alongside footage and photographs from the excavations, the transportation and conservation of the mosaic and its installation in the galleries of the British Museum will be shown in a TV monitor in short film-documentary format. Duration: 5 min



“The past is not only in the stones we dig, but also in the silence around them.”
– Hinton St Mary Excavation Team