

Catherine Balmelle, *Recueil général des mosaïques de la Gaule IV*. Province d'Aquitaine 2. Partie méridionale, suite (les pays gascons). Mit einem Beitrag von Xavier Barral i Altet. Gallia, Supplement 10. Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1987. 314 Seiten mit 203 Tafeln.

If any one man can be said to have been responsible for initiating the explosion of interest and research in ancient mosaics over the past forty years, that man is Henri Stern. Aware of the need to set down precise and accurate details of all pavements which either survive or have been recorded, if future generations of scholars were to make significant advances, he established the *Recueil Général des Mosaïques de la Gaule* and promptly wrote the first five fascicules for it, published between 1957 and 1975; three concerned Gallia Belgica and two Lugdunensis (one in collaboration with Michèle Blanchard-Lemée). These were all models of their kind and set high standards for others to follow in the series. Aware, too, of the need to call a spade a spade and not a shovel, to avoid terminological confusion and achieve standardization for the descriptions of motifs and compositional schemes, it was Henri Stern who was the guiding force behind the *Répertoire graphique du décor géométrique dans la mosaïque antique* (1973) and its handsome, stylish and invaluable successor, *Le décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine* (1985). Catherine Balmelle, author of the present work under review, is one of the new generation of French mosaic scholars who are keeping the Stern torch burning brightly. Collaborator on the *Décor*, co-editor of the Stern Festschrift (*Mosaïque: Recueil d'hommages à Henri Stern* [1983]), Balmelle has taken on the task of documenting the mosaics of Aquitania, of which this is the second fascicule (Aquitaine 1 was published in 1980), and the tenth in the *Recueil* as a whole. Only the mosaic corpora of Italy, Tunisia and Spain have made comparable progress, and of these some of the Spanish volumes leave something to be desired (of R. J. A. WILSON, *Gnomon* 59, 1987, 433 ff.).

No such shortcomings are detectable in the second Aquitania fascicule. Balmelle has sorted, catalogued and discussed a total of 326 mosaics to add to the 170 she covered in Aquitaine 1, to which are added a couple of medieval pavements, described in an appendix by X. BARRAL I ALTET (pp. 289–299). The mosaics come from sites in southern and central Aquitaine south of the Dordogne, all within the late Roman province of the 'Nine Peoples' (Novempopulana); they lie in the former territories of the Aquenses, the Aturenses, the Eleusates, the Auscii, the Lactorates, the Vasates and the Boiates, an area which today is mostly encompassed by the modern Départements of Landes, Gers, Gironde and Pyrénées Atlantiques.

The brief Introduction raises some general issues (pp. 9–23); then follows the meat of the book, the catalogue, where the mosaics are meticulously described and analysed, following the now familiar layout and guidelines established for the *Recueil* by Henri Stern. This is an invaluable and painstaking compilation, providing a secure framework for future advance. Balmelle moreover has no narrow provincial vision of her subject, and her familiarity with mosaics Empire-wide is readily apparent in the discussion of each piece, where necessary comparanda are introduced from elsewhere to set the Gaulish floors in context: examples cited are always apposite and the accompanying bibliography never wearisome. By searching so diligently through archival material, together with her assimilation of the archaeological discoveries of the past three-quarters of a century, Balmelle has produced an astonishing 5½ fold increase (from 57 to 326) on the yield from this same area the last time it was harvested, in 1909 (G. LAFAYE, in ID. and A. BLANCHET, *Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule* 1). There is, then, much cause for gratitude.

A compilation of this sort inevitably raises wider questions to which answers are not readily forthcoming. One concerns chronology. The widespread absence of secure dating evidence is a major factor bedevilling discussion of Roman mosaics throughout the Empire, for the vast majority of the pavements which survive have been uncovered without adequate archaeological control, and their dating depends largely on relative chronologies and stylistic criteria; the mosaics of Aquitania are no exception. Yet it is depressing to learn that even at villa sites which are currently or have been recently under excavation, such as Montréal-Séviac (nos. 285–310) or Saint-Sever (nos. 208–25), very little sound archaeological evidence for the chronology of the mosaics has been obtained. One floor at the former, it is true, has yielded a terminus post quem of c. 350/360 on the basis of coins and pottery, found beneath the mosaic of the frigidarium there (p. 151); but a single mosaic cannot and must not be used to date a whole villa or all of its floors. Just as any modern householder makes piecemeal changes to his property over a long period of time, so in antiquity periodic 'home improvements' were inevitable (cf. here p. 105).

One of the most intriguing aspects to emerge from this study is that the mosaics of Aquitania belong almost

in their entirety to a period not earlier than the beginning of the fourth century: apart from some largely uninteresting scraps from the late first / early second century, which come mostly from the towns, the entire mosaic series in the portion of Aquitania covered by the two fascicules to date seems to begin not long after 300. How long did this extraordinary flowering last? The vast majority of the mosaics are here assigned to the 'IV^e siècle', with a high proportion accompanied by a precautionary (and very necessary) question mark; but some of the pavements of the Saint-Sever villa (nos. 219–225) are dated to the fifth century, as are those of Sarbazan (nos. 249–254), a mosaic at Montréal (no. 303) and one at Orbessan (no. 345), while somewhat surprisingly nos. 176 and 178–180 (the Sorde – l'Abbaye villa) are suggested as 'VI^e, peut-être VII^e siècle?' (pp. 44; 49). The problem here is that such a 'linear' stylistic dating relies on the deceptively simple but doubtless often erroneous premise that the more amateur or incompetent a mosaic appears to be, the later it must be. One has only however to turn to some of the really big mosaic projects of antiquity, such as the great mansion of Piazza Armerina in Sicily, to see how some very mediocre examples of figure drawing lie side by side with superlative mosaic work which is unlikely to be other than contemporary. In the absence of documentary or other evidence it is hard to see how else to proceed other than by stylistic analysis, yet it is an approach which, it is always as well to recall, is inevitably fraught with dangers. In any case we may as well frankly admit that the timescale we are playing with in the Aquitanian corpus is unknown to us. If the vast majority of the pavements in the two fascicules which have appeared to date are really to be compressed within the fourth century (?300 floors), then the mosaic flowering of Aquitania was a very remarkable phenomenon indeed.

This in turn raises wider questions of the Aquitanian historical, economic and social background, about which Balmelle has disappointingly little to say. (It has been well remarked, in a review of another mosaic corpus, that the catalogue is a species of mosaic study which 'risks cutting itself off from the mainstream of humanistic enquiry', thus missing 'the opportunity to contribute to our knowledge of the human beings who commissioned mosaics and lived with them' [J. R. CLARKE, *Am. Journal Arch.* 92, 1988, 620 f., on M. DONDERER, *Die Chronologie der röm. Mosaiken in Venetien und Istrien*, 1986]). For Aquitania in the late Empire we have, unusually, precious literary testimony – the poems of Ausonius for the fourth century, the poetry and especially the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris for the fifth. Both give an invaluable insight into the life-style of villa-owners in south-west Gaul in the late Empire. As the late Sir Samuel Dill put it, in his still useful *Roman Society in the last century of the Western Empire* (1925, S. 167), 'in the poems of Ausonius Aquitaine is a land of peace and plenty, of vineyards and yellow cornfields, and palatial country seats'. And here is Salvian writing in the fifth century: 'nobody doubts that the Aquitani and the Nine Peoples (Novempopolana) possessed the best part of all Gaul. It is a land productive in its fertility and not only fertility but pleasantness, beauty and luxury, which are sometimes preferred to fertility . . . Truly the holders and masters of the land seem to have possessed not so much a portion of soil as an image of paradise' (gub. 7). Even allowing for literary exaggeration, the picture that emerges is of a remarkably settled and productive land; and the same comfortable life-style is apparent from the pages of Sidonius Apollinaris who, although he lived further north, outside the area covered by Aquitaine 1 and 2, frequently visited friends on rich estates further south. Yet after 418 Novempopolana was an area settled by Visigoths (gub. 7, 7), and although the literary sources suggest friction between the pro- and anti-Roman factions in the ensuing years, we hear little of it in the letters of Sidonius. In any case the Visigothic optimates did not necessarily dispossess existing landlords: they too adopted Roman living standards and may well themselves have become customers for the mosaic officinae (cf. E. JAMES, *The Merovingian Archaeology of SW Gaul* [1977] 5–7). So the overall picture that we have of south west Gaul in the fifth century suggests that conditions there were for the most part settled and that life on the great estates continued much as it had done throughout the fourth century (cf. especially C. E. STEVENS, *Sidonius Apollinaris and his Age* [1933] 73–83). The settlement of 418, the first such official settlement of barbarians in southern Gaul, may well have seemed calamitous to historians of the period; but there was no marked cultural or economic break with what had gone before. One corollary of this is that mosaic officinae are unlikely to have suddenly gone out of business after 418: there were still plenty of patrons around, and no reason why the demand for mosaic floors should not have remained substantial throughout much of the fifth century. I therefore have no difficulty in accepting the few fifth-century dates tentatively put forward by Balmelle; indeed one wonders whether some other floors should be slightly downdated and placed firmly in the fifth century. Possible candidates include pavements at Sorde – l'Abbaye (nos. 172, 174–175), at the villa of Saint-Sever (nos. 208–214, but I am not convinced that these are necessarily earlier than 215–225: both the overall

schema and the treatment of the individual motifs in 208A and 222, for example, are very closely comparable; contrast the less heavy-handed, probably earlier, treatment of the same composition at Montréal Séviac, no. 291B), at Éauze (nos. 270 and 277), at the villa of Montréal Séviac (nos. 302 and 308; for the latter in any case Balmelle argues for a 'datation très basse'), at Montréal Le Glésia (no. 311, the Oceanus mosaic with a very debased dolphin border), and the floors also at Hure (nos. 453–60). Although such downdating can only be very tentatively proposed on stylistic grounds, the placing of more mosaics in the fifth century, and the consequent stretching of the Aquitanian mosaic chronology, not only makes the apparent fourth-century mosaic effervescence slightly less striking, but also lends credence to the 'permanence remarquable de la romanité dans la Gaule du Sud-Ouest au cours du V^e siècle' on which Balmelle rightly but only briefly comments in her introduction (p. 19). The truth is that until more accurate chronological details are available, with full publication of deposits sealed beneath the mosaics, the chronology of mosaics in Aquitania, as alas in many other parts of the Empire, must remain at best informed guesswork.

Another question that this volume raises, one that deserved at least a brief airing in the introduction, is why we have this extraordinary late flowering of villa mosaics in central and southern Aquitania. As Balmelle rightly observes (p. 12), mosaics for the High Empire are few and far between; and indeed from c. 150 to 300 there is a total lacuna. The number of sites explored is such that the absence cannot be explained away as merely accidental. Yet Aquitania did not suddenly become fertile in the early fourth century: why then are there apparently no early rich villas? It might be tempting to suggest, in view of the fact that the mosaic series begins a generation or so after the traumatic events that wrecked villa life in north-east Gaul and the Germanies, that estates were bought up in Aquitania by emigrés from further north, as used once to be believed to explain the comparable boom in the Romano-British countryside at the same time (e.g. A. L. F. RIVET, ed., *The Villa in Roman Britain* [1969] 114, 208–209, neatly answered by J. T. SMITH, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 4, 1985, 341–351); but in a world where the vast majority of wealth was held in land, *domini* further north would have found themselves with unsaleable assets and untransferable capital after the troubles of the 250s to 270s. A more plausible explanation is a decline in the taste for urban living, brought about largely by increasing tax-burdens on the town-councillor class (*curiales*) in late antiquity, and the consequent desire when legally possible to escape to their country estates, a phenomenon which has been recognized in other parts of the Roman Empire (A. H. M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire* [1964] 737–763). Certainly some of the mosaics from urban contexts date to the fourth century (e.g. Auch, nos. 357–360, 377; Dax, nos. 187, 189, 194–195), so absolute urban decline in Novempopulana in the late Empire cannot be postulated; but the relationship between the prosperity of rural districts and the situation in the towns is one that needs to be urgently addressed in future archaeological work.

One other striking aspect of the Aquitanian mosaics treated so far is the overwhelming predominance of geometrical, floral and vegetal patterns, and the virtual total exclusion of figured floors. If we do not include the simple bird or fish which play a subsidiary role in the compartments or borders of some mosaics in this fascicule (nos. 175, 220A–B, 253, 259, 345 and 448), the only figured floors are a Dionysus mosaic (no. 234) and two marine scenes (nos. 239 and 255), all now lost, and a very rough-and-ready attempt at a head of Oceanus (no. 311). Yet in villas such as Montmaurin and Valentine (both treated in the first fascicule) we have some of the largest late Roman villas known in the entire Roman Empire (of. R. J. A. WILSON, *Piazza Armerina* [1983] 80–85); and the verse tombstone of Nymphius from the latter, probably at some stage the villa's *dominus*, gives another insight into the important role played by the great landed estate owner in this part of Gaul – as member of the provincial council, as donor of amphitheatre displays (*munera*), as much-loved patron with a wide clientela (CIL XIII 128). Yet if he or his fellow *domini* showed an interest in having more ambitious figured mosaic floors in their country mansions (cost is hardly likely to have been a prohibitive factor), we see little sign of it: it looks as if local *officinae*, perhaps aware of their own limitations, simply did not have figured scenes on offer to their customers, preferring instead to stick to their well-tried, more limited repertory. Presumably if *domini* had the right contacts they could have called on mosaicists from further afield, from Spain perhaps or even Africa, but there is no sign in Aquitania that they ever did. There is remarkably little evidence here, in fact, of influence from, or contact with, the ideas of Spanish mosaicists, although more may become clearer when the relevant fascicules of the Spanish corpus covering provinces bordering the Pyrenees becomes available. African influence is more apparent, not only in individual designs such as the 'spiked' laurel wreath border (e.g. 267, 292, 295, 298; cf. H. P. L'ORANGE, *Acta ad Arch. et Artium Hist. Pertinentia* 2, 1965, 72–74), but also in overall compositions: the pin cushion design, invented in Italy and first tried in polychrome by mosaicists in the El Djem

area in the second half of the second century (G. C. PICARD, *Antiquités Africaines* 2, 1968, 115–135), for example, makes a rare Gaulish appearance here (no. 313); and it is also interesting to find employed the device of intersecting acanthus leaf circles (no. 303, from Montréal Séviac), which does not appear in Africa apparently before the fourth century and later spreads to Sicily and Italy (R. J. A. WILSON, *Am. Journal Arch.* 86, 1982, 423 f.). The African parallels are carefully cited by Balmelle in the small print at the end of the relevant mosaic entry, but although no example is close enough to the parent motif to warrant the hypothesis of African hands at work in Aquitania, the diffusion of such African-inspired mosaic motifs and possible mechanisms for their diffusion deserve discussion in the Introduction.

That wider questions of this nature can be posed at all in relation to the Aquitanian mosaics can only now become possible because Balmelle has assembled with meticulous care all the relevant evidence. In so doing she has not only written a new chapter in the history of ancient mosaic, she has also made a major contribution to our understanding of the social and economic history of Roman Aquitania, for which she deserves warm congratulations. It is with a sense of keen anticipation that we now look forward to her third fascicule, on the Aquitanian mosaics north of the Dordogne.

Bonn / Dublin

Roger J. A. Wilson