

**Mimicking 'marble' in Roman mosaics in Conímbriga  
(Condeixa-a-Velha – Portugal) discovered between 1938 and 1941 in the time  
of Professor Vergílio Correia (1888-1944): a reflection**

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Ancient civilisations freely used ornamental stone to decorate both monumental public buildings and their more elegant residences, and they did so with grandeur and technical skill. Marble and other similar stone are rare in nature. Furthermore, since it is costly to extract and transport decorative stone it was regarded as a luxury product. This technical expertise in the embellishment of buildings can be seen in Conímbriga, for example, *in situ*, in the centre of the *triclinium* of the House of Cantaber, discovered in the time of Professor Vergílio Correia<sup>1</sup> between 1930 and 1934<sup>2</sup> and *ex situ*, in the remains found in the *forum* between 1964 and 1969<sup>3</sup> (**Figure 1**).

The craftsmen and artists who designed and executed the *crustae marmoriae* in the workshops of Conímbriga endowed the city with an authentic school of arts. This is borne out by the scrupulous choice of materials, the refined finish of the pieces and the skilful layout of the spaces to be decorated. Further proof can be found in the decorative stone panels preserved *in situ*, such as the panel inlaid in the mosaic in the centre of the *triclinium* in the House of Cantaber, Zone C<sup>4</sup> (**Figure 2**), and in the temple of the Flavian *forum*, under the project to extend the Augustan *forum* (**Figure 1**)<sup>5</sup>. And still more examples can be seen in the

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<sup>1</sup>It was Vergílio Correia who discovered 76 of the 93 known Roman mosaic floors in Conímbriga, which are preserved *in situ* and on view to the public and scholars. These 76 floors were all found between 1930 and 1941, with 40 being in the House of Fountains (OLEIRO, 1992 = CMRP, I p. 37-82, no. 19 1.25; p. 83-141, no. 2 to 16), 12 in the House of the Swastika (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 32-41, no. 17.1 to 24.1), 4 in the House of Skeletons (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 44-47, no. 25 to 28), and 24 in the House of Cantaber (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 50-68, no. 29-31, 33-53). In 1899 António Augusto Gonçalves (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 51, no. 32; p. 84, no. 60; p. 85, no. 61; p. 86, no. 62), had coordinated excavations that had revealed 4 mosaic floors. These were taken to the Museu do Instituto de Coimbra and later, in 1911, to the Machado de Castro National Museum (they came back to Conímbriga when the Monographic Museum was built, in 1962).

In the 1950s, the General Directorate of National Buildings and Monuments (DGEMN) was responsible for the discovery of 4 more mosaic floors in the House of the Trident and the Sword (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 72-74, no. 54-56). And then, between 1964-1971, Jorge de Alarcão and Robert Étienne led a joint Portuguese-French team in excavations that unearthed a further 5 floors (OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 78-79, no. 58, 59, Fragmento A and B; p. 82, Fragmento C).

Over 254 sites in Portugal with Roman mosaics have been inventoried (ABRAÇOS, 2005, p. 15).

A considerable part of the bibliography on Vergílio Correia has been referenced in works coordinated by Maria Teresa Pinto Mendes (1970), Jorge de Alarcão (1972, 1979) and João Manuel Bairrão Oleiro (1973, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>CORREIA, 1935, 16 - page brochure, updated and re-edited in 1936 and 1938. Idem, 1941, p. 263. OLEIRO; MOUTINHO ALARCÃO; ALARCÃO, 1963, p. 25. CORREIA, 2001, p. 108, Sala C 20. PESSOA; RODRIGO, 2005, p. 214-217, p. 260-261. OLIVEIRA, 2005, p. 58, no. 40.

<sup>3</sup>ALARCÃO; ETIENNE, *et alii*, 1977, p. 27-39, 87-133. TAVARES, 1977, p. 271-273. ALARCÃO; ETIENNE, *et alii*, 1979, p. 241-242.

<sup>4</sup>CORREIA, 2001, p. 108, Room C 20.

<sup>5</sup>TAVARES, 1977, p. 275-276. ALARCÃO; ETIENNE, *et alii*, 1977, p. 83-111.

permanent exhibition of the Conímbriga Museum, through an ensemble containing every kind of stone-type material capable of being cut and polished, used in ornamental stone panels discovered here<sup>6</sup>.

This is mentioned because we want to stress that not only are bichrome and polychrome stone artefacts, sometimes in the form of inlaid panels, widespread in Conímbriga<sup>7</sup>, but so, too, are imitations of them<sup>8</sup>. Interesting examples of imitation ornamental stone incorporated into wall paintings have survived to the present day, related to the first Pompeian style, which, according to Vitruvius<sup>9</sup>, is characterised by mimicking *opus sectile*. They were incorporated into a mosaic floor, too, as we shall see later. Painting was, in fact, the most significant artistic expression of stonework in the context of mimicry. It was very useful for painting walls that should have been made of stone, but the high cost made this impractical. The same has happened in quite recent times<sup>10</sup> and it even happens today. There are several examples of painting in imitation of 'marble' in Conímbriga. They are 'composed of straight, curved or wavy veins, alone in a field or added to other geometric forms such as circles, ovals, ovoids, etc.' in the House of Cantaber, the House of Fountains<sup>11</sup> and in a mosaic in the House of Skeletons (**Figures 3, 4, 5**). This is the *leitmotiv* of this reflection.

Translation: Jean Ann Burrows

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<sup>6</sup>ALARCÃO; PONTE, 1994, p. 25, 31, 88, 89, no. 216, Inventário 67.484; p. 101, no. 282, 1-6.

<sup>7</sup>TAVARES, 1977, p. 271-273. CORREIA, 2001, p. 108, C 20.

We find embedded marble panels and bas-reliefs used as wall coverings in the territory of the *ciuitas* of Conímbriga (PESSOA, 2005, p. 365, Fig. 1), in the palace of the Roman *Villa* of Rabaçal (PESSOA; RODRIGO; SANTOS, 2004, p. 19-43, no. 1-67. LIMA; VILARIGUES, 2011, p. 66-68).

<sup>8</sup>The general layout of the composition of wall painting that mimics *opus sectile*, in Sala 29, House of Fountains, in Conímbriga, is practically the same for all the panels on the four walls: a rectangle delimiting an inner area on which rest horizontal lozenges, sometimes extended in other smaller interiors with a longer vertical axis. These are marbleised imitations composed of straight, curved and wavy veins, isolated in a field or used to supplement other geometric shapes such as circles, ovals, etc. (Pedroso, 1992 = CMRP, I, 1, p. 161, Est. 71.1). From simple shapes, inscribed in rectangular panels, with strongly linear characteristics that were in evidence in the 1st century (Idem, p. 164, Notes 11, 12, 13) to the examples found (Idem, Notes 14, 15, 16) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, the variety is huge and the use constant (Idem).

<sup>9</sup>MACIEL, 2006, *Vitrúvio – Tratado de Arquitectura: Tradução do Latim, Introdução e Notas*, p. 272, 7. 5. 1. "... In fact, painting shows us an image of what is or can be, ... Thus the Ancients who established the principles of finishes first imitated the varieties and applications of marble panels and then explored various possibilities of cornices, mouldings and separating bands". Note 69 – When referring to the pictorial imitation of marble panels, the author evokes the first Pompeian style.

<sup>10</sup>COUTINHO, 2010, p. 446.

<sup>11</sup>PEDROSO, 1992, in OLEIRO, 1992, *Corpus dos Mosaicos Romanos de Portugal* = CMRP, I, 1, Appendix II, p. 164, Pl. 71.1. SALES, 2006, p. 79-81. The decorative paintwork in the Roman *Villa* of Caldelas (Tomar-*Sellium*) also has remarkable examples of faux marble (FELIX; BARBARA; PEDROSO; PONTE, 1992, p. 177). We find an interesting variation on the topic of painting and 'marble' wall covering in the decoration of some fragments of bas reliefs friezes of the wainscoting in Estremoz - Vila Viçosa marble, that embellish the *peristylum* and *tridinium* of the Roman palace of Rabaçal, Penela. Here, the technique involves filling the flat, background, parts of the pattern of motifs with paste of a contrasting colour, sometimes red (inside the central band) and sometimes black (parallel bands of chequered squares) (PESSOA; RODRIGO; SANTOS, 2004, p. 29, no. 30).



Figure 1. **General map of Conímbriga** Location of Zone B (Alarcão; Madeira, 2010, p. 8, Print 1). The blue arrow indicates the area where the House of Skeletons was found, Zone B, between 1938 and 1941. Author: José Luís Madeira. 2010

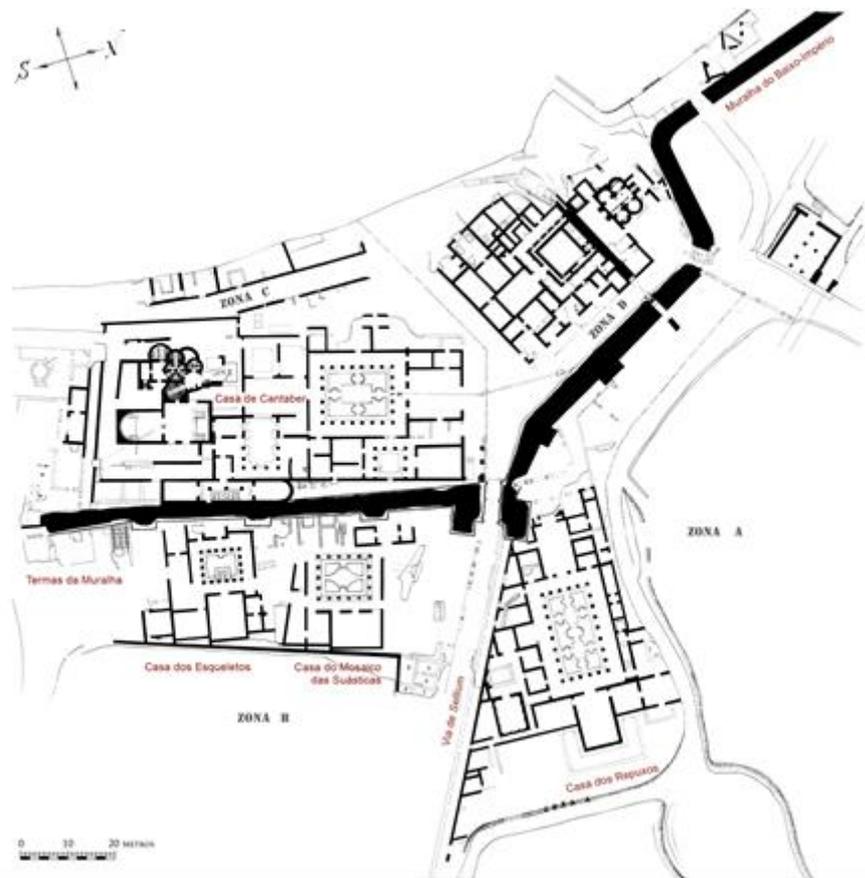


Figure 2. **Map of Zone B, in Conímbriga.** Location of the *triclinium*, B 21 (blue arrow), in the House of Skeletons, and the *triclinium*, C 20 (green arrow), in the House of Cantaber (Alarcão; Madeira, 2010, p. 10, Print 2). Author: José Luís Madeira. 2010



Figure 3. Photograph of the central panel of the mosaic in the *triclinium*, in the House of Skeletons, Conímbriga Panels 1, 2, 3. Author: Danilo Pavone. 2005

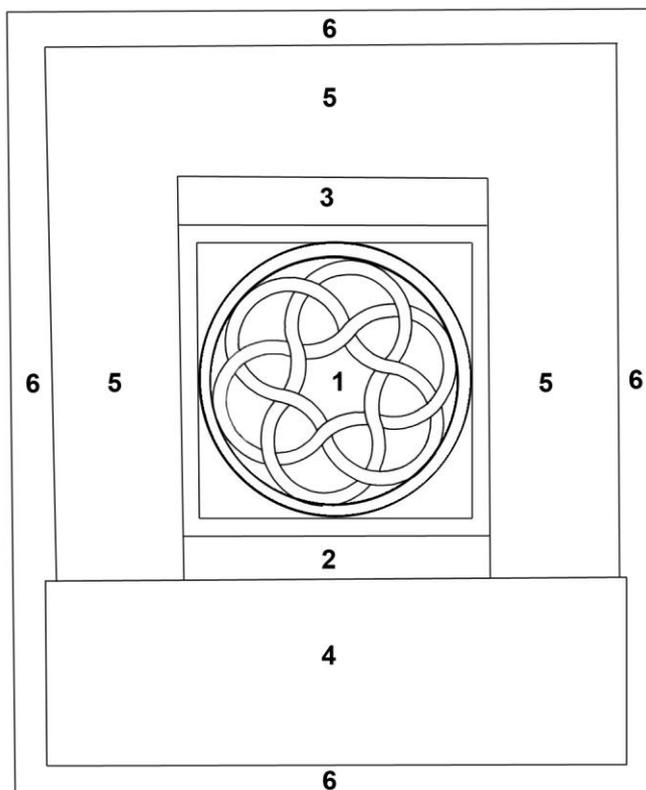


Figure 4. **Drawing of the scheme of the panels of the mosaic in the *triclinium*, House of Skeletons, Conímbriga** Entrance panel (4), central panel (1, 2, 3), area for the *lecti* (5), and outer border (6). Record and computerisation: José Augusto Alves Dias. 2013



Figure 5. **Black and white drawing. Graphic reconstruction of the composition, motifs and gaps.** General layout of the gaps in the mosaic floor of the *triclinium*. Record and computerisation: Ana Ravara Mendes. 2013