READING MUSEUM SERVICE

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ROMAN MOSAICS AH 59

Mosaics are known to exist in Ancient Greece from as far back as the sixth century BC.

Mosaics in Britain developed shortly after the invasion of the island by Rome. It is thought that mosaic flooring was being laid two decades after the invasion of AD 43. At first, the designs of the mosaics followed traditional Roman styles, incorporating patterns and images seen throughout the Empire. However, over the centuries following the Roman occupation, mosaics were created which were distinctly Romano-British.

Mosaics are made up of *tesserae*. *Tesserae* are small pieces of stone or tile which have been cut into squares in order to fit together to create the design. They can vary in their size. Larger *tesserae* were used in the bigger mosaics which did not contain a complicated design, or were used as a surround to the central image. Smaller *tesserae* were sometimes used for the detail in a complicated design - representations of people, animals or objects. With Romano-British mosaics, the *tesserae* were normally produced from local stone with the major colours being red, black, white and blue.



Above: A mosaic floor from Silchester, on display in the Museum of Reading.

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This is a piece of plain white mosaic from North Leigh Villa in Oxfordshire. The *tesserae* are made from marble, which is not commonly used to make white *tesserae*. Some of the original Roman mortar and cement remain on the back of this piece. If you look closely in one corner, you may be able to see where some modern conservation work has taken place.



This piece is taken from a mosaic found in London. It is a very striking fragment which shows some of the bright colours which were used. The way the *tesserae* are positioned seems to indicate that this is part of a design called a duplex knot. This piece appears to have had conservation work done on it - it is no longer embedded in its original mortar and the *tesserae* have been ground down to give a highly polished effect.



Another section from a plain white mosaic. Its place of origin unsure. If we compare it to the other white mosaic fragment in this box, we can see that, in this case, the *tesserae* are smaller and considerably less deep. These smaller pieces offer more scope for the mosaic maker to compact the pattern, making it more attractive to the eye. This piece has its original mortar, which is made from a mixture of materials. Bits of chalk, tile and stone have been added to the basic mixture. This created a more durable and water-resistant material. Like the fragment from London, this mosaic section has been ground down in more recent times to make the surface even and shiny.



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This final piece of mosaic is another example of the popular duplex knot design, this time using the three colours of white, red and blue. It is finely made - the *tesserae* are small and are very neatly arranged.



A selection of seven tesserae from one of the mosaics uncovered at Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester).





Left: A drawing of a mosaic floor from Silchester. The floor itself is on display in Stratfield Saye House.

Activity

The two modern tiles supplied have been cut up, each into six irregular parts. Once separated, the bits can be mixed together in order for the pupils to fit them back together to make their own mosaic.