

The Mosaics of Ancient Antioch

The floor mosaics in this courtyard reflect ancient Antioch and neighboring Daphne's position at a global crossroads between Asia and the Mediterranean Sea. Many of these fragments come from reception areas or dining rooms—social spaces where cosmopolitan elites of the 1st through 6th centuries displayed their wealth, culture, and artistic preferences.

Located in the Hatay Region of present-day Türkiye, Antioch served as a major commercial and military hub that, by the 1st century, was on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. It included a diverse population of Syrians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs, as well as travelers from many lands. Home to a large and long-standing Jewish community, Antioch also played a pivotal role in early Christianity.

Local art patrons favored patterns and subjects that originated in the Greek Hellenistic period (323–33 BCE) and remained popular well into the early Byzantine period (330–700s CE). In the 5th century, Antioch's mosaicists introduced motifs inspired by the art from the Iranian Plateau, attesting to the interconnectedness of the Turko-Syrian coast and central Asia.

Whereas curators and art historians have historically treated Antioch from a Eurocentric perspective—one that privileges the Greco-Roman tradition—this installation offers a more global understanding of the ancient city's art and artists and highlights the influence of western Asia and northeastern Africa on these magnificent artworks.

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Geometric Designs

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche”,
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.131

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting

A Dancing Maenad

2nd century

Sector 10-N, "Atrium House," Antakya (Antioch), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1933.52.1

Unidentified Artists

Fragment of floor mosaic depicting a dancing satyr

2nd century

Sector 10-N, "Atrium House," Antakya (Antioch), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, 1933.52.2

Garments and hair whirling from their frenzied dancing, the half-man, half-goat satyr and the maenad, a female devotee of the Greek god of wine, Dionysos, mirror each other's movements. Dance played an important role in Dionysiac rites, and these figures originally flanked a mosaic panel showing Dionysos' triumph over the demi-god Herakles in a drinking contest. Depictions of satyrs and maenads often decorated spaces and objects involved in the symposium, a ritualized drinking event practiced by both Greeks and Romans in which participants showed off their sophistication and culture.

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Decorated Wall

5th century

“House of Menander,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Marble

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1940.170a

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting

Geometric Designs

3rd century

Sector S-18-K, “House of the Drinking Contest,” Çevlik
(Seleucia Pieria), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1940.166e

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting

Beribboned Parrots

5th–6th century

Sector DH 27-0, “House of the Beribboned Parrots,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

The parrots’ fluttering ribbons attest to artistic exchanges between Antioch and the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), which was centered in modern-day Iran. They are characteristic features of the beribboned animal motif as it occurs on Sasanian seals, stucco, and silverwork. The mosaic’s overall design of repeating rows that alternate between facing left and facing right evokes the complex pattern weaves typical of drawloom silk, a luxury good that caravan traders moved from China across the Iranian Plateau to the Syrian coast.

Conservation Close-Up

BMA Objects Conservation Fellow Nicole Flam treated this mosaic in 2020. Dirt and grime covered the surface, and old repairs had left thick smears of plaster over cracked areas. Bare cement filled gaps in the design, and there were loose and missing stone cubes (tesserae).

Flam started by stabilizing and painstakingly cleaning the tesserae over several months. To preserve the artwork's visual cohesiveness, Flam then filled small losses with plaster, shaping and painting it to replicate surrounding tesserae. Flam also meticulously shaved, scraped, and reduced the patches of bare cement and filled them with tinted conservation-grade mortar. The conservation work on this mosaic reveals the luminosity and color range of the original stone tesserae.



BMA Objects Conservation Fellow Nicole Flam conserving this floor mosaic fragment on March 5, 2020

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Tethys In A Marine Background

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Aquatic animals, fishing scenes, and busts of the freshwater goddess Tethys and her husband, Oceanus, recall the abundant springs and pools for which the ancient city of Daphne was famous. The scene of the god Zeus in the form of a bull abducting Europa, a Phoenician princess, focuses on their journey across the Mediterranean to Crete.

Water themes dominated the floors of the House of the Boat of Psyche. The BMA has multiple mosaic panels from this site—many of which can be seen to your right. The building’s suite of dining rooms opened onto a portico and a water feature. Scholars debate whether the building was a grand villa or served as a dining and entertainment venue.

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.118



*A reconstructed floor plan of the “House of the Boat of Psyche.” Mosaic fragments cared for by the BMA are [can we give them borders – KT can OT/KF know which ones to highlight]. Image from Christine Kondoleon, *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City*, 2000.*

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Tethys And Oceanus

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.126

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic With Geometric Designs

5th century

House of Ge and the Seasons, Antakya (Antioch), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.148

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Dionysos

4th century

Sector DH-26-K/L, “House of the Triumph of Dionysos,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1938.711

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Intersecting Octagon

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.145

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Europa And The Bull

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.129

The Global Mediterranean

The ancient world was a globalized and deeply interconnected space, and the floor mosaics from the ancient cities of Antioch and neighboring Daphne attest to the cosmopolitan nature of the eastern Mediterranean. Grounded in the taste of the local elites, these artworks are made from material sourced as far away as Egypt and reference not only the Greek and Roman traditions that have historically been privileged by the Western world, but also Sasanian artworks from central Asia.

Antioch's mosaicists painstakingly pieced together hand-cut stone and glass cubes (tesserae) to form the floor mosaics found in this court. These artists were known across the ancient Mediterranean world for their remarkable skill. Although they did not typically sign their artworks, similarities between these mosaics and some found in modern-day Israel and Crete tell scholars that Antioch's mosaicists traveled widely, creating intricate works for public spaces and private homes.

The circulation of artists and artistic materials is merely one strand in a web of connections that brought states and societies from Africa, Asia, and Europe into contact with one another between the 1st and 6th centuries. Textiles, metals, and precious jewels came to the region from South Asia. Goods for religious and cultural ceremonies, like frankincense and myrrh, arrived from the Arabian Peninsula. And intellectuals, religious leaders, politicians, traders, and armies crisscrossed the continents to spread their ideas, conquer territory, and amass wealth.

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Peddler Of Erotes

3rd century

Sector II-U, “House of the Peddler of Erotes,” Antakya
(Antioch), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Water shimmers and wings glint thanks to the vibrant blue and iridescent green glass embedded in this floor mosaic. The use of these reflective, colored tesserae makes the natural world inhabited by these winged gods seem lush and idyllic. In contrast, the peddler—the man capturing and caging these frolicking Erotes—is depicted in duller, more muted limestone.

Stone, the most common element in these mosaics, was quarried locally, perhaps no more than a few miles from the city. Making glass, however, required mineral compounds shipped from as far away as Egypt.

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Scrolling Vine And Birds

6th century

Sector DH-28-O, “House of the Bird Rinceau,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.135

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Opora, Agros, And Oinos At Dinner

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, glass, lime mortar

Red labels identify these figures as personifications of Opora (Harvest) at left, Agros (Field) in the center, and Oinos (Wine) at right. The cities of Antioch and Daphne were in an agriculturally rich valley called the Amuq Plain, and wealthy citizens of this region frequently gathered for feasts and wine parties. Just as in the image, these banqueters reclined on couches arranged around three sides of a central, and oftentimes figurative, mosaic. This fragment came from one of at least four dining spaces in a structure known as the “House of the Boat of Psyche.”

Unidentified artists

Fragment of floor mosaic depicting a lion and a humped ox

5th century

Sector DK-13-B, “Hall of Philia,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

The Greek word *philia* (friendship) on the tree’s trunk refers to an abstract concept that, by the 5th century, signified an expansive range of social relationships ranging from the familial to the political. The pairing of predator and prey in relaxed postures connects the idea of *philia* to a peaceable society, and scholars have connected the motif both to Greco-Roman ideas of a golden age and to Christian descriptions of paradise. The pavement fragment is one of four in the BMA’s collection which comes from the hall of an unidentified and only partly excavated building in Daphne. Look for others in the stairwell next to the Cone Wing.

The Archaeology of Antioch

These floor mosaics came to Baltimore in the aftermath of World War I (1914–1918), when Europe’s occupation of western Asia created favorable conditions for European and American archaeological activity in the region.

In 1932, Princeton University—supported by the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Louvre, and the Worcester Art Museum and with the approval of the Syrian Antiquities Service— assembled an international team of archaeologists to excavate in and around Antakya and Harbiye. These researchers were interested in uncovering the remains of ancient Antioch and neighboring Daphne, cities that played pivotal roles in the late Roman and early Byzantine Empires. Then administered by the French on behalf of the League of Nations, these cities became part of Türkiye in June 1939, prompting the expedition to end its operations because of that nation’s strict laws governing the export of antiquities.

At the BMA, Board Member Robert Garrett championed the Museum’s participation in the project. Following a practice known as *partage*, archaeologists divided ownership of the excavated artifacts between the local archaeological museum and the foreign institutions sponsoring the excavation. Today, half of the excavated mosaics can be found in the Hatay Archaeology Museum in Türkiye, with the rest being found in museums around the world. The BMA is fortunate to be one of the few institutions in the United States that cares for artworks from these excavations, holding 34 mosaic fragments as well as 122 additional objects in its collection.



Barbari Mahmud Isa and William Gad Gabriel—foreman and supervisor, respectively, of the Antioch mosaic excavation crew—peel away muslin facing cloth from the Opora, Agros, and Oinos mosaic after removal from the House of the Boat of Psyche on August 24, 1934. Courtesy of Antioch Expedition Archives, Visual Resources Collection, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Star Made Of Lozenge Shapes

3rd century

Sector DH-23/24-M/N, “House of the Boat of Psyche”,
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.144

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Tigress And A Boar

5th century

Sector DK-13-B, “Hall of Philia,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.120

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Birds And Crops

5th century

Sector 10-Q, “House of Polyphemus,” Harbiye (Daphne),
Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.136

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Striding Lion, Birds, And Crops

5th century

Sector 10-Q, “House of Polyphemus,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

A life-sized lion strides across a diamond trellis pattern filled with fish, birds, and fruits. For the original viewers of this mosaic, the lion might have represented power or protection, while the imagery of nature’s bounty—an extremely popular theme in both clothing and home décor of the 5th and 6th centuries—was invested with the power to attract wealth and good fortune.

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.139



The full floor mosaic at the excavation site on May 15, 1935. Courtesy of Antioch Expedition Archives, Visual Resources Collection, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Male Figure

5th century

Sector DY-17/18-H/J, "Villa at Yakto," Harbiye (Daphne),
Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.143

Unidentified Artists

Border Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Geometric Patterns

5th century

Sector DK-13-B, “Hall of Philia,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.132

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Scrolling Vine And Birds

6th century

Sector DH-28-O, “House of the Bird Rinceau,”
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Spilling out of an oval-shaped jar (amphora) used to transport wine, a grape vine circles around birds and mammals. This type of motif is ubiquitous in mosaic pavements of the 6th century, appearing across religious and secular contexts across western Asia.

Broadly fashionable in the ancient world, the design held different meanings across diverse faiths. Wine played an important role to followers of the god Dionysos and in Roman and Sasanian banqueting traditions. In a Jewish synagogue, especially when associated with the menorah and ethrog, a citrus fruit, the motif might suggest God’s vineyard. In Christian church pavements, the design could resonate with scriptural passages that compared Jesus to the vine.

A Material History of Antioch's Mosaics

Antioch's mosaicists used cut cubes (tesserae) of locally sourced stone for the reds, mauves, greys, blacks, whites, yellows, and dark greens in their mosaics. They added glass tesserae to expand their color palette and create luminescent effects. Materials analysis indicates the glass contains natron, a compound of sodium salts imported from Egypt.

Renovations, earthquakes, rebuilding, and urban development contributed to burying the mosaics over time. Soil encrusted the mosaic surfaces and caused the glass tesserae to deteriorate. Before lifting the pavements, archaeologists glued cloth to the surface of the mosaics to keep tesserae in place and cut each floor into smaller pieces. To stabilize each mosaic for transport, archaeologists replaced its original bedding material with reinforced lime mortar and filled in surface gaps with cement. Early museum treatments sometimes included painting this cement to make it blend in with the original elements.

Today, conservators continue to work to clean and stabilize the mosaics. They choose from varied approaches to address losses in the mosaics' designs, adapting their treatment to each artwork's individual circumstance. The mosaic fragment depicting beribboned parrots, found on the wall to your right, shows an example of an adaptive conservation technique.

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting Stars And Squares

3rd century

Sector DH-25-L, Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Knots and eyes appear as a repeating motif within a complex pattern of stars, squares, and rectangles. These designs were meant to entrap and deflect the evil eye, a form of envy that could cause misfortune. Roman and Byzantine patrons often worked protective devices into thresholds, in the same way that they used imagery of nature's bounty to bring prosperity and good fortune.

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.146

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of Floor Mosaic Depicting A Procession Of Sea Gods And Creatures

2nd century

Sector DH-26-K/L, "House of the Triumph of Dionysus,"
Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Look closely at this energetic procession of sea gods and creatures and you will see figures, such as the winged god on the right, depicted in paint rather than stone or glass. These details were added during the mid-20th century in an attempt to recreate missing tesserae. Today, conservators use different strategies for dealing with areas of loss in mosaics to both repair the works and to clarify what material is original. Although we cannot know that the winged god on the right was present in the original mosaic, the bearded ichthyocentaur with the head and torso of a man and the fins of a fish, the hippocamp (winged horse), and nereid (sea nymph) were created by 2nd-century mosaicists.

Antioch Subscription Fund, 1937.123



Photograph of this floor mosaic immediately after its excavation on August 15, 1935. Courtesy of Antioch Expedition Archives, Visual Resources Collection, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of A Floor Mosaic Depicting A Leopard And A Goat

5th century

Sector DK-13-B, “Hall of Philia,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.121

Unidentified Artists

Fragment Of A Floor Mosaic Depicting A Lioness, A Stag, And A Bear

5th century

Sector DK-13-B, “Hall of Philia,” Harbiye (Daphne), Türkiye

Stone, lime mortar

Antioch Subscription Fund, BMA 1937.122