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Mosaics in Roman Britain: Stories in Stone. By P. Witts. Tempus, Stroud, 2005. Pp. 192, illus. Price: £17.99. ISBN 978 0 7524 3421 6.

In the preface to her volume on Romano-British mosaics, Patricia Witts pays tribute to the ‘custodians of our tessellated heritage’ (13), emphasising the scattered, disparate nature of her material and the need for an accessible handbook to illustrate and explain the many significant works displayed on sites and in museums, held in storage, reburied following excavation, or sadly lost and known to us only through earlier watercolours and sketches. In this sense, her book is a welcome resource for both scholars and laypeople with an interest in Romano-British art; it is affordable and handsomely illustrated, with clear explanations of relevant iconography, a glossary of technical terms, a gazetteer of relevant sites and museums, and a guide to further reading. It is not, however, a comprehensive catalogue along the lines of David Neal and Stephen Cosh’s four-volume reference guide *Roman Mosaics of Britain*. As W.’s sub-title *Stories in Stone* implies, her primary interest is in figurative and narrative scenes. Most second-century mosaics are, therefore, omitted because of their emphasis on abstract patterning, and the book concentrates instead on fourth-century examples, paying special attention to rich iconographical programmes in villa complexes such as those at Brading, Frampton, Keynsham, Lullingstone, and Pitney.

Rather than focusing on each site in turn, W. arranges her subject-matter thematically, discussing around 200 mosaics in chapters devoted to ‘Love Stories’; ‘Stories of Heroes’; ‘Rome, Religion and Culture’; ‘Personifications of Time’; ‘Images of Protection and Prosperity’; ‘Gods’; ‘Goddesses’; and ‘The Arena and the Hunt’. She concludes with a short chapter on ‘The Messages in the Mosaics’, bringing together the various myths and symbols displayed in specific contexts in order to discuss their potential programmatic significance. While such an arrangement will be helpful for readers seeking to trace the popularity and significance of certain iconographical trends, it can occasionally seem rather arbitrary. The Low Ham mosaic depicting scenes from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for example, is discussed in the ‘Heroes’ chapter, rather than ‘Love Stories’, despite its prominent display of Venus, and the erotic quality of the scenes depicted. The thematic structure also means that discussions of mosaics displaying multiple narratives and personifications are fragmented, so that the Lullingstone Europa panel is discussed in ‘Love Stories’, the Bellerophon panel in ‘Heroes’, and the Seasons panels in ‘Personifications of Time’, with very little cross-referencing or clear labelling of illustrations to enable the reader to put the images together. Unfortunately this undermines one of W.’s primary aims — that her book should be a helpful reference guide on site — and means that information relating to archaeological context, regional patterns, and shifting iconographical trends is often minimised or excluded. Although W. draws significant parallels, where relevant, with mosaic iconography in Gaul, North Africa, Spain and the Middle East, she gives little information about cultural life in Roman Britain itself, or the potential significance of other representational media viewed and commissioned by British patrons, such as wall-painting, sculpture and ceramics. Thus, for example, the chariot-racing mosaics of Horkstow and Rudston seem to exist in curious isolation from the wealth of circus imagery on Romano-British artefacts such as coins and glassware, while her argument that no chariot-racing took place in Britain needs to be revised in the light of recent discoveries at Colchester.

The potential for cultural nuance or sophisticated allegory arising from iconographic juxtapositions is briefly discussed in the final chapter, but generally W. prefers to steer away from programmatic interpretations. Such restraint is understandable in the light of her wish to provide an accessible introductory handbook to mosaic iconography: each account is predominantly descriptive, and although she points the reader to varying identifications and interpretations of images where appropriate, she plays down the potential allegorical significance of Orphic or hunting iconography, for example, in favour of their more secular meaning as signs of ‘Classical culture’ or aristocratic aspiration. Yet the concluding interpretative passages, such as W.’s account of the cosmic allegories at Brading or the significance of time and transformation in the mythological panels at Keynsham, are both exciting and convincing, and one wishes that more analysis and argument had been incorporated into the main body of the text: considering her considerable knowledge and admiration for this rich body of material, W. does her subject a disservice by claiming that mosaics ‘were, after all, only floors’ (159). Ultimately, however, the clear descriptions, well-reproduced illustrations, and rich variety of iconography make this book an exciting introduction to the subject, and any frustrations raised by its structure or omissions only serve to arouse the reader’s curiosity and determination to learn more.

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