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# SYMBOLS OF POWER AND NATURE: THE ORPHEUS MOSAICS OF FOURTH CENTURY BRITAIN AND THEIR ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXTS

*Sarah Scott*

## INTRODUCTION —————

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of studying mosaics within the social/architectural context. As Preston Blier (1987: 1) has pointed out, architecture is invariably anthropocentric, being bound up with human activity, experience, and expression. Mosaics, as integral features of architectural design, must also be seen as socially constructed. The approach to be employed here will involve the identification and location of those sites possessing Orpheus mosaics, and an analysis of the nature of representation. A part of this analysis will consider similar representations in other contexts and media, in order to provide new insight into the possible significance of Orpheus within fourth century Britain. The final part of the discussion will concentrate on the social/architectural contexts of the pavements, and an attempt will be made to explain the evidence in the light of this.

## THE DATA —————

Before carrying out any kind of analysis it is necessary to identify and locate representations of Orpheus on floor mosaics, and to place them within some kind of chronological framework. It will be useful to divide the

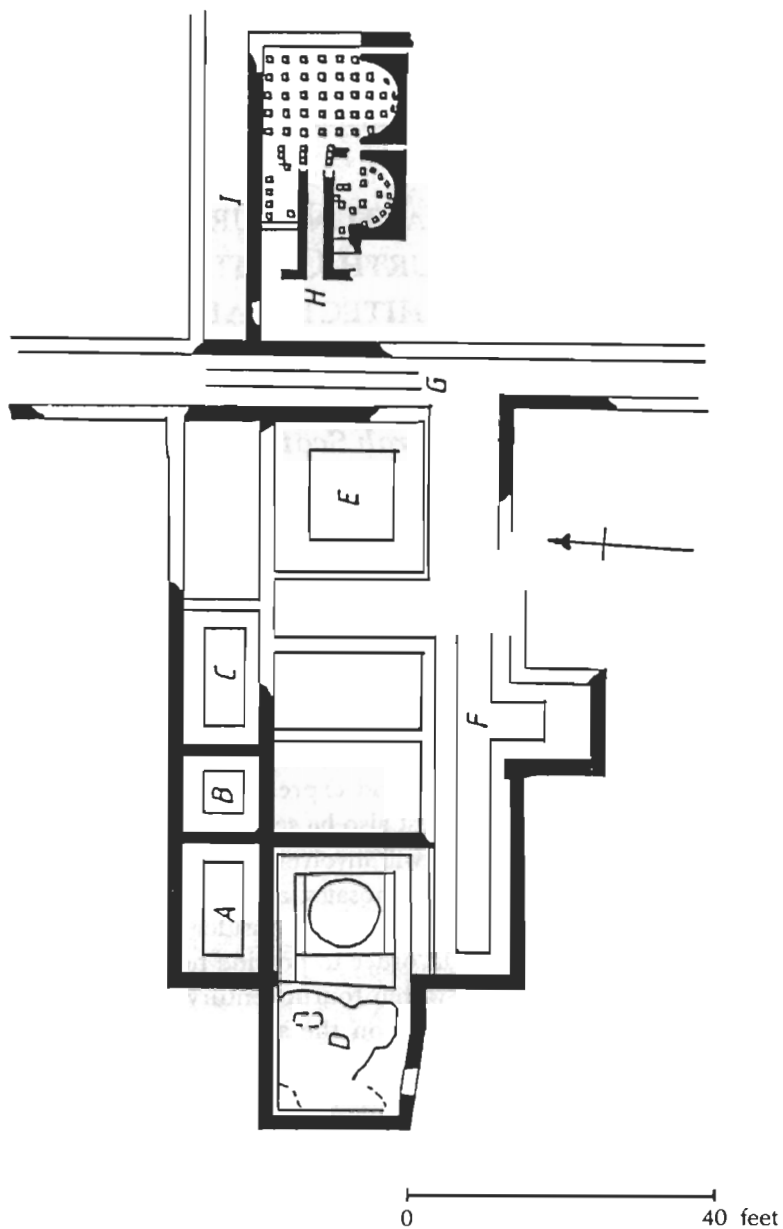


Figure 8.1. Rooms with mosaics at Withington villa  
(corresponding mosaics in Figure 8.2) (after Lysons 1817).

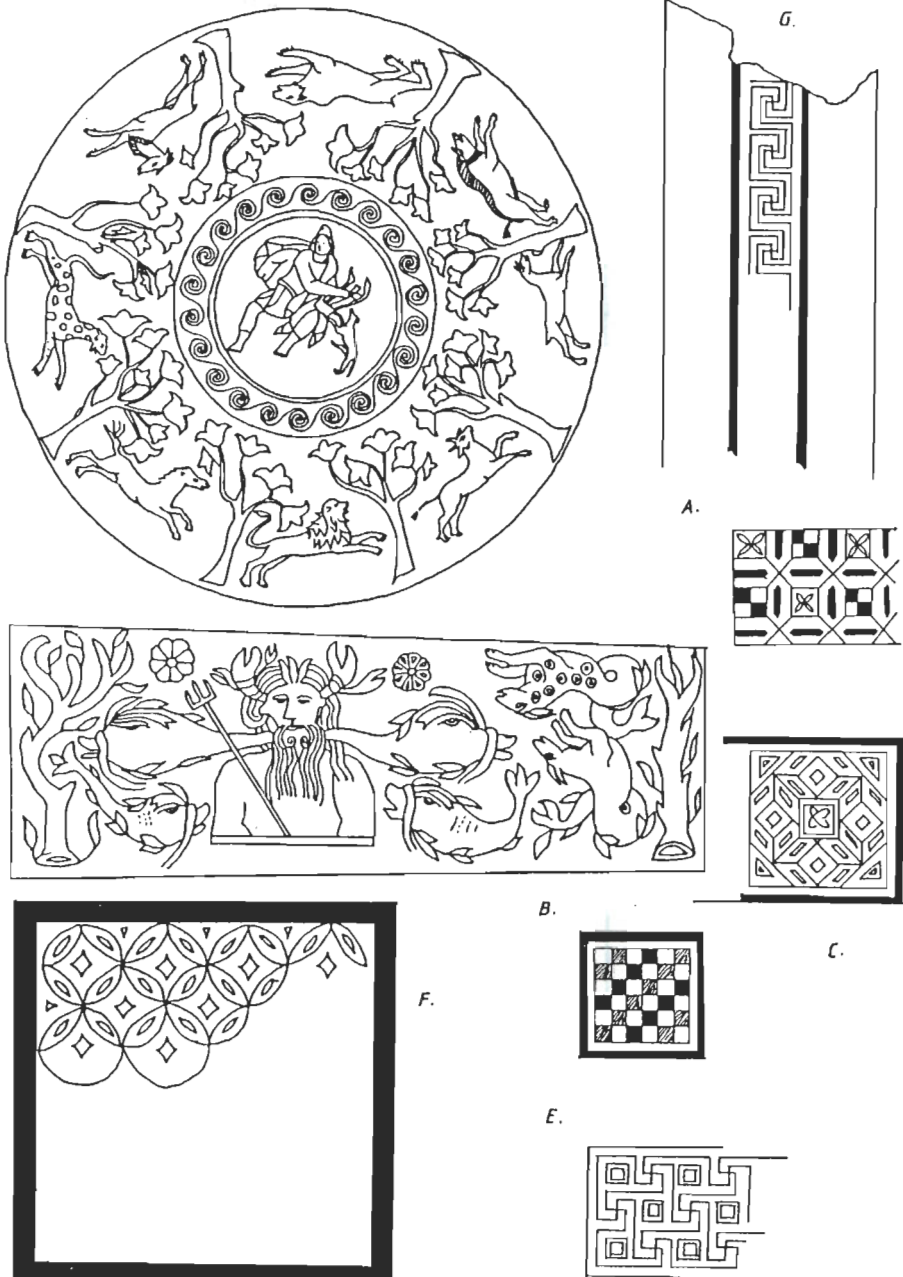


Figure 8.2. The mosaics at Withington villa (after Lysons 1817).

pavements into two groups: definite examples, and possible examples. Within the first category there are eight pavements: Barton Farm (Buckman and Newmarch 1850); Withington (Lysons 1817) (Figures 8.1 and 8.2); Woodchester (Lysons 1817); Newton St. Loe (Nichols 1838); Littlecote Park (Hoare 1819) (Figure 8.3); Winterton (Stead 1976) (Figure 8.4); Horkstow (Hinks 1933), and Brading (Price 1881) (Figure 8.5). Within the second category there are a further seven pavements: Dyer Street (Beecham 1886); Whatley;<sup>1</sup> Wellow;<sup>2</sup> Pit Meads (Hoare 1819); two pavements from Caerwent (Toynbee 1964: 266), and some fragments from Bishopstone.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of these pavements is summarised in Figure 8.6. The main aspects of the data are summarised in Figure 8.7.

## REPRESENTATION —————

In considering art forms in the archaeological record it is necessary to consider not only what is represented, but also how it is represented. As Boas notes (1955: 13):

It is essential to bear in mind the twofold source of artistic effect, the one based on form alone, the other on idea associated with form. Otherwise the theory of art will be one-sided.

With regard to Romano-British Orpheus mosaics, it will be important to assess the 'meaning' of Orpheus in the light of classical mythology, while also paying attention to the formal relationships within the mosaics, and the effect of form on meaning.

In mythology, Orpheus was the greatest singer and musician conceived by the Greeks. He was the son of the Muse Calliope, by either a King of Thrace or Apollo. Apollo gave him a lute with which he was able to charm wild beasts and make rocks and trees move. Jesnick (1989: 10) has noted that the character of the Orpheus image is defined by its difference from other scenes in the animal genre:

for the singer achieves by his art what otherwise takes great physical courage and skill. Men have only a tenuous hold over the captured beasts, who, always seeking to escape, eventually kill, or are killed. Orpheus stills this endless cycle.

The animals traditionally found on the Orpheus scene are those which exhibit types of behaviour which make them difficult to handle or capture. The animals represent both the negative and the bountiful aspects of

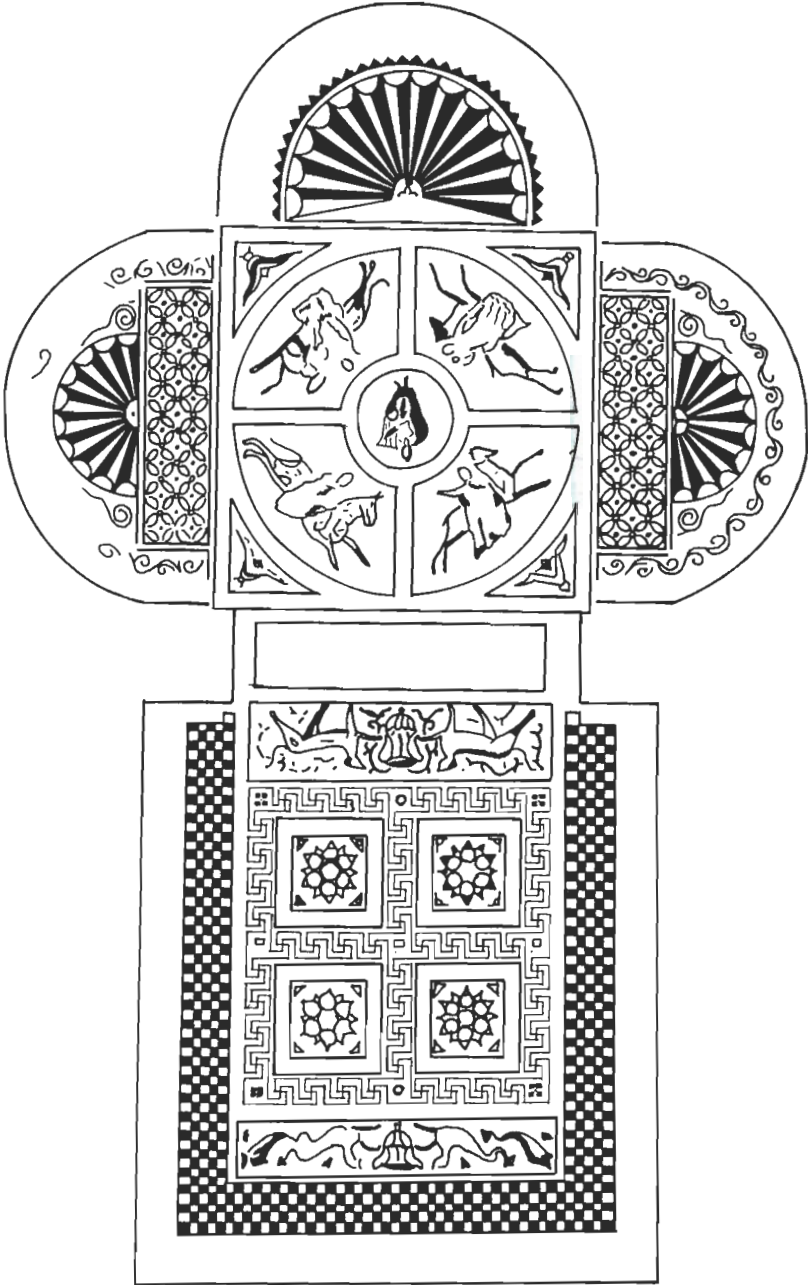


Figure 8.3. Mosaics at Littlecote Park (after Vertue 1730).

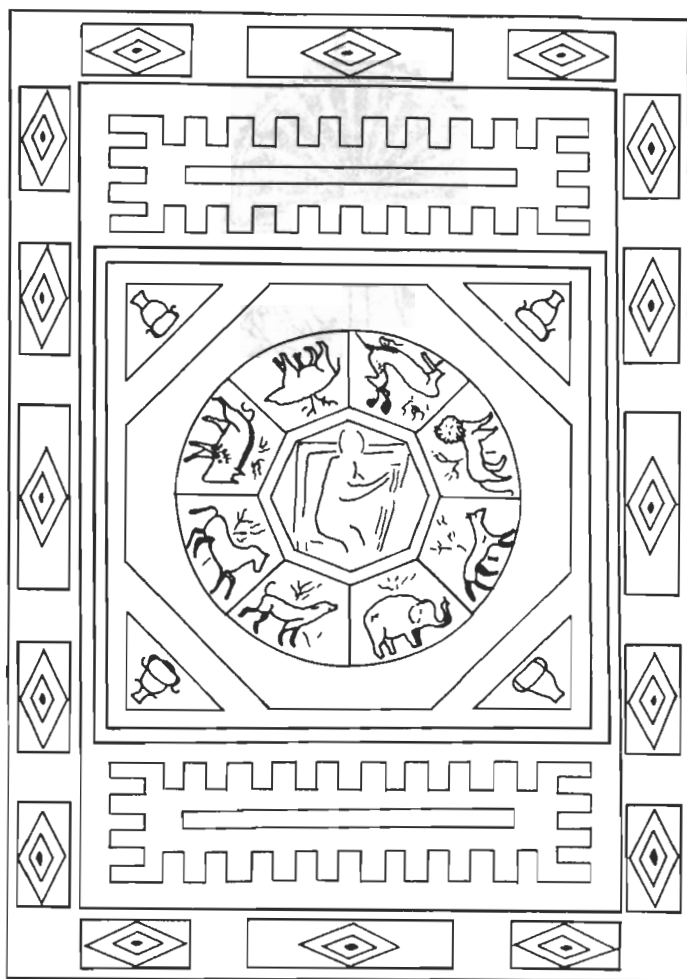


Figure 8.4. Mosaic at Winterton (after W. Fowler 1796).

nature, which Orpheus is able to control and hold in balance. The lion and the leopard are those animals most frequently represented in the Romano-British pavements, as is the case throughout the empire.

The majority of the Romano-British Orpheus mosaics employ the following scheme (Figure 8.8):

Orpheus is usually found at the centre of the pavement, surrounded by animals and birds. The central position of Orpheus emphasises his power, while the surrounding concentric circles reflect the nature of this power;



*Figure 8.5. Mosaic at Brading (after Price 1881).*

the animals are 'contained' by his charms. Another important feature of this design is that it can be viewed from any angle and still be understood. It is also possible to comprehend the central figure as someone possessing power without having to understand who he is, or the mythological background.

If we are to further understand the significance of Orpheus within Romano-British mosaics, it will be useful to assess the evidence for similar forms of representation in other contexts and media.

#### REPRESENTATIONS IN OTHER CONTEXTS —————

There are a number of representations in Britain which share physical attributes with Orpheus i.e. they are wearing similar clothing and are accompanied by animals. For example, at London (Merrifield 1986); Chedworth (Toynbee 1962: 156); Bisley (Clifford 1938); Upton St. Leonards (Rawes 1977); Box (Toynbee 1964: 179); Wilsford (Toynbee 1964: 179); Nettleton



(Wedlake 1982); Thrupton (Ingram 1849), and Lydney (Wheeler 1932). Three sculptures from London, termed 'hunter gods', of mid-fourth century date, are dressed in short tunics, a cap similar to that worn by Orpheus, and carry a short sword. At least two of the examples are accompanied by a dog and a deer. Merrifield (1986: 87) suggests that these figures probably came from a substantial Roman building which might have been a temple complex, the meeting place of a religious guild, or a residence with private shrines. Merrifield (*ibid.*: 89) proposes that these figures, and others with similar characteristics from the sites mentioned above, are the result of highly sophisticated and constructive religious thought. In support of such an argument are the parallels between the hunter god and Apollo and Orpheus. There is a relief from Ribchester, identified by its inscription as Apollo Maponus, in which the composite deity is represented with a quiver on his back, a lyre by his side, and apparently wearing a cap. It is likely that Apollo acquired this head-dress by a double association; with Orpheus through their common attribute, the lyre, and with Mithras through his solar connections (Merrifield *ibid.*). Hunter gods from the north and south-west have also been identified with Silvanus, god of the woodlands and wildlife.

To summarise, it seems that there was a cult figure in late Roman London, almost certainly under official patronage (*ibid.*: 87), who appears to be a conflation of Apollo, an oriental mystery god, and a native deity representing nature. It suggests someone in authority in London with a strong interest in comparative religion and the initiative to develop a new syncretic cult. This cult seems to have been popular in southern and central south-western England. Returning to the Orpheus mosaics, it can perhaps be suggested that his popularity, particularly in the central south-west, had something to do with his conflation with the hunter god identified above (Henig 1986: 17). In addition to the shared physical similarities, there are also the shared connections with power and nature.

It is interesting at this point to consider the interpretation of the Littlecote pavement proposed by Walters (1982). Walters has suggested that Orpheus acts as a link between Apollo, of whom he was a priest, and Dionysus, the principal deity of the cult alluded to in the mosaic. We are meant to see Apollo and his priest Orpheus. The same dual personality can be attributed to each of the four surrounding female figures. Walters (*ibid.*) suggests that the figures are semi-detached for reasons of allegorical narrative. They are seasons, but they are also goddesses representing the cycle of life, death, and resurrection. All of the animals, Dionysiac in form,

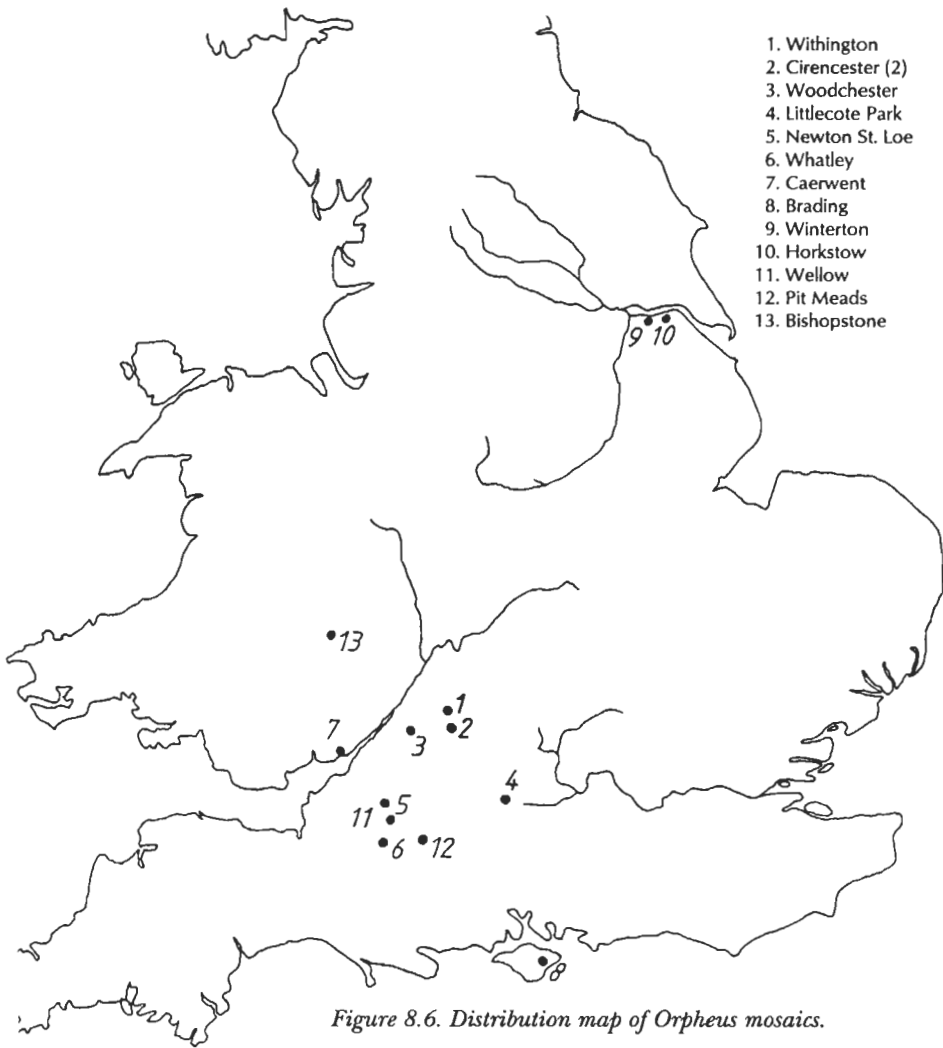


Figure 8.6. Distribution map of Orpheus mosaics.

were also intended to convey the same theme.

In order to pursue these ideas further, the mosaics have to be placed within the social/architectural context of their construction and use.

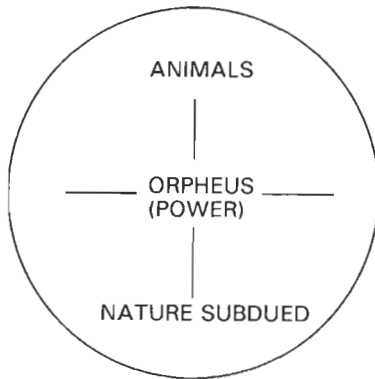
### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT —————

The early fourth century saw a 'flowering' of villas in Britain, particularly in the south-west. A number of factors were responsible for this move to the

Table 8.1. Summary of the evidence for Romano-British Orpheus mosaics.

<u>DEFINITE</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>
Barton Farm	Concentric circles	coins c.293 c.300-25	Reception area
Withington	Concentric circles	c.325-50	Reception area
Woodchester	Concentric circles	c.300-25	Reception area
Newton St. Loe	Concentric circles	c.325-50	Reception area
Littlecote Park	Radial (circular)	c.360	Reception area
Winterton	Radial (circular)	c.350	Reception area
Horkstow	Radial (circular)	c.350	Reception area
Brading	Medallion	4th century	Entrance hall
<u>POSSIBLE</u>			
Dyer Street	Concentric circles	4th century	Reception area?
Whatley	Square (concentric)	c.350-60	Reception area
Wellow	Uncertain	4th century	Reception area
Pit Meads	Circular (?)	4th century	Reception area
Caerwent (1)	Fragment	?	?
Caerwent (2)	Rectangular panels	?	?
Bishopstone	Fragments	4th century	?

countryside, one of the most important being the problem of inflation in the third century, and the debasement of the silver coinage from Caracalla onward. At this time the state preferred to collect taxes in kind, and the larger landowners were obviously the best equipped to deal with the



*Figure 8.7. Orpheus representations schematically interpreted.*

problem of taxation. As a result of this, a rigidly ordered society was being created, induced by the state's need to gather as much revenue as possible, and by the tendency of the territorial magnate to increase his estate by taking over the land of those who were not rich enough to survive in the changed world.

It is clear that, by the fourth century, the villas had become the primary centres for status display. As Millett (1990: 197) notes, those clients and others who required services from the powerful would come to them for an audience, and in all probability this would have been at their rural residences. The incentive for public display in the towns had disappeared by the early fourth century, and the later Romano-British villas should be seen as a re-direction of the surpluses of society towards personalised rather than communal display (*ibid.*).

Scott (1990: 169) has suggested that general trends in villa design, such as symmetrical facades, wings, courtyards, and enclosures, are related to the changing social situation noted above. She points out that these features first made their appearance in villa design in the second century, at about the same time as the establishment of a market economy, with the scale and degree of formalisation of these design elements reaching a peak in the fourth century. Scott (*ibid.*: 170) suggests that these architectural features express a duality of purpose. On the one hand they represent a sophisticated attempt at entry into the Romanised world of markets and 'civilisation', and on the other, they are an attempt to distance the household from an environment thought to be potentially hostile. This hostile environment was not just the perceived physical threat of barbarians. There was, Scott (*ibid.*) suggests, a more insidious threat: vulnerability to

market forces and therefore poverty, inflation, taxation, and the need to accept strangers over the threshold.

An analysis of those villas possessing Orpheus mosaics can, I suggest, contribute a great deal to the argument outlined above. In particular, it will serve to highlight a number of changes that were taking place throughout the fourth century in terms of the manipulation of architecture within social relations.

Concerning the villas and mosaics constructed in the earlier part of the fourth century, it does seem that the sites fit in with Scott's argument. The architecture obviously aims to impress, while also allowing the villa owner to control access to and within his home. Woodchester (Figure 8.9), for example, possesses three courtyards, and symmetry was obviously a major consideration in its design (Clarke 1982). Clarke (*ibid.*) notes that the site of the villa rises slightly towards the inner courtyard and room 1, and these features must have formed a topographical and architectural climax. Additionally, room 1 was vast; nearly 50 ft. (15m) square, with its floor entirely covered with the Orpheus pavement. As to the superstructure, Clarke (*ibid.*) suggests that a domed roof would be consistent with the concentric design of the pavement and the presence of columns, but the walls seem insufficiently buttressed, especially to the south. Another possibility is that the columns supported a gallery, and if so, this would have enabled the pavement to have been appreciated to best advantage. As yet, however, there is no evidence for a staircase. Both of the possibilities outlined above would have enhanced the impact of the Orpheus pavement. An important point to note is that room 1 most probably had four entrances, one in the centre of each wall. It would almost certainly have been the first room that was entered by guests. I suggest, therefore, that it would probably have been used for reception purposes; a form of reception hall where the patron could meet his clients, and perhaps also the location for large scale banquets. On entering the corridor (room 2), the visitor would have been on a visual axis with room 1, with Orpheus, and possibly a central fountain,<sup>4</sup> in view. Once in the room, the visitor may have been able to view the other corridors leading away to further wealth and splendour. Those guests who were on a sufficiently intimate footing with the owner may have been invited to experience this wealth beyond. The 'depth' to which a guest was able to penetrate the building, and the route that he took, emphasised the nature of his relationship with the owner.

Ellis (1991: 127) has noted that in late antique houses, statues of gods and mythological heroes were often employed to glorify the owner. Mosaics

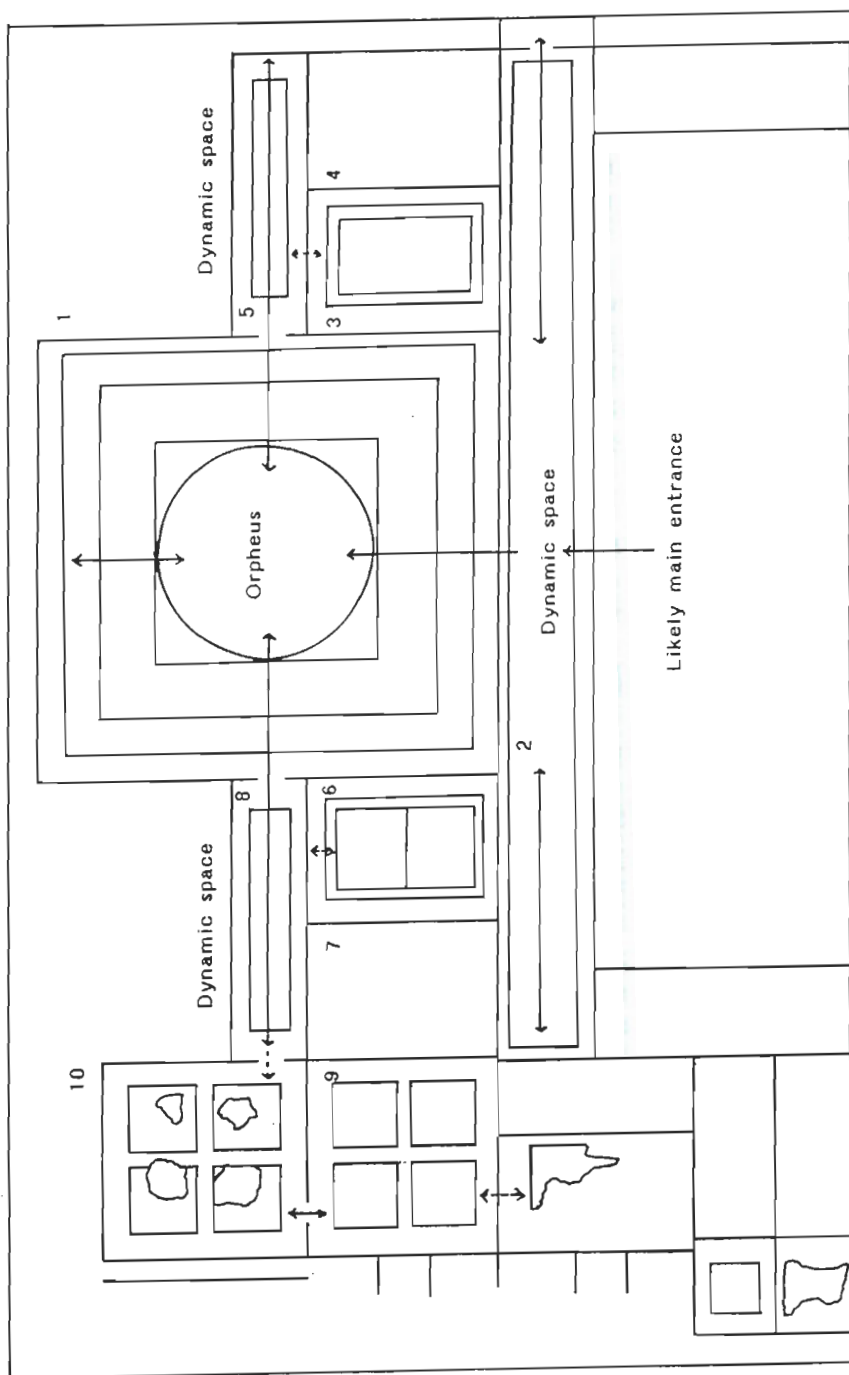


Figure 8.8. Viewing patterns at Woodchester villa.

were often used for the same purpose, for example, in North Africa many home owners commissioned pavements with hunt scenes, in which the owner himself was portrayed as the hero of the hunt. It is not unlikely that the owner of the villa at Woodchester chose Orpheus for similar reasons. Orpheus was able to control nature in its strongest and wildest forms without the use of physical force, and would therefore have been an appropriate choice for a room in which the owner would have conducted business, and entertained friends and/or strangers, and generally aimed to impress. The villa owner was associating himself with godly powers. As Ellis (1991: 126) notes, such interpretations might seem farfetched were it not for Ammianus's description of the flattering comparisons made to senators in Rome. Additionally, Diocletian attempted to raise the office of emperor to a transcendent plane, as did Constantius 2 in fourth century Rome (*ibid.*: 129). If the emperors could be seen as gods, then it is not unlikely that a villa owner could associate himself with a mythical hero.

It seems that other less wealthy villa owners in the area were sufficiently impressed by the Orpheus pavement at Woodchester to commission such pavements for themselves. Although they may not have possessed such considerable means, they certainly had similar ambitions and aspirations. Based on the chronology outlined in Table 8.1, it could be suggested that 'emulation' (Miller 1982) was taking place. The owner of the villa at Woodchester could be seen as a form of 'local emperor'. In order to improve their position within the social hierarchy, other villa owners in the area, at Barton Farm, Withington, and Newton St. Loe, for example, may have adopted this powerful symbol.

The villa at Littlecote represents, I think, a further development of these ideas. The room possessing the mosaic is, in fact, separate from the main villa building. It also lacks heating, and would probably have been cold and damp given its situation by a river. Walters (1982) has suggested that this hall would have been used for ceremonial purposes, perhaps the meetings of an unrecognised sect or fraternity in fourth century Britain. I would suggest, however, that this hall may instead have been a reception hall. Such chambers have been identified by Ellis (1988) in Roman and provincial houses, and they consist of large apsidal rooms, preceded by a vestibule, that can be entered through the main door of the house onto the street. The location of the halls next to the street would have ensured the maximum amount of privacy for the family. The aristocrat presumably appeared in the apse surrounded by his retainers (Ellis 1988: 569). Bek (1983: 91) has noted that in imperial palace architecture the apse was en-

visaged as a backdrop for the emperor. This idea of the apse as a backdrop for persons or events, rather than sculptures or furniture, may be relevant in the case of Littlecote. The 'hall' possesses both a vestibule and apses, and was also separate from the main villa building. It may have been here that the owner met his clients, perhaps appearing in the apse at the far end. The villa owner kept his public and private life separate, and perhaps only a privileged few would have been admitted to the main building. The mosaic itself, with its complex religious images, would have emphasised the formality of the architecture and the superiority of the villa owner. Those visitors who lacked the necessary education would have been excluded from the significance of the design, and their social distance from the villa owner would have been further emphasised.

It is interesting to note that the villas at Horkstow and Whatley have similar large halls, and both date to around the mid-fourth century, or slightly later. Like Littlecote, the Horkstow pavement is complex in its imagery, and combines Orpheus with a number of other mythological subjects.

These developments in domestic architecture coincide with the developments in religious thinking discussed briefly above. Looking back to the evidence for the 'hunter god', it is possible to suggest that the elite of mid-fourth century Britain felt it necessary to promote religious ideas in which various gods and deities were conflated, and in which the emphasis was on power over nature. This pattern fits in with changes that were occurring elsewhere in the empire. As Henig (1986: 194) suggests:

we must not ignore the deepening religious response of the fourth century Roman (and provincial) aristocracies in the fourth century, pagan as well as Christian. For the emperor Julian, Homer, Vergil and other Greek and Roman authors were writers of 'holy writ'.

The pagan resistance was undoubtedly widespread, but its core in the west was the Roman senate which, after Rome had ceased to be the capital of the Roman empire, assumed once more in Roman history a conspicuous role (Bloch 1963: 194). Notable evidence for such a revival in Britain occurs in the form of the Mildenhall Treasure (Painter 1977) and the Corbridge Lanx (Haverfield 1914), both of which appear to date from around the reign of Julian (355–363), and whose pagan character can hardly be disputed. By commissioning pavements with complex pagan images, the owners of the villas at Littlecote and Horkstow may have been associating themselves with these religious elites elsewhere in the empire, while also



asserting their own individuality through their inventive syncretism.

Ellis (1988: 573) proposes that the architectural developments may be associated with two historical trends: the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few aristocrats, and a change in the form of personal patronage. According to Sidonius (*ibid.*: 575), mid-fifth century Gaul appears to have been dominated by a villa-based aristocracy, with more autocratic relations between patron and client. The government was investing more power in local aristocrats, and in 371 landlords were made legally responsible for the collection of taxes. The only way that the poor could resist demands from officials and aristocrats was by resorting to someone with more power, even if they risked losing their liberty in the process (*ibid.*: 576). The construction of a hall such as that at Littlecote would have helped the villa owner to assert and maintain his authority. The patron could have appeared 'godlike' in the apse, surrounded by complex and impressive decor. The separation of the room from the main villa would have distanced the owner from the 'domestic' scene, stressing the contrast with those visitors whose main concern would have been domestic issues and survival in the changing world. The 'rules' that governed meetings between patron and client, and the repetition of such 'rituals', would have meant that these social relations were constantly reinforced through everyday actions.

## CONCLUSIONS —————

In summary, it has been suggested that the Orpheus pavements of the first half of the fourth century represent overt statements of power on the part of the villa owners. The nature of the designs would probably have enabled visitors or residents of the villa, from all social backgrounds, to comprehend the central figure as a figure possessing power. The Orpheus pavements are commonly found in reception or dining rooms at this time, and would almost certainly have been the rooms seen first by guests. Guests may have obtained glimpses of the rooms beyond, and according to their degree of intimacy with the owner may have been invited 'deeper' within the villa. The divisions between the 'public' and 'private' areas of the villas seem to have become more clear cut after the mid fourth century. In some cases visitors may not have been allowed to penetrate the villa at all, and were received instead in a separate hall, or audience chamber. The power of the villa owners may have become more autocratic by this time, and the architecture would have removed them from the domestic setting

into an almost religious context. The complexity of the designs would have emphasised the social differences between patron and client, and these differences would have been reaffirmed through the everyday use of the architecture.

One other point to note is that the villa owners themselves may have had apprehensions regarding their own security, both in this life and the next. The increasing concern with complex religious ideas may have been an attempt on their part not only to assert their superiority within the social order, but also to associate themselves with various deities and to obtain their protection. The conflation of numerous gods may have increased their feelings of security in a period when empire wide problems were making their future seem increasingly uncertain.

## NOTES

1. V.C.H. Somerset 1, 1906, 317.
2. V.C.H. Somerset 1, 1906, 312-314.
3. B. Walters - Paper presented at the 25th Symposium on Roman Mosaics, 7th Dec. 1991.
4. Research carried out by the Woodward brothers for a reconstruction of the pavement suggested water staining around the centre of the pavement, which may have been caused by a fountain.

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