

## SETTING THE RECORD

The  
contorted  
history  
of the  
Museum's  
Theseus  
mosaic



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# STRAIGHT



*The Cretans ... say that the Labyrinth was only an ordinary prison, having no other bad quality but that it secured the prisoners from escaping.*

— Plutarch, *Theseus*, 15

**T**he section dealing with everyday life in the Museum's newly installed Roman World Gallery uses a third-century mosaic to exemplify a typical Roman floor. Nothing special at first glance, its scene seems an unlikely subject for controversy: A pair of ordinary-looking sailors pilot a little boat across a sketchily rendered lake or sea. An enigmatic surfboard-like object floating on (or over) the water to the left of the boat's stern adds little to the narrative. Linear overlapping box designs alternatively filled with abstract rosettes occupy the panel spaces above and below the boating scene, which cuts through a plaited chain border or framing element to its right. Conventionally referred to as a *guilloche*, the border design is as old as the third millennium B.C. in the ancient Near East, so its appearance causes no surprise here.

On the other hand, some nagging little questions do begin to crop up when one looks more closely. Why did the mosaicist make his boat scene interrupt the border *guilloche*? Why does the object on the water look like a double door set inside an arch? Why is the word VINCLVSVS inscribed twice, above and below the "surfboard" with the final *s* missing from the word above? And what could VINCLVSVS mean? Search as you will, you won't find it in any Latin dictionary.

To help answer these questions we have to turn back the clock not just once but twice. First to 1904 when the mosaic came to the University of Pennsylvania Museum as a gift of Mrs. Dillwyn Parrish. She had purchased it a few years earlier on the London art market where its place of origin was listed (almost certainly erroneously) as Carthage, Tunisia.

Twelve years later, duly accessioned as MS 4012, it surfaced in the *Museum Journal* where it was illustrated and given a short description by the then curator of the Mediterranean Section, Dr. Stephen B. Luce. Five years after that, in 1921, Luce saw fit to devote two pages in his section catalogue to the mosaic.

While Luce was unquestionably aware that there was more to the mosaic's aquatic scene than first meets the eye, for reasons of his own he deliberately refrained from interpreting it as anything more than a

genre scene of everyday activity, and it has been treated as such by the Museum right up to its current display.

But if we turn back the clock a bit further, we learn that in 1860 the French consul Espina opened a large subterranean rock-cut tomb, entered by steps and covered by a sloping roof, in the cemetery of Roman Hadrumetum, the modern city of Sousse, Tunisia. One of its chambers contained a sarcophagus set on a large (5.6 by 3.4 meters) figured mosaic. Records show that this mosaic was hauled off in two pieces to enter the collection of Mohammad, son of the *khaznador* or state treasurer, Mustapha, for display in the courtyard of the Ben-Ayad Palace at Tunis. (As an aside it may be noted that the French, who administered Tunisia as a protectorate from 1881 to 1956, habitually bothered to record only the first names of non-European notables, to the considerable annoyance of their non-European readers to this day.) The smaller section of this mosaic had disappeared from the palace by 1910, and its larger piece was lost some time between then and 1960.

Luckily for posterity, a photograph was taken at the time of the mosaic's discovery by an alert M.G. Hannezo, a French lieutenant in the 4th Tirailleurs (Sharpshooters), perhaps on leave from neighboring Algeria, which had been under French military control since 1830. Although now lost, Hannezo's photo was preserved in drawings that still exist in copies. These renderings prove that the bulk of the mosaic depicts King Minos' mythical labyrinth on Crete, with the dying Minotaur at its center. At the right we see a small boat under sail moving away from the stylized representation of the labyrinth's entrance portal. The boat, of which a watercolor detail was made and later redrawn, is crowded with seven passengers. The largest figure, second from the stern, must be the Athenian hero, Theseus; the rest the Athenian youths he has just rescued from the Minotaur; his legendary helper and lover, Ariadne, is nowhere to be seen. To the left, inscribed in block letters, is *HIC INCLVSVS VITAM PERDIT* ("Whoever is locked up here loses his life"), in obvious reference to the fate of the monstrous



OPPOSITE: Detail of the boat scene from the University of Pennsylvania Museum's mosaic; THIS PAGE: First half of the third-century mosaic (MS 4012) probably found at Utica and today in the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Theseus escaping from Crete.

Minotaur's victims imprisoned in the dreaded labyrinth.

The similarities between the Sousse mosaic and our Museum's were not lost on Luce, who even suggested in his 1921 catalog that the first may have been the actual source for the second without ever coming out and saying that the Museum's belonged to a labyrinth mosaic.

According to such a reconstruction, after the labyrinth-and-Minotaur section of the Sousse mosaic was separated from the boat scene, the latter made its way to London for eventual sale to the Parrishes. Some of the letters of the Sousse mosaic's inscription would then have been redeployed by a modern "restorer" to compose part of the ostensibly nonsensical *VINCLVSVS* inscription. It follows that the so-called surfboard is the entrance to the labyrinth.

There are, however, some obstacles to this neat theory. If one takes a further look at the Museum's mosaic, certain features of the double door and the layout of the boat's hull, mast, square sail, and rigging do not agree with the photograph-based watercolor of the Sousse mosaic's boat. The Sousse boat is, moreover, framed to its right by the *guilloche* border, while we have seen how the Museum's mosaic interrupts the border. And a close inspection of the Museum boat's interior shows no evidence for its ever having included five additional figures.

For these reasons it seems to me highly unlikely that the Philadelphia mosaic was ever part of the Sousse mosaic, despite the fact that several later scholars have accepted Luce's guarded suggestion that it might have been.

Here the matter had been allowed to rest more or less in limbo until 1977, when the Polish archaeologist Wiktor Daszewski published a very perceptive study of Theseus mosaics. Daszewski relates that the venerable French archaeologist and savant Salomon Reinach had noted in 1886 how a certain item No. 328 from a sales catalog, titled *Sale of a Collection of African Antiquities belonging to M. d'Hébisson*, contained the following entry: "a large mosaic of an exceptionally interesting era, representing a boat with sailors and bearing the double inscription 'Vinclvsvs.' Utica. First century of our era."

According to Reinach the Utica connection was simply a mistake, and the piece offered for sale was instead a fragment

of the Sousse mosaic. In his 1975 letter to the Museum's then registrar, Ellen Kohler, Daszewski appears to largely agree with Reinach. But in his subsequent 1977 article, he adds the important information that the Count d'Hébisson owned property on the site of ancient Utica, the second most important Punic city after Carthage, and that he was known to have collected and sold antiquities excavated on his own estate. Daszewski consequently accepts some form of Utica connection as plausible in light of d'Hébisson's business proclivities and suggests the existence of a second version of sorts, which was sold to the Parrishes in London and from there made its way to Philadelphia.

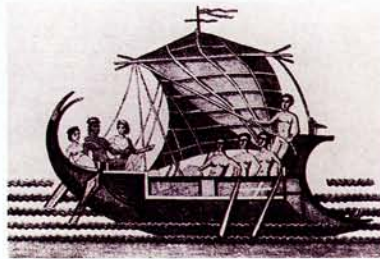
Daszewski offers two possible explanations for how this might have come about: Either the Philadelphia mosaic was an ancient copy of the Sousse mosaic, in which a journeyman copyist altered the composition and jumbled the original inscription out of ignorance of Latin (a language in which not everyone in Africa Proconsularis, today Tunisia, was necessarily conversant) or, alternatively, horror of horrors, the Philadelphia mosaic is a later 19th-century pastiche, whipped up by a modern faker from bits and pieces left over from the Sousse boat scene and then foisted off on the fin de siècle art-collecting public by d'Hébisson and his conniving accomplices.

This last explanation, which Daszewski seems to favor, I, after considerable soul searching, find hard to accept. I believe instead that what the Museum has is a *second* ancient mosaic representing the same scene and that it originated in third-century Roman Utica.

If it is true that, as seems likely, the Utica/Museum version originally included a labyrinth scene, it would have been remarkably similar in size to the Sousse version. This can be determined from the fact that the dimensions of both boating scenes are almost identical even though the Museum's version no longer preserves its original width (as indicated by, among other things, the fractured final *s* of its inscription).

On the other hand, as unusual as one ancient mosaic providing a knockoff of another ancient mosaic might seem, such things are known to exist. There is nothing in the shape, size, color (red-brown, yellow, gray, black, and white) and placement of the individual *tesserae* (stone cubes) making up the Museum's boat scene to suggest that its workmanship is anything but ancient. Nor is there any physical evidence that the overall composition has been tampered with to merge elements of a preexistent mosaic with something new.

A further sign of authenticity is the fact that before World War I, genuine mosaics were relatively common and therefore available at prices that seem ludicrously cheap by today's



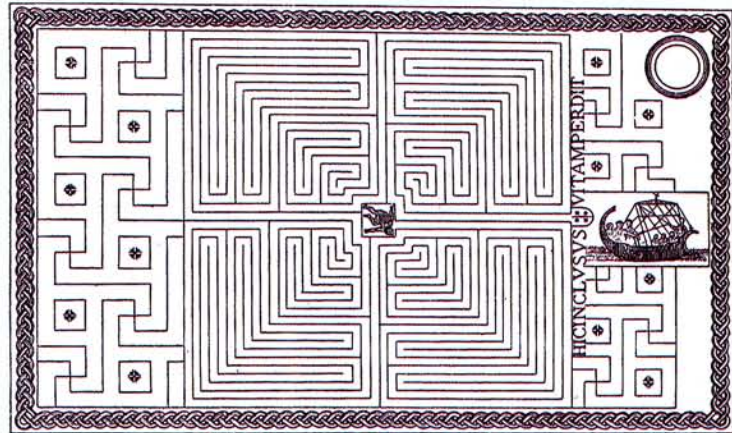
Detail of the Sousse mosaic's boat scene from a 19th-century drawing made by M. Rapine based on a watercolor by M. Daux. We do not know if Daux worked from the actual mosaic or the lost photo.

standards, making it economically pointless to fake something as fragmentary and deceptively ordinary as the Museum's mosaic. Not to put too fine a point on it, if a modern faker were going to copy or rearrange the Sousse mosaic, he would have been sure to include more than just the door to the labyrinth to bump up buyer interest.

This refocuses the whole question on the much impugned inscription. If genuine, VINCLVSVS represents what classicists call a *hapax legomenon*, meaning it appears only once in ancient literature — all right, twice if you count our mosaic literally. It seems likely that with a world of Latin words and phrases no farther away than the nearest Latin dictionary, any modern faker worth his salt could have come up with something better than VINCLVSVS, which has only caused vexation and confusion since Reinach's day.

Several suggestions have been offered to explain its meaning. The first was proposed years ago by a University of Pennsylvania professor of classics, W.B. McDaniel, who, without knowing anything about the mosaic's connection with the labyrinth thanks to Luce's reticence, suggested that VINCLVSVS could be a contraction of *vinc(imus)* from *vincio* and *lusus*, meaning "we win our games" or *vinc(tor)* (a corrupt version of victor) plus *lusus*, meaning "I am the victor in the contest." The latter reading obviously works especially well if applied twice for magical effect to the victorious Theseus escaping the dying Minotaur but is etymologically somewhat more difficult to defend.

Another interpretation comes from Professor R.E.A. Palmer, who has recently retired from the Penn Classics Department.



A 19th-century drawing based on a lost photograph taken of a labyrinth mosaic at the time of its excavation in 1860. From the Roman cemetery at Sousse, ancient Hadrumetum, Tunisia. Theseus and the rescued youths from Athens escape King Minos' labyrinth on Crete, fleeing the dying Minotaur. The mosaic was broken up soon after its discovery and appears to be entirely lost.

Also in the dark about the scene's connection with Theseus and the Minotaur, Palmer concluded that VINCLVSVS could be a male personal name. "The stem is *vinc(u)lum*, 'chains, bonds, imprisonment,' from the Latin verb *vincire*, to bind. The ending *-osus* (which enters into English as *-ous*) is normally rendered 'full of.' So the common Latin adjective *formosus*, 'shapely, beautiful,' yields a late antique name Formosus/a. Such personal names are by no means uncommon in late antiquity. VINCLVSVS exhibits a common variation of o/u (v)." According to Palmer, the name could mean, among other things, "loaded with chains," or burdened with grief.

Here we should recall the original burial setting of the Sousse mosaic. Coming off the floor of a tomb, its inscription (*hic inclusus vitam perdit*) can be read on two levels. It can be construed as a broadly optimistic allusion to Theseus' escape from the Minotaur's labyrinth, which by Roman times had become a metaphor for the soul's flight from the bondage of the flesh and its subsequent journey to the Isles of Blessed (i.e., as a symbol for life after death). But it could also have a second, distinctly less auspicious meaning, in which it refers literally to the tomb where "he who is enclosed loses his life."

We know nothing about the original setting of the Utica/Museum mosaic. Only three mosaics showing Theseus fleeing the labyrinth in a boat are known anywhere: a pictorially unrelated version from a private villa bath complex near Salzburg, the Sousse version from a tomb, and, if I am right, the Museum's from Utica. What was ancient Africa

Proconsularis, now Tunisia, preserves a disproportionately high number of tombs with mosaic floors that are otherwise rare elsewhere. If the Museum's also came from a tomb, this could explain how the spatial limitations of the burial chamber might have caused its ancient copyist to run his boating scene over the *gilloche* border. It would also strengthen the likelihood that Palmer's reading is the correct one and that it refers to the tomb's mortal occupant — forever "bound to this tomb" — rather than to the escaping hero.

Luce's reasons for ignoring the link with the Theseus story will never be fully known. Not aware of the Utica connection, he may have simply wanted to sidestep the messy problems involved with reconciling the differences in details between the Sousse mosaic and his own. For its part, the Mediterranean Section continued to ignore all of the relevant facts until the old gallery was closed for renovation in 2002 and I found myself having to rewrite the old label, describing it as simply a boating scene.

That, and a timely query from the Tunisian Department of Antiquities about the current status of our mosaic, led to a reexamination that has resulted in the above conclusions. As disconcerting an admission as this is, we are now at last in a position to say with some confidence that the Museum mosaic's apparently mundane marinescape and baffling inscription transcend the ordinary and convey us instead to the threshold of the mysterious eschatological universe of the Romans, some of whose aspects I have explored in connection with the Museum's enigmatic lead coffin in volume 39, number 3, of *Expedition* and elsewhere.



For the first three decades after getting his Ph.D. at Princeton, Donald White divided his time between excavating in Libya and Egypt and teaching for the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania. Apart from teaching, he has spent much of the past 12 years writing and curating. Named chief curator of the Museum's Mediterranean Section in 1990, he oversaw the renovation of its Greek gallery in 1994 and its Introductory, Etruscan, and Roman galleries ("Worlds Intertwined") in 2003. He is coauthor of a guide to the Museum's Etruscan and Roman galleries and two books on his work on coastal eastern Libya and northwestern Egypt, and he has written three additional books on the sites of Apollonia and Paraitonion, along with more than 75 articles and reviews.

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