

*Il est question d'un nouveau modèle de parquets de mosaïques représentant différents rôles de femmes et de jeunes filles.*

It is in North Africa at the Bardo Museum in Tunis, in the heart of Sicily, that I came across some of the most interesting hunt scenes on Roman floor mosaics of Late Antiquity (3rd, 4th and 5th century A.D.).

Most of these pavements were in private homes throughout the Western Roman World: Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Sicily and especially North Africa. The buildings collapsed over time but their floors and foundations remained, preserving the story of their inhabitants on colorful stone decorations. From the late first century on, mosaics were commissioned by wealthy land owners who wished to be portrayed with their families and servants.

Here, I found pictures of realistic women as opposed to mythological goddesses and nymphs. It occurred to me then, that women's history could be studied via mosaics. This marvelous discovery took place when I believed I spotted a little girl



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## WOMEN ON ROMAN FLOOR MOSAICS

on a horse from El Djem, North Africa.

I have been unable to do further research so I can only draw a very brief and introductory picture of women's history on the polychrome mosaics of late Antiquity.

The Dominus Julius mosaic from Carthage, North Africa portrays his wife as an object of desire, an extension of himself. This is more

explicit at Piazza Armerina. On the first mosaic, Julius is seated and his lady stands on the left. Venus-like, she accepts a necklace from a very erect female attendant holding a jewelry box in her left hand. Richly adorned, Julius' lady is quite removed from the duties of an estate as she smiles strangely to herself in a small hand mirror.

But on the top register of the same

mosaic, the vilica (bailiff's wife) oversees the crops and animal care while sitting on a bench. Two women attendants approach her with a basket of olives, and a baby lamb in their arms. Dominus Julius and his wife can clearly afford a luxurious home in Carthage, leaving the care of their estate in the hands of loyal female workers whom they visit regularly to collect profit.

At Zliten, North Africa another vilica oversees a threshing scene, supervising slaves who whip horses and oxen to make them tread on a stack of corn. At Tabarka, North Africa a woman spins wool. Figure six, a rural scene shows hard working peasant women hoeing the ground.

Women are shown participating with men in sports, or simply enjoying themselves in a group. A banquet scene from a Carthage tile shows two women musicians playing castanets, while in a mosaic from Zliten, a woman plays an organ.

Athletic women from Piazza Armerina practice running with weights, racing, throwing the discus and playing volleyball. A winner crowns herself and holds a palm, the symbol of victory, in her left arm. The excellent physical condition of these women is seen in their muscular legs and coordinated movements. These are the women who are referred to as the 'Bikini Girls.'

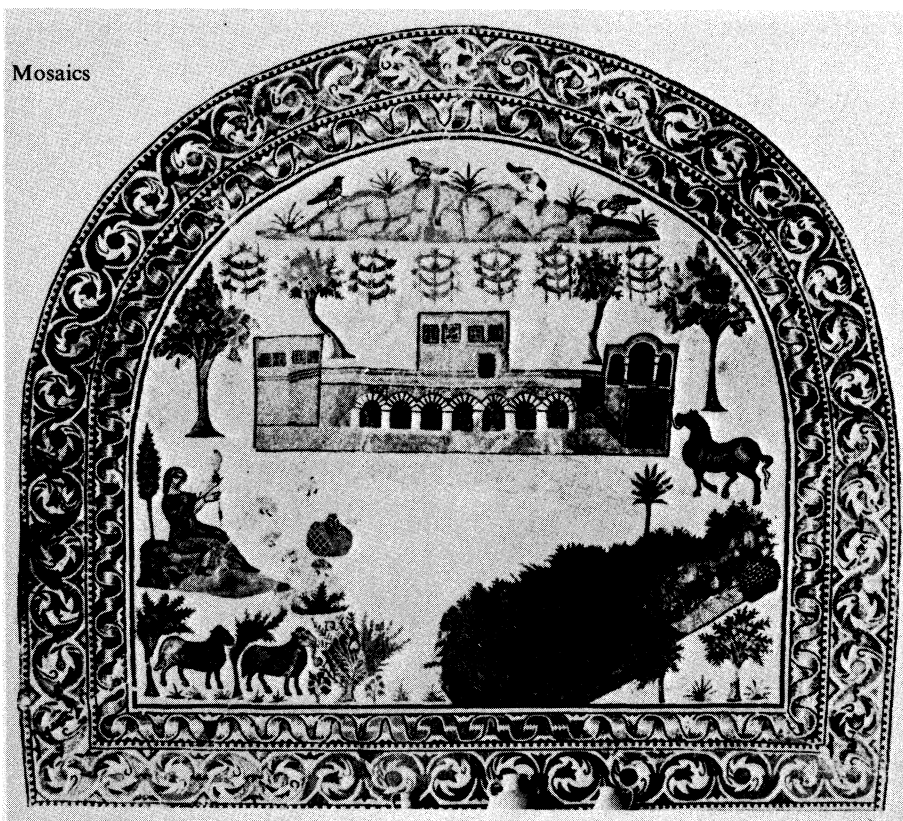
The mosaics give us but a few examples of women working on estates, entertaining the public, participating in sports. They give us information about their attitudes, duties and costumes. Mosaic studies do reveal a fascinating account of women's history in late Antiquity and Early Medieval times and deserve study in depth so that we can piece together a more complete history of womankind.

1 *Erotic Scene, Piazza Armerina*

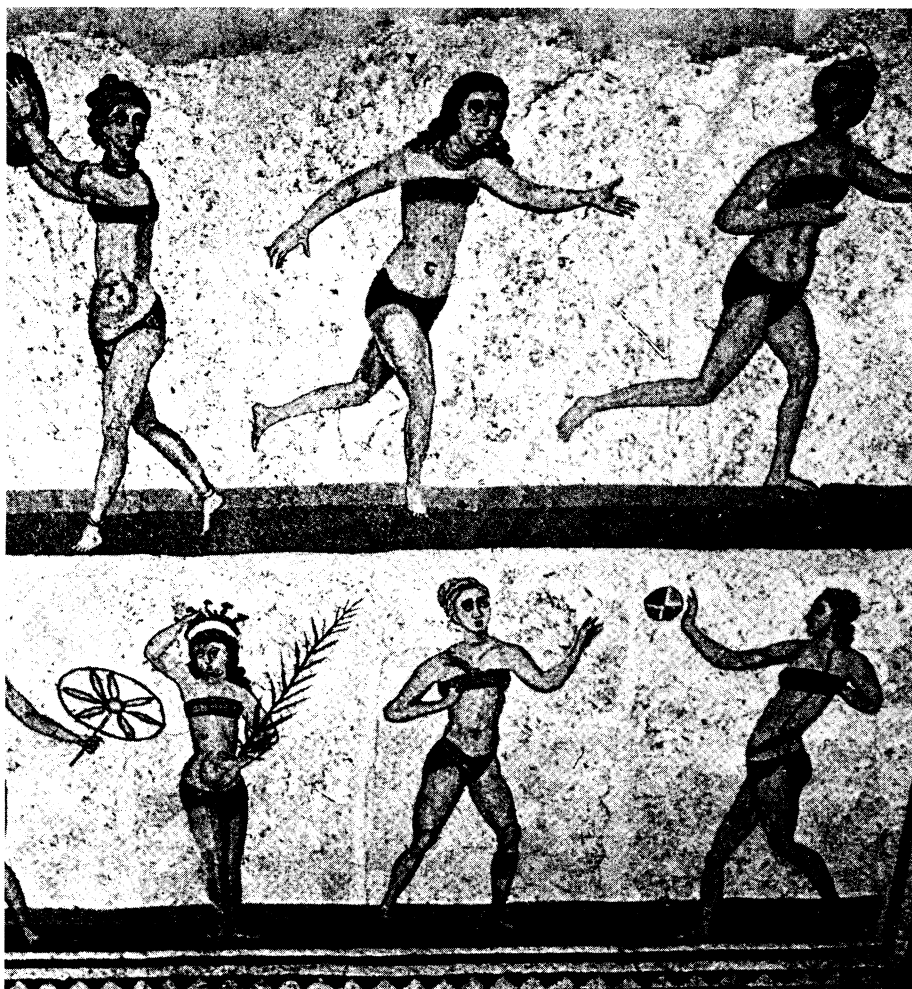
2 *Tabarka Villa Mosaic*

3 *Bikini Girls, Piazza Armerina*

All photos courtesy *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, by K. Dunbabin, 1978, Clarendon Press, Oxford.



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