

The title of this article leads the reader to expect a wild party. It is really a reference to the subject of a late Roman mosaic in the dining room of a luxury villa in Roman Africa, at a tiny rural hamlet called Sidi Ghrib. Of course there may have been (and I have no doubt there were!) wild parties in this villa, but this article is primarily about an archaeological investigation by members of the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Waterloo rather than about parties!

The dining room of the villa, which was within "summer cottage travelling distance" from Carthage, was used during the good weather. It was an apsed (semi-circular) room covered by a dome, but opening onto a corridor which itself was arched in four directions: to both directions in the corridor, into the dining room and into the peristyle which lay opposite the dining room. The opening of the dining room faced northeast, which kept it cool during the intense African heat, but allowed it to heat up slightly from the morning sun. This made the room usable both in summer and in the slightly cooler spring and fall, perhaps even on a warm "winter" day—which, unlike Canada, Africa does occasionally enjoy.

The decoration was rich and sumptuous. Arches and domes were held up with massive consoles, rectangular supports curving neatly into dome or arch, placed on top of the columns. The consoles were richly carved with acanthus leaves and flowers, and the five-petaled rose.

The color scheme of walls and ceilings in this late period was simple: white with some scant use of red as a trim, probably around the top of columns and walls only. Richer color was provided by splendid mosaics on the floors. These are now sadly missing save for fragments. One of the best areas preserved is the floor of this summer dining room. The mosaic here must have been well-loved; it is patched in several places.

The scene depicted in colors of red, green, blue, pale yellow and ochre, grey, black and white, is a hunt. Hunters and quarry gallop from both sides of the curved apse toward the centre. A wild ass drinks from a pond below a tree in the lower centre and makes a peaceful contrast to the frenzy around him.

From the left, a slave (we can tell from his clothing, a tunic) sits atop a brown horse and has just roped an onager straining towards the centre of the dining room. The brown horse is shown with open mouth and flared nostrils; the head of the slave is gone but presumably he showed similar vigor. From his legs we can tell he is leaning slightly backward with his rope, straining against the lassoed onager. On the right, another hunter's hand is depicted grasping reins; it looks as if he has sharply turned a galloping horse around.

The entire hunt is bordered with a braided red, blue and black design, and all is set into a white background. However, the entire villa was burned, and the once white mosaic cubes show splotchy discoloration from the flames.

The onager hunt depicted on the floor of the dining room may represent what was a favourite pastime of the owner of the villa. It may have sparked many a story about one or another incident, real or imagined, during those hunts, and provided the host and his guests with a subject for conversation during a lull in the other entertainments. Since the dining room opened onto the peristyle, there was plenty of space for musicians in the garden, and in the corridor for a stage of sorts. The rooms were so arranged that for really large dinner parties a "T" shaped table and seating arrangement could be set up into each side of the corridor or for really huge parties, the table could be extended into the peristyle. In either case, there was plenty of room for the entertainers to wander around the table and amuse the guests, and of course, for the slaves to serve them.