

# **SLEUTHING CLUES ABOUT A ROMAN MOSAIC STARRING TEN SPORTY WOMEN**

By Casondra Sobieralski, May 7, 2012

## **MAP OF AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNEY**

In the Villa Romana del Casale, Sicily, a small chamber is decorated with a fourth-century c.e. floor mosaic depicting ten sporty female figures. It is casually termed “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” because the women all wear bikinis. Since depictions of female athletes in antiquity are rare, this piece has inspired me, as a New Media artist and as a Boston-qualifying marathon runner, to create a contemporary homage to these ancient women, whether they were actual documented people or imagined figures. I am going to create simple 2D animations from the mosaic, and site-specifically geo-locate them using augmented reality.

In order to conceptualize my contemporary piece, I need to engage in a dialogue across space and time with the ancient artist who created the mosaic. I am striving to hear what he (presumably, given the artist’s culture) was trying to say through the piece so that I can position myself to respond. Will I be debuting the artist’s message to a new, contemporary audience, or will I be offering a critical rebuttal from my own time period? In a sense, I am playing a volley-game with the original artist; but will that game be cooperative or competitive?

Thus, in researching this mosaic, I have set out to interpret how the artist intended the ancient viewer to interpret it. Were these women athletes to be taken seriously, or was this image some sort of parody? Further, who can we determine that ancient viewer to be? Was this piece intended for guests of the villa or for residents? Was it in a location that only women would access, was it for general viewing, or was it perhaps even an ancient *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* objectifying the “bikini girls” for men? If the intended audience was women, was the purpose of the image to empower and encourage their fitness, to commemorate an event, to simply to serve as decoration, or something else?

Few scholarly sources exist that probe the mystery of “The Bikini Girls Mosaic”, and those that do are in Italian. Therefore, I have approached my inquiries by referencing both art historical sources and sources about women’s sports in antiquity, some of which at least mention the mosaic. Through the sports-oriented sources, I have mined how female athletes were perceived in fourth-century Rome. How common was it to be a female athlete in that culture? What status did they hold? Was sport just for fun, or did it have other purposes such as health, vanity, or ritual? What are the objects the “bikini girls” are holding? To animate, I need to know how the objects move through space and how they enhance or encumber the figures’ movement; but the objects also hold clues to interpreting meaning. I did not find any voices of female athletes themselves, so evidence comes from Roman poets, other art pieces, and contemporary sports scholars’ interpretations of the past.

Through the art historical and archaeological sources, I have examined where in the Villa Romana del Casale “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” is situated. I have also questioned what mosaics and visual clues exist in the rooms around its location, “room 38”. I thought this might give me insight into who moved through this part of the villa and under what circumstances.

First, I shall describe the mosaic in question. Second, I shall consider findings about sports in the Greco-Roman world, and women’s participation in those sports. Third, I shall look at the location of the mosaic in the context of the villa overall. Finally, I will form hypotheses about the meaning and intention of the mosaic considering all of these angles.

## **“THE BIKINI GIRLS” MOSAIC: AN EKPHRASIS**

The dimensions of this rectangular mosaic do not seem to be well documented, but the chamber housing it is small compared to other rooms in the villa. The mosaic’s landscape orientation is divided into two horizontal registers by a two-toned green stripe. The five female figures of the upper register stand on this stripe, and the lower register figures stand on a similar stripe at the bottom edge of the

composition. Thus the horizontal green bands serve both the pictorial function of grounding the figures and the graphic design function of proportioning the space. All ten figures occupy roughly the same z-axis plane, creating a shallow depth of field. The entire mosaic is bordered by a pattern of small blue or bluish-green triangles pointing outward. A missing top left corner reveals that this mosaic was installed over an earlier geometric mosaic.

The ten female figures are engaged in action poses, turning, gazing, and running in different directions. Some of the figures wear red bandeau tops and red bikini bottoms, whereas others wear blue tops with red bikini bottoms. One wears a necklace and another wears a necklace, an armband, and an ankle bracelet. The ten figures' hairstyles rhythmically alternate between being pulled back and hanging loose and free. All have muscular bodies, but some are more tone and chiseled than others. Some of the women hold sporty attributes such as dumbbells and a discus, two are running, and two others are volleying a ball. Important to note from an animation perspective, the Romans had at least five types of balls, and given that the ball in this register seems to float on air, I am deducing it is a *follis*. This type was made from inflated pig bladders and rounded over a fire. It could also possibly represent a *pila paganica* (peasant ball), a type stuffed with feathers like a medicine ball. Any of the other ball varieties would be too hard and rigid (like a golf ball) for the sort of bodily contact depicted. The second figure in the lower register holds, in her outstretched muscular arm, a perplexing golden object that looks like an encircled flower on a stick. H.A. Harris devotes a chapter of his book *Sport in Ancient Rome* to hoop bowling, which was taken seriously in antiquity. The sport involved tossing, spinning or rolling a wheel-like hoop with a stick or a hook. Oddly from a contemporary perspective, Ovid looked upon hoop bowling as a "manly" endeavor; but we know from Propertius that Spartan women enjoyed the game.<sup>1</sup> Based on these textual suggestions and on another Roman mosaic (now in

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome*, 133-140.

the Mosaic Museum in Istanbul) of boys running a race with a nearly identical shape, the perplexing golden object has to be this sort of hoop.

The lower left figure wears a golden toga exposing her left breast. Her brown wavy hair falls loose as she reaches toward the center of the composition with her right hand to offer a wreath of warm-toned flowers. In her left hand, which is closer to her body, she holds a palm frond. The middle lower figure serves as the central point of the composition. Posed frontally with a slight twist, she crowns herself with a flower wreath using her right hand. Her left hand supports a tall palm frond against her tone stomach. With her blue bandeau and red bikini bottom, she forms the bottom point of an inverted compositional triangle; the two blue-topped figures in the upper register form the flat-edge corners of that triangle. Further, figures Number Three and Number Four in the upper register form the top of a triangle that frames this central figure, with the lower left and right figures establishing the base of that triangle.

This mosaic of athletes is as animated as physical activity itself. It requires a lot of visual action on the part of the viewer because site lines dart every which way, but in a controlled manner. This creates a zig-zag eye tracking pattern in the viewer that mimics the darting eyes of a sports spectator trying to follow the action of an athletic event. With each figure captured in mid-motion, the piece is like a series of film stills representing snapshots in time.

## **SPORTS, AND WOMEN’S ATHLETICS, IN THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE**

In Rome, sports in general were more popular during the Imperial period than during the Republic. Upper classes, with their ample leisure time, enjoyed hunting, riding, military preparation athletics, swimming, weight training, ball games, and, as mentioned, hoop bowling or hoop racing. Many villas included a gymnasium, or *palaestra*, for fitness activities. Some villas had their own bathhouses, ball courts (*sphaeristerion*), and masseurs so the wealthy could work out—and recover—in privacy.

The lower class Romans, having more physically demanding jobs, less leisure time, and obviously smaller purses, generally seemed to prefer drinking and gambling over sports. Rural Plebeians, however, did hunt, and urban Plebeians went to public games, particularly gladiator contests and chariot racing. These games also served as a form of political theatre.

Plebeians, too, enjoyed bath culture, but they used public baths. These *thermae* were associated with the emperor and the state, but they belonged to the people and were mostly free. Like the villa baths, public baths included *palaestra* and *sphaeristerion*, and some included swimming pools. The baths sometimes housed libraries and theaters as well, for fitness of the mind. The baths were a place for socializing, therefore eating, conversing, poetry, and sexual romps were all common activities at the baths. Most notably for this art historical detective work, however, the baths, whether public or privately owned on estates, were the epicenter of sport culture and its associated mosaics. Bath mosaics showing Olympic-style sports, chariot races, musical contests, and torch races suggest that Roman citizens sought to associate their personal exercise regimes with the competitive contests of public festivals. Mosaic images of contestants winning prizes such as victory palms and victory crowns—made of gold or flowers—may have motivated those working out in the baths.<sup>2</sup> Newby says, “By including scenes of athletic competition among other public spectacles they [the mosaics] suggest that by the fourth century athletics had come to hold a secure place among the public spectacles of Ancient Rome.”<sup>3</sup>

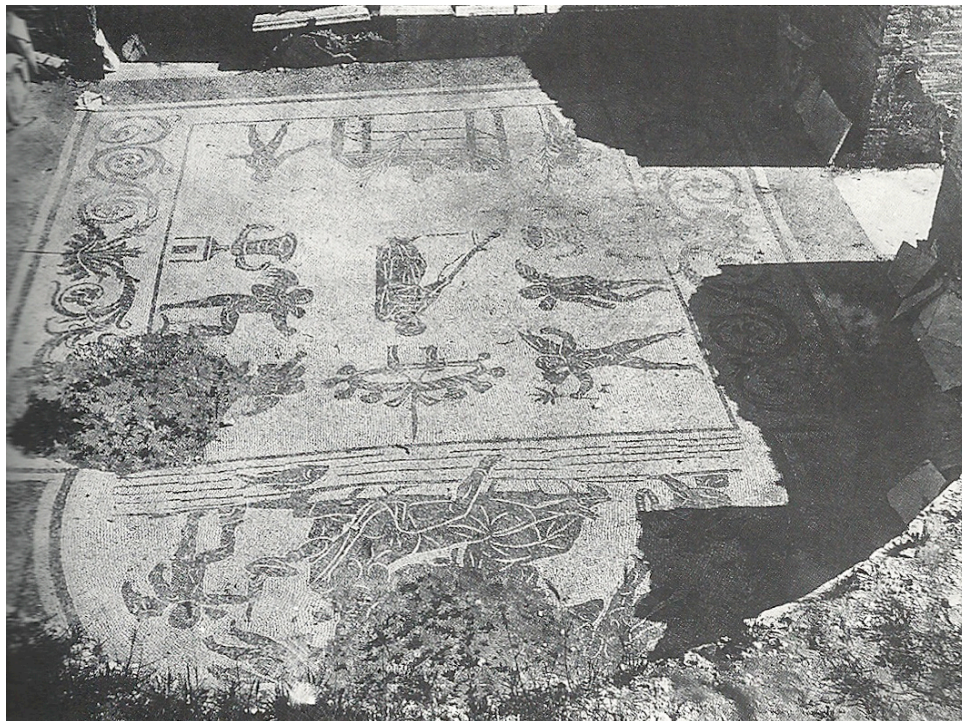
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<sup>2</sup> Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.



*A mosaic from a changing room of Porta Marina baths shows male athletes engaging in some of the same activities as the “bikini girls”. Note the athlete on the right is holding a discus, whereas some early scholars called the same shape a tambourine when held by one of the “bikini girls”. (Image from Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue*, 53.)*



*This bath mosaic from Terme Maritima prominently features a floral victory crown. It shows floral crowns were not just for female competitors. (Image from Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue*, 57.)*

Examining examples of bath mosaics from Rome, Ostia, and Pompeii, though, a question arises: Where are the women athletes? Women definitely used the baths, though in some cases at different hours than men or in different sections. Those sections often lacked the spacious *palaestra* that men's sections had. So where did female athletes train? "The Bikini Girls Mosaic" at Villa Romana del Casale seems to be the only known example of a mosaic of female athletes, yet we know that at least some women in ancient Rome indeed *were* athletes.

According to sports historian Allen Guttman, "...there has never been a time when girls or women were wholly excluded from sports, and there certainly have been times and places when their involvement was almost as extensive as men's."<sup>4</sup> Rome does not seem to be one of those places, like Sparta, where female athleticism was *as* widespread as men's, but we have plenty of evidence that female athletes existed. This may surprise some contemporary readers, since a Roman wife's legal status was on par with a child's, and an elite Roman woman's societal role was to reproduce and supervise slaves in the home.

Clearly some women rebelled against such expectations of passivity, especially when young. Examples from multiple sources abound. Tryphosa and her sisters were admitted to compete in Greek athletic festivals in Roman times. A first-century inscription at Delphi honors the three daughters of Hermesianax and Caesarea for athletic events in both Corinth and Delphi. Augustus created the *Iuvenes* to promote physical fitness, especially for military preparation. It was open to boys and girls alike, ages 18 to 20, of the middle and upper classes. They played team sports in front of crowds, learned equestrian skills, and engaged in gladiatorial combat, within limits (no killing). Emperor Domitian held footraces for girls in the Capitoline Games in Rome. Girls competed at the Augustalia in Naples, a Roman city with ties to Greece. Naples seems to have included races for married women,

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<sup>4</sup> Guttman, Allen. *Women's Sports: A History*, 1.

which would have been rare in the Western Roman Empire and a departure from Greek custom. In 154 c.e. Sei Spes honored his wife for her victory in a race among magistrates' daughters, but we do not know if she was already married when she won.

There is even evidence of female gladiators in Rome. A stele from Halicarnassus, Turkey (but now in the British Museum) shows there were women gladiators in both the Western and Eastern Roman Empire. Their names inscribed in Greek are "Amazon" and "Achillea", but these may have been stage names. Nero had wives of senators compete as gladiators for his amusement, though this sounds more like coercion than sport. The Roman state regulated female gladiators in a decree in 19 c.e., when women of noble rank and women under twenty were banned from the "debasement" of competing in the arena. In 200 c.e., Emperor Severus officially banned all female gladiators, but there exists an inscription from the third century describing them still fighting in Ostia; so how strictly was the ban enforced? The few surviving artistic representations of female gladiators suggest the activity was rare, but the Halicarnassus stele suggests being a gladiator could be a serious profession for lower class women. Some were forced to fight, some fought for the money, and some fought for the thrill, just like the male gladiators.<sup>5</sup> Women gladiators fought against other women and against animals, but there is no evidence they fought against men. "A female victory over a male would have upset the social order of the Romans."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, though more spectacle than sport, women participated in wild beast shows, which were not the same as gladiatorial combat. One type was a form of execution for slaves, but a second kind was a display of hunting wild animals for thrill, money, and audience amusement. Women who

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<sup>5</sup> Crowther, *Sport in Ancient Times*, 153.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



participated in these *venatores* often dressed as Diana, the goddess of hunting, and supposedly they boasted their bite scars.<sup>7</sup>

Roman attitudes towards athletic women varied, but the attitudes towards athleticism in general varied. Some Romans thought that festival sports were decadent, perverse (especially when athletes preferred nudity) and “too Greek”. Roman doctors such as Galen and Emperor Julian’s court physician, conversely, recommended athletics for health of body and mind. Some philosophers such as Seneca thought building muscle was inappropriate for men of letters. Others thought exercise nourished the mind. Cicero criticized Spartan girls who wrestled along the river instead of bearing children. (He apparently missed the point that from the perspective of the Spartan state, at least, female athleticism was part of eugenics philosophy that strong healthy females make strong healthy babies. Officially speaking, athleticism had little or nothing to do with their liberation.) The Roman poet Propertius, however, *admired* Spartan athletic girls, especially their wrestlers: “If Roman girls would do as the Spartans do, / then, Rome, I’d have cause for loving you.”<sup>8</sup> Roman satirists sometimes targeted female athletes. Attitudes towards female gladiators were more likely to be negative if the women were of a high social status; the activity was then thought to be unbecoming. The fact that there were races specifically for noble women, however, shows that at least some sports for women were viewed with respectability.

Reasons Romans exercised or competed included health, fitness, mental acuity, improving oratory skills (by increasing lung capacity, I suppose), fun, vanity, slowing the aging process, socializing, showing patriotism, and training for the military. For the most part, their reasons were the same as contemporary reasons. However, there is no evidence they exercised to be slim like many media-minded Americans are obsessed to do; slimness and paleness were considered to be the unhealthy state

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>8</sup> Warden, *The Poems of Propertius* [3.14], 166-167.

of lovelorn youth and depressed poets. Sports in Rome were generally more secular than in Greece—girls in Greece ran races as part of rituals to Hera, for example—but Roman religious festivals sometimes included an athletic component.

## EN SITU: THE VILLA ROMANA DEL CASALE

Next I will turn to the Villa Romana del Casale to consider the placement of “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” and what that might imply. The villa stands about 550 meters above sea level in the southern Sicilian district of Casale, which is a few miles from the town of Piazza Armerina. For this reason, the frescos within are sometimes referred to as the frescos of Piazza Armerina. The villa is quite secluded and nestled between Monte Mangone to the north and Monte Saldano to the east. Pastoral land rolls to the south. The main rooms face the Nociara stream.

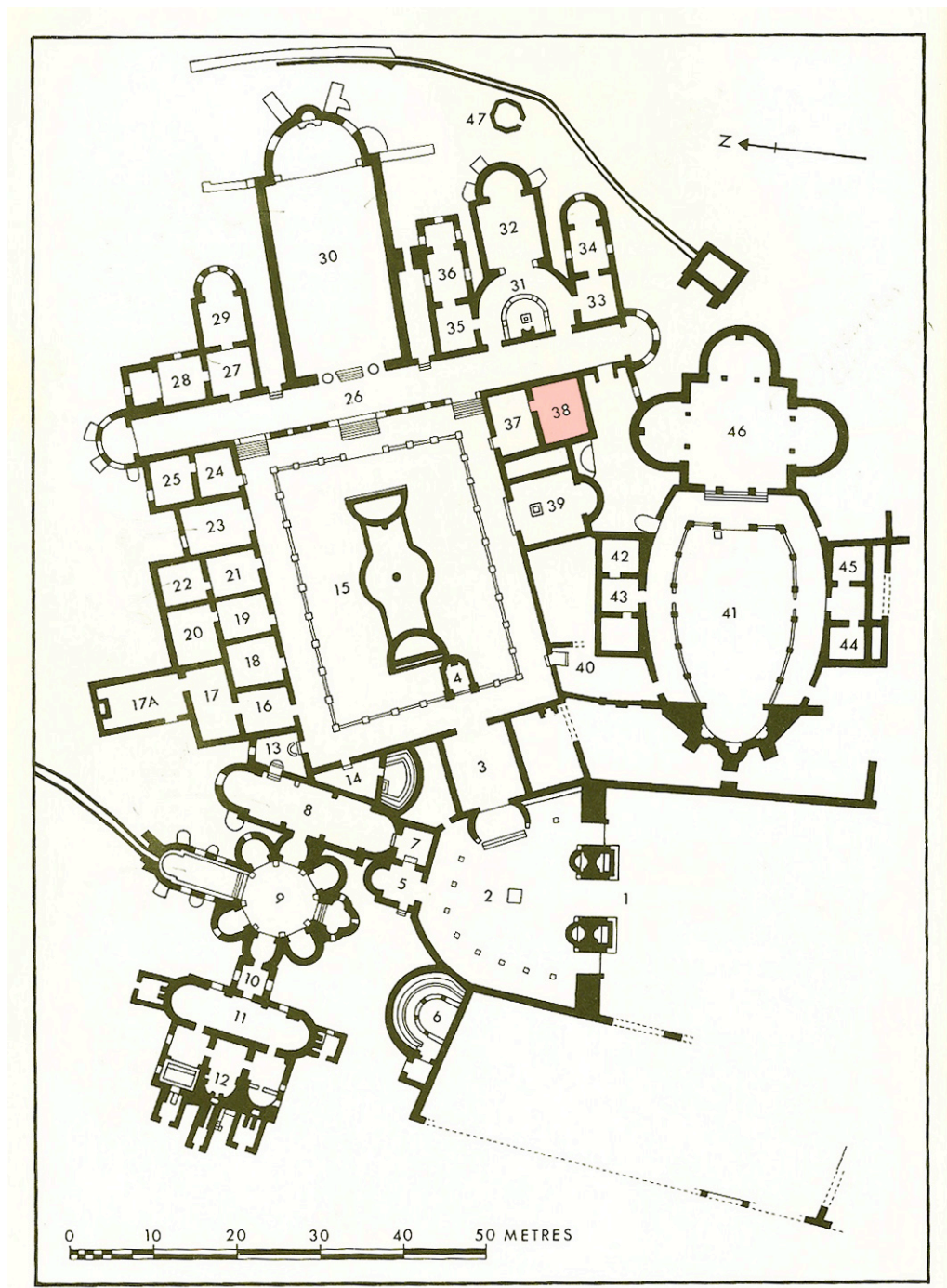
Floor mosaics cover 3500 square meters of the villa, making them the vastest expanse of such mosaics in the Roman Empire. The frescos are made of stones from Africa, not from Sicily, and stylistically they resemble frescos of Roman North Africa. “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” in room 38, however, differs drastically in style from the others; Wilson calls it “one of the least technically accomplished in the villa.” The missing upper left corner clearly reveals it was laid over a previous mosaic. Thus Wilson dates “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” as being about a decade younger than the others, so perhaps from about 320 c.e.<sup>9</sup> Who crafted this mosaic, or any of the mosaics, remains a mystery.

One enters the villa through a courtyard in the southwest quadrant. From the courtyard, one can turn right (eastward) and walk through a vestibule that retains fragments of a welcoming ceremony mosaic. The vestibule delivers the visitor to the peristyle hall with a large ornamental pool and what seems to be a small shrine. Alternately, residents and visitors can enter the courtyard and walk forward, through two

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, *Piazza Armerina*, 41.

small chambers (one of which has a statue of Venus) and into the *palaestra* (room 8) before proceeding to the baths.



1. Plan of the villa

*(Floor plan from Wilson, Piazza Amerina, 12, with color added to the room with "The Bikini Girls Mosaic".*

In accordance with what sports historians have determined to be typical, the *palaestra* includes a mosaic of a chariot race that includes a victory palm for the winner. The *palaestra* also houses a statue of the goddess Cybele. Moving westward, room 9 is the octagonal *frigidarium*, with a marine scene mosaic. Room 9 is surrounded by plunge pools, and then chamber 10, the “Chamber of the *Unctiones*”, includes a mosaic of an athletic man receiving a massage for his muscles. Room 11 is the *tepidarium*, and it includes fragments of a mosaic featuring runners in a torch race. This, too, sports historians would call typical. Crossing back over the *palaestra*, one finds a vestibule, (room 13, between the baths and the peristyle. Room 13 contains a mosaic of a noble woman with a long robe, a boy at her right, a girl at her left, and servants carrying folded clothing and bath accessories. The scene seems to be that of the *domina* of the villa accompanying her two children to the bath, and her hairstyle dates to the time of the Tetrarchy.

I would expect to find the mosaic of the “bikini girls” in this area of the villa, somewhere around the *palaestra* or the baths, because normally that is where mosaics of male athletes are found. Curiously, however, “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” is located on the far diagonal opposite corner of the villa. If room 38 was an additional workout room, one would have had to have walked the entire length and width of the peristyle, around the ornamental pool, to go from the room to the baths or vice versa. Albeit, the best entrance to the baths from room 38, given this layout, would be through room 13, the room with the female-centered bath scene. Still, it is hardly convenient. What mosaics, then, are around room 38? What clues might they give to the room’s use and to who might have used it?

Directly across the peristyle from room 38 is room 23, which contains the famous mosaic of the “Small Hunting Scene”. Along with many animals, it includes a scene of Diana, goddess of the hunt, with a quiver standing before a sacrificial altar fire. Room 26, a very long corridor running roughly on the north-south axis, borders room 38 to the east. It, too, contains a famous mosaic, “The Great

Hunting Scene”. The mosaic in room 26 features animals from Africa plus people dressed in costumes from the Tetrarch era. Could it be possible that spatially Room 38 relates female athleticism with Diana and the hunt, the way the *venatores* did?

A more likely explanation seems to come from the mosaics in room 39, which is just to the west of 38, and from a cluster of rooms on the other side of “The Great Hunt” corridor, rooms 31 through 36. Room 31 is a semicircular atrium with mosaics of winged cherubs fishing. Room 32, the apsed living room known as “Diaeta of Arion”, contains a mythological marine scene. Strongest clues, however, seem to lie in rooms 33 and 34. Room 33, the “Vestibule of the Small Circus”, contains a playful scene of a chariot track with an obelisk in the middle. Four chariots are driven by children and pulled by pairs of large birds. The colors of the birds represent the Roman teams: the reds, the blues, and the greens. A palm of victory is held towards one of the chariots, even though the race is in progress. Room 34, the “Cubicle of Choruses and Actors” includes an apse mosaic featuring two girls of the court entwining crowns of roses and hanging them on a tree. Baskets at their feet overflow with flowers. Also depicted in room 34 is a table with prizes on it, including crowns of roses, branches of palm entwined, and pouches marked with the value of what is inside. A third scene in room 34 is one of musicians and perhaps a judge holding a palm leaf to the musical prizewinner. A fourth register depicts a poet with a lyre, another judge, actors, and more wreaths and palms as prizes. *Rooms 33 and 34, just across a narrow corridor from room 38, are about public competition.* Similarly, room 35 shows a contest between Eros and Pan, a little girl, a little boy, their mother and a servant, plus more palm prizes. Room 36 is the “Cubicle of Children Hunting”, which shows, as the name implies, children hunting, but also maidens preparing to make rose garlands.

Chamber 37, to which 38 is directly connected, merely includes geometric mosaics, like that which is *underneath* “The Bikini Girls Mosaic”. Room 39 is the closest to room 38 to the west, but it is not

accessible from 37 or 38; one has to venture out to the peristyle and then turn into 39. The room, however, includes the “Dieta of Orpheus”, one of the most complete representations of the Orpheus legend from the later Roman period. Orpheus plays his lyre to a crowd of trees, animals and birds, so this room might have been associated with music performances. Room 39 also contains a small fountain and a torso of Apollo.

## SYNTHESIS and REMAINING MYSTERIES

Thus, based on its location and context within the villa, I think the placement of “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” in room 38 circles back to what the sports historians were saying: sports and athletic competitions were an important part of Roman festival culture, *together with* musical events and theatrical/poetic events. All were about pleasure, fun, building community and showing off a bit. From all the sports research I sorted through, and from the iconography of the mosaic itself (not least of all the figures’ defined muscles), I would conclude that the “bikini girls” were indeed genuine athletes, not mere performers playing a parody role. Due to the location of “The Bikini Girls Mosaic”, however, in relation to other mosaics and based on its *distance* from the baths, I would hypothesize that their athletics were seen as part of a multi-room celebration of festival-style competitions—which had a performative air about them. Perhaps the purpose of “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” was to commemorate and/or inspire the women of the house who participated in the athletic aspects of festival competitions. We know from the sports historians that elite women took part in these competitions, whereas lower class women sometimes had careers as gladiators. I suggest that the mosaic in question was perhaps *less* associated with personal exercise and *preparation* for festival competitions at the gymnasium, which is the common place to find mosaics of Roman athletes, or rather, Roman *male* athletes.

Alternatively, despite the distance to a proper bath afterward, perhaps room 38 was still, in addition to the aforementioned hypothesis, a more private area to work out, one designated for the women. The

fact that children also feature so prominently in the neighboring mosaics, and childrearing in that culture was “women’s work”, lends at least some tenuous support to this idea. Is it even reasonable to hypothesize that at one time this area was *going to be* an additional, more exclusive/less public bath area, given its proximity to the aqueduct? No other place in the villa is as close to an aqueduct except the established bathing/gymnasium area at the northwestern corner. So at least at one time, ease of access to water may have been important for rooms 31-36 or rooms 31-38.

Because of room 38’s proximity to what past scholars have presumed to be private quarters—rooms 31-36—I hypothesize that “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” may have been viewed mostly by villa residents, their more intimate friends, and their servants. I think it is safe to assume that these women were not objectified for men like contemporary *Sports Illustrated* bikinied women just because they, too, are in bikinis. First, their stances are active and *subjectified*, not posed for consumption. Second, bikinis in Roman culture were a nod to female modesty; male athletes exercised nude. Third, posed for consumption seems to have been the role consigned to young male athletes objectified for older male athletes; Zahra speaks of the statues of young willowy males in the Roman bath houses, passively looking down rather than meeting the viewers gaze, their suppleness offered to erotic voyeurism.

It would help to know, too, who owned the villa at the time “The Bikini Girls Mosaic” was laid, so as to investigate his/his family’s attitudes about women in sports; but sources conflict. Gentili, in his 1961 documentation of the villa, asserts with certainty that the owner was Maximian based on costume references in “The Great Hunt” scene and based on clues about the *domina* revealed in the welcoming scene at the entry of the villa. Both Gentili and Wilson note that L’Orange also thought Maximian was the owner. Prose, perhaps looking to these earlier sources, agrees it was Maximian. Wilson says that Kähler, Polzer and Settis argued the owner was Maximian’s son Maxentius. Their arguments are also

based on the vestibule mosaic, because it features two boys and Maxentius' wife Valeria Maximillia had two sons.

Wilson himself, however, disagrees with both theories. He says there is no evidence that either emperor had links to Sicily or that either owned such a secluded retreat. Wilson argues that past scholars' "evidence" that this was an imperial villa—architectural motifs, marbles from the same workshop as those in Diocletian's Yugoslavia palace, costuming of figures—could be mere pretension. Therefore, Wilson argues that the villa more likely belonged to an aristocratic Pagan family. Such an owner might have hailed from Sicily or not.<sup>10</sup>

I got excited when Wilson described how a very wealthy Roman *woman*, "Melina", sold off her estates one by one as she, like many Italians, worked her way south to avoid Visigoth invaders from the north. She settled with her husband (Valerius Pinianus) on an estate in Sicily. Did a *woman* own Villa Romana del Casale at one point, and was *she* the one to add "The Bikini Girls Mosaic"? Unfortunately, Wilson dates her southward migration to about 410 c.e., and if Wilson's dating of the late-addition mosaic is accurate, then she was about eighty or ninety years too late.<sup>11</sup> This tantalizing possibility, however slim, makes me want to achieve a more rigorous study of both this couple and of how exactly this mosaic's presumed date was determined. Gentili says that "The Bikini Girls Mosaic" is stylistically similar to those in a Greco-Asiatic lodge in Syria belonging to a caliph at Kossier Amra.<sup>12</sup> That might be a starting point for further research regarding the mosaic's actual date.

I have reached an additional conclusion through this extensive research, one applicable to more than this one curious mosaic. That is, there is a gaping hole in art historical research regarding women's sports in antiquity. Athletics enthusiasts and art historians tend to speak different languages, so more

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<sup>10</sup> Wilson, *Piazza Amerina*, 86-96.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Gentili, *The Imperial Villa of the Piazza Armerina*, 44.



collaboration could yield some exciting--and much needed--findings not only about this mosaic, but also about a plethora of puzzling depictions throughout the Near East and Ancient Mediterranean World. I enjoy that my own athletics help me to have an embodied awareness of figurative imagery, in the same way that my art practice can help me to get closer to an experiential understanding of a historical artist's process.

**Female Athletes from 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman mosaic at Villa Romana del Casale, Sicily (nicknamed "The Bikini Girls Mosaic")**

All photo credits: Yair Karelic Photography <http://www.yairkarelic.com/index.html>



**full mosaic:**

[http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG\\_9176-94\\_2.html](http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG_9176-94_2.html)



**Detail 1:** [http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG\\_9190.html](http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG_9190.html)



**Detail 2:** [http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG\\_9123.html](http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG_9123.html)



**Detail 3:** [http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG\\_9112.html](http://www.yairkarelic.com/Albums/Sicily%20-%20Villa%20Romana/slides/IMG_9112.html)

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