What the Temple Mount Floor Looked Like

By Gabriel Barkay, Zachi Dvira and Frankie Snyder

The Temple Mount Sifting Project has recovered more than a hundred geometrically cut and polished stone tiles known as *opus sectile*, from which we learn how Jerusalem's majestic Herodian Temple Mount was paved.

*Opus sectile*—Latin for "cut work"—is a technique for paving floors and walls in geometric patterns or figurative scenes using meticulously cut and polished polychrome stone tiles. These tiles were crafted and laid with such precision that there was hardly space to insert a knife-blade between them. *Opus sectile* floors were more prestigious than mosaic ones and were typically used in more important areas of buildings. Along with using frescoed walls, stucco decorations and elegantly carved columns, King Herod the Great (r. 37–4 B.C.E.) introduced this paving technique to Israel to decorate many of his palaces, including Masada, Jericho, Herodium and Cypros.

The first-century C.E. Jewish historian Flavius Josephus comments about the pavements in Herod’s Palace in Jerusalem this way: "The interior fittings are indescribable—the variety of the stones (for species rare in every other country were here collected in abundance)." Similarly, about the Temple Mount he writes, "The open court [of the Temple Mount] was from end to end variegated with paving of all manner of stones." In his early research at the Sifting Project, Assaf Avraham was able to identify specific paving tiles found in the Temple Mount material as being consistent with the *opus sectile* technique, and he suggested that some of these may be the paving stones to which Josephus was referring. Continued research has allowed us to distinguish the time period in which many of the recovered *opus sectile* tiles were crafted and to mathematically reconstruct possible floor patterns.

Roman tiles can be distinguished from others found at the Sifting Project—Byzantine, Crusader and Islamic—by careful analysis of the size, shape, material, color and craftsmanship of each tile. A key characteristic of Herodian tiles is the size, which is based on the Roman foot, 11.6 inches. In the floor patterns, each tile was surrounded by tiles of contrasting colors. Dark tiles were frequently made from bituminous chalk (bitumen) quarried locally just northwest of the Dead Sea, around Nebi Musa. Some of the contrasting light-colored tiles were made from local limestone and calcite-alabaster, while others were made of imported alabaster, *africano*, *breccia corallina*, *056 breccia di Aleppo*, *breccia di Settebasi*, *giallo antico*, *pavonazzetto* and *portasanta* from Greece, Asia Minor, Tunisia and Egypt.

Some *opus sectile* patterns popular in the Roman world during the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E. are shown here. These give us some idea of what the flooring on the Temple Mount looked like.

Two blocks comprising four squares arranged in a diamond design in each block have been reconstructed with tiles and tile fragments from the Temple Mount.

Eight-pointed-stars popular in Roman patterns appear to have been depicted on the Temple Mount. This pattern features an octagonal central tile surrounded by small black triangles and contrasting-colored squares and triangles.

Several Herodian floors use the specifically shaped “Herod’s triangle”—a triangle whose base is equal to its height, like a triangle constructed inside a square. This triangle with the unusual corner angles of 52°-64°-64° was very common in Herodian patterns but was rarely seen in floors elsewhere in the Roman world. When used in a pattern, the Herod’s triangles cause adjacent tiles to also have unusual, but mathematically recognizable, corner angles.

On the Temple Mount, this Herod’s triangle appears to have been used in a way similar to what we find at some of Herod’s palaces. The Temple Mount’s triangular tiles each have a base and height of 1 Roman foot.

Several smaller Herod’s triangles made of black bitumen were found in the Temple
Mount material and may have been used in the popular Roman pinwheel pattern.

Herod’s triangles can be used to generate fascinating designs. For example, if four Herod’s triangles are drawn inside a 1-Roman-foot square, this creates a versatile template from which to generate several tile patterns. By adding a small square in the center, variations of a popularly used four-pointed-star pattern can be produced, as shown.

This is just a sample of the *opus sectile* patterns used on the Temple Mount. Several other complete bitumen *opus sectile* tiles with dimensions based on the Roman foot have been found in the Sifting Project. Further research may help us understand how these tiles were used in Temple Mount floor patterns.

*Opus sectile* floors were typically used as pavements in enclosed areas or where a roof would protect them from damage by inclement weather. Huge open or uncovered areas may have been paved with simple large tiles that would have not been affected by the weather, and the Sifting Project has recovered many tiles and fragments that could have been part of these large paving tiles. The roofed, open-air southern basilica-type Royal Stoa that served as a gathering area for visitors to the Temple Mount and for other civic functions would have been a perfect location for *opus sectile* floors. Josephus tells us that the Royal Stoa was about 100 feet wide and 650 feet long—and that its ornate architecture was “more noteworthy than any under the sun.”

The covered porticoes that surrounded the eastern, northern and western sides of the esplanade may also have had *opus sectile* floors. Above all, *opus sectile* pavements may have been used inside the Temple itself.

Once the Temple and its courtyards were destroyed by the Romans, the *opus sectile* tiles would have been easily looted for use in other buildings. Any tiles made of imported marble or marble-like materials would have been highly prized.

Although the Temple and its courtyards were destroyed almost 2,000 years ago, the fact that we have some of the very tiles that were originally used to pave the floors of the Herodian Temple Mount offers us a unique perspective into the ornate architecture of this extraordinary edifice.

Footnotes:

Endnotes:


Temple Mount Sifting Project

**DAZZLING DESIGNS.** More than a hundred colorful stone tiles that once decorated the floors of King Herod’s Temple Mount have been recovered by the Temple Mount Sifting Project. The technique by which these geometrically-cut tiles were paved is called opus sectile, Latin for “cut work.” Reconstructing the patterns in which these tiles were laid can reveal what the Temple Mount floors looked like in the time of Herod.
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GEOMETRIC BEAUTY. Roman tiles found by the Temple Mount Sifting Project have patterns that are consistent with popular opus sectile patterns found throughout the Roman world in the first century B.C.E.–first century C.E. These patterns include two blocks comprising four squares arranged in a diamond design in each block (shown here) and an eight-pointed-star pattern in which eight triangles radiate from a central octagon.

“HEROD’S TRIANGLE,” a triangle whose base is equal to its height, was featured on several Herodian floors. This pattern appears to have been used on the floors of his Temple Mount, where the triangular tiles have a base and a height of 1 Roman foot (11.65 in). Herod’s triangles made of black bitumen have also been used to create the pinwheel pattern popular throughout the Roman period (shown here). The popular four-pointed-star pattern can be produced a variety of ways, with Herod’s triangles radiating from a central square tile.
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