

Mosaics provide missing pieces to popular ancient plays

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Four mosaics depicting Menander manuscripts were found in the ancient city of Antioch. The pictured mosaic represents a scene from 'Philadelphoi,' or 'Sisters Who Love Brothers.'

At the Jan. 6-9 meeting of the American Philological Association, Classics Professor Kathryn Gutzwiller will present her research on recently discovered mosaics depicting lost scenes from four Greek plays popular in Roman antiquity . Her presentation, “New Menander Mosaics and the Papyri,” will introduce previously unknown scenes by Menander, an Athenian comic poet from fourth century BC whose popularity in the Roman empire was only exceeded by Homer.

“Menander, although extremely famous in antiquity, is not so well known in the modern world. I would characterize him as the inventor or most popular writer of the romantic comedy,” Gutzwiller says. “The

unfortunate thing about him though is that over the centuries, his manuscripts were completely lost. However, throughout the 20th century, a number of Menander’s plays were recovered from papyri in Egypt.”

Papyri—thick paper-like materials on which texts were written —are just one medium for preserving information about ancient times. Paintings, mosaics, and small-scale replicas also help reconstruct the plots of Menander’s plays .

When Ömer Çelik, a staff archaeologist at the Hatay Archaeological Museum in Antakya, Turkey, discovered four mosaics during an expedition, he asked friend and University of Cincinnati geography graduate student Ezgi Akpınar-Ferrand to help identify their subjects. She immediately contacted the Department of Classics, knowing Gutzwiller’s background in ancient literature.

“The new material gives us significant information,” Gutzwiller says. “Of the four scenes depicted, three of them are from plays that are more or less completely lost. One is from a play that has been substantially recovered, but not the scene represented in the mosaic.”



A mosaic found in modern day Turkey represents Menander's poem 'Perikeiromene' ('Girl Whose Hair is Shorn').

The mosaics, which were found in ancient Antioch and date to the third century AD, represent scenes in “Women at Lunch,” “Girl Whose Hair is Shorn,” “Sisters Who Love Brothers” and “Possessed Girl.”

“The importance of these mosaics is two-fold. One, they help us to reconstruct each of the four plays. Two, they illuminate significantly the tradition of illustrating Menander and reveal variations in the illustrations of the plays.”

Akpinar-Ferrand adds, “The findings are further valuable to gather more information about mosaics done in and around the city of Antioch during the Roman period.”

Gutzwiller will be one of four invited speakers featured at the APA presidential panel. Steven Ellis and Kathleen Lynch, also with UC’s classics department, will present their research at the conjoined meeting of the American Institute of Archaeology as well.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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