



# *Opus Sectile* Floors on Jerusalem's Herodian Temple Mount

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## ■ Abstract

The Temple Mount Sifting Project has recovered more than a hundred Herodian-era geometrically-cut and polished stone *opus sectile* tiles that once paved the Temple Mount precincts. *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 floors were typically used in more important areas of villas and palaces, especially those areas where the owner would entertain his guests. Remnants of 2,000-year-old *opus sectile* floors can be found in the palaces of King Herod and his successors at Jericho, Masada, Herodium, Caesarea, Cypros, Machaerus, Bania and Tiberias. The finding of Herodian *opus sectile* tiles in the material from the Temple Mount indicates that these elegant floors were also used there.

We have analyzed the size, shape, material, colors and craftsmanship of each tile and have compared them to those used in the *opus sectile* floors at Herodian palaces. By combining these archaeological parallels with basic geometry, research into historical sources and the study of geological materials, we have reconstructed a series of possible floor patterns that may have created the elegant flooring of Jerusalem's majestic Temple Mount.

It appears that the *opus sectile* patterns and materials on the Temple Mount were “upgraded” from those used in the Herodian palaces. For instance, a simple pattern can be created by using square and triangular tiles to form a pattern that resembles smaller squares set inside larger ones. A simple two-squares pattern was used in a bathhouse at Masada, and a three-squares pattern was used at a bathhouse at Cypros. On the Temple Mount, there may have be a more complicated four-squares pattern since we have three sizes of isosceles right triangles, each size precisely one-half of the next larger size, the primary requirement for the construction of this pattern. In another example, an alternating-triangles pattern was used in the bathhouses of Masada and Lower Herodium created from black bituminous chalk and pink limestone tiles. On the Temple Mount, the same pattern appears to have been utilized, but the pink limestone was replaced by imported colored stones including Egyptian alabaster.

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.

