

MOSAIC FLOORS, LITURGICAL VESSELS AND FURNITURE, AND ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE FROM THE BYZANTINE MONASTERY IN NAḤAL QIDRON, JERUSALEM

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Salvage excavations in Naḥal Qidron, south of Jerusalem, revealed a monastery adorned with mosaic floors. Liturgical furniture made of imported marble, alongside local stone imitations, as well as architectural sculpture, were also found at the site (see Zelinger and Barbé, this volume).¹

MOSAIC FLOORS

Despite the fact that the mosaic floors were only partially preserved, the carpets and patterns are easily reconstructed. The church hall, or chapel, and the vestibule (nave and atrium respectively, see Zelinger and Barbé, this volume), were decorated with colorful mosaic carpets (Fig. 1), while the monastery courtyard was paved with a crude white mosaic.

The Church Hall Mosaic

Only five pieces have survived from the mosaic floor of the church hall, including three fragments of the border and two pieces of the carpet—one in the center (L1069) and one on the western side of the hall (L1057). The outer border was designed as a garland of buds, with four buds in the corner creating an open flower or rosette (Fig. 2). Each of these buds sits on a black V-shaped cup (Ovadia and Ovadia 1987: Type F23). The color palette is limited, and includes white, black and a pinkish red. The tesserae were laid diagonally, and those used in the garland are a uniform size of c. 1 sq cm, while the background stones are uniform only in width, c. 1 cm. The density of tesserae in the garland is 121 (counted diagonally) and 90 (counted horizontally) per sq dm, and

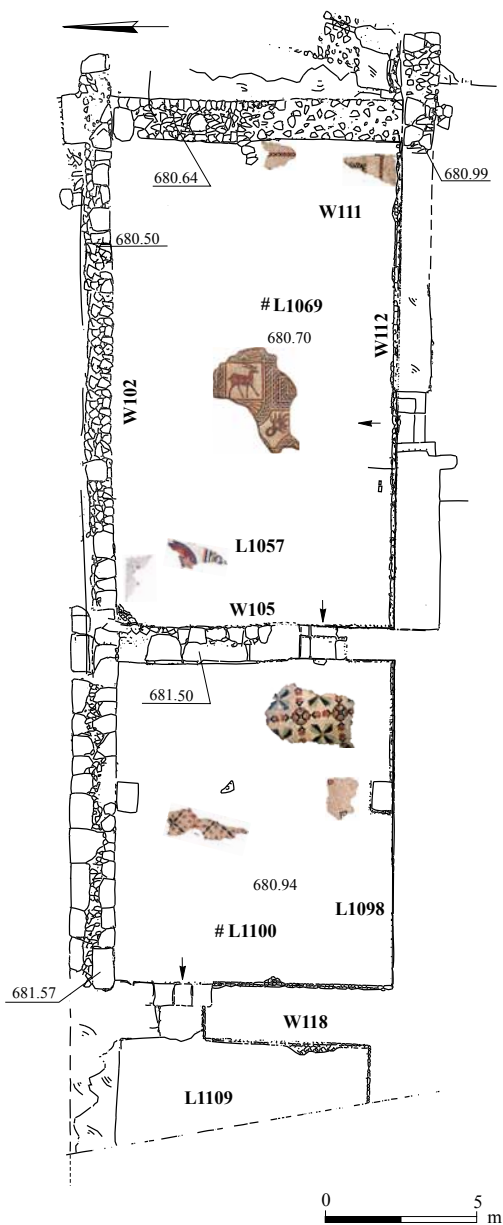


Fig. 1. The location of the mosaic floor fragments within the church.



Fig. 2. Fragments of the outer border of the church hall carpet: (a) garland of buds along the eastern wall of the hall; (b) outer and inner border of triangles and teardrops in the southeastern corner; (c) fragments of buds in the northwestern corner.

in the background, 144 (diagonally) and 90 (horizontally) per sq dm. The design of the buds is identical in all the mosaic sections that have survived in the monastery.

Borders designed as a garland of buds were uncommon in mosaic floors during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods. On the other hand, separate buds on a white background creating a kind of border in the margins of carpets were common, as in the northern and southern aisles of the church at Ḥorbat Berakhot (Tsafrir and Hirschfeld 1979:302, Figs. F, 12–15). An identical design of buds appears in the mosaic of the narthex in the church at Ḥorbat Berakhot (Tsafrir and Hirschfeld 1979: Figs. 40, 41), suggesting that they were produced by the same workshop of mosaicists (see below).

The southeastern corner of the inner border is preserved, revealing a simple design with a frame of triangles and ‘teardrops’, forming a row of crowns, or chess pawns, interspersed with buds (Fig. 2:b). The tesserae of the black border and the white background within it were laid horizontally, while the triangles, the buds and the white background outside the border, were laid diagonally. The pattern was designed using square, rectangular and triangular stones. The stones have a fixed width of 1 cm, while the length ranges between 0.8 and 1.2 cm. The density of tesserae in the area of the border is 195 (diagonally) and 110 (horizontally) per sq dm, and in the background, 195 (diagonally) and 121 (horizontally) per sq dm.

Variants of the pattern, comprised of triangles topped by circles instead of tears, also resembling chess pawns, or borders that imitate fringes of a carpet, are found in the Burnt Palace at Madaba and the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Raṣāṣ in Jordan (Piccirillo 1993:78, 236, Figs. 50, 338, 374, 375).

A mosaic section that has survived in the northwestern corner of the nave shows fragments of buds against a white background (Fig. 2:c).

While only two parts of the central carpet are preserved (Figs. 3, 6), similar compositions in the Holy Land (see below) enable us to reconstruct it as an interlaced geometric composition populated by animals. The interlace is composed of simple lines and guilloche bands creating ellipses, circles and squares, with polygonal spaces between them. Guilloche bands also form the meander (swastika) pattern that fills some of the squares. Three animals have survived: a deer, an octopus and a fish. In the center of a square is a deer depicted in profile, with a frontal eye (Figs. 3, 4). The horns of the deer are serrated and point backward, and the ears are small. A dark brown outline delineates the upper part of the head, part of the horns, and the front and back contours of the body and the legs. It also emphasizes the details of the eye, ears, nose, open mouth and hoofs. A gray outline separates the horns, ears, hoofs, and inner side of the hind leg from the white background. The head is shaped by a

dark brown outline, the face is a lighter shade of brown, and a gray line crosses the upper part of the face, with another, thin gray line below the cheek. The nostril is gray, the mouth is open and the end of the tongue is depicted by one red stone. The round eye has a pupil formed by a large round gray stone surrounded by a curved line of white stones below, a curved line of brown stones above, and black lashes. The neck and body of the deer are brown, and the body is divided into three sections by concentric circles in different shades of brown, with a kind of cross in the center. Gray and white patches and stripes shape the front, the rear, the stomach, the tops of the limbs, and the inner side of the tail.

The design of the deer indicates volume, realized by the interplay of light and shade, with a schematic design of three concentric circles on the animal's body. The tesserae more-or-less follow the curves of the body, other than the concentric circles. The first one to three rows of tesserae of the white background follow the contours of the animal's body, after which they freely fill the area.

On either side of the square housing the deer are two semicircles, together creating an ellipse, and in each of them is a depiction of a conch shell made up of a triangle surrounded by ribs (Fig. 3). The colors of the triangle graduate outward from dark to light, and comprise diagonally laid rows of tesserae in white, beige,



Fig. 3. Large fragment of the church hall carpet (L1069).

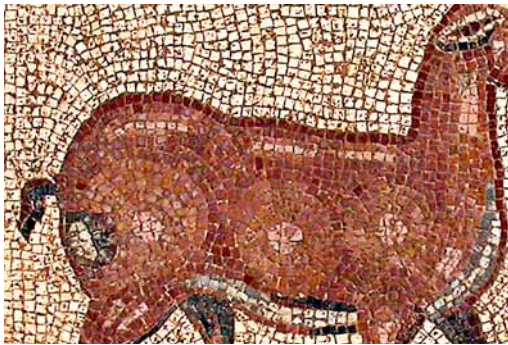


Fig. 4. The deer in the church hall carpet (top); detail of head; detail of body.

yellow and shades of gray. Each rib of the conch shell is composed of a black-gray outline, a row of white, a row and a half of yellow, and three and a half rows of orange tesserae. There are white spots between the ends of the ribs. In the second semicircle, a small section of the shell pattern—one complete rib—has survived, together with a surrounding guilloche border.

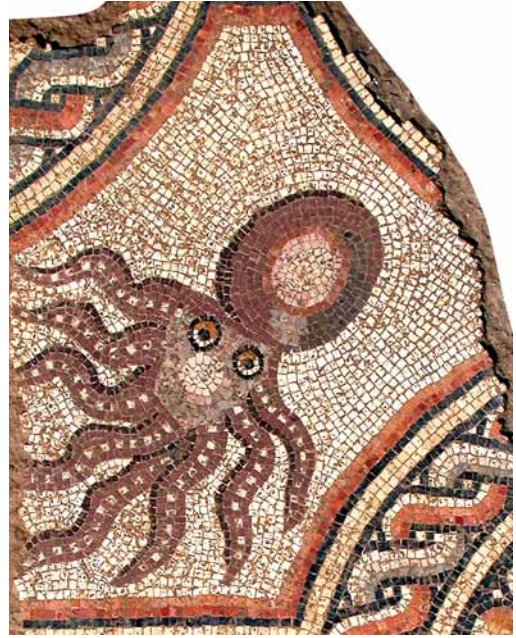


Fig. 5. The octopus in the church hall carpet.

Flanking the square with the deer on the north and south are parts of squares decorated with an intricate meander (swastika) pattern designed by guilloche bands.

In one of the polygonal spaces formed between the interlaces is an octopus (Figs. 3, 5), comprising a head with a pair of eyes, a sack-like body, and eight twisting arms emerging from its head. There is a black-dark brown outline along one side of the ink sack and arms, while the other side is light brown, thus creating a sense of volume. The sack is formed by concentric rows of tesserae with a dark brown outline, several rows of brown, a single row of orange, two rows of pale pink, and an inner circle of white-beige tesserae. The colors of the ink sack hint at its contents, or perhaps the sea creature's ability to change color as a means of camouflage in times of danger. The head is made of light brown tesserae, with a white circle in the center and below it, two round eyes. The pupil is a large, round, gray stone, the upper part is surrounded by a curved white half row, the bottom by a curved brown half row. The line of alternating white and gray dots along the dark gray arms indicates the



Fig. 6. Fragment of a fish in the church hall carpet (L1057).

suction pads. Here too, one to three rows of the white tesserae of the background follow the contours of the animal and the polygon, while the rest was filled in as necessary.

The surviving part of another polygon depicts part of the frame and the head of an open-mouthed fish with gills and a fin (Fig. 6). A black row with a violet row beneath it form the back and the fin. The body is purplish brown and on the back are two rows of alternating orange, brown and pink tesserae. The lower part of the head is formed of pink brown rows, with pink underneath. The pupil is denoted by a round, black stone, surrounded by an inner circle of small white tesserae, an outer circle of small black stones and a semicircle of larger purple stones. Below the eyes, two short, gray rows represent the gills. The area of the mouth is pink, the open mouth is formed by a gray outline, and the interior of the mouth is pink. A gray line separates the area of the mouth from the lower part of the fish.

The color palette of the hall carpet contains black, browns, oranges, grays, red, violet, pink, purple, yellow, white and beige. The tesserae are square, 1.0–1.5 cm in size, with smaller stones, 0.2–0.5 cm, used in the area of the eyes, while a round stone forms the pupil, and triangular and cut stones were used for the details of the animals. The density of the tesserae is 100–110 per sq dm in the guilloche border, 121 in the depiction of the octopus, 132 in the body of the deer and the surrounding background, 143 in the body of the fish, and 168 in the fish eye.

Based on a technical and stylistic analysis of the mosaic in the church hall, it can be dated to the mid-sixth century CE. This was deduced from the use of uniform-sized stones, other than in the area of the eyes; the flat, geometric elements forming the bodies of the animals; the limited impression of volume; and the lack of a sense of movement.

Discussion of the Church Hall Mosaic

The mosaic floor of the church hall has parallels in the Holy Land from the Byzantine and Umayyad periods, which are found in both secular and religious contexts. Similarities are evident in the form of the interlace, although in every floor the components and the choice of motifs populating the geometric units are different. Unfortunately, many figurative images in churches were destroyed by iconoclasts during the eighth century.

Comparative mosaics include those in the Western Church at Ḥorbat Keriot (Govrin 2006:44–47, 117, Figs. 31, 110–114, Ills. 14, 33) in Israel; in Jordan, the Church of St. Paul at Umm al-Raṣaṣ (Fig. 7; Piccirillo 1997:382–392, Foto 27; Maguire 1999: Pl. IV), with personifications of earth and the four rivers of the Garden of Eden, of which only the names remain; the Theotokos Chapel in the Memorial Church of Moses on Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1998:300–304, Figs. 73, 76); and the Umayyad Palace-Castle at Qaṣr al-Hallabat (Piccirillo 1993:350, Figs. 767–769).

The closest equivalent, however, is found in Jerusalem, in the Armenian Funerary Chapel of



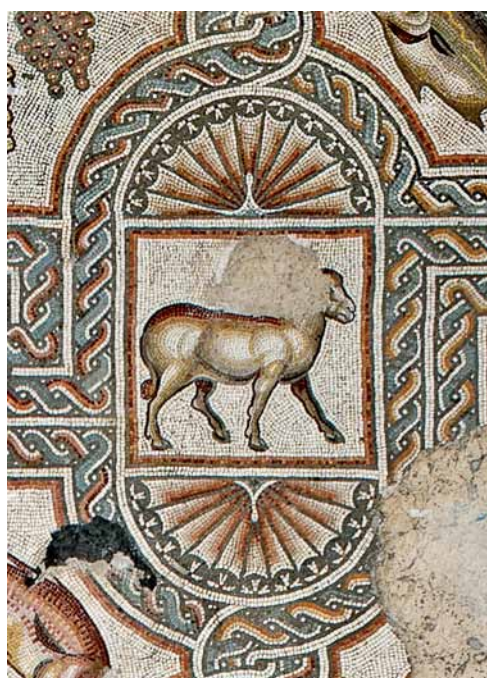
Fig. 7. Mosaic floor in the Church of St. Paul at Umm al-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1997: Foto 27; courtesy of M. Piccirillo).

Artavan on the Mount of Olives, today within the Russian Convent of the Ascension (Fig. 8), which has a variety of motifs such as sheep, chicken, a duck, fish, clusters of grapes, a citron and a harmonic shield (Narkiss 1979:21–22, Figs. 32–34). This floor is one of the most beautiful mosaic floors of the Byzantine period known in the region, created by skilled artists who preserved and continued the Roman mosaic tradition. The similarities, and the geographic proximity (3 km apart), between

Naḥal Qidron and the Artavan mosaics are striking. It is reasonable to assume that the artist who worked at the Naḥal Qidron monastery was aware of the Mount of Olives mosaic, and imitated the grid, the guilloche interlace and the technique of laying the tesserae; or perhaps, a third mosaic was the inspiration for these two mosaics. The difference in quality, however, is evident in the colorful design, the contrasts of light and shade, the graduated colors, and the illusion of volume. The superiority of the



a



b



c

Fig. 8. Mosaic floor in the Armenian Funerary Chapel of Artavan on the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem: (a) the mosaic; (b) detail of sheep; (c) detail of fish.

Artavan mosaic is also seen technically, in the greater density of stones (192 per sq dm) employed in the designs of the fish, the birds and the citron. Thus, the stylistic and technical differences lead to the conclusion that despite the similarity in composition and motifs, these two mosaics were created by different artists, who may have been associated with the same, or neighboring workshops.

The motifs in the church hall mosaic and in the parallels noted above, include fruit and animals. Some of these are also known to have religious symbolic significance. Thus, the question arises, as to how should these mosaics be interpreted? They might be understood literally, i.e., the animals are decorative motifs, a continuation of the long tradition of the *xenia* motifs, the gifts of the earth, the sea and the air, which began in villas of the Roman period, as in the wall paintings and floor mosaics of Oplontis, Pompeii, Rome and Aquileia in Italy (Sampaolo 1989: Figs. on pp. 31, 33, Cat. Nos. 6, 8, 13, 20, 26; Giubelli 1991: Figs. on pp. 16, 18–19, 23; Dellasorte 1998:39–40, Fig. 58) and the floor mosaics of North Africa (Ben Osman 1990a:73–78; 1990b:43–50; Ennaifer 1990:23–28; 1996:65–85). Such designs represented the abundance found in the house, the generosity and hospitality of the host, and the hope for future abundance (Dunbabin 1978:124–125; 2003:63–65, 156–161; Kondoleon 1995:126–133). Alternatively, such motifs in Christian or Muslim contexts might take on a religious or symbolic meaning. Depictions of the fruit of the earth, the fish of the sea, the birds and the fowl of the air express religious, philosophical and cosmological ideas—the celebration and richness of life, and the beauty of nature (Darmon 1990:107–112). In this way, the *xenia* depictions, among them the fish of the sea, continued to appear in church mosaic floors, for example, the abundance of fish and crabs in the northern aisle of the church at Bet Guvrin (Ovadia and Ovadia 1987:18–20, Pls. VII:1, 2; IX:1, No. 17), and the fish head with a hook in its mouth in the church of the Monastery of Martyrius at Ma‘ale Adummim (Khirbet el-

Muraşşas; Magen and Talgam 1990:123–125, Figs. 41, 45, 46). The depiction of the material world created by God in a Christian building of worship can be interpreted as expressing the diversity of nature, but also as an allegory and narrative of the creation, and as tidings of the new Christian era (Maguire 1987:81–84). This, in effect, turns the church into a micro-cosmos, and this is how the church hall mosaic should be interpreted—an illustration of the abundance and beauty of nature and God’s gift to his creatures on earth (Habas 2005:295–298).

The Vestibule Mosaic

In the vestibule (L1100; see Zelinger and Barbé, this volume), a mosaic floor fragment of a garland border and the end of a rectangle(?) survived along the southern wall (Fig. 9:a). The rectangle is formed by diagonally laid rows of black, gray and white tesserae; between the garland border and the rectangle is a white mosaic background.

Also preserved are two fragments indicating that the carpet was divided into two panels (Fig. 1). The western panel (Fig. 9:b) was decorated with a combination of two geometric grid patterns on a carpet of scales (Avi-Yonah 1933:141, Types J5 and J3 respectively). One grid pattern, composed of chains of small, black, alternating ellipses and beads, was laid diagonally to create outlines of black diamonds. The other grid, composed of a combination of large, red, concave-sided diamonds, was laid horizontally to form outlines of large red ‘flower squares’. Each flower square contains a background of white-gray tesserae laid in the form of ‘scales’, with buds made of reddish-pink and black tesserae in the center of each scale.

The color palette of the western of the vestibule floor is limited: black, white-gray, pink, and a reddish pink. For the most part, the stones are square and very uniform in size, 1.0–1.2 cm, with triangular stones used to shape the ends of the buds and fill in the ends of the ellipses. The stone density in the buds is



Fig. 9. Mosaic fragments from the vestibule of the church: (a) garland border along the southern wall; (b) pattern of diamonds formed by ellipses, and beads in the center (L1100); (c) pattern of diamonds comprised of buds containing leaves or flowers on the western side.

110 per sq dm, and in the ellipse chains, 81 per sq dm.

This geometric-vegetal net pattern is common in churches in the region during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods. Among the many examples, worth of mention in the Jerusalem area are those of the Khan el-Aḥmar (Avi-Yonah 1933:180), the Monastery of Martyrius at Ma'ale Adummim (Khirbet el-Muraṣṣaṣ; Magen and Talgam 1990:116–119, Figs. 36, 37a), and the Northern Church at Herodium

(Fig. 10; Ovadiah and Ovadiah 1987:69, Pl. LXXXII, No. 96; Netzer 1990:166–168, Figs. 3, 5).

The eastern panel (Fig. 9:c) was designed as a grid of diamonds composed of buds, each diamond containing leaves or flowers. The intersections of the diamonds of buds form large, open, four-petaled flowers or rosettes. The grid of diamonds is composed of two buds that are facing, but not touching, and the rosettes created at each intersection of the grid



Fig. 10. Mosaic floor in the Northern Church at Herodium (Netzer 1990: Fig. 5; courtesy of Roi Porat and the late Ehud Netzer).

are actually four large buds joined together. The petals of the rosettes are formed of concentric circles that are white in the center, becoming darker toward the edges in shades of pink and brown. The petals are separated by black lines that create a kind of cross, with a white stone in the center. In the middle of the diamonds are leaves or flowers made up of a central yellow-orange circle, from which grow four serrated leaves. Each leaf is depicted in two alternating colors, half green and half black, arranged in rows ending with triangular stones that mark the serration of the leaves. In the black half, the teeth turn to the right, and in the green half, they turn to the left, and they rise to their greatest height in the center.

The color palette of this panel is white, black, orange, pink, brownish purple and green. The tesserae are uniform in size, c. 1 cm, and the density is 110 per sq dm in the background, and 144 in the open flower (diagonally) and 110 (horizontally).

A similar mosaic was revealed in the crypt of the church at Ḥorbat Berakhot, south of Jerusalem (Fig. 11; Tsafirir and Hirschfeld 1979:317–318, Figs. 28–30, 37, 38; Magen 2010:214–215), and the density of 145 per sq dm is also identical. However, the floor at Ḥorbat Berakhot is more delicate and colorful.

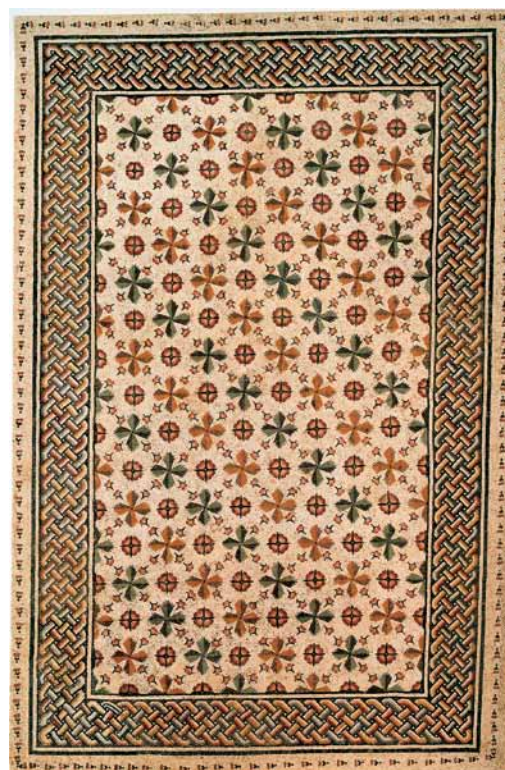


Fig. 11. Mosaic floor of the crypt in the church at Ḥorbat Berakhot (top) (Magen 2010: Fig. on p. 215; courtesy of the late Yoram Tsafirir, and the late Yizhar Hirschfeld); detail (bottom).

The tesserae of the background were laid differently than the background in the Naḥal Qidron vestibule, although the technique was known and implemented in the mosaic of the church hall there (see above). In addition, at Ḥorbat Berakhot there are serrated leaves of brown and beige, as well as green and black, creating a richer design. The close resemblance of these two floors suggests that they were products of the same mosaic workshop, or that the two artists were aware of each other.

LITURGICAL VESSELS AND FURNITURE, AND
ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE

In the southwestern area of the monastery, fragments of two liturgical vessels and a marble panel were discovered in L2060, the fill below the floor of Room 2053 that functioned as a flour mill (see Zelinger and Barbé, this volume: Plan 1). Above the eastern burial complex, on a white-mosaic surface just outside the eastern wall of the monastery (L1092), a fragment of a leg of an altar table was recovered, and in a corner of the vestibule (L1098), a limestone bracket was found (see Zelinger and Barbé, this volume: Plan 1).

Mortarium

Two joining fragments belong to a mortarium made of local red limestone (*mizzi alḥmar*), 9 cm high and 4 cm deep, with walls 2.5–3.0 cm thick and the base 5 cm thick (L2060, B20127; Fig. 12). The surface and rim were crudely chiselled, with visible chisel marks, while the inside of the bowl was roughly smoothed and the base is smooth. On the exterior of the bowl is a shallow engraving of a cross, the arms measuring 5.5 and 5.8 cm. Four ‘horned handles’ originally protruded from the rim of the bowl, two of which remain; they functioned as spouts.

In the Byzantine period, mortaria appear in both secular and religious contexts: in private houses, stores, cemeteries, churches, monasteries and baptisteries. Notable are the marble mortaria from the church at Ostrakine in North Sinai (Habas 2013:1059, Fig. 11), Bet She’an (Scythopolis), Jerusalem (Crowfoot and FitzGerald 1929:76, Pl. XVIII:21, 23; Tushingham 1985:100–104, Fig. 77:14), Siyar el-Ghanam (Corbo 1955:87, Tav. 28, Photo 80:3) and ‘Avedat (Oboda; Negev 1997:177, Photograph 283). They had various uses, including liturgical. Some scholars propose to view them as libation bowls (Negev 1997:177), bowls for washing hands, bowls for washing sacred vessels or mortars to grind incense (Dyggve and Egger 1939:44, 49, Abb. 62; Sodini and Kolokotsas 1984:207, Fig. 170, nn. 148–151). The role of the mortarium in the lives of monks in a Judean Desert monastery can be deduced from the treatise *Vita Sancti Georgii Chozibitae* (*Analecta Bollandiana*, VII, 1888:108). In this treatise, we read of a monk leading an exemplary life who asks those responsible for the pantry to collect for him the remains of the food from the tables on Sundays, which he grinds in a stone mortarium, makes into balls, and dries in the sun for several days. He then moistens them with water and eats them in his cell.

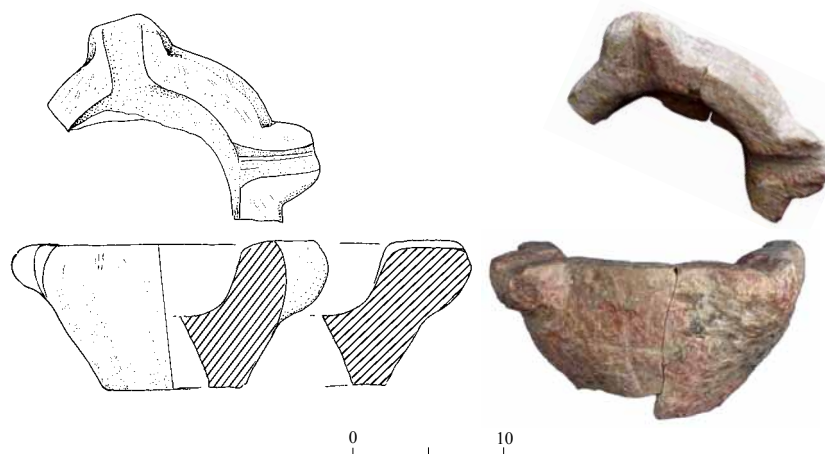


Fig. 12. Mortarium.

Polylobed Liturgical Basin/Bowl

Discovered alongside the mortarium in L2060 were seven fragments of a magnificent, rare marble liturgical basin or bowl with a polylobed lip (B20120; Fig. 13). It is unique in form, as well as in its large size and quality. It is 16.4 cm high, with an external diameter of 56 cm, and the wall thickness varies between 1.5–1.6 cm in the lower part, increasing upward to 3.8 cm. It has a rounded base, 1.5–2.0 cm thick, with delicate chiseling marks. The outer surface of the bowl is polished, emphasizing the dark gray veins of the marble. There are no identical parallels for this bowl, although some similar imported marble bowls have been found in the region, for example in the monastery at Mount Nebo (Saller 1941:153, 294, Cat. No. 68, Fig. 32:1, Pl. 129:11; Acconci 1998:497–499, Fig. 79, Pl. V:6, No. 79) and the Episcopal Church at Pella (Smith and Day 1989:130–131, Fig. 42).

The liturgical role of such bowls is unclear. If the vessel is large enough, it can be identified as a fountain (κρήνη), as in the Church of St. Demetrius at Thessalonika (Orlandos 1952:120, Fig. 70), and if it is found in a cemetery, it can be related to the funerary ritual, as at Salona (Dyggve and Egger 1939:43, 49, 51, Abb. 61:3–5). However, most of the bowls have been found in church contexts and are interpreted as vessels for holy water (Leclercq 1910a; 1910b), for washing sacred objects, or for washing the priests' hands before and during mass (Lassus 1947:203), as, for example, the marble hand-washing bowl from the Theothokos Precinct Church on Mount Gerizim (Magen 2010:232, Fig. on p. 233). In the wall mosaic in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna (547 CE; Deichmann 1958: Fig. 358), Empress Theodora leads a procession bearing a chalice for the sacrifice of the mass, and is preceded by two ministers, one of whom parts a curtain to reveal the spouting water of a fountain. Basin-fountains also appear in a mosaic floor at Tayyibat al-Imâm (Zaqzuq and Piccirillo 1999:445–446, Plan I; Pls. I, VI; Figs. 3, 5–7, 10–12).

In churches throughout the Byzantine Empire, the image of a basin with a pair

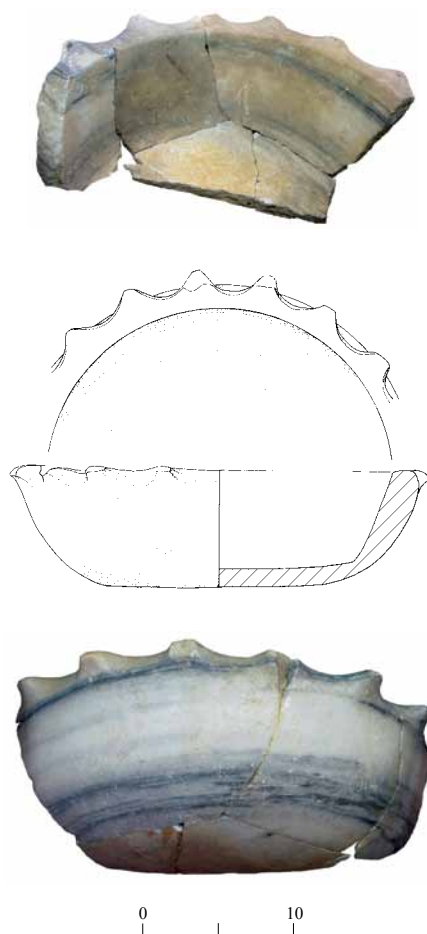


Fig. 13. Liturgical basin/bowl with polylobed lip.

of animals at its side is understood as the 'Fountain of Life', with the animals symbolizing believers coming to drink the waters of faith, as in the mosaics in the central church at Cyrene, and in Como, Pitsiunte, Salona, Carthage (Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980:52–53, Pls. 89–91), Oum Hartaïne (Donceel-Voûte 1988:193, Fig. 168), Khan Khaldé (Chéhab 1958:113; 1959: Pls. LXII, LXXIV), and also in illuminated manuscripts (Underwood 1950).

While the bowl from the Naḥal Qidron monastery is not large or deep enough for baptism nor is it shallow enough for communion bread, its rarity, ornate design and large dimensions indicate some important liturgical use. It might have been used as a basin for holy

water set at the entrance to the church or by the altar table.

Decorated Panel

In the same fill beneath the floor of Room 2053 (L2060, B20122) was a fragment of an imported marble panel preserving part of an engraved wreath and a fleur-de-lys. The marble is gray-white with gray veins, the background is 2 cm thick and the carved relief protrudes another 0.5 cm. The front and back are excellently worked and smoothed. This fragment belonged to the central part of a panel decorated in relief with a laurel wreath, fleurs-de-lys, and perhaps a cross inside the wreath. Only two clusters of the wreath remain, each made up of three serrated leaflets, and one of the three petals of a fleur-de-lys can be identified on the bottom right (Fig. 14). On the back of the panel are traces of patina.

A comparison with chancel-screen art allows us to reconstruct the decoration as a common composition found in a large group of panels bearing the *stephanostaurion* (wreath-cross) motif in their center (Habas 2009:103–104). This motif comprises a cross with fleurs-de-lys between the arms, all within a laurel wreath, as discovered in the church of the Monastery of the Lady Mary (567 CE) at Bet She'an (Fig. 15; FitzGerald 1939:3, Pl. III, Fig. 5; Habas 1994,

I:60; III:39–40, Fig. 57, No. 57; Israeli and Mevorah 2000: Fig. on p. 130), and the Church of Nilus (the western church) at Mampsis (Negev 1988:107, Fig. 9; Habas 1994, I: 62; III:42–43, Fig. 62, No. 62; 2009:102, Fig. 2.2).

The *stephanostaurion* motif symbolizes the triumph of Christ over death, and the redemption and salvation that he brings to Christian believers. The fleur-de-lys held by Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary originates in the early apocryphal text the *Protevangelium*, or the Book of James, which dates to the end of the second century CE and describes the life of Mary (*Protevangelium Jacobi* XI, 2). It is a symbol of her virginity on the one hand, and of the life and rebirth that stem from the appearance of Jesus and his works on the other. The origin of the symbolic meaning of the fleur-de-lys is found in the Egyptian water lily (*nymphae lotus*), which symbolized life and resurrection in ancient Egyptian art (Lurker 1994:77–78). Thus, the iconography in Byzantine chancel-screen panels of lilies incorporated between the arms of the cross or replacing it, emphasizes the purity and virginity of Mary, as well as resurrection and salvation (Habas 1994, I:90–93; 2000:124–128; 2009:101–104).

The function of this panel is unclear. It may have been placed in a prominent position on the wall of the church, or perhaps served as a tombstone, the latter supported by the

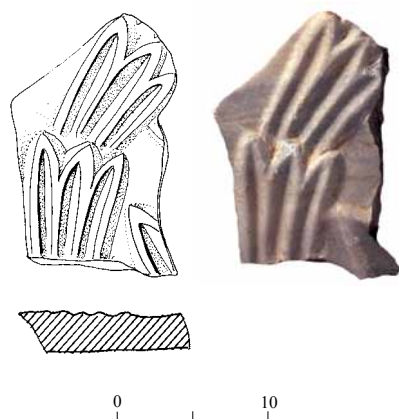


Fig. 14. Fragment of a decorated panel with a wreath and fleur-de-lys.



Fig. 15. Chancel screen from the church of the Monastery of the Lady Mary at Bet She'an (Israeli and Mevorah 2000: Fig. on p. 130).

existence of burial complexes in the Nahal Qidron monastery and the patina on the back of the panel. An inscription on a mosaic floor in Chapel G of the Monastery of the Lady Mary at Bet She'an, which deals with a tombstone decorated with a *stephanostaurion*, supports this hypothesis: "Where the wreath-cross (στεφανοσταυρίον) is, there lies the ... (?) of the mouth of the tomb, having rings; and he who wishes lifts up the wreath-cross and finds the... (?) and buries the dead ..." (FitzGerald 1939:14–15, Pls. XIV, XXI, Insc. IV).

Table Leg of Bituminous Schist

Three fragments of a colonnette leg of an altar table (*sacra mensa*) made of bituminous schist (Fig. 16) were found on the crude white mosaic floor above the eastern burial complex (L1092, B10263). It may be that these fragments and the mosaic floor attest to a place of prayer for pilgrims above the eastern *hypogaeum*, or perhaps they originated in the church hall. Two

joining fragments of the leg measure 15 cm in height and 8.5 cm in diameter. The upper part of the leg has been smoothed. Another fragment, belonging to a stylized lotus capital, is broken in half and preserved 12.5 cm high. It has a lateral groove positioned 3 cm from the top of the column, a vertical groove above it, and the smoothed, concave upper part that indicates the beginning of a stylized lotus capital that topped such altar-table legs.

This molded altar-table leg, decorated with a schematic lotus capital, is in fact a local imitation of imported marble altar-table legs, as revealed in the church of the monastery at Khirbet ed-Deir (Habas 1999:119–122, Pl. 1:5–7, 9–11) and the church at Ostrakine in North Sinai (Habas 2013:1059, Fig. 11). Fragments of identical local imitations of altar-table colonnette legs made of bitumen have been found in the complex of St. Stephen at Umm al-Raşaş, with a diameter of 8.5 cm, and dated to the eighth century CE (Acconci 1994:306, Figs. 57, 58, Nos. 57, 58). Fragments of altar-table legs made of bitumen schist have also been found with identical schematic capitals in two churches in 'Uyun Musa Valley: in the Upper Church of Kaianus (Piccirillo 1984:311, Fig. 10:a, b; Acconci 1998:532, Figs. 163, 164, Nos. 163, 164), and in the Church of the Deacon Thomas, with a diameter of 9 cm (Piccirillo 1990:241–242, Fig. 3:2, Foto 69; Acconci 1998:532, Fig. 165a, b, No. 165a, b).

The use of bitumen and the schematic style of the design indicate a date toward the end of the Byzantine period, or more likely in the Umayyad period, when the trade in imported marble came to an end after the Muslim conquest and disengagement from the Byzantine Empire. At that time, it became necessary to replace damaged marble liturgical furniture with reproductions in a local-stone imitation of marble, and bitumen was chosen for its resemblance to the color of marble.

Console Bracket Decorated with a Cross

Another local creation is a console bracket decorated with a cross within a medallion

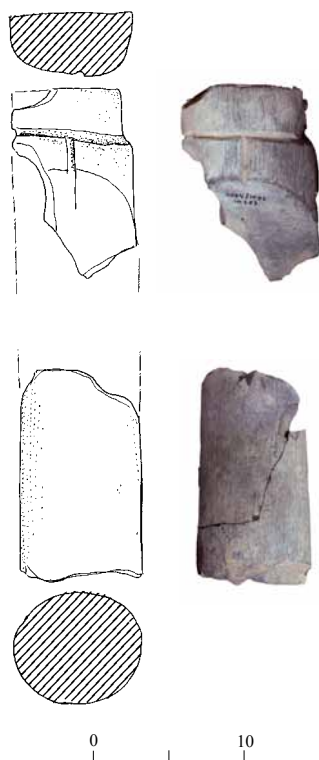


Fig. 16. Colonnette leg of an altar table made of bituminous schist.

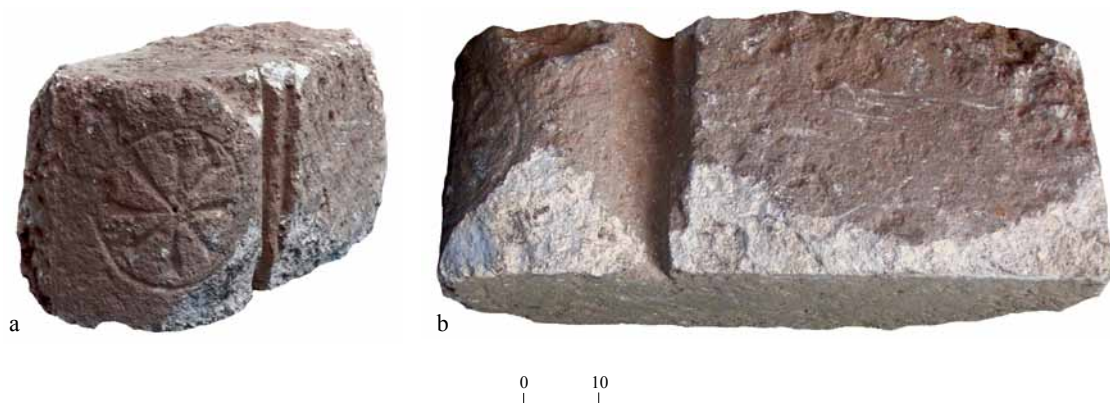


Fig. 17. Console bracket decorated with a cross: front (a) and side (b).

(Fig. 17), which was found on a pile of collapsed ashlars in a corner of the vestibule (L1098, B10265). Originally, this bracket projected from the wall and supported the beam or arch spanning the space between the northern and southern walls. It was formed from a rectangular limestone block, rounded at the protruding end, and measures 90 cm in length, 36 cm in width, and 33 cm in height. A groove was carved 57 cm from the squared end of the block to create a step, emphasizing the rectangular section and separating it from the rounded section. The rounded face is decorated with a medallion, 21 cm in diameter, in which an eight-armed cross is carved. The carving is simple, and at the center of the cross is a 0.8–1.0 cm hole for the compass. The arms of the cross are slightly wider at the ends, creating a triangular shape. The upper and front surfaces of the bracket are smooth, while the sides were roughly chiseled and smoothed, leaving traces of chisel marks.

During the Roman and Byzantine periods, brackets appear in the region in private and public, as well as secular and religious architecture. At sites in the Negev, brackets have been found springing from walls and columns, some simple and others carved with various motifs, such as dentils, bead-and-reel, rope, guilloche, triangles, arches, ivy and vine scrolls, as in the Nabatean buildings and the northern church at 'Avedat (Negev 1997:119–

120, Photographs 73, 176); they also appear in Alahan monasteries in Cilicia (Mango 1978: Fig. 51).

The cross motif is very common in the architectural decoration of churches across the Byzantine Empire, and appears on beams, doorposts and window frames, and mainly on keystones. An eight-armed cross set in a medallion, from which two branches of ivy emerge, is seen on the keystone of the apse window in Salona, Croatia (Dyggve and Egger 1939:27, Abb. 35). In Qal'at Si'man, Syria, the motif appears between two arched windows (Claire 1998: Fig. on p. 59).

SUMMARY AND CHRONOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

The church hall and vestibule in the Naḥal Qidron monastery were decorated with colorful mosaic carpets. A composition of geometric interlaces populated with animals adorned the floor of the church hall, while geometric and vegetal carpets decorated the vestibule. The monastery courtyard was paved with a crude white mosaic floor.

The mosaic floors of the Naḥal Qidron monastery have parallels in the Holy Land from the Byzantine and Umayyad periods, in both secular and religious contexts, but there is a pronounced connection with the mosaics in the vicinity of Jerusalem, suggesting the

existence of at least one mosaic workshop in the Jerusalem area. The Naḥal Qidron mosaics are simpler than those in the Chapel of Artavan on the Mount of Olives and at Ḥorbat Berakhot, and testify to different individual mosaicists, or perhaps a master and his apprentices. There may have been a number of workshops in the Jerusalem vicinity, and the mosaic artist of the Naḥal Qidron monastery was acquainted with the work of his colleagues, and influenced by it.

Stylistic and technical analyses of the mosaics indicate flat geometric elements forming the animals' bodies, a lack of movement and little illusion of volume, and the use of tesserae of a very uniform size for the most part, except around the eyes. These characteristics indicate a date for the mosaic floors in the mid-sixth century CE.

The rare marble bowl with a polylobed lip and the common type of marble panel bearing a *stephanostaurion* motif attest that luxury liturgical items made of marble were imported to furnish the monastery, while at the same time local artists created the mosaic floors, carved the architectural sculpture and the mortarium engraved with a cross, and designed liturgical furniture in bituminous schist imitating imported marble specimens.

The use of bitumen and the schematic design of the altar table testify to a date for this item in the seventh century CE (toward the end of the Byzantine or the Umayyad period), when marble liturgical furniture was being replaced with local products made of material that imitates marble.

NOTE

¹ Photography by Niki Davidov, Clara Amit and Lihi Habas; drawings by Carmen Hersh. My deepest gratitude to the excavators, Yehiel Zelinger and

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