From Wilderness to Paradise: A Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya
From Wilderness to Paradise

A Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya

Jane Chick
Cover: The images on the front cover are six of the fifty panels from the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. From left to right: a stag holding a serpent in its mouth; a personification of Ananeosis (renewal); a Nilotic scene; a leopard; a satyr with a pedum; and a sea-monster. These panels offer a small taste of the eclectic mix of images to be found in the pavement. Photos Author.
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1. Introduction

In the spring of 1957, a group of labourers working at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya came across part of a polychrome mosaic pavement. Subsequent excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Cyrenaica revealed a sixth-century church ‘containing the finest and most interesting set of Christian mosaics yet found in Libya’ (Fig. 1).¹

![Fig. 1. Large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. As shown in Illustrated London News, December 1957](image)

Overview of the Mosaics

Three fields of mosaics were excavated in the so-called East Church at Qasr el-Lebia. The mosaic from the sanctuary is now displayed in the West Church at Qasr el-Lebia, the pavement from the northeast annex has been moved to the floor of a small museum at the site, and the panels from the large pavement—the focus of this study—have been lifted and now hang like pictures in a gallery on the walls of the museum (the borders of the large pavement have been left in situ). It was the opinion of the excavators that all three fields of mosaics were laid at the time the complex was constructed.²

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¹ Illustrated London News, 14 December 1957
² Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 273-76. The dating of the mosaics is discussed later in this chapter.
Fig. 2. Fifty Panels from the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Author
The Large Mosaic Pavement

The large pavement is a remarkably rich and complex work that survives almost in its entirety (Fig. 2). It is composed of a grid of ten rows of five panels, all tied together by a continuous border of interlocking roundels (Fig. 3). Each panel contains a different image and they are all orientated to be viewed from the east and arranged to privilege the central east-west axis of the mosaic. Aquatic imagery is ranged around three sides of the pavement, architectural representations punctuate the images of land and sea, and a mix of real people and personifications populate the mosaic landscape. Given its laudatory introduction by the excavators, subsequent studies have been surprisingly dismissive. In an initial article about the pavement John Ward-Perkins suggested that more than half of the fifty panels were purely decorative, that the pavement comprised a random selection of images from a mosaicist’s pattern book and that the imagery had little or no symbolic meaning. Over the following decades the floor was described as ‘a heterogeneous assembly of unrelated pictures’, as a work of the ‘second order’, as

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3 Each panel measures between c.65cm² and c.67cm² and the whole pavement is roughly 11 m x 5.5 m.
4 Ward-Perkins 1958, 190
5 Goodchild 1961a 219
6 Mathew 1965, 86
having no coherent programme,7 and as lacking any organised planning.8 Some scholars have allowed that the pavement could be understood to represent God’s creation,⁹ and Henry Maguire, who flagged it up as one of the ‘most intriguing and puzzling of the works of art to have come down to us from the Justinianic period’, has published a cogent analysis of the pavement as an example of a so-called ‘Earth and Ocean’ composition.¹⁰ On the whole, however, the panels have only been considered piecemeal.

**Pavements in the Northeast Annex and Sanctuary**

The two subsidiary pavements—those from the northeast annex and the sanctuary—have received much less attention than the large pavement and although they are not central to this study, they are relevant to discussions about the context and interpretations of the large mosaic.

**Northeast Annex**

The northeast annex was attached to an antechamber at the east end of the north aisle and had openings in its east, west and north walls (Fig. 4). The mosaic, now in the museum at the site, is bordered by a series of interlocking shapes, containing birds, fish and poised squares, with Nilotic flora and fauna in the interstices (Fig. 5). A wide inner border is inhabited by a variety of creatures, including a camel, harts or gazelles with bells around their necks, a stag holding a serpent in its mouth and peacocks, and these are interspersed with flowering shrubs and fruiting trees (Fig. 6). A hunter and his dogs are depicted in the west range of the border. At the centre of the pavement is a Nilotic scene with two men in a coracle-like boat harvesting lotus blossoms (Fig. 7), while a third figure hangs on to the tail of a bull that a crocodile is trying to snatch from the riverbank (Fig. 8). Several of the motifs have been highlighted by the inclusion of bright green glass tesserae.

There are three inscriptions in the pavement, one by each opening. By the doorway in the west wall an inscription in a tabula ansata is orientated to be read by visitors entering the annex (Fig. 9).¹¹ Another inscription is positioned by the entrance to the rock-cut tomb chamber to the north of the annex (Fig. 10).¹² A third is orientated to be read by those leaving the annex and entering an unexcavated suite of rooms to the east (Fig. 11).¹³

The mosaic in the northeast annex was almost certainly laid at the same time and by the same atelier as the large pavement in the adjacent room. A number of motifs are virtually identical, for example, harts with bells around their necks, a stag with a serpent in its mouth, trees, Nilotic elements, and the border around the inscription in the west doorway. In addition, inscriptions in both pavements mention an indiction year three.

**Sanctuary**

The mosaic in the sanctuary was arranged around a central altar base. Trees growing from the four outer corners of the tableau denote diagonal axes and the overall composition comprises four repetitive, but

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7 Alfoldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 37
8 Dunbabin 1982, 613
9 Grüber 1962, 138; Stucchi 1975, esp. 400-02
10 Maguire 1987, 44-55
11 ‘Lord of the hosts be (or you are) with us, our succour, God of Jacob, mighty God, eternal God, be (or you are) the shield of your servant Theodorus the new deacon(?)’. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 283
12 ‘Your witnesses were trusted; that greatly adorns your house’. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284
13 ‘This good work also came into being in the time of Theodorus the most holy new bishop. In indiction year 3’. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284
Fig. 4. Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author

Fig. 5. Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author
Fig. 6. Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

Fig. 7. Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author
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Fig. 8. Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

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Fig. 10. Inscription by opening into tomb chamber to the north of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

Fig. 11. Inscription by doorway at the east end of northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author
not identical, figured panels inhabited by a variety of birds and animals (Fig. 12). Each panel features two stags flanking a decorated roundel containing, on the north, south and west sides, a jewelled cross, and on the east side, an inscription. Birds with festoons in their beaks sit on top of the roundels with another pair below (Fig. 13).

Although the assumption has been that all three fields of mosaics in the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia were contemporaneous—both with each other and with the construction of the church—certain aspects of the sanctuary mosaic argue against this. This pavement is less schematic than the other two; even though the trees provide a degree of separation between the four sides of the mosaic, the images are not ordered into registers or contained within frames. None of the images common to both the large pavement and the mosaic in the northeast annex are repeated here and the borders are completely different. The pavement actually bears more resemblance to a mosaic paving the sanctuary of the Central Church at Cyrene than to the other two pavements at Qasr el-Lebia (Fig. 14). Here, the mosaic is also arranged around a central altar base and it is also roughly divided into four sections by trees. Nilotic scenes feature on the north and south sides of the pavement but otherwise the flora and fauna are reminiscent of those found at Qasr el-Lebia. There is also a roundel containing a cross to the east of the altar base, in this case flanked by peacocks rather than stags, but the birds below the roundel

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14 The inscription was already badly damaged at the time of excavation but reads: ‘[This] work [too] [came into being] in the time of [the very holy] and pious Bishop Theodorus’. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284
Fig. 13. Sanctuary pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

Fig. 14. Sanctuary Pavement, Central Church, Cyrene. Copyright © The Society for Libyan Studies 2021
are almost identical to those at Qasr el-Lebia.\textsuperscript{15} Ward-Perkins and Richard Goodchild believed that the mosaic in the sanctuary of the Central Church at Cyrene was laid when the church was built and, based on the similarities between this pavement and that in the sanctuary at Qasr el-Lebia, dated the Central Church at Cyrene to the Justinianic period.\textsuperscript{16} Sandro Stucchi, however, dated the Central Church and the mosaic to the second half of the fifth century.\textsuperscript{17} If then, the sanctuary pavement at Qasr el-Lebia were to take its date from the Central Church in Cyrene—rather than the other way around—it is possible that it could predate those at the east end of the East Church complex.\textsuperscript{18}

If the sanctuary pavement in the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia is understood to predate those at the east end of the building, it would help to explain why, when the church was excavated, the pavement in the sanctuary was partially obscured by the base for an altar (Fig. 15). At some point after the mosaic had been laid the altar base was enlarged and a step was added on the west side. The new base was laid on top

\textsuperscript{15} For the East Church at Cyrene see Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 115-17. The pavement was in a very poor state of repair when the author visited in 2010, but has since been partially restored by a local team from the Department of Antiquities of Cyrene in 2020: Libyan Studies, vol. 52, 2021, 182-87

\textsuperscript{16} Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 157

\textsuperscript{17} This was based on the evidence of its masonry technique: Stucchi 1975, 382-83

\textsuperscript{18} Although the use of trees to create a diagonal axis does appear in other sixth-century pavements, it was already popular in the fifth century and hence its use here does not necessarily substantiate a sixth-century date. Fifth-century examples include the Ibex mosaic at Caesarea: Hachlili 2009, fig. IX-6; and the fifth-century Megalopsychia mosaic in the Yakto Complex at Daphne in Syria: Hachlili 2009, fig. VII-7

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Fig. 15. Altar base and mosaic at time of excavation. East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. From Illustrated London News, December 1957
of the mosaic, truncating the jewelled crosses, rendering the inscription on the east side illegible, and beheading stags and birds. It is not known when this happened or what, if anything, was used to cover the remaining mosaic, but it seems unlikely that headless deer, incomplete crosses and a fragmented inscription would have been considered suitable ornamentation for a functioning sanctuary. Given the ambiguity about the date of this mosaic, it is conceivable, although no more than conjecture, that the west end of the church was already extant when the large hall and subsidiary rooms at the east end of the complex were added, and that the sanctuary underwent refurbishment at this time. The excavators noted that the west end of the nave had been paved with large marble slabs, evidenced only by imprints in the ground at the time of excavation, and it is possible that these may have extended into the chancel area, covering the disrupted mosaic pavement.

**Dating**

The East Church and its mosaics have been dated to AD 539–40 on account of two references to an indiction year three; one in the northeast annex (see above) and the other in a dedicatory inscription near the centre of the large pavement (Fig. 16). Extrapolating a date from indiction years is not straightforward and at Qasr el-Lebia there is no stratigraphic evidence and no recorded coins or ceramics to corroborate this date. The currently accepted dating relies on a circular argument that postulates that an image of Polis Nea Theodorias (The new city of Theodora) in the central panel at the west end of the pavement represents the town in which the church was built, and that this settlement was renovated and renamed in honour of the empress Theodora (d.548), in her lifetime and during the reign of Justinian (r.527–565) (Fig. 17). This assumption has been perpetuated by modern scholarship; Gervase Mathew wrote that ‘in the 6th century this [Polis Nea Theodorias] was the small Episcopal see of Olbia and in 539 it was renamed in honour of the reigning empress as the New City of Theodorias’; A.H.M. Jones states that in Cyrenaica, Justinian ‘created a new—and very small—city west of Cyrene, called Theodoria’, and Paul Magdalino confidently claims that ‘although not mentioned by Procopius, this [Polis Nea Theodorias] was almost certainly one of the cities refounded by Justinian’. Settlements in other parts of the empire

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19 Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 277
20 The inscription has been transcribed and translated by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 282. Indiction years specified the position of a year within a taxation cycle. These cycles were either five or fifteen years and they were calculated from different dates in different regions. An indiction year alone is, therefore, not reliable dating evidence. For discussions about indiction years: Blackburn and Holdford-Stevens 1999, 769-70; Meimaris 1992, esp. 32; Whitby and Whitby 1989, esp. 10
21 Although a few coins have been recorded at other Cyrenaican sites with comparable mosaics, they are generally too badly corroded to be of use for dating purposes. For example, see, Widrig 1975, 69-70
22 Mathew 1965, 86
23 Jones 1937, 362. Jones does note, however, that Hierocles and Georgius, when listing sixth-century cities, ignored Theodoria and recorded only the five old cities.
24 Magdalino 1988, 105
are known to have been renamed in honour of the empress, but even though Justinian’s reputation for renovatio, and for church-building in particular, makes it tempting to credit new or renovated ecclesiastical buildings of the sixth century to the emperor, imperial initiatives in Cyrenaica appear to have been focused mainly on defending boundaries and fortifying the region in order to restrain ‘barbarians in that quarter from making sudden and unexpected inroads into the Roman territory.’ There is no mention of any church building and there is nothing, other than the mosaic itself, to tie either Justinian or Theodora to Polis Nea Theodorias. As Joyce Reynolds has pointed out, although it is ‘a very tempting conjecture that Justinian built a fort here [at Qasr el-Lebia], there is no positive evidence for it.’

However, as well as the indiction year mentioned in the inscriptions, certain diagnostic features help to substantiate a sixth-century date for the pavement. One of its most distinctive aspects is its grid formation. Pavements organised as grids appeared across the central Mediterranean region in the late fifth and first half of the sixth centuries, especially in Albania, Epirus Vetus and Greece, and although the mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia is not precisely matched elsewhere, it does nonetheless fall into this category. The pattern of interlocking roundels that frame the panels was also popular in the sixth century and while the recurrence of this pattern does not necessarily signal direct influence or contact between the different regions, it does help to corroborate the sixth-century date assigned to the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia (see Fig. 3).

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25 John Malalas notes that in AD 528 ‘the Roman Emperor renamed the fortress known as Anasarthon, Theodorias after the Augusta, having granted it city status’: Chronographia18:32, cited in Jeffreys et al. 1986, 259. In De Aedificiis, VI.5, Procopius records that the inhabitants of Béga (Vaga) in Proconsularis renamed their town Vaga Theodoriada, cited in Stewart et al. 2005, 162. Grabar mistakenly associated Qasr el-Lebia with the town of Vaga: Grabar 1968b, 47

26 Procopius De Aedificiis VI.2: Stewart et al. 2005, 155. Procopius also records that in Cyrenaica, Justinian instigated the rebuilding of the city walls at Berenike and Tauchëira, the building of two forts and two fortified monasteries on the southern frontier of Pentapolis, the renovation of the aqueduct at Ptolemais and the installation of a bath house at Berenike: Procopius De Aedificiis VI.2: Stewart et al. 2005, 153-56

27 It is thought that Theodora accompanied Hecebolus, governor of Pentapolis, to Apollonia but nothing more is known of her time there: Sarris 2007, 39. See also Potter 2017, 57

28 Reynolds 2001, 171


30 Grid mosaics have also been found in Roman villas but unlike the fifth- and sixth-century examples, they tended to comprise mainly geometric patterns (for example, the Drunkenness of Hercules mosaic in Vienne, Dunbabin 1999, 77), and on the whole, imagery was orientated to be viewed from all sides of the room, for example, the so-called Rustic Calendar from Saint-Romain-en-Gal: Dunbabin 1999, 80

31 Similar borders have been found in the north aisle of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis: Gjorgjievska 2008, 64-67, and also in the narthex pavement of the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi: Kolarik 1987, 295-306. Blocks of these roundels were used in
From Wilderness to Paradise

A number of panels in the pavement depict animals positioned in front of trees as though suspended on poles in the manner of merry-go-round horses, an arrangement that was particularly fashionable in the sixth century (Figs 18–21). Examples from elsewhere include a ram in a chapel in Madaba, Jordan (Fig. 22), a bull and a lion in the chancel of the sixth-century Church of Deacon Thomas at Mount Nebo, also in Jordan, and a leopard in the pavement in the north aisle of the sixth-century church at Kissufim in Israel (Fig. 23).

Notably, there are eight personifications in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. There are three abstract concepts: Kosmesis (adornment), Ktisis (foundation), and Ananeosis (renewal), (Figs 24–26) four Rivers of Paradise (Figs 27–30), and Kastalia, nymph of Apollo’s oracular springs (Fig. 31). Personification was a common theme in Late Antique visual culture, but it was not until the very end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth centuries that these figures began to migrate from secular contexts to ecclesiastical settings. Personifications of Earth and ocean, the seasons and months, rivers, and abstract concepts, regularly featured in the ornamentation of sixth-century churches and the personifications at Qasr el-Lebia can be seen as part of that development. Of note is the fact that until the very end of the fifth century the Rivers of Paradise were almost always depicted as four streams flowing from the Mount of Waters and were generally confined to the walls or vaults of churches. It was only from the beginning of the sixth century that they began to appear on floors and to take the form of personifications. Another detail

Fig. 18. Sheep in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author
Fig. 19. Gazelle in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

the sixth-century Church of Kıcık Tavşan Adsi at Bodrum in Turkey; Andaloro and Pogliani 2011, 19; and in the sixth-century Plaosne Basiliqa at Ohrid in Macedonia, for a general discussion on Plaosne basiliqa see Bakovska 2010

Piccirillo 1997,128, fig. 138
Church of Deacon Thomas, Mount Nebo: Piccirillo 1997, fig. 266
Kissufim: Hachili 2009, pl.VII-7
Kosmesis can also mean 'order' or 'governance': Guarducci 1975, 673. Ktisis can also mean 'creation' and, more rarely, 'possession' and 'acquisition': Leader-Newby 2005, 240; Stucchi 1975, 401
For example, in the sixth-century polygonal Plaosne church at Ohrid in Macedonia, the Rivers were depicted as mask-like heads spewing water from their mouths: Bitrakova-Gozdanova 1975, 55-57; in the sixth-century basilica of Thyrso at Tegea in Greece they were depicted as half-length, semi-naked figures: Maguire 2012, 42-43