

# FROM WILDERNESS TO PARADISE: A SIXTH-CENTURY MOSAIC PAVEMENT AT QASR EL-LEBIA IN CYRENAICA, LIBYA



JANE CHICK





# **From Wilderness to Paradise**

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

Jane Chick

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD  
Summertown Pavilion  
18-24 Middle Way  
Summertown  
Oxford OX2 7LG  
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-730-1  
ISBN 978-1-80327-731-8 (e-Pdf)

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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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## Acknowledgements

I could not have undertaken this journey without the support of my husband, Jon. I am also extremely grateful to all my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement along the way. Particular thanks go to Professor John Mitchell and Dr Richard Maguire whose help and advice have been crucial in bringing this book to fruition.



# 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).<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. Large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. As shown in Illustrated London News, December 1957

## 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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated London News, 14 December 1957

<sup>2</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 273-76. The dating of the mosaics is discussed later in this chapter.

FROM WILDERNESS TO PARADISE



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**).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Over the following decades the floor was described as 'a heterogeneous assembly of unrelated pictures',<sup>5</sup> as a work of the 'second order',<sup>6</sup> as



Fig. 3. Detail of border from the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

<sup>3</sup> Each panel measures between c.65cm<sup>2</sup> and c.67cm<sup>2</sup> and the whole pavement is roughly 11 m x 5.5 m.

<sup>4</sup> Ward-Perkins 1958, 190

<sup>5</sup> Goodchild 1961a 219

<sup>6</sup> Mathew 1965, 86

having no coherent programme,<sup>7</sup> and as lacking any organised planning.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars have allowed that the pavement could be understood to represent God's creation,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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**).<sup>11</sup> Another inscription is positioned by the entrance to the rock-cut tomb chamber to the north of the annex (**Fig. 10**).<sup>12</sup> A third is orientated to be read by those leaving the annex and entering an unexcavated suite of rooms to the east (**Fig. 11**).<sup>13</sup>

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

<sup>7</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 37

<sup>8</sup> Dunbabin 1982, 613

<sup>9</sup> Grabar 1962, 138; Stucchi 1975, esp. 400-02

<sup>10</sup> Maguire 1987, 44-55

<sup>11</sup> '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

<sup>12</sup> 'Your witnesses were trusted; that greatly adorns your house'. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284

<sup>13</sup> '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

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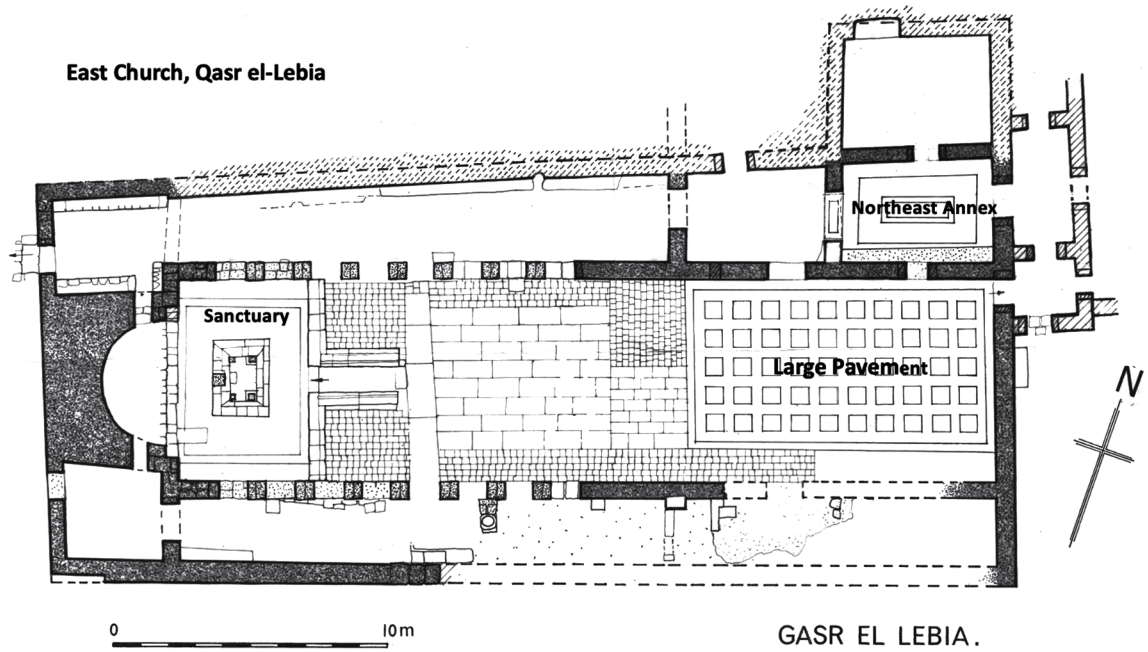


Fig. 4. Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author



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

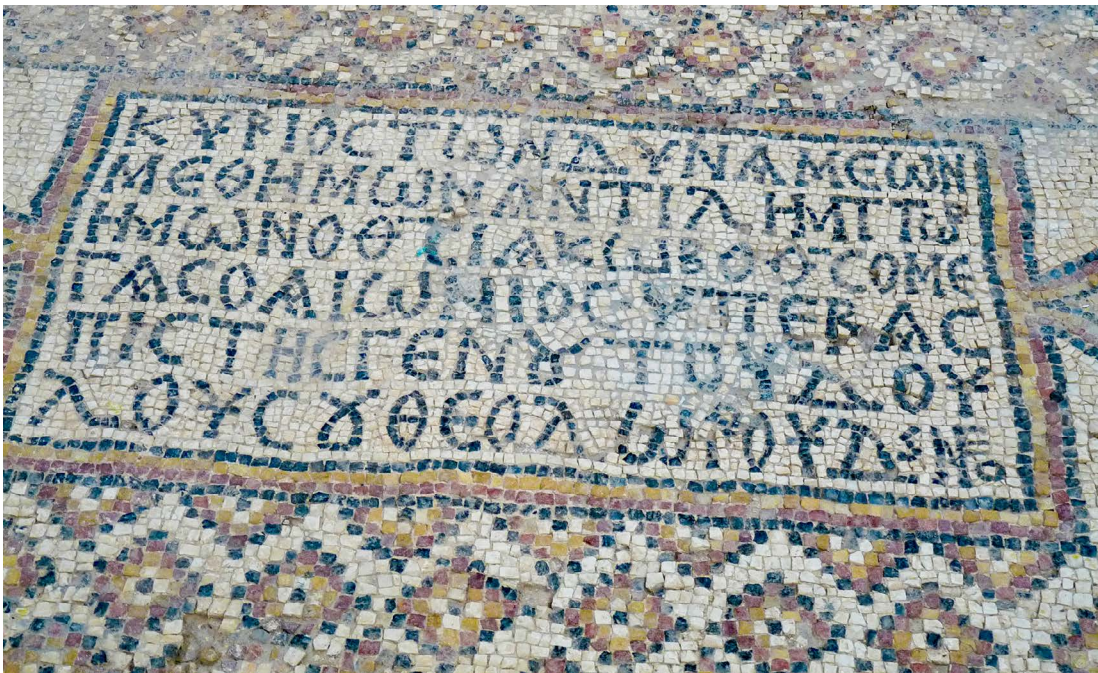


Fig. 9. Inscription by the doorway in the west wall of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



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



Fig. 12. Sanctuary pavement, 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.<sup>14</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> 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

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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

are almost identical to those at Qasr el-Lebia.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Sandro Stucchi, however, dated the Central Church and the mosaic to the second half of the fifth century.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

<sup>15</sup> 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

<sup>16</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 157

<sup>17</sup> This was based on the evidence of its masonry technique: Stucchi 1975, 382-83

<sup>18</sup> 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 Yaktó Complex at Daphne in Syria: Hachlili 2009, fig. VII-7

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,<sup>19</sup> 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).<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> The currently accepted dating relies on a circular argument that postulates that an image of *Polis Nea Theodorias* (The new city of Theodorias) 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 6<sup>th</sup> century this [*Polis Nea Theodorias*] was the small Episcopal see of Olbia and in 539 it was



Fig. 16. Inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

renamed in honour of the reigning empress as the New City of Theodorias’;<sup>22</sup> A.H.M. Jones states that in Cyrenaica, Justinian ‘created a new—and very small—city west of Cyrene, called Theodorias’;<sup>23</sup> 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’.<sup>24</sup> Settlements in other parts of the empire

<sup>19</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 277

<sup>20</sup> 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

<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> Mathew 1965, 86

<sup>23</sup> Jones 1937, 362. Jones does note, however, that Hierocles and Georgius, when listing sixth-century cities, ignored Theodorias and recorded only the five old cities.

<sup>24</sup> Magdalino 1988, 105

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Fig. 17. *Polis Nea Theodorias*, in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

are known to have been renamed in honour of the empress,<sup>25</sup> 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.'<sup>26</sup> 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*.<sup>27</sup> 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'.<sup>28</sup>

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,<sup>29</sup> and although the mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia is not precisely matched elsewhere, it does nonetheless fall into this category.<sup>30</sup> 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).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> 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': *Chronographia*18:32, 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

<sup>26</sup> 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 Taucheira, 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

<sup>27</sup> 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

<sup>28</sup> Reynolds 2001, 171

<sup>29</sup> Including a pavement from the church of St. Paraskevi at Kozani in Greece, now on display in the Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki; the nave of the Basilica of Thyrsos at Tegea in Greece: Spiro 1978, 182-83; the narthex of Basilica A and the nave pavements of Basilicas D and E at Byllis in Albania: Muçaj and Raynaud 2005, 383-98; the nave of the Vrina Plain Basilica, Butrint in Albania: Mitchell 2019, 336-57; the narthex of the Episcopal Basilica and the nave of the Extra Muros Basilica at Stobi in Macedonia: Kolarik 1987, 295-306; and the north aisle of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis in Macedonia: Gjorgjievska 2008, 64-67

<sup>30</sup> 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

<sup>31</sup> 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

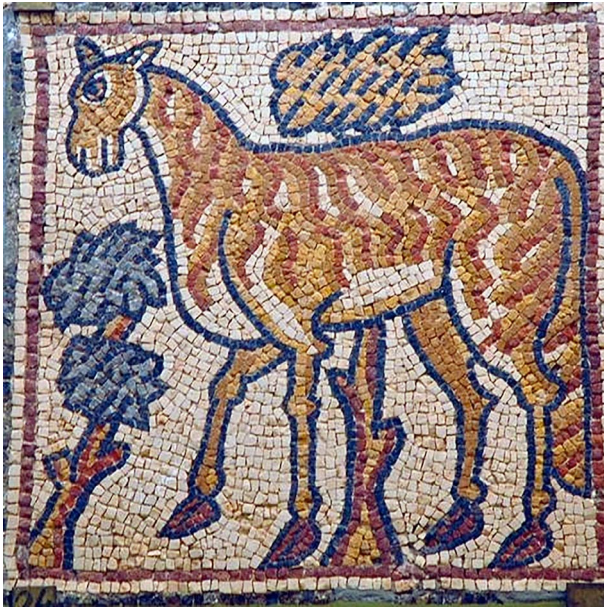


Fig. 18. Sheep in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



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

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**),<sup>32</sup> a bull and a lion in the chancel of the sixth-century Church of Deacon Thomas at Mount Nebo, also in Jordan,<sup>33</sup> and a leopard in the pavement in the north aisle of the sixth-century church at Kissufim in Israel (**Fig. 23**).<sup>34</sup>

Notably, there are eight personifications in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. There are three abstract concepts: *Kosmesis* (adornment), *Ktisis* (foundation),<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> Another detail

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the sixth-century Church of Küçük Tavşan Adsi at Bodrum in Turkey: Andaloro and Pogliani 2011, 19; and in the sixth-century Plaosnek Basilica at Ohrid in Macedonia, for a general discussion on Plaosnek basilica see Bakovska 2010

<sup>32</sup> Piccirillo 1997, 128, fig. 138

<sup>33</sup> Church of Deacon Thomas, Mount Nebo: Piccirillo 1997, fig. 266

<sup>34</sup> Kissufim: Hachlili 2009, pl. VII-7

<sup>35</sup> *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

<sup>36</sup> For example, in the sixth-century polyconchal Plaosnek 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 Thyrsois at Tegea in Greece they were depicted as half-length, semi-naked figures: Maguire 2012, 42–43

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Fig. 20. Bull in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 21. Lion in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 22. Ram in front of a tree, from a chapel in Madaba, Jordan. Author



Fig. 23. A leopard in front of a tree in the north aisle of a church in Kissufim, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author

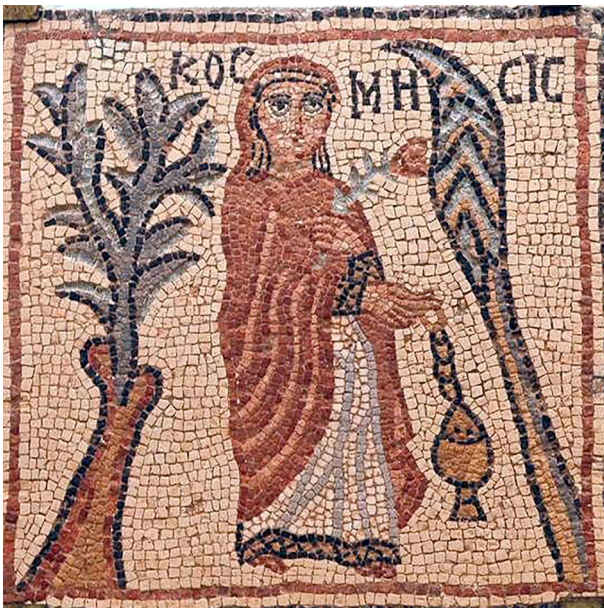


Fig. 24. Kosmesis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 25. Ktisis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 26. *Ananeosis* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 27. *Geon* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 28. *Euphrates* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 29. *Tigris* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

that supports a sixth-century date for the pavement is the attire worn by *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Ananeosis*; all three are bedecked with diadems and ornate pearl-studded prependicularia (jewels hanging from the temples)—jewellery befitting sixth-century elite females—and the two full-length standing figures of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* are wearing red shoes, as though to emulate female attendants at the imperial court in the sixth century.



Fig. 30. Phison in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 31. Kastalia in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

Given that the pavement in the northeast annex was almost certainly laid by the same atelier as the large pavement, it is also worth citing the crocodile-bull combat scene in the central panel of that mosaic when considering the date of the large pavement (see Fig. 8). The crocodile itself has a long history in the visual culture of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Nilotic landscapes, but the crocodile-bull combat scenes seem only to appear in the sixth century. Similar scenes have been recorded in the north aisle and the southeast annex of the East Church at Cyrene, in the late fifth- or early sixth-century pavement from the House of Leontis at Beth She'an, Israel (Fig. 32) and the sixth-century chapel at Haditha, also in Israel. It is also carved on the ceiling beams of the sixth-century church of St Catherine at Sinai in Egypt.<sup>37</sup>

Even though there is no corroborating archaeological evidence for the date extrapolated from indiction year three, there are enough diagnostic features to substantiate a sixth-century date for the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. However, the tendency to use the inscriptions in the East Church to categorise all churches in Cyrenaica as Justinianic, should be treated with caution. At Sidi Khrebish, Berenike, for example, excavations at a church turned up ceramics dating to the second half of the fifth century—and certainly no later than AD 525—and yet the excavators noted that, without the pottery evidence, one would have had little hesitation in assigning this church to the group of so-called Justinianic churches.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> East Church at Cyrene: Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, pls 84.2, 85.2; Beit Leontis at Beth She'an and the chapel at Haditha: Hachlili 2009, pl. V-6c, V-6d; St Catherine's at Sinai in Egypt: Forsyth and Weitzmann 1973, pl. LXIX-A. It has been suggested, however, that the scene may have been similar to one in a painting, now lost, described in Pliny's Natural History: *NH* XXXV, 142 [http://www.attalus.org/translate/pliny\\_hn35b.html](http://www.attalus.org/translate/pliny_hn35b.html) accessed 17 April 2023. See also Meyboom 1995, 100

<sup>38</sup> Lloyd *et al.* 1977, 173



Fig. 32. Crocodile and bull combat scene, House of Leontis at Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author

## 2. Cyrenaica

### Geographical Context

North Africa is renowned for its wealth of well-preserved mosaic pavements. Itinerant craftsmen worked throughout Africa Proconsularis—modern Tunisia, Northeast Algeria and western Libya—creating elaborate polychrome mosaics in civic buildings, private residences, and ecclesiastical complexes. Cyrenaica, however, despite being part of Libya, was separated from the prosperous agricultural province of Africa Proconsularis by a vast expanse of semi-arid mainly unpopulated coastal plain (**Fig. 33**). Unlike Latin-speaking Tripolitania in the west of Libya, Cyrenaica was Greek-speaking and gravitated culturally and politically towards the East.<sup>1</sup> Bordered to the west by the Syrtica desert, to the east by the Marmarica desert and to the south by the Calansico Sand Sea, Cyrenaica was a dangerous and inhospitable region. Even though the main overland route between Alexandria and Carthage passed through Cyrenaica, land-travel was hazardous and slow and an east-west route along the shoreline was precluded by a large number of wadis filled by substantial annual rainfall. Access from the sea was no easier; in the east and west of the region, strong onshore winds and unpredictable currents made shipping treacherous and harbouring problematic,<sup>2</sup> and in the central area, where the deeply indented coastline offered natural harbour facilities, access from the littoral to the major settlement areas on the upper limestone plateaux—the Gebel el Akhdar (Green Mountain)—was challenging.<sup>3</sup> Even today Cyrenaica remains relatively isolated.

Despite these complications, in Antiquity Cyrenaica was part of a Mediterranean-wide trade network; it was never strategically critical like Egypt with its grain or Tripolitania with its oil, but it was renowned for the export of Barcan horses and the celebrated wonder-drug, Silphium.<sup>4</sup> By Late Antiquity, however, there is little evidence of any significant commercial trading activity between Cyrenaica, also now known as Pentapolis, and the wider Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> Synesius, a fourth-century Bishop of Ptolemais, bemoaned the fact that during periods of barbarian attack, exporting goods of any kind was near-impossible as Syrian shipmasters, together with many of the larger traders negotiating the African coast, simply bypassed the Cyrenaican ports altogether.<sup>6</sup>

In the third century AD Cyrenaica was in decline; municipal buildings deteriorated, there is little evidence of new public inscriptions, cities contracted in size as people migrated from the urban areas to

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<sup>1</sup> Horden and Purcell 2001, 67, have likened the Gebel el Akhdar to ‘a fragment of some Mediterranean archipelago [...] uneasily wedged against the African continent’.

<sup>2</sup> Cook *et al.* 1936, 671. Synesius, writing in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, describes the hazards of sailing along the coast. He refers specifically to a voyage from Alexandria during which the vessel he was travelling in was forced into land several times: Synesius *Epistula* 4 <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-004/> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>3</sup> Jones and Little 1971, 71

<sup>4</sup> However, during a period of severe famine in the fourth century BC, large quantities of grain were exported from Cyrenaica to Greece: Jones 1937, 356. Silphium, unique to Libya, was a plant with numerous culinary and medicinal uses. It is thought to have been extinct since around the first century AD: Horden and Purcell 2000, 65. Barcan horses were renowned throughout Greece and Asia Minor: Goddard 1884, 20

<sup>5</sup> The term Pentapolis is thought to have been introduced when Apollonia was founded c. 67 BC: Jones 1937, 359-60. Pentapolis encompassed Ptolemais, Cyrene, Apollonia, Taucheira and Berenike. In the second century AD Hadrian founded a sixth city, Hadrianapolis. Archaeological evidence for the city remains elusive but it was mentioned by several late geographers and the term ‘Hexapolis’ has been found on an inscription at Ptolemais: Reynolds 1976, 219; Jones and Little 1971, 70. During the reign of Diocletian (AD 284-306) Pentapolis was referred to as Libya Superior: Kraeling 1962, 20. Amphorae produced in the region have not been found in any quantity outside of Cyrenaica, and evidence for imported goods is sparse: Wilson 2001, 28-43

<sup>6</sup> Synesius *Epistula* 148 <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-148/> accessed 20 March 2023

## 2. CYRENAICA



Fig. 33. Map of Libya. Public Domain

the countryside, and the distinction between towns and villages was gradually eroded.<sup>7</sup> Ward-Perkins described Cyrenaica as a 'poor province, richer in history than it was in fine contemporary monuments [...] there are few Roman buildings that are of more than local significance'.<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps not surprising then, that Late Antique Cyrenaica has been described as 'a slowly evolving entity separate and distinct from the greater Christian/Byzantine whole'.<sup>9</sup>

### Christianity in Cyrenaica

Circumstantial evidence suggests that Christianity arrived early in Cyrenaica: the New Testament

contains several references to the region;<sup>10</sup> legend tells that Mark the Evangelist was a Cyrenaican who founded the first Christian community there;<sup>11</sup> and a stone found at Cyrene engraved with 'Jesus Christos aleph and omega', has been interpreted as a Hebrew/Christian relic.<sup>12</sup> Even though it was not until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 that Cyrene was officially recognised as an ecclesiastical province of the patriarchate of Alexandria,<sup>13</sup> correspondence from Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (AD 247-64) to certain bishops of Pentapolis warning against the heresy of Sabellius, suggests that Alexandria already had unofficial dominion over the church in Cyrenaica in the third century.<sup>14</sup>

The earliest archaeological evidence for Christianity in Cyrenaica, apart from the inscribed stone from Cyrene referred to above, is a fourth-century mosaic pavement in the House of Hesychius, located east of the agora at Cyrene. The mosaic includes inscriptions invoking God and Christ and features an angel wearing priestly vestments (**Fig. 34**).<sup>15</sup> Nearly all of the early churches in the region have been dated

<sup>7</sup> For public inscriptions: Reynolds 1977, 55. It has been suggested that the ever-increasing number of attacks on the towns by indigenous semi-nomadic tribes forced people to decamp from the cities to smaller settlements: Jones 1937, 361-2. Procopius attributed the decline of Ptolemais to a problem with water supplies: Stewart 2005, 155. The massive earthquake that devastated Cyrene in AD 262 would undoubtedly have exacerbated the situation.

<sup>8</sup> Ward-Perkins 1981, 368

<sup>9</sup> Widrig 1975, 74

<sup>10</sup> Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus: Matthew 27:27-32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26. Christians from Cyrene are recorded as being in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:4-11. Cyrenaicans were among those who made up the first church at Antioch: Acts 11:20-26. And Lucius of Cyrene was one of the chosen to whom the Holy Spirit gave instructions to appoint Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for missionary service: Acts 13:1

<sup>11</sup> For example: Wright 2012, 38

<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew aleph rather than the Greek alpha was used, and the symbols are ordered from right to left. The excavators suggest only that it is 'conceivably quite early, before the Gospel had reached beyond the pale of the Jews': Rowe *et al.* 1956, 59

<sup>13</sup> Confirmed by the sixth canon of the Council of Nicaea: Gwynn 2015, 106. Two of the named attendees at the council were Libyan bishops; Secundus, bishop of Ptolemais, and Theonas, bishop of Marmarica: Hanson 1988, 162-63, 172

<sup>14</sup> Eusebius *Church History*, vii.26 26 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250107.htm> accessed 20 March 2023. Sabellianism denied that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were separate persons of the Godhead, but saw them as modes or aspects of a single divine person: Duchesne 1957, 149

<sup>15</sup> For inscriptions and translations see Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 172. It has been suggested that this house may have belonged to Synesius' father: Liebeschuetz 1985, 159. Synesius is said to have named his firstborn Hesychius: Cameron 1992, 428



Fig. 34. House of Hesychius, Cyrene. Author

to the mid-sixth century,<sup>16</sup> although a number were constructed above or adjacent to rock-cut chambers that are generally accepted as pre-dating the built churches.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the original function of these chambers, there is some evidence to suggest that they were incorporated into the churches. For example, both the East and the West Churches at Qasr el-Lebia have entrances leading into rock-cut chambers, and at Umm Heneia el Garbia, on the limestone escarpment of Cyrenaica, arcades and a baldacchino have been carved from the rock in an underground chamber beneath the double-apsed church (Figs 35–36).<sup>18</sup> As might be expected, most of the main cities of Pentapolis had several churches,<sup>19</sup> but what is more surprising is that several rural hamlets, Qasr el-Lebia included, accommodated two contemporaneous

<sup>16</sup> Even though the dating of some of the churches has been contested, the earliest date assigned to any church in Cyrenaica is the mid-fifth century. For a comprehensive catalogue of all sites in Cyrenaica with known Christian associations: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003

<sup>17</sup> The West Church at Lamluda was built directly above an extensive rock-cut complex: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 299–302. The double-ended basilica at Umm Heneia Garbia sits above a so-called underground church with a rock-carved baldacchino: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003 368–72. At Heneia esh Shargia a series of rock-cut tombs run along the north side of the basilica: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 418–19. The double-ended basilica at Messa sits above an elaborate rock-cut hypogeum extended and altered to include two small apses and a nave-like area: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 303–09.

<sup>18</sup> Qasr el-Lebia: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 268–80; Umm Heneia el Garbia: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 372

<sup>19</sup> Five churches have been recorded in Apollonia: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 35–114; four in Taucheira: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 201–24; three in Cyrene: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 125–78; three in Ptolemais: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 178–201; and one in Berenike: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 114–25



Fig. 35. Baldaccino beneath the church at Umm Heneia el Garbia. Author

churches; in each case the churches were built in close proximity—almost touching in some cases—with one more fortified than the other.<sup>20</sup> A striking feature of these pairs of churches is that it was common for one of the pair to be oriented to the east and the other to the west. Reverse-oriented churches are something of an anomaly in Late Antiquity and yet in Cyrenaica they occur time and again; of the fifty-two churches in Cyrenaica for which the orientation is known, twenty-four are oriented to the east, twenty-four to the west and four are double ended with apses in both the east and the west.<sup>21</sup> This unusual pattern of church building sets Cyrenaica apart from the rest of the eastern Mediterranean and remains unexplained.

#### The Archaeological Site at Qasr el-Lebia

Qasr el-Lebia occupies a small hilltop on a fertile plateau at the west end of a limestone escarpment, punctuated by the archaeological remains of ancient towns and villages (Fig. 37). The settlement, generally thought to have been renamed ‘Theodorias’ in Late Antiquity, has also been associated both with the ancient town of Olbia, referred to by Synesius, and with Neapolis, which may also have been

known as Caenopolis.<sup>22</sup> It was close to the main east-west route across Cyrenaica and had relatively good connections with the coastal towns of Maaten el Ogla and Ain Giargiarrumah, from where, at certain times of year, it was possible to cross the mouth of the Wadi Kuf and proceed eastwards towards the territories of Cyrene and Apollonia.

<sup>20</sup> Other examples are El Altrun: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 231-57; Gasr Silu: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 288-94; Lamluda: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 294-303; Mgarnes: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 310-16; and Siret Umm Sellem: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 362-68. Widrig 1975, 198 argued that the reverse orientated church at Ras al-Hilal was probably originally one of a pair—the other lost to the sea, perhaps. However, there is no archaeological evidence to corroborate this.

<sup>21</sup> Of particular note is that the East Church at Cyrene, sometimes referred to as the ‘cathedral’ of Cyrene, had its orientation changed from east to west in the sixth century: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 127-48

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on the depiction of *Polis Nea Theodorias* in the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia, see below. Synesius *Epistula* 76 <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-076/> accessed 20 March 2023; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 267. Both Neapolis and Caenopolis are mentioned in Ptolemy’s *Geographia* IV 4.7, but he records them at different locations [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Periods/Roman/\\_Texts/Ptolemy/4/4\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Periods/Roman/_Texts/Ptolemy/4/4*.html) accessed 18 April 2023. See also Stucchi 1975, 358



Fig. 36. Arcades under the church at Umm Heneia el Garbia. Author



Fig. 37. Approach to Qasr el-Lebia. Author

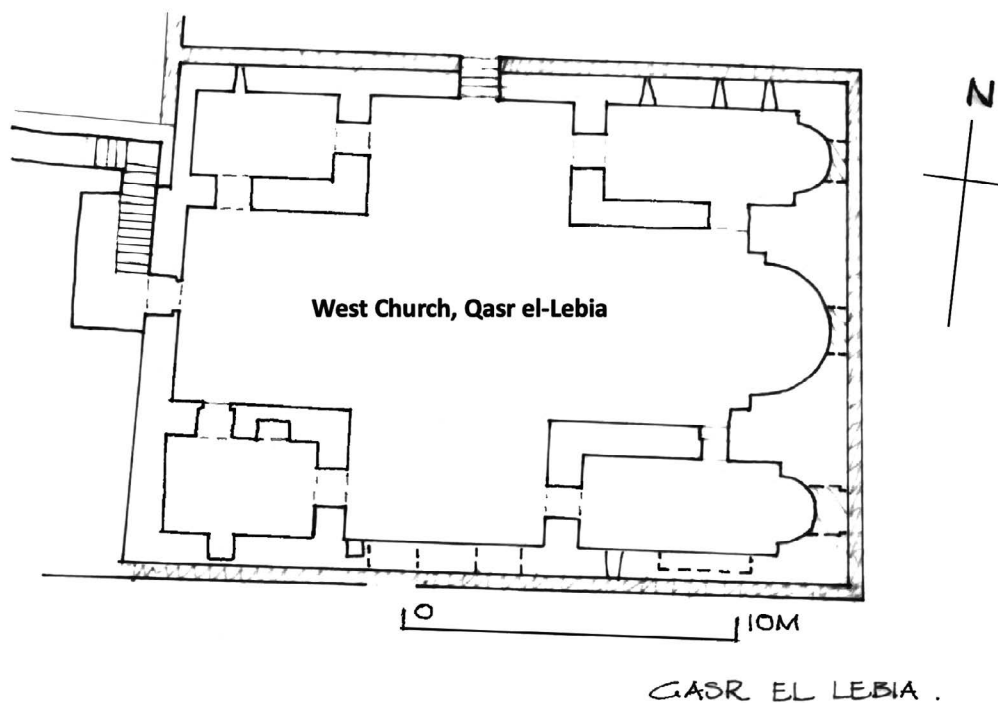


Fig. 38. Plan of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/2/7 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS

Today, the main archaeological features at Qasr el-Lebia are the remains of two sixth-century churches, identified as the West Church and the East Church.<sup>23</sup> The only other traces of ancient occupation are a number of rock-cut chambers adjoining both churches and scattered around the site.<sup>24</sup>

### **West Church**

The West Church, dated to the sixth century, takes the form of an inscribed cross with its principal apse to the east and the main entrance in the middle of the north wall (**Fig. 38**). The walls are largely still intact and the exterior is faced with dressed limestone masonry (**Fig. 39**). The interior space is divided into a cruciform central area with four angle-chapels, the doorways to which have flat lintels with relieving arches above (**Fig. 40**). A secondary entrance at the west end of the church, now blocked, led into a small courtyard and further subsidiary rooms. Several rock-cut chambers adjoin the west end of the church and may have played a role in determining the position or layout of the building. It has been suggested that the West Church may have been a garrison chapel.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 266-86

<sup>24</sup> The rock-cut chambers at Qasr el-Lebia may date from as early as the fourth century BC: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 267

<sup>25</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 272



Fig. 39. Exterior of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 40. Interior of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

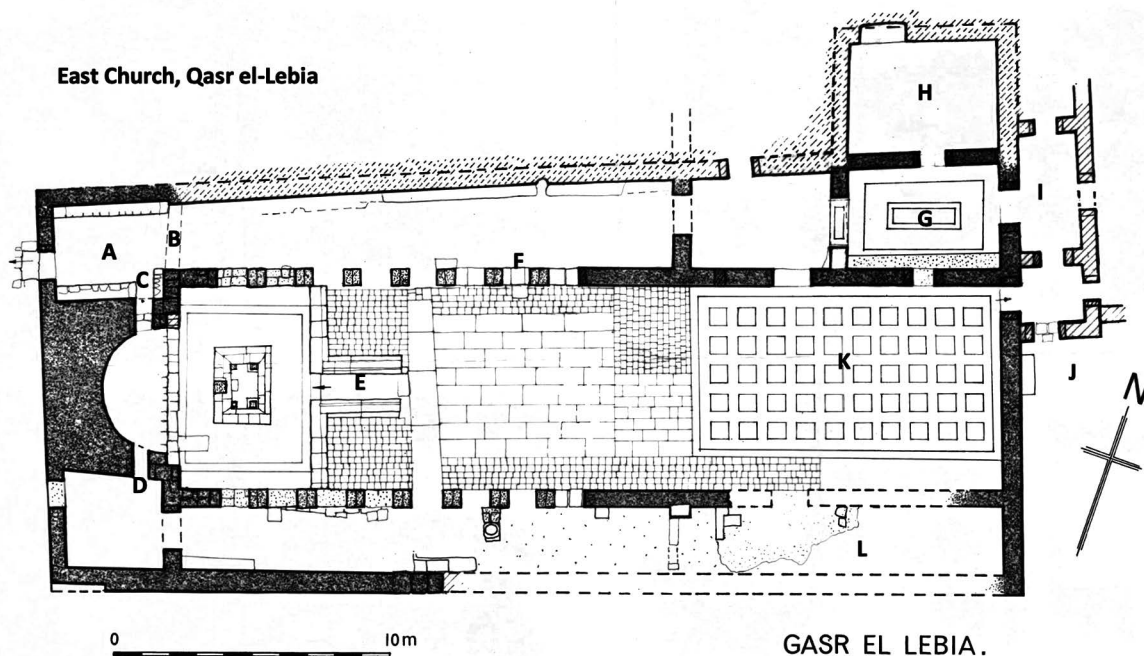


Fig. 41. Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author

### East Church

The East Church is situated about 200m to the east of the West Church. The complex comprises a reverse orientated basilica with an inscribed apse to the west and subsidiary rooms to the north and the east. The land on which the church was constructed slopes steeply from north to south. A large terrace was cut into the hillside to accommodate the southern part of the basilica, while the aisle and ancillary rooms to the north were carved into natural rock. The East Church is unusual in having neither a narthex nor a main axial entrance. The principal entrance, such as it was, appears to have been into a small annex in the northwest corner of the complex (**A on Fig. 41**).<sup>26</sup> This annex was paved with large stone slabs and had benches along the north and south walls (**Fig. 42**). The remains of a carved arch leads from the annex into the north aisle (**B on Fig. 41**) and a lateral opening in the south wall gives access to the apse (**C on Fig. 41**). A corresponding opening in the south wall of the apse (**D on Fig. 41**) suggests that there was probably a similar arrangement to the south, but the terracing here has long since collapsed leaving scant evidence of the south aisle and its subsidiary rooms. A solea or screened passage (**E on Fig. 41**) projected from the chancel into the nave (**Fig. 43**). The nave was paved partly with large marble slabs and partly with smaller off-cut tiles.<sup>27</sup> The north aisle was separated from the nave by stone piers, constructed from two abutting orthostats on a raised stylobate (**Fig. 44**).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Other churches in Cyrenaica with no main axial entrance, apart from the West Church, discussed above, include the East Church at Cyrene: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 135; the church at Messa: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 304; and the church at Um Heneia el Garbia: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 368. In each case the churches were double ended.

<sup>27</sup> The large slabs had already been robbed at the time of excavation but were evidenced by the imprints they had left in the ground: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 277

<sup>28</sup> A building technique observed in churches at several rural sites in Cyrenaica, including Lamluda: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 294-303; Gasr el Gaama: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 397-99; Messa: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003,



Fig. 42. Benches in northwest annex, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 43. Solea, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 44. Double orthostats, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

There appears to have been a break—an entrance into the nave perhaps—between two of the piers (**F on Fig. 41**) and a wall-painting of a jewelled cross set in an aedicule on the north wall of the aisle may have been intended to mark this entrance.<sup>29</sup> The north aisle leads into a small room or antechamber with access through an arched opening into the so-called northeast annex (**G on Fig. 41**). An opening in the north wall of the annex leads to a tomb-chamber carved into the bedrock with a grave niche in its northwest corner (**H on Fig. 41**), and a doorway in the east wall of the annex leads to the remains of at least three aligned small rooms (**I on Fig. 41**). Sondages in the area to the south of these rooms have revealed further polychrome mosaics (**J on Fig. 41**).<sup>30</sup> To the south of the northeast annex and antechamber, but seemingly with no direct access to it, is the hall-like space paved with the large mosaic that is the subject of this study (**K on Fig. 41**).<sup>31</sup> This area appears to constitute an eastward extension of the nave. A narrow corridor-like strip, paved in part with small marble offcuts, abuts what is likely to have been the wall to the south aisle, now lost (**L on Fig. 41**).<sup>32</sup>

303-10

<sup>29</sup> This feature is now barely legible: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 278

<sup>30</sup> *Pers. comm.* April 2010, Abdulhamid Abdussaid

<sup>31</sup> The walls of the annex have been rebuilt and jambs have been incorporated as though to indicate doorways, however, Abdulhamid Abdussaid, archaeologist at Shahat, and Ahmed Adhafy, archaeologist at Ptolemais, who both worked with Goodchild during the excavations at Qasr el-Lebia, confirmed that the openings shown on the plan are purely speculative and do not actually mark an opening or doorway: *pers. comm.* April 2010

<sup>32</sup> A photograph published in the *Illustrated London News*, 14 December 1957, shows small irregular marble tiles at the west end of this corridor-like space.

### 3. Reading the Mosaic Pavement

The East Church at Qasr el-Lebia was clearly intended for Christian worship and whether the space paved by the large mosaic was, as is generally assumed, an extension of the nave, or whether it belonged to an adjoining suite of rooms to the east of the main body of the church, it was an integral part of an ecclesiastical complex. At first glance, however, the imagery in the pavement is not conspicuously Christian, but appears to be an odd mix of discordant and incompatible images; classically inspired personifications, naked figures, and sea-monsters jostle for space with architectural representations and an array of flora and fauna. How then, was this miscellany of images perceived in the sixth century? Were the classical figures seen as pagan survivals, the pavement perhaps exemplifying a resolution between two major cultural systems? Or were they simply part of a repertoire of images that formed a common frame of reference? Were the inconsistencies deliberate, calculated to pique the interest of the viewer by adding further variation to an already eclectic ensemble? Or did they constitute a considered and complex iconographic programme? To begin to unravel the iconography in the pavement, modern ways of seeing, reading, and understanding images need to be put aside and we must metaphorically step into the shoes of the Late Antique viewer. As a prolegomenon to an in-depth iconographical analysis of the pavement, the next section takes a wider view of how different types of material culture were formulated and perceived at this time.

#### **Imagery and Literature in Late Antiquity**

The earliest Christian images suggest a need to formulate a mode of representation that was pertinent but also discreet; imagery was required to encompass and express the views of a new religion without offending detractors. In the Roman catacombs, for example, symbols such as birds, fish, anchors and boats carried Christian meanings over and above their literal denotation; Old Testament figures, including Noah, Jonah, and Daniel, were used, not only to evoke biblical accounts of their deliverance from certain death, but also to symbolise Christian salvation; and traditional figures, such as Orpheus and the ram-bearing shepherd, took on a new Christian import. This type of appropriation may have been born out of necessity at a time when Christians were fearful of persecution, but as Christianity became mainstream and its use of representational arts evolved, the idea that images could carry more than one meaning persisted. By the sixth century it was common for images, particularly in ecclesiastical settings, to be imbued with symbolic significance. For example, complicated guilloches, Solomon's knots, and cross motifs were understood as more than simply decorative panels and were often strategically placed in doorways, entrances and other liminal or sacred spaces to serve as apotropaic devices, offering protection and reassurance to those moving through the space. Stags drinking from a fountain, rivers flowing from a rock, Nilotic scenes, and peacocks flanking a cantharus became well-known signifiers of Paradise, Christian salvation, and everlasting life. It was accepted, indeed expected, that iconographic scenes, particularly in ecclesiastical settings, were not intended to be taken at face value and rather than being a case of 'what you see is what you get', they harboured hidden meanings and needed to be interpreted. Worshipers, regardless of where they came from or what language they spoke, would have understood the imagery as a kind of lingua franca.

This pervasive preoccupation with ambiguous constructs and fascination with concealing and revealing was not restricted to imagery, texts also often disseminated meaning over and beyond the actual sense of the words.<sup>1</sup> Maguire has commented that in the Justinianic period writers and artists 'liked to exploit

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<sup>1</sup> In a study of art and text in Byzantine culture, James poses the question: 'Are works of art and writings different but parallel forms of expression?': James 2007, 1. And Lauxtermann, in a discussion about text on lead seals, comments that the 'only fanciful element being the Byzantine gusto for puns and wordplay': Lauxtermann 2003, 162

### 3. READING THE MOSAIC PAVEMENT

the ambivalences inherent in words and images in order to saturate their works with meaning'.<sup>2</sup> This meant that interpretation was fluid and open to re-negotiation and just as viewers became adept at teasing out meanings from iconographic schemes, readers were accustomed to analysing nuances and searching out hidden messages, whether in poetry, prose, panegyrics or inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> That writers expected their texts to be dissected and scoured for subtexts and underlying significance is given weight by the fourth-century author, Ausonius, who noted that without his readers' imagination his work would 'be just monosyllables' and would remain incomplete, its meaning unresolved.<sup>4</sup> Ausonius was one of the best known proponents of cento poetry, that is, poems made up of lines taken from ancient verses, primarily Homeric or Virgilian.<sup>5</sup> The resulting patchworks of recycled sequences of words were arranged in such a way that new meanings could be teased out of old texts. There were games to be played and puzzles to be solved. Ausonius even described his *Cento Nuptialis* as being 'like a puzzle the Greeks called *ostamachia*'—a game, usually made from bits of bones, which involved juggling the pieces to create different objects.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 45. Anicia Juliana on the dedication page of the Vienna Dioscurides. Public Domain

Some literary works demanded strategies of visual engagement as well as an understanding of word-games. The poems, or *Carmina Figurata*, of Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, for example, included rubricated letters that formed patterns and shapes concealing complex layers of meaning.<sup>7</sup> And acrostics, writings in which the first letter or word of each line or stanza spelled out a name or a message, were intended to impress as much through visual impact as through verbal eloquence. For example, the Constantinopolitan poet, Romanos the Melodist, structured many of his hymns so that the initial letters of each stanza spelled out a variation on the theme of *by the humble romanos*, a device that claimed ownership of a work while maintaining a pretence of humility.<sup>8</sup> The same method was used by authors to pander to the vanity of patrons or donors; the dedication page of the sixth-century Vienna Dioscurides, for example, depicts Anicia Juliana enthroned at the centre of an octagonal frame around which an eight-lined poem runs,

the first letter of each successive line forms an acrostic spelling the name 'Juliana' (now largely illegible) (Fig. 45).<sup>9</sup> Inscriptions, particularly monumental inscriptions on buildings, were often displayed as though they were first and foremost images; they might have been read by those who were literate, and

<sup>2</sup> Maguire 1987, 55

<sup>3</sup> For discussions: Cox Miller 2009, 46-7; Henig 1995, 151-57

<sup>4</sup> Ausonius, *Technopaegnon*: White 1919, 287

<sup>5</sup> Schelke 1954, 972-73. The earliest extant cento is the second-century tragedy, *Medea*, usually ascribed to Hosidius Geta, but popularity of the cento reached its zenith in Late Antiquity: Hornblower and Spawforth 1996, 309

<sup>6</sup> Shorrock 2011, 125-26

<sup>7</sup> One interpreter commented that, 'there are more verses in Optatianus's poetry than a mere line-count will reveal: each poem also contains a number of inherent permutations of itself, a number of potential dispositions': Levitan 1985, 249. Cox Miller 2009, 51, noted that this is 'getting a lot from a little with vengeance!'

<sup>8</sup> Krueger 2006, 258

<sup>9</sup> Connor 2004, 110-11



Fig. 46. Inscription above west doorway in Santa Sabina, Rome. With permission of Web Gallery of Art

they may have been declaimed and explained to others,<sup>10</sup> but they were presented in such a way that even the semi-illiterate who gazed at them would have taken something from them. The fifth-century mosaic dedicatory inscription on the interior of the west wall of Santa Sabina in Rome, for example, is organised so that at the centre of the panel the name of the founder of the church, *PETRUS*, is flanked above by the word *FUNDAVIT* (founded), and below by *CHRISTI*.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the donor takes centre stage (Fig. 46).<sup>12</sup> This type of literary construct played a sort of intermediary role between text and image; for the literate elite it communicated a message, but the way the text was presented would have captured the imagination of viewers and told its own story, even to those unable to follow the sense of the words.

This short excursus into reading text is not to suggest that the inscriptions in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia harboured hidden messages, but rather to underline the fact that Late Antique audiences were accustomed to adopting strategies of elucidation and searching visual productions, be it text or image, for cryptic messages. The examples above illustrate that interpretation moved easily across the divide between representation and abstraction, and that meaning often involved a complex syntax rather than a straightforward linear development.<sup>13</sup> The pavement at Qasr el-Lebia represents just such an exploitation of imagery. The discordant nature of the mosaic may suggest a random selection of unrelated scenes, but the self-consciously episodic structure creates a type of acrostic in which the layers and interconnections have to be deciphered and interpreted. The enigmatic motifs would have piqued the imagination of the viewer, encouraging them to participate in the game and expose the hidden meanings. Like so many Late Antique visual and literary constructs, the pavement presents the viewer with a puzzle, the solving of which was part of its pleasure.

### *Varietas*

The art and literature of Late Antiquity has been charged with marking the demise and disintegration of classical culture. From the fourth century onwards, visual productions became a 'seemingly erratic succession of diverse and contrasting styles',<sup>14</sup> and literature ceased to exhibit the same 'careful

<sup>10</sup> Evidence suggests that in some churches inscriptions were read aloud and interpreted by so-called 'door-keepers': Agosti 2010, 177

<sup>11</sup> Brandenburg 2005, 174-75. See also Thunø 2007, 32, 35

<sup>12</sup> A slightly later example of this type of hidden message can be seen on the late eighth-century black marble epitaph, commissioned by Charlemagne to commemorate Pope Hadrian I. At the centre of one row the title, *KAROLUSREX*, announces Charlemagne's involvement with this prestigious monument. The epitaph may have been dedicated to Hadrian, but it celebrated Charlemagne, nonetheless: Story 2013, 259

<sup>13</sup> Onians 1980, 19. For further discussions: Brilliant 1984, 124-65; Rousselle 2001, 376-85

<sup>14</sup> Kitzinger 1977, 2, 7-19

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articulation of an apparently seamless composition'.<sup>15</sup> Order, uniformity and coherence no longer seem desirable and the ideals of the classical world were replaced by something 'disturbingly different'.<sup>16</sup> A fondness for assembling and displaying apparently disparate elements is evident in all manner of Late Antique productions and this new type of 'visual syncretism', sometimes referred to as *varietas*, became one of the dominating aesthetics of Late Antiquity.<sup>17</sup>

*Varietas* manifested itself in many different ways, one of the most prolific and high profile being as *spolia* in monumental architecture. For some, the use of *spolia* was an act of appropriation, the materials credited with carrying ideological meanings, but for others it was simply an expedient and pragmatic building practice.<sup>18</sup> Both theories have detractors; older building materials were often acquired from stocks in public depots, a custom that argues against the idea of appropriation, and studies have also shown that incorporating *spolia* into buildings was neither cheap nor particularly easy.<sup>19</sup> What is clear, however, is that the ostentatious display of spoliated elements was a popular and widespread practice in Late Antiquity, and the fact that *spolia* were introduced simultaneously into both a prominent state building and a prestigious religious building suggests that this was a deliberate building policy.<sup>20</sup> Mismatched columns and assorted capitals adorned churches, antique carvings were displayed in prominent positions, and inscriptions—often fragmented and incomprehensible—were incorporated into the façades of buildings. The effects were striking; unaltered, undisguised, and juxtaposed with newer elements, the second-hand components stood in stark contrast to, and suggested indifference towards, the principles of a classical aesthetic of unity. This *modus operandi* has, in the past, been widely disparaged. The Arch of Constantine, for example, a monument credited with helping to establish 'an aesthetic of *spolia*',<sup>21</sup> was described by Vasari as an 'egregious demonstration of the demise of artistic capability, evidenced not only by the pathetic efforts of its fourth-century friezes but by its reuse of second-century reliefs, *faute de mieux*'.<sup>22</sup> This type of judgmental attitude was not restricted to architecture and Late Antique literary works were often arraigned for not conforming to classical conventions. Cento poetry, for example, has often been pilloried as second-rate literature.<sup>23</sup> More recently, however, attitudes have changed and it is now generally acknowledged that, in Late Antiquity, 'coloristic and formal inconstancy' was desirable and that rather than the restraint previously admired, exuberant diversity was the order of the day.<sup>24</sup> Jas Elsner has drawn a clear analogy between cento poetry and the Arch of Constantine, not only because of

<sup>15</sup> Roberts 1989, 3

<sup>16</sup> Brown 1980, 17

<sup>17</sup> Couzin 2017, 20. *Varietas*, a literary, rhetorical and artistic device, was a concept already understood and used in the early Roman period. According to Cicero, *varietas* was '...a Latin word properly used of diversity of color, but by transference of many other kinds of diversity: a varied poem, a varied speech, varied character, varied fortune': Cicero, *De Finibus*, 2.3.10 [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cicero/de\\_Finibus/2\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cicero/de_Finibus/2*.html) accessed 18 April 2023. See also Carruthers 2009, 11-32

<sup>18</sup> Papalexandrou 2003, 76 described *spolia* as 'tangible vehicles for the transmission of memory'. See also Brilliant 2011, 169. For others, the use of *spolia* resulted from the unavailability of high-status building materials, for example: Deichmann 1975, 92. It is also a widely held opinion that the skills and imagination of craftsmen declined in Late Antiquity, for example: Gazda 1995, 122. For general discussion: Kinney 1997, 117-48

<sup>19</sup> Brandenburg 2011, 69-70. It has been calculated that adapting the reused components for use in the baths at Scythopolis would have been costly and time consuming, Saradi 1997, 399. The same observation has been made about *spolia* in the churches in Cyrenaica: Harrison 1985, 232

<sup>20</sup> Brenk 1987, 105-06

<sup>21</sup> Elsner 2000, 162

<sup>22</sup> Vasari, *Proemio delle Vite* 14-15: cited in Kinney 1997, 117

<sup>23</sup> The early Church Father, Irenaeus, described cento authors as 'collect[ing] words and phrases lying about here and there in a text and transpos[ing] them from their natural context to an unnatural one': Usher 1998, 12. Gibbon commented that the poetical fame of Ausonius, a well-known practitioner of the cento, condemns the taste of his age <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/gibbon/03/daf03001.htm> accessed 20 March 2023. And Treadgold 2010, 154 makes the judgmental observation that Sozomen 'expresses the absurd opinion that Apollinaris' centos were just as good literature as the real classics'.

<sup>24</sup> Brandenburg 2005, 176; Brown, 1980, 18; Kinney 1997, 127

a heavy reliance on the reuse of old material, but also because both offered viewers and readers a range of possible exegeses;<sup>25</sup> the mix of old and new carvings in the Arch offered optical gratification, while the citations in cento poetry, described as being ‘invested with brilliance and color by their original contexts’, provided linguistic gratification.<sup>26</sup>

Fragmentation, whether in art, architecture or literature, had become one of the main characteristics of the period, and rather than being seen as a negative, disjunctions and digressions added to the vigour and vitality of Late Antique productions.<sup>27</sup> Michael Roberts goes as far as to suggest that in literature the ‘seams not only show, they are positively advertised’.<sup>28</sup> It seems then, that permission had been granted for the long-established classical orders to be broken down, opening the way for a new cumulative aesthetic, one with no neat divisions between different categories, such as classical and non-classical, religious and secular, or even pagan and Christian. The pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, with its medley of miscellaneous motifs that appear to have no unifying theme, positioned with total disregard to order or continuity, exemplifies this fashion.

### Layout of the pavement

In a study of the mosaic pavements in Cyrenaican churches, Elisabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum has stated that the grid composition of the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia ‘has to be considered as rows of *emblemata* rather than parts of a composition under a central theme or unifying concept’. She has also speculated that this may reflect a preference by the Cyrenaican mosaicists for ‘an earlier Roman arrangement of mosaic pavements’.<sup>29</sup> This viewpoint presupposes that the panels contained individual stand-alone images, like the so-called *emblemata* found in elite villas from about the second century BC to the first century AD, and discourages the idea of an overall coherence to the pavement. However, by the time the pavement was made in the sixth century, elaborate polychrome mosaics proliferated in ecclesiastical settings and I would argue that the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, rather than being part of a backward looking ‘renaissance’, was part of a forward-looking, Mediterranean-wide development of pictorial structure and composition.

One of the most popular compositional devices for organizing imagery in ecclesiastical buildings in the eastern Mediterranean was the inhabited plant scroll.<sup>30</sup> Vines or acanthus plants, often issuing from amphorae or canthari, scrolled over pavements forming rows of incomplete or open roundels (hereinafter referred to as medallions).<sup>31</sup> The flexibility of this type of design allowed the vine to extend indefinitely in all directions, making it suitable for both long narrow aisles and large hall-like spaces. The majority of vine scroll pavements had either three or five columns of medallions—although occasionally an even number of columns was preferred—and motifs were almost always orientated to

<sup>25</sup> Elsner 2000, 176

<sup>26</sup> Roberts 1989, 57

<sup>27</sup> Kitzinger 1977, 45; Marrou 1958, 689-91

<sup>28</sup> Roberts 1989, 3

<sup>29</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 12. Grid pavements have also been found in the East Church at Cyrene: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 158-66; in the church at Ras al-Hilal: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 326-41; in the East Church at Apollonia: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 38-57; and in an unexcavated building, probably a church, at Gasr Bandis: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 393-97. Kitzinger 1965, 349 suggested that so-called *pseudo-emblemata* should be considered characteristic of the Justinianic ‘renaissance’.

<sup>30</sup> Merrony 1998, 464-65. For examples of vine scroll pavements: Hachlili 2009, 111-47

<sup>31</sup> Although inhabited acanthus scrolls sometimes formed borders around pavements, when a plant scroll filled a nave or an aisle—or indeed the main prayer hall of a synagogue—it was almost always a vine laden with grapes, even when it was shown sprouting from acanthus leaves.

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Fig. 47. Plant scroll in Armenian chapel Jerusalem. Public Domain

be viewed by one moving across the pavement towards the sanctuary.<sup>32</sup> It was common for the central axis, often flanked by pairs of figures, to contain images that could be construed to be symbolically significant (**Figs 47–48**). The medallions seem to have been intended more to arrange the images than to segregate or confine them and figures—both human and animal—are often shown breaking out of the medallions; sometimes just a foot or a tail is shown overlapping the vine, but in other cases people or animals are interacting with adjacent motifs or even moving between registers, an arrangement that leads the eye from one frame to the next and encourages viewers to make associations between the images and to read the pavement as a whole (**Fig. 49**).

The overall impression of this type of composition is of movement and fluidity; the organic plant scrolls wind sinuously across pavements with leaves, tendrils and clusters of grapes sprouting at random intervals. The grid composition at Qasr el-Lebia, on the other hand, presents uniform rows of regulated panels that appear rather like quasi-textual registers, and none of the figures break out of their frames (**see Fig. 2**). Despite these differences, however, both the grid and the vine scroll were devices used to organise collections of images; both could extend—either vertically or horizontally—to fill a given space, both worked to suggest a preferred direction of movement across the floor, and in most cases, both prioritised a central axis. At Qasr el-Lebia the border of interlocking circles may appear to be a contrivance intended to separate the panels and keep the images apart, but the strands that make up

<sup>32</sup> A seven-columned vine scroll has been recorded in a burial chapel at el-Hammam near Beth She'an. For examples of pavements with an even number of columns: Hachlili 2009, 132-33. There are just a few examples where images can be viewed from several directions, including the sixth-century nave pavement in the Church of al-Khadir at Madaba which had doors on three sides: Picirillo 1997, figs 146-47; and a sixth-century pavement, possibly in a villa, at Caesarea: Hachlili 2009, fig. VI-17



Fig. 48. Church of Ss Lot and Procopius, Khirbet al-Mukhayyat, Jordan. Author

the border also tie the panels together, inextricably linking the images (**Fig. 50**). It is also worth noting that the roundels created by the interlocking strands are interspersed with small leafy shoots and bud-like protrusions which could be understood as making a reference to the vine scrolls that the border may either take inspiration from or in some way mimic (**see Fig. 3**).

If the leap from a vine scroll pavement to the grid at Qasr el-Lebia seems too great, it may help to flag up a pavement that bridges the gap between the two. In the north aisle of the Byzantine basilica at Petra in Jordan, images are organised into three columns by a stylised vine scroll; the medallions are uniform in size and shape and the leaves and clusters of grapes are small and rather unnatural (**Fig. 51**).<sup>33</sup> The overall impression is of something far less dynamic and lively than most plant scrolls and much closer in design to the grid layouts found in the Cyrenaican churches. Despite this, many of the figures are shown with legs, tails and even heads escaping the confines of the vines, suggesting that even though the layout of the pavement is regulated and structured, the medallions were not intended to be seen as *emblemata* but as integral components of a larger composition. Across the nave in the south aisle, open nets of interlocking strands—the basic design of which is a variation of the border at Qasr el-Lebia—

<sup>33</sup> Hachlili 2009, pls VI-6-8

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Fig. 49. Qabr Hiram mosaic. Now in Louvre Museum, Paris. Public Domain. G. Garitan

organise images into rows and columns (Fig. 52). The figures in this pavement, like those at Qasr el-Lebia, are neatly arranged, contained and static, but the wide strands that clearly tie the panels together encourage viewers to make connections between the individual images.

If the panels at Qasr el-Lebia are disassociated from the idea of *emblemata*—discrete, self-contained units intended to be understood in isolation—and are, instead, likened to the medallions in vine scroll pavements, the way the pavement is perceived changes dramatically. This shift in perception transforms the pavement from a series of stand-alone vignettes to a collection of images that can both take meaning from and give meaning to the surrounding imagery. Seen thus, the grid comes to resemble a sort of crossword puzzle or word game that can be read in a number of different ways, and one begins to get a sense of the interconnectivity between the panels and of an overall coherence to the pavement.



Fig. 50. Panel with border. Photographed before the panels were lifted. Illustrated London News, December 1957

With this in mind, the iconographic analysis that follows deals with small groups of images that are related—either by subject matter or location—and that work together to give meaning over and above



Fig. 51. North aisle, Byzantine Basilica, Petra. Author



Fig. 52. South aisle, Byzantine Basilica, Petra. Author

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the signification of the individual images. The intention is not to try to draw definitive conclusions about the meaning of the imagery, but to evaluate a range of possible outcomes and to get a sense of any overarching themes that add to our understanding of this enigmatic pavement.

## 4. Iconographic Analysis

### Ocean and Nile

A series of aquatic scenes are ranged around the outside of the pavement, some oceanic and some Nilotic. This section considers how images of the ocean and the Nile were understood in Late Antiquity and, more specifically, what their function and import might have been in the context of the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia (Fig. 53).

### Ocean

Traditionally, pavements with watery borders have been interpreted as imitating the ancient ideogram of the inhabitable world encircled by the mythical *Okeanus*: the earth surrounded by the ocean.<sup>1</sup> In ancient Greek cosmology, *Okeanus*, the great fresh-water stream, was believed to encircle the earth like a moat and was credited with being the source—the father—of all terrestrial waters.<sup>2</sup> The moon and stars were believed to rise from and set into its waters, the sun-god sailed from east to west across the stream, marking the eternal flow of time, and Elysium—the Isles of the Blessed where the chosen few lived a blessed and happy afterlife—lay on its far western shores.<sup>3</sup> The advancement of knowledge, even the discovery of a spherical world, seems not to have challenged the concept of a terrestrial earth surrounded by *Okeanus* and the idea was absorbed into Christian thinking. Eusebius wrote that God, ‘in the middle, like a core, [He] laid out the earth, and then encircled this with Ocean to embellish its outline with dark-blue color’.<sup>4</sup> A sixth-century map by Cosmas Indicopleustes depicts the world as a land mass surrounded by water beyond which lies the earthly Paradise.<sup>5</sup> The journey across the



Fig. 53. Arrangement of oceanic and Nilotic images in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

<sup>1</sup> Barry 2007, 634-35; Engemann 1997, 154-56; Kitzinger 1951, 100-08; Maguire 1987, 221-22. Examples of this type of composition include: the late fifth- or early sixth-century church of St. John the Baptist at Uum Hartaine in Syria: Donceel-Voûte 1988, 192-201, plan 11; a late fifth- or early sixth-century church at Khalde in Lebanon: Donceel-Voûte 1988, 359-71, plan 15; the sixth-century Chapel of Thyrsus at Tegea in Greece: Maguire 2012, 13, fig. 1.2; and the pavement in the narthex of the sixth-century Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis in Macedonia: Gjorgjievskva 2008; for image [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2011\\_Bitola\\_Heraclea\\_Lyncestis\\_%2816%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2011_Bitola_Heraclea_Lyncestis_%2816%29.jpg) accessed 5 May 2023

<sup>2</sup> In the *Iliad*, *Okeanus* is twice introduced as the begetter of the gods: *Iliad* 14.201 and 14.302, also as the origin of all things: *Iliad* 14.246 <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0134%3Abook%3D14> accessed 18 April 2023. Strabo, quoting Homer, wrote that ‘The inhabited world is washed on all sides by Oceanus, and this is true’: Strabo *Geography* 1.1.3, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/44884/pg44884-images.html> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>3</sup> Hansen 2004, 22, 161; Sacks 1997, 8-9; Toynbee 1964, 309

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini* 6.6 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2504.htm> accessed 18 April 2023

<sup>5</sup> McCrindle 2010, esp. 131

waters of *Okeanus* to the Isles of the Blessed was seen by some to be synonymous with the transition of the faithful from an earthly to a heavenly realm.<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria described the passage from earth to Paradise as a voyage which culminated in being steered ‘to anchor in the haven of heaven’, an idea often referenced in early Christian imagery.<sup>7</sup>

One of the best-known Late Antique Earth and ocean pavements is in the sixth-century Basilica of Dometios (Basilica A) at Nikopolis; a panel of fruiting trees, plants and birds is enclosed by a series of borders, the largest of which is an aquatic border densely populated by fish, sea-creatures and fishermen (**Fig. 54**). The scene is accompanied by an inscription stating that, ‘Here you see the famous and boundless ocean, containing in its midst the earth’.<sup>8</sup> Visual references to Earth and ocean were part of a long tradition and were not confined to floor mosaics: at Villa Adriana in Tivoli, for example, the second-century Teatro Maritimo is a circular building encompassed by a ring canal—quite literally land surrounded by water—and entablatures running around the outside edge of the island are decorated with a sculpted marine *thiasos* frieze emphasising the idea of earth and ocean (**Figs 55–56**); the fourth-century decoration in the central dome of Santa Costanza in Rome, now only known from a seventeenth-century engraving by Pietro Santi Bartoli, had an aquatic border running around its rim separating the earth below from heaven above;<sup>9</sup> the ornately carved ceiling beams in the sixth-century church of St. Catherine’s Monastery at Sinai alternate geometric or foliate designs with land and aquatic compositions;<sup>10</sup> and the intarsia revetment panels in the apse of the sixth-century Basilica of Eufrasius at Porec in Croatia are decorated with tridents, as a reference to the sea, and cornucopias, as a reference to earthly abundance.<sup>11</sup>

In Late Antiquity, the ocean was perceived in a number of different—often contradictory—ways. On the one hand, it was understood as a formidable and threatening force, the bringer of turmoil and disorder and a place to be feared. Biblical texts refer to the ocean as an abyss, the depth, and a bottomless pit.<sup>12</sup> It was the ‘watery chaos of the material world’, the chasm of unruly waters harbouring the ‘primeval dragon of chaos’ that threatened the organisation of the world, and the place where ‘God keeps the sea-monsters in the solitary depths, lest they disturb the world’s shipping’.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the ocean was sometimes portrayed as a more benign presence: a personification of the ocean in a late fourth- or early fifth-century pavement from Ain Témouchent near Sétif in Algeria, is accompanied by an inscription invoking the gaze of the mask as protection against misfortune caused by envy (**Fig. 57**),<sup>14</sup> and in the sixth-century Church of the Apostles at Madaba in Jordan, a personification of *Thalassa* takes centre-stage and is accompanied by an inscription calling on God to give life to ‘Anastasius, to Thomas and Theodora’.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the ocean was sometimes seen as a personification of the bountiful seas, and as such, could be understood as a marine foil to Ge’s earthly abundance.<sup>16</sup> This may be why, in the sixth-century Church of Bishop Sergius at Umm er-Rasas in Jordan, a figure labelled *Abyss*—a title that

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Barry 2011, 11-12; Friedman 1967, 9

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.7 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02091.htm> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>8</sup> Inscription reads: ‘Here you see the famous and boundless ocean containing in its midst the earth, bearing round about in the skilful images of art everything that breathes and creeps, the foundation of Dometios, the greathearted archpriest’: Kitzinger 1951, 100-01

<sup>9</sup> Witts 2021, 42, fig. 3.16

<sup>10</sup> Forsyth and Weitzmann 1973, pls LXVI-LXXIX; Maguire 1987, 28-29

<sup>11</sup> Maguire 1987, 77; Terry and Maguire 2007, vol. 2, pl. 2

<sup>12</sup> For example, Genesis 1:2; Jonah 2:5; Revelation 9:2; Revelation 11:7

<sup>13</sup> McGinn 1994, 156-58. George of Pisidia, *Hexaemeron*, lines 1005-1008, cited in Maguire 1987, 34

<sup>14</sup> Dunbabin 1978, 151-52

<sup>15</sup> *Thalassa* was the Greek goddess of the sea. The inscription reads: ‘O Lord God who has made the heavens and earth, give life to Anastasius, to Thomas and Theodora. [This is the work] of Salaman the mosaicist’: Piccirillo 1997, 106, pl. 80. Wages 1986, 124-25 makes a case for the personification of *Thalassa* evolving from the figure of *Tethys*, the consort of *Okeanus*.

<sup>16</sup> McGinn 1994, 158



Fig. 54. Transept, Basilica A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis. Photo S. Curtis

would normally carry negative connotations—is located at the east end of the nave immediately in front of the sanctuary, while a personification of Ge, a much-revered and benevolent figure of abundance, has been relegated to the west end of the pavement.<sup>17</sup> That the ocean was perceived as a magnanimous provider is also apparent in an account of a reception for a local benefactor at Antioch:

<sup>17</sup> Both personifications have been defaced but are identifiable by attributes and inscriptions: Piccirillo 1997, figs 368-69

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Fig. 55. Teatro Marittimo at the Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Author



Fig. 56. Detail of the marine *thiasos* in the Teatro Marittimo at Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Author



Fig. 57. Okeanus from Ain Témouchent near Sétif, Algeria. Now in the Museum of Antiquities, Algiers. Author

Next, betweenwhiles they liken him to the greatest of rivers, comparing his grand and lavish munificence to the copious waters of the Nile; and they call him the Nile of gifts. Others, flattering him still more and thinking the simile to the Nile too mean, reject rivers and seas; and they instance the ocean and say that he in his lavish gifts is what Ocean is among the waters, and they leave not a word of praise unsaid.<sup>18</sup>

The multiple and co-existing strands to the nature of the ocean make it difficult to determine where the idea of *Okeanus*, the great freshwater stream and primordial force, ended and the concept of a terrestrial ocean—whether as a propitious power or a malign force—began. It seems that the bodies of water gradually merged in the Late Antique mindset and that the term ocean came to embrace any or all of these concepts.

<sup>18</sup> John Chrysostom, *De inani Gloria* 4-5, cited in Laistner 1951, 87-88

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Fig. 58. Sea-monster, large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 59. Sea-monster, large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

Among the oceanic scenes at Qasr el-Lebia are two panels containing hybrid sea-monsters (**Figs 58–59**). Creatures such as these—half-fish and half-mammal—were common in Roman visual culture. On floor mosaics they often accompanied sea gods, such as *Okeanus* and *Tethys*, but they were also a popular choice for sarcophagi where, alongside nereids and tritons, they formed part of a marine *thiasos* transporting the deceased across the sea to the Isles of the Blessed.<sup>19</sup> In early Christian artworks, sea-monsters were almost always associated with Jonah and were often depicted with canine-like wolf heads, as seen for example, on a fourth-century sarcophagus from the Cemetery of Calixtus (**Fig. 60**), and on a fourth-century loculus slab from the Cemetery of Praetextatus (**Fig. 61**), both now in the Vatican Museums. At Qasr el-Lebia, however, there is no particular reference to Jonah and the creatures, facing each other at the east end of the pavement, seem more likely to have been referencing the mythological *Scylla* and *Charybdis*. In Greek mythology, *Scylla*, derived from either the Greek *skyllaros*—dog, or *skylax*—dog-shark, was a ferocious fish-tailed sea-goddess with a cluster of canine fore-parts around her waist and a voice that sounded like the yelping of dogs.<sup>20</sup> *Charybdis*, a fearsome personified bladder-like whirlpool, sucked in and then spewed out vast quantities of water three times a day.<sup>21</sup> These two monsters occupied rocks either side of the Strait of Messina and were located close enough together to pose an inescapable threat to sailors; avoiding one hazard meant falling prey to the other.<sup>22</sup> This bipartite threat was still alive in the minds of the early Christians: Jerome, for example, is recorded as having paused by the shores of the Strait to contemplate the ancient myths of *Scylla*, *Charybdis* and *Odysseus*;<sup>23</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, when describing a drunken slave who had to be tied to the mast of a ship to keep him from the wine, made reference to *Odysseus* who had to negotiate *Scylla* and *Charybdis* as well as the sirens;<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence 1962, 294. For a general discussion: Cumont 1966

<sup>20</sup> Shepard 1940, 96

<sup>21</sup> Stoneman 1991, 51

<sup>22</sup> Hansen 2004, 231-32. Thetis was instructed by Hera to guide the Argonauts through the Strait of Messina avoiding *Scylla* and *Charybdis*: Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* 4, 70-830 <https://www.theoi.com/Text/ApolloniusRhodius4.html> accessed 28 March 2023

<sup>23</sup> Rahner 1963, 339-40

<sup>24</sup> Synesius of Cyrene, *Epistula* 32 <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-032/> accessed 18 April 2023



Fig. 60. Sarcophagus from the Cemetery of St. Calixtus, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museum. Author



Fig. 61. Loculus slab from the Cemetery of Praetextatus, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museums, Rome. Author



Fig. 62. Odysseus mosaic, House of Leontis, Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author

and a sixth-century mosaic pavement from Beth She'an in Israel, interpreted as representing the story of *Odysseus*, includes the fragmentary remains of two sea-monsters, presumably *Scylla* and *Charybdis* (Fig. 62).<sup>25</sup> At Qasr el-Lebia the two creatures, teeth bared and ready to attack, are positioned either side of the only securely identified entrance into this part of the complex. Assuming the roles of *Scylla* and *Charybdis*, the creatures can be understood as the malevolent counterparts of guarding lions, bedevilling the entrance of whoever ventured into the building.

Also amongst the oceanic imagery at Qasr el-Lebia is a hybrid merman—half-man and half-fish (Fig. 63). The earliest recorded merman, the sea-god *Ea*, or *Oannes*, was a god of the ancient Babylonians and is known from fragmented



Fig. 63. Merman in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

<sup>25</sup> Hachlili 2009, fig. V-1



Fig. 64. Phorkys mosaic from the Trajan Baths of Acholla. Now in the Bardo Museum, Tunis.  
Public Domain. D. Jarvis

reports of an account given by Berossus, a Chaldean priest of about 200 BC.<sup>26</sup> The merman subsequently reappeared in classical mythology as Triton, son and attendant of Poseidon and god of the great salt-lake Tritonis, believed to have been located in Libya.<sup>27</sup> The clean-shaven young merman at Qasr el-Lebia has been referred to as Triton—even though Triton is generally depicted as older and bearded—and despite the fact that he is holding a four-pronged fork rather than the traditional three-pronged trident. The Qasr el-Lebia merman also brings to mind *Phorkys*, a fish-tailed hybrid sea-god who had

<sup>26</sup> Fragments of Berossus' writings are known from quotations cited by authors around the first century BC-AD, for example, Alexander Polyhistor, and Flavius Josephus: Waugh 1960, 73

<sup>27</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, IV. 178-80 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D4&force=y> accessed 18 April 2023

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crab-claw forelegs growing from his belly, as seen, for example, in a mosaic from the Trajan Baths of Acholla (**Fig. 64**). This is a particularly apt association given that *Phorkys* is credited with fathering *Scylla*, who is possibly depicted immediately below the merman at Qasr el-Lebia.<sup>28</sup> On a more general level, the crab-claw forelegs growing from the merman's belly are reminiscent of the claws often shown sprouting from *Okeanus*' forehead and here, clutching his spear and his paddle, the figure underlines the idea that the waters surrounding the east end of the pavement belong to the ocean.

#### *Nile*

Imagery representing the Nile was a recurrent theme throughout the Mediterranean from the beginning of the first century BC onwards.<sup>29</sup> Distinctive features, such as Nilometers, representations of the city of Alexandria, and personifications of the Nile were common components of Nilotic imagery, for example, all three appear in the Nile Festival Building in Sepphoris, Israel (**Figs 65–66**). But even without these defining landmarks, the genre is instantly recognisable by its ubiquitous flora and fauna, among which are lotus flowers and seed-heads, ducks, hippopotami and crocodiles (**Figs 67–68**). The imagery is generally thought not to have expressed cultic or Egyptian associations,<sup>30</sup> but rather to have symbolised the annual inundation of the Nile—the *sēmasia*—the importance of which cannot be over-stated; the cyclical floods left the erstwhile parched land replenished and fertile and the resulting crops helped to ensure the continued well-being of the entire empire.<sup>31</sup> The rites and traditions surrounding the Nile's surge were inextricably interwoven into day-to-day existence and the rhythms of the agricultural cycle were so closely bound with the inundation that 'neither priestly nor imperial nor, ultimately, Christian institutions could alter its cultural significance'.<sup>32</sup> The Nile continued to be regarded as conveyor of material prosperity into the early Christian period and Nilotic images persisted as symbols of divine providence, wealth and fecundity.<sup>33</sup> Even though the annual flood came to be heralded as an illustration of the power of Christ, there was clearly a reluctance to transfer responsibility for this vitally important force of nature away from the tried and tested hands of the pagan gods—in particular Serapis, Isis and Demeter—to the control of the new Christian God.<sup>34</sup> Libanius highlighted this recalcitrance, noting an eagerness on the part of Christians to abolish all feasts to pagan deities while allowing feasts to the Nile to continue unabated.<sup>35</sup> At Hermopolis in Egypt, for example, a festival anticipating the annual flood involved inhabitants and priests parading a large wooden statue through the local villages in a 'bacchic frenzy',<sup>36</sup> and as late as the fifth century, the *sēmasia* was celebrated at the Temple of Akoris,<sup>37</sup> although, as Rina Talgam points out, these rites should probably be viewed as popular traditions rather than as evidence of pagan enclaves within a Christian society.<sup>38</sup> An invocation to the Nile, discovered on late third- or early fourth-century tablets comprising a school notebook, praises the waters of the Nile as though they were commensurate with the salvific waters of baptism, describing them as 'life-giving'

<sup>28</sup> *Phorkys and Keto* as parents of *Scylla*: Hopman 2013, 32-33. The mosaic from the Trajan Baths of Acholla is now in the Bardo Museum, Tunis.

<sup>29</sup> Hachlili 2009, 97-109, esp. 106; Meyboom 1995, 16

<sup>30</sup> Balty 1995, 249-53; Kitzinger 1976, 58-59

<sup>31</sup> Versluys 2002, 279. For a general discussion on the *sēmasia*: Meyboom 1995, 72-73.

<sup>32</sup> Frankfurter 1998, 42. Rites surrounding the anticipated surge were fixed astronomically but the *sēmasia* festival only took place when the river attained its optimum height.

<sup>33</sup> Lee 2009, 64; Maguire 1999, 181

<sup>34</sup> A sixth-century letter from a Christian at Oxyrhynchus reads: 'To the most honourable Calus, secretary of the noble house. I again bring the good news to your honor that the blessed fertilizing river of Egypt has risen by the power of Christ': Maguire, Maguire and Duncan-Flowers 1989, 15. For pagan gods and the *sēmasia*: Lesko 1999, 193

<sup>35</sup> Libanius *Orationes* 30 [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/libanius\\_pro\\_templis\\_02\\_trans.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/libanius_pro_templis_02_trans.htm) accessed 19 April 2023

<sup>36</sup> Frankfurter 1998, 44

<sup>37</sup> Weiss and Talgam 2002, 69

<sup>38</sup> Talgam 2004, 234



Fig. 65. Nilometer in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, Israel. Author



Fig. 66. Alexandria in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, Israel. Author

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Fig. 67. Nilotic imagery at east end of north aisle in the church at Tabgha, Israel. Author



Fig. 68. Nilotic imagery in the Villa Silin, Libya. Author



Fig. 69. Detail of oceanic border, Basilica, A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis, Greece. Photo S. Curtis

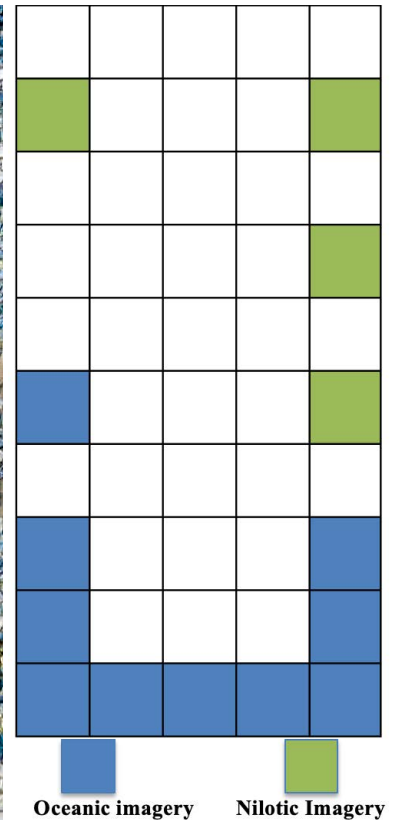


Fig. 70. Oceanic and Nilotic panels in the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Author

and ‘divine’ and acclaiming the river as ‘king of rivers’ and ‘nourisher of children’.<sup>39</sup> A sixth-century hymn goes one step further, displaying a syncretistic combination of ancient cultural tradition and Christian belief. It begins with the pagan-like invocation, ‘O most fortunate Nile, smilingly have you watered the land; rightly do we present to you a hymn’, but the verse concludes with a prayer to Christ: ‘True illumination, Christ, benefactor [save] the souls of men, now and [forever]’.<sup>40</sup>

For some early Christian apologists, the continued eulogising of the Nile was troubling; Firmicus Maternus, for example, warned that, ‘[i]n vain do you suppose that this (Nile) water that you worship will ever bring you profit. For it is through another water that people are renewed and reborn’.<sup>41</sup> Despite lingering fears that Christians were venerating the Nile, Nilotic imagery was quickly assimilated into Christian iconography, even appearing in churches and ecclesiastical complexes. It is notable, however, that when personifications of the Nile appeared in ecclesiastical contexts they were always in the guise of the paradisiacal Geon and chaperoned by the remaining three Rivers of Paradise—a precaution perhaps intended to discourage Nile-worship.<sup>42</sup> Even in its new Christian settings, Nilotic imagery retained its

<sup>39</sup> Criboire 1995, esp. 99–100. The five waxed tablets are preserved in the Louvre, MNE-911.

<sup>40</sup> From a sixth-century papyrus found in Antinoë, cited in Manfredi 1981, 56

<sup>41</sup> Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* 2.1, cited in Hermann 1959, 48

<sup>42</sup> A lone personification of the Nile was recorded in a building at Jiyeh in Lebanon that may have been a church, although this identification has never been confirmed: Ortali-Tarazi and Waliszewski 2000, 165–77. And in a church at Umm el-Manabi

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traditional significance of earthly abundance, wealth and fecundity, although it also took on the more specifically Christian significance of earthly paradise and spiritual regeneration.<sup>43</sup>

It was common practice in Late Antiquity for aquatic scenes to contain both oceanic and Nilotic elements. For example, the border in the Basilica of Dometios at Nikopolis, discussed above, is described in the accompanying inscription as the 'Ocean' but includes well-known Nilotic features such as ducks nesting in lotus flowers and wading birds (**Fig. 69** see also **Fig. 54**). The aquatic panels in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia break with this convention. Maguire remarks that in the panels 'river life, especially the flora and fauna, is mingled with marine life'.<sup>44</sup> On closer inspection, however, there is no mingling of oceanic and Nilotic motifs, on the contrary, care has been taken to separate the two bodies of water and mark them as distinct from each other. The subject matter does this very effectively; whelks, squid, lobsters, crabs, anemones and sea-monsters in the oceanic panels, and ducks, flamingos, lotus plants and a crocodile in the Nilotic panels. However, to ensure that there could be no confusion, the watery background of blue-grey wavy lines fills the entire panel in the oceanic scenes, while in the Nilotic scenes it only covers the lower half of the panels (**Fig. 70**).

The pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, although ostensibly in-keeping with other sixth-century 'earth and ocean' compositions, is actually set apart from them by the clear distinction made between the two different types of aquatic scenes; oceanic imagery surrounds the east end of the pavement, giving way to Nilotic imagery further west. The positioning of these panels, together with the traditional meanings associated with the two bodies of water, plays an important role in understanding the pavement as a whole. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### **Personifications - *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Ananeosis***

Towards the west end of the pavement three female figures, identified by inscriptions as *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis*, and *Ananeosis*, are clustered around an architectural representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias* (**Fig. 71**). The figures are generally understood to be personifications of abstract concepts commemorating the foundation, adornment and renewal of either the ecclesiastical building itself or the town in which it was built.<sup>45</sup>

Personifications gave human form to natural elements, to objects, places and abstract concepts. Although not gods, some personifications acquired a quasi-religious status; in visual narratives they were rarely distinguished by size or appearance from gods and goddesses, they were venerated, offered sacrifices, and even had cult statues and temples dedicated to them.<sup>46</sup> During the Hellenistic period, propitious female figures associated with wealth, abundance and good fortune—for example, Tyche, Ge and the Seasons—became conspicuous elements of imperial propaganda and were often used as a type of visual panegyric celebrating emperors' triumphant achievements and beneficent rule.<sup>47</sup> As Rome and its citizens began to transfer allegiance from pagan deities to the new Christian God there was a gradual shift in attitude towards personifications; their status was altered—downgraded—and although still

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in Jordan a figure, now lost, was tentatively identified as a personification of Nile, although this interpretation has also been treated with scepticism: Glueck 1951, 229-30

<sup>43</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 51; Hermann 1959, 64-7; Lee 2009, 65; Maguire 1999, 181

<sup>44</sup> Maguire 1987, 47

<sup>45</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 35; Grabar 1969, 264-82; Guarducci 1975, 683; Maguire 1987, 44; Ward-Perkins 1958, 189

<sup>46</sup> Shelton 1979, 29; Stafford and Herrin 2005, 2

<sup>47</sup> Mattingly and Sydenham 1968, 324-30; Smith 1999, 129. Cicero expressed incredulity that concepts such as hope, honour, victory and safety were accredited with so much power: 'I see their usefulness, and also their images which have been consecrated, but why they have the force of divinities I shall not understand until I am informed': Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, Book III. XXIV, translation <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/cicero-on-the-nature-of-the-gods> accessed 20 March 2023



Fig. 71. *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* flanking a representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias* with *Ananeosis* below. Large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

potent they were, on the whole, no longer objects of cult and were thus able to migrate seamlessly into early Christian visual culture.<sup>48</sup> However, an account from Thessaloniki at the beginning of the seventh century that tells how the inhabitants of the city were reassured, not by a vision of St. Demetrius, but rather by the appearance at his side of Lady *Eutaxia*, a ‘personification of good order, bringing to bear the full weight of her almost divine power’, makes it clear that personifications continued to be potent beings and were not simply viewed as enervated survivals of a past tradition.<sup>49</sup>

There has been a long-running and unresolved debate about the intention behind the use of personifications in Late Antiquity: Ernest Renan, Ernst Kitzinger and Michele Piccirillo understood the figures as belonging to a so-called ‘Justinianic Renaissance’;<sup>50</sup> Glanville Downey suggested that they reflected the moral and personal values characteristic of Late Antiquity;<sup>51</sup> Peter Brown, that they could be seen as a declaration of intent by local landowners to ‘exercise, within the city, virtues dear to ancient man’;<sup>52</sup> and Ruth Leader-Newby has ascribed their popularity to an increased enthusiasm for

<sup>48</sup> They appeared in churches, ecclesiastical complexes and elite villas, they adorned silverware, coins, tapestries and garments, and were prominent characters in Late Antique literary and theatrical works. The figures were mainly, but not exclusively, female, although river personifications were usually male and male personifications of the Seasons have been found in villa pavements at Dougga, Carthage and Argos: Parrish 1984, 134-6 and 105-08. Toynbee has described personifications as ‘new art types sprung from the old tradition’: Toynbee 1947, 136. See also Stafford 2000, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Brown 1980, 24

<sup>50</sup> Kitzinger 1976, 51; Piccirillo 1997, 22; Renan 1864, 625

<sup>51</sup> Downey 1938, 349

<sup>52</sup> Brown 1980, 19

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combining imagery and text—a development that she sees as an overt display of *paideia*.<sup>53</sup> Inevitably, the meanings associated with personifications would have changed according to context. In domestic settings, *Ge*, associated with abundance, is thought to have drawn attention to the wealth and status of the homeowner, and personifications depicted as richly bejewelled females, empowered and rendered efficacious by their imperial regalia, are sometimes seen as apotropaic devices intended to ward off evil.<sup>54</sup> The Seasons may have been a reminder of the blessings brought about by the agricultural year and George Hanfmann has surmised that if the Seasons were to have been replaced by an inscription, it would have read: ‘May this house enjoy all good things throughout the year’.<sup>55</sup> It is also possible that personifications such as these were chosen by homeowners as a strategy to attract the very properties that they represented.<sup>56</sup> In ecclesiastical settings, personifications probably took on additional, explicitly Christian, meanings. The Seasons, for example, might have been understood as embodying the logical cycle of nature created by God to give purpose to the passing of time and to imbue the world with an order by which man could live, while *Ge*, the folds of her robe overflowing with fruits, might have been seen as a celebration of the bountiful gifts of God.<sup>57</sup> Maguire has suggested that the use of these previously-pagan figures in Christian settings would have made the point that the good life, heretofore the prerogative of the Roman elite, was now under the control of the Christian Church and on offer to all.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Kosmesis and Ktisis*

In Late Antiquity personifications were generally depicted as forward-facing half-busts isolated from surrounding imagery by framing devices. The majority of these figures were identified by inscription, and some were associated with a particular attribute; *Ge* carried a swag or a cornucopia, *Tyche* wore a mural crown and the Seasons were adorned with plants and fruit appropriate to their time of year. At Qasr el-Lebia, however, *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* are depicted as full-length figures. They flank the representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias* and although they are holding objects, these are not attributes necessarily associated with the concepts of adornment and foundation and give no clues about the identities of the figures. *Kosmesis* holds a red flower in her left hand and swings a censer with her right hand.<sup>59</sup> *Ktisis*, who is more often than not shown holding a builder’s measure, holds a small white cloth in her left hand and offers a twisted branch or wreath with her right. *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* have also been found in two other mosaic pavements in Cyrenaica; in a sixth-century Christian basilica at Ras al-Hilal (**Fig. 72**), and in a building, probably a church, at Taucheira (**Fig. 73**).<sup>60</sup> In each of these three Cyrenaican pavements

<sup>53</sup> Leader-Newby 2005, 233-41. *Paideia* was a system of educating and training the mind in classical Greek and Hellenistic culture. For a general discussion on *paideia*: Jaeger 1961

<sup>54</sup> James 2003, 54; Maguire 1994, 268

<sup>55</sup> Hanfmann 1951, 261. The popularity of personifications of the Seasons seems to have increased during times of prosperity. In El Djem, for example, personifications of the Seasons proliferated during the late second and early third centuries when the olive oil trade was at its height, but waned during the fourth and fifth centuries when the region was no longer prosperous. In contrast, at Carthage, a city which remained relatively affluent into the sixth century, personifications of the Seasons continued to adorn the floors of villas, baths and public buildings throughout this period: Parrish 1984, 17

<sup>56</sup> Maguire 1999a, 243. The same type of figures on textiles may have been intended to bestow their qualities on the wearer: Maguire 1990, 215-24, esp. 217

<sup>57</sup> According to the teleological argument, the existence of orderly or purposeful creations was seen as evidence of an ‘ordering and purposing Creator’ and an expression of divine provenance: Pease 1941, 169

<sup>58</sup> Maguire 1999a, 253

<sup>59</sup> Red flowers often appear in early Christian funerary settings, sometimes as flowers growing on stalks, but often scattered randomly, as seen, for example, in a niche under St Peter’s in Rome: Basso 1980, fig. 28. Images of women carrying censers are not common, but a letter by Cyril of Alexandria describes the aftermath of the vote condemning Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431: ‘... and there was much joy and lighting of lights in the city, so that even women carrying censers led the way for us’: McEnery 1987, 107

<sup>60</sup> The panels from Ras al-Hilal are in the museum at Souza. My thanks to Will Wootton who managed to snatch a few photographs of the pavement from Taucheira, which was lifted and is now largely buried under rubble in a dangerous structure.



Fig. 72. *Ktisis* and *Kosmesis* from Ras al-Hilal. Now in the Museum at Susa (Apollonia). Author

the figures are identified by inscription; at Qasr el-Lebia and Taucheira the inscriptions read KOCMHCIC and KTICIC, while at Ras al-Hilal they read KOCCMHCIC and KTHCIC. At Taucheira the figures, together with a personification of *Ananeosis*, are depicted in a colonnaded arcade with large birds perched in the interstices and flowering shrubs at their sides.<sup>61</sup> *Kosmesis* holds a staff or a rod and *Ktisis* a censer and a small white cloth. All three women at Taucheira wear maphoria and there is evidence to suggest that, like the figures at Qasr el-Lebia, they have ornate pearl-studded prependulia and red shoes, as though to emulate female attendants at the imperial court.<sup>62</sup> At Ras al-Hilal the figures, originally positioned

For further comments on Taucheira: Michaelides 1982, 117; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 221.

<sup>61</sup> Stucchi 1975, 427 recorded the personifications as being immediately in front of the apse.

<sup>62</sup> The *Codex Justinianus* ruled that pearls, emeralds, amethysts and sapphires were reserved for imperial use, *Cod. Iust XI 12*: Becker and Kondoleon 2005, 211. It has been suggested that affluent villa owners who were not allowed to wear this type of finery included them in mosaics as a way of circumventing the law and demonstrating their wealth: Campbell 1984, 57. It is also notable that at Poreč in Croatia the Virgin wears red shoes under her imperial purple tunic: Maguire 2006, 394



Fig. 73. *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Ananeosis* from Taucheira. Photo Dr. W. Wootton

either side of a *solea*, are orant-like and stand under scallop-shell arches supported on Proconnesian columns. Here too, the women are dressed in *maphoria* over long-sleeved dresses, but in this case, they are unadorned and empty handed. Alföldi-Rosenbaum has attributed the differences in appearance between the personifications from Ras al-Hilal and Qasr el-Lebia to the fact that ‘Foundation’ and ‘Adornment’ ‘did not belong to the current stock of pictures available to the mosaicists so that, when called upon to provide pictorial renderings of these abstract concepts, the designers chose various representations of either donors or saints.’<sup>63</sup>

Depictions of *Kosmesis* have not been found outside of Cyrenaica, but personifications of *Ktisis* are more widespread. Apart from the three examples from Cyrenaica discussed above, all known examples of *Ktisis* are either half-length figures or busts in roundels and have been found in domestic settings. *Ktisis* is often depicted holding a builder’s measure—a symbol of a soundly constructed building. Examples include, the House of Eustolios at Kourion on Cyprus (Fig. 74),<sup>64</sup> the House of *Ktisis* at Antioch (Fig. 75),<sup>65</sup> the mosaic of the four seasons, from a villa in Antioch,<sup>66</sup> the Villa of the Amazons at Urfa (Fig. 76), and an unprovenanced, heavily restored mosaic now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Fig. 77).<sup>67</sup> In other pavements she is labelled as *Ktisis* but does not hold any attributes, for example, in

<sup>63</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 41

<sup>64</sup> Christou 2007, 27

<sup>65</sup> Cimok 2000, 295

<sup>66</sup> Now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris

<sup>67</sup> Evans *et al.* 2001, 16. According to the Metropolitan Museum’s website, the panel, including the first part of the inscription *KTI*, has been reconstructed from two separate fragments <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/469960>



Fig. 74. *Ktisis*. House of Eustolios, Kourion, Cyprus. Author



Fig. 75. *Ktisis*. House of *Ktisis*, Antioch. Author



Fig. 76. *Ktisis* Villa of the Amazons, Urfa, Turkey. Author

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Fig. 77. *Ktisis*. Now in The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain, Wmpearl

a mosaic from the House of Ge and Seasons at Antioch.<sup>68</sup> In a pavement from Jiyeh, now on display at the Beiteddine Palace in Lebanon, the figure is named as *Ktisis* but she holds a hunting spear (Fig. 78).<sup>69</sup> In these domestic settings *Ktisis* may have been intended to identify the villa owner as *ktistes*, that is, as founder, benefactor or restorer,<sup>70</sup> and in centres such as Antioch and Kourion, where the danger of earthquakes was a constant threat, *Ktisis* with her builder's measure is likely to have provided a

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Accession no. 1998.69; 1999.99 accessed 20 March 2023. To the left of *Ktisis* a small figure offers an overflowing cornucopia and is accompanied by the Greek word ΚΑΛΟΙ 'good'. It has been suggested that there was possibly another small figure on the other side and that the inscription originally read 'good wishes'. Even though *Ktisis* is depicted with a builder's measure, the subordinate figure (or figures) would be more in keeping with the tradition of depicting *Ge* with two offerers—*karpoforoi*—than with representations of *Ktisis*. For discussions about *Ge* and two offerers: Maguire 1987, 71; Merrony 1998, 468

<sup>68</sup> Cimok 2000, 281

<sup>69</sup> The provenance of the mosaic is not certain, but it is thought probably to have come from a villa either at 'Awza'i or 'Ouza'i south of Beirut <https://www.romeartlover.it/Beiteddine2.html> accessed 20 March 2023. Dr Tomasz Waliszewski warned that the mosaic was 'heavily damaged by modern restoration during the 1980s': *pers. comm.* 27 September 2012

<sup>70</sup> Leader-Newby 2005, 240-41



Fig. 78. *Ktisis*. From Jiyeh, now in the Beiteddine Palace, Lebanon. Public Domain

reassuring presence.<sup>71</sup> In Cyrenaica, however, all three known examples of *Ktisis* are full-length figures, none holds a builder's measure and they were all found in ecclesiastical buildings. It is possible that, here too, the presence of the personification was understood as offering extra protection to the built structure, although, as Stucchi has suggested, her remit may have extended to include securing the foundations of God's creation—the Earth.<sup>72</sup> Maguire endorses this idea and notes that at Qasr el-Lebia the rich variety of creatures in the large pavement 'demonstrates that here *Ktisis* stands for earthly creation'.<sup>73</sup>

The full-length figures of *Ktisis* and *Kosmesis* in Cyrenaica stand out from the usual cameo-like bust-in-roundel personifications and without their identifying labels the women would not necessarily be recognised as personifications. Indeed, they have more in common with contemporaneous donor portraits. *Kosmesis* with her censer, for example, has been likened to Elias in the Church of Elias, Maria and Soreg at Gerasa, and to Theodore in the mosaic pavement of the church of Ss. Cosmas and Damian, also at Gerasa.<sup>74</sup> *Ktisis*, clutching a twisted branch in her right hand, has been compared to Soreg, also in the Church of Elias, Maria and Soreg. Another donor in this church, identified by inscription as Maria, is dressed in a maphorion very similar to those worn by both *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis*. A comparison can

<sup>71</sup> Maguire 2012, 30-32

<sup>72</sup> Stucchi 1975, 401

<sup>73</sup> Maguire 2012, 32

<sup>74</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 35-36. For images of Elias, Maria and Soreg in the Church of Elias, Maria and Soreg at Gerasa: Piccirillo 1997, pls 572, 569, 515. For Theodore in the Church of Ss Cosmas and Damian: Piccirillo 1997, fig. 507. The head of Theodore is not original: Piccirillo 1997, 288-89

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also be made between the Cyrenaican personifications and a group of three figures flanking a building, generally thought to be a church, in the nave pavement of the sixth-century Church of Bishop Sergius at Umm er-Rasas in Jordan.<sup>75</sup> The figures have been defaced—the tesserae muddled up by iconoclasts—but it is still clear that to the right of the church a figure, probably a woman, swings a censer towards the building, and to the left two further figures are holding out offerings, one of which is a red flower. The similarities between these donor portraits and the full-length personifications in Cyrenaica are marked.

For the Romans, driven by a desire not to be forgotten, patronage and public magnanimity were important forms of self-presentation.<sup>76</sup> Making donations and leaving foundations in wills were means of buying status, perpetuating one's reputation, and achieving commemoration.<sup>77</sup> By the fourth century, however, there was a notable decline in public euergetism, and by the sixth century, 'traditional, local and private secular patronage had effectively died.'<sup>78</sup> The sponsoring of Christian foundations, on the other hand, had increased to such an extent that lithomania was highlighted as a 'besetting sin of great bishops', and Justinian had to legislate against laymen building churches unless they could provide sufficient endowments to support a clergy and meet the running costs.<sup>79</sup> Enthusiasm for religious patronage was not confined to men; women may not have been allowed to hold office in the Church but making donations allowed them to advance their social status, leave their mark on the Christian community, and ensure the 'goodwill of the Almighty'.<sup>80</sup> Female donors, previously rarely visible in epigraphic or archaeological records, were making considerable private benefactions to ecclesiastical foundations. Brown has observed that '[t]he impact of upper-class ascetic women on the Latin church was far out of proportion to their numbers.'<sup>81</sup> An illustration of the important role played by elite female donors is the frontispiece of the sixth-century Vienna Dioscurides manuscript, which features a portrait of Anicia Juliana, patron of at least three churches, including St. Polyeuktos in Constantinople (see Fig. 45).<sup>82</sup> Anicia Juliana, flanked by two classically inspired personifications, *Megalopyschia* (magnanimity) and *Sophrosyne* (prudence) is enthroned within an eight-pointed rope star that is set within a roundel. In the spandrels of the star *putti* work as labourers, carpenters and stonemasons while another, labelled *Pothos tou Philoktistou* (the desire to build), hands Anicia Juliana an open codex. A small figure in proskynesis at her feet and a dedicatory inscription running around the inside of the star further confirm her role as benefactress and builder.<sup>83</sup> Anicia Juliana is depicted scattering gold coins from the fold of *Megalopyschia*'s dress with one hand and indicating the codex held by *Sophrosyne* with the other; gestures presumably intended to claim the personifications as her own attributes. However, it is notable that Anicia Juliana is the one staring straight ahead, while *Sophrosyne* and *Megalopyschia*, rather surprisingly for personifications, are quite animated. Were it not for the accompanying inscriptions, *Megalopyschia* and *Sophrosyne* could almost be misinterpreted as elite women or ladies in waiting and Anicia Juliana as a personification of Patronage.

The interchangeability of the female figures on the frontispiece of the Vienna Dioscurides is of particular interest when considering *Ktisis* and *Kosmesis* at Qasr el-Lebia. At this time not only was there a sharp increase in the number of female patrons, but there was also a shift towards anonymous

<sup>75</sup> Piccirillo 1997, fig. 365

<sup>76</sup> Bowes 2008, 594

<sup>77</sup> Champlin 1991, 163; Vuolanto 2015, 37

<sup>78</sup> Lomas 2003, esp. 28-42; McEachnie 2017, 127; Ward-Perkins 1987, 37

<sup>79</sup> Brown 1980, 19

<sup>80</sup> For advancing social status: Hunt 1994, 120; Kitzinger 1967, 2; Parrish 2005, 1103. Establishing themselves in the Christian community and church: Clark 1990, 253, 255; Ward-Perkins 1987, 71

<sup>81</sup> Brown 2008, 344. See also Vuolanto 2002, 245

<sup>82</sup> Anicia Juliana came from a prestigious line of female patrons. Her grandmother, the empress Licinia Eudoxia, and her mother, Placidia the younger, were both patrons of St. Euphemia en tois Olybriou: Connor 2004, 105-15; Kiilerich 2001, 181

<sup>83</sup> Kiilerich 2001, 171-3

philanthropy—a phenomenon previously unfamiliar to Roman benefactors.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps prompted by biblical passages such as John 7:18 and Matthew 6:2, which urge Christians to strive to glorify God rather than themselves, conspicuous and extravagant displays of magnanimity favoured by the Romans were gradually replaced by ostentatious displays of anonymity and humility.<sup>85</sup> Donor portraits did not exactly go out of fashion but, in many cases, they reflect a disinclination to make self-aggrandising proclamations. Consular diptychs, for example, high-status commemorative objects commissioned by consuls to record their magnanimity, were inscribed with the names and titles of individual consuls, but the portraits themselves were ‘essentially identical throughout the series’, as though to down-play separate identities (**Fig. 79**).<sup>86</sup> A similar reticence is evident in ecclesiastical contexts where donations were commonly acknowledged, perhaps by an inscription in the church pavement, for example, but in such a way that benefactors remained anonymous. An inscription in the basilica of Soloi on Cyprus, for example, requests that, ‘God help him who made the mosaic’,<sup>87</sup> and in the basilica at Palaiopolis (Kerkyra) on Corfu an inscription referencing a donor simply reads, ‘On behalf of his soul’.<sup>88</sup> The same studied anonymity is evident in an *ex voto* inscription towards the west end of the nave pavement in the Vrina Plain basilica at Butrint, Albania. It states that the mosaic was made, ‘In fulfilment of the prayer of those whose names God knows’;<sup>89</sup> in this case, not only is the dedication anonymous, but the inscription is also set slightly off-centre, a contrivance that removes the donor from the main axis of devotion, thereby further expressing humility.<sup>90</sup> Charlotte Roueché has argued that the practice even extended to emperors and empresses who included their monograms rather than their names in prestigious church buildings.<sup>91</sup> Ostentatious displays of anonymity and humility such as these suggest an underlying tension between benefactors feeling a need to record their euergetism and elite status, while at the same time wishing to comply, or perhaps be seen to be complying, with the idea of anonymous philanthropy.<sup>92</sup>

This apparent anxiety over whether to reveal or conceal one’s identity seems to have prompted female donors to be inventive when commemorating their benefactions. Female portraits are almost always richly attired and bejewelled and their imperial regalia, most notably the pearl bands often worn by empresses, work to aggrandise the figures, helping to establish their elite status and ensure perpetual memory. These portraits were rarely labelled, but dedications elsewhere in the vicinity sometimes held clues to their identities. In the sixth-century Upper Chapel of Priest John at Wadi’Afrat in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, Jordan, for example, two unnamed portrait busts in frames, one male and one female, survive in the border of the nave pavement. It is thought that they were donors and were probably associated with an inscription at the east end of the nave that reads: ‘For the salvation of, and as a present of Your servant Sergius [the son] of Stephen, and Procopius, [the son] of Porphyria, Rome, and Mary, and Julian,

<sup>84</sup> Making reference to *tituli* recording benefactors, Champlin 1991, 26 points out that ‘there is no Greek or Latin expression for ‘anonymous donor’.

<sup>85</sup> John 7:18 ‘He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him’. Matthew 6:2 ‘Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward’.

<sup>86</sup> Eastmond 2010, 762; Morey 1941, 46. On western consular diptychs the consuls’ names are generally inscribed on the back and his offices on the front. With eastern diptychs it is the other way around: Williamson and Stevenson 2010, 47

<sup>87</sup> Michaelides 1987, 33, fig. 34

<sup>88</sup> Bowden 2003, 132

<sup>89</sup> Mitchell 2019, 337, 345–46, 353, pls. 11.1–3, fig. 11.3

<sup>90</sup> Although a second inscription, now largely lost, is on the central axis and may have contained a name. Mitchell 2019, 337

<sup>91</sup> For example, Justinian and Theodora marked Hagia Sophia with their monograms not their names: Roueché 2007, 234. Paul the Silentiary described these monograms as ‘one symbol that means many words’: *Descriptio ecclesiae Sanctae Sophiae* lines 713–4, cited in Mango 1972, 87

<sup>92</sup> Roueché, 2007, 230 has suggested that anonymous inscriptions were a way of avoiding the attention of the evil eye, a proposal given weight by a sixth-century pavement in the triconch church at Antigoneia in Albania, where donors are named but the inscriptions are accompanied by a major apotropaic image—a strange bird-headed beast tentatively identified as Abrasax: Mitchell 2006, 267–76, fig. 4

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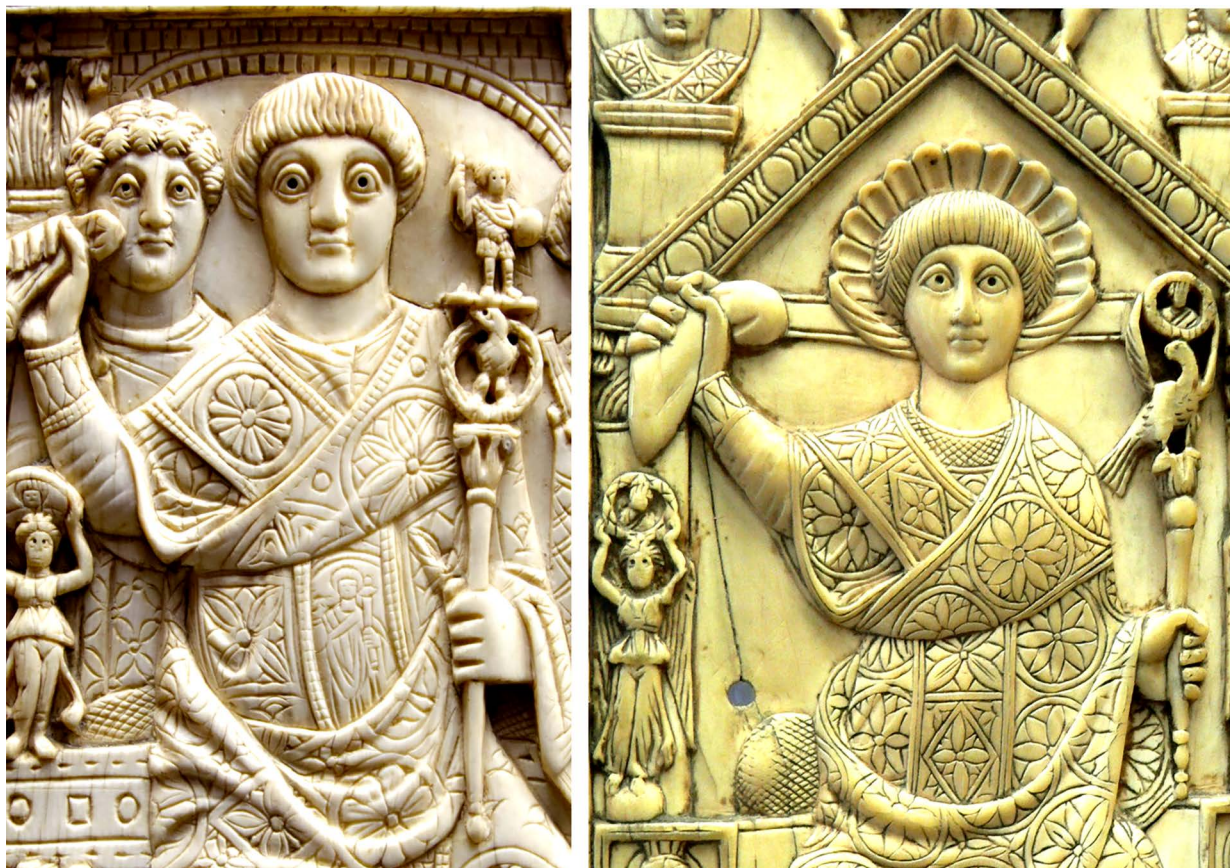


Fig. 79. Consular diptychs of Aerobindus and Probus Anastatius. Public Domain - Musée de Cluny and Bibliothèque Nationale de France

the monk'.<sup>93</sup> To focus on the female portrait, she has been depicted as a generic elite female and is indistinguishable from many of the bust-in-roundel type personifications discussed above, although had she been a personification, she would almost certainly have been either labelled or accompanied by a distinguishing attribute (Fig. 80).<sup>94</sup> The figure is not in close vicinity to the dedicatory inscription and there are no clues to her identity; she is, to all intents and purposes, anonymous. However, her image is enshrined at the east end of the church and it seems more than likely that literate Late Antique viewers would have made an association between the figure



Fig. 80. Female portrait from The Upper Chapel of Priest John at Wadi' Afrit, Jordan. With permission from The American Center of Research, Jordan

<sup>93</sup> Hunt 1994, 119-20; Piccirillo 1997, 174-75, pls 216-17, 228, 230 The male, in his clerical-looking garb, has been tentatively identified as Julian the monk, and the female as Rome or Mary: Britt 2008, 123

<sup>94</sup> Hunt 1994, 120 sees the figure as imitating Empress Theodora.



Fig. 81. City personifications, Hippolytus Hall, Madaba, Jordan. Author

and the inscription. A similar sleight of hand is apparent in the sixth-century Hippolytus Hall at Madaba where the jewelled city personifications of Rome, Gregoria and Madaba occupy the eastern edge of the pavement (Fig. 81). To date, it has not been possible to securely associate Gregoria with a specific city, and it has been proposed that the figure may have represented a local philanthropist who wished to remain anonymous—certainly her prominent, central position and attire fit nicely with the way female benefactors, anonymous or not, were portrayed at this time.<sup>95</sup> The same intention might lie behind the depictions of two females in the sixth-century Orpheus mosaic from Jerusalem, now on display in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. The mosaic paved a building, possibly a Christian funerary chapel,<sup>96</sup> and features two full-length

<sup>95</sup> Bowersock 2006, 85 has suggested that she may have represented Antioch, and Avner-Levy 1996, 370 that she was a local philanthropist. Buschhausen 1986, 153 has proposed that the portrait could be a benefactor who allegedly built a monastic institution in Constantinople during the time of Theodosius I.

<sup>96</sup> The building included a small apse adorned with a discrete cross. Mucznik *et al.* 2004, 210-12 have argued that as neither the building nor the mosaic were aligned to the east and no sarcophagi were found, the building should not automatically be assumed to be Christian.



Fig. 82. Theodosia and Georgia in the Orpheus Mosaic from Jerusalem, now in the Archaeological Museum. Archaeological Museum. Public Domain



Fig. 83. Mosaic pavement depicting female donors Kissufim, western Negev 578 CE stone and glass IAA 1977-416 Collection of Israel Antiquities Authority Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner

female figures named by inscription as Theodosia (Gift of the God) and Georgia (Fruit of the Earth or Agriculture), flanking a ribbon-bound column reminiscent of those found in the groves of classical sacral idyllic landscapes (Fig. 82).<sup>97</sup> Like the figures of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* at Qasr el-Lebia, the women are richly attired with maphoria over embroidered dresses, red shoes, necklaces and prependicularia. Theodosia holds a white object in her right hand and a gold cloth with a red border and tassels in her left, and Georgia clutches a small bird. The women may be personifications—allegorical figures holding attributes of a symbolic nature—but, equally, they could be portraits of female donors.<sup>98</sup> Two more enigmatic women are depicted in an intercolumnial panel between the nave and the north aisle in a sixth-century church at Kissufim in Israel (Fig. 83).<sup>99</sup> The figures are labelled *Kalliora*, (Good Hour or Propitious Hour) and The Lady Syltous or The Lady of Sylto.<sup>100</sup> *Kalliora* holds a platter, possibly containing a fowl, and The Lady Syltous holds a small white cloth in her left hand and, in a gesture of *sparsio*, distributes coins with her right hand.<sup>101</sup> Both women wear maphoria and are bedecked with diadems and earrings so that they ‘somewhat resemble the attendants of Empress Theodora in the Church of St. Vitale in Ravenna, Italy.’<sup>102</sup> Even though the way the figures have been labelled suggests that *Kalliora* should be understood

<sup>97</sup> Friedman 1967, 2. More recently, Olszewski 2009, 658 proposed that the small nodule on top of the column might be a *gnomon*, thereby aligning the column to the sundials erected in the marketplaces of ancient towns.

<sup>98</sup> Mucznik *et al.* 2004, 201. However, Friedman 1970, 75 suggested that the sixth-century attire worn by the women argues against the idea of personifications.

<sup>99</sup> Dated by two inscriptions to AD 576-8, Hachlili 2009, 290

<sup>100</sup> Cohen 1993, 279. Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, 275 have suggested that *Kalliora* should be understood as the greeting, ‘in good time’; Poulsen 2012, 69-70 that the position of the mosaic could suggest that The Lady Syltous was a benefactress responsible for either part or all of the mosaic pavements in the basilica.

<sup>101</sup> The Roman rite of *sparsio* stems from the distribution of coins by consuls at their inauguration, Cutler 1994, 295

<sup>102</sup> Cohen 1993, 277

as a personification of an abstract concept, and The Lady Syltous as a donor portrait, the similarities between the two depictions seem to demand that both should be understood in the same way—either as donors or as personifications. Rudolph Cohen has suggested that *Kalliora* appears almost to be an older version of The Lady Syltous,<sup>103</sup> which would allow both portraits to represent one donor. Alternatively, the figures may both have been personifications, intended, perhaps, to commemorate the timeliness and magnanimity of one (anonymous) benefactress.

Given the culture of discretion at this time, it is possible that the distinctions between portraits and personifications were intentionally blurred to allow benefactresses to be commemorated while maintaining a semblance of humility and anonymity. There was clearly an overlap between the way female donors and personifications were depicted, and in the same way that attributes held by personifications helped to define them, so the objects held by the female portraits were an important part of how they were perceived. With this in mind, it is notable that several of the women, including *Ktisis* at both Qasr el-lebia and Taucheira, Theodosia in the Jerusalem Orpheus mosaic, and The Lady Syltous at Kissufim, are clutching something resembling a piece of white fabric in their left hands. Although these cloths have been variously interpreted they have not been satisfactorily explained.<sup>104</sup> A folded white cloth, known as a *mappa circensis*, was traditionally used ceremonially to signal the start of races in the hippodrome.<sup>105</sup> It became a symbol of consular authority, appearing on most consular diptychs in the right hand of the consul whose duty it was to fund the games (see Fig. 79),<sup>106</sup> and in Late Antiquity the *mappa* became an emblem of power and status.<sup>107</sup> And it was not only men who were depicted holding a *mappa*; many of the so-called empress steelyard weights—female bust-figures—also hold a *mappa*, albeit usually in the left hand rather than the right.<sup>108</sup> The weights had to be certified by the eparch of Constantinople, the city’s chief administrator, suggesting that, in these cases, the *mappa* may have been used as a sign of imperial authority rather than—or perhaps as well as—power.<sup>109</sup> It is possible then, that the white cloths held by the donors/personifications discussed above, might also have been *mappa* intended to invest the figures with a degree of power or authority. It could also be argued that as the *mappa* was almost always present on the consular diptychs and universally associated with magnanimous benefactions, it may well have been understood as an attribute of donorship. This hypothesis is given weight by a seventh-century mosaic in the church of St. Demetrius at Thessaloniki in which two figures, thought to be the archbishop of Thessaloniki and a donor—possibly the eparch of the city—flank St Demetrius. The saint has his arms around both men as though congratulating and commending them and the man to his left, the benefactor, holds a *mappa* in his right hand (Fig. 84).

Before returning to *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* at Qasr el-Lebia, a fragment of mosaic pavement found at Gasr Bandis, a hill-top village, inland, about 30kms to the east of Qasr el-Lebia, needs to be introduced. The site has not been excavated and the extent of the pavement is not known, but it is clear that the mosaic takes the form of a grid, the panels of almost identical dimensions to those in the large pavement at

<sup>103</sup> Cohen 1993, 279

<sup>104</sup> The object held by *Ktisis* at Qasr el-Lebia has been described as a folded cloth: Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 123. The cloth held by Theodosia, as a scarf: Avi-Yonah 1981, 320; as a lotus: Mucznik *et al.* 2004, 199; and as a rose or a lily: Olszewski 2009, 657. That held by The Lady of Syltous, as the edge of an apron: Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, 275; and as a *mappa*: McClanan 2002, 37

<sup>105</sup> This practice was documented in the middle of the first century AD, but may have been established earlier: Dagron 2007, 203-04. Cassidorus’ *Variae* iii. 51.9 includes an anecdote describing how Nero ordered that his napkin should be thrown from a window to give permission for a contest to begin, cited in Cameron, Alan 2011, 696

<sup>106</sup> In John Lydos’ sixth-century work *On Power* ‘a white napkin of linen in the right hand’ is listed as one of the insignia of consuls: McClanan 2002, 71

<sup>107</sup> Dagron 2007, 206; Olovdotter 2011, 105

<sup>108</sup> Kalavrezou 2003, figs 10, 11, 12, 13

<sup>109</sup> Vikan and Nesbitt 1980, 32-33; Kalavrezou, 2003, 38

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Fig. 84. Mosaic in the Church of St Demetrius, Thessaloniki, Greece. Author



Fig. 85. Mosaic in a field at Gasr Bandis in Cyrenaica. Author



Fig. 86. Panel showing two women holding offerings. Gasr Bandis, Cyrenaica. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies



Fig. 87. Male figure next to the female figures at Gasr Bandis, Cyrenaica. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies

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Qasr el-Lebia (**Fig. 85**).<sup>110</sup> The border framing the panels is very similar to the borders at Qasr el-Lebia, Ras al-Hilal, Cyrene and Taucheira, suggesting that the mosaic is likely to have paved a church or an ecclesiastical building. Of particular relevance to this discussion is a panel that contains two grandly dressed women wearing maphoria over full-length robes and holding offerings (**Fig. 86**). Both figures are turned slightly to the left. The figure on the right of the panel holds a leafy branch in her right hand and clutches a jar or amphora in her left arm. The figure on the left wears an ornamented headband hung with distinctive strands of pearls resembling imperial prependicularia and holds out a round object (damaged) on a tasselled cloth. The figures are accompanied by an inscription, [οἱ π] ρ ο σ φ έ ρ ο ν τ ε ς (Those Who Make Offerings), a term regularly used for Christian donors.<sup>111</sup> The word is in the masculine gender and must, therefore, also include the male figure to the left of the women (**Fig. 87**). There are striking similarities between these female figures, who are clearly identified as donors, and *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* at Qasr el-Lebia and the other donor portraits/personifications discussed above, substantiating the idea that, in the sixth century, the two categories were often interchangeable and that female figures, even when labelled, should not automatically be assumed to be personifications.

To sum up, *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* at Qasr el-Lebia are labelled as though they are personifications, but they are depicted in the manner of elite female benefactresses and appear to be making offerings to the architectural representation between them. Given the trend for female euergetism in the sixth century, together with a propensity for anonymous donations, the figures may have been intended to commemorate elite women whose benefactions made the foundation and adornment of the ecclesiastical complex at Qasr el-Lebia possible.

#### *Ananeosis*

In the row of panels immediately to the east of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis*, and adjacent to the architectural representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias*, a half-length female figure is identified by inscription as *Ananeosis*, (Renewal) (**see Fig. 71**). She is richly bejewelled with necklace, headdress and prependicularia and is seated in an aedicule-like structure with a scallop-shell dome supported on spiral Proconnesian columns rising from stepped bases. Curtains are draped around the columns and a lattice screen is fitted between them in front of the figure. *Ananeosis* appears to be pulling something—a flower festoon perhaps—from a basket resting on the screen in front of her.<sup>112</sup> As noted above, an image of *Ananeosis* has also been recorded at Taucheira (**see Fig. 73**), where she is depicted as a full-length, female figure in elite dress holding a censer in her right hand. Beyond Cyrenaica, fragments of an inscription in a pavement from the House of the Sea Goddess at Seleucia suggest that *Ananeosis* had been pictured there,<sup>113</sup> and in the Constantinian Villa at Antioch, *Ananeosis*, framed in a foliate wreath encompassing clipeate personifications of the four Seasons, has been interpreted as representing the cycle of nature and abundance (**Fig. 88**).<sup>114</sup>

At Qasr el-Lebia *Ananeosis* is generally understood as one of a trio of personifications celebrating the renewal of *Polis Nea Theodorias*.<sup>115</sup> However, the way *Ananeosis* is depicted is quite different from *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* and falls more convincingly into the category of Late Antique personifications of abstract concepts. Andre Grabar has suggested that her architectural setting could be alluding to a temple

<sup>110</sup> The mosaic is very close to the surface of the field and local farmers have cleared some of the vegetation to reveal several of the panels. Seen by the author in 2010. That a mosaic exists at the site is recorded in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 393-94

<sup>111</sup> Transcribed and translated by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 394

<sup>112</sup> Kondoleon 1987, 308 sees her as 'a bust bearing fruits'.

<sup>113</sup> The image is damaged beyond recognition but the inscription survives: Levi 1947, 350

<sup>114</sup> Cimok 2000, 244

<sup>115</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 35-37



Fig. 88. *Ananeosis* from the Constantinian Villa, Antioch. Now in Hatay Mosaic Museum, Turkey. Author



Fig. 89. Tyche mosaic from Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author

dedicated to the Tyche of *Polis Nea Theodorias*,<sup>116</sup> although Suzy Dufrenne refutes this on the grounds that aedicule-like structures were universal and that if the intention had been to represent *Ananeosis* as Tyche, she would doubtless have been depicted with an identifying mural crown.<sup>117</sup> It could be argued, however, that not only is *Ananeosis*' rich attire and imperial jewellery germane to representations of Tyche, as seen, for example, in a mosaic from Beit She'an in Israel (Fig. 89),<sup>118</sup> and that her overflowing basket is a symbol of abundance and a flourishing city, but that she is indeed crowned—by the turreted walls of *Polis Nea Theodorias* in the panel immediately above her (see Fig. 71). It is worth considering how such a reading might change the pictorial dynamics at the west end of the pavement. *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* would no longer be making offerings to a topographical representation, an arrangement that both Grabar and Dufrenne flag up as problematic,<sup>119</sup> rather, they become two subordinate figures flanking and making offerings to *Ananeosis*-as-Tyche; one offers a wreath and the other a censer. This type of composition, a central figure propitiated by two adjutants, is an oft-repeated configuration and two votive reliefs from Dura Europos in Syria are particularly apposite examples. In both cases two attendants flank the central figure—the Gadde, or city Tyche—and the figure to his left crowns him with a wreath. In at least one of the reliefs the figure to his right, probably a priest, holds a *thymiaterion*, or a censer, and the Gadde is seated on a throne supported by eagles (Fig. 90); a detail reminiscent of Qasr el-Lebia where *Ananeosis* is positioned directly above an eagle (Fig. 91).<sup>120</sup> To see *Ananeosis* as a crowned Tyche receiving offerings from *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* also introduces the idea of exchange and reciprocity, that is, offerings being made in anticipation of return blessings.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the grid layout of the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia can be seen as a sort of crossword puzzle; it allows panels to be read in different directions with different groups of

<sup>116</sup> Grabar 1969, 268.

<sup>117</sup> Dufrenne 1980, 244-45

<sup>118</sup> Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

<sup>119</sup> Dufrenne 1980, 242. Grabar 1968b, 50 makes the point that 'on ne couronne pas une ville'.

<sup>120</sup> In one relief the figure to the right of the Gadde is badly damaged but he too could have been holding a censer: Grabar 1969, 269-71

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Fig. 90. Votive relief of Gadde from Dura Europos. Public Domain, Yale University Art Gallery



Fig. 91. *Ananeosis* above the eagle in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

images, their meaning shifting with each change of focus. This is certainly the case for *Ananeosis*. She can be read in conjunction with *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Polis Nea Theodorias*, but she also fulfils another role, one in which she takes on a different persona and a Christian significance.<sup>121</sup> *Ananeosis* occupies a central position at the top of a tableau of nine panels, clearly defined by the four Rivers of Paradise, one at each corner (Fig. 92). She is flanked by personifications of Geon and Phison, both seated in *contrapposto* with their bodies turned towards her, both proffering gifts and both seemingly paying her reverence. Seen in this context, her canopied aedicule is metamorphosed from a temple for Tyche to a Christian ciborium; the scallop-shell semi-dome, spiral columns, curtains and lattice-work screen are all elements commonly used in church architecture, and her overflowing basket no longer represents the prosperity of a city but becomes instead an object of Christian import adding a further layer of significance to the image. The basket held by *Ananeosis* is piled high with pink, red and white objects. Although they could be fruit or bread, the most likely interpretation is that *Ananeosis* is pulling a flower festoon from the basket, particularly when compared to a panel towards the east end of the pavement in which four birds are holding festoons in their beaks (Fig. 93). If then, *Ananeosis* is holding a basket of festoons, what is their significance? This type of festoon—simple strings of petals or flowers—appeared in domestic, ritual and religious settings and their function and how they were perceived would undoubtedly have varied according to context.<sup>122</sup> Of particular interest for this study, is that from about the second century AD, flower festoons proliferated in funerary art. They appeared on tomb reliefs,<sup>123</sup> on sarcophagi,<sup>124</sup> in many of the Roman catacombs,<sup>125</sup> and on the walls of tombs.<sup>126</sup> Attaching a specific meaning to these festoons is not straightforward and they are regularly dismissed as space-fillers or as being purely ornamental. However, that they appear so regularly and in such profusion in funerary contexts suggests that they were an important element in observances for the dead.<sup>127</sup> The imagery may have reflected the tradition of scattering flowers on tombs during the annual rose festival, or the practice of decorating altars and shrines with real garlands, a custom evidenced by extant hanging-devices in some tomb chambers.<sup>128</sup> Alternatively, they may have been intended as a type of wreath of martyrdom, particularly when they

<sup>121</sup> Although the triumph of Christianity saw the gradual abandonment of altars and temples dedicated to Tyche, offerings continued to be made to city Tyches. A fifth-century text by Isaac of Antioch describes sacrifices being offered to the Tyche of Antioch, and in the middle of the sixth century Symeon Stylites rebuked the inhabitants of Antioch for sacrificing in the name of the city Tyche: James 2005, 300. Brown 1980, 24 has suggested that Tyche, ‘stepped confidently into a gap that had opened up in men’s minds between a very remote Christian God and a city whose vicissitudes still mattered to them’.

<sup>122</sup> A distinction should be made between these simple flower festoons and lavish foliate swags heavy with fruit and flowers and traditionally associated with sacrificial altars, for example, on the first-century *Ara Pacis* in Rome. A monument that clearly illustrates the different functions of the two garlands is the second-century tomb of Haterii, now in the Gregoriana Profano Museum in Rome. Here, ornate multi-fruited garlands hang on the walls of the depicted tomb chamber and a simple flower festoon is being presented to the deceased: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 58, fig. 45

<sup>123</sup> For example, a second-century tomb relief from Ostia Antica on which putti hold festoons either side of the deceased couple: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 178, fig. 165

<sup>124</sup> On the lid of a sarcophagus in Octagonal Court in the Vatican Museums, for example, a cupid offers a festoon to a ‘sleeping’ woman: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 187, fig. 172

<sup>125</sup> In the Catacomb of Domitilla, festoons are strung across the ceiling of the cubiculum of the Good Shepherd and the walls of the cubiculum of Cupid and Psyche: Pergola 2000, 24, 32. On a vault in the Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter, unattached festoons fill the interstices between the protagonists: Grabar 1967b, pl. 234; and in the Via Latina Catacombs festoons adorn many of the walls and ceilings, overflow from baskets and are shown in the beaks of small birds and peacocks: Grabar 1967b fig. 250

<sup>126</sup> As found in the early Christian necropolis at Sopiana (modern-day Pécs), Hungary: Hudak and Nagy 2009, figs 6, 19; in the Christian tombs at Sardis: Rousseau 2019, figs 9,13-16, 19-22; and in the Christian burial chambers at Thessaloniki, some of which are now on display in the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki.

<sup>127</sup> Two late third- or early fourth-century sarcophagi depict the production of festoons. One, thought to be the sarcophagus of the proprietor of a garland-making workshop, is now in the baptistery in Florence: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 29, fig. 25. The other, the so-called Noah Sarcophagus, is in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Trier: Snyder 2003, 80, pl.16

<sup>128</sup> For the rose festival: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 28. For hanging devices in tomb chambers: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 295. An extant festoon dated to the second or third Century AD was discovered in Hawara, Egypt. It is now preserved in the British Museum <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=1890,0519.7> accessed 20 March 2023

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Fig. 92. Tableau of nine panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

are positioned behind a figure, as seen, for example, behind Daniel in the fourth-century cemetery at Sopiana, Hungary (Fig. 94). Either of these interpretations could help to explain the prevalence of festoons in funerary settings, but even though there does appear to have been a rock-cut tomb chamber to the north of the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia, there is nothing to suggest that the space paved by the large mosaic and occupied by *Ananeosis* and her companions had burial associations. However, as we shall see when the pavement is viewed as a whole, the tableau of nine panels which *Ananeosis* presides over is saturated with references to Christian baptism, at the heart of which is the death of Christ.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Romans 6:3 'Whoever was baptised in Christ was baptised in his death'; Romans 6:10 'to be baptised in the death of Christ was to die to sin'.



Fig. 93. Birds pulling festoons from a basket in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

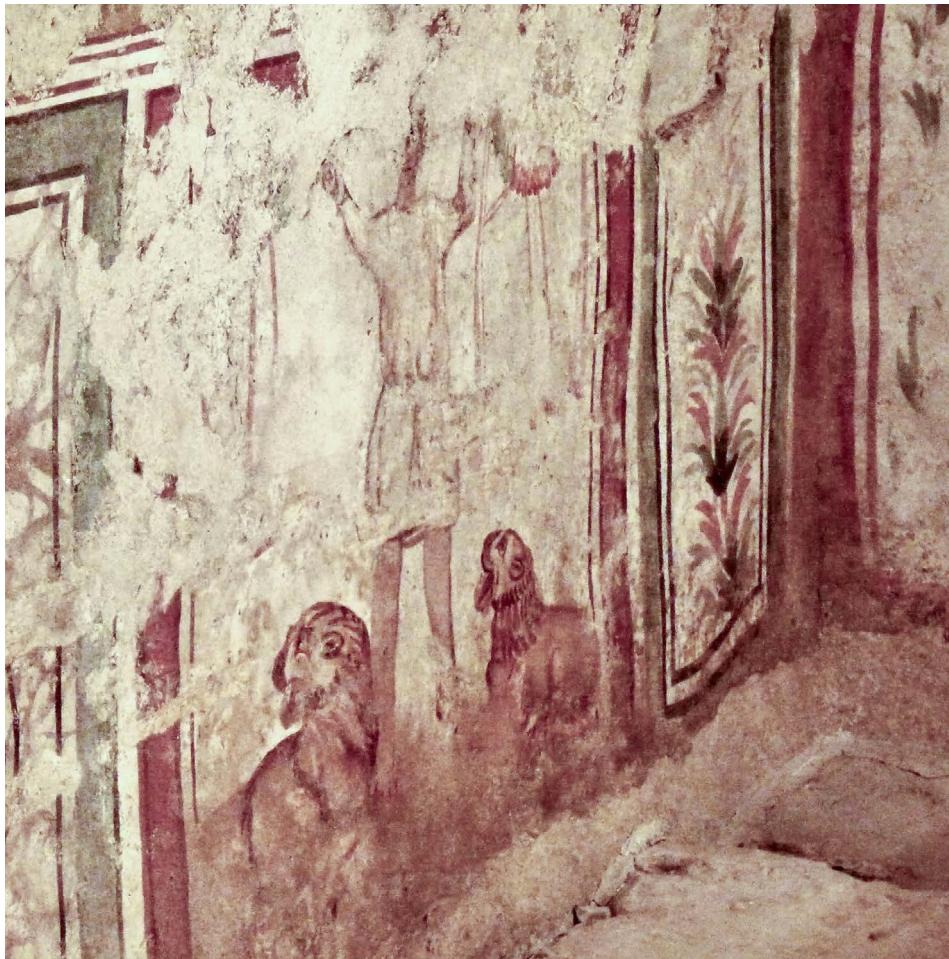


Fig. 94. Daniel with festoons behind him. Pécs (Sopiana), Hungary. Author

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Situated on the central axis of the pavement, bedecked in jewels worthy of an empress and occupying an aedicule that draws on both imperial architecture and high-status church furnishings, *Ananeosis* is a multivalent motif playing a complex and pivotal role in the overall interpretation of the pavement. On the one hand, 'crowned' by the turreted walls of *Polis Nea Theodorias* above and attended by the propitiating figures on each side, she becomes Tyche, protecting the city and personifying seasonal abundance and good fortune. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly in this setting, she can be understood as personifying Christian renewal. Her presence imbues the pavement with a soteriological significance by instantiating the ideas of rebirth through baptism, resurrection, and life everlasting.

#### The Rivers of Paradise

The west end of the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia is dominated by a tableau of nine panels, defined by personifications of the four Rivers of Paradise, one in each corner. The figures are clearly identified by inscription as Geon, Phison, Tigris and Euphrates (see Fig. 92).

#### *Geon*

A personification of the river Geon is seated on an amphora from which water flows (Fig. 95). His body is orientated to the left, but his upper body is twisted to the right as though to face the centre of the pavement. He has a robe wound around his upper torso and left shoulder but is otherwise naked, his genitals clearly displayed. Lotus-like flowers sprout from his hair, a cornucopia is nestled in the crook of his left arm, and he holds a sistrum in his right hand.<sup>130</sup> A fruiting tree fills the left-hand side of the panel.

#### *Phison*

A personification of the river Phison is seated on a rock beside an upturned, overflowing amphora (Fig. 96). His body is orientated to the right, but he is turned to face the centre of the pavement. He is naked apart from a robe thrown over his left leg, he has reeds growing from his hair, and he holds a vessel—possibly overflowing with water—in his right hand. A large reed is depicted on the right-hand side of the panel.

#### *Euphrates*

A personification of the river Euphrates is seated on a vessel overflowing with water (Fig. 97). Like Geon and Phison, he is seated in *contrapposto* with his body turned to face the centre of the pavement. He has a robe draped over one shoulder and his genitals are on display. He holds a lotus flower in his right hand, has a cornucopia under his left arm and weeds growing from his hair. An over-sized lotus seed head dominates the right-hand side of the panel.

#### *Tigris*

A personification of the river Tigris is seated on either a vessel draped with a cloth or a rock from which water flows (Fig. 98). In keeping with the other three rivers his body is twisted to face the centre of the pavement. He is naked apart from a robe over his left leg, his genitals are displayed, and he has water

<sup>130</sup> The sistrum often appeared in Nilotic imagery. Originally a religious utensil, often associated with Isis, the sistrum was credited with prophylactic and apotropaic values and was invoked to protect and preserve the annual flux of the Nile: Roos 2021, 215-18. Given Geon's proximity to the eagle with its prey in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, it may be of note that William Stukeley (1687-1765) suggested that the prophet Abraham, when performing animal sacrifices, used a type of sistrum to drive away the birds of prey who tried to feed on the sacrificed animals: Roos 2021, 218



Fig. 95. Geon in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 96. Phison in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author



Fig. 97. Euphrates in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

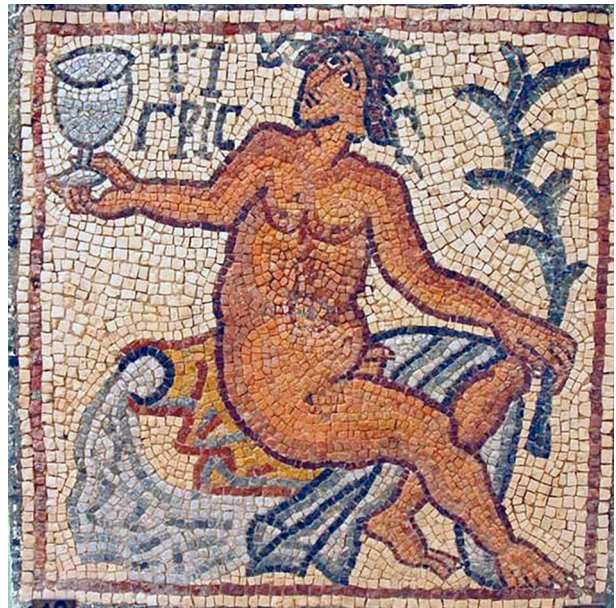


Fig. 98. Tigris in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

reeds growing from his hair. He holds a branch or a reed in his left hand and with his right hand he proffers a stemmed vessel.

Genesis 2:10-14 describes the rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden:

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land

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of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good: there is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel (Tigris): that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates.

Associations have been made between these biblical Rivers and certain terrestrial rivers; the Euphrates and Tigris (Hiddekel) with their modern-day namesakes, Geon with the River Nile, and Phison with the Ganges or the Danube.<sup>131</sup> For many, the Rivers of Paradise were understood as a tangible link between the heavenly and earthly realms and the early Christian commentators saw them as blessings flowing from Paradise into the inhabited world.<sup>132</sup> In the fourth century, Ephraem the Syrian described the Rivers as being absorbed into ‘the periphery of Paradise’ and being channelled, ‘as if by an aqueduct’ through the sea to the earth.<sup>133</sup> The sixth-century poet, Avitus, wrote of the Rivers springing from a fountain in Eden and of the River Phison conveying both the water of life and the wealth of paradise to man’s place of banishment on earth.<sup>134</sup> Cosmas Indicopleustes’ sixth-century map shows the Rivers flowing from the earthly Paradise under the ocean and re-emerging in the inhabited world.<sup>135</sup> For Epiphanius of Salamis, being able to see the River Nile—thought to be the biblical Geon—with his own eyes and drink the water from the Euphrates, was all the proof he needed that the description of Paradise in Genesis was true.<sup>136</sup>

From at least the third century AD, a connection was made between the Rivers of Paradise and the four Gospels; the rivers irrigated and fecundated the inhabited world and the Gospels—the word of God—sustained and nourished the Church.<sup>137</sup> In the third century, Cyprian wrote:

The Church, setting forth the likeness of paradise, includes within her walls fruit-bearing trees [...] These trees she waters with four rivers, that is, with the four Gospels, wherewith, by a celestial inundation, she bestows the grace of saving baptism.<sup>138</sup>

This idea is illustrated in the fifth-century chapel of Hosios David at Thessaloniki where a mosaic of the Mount of Waters is accompanied by the inscription: ‘A life-giving source, accepting and nourishing the souls of the faithful [is] this most venerable house’ (Fig. 99).<sup>139</sup> Comparisons were made between the four Rivers of Paradise and the four Evangelists, for example, a description of the fifth-century apse mosaic in the basilica at Nola describes Christ standing on a rock from which four sonorous springs, the evangelists, the living streams of Christ, flow.<sup>140</sup>

In the fourth and fifth centuries visual depictions of the Rivers of Paradise appeared on the vaults and walls of ecclesiastical buildings, on sarcophagi, and on smaller portable objects.<sup>141</sup> They were generally

<sup>131</sup> Geon as Nile: Maguire 2012, 22. The River Phison was identified as the Ganges by the Jewish-Roman historian, Josephus: *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.3 [https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0037-0103,\\_Flavius\\_Josephus,\\_The\\_Antiquities\\_Of\\_The\\_Jews,\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0037-0103,_Flavius_Josephus,_The_Antiquities_Of_The_Jews,_EN.pdf) accessed 11 April 2023. In the late sixth or early seventh century Isidore of Seville also made this connection: Barney *et al.* 2006, 280. In the Syriac commentaries, Phison was identified as the Danube: Mathews *et al.* 1994, 100.

<sup>132</sup> Maguire 2002, 25

<sup>133</sup> Ephraem the Syrian *Commentarii in Genesim* 1.23B, cited in Daniélou 1953, 452

<sup>134</sup> Avitus *Poematum de mosaicae historiae gestis*, cited in Maguire 2002, 26

<sup>135</sup> McCrindle 2010, 75-76

<sup>136</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis *Epistula ad Joannem Episcopum Jerosolymorum*, cited in Maguire 2007, 3

<sup>137</sup> Underwood 1950, 105-06

<sup>138</sup> St. Cyprian, *Ep.* 72.10 [www.newadvent.org/fathers/050672.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050672.htm) accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>139</sup> Maguire 2012, 20

<sup>140</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Epistula* XXXII.X: Walsh 1966, 145. See also: Underwood 1950, 47

<sup>141</sup> The only example known to the author of the Rivers of Paradise being referenced in a non-Christian building in Late Antiquity is an inscription naming the four Rivers in Ostia. The building, originally thought to have been a baptistery, has more recently been reclassified as a second-century nymphaeum or bathhouse belonging to the Domus of the Tigriani. In the first instance the inscription was transcribed as: *In [chrism] Geon Fison Tigris Eufrata / Cri[st]ianorum sumite fontes*: Calza 1940, 63-88,



Fig. 99. Apse mosaic, Hosios David, Thessaloniki. With permission from David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy

shown as four streams issuing from the Mount of Waters with either Christ or his proxy—most commonly a cross or a sheep—atop.<sup>142</sup> For example, in a fourth-century vault mosaic from the mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome, and in the main apse of the fifth-century Hosios David in Thessaloniki, Christ is depicted above the Mount of Waters.<sup>143</sup> Several sarcophagi in Sant' Apollinaris in Classe near Ravenna depict either a sheep or a cross atop a mound from which the Rivers of Paradise flow (**Fig. 100**), and on a sarcophagus in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna the Mount of Waters is surmounted by both a sheep and a cross (**Fig. 101**).

From around the end of the fifth century there appears to have been a shift in attitude and two notable changes occurred. Firstly, depictions of the Rivers of Paradise migrated from walls and vaults to pavements, and secondly, the Rivers began to appear as personifications. It is hard to believe that translating such an important Christian subject onto the floor would not have been frowned upon, as being trampled underfoot was generally a sign of disrespect. Mark the deacon describes how, after the destruction of the Marneion in AD 402, Porphyry constructed a huge church on its foundation, placing the remaining fragments of *spolia* in front to be 'trodden underfoot not only of men but also of women and dogs and swine and beasts. This aggrieved the idolaters more than the burning of the

but a re-examination has suggested a reading of: *In Christo* (= XP monogram) *Geon, Fison, Tigris, Euphrata. Tigrinianorum sumite fontes*: Brenk 2003, 48. For image: Underwood 1950, fig. 33

<sup>142</sup> Schlee 1937, esp. 37. The image of Christ atop the mount of waters has also been interpreted as having apocalyptic associations: Daly 2009, 59; Finch 1991, 22

<sup>143</sup> For Santa Costanza: Brandenburg 2005, fig. 40. For Hosios David: Bakirtzis et al. 2012, 186-87, pl. 5

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Fig. 100. Two sarcophagi from Sant'Apollinaris in Classe, Ravenna, Italy. Author



Fig. 101.  
Sarcophagus in  
the Mausoleum of  
Galla Placidia,  
Ravenna, Italy.  
With permission  
from Carola Jäggi,  
Zurich University

temple'.<sup>144</sup> The same attitude is reflected in the Theodosian edict of AD 437 that prohibited the use of the cross in church pavements.<sup>145</sup> It is possible then, that to facilitate the transfer of a Christian theme from wall to floor—where being trampled underfoot was unavoidable—the Rivers of Paradise underwent a metamorphosis, transforming into personifications in the guise of pagan river-gods. Sometimes they were depicted as half-length semi-naked figures, as seen in the sixth-century Chapel of the Martyr Theodore at Madaba in Jordan,<sup>146</sup> in the sixth-century Church of St Paul at Umm er-Rasas, also in Jordan,<sup>147</sup> in the sixth-century basilica of Thyrsos at Tegea in Greece,<sup>148</sup> and in a late fifth- or sixth-century church at Hadrianopolis in Paphlagonia, Turkey.<sup>149</sup> At other times they were shown as mask-like heads, water spewing from their mouths, for example, in the late fifth-century baptistery at Mariana on Corsica and the sixth-century Plaosnek church at Ohrid in Macedonia.<sup>150</sup> In the sixth-century baptistery at Jabaliyah in Israel, two personifications of the Rivers of Paradise survive and, unusually, Geon is depicted as a bare-breasted female, rivulets springing from her nipples (**Fig. 102**).<sup>151</sup> Before the late fifth century, personifications of rivers were almost never included in the decoration of churches, perhaps because, as Maguire has noted, they were 'too reminiscent of pagan deities to have been at home... even on the floor.'<sup>152</sup> Textual sources certainly suggest a lingering fear of idolatry when it came to rivers and river-gods: Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, castigated the Egyptians for revering springs and rivers;<sup>153</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, in his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, condemned the practice of lighting lamps and incense to springs and rivers;<sup>154</sup> and John Chrysostom, with particular reference to women, denounced the wearing of amulets inscribed with the names of rivers.<sup>155</sup> It is also significant that, unlike depictions of the Rivers of Paradise on walls, vaults and sarcophagi, in pavements they were, with only a few exceptions, not shown flowing

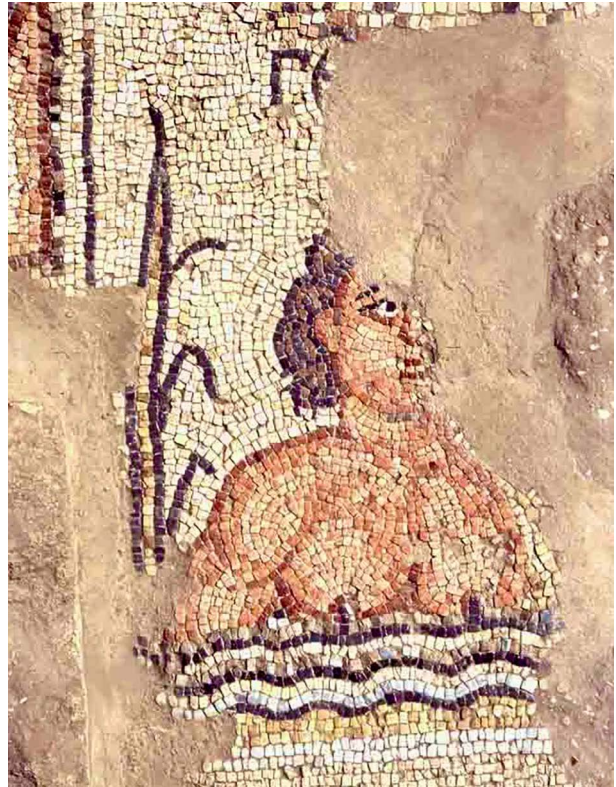


Fig. 102. Geon in the baptistery at Jabaliyah, Israel.  
With permission from Jean-Baptiste Humbert

<sup>144</sup> Mark the Deacon, *Porphyry* 76, translation, [www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/porphyry.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/porphyry.asp) accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>145</sup> Cited in Mango 1972, 36

<sup>146</sup> The only personification not badly defaced by iconoclasts is Euphrates: Piccirillo 1997, 117, pls 112-15

<sup>147</sup> These personifications are now only identifiable by the extant inscriptions: Piccirillo and Alliata 1999, 200, pl.4

<sup>148</sup> Maguire 2012, 42-43

<sup>149</sup> Pataci *et al.* 2012, 169

<sup>150</sup> For the baptistery at Mariana: Doig 2008, 44; for Plaosnek: Bitrakova-Gozdanova 1975, 55-57

<sup>151</sup> Humbert 1999, 216-18. The figure is always referred to as female but could, conceivably, be a male with water pouring from his nipples.

<sup>152</sup> Maguire 1987, 21. In Antiquity, pagan river-gods were revered and during the Hellenistic and Roman eras personifications of rivers functioned as 'potent indicators of place' and vehicles of imperial propaganda. For example, the Tyche of Antioch stands on a personification of the Orontes River: Huskinson 2005, 248. On the arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki, a personification of Tigris reclines at the feet of a personification of Armenia or Mesopotamia: Laubscher 1975, 75

<sup>153</sup> Athanasius, *Oratio contra gentes*, 24; PG XXV col. 48c, cited in Maguire 1993, 150

<sup>154</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogica Catechesis* I, 8; PG 33, col. 1072B, cited in Maguire 2012, 26

<sup>155</sup> John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses, Homilia VIII*, cited in Schaff 1976, 298



Fig. 103. Baptistry at the Episcopal Basilica, Stobi, Macedonia. Author

from a single source,<sup>156</sup> but as four separate entities, often dispersed around the room. For example, in the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi in Macedonia the Rivers are shown as four large canthari overflowing with water—the actual Fountain of Life from which all four Rivers flowed, although implied, was not shown (Fig. 103).<sup>157</sup> The same is true of the Rivers of Paradise in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Alluding to the *fons vitae aeternae* without actually depicting it guaranteed that it could not be trampled underfoot and, given that the Mount of Waters from which the Rivers flowed was traditionally surmounted by Christ or his proxy, it also ensured that visitors could not position themselves above all four Rivers, thereby aligning themselves with Christ.

The personifications of the Rivers of Paradise at Qasr el-Lebia differ somewhat from the usual depictions found in Late Antique pavements. Rather than being shown as busts or masks as was customary, they

<sup>156</sup> Examples where the Rivers do flow from one source include: a fifth-century pavement in the Church of the Holy Martyrs at Tayibat al-Imam in Syria where an eagle sits atop a sort of pedestal from which the Rivers of Paradise flow: Zaquq and Piccirillo 1999, 445; a pavement in a sixth-century funerary chapel in Basilica D at Byllis in Albania, where the Rivers flow from a small semi-circular panel: Ceka and Muçaj 2005, 79; and a pavement in a sixth-century baptistry at Oued Ramel in Tunisia where several streams of water flow from the scalloped edge of a shell: Underwood 1950, 136-37, fig. 75. See also Jensen 2011, 220

<sup>157</sup> For Stobi: Stephenson 2022, fig. 6. For Plaosnek: Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1975, 55-57



Fig. 104. Apotropaic phalli on a street corner in Leptis Magna, Libya. Author

are full-length reclining figures reminiscent of those found on triumphal arches, coins and ivories.<sup>158</sup> And what is perhaps even more surprising, especially given the ecclesiastical setting, is that three of the four figures are naked, their genitalia prominently displayed—in the case of Geon, his penis is given added emphasis by the addition of a single white tessera highlighting its tip (see Fig. 95).

In ancient Greece, the athletic male nude was celebrated and nudity was considered, not only heroic, but also the ‘true mark of the aristocratic Greek male.’<sup>159</sup> Images of exposed sexual organs came to be seen as potent symbols imbued with magical and apotropaic powers, representations of enlarged phalli were often used to protect vulnerable points in public spaces (Figs 104–105), and *fascina* (divine penises) were a popular choice for personal amulets.<sup>160</sup> During the Roman era attitudes towards nudity gradually became more ambiguous and a rather peculiar disjunction existed between what was appropriate in real-life and what was acceptable in visual culture. On the one hand, in artistic productions nudity was still considered heroic; it was a state associated with mythological gods and goddesses and was used as a means of projecting divine qualities onto mortal beings.<sup>161</sup> On the other hand, being seen naked in public was considered shameful or degrading and nudity was used to endorse the inferiority of

<sup>158</sup> Rubenstein 1984, 259. Full-length reclining personifications of the Rivers of Paradise have also been recorded in a badly damaged pavement taken from an ecclesiastical building at Taucheira in Cyrenaica. The pavement has been excavated but not fully published. For general comments: Michaelides 1982, 117; Stucchi 1975, 427; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 221

<sup>159</sup> Bonfante 1990, 30

<sup>160</sup> Running or winged phalli were often carved into stones on street corners, for example, at Leptis Magna in Libya and at Hippo Regius and Tiddis, both in Algeria. For phalli on street corners and at entrances: Bonfante 1989, 544

<sup>161</sup> Dautermann Maguire and Maguire 2007, 125; Hallett 2011, 9–10

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those of low social standing; slaves were paraded naked in the market place, captives were paraded naked in triumphal processions, and Christian martyrs were stripped naked before being publicly tortured or killed.<sup>162</sup> Nudity was also renounced as reprehensible by many early Christian writers: Clement of Alexandria wrote on the dangers of nakedness, promiscuity and licentious behaviour in the baths;<sup>163</sup> Jerome vociferously denounced public nudity in bathhouses;<sup>164</sup> and Mark the Deacon noted in *The Life of Porphyry, Bishop of Gaza*, that a naked statue of Aphrodite allowed ‘all of her shameful parts to be seen’.<sup>165</sup> Completely naked figures are rare in Late Antique art and when they do appear they are generally understood as iconographical transfers from a classical tradition.<sup>166</sup> A pavement at Sepphoris in Israel, for example, includes naked hunters and has been interpreted as a mythological scene, the intention of which was to ‘revive the sensual quality of the Classical nude, contrary to the prevalent trend in late antique art to neutralise this figural style’ (**Fig. 106**).<sup>167</sup> Also, the nudity of Patrocles and Achilles in the Mosaic of Achilles at Madaba in Jordan has been described as ‘startling and rare’ and attributed to the fact that the subject matter of the pavement is mythological.<sup>168</sup> On the whole, ‘naked’ figures were either partially-clothed or shown in a generic and sexless manner; the ‘naked’ figures in the mosaic borders in Basilica A (Basilica of Dometios) at Nikopolis, for example, are unclothed but their genitalia are not depicted (**Fig. 107**).<sup>169</sup>



Fig. 105. Phallus carved on a pier outside a cave, thought to have been a Mithraeum, on one of the main streets in Tiddis, Algeria. Author

There was, however, one Christian ceremony for which nudity was not only acceptable but actually a pre-requisite—baptism. The ritual of baptism is described in the New Testament as death and rebirth, the baptismal font symbolising both the tomb in which one was buried with Christ, and the womb of the spiritual mother—the Church—from which one was reborn.<sup>170</sup> Nakedness was a state common to both processes. It is generally accepted that catechumens seeking full membership of the Church through the rite of baptism would have completely disrobed before entering the font, thereby allowing

<sup>162</sup> For example, Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas were naked when they were led into the arena at Carthage to be martyred, but the crowds were so offended by their nudity that they were taken from the arena and draped in loose clothing, Farina 2014, 17. See also: Glancy 2002, 9-38; Hallett 2011, esp. 64

<sup>163</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 3.5 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02093.htm> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>164</sup> Jerome *Epist.* 107.11 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001107.htm> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>165</sup> Cited in Dautermann Maguire and Maguire 2007, 106

<sup>166</sup> For a general discussion, Dautermann Maguire and Maguire 2007, 97-134

<sup>167</sup> Weiss 2010, 175

<sup>168</sup> Piccirillo 1997, 76-77, figs 43, 48; Talgam 2004, 227

<sup>169</sup> Chrysostomon and Keffaloniton 2005, 38

<sup>170</sup> For example, Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:12. Part of the inscription on the octagonal architrave above the font in the baptistery of the Lateran Basilica in Rome, reads: ‘By a virginal birth, Mother Church bears these children. Those whom she conceives by God’s breathing she births by this stream’. Jensen 2012, 53

the baptismal water to touch and sanctify every part of the body.<sup>171</sup> As they emerged from the water their nakedness represented both rebirth in Christ and a return to a state of prelapsarian innocence. In support of this reading, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Jerusalem saw the removal of clothes prior to baptism as symbolising the peeling off of the old self and all associated evil deeds.<sup>172</sup> John the Deacon, in a letter to Senarius, reports that candidates were ‘instructed to approach the font naked to their feet’.<sup>173</sup> However, it has been argued by some scholars that the Greek and Latin terms for nakedness—*gymnos* and *nudus*—need not necessarily imply complete nudity, but may simply have referred to the divestment of certain garments,<sup>174</sup> a possibility supported by John Chrysostom’s *Instructions to Catechumens* which refers to baptizands undressing but retaining one garment.<sup>175</sup> Whether or not catechumens were completely naked, the act of undressing before entering the baptismal font was an integral part of the baptismal ceremony. Unashamedly disrobing would have contrasted with, and perhaps to some extent redeemed, Adam’s shameful nudity after he was ‘brought low to the necessity of covering’.<sup>176</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem wrote:

You were naked in the sight of all, and were not ashamed; for truly you bore the likeness of the first-formed Adam, who was naked in the garden, and was not ashamed.<sup>177</sup>

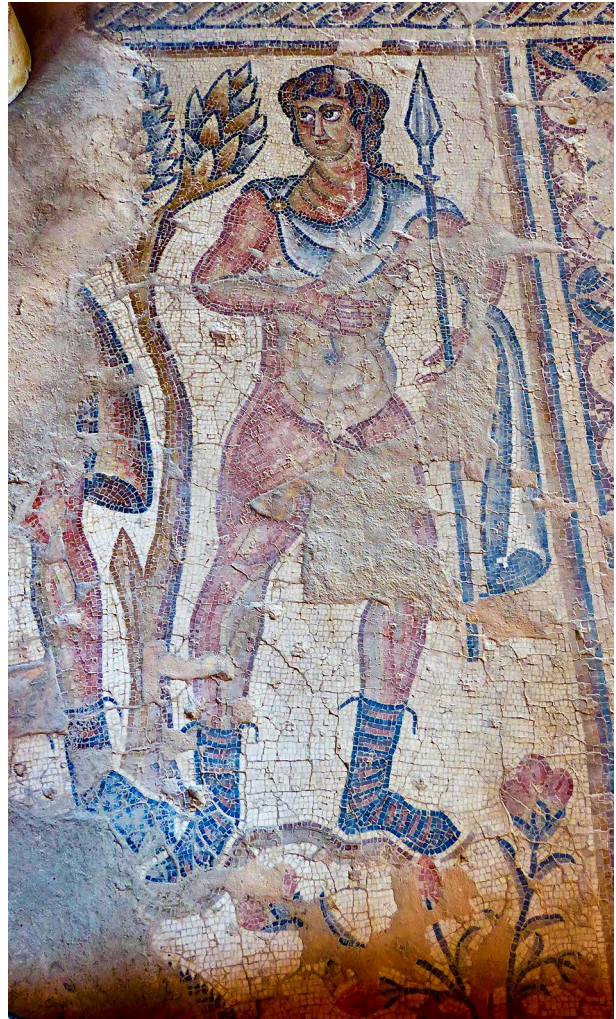


Fig. 106. Naked hunter, Sepphoris, Israel. Author

That nudity was important to the sacrament of baptism is also corroborated in the visual culture of Late Antiquity. The Old Testament prophets, Daniel and Jonah, regularly featured in early Christian iconography, especially in funerary settings, and despite the fact that nudity was deemed degrading and humiliating in the books of the Old Testament,<sup>178</sup> these two figures were almost always depicted naked. As neither the attire nor the appearance of Daniel or Jonah is mentioned in Old Testament accounts of their salvation, their nudity is sometimes interpreted as ‘heroic’, although this does not explain why

<sup>171</sup> Ferguson’s survey of early Christian sources on baptism includes references to support the idea of complete nudity: Ferguson 2009, esp. 507, 697, 785

<sup>172</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. Hom* 3.8, cited in Jensen 2012a, 169. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst* 2.2, cited in Jensen 2012a, 170

<sup>173</sup> Jensen 2012a, 170

<sup>174</sup> Guy 2003, 138; Zeitler 1999, 186. However, Bonfante 1989, 547 maintains that both *gymnos* and *nudus* mean total nudity.

<sup>175</sup> John Chrysostom *Instructions to Catechumens* 1.2 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1908.htm> accessed 12 April 2023. Deaconesses may have been involved in the pre-baptismal anointing, but male clergy are unlikely to have baptised naked women. For discussions: Christiansen 1981, 1-8; Guy 2003, 136-38; Jensen, 2012a 168; Wijngaards 2011, 77-78

<sup>176</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. Hom*. [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodore\\_of\\_mopsuestia\\_lordsprayer\\_02\\_text.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/theodore_of_mopsuestia_lordsprayer_02_text.htm) accessed 12 April 2023; Jensen 2011, 166

<sup>177</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst* 2.2, cited in Riley 1974, 145

<sup>178</sup> Keller 1993, 32; Bonfante 1989, 546

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Fig. 107. Border in Basilica A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis, Greece. Photo S. Curtis

they were singled out from other heroic characters in the Old Testament to be depicted naked.<sup>179</sup> One suggestion is that they were naked because they were modelled on classical figures; Jonah on Endymion in his permanent state of sleep, or even on a slumbering Ariadne,<sup>180</sup> and Daniel on the Master or Mistress of the Animals, the *Potnia Theron*.<sup>181</sup> However, the proposed prototypes were rarely depicted completely naked, suggesting that it was not simply a case of nudity being copied from a classical model, but rather that a classical model was rendered naked for a specific reason. Both Daniel and Jonah were exemplars for Christian salvation and sacramental rebirth, their nudity making an unequivocal statement about the paradisiacal prelapsarian state and about restoring prerogatives lost by Adam.<sup>182</sup> Interestingly, despite their baptismal associations, Daniel and Jonah rarely appeared in baptisteries,<sup>183</sup> rather, they tended to adorn catacombs, sarcophagi and other funerary monuments where their presence—and specifically their nudity—made direct reference to, and a connection with, the rites of baptism and Christian salvation. This would have been a particularly pertinent theme to accompany those awaiting

<sup>179</sup> Jensen 2012, 313. For example, the three Hebrews (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego), Moses, Aaron, Eliseus, Samuel and David. For a discussion: Galadza 2018, 270. Adam and Eve are the other Old Testament characters likely to appear naked in early Christian art but, unlike Daniel and Jonah, their nudity conforms to their story in the Old Testament. Adam and Eve appear naked in the Marcellinus and Peter catacombs in Rome; the Catacomb of the Coemeterium Majus in Rome; the San Gennaro catacombs in Naples; on the Junius Bassus and the Dogmatic sarcophagi; and on a fragment of mosaic pavement from Syria, now in the Cleveland Museum.

<sup>180</sup> Elsner 2006, 293.

<sup>181</sup> For discussion on the *Potnia Theron*: Guggisberg 2010, 223-33

<sup>182</sup> Jensen 2012, 310, 315; Riley 1974, 183. Christ himself only appears naked in baptismal settings, for example, in the Arian and Orthodox baptisteries in Ravenna.

<sup>183</sup> Exceptions include the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna, where they are depicted in stucco above two of the prophets, Jonah is naked but, unusually, Daniel is clothed: Deichmann 1958, pls 82, 85

resurrection.<sup>184</sup> With this in mind, it is notable that in the eighth-century Umayyad desert castle at Qusayr Amra in Jordan Jonah is depicted clothed; could this be because, in this particular setting, he was no longer intended as a symbol of Christian salvation?

To understand depictions of naked figures in early Christian settings as alluding to the undressed state of baptisands could help to explain a seemingly uncharacteristic open-mindedness that occasionally permitted seemingly inappropriate and pagan-like figures to appear in Christian contexts, as is the case with the personifications of the Rivers of Paradise at Qasr el-Lebia. Nestled amid the paradisiacal flora and fauna at the west end of the pavement, the Rivers, clearly identified by their labels, make an obvious allusion to Paradise. Their nudity, however, appears to transgress overt Christian models, creating a tension with expected norms of appropriateness and decorum and raising questions about their presence in this ecclesiastical setting. The naked figures are not in a baptistery, nor in a funerary setting. They are, however, key components of a tableau of nine panels presided over by *Ananeosis* (renewal). As discussed above, *Ananeosis* can be understood in a number of different ways, but when seen in conjunction with the imagery in this tableau, she assumes the mantle of Christian renewal, thereby imbuing the surrounding imagery with soteriological significance and allowing the naked river personifications to evoke the unashamed nudity of catechumens entering the font.

The presence of the four biblical Rivers of Paradise, together with the Nilotic flora and fauna, infuses the west end of the pavement with a reassuringly paradisiacal feel. However, their unexpected nudity would undoubtedly have caught the attention of viewers, perhaps prompting them to question the function and meaning of the figures. The reference the personifications make to baptism and the salvation of the Christian soul is key to understanding the pavement as a complete and coherent work.

### **Kastalia and the Eagle**

Towards the west end of the pavement, at the centre of the tableau of nine panels defined by the Rivers of Paradise, a bird—probably an eagle—is depicted rending its prey (**Fig. 108**). Beneath the bird a naked female personification entitled Kastalia reclines on an overflowing urn (**Fig. 109**).

### ***Kastalia***

It is generally assumed that the naked female figure identified as Kastalia is the nymph of one of Apollo's oracular springs, although whether she represents the prophetic Castalian spring at Daphne, the sacred Castalian spring at Delphi, or is simply representative of Apolline oracular springs in general is not clear. Although mentioned in a number of textual sources, visual depictions of the Castalian spring are rare.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>184</sup> Another example of naked figures being used to underline a salvific theme appears in depictions of 'The Raising of Lazarus', a popular choice of imagery in funerary settings. Although the scene is easily recognisable by the bandaged figure standing in a pedimented doorway, there is often also a small naked child-sized figure close by, thought to represent Lazarus after his rebirth. For a discussion: Jensen 2012a, 150, 158

<sup>185</sup> Sources that mention the Castalian spring include: Euripides *Ion*, 94; Horace *Odes*, 3,4 and 61; Ovid *Metamorphoses*, 1, 3, 4 and 14; Ovid *Amores*, 1, 15 and 36; Nonnus *Dionysiaca*, 4 and 13. The only other securely identified visual depiction of the Castalian spring is in the topographical border of the mosaic pavement from the fifth-century Yaktō complex at Daphne in Syria, where a female figure is accompanied by two inscriptions; 'Kastalia' and 'Pallas': Cimok 2000, 274. It has been suggested that the fragmented remains of a female figure in the pavement of the cemetery church at Delphi may have been a personification of the Castalian spring, there is, however, no identifying inscription or corroborating evidence for this identification: Sodini 1970, 710-11



Fig. 108. The eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

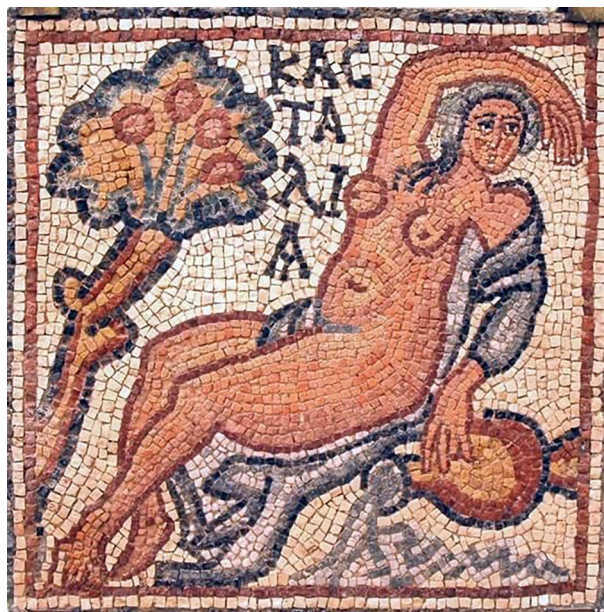


Fig. 109. Personification of Kastalia in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

### *Castalian Spring at Daphne*

Daphne, a residential area lying about six kilometres to the south-west of Antioch, was celebrated for its cypress groves, its temperate climate and the crystal clear water coming from an offshoot of the Castalian spring. A temple at Daphne was dedicated to Apollo and the site gained a reputation as an Apolline oracular source.<sup>186</sup> According to legend, the spring was blocked in the second century AD by Hadrian after the oracle foretold his accession; a measure he hoped would ensure that no-one else would receive the same prophecy.<sup>187</sup> However, if the spring was closed down at this time, it must have been reopened at some point, as in the fourth century the Christian community at Daphne attempted to stem a flow of pagan prophecies from the spring by translating the relics of Saint Babylas, a third-century Antiochene bishop, to the site.<sup>188</sup> Their efforts appear to have been successful. Socrates Scholasticus reported that the saint's remains inhibited the prophetic source and that the oracle was silenced.<sup>189</sup> According to Sozomen, when the emperor entered the temple, Apollo complained that, "the place is quite full of the dead" and that, because of this, the oracular responses were prevented from going forward'.<sup>190</sup> Towards the middle of the fourth century, Julian the Apostate had the relics of Babylas removed from the spring in the hope that the oracle would once again issue prophecies.<sup>191</sup> However, shortly after the spring was

<sup>186</sup> Scott 2014, 33-42

<sup>187</sup> Sozomen *Hist. Eccl.* 5.19 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26025.htm> accessed 12 April 2023. Also, Ammianus Marcellinus, 22.12.8, cited in Downey 1961, 222. However, it has also been suggested that the water supply was diverted away from the spring as a result of Hadrian's re-engineering of the water works at Antioch: Boatwright 2003, 137-38

<sup>188</sup> Digeser 2004, 66.

<sup>189</sup> Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.18 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26013.htm> accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>190</sup> Sozomen, *Eccl. Hist.* 5.19 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26025.htm> accessed 12 April 2023

<sup>191</sup> Athanassiadi 1991, 274; Bowersock 1978, 99. Julian also ordered the removal of prayer houses that had been built around the Temple of Apollo at Didyma: Sozomen, *Eccl. Hist.* 5.20 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26025.htm> accessed 12 April 2023

reinstated a fire destroyed the site; an event for which Julian blamed the Christians, and which the Christians saw as an act of divine retribution.<sup>192</sup>

### *Castalian Spring at Delphi*

At Delphi, the Castalian spring, sited at the foot of Mount Parnassus, was believed to be a gift from the Cephisos River and was considered a source of poetic inspiration.<sup>193</sup> Its main function, however, was for lustration; ritual purity was a prerequisite for anyone wishing to approach the religious precinct of the temple of Apollo,<sup>194</sup> and legend tells that the god himself had bathed in the waters of the Castalian spring, thereby imbuing them with an extraordinary quality for purification.<sup>195</sup> The Pythia—high priestess of Apollo’s temple—and her priests bathed and washed their hair in the fountain before entering the sanctuary and water was taken from the spring to purify the temple. A ceremony involving lustration in the Castalian spring took place on the seventh day of each month—the day sacred to Apollo—and is described in Euripides’ *Ion*:

But come you Delphians, Apollo’s devout,  
Go to Castalia’s silver springs  
And dip yourselves in its crystal dews.  
Then enter the shrine with lips all purged  
Of hurtful converse. Set your tongues  
As paragons of gracious speech  
To those who would consult the god.<sup>196</sup>

The Pythia continued to issue prophecies at Delphi until about AD 362 when the oracle herself reportedly announced to Julian’s envoy, Oribasius the Quaestor:

Say to the king: the decorated court has fallen to the ground.  
Apollo no longer has a cell, or a prophetic laurel,  
Or a babbling spring: even the chattering water is dry.<sup>197</sup>

Theodosius officially closed the site sometime around AD 390/1.<sup>198</sup>

### *Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia*

In the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, Kastalia reclines naked on an urn with her right arm draped over her head. She is flanked by personifications of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris (**see Fig. 92**). Given the inextricable link between the Castalian spring and Apollo, and particularly given the Christian attitude towards pagan oracles, Kastalia is a surprising addition to the ecclesiastical complex, her blatant nudity making the figure more incongruous still.

<sup>192</sup> Matthews 2010, 440-41

<sup>193</sup> An attribute that aligns the spring with the Muses: Faraone 2004, 218. The writer, Martial, used the word ‘Castalian’ as an epithet of the Muses: Parke 1978, 207. Classical descriptions of the inspiration of the Muses also regularly invoked the waters of Castalia: Agosti 2003, 545-46. Pindar uses the name Castalia as a poetic periphrasis for Delphi: Parke 1978, 200-01

<sup>194</sup> Frazer 2012, 256; Hellholm 2011, 7; Nikopoulou-de-Sike 1978, 9

<sup>195</sup> Parke 1978, 204

<sup>196</sup> Euripides, *Ion* 94 <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/murrayeuripides-ion/murrayeuripides-ion-00-h.html> accessed 3 May 2023

<sup>197</sup> *Anthology Palatina* 3.6.122, cited in Clark 2004, 56

<sup>198</sup> Fontenrose 1988, 25. Even though some well-established pagan oracles survived into the early Christian period, a polemic against them was already evident by the end of the second century AD. Clement of Alexandria, in a grand rhetorical attack on paganism, asserted that the oracles, including the Castalian spring, had been silenced, ‘The Castalian spring, at least, is all silent. So is the spring of Clophon; and the rest of the prophetic streams are likewise dead’: Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 2.10 <https://www.theoi.com/Text/ClementExhortation1.html> accessed 3 May 2023

#### 4. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

A variety of explanations have been offered for Kastalia's presence in this pavement. Alföldi-Rosenbaum, reluctant to credit the image with any symbolic meaning, suggested that mosaicists simply copied Kastalia, together with the Rivers of Paradise, from pairs of river-gods and nymphs found in pattern books.<sup>199</sup> Stucchi saw the whole pavement as a representation of God's creation, with Kastalia marking the centre of the world and the fruiting tree by her side representing the Tree of Life.<sup>200</sup> Paul Magdalino, assuming that the personifications of the Rivers of Paradise represented the four Evangelists, the four Gospels, and divine wisdom, casts Kastalia in the role of personifying the sagacity of the Apolline oracles and earthly wisdom. He is uncertain, however, whether the figure was intended to symbolise 'the harmonious coexistence of divine and earthly wisdom or the resurgence of the former at the expense of pagan prophesy which has run dry'.<sup>201</sup> A more recent interpretation by Gianfranco Agosti follows a similar line of thought and draws on a poem attributed to Eudocia in which it is suggested that the Castalian spring at Daphne was imbued with a new and superior sacrality when Apollo's prophecies were replaced by the heavenly-inspired words of a holy man. Seen thus, the image of Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia becomes a powerful and inspirational Christian force—one that was able to, 'slake the thirst of the blessed'.<sup>202</sup> In other words, the figure should be understood as a Christian positive rather than a pagan negative. Grabar preferred to see the scene as religiously significant, interpreting it as an allegory of Christianity overcoming paganism; the flanking Rivers of Paradise, he argued, had silenced the pagan oracle.<sup>203</sup> Maguire took the idea of paganism defeated a step further, suggesting that not only had the pagan spring been silenced by the Rivers of Paradise but that it had been converted by them.<sup>204</sup> To hypothesise that Kastalia was a symbol of paganism defeated or converted may offer a neat solution to the problem of why a personification with such well-known pagan associations was assigned a key position alongside the Rivers of Paradise in a Christian building, but the iconography seems to be at odds with such an interpretation. As discussed above, legend tells that when the Castalian spring at Daphne was blocked, water no longer flowed, and the oracular prophecies ceased. If then, the imagery at Qasr el-Lebia had been intended to show the Castalian spring as silenced, defeated or converted, it seems unlikely that the personification would have been portrayed with her water-source in full flow. In addition, even though the figure is positioned between personifications of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, the scene is not concordant with the idea of victorious oppressors flanking a defeated enemy; far from appearing as the down-trodden object of subjugation, Kastalia reclines with an air of insouciance while the neighbouring Rivers of Paradise seem to be paying her homage and celebrating her presence. It is, in fact, Kastalia who appears to be the dominant figure, supported and confirmed by the flanking subaltern river-gods. The late fifth-century apse mosaic at Hosios David at Thessaloniki makes an interesting comparison (**Fig. 110, see also Fig. 99**). Christ, seated on a rainbow in an aureole of light, is positioned directly above the Mount of Waters from which the Rivers of Paradise flow, and in the body of water below his feet the outline of a pagan river god is just visible. Maguire has suggested that, in the same way that Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia should be understood as a converted pagan spring, this ghostly figure represents the 'defeated or converted figure of the old deity'.<sup>205</sup> At Hosios David, however, the way the river god has been depicted seems to corroborate such an interpretation; the figure is shadowy, almost lost among the fish and the ripples of the water, and the spectral god raises his arms 'in astonished acknowledgement of the heavenly vision above him, recognising Christ as his master'.<sup>206</sup> Unlike Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia, the figure at Hosios David does, indeed, appear to be defeated, downtrodden and subservient. A further consideration is that if Kastalia is to be interpreted

<sup>199</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 40

<sup>200</sup> Stucchi 1975, 401-02

<sup>201</sup> Magdalino 1988, 104. For further discussion about the four Rivers as the evangelists and the gospels: Thunø 2002, 57

<sup>202</sup> Eudocia's *Homerocentones*, cited in Agosti 2003, 555.

<sup>203</sup> Grabar 1968b, 52; Grabar 1969, 277-78

<sup>204</sup> Maguire 1987, 51; Maguire 2012, 14

<sup>205</sup> Maguire 2012, 21

<sup>206</sup> Maguire 2012, 21



Fig. 110. Section of the apse mosaic at Hosios David in Thessaloniki, Greece. With permission from David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy

as having been overpowered by the flanking Rivers of Paradise, the same interpretation must surely also apply to *Ananeosis* (renewal) above, who is flanked by personifications of the Geon and Phison rivers; an interpretation that seems even more unlikely (see Fig. 92).

As discussed above, public nudity was not generally acceptable in Late Antiquity, the only exception being during the initiatory ritual of baptism. Naked figures, particularly naked females, are rare in visual imagery and are generally dismissed as iconographical transfers from a classical tradition.<sup>207</sup> It would be easy to dismiss the image of Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia as a reference to, or remnant of, a pagan past, but there are another two notable sixth-century examples of bare-breasted female figures in mosaic pavements in ecclesiastical settings that could help to shed light on her presence here. The first, in the baptistery at Jabaliyah in Israel, is a bare-breasted personification of Geon who is seemingly female and has 'rivulets springing from her breasts' (see Fig. 102).<sup>208</sup> The second, a personification of Summer, has her right breast bared and is positioned towards the east end of the south aisle of the so-called Byzantine Basilica at Petra in Jordan (Fig. 111).<sup>209</sup> At Jabaliyah, the personification is immediately adjacent to the font and it is easy to understand Geon's nudity as a baptismal reference. At Petra the bare-

<sup>207</sup> Even in Antiquity most female divinities, with the exception of Aphrodite and Venus, were normally depicted clothed: Jensen 2012, 304

<sup>208</sup> Hachlili 2009, fig. VIII-1; Humbert 1999, 216-18. This singular example of a River of Paradise is reminiscent of Nonnus' tale of the suicide of Aura in which she was transformed into a fountain by Cronion and 'her breasts became spouts of falling water': Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* 48.928 <https://topostext.org/work/529> accessed 12 April 2023

<sup>209</sup> Hachlili 2009, pl. XII-2a



Fig. 111. Personification of Summer, in the Byzantine Basilica at Petra, Jordan. Author

breasted personification is not in a baptistery but the surrounding images—fish, wading birds, deer, cantharus and eagle (reminiscent of the eagle at Qasr el-Lebia)—are motifs commonly found in baptismal settings (Fig. 112). The orientation of these images suggests that the aisle was intended to be traversed from west to east and, as at Qasr el-Lebia, the panels suggest a kind of processional pathway or corridor with the personification of Summer, with an eagle above, at its centre. The baptistery at Petra is to the west of the basilica and although no more than speculation, it is possible that baptisands processed along the south aisle after baptism to take their first communion. These three semi-naked female figures—Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia, Geon at Jabaliyah and Summer at Petra—are geographically widely-dispersed, they adorn a variety of different spaces and personify diverse concepts, but what they do have in common is that, in each case, the context or surrounding imagery suggests a connection with baptism.

It might seem that the figure of Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia, naked and reclining in a classical pose, would not easily have been disaffiliated from her Apolline origins. However, nestled among the Four Rivers of Paradise in this ecclesiastical setting,

Kastalia combines the oracular utterances of the past with the Christian promise of salvation and offers an eloquent, if rather covert, connection between pagan purificatory rituals and the transformative ritual of baptism.

### *The Eagle and its Prey*

Above Kastalia is a large bird with its prey (see Fig. 108). The bird, generally accepted as an eagle, has its wings raised, looks to one side, and is rending its prey—a small gazelle or antelope. The panel can be interpreted in a number of ways and it is worth considering the different meanings associated both with a lone eagle and with an eagle rending a corpse.

On a general level, the eagle was associated with regeneration and resurrection, and Old Testament writings associate the bird with the renewal of the soul by the grace of God.<sup>210</sup> For the Romans the eagle was a psychopomp and a well-known symbol of apotheosis; at the cremation of an emperor, for example, living eagles were released from the funeral pyre to symbolise the soul ascending to heaven.<sup>211</sup> The bird became a popular choice for the decoration of tombs and sarcophagi.<sup>212</sup> This tradition continued into the early Christian period and analogies were made—in both art and in literature—between the eagle and Christ, the new psychopomp. In the fifth-century mosaic pavement at the Church of the Holy Martyrs at

<sup>210</sup> Isaiah 40:31 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint'; and Psalm 103:5 'Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's...'

<sup>211</sup> A psychopomp was a spirit or deity who escorted newly deceased souls to the afterlife: Friedman 1970, 79

<sup>212</sup> Cumont 1922, 158-59



Fig. 112. Section of south aisle in the Byzantine Basilica at Petra, Jordan. Author

Tayibat al-Imam in Syria, for example, an eagle takes pride of place atop the Mount of Waters, a position usually reserved for Christ or his proxy (Fig. 113),<sup>213</sup> and on the sixth-century Antioch Chalice, Christ is seated directly above an eagle with its wings outstretched.<sup>214</sup> Maximus of Turin wrote that, 'Christ [who] takes the Christian captive to the heavens, as the eagle carries off its prey',<sup>215</sup> and in the *Physiologus*, a didactic Christian text generally believed to date from around the second or third century AD, the eagle is described as flying high up to the sun before diving three times into a spring where the water restored and renewed it;<sup>216</sup> an action that came to be seen as a prefiguration of the triple immersion of believers during Christian baptism.<sup>217</sup>

In classical mythology Zeus sent two eagles to fly around the world to determine its centre; the birds met above Delphi and the spot was deemed to be the *omphalos* of the ancient world.<sup>218</sup> Even though there is only one eagle in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, the legend is nevertheless pertinent as the bird is

<sup>213</sup> Zaquq and Piccirillo 1999, 443-64, esp. 445

<sup>214</sup> Weitzmann 1979, 592, fig. 542. For general discussion about Antioch chalice: Newbold 1925

<sup>215</sup> Maximus of Turin, *Homilia LX*, Migne PL 62:369-370, cited in, Bolman 2009, 63

<sup>216</sup> Every part of the bird was renewed except its beak that it chipped off on a rock: Payne 1990, 61. By the fourth century, the *physiologus*, thought to have possibly been compiled in Alexandria, was widely known and by the end of the fifth century it had been translated into Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian and other vernacular languages: Parrish 2005, 1110

<sup>217</sup> Just as the eagle was able to renew its youth by diving three times into the restorative waters of the spring, so the sinner who repented could be renewed by being immersed three times into the waters of baptism: Rendell 1928, 10

<sup>218</sup> Cole 2004, 74. This perception persisted into Late Antiquity. For example, in a literary exchange between Paulinus and Ausonius, Paulinus described how visitors would 'summon deaf Apollo from his Delphic cave'; *ciere surdum Delphica Pheobum specu*, the word 'Delphica' in the middle of the line underlined the idea that Delphi was located at the centre of the classical world: Shorrock 2011, 19

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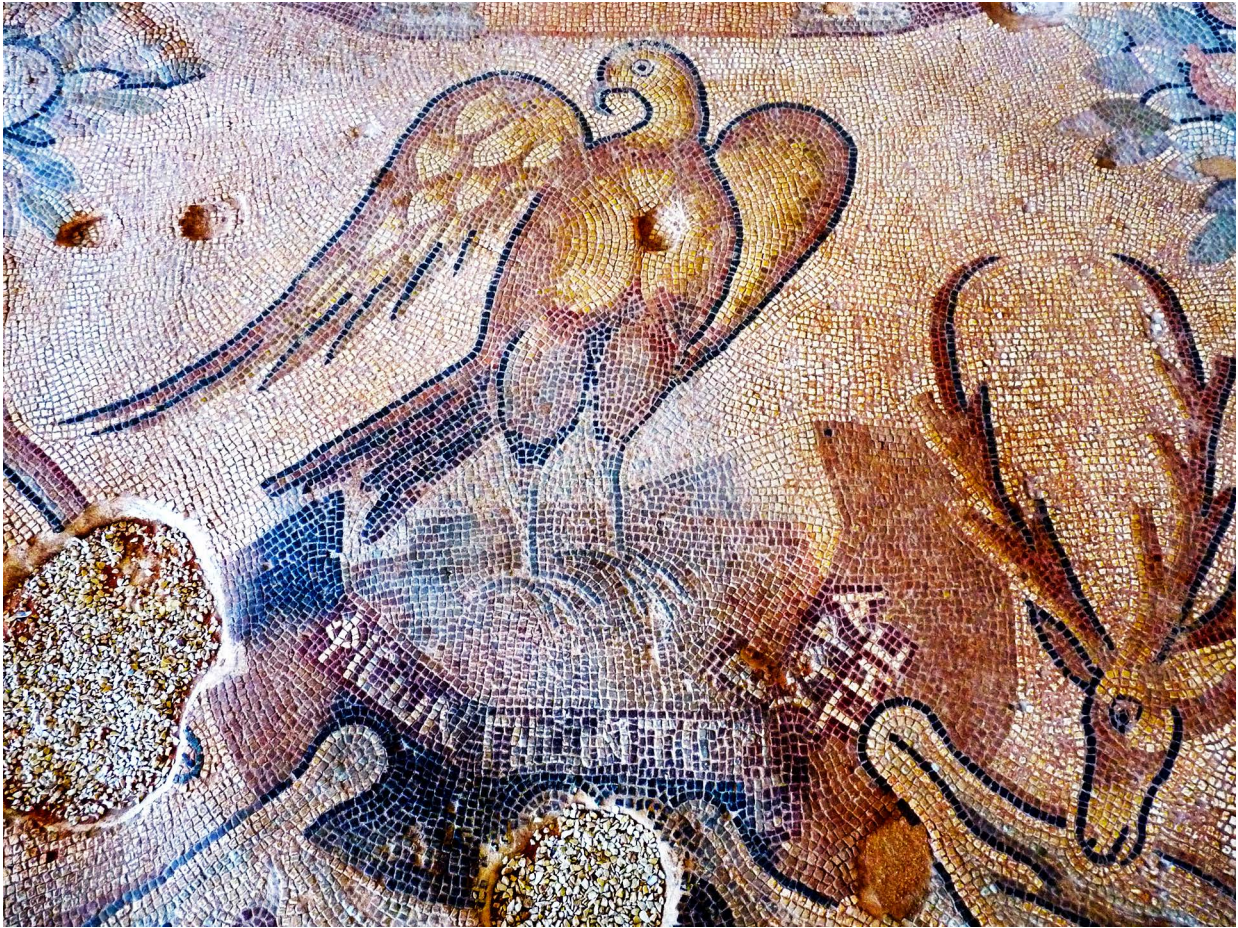


Fig. 113. Nave mosaic, Tayibat al-Imam, Syria. Author

positioned immediately above the figure of Kastalia, namesake of the Castalian spring at Delphi. The *omphalos* of the Christian world, the Holy Sepulchre, also features a spring; the blood and water that sprang from the wound in Christ's side—the *fons vitae aeternae*.<sup>219</sup> An idea expressed by Ambrose in *De Paradiso*:

There was the fountain which watered paradise. What is this fountain if not Jesus Christ!  
The fountain of life is eternal just like the Father; as it is written... 'out of his body shall flow  
the living water'.<sup>220</sup>

The concept is also celebrated in a fifth-century inscription above the font in the Lateran baptistery in Rome that reads: 'Here is the font of life which bathes the whole world, its ultimate source the side of Christ wounded'.<sup>221</sup> And a seventh-century account by John of Damascus describes the Holy Sepulchre as the 'spring', 'source' or 'fountain' of our resurrection'.<sup>222</sup>

<sup>219</sup> John 7:38, '...out of his body shall flow the living water'; John 19:33-4, 'But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs: But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forth-with came there out blood and water'; Revelation 22:1, 'And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb'.

<sup>220</sup> Ambrose, *De Paradiso* III, 13, cited in Thunø 2002, 58

<sup>221</sup> Ferguson 2009, 769

<sup>222</sup> John of Damascus, *Oratio* III, 34, cited in Underwood 1950, 96

If then, the personification of Kastalia references the spring at the centre of the ancient world, the corpse of the deer with blood emanating from its wounds could be seen as the spring at the centre of the Christian world—the body of Christ from which the *fons vitae aeternae* emanates. This idea has already been explored by Maguire who, noting that descriptions of eagles gathering at a carcass are generally understood as the gathering of Christian congregations,<sup>223</sup> has interpreted the eagle with its prey at Qasr el-Lebia as symbolising the gentiles gathering at the body of Christ.<sup>224</sup>

When viewed in isolation, these two panels seem to be making reference to a pagan past, however, when they are read as part of a larger scheme—taking meaning both from each other and from other adjacent panels—their significance changes. In this paradisiacal setting, with the purifying waters of the Castalian spring flowing beneath them, the eagle with its prey takes on a soteriological significance and becomes the pivotal panel around which the whole programme of the pavement revolved; a hypothesis explored in the next chapter.

### A Musician, a Leopard and a Satyr

Towards the east end of the pavement is a trio of images: a musician, a leopard and a satyr (**Fig. 114**). At the centre of the trio—and on the central axis of the pavement—is a pastoral scene with a man playing a musical instrument. He is wearing a leopard skin tunic covering one shoulder, is seated on a rock and plays a long-necked stringed instrument.<sup>225</sup> To his right is a tree bearing gourd-like fruits with a pot hanging from one of the lower branches and to his left a dog lies at his feet, head turned up to look at its master. Pastoral scenes were popular in the late fifth and sixth centuries and, when viewed in isolation, the musician at Qasr el-Lebia could be seen to belong to this genre of imagery.<sup>226</sup> However, his prominent position on the central axis of the pavement, together with the images either side of him, belies the idea of a simple pastoral idyll.

The musician has hitherto only been considered as a stand-alone figure and has been variously interpreted: despite there being no sheep in the scene, but probably on account of the dog at his feet, he has been identified as a shepherd;<sup>227</sup> he has been likened to Orpheus, even though there are no wild animals and he is not playing a lyre;<sup>228</sup> and, perhaps in acknowledgement of the fact that the image incorporates elements of both Orpheus and the Good Shepherd, without actually conforming to

<sup>223</sup> Matthew 24:28, 'For wherever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together'; Luke 17:37, 'And he said unto them, wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together'. A commentary on the *Hexaemeron*, attributed to Anastasius Sinaites, interprets eagles as the souls of the just gathering at the body of Christ: *Hexaemeron*, 6, cited in Kühn and Baggarly 2007, 179; St. Ambrose's commentary on St. Luke's Gospel identified the corpse as 'the church where we are renewed in spirit through the grace of Baptism: *Expositio in Lucam* 8.55-6, cited in Riain and Íde 2001, 288-89. And in *De Sacramentis* 4.7 Ambrose states: 'The corpse represents the altar and the corpse of Christ is on the altar. You are eagles, renewed by the washing away of the fault', cited in Maguire 1987, 52. A hymn by Ephraim the Syrian suggests that a believer who partakes of the communion bread—the 'corpse'—becomes an eagle that flies to Paradise: *Hymn of Ephraim the Syrian*, cited in Maguire 1992, 292

<sup>224</sup> Maguire 1987, 51-53

<sup>225</sup> The instrument resembles a modern buzuq, a fretted lute related to the Greek bazouki and the Turkish saz. A similar instrument appears on a third-century sarcophagus, now in the Archaeological Museum in Naples: Zanker and Ewald 2012, 115, fig. 100.

<sup>226</sup> Comparable pastoral scenes appear in manuscripts and on textiles and silverware, as well as on mosaic pavements. Examples of mosaics include: a sixth-century pavement at Beth She'an in Israel, where a pot hangs from a vine to the right of the musician; and a sixth-century pavement at Be'er Shema in Israel where a dog sits at the feet of the musician: Hachlili 2009, 170-73

<sup>227</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 43. In John 10:1-21 Christ describes himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep.

<sup>228</sup> Garbar 1962, 119, 138; Guarducci 1975, 674; Maguire 1987, 53

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Fig. 114. Satyr, Musician and Leopard in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

conventions for portraying either, he has been seen as a syncretic Orpheus-Christus figure.<sup>229</sup> Both the Good Shepherd, symbolising Christ, and Orpheus, famed for his ability to charm all living things with his music, regularly appeared on vaults or over *arcosolia* in early Christian catacombs; both individuals suffered violent deaths but returned unscathed, and both were understood as symbols of salvation.<sup>230</sup> Early depictions of the two characters make a clear distinction between Orpheus and the Good Shepherd but gradually the two subjects became conflated making it difficult, sometimes impossible, to differentiate between them. A fourth-century red earthenware bowl from North Africa, for example, is decorated with two sheep, a naked Jonah seated on a rock, and a figure carrying a ram on his shoulders. It would be tempting to see the man with the ram as the Good Shepherd, particularly given Jonah's presence on the plate, but the figure is dressed in a Phrygian cap, tight leggings and paludamentum over a long-sleeved tunic—a costume traditionally worn by Orpheus.<sup>231</sup> Clement of Alexandria, perhaps believing that a perceived crossover between Orphism and Christianity posed a danger to the early Church, branded Orpheus an impostor who, under the cover of music, 'outraged human life, being influenced by daemons, through some artful sorcery, to compass man's ruin'.<sup>232</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, on the other hand, used Orpheus' ability to charm ferocious beasts and tame nature as an allegory for the power that the Christian doctrine exerted on humanity.<sup>233</sup>

Labeling the musician at Qasr el-Lebia as an Orpheus-Christus figure is a convenient way of introducing a Christian element into an otherwise very unchristian part of the pavement, but if he is considered with the images either side of him, rather than as a stand-alone figure, his meaning changes. As part of a trio of images, the musician becomes a protagonist flanked by a satyr on his right and a leopard on his left—a composition that takes on quite a different significance (see Fig. 114).

Satyrs were traditionally associated with revelry, debauchery and untamed nature. They often appeared in the company of centaurs—creatures of lust and violence seen to symbolise the weakness and depravity of those living on the fringes of human society.<sup>234</sup> At Qasr el-Lebia, the satyr, flanked by two trees, trots

<sup>229</sup> Tülek 1998, 41 has suggested that the musician at Qasr el-Lebia was one of the last examples of 'Orpheus disguised in the Good Shepherd figure'.

<sup>230</sup> Hanfmann 1980, 88

<sup>231</sup> Weitzmann 1979, 520-21, fig. 465

<sup>232</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 1.4 <https://www.theoi.com/Text/ClementExhortation1.html> accessed 14 April 2023

<sup>233</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Oraition in Praise of Constantine* 14.5 [www.newadvent.org/fathers/2504.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2504.htm) accessed 20 March 2023

<sup>234</sup> Friedman 1970, 83; Weiss and Talgam 2002, 73

towards the musician. With his right hand he proffers an object, possibly a wineskin or bowl,<sup>235</sup> and over his left shoulder he holds a type of shepherd's crook, or *pedum*—a fairly common attribute for satyrs—sheathed in a cloth that billows out in twin wing-like formations.<sup>236</sup> On the other side of the musician a leopard, positioned in front of a tree, is walking away from him but has its head turned back towards him. The leopard, often seen as a symbol of cruelty, corruption and sin, was sometimes associated with the Antichrist.<sup>237</sup> It seems unlikely that a satyr or a leopard would have been chosen as escorts for a figure representing the Good Shepherd, neither were they creatures commonly associated with Orpheus.<sup>238</sup> Both the satyr and leopard were, however, ubiquitous companions of Dionysos, god of fertility and divine embodiment of wine, and at Qasr el-Lebia the wineskin being held out by the satyr and the fact that the musician is wearing a leopard skin, Dionysos' garment of choice, seem to allude to this connection. Given these Dionysiac references, it is tempting to see the trio of motifs—the satyr, the musician and the leopard—as constituting an abbreviated Dionysiac *thiasos*, a possibility hitherto unexplored.<sup>239</sup>

Dionysos remained a popular figure into the Christian era, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean where he appeared on sarcophagi, textiles, silverware, ivories and mosaic pavements. Literary sources suggest the persistence of a Dionysiac cult,<sup>240</sup> but for communities in which many individuals eluded the rigid pagan-Christian dichotomy, Dionysos may simply have been a visual expression of elite status and a way of articulating the good life enjoyed in the highest spheres of society.<sup>241</sup>

The idea that a musician, as depicted at Qasr el-Lebia, could be understood to conflate the qualities of Dionysos with other influential characters is not without precedent; the oversized lyre in a frenzied Dionysiac scene in the Sheikh Zouède mosaic from Eretz in Israel, has been interpreted as representing the merging of Apollo and Dionysos (**Fig. 115**), and the presence of Orpheus, a satyr and a centaur in the Jerusalem Orpheus mosaic is sometimes seen as a synthesis of Orpheus and Dionysos.<sup>242</sup> Dionysos, associated with frenzied dancing and the negative and dangerous transformative dynamism of the Dionysiac cult, and Orpheus, epitomising restraint, order and control, may appear to be polar opposites, but the two characters actually found much common ground. Both enjoyed well-established affiliations with the god Apollo and with the sanctuary at Delphi. As far back as the fifth century BC, Sophocles used the name *Castalia* to invoke Delphic associations with Dionysos rather than with Apollo,<sup>243</sup> and, according

<sup>235</sup> It is similar to a discarded wineskin on an early seventh-century silver plate, now in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia, which depicts Silenus dancing with a Maenad: Hermitage W-282; and a vessel being offered to Dionysos by a satyr on the Mildenhall Great Dish, now in the British Museum: BM 1946,1007.1

<sup>236</sup> Examples include a fifth- or sixth-century textile from Egypt depicting a satyr holding a *pedum* over his right shoulder: Weitzmann 1977, 144, fig. 123; the fourth-century Great Dish from the Mildenhall Treasure on which a satyr brandishes a *pedum* with several others are strewn around the outer frieze of the dish: BM 1946,1007.1. However, a 'winged' or cloaked *pedum* seems to be an oddity.

<sup>237</sup> Ferguson 1961, 21. Revelation 13:2, 'And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion'. See also Cooper 1992, 147; Payne 1990, 22

<sup>238</sup> Exceptions include a fourth-century ivory pyxis in the Museo di San Columbano at Bobbio and a sixth-century pyxis from the Abbey of St. Julien at Brioude, now in the Bargello Museum in Florence. For images: [https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/22/\\_23392](https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/22/_23392) and [https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/22/\\_23396](https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/22/_23396) accessed 4 May 2023

<sup>239</sup> A *thiasos* was a procession of inebriated and enraptured worshippers following Dionysos.

<sup>240</sup> St. Augustine made reference to a public celebration held in honour of Dionysos (Bacchus): St. Augustine, *Epistula* 17.4 [www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102017.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102017.htm) accessed 20 March 2023. Sozomen recorded that two Christian clerics in Laodicea were punished for attending a Dionysiac ceremony that should have been the reserve of the initiated: Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.25 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/26026.htm> accessed 14 April 2023. At the beginning of the fifth century, Synesius made reference to the rites of Dionysos 'in a manner which would suggest the recent past', Synesius of Cyrene, *Calviti* *Encomium*, 21, *De Providentia & De Insomniis*: Fitzgerald 1926, 31; Pando 1940, 141

<sup>241</sup> Hölscher 2004, 5; Talgam 2004, 222-23

<sup>242</sup> Mucznik 2011, 276

<sup>243</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1130, cited in Parke 1978, 201

#### 4. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

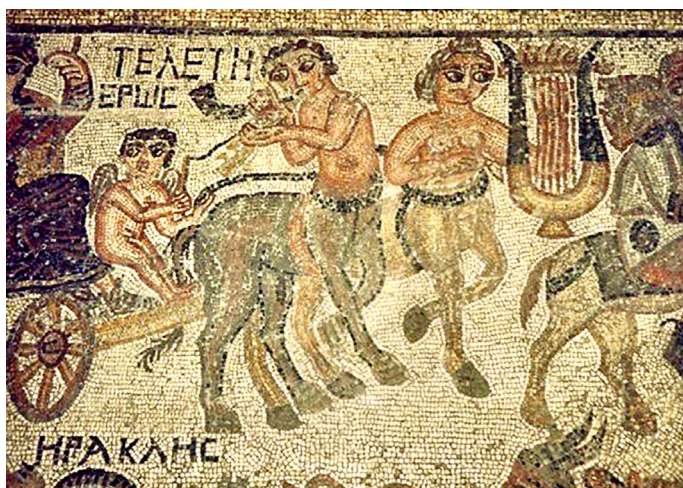


Fig. 115. Section of the Sheikh Zouède mosaic, Eretz, Israel.  
With permission from Marek T. Olszewski

to the writings of Diodorus Siculus, the Muses of Mount Helicon travelled with Dionysos, bringing him pleasure with their singing and dancing.<sup>244</sup> Delphi came to be acknowledged as a site where a chthonic Dionysos/Bacchus shared dominion with Apollo.<sup>245</sup> According to legend, Orpheus, son of the muse Calliope of Mount Helicon, was gifted his golden lyre by Apollo, and although formerly a priest of the cult of Dionysos, he later abandoned his position and devoted himself to Apollo.<sup>246</sup>

As discussed above, parallels were often drawn between Orpheus and Christ, but there were also perceived crossovers between Dionysos and Christ; for Justin Martyr, the similarities between the two

were so strong that he believed demons, trying to deceive and seduce the unwary, had mimicked the Old Testament prophets by having Dionysos fulfill the things that had been prophesied for Christ.<sup>247</sup> All three—Christ, Orpheus and Dionysos—were understood as psychopomps and had connections with Hermes, god of transitions who moved between the world of mortals and the divine.<sup>248</sup> Hermes *Kriophoros*—the ram-bearer—is generally acknowledged as the figure on which Christ the Good Shepherd was modeled,<sup>249</sup> and legend tells that after his birth from the thigh of Zeus, Dionysos was given into the care of Hermes.<sup>250</sup> It was also Hermes who invented the lyre that Orpheus used to tame the natural world.<sup>251</sup>

Whether the musician at Qasr el-Lebia is understood as referencing Christ, Orpheus, Dionysos or Hermes, one of the main features of the scene is the instrument that he is playing; it cuts across the composition and it is not simply being held, but is being played, the strings plucked with a plectrum-like object. In the classical world, the musical harmony produced by the heavenly spheres as they revolved around the earth was believed to be fundamental to the order of the cosmos,<sup>252</sup> and, according to Pythagoras, understanding the sound of the cosmos was key to understanding the divine order of creation.<sup>253</sup> Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* tells how, 'learned men who know how to imitate on the string of the lyre [the harmony

<sup>244</sup> Shorrock 2011, 81-82

<sup>245</sup> Finch 1991, 20. By the sixth century the relationship between Dionysos and Delphi was widely recognised: Jesnick 1997, 39

<sup>246</sup> Friedman 1970, 6, 55

<sup>247</sup> Justin Martyr, *I Apology* LIV <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm> accessed 14 April 2023. Mathews 2003, 45 has suggested that Dionysiac facial traits were sometimes used for representations of Christ.

<sup>248</sup> The name, Hermes, comes from *hermai*—rectangular stone pillars with male heads and erect genitalia placed at crossroads and intersections as symbols of protection and divine blessing. This connection is particularly pertinent at Qasr el-Lebia where there is an explicit display of genitalia.

<sup>249</sup> Gazda 2002, 47-49

<sup>250</sup> An event commemorated during the Dionysiac festival of *Anthestia*, the third day of which was known as *Chytroi*, and was shared with Hermes *Chthonios*: Evans 2010, 178-79

<sup>251</sup> Hansen 2004, 50, 110

<sup>252</sup> Teeuwen 2002, 190. The musicians of the spheres, according to Plato, 'utter one sound, one note' thereby creating 'the concord of a single harmony': Plato, *Republic*, X, 14, cited in Underwood 1950, 125

<sup>253</sup> James 1993, 31 and 37. Pythagoras believed that the sounds of stringed instruments elevated the human soul to the heavenly orbits: Kartomi 1990, 115-16

of the spheres] have opened up for themselves a return to that place [heaven]'.<sup>254</sup> Musical inspiration came from the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne and followers of Apollo; they provided the poet or musician with inspiration to write and a voice with which to sing, and the 'poet of the Muses' came to be seen as a mediator between the divine and human.<sup>255</sup> By learning the gifts of the Muses one became *mousikos aner*—a cultivated man—an attribute that 'made you a human instead of a beast' and helped to ensure immortality and salvation of the soul.<sup>256</sup> The Muses continued to play an important role into the early Christian period,<sup>257</sup> for example, Paul Zanker has observed that in the visual arts 'there [was] scarcely a poet or philosopher, or scholar who [did] not appear along with his Muse',<sup>258</sup> and as late as the sixth century, Fulgentius wrote about the continued inspiration exerted by the Muses.<sup>259</sup> Gradually, however, the music of the spheres was replaced by the harmony of the Word of God, and in the first book of his *Protrepticus*, Clement of Alexandria writes about Christ as the New Musician whose song—the Logos—tames the souls of humans.<sup>260</sup> Maguire has suggested that the musician at Qasr el-Lebia symbolises 'the harmony of the congregations with the Church, and the harmony of the whole Creation'.<sup>261</sup> Perhaps this interpretation could be expanded to include the harmony of the spheres and the harmony of the Word of God through which one achieved immortality and salvation?

The musician, anonymous and ambiguous, encapsulates the transformative qualities of Dionysos, the pacifying and salvational nature of Orpheus-Christus and the transitional qualities of Hermes. Situated immediately below a peacock, symbol of apotheosis and immortality,<sup>262</sup> and close to a pedimented building that, as will be discussed later, marks a major intersection in the pavement, the musician can be seen to play a pivotal role in shepherding visitors from the wilderness at the east end of the pavement to the paradisiacal west.

### Architectural Representations

Nestled among the flora and fauna of the large pavement are four architectural representations. Three lie on the central axis depicting, from east to west, the *Pharos*, a pedimented building, and the city gates of *Polis Nea Theodorias*. The fourth is an unidentified castellated building to the south of the central axis.

<sup>254</sup> Cicero *Somnium Scipionis* 5.2, cited in Friedman 1970, 80

<sup>255</sup> Shorrock 2011, 14; Spentzou and Fowler 2002, 36

<sup>256</sup> Nock and Beazley 1946, 143. In the third or fourth century, Aristides Quintilianus, making reference to the music of the spheres, noted the correlation between stringed instruments, the ethereal cosmos and the soul itself: Aristides Quintilianus *De Musica* 2.18, cited in Mathiesen 1999, 543-45

<sup>257</sup> Constantine installed statues of the Muses of Helicon in his palace in the newly founded city of Constantinople: Shorrock 2011, 47

<sup>258</sup> Zanker 1995, 327-31

<sup>259</sup> Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *Mythologiae*, 1.15 <https://www.theoi.com/Text/FulgentiusMythologies1.html#15> accessed 14 April 2023

<sup>260</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 1 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020801.htm> accessed 14 April 2023. See also: Shorrock 2011, 15-20

<sup>261</sup> Maguire 1987, 54

<sup>262</sup> Cooper 1992, 179. The peacock was the bird of Juno, patron goddess of the Roman Empire, and symbolised the apotheosis of Roman empresses and other female personages of rank: Kiilerich 2001, 183; Underwood 1950, 88. The peacock became a symbol of immortality and Christian renewal as its plumage grows afresh each year and the flesh was believed to be incorruptible. St. Augustine found the possibility of incorruptible flesh so unbelievable that he put it to the test by keeping a slice of cooked peacock meat that had been served to him in Carthage. He inspected the meat at intervals and noted that it remained unchanged and that even a year later it was in the same state, 'except that it was now a little more shrivelled, and drier': Augustine, *City of God* Book XXI, 4 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120121.htm> accessed 14 April 2023

## Pharos

The architectural representation at the east end of the pavement, labelled ΟΦΑΡΟΣ, is generally accepted as representing the *Pharos* at Alexandria (**Fig. 116**).<sup>263</sup> Built between 283–279 BC, the Alexandrian *Pharos* was designed by the Greek architect, Sostratus Cnidus, during the reign of Ptolemy II.<sup>264</sup> It originally functioned as a navigational tower and was later transformed into a lighthouse. Standing about 400 feet high, clad in brilliant white marble and adorned with numerous sculptures, the *Pharos* stood on the eastern tip of the island of *Pharos* and was connected to the mainland by a Heptastadion—a man-made causeway.<sup>265</sup> It was an iconic and celebrated landmark that became synonymous with Alexandria and announced the city as the gateway to Egypt: ‘the *Pharos* became Alexandria and Alexandria became the *Pharos*’.<sup>266</sup> The building was toppled by a series of earthquakes between AD 320 and AD 1303.

At Qasr el-Lebia, the *Pharos* is depicted as a rather squat stone building with two crenellated tiers and a ramp leading to an arched doorway.<sup>267</sup> The structure is surmounted by a semi-circular dome and a monumental naked figure, crowned by a rayed-halo and holding a staff in his right hand.<sup>268</sup> To the right of the *Pharos*, beyond a stretch of water indicated by blue-grey wavy lines, is an idiosyncratic tripartite structure, also surmounted by a large naked figure. The distinctive trilobite form of this edifice suggests that it was intended to represent a particular structure but if that was indeed the case, the original inspiration for the image is not known.<sup>269</sup> If the mosaic panel had simply been intended to represent the *Pharos*, the choice of imagery is puzzling; a tall tiered-structure, like those depicted on numerous coins and in the black and white mosaics and on carved reliefs at Ostia, would have achieved this effectively and without the need for an inscription (**Figs 117–118**).<sup>270</sup> Equally, if the panel was intended to represent the city of Alexandria, a townscape like that in the fifth-century Nile Festival building at Sepphoris in Israel, for example, might have been expected (**see Fig. 66**).

The inscription on the panel leaves no doubt that the structure represented the *Pharos* and yet it is the two naked colossi that dominate the panel, even, as Goodchild noted, ‘at the cost of distorting the appearance of the supporting structures.’<sup>271</sup> The two monumental figures, although shown with life-like anatomy and in natural poses, are not a rosy-pink colour like the other figures in the pavement, but are grey-green suggesting that they probably represented bronze statues. Textual and visual evidence attests to the fact that a statue did originally sit atop the *Pharos*, although its identity has been much

<sup>263</sup> The more usual spelling of *Pharos* was ΦΑΡΟΣ: Fakharani 1974, 264

<sup>264</sup> At this time, only the name of the reigning king was allowed on buildings, but Sostratus carved a personal dedication that was concealed under the official dedication to Ptolemy. Sostratus’ inscription read, ‘Sostratus of Cnidus, son of Dexiphanes, to the savior gods, for sailors’: McKenzie 2007, 41

<sup>265</sup> Elnashi *et al.* 2006, 138. The Heptastadion measured seven stadia: Haas 2006, 24. One stade measured about 600 Grecian feet (about 180m), the length of a stadium: Gagarin 2010, 382

<sup>266</sup> Forster 1922, 133

<sup>267</sup> The ramp resembles the steps on the so-called *Pharos* coins of Alexandria, issued around the time of Domitian: Goodchild 1961a, 220. The ramp was also described in an Arab text in AD 1166: McKenzie 2007, 42

<sup>268</sup> The dome may have represented a large mirror on top of the *Pharos*, described as being used both telescopically and defensively: Thiersch 1909, 40

<sup>269</sup> It has been suggested, albeit without much conviction, that the feature may have been intended to represent a triumphal arch or even part of the Alexandrian Serapeum: Goodchild 1961a, 223. The rounded lobes bear some resemblance to Egyptian papyriform columns, for example, the re-cut columns salvaged from the sea near Fort Qait Bey at Alexandria. For image: McKenzie 2007, 48, fig. 55

<sup>270</sup> Even though coins rarely reproduced the proportions or ornamental detail of the *Pharos* realistically, the depictions were easily recognisable: Handler 1971, 58. At Ostia the images would almost certainly have represented the so-called Claudian *Pharos* at Portus, modelled on the Alexandrian *Pharos*.

<sup>271</sup> Goodchild 1961a, 220



Fig. 116. The *Pharos* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 117. Reverse of a Tetradrachm of Commodus. AD 177-92. Public Domain

debated. Traditionally, the figure was thought to be Isis Pharia,<sup>272</sup> but at the beginning of the twentieth century Hermann Thiersch put forward a case for Poseidon.<sup>273</sup> In the 1930s the identity of the statue was again brought into question following the discovery of a glass cup at Begram in Afghanistan, adorned with a depiction of the *Pharos* surmounted by a beardless male, thought more likely to be a Ptolemaic ruler than a god.<sup>274</sup> At Qasr el-Lebia, the figure atop the *Pharos* is depicted with a radial halo and Goodchild has argued that it may have represented Helios, a proposition given weight by a haematite gem, now in the British Museum, that also depicts a lighthouse surmounted by Helios, and by the fact that the Colossus, a monumental structure built around the same time as the *Pharos* to guard the entrance to the harbour at Rhodes, has been identified as Helios.<sup>275</sup> The identity of the statue atop the trilobite structure at Qasr el-Lebia remains even more elusive.

In the Hellenistic period the word ΦΑΡΟΣ was used specifically to refer to the *Pharos* of Alexandria, subsequently it came to mean simply lighthouse. In early Christian iconography lighthouses were understood as symbolic guiding lights—beacons of faith—and regularly appeared in imagery, particularly in funerary settings.<sup>276</sup> A loculus cover from the Coemeterium Jordanorum catacomb in Rome, for example, is engraved with an epitaph to Firmia Victoria and depicts a boat heading towards

<sup>272</sup> On coins, Isis is often shown next to the *Pharos* rather than atop it. The epithet 'Pharia' was probably added to Isis to refer to her cult place on the island of *Pharos*: Handler 1971, 60

<sup>273</sup> Thiersch 1909, 8-12

<sup>274</sup> Goodchild 1961a, 217. For image: <https://ackuimages.photoshelter.com/image/I00001wg7VtH5Zh4>, accessed 14 April 2023

<sup>275</sup> Goodchild 1961a, 221-22. For image: <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofearly00brit/page/14/mode/1up> accessed 14 April 2023. For further discussion on associations between the statue at Alexandria and the Colossus of Rhodes: Hoepfner 2003, 74

<sup>276</sup> Stucchi 1975, 402 refers to the lighthouse as 'il farò della fede' (the beacon of faith). See also Maguire 1987, 51



Fig. 118. A *Pharos* mosaic from Ostia Antica, Italy. Author

a lighthouse (**Fig. 119**), a composition not unlike the east end of the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia where a boat is sailing towards the *Pharos* (**Fig. 120**).<sup>277</sup>

### *Pedimented Building*

Towards the centre of the pavement is a representation of a grand pedimented building that has been variously interpreted (**Fig. 121**). Alföldi-Rosenbaum saw the structure as purely ornamental with no symbolic meaning;<sup>278</sup> Stucchi and Margherita Guarducci interpreted it as a church;<sup>279</sup> Dufrenne as a synagogue;<sup>280</sup> Henri Stern as a disused temple;<sup>281</sup> and Maguire allowed it to represent any one—or indeed all—of the above.<sup>282</sup> If the image had been intended to represent a specific building, it seems probable that, like the *Pharos* below and the townscape of *Polis Nea Theodorias* above, it would have been identified by an inscription. Equally, the building could have been marked as unequivocally Christian, by the addition of a cross or a Chi-Rho for example, instead of which a rather generic and non-specific semi-circular object sits atop the pediment. Despite the fact that the structure is unidentified it was clearly a building of distinction: the ceiling above the porch appears to be coffered; the columns are made from dark-purple tesserae giving them the appearance of porphyry, a high-status building material; and the pale-blue and white lines of tesserae between the columns suggest Proconnesian marble, either laid as a pavement or as revetment on steps leading to the tripartite entrance, although columns rising from the bottom rather than from the top of a flight of steps would be a singular feature.<sup>283</sup>

<sup>277</sup> Early Christian writers referred to boats as metaphors for the safety and peace of the Church: Maguire 1987, 34. Rahner 1963, 346 refers to the Church as a ship on the ocean, serving as a safety net and offering salvation and entry to heaven.

<sup>278</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 59

<sup>279</sup> Guarducci 1975, 666; Stucchi 1975, 403

<sup>280</sup> Dufrenne 1980, 247. The representation is reminiscent of the façade of the synagogue at Kafr Bir'im in Israel, for images see Magness 2012, 297-98. It is also similar to representations of the Torah shrine in two sixth-century pavements, one at the east end of the Upper Chapel of Priest John at Mount Nebo in Jordan: Hachlili 2009, pl. II-3a; and the other in the synagogue at Horvat Susiya in Israel: Hachlili 2009, pl. II-1.c

<sup>281</sup> Stern 1969, 282

<sup>282</sup> Maguire 1987, 53

<sup>283</sup> The House of Jason Magnus at Cyrene has steps revetted with Proconnesian marble.



Fig. 119. Loculus cover from the Coemeterium Jordanorum, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museums. Author



Fig. 120. Boat heading for the *Pharos* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

Either side of the pediment lush palm trees appear to sprout from behind the outer columns. In the Old Testament, the doorways of Solomon's temple are described as being adorned with palm trees, and in one of Ezekiel's visions God reveals the walled temple of Jerusalem that has palms on the 'posts' around the windows and gateways.<sup>284</sup> In early Christian iconography palm trees commonly appeared in paradisiacal scenes and trees sprouting from architecture, perhaps a carryover from the Old Testament references above, were often associated with vigour and vitality.<sup>285</sup> For example, a sixth-century pewter pilgrim ampulla from Bobbio in Italy, and a sixth-century glass chalice from Palestine, both depict the Holy Sepulchre with trees sprouting from the supporting columns, presumably to distinguish it

<sup>284</sup> 1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35; 1 Kings 7:36. The 'posts' presumably refer to jambs: Ezekiel 40:16, 22, 26, 31, 34, 37

<sup>285</sup> Underwood 1950, 90



Fig. 121. Pedimented building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

as ‘life-giving’ (Figs 122–123).<sup>286</sup> With this in mind, it is possible that the trees sprouting from the architectural representation in the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia mark it out as a living, vibrant building.

If the depiction is understood as the façade of a building, one element makes it stand out from the majority of Late Antique architectural representations; the curtains hanging at the doorways are closed. Curtains were commonly shown in doorways and entrances but they were almost always tied back, either in a central knot and hanging in a sort of V-shape, as is the case at the entrance to *Polis Nea Theodorias* in the panel at the west end of the pavement, or draped around columns, as seen either side of *Ananeosis*. Rarely are curtains shown covering—closing—an entrance into a building.<sup>287</sup> There is, however, plenty of evidence to suggest that curtains and textiles were commonly used inside buildings,

either to create divisions or to conceal sacred objects and spaces; fittings for curtain rods have been found above pilasters supporting arches in early Christian churches in North Syria, and, perhaps more relevant to this study, large stone supports for curtain rods are still evident in the church at Ras al-Hilal and in the Siret el Giambi Monastery at El Beida, both in Cyrenaica (Figs 124–125).<sup>288</sup> Records suggest that at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople the Eucharist was celebrated behind the drawn curtains of the ciborium that enclosed the altar,<sup>289</sup> and two sources describing the Emperor Valens donating gifts to the church of Caesarea in Cappadocia, record that the emperor had to pass through closed curtains in order to greet the bishop, Basil of Caesarea.<sup>290</sup> Could, then, the closed curtains at the doorways of the pedimented building at Qasr el-Lebia have been intended as a visual barrier, either to separate the holy from the mundane, or perhaps to obscure the mysteries that lay beyond? Seen thus, the building can be understood as a kind of portal between the east end of the pavement, dominated by wild oceanic imagery, and the west end, where paradisiacal and Nilotic scenes abound. The horses either side of the building, one galloping towards it and the other saddled up ready to go, help justify this hypothesis by marking the building out as a *mansio*—a stopping point on a journey.

<sup>286</sup> The pewter ampulla is now in the treasury of the Abbey of San Colombano in Bobbio, Italy. The glass chalice is in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington: Weitzmann 1977, 609, fig. 545. For a general discussion on trees of life and the Holy Sepulchre: Underwood 1950, 101-03

<sup>287</sup> The only comparable example from the same period known to the author is in a mosaic pavement from Synagogue A at Beth She’an in Israel, now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, in which a closed curtain covers the doorway of the Ark of the scrolls, thereby separating the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies: Hachlili 2009, pl.11-2.b. Evidence seems to suggest that, in Syrian synagogues, curtains replaced the carved screens previously used to veil the Torah shrine: Gervers 1977, 69

<sup>288</sup> For Syrian churches: Lassus 1947, 177-78, 205-06. See also Dautermann Maguire *et al.* 1989, 45-47

<sup>289</sup> Gervers 1977, 70; Krautheimer 1986, 56, 99, 102, 168, 171, 190 and 216

<sup>290</sup> Gregory of Nazianus states that Valens ‘passed through the curtain, thus coming within Basil’s sight and hearing’; and Theodoret, describing the same episode, writes that ‘Basil invited him to enter the divine curtains where he was seated’: Lassus 1947, 206-07



Fig. 122. Ampulla from the Abbey Museum, Bobbio, Italy. Public Domain



Fig. 123. Glass chalice from Palestine, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum. With permission from Dumbarton Oaks Museum



Fig. 124. Above a door in the south wall of the church at Ras al-Hilal, Cyrenaica. Author

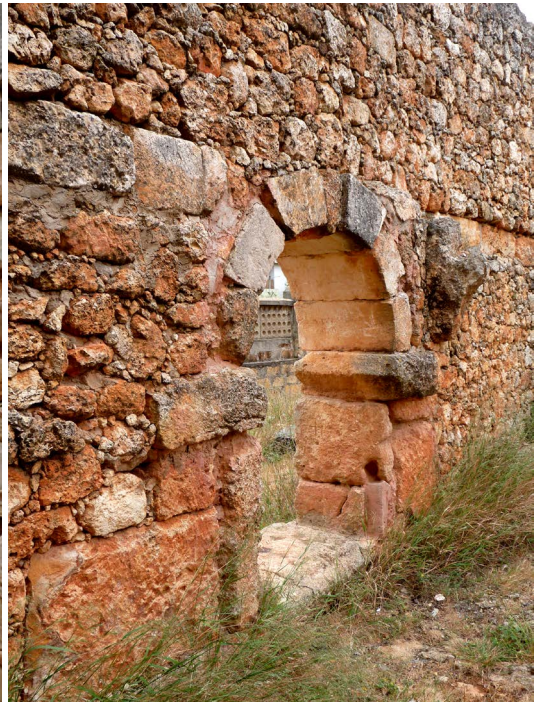


Fig. 125. One remaining support for curtain rod above a door in the east wall in Siret el Giambi Monastery, El Beida, Cyrenaica. Author

### *Polis Nea Theodorias*

An architectural representation, identified by inscription as *Polis Nea Theodorias*, is situated at the west end of the central axis of the pavement (Fig. 126). The building is delineated by rows of black tesserae suggesting block work, architraves, and windows. At the centre, a tall black archway is hung with a white and black speckled curtain tied in a knot. The central gatehouse is flanked on either side by a pair of castellated towers from which branches and stylized trees appear to sprout. It is generally assumed that this townscape represented the settlement in which the mosaic was found, and that the pavement was commissioned to celebrate the rededication of the town to Empress Theodora. There is no evidence, beyond the mosaic itself, to suggest that *Polis Nea Theodorias* received the attention or patronage of either Justinian or Theodora, although this does not rule out the possibility that the town was named in honour of the empress; the inhabitants of Aphrodito in Egypt, for example, desperate to escape the extortionate taxes demanded by the reigning pagarch (powerful local official responsible for organising the collection of taxes), gave their village to the *divina domus* of the Empress Theodora in the hope that she would protect her own tenants.<sup>291</sup> At Qasr el-Lebia, the flanking personifications of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis*, with their red shoes and pearl encrusted jewellery, play into the idea of an imperial foundation, although, as discussed earlier, personifications making offerings to an architectural representation is not a common composition.

### *Castellated Building*

Immediately to the south of the central axis, and just to the east of the pedimented building, is an unidentified castellated structure (Fig. 127). The building is not labelled, it has no distinguishing features, there are no trees in the background and, unusually in this pavement, the panel has no corresponding image. In a composition dominated by flora and fauna from the natural world, this lack of foliage makes it stand out. The generic fort-like structure could have been a reference to the many defensive structures—farms, houses and churches—that punctuated the Cyrenaican countryside to offer protection against frequent attacks by the indigenous Libyans.<sup>292</sup> What seems more likely, however, is that the value of this image was primarily symbolic; this row of five panels



Fig. 126. *Polis Nea Theodorias* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 127. Castellated building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

<sup>291</sup> Jones 1964, 407

<sup>292</sup> Reynolds 1977, 56

is bookended to the south and north by a pair of ostriches, creatures believed to inhabit the edges of the wilderness,<sup>293</sup> and immediately to the west of this row is the point at which the watery imagery surrounding the pavement changes from oceanic to Nilotic (**Fig. 128**). This man-made structure emphasises the fact that, from this point onwards, the untamed wilderness becomes a cultivated, fruitful landscape. It may even have represented one of the forts along the outer boundaries of the empire, like the fort at Thouda near Sidi Okba in Algeria, for example.

When viewed individually, each of the three architectural representations along the central axis of the pavement—the *Pharos*, the pedimented building and *Polis Nea Theodorias*—has its own associations and meanings. When the pavement is viewed as a whole, however, these three buildings take on a new significance; positioned at intervals across the pavement, they become way-markers on a journey from east to west; a journey that starts at the *Pharos*, passes through the veiled entrances of the central building and culminates at the city of *Polis Nea Theodorias* (**Fig. 129**). This journey, and the import of the buildings, is discussed in the next chapter.

### Two-by-Two

A notable feature of the large pavement is the recurrence of pairs of motifs. These corresponding images create heraldic-like compositions, some of which are positioned along the outer edges of the mosaic and work rather like boundary markers or bookends, while others appear to frame, guard, and reinforce the importance of the central axis of the pavement.

### Ostriches

Starting at the east end of the pavement, the first pair of creatures encountered are two ostriches. They are positioned either end of a row of images that includes a peacock, a pair of guinea fowl flanking a pomegranate tree in a fluted chalice-like bowl, and an unidentified fortress-like building (**Fig. 130**).

In the Old Testament, ostriches were believed to live on the edge of the wilderness, a place of wild beasts and demons, and are described as being cruel with no wisdom or understanding.<sup>294</sup> Isidore of Seville



Fig. 128. Plan showing position of castellated building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

<sup>293</sup> For ostriches, see below.

<sup>294</sup> Lamentations 4:3 '...the daughter of my people is become cruel, like the ostriches in the wilderness'. Job 39:14-17, '[the ostrich], which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust, And forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or

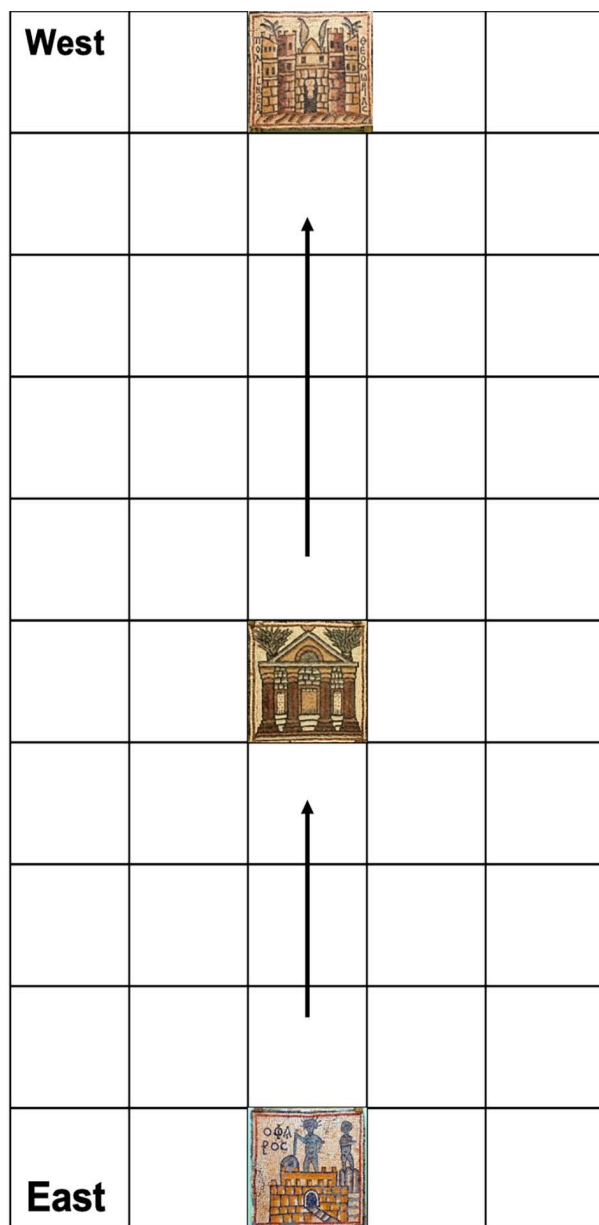


Fig. 129. The three architectural representations on the central axis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

Festival Building at Sepphoris in Israel, two horsemen, one holding a sistrum—an instrument associated specifically with the Nile—gallop towards an architectural representation of Alexandria (see Fig. 66). The mosaic represents the *sēmasia*, the ritual of sending out messengers to announce that the optimum level of flood had been reached in the Nile. A horseman also appears in the Nilotic border of a pavement

gives a similarly negative account, describing the ostrich as having ‘feathers like a bird, but it does not rise above the ground. It neglects to incubate its eggs, but the abandoned eggs are brought to life by the warmth of the earth alone’.<sup>295</sup> However, in the *Physiologus*, the ostrich’s habit of only laying its eggs when the star Virgilia appeared in the constellation of the Pleiades was held up as an example to man to take more heed of signs from God.<sup>296</sup> The belief that ostrich eggs were incubated by the warmth of the sand rather than by a parent, led to the eggs, already prized for their rarity, size and hardness, becoming a symbol of the immaculate conception of Christ and the Virgin birth.<sup>297</sup>

At Qasr el-Lebia the birds are not shown with their eggs and their presence seems to be more consistent with the idea of the ostriches inhabiting, and thus symbolising, lands bordering the wilderness. This interpretation is particularly apposite when the creatures are seen as part of the overall programme of the pavement; not only are they on the edges of the pavement, but they are strategically positioned at the point where the wild ocean at the east end of the pavement morphs into the paradisiacal Nile to the west, and where the disorderly arrangement of imagery becomes organised and symmetrical.

#### Horses

Moving westwards, two horses flank the central east-west axis of the pavement (Fig. 131). One is being ridden and the other is tethered to a tree, saddled up and ready to go. Horsemen are not very common in Late Antique mosaics and when they do appear it is more often than not in the context of a hunting scene. There are exceptions; for example, in the pavement of the so-called Nile

that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones as though they were not her’s: her labour is in vain without fear; Because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding’. See also: Smith 1969, 108

<sup>295</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* XII.vii.20, cited in Barney, *et al.* 2006, 265

<sup>296</sup> Curley 1979, 55; Payne 1990, 69; Williams 2013, 69

<sup>297</sup> In religious paintings ostrich eggs are often hung above the Virgin Mary: Meiss 1954, 94-5; Ragusa 1971, 435, 438



Fig. 130. Ostriches at either end of a row of panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 131. Horses flanking the pedimented building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

in the sixth-century Beth Guvrin chapel at El-Maqerqesh in Israel. He holds aloft an object, either a sistrum or a stalk of corn, suggesting that he too may be associated with the *sēmasia*.<sup>298</sup> Given the wealth of Nilotic references in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, it is possible that the rider and the horse here were also intended to allude to the festival of *sēmasia*, although the positioning of the horses, both facing the pedimented building on the central axis of the pavement, suggest that it was the building that was the focus and that the horses were intended to draw attention to it, perhaps marking it out as a destination or a stopping point on a journey.

### Sheep

Immediately to the west of the horses, two almost identical sheep flank a wreath containing a dedicatory inscription (**Fig. 132**).<sup>299</sup> Sheep had well-established Christian associations in Late Antiquity and were used to represent Christ, the four apostles, the twelve disciples, or the faithful who followed Christ. Here at Qasr el-Lebia, the sheep flanking the inscription honouring Bishop Macarius, would have been a clear indication, even to illiterate viewers, that the contents of the inscription was Christian.<sup>300</sup>

<sup>298</sup> Hachlili 2009, fig. VIII-3

<sup>299</sup> The inscription reads: 'This work too came into being in the time of Macarius the most holy bishop in indiction year 3', transcribed and translated by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 282. Alföldi-Rosenbaum referred to the creatures as zebras: Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 56

<sup>300</sup> A similar arrangement existed in the nave pavement of the Vrina Plain Basilica at Butrint in Albania, dated c. AD 500; near the centre of the pavement an inscription in a *tabula ansata* is flanked by two—possibly originally four—sheep: Mitchell 2019, 337, 341



Fig. 132. Sheep flanking inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 133. Bulls flanking sheep and inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

### Bulls

Flanking the sheep are two bulls, each a different colour but a pair nonetheless (**Fig. 133**). Traditionally associated with sacrifice, bulls were often depicted in synagogues and mithraea, but were not common in ecclesiastical buildings.<sup>301</sup> Exceptions include a mosaic pavement in the western-most section of the nave in the Church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat on Mount Nebo in Jordan, where two bulls flank an altar and are accompanied by Psalm 51:21: ‘Then they shall lay calves upon thy altar’.<sup>302</sup> The same inscription is accompanied by two bulls and two gazelles in front of the altar in the Theotokos Chapel at ‘Ayn al-Kanish, also in Jordan.<sup>303</sup> And in a mosaic from Umm Hartain in Syria two bulls are depicted flanking a chalice atop a pedestal, arguably a depiction of the Eucharistic sacrifice (**Fig. 134**).<sup>304</sup> The bulls at Qasr el-Lebia do not appear to have any sacrificial connotations, rather, together with the two sheep, they provide a sort of honour guard, drawing attention to and augmenting the importance of the dedicatory inscription in the central panel.

<sup>301</sup> For bulls and sacrifice: Rice 1998, 41-61. For the importance of the bull for Mithraism: Adrych *et al.* 2017, esp. 22-37. For the frescoes in the mithraeum at Dura Europos: Kaizer 2016, 134-41. Depictions of bulls in synagogues include, the mosaic pavement at Sepphoris: Hachlili 2009, fig. IV-19.a; the wall paintings in the synagogue at Dura Europos: Hachlili 2009, pl. II-4b

<sup>302</sup> Piccirillo 1997, 164-65, fig. 213

<sup>303</sup> Piccirillo 1997, 151, fig. 200

<sup>304</sup> Donceel-Voûte 1988, 192-93, fig. 168, pl. 11



Fig. 134. Bulls flanking a pedestal, Umm Hartain, Syria. With permission from Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar

### Lions

Between the two pairs of Rivers of Paradise are two lions, one either side of the central axis (**Fig. 135**). Lions guarding doorways or protecting important or sacred objects were common in pagan and Jewish visual culture. For example, the so-called Lion Gate at Mycenae, dated to c.1250 BC, had a lion either side of a column above the main gate into the city,<sup>305</sup> and pairs of lions flanking inscriptions or sacred objects was a common theme in mosaic pavements in synagogues.<sup>306</sup> In Christian iconography pairs of lions retained their protective role, for example, in the sixth-century Basilica D at Byllis in Albania, two lions guarded the entrance to the nave (**Fig. 136**),<sup>307</sup> and in the sixth-century church at Be'er-Shema in Israel, lions flank a cantharus from which an inhabited vine-scroll grows.<sup>308</sup>

However, a single lion in a Christian setting may have carried a rather different meaning. The *Physiologus* recounts how lions sleep with their eyes open, a watchfulness believed to link the creatures with an all-seeing Christ.<sup>309</sup> It also tells of lion cubs being born dead, only coming to life three days later when breathed upon by their sire, an allusion to Christ's resurrection after three days in the tomb, and to the triple immersion of baptism.<sup>310</sup>

<sup>305</sup> Watkin 2005, 22, fig. 23

<sup>306</sup> In the nave pavement of the fifth-century synagogue at Sepphoris, a pair of lions, each holding a bull's head, flank a wreath: Hachlili 2009 fig.11-2; in the nave pavement of the sixth-century synagogue at Beth Alpha two lions protect the Ark of the Scrolls: Hachlili 2009, fig.11-3

<sup>307</sup> Ceka and Muçaj 2005, 60, fig. 60.a

<sup>308</sup> Hachlili 2009, pl.VI-5

<sup>309</sup> Rendell 1928, 5-6

<sup>310</sup> Payne 1990, 19



Fig. 135. Lions flanking the eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

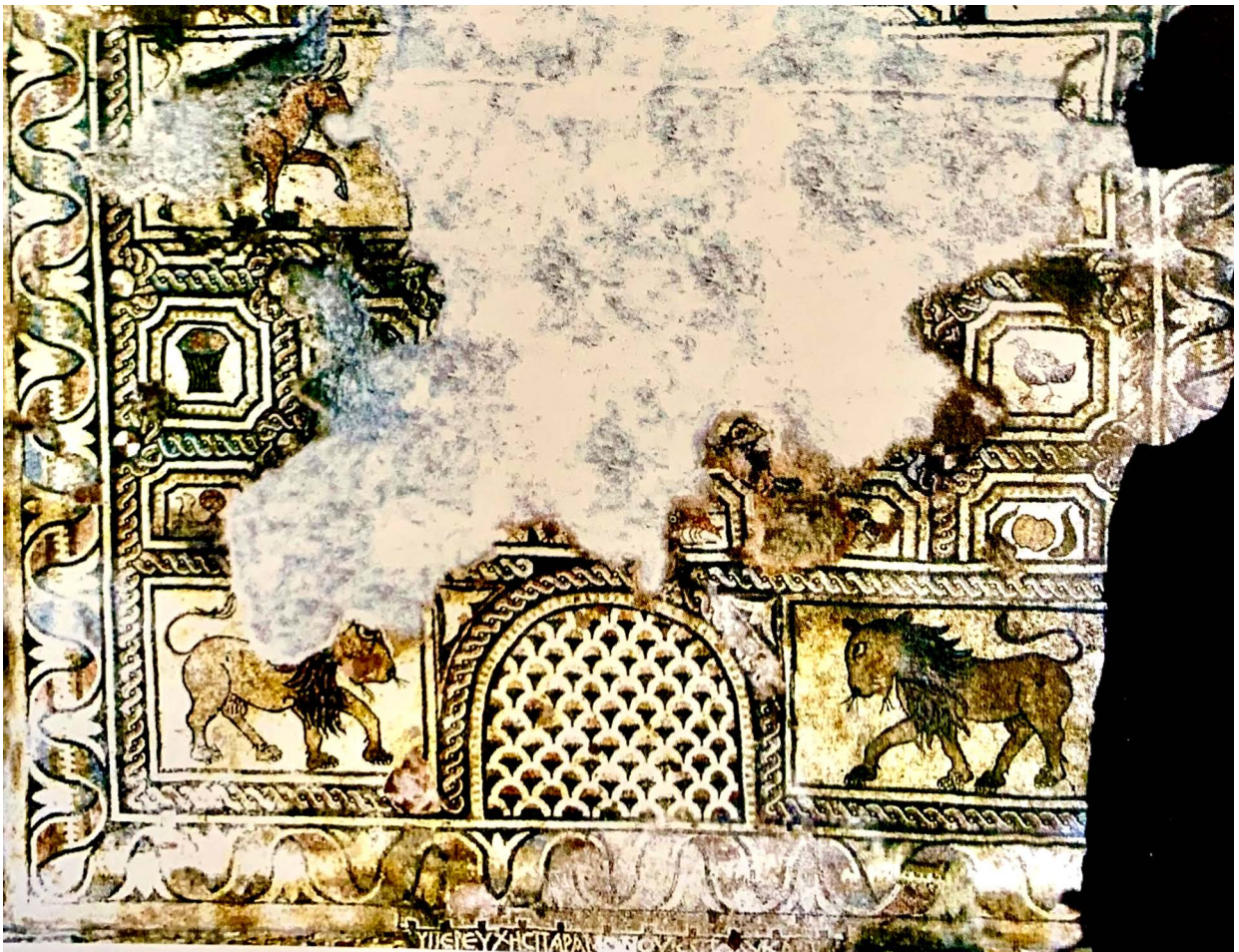


Fig. 136. Mosaic in Basilica D in Byllis, Albania Byllis. With permission from Neritan Ceka

At Qasr el-Lebia the lions are in the tableau of nine panels and they are surrounded by named personifications. It would be easy to dismiss them as inconsequential—as space-fillers even—but their presence is important. The fearsome appearance of the lions, teeth bared and tongues protruding, suggests that they were intended to guard the eagle and its prey—the panel around which, arguably, the whole programme of imagery revolved. More than this though, they were associated with both the resurrection of Christ and salvation by baptism, adding a further layer of meaning to the underlying baptismal and soteriological meaning of this group of panels.



Fig. 137. Stags flanking the lions and the eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

### Stags

Either side of the lions two near-identical stags face the centre of the pavement; one is grazing and the other holds a snake in its mouth (**Fig. 137**). The stag, with reference to Psalm 42: ‘As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God’, was regularly used as a symbol of the neophyte who attains eternal life through baptism.<sup>311</sup> Images of stags with serpents in their mouths were far less common. There is a second stag with a snake in its mouth at Qasr el-Lebia, depicted in the pavement in the northeast annex (**Fig. 138**), and comparable depictions have also been found in the pavement of the sixth-century Central Church at Cyrene.<sup>312</sup> Outside of Cyrenaica, examples have been found in a fifth- or sixth-century pavement in the baptistery at Henchir Messaouda, Tunisia,<sup>313</sup> and in a sixth-century pavement from a basilica at Apamea in Syria.<sup>314</sup> In non-ecclesiastical settings, a stag with a snake appears on the pavement of the sixth-century Great Palace mosaic in Constantinople (**Fig. 139**), and on a fourth-century silver plate from the Mildenhall hoard.<sup>315</sup> The *Physiologus* describes stags extricating serpents—their arch enemies—from crevices by applying their nostrils to cracks in the rocks and drawing the serpents out with their breath,<sup>316</sup> and also by spitting water into the cracks to flush them out—an action that has prompted comparisons between the stag and ‘our Lord, who slew the great serpent (the devil) with the heavenly waters of virtuous knowledge’.<sup>317</sup> Swallowing a serpent was believed to induce a great thirst and, in order to quench that thirst and rid its body of the venom, stags were forced to seek out water and drink copiously; the water and ingested impurities were regurgitated and the stag was purified. At the same time the animal shed its large, heavy horns leaving it with renewed strength and vigour, an action likened to a sinner turning to Christ to shed the weight of worldly sins. The theme of a stag devouring a snake first appeared in the works of early

<sup>311</sup> Puech 1949, 30-52; Hanfmann 1980, 83

<sup>312</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, pls 41. 2-3

<sup>313</sup> Hanfmann 1980, 83, fig. 16

<sup>314</sup> Seen by the author in the Museum at Apamea in 2011. The original location of the mosaic in the basilica is unknown.

<sup>315</sup> For Great Palace mosaic: Yücel 2010, 35. The Mildenhall plate is now in the British Museum: BM 1946,1007.2

<sup>316</sup> Ettinghausen 1955, 272

<sup>317</sup> Curley 1979, 58-60; Rendell 1928, 28; Sbordone *et al.* 1936, 97-9

#### 4. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS



Fig. 138. Stag with a snake in its mouth in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 139. Stag with snake in the Great Palace Mosaic, Istanbul. Author

scientific writers,<sup>318</sup> and it has been suggested that the motif migrated directly from the illustrations of pseudoscientific animal lore to Christian art where it became ‘a new visual symbol for one of the sacraments of the Christian religion’.<sup>319</sup>

At Qasr el-Lebia this double register of flanking animals—lions and stags—serves to focus attention on the eagle with its prey. In addition, both creatures have baptismal and christological associations that further emphasise the soteriological importance of the scene at their centre.

#### Gazelles

Another two creatures with antlers, possibly gazelles, occupy the two corner panels at the west end of the pavement (**Fig. 140**). One animal is standing in front of a pomegranate tree and the other is kneeling in front of a pear tree. Both have bells around their necks. On a very general level, and perhaps reflecting real life, bells around the necks of animals have been taken as a sign of domestication, but bells also carried symbolic meanings.<sup>320</sup> On the one hand, they were associated with cosmic harmony, with the music of the spheres, and with the divine order of creation—an interpretation that may have extended to encompass the Word of God and the harmony of the Gospels.<sup>321</sup> On the other hand, in Late Antiquity, small bronze bells—*tintinnabula*—were believed to offer protection against the Evil Eye; they were hung above cradles, suspended from doorways, placed in graves, worn on chains around the neck and were generally considered to be part of everyday life.<sup>322</sup> The gazelles with the bells at Qasr el-Lebia were strategically positioned in the western-most corners of the pavement and may therefore have

<sup>318</sup> For example, Lucretius, (c.99-55 BC) *De Rerum Natura*, book VI, 765-766 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0131%3Abook%3D6> accessed 15 April 2023; Pliny the Elder, (c. AD 23-79) *Natural History*, book VIII, 118 [http://attalus.org/translate/pliny\\_hn8b.html](http://attalus.org/translate/pliny_hn8b.html) accessed 15 April 2023; Martial, (c.AD 38-102) *Epigrams*, book XII, 29 [https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial\\_epigrams\\_book12.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/martial_epigrams_book12.htm) accessed 15 April 2023; Aelian, (c.AD 175-235) *De Natura Animalium*, II.9 <https://topostext.org/work/560> accessed 15 April 2023

<sup>319</sup> Hanfmann 1980, 83-84

<sup>320</sup> For example, a hart in the Theotokos Chapel on Mount Nebo in Jordan has been categorised as a domesticated animal on account of the bell it wears: Saller 1941, 233; for images: Piccirillo 1997, figs 173, 200

<sup>321</sup> Braun 2002, 196; Nock and Beazley 1946, 143; Underwood 1950, esp. 125

<sup>322</sup> Russell 2008, 42; Talloen 2011, 597



Fig. 140. Gazelles flanking *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Polis Nea Theodorias* in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

been intended as apotropaic devices to protect *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Polis Nea Theodorias*, or even, as will be discussed in the next chapter, those traversing the pavement.

### Anomalies

Before concluding this section, there are two anomalies that should be addressed. Firstly, all the panels running along the north and south sides of the pavement either fall into the Nile/ocean categories or, like the ostriches, bulls and stags, have corresponding images on the opposite side of the pavement, apart from one—the bear (**Fig. 141**). Bears were not common in early Christian iconography and when they did appear it was usually as part of a hunting scene. There are a few stand-alone examples in ecclesiastical settings, including what appears to be the hind leg of a bear in a fifth-century nave pavement in the Vrina Plain basilica at Butrint in Albania,<sup>323</sup> a running bear in an octagonal panel in a sixth-century pavement in the chapel of Beth Guvrin at el-Maqrqesh in Israel,<sup>324</sup> and a leaping bear—one of four animals—at the centre of the atrium in Basilica A at Peyia on Cyprus.<sup>325</sup> At Qasr el-Lebia the bear is depicted rearing up on its hind legs, perhaps because this was the easiest way to portray the animal in a square panel, but it may have been because, as Isidore of Seville noted in his *Etymologies*, a bear's strength was believed to be in its forepaws and loins when it stood erect. He also recorded that the bear, *ursus*, was so-named because its offspring were born unformed and were shaped in the mother's mouth (*ore suo*).<sup>326</sup> The mother licking her amorphous cubs into shape has been likened to God bringing order from chaos.<sup>327</sup> There are, however, no bear cubs depicted at Qasr el-Lebia and the purpose of the bear in the scheme remains



Fig. 141. Bear in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

<sup>323</sup> Mitchell 2019, 342-43, pl. 11.6

<sup>324</sup> Hachlili 2009, fig. VIII-3

<sup>325</sup> Michaelides 1987, 48, fig. 56

<sup>326</sup> Barney *et al.* 2006, 252-53

<sup>327</sup> Clark and McMunn 1989, 16

#### 4. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS



Fig. 142. Mismatched 'pair' of animals in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

unclear. Perhaps, given that the bear is standing erect—in a position of strength—it was simply intended as an apotropaic motif.

The second anomaly is a pair of creatures, a bull and a ram, standing head-to-head towards the east end of the pavement (**Fig. 142**). Even though the animals are two different species, at first glance they appear to belong with the pairs of animals discussed above. However, in this case, the animals do not flank the central axis of the pavement, there is no focal image between them, and they break with the ordered symmetry created by the other pairs of motifs. It has been argued that the placement of these two panels was an error by the mosaicists and that the bull and the ram were originally intended to flank the basket with four birds adjacent to the bull; a rearrangement that would bring the composition in line with the symmetrical layout of the imagery further west.<sup>328</sup> However, to postulate a displacement of the imagery, apart from involving a huge and unsubstantiated assumption, is to miss the possibility that the anomaly was a calculated adjustment intended to further highlight a separation between the ordered symmetry in the paradisiacal west and the chaotic disarray in the wilderness of the east end of the pavement. Traditionally, both the bull and the ram were associated with pagan sacrifices and the festoons being pulled from the basket by the birds in the adjacent panel were commonly used to adorn sacrificial altars. Given their disorderly arrangement and the fact that they are located among sea-monsters at the east end of the pavement, perhaps these three panels were intended to evoke a pagan past in which sacrifice was the norm.

<sup>328</sup> Engemann 1997, 154; Stucchi 1975, 400. Guarducci has suggested that no less than fifteen panels in the pavement should be re-arranged: Guarducci 1975

## 5. Overall Programme

Previous chapters have concentrated on either single motifs or small groups of images. This chapter pulls together all the individual elements and, rather than dealing with the panels as flat two-dimensional images—like pictures in a book or paintings on a wall—it considers the pavement from the viewpoint of those treading on and moving over the imagery. It explores the phenomenological responses this interaction may have elicited.

To try to understand how mosaic pavements might have been experienced in Late Antiquity, a shift in perception is required. Today, it is common for mosaics to be studied rather like historical documents; they are analysed for what they can tell us about the beliefs and customs of those who commissioned, made, and viewed the pavements. Extracts of mosaics are reproduced in books, often with little information about their original context and no idea of scale. To allow modern viewers to marvel at the brilliance of the mosaics and fully appreciate the artistry of the craftsmen who produced them, fragments of pavements hang on the walls of museums as though they are paintings to be viewed straight on and in isolation. Even when pavements have been left *in situ*, viewing is often problematic; either they are roped off from the public, allowing only distant glimpses, or, when funds allow, raised walkways afford uninterrupted views across whole series of rooms as though no walls or doorways separated the spaces, and no furniture—or indeed occupants—obscured any part of the pavement. In Late Antiquity, however, the way the same mosaics were experienced and understood would have been quite different. With only a few exceptions, in *triclinia*, for example, pavements were generally looked down on, obstacles impeded complete views, and images and themes were only fully revealed as they passed fleetingly beneath one's feet. In other words, someone walking over a mosaic pavement was afforded only a sequential disclosure of the imagery and it is unlikely that individual elements would have been seen as discrete, stand-alone images, but rather as constituent parts of a whole.

Patterns and images passing swiftly underfoot may have been somewhat disorientating,<sup>1</sup> but it is also possible that they gave impetus to those moving across them. John Clarke has argued, for example, that people walking over figural mosaics would have followed 'compositional clues with the body rather than with the eyes alone', and that this kinaesthetic reaction to the directional movement of figures beneath their feet may have caused them to take a specific route or modify their course.<sup>2</sup> It may also have prompted them to pause at a predetermined spot or to react to their surroundings in a certain way. Non-figural mosaics may not have been as conspicuously directional, but geometric mosaics would also have elicited a physical reaction from viewers; they divided rooms, demarcated spaces, and framed focal points, subtly guiding, informing and protecting viewers as they moved across the floor, inhabiting the unoccupied fields of mosaics and bringing them to life.

At Qasr el-Lebia all the images were orientated to be viewed as one moved from east to west. The repetitive and continuous border of interlocking roundels tied the individual panels together, indicating that, rather than being read as a series of discrete images, the pavement should be understood as a coherent whole, and 'compositional clues' signposted visitors to the central axis, encouraging them to view their passage across the pavement as a type of journey. This discussion begins in the northeast corner of the room, at the only securely identified doorway into this part of the building, and follows a route, dictated by the mosaics, from east to west.

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<sup>1</sup> Swift 2009, 26

<sup>2</sup> Clarke 1979, 20-21

## The Journey: Wilderness to Paradise

### Wilderness

Visitors entered this part of the complex from a small annex to the east of the room paved with the large mosaic. Stepping directly onto a monstrous fish straining to escape the confines of its panel they found themselves in an unsettling, liminal space in which they were metaphorically treading water (Fig. 143). Thresholds in ecclesiastical buildings were often protected with mosaic ‘doormats’ of apotropaic motifs that offered assurance to newcomers. For example, the entrance to the north aisle at Sabratha in Libya was protected by peltae (Fig. 144),<sup>3</sup> and the south aisle of Basilica A at Amphipolis in Greece had a complicated knot motif at its entrance (Fig. 145). The large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia had no such devices to protect and reassure visitors, neither were newcomers enticed across the threshold by a display of paradisiacal imagery, rather, this part of the pavement was encompassed by oceanic imagery and inhabited by strange, threatening creatures. Adding to a sense of disorientation, the room was entered asymmetrically, the off-centre doorway challenging visitors to seek out a way forward (Fig. 146).



Fig. 143. Large fish at entrance to east end of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 144. Entrance to north aisle, Sabratha, Libya. Author



Fig. 145. Threshold to south aisle, Basilica A, Amphipolis, Greece. Author

To move straight ahead would have meant stepping into the domain of a terrifying sea-monster. Together with its counterpart, immediately to the south of the *Pharos*, these two creatures evoked the predatory and deadly *Scylla* and *Charybdis*, a two-fold malevolent presence threatening the safety of all who entered (Fig. 147). However, although the imagery surrounding the doorway appeared hostile, it also contained clues to help newcomers on their way. The monstrous fish in the doorway had its head twisted upwards as though to indicate the way forward, and immediately to the south of the entrance a

<sup>3</sup> Chick in Miles and Greenslade 2020, 145

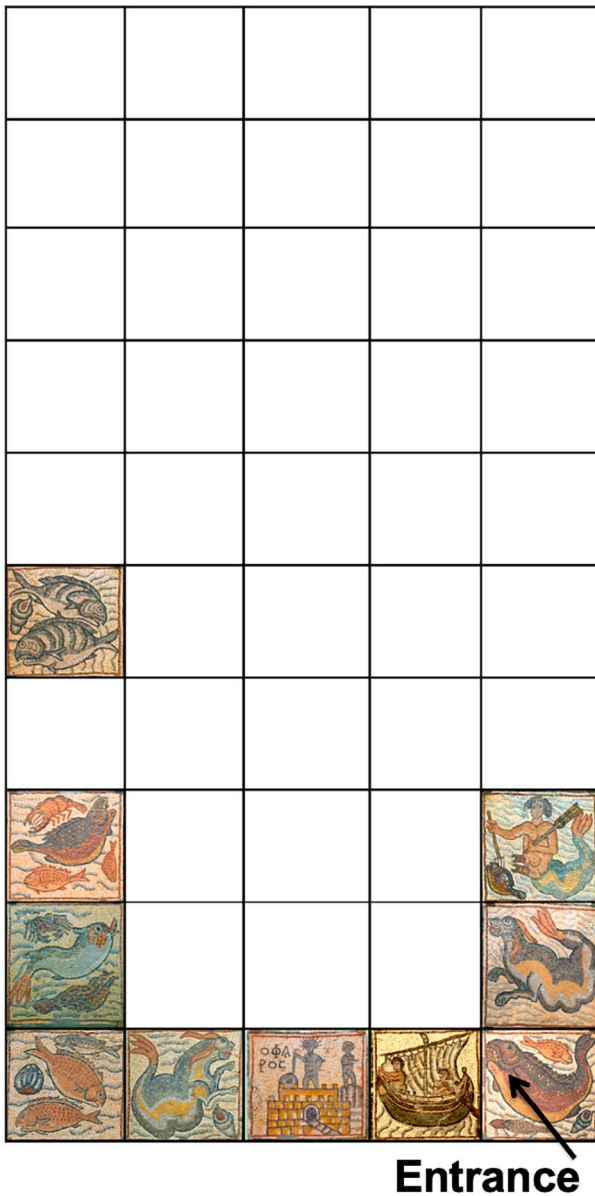


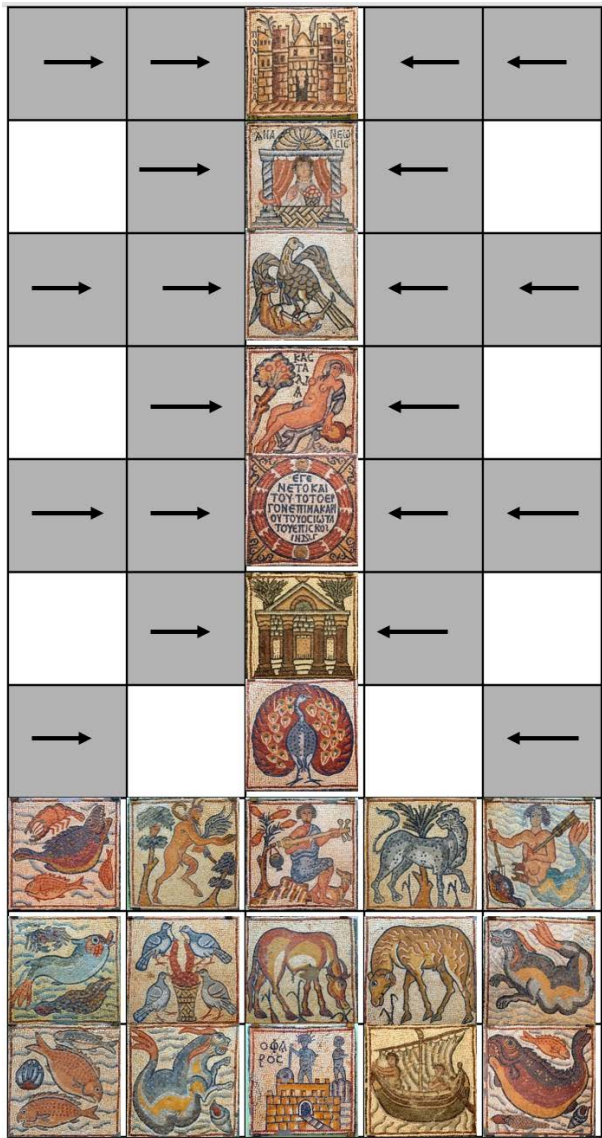
Fig. 146. Doorway into the space paved by the large mosaic, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 147. Panels by the entrance to the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

boat, manned by the only human figures in this part of the pavement, encouraged visitors to hop aboard and travel with them towards the guiding light of the *Pharos*—a reassuring landmark amid the chaos (Fig. 146). This marked the start of a journey, pre-determined but as yet undisclosed.

Arriving at the *Pharos*, visitors found themselves at the east end of the central east-west axis of the pavement. Further west this row of panels becomes a clearly defined route flanked by symmetrical figures, but here, in the oceanic wilderness, the idea of a pathway was still no more than a suggestion. Deterred from proceeding further southwards by the ferocious looking sea-monster, and with a wall behind them, visitors would have moved forwards, encountering a bull, a ram and four birds pulling flower festoons from a basket. The symmetry that would emerge as one progressed across the mosaic was not yet evident and in these disorderly and hostile surroundings the bull, the ram and the festoons may



have brought to mind pre-Christian sacrificial rites, further adding to a sense of foreboding or disquiet (Fig. 148).

Progressing westwards, one next encountered a musician flanked by a satyr and a leopard. The figure has been variously interpreted as Orpheus, as Christ the Good Shepherd and as an Orpheus-Christus figure, but his companions also allow him to reference the transformative and regenerative qualities of Dionysos; all of these characters were well-known psychopomps. The stringed instrument played by the musician can be seen to allude to the harmony of the spheres, the musical gifts of the Muses, or the concord of the gospels, all of which had the power to help listeners transcend the limits of the mortal world. Guided by the musician and the sound emanating from his instrument, visitors were guided out of the chaotic wilderness at the east end of the pavement and away from a world inhabited by satyrs, leopards and fantastical beasts. They moved towards a more orderly, structured landscape, one in which the Nilotic imagery suggested fruitfulness and fecundity and the Rivers of Paradise dominated.

Fig. 148. Arrows marking the symmetry that emerges further west in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.  
Author

### Paradise

Positioned immediately to the west of the musician—and substantiating the idea that the musician should be understood as a psychopomp intended to facilitate a transition from an earthly to a heavenly realm—was a peacock, well-known symbol of apotheosis, renewal and everlasting life. Tail fully extended, the ocelli mirroring the stars in the vault of heaven, the peacock—one of only two circular motifs in the pavement—stood out as a beacon of hope and a promise of what lay ahead (**Fig. 149**). This row of panels was bookended by a pair of ostriches, creatures believed to have lived on the very edges of the wilderness, and here they can be understood to mark a liminal space between the oceanic wilderness at the east end of the pavement and the Nilotic paradise to the west. Adjacent to the ostrich on the south side of the pavement was an image of a fortified structure. Unlike the other architectural representations in the pavement, this building was neither positioned on the central axis nor was it identified by inscription. Given its proximity to the ostrich, the man-made structure may have been another indication that the uninhabited wasteland had been left behind. The panel abutting the ostrich at the north side of the pavement contained two gallinaceous birds, possibly guinea fowl, flanking a pomegranate plant growing from a cantharus, a motif overflowing with references to fruitfulness, the good life and Paradise.

Beyond the peacock—and sandwiched between the only two round motifs in the pavement—was a depiction of an imposing pedimented building. Notably, and unusually for images of buildings at this time, closed curtains covered the doorways. If the musician and peacock heralded a transition from the mundane to the sacred, this building, its doorways veiled as though to obscure and protect the mysteries beyond, can be understood as a portal through which those progressing from east to west had to pass. The horses either side of the building, one being ridden and the other saddled up ready to go, added to the idea of a journey being undertaken. It was also at this point on the pavement that the waters converged—an oceanic scene at one end of the row of panels, a Nilotic at the other (**Fig. 150**). The building then, was at a pivotal juncture in the pavement; it was where the ocean gave way to the Nile, where wilderness became Paradise and where the mundane changed to spiritual. This was the start of the next leg of the journey.

From this point westwards the watery images dispersed around the edge of the pavement are unmistakably Nilotic and, together with the fruit trees behind the gazelles in the westernmost corner panels, imbued this part of the pavement with a sense of abundance and wellbeing (**Fig. 151**). Pairs of

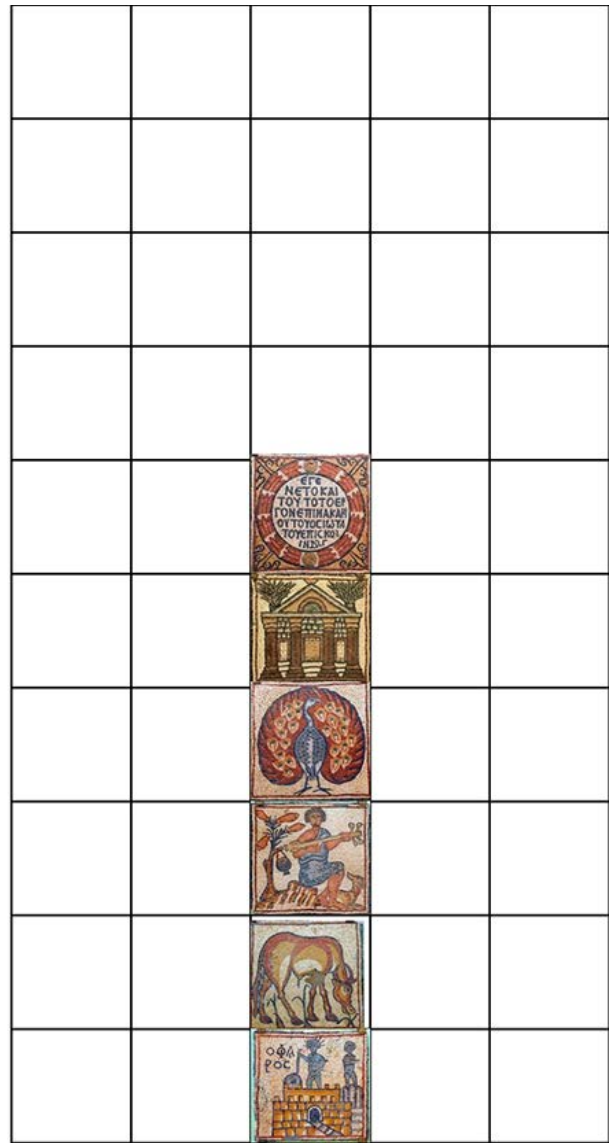


Fig. 149. Peacock and wreath on the central axis of the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

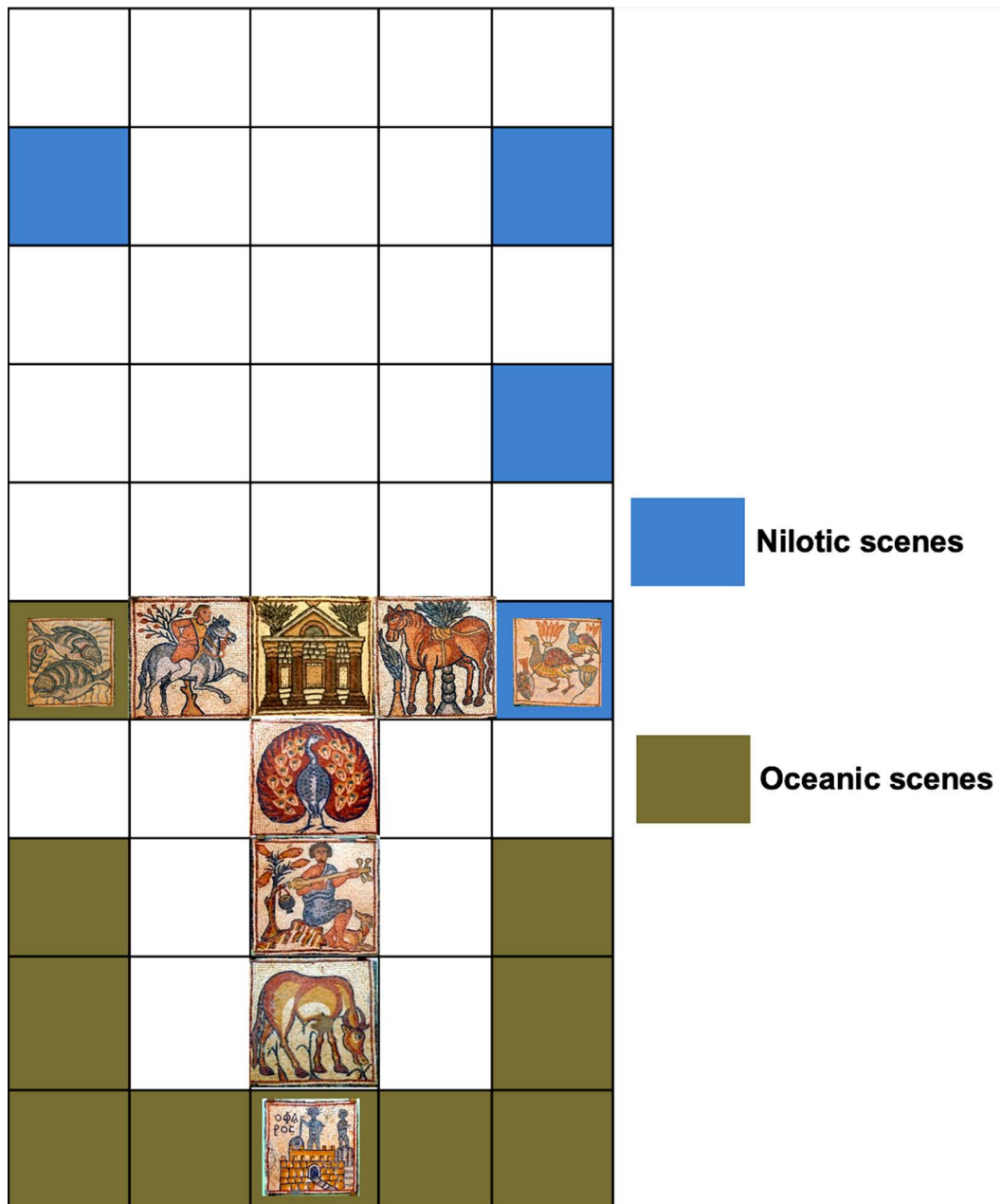


Fig. 150. Pedimented building marking the change from Ocean to Nile in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

corresponding figures were disposed in strict symmetry bringing a sense of order to the composition that would have inspired those journeying across the pavement to move forward with confidence. From here the central axis became a pathway lined with affronted beasts and personifications, the sentinel-like figures forming a kind of honour guard accentuating and acclaiming the images between them (**Fig. 152**). Those processing along the route, which could be seen as a type of Via Sacra, may have imagined that they were being acclaimed by the flanking figures and that they were the intended recipients of the proffered gifts.



Fig. 151. Nilotic and Paradisiacal imagery in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

This part of the journey began on a wreath containing a dedicatory inscription to ‘Macarius the most holy bishop’,<sup>4</sup> flanked by two sheep, animals often associated with Christ and his followers (see Fig. 132). This unambiguous Christian reference informed viewers that what lay ahead was sanctioned by the bishop and should therefore be understood within an essentially Christian framework. This was an important point as the vocabulary that followed was not entirely unproblematic and included pagan notes and unexpected undertones.

From the dedicatory inscription visitors moved onto a tableau of nine panels defined by personifications of the four Rivers of Paradise, one in each corner (Fig. 153). Although saturated with baptismal references, this group of images also referred back to a pagan past and, in keeping with the Late Antique partiality for puzzles and hidden meanings, harboured a rich interpretative potential. Visitors stepped from the wreath onto a personification of Kastalia reclining nonchalantly—lasciviously even—on an overflowing urn. The Castalian spring was universally associated with Apollo and a pagan tradition and this naked figure, disposed in the manner of a pagan river god, would undoubtedly have brought to mind the purifying waters and lustration rites of a pagan past. Was her presence intended as a final hurdle—a temptation to be overcome before one attained eternal salvation and Paradise? Or was it the case that seen here, in this ersatz Garden of Eden, the figure took on a more nuanced meaning, the water flowing from her urn alluding to the holy purifying water of baptism?

Immediately beyond Kastalia at the centre of the tableau—and arguably at the heart of the whole programme—was a depiction of an eagle rending its prey. A well-known symbol of regeneration and resurrection, the eagle was commonly associated with Christian baptism and rebirth. Here, however, the presence of the eagle’s prey changed that symbolism and the scene took on new meaning. If the eagle is understood to represent Christian congregations gathering at the body of Christ, the gazelle or antelope in its grasp becomes the body of Christ and the blood flowing from the wounds in its sides could be seen to be referencing the *fons vitae aeternae*. Together, the eagle and its prey presented a nexus of the sacramental events of Christian salvation made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Reinforcing the importance of the scene, a double rank of animals flanked the panel; two lions,

<sup>4</sup> ‘This work too came into being in the time of Macarius the most holy bishop in indiction year 3’, transcribed and translated by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 282

## 5. OVERALL PROGRAMME



Fig. 152. Honour guard flanking the central axis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

associated by legend with the resurrection of Christ, fiercely guarded the panel between them, and either side of the lions two stags, one with a snake in its mouth, made reference to Psalm 42.

Beyond the eagle a personification of *Ananeosis* (renewal) presided over the tableau of nine panels. Forward facing, basket of festoons in hand, she appears to await the arrival of those making the spiritual journey across the pavement. *Ananeosis* was not a personification with well-known Christian significance, but here, surrounded by baptismal and eucharistic references and seated in an aedicule-like structure, the elements of which draw on high-status church furnishings, she can be understood in a specifically Christian sense; as exemplifying the Christian concept of renewal through baptism.

Moving over this tableau of images would have elicited many different responses, but how might visitors have reacted to the nudity underfoot? Stepping

onto a naked *Kastalia* may have caused some to stop in their tracks and question, not only why they were encountering a personification of Apollo's oracular spring, but also what place a bare-breasted female, and indeed the four naked river personifications, had in this Christian building. If, as is suggested in one of the hypotheses that follow, the mosaic paved a space entered by neophytes after going through the initiatory rites of baptism, these naked figures would have been particularly poignant. Metaphorically paddling in the purifying waters of the Castalian spring, the neophytes were poised at the edge of the panel containing the eagle rending its prey, an image protected and potentiated by the guarding lions. As they progressed across the tableau, participants were offered gifts by the Rivers of Paradise whose nudity suggested a bond with the newly baptised. Ahead, a basket of flower festoons or garlands at the ready, *Ananeosis*, awaited them. Now fully cognisant of the message unfolding beneath their feet and completely subsumed in the drama of the pavement, it was those traversing the pavement who took on the role of protagonist, inhabiting and breathing life into the scene laid out before them.

Leaving the tableau of nine panels, visitors arrived at the gates of *Polis Nea Theodorias*. The city was flanked by personifications of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis*, invested with authority by the *mappa* she holds,



Fig. 153. Tableau of nine panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

proffering a twisted wreath (Fig. 154). Here too, anyone inhabiting the space between the two figures is likely to have understood these offerings as personal tributes; rewards, perhaps, for having negotiated the spiritual journey thus far. It is notable, however, that the architectural representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias* appears to represent an actual city—rather than a spiritual or heavenly city—and that *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* are not naked but dressed in attire that appears to mimic that worn by elite women in the imperial court. These subtle changes engender the sense that one has left an ethereal or paradisiacal sphere and returned to an earthly realm—that the spiritual transformation is complete and they now need to move forward in the real world.

The pavement mapped out a definitive route across the floor and even though the goal was non-negotiable, interpretation along the way remained fluid. It could have been understood to chart a physical

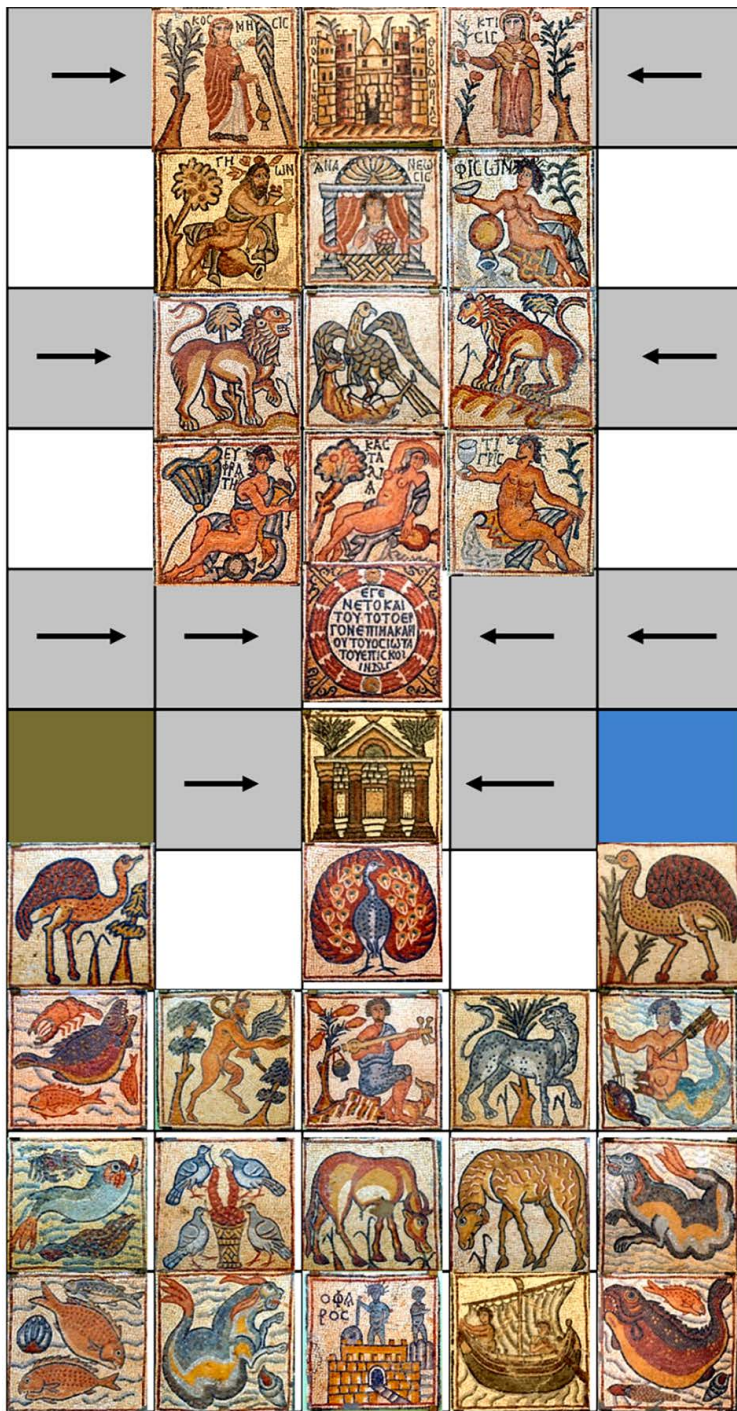


Fig. 154. Arriving at Polis Nea Theodorias, flanked by *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis*. The large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

journey from Alexandria in the east to Cyrenaica in the west, for which the representations of the *Pharos* and *Polis Nea Theodorias* provided a degree of verisimilitude. Or perhaps the accents along the way allowed the short transfer from east to west to become ‘a microcosm of the long journey of pilgrimage itself’.<sup>5</sup> Above all, however, the passage across the pavement can be seen to represent an axis of regeneration, with a progressively coherent pictorial and theological programme unfolding as one moved from east to west. It constituted a simulacrum of a spiritual journey—an exegesis of the life journey of a believer—setting out the transition from an ephemeral temporal world to the abiding heavenly realm, mediated by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Perhaps in the same way that the contemporaneous apse mosaic at Sinai has been seen to represent ‘a spiritual journey which those viewers could be reasonably expected to see themselves making’,<sup>6</sup> the spiritual journey implicit in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia presented, albeit in an elaborately codified form, a journey fundamental to the faith-life of wider Christendom.

<sup>5</sup> Brown 1981, 87

<sup>6</sup> Elsner 1995, 88,

## 6. Architectural Setting and Hypotheses

### Architectural Setting

Previous studies have, without exception, assumed that the space paved by the large mosaic pavement at Qasr el-Lebia was part of the nave of the church.<sup>1</sup> However, several factors argue against this assumption, and it is worth considering whether the mosaic paved a separate space and, that being the case, what the function of that space might have been.

Even though the protective structure and viewing platform built over the pavement shortly after the mosaic was discovered have destroyed much of the archaeology, it appears that a wall or screen of some kind may have separated the area paved by the mosaic from the nave (here taken to mean the space to the west of the large pavement, originally paved with a mixture of large marble slabs and smaller offcuts) (Fig. 155).<sup>2</sup> A partition or screen at this location would have aligned with a wall that divided the north aisle from a small annex at its east end, and with what appear to be the fragmentary remains of a wall that would have been at the west end of the south aisle (although the aisle has been lost due to subsidence). To postulate a division at this point may help to explain several anomalies in the building.

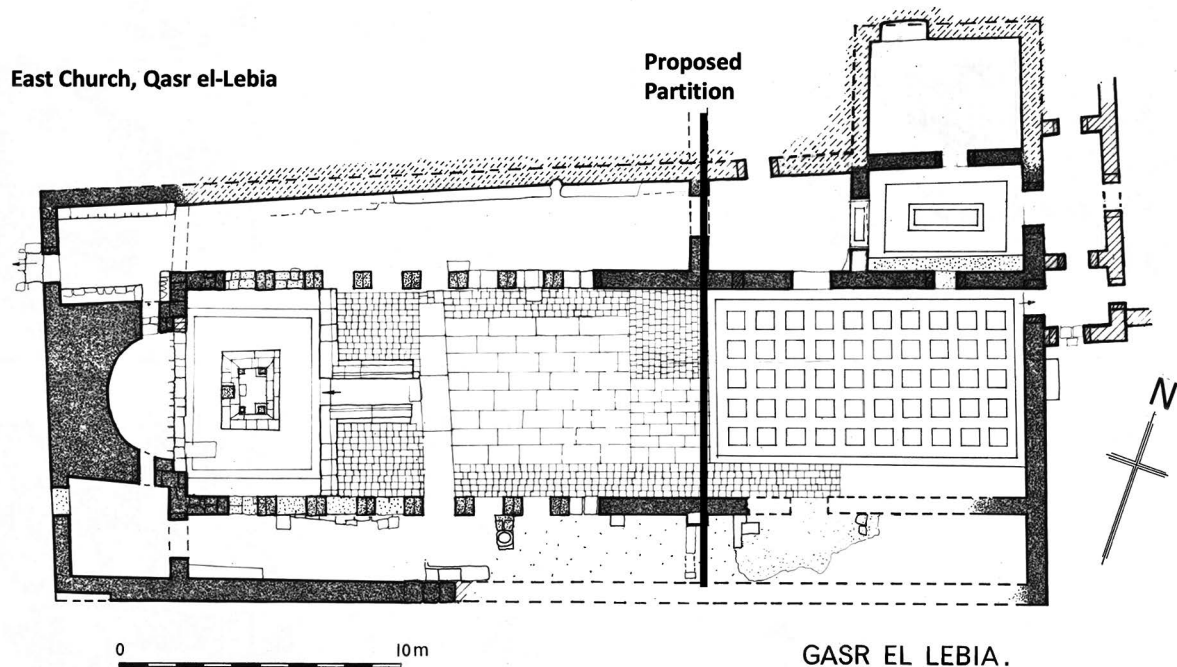


Fig. 155. Plan of the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia showing the proposed partition. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author

<sup>1</sup> Agosti 2003, 541; Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 121; Grabar 1962, 115; Maguire 1987, 44; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 286

<sup>2</sup> Archaeological evidence suggests that there may have been similar divisions in both the East Church at Apollonia and the East Church at Taucheira: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 38, 204. A fortified building at Zawiet el Argub, which may have been a church, also had a partition across what would have been the nave: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 374. It is not clear whether these partitions continued unbroken across the naves or whether they constituted substantial walls or simple screens. Neither is it clear whether, like at Qasr el-Lebia, the flooring was different on either side of the division.



Fig. 156. Strip of vine scroll mosaic to the west of the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

If there had been nothing dividing the two areas, the nave would have had a rather singular layout. At the west end of the elongated nave, piers, constructed from double orthostats, separated it from the flanking aisles, but about halfway along, the piers gave way to solid walls, which may or may not have had openings to the north and south. There was a marked change in flooring either side of the proposed partition; mosaic to the east and a mixture of large marble slabs and smaller marble tiles to the west.<sup>3</sup> A strip of mosaic depicting an inhabited vine-scroll abuts the western edge of the large mosaic pavement, but unlike the large pavement, it is orientated to be seen from the west rather than from the east, possibly indicating a change of focus (**Fig. 156**). It is also notable that the central east-west axis of the large mosaic pavement does not line up with the centre of the western apse, but the cantharus in the middle of the strip of vine-scroll does.<sup>4</sup> Another anomaly that would make more sense if there had been a partition at this point in the building is the long narrow corridor-like space that runs between the large pavement and the wall to the south. This space, the west end of which was still paved with small

<sup>3</sup> The large slabs had already been robbed at the time of excavation but were evident from the imprints they had left in the ground: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 277

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, cutting out and lifting the 50 panels would have caused a certain amount of disruption to the surrounding tesserae, but the orientation and position of the vine-scroll mosaic does not appear to have been affected.

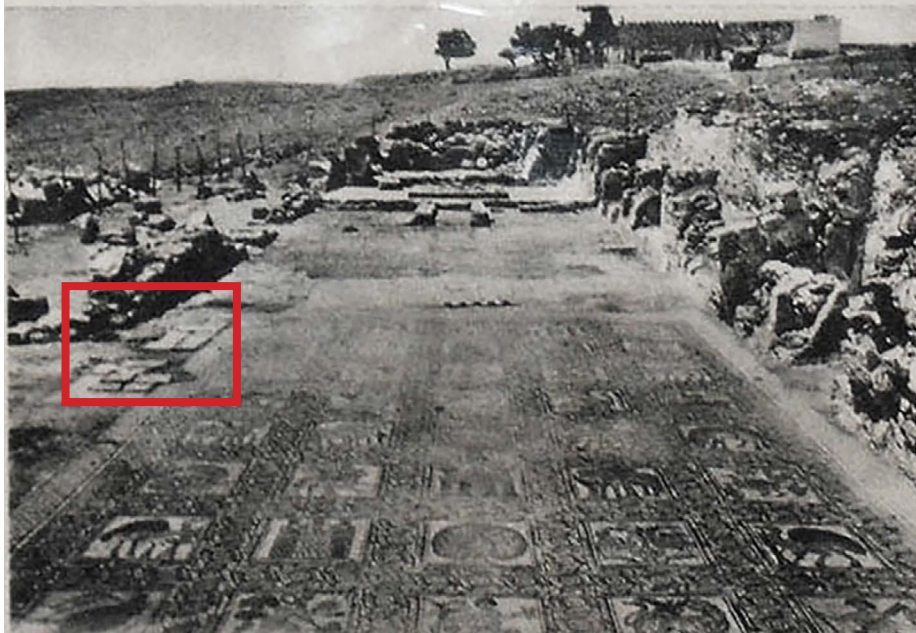


Fig. 157. Photograph of showing the small marble tiles. From the Illustrated London News, December 1957

marble tiles when the site was excavated, means that the large pavement is not central to the west end of the church.

Without further excavation it is only possible to surmise, but it seems likely that the large pavement was in a self-contained space that was entered through a door in the northeast corner. To the east of this entrance are further, unexcavated, rooms which could have been accessed from the annex at the east end of the north aisle. Sondages made to the east of these rooms when the site was excavated revealed evidence of further polychrome mosaics.<sup>5</sup> Given the iconographic themes, the episcopal inscriptions, and the position and layout of the mosaic, there seem to be two hypotheses worth exploring: the large pavement as part of an episcopal complex, and the large pavement as part of a baptismal complex.

### **Hypothesis 1: The Large Mosaic as the Pavement of part of an Episcopium**

The corridor-like space to the south of the large pavement may offer a clue as to how this part of the complex functioned. The space was just over a metre wide at the west end, tapering very slightly to just under a metre at the east end. When the complex was excavated small marble tiles still paved the west end of the corridor (**Fig. 157**). If this space had been intended as a corridor, one might expect it to lead somewhere but there is no evidence of a doorway in the wall at the east end of the room. However, the dimensions of the space do roughly correspond with the width of staircases recorded in churches at Ras al-Hilal, Cyrene, Taucheira and Ptolemais.<sup>6</sup> It is feasible then, that this space accommodated a staircase to an upper level.

<sup>5</sup> *Pers. comm.* April 2010, Abdulhamid Abdussaid who excavated the site with Goodchild

<sup>6</sup> Ras al-Hilal: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 328; Central Church, Cyrene: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 162; East Church, Cyrene (steps to baptistery): Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 138; East Church, Taucheira: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 209; West Church, Ptolemais: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 185

With this in mind, it is worth considering whether this might have been part of an episcopal palace, a hypothesis possibly supported by the dedicatory inscription to Bishop Macarius near the centre of the floor (**see Fig. 16**), and references to Bishop Theodorus in the northeast annex (**see Fig. 11**) and in the sanctuary (now almost completely lost)<sup>7</sup>. Little is known about episcopal residences in Cyrenaica, but in the wider eastern Mediterranean there seems to have been a trend during the first half of the sixth century for bishops to commission lavish polychrome mosaics.<sup>8</sup> These elaborate and sophisticated works, commonly featuring imagery from the natural world and often accompanied by an inscription identifying the bishop as patron, were seen as a means of self-aggrandisement and thought to have been motivated ‘as much by the bishop’s worldly ambitions as their spiritual inspiration’.<sup>9</sup> The narthex of the sixth-century Episcopal Basilica at Stobi in Macedonia, for example, had a rich and elaborate mosaic pavement and above the entrance an inscribed lintel referenced the ‘most holy Bishop Philip [who brought about] a building for the holy church of God’.<sup>10</sup> And in the sixth-century basilica at Tegea in Greece, an elaborate grid mosaic included an inscription identifying a bishop Thyrsos.<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest for this study is a complex of rooms adjacent to the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis that have been identified as part of an episcopal residence.<sup>12</sup> The mosaic pavement in the chapel of this episcopium comprises a series of panels filled with a variety of flora and fauna, including numerous paradisiacal references, and, as in the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, here there is also an emphasis on water; the outer border of the pavement is inhabited mainly by fish and wading birds, a wave pattern creates an inner border, a fountain flows from an overly large cantharus, and two of the extant large panels have watery backgrounds and are crammed with a variety of fish and waterfowl—both oceanic and Nilotic (**Figs 158–159**).

Correspondences between Qasr el-Lebia and these episcopal complexes could suggest that a bishop commissioned the large pavement—Bishop Macarius perhaps—and that it was part of an episcopal residence.

### **Hypothesis 2: The Large Pavement as Part of a Baptismal Complex**

To date, excavations at Qasr el-Lebia have not uncovered a baptistery,<sup>13</sup> but it seems likely that there would have been one, particularly given the episcopal references in inscriptions in the complex.<sup>14</sup> Six early Christian baptisteries have been recorded in Cyrenaica but there is no pattern to their placement: they are variously sited in rooms to the north and the south of the apse, in antechambers one room removed from the apse, and in rooms at the opposite end of the church to the liturgical apse.<sup>15</sup> A baptistery at the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia is unlikely to have been to the north of the complex, where rooms are cut into the bedrock, or to the south, where the land slopes steeply away and retaining walls

<sup>7</sup> Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284

<sup>8</sup> It has been suggested that a mosaic pavement at Taucheira may have been part of a bishop’s palace: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 221

<sup>9</sup> Kolarik 2005, 1264–67

<sup>10</sup> Kolarik 2005, 1259. The narthex pavement is a grid composition with a border of interlocking roundels almost identical to the border at Qasr el-Lebia, although here the roundels are inhabited by a variety of figural imagery.

<sup>11</sup> Karivieri 2012, 221; Maguire 2012, fig. 1–2. Here too, the pavement was a grid composition and, in common with the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, contained personifications of the Rivers of Paradise.

<sup>12</sup> Gjorgjievska 2008

<sup>13</sup> Saradi has mistakenly asserted that a baptistery has been discovered at the site: Saradi 2006, 139

<sup>14</sup> In the large pavement, the chancel and the northeast annex.

<sup>15</sup> In the East Church at Apollonia the baptistery was in an annex to the north of the apse; at Ras al-Hilal and in the East Church at El Altrun they were in annexes to the south of the apse; at Berenike and the East Church at Cyrene they were in antechambers or annexes north of the apse, although at Cyrene that apse was already redundant when the font was installed; and at the West Church at Apollonia it was in a complex of rooms at the opposite end of the church to the liturgical apse. For a summary of baptisteries in Cyrenaica: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 24–25



Fig. 158. Episcopium chapel, Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia. Author

Fig. 159. Episcopium chapel, Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia. Author



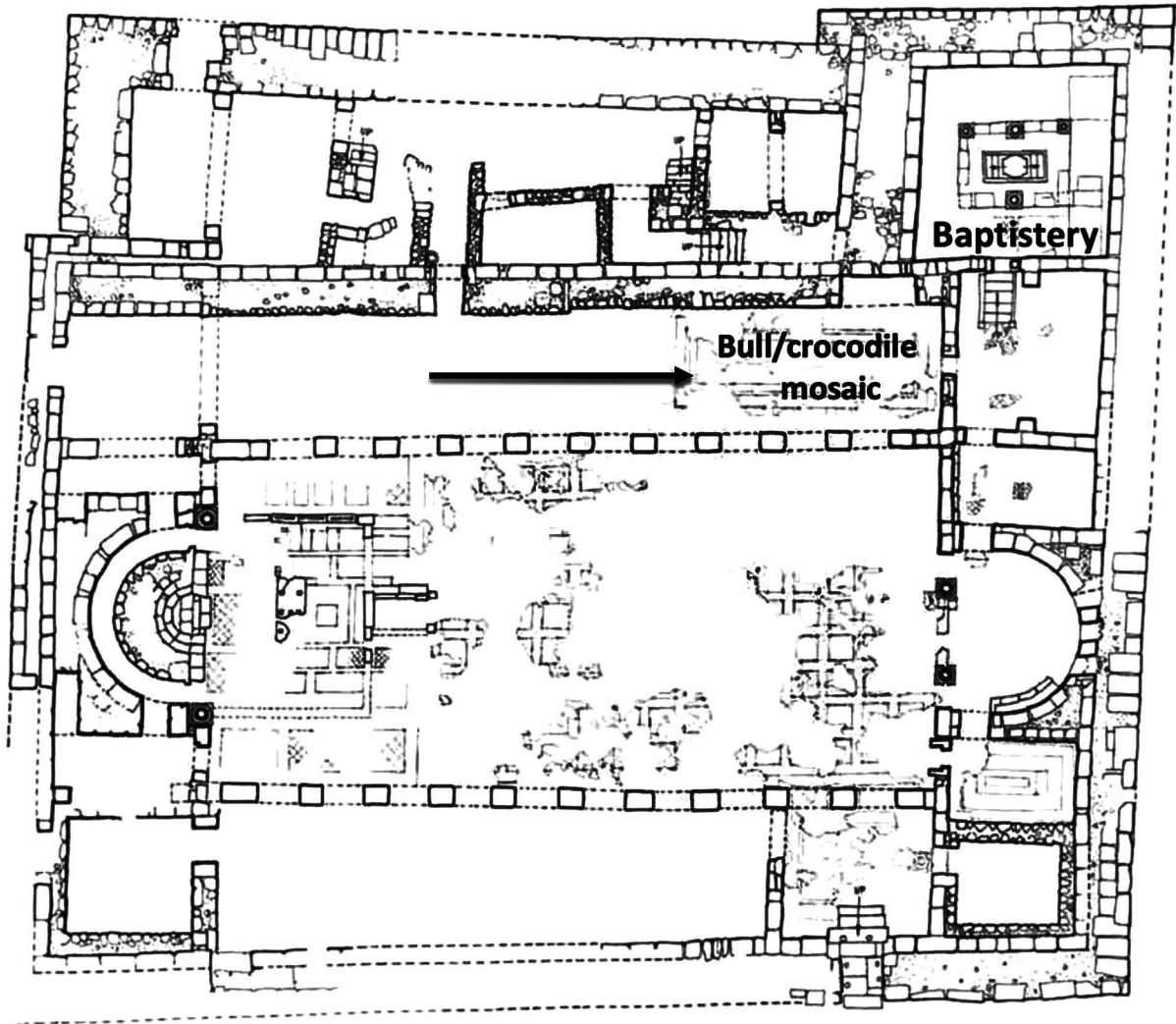


Fig. 160. Plan of the East Church Cyrene with location of baptistry and Crocodile/ bull combat scene. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. *Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica*, with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies. Annotations by author

were required to support the building. The most likely location for a baptistry would have been among the unexcavated range of rooms to the east of the large mosaic pavement where exploratory sondages have revealed further polychrome mosaics.

The iconography in the northeast annex of the East Church also supports the assumption that a baptistry at Qasr el-Lebia is likely to have been located to the east of the complex. In the East Church at Cyrene, the font—a reused sarcophagus—is in a room in the northeast corner of the complex. A study of this church, its mosaic pavements and patterns of use, has suggested that catechumens making their way to the baptistry would have passed over a Nilotic mosaic that included a tussle between a crocodile and a bull (**Fig. 160**).<sup>16</sup> Although sometimes interpreted as representing the mortal combat between the

<sup>16</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 112. There are two examples of this scene in the East Church at Cyrene: Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, pls 68.2, 63.1. The scene also appears in mosaic pavements in Beit Leontis at Beth She'an



Fig. 161. Peacocks by east doorway in northeast annex, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

colossal biblical creatures, Leviathan and Behemoth,<sup>17</sup> in early Christian settings the scene is generally understood to have had eschatological significance, evoking the triumph of good over evil.<sup>18</sup> Seen in this way, the crocodile/bull combat is a particularly pertinent scene for catechumens to encounter en route to the baptismal font. Accepting that a baptistery was indeed sited at the east end of the complex at Qasr el-Lebia and that movement through the complex was, to some degree, determined by the orientation of the imagery and inscriptions in the pavements, it is likely that the baptistery would have been accessed via the northeast annex; that being the case, catechumens would have passed over the crocodile/bull combat scene (**see Fig. 8**). Also in the northeast annex, two stags, one with a snake in its mouth, add to the soteriological character of the mosaic (**see Fig. 138**). In the west doorway of the annex a pair of peacocks flank an inscription, orientated to be read as one left the room, they are standing in front of profusely fruiting trees and hold red flowers in their beaks (**Fig. 161**). Peacocks flanking a central object—often a cantharus—was a motif commonly used in sacred spaces and was particularly popular in baptismal settings. For example, pairs of peacocks flank canthari overflowing with water in the baptistery at Stobi in Macedonia (**see Fig. 103**),<sup>19</sup> peacocks flank a chalice from which a vine sprouts in the baptistery at Butrint in Albania (**Fig. 162**),<sup>20</sup> and peacocks appear to be eating the fruit from a large basket in the roundel encircling the central dome in the baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte in Naples, Italy (**Fig. 163**). At Apollonia in Cyrenaica, fragments of a peacock, probably originally one of a pair flanking a central motif, have been found in the mosaic pavement in an antechamber to the west of the baptistery.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed above, the orientation of the images, and more particularly the inscriptions, in the northeast annex at Qasr el-Lebia suggests that visitors would have been intended to process through this space from west to east. Neophytes leaving a proposed baptistery to the east of the complex after undergoing the rites of baptism are unlikely to have returned along the same route. And it seems much

(possibly a church), and in the chapel at Haditha, both in Israel: Hachlili 2009, pl. V-6a, 6b. It was also carved into one of the ceiling beams in St Catherine's Monastery at Sinai: Forsyth and Weitzmann 1973, pl. LXIX-A

<sup>17</sup> Drewer 1981a, 48-56. Leviathan was created on the fifth day as ruler of sea animals and Behemoth on the sixth day as king of land creatures. A mythical bird, Ziz, took the same role in the air. The main role of the trio was to provide food for the righteous at the Messianic banquet and the theme is more developed in Jewish than in Christian traditions. Biblical references include: Job 40:15-24; Isaiah 27:1; Job 41:1-34; Psalm 104:26

<sup>18</sup> Bonacasa 2005, 1352; Roussin 1981, 6-9

<sup>19</sup> Hoddinott 1963, 168-69, figs 78-9

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell 2008, 30

<sup>21</sup> Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 92, pl. 65; Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 86-90



Fig. 162. Butrint Baptistery. With permission from The Butrint Foundation

more probable that they would have continued their spiritual journey across the large mosaic. A large hall like this, accessible from a baptistery, might well have served as a *consignatorium* or *chrismarium*, that is, a room in which the newly baptised were confirmed, anointed with chrism and blessed by the bishop. Although rooms intended for this function are not particularly easy to identify with any certainty, it has been suggested that a trapezoidal hall adjacent to the sixth-century baptistery at Butrint in Albania may have served as a *consignatorium* (Fig. 164).<sup>22</sup> A doorway allows direct access between this room and the baptistery and the orientation of pairs of birds in the mosaic pavement by the door suggests that the room would have been entered from the baptistery, so after the baptism had taken place, rather than it being used as an *apodyterium* prior to baptism (Fig. 165). Another possible *consignatorium* is in the episcopal complex at Salona in Croatia, where a room to the west of the baptistery had a mosaic panel with two stags and part of Psalm 42 in the doorway adjacent to the baptistery.<sup>23</sup> The hall may have been a catechumeneum where neophytes were prepared for baptism, but the mosaic is oriented to greet those entering the room from the east, not leaving it, suggesting that it is more likely to have functioned

<sup>22</sup> The mosaic paving the room is a complex design of interlocking patterns and flora and fauna. It also includes the remains of an inscription to bishop Se[rgius?], presumably the bishop who commissioned either the pavement or the room itself: Mitchell 2008, 51-57

<sup>23</sup> The mosaic is now lost.



Fig. 163. Ceiling mosaic in San Giovanni in Fonte, Naples, Italy. Author

as a *consignatorium* for use after baptism.<sup>24</sup> In Cyrenaica, it has been tentatively suggested that a large apsidal hall at Taucheira might have been a *consignatorium*.<sup>25</sup>

Accepting that the large mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia paved a *consignatorium* allows for the possibility that any wall or division immediately to the west of the mosaic is likely to have had some kind of portal for the newly baptised to access the church for their first communion. In this scenario, neophytes would have passed directly over the architectural representation of *Polis Nea Theodorias* which, enlivened and invigorated by the foliage sprouting from behind its turrets, became a sort of triumphal entrance for the *adventus* of those about to be enrolled in full membership of the Christian Church. As they took this step they would have passed between *Kosmesis*, holding a flower in one hand and a censor in the other, and *Ktisis*, authorized by the *mappa* in her left hand and offering a wreath with her right. These two figures were positioned to welcome and honour those embarking on the next leg of their spiritual journey (Fig. 166).

To hypothesise that the large mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia paved a *consignatorium* is clearly no more than conjecture, nevertheless, the imagery would have been wholly appropriate as part of a baptismal complex. As one traversed the pavement, the rejection of chaos, the acceptance of Christ and the

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell 2008, 55

<sup>25</sup> Stucchi 1975, 426-27. However, to date, no baptistery has been identified in the vicinity of the hall and it has also been interpreted as a martyrrium, a chapel and part of a palace complex: Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 218-21

6. ARCHITECTURAL SETTING AND HYPOTHESES

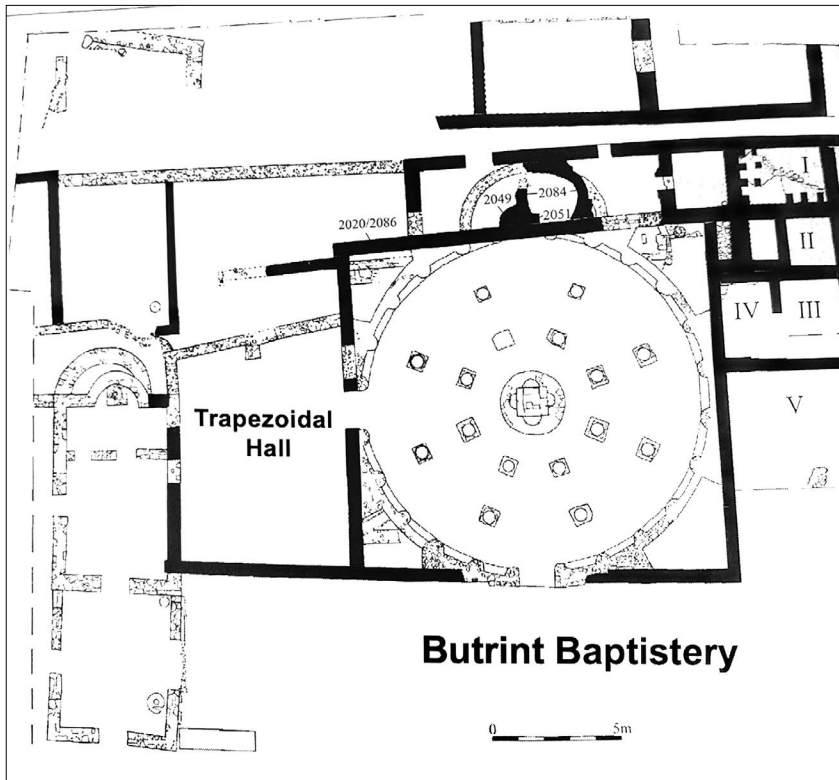


Fig. 164. Baptistery at Butrint with possible consignatorium. With permission from the Butrint Foundation



Fig. 165. Mosaic by door between baptistery and adjacent hall at Butrint. With permission from The Butrint Foundation



Fig. 166. *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* at the end of the journey, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

liturgy of baptism, all played out beneath the feet of viewers, reflecting the spiritual journey of the those recently baptised.

Without further excavation—and probably even then—hypotheses about the function of the space paved by the large mosaic remain irresolvable. The protective structure and viewing platforms built over the pavement shortly after the mosaics were excavated have destroyed—or at least obscured—remaining archaeological evidence, and the site was disrupted still further when the fifty panels were lifted and hung in a purpose-built museum at the site to prevent further deterioration. The layout of the building, the change in flooring materials, and the orientation of the mosaic panels, all suggest that there is likely to have been a division of some kind to the west of large pavement, but it is now impossible to determine if this was indeed the case. The new walls built to support the current roof incorporate *spolia* from the original structure, but they have been randomly positioned, with no thought given to their earlier use. The possibility that there was a staircase to the south of the large pavement seems quite likely, but that area is now obscured under a stone-built metre-wide viewing platform. And the proposition that there was a baptistery, or at least a font, to the east of the excavated building is compelling, but remains unproven.

## Conclusion

There remain many unanswered questions about the East Church and the large mosaic pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. The intention of this study is not to offer up definitive interpretations, but to open up discussion and to make the point that, far from being a hodgepodge of random images with no symbolic meaning and no coherent programme, as has been suggested by a number of scholars,<sup>26</sup> the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia, was a comprehensive and carefully considered composition.

It is easy to forget, particularly now that the mosaic panels from the large pavement hang like pictures on the walls of the museum, that the images, although discrete in their own frames, were also integral parts of a whole. The grid allows a series of thematically linked images to operate, either centripetally or centrifugally, around a longitudinal east-west axis, and connecting threads pull the individual panels together and give the pavement its internal logic and soteriological structure. The meanings of the individual motifs are important, but it is as a complete work that the mosaic would have made the biggest impact. Late Antique viewers, accustomed to fragmentation and conundrums, expected to have to unravel tangles of allusions and to extricate hidden meanings, and the imagery in the pavement would have unfurled like an extraordinarily rich and intricate carpet, divulging its programme piecemeal.

<sup>26</sup> Detailed in the introduction.

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