

The Ship Depicted on the North Colonnade of the Great Mosque at Damascus: A Nilotic Theme or the Representation of Paradise?

Şam'daki Emeviye Camii Kuzey Sütun Dizisi Üzerinde Yer Alan Gemi Tasviri: Nil Nehrine Ait Bir Konu ya da Cennet Tasviri?

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Abstract

This paper will bring for the first time an in-depth study of the ship depicted in the mosaic on the east pier of the north colonnade of the courtyard in the Great Mosque at Damascus. The vessel inhabited by two men, one sited on the prow and the second is the helmsman working the port steering-oar, synthesizes several topics:

1. *The ship and the adjacent architecture in the Damascus mosaic evidence the continuity of Roman tradition of maritime or Nilotic scenes depicted in Umayyad mosaics;*
2. *Suggestion for the symbolic representation of the Paradise referred in the Koran;*
3. *The depiction of human figures in early Islamic arts suggests the tolerance of the Umayyad regime compared to the more restricted iconoclastic law in the Abbasid period and supported by the Hadith;*
4. *Preserved shipbuilding tradition of the Pharaonic Egyptian papyriform vessels and their diffusion as late as the 8th century CE in the eastern Mediterranean.*

We may suggest that the ship illustrated in the mosaic in the Great Mosque at Damascus belongs to the original building period of the Mosque by al-Walid I (705-715 CE). The boats depicted within the Nilotic frame surrounding the main mosaic carpet in the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas in Jordan (718-756 CE) are the latest examples of Nilotic theme decoration within a Christian Church built and functioning during the Umayyad – Abbasid periods. The Damascus and al-Rasas mosaics both are related in subject decoration, and their architectural content, within different religious edifices (church and mosque), and their illustrated messages may suggest the same symbolism.

Keywords: *mosaics, Nilotic motif, ships, Umayyad period.*

Öz

Bu makalede, ilk kez Şam Emeviye Camii'nin avlusunun kuzey sütunları doğu cephesi üzerindeki mozaikte bulunan gemi tasviri derinlemesine incelenmiştir. Gemi üzerinde iki erkek betimi vardır. Bunlardan ilkinde erkek pruva üzerindeki diğer erkek kürek çeken bir dümençi olarak gösterilmiştir.

1. *Şam mozaiklerindeki gemi ve onunla bitişik mimari betim, Emevi mozaiklerinde tasvir edilen ve Roma geleneği olan Nil Nehri ya da deniz sahnelerinin sürekliliğine bir delil teşkil eder.*
2. *Bu sahne, Kur'an'da geçen sembolik cennet tasvirini akla getirmektedir.*
3. *Erken İslam sanatındaki insan figürleri, Hadis tarafından desteklenen ve Abbasi Dönemi'nde daha sınırlı ikonoklastik anlayışla karşılaştırıldığında daha hoşgörülü bir Emevi rejimini göstermektedir.*
4. *Mısır papirüs çiçeği formundaki gemilerin yapım geleneği, Doğu Akdeniz'de en geç 8. yüzyıla kadar kullanıldığını göstermektedir.*

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5. *Şam Emeviye Camii mozaiklerindeki gemi tasvirinin, Cami'nin el-Velid (705-715) tarafından yaptırılan orijinal yapı dönemine ait olduğu düşünülmektedir.*

Ürdün, Umm al-Rasas'taki Aziz Stephen Kilisesinde bulunan ana mozaiği çevreleyen Nil sahnesinde betimlenen gemi tasvirleri (718-756), Emevi-Abbasi döneminde kullanılan bir Hristiyan Kilisesi içinde Nil temalı son örneklerdir. Şam ve al-Rasas mozaiklerinin her ikisi de dekorasyon konusuyla ilgilidir ve onların mimari içerikleri, farklı dini yapıların içinde bulunmaları (kilise ve camii), ortaya koydukları mesajlar aynı sembolizme işaret eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: mozaikler, Nil motifleri, gemiler, Emevi Dönemi.

Some remarks on the mosaic making in the Damascus Mosque

The riverine mosaic depicted on the east pier of the north collonade has not been studied yet and therefore this paper will bring an in-depth first hand study of this mosaic in its all aspects. When looking at the Damascus riverine mosaic (not being noticed by many scholars) we have to ask and then try to answer to some questions:

1. What is the meaning of the ship in the Damascus mosaic?
2. Why human figures appear in early Islamic mosaic?
3. What is the context of the riverine mosaic?
4. Who commissioned the riverine mosaic?

The Great Mosque at Damascus was built by al-Walid I (705-715 CE) on the site of the Byzantine Basilica of St. John the Baptist. It was built and decorated with the money collected by al-Walid I from the revenue of seven years land tax of Syria (McKenzie 2010: 356). This Mosque was the most magnificent and central point of Damascus (Fig. 1). Exquisite mosaics, comprising varied architectures, towns, as well as a great richness of trees and fruit-trees laden with ripped fruits, probably were meant to symbolize the human ideal vision of Paradise referred in the Koran that decorated the inside and outside walls of the Mosque, and the three-sided colonnades, and the galleries of the courtyard.

The unique riverine mosaic that decorated the east pier of the north colonnade of the Damascus Mosque has not been studied yet (Figs. 1a-1b). Marguerute Gautier van-Berchem was the first scholar who observed this riverine mosaic. She made a general description of the ship and the architecture forming the



Figure 1
Aerial view of the Great Mosque
at Damascus and the courtyard
(after: Aerial view.
Photo © Sacredsites.com).

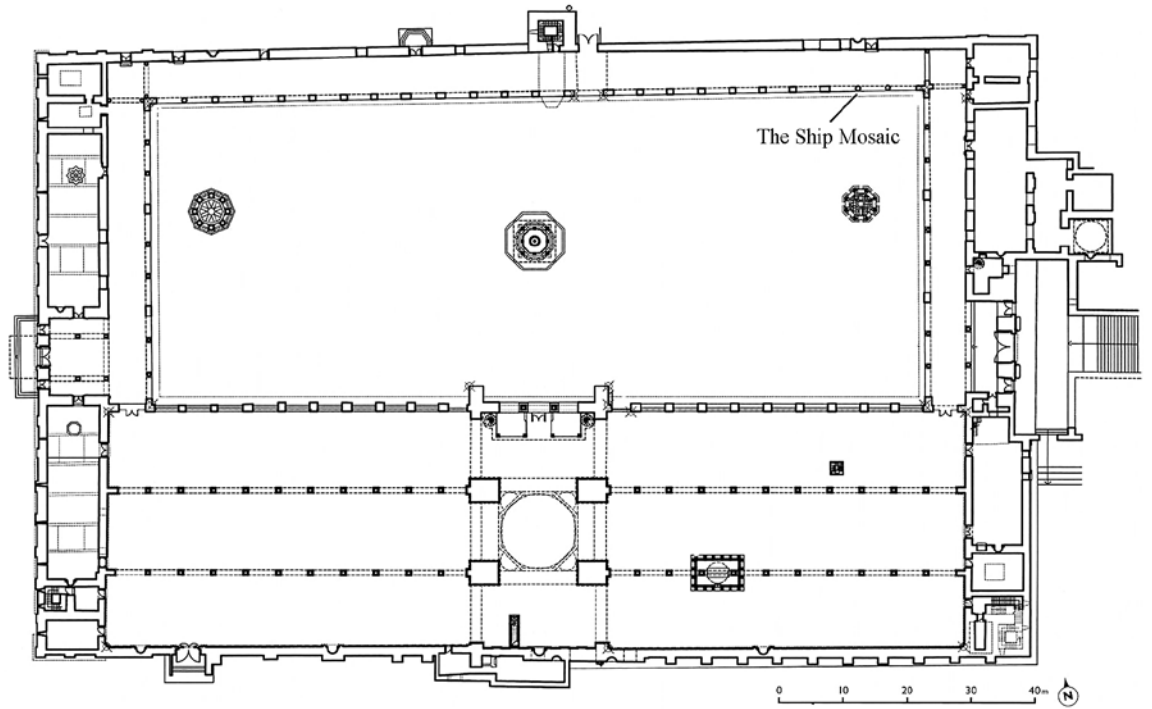


Figure 1a
Plan of the Great Mosque and the location of the ship mosaic (processed after: DeGeorge 2010: 71).

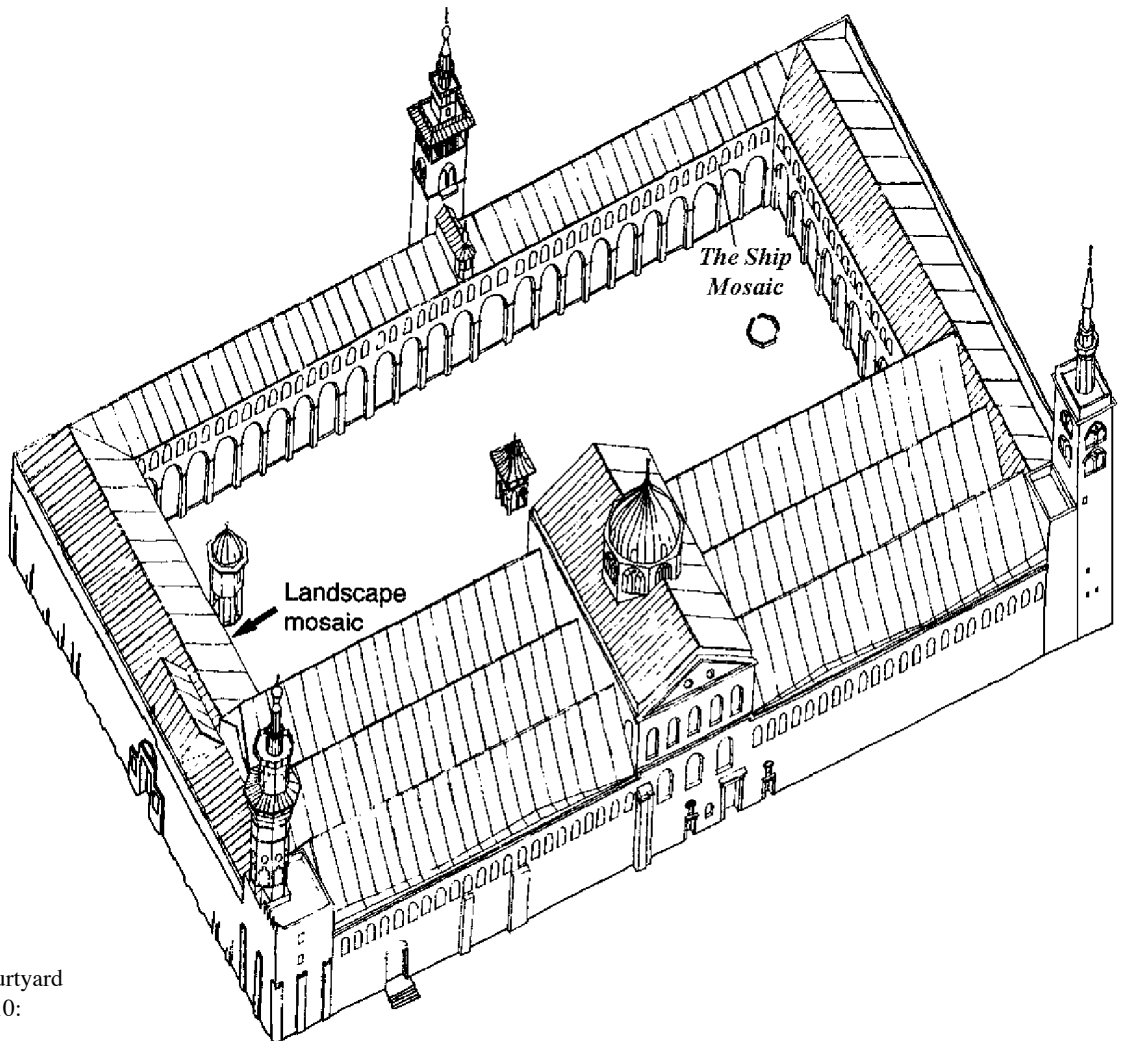


Figure 1b
Axonometric view of the Great Mosque and the courtyard (processed McKenzie 2010: 362 fig. 605).

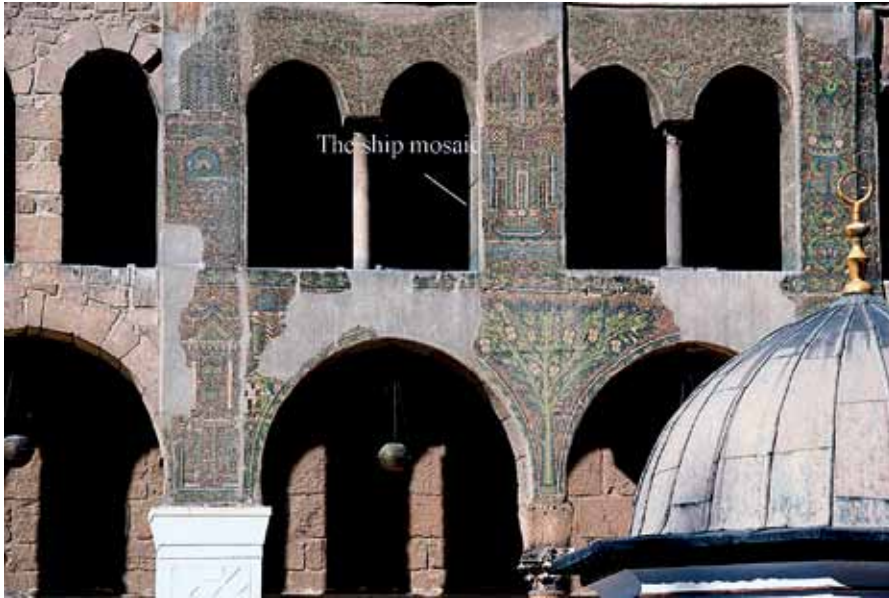


Figure 2
The location of the ship mosaic on
the east pier of the north colonnade.
([http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3244/
3353880607_ea6174c920.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3244/3353880607_ea6174c920.jpg)).



Figure 2a
The ship mosaic scene
(McKenzie 2010).

background (Figs. 2-2a). Van-Berchem observed this mosaic in 1927 when researching all the mosaic decorations in the Damascus Mosque. Since its building the Mosque and the mosaics suffered many damages due to fires and earthquakes. Some restorations carried out on these mosaics and the structures were recorded by old Arabic historians, geographers and travelers who visited Damascus, as well from from few Arabic/Kufic inscriptions inserted within these mosaics during some restorations. The restored mosaics were meant to follow the original works (built in 705-715 CE). Therefore when studying these mosaics we have to look very carefully on their layout. The east pier of the north colonnade and large parts of the mosaic decoration also went through intensive restorations. Van-Berchem observed and considered that some fragments of architectural composition, and the eastern and the western extremities of the north colonnade belonged to the original construction of the mosque by al-Walid I (Creswell – van-Berchem 1969: 349). Some surviving mosaics on the north colonnade were restored in the 11th century CE. Van-Berchem assumed that

these restorations were carried out by Malik Shah in 1082/83, after the great fire that almost destroyed the Mosque in 1069. She concluded the date of the restoration from two Kufic inscriptions, each inserted in tabula ansata within the mosaic on the north colonnade. These inscriptions do not indicate the date of the restoration rather they are prize words to Muhammad (Creswell – van-Berchem 1932: 234). Additional restoration was carried out by Sultan Tutush (Malik's Shah brother) in 1092/93. Tutush gave account only of the walls restoration and not the arcades on the two storeys set on the north-eastern colonnade that have preserved their original structure (705-715 CE). Though, the architectural motifs in the mosaic on the north colonnade are not made in the same fine work of the Barada panorama on the western colonnade, they still follow the same theme. We have to consider that the mosaic work was carried out through a long period (705-715 CE), probably not by the same mosaicists, and therefore the differences between several mosaic works resulted from the less skilled mosaicists who tried to follow the earlier style, as well from some restorations carried out throughout varied periods. Other restorations and renovations were carried out until the beginning of the 20th century (Creswell – van-Berchem 1969: 350). Further on I will try and explain that the riverine mosaic on the east pier of the north colonnade belongs to the original construction of the Damascus Mosque.

The ship context within the mosaic of the Great Mosque at Damascus

The ship depicted in the Damascus riverine mosaic has not been studied yet, and therefore this paper will bring the first an in-depth study of this ship (Figs. 2, 2a). The mosaics decorating the inside, and the outside walls of the Mosque, and the three-sided colonnade courtyard were extensively described for the first time by Margueritte van-Berchem in the publication of Creswell, 1932, Part II and then again more results in the research of the mosaic published in Creswell, 1969, Part II. She also was the first scholar to observe the ship in the mosaic on the east pier when she visited the site in 1927; van-Berchem described the ship as:

“... a beautiful green and red boat, floating on blue water, with two ends curved slightly upward like the boats in the Pompeian frescoes. At the poop which is higher than the prow, a few oars are still visible. The center of the boat is sheltered by a checkered awning. In the distance, acting as a background for the boat is a hemicycle decorated with columns, three vaulted doorways, and an apse with shell-like hood – all of these quite classical architectural elements” (Creswell – van-Berchem 1932: 234).

The width of the east pier with the ship mosaic is c. 1.2 m, thus we may deduce that the length of ship's hull is c. 1 m, and the height at its middle point is c. 0.4 m (Fig. 3)¹. The description of the ship by van-Berchem has some confusion (resulted from her lack of understanding the ship construction and its gear). Indeed the hull contains red and green coloring but it also is produced with several more hues: yellow/gold, several hues of green, grey, turquoise, pink, light and dark brown, and black tesserae. The strakes are indicated by long horizontal colored strips. The gunwale is distinguished by one row of black tesserae. The top strake is made with three rows of light green tesserae. Two rows of turquoise tesserae indicate the seam between the planks. The second strake is made with two rows of brown hue. The wale alongside the port hull is indicated

¹ The width of the pier was deduced from the plan of the Mosque, Fig. 1a below.



Figure 3
The ship (detail after:
DeGeorge 2010: 170).

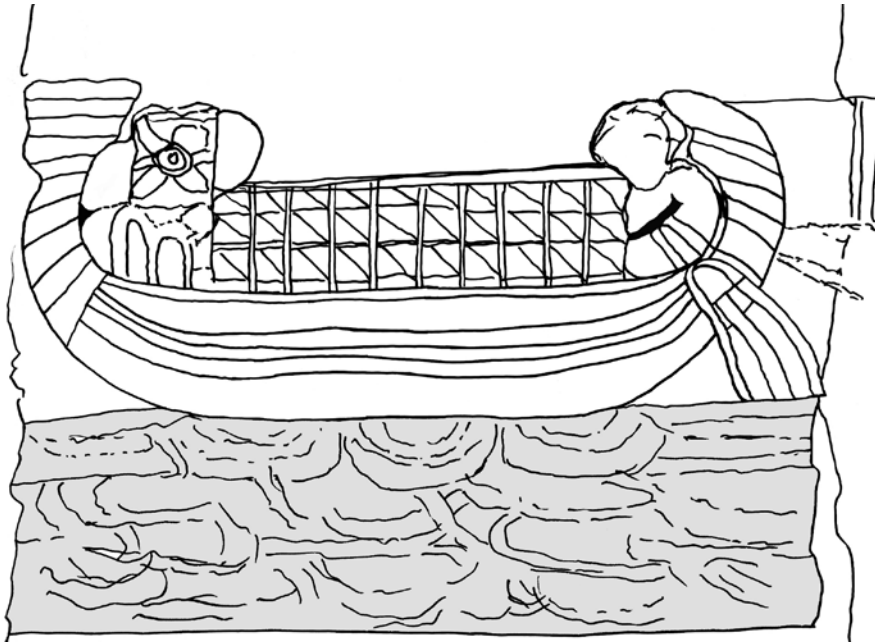


Figure 3a
Drawing of the ship
(drawing: Z. Friedman).

by two rows of white tesserae. The strake beneath the wale and the bottom of the vessel are depicted with black tesserae, thus suggesting the bitumen coating to make the hull watertight. Both rounded stem and stern are upraised and broad. The vertical stempost is finished with a wide and flat tip, symbolizing the tight ends of papyrus stems forming the umbel (Figs. 3, 3a). The rounded raised sternpost is slightly inverted over the quarter. Both stem-and-stern posts are depicted with similar colored strips as the hull. On the deck are illustrated



Figure 4
The Helmsman
(details after:
DeGeorge 2010: 170).

three rectangles with checkered façade depicted with yellow, green, dark brown and pink tesserae. The horizontal and vertical strips of the checkered pattern are outlined with black tesserae. This element may indicate the lattice-screens to protect the passengers from the sprays of the waves, or three wooden containers on the deck, suggesting the cargo carried on board. The vessel is sailing on wavy waters (Tigris or Euphrates), depicted with green, yellow, brown, turquoise, black and white tesserae. The ship lacks its sailing rig (mast, yard, sail and tackle). The only gear is comprised by one pair of steering oars, one oar mounted on each quarter gunwale. No fauna or flora are depicted in the water or around the Damascus riverine scene. The ship is inhabited by two men: one sited on the prow with his back turned to the stempost is bent forwards, while the second figure is the helmsman sitting on the quarter bench beneath the inner-arched sternpost. He is shown in three-quarter view with his face turned to the port side, and is slightly bent over the port steering-oar, appearing to put all his effort to maneuver the oar by the short horizontal grip-spar attached to the head of the loom (Figs. 3, 3a, 4). The elongated and broad blade is made with two rows of black tesserae, while the field is made with yellow/gold tesserae. The starboard steering-oar is evidenced only by the elongated blade projecting from beneath the stern, thus appearing on top of the port blade. It is outlined with two rows of black tesserae, whereas the field is made with two rows of yellow/gold tesserae, similar to the port blade. Both figures were defaced by the iconoclasts and the damaged spaces were filled in by the original mixed hues of yellow/gold, black and dark brown tesserae. The figures were not destroyed completely rather their original outline is still distinct. A broad square frame (almost equal the width of the man's side) made with black and dark brown hues, with an inscribed flower depicted with light-and-dark brown and yellow tesserae, was inserted over the side of the sitted figure on the prow (Figs. 3, 3a, 5).

On the starboard side of the ship and forming the background is a two-storied building with an arched façade flanked on either side by one Ionic column on the ground level. The building is set on a raised platform reached by several steps from the quay (Fig. 2a).

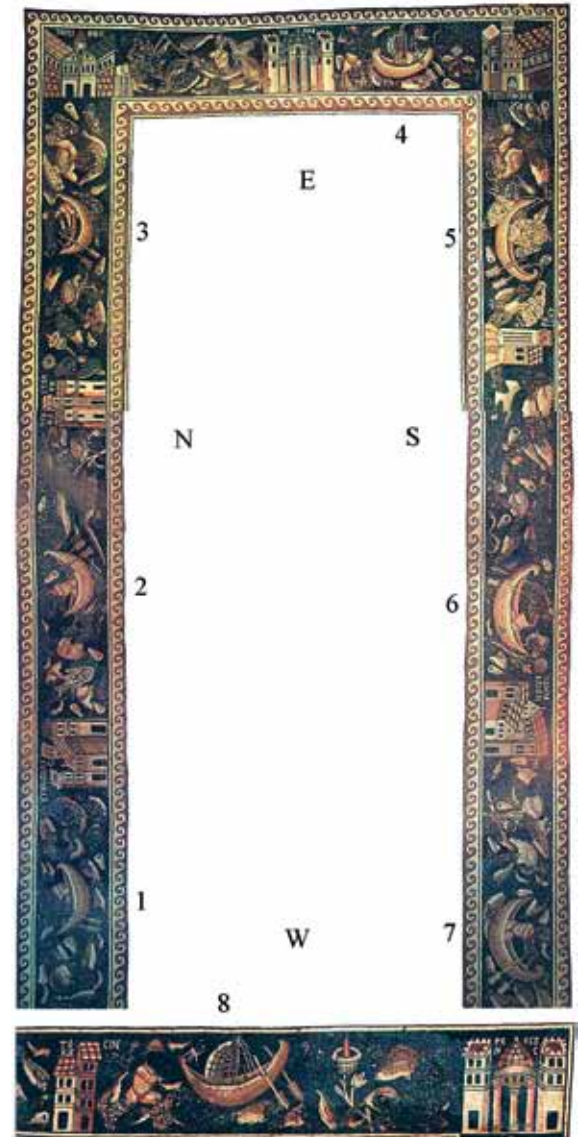
The Nilotic frame mosaic in the Church of St. Stephen, Umm al-Rasas, Jordan

The Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas, Jordan, was built and functioning during the Umayyad-Abbasid periods (718-756 CE). It belonged to an ecclesiastic complex comprising two adjacent churches (Piccirillo 1988: 227; Friedman 2005: pl. 52.4). The ancient name of Umm al-Rasas, Mefa'a or Kastron Mefa'a is depicted within the long dedicatory inscription beneath the step of the presbytery². This inscription also indicates the date of the construction of the church in 718 CE (Piccirillo – Attiyat 1986: 347). The central mosaic carpet in the nave is surrounded by a wide Nilotic frame encompassing six rowboats and two sailing boats, putti fishing, varied Nilotic fauna and flora, and ten structures topped by Greek inscriptions referred to cities in the Nile Delta (Figs. 6, 6a). The length of the Nilotic frame on the east-west axis is 13 m, while on the north-south axis is 7 m. The width of the north frame is 0.72 m, whereas the



Figure 5
The sited man on the prow
(details after:
DeGeorge 2010: 170).

² Kastron Mefa'a is also illustrated within the rectangular panel in the south intercolumnnar of the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas; (Piccirillo - Alliaata 1994: 216 tav. III). Within the mosaic floor in the northern inter-columnnar are depicted eight cities from the western Holy Land (Israel), while within the southern inter-columnnar floor are depicted seven cities from the eastern Holy Land (Jordan) (Piccirillo 1988: 227).



south, east and west frames are 0.75 m wide³. The rowboats (three boats in each northern and southern frame) are propelled by two row-oars, one oar mounted on either side of the gunwale, whereas each sailing vessel is depicted with fully open sail billowing forward the mast, thus suggesting their sailing direction with the wind blowing from the port quarter or astern (Fig. 7). Both sailing vessels are also rigged with a pair of steering oars, one oar mounted on each quarter gunwale. All the vessels besides Boat 8 are inhabited by one putto, who either is rowing the boat or is fishing with a fishing rod from the boat. The iconoclasts defaced all putti but did not damaged their lower body and the legs. They also defaced the heads of the fish and the birds. The original shape of the figures is still distinct and the “adjusted” areas were replaced with the original mixed black and colored tesserae from the destructed figures (Fig. 7). The boats in the north frame are facing the same direction with their prow pointed to the west (Fig. 6a.1-3). The prow of the Boats 5 and 7 are pointed to the east, while the

Figure 6
Mosaic floor in the Church of
St. Stephen, Umm al-Rasa, Jordan
(after: Piccirillo 1993: 219 fig. 345).

Figure 6a
Detail of the Nilotic Frame
(after: Piccirillo – Alliata 1994:
142-143 figs. 33, 34; computer
process: Z. Friedman).

³ The research of the mosaic was carried for my MA dissertation in 1997, with the permission granted by Fr. Prof. Michele Piccirillo. During the study I also took the measurements and detailed photos of each boat; (Friedman 2005: 408 table I).

bow of Boat 6 is pointed to the west, in the southern frame. The prow of the sailing vessels in the east and west frames are pointed to the North (Fig. 6a.4, 8). Almost all the vessels have rounded spoon-shaped hulls built with wooden strakes indicated by wide strips of ochre, dark brown and purple tesserae (Fig. 7). The lower part of the hulls is made with purple tesserae, thus indicating the pitch/bitumen coating to make the hulls watertight. The stempost of all the vessels is marginally rose above the gunwale with a pointed tip. The short sternposts of each vessel is slightly inverted above the quarters (Fig. 7.1-8). Boats 6 and 7 in the southern frame are depicted with a projecting short forefoot rather indicating the cutwater than the ram. This device is a construction element; it is the forward extension of the keel meant to give better hydrodynamics and hydrostatics to the vessels (Fig. 7.6-7). The row-oars of the rowboats and the steering oars of the sailing vessels have similar shapes, comprising a thin shaft and a rectangular blade, whereas the lower shaft transverses the blades longitudinally. The oars are mounted to the gunwale by a metal or leather ring rowlock made with purple tesserae. The sailing vessels are rigged with a vertical mast stepped amidships (Figs. 7.4, 8). The lower mast of each vessel is supported by a mast-frame; the horizontal spar of the mast-frame is sustained by two short vertical spars, each attached to the inner side of the hull amidships (Fig. 7.4, 8). The foreshortened horizontal spar attached to the masthead indicates the yard supporting the head of the sail billowing forward. On the foreface of each sail are depicted several vertical lines probably indicating the brails to work the sail, whereas the horizontal strips indicate the reinforcing bands, or the seams of the sewn pieces of the bunt. The hanging extreme line to the right side of each mast may indicate the starboard brace, whereas the line closer to the mast probably indicates the freed halyard or the backstay, or presumably the port brace (misplaced). The foreshortened yard, the billowing sail of each sailing vessel, and the mast-frames depicted in 3/4 view were meant to give some perspective or kinetics to the vessels, although that they are static. No mooring or anchoring device is shown (anchor or mooring lines). A putto (deduces from the remains of his lower body and his upper thighs) facing the sailing boat in the east frame appears to pull the bow of the vessel to deeper waters, thus preparing it to sail (Fig. 7.4).

Nilotic scene or the representation of the Paradise?

Nilotic scenes or riverine landscapes may be defined as images of the flooded banks of the Nile river or its Delta with the typical fauna and flora, alongside with the activities and the ceremonies of the inhabitants during this period. Such images of the flooded Nile had a great impact on artists and visitors who came to the ancient Egypt. This theme of decoration became more popular from the Hellenistic period (3rd – 2nd century BCE) and was still in use as late as the 8th century CE (Umayyad – early Abbasid era). Nilotic scenes testify to the interest in Egypt and the Egyptian civilization, which often are affiliated with a religious character. One of the first and complex representation of Nilotic theme is augmented by the late 2nd century BCE Nile mosaic from Palestrina, Italy. Later representations of Nilotic themes in mosaic are augmented by the 4th century CE glass opus sectile panels from Kenchreai, Greece, and the 8th century Nilotic frame from Umm al-Rasas, Jordan. Both Palestrina and the Kenchreai mosaics illustrate varied sailing vessels and fishing scenes associated with human figures. The al-Rasas vessels are indicated only by two types, six rowboats and two sailing vessels. These mosaics also depict the characteristic lotus and papyrus plants, as well as fish, shells, or water birds emphasizing their Egyptian origin (Friedman 2007: 131-132, 135-138). All the vessels illustrated in the mosaics



Figure 7
1-8: The Umm al-Rasas vessels (photo: Z. Friedman).

from Paestri, Kenchreai, and al-Rasas reflect the preserved tradition of wooden shipbuilding *papyriiform* vessels known since the early Old Dynasty of Egypt and their diffusion in the Mediterranean throughout the centuries as late as the 8th century CE⁴.

Nilotic themes appeared sporadically in mosaic pavements from the eastern Mediterranean only by the end of the 5th century CE. During the 6th-7th centuries CE these themes became common decorative patterns in the pavements of churches and in private houses in Syria, *Palaestina Prima*, *Palaestina Secunda* and *Provincia Arabia* (Hamerneh 1999: 185). The variety of fish, mollusks, water birds and plants, refer to the knowledge of the artists of such subjects rather than their place of origin (Nile Delta). The presence of Nilotic or maritime scenes in mosaics from the eastern Mediterranean, especially in territories with a dry climate, besides other elements such as trees laden with fruits, numerous birds and animals, were probably intended to symbolize the welfare of the inhabitants (Hamerneh 1999: 189). This motif preserved as late as the 8th century CE, as being augmented by the Nilotic frame mosaic in the Church of St. Stephen, at Umm al-Rasas. The boats depicted within this Nilotic frame are not proportional to the scenes and especially to the walled structures (Fig. 6a). These boats were meant to emphasize their importance in the everyday life in the Delta, as traffic utilitarian for carrying cargoes and passengers, and for fishing, or as ceremonial devices during the flood period of the Nile and the Delta (Friedman 2005: 412). Nilotic scenes associated with ships may be seen as signs of God's creations. Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century CE), expressed his amazement of ships when he referred in the commentaries to the creation of God:

“How this element (the ship) carries the sailor from dry land with the aid of a little wood and some wind? Do you not admire this when you see it (the ship), and is not your mind astonished by the sight?” (Maguire 1987: 34 n. 19; Friedman 2005: 411).

In the Barada mosaic on the western colonnade of the Great Mosque at Damascus categorically no living creatures were depicted. The only exception is evidenced by the ship inhabited by two men illustrated in the riverine mosaic on the east pier of the north colonnade (Fig. 2a). The depiction of trees laden with heavy fruits (mainly oranges) and the luxurious structures set on the riverbanks may symbolize the human ideal vision of Paradise, as mentioned in the Bible and Koran. In Koran Paradise is called “*janna*” – garden, and frequently it is associated with flowing rivers:

“... a garden underneath which rivers flow; ... beneath them rivers flowing in the Garden of Bliss” (Koran 10: 9).

“Gardens of Eden, beneath which rivers flow, dwelling therein forever” (Koran 20: 76).

Apparently the mosaicists of the Great Mosque did not portray a real world rather a distinct one which can only be inhabited by believers after Resurrection (Brisch 1988: 17). Buildings in Koran are also associated with the Paradise:

“And those who believe and do good, We shall certainly give them an abode in high places in the Garden wherein flow rivers...” (Koran 29: 58).

⁴ Actually, when the ancient Egyptians built wooden vessels in the early Dynasties they copied the hull shape from the papyrus boats, which resulted with a new type known as *papyriiform* crafts (Landstrom 1970: 24). The oldest excavated wooden *papyriiform* ship comes from a pit near the pyramid of Cheops (Khufu), dated to the 4th Dynasty. The shape of the hull resembles a very large papyrus boats with the stem-and-stern posts shaped as papyrus umbels; (Friedman 2007: 131).

Ibn Zabada when completed writing the history of Median in 814 CE, also referred to the mosaicists who commissioned the mosaic work in this mosque in accordance with the Koranic image of the Paradise, as well as the panorama from the surrounding sites:

“There (in the mosaics) we reproduced of what we have found of images of trees and castles of Paradise” (Brisch 1988: 18).

The delightful mosaic decorations of the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus can be understood not only as the vision of Paradise, which appears 120 times in Koran, but also as a propaganda of the “*fidei*”, an invitation to the Jewish and Christian population under the Muslim rules, to convert to Islam (Brisch 1988: 18).

The ship in Koran and its interpretation in the Damascus riverine mosaic

The ship is mentioned several times in Koran with varied symbols. Not all the references will be brought into discussion but only those which may be referred to the context of the ship in the Damascus riverine mosaic:

“... and the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man; ... and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: (in all this) there are messages indeed for people who use their reason” (Koran 2: 164).

This passage appeals to people who “use their reason” to observe the nature wonders (winds, clouds, change of seasons), whereas one of the man’s ingenuity is building ships that sail on the seas. The man also must be aware of the God’s creative power (Asad 1980: 34 note 130).

“It is God who has made the sea subservient (to His laws, so that it be of use) to you: so that ships might sail through it at His behest, and that you might seek to obtain (what you need) of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful” (Koran 45: 12).

The cited reference is more practical. Thus, men must have in their minds that God is the creator of the world. Thus the “ships” belong to God, who gives intelligence and inventiveness to man, as He also is guiding man’s ability to exploit the natural resources. Men built ships to sail them on the seas as utilitarian for trade and commerce, and therefore they must be grateful to God for all their welfare.

“And His are the lofty ships that sail like (floating) mountains through the seas” (Koran 55: 24).

The Damascus ships inhabited by two men may be interpreted as a symbolic illustration of the references from the Koran cited above. This ship is a transportation utilitarian used for trade and to gain economic benefits, as well as a mode of cultural diffusion and exchange of ideas. In any ancient civilization (beginning with the pre-dynastic and Pharaonic Egypt) the ship symbol is referred to a journey, a passage, a bridge or the transition from the realm of living to the realm of dead, or vice-versa (Cooper 1987: 152). The ship is the carrier of believers, and when reaching safe ground they must be grateful to God. It also may be deduced that the ship symbol in Koran is a sign of Allah for guiding the people on their right way. The Damascus ship inhabited by two men is the only known example to appear in the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus. Probably, the figures were defaced at the beginning of the Abbasid period, when the iconoclasm was

supported by the Hadith, which was more restrict with the visualization of human figures in the Islamic arts. The transition from the tolerance towards human figures depicted in Umayyad arts, and the application of the iconoclastic doctrine, especially in the mosaics of the Damascus Mosque is augmented by the large square with the inscribed flower that was inserted within the side of the figure sitted on the prow of the ship (Figs. 3, 5). The golden background around the ship was also altered by the iconoclasts, especially distinct around the steering oars and to the left side of the prow. Presumably other human figures and/or animals were found within the mosaics of the north colonnade. The present author may suggest that the Nilotic theme decoration of the mosaic on the north colonnade may have adorned other walls of the galleries in the norther collonade that are not preserved anymore. Possibly, each side of the colonnade in the courtyard depicted varied visual interpretations of the Paradise as referred in Koran.

The defacing of the putti, the water birds and the fish in the Nilotic mosaic frame from Umm al-Rasas may have occurred at the same period when the human figures in the Damascus Ship went through the same "adjustment". Both, the Damascus Mosque and the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas date to the same period, Umayyad – Abbasid era, belong to different religious edifices, but they both used the same Nilotic motif in the mosaic decorations.

Discussion

In order to understand the Damascus riverine mosaic and its symbolism we have to look for the mosaicists who produced this mosaic. Early Arabic authors mention that al-Walid appealed to the Byzantine emperor at Constantinople asking for workmen to assist in building and decorating the Mosque at Damascus (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 197). Greek chronicles dated to the Umayyad period do not confirm that al-Walid asked for such aid from the Byzantine emperor. In Greek papyri dated from the beginning of the 8th century, known as *Aphrodito Papyri*, are mentioned that skilled Egyptian workmen were sent to assist in the construction and maintenance of the Great Mosque at Damascus (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 196). According to Oleg Graber, it was not necessary for the mosaicists to come from Byzantium, rather they were in the near reach from Egypt or Syria. He also stated that the iconographic program of the mosaics in the Damascus Mosque refer specifically to Islamic ideas (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 196). Apparently the Byzantine emperor already lost most of his control over Syria and Palestine under the Umayyad rule. Therefore it was the Caliph himself (al-Walid I) who sent Syrian and Egyptian artisans to places where he wanted them to commission the building and restoration projects under his rule (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 197). The best evidence to understanding the organization and government of Egypt under the Umayyad Caliphate, with influences on Syria and Palestine, comes from the collection of *Aphrodito Papyri*⁵. Specifically, *Aphrodito Papyrus nr. 1433* provides very significant information that 40 skilled workmen were required for the construction of the Damascus Mosque in 706/6 and 709 CE (Bell 1912: 373; McKenzie 2010: 362). Evidently, many individual Egyptian artists travelled or immigrated to the eastern and western Mediterranean areas, or they were contracted by local rulers to commission mosaic decoration projects in religious edifices or private villas. Lohuizen-Mulder, assumed that

⁵ The *Aphrodito papyri* were acquired by the British Museum in 1903; (Bell 1908: 98). These letters/documents probably were addressed to Basileus, *dyoketes* (Arabic, *Sahib*) of Aphrodito. These papyri provide information on building materials, as well as of workmen required for the building of the Damascus and Al-Aqsa Mosques.

the artisans who made the mosaics in the Great Mosque at Damascus came from Alexandria (1995: 206). His hypothesis is deduced from his research of the capital of a small domed octogon in the sahn of the Great Mosque, as being the product of the Egyptian artisans (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 206). Additional support for the Alexandrian style and artists involved in the decoration of the Great Mosque is expressed by C. R. Morey. He referred that the mosaics in the Church of St. George at Thessaloniki resemble the architectural landscape of Damascus (Lohuizen-Mulder 1995: 206).

The Damascus riverine mosaic with the ship inhabited by two men augments the preserved tradition of the Nilotic motif in Umayyad religious edifice and the tolerance of the early Arab rulers to comprise human or animal figures in varied visual arts. We may assume that Egyptian mosaicists were employed to the commission of the riverine mosaic in the Great Mosque. The use of Nilotic theme decoration in religious edifices, the Church of St. Stephen, Umm al-Rasas, or the Great Mosque at Damascus, allude to the Nile referred as one of the four rivers of Paradise. The varied trees and the fancy structures depicted in the mosaics of the Great Mosque are referred to visualize the image of Paradise as described in the Koran. The description of ships in several passages in the Koran appears as utilitarian and inventions of men under the guidance of God. The Damascus ship depicted on the east pier of the north colonnade may evidence the symbolism and the visual representation of the ship mentioned in Koran.

Conclusion

The ship depicted in the riverine mosaic on the east pier of the north colonnade in the courtyard of the Great Mosque at Damascus may be considered as an indicator for the dating of this mosaic decoration to the original construction of the Mosque complex by al-Walid I (705-715 CE). Van-Berchem observed that some fragments of the architectural composition, and the east and west extremities of the north colonnade belong to the original construction of the Damascus Mosque (Creswell – van-Berchem 1969: 349). The helmsman and the seated figure on the prow are outstanding evidences to support that the riverine scene mosaic was produced during the construction period of the Mosque, and following the Roman tradition of maritime and/or Nilotic themes. The Damascus riverine mosaic may have been designed by Alexandrian mosaic master and then produced under his guidance by local Syrian mosaic artisans. The distinct transition line from the tolerant approach to the depiction of human figures in the Umayyad mosaics and the impact of the iconoclasm in the early Abbasid period, and supported by the Hadith (9th century CE) is augmented by the insertion of the large floral square onto the sitting man on the prow (Figs. 3, 3a, 5). The Damascus ship shows a strong Nilotic influence. It also indicates the diffusion of Egyptian shipbuilding tradition of wooden *papyriform* vessels that preserved in the eastern Mediterranean as late as the 8th century CE. The vessels in the Nilotic frame mosaic from Umm al-Rasas also augment the preserved tradition of Egyptian *papyriform* crafts. The Damascus ship may symbolize the visual representation of God's making the natural phenomena "subservient" to man, thus He enabled men to derive benefits from the sea, and the ships to be used for transportation and commerce, and therefore men have to be grateful to God:

"It is God who made the sea subservient (to His laws, so that it be of use) to you – so that ships might sail through it (the sea) at His behest, and that you might seek to obtain (what you need) of His Bounty, and that you might have cause you to be grateful" (Koran 45: 12).

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