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Funerary Mosaic Found in Northern Syria

Kuzey Suriye’de Bulunan Mezar Mozaïği

Komait ABDALLAH*

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Abstract

A mosaic was discovered in 2007, in a funerary chamber at Frykia village in northern Syria, by the excavation service of the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria. This mosaic presents an interesting scene consisting of two columns with a pair of animals facing each other next to a fruit tree. The study of the decor suggests that this mosaic belongs to the 6th century B.C. and that the iconographic theme is inspired by Isaiah 11:6 concerning the animal kingdom of peace and is rendered according to the Syrian tradition of mosaic art from the 6th century. The representation of this topic in a mosaic belonging to a funerary chamber has a significance, regarding the Christian interpretation of life after dead.

Keywords: Mosaic, Syria, Idleb, funerary, Byzantine.

Öz

2007 yılında, Suriye Eski Eserler ve Müzeler Müdürlüğü tarafından, Kuzey Suriye’deki Frykia köyündeki bir mezar odasında gerçekleştirilen kazıda bir mozaik bulunmuştur. Bu mozaik üzerinde, iki sütun arasında, bir meyve ağacının yanında durur şekilde birbirine doğru bakan bir çift hayvanın betimlenmiş olduğu ilginç bir sahne yer almaktadır. Bu dekor çalışması, bu eserin İ.S. 6. yüzyıla tarihlendirilebileceğini düşündürmektedir. Ayrıca bu ikonografik tema hayvanlar alemindeki barışın üzerinde duran İsaiah 11:6’dan esinlenilmiş olup 6. yüzyıl Suriye mozaik sanatı geleneği ile yorumlanarak betimlenmiştir. Bir gömü odasına ait olan mozaik üzerindeki bu tür bir betim Hıristiyanlık’ın ölümden sonraki yaşamla ilgili yorumlarını yansıtmaları bakımından oldukça önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mozaik, Suriye, Idleb, mezar, Bizans.

The mosaic was discovered in 2007 by the Antiquities Section in northern Syria at Frykia village in Idleb. Currently it is preserved *in situ*. It is a floor mosaic from an ancient room used by the owner of the neighbouring house as a stable. Following the excavation, it was determined that this room belongs to the Byzantine Period and that it was reused and restored many times during the Medieval Period¹. This room eventually became a funerary chamber, including many *sarcophagi* made of limestone. The *sarcophagi* are located at three sides of the chamber. Some of the *sarcophagi* were destroyed while others have been conserved and decorated with cross sculptures in medallions. The entrance to the room was located in the western wall preceding a staircase composed of three grades. The floor of the room was paved with a rectangular mosaic panel that measures 5,80 x 4,60 m. The *tesserae* are made from limestone and measure 1 cm on each side; the colours used are: white, black, brown, grey, red, and pink. The mosaic is composed of three frames and a figured panel.

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¹ A preliminary report of the discovery of a mosaic in Frykia village: DGAM 2007. The excavators did not provide in their report the reasons for the proposed dating.

Mosaic description

We observe the first external frame (Fig. 1), which surrounded the grades and was located between the sarcophagi. It is separated from the second frame by a white row and decorated in a chessboard-pattern with a nested square polychrome pattern of alternating brown and grey (Décor I: pl. 115b). The second frame (Fig. 2) surrounded the figured panel. It included a polychrome row of outlined tangent circles and horizontal spindles (Décor I: pl. 22i). The circle is coloured in with white and contains another circle in pink and a smaller circle in white, in the middle of which there is a black spot. A black triangle outlined the space of the frame, which is ensconced between the circles and the spindles. Each grey spindle includes a smaller spindle, in white, ornamented with a vertical lozenge in red.

The main subject (Fig. 3) consists of animal figures arranged vertically in two columns: all the figures are portrayed against a white background. There are four scenes, each scene is composed of a fruit tree separating a pair of animals facing each other, one wild and the other peaceful. In front of each animal there is a



Figure 1
DGAM archive, Syria.

Figure 2
DGAM archive, Syria.



Figure 3
DGAM archive, Syria.

flower plant. The *tesserae* of the background have been irregularly disposed. We can read the scene starting from the lower register, which is the first scene at the entrance to the room. We find a lamb in the right side confronting a wolf on the other side. At the centre, a tree with round fruits (probably apples) is depicted (rendered in red *tesserae* and bordered by white *tesserae*). In the second register from above, a leopard is represented at the right facing a goat depicted at the left-hand side. The tree depicted at the centre is a pear tree. The third register

contains a cow on the right-hand side in front of a bear at the opposite side. The tree in the middle bears round fruit, rendered in red *tesserae*. In the upper register, a lion is portrayed at the right-hand side facing a bull, at the left-hand side, and a grenadine tree separates the two animals.

Geometric motifs

The first geometric motif of the frame, decorated in a chessboard-pattern with a nested square polychrome, is a rare motif. The only example to compare it with is found in the mosaic of the Houad church, in Syria (Abdallah 2009: pl. XXXI, 2), dated to 568/569 A.C. The difference between the two mosaics is found in the colours used, but the treatment of the chessboard-pattern is very similar.

The second motif of the frame is the row with a polychrome pattern consisting of outlined tangent circles and horizontal spindles. We can see these geometric elements in the frames of the mosaic of the church of Tell Ar (Abdallah 2009: pl. LX, 2), in northern Syria (434/435 A.C.), and of the mosaic of Kafer Sajneh (Abdallah 2009: pl. CXVI, 1), of the mosaic of the Rams' Heads (Levi 1947: pl. CXXXIII, c) at Antioch (5th century A.C.), and of the frame of the central nave of the church of Beit Mery (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 340 fig. 324) in Lebanon (second third of the 5th century A.C.). But, in these two cases, the circles and the spindles are interloped tangentially in asymmetrically shaded bands. In the Marret An-Nouman Museum, we have an example very close to our motif that we can see in the panel exposed at the portico (end of the 5th and beginning of the 6th century A.C.), which was conserved in Canada (Abdallah 2009: pl. C, 1). The frame of this mosaic is ornamented exactly like the frame of our mosaic, by a polychrome row of outlined tangent circles and striped horizontal spindles. The difference is observed in the colour and the motif filling the spindle. In the mosaic at Marret An-Nouman, there is a lozenge in the spindle that is not depicted on our mosaic. Another example that receives the same treatment is the frame of a mosaic conserved at the İznik Museum in Turkey (Şener 2011: 875 fig. 2).

Iconography

In this mosaic, we find many types of scenes that are characterised by a landscape background characterised by trees and flowers or flower motifs. In the landscape, both wild and domesticated animals are represented and are horizontally or vertically disposed. Sometimes the animals are depicted fighting each other and other times they are depicted in harmony. In this mosaic, we see four pairs of animals, represented vertically in two columns, carnivorous animals and herbivores. We observe a similar scene in the panel of the main nave of the church of Houad, dating from 568/569 (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 141). In this panel there are also two columns of animals disposed according to their nature, but they do not confront each other nor are they separated by a tree, as in our case. The flowering plants placed in front of each animal, in our mosaic, are dispersed irregularly in the background of the panel of Houad. In addition, there are bird figures on the Houad panel, and we find that an eagle flanked by a phoenix dominates all animals, but such figures do not occur in our scene.² Another example that is iconographically close to our scene is found in a panel conserved in the Hama museum, belonging probably to the second half of 6th century (Abdallah 2014: 302 fig. 7). In this example, we see opposing animals, depicted

² For this mosaics, the scene is probably inspired from the Genesis (1, 7 et 2,7, 18-23) and was interpreted as the figure of the new world inaugurated by Christ, symbolised by the eagle (Abdallah: 2009: 18).

in a peaceful atmosphere, but they are arranged in three columns and there are no trees or flowers to separate the animals. It is clear that the scene from our mosaic is unique. Although this kind of scene is quite common in Syrian mosaics, our case is very peculiar compared to the others. We can see the representation of fruit trees between two animals in front of one another, but in the majority of cases, the animals are identical, making an asymmetrical composition (Abdallah 2009: 372). Concerning the flowering plant depicted facing each animal, we can find some examples of this in northern Syrian mosaics, but we observe that the flowering plant is just accompanying the pacific animals, as can be seen in the Frykia mosaic exposed in the Marret An-Nouman museum, dated to 511 A.C. (Abdallah 2009: pl. XVI, 1); in the mosaic of Alqassabiat (Abdallah 2009: pl. CXI, 1, CXII, 1-2); and in the mosaic of Maar Zita (Abdallah 2009: pl. CXXV, 1-2). We have some mosaics in Jordan that include a plant between two identical pacific animals, such as the mosaic of the church of Apostles at Madaba, dated to 587 A.C. (Piccirillo 1993: 106 fig. 89). The mosaic of the chapel of the Theotokos in Mont Nebo, belonging to the first decades of the 7th century, presents a flowering plant in front of a gazelle (Piccirillo 1993: 151 fig. 200). In another mosaic, that is the floor of the church of Sergius at Umm Al Rassas and dating from 587/88 A.C., we can see two flowering plants in front of two sheep facing each other in a medallion (Piccirillo 1993: 243 fig. 365). In the mosaic of the chapel of the Tawl family at Madaba, we also find a lion and a bull facing each other and separated by a plant (Piccirillo 1993: 128 pl. 139).

Rendering

Concerning the mosaic of Idleb, the animals are drawn in a simple style. Even though each animal is identifiable, the overall quality of the figures is poor. Their bodies are determined by a thick outline in black *tesserae*. The mosaic artist employed two colours for marking the volume of the body. At the same time, the artist tried to identify each animal by selecting a specific colour in which to render its skin. This schematic way to represent the animals is due to the degradation of the quality of 6th century mosaic workers. In some examples of animal figures represented in the mosaics of northern Syria in the 6th century, we observe the use of a thick outline for the body and two colours to evoke the skin. We find this peculiar treatment in many animal figures on the mosaic of the northern church of Marrata (Abdallah 2009: pl. IX) in northern Syria, probably dating to the second half of the 6th century A.C., as well as in the mosaic dating to 668/669 A.C. of the south collateral of the church of Houad (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 141 fig. 110).

Concerning the trees, it can be observed that they have been treated in a schematized manner. Each tree is characterized by a reduced size compared with the animal figures, the disproportion between the trunk and the branches bearing fruits, and the use of black outlines for rendering all parts of the tree. The trunks are coloured with one light colour with many branches forking outwards to support the pear-shaped leaves rendered against a dark background along with a trunk (this can be observed in three trees). The fruits are rendered in two forms, one is rounded and coloured in red, or in red and white (three trees), and the other is pear-shaped (one tree). We find this schematised manner in the treatment of the fruit trees on the mosaic of the southern church of Marrata in northern Syria, dating to the second half of the 6th century (Abdallah 2009: pl. X-XI). The flowering plant is composed of a stump forking into many stems, two or three of which bear a flower. The stump and the stems are rendered in grey and

black *tesserae* and the flower is pink and triangular in shape. We have several examples of plants bearing flowers in Syrian mosaics dating from the second half of the 5th and 6th centuries. The type of plant depicted on our mosaic is similar to those of the church of Oum Hartein in the centre of Syria, dating to 500 A.C. (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 194-195 fig. 170-172), and in the mosaic of the church of Houeidjit Halaoua, situated in northeast of Syria, and dated to 471 A.C. (Donceel-Voûte 1988: 146 fig. 119).

Interpretation

The mosaicist's choice to represent both wild and domesticated animals in a peaceful environment evokes the passage of Isaiah 11: 6-7 regarding the kingdom of peace where animals live together serenely. Comparing the biblical text with the mosaics, we find that these scenes are inspired by the Isaiah passage, but they are treated in a particular manner that follows traditional iconographic forms, known in Syria in the 6th century. The animals portrayed and the hierarchy of the scene in this mosaic reflect the passage from Isaiah. In this mosaic, the animals portrayed from the lower register to the upper are: a wolf and lamb, a leopard and goat, a bear and cow, and a lion and bull (or an ox). In the Isaiah passage, we read:

«The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.» (Isaiah 11: 6-7).

Only the third phrase in the text is not depicted. In addition, the representation of the flowering plant and the fruit tree with the animal figures do not correspond to the description in the text.

According to Campbell (Campbell 1995: 125) there are five examples of this subject in mosaics in early Byzantine churches, discovered in many regions, especially in Turkey, Corsica and Jordan. In these mosaics there are many scenes, which demonstrate the peaceful kingdom of Isaiah, represented in different ways, all of these scenes are accompanied with inscriptions from the Isaiah passage.

Three examples are found in southern Turkey. The most complete depiction of them is found in the church of Karlık (Gough 1974: 416-419). In this mosaic, all the pairs of animals described in the Isaiah passage are rendered with fidelity, even to the point of the description of the actions of each pair. It is possible that the elephant and stag are the whim of the mosaicist (Campbell 1995: 128). Thus, there is a difference compared to our mosaic, where the mosaicist did not respect the details of the textual description and chose only four pairs of animals and represented them facing each other separated by a tree and not according to the attitude that distinguish the animals as they are described in the biblical text, and as they figure in the Karlık mosaic. The second example from Turkey is a fragment of mosaic from the church of Koryos, in front of the apse (Campbell 1995: 182). This fragment shows a lion, a leopard and a ram with a short inscription in Greek, taken from the verses in Isaiah. The third mosaic from Turkey is the mosaic located in front of the apse in the Anemurium (Russell 1987: 70-74), and we find just a leopard and a kid separated, as in our mosaic, by a tree. Nevertheless,

they are not preceded by a flowering plant, as is mentioned in the inscription above them, which is an excerpt from the verses of Isaiah.

In a church discovered in Corsica, we have a mosaic showing the rest of an ox and a manger with straw with a Latin inscription citing a passage from Isaiah (Campbell 1995: 128). Similarly, at Ma'in, in Jordan, we have a fragment of an ox with a Greek inscription, identifying the lion eating straw, like the ox, as we read in the passage from Isaiah (Piccirillo 1989: 81).

We have also some examples in mosaics from early Byzantine churches, from Jordan and Syria, which contain representations of animal pairs (predators and prey), depicted in pacific postures. This representation evokes the peaceful kingdom of Isaiah. For example, the paradise mosaic of the Farid Elmasri house (Piccirillo 1993: 78) that includes a lion and an ox facing each other on either side of a plant. In Syria, the Jarjinaz mosaic, displayed at the Marret An-Nouman museum, we observe a bear eating fruit near a gazelle in a landscape (Abdallah 2009: pl. LXXVI, 2). Another example from Syria would indicate that the peaceful kingdom is found in a mosaic exhibited at the Hama Museum (Abdallah 2014: 302 fig. 7). In this mosaic, both predator and prey are portrayed vertically without a discernable order and in a peaceful position.

It is clear that our mosaic is distinguished by the manner of representation of the peaceful kingdom depicted in Isaiah, which is characterised by the figures of predators and prey in peaceful positions and by the introduction of paradisiac elements, such as fruit trees and flowers. The particularity of the mosaic is demonstrated also by the architectural context, which is a funerary chamber. It is evident that the subject depicted in the mosaic is linked to the function of the room. Funerary mosaics are very rare in Syria in the early Byzantine era. One of the first examples was found in a catacomb at Homs, dated to the 6th century A.C. (Balty 1977: 144-145). But in this mosaic, there is figuration of the deceased with two others personages. In North Africa, we have many funerary mosaics dating to Late Antiquity, which include epitaphs. These mosaics are decorated with motifs suggesting paradisiac happiness (Duval 1976: 65). The motifs include a flower, a vase, a palm tree, a vine scroll, and fruits such as grenadines, apples, grapes, and figs. There are also representations of different birds, as well as fish and lambs (Duval 1976: 62-66). Many funerary mosaics, which date to Late Antiquity, are known from Spain, Italy, and Croatia. All of these mosaics include epitaphs and are similar to those found in North Africa (Duval 1976: 72-76). Christian funerary iconography from Late Antiquity was especially marked by motifs evoking a paradisiac atmosphere. Vegetal elements (such flowers, vine scrolls, and palms), birds, lambs, and crosses are elements mainly representative of paradise. The figures of the deceased along with saintly figures, and some narrative scenes inspired by the Bible, such as Daniel fighting the lion, or the arc of Noah with the animals, or the good shepherd with predators and prey depicted abiding peacefully are also themes that appear habitually (Zebawi 1998: 229-230).

It is evident that paradisiac and eternal peace is the most significant iconographic element in the funerary art of early Christianity. The figurative or narrative scene of paradise evokes this notion of eternal life. The Idleb mosaic includes a representation of paradise that is likely the peaceful kingdom as it is described in Isaiah. Theodoret of Cyrus³ interprets this theme in his commentary on Isaiah,

³ Theodoret of Cyrus is a syrian theologian of the school of Antioch. He was a bishop of Cyrhus (in northern Syria) between 423-457 AC.

as the vision of the end of days where animal that are natural enemies, will be at peace with each other. It is the messianic reign of peace, foretold by Isaiah and effectuated by Christ who promised to provide it as a gift to the faithful⁴.

These types of paradisiac figures are especially depicted, as we have mentioned above, in church mosaics from the early Byzantine period. For the scene in the Karlik mosaic, Gough has indicated that it represents the peace promised by Christ to the believers as a special gift and may symbolise the reconciliation between opposing Christian fractions in the 5th and 6th centuries A.C. (Gough 1974: 419). According to Campbell who has worked on the iconography of the peaceful kingdom in mosaics, the relation of this iconographic theme to the Christological controversies of the 5th and 6th centuries does not provide a satisfactory solution. Campbell attempted to provide an explanation of this scene by linking it to the rite of Baptism that was highly important in the early Byzantine period (Campbell 1995: 129-130). In our example, the relation between the function of the funerary chamber and the subject depicted in the mosaic is very clear. The paradisiac reference in the image is indisputable. The main subject of Christian funerary iconography in Late Antiquity was the eternal life motif with a peaceful connotation. It is obvious that the funerary iconography is linked with the Christian interpretation of life after death. In reality the iconography that we find in Christian tombs in Late Antiquity corresponds to the exposition of the believers' fate in the afterlife, as it is described in the biblical text and in the apostolic constitution. The peaceful kingdom is the messianic kingdom of paradisiac peace promised by Christ to the true believers (Gough 1974: 417). It exemplifies the role of the pious and the righteous and those who see the glory of Christ (Metzger 2003: 240-243). Thus the explanation of the scene includes a figurative representation of paradise based on the biblical text of Isaiah and represented according to the mosaicist's vision. According to this vision, the addition of fruit trees and flowering plants can be considered as paradisiac elements.

Dating and Conclusion

The representation of the animal scene with geometrical frames is frequently used in the mosaics of northern Syria from the second half of the 5th and 6th centuries A.C. The comparative study for the geometrical motifs of the frames and the quality of animals figures suggest that this mosaic could be dated to the second half of the 6th century A.C.

The Idleb mosaic is an exceptional example in comparison with the Syrian mosaics of the early Byzantine period, especially as regards the iconographic themes and the architectural context in which the mosaic was laid. On the one hand, it presents an obvious illustration of a biblical passage that is not very frequently represented in Syrian mosaics. On the other hand, it paves the floor of a tomb, which is very rare for Byzantine Syria. In addition, this iconography provides us with an idea about Christian theology concerning the afterlife and funerary practices in the villages of northern Syria in the early Byzantine period.

⁴ Théodoret de Cyr, commentaire sur Isaïe 11: 6-7, 415-440.

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