

Book Review - Kitap İncelemesi

Henry MAGUIRE*

From Wilderness to Paradise: a Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at Qasr el Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya, Jane Chick, 155 pages, 166 figures color & black and white, Archaeopress Publishing, Archaeopress Archaeology, Oxford, 2024, ISBN: 978-1-80327-730-1 (printed book), ISBN: 978-1-80327-731-8 (e-Pdf version).

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Jane Chick's book, based on a PhD dissertation completed in 2014, is devoted to the "large mosaic pavement" in the so-called East Church at Qasr el-Lebia, in Cyrenaica. This remarkable floor comprises a grid of fifty square panels framed by undulating interlaced bands. The individual panels contain an astonishing variety of subjects, which make the floor one of the richest with respect to its imagery to survive from the Early Byzantine world. The mosaic resembles a giant crossword puzzle, whose meanings have to be teased out from the enigmatic clues provided by the individual images and their sparsely provided inscriptions. It is certainly deserving of a book-length study, which it had hitherto not received. Even if it is not the most technically accomplished of mosaics, its complex iconography is fascinating and revealing of many aspects of early Byzantine thought and life, including concepts of theology, geography, patronage, imperial expansion, and power. The mosaic was created in Theodorias, a town evidently refounded in the province of Cyrenaica as part of the Emperor Justinian's campaign to pacify the lands to the west of Egypt.

Early commentators on the mosaic saw the diverse images it contains as nothing more than a random selection, with little or no coherent symbolic content. However, subsequent scholars, beginning with André Grabar, have proposed that the composition of the floor was meaningful, especially as an evocation of God's creation. Chick presents a more complete documentation of the mosaic and its imagery than was available in previous publications, and expands upon the symbolic potential of its imagery.

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



JANE CHICK



The first chapter contains an introduction to the church and its three surviving areas of mosaic, the northeast annex, the sanctuary at the west end of the building, and the east end of the nave, where the large pavement on which the book focuses is located. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the dating. Chick accepts that the mosaic in the northeast annex was laid at the same time and by the same workshop as the large pavement, while the mosaic in the sanctuary is evidently not by the same atelier as the other two mosaics. She accepts a sixth-century date for the large mosaic, on the basis of inscriptions in both the large pavement and the northeast annex mosaic, and of stylistic and iconographic parallels with other churches.

The second chapter presents a brief discussion of the geographical and ecclesiastical context in Cyrenaica, and of the site of Qasr el-Lebia. The main archaeological features that have been discovered in the town are the East and the West Churches. The West Church had an inscribed cross plan, while the East Church was a two-aisled basilica, with a reverse orientation to the west. Its nave was paved with large marble slabs and smaller slabs at its western end, and with the large pavement at the east.

The third chapter seeks to interpret the imagery of the large pavement by stepping “into the shoes of the Late Antique viewer” (p. 30). Chick stresses the well-known ability of iconographic motifs in Early Byzantine art to convey multiple meanings at the same time, comparing the mosaic to cento poetry and to acrostics. She invokes the principle of *varietas*, drawing a parallel between the pavement’s eclectic imagery and the use of spolia in Late Antique construction to add “vigour and vitality” (p. 34).

The ensuing iconographic analysis in the fourth chapter focuses on groups of motifs, related either by context or by location within the mosaic, that create “meaning over and above the signification of the individual images”(pp. 37-39). Much of this discussion is a well illustrated summary of previous scholarship, but there are also interesting new observations. Thus Chick follows earlier writers in describing the aquatic motifs in the outer edges of the composition as representing the ancient concept of the ocean surrounding the inhabited earth, but also in her discussion of the figures labelled *Kosmesis* (Adornment) and *Ktisis* (Creation/Foundation) she makes the interesting new suggestion that these figures of women, though labelled as personifications, were veiled references to the role of female patronage in this ecclesiastical complex. This chapter also includes detailed analyses of the central personification of *Ananeosis* (Renewal), of the four nude personifications of the Rivers of Paradise, and of the reclining nude figure of a spring labelled *Kastalia*. She also discusses the symbolism of the motif of the eagle with its prey, which appears in the panel immediately below the one containing *Ananeosis*, seeing in it a soteriological significance, and she attempts to make sense of the trio of panels portraying a bucolic musician, a leopard, and a satyr. Finally, she addresses the panels with architectural representations, including the view of a walled town labelled “*Polis Nea Theodorias*” (“New City Theodorias”) which is top and center of the mosaic, before finishing with an assortment of animals: ostriches, horses, sheep, lions, stags, gazelles, a bull and a bear.

The fifth chapter attempts to outline how this remarkably diverse imagery created an overall program. Here the emphasis is placed on its Christian significance rather than on the political meanings evoked by the naming of the “New City Theodorias”, and the possible connections between *Ananeosis* and the campaign of renovation in the province of Cyrenaica that was associated with Justinian and his empress Theodora. Chick interprets the mosaic as it would have been viewed by those who walked across it, from east to west. She sees the eastern portion as representing a more unstable, chaotic world, containing asymmetrical images including threatening sea monsters and the satyr, while the western part, nearer the sanctuary, is resonant of paradise. She argues that the western portion features panels containing images with stronger Christian associations, including a peacock, the rivers of Paradise, the eagle with its prey, and *Ananeosis*, which are arranged in a more orderly composition of central figures flanked by symmetrically paired motifs. She characterizes the experience of moving across the floor as a “simulacrum of a spiritual journey” (p. 125). Throughout her discussion Chick sees a strong reference to baptism running through the imagery, especially in the personifications of *Ananeosis*, the Rivers of Paradise, and *Kastalia*.

In the final chapter Chick turns to the large pavement’s architectural setting, questioning whether the location that it occupies was indeed part of the nave, as earlier writers had assumed. Instead, she proposes that the mosaic occupied a separate space, which was divided by a partition from the nave proper to its west,

although there appears to be no sure archaeological record of such a feature. She hypothesizes that this space could have been part either of an episcopal palace, or of a baptismal complex.

Chick's book will be extremely useful to researchers working on Late Antique mosaics in North Africa, and on Early Byzantine iconography in general. It is extremely well documented, with extensive footnotes and a rich bibliography. It is also beautifully illustrated with color photographs, most of them taken by the author herself, both at Qasr el-Lebia and at other widely scattered sites as far apart as Ostia in Italy and Pécs in Hungary.

One interesting aspect of the large pavement that the book does not address is the approach of the mosaicists toward the illustration of the flora and fauna of nature. Although the images cannot be considered naturalistic in a photographic sense, nevertheless some of the portrayals of animals and plants pay careful attention to the characteristics that differentiate different species. For example, among the aquatic creatures, the Nile boliti fish (tilapia) is clearly recognizable from its long dorsal fin and the Nile puffer fish from its ability to inflate when under threat. These identifications, incidentally, throw doubt on the book's claim that "there is no mingling of oceanic and Nilotic motifs," and that "care has been taken to separate the two bodies of water and mark them as distinct from each other" (p. 53), for the tilapia and the puffer, mainly freshwater fish, appear together with a triton and sea shells in panels that the book identifies as "oceanic imagery" (fig. 70).

The interpretation of symbolism in Early Christian art is an uncertain task, and as a consequence some readers may find that the book pushes too far in proposing meaning for motifs that may possibly have been innocent of anything other than their literal content. To take one instance, it is suggested that the facing bull and ram at the bottom of the mosaic, which are here classed as "anomalies", may have been "intended to evoke a pagan past in which sacrifice was the norm" (pp. 114-115). But perhaps these animals were no more than illustrations of the diversity of God's Creation, evoked by the personification of *Ktisis*, which had the dual meaning of divine Creation and human foundation. In viewing Early Christian mosaics, it may not always be necessary to look for individual symbolism in every single motif. While some subjects, such as peacock or the eagle with its prey, plainly were freighted with extra layers of signification, others may have been no more than portrayals of the *varietas* of Creation.

These observations should in no way detract from the overall value of this book as an invaluable record and analysis, as complete as the archaeological circumstances allow, of one of the richest and most challenging mosaics to have survived from the Justinianic era. As the author herself writes in her conclusion: "The intention of this study is not to offer up definitive interpretations, but to open up discussion" (p. 136). In this aim she has succeeded admirably. We are greatly in the author's debt for bringing her work to publication.