



## Early Christian Basilicas in Philippopolis and Herakleia – Two Works from Unknown Metropolitan Mosaic Ateliers

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### ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the similarities between the mosaic pavements of the episcopal basilica in Philippopolis and the basilica near the curtain walls in Herakleia (former Perinthos) from around 450-460 AD. Beyond a basic examination of the details, the whole concepts of both works also show similarities, specifically the middle of the outer aisles and the design of the "entrance" panel which featured a specific image in a medallion. Three images are present, with the last two being interchangeable: fons vitae, full peacock, and a chalice. The core of the new mosaics was produced by mosaicists who came from Constantinopolitan mosaic ateliers; they brought with them the trends in the development of mosaic decoration from Thrace by including figural motifs. It appears, however, that the concept of the new mosaic decoration is closely connected with the metropolitan liturgy, and therefore, this new mosaic decoration served the needs of the newly introduced within the diocese Thracia Constantinopolitan liturgy.

**Keywords:** Philippopolis, Herakleia, Basilica, Mosaic Pavement, Iconography.

It is now assumed that the Episcopal basilica was built at the very center of Philippopolis around the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> With its impressive dimensions, 86.4 by 38.5 m, it is not only the largest Christian basilica in the provincial capital and Thrace, but also in the diocese of Thrace itself. By the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the basilica received its first mosaic floor decoration, which has not yet been fully published in

1 Е. Кесякова, "Археологическото наблюдение на консервационно-реставрационни работи на обект „Епископска базилика“, гр. Пловдив." *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2015*, София, 2016, p. 592. In recent publications it is assumed that the basilica had a non-mosaic floor of *opus signinum* which is dated to the time of Constantius II – see E. Кантарева-Дечева, "Нови стратиграфски проучвания на мозайката от епископска-та базилика на Филипопол." In: *Сборник доклади от Международна научна конференция 'Наука, образование и иновации в областта на изкуството'*. Пловдив, 2017, p. 365-372; V. Попова, "Fons vitae in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria." *Studia academica Šumenensia*, 3 (2016), p. 139.



all its details.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, another mosaic floor was laid which has been recently uncovered and exposed in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> Through this, a mosaic palimpsest was produced, as the earlier mosaic pavement had remained almost entirely intact, with some exceptions, especially in certain areas in the nave. However, it is difficult to understand why this transformation took place. The entire area of over 2,000 m<sup>2</sup> was replaced with new mosaic pavement instead of repairing only certain pieces when necessary, which occurred in the 6<sup>th</sup> century when the mosaic pavement near the altar area was repaired. Researchers have attempted to learn whether the construction of the new mosaic pavement was due to the stylistic changes in the mosaic iconography at the time or if it was due to some other specific reasons, such as for liturgical needs.

The later mosaic floor was made by combining the three mosaic techniques – *opus vermiculatum*, *opus tessellatum*, and *opus sectile*.<sup>4</sup> It covers the entire area of the basilica – the naos, narthex, and atrium. The mosaic decoration of the altar area consists of an *opus sectile* mosaic, while the floor decoration of the apse and nave consists of *opus vermiculatum* and *opus tessellatum*. The decoration of the nave consists of three panels, two of which are entirely filled with geometric patterns, i. e. the second and third, while the first presents figural motifs. The composition of the panel along the presbyterium, which seems to be a late repair,<sup>5</sup> is filled with the polychrome orthogonal pattern of circles interlooped tangentially,<sup>6</sup> with the medallions being filled with birds, peacocks, a basket of fruits, kantharos, and other symbols.

The iconography in the first panel of the nave consists of two main compositions: entirely geometric at the center where the ambo was located and images of birds combined sometimes with others (such as cages and plants) filling the squares outlined by the geometric frame.<sup>7</sup> Despite the numerous images of birds (more than 70), only a few species are presented, and all of them are local: an eagle, a peacock, a galeeny, a hen, and a duck. As for the next panels,

2 See the mosaic floor partially published recently in R. Pillinger, A. Lirsch, V. Popova, *Corpus der Spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016, p.200-2003, Taf. 140-141, Abb. 364-368; С. Станев, Е. Кантарева-Дечева, "Новоразкрити мозайки от Епископската базилика на Филиппол (2019-2021)." In: Шекерджиева-Новак, Т., Лардева, Г., Дженева, Д., Петков, Л. (ed) *Годишник на Академия за музикално, танцово и изобразително изкуство „Проф. Асен Диамандиев“*, Пловдив 2020, 2021, p.23-34.

3 Кантарева-Дечева, p. 365-372.

4 The mosaic floor has been published and discussed recently in Е. Кесякова, "Мозайки от Епископската базилика на Филиппол." In: Станев, Ст., Григоров, В., Димитров, Вл. (ed.), *Изследвания в чест на Стефан Бояджиев*. София, 2011, p.191; I. Topalilov, "The Mosaic Pavements of the Bishop's Basilica in Philippopolis, Thrace. Chronology and workshops (Preliminary report)." In: Trovabene, G. & Bertoni, A. (ed.), *Atti XII Colloquio AIEMA, Venezia, 11-15 settembre 2012*. Verona: Scripta edizioni, 2015, p.592. Pillinger et al., p.206-212, Abb. 144-159, Abb. 374-412; Кантарева-Дечева, p. 365-372.

5 In Pillinger et al., p.216 it is dated to the time of Justinian I.

6 Balmelle et al., M. *Le Décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine. I. Répertoire graphique et descriptif des compositions linéaires et isotropes*. Paris: Picard, 2002, DG 1, pl. 235a.

7 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 69f.

the second is filled with a polychrome orthogonal pattern of circles interlooped tangentially,<sup>8</sup> while the third has a polychrome orthogonal pattern of intersecting circles, forming saltires and concave squares with circles.<sup>9</sup> Each of the panels has its own bordure with an ivy scroll pattern, with or without grapes, some of which have two bordures.

More interesting is the iconography of the mosaic floors in the outer aisles, but that in the southern aisle is entirely published. It consists of three panels, of which the first and last are identical. They are filled with a polychrome grid-pattern of Herakles' knots<sup>10</sup> with kantharos, a wicker basket of fruits (probably pears or apples), birds, and stylized four-leaf rosettes in the space between them. The orientation of these images in the western panel clearly reveals the direction of movement – from west to east toward the central panel – while the orientation in the eastern panel is mixed (**Fig. 1**). Especially interesting is the iconography of the central panel. The accent is on the image of *fons vitae* where a kantharos is depicted at the very center, inscribed in a circle with two schematic fluted handles, and finishing up with a spherical pine which disperses some water. On both edges of the vessel, two peacocks are resting. Some other birds with a floral motif are presented around the *fons vitae* itself as well as around the inscribed squares. At the four corners of the panel *kantharoi* with a vine-scroll coming out are displayed (**Fig. 2**).



**Figure 1.** South hallway mosaics with kantharos, wicker fruit basket, birds and stylized four-leaf rose motifs.

8 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 235a.

9 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 238e – variant.

10 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 254f.



**Figure 2.** Fons vitae motif on mosaic ground, surrounded by depictions of plants and birds.

Similar is the decoration of the northern aisle of the basilica. It also consists of three panels with identical iconography in the first and middle panels. Thus, as in the southern aisle, the composition of the eastern panel is filled with Herakles' knots and baskets, four-leaf rosettes, vases, fruit, and birds. This is identical to the first and third panel in the other outer aisle of the basilica, while the third panel is identical with the third of the nave – an orthogonal composition of interlooped circles. The accent is on the central panel with the *fons vitae* image, representing a peacock with a spread tail.<sup>11</sup> The decoration in the western panel is a variant of the polychrome orthogonal pattern of intersecting circles, which form saltires and concave squares with circles that are similar to those in the western panel of the nave.<sup>12</sup> In its iconography, it resembles the western panel in the nave.

The narthex and the rooms as well as the porticos on the northern and southern part of the atrium also have mosaic pavement. The panels in the southern part that are filled with an orthogonal grid and geometric patterns have been published,<sup>13</sup> together with that in the narthex filled with geometric motives combined repeatedly with the image of a cantharos and a basket with bread rolls (**Fig.3**). Sadly, the mosaic pavement in the narthex is not published yet. However, the photos that can be found on the internet show that its iconography as a

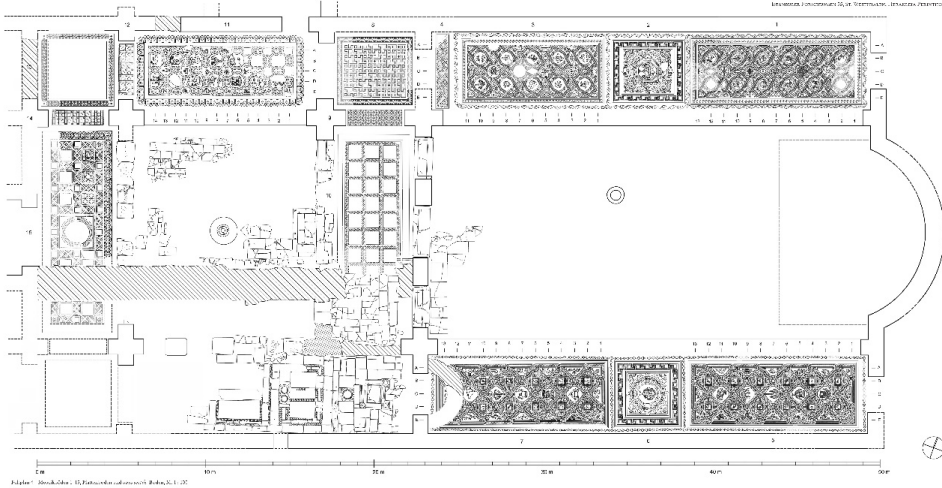
11 Кантарева-Дечева, p. 365-372.

12 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 238e – variant.

13 Кесякова, Мозайки от епископската базилика на Филипопол, p.188-190.



whole is geometric with the figural part only in the center, just in front of the main entrance to the naos, consisting of the image of a full-peacock in a medallion (**Fig.4**).



**Figure 3.** Episcopalian Basilica of Philippopolis, illustration of mosaic floor.



**Figure 4.** The mosaic floor in the narthex.

The date of the mosaic pavements has been debated recently, based on the iconography as well as the results of the recent archaeological excavations. Thus, the initial excavator

Elena Kessjakova claims that the mosaic pavements should be dated to the second quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, based on the lack of human and animal figures. As the presence of birds is a common feature in the Near East in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, this parallel may align with the date of the Philippopolitan mosaic.<sup>14</sup> E. Kessjkova goes further and believes that the mosaicists in Philippiopolis may have drawn their inspiration and artistic impulse from the fashion trends of a Near East atelier.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that there is a massive discrepancy between the mosaics in Philippiopolis and Near East.

Another date is proposed by V. Popova. Initially based on the schematic presentation of the birds, as well as the popularity of schemes and motifs and parallels with other mosaics in Philippiopolis, she dated the mosaic pavements to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically, to the time of Anastasius I.<sup>16</sup> The ecclesiastical floor mosaics of Greece and the Balkans undoubtedly feature a preference for images of living creatures, plants, and fruit,<sup>17</sup> especially in 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> However, the case of the Heraklean basilica suggests that an earlier date – the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century – is also possible, as we will outline.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Vanja Popova reconsidered the date initially proposed and she is now inclined to date the mosaic after the invasion of the Huns in 447 AD, which is accepted as *terminus post quem*. Therefore, the date should be assumed to be between the 450s to the 460s, when the city recovered. Another argument for this date is the numerous images of birds in the nave which, she assumes, was produced by a metropolitan mosaic atelier.<sup>20</sup>

The later date of the mosaic pavements has been also expressed in another publication which deals with the results of the recent excavations on the pavements themselves. It is suggested that this period may be distinguished into three phases regarding the construction of the mosaic pavements: the first one deals with the mosaics in the narthex and atrium, the second one relates to the mosaics in the naos and specifically with the nave and outer aisles, and the third one deals with all sides of the *presbyterium*. As a whole, the period itself is dated from the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century till the middle of 6<sup>th</sup> century. No further comments on the date of these three phases are given.<sup>21</sup>

Although the mosaic pavements of the Episcopal basilica remain unpublished, some preliminary observations may be made. For instance, when studying the mosaic pavement

14 Ibid., p.193-194.

15 Ibid., p.194.

16 Pillinger et al., p.220.

17 M. P. Raynaud, *Corpus of the Mosaics of Turkey 1: Lycia. Xanthos 1: The East Basilica* (Uludağ University Mosaic Research Center Series 2). Bursa: Ege Yayınları, 2009, p.138, n.24.

18 H. Maguire *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art*. Monographs on the Fine Arts. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1987, p.83; St. Westphalen, "Die Basilica am Kalekapi in Herakleia/Perinthos. Bericht über die Ausgrabungen von 1992-2010 in Marmara Ereğlisi", *Istanbuler Forschungen*, 55 (2016), p.110.

19 Westphalen, p.110.

20 Popova, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.164-165.

21 Кантарева-Дечева, 371. In the text, under fig.7 the end of 5<sup>th</sup> c. is mentioned as the initial date of the period.

in the naos, three things are easily observed: the compositional differences between the mosaics in the nave and in the outer aisles, the almost entire geometric composition in the nave, as well as the more refined, precise, and sophisticated work of the mosaics that covered the narthex, achieved by the use of rich colour diversity with red, yellow, dark and grey blue, brown, green, white, and orange *tesselae*. The *tesselae* themselves are of smaller size, with those of glass being used for the yellow-colored *tesselae*. All these specifics refer also to the figural mosaics in the aisles as well as the first panel of the nave, where, however, the mosaic is not as refined as it is in the narthex. Unlike these is the work in the geometric panels made by bigger-sized *tesselae* of lower artistic value.<sup>22</sup> The assumed interpretation is that the figural mosaics in the aisles were produced by one mosaic atelier, while the geometric mosaics in the nave were produced by another.<sup>23</sup> It appears, however, that things are more complicated, as the figural style and composition in the first panel of the nave differs significantly from what is attested, not only in the outer aisles, but also in the narthex and atrium mosaic pavement. This clearly reveals the work of another mosaic atelier.<sup>24</sup> By this, as a whole, it could be suggested that at least three mosaic ateliers worked in the naos, two of which produced the figural mosaics while the other produced the geometric panels, plus one more in the narthex and the rooms adjacent to the atrium and another one that executed the *opus sectile* in the altar area. The high artistic level and elegant iconography of the *fons vitae* in the southern aisle with that in the narthex's composition, which is already observed,<sup>25</sup> may reveal that both mosaics were produced by the same mosaic atelier.

The stylistic analysis shows that at least two of these ateliers in fact fulfilled almost the entire task, with the exception of the first panel in the nave, westward of the presbyterium. Thus, the first one covered the entire southern aisle and eastern two-thirds of the northern aisle, while the other worked on the western two-thirds of the nave and western one-third of the northern aisle. It may be assumed that one of them produced the "birds" panel in the nave as well.

The picture is a bit more complicated as some confusions may arise from observations in the first panel in the southern aisle and the third panel in the nave. In the first case, unlike in the third panel, some of the images of birds have a different orientation, with a mixture of eastward and northward direction, i.e. toward the eastern wall of the basilica (and the entrance?) (**Fig.5**). E. Kessjakova believes that this may be due to both lower esthetical requirements reveals the work of two mosaic ateliers.<sup>26</sup> In the latter case, it may imply that the mosaic pavement was repaired sometime in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.

22 Кесякова, Мозайки от Епископската базилика на Филипопол, p.196-197; Topalilov, The Mosaic Pavements of the Bishop's Basilica in Philippopolis, Thrace, p.597.

23 Кесякова, Мозайки от епископската базилика на Филипопол, p.196-197.

24 Попова, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.165, n.41

25 Попова, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.166.

26 Кесякова, Мозайки от епископската базилика на Филипопол, p.178.

Instead, however, we could assume that this is nothing more than a confusion and not as a work of another atelier.

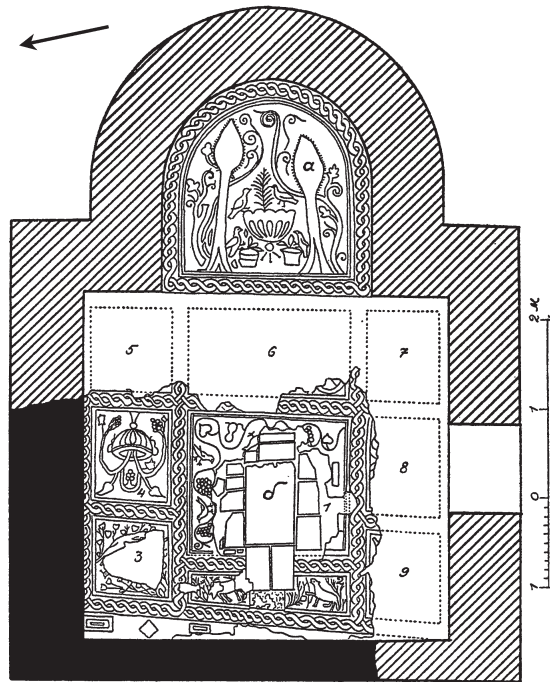


**Figure 5.** Depiction of a bird oriented towards the east wall of the basilica.

Another curiosity can be observed in the western panel of the nave where two different areas use the same iconography, but in the opposite colours (**Fig.6**). While the reason for this remains unclear, we can assume that there was a lack of necessary supplies, rather than assuming this to be a sign of the work of another atelier. All the discrepancies attested in the mosaic pavement of the naos may in fact have been repairs through the ages and therefore the work of various ateliers, mostly originating from Philippopolis. Until we have the entire and detailed publication of the mosaic pavement, however, all of this remains mere speculation. What is certain is that the whole mosaic pavement in the naos was constructed within one phase, as revealed recently in the bibliography,<sup>27</sup> with the work of at least three mosaic ateliers. The evidence, although scanty, allows us to trace the main phases in this work. Thus, it seems that the work began in the eastern part of the southern aisle, and possibly, if not synchronously, a bit later, in the nave, with the first panel located near the altar area. This initial work was undertaken by two mosaic ateliers, one of which left the basilica after the completion of the pre-altar area and the first panel in the nave. When the mosaic pavement of the southern aisle was completed, the mosaicists moved to the northern aisle to complete the first two panels. The confusion of the orientation of the birds observed in the eastern panel of the southern aisle reveals that this section was initially covered with the mosaic floor. After this was finished, there was no room for more mistakes, and accordingly, the mosaic pavement in the respective area in the northern aisle was made properly.

27 See Кантарева-Дечева, р. 365-372, contra Кесякова, Мозайки от Епископската базилика на Филиппол, р.196-197.





**Figure 6.** The mosaics on the west panel of the Nave, which have the same iconography but different colors.

Due to some unknown yet reasons, perhaps the sudden departure of the mosaicists, the western two-thirds of the mosaic pavement in the northern aisle is geometric instead of figural. We may assume that the mosaicists that completed it were those that made the geometric panels in the mosaic floor in the nave. All three of these mosaic ateliers have specific traits that are easily detected and make the differentiation between them in style and iconography clear. They also allow us to search for their origin, or at least their association with some artistic circles. For instance, the mosaic in the first panel in the nave is parallel with the Near Eastern mosaics, which led E. Kessjakova to assume that the mosaicists in Philippopolis '*drew their inspiration and creativity from the trends and the fashion of Middle Eastern ateliers.*'<sup>28</sup> It should be also connected with the fact that in Philippopolis '*a large number of masters and craftsmen from the Near East have found their realisation.*'<sup>29</sup> Although Syrians are attested in the epigraphic monuments, it seems that the mosaic pavements in Philippopolis were not produced by masters of Near Eastern origin, but instead that the 'Syrian influence'

28 Кесякова, Мозайки от епископската базилика на Филипопол, p.194.

29 Ibid., p.195.

probably reached the city through Constantinople and cities on the Western Asianic coast.<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, the mosaic atelier in Philippopolis can be identified with an unknown yet metropolitan mosaic atelier, or at least one that belonged to a metropolitan circle and was strongly influenced by Constantinople.<sup>31</sup> The possible production of the *opus sectile* in the altar area also refers specifically to Constantinople, particularly to the floor in the *opus sectile* of Hagia Sophia. Unfortunately, the area is quite disturbed and the floor was removed later, which does not allow us to reach a conclusion as to whether the *opus sectile* floor belonged to the 5<sup>th</sup> century construction of the mosaic floor or to the repair of the altar area that occurred in 6<sup>th</sup> century during the time of Justinian I.<sup>32</sup>

The second atelier that made the figural mosaics in the aisles in the Episcopal basilica is also interpreted as being metropolitan or at least heavily influenced by Constantinople. V. Popova expresses the opinion that among their work is the mosaic pavement, discovered at 4, Puschkin Str,<sup>33</sup> as well as the mosaic pavement in the aisles of the Herakleian basilica.<sup>34</sup> The style of mosaics of both basilicas is definitely very similar, but that of the Heraklean basilica is more elegant, complete, and delicate. The peak of the development of the mosaic art can be seen in the central image in the narthex: the full peacock surrounded by other birds. They are presented in a way that is unique for the mosaic pavements of late antique Philippopolis and have some parallels to an earlier presentation of birds in found in a mosaic pavement dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike the ateliers who were metropolitan or belonged to the artistic circle of Constantinople, the mosaic atelier that produced the geometric mosaics in the nave and the north aisle can be seen as local. The style, manner of execution, color diversity, and capacity undoubtedly proof of the craftsman coming a different artistic circle. This is clearly observed in the case of the westward panel in the mosaic pavement of the northern aisle, for which there was obviously a lack of capacity and supplies after the metropolitan mosaicists departed the project for an unknown reason.

The similarities between the mosaic pavement of the Episcopal basilica in Philippopolis and the basilica discovered near the curtain wall of Herakleia (former Perinthos), the capital of the province *Eurōpē*, have already been observed in the literature. Thus, St. Westphalen points out the mosaic pavement of the southern aisle of the Philippopolitan basilica as a parallel of such patterns as the Herakles knot, but also the whole concept of

30 I. Topalilov, "On the Syrian influence over the mosaics in Philippopolis, Thrace in 4th - 5th c." *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 22 (2016), p.129.

31 Popova, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.165, n.41.

32 The mosaic technique *opus sectile* did not gain wide acceptance in Philippopolis according to the archaeological discoveries up to now.

33 On the site and the mosaic pavement – see Pillinger et al., p.254-257.

34 Popova, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.165, n.41.

35 Е. Кесякова, "Мозайки от резиденцията на Филипопол." *Годишник на Регионален археологически музей – Пловдив*, 11 (2009), p.140.

the mosaic decoration in the aisle, which shows a medallion with a peacock in the middle, features flat patterns that are aligned with mirror symmetry.<sup>36</sup> Similarities between some of the figures in both pavements have also been observed by V. Popova, who is inclined to accept that the mosaic pavement in the southern aisle of the Philippopolitan basilica and those in the outer aisle of the Herakleian basilica have been produced by “a workshop from the same metropolitan circle or strongly influenced by Constantinople (atelier I).”<sup>37</sup> In order to reveal this, a short description of the mosaic pavements in the Herakleian basilica would be useful.

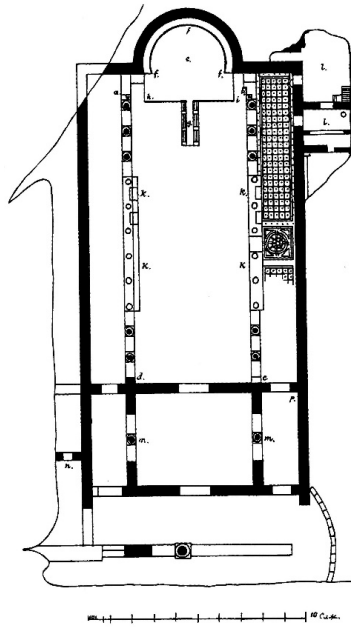
The basilica in question is a three-aisle basilica with a narthex and atrium. As in Philippopolis, the mosaic floor covers the naos and narthex, as well as the rooms at the atrium (**Fig.7**). As already noted, the whole concept of the mosaic decoration is the same, with a medallion in the middle of the aisle.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the mosaic floor at the northern aisle is divided into three panels with: a central one, which comprises the scene *fons vitae*, and two oblong panels on both sides filled with an orthogonal pattern of tangent crosses of interlaced scuta.<sup>39</sup> The resulting octagonal area is filled with figural motifs (kantharos and a basket of fruits), floral (a fruit tree, a bush with three pomegranates, and a vine), and animals (a couple of ducks, a couple of parrots, various types of birds, and fish). In some cases, a mixed composition can be found, such as: a palm tree with a pair of birds, a chalice with a couple of birds, fish with a harpoon, a bird and an open cage, a pair of birds with a worm and key, a duck with a lotus flower, a crane and a plant, and a Shrub with three cones. Occasionally, one will find a geometric motif, such as a Solomon knot. As for the medallions that are formed, they are mainly filled with geometric and similar ornaments, such as a vortex, meanders, a braid knot, and a star. The *fons vitae* scene consists of two peacocks resting on both edges of a chalice in two intersected squares (**Fig.8**). On the four corners of the panel, chalices with wine are presented. The orientation of the images represents the orientation of the movement – from the west to the east toward the central panel and henceforth to the east.

36 Westphalen, p.119, n.149.

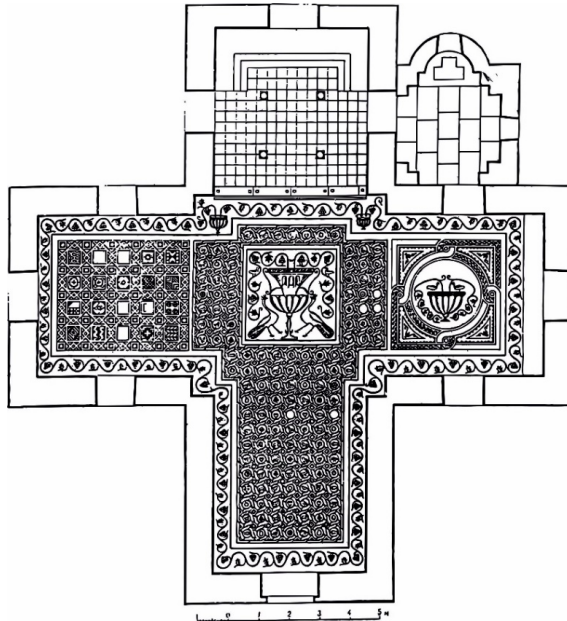
37 Popova, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.165, n.41.

38 See also, I. Topalilov, “Local Mosaic Workshops in Late Antique Philippopolis, Thrace: Some consideration.” In: Luz Neira Jiménez (ed), *Estudios sobre mosaicos antiguos y medievales*, Roma, 2016, p. 185-187.

39 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 153a.



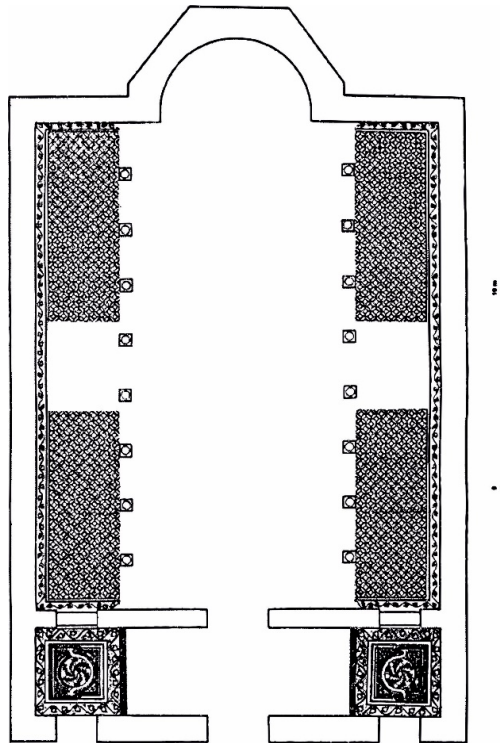
**Figure 7.** The mosaic floor of the basilica at Heracleia, covering similar areas to the basilica at Philippopolis.



**Figure 8.** The depiction of fons vitae with two peacocks leaning on either side of a chalice in two intersecting squares.



The decoration of the southern aisle is conceptually the same, with a smaller square panel in the middle, and two larger outer panels with identical decoration. The composition in the latter consists of a mixture of several geometric schemes,<sup>40</sup> with the figural and animal images being identical to those presented in the northern aisle – a couple of parrots, a bush with three pomegranates, a bird and an open cage, a chalice, and a pair of birds with a worm and a key. However, some new motifs can also be found, such as the image of a melon, a duck between branches, a goose and a branch, a carafe with two glasses, a pomegranate, a bird with a snake, a cherry, herons, and a fish. The central square panel features an image of a peacock with a spread tail inscribed in a circle (**Fig. 9**). The orientation of the main images, i. e. those inscribed onto the central medallions, is equal to that in the northern aisle. Although more abundant than those in the Episcopal basilica in Philippopolis, the meaning of the images is the same – in both mosaics they represent the surrounding flora and fauna.



**Figure 9.** The central square panel in the decoration of the south aisle, with the image of a peacock.

40 Balmelle et al., DG 1, pl. 235, a; 236b.



**Figure 10.**

The construction of the basilica is dated to between AD 450 and 480, mainly based on the huge similarities with the basilica of Saint John at Studios monastery in Constantinople, combined with the archaeological material found and the specifics of the architectural decoration. Plan, proportion, and metrology is a feature of both basilicas,<sup>41</sup> although a discrepancy may be observed in the semicircle apse at Herakleian basilica. The significance of the church planning the Studios basilica that was built between 450<sup>42</sup> and 453<sup>43</sup> it was that it became a prototype for many other basilicas in Constantinople,<sup>44</sup> and elsewhere,<sup>45</sup> including Thrace. Whether it was exactly this basilica that inspired the construction in Herakleia remains unclear, as it appears that in around 463, it became a catholicon of the Studios monastery.<sup>46</sup>

41 Westphalen, p.27-115.

42 U. Peschlow, "Die Johanneskirche des Studios in Istanbul." *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, 32(4) (1982), p.429-334.

43 C. Mango, "The Date of the Studios Basilica at Istanbul." *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 4 (1978), p.115-122.

44 T. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*. University Park and London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1971, p.19-39.

45 Westphalen, p.114.

46 Theoph. Chron. 175; Suda IV, 438.

The settlement of the *akoimetoι* monks there, who used to be Nestorios's supporters,<sup>47</sup> suggests the establishment of the monastery around the already built Studios church. If so, the monastery itself was built in 463, and this is one of the emblematic examples of a church expanding into a monastery complex, in this case, shortly after the basilica itself was built. Nonetheless, given the specifics of the Early Christian catholicon, we could assume that in fact the Studios basilica followed an undiscovered yet metropolitan prototype.

To sum up, it is now clear that within the limits of two decades, i.e. between the 450s 460s, some major reconstructions took place in the capitals of at least in two provinces included in *Thracia* diocese – Philippopolis and Herakleia. It is logical to assume that they are connected with the restoration of the cities after the Hunnic invasions, but some of them include the construction of new Christian basilicas and an embellishment of the preexisting ones. The state of preservation of the earlier mosaic pavement in the Episcopal basilica did not necessitate a complete replacement of the mosaic pavement. As such, it appears that the reason for these initiatives should be sought in another direction which would not allow for the replacement of the potentially affected sectors by "patches," but the construction of a whole new mosaic floor.

The new mosaic decoration concerns the entire naos and narthex, as well as the rooms attached to the atrium. The decoration in both places has identical conception, with a focus on some specific areas, such as the middle of the outer aisles and the main entrance, either in the narthex or atrium. This was done by inserting a specific symbol or scene for the Christians and Christianity, such as the image of a full peacock, *fons vitae*, or a chalice, into a square medallion which was already adorned with birds.<sup>48</sup> These are the lavishly colored areas of the basilica, with such birds and vessels as cantharos and calices, that are more sophisticatedly executed when compared to the rest of the mosaic pavement. A discrepancy, however, may be observed between the mosaics which concerns the symbols used in these places. In this way, in the Philippopolitan basilica, a *fons vitae* adorns the middle of both aisles, while in Herakleian, this symbol was replaced in the south aisle by the image of a full peacock. Unlike the chalice depicted in the medallion of the entrance panel in the Herakleian atrium, a full peacock indicates that area in the narthex in the Episcopal basilica. Nonetheless, the Eucharistic symbols revealed by the *fons vitae* scene are found only in the aisle mosaic pavement in both basilicas.

The mosaic pavement defined another area in the southern part of the narthex in the Episcopal basilica and in the northern room attached to the atrium of the Herakleian basilica. This is achieved by the inclusion of specific symbols, such as the cantharos and a basket filled with bread rolls, among the geometric patterns in the geometric composition. Its location in the narthex in the Philippopolitan basilica may be due to the specifics of the narthex

47 See Theoph. Chron. 175.

48 I do not intend to discuss their possible meaning and all the places known they are founded decorating the Early Christian basilica as this is not relevant to the topic that is discussed in this article.

itself, which is intertwined in this section with the atrium and the room attached southwards to the colonnade square.

It is clear that the iconography of the mosaic pavement decoration revealed in these two basilicas was new for Thrace, inspired either by mosaic ateliers who were influenced by Constantinople or by metropolitan ateliers themselves. In Philippopolis, where more mosaic pavements have been discovered and a comparison is available,<sup>49</sup> the style of the entrance panel differs significantly from what was known at that time. Therefore, there is little doubt of its non-Philippopolitan origin. The same applies to the other figural mosaic pavements in the naos of both basilicas. It should be noted, however, that such iconography has not yet been revealed in Constantinople, which may be due to the state of discovery and study of the mosaic pavements, including those in the Christian churches at that time. However, a question remains as to whether the introduction of this new iconography, which focused on specific areas in the middle and implemented figural patterns, has a purely decorative connotation, revealing a new trend in the mosaic art first introduced in Constantinople, or if it was closely tied with the liturgy and liturgical life pursued at the time in the complex. Based on everything presented here, we can posit that the definite Eucharistic interpretation of some of the elements is in favor of the assumption that these places played a certain role in the liturgic life of the complex. Using the assumption of the tight link between the mosaic pavement decoration and liturgy, V. Popova goes further and suggests that the crater in the *fons viate* scene in the middle of the southern aisle in the Philippopolitan basilica in fact represents the high basin/chalice/cup with Mary, The Life-Giving Spring with Child Christ, and therefore, the *fons vitae* scene may in fact be connected with this cult.<sup>50</sup> It is known that this specific cult appeared in the time of Leo I the Thracian (457-474) and was attested for the first time in Constantinople with the construction of the church "Theotokos Pege." Being located close to the metropolis, Philippopolis appears to have been directly influenced by the depiction of this image,<sup>51</sup> especially having in mind that the floor mosaic was laid in that period. Therefore, it would not be surprising to discover that this iconography (or a type of it) also spread to the areas of the empire that were under direct Constantinopolitan influence in the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century and depended on the local traditions. In fact, this was one of the enduring metropolitan influences in these regions in the following centuries.

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49 they are discussed most recently in Pillinger et al., p.164-270.

50 Popova, *Fons vitae* in Late Antique Monuments in Bulgaria, p.164; V. Popova, "Liturgy and Mosaics: The Case Study of the Late Antique Monuments from Bulgaria". In: Rakocija, M. (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium Symposium* 16, Niš, 2018, p.148.

51 Pillinger et al., p.164.



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