

The Mosaic Floors of the Church at Hazor-Ashdod, Israel

İsrail, Hazor-Ashdod Kilisesi'nin Mozaik Zeminleri

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Abstract

A basilica has been found in Hazor-Ashdod, with a narthex in the west and a hall attached on the north side. The eastern part has not survived, but a capital of an altar table leg has been found, not in situ. The complex is decorated with mosaic floors, and each part of the building is decorated with a different pattern. The dedicatory inscriptions on the mosaic floors date completion of the mosaic floor in the northern hall to 506/507 CE, and completion of the basilica floor to 512 CE.

The nave of the basilica is emphasized by the choice of a vine scroll pattern, populated by inanimate objects, animals, and birds. The carpet is dynamic, rich and crowded with motifs. By contrast, the aisles, the intercolumnars, and the northern hall are decorated with geometric carpets.

Special panels mark the entrances to the nave, the northern aisle, and the transition between the first and second carpet in the northern hall. The Hazor-Ashdod panels contain a few crosses, the letters A, Ω, I, X, and motifs with deep and symbolic Christian significance. All the motifs in the panels are depicted in one direction – from west to east from the viewpoint of a worshipper entering the church.

The mosaic floor is similar in style, composition and iconography to early 6th century CE mosaic floors in the southern coastal plain, western Negev, and Gaza area. The floor belongs to a group of mosaics made to a moderately high technical standard. The style is schematic and quite flat. The style and technique are uniform throughout the church, and differ from those documented in the neighboring mosaic floors – evidence that they were made by an anonymous artist or a local workshop.

Keywords: Hazor-Ashdod, Gaza area, Populated vine scrolls, Crosses, The Greek letters alpha, omega, iota, chi.

Öz

Hazor-Ashdod'da, batısında bir narteks girişi ve kuzey tarafında bir salon yer alan bir bazilika bulunmuştur. Doğu kısmı günümüze kadar kalmamıştır; ancak bir sunak masası bacağının sütun başı asıl yerinden başka bir yerde bulunmuştur. Kompleks, mozaik zeminlerle dekore edilmiştir ve binanın her bir kısmı farklı bir desenle dekore edilmiştir. Mozaik zeminler üzerine yapılan ithaf yazıtları kuzey salonda mozaik zeminin İS 506/507'de, bazilika zeminin ise İS 512'de tamamlandığını göstermektedir.

Bazilikanın nefi, cansız nesnelere, hayvanlar ve kuşlar tarafından doldurulmuş bir asma dalları deseninin seçilmesiyle vurgulanmıştır. Döşeme, dinamik, zengin ve motiflerle doludur. Bunun aksine, koridorlar, kolonların araları ve kuzey salonu geometrik döşemelerle dekore edilmiştir.

Özel paneller, nef girişlerini, kuzey koridoru ve kuzey salondaki birinci ve ikinci döşeme arasındaki geçişi işaret eder. Hazor-Ashdod panelleri birkaç haç, A, Ω, I, X harfleri ve Hristiyanlık açısından derin ve sembolik önemi olan motifler içerir. Panellerdeki tüm motifler, kiliseye ibadet için giren bir kişinin bakış açısından batıdan doğuya doğru bir yönde tasvir edilmiştir.

Mozaik zemin, güney sahil düzlüğü, batı Negev ve Gazze Bölgesi'ndeki İS 6. yüzyıl başlarının mozaik

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zeminlerine benzer şekillere, kompozisyona ve ikonografiye sahiptir. Zemin, orta derecede yüksek bir teknik standarda göre yapılmış bir grup mozaiğe aittir. Stil şematik ve oldukça düzdür. Stil ve teknik, kilisenin her yerinde aynıdır ve komşu mozaik zeminlerde belgelenenlerden ayrılmaktadır- ki bu da anonim bir sanatçı veya yerel bir atölye tarafından yapıldığına dair kanıtlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hazor-Ashdod, Gaza Bölgesi, sarmaşık asma dalları, haçlar, Yunan harfleri alfa, omega, iota, chi.

Introduction

The mosaic floors of the church at Hazor-Ashdod (Kh. Banaya) were uncovered in 1956, in an excavation carried out by Y. Ori on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums¹. The site lies on the seam between the southern coastal plain and the western Negev, some 17 km north-east of Ascalon². The excavation revealed a basilica comprising a narthex, nave, and two aisles. The bema intruded into the nave, and was raised above it, reached by two steps that remain *in situ*. The liturgical area is only partly preserved, and does not allow for a discussion of its programme, but the capital of an altar table leg has been found, not *in situ*. A hall was also found adjacent to the church, along the entire length of the north side. The basilica measures 18.5 x 11 m, and with the inclusion of the northern hall, 19.7 x 19 m (Fig. 1).

The church and all its various parts are decorated with mosaic floors in a variety of patterns, differing from each other, on a white background³. Inset in the floors are four dedicatory inscriptions in Greek, located at the entrance to the nave, at the front of the bema and between the first and second carpets in the northern hall, and between the arms of the cross in the medallion of the first carpet in the northern hall (Di Segni 2019). The article will first describe the mosaics, and then make a technical stylistic analysis of the carpets, the design of the motifs, the compositional array, and the iconographic significance.

The Basilica

The narthex (Fig. 2): The floor of the narthex has been preserved in part. It is 3 m wide and its length is unclear. The narthex is decorated with a mosaic of white stones surrounded by a simple frame of two black lines⁴.

The entrances: On the eastern wall of the narthex there were three entrances into the basilica, of which the central entrance to the nave and the northern entrance to the northern aisle remain. Next to the main entrance leading to the nave, against a background of white mosaic scattered with buds, is a Greek inscription (Fig. 3). The inscription is set in a wreath of buds from which ribbons emerge, winding out to the sides and ending in ivy leaves held in the beaks of a pair of

1 Permit no. 1956/33, Delegation no. 1295. Excavation and photography Y. Ori, measurements and plan Y. Kolodny.

2 The church is mentioned in Avi-Yonah (1957: 270-271 fig. 11), Yeivin (1960: 45), in Ovadiah and de Silva's corpus of churches (Ovadiah 1970: 71-72 no. 61; Ovadiah – de Silva 1982: 133 no. 18 plan on p. 133), Bagatti (1983: 166-167), Avi-Yonah - Ovadiah (1992: 801) and Tsafirir, Di Segni and Green (Tsafirir et al. 1994: s.v. Hazor Ashdod/Asor, Aser, 70). A brief description of the mosaic floors is found in the book by Ruth and Asher Ovadiah (1987: 67-69 no. 93 pls. LXXI–LXXXI). The church published recently in a collection of essays in Honor of Joseph Patrich: Di Segni 2019; Feig 2019; Habas 2019.

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3 Unless stated otherwise, all the mosaics are located in the Mosaic Unit, Conservation Department, IAA, at the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem.

4 The floor remains *in situ*.

Figure 1
Plan of the church at Hazor-Ashdod.

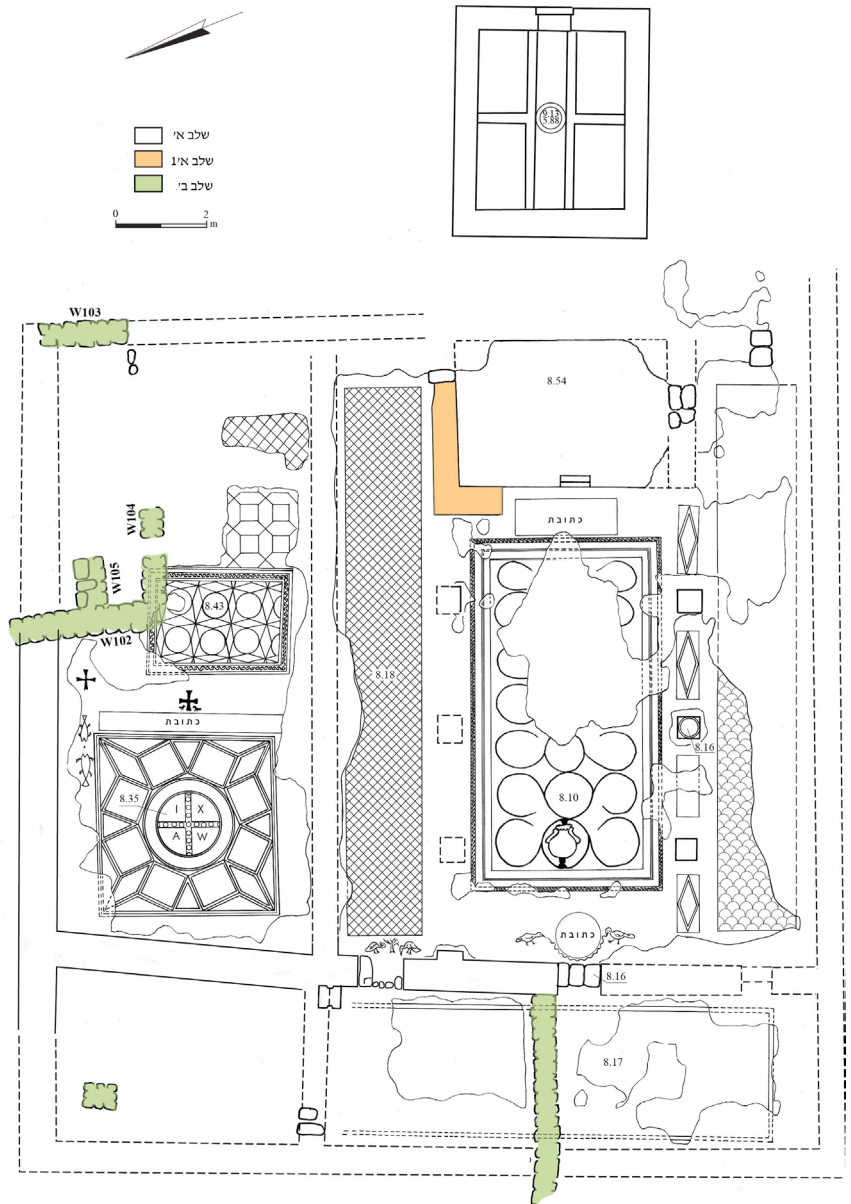


Figure 2
The church at Hazor-Ashdod.



Figure 3
Inscription set in a wreath with a pair of birds, at the entrance to the nave.

birds on either side of the inscription. A black Greek cross appears at the top of the inscription, and there is a black Greek cross at the start of the inscription, and two orange Greek crosses at the end: “By the grace of Christ the entire work of the mosaic was completed on the 10th of Daesius of the year 615, in the 5th indiction [512 CE]. Lord, remember Thy servants Eglon and Maximon” (trans. and discussion: Di Segni 2019: 41-43 fig. 1)⁵.

Next to the northern entrance leading to the northern aisle is a depiction of a tree, with a pair of birds on either side (Fig. 4). The branches end in heart-shaped leaves or fruit. The bird on the right is light, while the bird on the left is darker and its head has not survived. The background is formed by diagonally-laid stones, other than a row of stones following the details of the pattern.

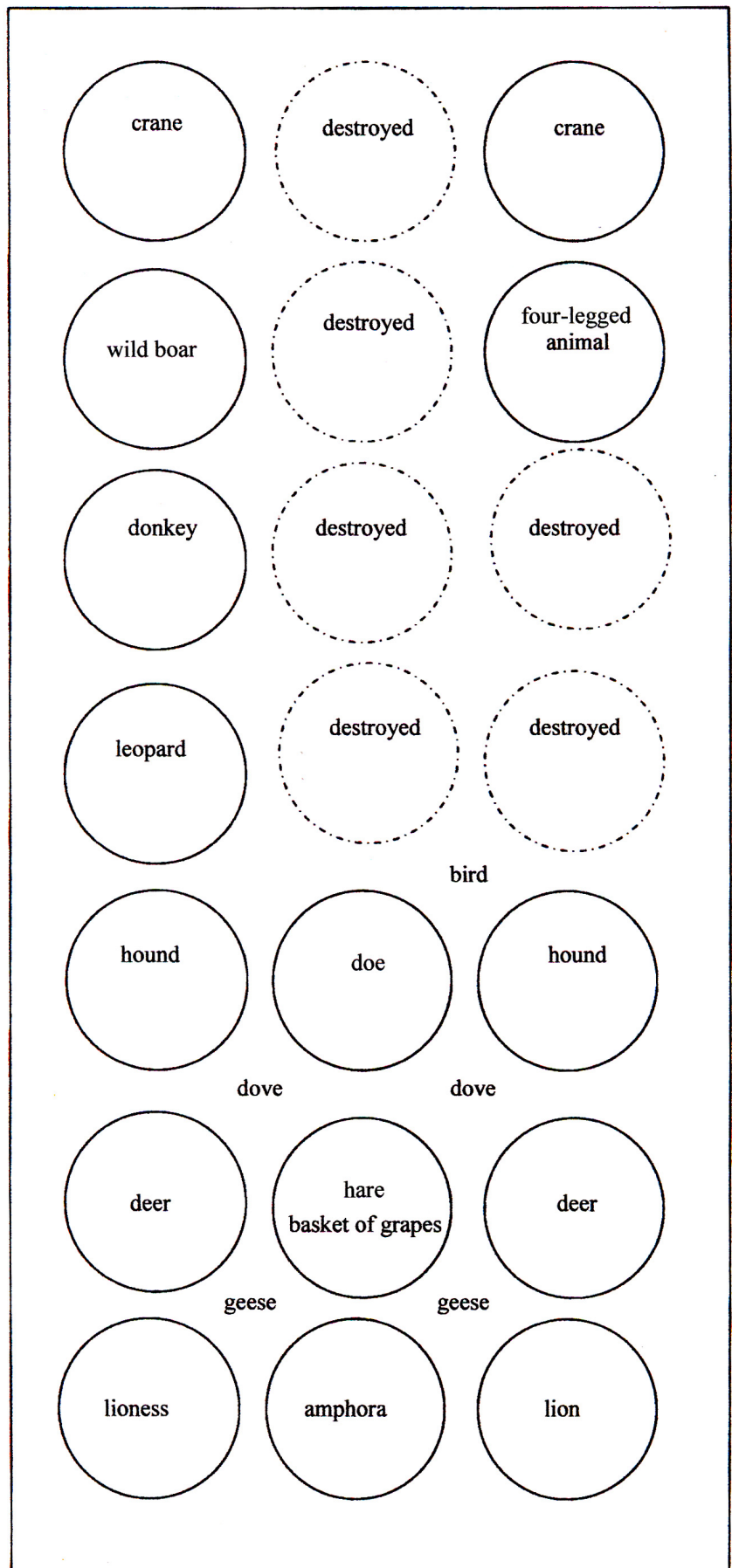


Figure 4
Tree and pair of birds at the entrance to the northern aisle.

The nave (Figs. 1, 2, 5): Decorated with a carpet of populated vine scrolls developing out of an amphora in the centre of the first row. The carpet has twenty-one scrolls, laid out in seven rows of three scrolls. Six of them have been destroyed beyond recognition, while the others have been partially or completely preserved and can be identified. The scrolls create circular medallions, between which are lozenge-shaped, concave, and irregular spaces. The medallions are tangential to each other, but the branches are not intertwined. Growing out of the scrolls are bunches of grapes, vine leaves, heart-shaped leaves, and tendrils, filling the medallions and the spaces between them, and these spaces also have depictions of birds, doves and geese pecking at the bunches of grapes.

5 The era of Ascalon began in 104 BCE. For an initial discussion of the inscriptions at Hazor-Ashdod, see: Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 67; Di Segni 1997: 472-474 no. 136 fig. 176; Ameling et al. 2014: 225-226 no. 2313 fig. 2313.

Figure 5
Plan of the populated vine scrolls in the
nave.



The bunches of grapes hang on short branches, and their design is identical and flat, in varying colours, with a white stone highlight at the centre. The vine leaves are designed simply as a serrated black-grey silhouette. Various leaves are also depicted, some simple and some shaped liked a curly heart (Figs. 6-15)⁶.

Row A: In the centre of the row is an amphora (Fig. 6), and beside it a pair of lions, or a lion and lioness (Fig. 7). The amphora is set in a closed scroll, filling

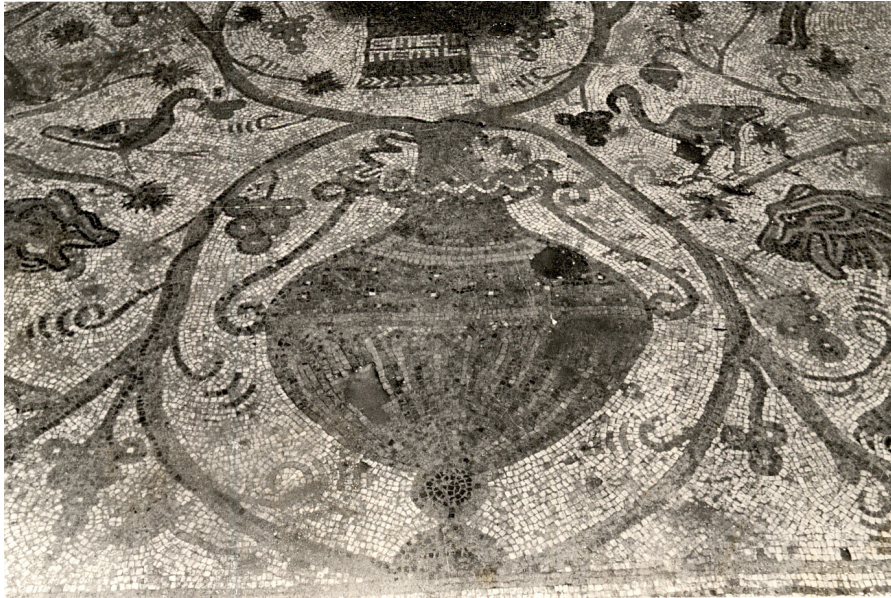


Figure 6
Row A: Amphora.



Figure 7
Row A: Pair of lions, or lion and lioness.



6 Description of the carpet from west to east.

almost the entire area of the medallion. The amphora has a base, body and neck depicted frontally, while the rim of the vessel is depicted partially from above. The amphora is simple and schematic, set on a semi-circular base, with a kind of button connecting the polygonal body to the base. The rim of the vessel is curly, and is partly raised to allow the observer to see the interior from above, out of which two simple branches emerge to the sides. Two narrow curly handles extend from the rim to the body of the vessel. The animals are shown striding towards the amphora, one front leg raised towards it, and one hind leg extending beyond the borders of the scroll. The animals on either side of the amphora are not identical, and the design of the head and full mane identify the animal to the right as a lion. The mane, together with the design of the face and eye, create a strong and threatening expression. The head of the animal on the left is more delicate, as is the fur on its neck. It is possible that the artist intended to depict a lioness. The creature's mouth is open, with protruding tongue. The bodies of the lion and lioness are designed graphically, tail raised and curling upward along the back, and claws extended. In the spaces between the scrolls between the first and second rows is a pair of geese, opposite each other and facing a bunch of grapes and a leaf (Figs. 6, 8).

Figure 8
Row B: Hare crouched on a woven basket, eating grapes.



Row B: In the centre of the second row a woven basket is depicted, with a hare sitting on it (Fig. 8) and two horned animals (deer or ibexes) on either side (Fig. 9). The woven basket is decorated with geometric herringbone motifs, and vertical and horizontal lines imitating the woven straw. The hare is crouched on the basket, its long ears laid back, eating from a bunch of grapes. The upper edge of the basket has been destroyed, but in line with parallel examples it can be assumed that in the original depiction the hare was sitting on a basket filled with grapes. The pair of deer in antithetical array face the centre – toward the basket and the hare. The deer on the right (Fig. 9 above) is entirely set within the scroll, head down, ears pricked up, and is depicted eating a vine leaf. The deer on the left (Fig. 9 below) stands erect, ears back, eating a bunch of grapes. One hind leg and the short tail of the deer on the left extend beyond the borders of the scroll. The deer have short horns that curl at the end. Their mouths are open and a little tongue touches the leaf and a bunch of grapes. Between the second and third row, in the spaces between the scrolls, a pair of doves face each other and peck at a bunch of grapes.



Figure 9
Row B: Deer eating a vine leaf and deer eating grapes.



Row C: In the third row there is an animal hunt scene. Depicted in the centre is a fleeing doe, and on either side, a pair of collarless hunting dogs (Figs. 10-11). The dogs are leaping towards the centre, their bodies narrow and long, legs long and extended – details characteristic of the hounds used for hunting. The doe is depicted leaping and fleeing towards the left, its head turned back to the right towards the pursuing dog, as if assessing its diminishing chances, as it comes up against the dog chasing it from the left. The drama is enhanced by the depiction of the gaping mouth and protruding red tongue of the hunting dogs. The hind



Figure 10
Row C: Doe fleeing, pursued by hunting dog.



Figure 11
Row C: Hunting dog in pursuit.

Row D: Only the left side scroll has survived in the fourth row, and it contains a leopard whose head has been destroyed (Fig. 12). It is reasonable to assume that the leopard was part of an animal hunt scene that has not survived in its entirety. The leopard is shown leaping to the left after its victim, its hind legs and tail breaking out of the borders of the scroll. The body is long, narrow and lithe, with a long tail. Curved claws extend from its paws.

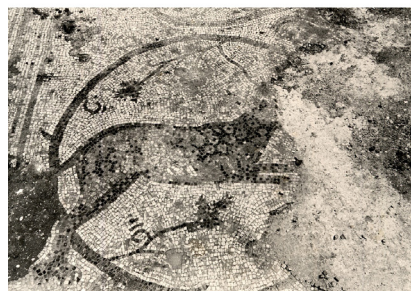


Figure 12
Row D: Leopard in pursuit.

Row E: In the fifth row the left-hand scroll has survived, containing a donkey whose head has been destroyed (Fig. 13). The donkey is shown walking forward, a yoke, saddle pack and rug on its back. A broad, brown strap lies over the rug, which is held around its belly by a black strap. The rug is decorated with coloured diagonal stripes. A pink rope hangs forwards from the donkey's neck. Its rear, tail, and one hind leg extend beyond the borders of the scroll. This is the only animal whose male member is shown.



Figure 13
Row E: Donkey.

Row F: The outer scrolls of the sixth row have survived in part. Depicted in the right-hand scroll is a hooved, four-legged animal, facing towards the centre of the carpet. The rear end and tail of the animal remain (Fig. 14 below). The hind legs and long tail extend beyond the borders of the scroll. In the left-hand scroll there is a wild boar facing the centre of the carpet (Fig. 14 above). Half of the boar has survived. Bristles grow along its back, depicted as short, diagonal rows. The tail is curly, creating the loop characteristic of boars, and down-turned.

Row G: The outer scrolls have survived in the seventh row, containing a pair of cranes facing towards the centre (Fig. 15). The cranes stand on the long, thin legs characteristic of waterfowl. Their long, narrow necks bend diagonally downwards.

The tesserae of the background of the vine scrolls carpet are laid in a regular manner. A row of stones follows the outline of the scrolls, the animals, and other objects. Afterwards the stones are laid freely, relating to the adjacent vegetal motifs.

The vine scrolls carpet is surrounded by geometric frames (described here from the inner to the outer frame) - a frame of two rows of orange stones; a frame of a row of black stones (Avi-Yonah 1933b: A1; Décor I: pl. 1i, a; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: A1, A2);⁷ a frame patterned with graduated orange triangles outlined in black facing towards the carpet (Avi-Yonah 1933b: A5-6; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: A5-6); a double frame of a row of black-grey stones; a frame of graduated orange triangles outlined in black facing outwards (Décor I: pl. 10c); and a frame with a guilloche pattern on a black background set between borders (Avi-Yonah

⁷ Definitions of the patterns from: Avi-Yonah 1933b; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987; Décor I; Décor II.



Figure 14
Row F: Four-legged animal and wild boar.

Figure 15
Row G: Cranes.

1933b: B2; Décor I: pl. 74h). The tesserae of the margins of the carpet are laid diagonally, by contrast with the straight lines of the frame.

At the eastern end of the nave and in front of the bema is a six-line Greek inscription surrounded by a rectangular frame: “+Under the most holy and saintly bishop Antonius and the most god-fearing priest and *chorepiscopus* Calopodius

and the most god-fearing priest and abbot Paulus, this work of the mosaic was done +” (trans. and discussion: Di Segni 2019: 43-46 figs. 2-4)⁸.

The southern aisle (Fig. 1): The mosaic floor of the southern aisle is only partially preserved (Feig 2019: figs. 1, 6), and is decorated with a continuous, long carpet comprising a simple frame of two lines of brown stones (Avi-Yonah 1933b: A1; Décor I: pl. 1i; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: A1) surrounding a pattern of scales (Avi-Yonah 1933b: J3; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: J3). The scales are made up of a row of brown tesserae and two orange rows, with buds set inside them. The white background tesserae are laid according to the outline of the scales. The margins are decorated with white mosaic stones, laid diagonally, and in the centre there is a row of buds, separated by a regular space⁹.

The northern aisle (Figs. 1, 16): The mosaic floor of the northern aisle has survived almost in its entirety, and is decorated with a continuous, long carpet with a simple frame (Avi-Yonah 1933b: A1; Décor I: pl. 124c; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: A1), within which is a grid pattern of small diamonds (Avi-Yonah 1933b: H1; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: H1)¹⁰.

The panels between the intercolumnars (Fig. 17):¹¹ Four small panels were laid in the spaces between the three columns. Each panel is decorated with a rectangle populated with geometric-vegetal patterns, differing from each other in the details. Of the southern row of columns, the first, third and fourth panels, taken from their site, should be mentioned, reading from the west, while the second panel remains *in situ*. The panels in the northern row of columns have not survived. The margins of the panels are designed in diagonally-laid stones, and the pattern is surrounded by a frame of three to six rows of straight, white stones. Set in each rectangle is a lozenge with white sides, the apexes touching the frame. Four right-angled triangles fill the corner spaces.

The first panel (Fig. 17 left) comprises a lozenge surrounding a long, white geometric –vegetal motif, in the centre of which is a diamond, and around it a running wave motif (Avi-Yonah 1933b: B7-8), two large drops and four small drops facing towards the apexes. An alternating black and pink background fills the space between the pattern and the lozenge. In the corners of the rectangle are four right-angled triangles.

The third panel (Fig. 17 middle) comprises a lozenge within which there is a vegetal-flower motif, and in the centre, a flower made up of colourful concentric circles. Depicted in the middle are four small petals. These are surrounded by an outer circle decorated alternately with graduated triangles. Around the flower are four more petals, and two triangles. Hearts and drops of different sizes develop out of the flower, facing towards the narrow apexes of the lozenge. In the corners are right angled triangles.

The fourth panel (Fig. 17 right) is decorated with a lozenge with a geometric-floral motif that has a flower at the centre comprised of coloured concentric circles, with black dots resembling stamens. Four petals grow out of the flower. The pattern develops into a decorative white shape, whose margins are designed in a running wave pattern ending in a pelta shield (Amazon shield; Avi-Yonah 1933b: I14), and triangles of different sizes surrounded by a V-shaped



Figure 16
The northern aisle.

8 For an initial discussion of the inscription, see: Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 68; Di Segni 1997: 470-472 no. 135 fig. 175; Ameling et al. 2014: 227-228 no. 2314 fig. 2314.

9 The floor remains *in situ*.

10 The floor remains *in situ*.

11 The three panels are on display in the Jerusalem Supreme Court.

decoration. The background is black and scattered with single white tesserae at fixed intervals between running wave patterns. In the corners of the rectangle are four right-angled triangles.



Figure 17
Geometric panels between intercolumnars.

The Technique Used in the Basilica Mosaics

Most of the tesserae are square, of uniform size – 0.8 x 0.8 and 1 x 1 cm. Rectangular stones are also used, 1 x 0.8, 1.2 x 1, and 1.5 x 1 cm in size. In the area of the eyes the stones are small, 0.5 x 0.5 cm. Sometimes triangular stones are used, as well as round stones for the pupils of the eyes, with an average size of 1.3 cm.

Tesserae made of limestone in white, beige, yellow, orange, red-ochre, purple, pink, brown, black, olive, and variegated colours have been used to make the mosaic. The grey stone is made of veined grey marble.

The most common density of stones is 100 – 120 per dm². In the inscription at the entrance to the nave there are 100 stones per dm²; in the bird to the right of this inscription, in the southern aisle, in the cross, and in the birds at the entrance to the northern aisle, 110 stones per dm² have been counted; in the birds to the left of the inscription at the entrance to the nave there are 120 stones per dm². The most common stone density in the vine scrolls is 100–110 stones per dm². The common density of tesserae in the geometric frame surrounding the vine scroll carpet is 110–130 stones per dm². The density of stones in the panels between the intercolumnars varies: in panel 1: 80–81 stones per dm²; in panels 3 and 4: 90–100 stones per dm².

The number of mosaic stones per dm² is one of the yardsticks for determining the technical quality. Researchers have defined three categories for mosaic quality (Talgam 1987: 40). In Avi-Yonah's view (1934: 72), it is possible to distinguish between unsophisticated mosaics with 4-20 stones per dm², medium quality floors with 20-30 stones per dm², and floors of high quality with 42-100 or more stones per dm². Sofer (1963: 106) has proposed a different classification: single colour floors with 10-20 stones per dm², floors with simple decoration and 40-80 stones per dm², and richly decorated floors with 90-120 stones per dm². Dauphin (1976: 123-125, 133 fig. 6) reviewed 116 mosaics in the Levant, including populated scrolls, and distinguished the following categories: (a) crude

floors with 20-60 stones per dm²; (b) medium quality floors with 60-110 stones per dm²; (c) good quality floors with more than 110 stones per dm²; (d) mixed floors, where small stones are used in some areas, for example for parts of the body in figurative depictions. On the basis of the categories described above, by the method adopted by Avi-Yonah and Sofer, the mosaic floor of the basilica at Hazor-Ashdod can be placed in the high quality category. According to Dauphin, it belongs in the group of mosaics that are between medium and good quality.

The Style of the Basilica Mosaic

A schematic design characterizes the populated vine scrolls decorating the nave. This can be seen in the flat design of the elements, which lack volume. The vine leaves are depicted as a dark, jagged silhouette in black-grey, without relating to the veins and blades of the leaf. The bunches of grapes are designed in a stylized and decorative manner, the centre of each grape highlighted with a white stone, with no graduated transition of colour expressing the play of light and shadow. There is a hint of curling tendrils on the branches, but these are not developed into a depiction of volume.

The outline of the motifs is usually in the form of a dark, black-brown line. In designing the bodies of the four-legged creatures, birds, and inanimate objects, the craftsman has taken three approaches: a. a decorative-graphic approach of laying rows of coloured stones (inanimate objects, birds, the mane of the lion and lioness); b. use of large areas of colour to form the parts of the animal's body (deer, dogs, and doe); c. creating geometric shapes on the animal's body, such as the triangle of the knee (the lion, lioness, and deer). In some cases, the craftsman has created a slight sense of volume and interplay of light and shadow, by means of light, white lines emphasizing the lower part of the wings (birds and cranes), the abdomen (the lion, deer, doe, and dogs), and the rear part of four-legged animals (deer).

These stylistic details contribute to the schematic and flat character of the carpet. They create very flat motifs, lacking volume and with almost no play of light and shadow – which could have been obtained, had the craftsman adopted a refined, graduated colour approach. This is also supported by the frontal position of the inanimate objects, and side view of the animals, with no three-quarters depiction or foreshortening to create the illusion of depth and three dimensionalities. Despite the flat depiction, the artist is careful to present the motifs correctly and accurately, to maintain the proportional relationship between the components of the composition, and to mark the characteristic details of the type of animal and bird (manes, spots, horns, bristles, hooves, blades, feathers, types of beak, ears, and tails). The genitalia of the animals are not shown, other than in the depiction of the donkey.

Quiet and calm scenes are incorporated in the carpet (the lion and lioness, the hare, the donkey, and the birds), alongside stormy and dramatic scenes characterized by considerable movement (the hunting dogs and doe, the leopard). The animals are depicted in several poses: the deer eat leaves and a bunch of grapes, the hare and birds eat and peck at bunches of grapes. Animals sprint diagonally (leopard, hounds) or flee, looking back towards their attacker (the doe). The dynamic movement comes from an ancient prototype originating in scenes of pursuit and hunting in the Roman period. These depictions lessened in the Byzantine period, and were copied and incorporated without their original context.

This stylistic discussion has emphasized the schematic and flat approach in the design of the mosaic. As a result, the mosaic floor of the church at Hazor-Ashdod

(512 CE) should be attributed to the group of mosaic floors from the fifth and beginning of the sixth century CE in the southern coastal plain, Gaza area, and western Negev, that are characterized by a flat style, as appearing in the church at Ozem (430/1 CE; Habas 2016a; 2018), the synagogue at Gaza Maritime (508/9 CE; Ovadia 1969; 1975), and the church at Gan Yavne (511/2 CE; Habas 2012; 2015b; 2016b).

It is worth mentioning that despite the similarity in the schematic and flat trend used by artists in the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth century (Talgam 1987: 69-78; 2014: 134-155), it is possible to distinguish the hand of different artists, each of them with a different stylistic approach (Habas 2015b: 234-235).

The Composition and Iconography of the Populated Vine Scroll Carpet

The vine scroll carpet in the nave of the church at Hazor-Ashdod has not survived in its entirety, but nonetheless a similarity can be found in its composition to the characteristics of the Gaza School identified by Avi-Yonah, with a rigid symmetrical layout, emphasis of the central axis, the existence of symmetrical groups arranged in antithetical array on either side of the axis, the depiction of the amphora at the entrance, the absence of human figures, and the appearance of the caged bird motif. Avi-Yonah listed eight mosaic floors that he considered to be the work of a local school operating in Gaza: the mosaics in the synagogues in Gaza Maritime, Ma'on (Nirim), and Beth-Shean, and in the churches at Shellal, the Armenian Church in Jerusalem, 'Ein Hanniya, Khirbat 'Asid, and El-Maqerqesh (Beth Guvrin; Avi-Yonah 1975).

Ovadia supported Avi-Yonah's opinion (Ovadia 1975: 554-557), while other researchers, among them Dauphin (1976: 122, 130, 140-141), Hachlili (1987; 2009: 144-147), Waliszewski (1994: 571-573), and Talgam (1998: 79-80), expressed doubts over identifying the school with Gaza, because populated scrolls, and amphora at the centre of the bottom row, and an emphasised central column are also known in other places within the Palestine provinces, and there are differences between them originating in the technique, composition, and style of a variety of workshops. Balty (1995) defined the term "school" as the cultural atmosphere and atmosphere of artistic creation in one region or another. The schools or workshops were scattered, and were influenced by local fashion. In Balty's opinion, there were a number of workshops operating in an urban environment, such as Beth Shean, Gerasa, Madaba, and Apanea, as well as in the nearby countryside. Workshops that were active in the eastern provinces used the same repertoire of motifs, and this is why they were widely distributed. At the same time, each workshop developed a unique range of compositions in which to set its chosen subjects. In regions where compositional and iconographic parallels can be seen, it is possible to discern stylistic differences indicating a variety of workshops (Balty 1995: 135-137).

Balty's explanation fits the analysis of the mosaics of the southern coastal plain and western Negev: the three floors in the synagogue at Gaza Maritime (508/9 CE), and the churches at Gan Yavne (511/2 CE) and in Hazor-Ashdod (512 CE) are close in time, place, composition, and style. Nonetheless, each of them has a different schematic and flat style. This testifies to the individual style of the craftsman, and to a number of workshops operating in the region. It is reasonable to assume that these craftsmen were aware of the work being carried out at nearby urban centres such as Gaza and Ascalon. Unfortunately, there is little archaeological evidence from Gaza and Ascalon, and we are dependent on the abundance of information from the rural areas surrounding these urban centres.

As mentioned, the state of preservation of the mosaic at Hazor-Ashdod, and the destruction of many of the scrolls, prevents a reconstruction of the content of the scrolls in their entirety, and of the central axis. However, what remains indicates a layout of antithetical pairs of animals facing towards the centre, thus emphasizing the central axis of the carpet.

The carpet is crowded, and the craftsman has adopted the *horror vacui* approach. Contributing to this feeling are the bunches of grapes, vine leaves, variety of leaves, tendrils, birds and fowl filling the space of the medallions and the area between them. Some of the creatures are positioned in the centre of the scroll (the hare, right-hand deer, doe, and cranes), while some extend beyond the boundaries of the scroll with their hind legs (the lion, lioness, left-hand deer, hunting dogs, leopard, donkey, four-legged creature, and wild boar). This eruption from the borders of the medallions contributes to the crowded feeling of the carpet.

The vine scrolls decorating the carpet create circular medallions. They do not twist, and touch each other without a ring at the point of contact. There is no overlap or hiding of the details making up the composition.

The depiction of the amphora from which the vine scrolls grow and develop, with animals on either side facing each other in heraldic array, is very common. It is positioned in the centre of the first row, at the western end of the carpet and at the entrance to the building. Dauphin defined the layout as Type IV: b (1976: 116-117). The depictions of the animals in the vine scrolls have many parallels in the Land of Israel, such as the lion and lioness in the Church of St. Stephen at Horvat Be'er-shem'a (Gazit – Lender 1993: 274-276 fig. on p. 273 pl. XXI:d), and the lions in the church at Khirbat 'Asida (Baramki – Avi-Yonah 1934: 17-19 pls. X, XI:2). The depiction of the hare crouching on a basket and eating grapes is a variant of a common motif depicting a crouching hare or fox eating a bunch of grapes hanging from a grapevine, or in an overturned basket from which bunches of grapes spill out and scatter¹². Parallels have been found in the church at Gan Yavne (Habas 2012: 132; 2016b: 105* ill. 36) and the Monastery of Martyrius at Ma'ale Adummim (Magen - Talgam 1990: 110-114, 124 figs. 25-26, 32, 41, 44).

The leopard, wild boar, and hounds pursuing a doe are part of an animal chase scene that belongs to the cycles of hunting, fighting and pursuing animals. The episode is spread over a number of scrolls: the predator leaps diagonally forward, the prey flees in panic, sometimes looking back as depicted at Hazor-Ashdod. Parallels have been found in the synagogue at Gaza Maritime (Ovadia 1969: 124 pl. 3), and in the church at Shellal (Trendall 1957: 20 fig. 5:b pls. I-II). The leaping dogs are depicted in hunting and animal pursuit cycles, in most cases shown with a collar around their neck indicating that they are domesticated. The lack of a collar in the mosaic at Hazor-Ashdod is also found in other chase scenes, such as in the mosaic of the church at Shellal (Hachlili 2009: pl. VII.8a). The figure of the donkey is usually related to depictions of the vintage cycle, in scenes of carrying the grapes from the vineyard to the wine press, or transporting goods (Habas 2005: 1: 216-223; Hachlili 2009: 150-152 pl. VII.2). In the mosaic at Hazor-Ashdod, the scrolls adjacent to the donkey have not survived, nor has the animal's head, but the rope around its neck indicates that this may have originally been a depiction of transporting goods by means of donkeys, as in St Stephen's Church at Beer-Sheva' (Gazit - Lender 1993: 275 pl. XXI:a). The

¹² Depictions of this kind are related to the vintage cycle. The motif originates in the Roman period, continuing into the Byzantine period (Habas 2016b: 119* and reference there).

variety of birds and fowls appearing at Hazor-Ashdod is familiar from other mosaics of the period.

The Composition of the Aisles

The aisles are decorated with simple, extended and continuous geometric carpets. The layout is common in mosaic floors in the aisles of churches in the Land of Israel, and expresses the fact that they are secondary spaces by comparison with the nave, which is usually embellished with a complex and crowded carpet. Among the many parallels to the diamond net pattern populated with little squares are the southern aisle of the Central Church at Beit 'Anun (Magen 2012: 149-150 figs. 2-4, 34-35, 59-60), and the southern and northern aisles of the church at Khirbet Istabul (Aristobulias, 701 CE; Peleg – Batz 2012: 315 figs. 1, 12-13). Among the parallels for the pattern of scales and buds it is worth mentioning the southern aisle of the Northern Church at Herodium (Netzer et al. 1993: figs. on pp. 221-223, 232 pl. XVI:a), and the northern aisle of the Central Church at Beit 'Anun (Magen 2012: 149 figs. 2-4, 34-35, 57-58).

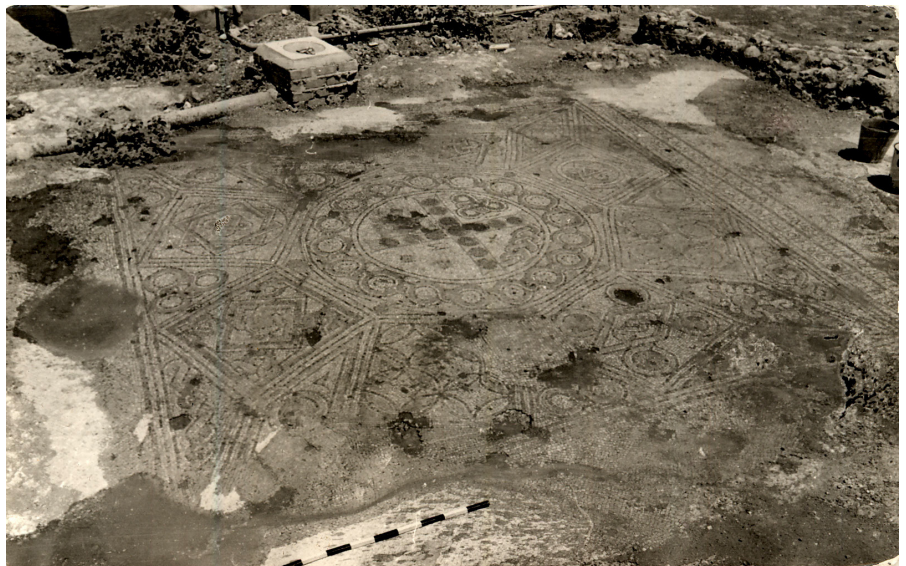
The Northern Hall (Fig. 1)

The floor of the northern hall is divided into a number of geometric panels, differing from each other in size. Some have been preserved in their entirety, while others are only partly preserved¹³.

The First Carpet (Fig. 18)

The first carpet is square, and is decorated with a geometric net with an octagon in the centre, in which a medallion surrounded by a circular frame is set. These are surrounded by alternating squares and lozenges, and triangles populated by a variety of geometric patterns. This pattern in the mosaic floor imitates *opus sectile* floors (Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: H13; Décor II: pls. 315:c, 373a).

Figure 18
Northern hall: First carpet.



In the centre of the medallion is a Greek cross, designed with a black outline and concave ends to its arms (Fig. 19). The arms of the cross are decorated

¹³ Reading from west to east.

with seven circles, imitating the *crux gemmata* type of cross that is inset with precious stones. Above the horizontal arm of the cross are the Greek letters I and X. By the letter I is an interlace of three circles in a triangular array, connected by links, while by the letter X is an interlace in the form of a braid. Beneath the horizontal arm are the Greek letters A and Ω, and next to them a pair of diamonds. A circular frame surrounds the medallion, and it is outlined with black lines, between which there is an interlace of circles with connecting links.



Figure 19
First carpet: Medallion containing a cross and the Greek letters A, Ω, I, X.

The octagon is surrounded by eight squares, which will be described counter-clockwise from the west. The first square (Fig. 20 right) is decorated with a black circle containing an interlace of two squares creating a kind of star, in which a Solomon knot interlace is set (Avi-Yonah 1933b: I4; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: I4; Décor II: pl. 288:a-b). The second square (Fig. 20 left) is decorated with a diamond interlace in which there are four loops. The diamond is connected to the corners by an interlace of a circle and three small connecting loops. The third square (Fig. 21 right) is decorated with a net of interlacing circles (Avi-Yonah 1933b: J4; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: J4; Décor II: pl. 313:d), a pattern that creates a *trompe-l'œil* illusion of concave diamonds or flowers with four coloured petals. The fourth square (Fig. 21 left) is populated by an interlace comprised of a lozenge in which there is a braid and four circles connected by loops to the middle of the sides of the lozenge. The space inside the circles is divided into four squares, creating schematic flowers or an 'hourglass' pattern (Décor II: 39). The fifth square (Fig. 22 right) is populated by an interlace of four circles in a square array, connected to each other and to the frame by connecting loops. The sixth square is decorated with an interlace comprised of a circle in

Figures 20 - 21

First carpet: Squares and triangles in which there are geometric interlaces.



which there is a star in the form of two interlaced triangles. One is designed with straight lines, and the other as loops in the form of a triangle. The frame of the circle develops into a series of loops, four loops connect the circle to the centre of the square, and four fill the corner space. The seventh square (Fig. 22 left) is decorated with an interlace of a star made of two triangles, in which there is a Solomon knot. In this square an ancient repair in white stones can be seen. The eighth square is decorated with an interlace of four circles in a square layout, connected to each other by loops.

Between the squares are lozenges populated with various geometric motifs. In some of the lozenges there is an interlace made up of a lozenge with a circle in the centre, and two connecting loops to the corners of the lozenge (Fig. 20 right). In another lozenge of the same pattern, a ring inside the circle is divided into quarters, creating a kind of schematic flower or pair of coloured hourglasses.



Figure 22
First carpet: Squares and triangles in which there are geometric interlaces.

A pair of small triangles fill the corner space of the lozenge. Another lozenge is decorated with a pattern that has a ring at the centre and drop shapes on either side, and is surrounded by a running wave pattern with drops in the corners (Avi-Yonah 1933b: I6, B7-8; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: I6, B7-8).

The triangles are populated with various interlaces such as the simple guilloche (Fig. 20 left) with a large loop in the centre; interlaces made up of three circles laid out in a column with a large one in the middle, and in one triangle of this pattern the large central ring is divided into four squares creating a kind of schematic flower or pair of coloured hourglasses; and interlace of circles in triangular array connected to each other by loops, where in one triangle an ancient repair of the mosaic in white stones can be seen; one circle connected to the frame by a connecting loop; and a rainbow pattern (Fig. 21 left).

Parallels to the geometric net of the first carpet were found in the Chapel of Hermitage no. 27 at the monastery of Mar Saba (Patrich 1993: 238 fig. on p. 238) and in the Monastery at Deir Qal'a (Magen – Aizik 2012: 128-130 figs. 28-29, 34).

The Technique and Style of the First Carpet

The central medallion in which the cross is set is designed using square tesserae cut in varying sizes of 0.8, 1.00, and 1.5 cm. The density of the stones is 64 per dm². The white background is formed by laying between two and four straight rows of stones, following the outlines of the arms of the cross and the circle of the medallion, while the rest of the background is filled in as necessary.

The geometric interlaces surrounding the medallion are diverse. The ribbons forming the interlaces create the impression of a rich panel with considerable movement, because of their twisting shape and varying and alternating colours. For the most part the tesserae are square, approximately 1.00 cm in size. The tesserae are made of white, red-ochre, pink, black, light brown, dark brown, yellow and beige limestone. The grey colour is marble with grey veins. The density is 90-100 stones per dm². One line of the background stones traces the outline of the motifs, while the others are free infill.

The mosaic floor of the western carpet can be placed according to Avi-Yonah in the group of good quality mosaics, and according to Dauphin, in the group of medium quality mosaics (Avi-Yonah 1934: 72; Dauphin 1976: 123-125, 133 fig. 6).

Fish in the Margins and by the North-Eastern Corner of the first Carpet

Depicted in the margins by the north-eastern corner of the carpet is an antithetical pair of fish, and between them a motif that has only partially survived, and therefore cannot be identified for certain, but may be flower buds (Fig. 23). The surrounding background has two rows of stones following the outline of the fish, while the rest of the background is made of diagonally-laid stones. The difference between the diagonal of the stones in the area of the margins and the stones laid in straight lines in the frame of the carpet emphasizes both the fish motif and the first carpet.

Figure 23
Northern hall: Fish in heraldic array.



The Inscription and Crosses between the first and second Carpet

Between the first and second carpets are two Greek inscriptions, one above the other, in two rows. The letters are in black, and each inscription is set in a frame: “+Under the most god-fearing and most holy Antonius our bishop the mosaic was made in year 610 [according to Ascalon era 506/7 CE]”; “+Under the most god-fearing priest and *chorepiscopus* Calapodius and Erennius the most god-fearing priest.” (trans. Di Segni 2019: 46-49 figs. 5-7)¹⁴.

To the east of the inscription is a row of graduated diamonds, separated from each other by regular intervals, and in the centre a Greek cross with an antithetical pair of birds on either side (Fig. 24). The arms of the cross are decorated with five circles, and the ends of the arms are concave. The density is 110 stones per dm². In addition, there is a Latin cross, the ends of its arms concave, by the northern wall and next to a pair of fish (Fig. 25).

Figure 24
Northern hall:
Greek cross and birds.



Figure 25
Northern hall: Latin cross.

¹⁴ For an initial discussion of the inscription, see: Ovadia – Ovadia 1987: 68; Ameling et al. 2014: 228-230 no. 231 fig. 2315.5.

The second Carpet¹⁵

The second carpet is decorated with a net of geometric interlaces (similar but not identical to the net, see: *Décor I*: pl. 147d), about two thirds of the width of the first carpet (Fig. 26). The carpet is surrounded by a frame of black and white rows of stones, in which there is a guilloche pattern. The geometric carpet comprises interlaces creating a *trompe-l'œil* illusion: on the one hand it is possible to see circles surrounded by lozenges, with triangles between them; on the other hand, lozenges can be seen creating cross shapes with circles between the arms. Looking again, the carpet appears to be interlaced octagons with circles at the centre, and the combination of octagons creates diamonds and triangles. In each circle a Solomon knot motif is set, and in the lozenges and triangles there are small triangles. The density of the stones in the frame is 110 stones per dm², and in the interlaces it is 80 stones per dm².



Figure 26
Northern hall:
Second carpet and third carpet.

The third Carpet¹⁶

To the east of the second carpet, a geometric carpet with a net of interlaced octagons has survived in part (Fig. 27) (*Avi-Yonah 1933b*: H3; *Ovadia – Ovadia 1987*: H3; *Décor II*: pl. 421b). Between and within the interlaced octagons, squares and hexagons are formed. The squares are decorated with diamonds in a colourful zigzag and rainbow pattern. The carpet abuts the guilloche frame of the second carpet, and is not surrounded by a frame of its own.

In general, there is a tendency to use this pattern in the secondary spaces of the building, such as the narthex of the church at Bahan, the lower pavement of the tomb of El-Hammām at Beth-Shean and the panel in the church or monastery of El-Maker (*Ovadia – Ovadia 1987*: 15, 32, 57-58 nos. 8, 27, 76 pls. VII, XXVI.3, XLVI).

The fourth Carpet¹⁷

To the east of the third carpet, a geometric carpet with a net of diamonds

¹⁵ The carpet remains *in situ*.

¹⁶ The carpet remains *in situ*.

¹⁷ The carpet remains *in situ*.

populated with small diamonds has survived in part (Fig. 27) (Avi-Yonah 1933b: H1; Ovadiah - Ovadiah 1987: H1; Décor II: pl. 422: a). The few remains of the fourth carpet and the damage to the floor between the third and fourth carpets prevent an understanding of their continuity and width.

Figure 27
Northern hall:
Third carpet and fourth carpet.



Layout of the Carpets in the Northern Hall, and its Date

The layout of the carpets in the northern hall, and the date appearing in the inscription raise a number of questions. The basilica and the northern hall share a common western wall, but the wall bounding the northern hall was built at a slightly different angle to that of the basilica. Furthermore, the layout of the carpets in the space of the northern hall is puzzling and problematic. The laying of the first (western) carpet is not parallel to the walls as is customary, and it is slightly inclined and in opposition to the direction of the walls. The second carpet is short, and represents around two thirds of the width of the first carpet. The first two carpets are surrounded by frames, which do not exist in the third and fourth carpets. This strange layout is in contrast to the layout of carpets in the art of mosaic floors in the Byzantine period – where the craftsmen are careful to lay the carpets in line with the walls, creating a harmony between the decorated floors and the architecture of the building, that is, the adjacent walls. This unusual arrangement in the northern hall is in contrast to the quality and ability of the craftsman in creating complex and accurate nets and interlaces, and marking symbols of deep Christian significance.

The dates mentioned in the dedication inscriptions in the mosaic floor date completion of the work of the mosaic floor in the northern hall to 506/7 CE, and completion of the floor of the basilica to 512 CE. The chronological difference is small, and changes nothing with regard to the stylistic discussion, but is evidence that the northern hall was paved before the basilica, thus creating a difficulty in understanding the development of the complex. It would appear to be logical to lay the mosaic floor of the basilica first, and then that of the northern hall which is an annex. Furthermore, the names of *episcopus* Antonius and the priest and *chorepiscopus* Calapodius appear both in the inscription in the nave at the front of the bema, and in the northern hall, raising a number of questions: how did the complex function between 506/7 and 512? And what floor did the church have before 512? Is there a connection between the earlier date of the northern

hall, the different angle of the western wall bounding it, and the singular layout of the carpets? Although a slight difference of 2-3 cm was found between the height of the floor in the northern hall and the floor of the basilica, this does not resolve the problem, and could be explained by lifting of the floor over the generations. Unfortunately, the floor in the area between the northern aisle and the northern hall has not survived, and so we are unable to understand the internal development of the assembly.

The Iconographic Meaning: Motifs with Religious Significance

Lion and Lioness

The appearance of a lion and lioness alongside the amphora and in the first row of the carpet of the nave is not incidental. In ancient cultures the lion is described as having divine qualities, and is a symbol of power and strength. Accordingly, gods and heroes adopted the figure of the lion (Charbonneau-Lassay 1974: 35-37; Pollitt 1986: 26, 36-37). In Judaism, the lion appears on King Solomon's throne as a symbol of government (1 Kings 10:20), as well as in Jacob's blessing (Genesis 49:9-10), and it was one of the four creatures in the vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:10), and in this way passed into Christianity (Revelation 5:8; 6:5-6). The positive qualities of the lion as a symbol of strength and courage in antiquity and its appearance in Jacob's blessing led the Church Fathers to draw an analogy with Jesus Christ, based on John's vision in Revelation 5:5: "Then one of the elders said to me, Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals", and to see it as a symbol of the Resurrection.

Origen, Epiphanius and the *Physiologus*¹⁸ quoted a legend from the writings of Aristotle, Pliny and Plutarch, telling of a lioness who gave birth to dead cubs, and for three days the cubs gave no sign of life. On the third day the lion returned and brought them back to life with a roar or exhalation, and the Christian meaning is: "Just so did the Father Omnipotent raise Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day" (trans. White 1954: 8; French 1994: 279; Kalof 2007: 46; Salisbury 2011: 86). The Church Fathers also drew an analogy with the story of Christ resurrected after three days (Acts of the Apostles 26:23), and according to Paul, Christ will bring his followers back to life (Epistle to the Romans 6). Another legend describes the lion sleeping in the desert with his eyes open, and the Church Fathers interpreted this thus: "In this very way, Our Lord also, while sleeping in the body, was buried after being crucified - yet his Godhead was awake. As it is said in the *Song of Songs*, 'I am asleep and my heart is awake', or in the *Psalms* 'Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep'..." (*Etymologies* 12, 2:4-5; trans. White 1954: 8; Barney et al. 2006: 251). Hilarius and Augustine drew a parallel between the unique way in which the lion slept and the ever-watchfulness of the Messiah, who sees all and protects the souls of the faithful from all harm, like the Good Shepherd keeping his flock (in Charbonneau-Lassay 1974: 37-44). The lion symbolizes the Evangelist Mark, because he dealt a great deal with the resurrection of the Messiah and emphasized the kingdom of Christ (Ferguson 1961: 21-22), as in the words of Jerome: "Mark is depicted as a lion because his gospel tells mainly

18 The *Physiologus*, meaning the Natural Scientist. The Greek essay was composed by an anonymous author, apparently in Alexandria in the second century CE. It first quotes the holy writings, and then describes the habits and characteristics of the animals, and discusses the moral that can be learned from animals by humans, finally ending with quotes from the Pentateuch (Salisbury 2011: 86). In the sixth century, the *Physiologus* was translated into Latin by Isidore of Seville.

of the resurrection; and indeed they say that for three days after they are born, lion cubs sleep like the dead, and then they are woken by the roars of the mother lioness...". These interpretations were adopted in Christian iconography (Testini 1985: 1147-1150; Baudry 2009: 108-109).

The Crosses

As mentioned, crosses are depicted on the mosaic floors at Hazor-Ashdod, and between the arms of the cross set in the central medallion of the first carpet in the northern hall are Greek letters. Above the horizontal arm of the cross are the Greek letters *iota-chi*, representing Ἰησοῦς Χριστός – Jesus Christ. Below the horizontal arm are the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, which are a common abbreviation of ἄλφα (καί) ὤμειγα, referring to the words of Jesus in Revelation 1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come"; and in Revelation 22:13: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Avi-Yonah 1940: 53, 73; Ameling et al. 2014: 230 fig. 2316 no. 2316; Di Segni 2019: 49 fig. 10).

The appearance of crosses in mosaic floors in churches in the Holy Land is common, and mosaic floors that have been uncovered show that crosses also adorned the inside of both secular and religious buildings. In ecclesiastical buildings, crosses of different types are found in different areas (Hachlili 2009: 224-226 fig. XI:2 pl. XI:2), visible to all, in passages between one area and another, at the front of the entrances, and in the liturgical spaces.

Crosses of different types have been found in many Ecclesiastical buildings in the Holy Land, and some with the letters *iota*, *chi*, *alpha* and *omega* or accompanied by animals or a pair of birds on either side of a tree (Habas 2005: 1: 313-315, 345-347, 370-373, 378-384; 2015a; forthcoming, where there is a detailed sites, discussion, and references).

Roussin saw the cross and the Christogram as the most common Christian symbols in the mosaic floors of churches in the Holy Land; however, Talgam drew attention to the fact that despite the discovery of crosses in many churches, they are still few in number by comparison with the hundreds of churches adorned with mosaics that do not contain crosses (Roussin 1985: 59-74; Talgam 2014: 477).

The appearance of crosses in mosaic floors in churches would seem to be surprising, because it contravenes the edict issued in 427 CE by the Emperor Theodosius II prohibiting crosses on floors: "It being our concern to preserve by all means the faith in God Supreme, we hereby decree that no-one shall carve or draw the sign of the Lord our Saviour on the floor or on a slab of marble laid over the ground; those that are found shall be removed, and whoever dares to break this law shall be punished with a heavy fine" (*Cod. Just.* I, viii; trans. Mango 1986: 36). Evidence of failure to comply with the edict can also be found in the fact that another edict was published in 692 CE, included in the canons of the Ecumenical Council in Trullo. Cannon LXXIII renews the edict of Theodosius, and repeats the prohibition against representing and depicting the cross in inappropriate places.¹⁹

In the past, researchers discussed and raised various claims that aimed to bridge the gap between the wording of the decree and the archaeological reality.

19 H. R. Percival (ed.), *The Seven Ecumenical Councils. The Council in Trullo: Quinisext Council*, Published by P. Schaff, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886; Trans. <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txud/counci34.htm>; ch. Pidalion, *Canons of the Orthodox Church*, Athens, 1957, 283.

Kitzinger claimed that overt crosses were not common on mosaic floors, and in cases where they did appear, for the most part they were not placed on the axis of traffic or on the entrance route into the building, for fear of desecrating the sacred symbol. Avi-Yonah held that the crosses were situated in places on which people did not tread, or in places where they walked barefoot, or in places where only the priest walked over them, that is, in the liturgical spaces (Avi-Yonah 1933a: 13-14; 1934: 63; 1957: 270; Kitzinger 1970: 640-644, 646 notes. 12-13, 21-23, 27). Brandenburg also held this view, and related to the topographic role of the Christian symbols (*signa Christi*), marking the position of furniture connected with the liturgy (altar table, lectern, or offering table) or a sacred spot, and the crosses were seen as apotropaic motifs of secular origin, a kind of superstition – rejected by the edict (Brandenburg 1969: 96, 98, 104, 111-110, 127-129, 132-133). Those statements, which may have been correct in their time, no longer hold true in light of the discovery of many churches and mosaic floors as a result of the archaeological excavations of recent decades throughout Israel and Transjordan. These point to the continued existence of crosses in church floors in practice (Kitzinger 1970: 646-647 note 39; Tzaferis 1971: 61-63). As a symbol of redemption, protection, health and good fortune, the cross has become a powerful divine symbol, and the personal symbol of Christ. These meanings explain why the imperial decree was not upheld, despite the conflict of potential desecration of the sacred symbol because some of the crosses were in places where people would walk and step on them. Hence the opinion of those who consider the date 427 CE as the *terminus post quem* for cross representations must be rejected, since crosses were placed in mosaic floors before, during and after the edicts were issued.

The motif of a pair of birds on either side of a tree is also of symbolic significance. The tree is seen as the tree of life, the cross, and Christ, and the birds are the worshippers, adoring Christ and the Christian faith. In the depiction in Hazor-Ashdod, the tree replaces the cross as an apotropaic motif and as a motif of blessing on entering.

The Fish

The position of the fish and their proximity to the crosses in the floor of the church at Hazor-Ashdod emphasizes the symbolic Christian significance given to them. The motif of the fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ) can be interpreted as a hidden symbol of Christ: Ι(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) Θ(εοῦ) Υ(ιὸς) Σ(ωτήρ), an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour (Avi-Yonah 1940: 73), and also as a symbol of Christian souls, divine providence, and blessed life on earth (Habas 2005: 1: 297-298).

Summary and Conclusions

A basilica was uncovered at Hazor-Ashdod, with a narthex to the west and an adjacent hall on the north side. The eastern part has not survived, but the capital of an altar table leg was found, not *in situ*. The complex was decorated with mosaic floors, and each part of the building was decorated in a different pattern. The dates mentioned in the dedicatory inscriptions in the mosaic floor date completion of the work of the mosaic floor in the northern hall to 506/7 CE, and completion of the floor of the basilica to 512 CE.

In the basilica, the nave is emphasized by the choice of the vine scroll pattern, populated with inanimate objects, animals, birds, and fowls. The carpet is dynamic, rich and crowded with motifs, while the aisles are decorated with simple, extended geometric nets. The floors of the intercolumnar panels, the

aisles, and the northern hall are decorated with geometric carpets.

Special panels mark the entrance to the nave, the northern aisle and the passage between the first and second carpets in the northern hall. The mosaic at Hazor-Ashdod is unique in the appearance of a number of crosses and the Greek letters *alpha*, *omega*, *iota*, *chi*, as well as motifs with deep Christian symbolic meaning. The motifs (symbols, inanimate objects, and animals) are depicted in one direction – from west to east from the standpoint of the worshipper entering the church.

The mosaic floor is similar in style, composition, and iconography to mosaic floors from the beginning of the sixth century CE in the southern coastal plain, western Negev and Gaza area. The floor belongs to the group of mosaics that are made to a medium to high technical standard. The style is very schematic and flat. The style and technique are uniform in all parts of the church, and differ from those documented in the mosaic floors at neighbouring sites. The mosaic was made by a local workshop, by a craftsman whose identity remains anonymous.

The mosaic floor decorating the nave of the church at Hazor-Ashdod contributes to an understanding of the stylistic, compositional, and the iconographic development of the populated vine scroll carpet in the sixth century, and represents a contribution to the group of mosaics from the beginning of the sixth century found in the southern coastal plain and western Negev.

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