

Symbols of Faith in the Mosaic Floors of the Newly Discovered Ecclesiastical Complex at Ashdod Maritima, Israel

Ashdod Maritima, İsrail’de Yeni Keşfedilen Dini Kompleksin Mozaik Zeminlerindeki İnanç Sembolleri

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Abstract

An ecclesiastical complex has recently been discovered in Ashdod Maritima – ancient Azotus. The site was excavated in 2019 and 2021. The complex includes a basilica, several rooms, and a chapel on the north side, all decorated with mosaic pavements.

A mixed trend comes to light in the mosaics: on the one hand, there is a continuation of the geometric and vegetal compositions and motifs that originated in the Roman world and continued into the Byzantine period. On the other hand, the complex is unique in the many symbols of faith that appear, scattered throughout its parts. All types of crosses are depicted; a medallion with a Greek cross accompanied by the Greek letters iota-chi, and alpha and omega; a medallion with a Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill with the Greek letters iota-chi and alpha and omega; a large Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill with two large Greek crosses between its arms; and a medallion with a quote from Psalms.

The complex is exceptional in the large number of crosses, the names of the bishops, priest, deacon, and deaconesses who were involved in the construction and decoration or were buried in the complex, and the large number of dated inscriptions.

Keywords: Ashdod Maritima, Greek cross, a Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill, Greek letters iota-chi and alpha and omega, deaconesses.

Öz

Antik adı Azotus olan Ashdod Maritima’da yakın zamanda bir dini kompleks keşfedilmiştir. Alanda 2019 ve 2021’de arkeolojik kazı gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kompleks, tümü mozaik döşemelerle süslenmiş bir bazilika, birkaç oda ve kuzey tarafında bir şapel içermektedir.

Mozaiklerde karışık bir eğilim ortaya çıkmaktadır: Bir yanda, Roma dünyasında ortaya çıkan ve Bizans dönemine kadar devam eden geometrik ve bitkisel kompozisyonların ve motiflerin devamı varken; öte yanda, kompleks, bölümlerine dağılmış olarak ortaya çıkan birçok inanç sembolü bakımından benzersizdir. Her tür haç tasvir edilmiştir; Yunan harfleri iota-chi ve alfa ve omega ile birlikte Yunan haçı olan bir madalyon; Golgotha Tepesi’nde Yunanca iota-chi ve alfa ve omega harfleriyle Latin haçı bulunan bir madalyon; kolları arasında iki büyük Yunan haçı bulunan Golgotha Tepesi’nde duran büyük bir Latin haçı; ve Mezmurlar’dan bir alıntı içeren bir madalyon yer almaktadır.

Kompleks, çok sayıda haç, inşaat ve dekorasyonda yer alan veya komplekse gömülen piskopos, rahip, diyakoz ve diyakozların adları ve çok sayıda tarihli yazıt ile istisnai bir yere sahiptir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ashdod Maritima, Yunan haçı, Golgotha Tepesi’nde duran Latin haçı, Yunan harfleri iota-chi ve alfa ve omega, diyakozlar.

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The Ecclesiastical Complex and the Mosaic Floors

A new ecclesiastical complex has recently been discovered in Ashdod Maritima – ancient Azotus in Israel. The port of the city of Azotus appears in the Madaba map (AD c. 550) as Ἀζωτος παράλο[ς] *Azotus Paralus* – Azotus on the seashore. In the map and in the Byzantine period the city, Ἀσδὼ[δ ἢ καὶ Ἀζω]τος (Ashdod also Azotos), and the port, *Azotus Paralus*, were separate, and the port was larger and more glorious (Avi-Yonah 1953: 152 pl. 8 nos. 92-93; 1954: 70 pl. 8 nos. 92-93; Donner 1992: 64 nos. 89-90; Alliata 1999: 83 section II nos. 96-97; TIR 1994: 72) (Fig. 1). The fragmentary representation shows a colonnaded street running from north to south, interrupted by the façade of a church with steps leading to it from the shore. Another red-roofed ecclesiastical building is seen to the north of the former church, and a third church with a triangular yellow pediment lies in a southerly direction on the shore. Several houses appear between the churches.



Figure 1

The port (*Azotus Paralus*) and the city (*Azotus*) of Ashdod in Madaba map (after: Alliata 1999: figs. on pp. 81, 83).

An archeological survey was conducted at the site before the construction of a new neighborhood, after which it was declared as an archeological site, prohibiting any construction. Despite this, at one time a large villa was built, covering part of the ecclesiastical complex in the west (Fig. 2). The site was excavated in 2019 and 2021 by Alexander Fantalkin on behalf of Tel Aviv University, in collaboration with the Israel Antiquities Authority, the Hebrew



Figure 2

Aerial view of the excavation area, the neighborhood and the seashore (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).

University of Jerusalem, and additional research institutes.¹

The ecclesiastical complex includes a basilica, a chapel, and several rooms on the north side, all decorated with mosaic pavements that were in proximity to the topsoil. Stratigraphic analysis and many dated Greek inscriptions made it possible to understand the development of the complex, and four main phases were discerned, dating the complex to the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Many tombs were found cutting into the mosaic floors, which were covered with marble slabs or simple or decorated mosaic patches, some of which are accompanied by inscriptions.

The Basilica

The basilica was built first, divided by two rows of pillars into a wide nave, narrow aisles, bema, projecting semi-circular apse, and a side room on the south side - maybe used as a *martyrium*. The dated inscription in the south aisle gives the date of foundation of the basilica as AD 415/16 or even before. The mosaic pavement of the nave is surrounded by a white margin decorated with a row of serrated polychrome squares (Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 237 Type D). The carpet is surrounded by several frames (Fig. 3): simple frames of white and black rows;

Figure 3
The mosaic floor of the nave of the basilica (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).



a polychrome three-strand guilloche on a black ground: one strand designed with black, white, and red colors, the second strand designed with black, white and gray colors, and the third strand in black, white and yellow colors (Avi-Yonah 1933: 138 Type B3; Décor I: 122 pl. 72d; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 233 Type B3); simple frames; and a polychrome serrated saw-tooth pattern designed with black outline and red triangles, creating the effect of a serrated zigzag (Avi-Yonah 1933: 138 Type A5-6; Décor I: 39 pl. 10a; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 229 Type A5-6). The carpet itself is decorated with a polychrome orthogonal pattern of tangential multilobate squares of scales, radiating in four directions from the central quadrilobe of scales, creating the effect of a grid of poised tangential concave squares (Avi-Yonah 1933: 141 Type J5), and a diagonal grid

¹ Alexander Fantalkin: director of the excavation; Leah Di Segni: Greek inscriptions; Lihi Habas: mosaic floors, marble architectural sculpture, and liturgical furniture. Special thanks to Alexander Fantalkin for his help and cooperation, and to Liora Bouzaglou, who assisted me in the documentation process.

of tangential recumbent spindles (Décor I: 341 pl. 219f; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 254 type J5). The background is red, the scales are white with a rosebud in the middle of each scale, and the spindles are red with black outlines. This carpet, which combines geometric and vegetal-floral motifs, creates a *trompe-l'œil* effect: it is a geometric grid of diamonds, but at the same time there are schematic floral squares, formed by the red margins surrounding the scales.

In the eastern part of the nave, a wreath is embedded in a mosaic (Fig. 4) formed by two black outlines, between which are schematic black/gray leaves on a red background, and black leaves on the outside. The wreath is tied with ribbons, and four pomegranates are depicted on the four sides. In the wreath is a quote from Psalms 121 [120]:8: “May the Lord guard your entrance and your exit, from this time forward and even forever.”²



Figure 4

A wreath in the mosaic floor of the nave and quote from Psalms 121 [120]: 8 within (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

The carpet pattern is common, and parallels of the pattern have been found in Israel in the nave of the church at 'Agur, and in the nave of the Northern Church in the Lower City of Herodium (Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 11, 70 pls. I, LXXXII

² Translation: King James version.

nos. 1, 96), as well as in Transjordan, in the northern aisle of the Memorial of Moses Basilica in Mt. Nebo, and in the northern aisle of the Church of Saint George (AD 535/36) at Khirbat al-Mukhayat (Piccirillo 1993: 148, 178 figs. 190, 244-245). The verse from Psalms is common in the Levant, and appears in private homes, churches, and synagogues on lintels and mosaic floors, especially at entrances (Avi-Yonah 1934: 69; Di Segni 2017: 69 table 4.1). Examples of the verse appearing at an entrance are found in the monastery at Tell Basul (SEG 37 (1987): 1533; Felle 2006: 118 no. 180), and in the monastery at ‘Ein Ma’amudiye (Stève 1946: 569-570; Felle 2006: 112-113 no. 166). Sometimes the verse appears in the passages between the rooms, as in the Imehof Monastery excavations at Beth-Shean (Habas in print). The location of the verse inside a medallion/wreath and in the center of the floor as in Ashdod Maritima is not common but was discovered also in the church complex at Horvat Beit Loya (SEG 35 (1985): 1540; Patrich - Tsafrir 1993: 271 fig. on p. 271; Felle 2006: 116 no. 176). Its location in the center of the nave in Ashdod can be interpreted perhaps because it is on the axis of the nave and the altar.

No mosaics were found in the liturgical area, due to modern activity, but a tomb and a reliquary were discovered, indicating the location of the altar table. Outside the *bema* in the north and south, red crosses with black outlines have survived in the floor (Fig. 5).

Figure 5
Red crosses outside the *bema* in the north and south (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).



Figure 6
The eastern carpet of the southern aisle of the basilica and Greek inscriptions (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).



At the eastern end of the southern aisle (Fig. 6), Greek inscriptions were found indicating that Bishop Heraclius was responsible for laying the mosaic in the year AD 415/6, while another inscription is in memory of Gaianus the priest and Severa the deaconess. The white margin is decorated with a row of buds in the center at regular intervals, and the southern aisle is decorated with two carpets unified by several frameworks of simple filets of white and black rows (Avi-Yonah 1933: 138 type A1; Décor I: 27 pl. 1a, i ; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 229 types A1, A2), and a band of polychrome serrated saw-tooth pattern, creating the effect of a serrated black zigzag and red triangles as in the nave.

The eastern carpet (Fig. 6) is decorated with intersecting octagons with recessed reverse-turned swastikas at their meeting points in the center, and four surrounding oblong hexagons inscribed with small rhombuses (Décor I: 262 pl. 171g). Two tombs were originally covered by the mosaic floor, and later open

and were covered with marble slabs and a mosaic patch. Parallels to this pattern have been found in Israel in the southern aisle of the church at Shavei Zion (Prausnitz 1967: plan 7 pls. III, XXX:a, XXXIX), and in Transjordan in panels in the northern intercolumnar of Procopius Church (AD 526), and the Church of Bishop Isaiah (AD 559) at Gerasa (Biebel 1938: 338-340 pls. LXXX:a, LXXXI:c; Clark 1986: 303-307 fig. 4; Piccirillo 1993: 292, 294 figs. 560, 566).

The western carpet is decorated with the same pattern as the nave (Fig. 7), with a white patch covering the later grave. The western end of the panel is buried under the modern villa.



The white margin of the northern aisle is decorated with a row of buds at regular intervals in the center. The mosaic floor of the northern aisle was originally divided into three carpets (Fig. 8) surrounded by a unifying frame of a serrated polychrome saw-tooth pattern, creating the effect of a serrated black zigzag and red triangles as in the nave. The eastern carpet follows the same pattern as the eastern carpet of the southern aisle; the central carpet follows the same pattern as the western carpet of the southern aisle and nave; and the western carpet (Fig. 9) is decorated with a grid of bichrome serrated triple filets of diamonds enclosing small, polychrome serrated diamonds (Avi-Yonah 1933: 139 type H1; Décor I: 124 pl. 124b,c; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 242 type H1). This pattern is very common in a secular and religious context and is used in small panels and large carpets alike, such as in Hall E of the Lady Mary Monastery (AD 567) at Beth-Shean (Fitzgerald 1939: 8 pls. XII-XIII), and in the northern aisle and the small panel of the intercolumnar of the synagogue at Na'aran (Vincent – Benoit 1961: 163-177 pl. VII) in Israel. The pattern also appears in the eastern panels of the southern aisle of the Basilica of Moses at Mt. Nebo, and in the Upper Church at Kaianus in Transjordan (Piccirillo 1993: 148, 190-191 figs. 193, 278).

At least five tombs were discovered in the northern aisle, which were cut into the original floor over and over again, and formed mosaic patches on the floor with Greek inscriptions, all facing east. The first inscription mentions the holy mother Euphrosyne. The second tomb is decorated with a Latin cross standing on a graduated plinth symbolizing Golgotha Hill, two *crux quadrata*, and an

Figure 7

The western carpet of the southern aisle of the basilica (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

Figure 8

The northern aisle of the basilica (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Plan: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).

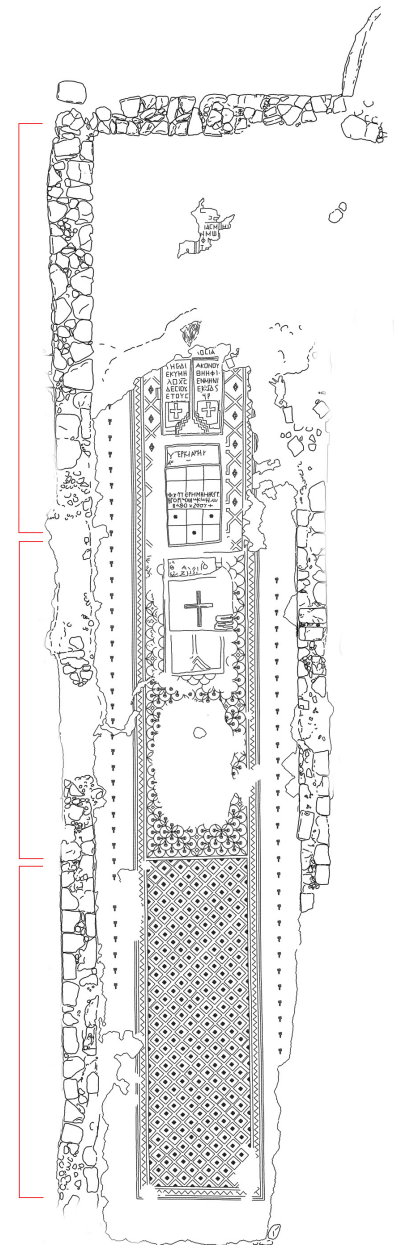


Figure 9
The western carpet of the northern aisle of the basilica (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Sasha Flit).



Figure 10
Tomb of Theodosia the deaconess with a Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill and two *crux quadrata* (AD 441/2) (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Sasha Flit).

inscription dated to AD 441/2, mentioning Theodosia the deaconess (Fig. 10). The inscription of the third tomb is too fragmentary, and the inscription of the fourth tomb mentions Gregoria the deaconess from Bithulion. The fifth patch indicates a reopening for multiple graves a few times, with depictions of a Latin cross and another Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill, and with many changes that cut into the pattern. One inscription mentions Maximus the deacon, and the second one is dated to AD 449 (Fig. 11). The last tomb was covered with a white patch. Based on the inscriptions it can be determined that the date of the tombs is between AD 441/2 and AD 449. No graves were found in the western carpet of the northern aisle, which remains with its original mosaic.



Figure 11
Multiple graves covered with inscriptions (Maximus the deacom), Latin cross and Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill (AD 449) (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

The Chapel

A chapel with a projecting semi-circular apse was built in the mid-5th century, adjacent to the northern aisle on the northeast (Figs. 12-13). The entrance is in the western wall, and the chapel consists of a hall and an apse. The carpet of the hall itself is divided into western and eastern panels. The white margin

is decorated in the middle with a row of serrated polychrome squares in black and red colors, separated from each other equidistantly. The western carpet is designed of interlaced circles made of two different stripes – an asymmetrically shaded rainbow and a guilloche, with concentric circles in each circle. Concave diamond shapes are formed in the background, which is decorated by open flowers made of four buds or crosslets in black, red/pink, white/beige and light and dark gray colors (similar but not identical net, see: *Décor I*: 398 pl. 251c). The carpet is surrounded by a wide frame with a geometric interlace made of circles, loops, and guilloche, and simple colored frames. A later repair was made in the southwestern part of the carpet, in the shape of the letter L, with larger stones placed at random.

The eastern carpet of the hall is surrounded by several frames (Figs. 12-13): simple rows; polychrome undulating ivy branches (Avi-Yonah 1933: 138, 141 types BI+J6; *Décor I*: 114 pl. 64d; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 233, 255 types BI+J6); a black and white running wave (Avi-Yonah 1933: 138 type B7-8; *Décor I*: 156 pl. 101b; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 234 type B7-8); and a wide geometric polychrome frame of three-dimensional swastika-meander with double returns, with horizontal squares and rectangles populated with scales in the spaces (for

Figure 12

Northern annex of the monastery (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).

Figure 13

A chapel adjacent on the northeast to the basilica (mid-5th century AD) (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).



squares and rectangles see: Décor I: 82 pl. 39c, f; for scales see: Décor I: 34 pl. 219a). The carpet itself is decorated with populated vine scrolls growing from an amphora depicted in the middle of the first row (Dauphin Type IVb; Dauphin 1976: 117 fig. 2). In the first and second rows a pair of peacocks is shown in heraldic array flanking the amphora; in the second and third rows there is an animal chase scene with a lion pursuing a stag or gazelle, and in the middle, a birdcage with open door is depicted (Fig. 14); in the fourth row is a pair of waterfowl (sea gulls or herons) flanking a chalice with fruit; and in the fifth row there is a scene of an animal chase in which a tigress attacks a calf (Fig. 15).



Figure 14
Populated vine scrolls: peacocks are flanking the amphora and a lion pursuing a stag or gazelle and a birdcage between them (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

Figure 15
Populated vine scrolls: sea gulls or herons flanking a chalice with fruit and a tigress pursues a lamb or calf (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

The carpet is crowded, and the craftsman has adopted the *horror vacui* approach. The depiction of the scrolls is varied: large, small, closed or open. Bunches of grapes, vine, leaves, and tendrils fill the space inside the scrolls and between them, and the animals extend beyond the boundaries of the scroll, leaping diagonally towards the center.

A similarity to this composition and iconography can be found in 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 1975). These features are found in the mosaic floors in the synagogues in Gaza Maritima (AD 508/9), Ma’on (Nirim), and Beth-Shean; and in the churches at Shellal, ‘Ein Hanniya, Khirbat ‘Asida, El-Maqerqesh-Beth Guverin, the Armenian mosaic in Jerusalem (Avi-Yonah 1975), Gan Yavne (AD 511/2) (Habas 2015a: 231-232 fig. 1), and Hazor-Ashdod (AD 512) (Habas 2020a: 112-118 figs. 2, 5).

For years the definition ‘Gaza school’ proposed by Avi-Yonah was accepted as the paradigm. With time, and the discovery of new mosaics, several researchers denied the existence of such a school, which influenced the design of all the mosaic floors in Israel. The subject is complex, and the researchers expressed their opinion, each according to his concept: Ovadia supported Avi-Yonah’s opinion (Ovadia 1975: 554-557), while other researchers opposed, among them Dauphin (1976: 122, 130, 140-141), Hachlili (1987; 2009: 144-147), Waliszewski (1994: 571-573), and Talgam (1998: 79-80). They 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 Apamea, 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). In my opinion, Balty's explanation fits the analysis of the mosaics of the chapel in Ashdod Maritima, and the definition of 'Gaza school' proposed by Avi-Yonah also fits.

The array of a pair of peacocks facing an amphora/kantharos is common, and appears in the first row in Shellal and Ma'on mentioned above, and in the 'bird mosaic' (the Armenian mosaic) in Jerusalem (Narkiss 1979: 28 figs. 39-40); on the side of chalice with a tree growing from it in the Church of Saint George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Piccirillo 1993: 178 figs. 244, 246); and on the side of acanthus foliage together with boys in the Church of Saint Stephen at Umm al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993: 238 figs. 345, 380, 383).

The frames are common in the area, and among the many examples it is worth mentioning the frame of undulating ivy branches in the monastery in Sede Nahum (Habas 2022: 222, figs. 5-6), and in the church at Askelon-Barn'a (Ovadiah - Ovadiah 1987: 13-14 pl. III:1 no. 7); the frame of black and white running wave in Sede Nahum mentioned above, and in the basilica at 'Ein Hanniya (Baramki 1934: 115 pl. XXXVI); the frame of swastika-meander with squares in the Lower and Upper Chapel of the Priest John, and the Church of Saint George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Piccirillo 1993: 174, 176, 178 figs. 230, 233-234, 240, 244-245).

In the southern part of the hall there is an L-shape installation closed off by two marble chancel screens (Fig. 13), perhaps a place for a sarcophagus. Nearby, a square-shaped plastered installation was found, with a half jar within, which was sealed by a roof tile. This installation has been identified as a *reliquarium*. The round opening is associated with oil, which is sanctified by contact with the relics - the practice of pouring holy oil is associated with the saints and martyrs cult. The oil is then collected in *ampullae* carried by the pilgrims, which are considered as a blessing (*eulogia*), with prophylactic and medical benefits.

In the apse two phases can be discerned (Figs. 13, 16). The floor of the hall belongs to the early phase, and in the west side of the apse there is a Greek inscription that mentions the (son) of Stephanus and is dated to AD 455. In a later phase, the apse was paved with different white tesserae that covered part of the inscription, decorated with a geometric polychrome interlace composed of a knot of three figures of eight, a central circle, and an open flower within, which creates on the one hand an elegant flower, and on the other hand a hidden cross. A medallion is located in the center of the apse, made of an asymmetrical guilloche with shaded strands on a black ground (Décor I: 120 pl. 70j), within which is a Latin cross imitating a *crux gemmata* standing on Golgotha Hill. Above the horizontal arm of the cross are the Greek letters *iota-chi*, representing $\text{I}(\eta\sigma\omicron\upsilon\zeta)$ $\text{X}(\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\zeta)$ – Jesus Christ. Below the horizontal arm are the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, which are a common abbreviation of $\alpha(\lambda\phi\alpha)$ (καί) $\omega(\mu\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\alpha)$ (Fig. 16) (Avi-Yonah 1940: 53, 73).

Figure 16
Two phases of the mosaic of the apse
(courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Sasha Flit).



Figure 17
Medallion within it is a Greek cross with I, X, A, Ω between the arms in the sacristy and in front of the entrance to the chapel
(courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Lihi Habas).

The Diaconicon / Sacristy

Following the construction of the chapel, the complex underwent an extension phase, and a new unit was built adjacent to the northern aisle on the northwest, connected to the chapel by a door. It may be possible to identify it as diaconicon/sacristy (Fig. 12). The unit itself is divided into two parts. In the middle of the western part there is a Greek inscription set inside a circle in a square, connected by loops. Four buds are depicted in the corners of the square. The patterns are made of black and red/orange stones. The inscription says that by the prayers (or: for the vow) of bishop Cyrus the work was done, and it is dated by paleography to c. AD 540. An opening in the center of the eastern wall leads into the eastern part of the diaconicon. Against a white background in front of the entrance to the chapel there is a medallion, and within it is a Greek cross. Above the horizontal arm of the cross are the Greek letters *iota-chi*, and below the horizontal arm are the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, the abbreviations mentioned above (Fig. 17).

The Narthex

Later in the 6th century a narthex was added to the basilica to the west, as well as a room on its northern side (Figs. 12, 18). The white margin of the narthex is decorated in the middle with a row of alternating serrated polychrome squares and buds, separated from each other equidistantly. The carpet is surrounded by simple and polychrome serrated saw-tooth pattern frames, and the carpet itself is decorated with a pattern of scales designed in outlines of red/orange, black and red/orange, populated with buds in black and red/pink colors (Avi-Yonah 1933: 139, 141 Types F3, J3; Ovadiah – Ovadiah 1987: 238, 254 Types F3, J3; Décor I: 336, 341 pls. 215c, 219c). The original mosaic floor was cut by three tombs, one of which bears the name of the deceased and his profession, ‘Theodorus magistrianos’. One tomb is covered with a marble slab, and the other with mosaic patches. In one of them there was an attempt to recreate the original pattern, but the scales are larger. The rest of the narthex is buried under the modern villa.

The Northern Room

The entrance to the northern room is in the south wall by the narthex (Figs. 12, 18). The room is decorated with a grid of diamonds like the western carpet of



Figure 18

A narthex and the northern room (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Slava Pirsky and Sergei Alon).

the northern aisle, enclosing florets of four buds or crosslets (Décor I: 188 pl. 124a; Décor II: 39) and surrounded by simple and polychrome serrated saw-tooth pattern frames. Black, dark brown, red and yellow/orange are used in the design of the patterns. Next to the entrance is an inscription within a *tabula ansata* facing north, which indicates that the work was done from the foundation under bishop Procopius in AD 539/40.

Appearance of Crosses in the Mosaic Floors

Scattered throughout the ecclesiastical complex of Ashdod Maritima are all type of crosses: a Greek cross and a Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill, accompanied by the Greek letters *iota-chi*, and *alpha* and *omega*, and a large Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill with two large Greek crosses between its arms. Integration of crosses in mosaic is a well-known and common phenomenon throughout the ecclesiastical buildings in the Holy Land. Sometimes one type of cross appears, and sometimes several types of cross appear in the same ecclesiastical building (Habas 2015b; 2020b).

Of the many examples, it is worth noting a Latin cross at the entrance to the nave of Church A at Magen (Tsaferis 1985a: 6, 8 figs. 2, 9-10, 15; 1985b: 19-21 fig. 6), and three Latin crosses in the presbytery of the church at Khirbet el-Beiyûdât (Hizmi 1990: 252 fig. 6, 10 plan on p. 246). Greek crosses were

found in the courtyard and in front of the northern chapel in the monastery at Khirbet Deir Sam'an (Magen 2012: 23 figs. 8-10, 22), and in the 'Glass Court' in the Cathedral complex at Gerasa (Biebel 1938: 309-312 pl. LVIII:a-b; Piccirillo 1993: 284 fig. 526). A Latin cross imitating a *crux gemmate*, its arms decorated with squares imitating precious stones, was discovered in room 9 at the entrance to the chapel of the Monastery at Umm Deimine (Amir 2012: 447, 481 fig. 46:6; Magen – Batz – Sharuk 2012: 455-456 figs. 4, 27), and a large *crux gemmata* type cross, with four small crosses between its arms decorates the northern aisle of the Church of Saint Bacchus at Horvat Tinsihmet (Dahari 2012: 106, 124 figs. 4, 6). The Greek letters I X and A Ω are sometimes incorporated in the crosses, as in the Greek cross with the inverted letters AΩ in Horvat Qastra (Finkielstzjejn 2005: 441 fig. 8), and the Latin cross with the Greek letters A, Ω, I, X, flanked by two lions in the church at Ozem (AD 430/1) (Habas 2016: 274 figs. 1-2; 2018: 99 figs. 3-4). A parallel to the Latin cross standing on a graduated plinth that is a graphic representation of the hill of Golgotha was discovered in the northern apse of the church in Hufa al-Wastiyah, its arms decorated with squares, imitating the *crux gemmata* decorated with precious stones. Underneath the horizontal arm are the letters AΩ - representing Christ, and on either side of the cross are peacocks in heraldic pose, which represent the believers taking part in the Eucharist and attaining salvation, who are rewarded with eternal life when they embrace Christianity (Abu Dalu 1994: 13 figs. 5, 11; Habas 2005: I: 314, 345-347).

Since the crosses are not hidden and are not limited to a specific part of the church or chapel building, it seems that the prohibition in the edict issued in AD 427 by Emperor Theodosius II against depicting crosses on floors (Cod. Just. I, viii; trans. Mango 1986: 36) had scant influence on the mosaics of our region, and the archeological finds testify to the existence of crosses carved in stone or incorporated in mosaic floors (Tzaferis 1971: 63; Saller 1982: 27; Saller – Bagatti 1949: 87 note 3; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 18, 438-439, 465-466; Habas 2015b; 2020b). Evidence of failure to comply with the edict can also be found in the fact that in AD 691 another edict was published, included in the canons of the Ecumenical Council in Trullo. Canon LXXIII renews the edict of Theodosius.³

Three Deaconesses in the Church

Among all the findings, the most amazing and unusual was the appearance of the names of Severa, Theodosia, and Gregoria, the deaconesses. In general, women were excluded from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but nonetheless, Phoebe the deaconess is already mentioned in the epistle to the Romans "It is my desire to say a good word for Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in Cenchreae" (Rom. 16.1). Women were appointed to the role of female diaconate, as defined and documented in Didascalia Apostolorum (first half of the 3rd century AD), Apostolic Constitutions (late 4th century AD), Testamentum Domini (5th century AD), the canons of the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). In the Didascalia Apostolorum is said that: "O Bishop, appoint to thyself ... but a woman for the service of the women; for there are houses where thou canst not send a Deacon to the women on account of the heathen, Send a Deaconess for many things. The office of the woman Deaconess is required, first, when the women go down to water, it is necessary that they be anointed by a Deaconess, and it is not fitting that the anointing oil should

3 The Seven Ecumenical Councils. The Council in Trullo: Quinisext Council, ed. H.R. Percival, 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.

be given to a woman to touch; but rather the Deaconess. For it is necessary for the Priest who baptized, to anoint her who is baptized; but when there is a woman, and especially a Deaconess, it is not fitting for the woman that they be seen by the men ...; to visit those who are sick, and serve them with whatever they need, and anoint (wash) those who are healed from sicknesses” (Didascalia Apostolorum, XVI; trans. Dunlop Gibson 1903: 78-79). Moreover, the Deaconess was compared to the Holy Spirit: “... but let him [the bishop] be honored by you as God, for the bishop sits for you in the place of God Almighty. But the deacon stands in the place of Christ; and do you love him. And the deaconess shall be honored by you in the place of the Holy Spirit ...” (Didascalia Apostolorum, IX; trans. Dunlop Gibson 1903: 48; Apostolic Constitutions II.26). In the Apostolic Constitutions was written: “Ordain also a deaconess who is faithful and holy, for the ministrations toward women. For sometimes he cannot send a deacon, who is a man, to the women, on account of unbelievers. You shall therefore send a woman, a deaconess, on account of the imaginations of the bad. For we stand in need of a woman, a deaconess, for many necessities; and first in the baptism of women, the deacon shall anoint only their forehead with the holy oil, and after him the deaconess shall anoint them: for there is no necessity that the women should be seen by the men ...”[...] “...and let a deacon receive the man, and a deaconess the woman ...” (Apostolic Constitutions III.XV-XVI; trans. Donaldson 1886). All the sources reflect the reality of the Eastern churches. The office of woman deaconess was required but was limited. The deaconess assisted the bishop and the deacon, she devoted herself to the care of the sick and poor of her sex, she was present at interviews of women with bishops, priests, or deacons, she instructed women catechumens, kept order in the women’s part of the church, and her most important role was assisting at the baptism of women, for reasons of propriety and modesty. Opinions on the order of the female diaconate were divided, some objected, such as Tertullian, some accepted it, such as Epiphanius and Basil, but archeological evidence and ancient sources confirm their existence and even their names - as the evident from the ecclesiastical complex of Ashdod.

Summary and Conclusions

A mixed trend comes to light in the mosaics: on the one hand, there is a continuity of compositions and motifs originating in the Roman world that continued into the Byzantine period. On the other hand, the complex is unique in the many symbols of faith that appear scattered throughout its parts. There are all types of crosses, a Greek cross and a Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill accompanied by the Greek letters IX, and AΩ, a large Latin cross standing on Golgotha Hill with two large Greek crosses between its arms, and a medallion with a quote from Psalms. The many crosses and the meaning of the texts of the inscriptions may explain the phenomenon of the large number of tombs under the mosaics. The names of members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy involved in the construction or decoration or buried in the complex during the 5th - 6th centuries AD are documented: bishop Heracius, priest Gaianus, and deaconess Severa; deaconess Theodosia; deaconess Gregoria of Bithulion; deacon Maximus; son of Stephanus; bishop Cyrus; and bishop Procopius. The church was destroyed by fire, probably during the 7th century (Fig. 19). The intensity of the conflagration is expressed in the burnt layer from the collapse of the building superstructure that is found on all the floor mosaics. Those accumulations include ash, burnt wooden beams and shattered roof tiles.

Figure 19

Burnt layer with the collapse of the building superstructure on all the floor mosaics (courtesy of Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University. Photograph: Sasha Flit).



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