

Composition and Iconography in the Liturgical Area of the Churches of the Holy Land

Kutsal Topraklar'daki Kiliselerin Litürjik Alanlarında Kompozisyon ve İkonografi

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Abstract

A study of the churches of the Holy Land has revealed that the liturgical areas are decorated with an iconographic and compositional variety of mosaics. It became clear that in some churches neutral geometric and vegetal arrays were preferred, while in others, figurative arrays were preferred.

Vegetal motifs including trees, and populated vine scrolls. Some mosaics depict sheep, rams and peacocks facing the altar table, placed in front of it or under the altar. These animals represent the believers taking part in the Eucharist and attaining salvation. The same holds for the antithetical pairs of animals flanking an amphora, tree, or cross, or drinking from a spring. Some trees identified as the cross on the Hill of Golgotha.

In a few sites, there is a tendency towards a mixture of styles: a neutral geometric and vegetal carpet and a vegetal carpet with figurative motifs, symbolic in character. Less frequently are depictions of an architectural façade, donors, and everyday life episodes, which are common in the carpets of the nave.

The repetition of iconographic schemes in contemporary churches in the same area hints at the activity of a specialized regional school of mosaic craftsmen, and/or local preference.

Keywords: Liturgical space, vegetal and geometric arrays, vine scrolls, trees, figurative motifs.

Öz


Kutsal Topraklar'daki kiliselerin incelenmesi, litürjik alanların zengin bir ikonografik ve kompozisyonel çeşitlilik sergileyen mozaiklerle bezendiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bazı kiliselerde nötr geometrik ve bitkisel düzenlemeler tercih edilirken, diğerlerinde figüratif düzenlemelerin ağırlık kazandığı anlaşılmıştır.

Bitkisel motifler; ağaçlar ve çeşitli canlı betimlemeleri içeren sarmaşık (asma'nın kıvrımları) gibi süslemeleri kapsamaktadır. Bazı mozaiklerde, altar masasının önünde veya altında, altara yönelmiş koyunlar, koçlar ve tavus kuşları betimlemektedir. Bu hayvanlar, Efkariya'ya katılan ve kurtuluşa erişen inananları simgeler. Aynı şekilde, bir amphora, ağaç veya haçın iki yanına yerleştirilmiş karşıt hayvan çiftleri ya da bir kaynaktan su içen hayvan sahneleri de aynı anlamda kullanılmıştır. Bazı ağaçlar ise Golgota Tepesi'ndeki Haç ile özdeşleştirilmektedir.

Bazı alanlarda ise stillerin birleşimine yönelik bir eğilim gözlenmektedir: nötr bir geometrik-bitkisel "döşeme" düzenlemesinin yanı sıra sembolik karakterde figüratif motifler içeren bitkisel "döşeme" kompozisyonları da bulunmaktadır. Daha seyrek olarak, mimari cephe tasvirleri, bağışçı figürleri ve günlük yaşam sahneleri gibi öğeler, genellikle naos bölümündeki mozaik "döşemelerde" görülmektedir.

Aynı bölgede çağdaş kiliselerde ikonografik şemaların tekrarlanması, muhtemelen uzmanlaşmış bir bölgesel mozaikçi atölyesinin faaliyetini ve/veya yerel bir beğeni ve geleneği işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Litürjik mekân, bitkisel ve geometrik düzenlemeler, sarmaşık (asma) kıvrımları, ağaçlar, figüratif motifler.

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Introduction

The predominant architectural design employed by churches in the Holy Land (4th - 8th century AD) is the basilica, round or cruciform structures are less prevalent. Additionally, independent chapels or those attached to the main church are commonplace, as noted by scholars such as Ovadiah (1970), Ovadiah and de Silva (1981; 1982; 1984), Piccirillo (1993a), Habas (1994: I: 19-27; 2005: I: 24-44), and Michel (2001: 23-33).

Commencing from the 4th century AD throughout the Byzantine Empire, the eastern section of churches assumed a liturgical role, comprising the apse and *bema*. This liturgical emphasis area, referred to as the *presbyterion* or *hierateion*, served as the focal point for ritual activities, the celebration of the Eucharist. Its distinctiveness lay in its segregation from the rest of the church and congregants, permitting only clergy access. This segregation aligns with Christian liturgical practices, as affirmed by Ecumenical Councils such as the Council of Laodicea in AD 368, which restricted entry to the *bema* solely to the clergy, reinforcing the notion of exclusivity: “women are forbidden to enter”, and the Council of Trullo in AD 692, confirmed the previous rulings, prohibited laymen from entering the *bema* (Mathews 1971: 123). The *bema*, enclosed by a chancel screen, signified its limits symbolically (Orlandos 1952: 509-513, 560-584; Delvoye 1966; Johnson 1991).

Elevated by one to five steps above the nave, the topmost step generally preserves remnants of the chancel screen structure. The *bema* entrance is always on the western side and aligns with the apse. In certain instances, additional entrances on the southern and northern sides of the chancel screen can be found.

Within the territories of Palaestina Prima, Secunda, Tertia, and Provincia Arabia (present-day Israel and Jordan), several *bema* types were identified, with the most prevalent projecting into the nave. Less common configurations include the tripartite ‘T’-shaped *bema* and the rare *bema* extending across the entire width of the church (Habas 2000: 115-118 fig. 61). Liturgical rituals in this space involve various furnishings, such as *synthronon* benches, altar, offering table, and the chancel screen. Adjacent but outside the liturgical space, the ambo is typically situated.

From the 4th century AD onward, Christian authors posited the symbolic significance of church architecture. Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, I, 19 (4th-5th century AD) advocates for a raised throne in the east and emphasizing the importance of the altar: “... let there be a throne at the east ... [let there be] places for the presbyters. Let the place of the throne be raised by three steps, for it is right that the altar be there” (transl. Sperry-White 2010: 46-47). Sophronius (AD c.560-638), Patriarch of Jerusalem, further expounds on the church structure in his *Commentarius Liturgicus* (PG III. 87), associating the *synthronon* with the heavenly throne, is termed as such because both the Father and the Son are depicted seated upon it alongside the priests, symbolizing their participation in the crucifixion experience with Christ. The altar table, known as the *hagia trapeza*, serves as a representation of the Holy Sepulchre. The *bema* mirrors the celestial realm where the angels of God carry out their service, with priests positioned on the *bema* akin to seraphim. Sophronius provides an additional interpretation: the *bema*, elevated on stairs, symbolizes the Second Coming of the Messiah, serving as the location for the pronouncement of judgment during the Last Judgment. The chancel screens symbolically emulate the screens of the Holy Sepulchre, delineating the area for the faithful outside the *bema* and the space designated for priests within; access is restricted to the clergy.

This article explores various topics arising from Christian sources and church architectural plans, including the correlation between structural elements (e.g., the apse's semicircle and the *bema*'s rectangle) and mosaic carpets, the interplay between mosaic pavement and liturgical furniture, and the influence of worship on the selection of iconographic and compositional arrays for mosaic floors in liturgical areas (Maps 1-2).¹

Map 1
The Churches in Israel (map processing L. Habas).

Map 2
The Churches in Jordan (map processing L. Habas after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. on p. 14; Michel 2001: fig. 1; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF)



A Harmony Between Mosaic Carpets and Architectural Units of the Liturgical Area

An inherent harmony is observed between the architectural components of the liturgical space, encompassing the semicircular apse and the rectangular *bema*, and the composition of mosaic carpets. Two distinct approaches are noted in this harmonization. Firstly, there is a tendency to unify the space by employing a singular mosaic carpet adorned with geometric, vegetal, or figurative images. This unified design is then encircled by a single border, as exemplified in the simple geometric patterns of the church at Huwara (Fig. 1) (Karasneh - al-Zibda 1998: 19, 22-24 figs. 4, 8-9) and Khirbat ad-Duwayr (Jinin as-Safa; Melhim 1998: 28-33, 36 figs. 2, 4). Conversely, some churches emphasize the individuality of each unit within the space. Different patterns are employed for each unit, each framed separately as the Church of Bishop Sergius (AD 587/88), and the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (Piccirillo 1993a: figs. 331, 338). Some examples employed the same frame pattern as the geometric carpets of the Chapel of Bishop Marianus (AD 570) at Gerasa (Fig. 2) (Piccirillo 1993a: 298 figs. 579, 581). Some incorporated various frame patterns, particularly within intricate and rich compositions, as seen in the Theotokos Chapel within the Memorial of Moses complex at Mt. Nebo (Fig. 3) (Piccirillo 1993a: 151 fig. 200).

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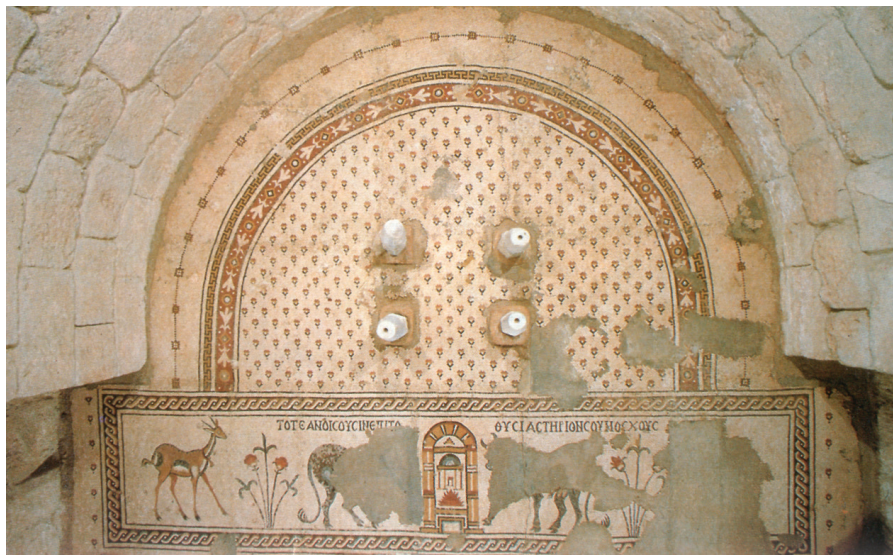
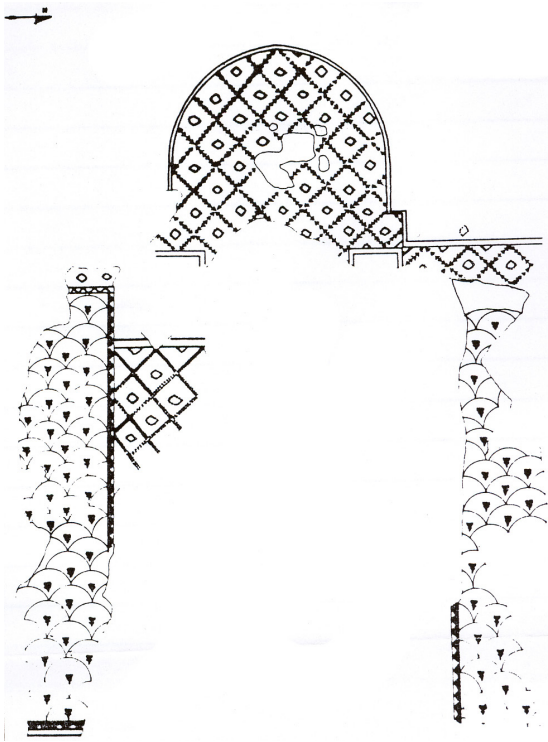


Figure 1
The Church at Huwara (after: Karasneh – al-Zibda 1998: fig. 4).

Figure 2
The Chapel of Bishop Marianus at Gerasa (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 581; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Figure 3
The Theotokos Chapel in the Memorial of Moses complex on Mt. Nebo (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 200; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Relationship Between Mosaic Pavement and Liturgical Furniture

Exploring the correlation between mosaic pavement and liturgical furniture yielded several insights (Habas 2005: 384-385). It is observed that *synthronon* benches, corresponding to the curved apse wall, were often added in later stages, resting on the existing mosaic pavement (Neale 1850: 190; Duval 1994: 188-192). Instances of this phenomenon were uncovered in the churches of Julianos at Umm el-Jimal (Corbett 1957: 58-59 fig. 16:a), Hayyan al-Mushrif (al-Muheisen – Tarrier 1995: 521-522), and Bishop Malechius in Mekawer (Piccirillo 1995: 300 fig. 4 foto 11). A similar situation applies to the plastered seats and benches constructed on both the north and south sides of the *bema*, as well as adjacent to the chancel screen.

The altar table was positioned either in the center or the chord of the apse or in the center of the *bema*. Three developmental stages of the altar structure have

been identified through archaeological findings (Duval 1994: 169-179, 203; Habas 2005: 385-389; Bianchi 2021). Initially, it was a portable table, made entirely of wood or with wooden legs, on rare occasions, the mosaic pavement corresponds to the positioning of the altar, taking the form of a bordered panel. In the second stage, the altar transformed into a permanent structure, featuring a rectangular marble slab supported by four marble legs and bases, often embedded into the existing stone or mosaic floor. Some churches, such as the North Church at Ebus (Fig. 4), incorporated specially designed panel for legs/bases insertion (Lawlor 1979: 4-6 fig. 7; 1980: 100 fig. 5; Piccirillo 1993a: 250 figs. 433-434), and a similar situation applies in the Church of Bishop Malechius in Mekawer, when the legs/bases were inserted into the corners of a rectangular panel (Piccirillo 1993a: 246 figs. 418-419; 1995: 298-301 fig. 4 fotos 11-13). In many 6th-century AD churches, there is evidence of damage to mosaic patterns, caused by the insertion of legs of the permanent altar into the floor as in the Church of the Deacon Thomas in the 'Uyun Musa Valley (Fig. 5) (Piccirillo 1993a: 187 figs. 266, 269).



Figure 4
The North Church at Ebus (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 434; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



Figure 5
The Church of Deacon Thomas in the 'Uyun Musa Valley (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 266; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

When the floor featured a geometric or vegetal pattern, the insertion did not detract from the overall appearance. However, in instances of figurative compositions, the damage incurred was substantial. Occasionally, the motif was concealed by a reliquary (reliquarium) or the stone base that accommodated the table legs. In certain churches, deliberate efforts were made to coordinate the insertion of legs/bases and reliquary in a manner that preserved the integrity of the overall artistic program as in the Church of St. George (AD 535/36) in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 6) (Piccirillo 1998: 322 figs. 116, 121-122). In Transjordan, the third stage of altar development was unearthed, notably identified in the churches of Umm al-Rasas from the mid-7th to mid-8th centuries AD saw the advent of a massive altar, replacing the four-legged table. The altar, constructed from bricks or stones, contains, or covers the reliquary, and often disregarding mosaic floor decorations entirely, covering a substantial portion of the floor as evident in the Church of St. Paul in Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 7) (Piccirillo 1997: 380-384 fotos 17-18, 26; Bianchi 2021: 64 fig. 5). The rare ciborium also stood on four legs, which were inserted into the floor mosaic.



Figure 6
The Church of St. George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (after: Piccirillo 1998: figs. 121-122; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



Figure 7
The Church of St. Paul at Umm er-Rasas (after: Bianchi 2021: fig. 5; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

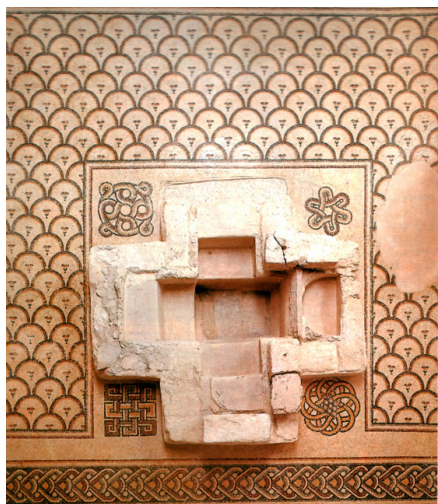


Figure 8
The Old Diakonikon-Baptistry in the Memorial of Moses complex on Mt. Nebo (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 184; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Baptistry chapels (*baptisterium/baptisteria*) tailored the mosaic pavement to the structure of the font, with decorative schemes aligning with the shape of the baptismal font. An illustration of this adaptation can be found in the geometric interlacing motifs found between the arms of the font shaped as a cross in the old diakonikon-baptistry (AD 530/31) in the Memorial of Moses complex in Mt. Nebo (Fig. 8) (Piccirillo 1993a: 146 fig. 184).

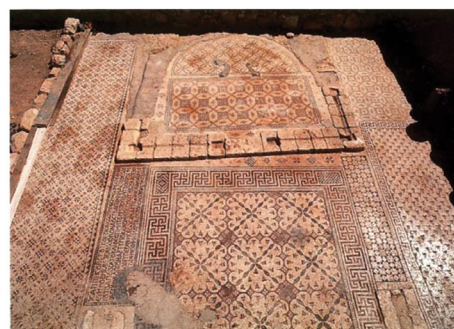
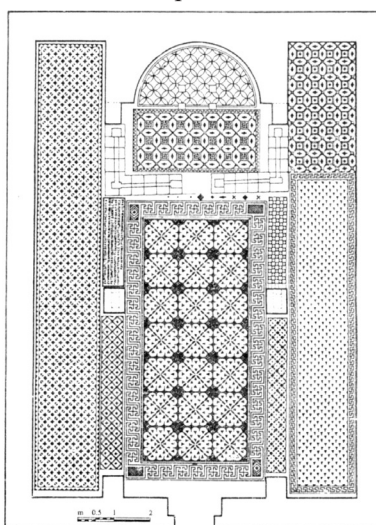
Compositional and Iconographic Arrays

The examination of various churches reveals a discernible divergence in preferences regarding compositional and iconographic arrays. Some establishments favored neutral geometric and vegetal arrays, while others exhibited a predilection for figurative arrays, creating a distinctive amalgamation of geometric, vegetal, and figural motifs.

Neutral Geometric Arrays

Certain ecclesiastical sites demonstrated a tendency towards neutral geometric arrays, exemplified in the Chapel of Bishop Marianus at Gerasa (Fig. 2) (Piccirillo 1993a: 298 figs. 579, 581). Notable instances include the Church of St. George (no. 79; AD 637), the Egumen Church (no. 82), the fortress church (no. 29), and the northeast chapel (no. 20) in Khirbat al-Samra, adorned with simple geometric patterns such as chessboard, diamonds, octagons with swastika designs (Piccirillo 1993a: 306, 308 figs. 600-601, 611, 613-615, 617-618). Similarly, the Church of St. Basil (AD 594), Church of St. Peter (AD 623/24), Church of St. Means (AD. 635) (Fig. 9), and Church of the St. martyr Nicophorus Constantine (AD 623) at Rihab featured simple geometric patterns like scales, intersecting circles, octagons with swastika, diamonds, and tangent interloped circles and squares (Lux 1967a: 36 taf. 13:b; Piccirillo 1993a: 311-313 figs. 626, 630, 633-635; al-Husan 2001: 9 fig. on p. 9). These sites manifested a regional penchant for geometric decoration in both the liturgical space and the halls. It is important to note that this preference does not imply an aniconic tendency but rather reflects a local proclivity for geometric nets and interlacing. Churches adorned with simple geometric patterns created a neutral and open ambiance that did not compete with the sacred activities transpiring within the space.

Figure 9
The Church of St. Means at Rihab (after: Piccirillo 1993a: figs. 634-635; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



In certain instances, the liturgical areas were enriched with complex interlaced geometric compositions. The intricacy of these geometric pavements varied, ranging from straightforward patterns to elaborate interlacing. This trend

reached its zenith during the Umayyad period, as evidenced by the Church of St. Stephen (AD 756) at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 10). The floor exhibits a harmonious shield and intricate interlaced nets, featuring polygons, circles, diamonds, trefoil squares inhabited circles and buds (Piccirillo 1994: 136-137 figs. 23-29).

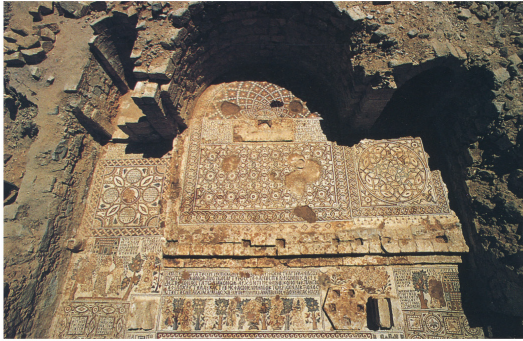


Figure 10
The Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas
(after: Piccirillo 1994: figs. 24-25; courtesy
of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Populated Geometric Arrays

Certain ecclesiastical structures exhibit adorned geometric arrays enriched with decorative vegetal and figural motifs, demonstrating a departure from neutral geometric designs. Examples of such compositions include the octagonal network of the *bema* of Chapel B at Qam, where figurative motifs were obliterated by iconoclasts (Ta'ani 1997: 14 fig 2). Another instance is found in the *bema* of the Northeast Chapel of the Church of the Apostles (AD 578) at Madaba, featuring tress, leaves, a cluster of grapes, and citrons within a diamond net of buds, which is characteristic of Madaba's mosaic workshops (Lux 1968: 125 taf. 26:b; Piccirillo 1993a: 106 fig. 90). A particularly elaborate composition is observed in the lower mosaic floor of the *bema* of the North Church at Esbus (Fig. 4). This floor incorporates a diamond net of buds filled with a variety of birds and waterfowl, including Nilotic scenes, hunting scenes, and a cage with a partridge. In the apse, two deer face a medallion with a dedication inscription (Lawlor 1979: 4-6 fig. 7; 1980: 100 fig. 5; Piccirillo 1993a: 250 figs. 422-423, 428-429, 433-434).

Mixture of Styles

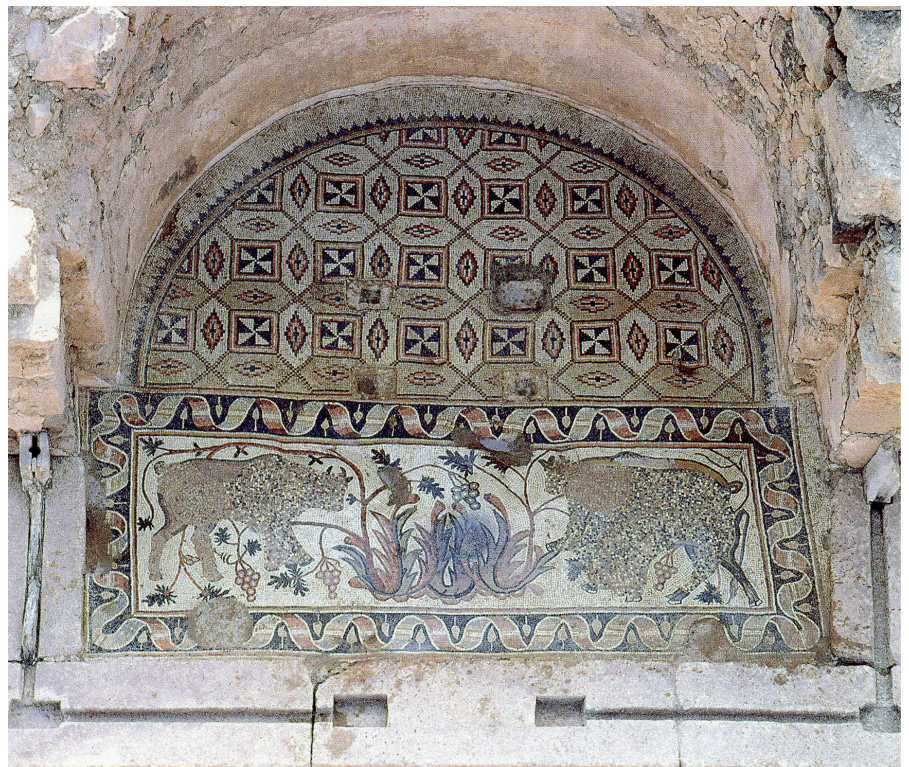
Several ecclesiastical sites display a predilection for a combination of styles, wherein a geometric carpet adorns the apse, while the *bema* features a vegetal carpet with figurative motifs imbued with symbolic significance. This stylistic amalgamation aims to create a neutral decorative background for the altar and a visually meaningful composition in proximity to the altar, emphasizing its location and the sacred rituals performed therein. Instances of this trend are evident in various churches in Umm al-Rasas. For instance, in the Church of the Palm Tree, altar legs embedded into a mosaic floor of hexagons forming swastika squares in the apse, while the *bema* is adorned with peacocks, partridges, and lambs within vine scrolls emanating from a central kantharos, above palm tree is growing. Both panels are unified by a guilloche frame (Fig. 11) (Bujard et al. 1992: fig. 1 pls. III:2, XVIII:1; Piccirillo 1993a: 241-242 figs. 392-393; Bianchi 2021: 61 fig. 2). Similar schemes, featuring intersecting octagons with squares and rhombuses, constitute the background of the altar in the Church of Priest

Figure 11
The Church of the Palm Tree at Umm al-Rasas (after: Bianchi 2021: fig. 2; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



Wa'il (AD 586) (Fig. 12), and the *bema* is adorned with three bulls facing a central clump of acanthus leaves (Piccirillo 1993a: 242-243 figs. 396, 399; 1993b: 323 fig. 23; Bianchi 2021: 61 fig. 1). The same scheme is also evident in the Church of the Rivers (Bujard et al. 1992: fig. 1 pl. II:2; Piccirillo 1993a: 240-241 figs. 391-392), the Church of the Lions (AD 574 or 589) (Piccirillo 1992a: pianta I foto 31; 1993a: 236 figs. 338, 376), the Peacock Chapel (Piccirillo 1992b: 367-368; Abela - Pappalardo 1998: fig. 2), the Church of Bishop Sergius (Piccirillo 1993a: 234-235 figs. 331, 365), and the Theotokos Chapel in the Memorial of Moses complex on Mt. Nebo (Piccirillo 1993a: 151 fig. 200). This pattern recurs in several contemporary churches in the same region, suggesting the presence of a specialized regional school of mosaic craftsmen.

Figure 12
The Chapel of Priest Wa'il at Umm al-Rasas (after: Bianchi 2021: fig. 1; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



An inverted arrangement characterizes the liturgical space of the Church of St. George in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 6), with intersecting circles decorating the *bema*, while a symbolic depiction of a ram and a tree is situated in the apse and on the eastern side of the altar (Piccirillo 1998: 322 figs. 116, 121-122).

Amphora/Kantharos and Vegetal Composition with Symbolic Iconography

A prevalent theme within the ecclesiastical mosaic artistry is the depiction of vegetal elements, such as vine scrolls and trees, often manifested in the nave of churches and occasionally extending to liturgical areas in either a reduced or complex form.

The simplest representation involves the portrayal of an amphora or kantharos either in isolation or accompanied by animals, as exemplified by a pair of pheasants in the north apse and a pair of eagles flanking the names of benefactors in the south apse of the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 13) (Piccirillo 1992a: 220 fotos 46-47 pianta I; 1993a: 236 figs. 373-376). Similarly, the *bema* of the church at 'Anab el-Kabir features an amphora flanked by four damaged lion figures (Amir 2012: 451 figs. 8-9; Magen et al. 2012: 346 figs. 4, 22).



Figure 13
The Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas
(after: Piccirillo 1993a: figs. 374-375;
courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Other churches present bunches of grapes emanating from an amphora, as seen in the *bema* of the chapel in the monastery of al-Kanisah at Mukhayyat (Piccirillo 1998: 319-320 figs. 112-114) or vine scrolls emerging from an amphora in the apse of the Church of al-Dayr (AD 557/58) in Ma'in (Piccirillo 1993a: 202-203 figs. 319-320) and the chapel at Shepherd's Field (Tzaferis 1993: 204 fig. on p. 205). From these relatively straightforward compositions, richer depictions emerged, featuring an amphora, populated vine scrolls, and antithetical pairs of animals flanking the amphora, surpassing the size of motifs found in the remaining scrolls. This development often resulted in a captivating iconographic program infused with symbolic motifs.

A notable combination of symbolic representation and scenes from everyday life is evident in the *bema*'s lower mosaic of the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 14). Here, two vine shoots laden with bunches, leaves, and tendrils emerge from an amphora and form five scrolls. Flanking the vessel are two facing rams in heraldic positions with lifted legs. Above, an animal chase unfolds, portraying a wild beast, likely a lion, pursuing a hare, while a bird completes the scene (Piccirillo 1998: 311-312 fig. 94). This same combination appears in the Upper Church at Massuh, where the carpet's frame is adorned with acanthus scrolls populated by a hound chasing a hare, while the remaining carpet features vine scrolls and the peacock's tail, a conventional heraldic depiction of a pair of peacocks on either side of an amphora (Piccirillo 1983: 336-338, 343-344 fotos 6, 11-12; 1993a: 252 figs. 436-437, 444). Similar themes, featuring bird hunting scenes, are portrayed in the apse of the Church of the Holy Martyrs (al-Khadir) in Madaba (Lux 1967b: 168-182 taf. 37:b-c; Piccirillo 1993a: 129-131 figs. 144-146).

Figure 14

The lower mosaic of the Chapel of the Priest John at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (after: Piccirillo 1998: fig. 94; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



In the *bema* of the Chapel of Elias, Maria, and Soreg at Gerasa, a complex composition unfolds, including a date tree with vine scrolls. Flanking the tree are a pair of peacocks and sheep arranged heraldically. Other scrolls depict church members (Elias holds a censer and Maria holds a cross), benefactors, hunters, vine harvesters, and various bird and animal chase scenes (Saller - Bagatti 1949: 269-289 pls. 45, 50:1-2, 51:1; Piccirillo 1993a: 296 fig. 571-572).

The depiction of peacocks in a heraldic arrangement on both sides of a central motif is a prevalent theme and appears in various compositions. Noteworthy examples include a pair of peacocks, partridge, and lambs within vine scrolls sprouting from a central kantharos, with a palm tree growing above, in the *bema* of the Church of the Palm Tree at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 11). Other animals are also featured in a heraldic arrangement on the sides of a central motif, such as a pair of stags facing a dedicatory inscription within a wreath in the apse of the North Church at Esbus (Fig. 4) and a pair of stags facing an amphora in the *bema* of the lower mosaic of the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 14). A pair of bulls on the sides of a tree laden with fruit is depicted in the Church of St. Paul in Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 7), and three bulls facing a central clump of acanthus leaves in the Chapel of Priest Wa'il (Fig. 12). Other compositions include a pair of eagles facing an amphora in the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 13), where lions and sheep are also present. This thematic composition is also recurrent in some of the nave carpets of churches and hall chapels, typically positioned on the west side, at the entrance, or on the east in front of the liturgical space.

In specific regions, such as Madaba, Gerasa, Esbus, and Philadelphia in Jordan, the liturgical area is frequently adorned with compositions based on various tree arrangements, interspersed with animals in an antithetical disposition. These trees are often fruit-bearing trees native to the region, distinguished by their prominent fruits. Grapevines occasionally entwine around the trunks of these trees, and the accentuated fruits are characteristic of the Madaba region. Less common are representations of bushes and trees devoid of fruit.

Single Tree in a Horizontal or Vertical Panel

In some ecclesiastical contexts, the representation of single trees becomes a focal point in the side rooms of certain churches. For instance, the Church of Priest Wa'il (AD 586) at Umm al-Rasas features a pomegranate tree in the southern room and a date tree laden with date clusters, accompanied by shoots growing at the trunk's base, in the northern room (Piccirillo 1993a: 242-243 fig. 396;

1993b: 326 figs. 30-31, 47). Additionally, certain churches incorporate animals against a tree backdrop, occasionally tied to the tree with a rope. In the Chapel of Twal Family in Madaba, a ram is portrayed within a laurel wreath, bowing its head and grazing in front of a tree (Fig. 15) (Piccirillo 1993a: 128 figs. 138, 140-141). Similar compositions include a ram in an upright position in front of a tree east of the altar and reliquary in the Church of St. George in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 6) (Piccirillo 1998: 322 figs. 116, 121-122) and two sheep, each tethered to a tree, in the upper baptistry chapel's cross-shaped baptismal font in the Cathedral complex in Madaba (Fig. 16) (Piccirillo 1993a: 118 figs. 116-117).



Figure 15
The Twal Family Chapel in Madaba (after: Piccirillo 1993a: figs. 138, 140; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

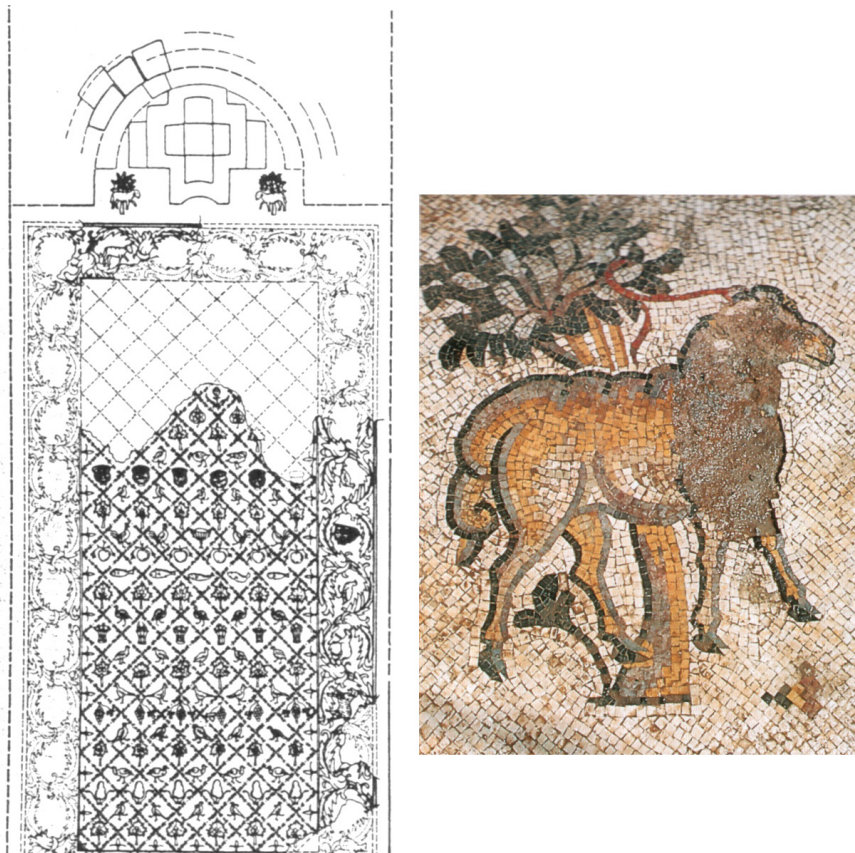


Figure 16
The Upper Baptistry Chapel in the Cathedral complex in Madaba (after: Piccirillo 1993a: figs. 116-117; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Tree/s and Animals in Antithetic Array

The strategic placement of a tree at the center of the *bema* or the apse emphasizes the building's axis and underscores the altar's location in the liturgical space. Animals, including livestock (bulls, sheep, goats, rams, and goats), lions, stags, and birds, are often arranged symmetrically around the tree in a manner that contributes to the overall composition. Fruits, characteristic of the region, may or may not be present on these trees.

In certain churches, a composition based on a single tree emerges. Examples include a pair of stags pacing a tree in the *bema* of the church at Shiloh (Kjær 1930: 139-145 fig. 30), and a pair of sheep pacing a pomegranate tree in the center of the *bema* and in front of the altar in the Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius (AD 557) at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Fig. 17) (Saller - Bagatti 1949: 55-57 fig. 7 pl. 14:1; Piccirillo 1998: 346 figs. 190-191). Similar compositions appear in the apse and east of the altar in the Church of St. Sergius (Southern Church) at Nitl, where the tree, though stylized, and the sheep were destroyed by the iconoclasts (Piccirillo 1993a: 246 fig. 420; 2001: 280, figs. 3 photo 5 plan I; Hamarneh 2006: 410 fig. 8; 2015: 335). In the lunette of the apse of the Crypt of St. Elianus (AD 595/96) under the Church of the Prophet Elias in Madaba, a pair of sheep faces a small tree laden with fruit, while below the tree are two vine branches, leaves, and bunches of grapes (Saller - Bagatti 1949: 236, 240-242 pl. 40:5; Piccirillo 1993a: 124-125 figs. 132, 134-135). Similarly, a pair of goats moves with raised front legs towards a palm tree laden with date clusters in the south sacristy of the Church of St. George in Khirbat al-Mukhayyat, where Greek and Christian-Palestinian inscriptions contribute to the composition (Fig. 18). A surviving fragment, preserved in the north sacristy, reveals an identical composition (Saller - Bagatti 1949: 171-172 fig. 8 pl. 30:1; Milik 1960: 159-160; Piccirillo 1993a: 178 figs. 244, 250; 1998: 327-328 figs. 116, 136).

Figure 17

The Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (after: Piccirillo 1998: fig. 191; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Figure 18

The Church of St. George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (after: Piccirillo 1998: fig. 136; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).



A composition replicating the single tree is the row of trees and animals in an antithetic array, often placed in front of the altar or the baptismal font. In the New Baptistery Chapel (AD 597/98) in the Memorial of Moses complex in Mt.

Nebo (Fig. 19), a rectangular panel in front of the clover/cross-shaped font is adorned with five small trees laden with fruit, interspersed symmetrically with four birds and two gazelles. Despite damage inflicted by the iconoclasts, these elements remain recognizable (Piccirillo 1998: 296-298 figs. 64-65, 70).

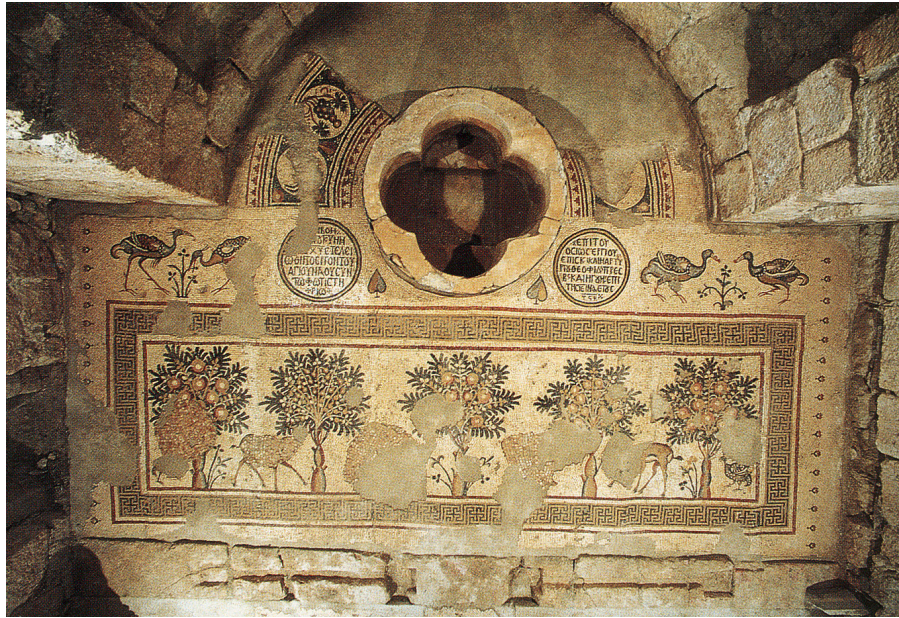


Figure 19
The New Baptistery Chapel in the Memorial complex of Moses complex on Mt. Nebo (after: Piccirillo 1998: fig. 65; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

Trees, Dedicatory Inscription, and Animals in Antithetic Array

A common and significant composition found in the liturgical area involves a dedicatory inscription flanked by trees and animals arranged in antithetic arrays. This composition is observed in the lower floor of the apse of the North Church at Esbus (Fig. 4), where two deer face a medallion containing a dedication inscription. Schematic branches at the edges of the composition follow the curvature of the apse’s lunette (Lawlor 1979: 4-6 fig. 6; 1980: 100 pl. LXIII:1; Piccirillo 1993a: 250 figs. 426, 433-434). In the *bema* of the Church of Bishop Sergius at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 20), a medallion with a dedication inscription is



Figure 20
The Church of Bishop Sergius at Umm al-Rasas (after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 331; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

flanked by a ram and a pomegranate tree on each side, with the rams facing the medallion while lifting one leg (Piccirillo 1993a: 234-235 figs. 331, 365; 1994: 122 figs. 3, 5). The mosaic panel of the *bema* of the Church of Bishop Sergius helps decipher a destroyed *bema* panel in the Western Church at Yasilah, where a medallion, two pomegranate trees, and bushes have survived (al-Muheisen 1990: 460-461 fig. 2; Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 754).

Complex Arrays of Trees, Amphora, Antithetic Animals, and Symbolic Iconography related to the Altar Table

In certain churches, intricate arrays featuring trees, amphorae, antithetic animals, and symbolic iconography are meticulously planned, each having specific motifs positioned strategically around, under, or in front of the altar. Unique compositions are witnessed, reflecting advanced planning and symbolic significance.

Triangular array appears in the Church of St. Paul in Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 7). A pair of bulls faces a fruit tree in the *bema*, and the center of the apse lunette features an amphora with a pair of birds facing it (Piccirillo 1997: 380-384 fotos 17-18, 26; Bianchi 2021: 64 fig. 5). A similar arrangement was designed in the Northern Church of Massuh. In front of the altar table, a pair of heraldic peacocks is depicted, and to the east, a pear tree is shown with birds flying around (Piccirillo 2000: 496 fig. 2).

In certain locations, the artist transformed the conventional horizontal composition of trees, creating diverse and unique arrangements. The *bema* of the Church of the Deacon Thomas in the 'Uyun Musa Valley (Fig. 5) is adorned with a square array consisting of two pairs of fruit trees (pomegranate, pear, and apple), with a lion leaping towards a bull (Zebo) in heraldic array in front of the western pair of trees, and a lamb or stag placed under the center of the altar table, east of the pair of eastern trees (Piccirillo 1993a: 187 figs. 266, 269). In the *bema* of the Chapel of the Martyr Theodore (AD 562) in the Cathedral complex of Madaba, four fruit trees grow from the center of each side of the square panel, with the foliage facing the center. A pair of stags is depicted on the western side, and a pair of lions is on the eastern side (Piccirillo 1993a: 117 figs. 110-11). A diagonal array and elaborate composition appear in the *bema* of the Church of Bishop Isaiah (AD 559) at Gerasa feature four trees between two vines rising from each corner. Gazelles, deer, a personification of the Earth (ΓΗ) positioned between two youthful *karpoforoi*, each bearing baskets of fruit, and an amphora with pair of peacocks complete the scene (Clark 1986: 303-307 fig. 6 pl. II:3; Piccirillo 1993a: 194 figs. 561, 566). The apse of the Church at Khirbet Beit Sila is decorated with interlace circles inhabited by varied birds, but on the axis of the apse and related to the altar to the east, a fish and an amphora are depicted, connecting them directly to the sacrament of the Eucharist (Batz 2012: 389-391 figs. 25-26 pl. VII).

Human Figures in Complex Arrays

The inclusion of human figures in these complex compositions adds a layer of symbolism, combining scenes from everyday life with motifs carrying symbolic meaning. Such depictions embellish the presbytery of the Church of the River in Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 21). Among the pomegranate trees and bushes, a man sitting and holding flowers or a branch on the left, another figure picking fruit, and a third figure (destroyed beyond recognition) and a lamb are depicted. Two lambs further east face the altar (Bujard et al. 1992: 295-296, 298-299, 301 fig.



Figure 21
The Church of the River at Umm er-Rasas (after: Bianchi 2021: fig. 3; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

1 pl. II:2; Piccirillo 1993a: 240-241 figs. 391-392; Bianchi 2021: 63 fig. 3). The *bema* of the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damianos at Khirbet Dariya (Fig. 22) is adorned with human figures, possibly donors identified by their names, were destroyed by the iconoclasts, with parts of robes and one leg surviving. One figure holds a candelabrum (*candelabrum*), and a dedicatory inscription survived in the apse (Karasneh 1997: 28-29 figs. 12, 14-15; Hamarneh 2012: fig. 4).

Crosses and ‘Tree of Life’

In liturgical spaces, crosses are not only found as standalone motifs but are also incorporated into complex compositions, often carrying deep symbolic meanings relevant to their specific locations. In addition to their symbolic role, crosses were sometimes placed on the floor to mark the positions of liturgical furniture such as altar table and reliquary or offering table (Habas 2020: 162). Chéhab proposes that the monogram crosses serve to designate the positions of the reading stands – sacred spaces where readers and singers stood during the recitation of homilies. Donceel-Voûte suggests that the monogram cross positioned at the center of the *bema*, in front of the altar table, along with the inclusion of the letters ΑΩ, symbolizes the presence of Christ within the broader context of eternity (Chéhab 1958: 92-93; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 436-438).

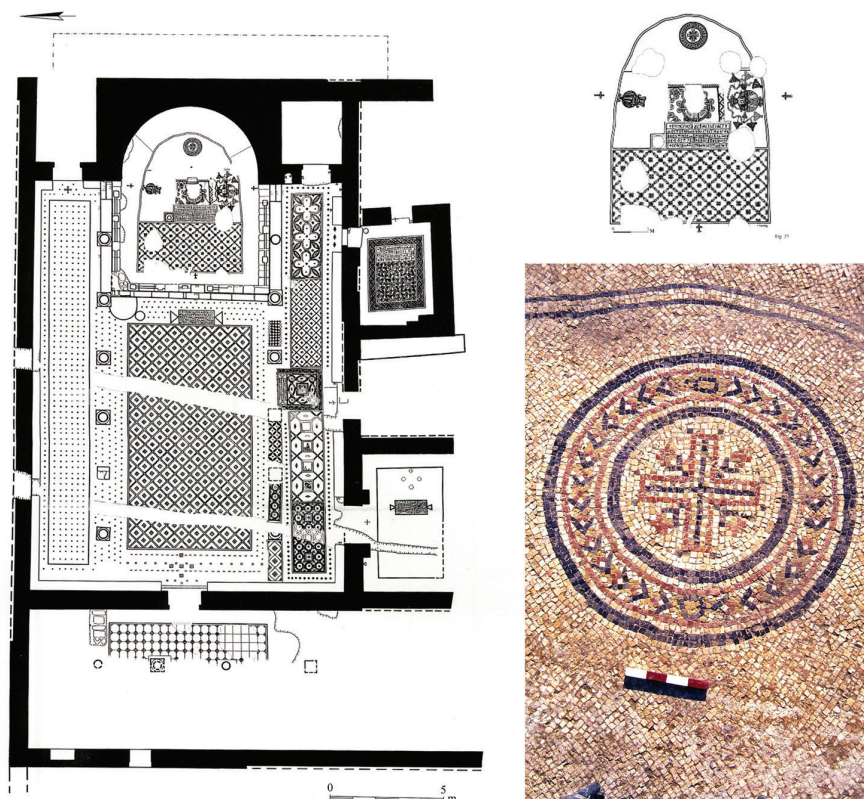
Various types of crosses and compositions are portrayed on the mosaic floors. In certain churches a solitary cross is featured. A large Greek cross with rectangular edges, adorned with small Greek crosses between its arms and around it, decorates the entire surface of the apse floor in the chapel on the Mt. of Olives, Jerusalem. This cross is thought to indicate the place of the altar table (Séjourné 1896: 274-276 fig. on p. 275; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 19). A Greek cross is visible at the entrance to room 1, featuring a baptismal font adorned with two additional Greek crosses inside the 4th-century AD Chapel C at Magen (Tsaferis 1985a: 6, 8 figs. 2, 9; 1985b: 23 fig. 13). The apse of the Qazone Church at Ghor al-Maza’a is also embellished with a cross flanked by two small birds (Politis 2023: 10-11 fig. 1.19).



Figure 22
The Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damianos at Khirbet Dariya (after: Hamarneh 2012: fig. 4; courtesy of B. Hamarneh, University of Vienna).

In other churches, crosses are depicted within medallions or wreaths, positioned at various locations. In this type, the cross appears as the central motif. Examples include the oval and round medallions in the mosaic floor on the context of liturgy of a later phase of the church in the monastery at Khirbet ed-Deir in the Judean Desert. The oval comprises a prominent central cross accompanied by two smaller crosses, while the second medallion is circular and features a sizable Greek cross and between the arms there are four small Greek crosses. Notably, fragments of a marble altar table were discovered *in situ* between these two medallions, suggesting this area served as the designated space for the altar (Hirschfeld 1999: 48-49 figs. 70-71; Talgam 1999: 112-113 figs. 14-16). East of the altar table, in the center of the apse of the Western Church at Tel Qerayot, a cross enclosed within a wreath/medallion, entwined with ivy branches, can be found. This cross, belonging to the *crux gemmata* type, exhibits thin lines forming an X (chi) between its arms—a variation reminiscent of a *chrismon* (Govrin 2006: 46-47, 115-116 figs. 31-32, 109 pl. 14). In the northern chapel of the monastery at Khirbet Deir Sam'an, the mosaic floor, opposite the *bema* opening, features a small Greek cross enclosed within a circle. Additionally, a large Maltese cross occupies the center of the room within a medallion, and palm trees between its arms (Magen 2012: 38 figs. 8-9, 40-41). In the center of the *bema* of the monastery at Mevo Modi'im, the mosaic floor showcases a *crux gemmata* type cross encircled by a circle of interlaced geometric patterns (Eisenberg – Ovadia 1998: 1*, 5* fig. 4, plans 1-2; Magen – Kagan 2012a: 232 fig. 105.1, 3). In the church at Khirbet el-Beiyûdât (c. AD 570) (Fig. 23), the presbytery exhibits three Latin crosses strategically placed in front of the western, southern, and northern entrances from the chancel screen. At the eastern edge of the apse, the mosaic floor showcases a medallion/laurel wreath enveloping a Greek cross with four buds positioned between its arms (Hizmi 1990: 252-254 fig. 6, 10 plan on p. 246; Habas 2020: Fig. 11).

Figure 23
The church at Khirbet el-Beiyûdât (after: Habas 2020: fig. 11; courtesy of H. Hizmi, IAA).



Crosses, intertwined within a more intricate composition of profound iconographic significance, have been discovered in certain churches. A Greek cross studded with jewels in square and oval settings (*crux gemmata* type) placed above an amphora with vine-trellis, accompanied by inscriptions in Syriac and Greek is decorated the *bema* of the Church of St. John at Khirbet Umm er-Rus (Magen - Kagan 2012b: 126 fig. 238:1, 3). A similar depiction was uncovered in the Western Church at Horvat Qastra (Fig. 24). In this instance, the Greek cross is positioned above an amphora, with tendrils emanating from it, and the cross is tangentially aligned with the eastern wall of the apse (Finkielsztejn 2005: 442-443 figs. 10-11).



Figure 24
The Western Church at Horvat Qastra (after: after Habas 2020: fig. 16; courtesy of Gérald Finkielsztejn, IAA).

In some floors, a tree grows from three hills shaped as semicircles in a triangular array or a cross stands on these hills, identified with the Hill of Golgotha. An example is found in the late phase of the chapel in the Ecclesiastical Complex at Ashdod Maritima (Fig. 25), where in the center of the apse is depicted a medallion adorned with a Latin cross imitating a *crux gemmata* standing on Golgotha Hill. Positioned above the horizontal arm of the cross are the Greek letters *iota-chi*, representing Ἰ(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) – Jesus Christ. Below the horizontal arm, the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* are featured, commonly representing the abbreviation ἄ(λφα) (καί) ὤ(μέγα) (Avi-Yonah 1940: 53, 73). Close to the cross, a geometric interlace emerges, comprised of a knot of three figures of eight, a central circle, and an open flower within. This intricate design forms both an elegant flower and, simultaneously, conceals a hidden cross (Habas 2023: 260, figs. 12-13, 16). In the church in Hufa al-Wastiyah, a Latin cross is depicted standing on a graduated plinth in the northern apse lunette, adorned with white squares imitating precious stones imitating a *crux gemmate*. Beneath the horizontal arm, the letters ΑΩ are inscribed, and flanking either side of the cross are animals portrayed in a heraldic pose. Despite the iconoclastic destruction, the animals can be readily recognized as a pair of peacocks (Abu Dalu 1994: figs. 5, 11; Habas 2015: 39 fig. 9).



Figure 25
The chapel in the Ecclesiastical Complex at Ashdod Maritima (after: Habas 2023: fig. 16; courtesy of A. Fantalkin, Tel Aviv University).

Architectural Façade in the Liturgical Space

Infrequently, liturgical spaces depict architectural façades, adding a unique dimension to the artistic elements within. Examples include the presbytery of the Chapel of the Theotokos in the Monastery at 'Ain al-Kanisah, this chapel is adorned with a shell-shaped tympanum supported by two columns. Between these columns hangs a curtain (*vela*), knotted at the center. On either side of the tympanum, partially destroyed sheep stand in front of a small tree laden with fruit (Piccirillo 1998: 359 figs. 226-228).

The presbytery of the Theotokos Chapel at the Memorial of Moses complex on Mt. Nebo (Fig. 3) is adorned with two distinct carpets, with the apse featuring a field of buds, and at its center, the altar table is prominently positioned. The *bema*, though partially destroyed by iconoclasts, can be restored. In the *bema*'s center, in front of the altar, an architectural representation is depicted—a niche with a tympanum supported by two columns standing on bases. Between these columns, a vestibule or gate leads to a courtyard, indicating a flame. Above, there is a domed tabernacle with a cupola supported by four columns (*tetrastylus façade*). At the center of the tabernacle is a table with two supports, recognized as the showbread table. Two bulls, two gazelles, and flowering shrubs face the architectural representation. The scene's interpretation is supported by a citation in Greek of Psalm 51:21: "Then they shall lay calves upon Thy altar", suggesting that the *bema* is decorated with a biblical sacrifice offered in the Temple of Jerusalem (Saller 1941: 233-241, 254-258 pl. 109:1; Piccirillo 1993a: 151 fig. 200; 1998: 300-302 figs. 73-74, 77).

Donors in the Liturgical Area

Depictions of donors in the liturgical area are rare, contrasting with inscriptions that explicitly mention donor names. The donors in the mosaics, whether clergy or community members, are identified by name. Clergy members in frontal and stiff pose are depicted in their characteristic attire, holding cultic objects. In contrast, hunters and farmers are shown in dynamic, active poses, adding a diversity of representations within the liturgical context.

Symbolic Compositions and their Christian Meaning

When considering symbolic compositions in the liturgical area, deliberate choices are made to convey particular significance.

Prominence, balance, and conciseness – the compositions are large, prominent, and maintain symmetry and balance within the composition. Avoiding minutiae, they focus on essential elements, ensuring clarity in conveying their intended message. This distinguishes them from the potentially more intricate designs found in the nave.

Christian Symbolism and Interpretation of Vegetable Motifs

Christian symbolism often finds expression in various motifs, including those inspired by nature, such as animals, vegetable motifs and vessel. The interpretation of these motifs within a Christian context often carries symbolic significance.

Examination of the writings of the Church Fathers and a comparison with Byzantine art across the Empire reveal that trees, both bearing fruits (such as pomegranate, apple, pear, peach, plum, date) and fruitless trees and vines, symbolized the Christian Paradise (*Paraddeisos*). Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 330 - c. 395) defined the Παράδεισος as "a forest planted with thick trees" (Gregorius Nyssenus, PG XLIV, col. 969B; Daniélou 1953: 433-434). According to Baumann, the selection of pomegranate trees is significant as they imply eternal life, a fixed and ideal time (Baumann 1999: 87-88).

The tree and the cross represented Christ and the Christian faith – the 'tree of life' from the garden of paradise (Gen. 2.9) and Rev. (2.7) "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the 'tree of life', which is in the paradise of God",

perceived by the Church Fathers and in the liturgy as a cross. According to Cyril of Jerusalem (c. AD 315-386), the cross is the ‘tree of life’: “... And if, because of the tree of food, they were then cast out of paradise, shall not believers now more easily enter into paradise because of the Tree of Jesus?” (Catech. XIII.2; PG XXXIII, cols. 773-774; Bagatti 1957: 141).²

The animals were perceived as allegorical creatures forming a symbolic composition. The allegorical use of animals in literature and art dates back to antiquity, and with the advent of Christianity, zoomorphic depictions were integrated into Christian iconography (Testini 1985: 1122-1123; Habas 2005: I: 429-454). The most definitive text on animal symbolism in Christianity is the *Physiologus* (Woodruff 1930: 242; Charbonneau-Lassay 1974).³

A lone sheep positioned beneath the altar, or a ram tethered to a tree, or standing before it, were iconographically linked with the binding of Isaac and the sacrifice of Christ. Sheep, rams, and peacocks facing the altar or positioned in front of it symbolize believers participating in the Eucharist, achieving salvation, or the souls of the departed gathering around Christ’s symbols. The same symbolism applies to opposing pairs of animals flanking an amphora, chalice, tree, cross, or drinking from a spring. These motifs in the liturgical area symbolized the Fountain of Life, as well as the sacrament of the Eucharist (Saller – Bagatti 1949: 171-172, 242; Bagatti 1957: 140-142; Piccirillo 1989: 331-333). According to Hamarneh, the lamb is the symbol of the righteous believer. The depiction of the sheep with a raised leg and bowed head creates a rural atmosphere set in the supernatural world—the Garden of Eden, where the souls of believers, symbolized by the sheep, find rest (Hamarneh 1994: 232). According to Hesychius, a presbyter of Jerusalem in the 5th century AD, animals eating the leaves of the tree symbolize believers: “Do not be afraid of the image of the sheep, which are led in the Shepherd’s stick; we are also shepherds led by Jesus - by his cross” (Hesychius of Jerusalem, Frag. In Ps.; PG XCIII, cols. 1245-1246; Bagatti 1957: 141-142).

The animals serve as symbolic representations of Christian believers who, upon embracing Christianity, are promised eternal life. This notion is particularly evident in the symbolism of peacocks and lions, which had long been associated with themes of resurrection and eternal life in antiquity. The pagan idea of the peacock as immortal and representing resurrection and eternity seamlessly transitioned into Christianity, finding a place in Christian iconography. Consequently, the frequent portrayal of peacocks underscores the theme of salvation and redemption that Jesus bestows upon his followers. The peacock, as previously mentioned, held significance as a symbol of resurrection in pagan cultures. Aristotle and Pliny the Elder attributed to the peacock the remarkable ability to preserve its body and avoid decay. Moreover, the peacock, shedding its beautiful tail feathers before winter only to regrow them in spring, became a powerful symbol of the resurrection of the dead (Aristot. *hist. an.*, X.7; Plin. *nat.*, X.XXII, 43-44; Leclercq 1937: 1075-1076; Blanchard-Lemée 1996: 255). In Imperial Roman iconography, peacocks were depicted accompanying the souls of Roman empresses to heaven during scenes of Imperial *apotheosis* (Charbonneau-Lassay 1974: 623; Dunbabin 1978: 166; Testini 1985: 1125; Habas 2005: I: 443-447; 2014: 149). The allegorical use of animals was already

2 <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310113.htm> (accessed 12 December 2013).

3 The *Physiologus*, meaning the Natural Scientist. The Greek essay was composed by an anonymous author, apparently in Alexandria in the 2nd century AD. 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 6th century AD, the *Physiologus* was translated into Latin by Isidore of Seville.

a hallmark of classical literature and art. The Church Fathers adeptly employed pagan and Jewish myths, infusing them with new Christian significance to elucidate and propagate abstract symbolic ideas. In the realm of art, which served as a visual translation of religious concepts, existing and familiar figures, metaphors, and formulae were employed to convey these profound ideas.

The portrayal of a lion leaping toward an ox in the heraldic arrangement symbolizes the coexistence of predatory and farm animals in a state of peace and tranquility. This imagery is understood as an illustration of the harmonious relationship between animals (*filia*), as described in the Book of Isaiah 11:7, anticipating a future era of Messiah. This theological perspective, initially rooted in the biblical text, found resonance among Christians and came to symbolize the eschatological fulfillment in the Christian paradise (Bagatti 1957: 139-160; Bamberger 1971; Tigay 1971).

The graduated base or three hills supporting the cross serves as a visual representation of the hill of Golgotha. In Christian art, the combination of the cross and the letters ΑΩ is a prevalent motif representing Christ. The letters *alpha* and *omega* are recognized abbreviations of ἄ(λφα) (καί) ὤ(μέγα) (Avi-Yonah 1940: 53), referencing the words of Jesus: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (Revelations 1.8).⁴

Despite the prohibition against depicting crosses on floors in the edict issued by Emperor Theodosius II in AD 427, archaeological and art historical research has revealed the prominent presence of crosses in mosaic floors. This evidence contributes significantly to our understanding of the iconographic meanings embedded in the compositions adorning mosaic floors (Habas 2015: 53-56; 2020: 169-172, with respective sites and references).

Theological concepts find expression in the *bema* of the Church of the Palm Tree in Umm al-Rasas, mentioned above (Fig. 11): the kantharos symbolizes the Fountain of Life, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and the peacocks and lambs represent Christian believers attaining eternal life through acceptance of the Christian religion (Bujard et al. 1988: 106-108). These theological ideas are particularly evident in two churches adorned with intricate depictions, bearing deep symbolic significance revealed in the liturgical space. The presbyterium of the Church of the Lions (AD 574 or 578) at Umm al-Rasas (Fig. 26) features two main panels: the *bema* is adorned with two gazelles and two lions facing trees laden with fruit in a heraldic symmetrical arrangement. In the apse, in a defined panel under the altar table (*sacra mensa*), a Greek cross set in a clipeus (*crux clipeata*) is present, and the arms of the cross, adorned with buds. The panel is accompanied by a pair of sheep or bulls facing the altar, destroyed by the iconoclasts. The east part of the apse is decorated with a field of buds. The cross emphasizes the Eucharist ritual in the apse, the sacrifice of Christ, and the redemption granted to his followers, depicted as sheep participating in the ritual. This symbolism is echoed in the depiction of animals facing the fruit-laden trees of the *bema*, symbolizing the 'Tree of Life', identified as the cross (Piccirillo 1992a: 213-214, pianta I fotos 13, 31; 1993a: 236 figs. 338, 376; Habas 2015: 41 fig. 11; Bianchi 2021: 63 fig. 4). The mosaic of the *bema* in the church of St. Lot at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abata (AD 606; 691) (Fig. 27) illustrates the symbolism clearly. A complex iconography with profound theological significance is present. Despite



Figure 26
The Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas
(after: Piccirillo 1993a: fig. 338; Bianchi
2021: fig. 4; courtesy of M. Piccirillo, SBF).

⁴ New Testament, Authorized King James Version; <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org> (accessed 18 September 2025)..



Figure 27

The church of St. Lot at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abata (after: Politis 2012: colour pl. 22; courtesy of K. D. Politis, Ionian University in Corfu and Hellenic Society for Near Eastern Studie, Euboea).



the loss of part of the panel, a symmetrical composition of inhabited vine scrolls with a surviving peacock, likely facing an amphora or kantharos, can be reconstructed. In the central scroll, a medallion with a Greek cross (*crux clipeata*) is depicted. The vertical arm bears the letters ΤΕΛΟΣ, and the horizontal arm ΚΑΛΟΝ, meaning 'a good end' (*telos kalon*). Above the cross, a small scroll containing a goblet is depicted, positioned between the legs supporting the altar table. Above the peacock are two sheep or rams on either side of the cross, facing it, with one foreleg slightly raised towards the cross (Piccirillo 1993a: 336 figs. 723, 725-726; Politis 2012: 176 colour pl. 22). The iconographic meaning of the panel is evident: the four recesses marking the exact position of the altar help understand the scheme of the *bema* mosaic. The composition emphasizes the central vertical row of vine scrolls: the clipeus containing the cross with the inscription and the goblet positioned beneath the altar. The peacocks on either side of the vessel and the sheep/rams alongside the cross are other prominent elements. The heraldic, symmetrical, and hierarchical arrangement enhances certain elements relative to other motifs, providing emphasis. All these elements express the iconographic concept underlying the composition. The mosaic floor thus recreates the liturgy performed in the area of the *bema* and the Eucharist

ceremony, emphasizing the cross as Christ, the goblet of wine as Christ's sacrifice, and the sheep/rams and peacocks as Christian believers worshipping the cross. The peacocks also symbolize the resurrection and eternal life granted to Christian believers. The inscription on the arms of the cross sums up the believers' aspiration for a good end (Politis 1992: 283; Habas 2005: I: 368).

As previously mentioned, animals are sometimes depicted facing an architectural façade, symbolizing worshipers approaching the church and its holiest section, where liturgy is conducted. Following the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, Christians transferred the cult and sacrifices from the Temple Mount to the church (Bagatti 1984: 240-241). This concept is articulated through representations of architectural façades on the *bema* or in front of it, particularly featuring the depiction of the Temple with smoke rising from the altar and pairs of oxen and gazelles accompanying the inscription taken from Psalm 51.21: "Then they shall lay calves upon Thy altar", as seen in Theotokos Chapel in the Memorial of Moses complex in Mt. Nebo (Rosenau 1936: 161; Saller 1941: 235; Saller - Bagatti 1949: 105, 109-110; Piccirillo 1998: 300). The idea of the new sacrifice is recurrently depicted through pairs of oxen in various churches, either facing the altar or positioned in front of it, along with those flanking a smoking altar, also found in the nave. This artistic representation establishes a connection between the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem and the church's altar, linking the sacrifice of oxen in the Jewish Temple to the weekly Eucharistic celebration. The artisan thus conveys the transition from the old sacrificial system to the new Christian era. Early Church Fathers often referred to the Temple in Jerusalem, its sacrifices, and rituals as heralds and symbols of Christian worship. The use of biblical texts in these depictions serves a typological purpose, referencing the sacrifice of the new era and the writing of the New Testament. Consequently, the iconography in some churches illustrates a profound theological typology expressed in the liturgy and the writings of the Church Fathers (Saller 1941: 234-235).

As it happens, the liturgical area occasionally incorporates scenes derived from the genre cycles commonly found in the nave's carpets. In one instance, there is even a representation of the personification of the earth (ΓΗ), accompanied by youths bearing gifts (*karpoforoi*). Heraldic animals flanking an amphora or positioned between trees are depicted alongside scenes of vintage, the chase, and hunting. This combination of symbolic motifs and seemingly secular themes suggests a desire on the part of patrons and artisans to blur boundaries, despite architectural demarcations, and unify the various parts of the church into a cohesive entity. In this unified representation, God's blessings to humanity and their endeavors in this world seamlessly merge with belief and the anticipation of eternal life in the world to come, symbolized by Paradise. The compositions and motifs present in the nave reflect this same inclination.

Summary and Conclusions

The numerous churches adorned with mosaic floors discovered across the Holy Land during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods present a fascinating overview of the composition and iconography within the liturgical space. The depictions exhibit significant variation, differing from one region to another. Some churches favored neutral geometric and vegetal patterns, while others opted for figurative designs. Vegetal motifs, including trees and populated vine scrolls, were common. Certain mosaics featured sheep, rams, and peacocks positioned in front of or under the altar, symbolizing believers participating in the Eucharist and attaining salvation. Antithetical pairs of animals flanking elements such as

amphorae, trees, crosses, or drinking from springs conveyed similar theological messages. Trees, particularly associated with the 'Tree of Life', were identified with Jesus, with some trees symbolizing the cross on Golgotha.

In select sites, there was a tendency towards a fusion of styles, combining neutral geometric and vegetal carpets or vegetal carpets with symbolic figurative motifs. Depictions of architectural façade, donors, and everyday life episodes, common in nave carpets, were less frequent in the liturgical area.

The recurrence of specific iconographic patterns in contemporary churches within the same region suggests the presence of a specialized regional school of mosaic craftsmen and/or a local preference for certain themes.

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