

Plant Mosaics in the Church at Ya'amun

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THE CHURCH AT YA'AMUN in Jordan has yielded mosaics with rich illustrations of plant life. The purpose of this study is to examine the plant designs and their role in the mosaic as a whole. The remains of the mosaics are today dominated by plants owing to the destruction of the human figures.

Our aim is to describe the plant mosaics and to compare them to pavements found elsewhere dating from approximately the same period. We are interested in pavements of the Roman and Byzantine periods, in which both local and external influences can be seen. Wherever possible, comparanda have been chosen from sites relatively close to Ya'amun geographically, in order to obtain a comprehensive overview of the region's mosaic production. At the same time, every effort has been made to discern and identify the chief sources of influence in the mosaic production at Ya'amun. We have further sought to ascertain the influences coming from Asia Minor and other areas, dating from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Ya'amun occupies a geographically important site in northern Jordan, approximately 25 km. south of Irbid, near the village of Nuaimah.¹ A survey was begun in summer 1999, with six excavation campaigns under the supervision of Jerome Rose (University of Arkansas), and Mahmoud el-Najjar and Nizar Turshan (Yarmouk University) as part of a joint project involving the Bio-archaeological and Archaeological Field

¹ N. Turshan, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 617, *fig.* 1; see also M. Nassar and N. Turshan, "Geometrical Mosaic Pavements of the Church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun," *PEQ* 143 (2011) 41–62.

School and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. During these campaigns, six main structures were unearthed, including a Christian basilica (the main church) on the southeast slope overlooking the site, dated from the late fifth to early sixth centuries by a Greek inscription,² and five tombs of the Roman period located to the southwest of the site.

We first consider the technique used in the pavements' construction. As is usually the case with large mosaic pavements, each has a bed composed of several layers. The first consists of soil, a compacted layer of local red earth. On top of this is a layer of small round pebbles packed closely together and covered with a layer of ash and lime mortar. This smooth bed covered the whole area, to a thickness of 13 cm. A layer of wet lime plaster, on average 1 cm. thick, was spread over it. This was done in stages, area by area, and the mosaicist had to work before the plaster dried.

Normally, the mosaicist would draw outlines of the composition in red or black. He would then start laying the tesserae into the wet plaster. The tesserae were usually cubes 1 cm. square, cut from local limestone, basalt, jasper, or oil shale. Sometimes glass tesserae were used in order to achieve brighter colours, such as green, blue, and gold.³ Much the same technique (without glass tesserae) was used for the floor of the church at Ya'amun.

The plant mosaic pavements

The plan of the Church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun (*fig. 1*) is that of a typical basilica (20 x 13 m.), complete with an apse, chancel screen, nave, and side aisles.

² Turshan, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 618, *fig. 2*; Nassar and Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 41–62.

³ D. Neal, "Floor Mosaics," in D. Strong and D. Brown (eds.), *Roman Crafts* (London 1976) 241; M. Piccirillo, *Byzantinische Mosaiken aus Jordanien* (Vienna 1986) 40; R. Ling, "Against the Reverse Technique," *JRA* Suppl. 9 (1994) 77–88.

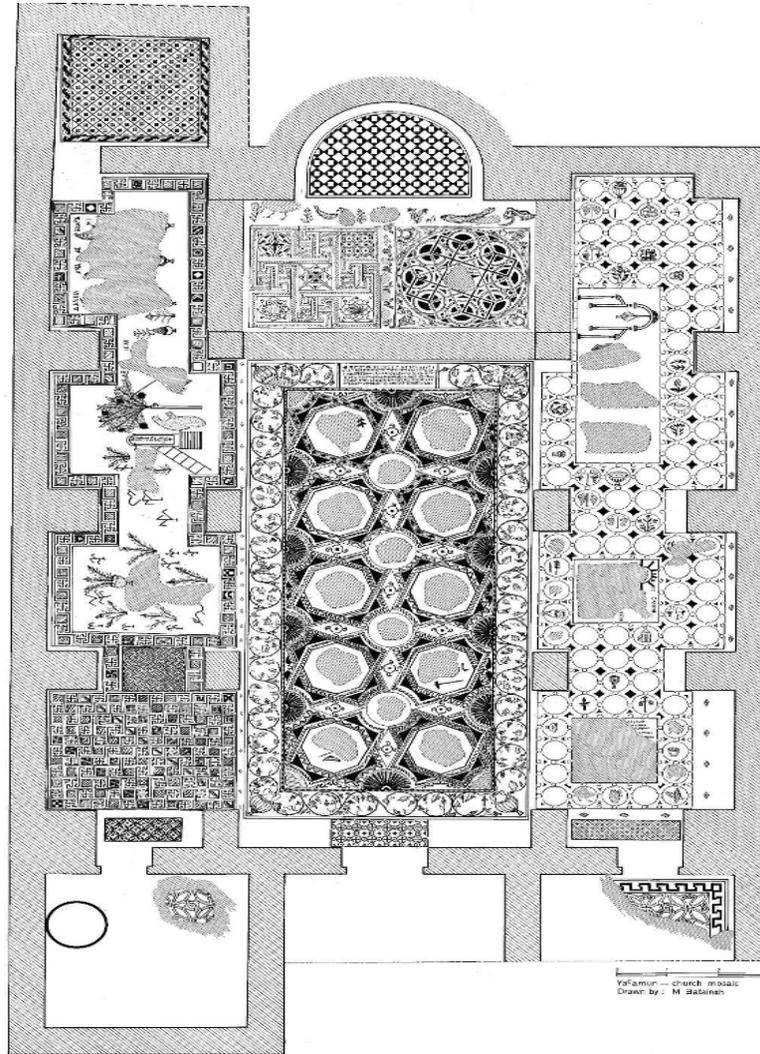


Figure 1. Plan of the pavements of the church at Ya'amun

All parts of the church were covered with mosaic pavements. Although it is mainly the areas with geometrical patterns that survive, some parts of the floor contain plant motifs—trees, fruit, scrolls of grape vines.

Plant motifs decorated many important church floors in the Byzantine period. The church at Ya'amun has such decorative plants along with geometrical motifs, thus the vine scrolls, leaves, pomegranates—and also some wheat, a rarity in Byzantine mosaics and so a distinctive feature in the decoration of this church. In the church at Ya'amun we can classify these motifs into two themes: trees (pomegranate trees and grapevines) and fruits (pomegranates, grapes, gourds, wheat).

Trees: These are illustrated in some parts of the church floor in two sorts, pomegranate trees and grapevines.

Pomegranate trees and their fruit, one of the important motifs found in churches in Jordan during the Byzantine era, here are represented along with the geometrical motifs. The pomegranate tree is mentioned in the Bible a number of times.⁴ As decorative motifs in architecture, they were used in column capitals (Kgs, Chron, Jer), and as ornaments in dress (Ecclus). In general, we find the pomegranate used in Roman art and architecture, with examples at Abila (Qweilbeh in the Decapolis in northern Jordan), in frescos of the fruit on the walls of some tombs. Examples of Byzantine date from Jordan and other areas allow a comparative study.

The central section of the north aisle of the church is 5.0 m. wide and 17.5 long. The border of the aisle is decorated with a multi-swastika meander around four panels with quite different subjects. The easternmost and largest panel features a landscape, largely effaced by iconoclasm, with human figures (Daniel and his brothers).⁵ The next panel, continuing westwards, has a landscape with a pomegranate tree containing five pomegranates (*fig. 2*). The tree is depicted in red, white, and black, the leaves red, light red, and white; the five pomegranates are red and light red.

⁴ Exod 39:25; Num 13:23; 1 Sam 14:2; 1 Kgs 7:18, 20, 42; 2 Kgs 25:17; 2 Chron 4:13; Song of Songs 6:11, 7:12; Ecclus 45:9; Jer 52:22, 23; Joel 1:12; Hag 2:19.

⁵ N. Turshan and M. Nassar, *GRBS* 51 (2011) 340–349.



Figure 2. Pomegranate tree

Pomegranate tree decorations became widespread in Jordan during the Byzantine period. One example is in the north aisle of the church of Saint John at Gerasa (A.D. 531).⁶ There the pomegranate tree stands in an architectural scene, while in the Ya'amun Church it is in the midst of a landscape. At Gerasa the colors are more realistic than at Ya'amun. An example in central Jordan similar to the Ya'amun church is the in the chapel of Suwayfiah at Amman (sixth century).⁷

Similar motifs can be found at other sites in Jordan, with many examples in the Madaba churches. Six of these have pomegranate trees. Thus, in the nave of the Hippolytus Hall (mid VI) is a tree with four pomegranates, in more realistic

⁶ M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1997) 288, pl. 505.

⁷ B. Van Elderen, "The Byzantine Church at Swafieh," *ADAJ* 15 (1970) 25–27; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 264, pls. 455, 471.

colours.⁸ Many pomegranate designs are found in the north-west chapel of the Apostles church at Madaba (578).⁹ The baptistry chapel at Madaba has pomegranate trees, most with three pomegranates, the colors again more realistic than in the Ya'amun church.¹⁰ In the chapel of the Martyr Theodore (562) are four trees with many pomegranates.¹¹ The apse of the crypt of Saint Elianus at Madaba (595/6) has one tree with its fruit.¹² Finally, the nave of the church of Al-Khadir is decorated with a group of pomegranate trees, once more in colours more realistic than those of the Ya'amun church.¹³

There are three examples of this motif at Mount Nebo (Siyagha) that are similar to those found at Ya'amun. One is in the north aisle of the Memorial of Moses-Diakonikon (530).¹⁴ Another is in the church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius (557): pomegranate trees cover most of the floor of the church, in colours more realistic than at Ya'amun.¹⁵ The third example is in the floor of the chapel of the Priest John

⁸ M. Piccirillo, "La chiesa della Vergine a Madaba," *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 373–408; *Mosaics* 66, pls. 3, 6.

⁹ U. Lux, "Die Apostel-Kirche in Madaba," *ZDPV* 84 (1968) 106–129; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 106, pls. 89–95.

¹⁰ M. Piccirillo, "La 'Cattedrale' di Madaba," *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Jerusalem 1989) 21–40; *Mosaics* 118, pls. 104, 119.

¹¹ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Chiese* 20–40; *Mosaics* 117, pl. 110.

¹² P.-M. Séjourné, "L'Éliane de Madaba," *RBibl* 6 (1897) 648–656; Piccirillo, *Chiese* 67–75; *Mosaics* 124, pls. 132, 134.

¹³ U. Lux, "Eine altchristliche Kirche in Madaba," *ZDPV* 83 (1967) 165–182; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 129, pls. 142, 156.

¹⁴ S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo* (Jerusalem 1941); V. Corbo, "Nuovi scavi archeologici nella cappella del Battistero della Basilica del Nebo," *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258, and 20 (1970) 273–298; M. Piccirillo, "Campagna archeologica nella Basilica di Mose Profeta," *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318; *Mosaics* 146, pls. 166, 168.

¹⁵ S. Saller, and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem 1949) 49–55; Piccirillo *Mosaics* 64, 165, pls. 213, 214.

(565).¹⁶

Near Madaba, comparable examples are found in the church of the Deacon at Uyun Moses,¹⁷ and three more at Umm el-Rasas. One is in the chancel of the church of Bishop Sergius (587/8), with realistic colours.¹⁸ Another is in the chancel of the church of Lions (end of the sixth century), with trees containing many pomegranates and in more realistic colours.¹⁹ The third is the church of Saint Stephen (eighth century).²⁰

Finally, two examples are at Mukawir near Madaba. One is in the church of the Rivers (579 or 594), with large trees and realistic colours;²¹ the other is in the nave of the church of Mukawir (602/3).²² Pomegranate trees are also used in some churches in southern Jordan, e.g. the church on the Acropolis at Ma'in (719/20), again with pomegranate trees and fruit more realistic than at Ya'amun.²³

Such decoration is also known from the northern part of the Levant in the House of the Worcester Hunt at Antioch, of Roman date.²⁴ There the pomegranate trees are in the context of a hunting scene, four trees with many pomegranates, again with realistic colours. An earlier example, but from Rome, is in the vault of the Mausoleum of Constantia (church of Santa

¹⁶ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo*; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 174, pl. 228.

¹⁷ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 216–223; *Mosaics* 174, pls. 256, 266.

¹⁸ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 273–282; *Mosaics* 234, pls. 331, 335, 365.

¹⁹ M. Piccirillo, "Umm er Rasas-Kastron Mefaa. Quarta Campagna 1989," *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268; *Mosaics* 236, pls. 338, 337.

²⁰ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 282–301; *Mosaics* 238, pls. 381, 387.

²¹ J. Bujard, "Les églises geminées d'Umm er-Rasas," *ADAJ* 36 (1992) 291–306; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 240, pl. 391.

²² Piccirillo, *Chiese* 216–223; "Lo scavo della chiesa del Vescovo Malechios at Mekawer," *Liber Annuus* 40 (1990) 466–468; *Mosaics* 246, pl. 414.

²³ R. de Vaux, *RBibl* 47 (1938) 227–258; M. Piccirillo, "Le antichità bizantine di Ma'in e dintorni," *Liber Annuus* 35 (1985) 339–364; *Mosaics* 200, pls. 297–298, 300–303.

²⁴ Christine Kondoleon, *Antioch the Lost Ancient City* (Princeton 2000) 66, fig. 2.

Costanza), of the second quarter of the fourth century.²⁵

Grapevines decorated the floors of many churches in Jordan, and especially in scroll form, and also within geometric motifs, both of which we find at Ya'amun. The vine and its fruit were of general interest in the Bible and often mentioned.²⁶ They had been represented earlier in the Roman period: an example is the floor of the Caseggiato of Bacchus and Ariadne at Ostia (ca. 120–130), in black and white.²⁷ The vine decor can be classified in order to study the scrolls and the fruit within the geometric patterns.



Figure 3. Scrolls of grapevines

Such scrolls consist of branches, leaves, and bunches of grapes, defining a border. This motif was used in many churches in Jordan, and so too in the Ya'amun church (*fig. 3*). The nave is decorated with grapevine scrolls serving as a border for the several scenes. The bunches of grapes contain four to eight circular grapes per cluster. The colors are red or

²⁵ R. J. Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (London 1998) 108–109, pl. 77.

²⁶ Gen 40:11, 49:11; Num 13:20, 23; Deut 32:14; Eccles 39:31, 50:16, 51:19; Amos 9:13; 1 Macc 6:34.

²⁷ K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) 60–61, fig. 61.

dark red, surrounded by a black edge, and also some ripe grapes in green. The scrolls are borders for human or animal forms, but these have been obliterated by iconoclasm and cannot be deciphered.

Decoration with grapevine scrolls is found at other Jordanian sites of the Byzantine period. Two examples at Gerasa are similar to that in the Ya'amun church. One is in the chapel of Elias, Maria, and Soreg, where such scrolls serve as borders to scenes of daily life—hunting and agriculture, isolated animals and persons.²⁸ The grapes are oval rather than circular as at Ya'amun; the colours are red, green, and black, on a reddish-yellow background. The other is in the southwestern intercolumnar panel of the church of Bishop Isaiah,²⁹ where vine scrolls enclose birds and a jar. The grapes are oval; the colours are more realistic and the branches thicker than at Ya'amun. Another example has been found in the area west of Ya'amun, the chapel at Qam, where scrolls frame birds such as partridge, duck, dove, and francolin;³⁰ the grapes are circular as at Ya'amun, with more realistic colours.

In the eastern part of Jordan are two examples comparable to grapevines in the Ya'amun church. One is in the chapel of Anastasius at Khirbet al-Samra,³¹ where the floors, though damaged by iconoclasm, still preserve the vine scrolls clearly. The other is in the intercolumnar section of the church of the Saint Paul at Rihab (595), with colours more realistic than at

²⁸ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo* 269–289; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 296, pls. 513, 572.

²⁹ V. Clark, "The Church of Bishop Isaiah at Jerash," in F. Zayadine (ed.), *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983 I* (Amman 1986) 303–341; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 294, pls. 561, 565.

³⁰ F. Tarawneh, "Qam Salvage Excavation," *Newsletter of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology Yarmouk University* 9 (1990) 12; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 340, pls. 682, 746–750.

³¹ J.-B. Humbert, "Khirbet es-Samra du diocèse de Bosra," in G. C. Bottini et al. (eds.), *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land, New Discoveries: Essays in Honour of V. C. Corbo* (Jerusalem 1990) 467–474; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 308, pl. 612.

Ya'amun.³²

Mosaics with grapevine scrolls have also been found in the chapel of Suwayfiyah at Amman,³³ there framing agricultural scenes. Another example from Amman is in the nave of the chapel of Khirbet al-Kursi,³⁴ with hunting scenes, the colours more realistic than at Ya'amun.

Other examples of this motif are found in the Madaba area as well as at other sites. In the nave of the church of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius at Mount Nebo (557) vine scrolls accompany hunting scenes;³⁵ the grapes are in large clusters, the colours brick red, light and dark green, and yellow. Two examples at Mount Nebo (Mukhayyat) are similar to those at Ya'amun. One is in the nave of the lower chapel of the Priest John (565),³⁶ with grapes circular like those at Ya'amun. The other is in the north aisle of the church of Saint George (535/6),³⁷ with vine scrolls accompanying hunting scenes; the grapes are circular, the colours green, dark green, and brick red.

Two similar examples are at Uyun Musa. In the church of the Deacon Thomas the vine scrolls serve as borders of scenes of daily life (hunting and agriculture), with representations of individual animals and persons.³⁸ The branches are brick red

³² M. Avi-Yonah, "Greek Christian Inscriptions from Rihab," *QDAP* 13 (1947–48) 68–72; M. Piccirillo, "Le antichità di Rihab dei Bene Hasan," *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 317–350; *Mosaics* 312, pls. 627, 629.

³³ Van Elderen, *ADAJ* 15 (1970) 25–27; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 264–265, pls. 470, 474.

³⁴ M. Piccirillo and K. Amr. "A Chapel at Khirbet el-Kursi – Amman," *Liber Annuus* 38 (1988) 361–382; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 265, pl. 476.

³⁵ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo* 55–67; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 152–153, 164–165, pl. 202.

³⁶ M. Piccirillo, "La cappella del Prete Giovanni di Khirbet el-Mukhayyat (villaggio di Nebo)," *Liber Annuus* 38 (1988) 297–315; *Mosaics* 176, pls. 237–240.

³⁷ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo* 67–77; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 178, pl. 246.

³⁸ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 216–223; *Mosaics* 186–187, pl. 252–253.

and yellow, the grapes brick red, and the leaves green and brick red; the grapes, circular, are red or green. The lower church of Kaianus (beginning of the sixth century) has vine scrolls that are similar to those of the Deacon Thomas church.³⁹

Two examples similar to those at Ya'amun are in Umm al-Rasas near Madaba. In the nave of the church of Bishop Sergius (587/8) grapevine scrolls border scenes of daily life such as hunting and agriculture (the figures defaced by iconoclasm).⁴⁰ In the church of Saint Stephen (eighth century) the scrolls, in colours more realistic than at Ya'amun, frame figures that are again defaced by iconoclasm.⁴¹ Vine scrolls are also known from Israel, for example in the synagogue Ma'on-Nirim (first half of the sixth century), framing animals and plants.⁴²

Grapevine scrolls can also be found further afield in Roman and Byzantine times, for example in the Atrium House at Antioch, which dates to the beginning of the second century.⁴³ The scrolls there resemble those at Ya'amun but with more realistic colours than at other locations. A later example from near Antioch is in the quatrefoil Martyrion, evidently of the second half of the fifth century.⁴⁴

Finally we can mention two examples from Sabratha in North Africa that are similar to those found at Ya'amun. One, in the El-Djem Museum in Tunisia, dates to the mid third century,⁴⁵ the other, in the nave of the Basilica of Justinian, is mid

³⁹ M. Piccirillo, "Una chiesa nell' wadi Ayoun Mousa ai piedi del monte Nebo," *Liber Annuus* 34 (1984) 307–318; *Chiese* 536–586; *Mosaics* 190–191, pl. 275.

⁴⁰ M. Piccirillo, "Le iscrizioni di Um er-Rasas," *Liber Annuus* 37 (1987) 177–239; *Chiese* 273–282; *Mosaics* 234, pl. 369.

⁴¹ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 282–301; *Mosaics* 238–239, pls. 345, 380,

⁴² Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 193, fig. 205.

⁴³ Louvre no. Ma 3443: Kondoleon, *Antioch* 169, 173, pl. 58.

⁴⁴ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 181, fig. 193.

⁴⁵ Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 82, fig. 58.

sixth century.⁴⁶ There are however many more examples from the Roman Empire, for example in the vault of the Mausoleum of Constantia.⁴⁷

Fruits. In addition to the pomegranate trees and grapevines, isolated fruits are used: clusters of grapes, pomegranates, gourds, and wheat.



Figure 4. Grape cluster in looped motif

The *grape clusters* are set within geometric motifs in two forms: a looped circle or interlaced lines. The oldest of such decorative grape clusters in geometric frames date back to the mid-second

⁴⁶ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 128, fig. 131.

⁴⁷ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 248, fig. 263.

century: thus at Thysdrus the House of the Dionysiac Procession, in the El Djem Museum.⁴⁸

These clusters are in the south aisle of the Ya'amun church. In the looped circle frame, the grapes and leaves are red, dark red, and grey, against a white background (*fig. 4*).

Similar motifs can be found at other sites in Jordan, for example in the chancel of the church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (late sixth century).⁴⁹ There the frame is a circle motif,



Figure 5. Cluster of grapes within interlaced circle motif

⁴⁸ Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 108–109, fig. 108.

⁴⁹ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268; *Mosaics* 236, pls. 338, 341.

rather than looped as at Ya'amun. The grapes are multi-coloured—dark red, grey, and yellow.

In the north panel of the chancel of the Ya'amun church the clusters and leaves are in an interlaced motif, and with a pomegranate beside the grapes (*fig. 5*). The colours are red, blue, dark blue, and red, against a red and white background.⁵⁰

This pattern is found in mosaics in other churches in Jordan in the Byzantine period; for example, in the Memorial of Moses-Diakonikon at Mount Nebo (530).⁵¹ There the grapes and interlaced frame are in black, yellow, and dark red, against a white background, but the interlaced lines are without the looped bands seen at Ya'amun. Grape clusters within geometrical motifs are found more widely, thus at Antioch, for example, in the mosaic of the Striding Lion (fifth century), where the framing motif is square.⁵²

Pomegranate fruits in the Ya'amun church have also these two types of frame, the looped circle or interlaced lines. The pomegranates appear in the south aisle of the church (*fig. 6*). Here are two pomegranates within a looped circle motif; the colours are red, dark red, and grey, against a white background.

Pomegranate decorations became widespread in Jordan during the Byzantine period. One example is in Saint Elianus at Madaba (595/6),⁵³ where the pomegranates are within a medallion frame of three interlaced figure-eights. Another is at Mt. Nebo-Siyagha in the Theotokos chapel / Memorial of Moses (seventh century),⁵⁴ with four pomegranates within a border of alternating squares with a swastika meander.

⁵⁰ See Nassar and Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 51, fig. 10.

⁵¹ See n.14 above.

⁵² Baltimore Museum of Art, no. 37.139: Dunbabin, *Mosaics* 179, fig. 190; A. Gonosova, in Kondoleon, *Antioch* 130, fig. 1.

⁵³ P.-M. Séjourné, "L'Éliane de Madaba," *RBibl* 6 (1897) 648–656; Piccirillo, *Chiese* 67–75; *Mosaics* 124, pl. 136.

⁵⁴ See n.14 above; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 151, pl. 199.



Figure 6. Pomegranates within a looped motif

There are two examples at Umm al-Rasas that are similar to those at Ya'amun. In the south aisle of the church of Saint Stephen (eighth century) the pomegranates are framed by interlaced squares, circles, and ellipses.⁵⁵ In the chancel of the church of the Lions (late sixth century) three pomegranates are within a circle.⁵⁶ Finally, the pattern is also known in the northern part of the Levant in the Mosaic of the Striding Lion at Antioch (fifth century; see n.51 above).

Gourds are shown on the floor of the south aisle of the Ya'amun church (*fig. 7*): two gourds are executed within a looped circle motif. The colours are red, dark red, and grey, against a white background. This scheme of decoration with

⁵⁵ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 282–301; *Mosaics* 238, pl. 345.

⁵⁶ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268; *Mosaics* 236, pl. 338.



Figure 7. Gourds

gourds is confined to this church, and being unique it testifies to a creative artist at Ya' amun.

Spikes of wheat as isolated motifs are rare in churches of the Byzantine era, but the Ya' amun church gives an example. Wheat is often mentioned in the Bible.⁵⁷ The wheat decorates the floor of the south aisle, but has been damaged, apparently by iconoclasm (*fig. 8*). They number only four. A parallel is at Madaba, the Hippolytus Hall (mid VI), which shows Tyche carrying a bundle of wheat.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Gen 43:2, 47:14; Neh 5:11, 10:39, 13:5, 12; Is 28:28; Hos 2:8, 22, 7:14; Joel 1:10, 17; Amos 8:6; Lk 3:17.

⁵⁸ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 386–396; 35 (1985) 429; *Mosaics* 66, pl. 13.



Figure 8. Spikes of wheat

Conclusion

As we have seen, Jordan is an important point of reference for the study of the mosaic pavements used during the Byzantine period, especially those dating to the sixth century. In general, the Ya'amun mosaic artists showed great ability and technical skill in producing these decorative elements, using only locally available limestone as raw material. The Ya'amun mosaicists were true masters of their profession. They combined motifs with a long tradition, going back to the early and middle Roman imperial age, with newly-created designs that appear here for the first time. An analysis of the decorative elements shows a high level of skill in their manufacture. This can be inferred from the level of refinement of the final products, which demonstrates a quality of technique as measured by comparison with other sites. Such is the case with all the plant mosaic pavements in this church. Comparative study increases our understanding of the relationship between Ya'amun and other Roman and Byzantine sites. It also allows us to compare the artistic level of the artists at Ya'amun with those working at other sites. Similar elements have been found elsewhere in Jordan and farther afield. Of particular interest are the similarities between the decorative elements found at Ya'amun and

those at several other places in the eastern Mediterranean, from both the Roman and Byzantine periods.

Some designs make their first appearance in the mosaics at Ya'amun. One is the cluster of grapes within an interlaced circle motif, which appears a little later in the Memorial of Moses-Diakonikon at Mt. Nebo. Another is the motif of spikes of wheat, known as yet in only two locations in Jordan, Ya'amun and the later church of the Virgin Mary at Madaba. Third is the motifs of gourds, which is unique to the church of Ya'amun.

Thus, the Ya'amun artist produced novel decorative plant elements which do not appear in other mosaics in Jordan or even all the Levant or elsewhere. The Ya'amun plants are close to nature in their colours and shapes. The artist kept traditional motifs found in the Levant, and some of the plants are those mentioned in the Bible such as pomegranates, grapes, etc.: he kept close to religious ideas in the choice of decoration. But he was also creative. The authors hope that these findings will contribute to research on this significant subject.

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