

The Second Church at Yasileh in Jordan and its Mosaics

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YASILEH IN NORTHERN JORDAN has two churches from the Byzantine period, both located on the western bank of the Wadi Yasileh, an important site nine km. east of Irbid and five west of al-Ramtha. The first, dating from the middle of the fifth to the beginning of the sixth century, has been described.¹ Church II, unpublished, is our concern here. It has revealed impressive and well-preserved mosaic pavements. The finds show that the Yasileh mosaicists were true masters of their craft.

The main inscription in the eastern part of the central aisle just in front of the apse (*fig. 1*) was executed in red inside a black rectangular frame (5.02 x 0.625 m.) with triangular ends, a *tabula ansata*. This pattern is often found in mosaic pavements, e.g. the church of Procopius in Gerasa² and on doorjambs of graves or houses as part of commemorative inscriptions and drawings. The frame consists of three differently coloured rectangles, the outside one pale brown, the middle one dark red, and the inner one black—emphasizing the depth of the panel; the terminal triangles were in a bad state of preservation. The Greek is in black on a white background; the middle part was destroyed by a grave containing a single individual. The inscription dates the church to A.D. 528 by the era of Bostra.³

¹ M. Nassar and Z. al-Muheisen, “Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Yasileh in Jordan,” *PEQ* 142 (2010) 182–198, with a description of the site.

² I. Browning, *Jerash and the Decapolis* (London 1982) 209.

³ Cf. H.-G. Pflaum, *Syria* 29 (1952) 307–308.

† ἐπὶ τοῦ θεο[-----πρ]εσβυτέρου
 ἐψηφώθη καὶ ἐσ[τεγάσθη? ἡ ἅ]για ἐκκλησία
 μη(νός) Σεπτεμβρίου [ἰνδικτιῶ]ν(ος) δ' τοῦ υκγ' ἔτους.

In the time of the [most pious(?) pr]esbyter - - -, the holy church
 was paved and roofed(?), in September of indiction 4, year 423.



Figure 1. Principal mosaic inscription

The church is rectangular, a model basilica, oriented north-south. It consists of a main courtyard 42 x 15 x 9 m. (exterior), 13.83 x 8 (interior), divided into three parts by two rows of columns; each of the parts has two columns. There is a central nave, a south aisle, a northern aisle, an apse, a northern room, a southern apse, and entrances. Annexed to the church are two walls and a row of stones between the northernwestern column and the western wall (see *fig. 2*).

The main courtyard is on a north-south axis and has interior dimensions of 13.85 x 8.00 m. The surviving parts of the nave are the bases of the southern wall where a number of stones have been removed, leaving a gap of 2.57 m. This wall, running east-west, consisted of a single row of worked limestone blocks (0.77 x 0.57 x 0.20 m. average dimensions). The southern wall joins the southern extension of the eastern wall (4.21 m. long and 0.45 wide) and consists of one row of dressed stones aligned vertically and horizontally, beginning from the south-eastern corner and ending with the wall of the southern apse. The southern and western walls connect at the south-western corner. This western wall parallels the eastern wall; it is built of dressed, calcareous stones (0.55 x 0.40 x 0.20 m. average dimensions) aligned horizontally and longitudinally.

This wall extends northward (9.28 m. long and 0.77 wide). Pottery sherds and construction methods imply that the eastern wall was reused during the post-Byzantine era, and particularly during the Umayyad period.

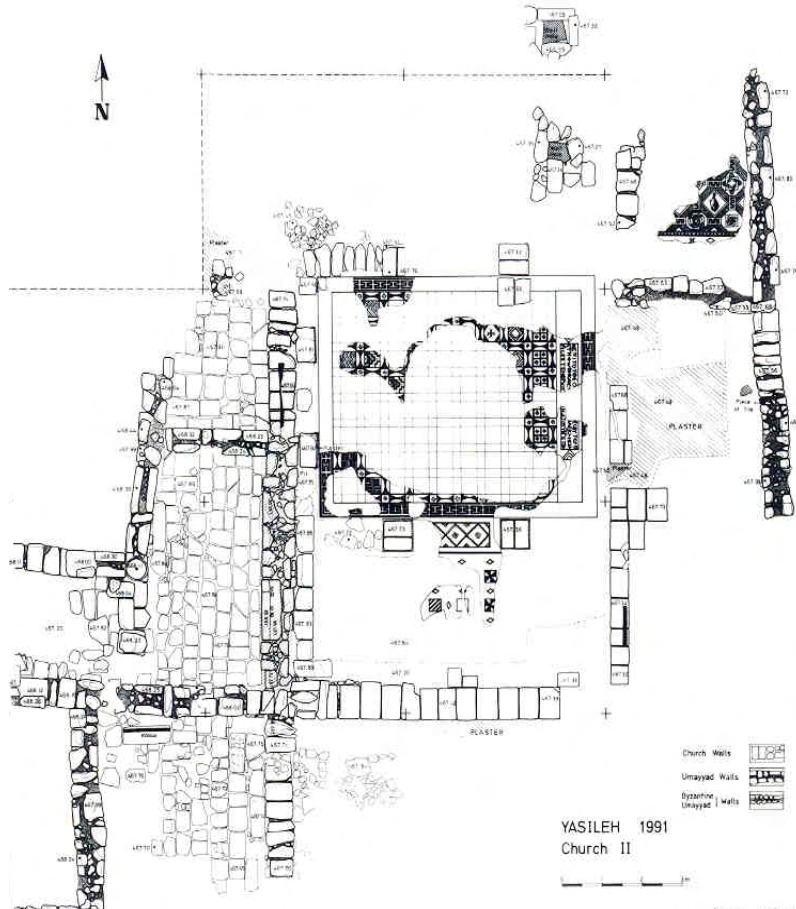


Figure 2. Restored plan of Church II at Yasileh

Parts of the nave may have been removed during the Umayyad period, as is indicated by some Umayyad structures uncovered to the west of the church. Among the structures removed is a 15.5 m. wall which represents the extension of the western wall, which would have met the northern wall of the nave at the north-eastern corner. The eastern wall, north of the northern apse, was also removed and replaced with another wall dating from a later era; this is indicated by pottery sherds and by the construction technique, which differs from that of the southern and south-eastern walls of the church.

The nave of the church is 5.80 m. north-south and 8.00 east-west. The southern side is bounded by two square column bases (0.70 m.); each base consists of two adjacent rectangular soft limestone blocks covered with gray cemented plaster, indicating that the bases and probably the columns had been plastered. The southeastern base is sunk below the mosaic pavement and is covered with a layer of plaster 0.34 m. deep. This may indicate that the floor was initially plastered and the mosaic pavement was a later addition. The same can be said of the northern base, which is positioned south of the main base of the northeastern column. This location may be attributed to an earthquake that might have dislodged the upper row of the base from the lower one; both rows form the lower parts of the upper column bases.



Figure 3. Border of the nave

In the central nave the mosaic decorations are mostly geometric—circles and arcs, squares, zigzags, steps, interconnected squares, crosses, and inscriptions. The mosaic border (*fig. 3*) that frames the decorative figures in the central nave runs between the colonnade rows and the apse. The exterior dimensions are 6.97 m. long (east-west), 5.74 wide (north-south), and

0.37 thick, while the interior measures 6.25 long and 5.02 wide. The border design contains a repeated shape H in gray with black shadow and brown with dark red shadow, framed by rectilinear white and reddish lines. The remaining areas of mosaic include parts of the eastern side, 0.91 m. long, 2.85 from the southern side and 1.51 from the northern side. This scheme of border seems to be found only in Church II at Yasielah.

The main panel of the nave, 5.62 x 5.02 m. (*fig. 4*), is divided by nine vertical straight lines, each 0.20 m. wide, crossing ten horizontal lines, creating large (0.40) and small (0.10) squares. The lines are bounded on either side by two black lines on a white background. In total the panel contains 48 circles, each containing a square. The pavement of the nave has a composite pattern (6), the repetition of the circles which almost touch each other in the rectangular areas between neighboring squares.



Figure 4. Nave mosaic, eastern panel: composite pattern

This area manifests a pattern of opposed arcs, some horizontal and others longitudinal depending on the orientation of the frames. The arcs are in white with the areas between them in dark red and pale brown. Areas between arcs are in a variety of colours including yellow (in the first horizontal frame after the inscription), pink (second frame), bluish brown (third), and pale brown (fourth). The fifth, sixth, and seventh frames have completely disappeared, while the areas between arcs in the eighth, ninth, and tenth frames are in bluish gray. Small squares representing conjunctions of the arcs are done with pinkish red lozenges (0.07 m. side length) with a black cube in the center on a white background. There appears to have been a row of squares on the eastern side close to the inscription, although only two of the eight squares of the row remain, plus three imperfect rectangular shapes. Each of these squares is divided into four smaller (0.10) squares by dark red lines and each contains a black rhomboidal figure (0.07 side length) with a dark red cube on a white background in its center.

The composite pattern is known from other parts of the Levant: there are two examples at Antioch, both similar to those found in Church II at Yasileh. One is in Bath D, Room 4, dating from 300–325.⁴ There the big and small circles have the same motifs, while Yasileh has distinct motifs such as zig-zag, waves, and others. The other is in the east aisle (room 4) of the Kaoussie church, Martyrion of St. Babylas, dated to 387,⁵ where the composite pattern resembles those in Bath D and the colours are white, black, beige, red, and pink. This type of scheme is also found in the western provinces: at Vienne in France, in the Roman period, the patterns are a duplicate of those found in Antioch.⁶

The second row of squares (*fig. 5*) is decorated with lozenges

⁴ S. D. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto 1988) 17, fig. 8.

⁵ D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947), pl. CXIIb; Campbell, *Mosaics of Antioch* 45, pl. 133.

⁶ C. Balmelle et al., *Le décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine* (Paris 1985) 218, 219, pl. 144.

crossing the internal corners of the squares with four dark red lines 0.15 m. apart on a white background. Only one square remains from the third row (*fig. 6*), decorated with four double brown lines drawn diagonally across the internal corner of the square; a compound cross, reddish brown on a white background, occupies the center of the square. Nothing remains of the squares on the western side of the pavement. Similar schemes are known in other locations in Jordan, for example in the Glass Court of the Cathedral Complex at Gerasa, dating to the Byzantine period.⁷

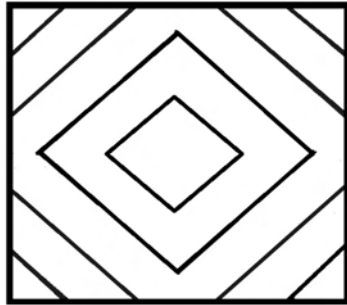


Figure 5. Nave mosaic, eastern panel: motif of lozenges

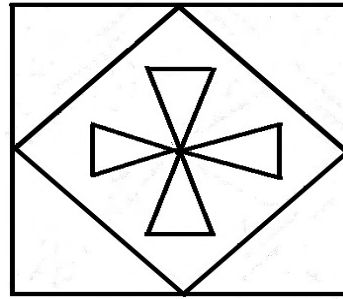


Figure 6. Nave mosaic, eastern panel: motif of cross

The decorative style of the seventh, eighth, and ninth rows is more developed and less repetitive than on the eastern side. Thus in the seventh row is part of a square with stepped figures (*fig. 7*), which could be adapted to manifest colour multiplicity and three-dimensional depth. The upper strip is bluish brown outlined in black, the next is in cumin yellow bounded by black lines, and the lowest is in dark red framed with black lines, creating a feeling of depth; and in the middle of each strip is a black column, probably to enhance the appearance of depth.

⁷ M. Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1993) 284, pl. 526; M. Nassar, *Catalogue of Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Jordan during the Byzantine Period* (unpublished), fig. 5: 1.12.

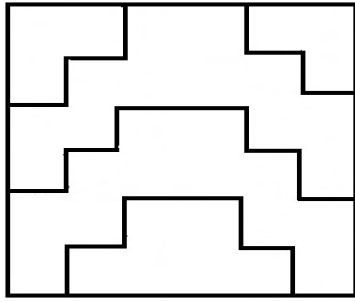


Figure 7. Nave mosaic, central panel: motif of steps

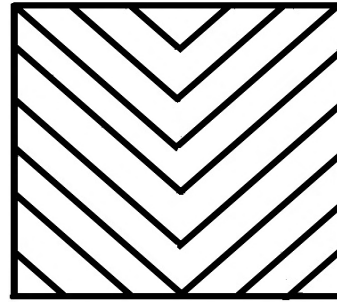


Figure 8. Nave mosaic, central panel: V motif

Traces of three squares with different decorative figures can be seen in the eight rows of squares to the west. The first square to the north has a repetitive decoration in a V shape (fig. 8) in dark red and white, while the third square shows the step design as in the seventh row. Mosaics with the V pattern have also been found in the Twal Family Chapel at Madaba, dating to the Byzantine period.⁸ There are two examples at Gerasa, both similar to those at Yasileh: in the church of Apostles, Prophets, and Martyrs (dated 464/5)⁹ and in the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian (533).¹⁰ The pattern is also known from the northern part of the Levant, in the House of the Drinking Contest, Room I, at Antioch (late fifth century),¹¹ where the motifs are within rectangles rather than squares as at Yasileh. Similar schemes are known in North Africa, e.g. the border of the floor of the South Building of the Large Baths, the hunt and amphitheater scenes, at Djemila (Cuicul) in Algeria (sec-

⁸ S. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo (Khirbet el-Mekhayyat)* (Jerusalem 1949) 236–238; M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Vienna 1989) 129–132; *Mosaics of Jordan* 128, pls. 38, 140.

⁹ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 285, pl. 534; Nassar, *Catalogue* fig. 5: 1.15.

¹⁰ C. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (New Haven 1938) 331, pl. 73; E. Kitzinger, “Stylistic Developments in Pavement Mosaics,” in *La Mosaique gréco-romaine* (Paris 1965) 347, fig. 11.

¹¹ Kitzinger, in *La Mosaique* 342, fig. 3.

ond century);¹² here again the motifs are within rectangles.

The eighth square of the same row includes interlocked squares (*fig. 9*) done in beige, bluish gray, and dark red, so as to confer both depth and vitality to the surface. The same design has been found in the southeastern corner of the church of Apostles, Prophets, and Martyrs at Gerasa.¹³

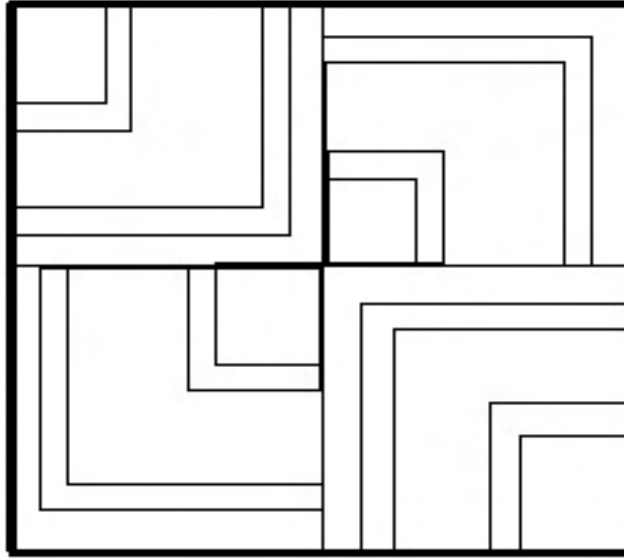


Figure 9. Nave mosaic, interlocked squares

Second from the right on the westernmost side of the central nave is a zigzag motif of rainbow style (*fig. 10*), which exhibits both multiplicity and harmony among colours. The colours in this square are dark red, beige, bluish brown, black, and white, and each instance adds a colour through which the impression of a shadow could be conveyed; thus the bluish gray has black

¹² Kitzinger, in *La Mosaique* 346, fig. 8; R. J. Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (London 1998) 87.

¹³ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 285, pl. 534.

shading, the brown has pale red, and so on. Similar motifs can be found at other sites in Jordan, for example in the nave of the lower church at Massuh near Hesban (fifth century).¹⁴ There are many examples at Antioch in the Roman and Byzantine periods, e.g. in the House of Menander at Daphne (dating to 250–275).¹⁵ The pattern is also known from North Africa, e.g. the border of the hunt and amphitheater scenes at Cuicul.¹⁶

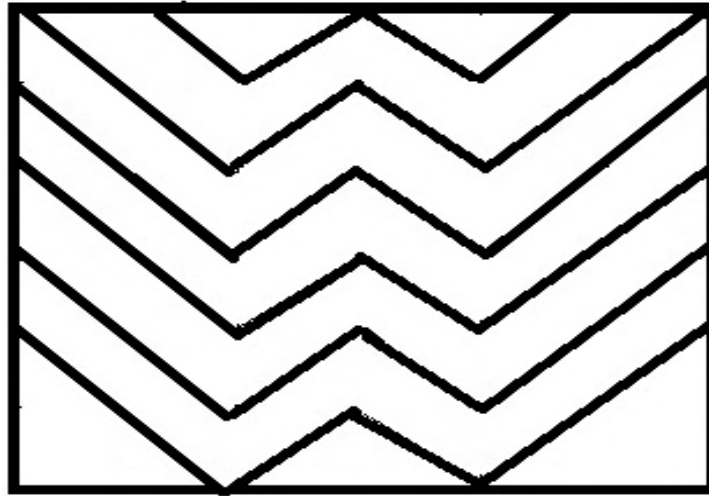


Figure 10. Nave mosaic, western panel: zigzag motif

These decorations are restricted to the area between inter-columnar areas separating the central nave from the southern aisle. The motif of lozenges (*fig. 11*) consists of a rectangular bluish gray frame 1.71 m. long x 0.57 wide, encompassing three reddish brown lozenges with sides of 0.40 cm., although the western one is deformed in shape. Each lozenge contains miniature lozenges with sides of 11 cm., defined in bluish gray

¹⁴ M. Piccirillo, “La chiesa di Massuh e il territorio della diocesi di Esbous,” *Liber Annuus* 33 (1983) 335–346; *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, pl. 446.

¹⁵ Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 58, fig. 40.

¹⁶ Kitzinger, in *La Mosaique* 346, fig. 8; Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 87.

with internal areas of either yellow or brown. Two examples at Rihab are similar to those at Yasileh. One is in the intercolumnar panels of the north and south rows of pillars of the church of Saint Peter (623).¹⁷ The other is in the northern intercolumnar panel of the church of Saint Menas (635).¹⁸

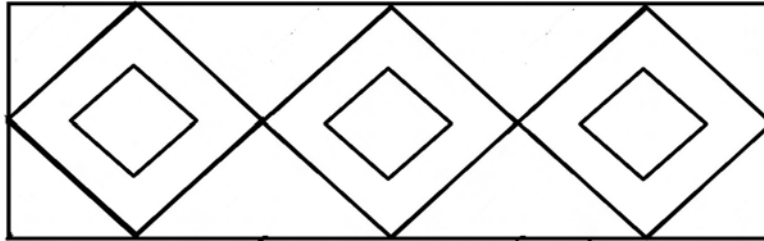


Figure 11. Nave mosaic, southern intercolumnation:
motif of lozenges

The atrium in front of the church on the western side adjoins the frontal portico (colonnaded corridor), which normally had a stone-paved floor. The atrium is a few steps below the level of the portico pavement. The atrium is paved with medium-sized, semi-dressed limestone with cement mortar covering an area 13.71 m. north-south x 2.85 east-west, and also extends 4.30 south of the southern wall. The northern part and the south-western extremity of this pavement were completely demolished—a space 5.57 x 2.85 m. wide, stretching from the northern end of the church to the area in front of the atrium in the south. Most of the dislodged stones could have been reused in building the Umayyad chambers southwest of the church area. The mosaic pavement of the atrium was destroyed.

¹⁷ 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 of Jordan* 312, pl. 633; Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 5: 2.3.

¹⁸ U. Lux, "Der Mosaikfussboden der Menas-Kirche in Rihab," *ZDPV* 83 (1967) 34–41; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 312, pl. 633; Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 5: 2. 4.

The apse is on the eastern side facing the central nave. Most of the wall had been demolished before excavation and only two foundation stones could be found from the southern wall. Most of the apse stones are gone, but two were found in the southwestern part of the apse. These two stones (0.28 m. x 0.50 x 0.78 average dimensions) along with the southeastern wall formed the southwestern corner of the apse. The two stones have an overall length of 1 m., were longitudinally aligned, and were bound with gray mortar. Another dressed stone, which probably functioned as a bema or platform, was found touching one of these stones. The northern wall had been completely removed and replaced during the Umayyad period, as indicated by some potsherds and the construction method. The eastern wall had also been entirely removed and replaced with a wall stretching the length of the church from north to south; this also dates to the Umayyad period, as shown by some tiles from the roof, plaster, and frescoes found along the bases of the foundations.

In order to reconstruct the plan of the apse we may rely on either of the following possibilities. First, from the results of excavations in the niche and the alignment of the stones of the southern niche wall, it is possible that the wall would have stretched east-west to form a square corner with the eastern wall of the niche; parallel to this wall is the northern wall that has been replaced with an Umayyad wall. If the Umayyad wall was constructed to the same plan as the one it replaced it would form a right angle with the eastern wall and therefore the niche would have a semi-square plan. Second, comparison with other churches in Jordan suggests that the church could have had an apsidal niche; but it is difficult to reconstruct the original plan of this part of the church owing to destruction of the mosaic pavement and most of the foundations. The niche is 4.28 m. wide, but too badly damaged to determine its depth. The mosaic pavement of the apse was destroyed.

The northern aisle, in keeping with the construction of basilicas in Jordan, is reckoned to have been 3.30 m. north-south x 8.0 east-west, despite the fact that the northern, western, and southern walls of the church were completely demolished. This

is also based on the supposed extension of the foundations of the eastern and western walls northward, parallel to the northern wall. The mosaic pavement of the northern aisle was destroyed.

The southern aisle is identical to the northern aisle, but a part of the mosaic pavement survives near the intercolumns.

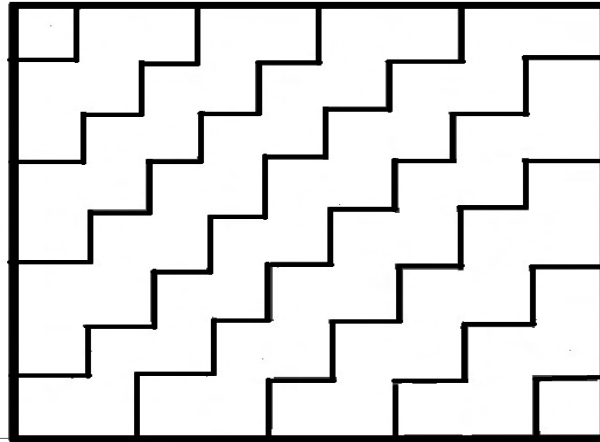


Figure 12. Southern aisle: rainbow pattern

Decoration of the southern aisle is simply four squares (0.285 m.), each including seven lozenges with sides of 0.11 m., which echo the lozenges of the southern end. The decoration varies from square to square and each row differs from the others. Even though the remaining squares are severely damaged, it was apparent that two of them included a fan decoration of dark red on a white background, while another had diagonal red stripes on a white background. In addition, we find the remains of decorative elements, such as a cross within squares as is found in the nave of the church (cf. *fig. 6*). Here too is a pattern in rainbow style (*fig. 12*); a similar motif is found at other sites in Jordan, e.g. in the central church at Pella, which dates to the Byzantine period.¹⁹ Overall then, one can assume

¹⁹ R. Smith, *Pella of the Decapolis II* (Wooster 1989) 127; Piccirillo, *Mosaics*

that the decorations of the central nave and southern aisle consisted of ten north-south horizontal rows and three longitudinal rows stretching east-west.

The northern chamber is located north of the apse, opposite the northern aisle; most of its stones had been removed and replaced by walls (including that connecting the apse with this chamber), perhaps during the Umayyad period. Also uncovered were the foundations of the eastern wall that had stretched north-south, but had been replaced by the wall of the church. Despite some missing areas of the mosaic pavement, there were indications of a side chamber, probably intended for the priest's clothes or other religious activities.

The western wall of this chamber that connected with the northern aisle has been completely demolished and replaced with a wall built probably during the Umayyad period. The remaining parts of the 'Umayyad' wall included four medium-sized stone boulders aligned laterally and bonded with mortar and stone chips.

The northern wall, which is believed to be an extension of the northern wall of the main nave, was also entirely demolished. By analogy with other Byzantine basilicas, we may deduce that the chamber is 4 m. long and, as indicated by the mosaic designs on the floor, 3.14 wide. The plan of the eastern wall was hard to reconstruct: it could not be determined whether it was a semicircular niche, as in most churches in the Orient, or was rectilinear; the latter seems to have merit because the frame incorporated in the design of the mosaic floor has a square corner and, furthermore, the foundations of the eastern wall do not indicate the presence of curves.

The mosaics in the northern chamber (*fig. 13*) showed a variety of design styles, including geometrical decoration (square, octagonal, spiral, plaited, and lozenge designs), and zoomorphic (fish) decorations, framed within a double geometrical border (saw-tooth motifs and compound cross).

of Jordan 330, pl. 706.



Figure 13. Northern chamber: mosaic pavements



Figure 14. Northern chamber: rhomboid and cross motif

The outer border, which extends around all four sides, contains a rhomboid and cross motif (*fig. 14*). The colours are dark red and light red against a white background. This scheme was found also in the north and south aisles of Church I at Yasileh.²⁰ The pattern is known in mosaics in other churches in Jordan in the Byzantine period. An example is in the lower church of al-Quwaysmah in Amman (717/8),²¹ Additionally, we find one example at Madaba, in the chapel of the Martyr Theodore Cathedral (562).²²

²⁰ Nassar and al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 187, fig. 4.

²¹ M. Piccirillo, "Le chiese di Quweismeh-Amman," *Liber Annus* 34 (1984) 329–340; *Mosaics of Jordan* 266, pl. 485.

²² M. Piccirillo, "La 'cattedrale' di Madaba," *Liber Annus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 21–40; *Mosaics of Jordan* 117, pl. 110.



Figure 15. Northern chamber: saw-tooth motif

The inner border of the chamber consists of serrated saw-tooth pattern (*fig. 15*),²³ a motif often used in Jordan during the Byzantine period, e.g. the outer border of the mosaic inscription in the Ya'amun church (late fifth to early sixth century).²⁴ There are many other examples on the floors of Byzantine churches in Jordan. Two are in the Madaba area, in the chancel of the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (late sixth century)²⁵ and in the south-east corner of the nave of the church of the Virgin Mary (eighth century).²⁶ Two examples at Hesban (Esbu) are similar to those in Church II at Yasileh: in the chancel of the North Church at Hesban²⁷ and in the lower church at Massuh near Hesban,²⁸ both of the Byzantine period. The saw-tooth motif is also seen in the church of Saints Cosmas and Damian at Gerasa (533),²⁹ and in some churches in Rihab, e.g. the border of the inscription in the church of Mary (533).³⁰ Finally, an example is in the central nave of the church of Pella, which dates to the Byzantine period.³¹

²³ Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 1:1.8.

²⁴ M. Nassar and N. Turshan, "Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Yasileh in Jordan," *PEQ* 142 (2011) 43, fig. 2.

²⁵ M. Piccirillo, "Umm er Rasas-Kastron Mefaa. Quarta Campagna 1989," *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268; *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, pl. 338.

²⁶ M. Piccirillo, "La chiesa della Vergine a Madaba," *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 373–408; *Mosaics of Jordan* 64, pl. 21.

²⁷ J. Lawlor, "The Excavation of the North Church at Hesban, Jordan," *AUSS* 18 (1980) 65–76; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 250, pls. 426, 434.

²⁸ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 33 (1983) 335–346; *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, pl. 447.

²⁹ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, pl. 538.

³⁰ Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 13 (1947–48) 68–72; Piccirillo *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 317–350; *Mosaics of Jordan* 311, pl. 625.

³¹ Smith, *Pella II*, pl. 18; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, pl. 447.



Figure 16. Northern chamber: curvilinear square interlooped motif

The first panel in the northern chamber has been designed as a square and a curvilinear square interlooped on a background of a non-equilateral octagon (*fig. 16*). The colours are red, dark red, and white, on a white background. Two mosaics are similar to these in Church II at Yasileh, at Gerasa in the southeast corner of the church of the Apostles, Prophets, and Martyrs (464/5), and at Gadara in the Baths of Herakleides (Byzantine date).³² We can compare also an earlier example from Asia Minor, in House 2 at Aphrodisias in Caria (mid-fifth century);³³ there the curvilinear square is interlooped on the background of a square, rather than an octagon as at Yasileh.

³² Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 285, pl. 534, and 328, pl. 686.

³³ S. D. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Aphrodisias in Caria* (Toronto 1991) 20–21, pl. 73.



Figure 17. Northern chamber: interlaced motif

The second panel has a square with looped circle (interlace motif) on a background of a non-equilateral octagon (fig. 17). The colours are red, dark red, and white, on a white background. Similar motifs can be found at other sites in Jordan, e.g. in the lower mosaic of the Memorial of Moses-Diakonikon at Siyagha (Mount Nebo), dated to 530.³⁴ There the interlace motif connects with a circle, rather than a square as at Yasileh; the colours are apparently similar to those at Yasileh. Parallels are again offered at Gerasa and Gadara: in the north aisle of the church of Saints Cosmas and Damian at Gerasa (526–534),³⁵ and in the Baths of Herakleides.³⁶ Another example is

³⁴ M. Piccirillo, “Campagna archeologica nella Basilica di Mose Profeta sul Monte Nebo-Siyagha,” *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318; *Mosaics of Jordan* 146, pl. 185.

³⁵ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, pl. 286.

³⁶ U. Lux, “Der Mosaikfußboden eines spätantiken Bades in *umm qes*,” *ZDPV* 82 (1966) 64–70, pl. 4B; T. Weber, “Das Hypogäum und der Rundbau,” *AA* (1990) 204–214; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 328, pl. 685.

in the church of Mary at Rihab (582/3).³⁷

The third panel of the northern chamber has an interlace motif consisting of looped circles connecting with a non-equilateral octagon (*fig. 18*). The colours are red, dark red, and white, on a red background. This scheme of motif seems to be found only at the Yasileh site.



Figure 18. Northern chamber: Interlaced motif

The fourth panel of the northern chamber is an octagon motif (*fig. 19*) containing a fish in an inner square. The colours are red, dark red, and white, while the background is red. Fish were a common Christian decoration, symbolizing Jesus by invoking IXΘΥΣ for Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτήρ.³⁸

³⁷ Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 13 (1947–48) 68–72; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 317–350; *Mosaics of Jordan* 311, pl. 622.

³⁸ A. Amr, “Four Byzantine Symbolic Elements from Jerash,” *ADAJ* 30 (1989) 353–355.



Figure 19. Northern chamber: fish with octagon motif

The fish decoration was widespread in the mosaic pavements of Jordan during the Byzantine period. At Madaba, in the Church of the Map³⁹ fish are portrayed in the River Jordan, rather than inside a square as at Yasileh. In the Apostles Church (578),⁴⁰ a medallion shows fish in the sea—signed with the name of the mosaicist Salaman. Another example is in the upper mosaic of the Baptistry Chapel of the Cathedral (575/6).⁴¹

Two examples at Mount Nebo are similar to the image at Yasileh, one in the Upper Chapel of the Priest John (latter half of the sixth century),⁴² the other in the intercolumnar panel of

³⁹ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 94, pls. 61, 62, 74.

⁴⁰ U. Lux, “Die Apostel-Kirche in Madaba,” *ZDPV* 84 (1968) 106–129; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 96, pl. 78.

⁴¹ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 21–40; *Mosaics of Jordan* 116, 118, pl. 119.

⁴² Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo*; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 174, pls. 227, 230.

the church of the Deacon Thomas at 'Uyun Musa, which dates to the Byzantine period;⁴³ here too the fish is inside a square as at Yasileh. Finally, Umm al-Rasas has two examples, in the Church of Stephen (eighth century)⁴⁴ and the Church of the Priest Wa'il (586).⁴⁵



Figure 20. Northern chamber: meander pattern

A meander pattern adjoins the panels (*fig. 20*). Its colours are red, dark red, and white, with red background. Meander motifs can be found at other sites in Jordan, e.g. in the chancel of the Ya'amun church.⁴⁶ A similar design is in the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (574 or 589),⁴⁷ where the colours are dark red on a white background. At Gerasa there are examples in the Church of John the Baptist (531) and in the inter-columnar panel of the Church of Bishop Isaiah (Byzantine

⁴³ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 187, 188, pl. 264.

⁴⁴ Piccirillo *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 272–308; “Il complesso di Santo Stefano a Umm al-Rasas-Kastron Mefaa in Giordania,” *Liber Annuus* 41 (1991) 327–364; *Mosaics of Jordan* 238, pl. 330.

⁴⁵ M. Piccirillo, “Sesta campagna a Umm er-Rasas-Kastron Mefaa,” *Liber Annuus* 41 (1991) 522–526; *Mosaics of Jordan* 242–243, pls. 395, 398.

⁴⁶ M. Nassar and N. Turshan, “Geometrical Mosaic Pavements of the Church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun,” *PEQ* 143 (2011) 46, fig. 5.

⁴⁷ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 39 (1989) 266–268; *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, pl. 374.

date).⁴⁸ Another example is in the central part of the church at Pella (Byzantine).⁴⁹

The southern chamber, which is slightly below the level of other parts of the church, is adjacent to the southern apse. The southern and eastern walls and parts of the northern wall were gone, and only parts of the foundation of the western wall that bounds this chamber and the southern aisle were preserved. Most of the destruction occurred during the Umayyad period, but some is more recent, and its location on the southeastern slope of the site contributed to the collapse of the walls. The presence of this chamber was indicated by fragments of gray plaster on the surface. The foundations of the western wall of the chamber included a rectangular furrow (0.95 m. long, 0.08 wide, 0.03 deep), which could have been part of a step between the southern chamber and the southern aisle, or could have held a screen to prevent the populace from access to a part of the church possibly reserved for the chief priest.

Also, a limestone block with a furrow identical in dimensions to that at the first entrance was found torn out of place in the western wall of the chamber. This limestone was reused in rooms dating from the Umayyad period that were uncovered in the area north-west of the church.

Entrances and doors: a doorstep of the entrance (1.42 m. x 0.48) was found in the western wall of the nave opening onto the southern aisle; it is 1.14 m. from the southern wall, and north of it was found a 1.57 long x 0.128 wide groove with five stones from the wall in the center. This groove reflected a threshold for a second entrance leading to the central nave, opposite the apse. It is possible that there was a third entrance opening on the northern aisle, but the degree of destruction made it impossible to identify a threshold.

In conclusion: the Yasileh artists possessed high ability and technical skill in producing these decorative elements, using local stone (limestone, basalt, jasper, oil shale) as raw material.

⁴⁸ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, pl. 506, and 294, pl. 565.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Pella II*, pl. 17; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 330, pl. 703.

This level of skill may be inferred from the refinement of the final products, which are evidently of a high level of technique as measured by repetition, similarity, and uniformity. This is the case with all the mosaic pavements considered.

Comparative study of the decorative elements has increased our understanding of the relationship between Yasileh and other Byzantine sites and thus a comparison of the artistic level of the artists in Yasileh with those at other sites. Similar elements have been found in other sites in the Levant, and of particular interest are the similarities between decorative elements found at Yasileh and several sites in modern Turkey, as well as in the broader territory of the Roman and Byzantine domains.

Also, we find designs that make their earliest appearance in the mosaics of Church II at Yasileh. A border design of the repeated shape H (*fig. 3*) is found only at Yasileh; likewise the looped circles connected to a non-equilateral octagon (*fig. 18*). The intertwined squares motif (*fig. 9*) seems to be anticipated only in the Church of the Apostles, Prophets, and Martyrs in Gerasa, and then at Yasileh. The authors hope that these discoveries will further encourage the scholarly investigation of this significant subject.

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