

The Geometric Mosaics at Qusayr Amra in Context

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THE QUSAYR AMRA PALACE, an early Ummayyad castle some 70 km. east of Amman, is one of the most important structures with geometric mosaic pavements in Jordan. The purpose of this study is to examine the individual designs in comparison with others to understand influences from the region and beyond. Wherever possible, comparative examples have been chosen from sites that are relatively close so that a comprehensive overview of mosaic production in the region may be possible. Every effort has been made to discern the major sources of influence at Qusayr Amra, and in particular those coming from Asia Minor and elsewhere outside of the region.

The site, about 550 m. above sea level, has long been known and studied. The region of Amra was visited and described by Ulrich Seetzen in 1806, and James Burckhardt visited the site in 1812. One of the first who pointed to the archaeological remains in the area was Alois Musil, who mentioned the presence of an old palace. When he visited the palace for the third time in 1901 he was accompanied by a painter, Alphons Mielich,¹ and ever since, greatest interest has been attached to the wall paintings. Far less attention has been paid to the geometric mosaics.

¹ A. Musil, "Kusejr 'amra und andere Schlösser östlich von Moab: Topographischer Reisebericht," *SBWien* 144.7 (1902) 26–51, and *AnzWien* 12 (1905) 40–46. Mielich's rendering was published in Musil, *Kusejr 'Amra* (Vienna 1907).

The plan of castle² has three parts: the main hall with its alcove on the south side; a bath with three rooms (frigidarium, tepidarium, calidarium); and a living area of two rooms, east and west, flanking the alcove, decorated with geometric pavements.



Figure 1: The east room
(after M. Almagro, *Qusayr Amra* [Madrid 1975] 52)

² K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (New York 1979) 254; see also pinterest.com/pin/460774605596857761.

The east room mosaics

The east room of the castle (*fig. 1*) is 3.10 m. deep, 2.80 wide, with an apse. It is decorated on the south side with two vine shoots issuing from a vase in semicircular apse. The field of the floor is enclosed by a double border, the outer a plain strip and the inner a two-stranded guilloche. The panel itself has an interlace motif.

Plain strip motif

The outer plain strip motif border extends around all four sides (*fig. 2*). This is found at other sites in Jordan, e.g. in the apse and chancel of the Khirbat al-Bediyeh church (A.D. 640).³



Figure 2: Plain strip

Two-stranded guilloche motif

The inner border is decorated with two-stranded guilloche (*fig. 3*). There are two similar examples from the Umayyad period, one in Room 4 at Qasr al-Hallabat in Jordan,⁴ the other in the Bath of the Khirbat al-Mafjar at Jericho.⁵ We can trace this motif back to the Roman and Byzantine periods and even earlier. A Roman example in Jordan is in the entrance of the Roman Building at Philadelphia (Amman).⁶

³ Cf. M. Nassar and Z. al-Muheisen, “Geometric Mosaic Ornament at Khirbet al-Bediyeh,” *GRBS* 53 (2013) 596.

⁴ G. Bisheh, “The Second of Excavations at Hallabat, 1980,” *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 133–143, and “Qasr al-Hallabat: A Summary of the 1984 and 1985 Excavations,” *AOF* 33 (1986) 158–162.

⁵ F. J. Bliss, “Notes on the Plain of Jericho,” *PEQ* 26 (1894) 175–183; R. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar: An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley* (Oxford 1959); *Walid and his Friends: An Umayyad Tragedy* (Oxford 1988); J. Bacharach, “Marwanid Umayyad Building Activities: Speculations on Patronage.” *Muqarnas* 13 (1996) 27–44; M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1997) 344, fig. 760; H. Taha, “Rehabilitation of Hisham’s Palace in Jericho,” in F. Maniscalco (ed.), *Tutela, Conservazione e valorizzazione del patrimonio culturale della Palestina* (Naples 2005) 179–188.

⁶ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 262, fig. 468.

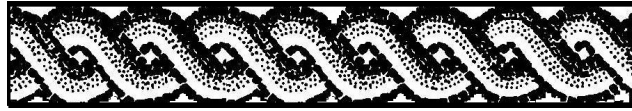


Figure 3: Two-stranded guilloche

The two-strand guilloche occurs in several Byzantine churches in Jordan. Three examples at Madaba are similar those in Qusayr Amra: in the northeast chapel of the Church of the Apostles (578),⁷ in the apse of the crypt of Saint Aelianus (607/8),⁸ and in the nave of the church of the Virgin Mary (VIII cent.).⁹

Near Madaba the motif recurs in the nave and apse of the Church of the Lions at Umm el-Rasas (Kastron Mefaa) (late VI);¹⁰ in the nave and north room of the church of John and Elias at Khattabiyah north of Madaba;¹¹ and at Mukawir in the north aisle of the Church of Bishop Malechius (602/3).¹² The motif also appears on the borders of the inscriptions in medallions in the apse and the chancel of the North Church at Hesban (Esbus).¹³

In eastern Jordan, there are three examples from Khirbat el-Samra: the border of an inscription in a medallion in the nave of the church of Saint Peter (637); a similar border in the

⁷ U. Lux, "Die Apostel-Kirche in Madaba," *ZDPV* 84 (1968) 106–129; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 106–107, fig. 90, 95.

⁸ P.-M. Séjourné, "L'Éliane de Madaba," *RBibl* 6 (1897) 648–656; M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Jerusalem 1989) 67–75; *Mosaics of Jordan* 125, fig. 132, 135.

⁹ M. Piccirillo, "La chiesa della Vergine a Madaba," *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 373–408; *Mosaics of Jordan* 64–65, fig. 2.

¹⁰ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, fig. 338, 376, 378.

¹¹ Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 309–313; *Mosaics of Jordan* 244, fig. 403, 404, 406.

¹² Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 246, fig. 415, 417.

¹³ J. Lawlor, "The Excavation of the North Church at Hesban," *Andrews Univ. Seminary Studies* 18 (1980) 65–76; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 250, fig. 426, 431.

chancel of the church of Saint George; and in the nave of the Egumen Church.¹⁴ At Rihab we find the border of the south aisle of the church of Saint Mary (582/3) and the northern intercolumniations of the church of Saint Peter (623).¹⁵

In the Mount Nebo area, the motif is found at Mukhayyat, in the chancel of the church of Saints Lot and Procopius (VI)¹⁶ and in the south room of the church of Saint George (535/6).¹⁷ At Siyagha, an example is in the Memorial of Moses in the Theotokos Chapel.¹⁸

Three examples are in northern Jordan: an inscription border in the Mausoleum Church at Umm Qays (Gadara),¹⁹ a border in the Qam chapel,²⁰ and the border of the north and south aisles of the First Church at Yasileh (mid-V to early VI).²¹ There are examples at Beth Shean: in the Monastery of Lady Mary, Hall A and Chapel G (553/4).²²

¹⁴ J. Humbert, "Khirbet es-Samra du diocèse de Bosra," in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 1991) 467–474; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 306–308, fig. 593, 601, 606, 607, 611.

¹⁵ M. Avi-Yonah, "Greek Christian Inscriptions from Rihab," *QDAP* 13 (1947/8) 68–72; M. Piccirillo, "Le antichità di Rihab dei Bene Hasan," *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 317–350; *Mosaics of Jordan* 311–312, fig. 622, 633.

¹⁶ S. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem 1949) 55–67; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 164–165, fig. 213, 214.

¹⁷ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo* 76–77; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 178, fig. 244, 250.

¹⁸ S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo I* (Jerusalem 1941) 91–107; V. Corbo, "Nuovi scavi archeologici nella cappella del battistero della basilica del Nebo (Siyagha)," *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258; M. Piccirillo, "Campagna archeologica nella Basilica di Mose Profeta sul Monte Nebo-Siyagha," *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318; *Mosaics of Jordan* 144, 151, fig. 173, 200.

¹⁹ U. Lux, "Der Mosaikfussboden eines spätantiken Bades in Umm Qes," *ZDPV* 82 (1966) 64–70; T. Weber, "Das Hypogäum und der Rundbau," *AA* (1990) 204–214; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 328, fig. 689.

²⁰ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 340, fig. 746, 750.

²¹ M. Nassar and Z. al-Muheisen, "Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Yasileh in Jordan," *PEQ* 142 (2010) 194, fig. 13.

²² M. Merrony, *Socio-Economic Aspects of Late Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in*

Farther afield, there are examples in Cyprus and Asia Minor: in the House of Aion at Nea Paphos (IV),²³ and House 2 at Aphrodisias in Caria (V).²⁴ In the first, each of the two strands is decorated with a guilloche. In the second, one strand shows the same decoration, the other a rainbow motif; in the eyelets formed by the loops are rosettes with dark blue crosses in the centres and petals in red, pink, and white.



Figure 4: Interlaced circles

Interlaced circles motif

Within this frame, the east room mosaic consists of interlaced circles whose bands form hexagons (fig. 4). This multicolored mosaic carpet uses black, white, red, green, and yellow-green on a light red background. A very similar mosaic of the Umayyad period is in Room 4 of Qasr al-Hallabat in Jordan,²⁵ where the design and the colours resemble of those at Qusayr Amra but add the colour orange.

Phoenicia and Northern Palestine (Oxford 2013) fig. 250, 253.

²³ K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) 231, pl. 242.

²⁴ S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Aphrodisias in Caria* (Toronto 1991) 20, pl. 76.

²⁵ Bisheh, *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 133–143, and *AOF* 33 (1986) 158–162.

Similar motifs can be found at other locations in Jordan: at Madaba in the nave of the church of the Virgin Mary and in the Hippolytus Hall in the eighth century,²⁶ and at Khirbat Hubeila in the West Bank the border of the central nave of the church.²⁷ Examples are also found in Greece: on Kos in the central nave of the Major Basilica at Kephalos (V/VI),²⁸ in the Basilica at Delphi (V/VI), in Basilica C in Thebes in Phthiotis (Nea-Anchialos) (VI),²⁹ and at Butrint in Albania (Buthrotum) in the Baptistery (525–550).³⁰

The vase of the apse motif

The apse on the south of the east room is decorated with two vine shoots issuing from an amphora (*fig. 5*). Other Ummayyad examples of this motif are found in the Dome of the Rock.³¹

²⁶ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 64–65, figs. 2, 21.

²⁷ M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine* (Jerusalem 1981) 285, 331, fig. B10).

²⁸ L. Morricone, “Scavi e ricerche a Coò, 1935–43, Relazione preliminare,” *Bollettino d’arte* 35 (1950) 65–66, 327–330; G. Rocco, “L’isola di Coò. Gli scavi nell’isola,” in *La presenza italiana nel Dodecaneso* (Catania) 77–81; L. de Matteis, “The Mosaics of the Early Christian Basilicas on the Island of Kos,” in *11th International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics* (Istanbul 2011) 339–351, fig. 4.

²⁹ M. Spiro, *Critical Corpus of the Mosaic Pavements on the Greek Mainland, Fourth–Sixth Centuries* (New York 1978) 239–240, 325–326; W. R. Caraher, *Church, Society and the Sacred in Early Christian Greece* (diss. Ohio State U. 2003) 26, Plan 57.

³⁰ Sodini, *BCH* 94 (1970) 741, fig. 9; A. Meksi, “Bazilika e madhe dhe baptistery i Butrintit,” *Monumentet* 25 (1983) 47–94; W. Bowden and L. Perzhita, “The Baptistery,” in *Byzantine Butrint* (Oxford 2004) 178, fig. 10.1; J. Mitchell, “The Mosaic Pavements of the Baptistery, in *Byzantine Butrint* 202–218, and *The Butrint Baptistery and its Mosaics* (London 2008); E. Omari, “New Applications for Mosaics Conservation at Butrint” (cipa.icomos.org/fileadmin/template/doc/PRAGUE/107.pdf) (2011) 4, fig. 6.

³¹ Saïd Nusebeih and Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (New York 1996) 82.



Figure 5: Amphora with vine

In fact, the amphora with vine motif is considerably older, already in use in the Roman period and common in the Byzantine period. Examples in Jordan include the Bacchic Procession (Madaba Museum),³² where two rams and two peacocks face each other from either side of a high-footed amphora, from which grow two vine branches with leaves rather than grapes as at Qusayr Amra. Further, in the Madaba area, at Mount Nebo-Siyagha in the Memorial of Moses;³³ at Mount Nebo-Mukhayyat the chapel of the Priest John, Lower Sanctuary,³⁴ where grape vines issue from a vase to create five volutes which contain two sheep, a running hare, another animal, and a bird; and the Monastery of Wadi Afrit,³⁵ where the amphora has two bunches of grapes of different colours.

At Ma'in, in the apse of the Church of al-Dayr (557/8)³⁶ the amphora has multiple bunches of grapes. In the chancel of the North Church/Upper Sanctuary at Hesban,³⁷ a panel features

³² Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 76, fig. 34, 40.

³³ Corbo, *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258, and “Scavi archeologici sotto i mosaici della basilica del Nebo (Siyagha),” *Liber Annuus* 20 (1970) 273–298; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318; *Mosaics of Jordan* 144, fig. 174.

³⁴ Saller and Bagatti, *Town of Nebo* 53–54; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 176, fig. 237.

³⁵ M. Piccirillo, “Campagna archeologica a Khirbet el-Mukhayyet (Città del Nebo),” *Liber Annuus* 23 (1973) 322–358; *Mosaics of Jordan* 193, fig. 291.

³⁶ M. Piccirillo and M. Russan, “A Byzantine Church at ed-Deir (Ma'in),” *ADAJ* 21 (1976) 61–70; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 202–203, fig. 320.

³⁷ M. Piccirillo, “La chiesa di Massuh e il territorio della diocesi di Esbous,” *Liber Annuus* 33 (1983) 335–346; *Mosaics of Jordan* 250, fig. 424, 425.

a high-footed jar from which sprout two grape vines, each with six grapes. On each side of the jar a gazelle faces a tree (the gazelles have been defaced by iconoclasts). The motif also occurs in the nave of the Jubaiha church in Amman,³⁸ where scrolls are formed by two vine shoots issuing from a jar on a high pedestal.

In northern Jordan is an example from Gerasa, in the southern intercolumnar panel of the church of Bishop Isaiah,³⁹ where grape vines issue from a vase. In the chapel at Qam⁴⁰ two vine shoots issue from an amphora on a high pedestal to form scrolls. Similar is a mosaic in the chapel of Anastasius at Khirbat al-Samra.⁴¹

Examples in the West Bank include the Aazor Church (512),⁴² where the vine trellis issues from an amphora, and the Khirbat Asida church (V);⁴³ in Jerusalem we can cite the Armenian Church (VI);⁴⁴ at El-Maqerqesh (Beth Guvrin) an example in the small chapel (VI);⁴⁵ and in the church of Beth

³⁸ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 314, fig. 644.

³⁹ R. Clark, "The Church of Bishop Isaiah at Jerash," in F. Zayadine (ed.), *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981–1983 I* (Amman 1986) 303–341; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 294, fig. 565.

⁴⁰ F. Tarawneh, "Qam Salvage Excavation," *Newsletter of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology* (Yarmouk Univ.) 9 (1990) 12; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 340, fig. 747, 750.

⁴¹ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 308, fig. 612.

⁴² R. and A. Ovadiah, *Mosaic Pavements in Israel* (Rome 1987) 67–68, no. 93; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* (Leiden/Boston 2009) 113, fig. VI-2.

⁴³ D. Baramki and M. Avi-Yonah, "An Early Christian Church at Khirbat 'Asida," *QDAP* 3 (1934) 17–19, pl. 9–12; Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine* 391; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 113–114, fig. VI-3.

⁴⁴ M. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaic Pavements in Palestine," *QDAP* 2 (1933) 171–172, no. 132; H. Evans, "Nonclassical Sources for the Armenian Mosaic near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington 1982) 217–222; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 119, fig. VI-7.

⁴⁵ M. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaics at El-Maqerqesh," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land I* (Jerusalem: 1993) 197–198; Hach-

Loya (VI).⁴⁶ An example in Lebanon is in the nave of St. Christopher at Qabr Hiram (575).⁴⁷

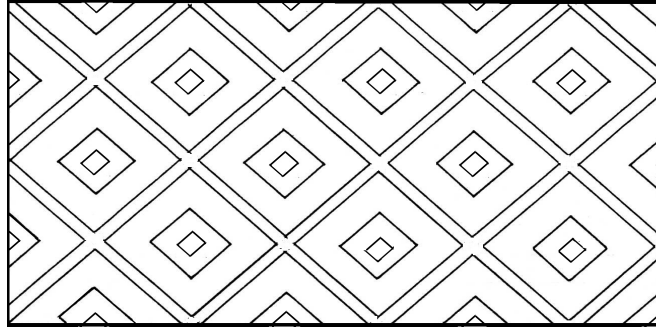


Figure 6: Squares and diamonds

Squares and diamonds motif

The entrance of the east room has a grid of diagonal squares, a square and diamond motif (*fig. 6*). The colors of this panel are red, blue, and dark blue against a red background. This motif can be found in the area and beyond: the north and south aisles of the church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun (late V/early VI);⁴⁸ the intercolumnar of the Second Church at Yasileh (528);⁴⁹ at Rihab, the intercolumnar panels of the north and south rows of pillars of the church of Saint Peter (623),⁵⁰

lili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 125, 127–128, fig. VI-12b.

⁴⁶ J. Patrich and Y. Tsafirir, "A Byzantine Church Complex at Hor-vat Beit Loya," in *Ancient Churches Revealed* (Jerusalem 1993) 268–269, pl. 19b.

⁴⁷ H. Stern, "Sur quelques pavements paléochrétiens du Liban," *CahArch* 15 (1965) 21–37, fig. 3; P. Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban* (Louvain 1988) 411–414, fig. 403, pl. h-t; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 138, fig. VI-18.

⁴⁸ M. Nassar and N. Turshan, "Geometrical Mosaic Pavements of the Church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun," *PEQ* 143 (2011) 41–62, fig. 24, 25.

⁴⁹ Z. al-Muheisen and M. Nassar "The Second Church at Yasileh in Jordan and its Mosaics," *GRBS* 52 (2012) 661–683, fig. 11.

⁵⁰ Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 13 (1947/8) 68–72; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980)

and the northern intercolumnar panel of the church of Saint Menas (635).⁵¹



Figure 7: The west room
(after Almagro, *Qusayr Amra* 53)

317–350; *Mosaics of Jordan* 312, fig. 633; M. Nassar, *Catalogue of Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Jordan* (unpubl., n.d.), fig. 5: 2.3.

⁵¹ U. Lux, “Der Mosaikfußboden der Menas-Kirche in Rihab,” *ZDPV* 83 (1967) 34–41; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 313, fig. 635; Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 5: 2. 4).

The west room mosaics

The west room of the castle (*fig. 7*) is 3.10 m deep and 2.80 wide, with an entrance on the east. The entrance has a hexagon design; the room has an interlace motif enclosed by double borders, the outer with a calyx motif and the inner with a saw-tooth pattern.

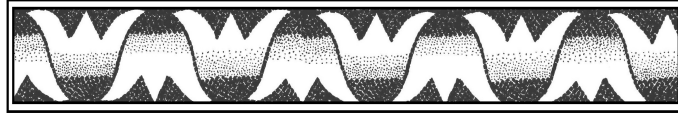


Figure 8: Double calyces

Calyx motif

The outer border is a polychrome row of adjacent double calyces (*fig. 8*); the colors are black, white, red, green, yellow-green on a light red background. A similar pattern from the Umayyad period is in the south side of the Room 4 at Qasr al-Hallabat;⁵² its colors are red, dark and light red, blue, dark blue, and gray against a white background. An example at Madaba is in the Burnt Palace;⁵³ the colors are red, dark red, outlined in black, on a white background.

The motif is found in the principal hall of a burial chapel at Jerusalem (VI),⁵⁴ in the transept of the church of Tabgha

⁵² Bisheh, *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 133–143, and *AOF* 33 (1986) 158–162; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 350, fig. 768, 769.

⁵³ M. Piccirillo, “The Burnt Palace of Madaba,” *ADAJ* 30 (1986) 333–339; *Mosaics of Jordan* 78, fig. 51.

⁵⁴ H. Vincent, “Une mosaïque byzantine à Jérusalem,” *RBibl* 10 (1901) 436–444; S. Mucznik, A. Ovadiah, and Y. Turnhaim, *Art in Eretz Israel in Late Antiquity* (Tel Aviv 2004) 193–208; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 76–77, fig. IV-14; N. Olszewski, “Orphée endeuille de la mosaïque funéraire de Jérusalem,” in *Orphée entre soleil et ombre* (Toulouse 2008) 205–214, 226, and “The Orpheus Funerary Mosaic from Jerusalem in the Archaeological Museum at Istanbul,” in *11th International Colloquium* 655–657, fig. 2–5.

(second half V),⁵⁵ in the south aisle of the Kursi church (582–587),⁵⁶ in the apse of the North Chapel at Kafr Kama (500–550),⁵⁷ and at Gaza-Maiumas in the nave of the Diakonikon of Jabaliyah (451).⁵⁸

This double-calyx pattern can also be found elsewhere in the Near East: in Room C of the House of Barracks at Antioch (450–475),⁵⁹ and the border of the nave at Korykos (490/1).⁶⁰



Figure 9: saw-tooth pattern

Saw-tooth motif

The inner border of the west room is decorated with a polychrome row in a saw-tooth pattern (*fig. 9*). The colors are black, white, red, green, yellow-green, on a light red background.⁶¹ A parallel from the Umayyad period is in Room 4 at Qasr al-Halabat.⁶²

⁵⁵ A. Schneider, *The Church of the Multiplying of the Loaves and Fishes* (London 1937) 58–63, plan 3, tables A, B; Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine*, pl. 50; B. Pixner, “The Miracle Church of Tabgha on the Sea of Galilee,” *BiblArch* 48 (1985) 196–206; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 97, 99, fig. V-2.

⁵⁶ V. Tzaferis, “The Excavations of Kursi – Gergesa,” *Atiqot* 16 (1983) 30–39; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 290, pl. X.1c; Merrony, *Socio-economic Aspects* fig. 210.

⁵⁷ Merrony, *Socio-economic Aspects* fig. 222

⁵⁸ Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 290, pl. VII.10a; J.-B. Humbert et al., “Mukheitem à Jabaliyah, un site byzantin,” in *Gaza méditerranée, Histoire et archéologie en Palestine* (Paris 2000) 121–126.

⁵⁹ S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto 1988) 80–81, fig. 62a, pl. 228.

⁶⁰ S. Campbell, “The Peaceful Kingdom: A Liturgical Interpretation,” in R. Ling (ed.), *Fifth International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics* (*JRA* Suppl. 9.2 [1995]) 125–133, fig. 2.

⁶¹ Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 1:1.8.

⁶² Bisheh, *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 133–143, and *AOF* 33 (1986) 158–162; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 350, fig. 776.

This motif was often used in Jordan during the Byzantine period: thus the outer border of the mosaic inscription in the First Church at Ya'amun (late V–early VI), and in the north room of the Second Church at Yasileh (528).⁶³ In the Madaba region are the chancel of the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (late VI)⁶⁴ and the south-east corner of the nave of the church of the Virgin Mary (VIII).⁶⁵ At Hesban an example is in the chancel of the North Church,⁶⁶ and nearby at Massuh in the lower church.⁶⁷ The saw-tooth motif is also seen in the church of Saints Cosmas and Damian at Gerasa (533)⁶⁸ and in some churches in Rihab, e.g. the border of the inscription in the Church of Mary (533),⁶⁹ also in the central nave of the church of Pella,⁷⁰ and at Sepphoris in Room 6 of the Festival Building and the House of Dionysos (both V–VI).⁷¹

Earlier, it is found at the Herodian western palace at Masada (I B.C.) in the anteroom (Oecus 456) and in the bathhouse corridor (Room 449).⁷²

⁶³ Nassar and Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 44–45, fig. 2, 3; al-Muheisen and Nassar, *GRBS* 52 (2012) 676, fig. 15.

⁶⁴ Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 266–268; *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, fig. 338.

⁶⁵ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 373–408; *Mosaics of Jordan* 64, fig. 21.

⁶⁶ Lawlor, *Andrews Univ. Seminary Studies* 18 (1980) 65–76; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 250, fig. 426, 434.

⁶⁷ Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 33 (1983) 335–346; *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, fig. 447.

⁶⁸ Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, fig. 538.

⁶⁹ Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 13 (1947/8) 68–72; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 30 (1980) 317–350; *Mosaics of Jordan* 311, fig. 625.

⁷⁰ R. Smith, *Pella of the Decapolis* II (Wooster 1989), pl. 18; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, fig. 447.

⁷¹ Z. Weiss and R. Talgam, “The Nile Festival Building and its Mosaics: Mythological Representations in Early Byzantine Sepphoris,” in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East III* (*JRA* Suppl. 49 [2002]) 61, 66–67; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 101, 107, pl. V.2a, 3.

⁷² Y. Yadin, *Masada: Herod's Fortress* (New York 1966) 84, 124–125, 129; G. Foerster, *Masada V Art and Architecture* (Jerusalem 1995) 140–158, fig.

Composite pattern

The panel of the west room (*fig. 10*) consists of a composite pattern, twelve circles connected with lateral loops and two simple guilloches, forming squares with lateral loops. Each of the circles and squares contains a circle or a lozenge.



Figure 10: composite pattern

It seems that mosaics with such a composite pattern are rare in the Byzantine and Islamic eras: we find only one example very similar to that in Qusayr Amra, the floor of the Zababida Church in the West Bank (VI).⁷³ There each of the circles and squares contains a different motif, by contrast with Qusayr Amra.

The lozenge in the apse

The apse of the west room (*fig. 11*) contains a large lozenge bridged within by a large circle with loops; the outside of the lozenge is ornamented with loops. A vine-leaf is in the center of the circle.

⁷² 252–259, pl. XII–XV; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 6, pl. I.1.

⁷³ Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 3 (1934) 46, no. 329, pl. 18.2.

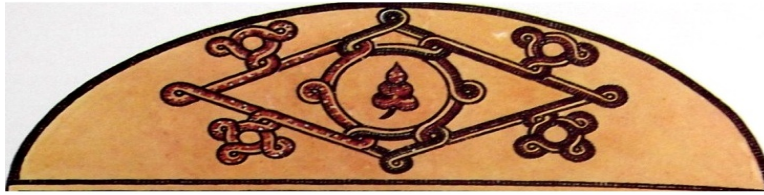


Figure 11: lozenge with loops

Similar examples from the region are the lower mosaic in the Memorial of Moses, Diakonikon, at Mount Nebo (530),⁷⁴ with a large circle with four loops; and at Yasile the intercolumniation of the Western Church (mid V–early VI).⁷⁵

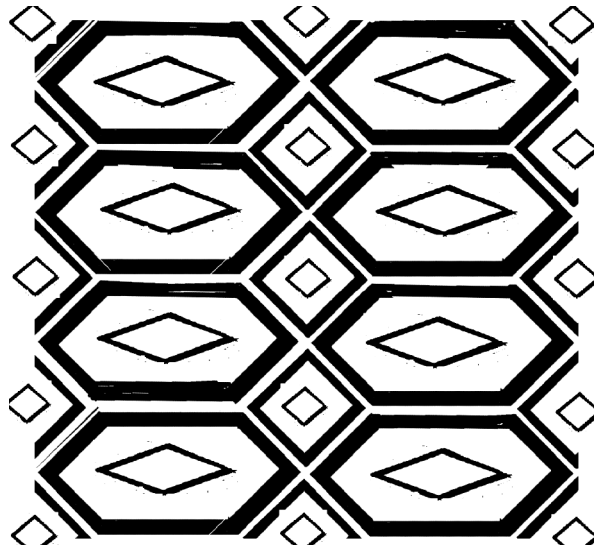


Figure 12: hexagons and squares

Drawing: M. Nassar

⁷⁴ Corbo, *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258, and *Liber Annuus* 20 (1970) 273–298; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318; *Mosaics of Jordan* 146–147, fig. 182, 187.

⁷⁵ Nassar and al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 196–197, fig. 16, 17b; Nassar, *Catalogue*, fig. 2:4.11.

Hexagons and squares motif

The entrance of the west room has a pattern of rows of upright adjacent oblong irregular hexagons, forming squares. Each hexagon is composed of a lozenge, while each square contains a small square (*fig. 12*). The colors of this panel are red, blue, and dark blue against a red background. It seems that the hexagons and squares motif is rare in the Byzantine and Islamic periods; an earlier example is in Spain, in Alcázar de San Juan, dating to the Roman period.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The mosaic artists at Qusayr Amra possessed great technical skill. Comparative study of the decorative elements increases our understanding of the relationship between Qusayr Amra and Roman and Byzantine sites. The artists, whether they were Christians or converts to Islam, had no difficulty in using their experience of traditional motifs, including those found in churches, to decorate the palace of the new Muslim rulers. The debt of the geometrical motifs at Qusayr Amra to Byzantine artistic conventions is clear. But we find some motifs that were rare in the area and elsewhere, e.g. the interlaced circles (*fig. 4*), the composite pattern (10), lozenge with loops (11), and the hexagons and squares (12) found only here and in Alcázar de San Juan (Roman Spain). The author hopes that these findings will further encourage the investigation of these artistic traditions.

December, 2014

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⁷⁶ J. San Valero Aparisi, “Los mosaicos romanos de Alcázar de San Juan (Ciudad Real),” *Noticario Arqueológico Hispano* 3–4 (1956) 195–199.