

# The Geometric Mosaics at Khirbat Mar Elyas: A Comparative Study

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THE GREAT CHURCH at Khirbat Mar Elyas is one of the most important sites with geometric mosaic pavements in northern Jordan, with one of the best-preserved baptistries in the area. In 2000 Pope John Paul II visited the site; it is considered one of the five Christian pilgrimage sites in Jordan. The purpose of this study is to examine the specific types of geometric designs in comparison with other pavements of the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.

The site of Khirbat Mar Elyas, ca. 10 km. northwest of Ajloun City, is a geographically important tell dominating its surroundings (*fig. 1*), about 900 m. above sea level. The most important archaeological materials are on and around the main tell. Because of modern agricultural use, many archaeological remains have been lost or destroyed. Still, we can say that the Khirbat Mar Elyas finds are considerable, though poorly preserved.

Khirbat Mar Elyas was visited and described by some early travelers. One of the first archeologists who reported archaeological remains was van Kasteren; the area was also described by Steuernagel.<sup>1</sup> Augustinovich and Bagatti studied the site during 1940–1950,<sup>2</sup> and in 1998/9 the Department of Antiquities of Jordan excavation team began work here.

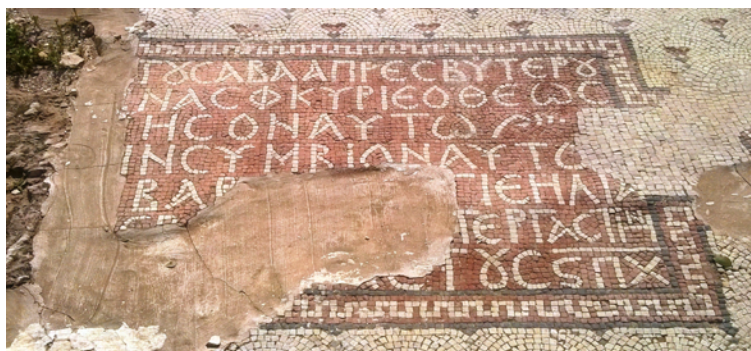
<sup>1</sup> J. P. van Kasteren, “Bemerkungen über einige alte Ortschaften im Ostjordanlande,” *ZDPV* 13 (1890) 207–211; D. Steuernagel, “Der Adschlun,” *ZDPV* 48 (1925) 335.

<sup>2</sup> A. Augustinovich and B. Bagatti, “Escursioni nei dintorni di Ajlun,” *Liber Annuus* 2 (1952) 227–314.



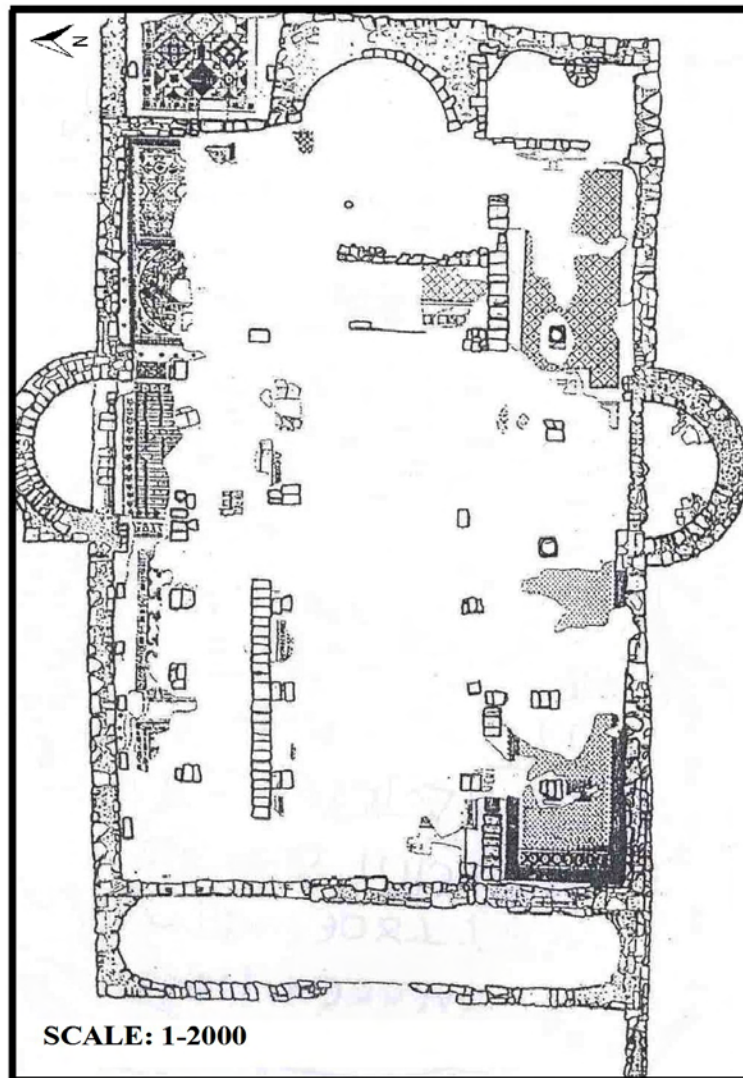
*Figure 1.* Khirbat Mar Elyas, from the west

The main finds have been the upper and lower churches, with remains of Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic date. The upper church is the object of our article. There are three inscriptions in the floor, one of which dates the church to A.D. 624 (*fig. 2*).



*Figure 2.* South aisle, inscription

The upper church is a typical basilica with an apse, chancel, nave, and side aisles (*fig. 3*). Three apses constitute a cross, a plan rare in the region; but an example is in the West Bank, the



*Figure 3.* Plan of the church of Mar Elyas



Figure 4. Apse of the church

church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, rebuilt by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century.<sup>3</sup> All of the Mar Elyas church was covered with mosaic pavements, but some areas are destroyed e.g. in the nave and the apses (fig. 4).

The *chancel* of the church (fig. 5) measures 3.60 m. east/ west and 9.00 north/south. Its mosaic floor is enclosed by a border with swastika meander motif, while the panel has diamond motifs.

The outer border (fig. 6) is a latchkey meander in swastikas with spaced upright double latchkeys with a square in each space. The colours are dark red on a white background.

Two parallels are in the Madaba area. One is in Mosaic of Achilles (first half of the sixth century).<sup>4</sup> There the latchkey meanders in swastikas lack squares; the colours are red and

<sup>3</sup> R. Hamilton, *QDAP* 3 (1934) 1–8; E. Richmond, *QDAP* 5 (1936) 72, fig. 1, and 6 (1937) 67–72; M. Baccia, G. Bianchib, S. Campanab, and G. Ficherab *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 13 (2012) 10, fig. 2; A. Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 147–190; J. Magness, *The Archaeology of the Holy Land* (Cambridge 2012) 335–336, fig. 16.3.

<sup>4</sup> M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Jerusalem 1989) 136–138, and *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1997) 76, 77, pls. 43, 48.



Figure 5. Chancel mosaics



Figure 6. Chancel mosaic, outer border

dark red on a white background. The other is in the aisles of the Basilica of Moses at Mount Nebo-Siyagha (first half of the sixth century),<sup>5</sup> a similar latchkey meander but in design and colours closer to the Mosaic of Achilles. The motif is found elsewhere in the Near East in the Roman and Byzantine periods, e.g. in the Villa of the *triclinos* at Apamea (539).<sup>6</sup> In

<sup>5</sup> V. Corbo, *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258, and 20 (1970) 273–298; M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 148, pls. 191, 193.

<sup>6</sup> J. Trilling, *DOP* 43 (1989) 48–49, fig. 67.

Asia Minor, there are three examples at Aphrodisias in Caria. In the South Room of the North Temenos Complex (350–375)<sup>7</sup> is a meander of spaced recumbent double latchkeys with a horizontal rectangle in each space; the colours are dark blue and orange on a white background. In the North Room of the Teterapylon House (early fifth century), the colours are dark blue on a white background.<sup>8</sup> Room 3 of the Bishop's Palace (350–375)<sup>9</sup> has latchkey meanders in two-strand guilloche and rainbow (a panel rather than a border as at Mar Elyas). The colours are dark blue on a white background. Another example in Asia Minor is in the Stoa of the Alytarch in Ephesus (fourth century);<sup>10</sup> the colours are dark blue and red, on a white background.

Significantly, the motif is considerably older, already in use during the Hellenistic period, and a common design throughout the Byzantine period. An example from the western provinces (Britain), is in the Bacchus mosaic at Verulamium (fourth century),<sup>11</sup> but there the design is a panel rather than a border; the colours are grey on a white background.



Figure 7. Chancel mosaic, inner border

An inner border of serrated saw-tooth pattern frames the eastern first panels on each side of the chancel (*fig. 7*);<sup>12</sup> the

<sup>7</sup> K. Erim, *TürkArkDerg* 15 (1966) 59–67, and *AJA* 71 (1967) 233–243; S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Aphrodisias* (Toronto 1991) 1–4, 37, fig. 6, pl. 9–11.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, *Mosaics of Aphrodisias* 16–19, pl. 55–56.

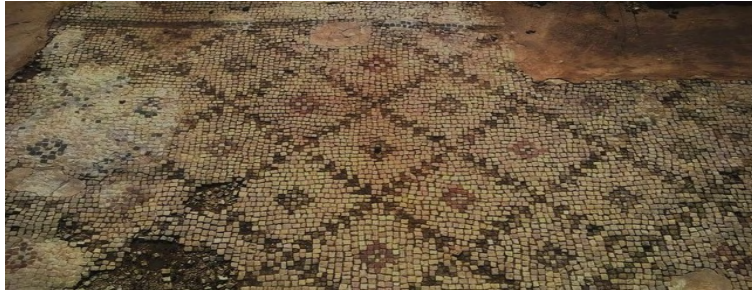
<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *Mosaics of Aphrodisias* 14–15, 41, fig. 188//d, pl. 52–54.

<sup>10</sup> W. Jobst, *Forschungen in Ephesos VIII.2* (Vienna 1977) 32, figs. 45, 46.

<sup>11</sup> D. Neal, in D. Strong and D. Brown (eds.), *Roman Crafts* (London 1976) 250, fig. 388, and in P. Wilson (ed.), *The Archaeology of Roman Towns: Studies in Honour of John S. Wacher* (Oxford 2003) 198–200; N. Faulkner and D. Neal, *Current Archaeology* 237 (2009) 34; D. Neal and S. Cosh, *Roman Mosaics of Britain III.2* (London 2009) 422–425; S. Frere, *Britannia* 42 (2011) 272.

<sup>12</sup> M. Nassar, *Catalogue of Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Jordan* (unpublished,

colours are light red on a white background. Many parallels are found in Byzantine churches in Jordan.<sup>13</sup>



*Figure 8.* Chancel, panel

The panel in the chancel is decorated with squares and diamonds (*fig. 8*); each rib of the rhomboid is a lotus shape, while the inside of the rhomboid is a smaller rhomboid. The colours are dark red on a white background. Similar motifs found in Jordan are for example the nave of the First Church at Yasileh (mid fifth to early sixth century).<sup>14</sup> There, each pair of shields is decorated, one with a two-strand guilloche and the other with a rainbow.



*Figure 9.* Nave borders

n.d.), *fig. 1:8*.

<sup>13</sup> See M. Nassar, *GRBS* 55 (2015) 427.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Al-Muheisen, *ADAJ* 35 (1991) 341–344, cf. *AJA* 96 (1992) 535, *fig. 30*.

The *nave* (26.00 × 6.00 m.; *fig. 9*) is framed by six column bases on each side. The mosaic in the center is enclosed by a triple border: the outermost has a meander, the middle a double guilloche, and the inner one a saw-tooth motif.



*Figure 10.* Nave, outer border

The outer border border consists of a simple meander forming dentils (*fig. 10*);<sup>15</sup> the colours are light red and black, on a white background. The same meander pattern can be found at other Byzantine sites in Jordan, for example in the north aisle of the Church of the Lions at Umm al-Rasas (574–589),<sup>16</sup> with design and colours similar to those of Mar Elyas. There are two parallels at Gerasa. One is in the church of Saint John (531), the colours white on a dark red background.<sup>17</sup> The other is between the columns of the church of Bishop Isaiah.<sup>18</sup> An example at Pella is in the lower floor of the church.<sup>19</sup> In the West Bank, an example is in the Beth Midrash of Meroth (early seventh century).<sup>20</sup>

The middle border consists of a tongued double guilloche (*fig. 11*).<sup>21</sup> The colours are dark red and light red and black, against a white background. Similar motifs elsewhere in Jordan

<sup>15</sup> Nassar, *Catalogue* fig. 1:3.

<sup>16</sup> Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici* 266–268, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, pl. 374.

<sup>17</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 273, 288, pls. 506 and 541.

<sup>18</sup> V. Clark, in *Jerash Archaeological Project, 1981–1983* (Amman 1986) 303–341; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 294, pl. 565.

<sup>19</sup> R. Smith, *Pella of the Decapolis II* (Wooster 1989) 128, fig. 39; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 330, pl. 703.

<sup>20</sup> Z. Ilan, in *Ancient Synagogues in Israel* (Oxford 1989) 33–34; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* (Leiden 2009) 88, fig. IV.22.

<sup>21</sup> Nassar, *Catalogue* fig. 1:18.1.



include the north aisle of the Church of Procopius at Gerasa;<sup>22</sup> the outer border of the nave of the First Church at Khirbet al-Bediyeh (640);<sup>23</sup> in the Madaba area, the lower mosaic of the old Diakonikon Baptistery at Mount Nebo-Siyagha (530);<sup>24</sup> in Umm al-Rasas the south aisle of the Church of the Lions (574 or 589);<sup>25</sup> and the lower floor of the church at Pella (Tabaqat Fahal).<sup>26</sup> Farther afield, an example of Hellenistic date is the border of the floor of Pappalardo House at Morgantina.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 11. Nave, middle border

The inner border is a saw-tooth pattern similar to that in the chancel (cf. *fig. 7*); the colours are dark red and light red and black, against a white background.

The nave panel, mostly destroyed, has a perspective motif (*fig. 12*) and plants and flowers (*fig. 13*). A perspective design is found in e.g. the Church of Cosmas and Damian at Gerasa (533),<sup>28</sup> where it adds a swastika pattern but has the same colours.

<sup>22</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 292, pl. 560.

<sup>23</sup> Nassar and Al-Muheisen, *GRBS* 53 (2013) 594, fig. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Corbo, *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258, and 20 (1970) 273–298; Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 26 (1976) 281–318, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 146, pls. 166, 182, 184.

<sup>25</sup> Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici* 266–268, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 236, pl. 376.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Pella II* pl. 18D; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 330, pl. 706.

<sup>27</sup> B. Tsakirgis, *AJA* 93 (1989) 405–407, figs. 27–28; Z. Welch, *Mosaic Pavements in Classical and Hellenistic Dining-rooms* (M.A. thesis McMaster Univ. 1992) 158–159, 249, fig. 82. Further examples at Nassar and Al-Muheisen, *GRBS* 53 (2013) 598–599.

<sup>28</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 288, pl. 540.



*Figure 12.* Nave panel, perspective motif



*Figure 13 a, b, c.* Nave panel, plants and flowers

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Figure 14. North intercolumniations

In the *north intercolumniations* the designs are mostly destroyed, but some decoration survives in the western part of the north aisle: intersecting circles form quatrefoils, with stylized crosslets in the centers of the quatrefoils (fig. 14). The colours are white and dark red, against a light red background. The intersecting circles motif became quite popular in the churches of Jordan in the Byzantine period, though it can be found as early as the Hellenistic age.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 15. North aisle

<sup>29</sup> For numerous examples see Z. Al-Muheisen and M. Nassar, *GRBS* 54 (2014) 98–99.

The *north aisle* (29.50 × 5.50 m.; *fig. 15*) has five panels. The first (4.55 × 4.30 m.) is enclosed by a border consisting of outlined two-stranded guilloche of dark red, light red, and white, on a dark grey background (*fig. 16*). This border pattern is widespread in mosaics of the Roman and Byzantine periods.



*Figure 16.* North aisle, border

The enclosed mosaic has a composite motif (*fig. 17*), four squares connected by interlooped bands forming quadrilobes. The colours are dark red, light red, dark grey, and white, while the background is white. The center of each square has a circle with acanthus shapes as crosses; in each circle is a rosette with crosses.



*Figure 17.* North aisle, first panel border

This motif was rare: an example is in the nave of the Church of Saint George at Khirbat al-Samra in northeastern Jordan

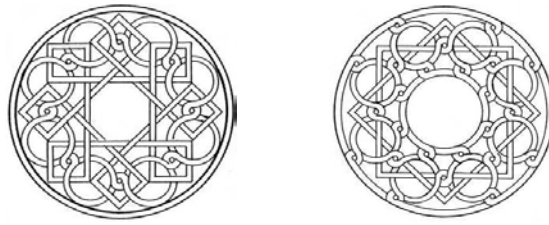
(637).<sup>30</sup> There the squares are filled with diverse motifs such as flowers, leaves, fruits, etc., while at Khirbat Mar Elyas we find only one theme, the circular rosette with crosses; but the colours are similar.



Figure 18. North aisle, second panel

The second panel (4.55 × 4.30 m.; *fig.* 18) has a composite pattern within a circle (2.00 m.), eight interlaced circles and squares. A large circle contains eight smaller circles connected with loops. These smaller circles are intertwined with one another; additionally, they are connected by eight squares having diagonals that are equal to the diameter of the circles, which touch each other at their corners. Superimposed squares are joined to form a star of two rotated squares at the center of the scheme. The borders of the squares and circles are decorated with triangular and oval shapes. The colours are red and dark red, on a dark red background.

<sup>30</sup> J. Humbert, in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land, New Discoveries: Essays in Honor of Virgilio C. Corbo* (Jerusalem 1991) 467–474; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 306, pl. 601.



Figures 19–20. Composite patterns (Gerasa)



Figures 21–22. Composite patterns (Yasileh, Ya'amun)

There are two parallels at Gerasa, in the northern and the southern aisle of the Church of Procopius (526),<sup>31</sup> where the small circles are connected to the outer circle by loops, and in the middle an inner ring is entwined with the eight circles (*figs.* 19–20). Instead of the eight small squares, we find there two large ones interlocked with the circles. In the nave of the First Church at Yasileh (mid-fifth/early sixth century; *fig.* 21)<sup>32</sup> a large circle is connected by loops, with eight small circles in its interior. The small circles are intertwined with each other and are connected by eight squares of the same size. In the chancel of the church at Ya'amun (late fifth/early sixth century; *fig.* 22)<sup>33</sup> the large circle contains eight smaller circles connected with loops. These smaller circles are intertwined with one another, and are connected by eight squares having diagonals that are equal to the diameter of the circles, which touch each

<sup>31</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 292, 297, pl. 560, 574; Nassar, *Catalogue* fig. 2:5.5.

<sup>32</sup> M. Nassar and Z. Al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 190, fig. 9a; Nassar, *Catalogue* 2:5.4.

<sup>33</sup> M. Nassar and N. Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 43, fig. 12.

other at their corners. Superimposed squares are joined to form a star of two rotated squares at the center. The colours are red, dark red, blue, on a dark blue and red background.

Other examples of this motif are found in the region—thus an interlaced design in the church at Dayr al-Smadiyah (on Jabal Ajlun) near Khirbat Mar Elyas;<sup>34</sup> also nearby, in the nave of the church of Rajeb;<sup>35</sup> at Umm Qays (Gadara) in the Byzantine Bath;<sup>36</sup> and at Bethlehem in the nave of the Church of the Nativity (Constantinian).<sup>37</sup>



*Figure 23.* North aisle, intermediate design

Between the second and third panels is a mosaic with three circles interlooped tangentially and intertwined, interlaced with two squares also of interlooped design (*fig. 23*). The colours are dark red, light red, dark grey, and white, on a dark red background. The design is similar to the second panel (circles and squares motif). The pattern is rare in the region, but one example from Bethlehem is in the nave of the of the Church of

<sup>34</sup> P. Séjourné, *RBibl* 9 (1900) 118–121; M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici della Giordania settentrionale* (Jerusalem 1981) 17–18, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 338, pl. 733.

<sup>35</sup> M. Abu Abeilah, “New Discovery at Wadi Rajeb,” <http://www.ajlounnews.net/index.php?module=articles&id=1204> (2011).

<sup>36</sup> U. Lux, *ZDPV* 82 (1966) 64–70; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 328, pl. 686.

<sup>37</sup> Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 151, fig. 3.



Figure 24. North aisle, third panel

the Nativity, where, the squares are tangent to the interiors of the circles.<sup>38</sup>

The pavement of the third panel (7.00 × 5.50 m.; *fig. 24*) is enclosed by a border with a lotus motif, decorated by rows of zigzags. The colours of the panel are red, light red, blue, white, and light brown. The design is paralleled in Jordan in e.g. the west side of the central nave of the Second Church at Yasileh (mid fifth/early sixth century),<sup>39</sup> where the colours are dark red, beige, bluish brown, black, and white. Compare too the nave of the lower church at Massuh near Hesban (fifth century).<sup>40</sup> There are many examples at Antioch, e.g. in the House of Menander at Daphne (250–275).<sup>41</sup> The pattern is also found in North Africa, thus the border of the hunt and amphitheater scenes at Cuicul.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 151, fig. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Z. Al-Muheisen and M. Nassar, *GRBS* 52 (2012) 670, fig. 10.

<sup>40</sup> M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 33 (1983) 335–346, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 254, pl. 446.

<sup>41</sup> R. Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (London 1998) 58, fig. 40.

<sup>42</sup> E. Kitzinger, in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine* (Paris 1965) 346, fig. 8; Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 122, pl. 87.





*Figure 25.* North aisle, intermediate design

The motif between the third and fourth panels is an octagon connected with six half octagons (*fig. 25*); the colours are dark red, light red, dark grey, and white, the background dark red.



*Figure 26.* North aisle, fourth panel

The fourth panel of the north aisle (6.10 × 5.50 m.), heavily damaged, has a border consisting of an outlined multi-swastika meander around recessed-returned swastikas (*fig. 26*). The swastika-meander is dark red on a white background.

The First Church at Yasileh, for example, has a meander border with recessed double reverse-returned swastikas divid-

ing squares; some squares are filled with a checkerboard pattern or with four-petal rosettes. The swastika-meander is dark red on a white background while the checkerboard squares are dark red, pink, yellow, and light blue on a white background; the rosettes are white on a dark red background.<sup>43</sup> Another example from the region is in the Prophets Church at Gerasa (464/5).<sup>44</sup> In the intercolumniations of the Khirbet al-Bediye church (640) the border has recessed-turned swastikas which divide squares containing birds.<sup>45</sup> The motif is in fact as old as the Roman period.



Figure 27. North aisle, fourth panel, Solomon knot motif

Most of the fourth panel has been destroyed; but there remain three Solomon knot motifs (*fig. 27*), in red on a white background. The design is found at several sites in Jordan, for example in the north aisle of the Ya'amun church,<sup>46</sup> where the knot is within the squares, the colours red, blue, and dark blue, against a white background.

Two parallels are in the West Bank: in the nave of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem<sup>47</sup> and in the south aisle of

<sup>43</sup> *AJA* 96 (1992) 535, fig. 30; Nassar and Al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 189, fig. 8.

<sup>44</sup> C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa* (New Haven 1938) 337, pl. 78; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 286–287, pl. 535.

<sup>45</sup> Nassar and al-Muheisen, *GRBS* 53 (2013) 604, fig. 13.

<sup>46</sup> Nassar and Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 57, 58, figs. 19, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Richmond, *QDAP* 5 (1936) 75–81, fig. 1, and 6 (1937) 67–72; B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Gentiles in Palestine* (Jerusalem 1971) fig. 49; Madden,

the First Church at Bethany (late fourth century).<sup>48</sup> Compare in Syria the Cathedral of Apamea (third quarter of the fourth century)<sup>49</sup> and Bath E in Antioch (Constantinian).<sup>50</sup> The motif is considerably older, already in use in the Roman period (Villa at Halstock)<sup>51</sup> and a common design throughout the Byzantine period.

The fifth panel, before the side entrance of the church (6.10 × 3.20 m.; *fig.* 28), has an outer border consisting of outlined double calices (*fig.* 29). The colour is light red on a dark red background. Parallels include: at Madaba, in the Burnt Palace, where the colours are red, dark red, outlined in black, on a white background;<sup>52</sup> in the West Bank, the hall of the Burial Chapel at Jerusalem (sixth century)<sup>53</sup> and the transept of the Church of Tabgha (second half of the fifth century);<sup>54</sup> the south aisle of the Kursi Church (582–587);<sup>55</sup> at Kafr Kama, in the

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*Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 151, 174, *figs.* 3, 18.

<sup>48</sup> S. Saller, *Excavations at Bethany* (Jerusalem 1957) pl. 22a; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 182–183, *fig.* 24.

<sup>49</sup> J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques du Proche-Orient* (Paris 1995) 265–266; K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge 1999) 169, *fig.* 175; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 170–173, *fig.* 16.

<sup>50</sup> D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947) 260–277, *fig.* 157; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 175, *fig.* 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 69, *fig.* 48.

<sup>52</sup> M. Piccirillo, *ADA* 30 (1986) 333–339, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 78, pl. 51; M. Nassar, *MAA* 13 (2013) 72.

<sup>53</sup> H. Vincent, *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, in *Actes du colloque “Orphee entre soleil et ombre”* (Toulouse 2008) 205–214, 226, and *11th International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics* (Istanbul 2011) 655–657, *figs.* 2–5.

<sup>54</sup> A. Schneider, *The Church of the Multiplying of the Loaves and Fishes* (London 1937) 58–63, plan 3, tables A, B; M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine* (Jerusalem 1981) pl. 50; B. Pixner, *BiblArch* 48 (1985) 196–206; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 97–99, *fig.* V.2a–b.

<sup>55</sup> V. Tzaferis, *Atiqot* 16 (1983) 30–39; M. Merrony, *Socio-Economic Aspects of Late Roman Mosaic Pavements* (Oxford 2013) *fig.* 210.



Figure 28. north aisle, fifth panel

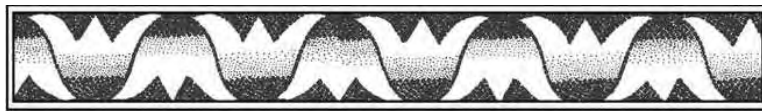


Figure 29. North aisle, fifth panel, double calices

apse of the North Chapel (500–550);<sup>56</sup> at Gaza-Maiumas, in the nave of the Diakonikon of Jabaliyah (451).<sup>57</sup> Farther afield, the double calices pattern is found in Asia Minor, in the House of Barracks at Antioch (450–475) and in the nave at Korykos (490/1).<sup>58</sup>

The the fifth panel of the north aisle has a design of tangent multilobed scales, with spindles radiating in four directions from a central quadrilobe, and in the inner scales a rose (*fig. 30*). The colours are red and white on a dark red background.

<sup>56</sup> Merrony, *Socio-Economic Aspects* fig. 222.

<sup>57</sup> J.-B. Humbert, *Gaza méditerranéenne, Histoire et archéologie en Palestine* (Paris 2000) 123.

<sup>58</sup> S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto 1988) 80–81, pl. 228, and in *Fifth International Colloquium on Ancient Mosaics II* (Cleveland 1995) 125–126, 129, 133, fig. 20.



Figure 30. North aisle, fifth panel

Similar schemes are found in the Madaba area: in the north aisle of the Church of Saint George in Mount Nebo (535/6),<sup>59</sup> in the south room of the Church of Dayr (557/8),<sup>60</sup> and at Rihab in the Church of Saint Menas (635),<sup>61</sup> where the nave consists of 21 squares of tangent multilobed scales, the colours red and red dark, on a white background. In the Decapolis we find the pattern in the south room of the church at Pella, with colours red and white, on a dark red background,<sup>62</sup> and in the Baths of Herakleides at Gadara.<sup>63</sup> There are two instances at Antioch: in the House of Aion (500) and the Magdough Mosaic (500–525).<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 178, pl. 245.

<sup>60</sup> M. Piccirillo and M. Russan, *ADAJ* 21 (1976) 61–70; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 202, pl. 319.

<sup>61</sup> U. Lux, *ZDPV* 83 (1967) 34–41; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 313, pl. 634, 635.

<sup>62</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 330, pl. 705.

<sup>63</sup> Lux, *ZDPV* 82 (1966) 64–70; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 328, pl. 686.

<sup>64</sup> R. Lodge and G. McKay, *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 39 (1981/2) 55–69; Campbell, *Mosaics of Antioch* 58–59, pl. 170–173, and 48, pl. 140.



*Figure 31.* South aisle



*Figure 32.* South aisle, first panel

The *south aisle* ( $29.50 \times 5.50$  m.; *fig. 31*) is divided into two panels with geometric patterns. The first ( $9.50 \times 5.40$  m.) extends from the front of the south room to the beginning of the south apse; it is framed by a plain strip border. The enclosed pattern consists of lozenge motifs with a crosslet in the center of each lozenge (*fig. 32*); the colours are red, light red, and white. The motif finds parallels in the intercolumniations in the First

Church at Yasileh,<sup>65</sup> the south aisle in the Ya'amun church,<sup>66</sup> the apse of the Khirbet al-Bediyeh church,<sup>67</sup> and the aisles of the Ras ed-Deir church.<sup>68</sup>



Figure 33. South aisle, second panel

The second panel of the south aisle (20.00 × 5.00 m.; *fig. 33*) extends from the beginning of the south apse to the front of the side entrance of the aisle. It is divided into two parts, one with a motif of tangent scales, the other with lozenges.

The mosaic is surrounded by a complex border. Saw-tooth designs in dark red and light red on a white background frame a six-stranded guilloche of dark red and light red on a light blue and white background (*fig. 34*). A similar guilloche in Jordan is in the nave of the Western Church at Yasileh.<sup>69</sup> In Israel, one can compare the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias

<sup>65</sup> Nassar and al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 182–198, fig. 17b.

<sup>66</sup> Nassar and Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 60–61, fig. 24, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Nassar and al-Muheisen, *GRBS* 53 (2013) 596–597, fig. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Muheisen and Nassar, *GRBS* 54 (2014) 91, fig. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Nassar and al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 189, fig. 7.



Figure 34. South aisle, second panel, border

(late fourth century).<sup>70</sup> Farther away, this type of guilloche is found in a mosaic made by Roman prisoners of war in the Palace of Sapor at Bishapur in southwest Iran (260).<sup>71</sup>



Figure 35. South aisle, second panel, first part

The design of the first part of the second panel is tangent scales in outline, each with a flower inside (*fig. 35*). The scales are white, the flower dark red. The inscription dating the church (*fig. 2*) is in the center. Two parallels are in the Madaba area: in the baptistry (Diakonikon) of the Memorial of Moses at Mount Nebo-Siyagha (530),<sup>72</sup> and in the south intercolumni-

<sup>70</sup> Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* 190, fig. 202.

<sup>71</sup> Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* 175, fig. 186.

<sup>72</sup> Corbo, *Liber Annuus* 17 (1967) 241–258; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 147, pl. 184.



ation of the church of Bishop Sergius at Umm al-Rasas.<sup>73</sup> Compare at Khirbet as-Samra the church of St. Peter,<sup>74</sup> at Rihab the apse of the church of St. Basil (594),<sup>75</sup> and the church at Pella.<sup>76</sup>



*Figure 36.* South aisle, second panel, second part

The smaller second part is in front of the southwest side entrance of the church (*fig. 36*); it consists of a row of joining lozenge motifs with a crosslet inside each lozenge. The colours are dark red, light red, and dark grey, on a white background. It seems that this design is rare in the Byzantine period.

In the *north room* (5.60 × 4.00 m.; *fig. 37*) the mosaic floor is framed by a swastika-meander border. The panel is decorated with squares of various sizes, filled of many different motifs—an interlaced squire’s motif, Solomon knot, zigzag, two-stranded guilloche, looped circles, perspective motif. The square at the center shows a basket of pomegranates. The colours are dark red, light red, dark grey, and white, on a dark background.

Parallels in Jordan are in the northwest panel of the Chapel of the Twal Family at Madaba,<sup>77</sup> with a composite pattern of squares of various sizes filled with interlaced motifs and birds,

<sup>73</sup> M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annus* 37 (1987) 177–239, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 234, pl. 365, 369.

<sup>74</sup> Humbert, in *Christian Archaeology* 467–474; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 307, pl. 606–608.

<sup>75</sup> M. Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 13 (1947/8) 68–72; M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annus* 30 (1980) 317–350, and *Mosaics of Jordan* 311, pl. 626.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Pella* II pl. 17D; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 331, pl. 703.

<sup>77</sup> S. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem 1949) 236–238; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 128, fig. 141.



Figure 37. North room

and in the north room of the El-Bediye church (640).<sup>78</sup> Two others are in Antioch: in Bath A, Room 29 (300–350) and in the east aisle of the Kaoussie Church, Martyrion of St. Babylas, (387).<sup>79</sup>



Figure 38. South room

The *south room* (5.70 × 4.00 m.; *fig. 38*) has a simple mosaic design, in dark red on a light background.

<sup>78</sup> Nassar and Al-Muheisen, *GRBS* 53 (2013) 608, fig. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Campbell, *Mosaics of Antioch* 13, pl. 46, and 45, pl. 133.



*Figure 39.* Baptistery room

The *baptistery room* (8.80 × 7.60 m.; *fig. 39*) is in the northwest of the church. The decoration is in three parts: scales, lozenges with crosslets, and rows of circles. The lozenge panel is framed by double calices (*fig. 40*). The colours are dark red, light red, dark grey, and white, on a white background.



*Figure 40.* Baptistery room, lozenge panel

### *Conclusions*

The Khirbat Mar Elyas church is important from several perspectives, first as a major pilgrimage site in Jordan. The plan with three apses is unusual in the area—we find one other

example in the West Bank, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. We see also the high level of skill attested by the geometrical mosaic pavements in this church. Comparative study of the decorative elements increases our understanding of the relationship between Mar Elyas and other Byzantine sites. It allows us to compare the artistic level of the work elsewhere. Some designs make their first appearance in the mosaics at Mar Elyas, such as the lozenge motif in the south aisle (*fig. 36*). And some are of unusual sophistication when compared with similar designs elsewhere, such as the interlaced designs (*figs. 19–22*). The authors hope that these findings will contribute to scholarly appreciation of these art forms.

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