

# The Magi: a Rare Mosaic Floor in the Ya'amun Church (Jordan)

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**T**ELL YA'AMUN, 23 kilometers southeast of Irbid, Jordan, has been occupied continuously from the Early Bronze Age to the present. The site (*fig. 1*) was first excavated in 1999 by Dr. Jerome Rose of the University of Arkansas and Prof. Mahmoud el-Najjar and Dr. Nizar Turshan of Yarmouk University as a joint Bioarchaeological and Archaeological Field School project. Test trenches that discovered the church were dug late in the 1999 season.<sup>1</sup> The church was briefly mentioned in the 1999 field report published in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities*.<sup>2</sup>

## *The Ya'amun Church*

The Ya'amun church is a three-aisled basilica with an internal apse measuring approximately 20 by 14 meters excluding the narthex. The prothesis is on the north side of the apse; a marble chancel rail surrounded the raised altar. The floor is mosaic with floral, faunal, and geometric designs. Columns separate the nave from the aisles and at one time supported the roof. The walls were plastered and painted at least twice, and the roof was tiled at some point.

<sup>1</sup> Field staff consisted of professors and co-directors Mahmoud Y. El-Najjar of Yarmouk University and Jerome C. Rose of the University of Arkansas and Yarmouk, along with site archaeologist Dr. Nizar Turshan, surveyor and draftsman Muwafaq Bataneh, and photographer Husein Debajeh of Yarmouk.

<sup>2</sup> M. El-Najjar, J. C. Rose, Attalla Nabil, N. Turshan, and Dolores L. Burke, "First Season of Excavation at Ya'amun (1999)," *ADAJ* 45 (2001) 413–417, at 414–415.

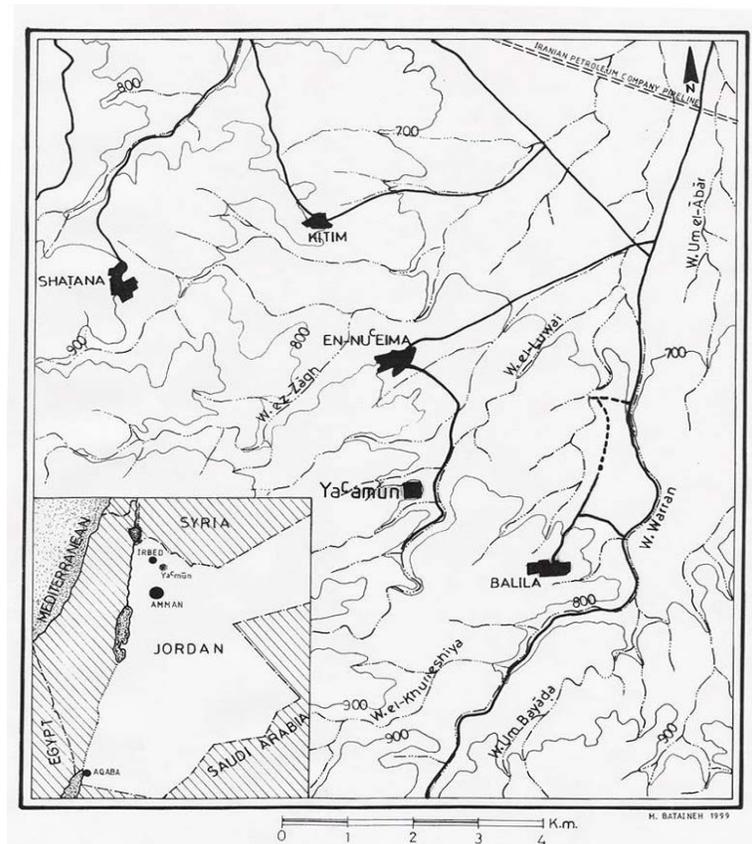


Figure 1: Location of Tell Ya'amun (drawing by Muwafaq Bataineh)

A dedicatory inscription is in front of the chancel (*fig. 2*):

ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοσεβεστάτου καὶ ὀσι-  
 οτάτου Λεοντίου ἐπισκόπου καὶ τοῦ εὐλ(αβεστάτου)  
 Ἡλία πρεσβ(υτέρου) καὶ Ἰωανίου διακ(όνου) καὶ Καμου-  
 4 σα καὶ Ἀλαφέου καὶ Μαξίμον Χασουος Γερμαμ-  
 η Σαβατίου Ἡλία Σαβατίου καὶ λυποῖς γηρότης ἐψη(φώ)-  
 θη τὸ μαρτύρην ἐν ἔτι ὀγδόου χρ(όνου)ς ὀγδόης ἰνδικ(τιῶνος).



Figure 2: Dedicatory inscription

In the time of the most reverend and holy Leontios the bishop and Elias the most pious priest and John the deacon and Kamousa and Alapheos and Maximus, Chasouos(?), Germames, Sabatios, Elias, Sabatios, and the other elders, the martyriion was paved with mosaics in the eighth year, the time of the eighth indiction.

The church and the mosaic floor date to the late fifth to the early sixth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The church floor was cleared by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities following the 1999 season. There is no recorded stratigraphy from the church floor itself and no artifacts were collected during this clearing process. Because of this, all knowledge we have of stratigraphy comes from the anterior rooms and the prothesis.

During the third season in 2001 two probe trenches were carried out in different parts of the tell, one in the north part of the tell, the other in the eastern part. The latter revealed a part of mosaic floor at a depth of ca. 10–20 cm. The pavements have very different designs with colorful cubes. The fourth season of excavation, in summer 2002, concentrated on the eastern part of the tell, with a group of squares dug in order to

<sup>3</sup> Other Greek inscriptions were found in the mosaic floor, especially on the north aisle mentioning Daniel and his three brothers (publication forthcoming).

reveal all parts of the mosaic. The plan of the basilica church with full mosaic floor was revealed. Here we will analyze and offer the best possible interpretation of the discovery, the inscriptions, the plan of the church, and the mosaic floor.

What are the relationships of the Ya'mun church to this typology? The floor plan of the church is a basilical design with an external apse (*fig. 3*). The apse does not span the entire width of the nave. There are six column bases, three on each side of the nave. Only one base is still visible, but there are traces of the other five. The aisles terminate at the eastern wall, with no diakonikon or prothesis. The base of the chancel extends from the eastern wall to the first set of columns and is one step higher than the nave. No evidence of an ambo has been documented. There is a narthex adjacent to the church on the west in which a baptismal font was found out of context; another font was found in the south aisle, but has not been closely examined or shown to be *in situ*. It has not yet been determined whether or not this church has an atrium.

The dedicatory inscription, however, proclaims this church as a martyrion; therefore, it was possibly a place of baptism instead of a congregational church. This claim is supported by the following features: (1) the church lacks some important liturgical elements, e.g. the ambo, and the diakonikon/prothesis areas; (2) the size of this church would not allow a large congregation to fit inside; (3) there are two baptismal fonts present; (4) the information in the dedicatory inscription (*martyrion*) is consistent.

The basilica church plan was one of the most popular in Jordan during the Byzantine period. The Ya'mun church was built on this design. It is oriented east, where we find the niche of the church and in front of the niche the chancel screen, which was built of two kinds of material: the marble columns discovered in the narthex, and the wooden elements that separated the clergy from those attending the church to pray.

The nave of the church had in the middle four bases that held the columns supporting the roof at center; the columns themselves were not recovered and only the bases were found.

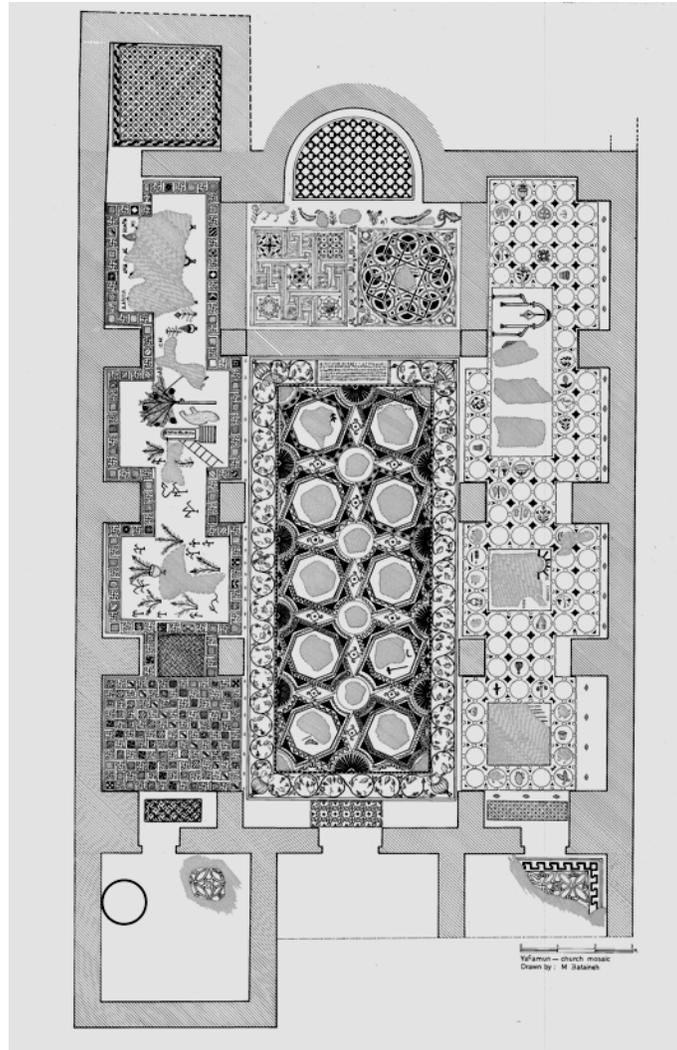


Figure 3: Ya'amun church floor plan (drawing by Muwafaq Bataineh)

The nave is flanked on the south and north by aisles, which match the width of the nave.

Three entrances at the west end were excavated. The main entrance leads to the nave, the other two to the aisles; but all

the entrances were closed during the Umayyad period when the church was not in use.

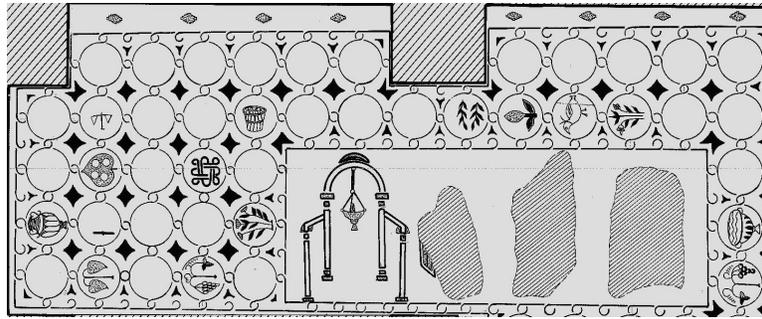
In analyzing the church's various structures, we found that the surviving elements were built with very well-dressed limestone which came from Ya'moun, especially from the quarries west and north of the site. The spaces between the stones were filled with lime-mortar. In addition, many fragments of tiles were excavated; these show that the roof was built of wooden beams covered by tiles. The pottery sherds recovered from this area date to the early and late Byzantine period.

The church continued in use for some unknown time but gradually fell into disuse. After another unknown period the church was repaired and reused again for secular purposes.<sup>4</sup> One indicator of the abandonment is that the floor was patched. Large white stone tesserae indicative of the Umayyad period were used in place of the small colored ones. While this repair does not specifically demonstrate that the people who made these repairs were of a different religious group, other modifications to the church indicate that it was no longer used as a sacred space.

*The south aisle mosaic*

The south aisle mosaic is mostly small circular medallions with flowers, plants, birds, fish, geometric designs (circles, squares, lozenges, etc.), and urns and vases (*figs.* 4, 5). Much of this aisle is damaged and part of the north side is completely missing. Three large rectangular inserts are embedded among these circular medallions. The central one contains three inscriptions: sun, moon, and one is still uninterpreted; the sun's rays are visible in its southeastern corner, but the rest of this design has been patched with large white tesserae. The eastern rectangle has three figures facing a large structure; the structure

<sup>4</sup> This trend is discussed by Geoffrey R. D. King, "Two Byzantine Churches in Northern Jordan and their Re-use in the Islamic Period," *MDAI(D)* 1 (1983) 111–136; "Some Churches of the Byzantine Period in the Jordanian Hawran," *MDAI(D)* 3 (1988) 35–75.



*Figure 4: The south aisle mosaic (drawing by Muwafaq Bataineh)*



*Figure 5: The south aisle mosaic*

has four columns, each with a base and nearly identical crown, supporting a dome. A large oil lamp with a rectangular base and a red flame hangs from the middle of the dome (*fig. 6*).

The human figures have also been patched with large white tesserae, the result of iconoclast actions. This sort of destruction



Figure 6: The dome and the lamp

occurred at many other churches in northern Jordan.<sup>5</sup> There are no independent means of determining a date for this change, but when compared to other churches with similar destruction it corresponds well. Therefore, this appears to have been done in the eighth century, as proposed by Robert Schick.<sup>6</sup> This theory addresses the unusually high number of churches in north Jordan that show this type of destruction, all dating to this same period. Whether or not this corresponds to the historically contested edict issued by Caliph Yazid is debated. Oleg Grabar disputes Schick's theory and denies the idea of an "official doctrine."<sup>7</sup>

This scene might be either the Magi bringing gifts to the

<sup>5</sup> Robert Schick and Emsayif Suleiman, "Preliminary Report of the Excavations of the Lower Church at El-Quweisma, 1989," *ADAJ* 35 (1991) 325–340, at 327; Robert Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton 1995) 112; Michele Piccirillo, "Umm al-Rasas: A Byzantine Mosaic Centre in the Jordanian Desert," *Minerva* 4.3 (1993) 22–29.

<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Communities* 117; cf. Piccirillo, *Minerva* 4.3 (1993) 231, and Michele Piccirillo, "The Mosaics of Jordan," in B. MacDonald et al. (eds.), *The Archaeology of Jordan* (Sheffield 2001) 671–676, at 675.

<sup>7</sup> Oleg Grabar, *Museum International* 55 (2003) 46–55, at 48.

infant Jesus, illustrating the account in Matt. 11; or the women coming to the tomb on Easter morning (three in number at Luk. 24:10), the domed structure representing the tomb and the lamp representing the angel.

It might seem that the erased figures portray the women. At Dura Europos the scene of the (five) women has the angels represented by stars.<sup>8</sup> There is a late parallel (women, baldachino, hanging lamp) at the Mar Musa al-Habashi monastery in Syria;<sup>9</sup> but that painting dates to the eleventh century, and shows the expected angel and the empty tomb. Moreover, the Ya'amun mosaic shows the three persons holding forward something in their hands, which means that they have gifts. They are the Magi; presumably they are facing east toward what was meant to be the Bethlehem church in Palestine (the nativity church), the birthplace of Jesus.

The mosaic floor shows that the artist, under the instruction of the clergy, did not portray the body or face of Christ; because of his sanctity, Christ is instead symbolized by the flame of the lamp hanging from the dome. While the artist was not allowed to portray such a face on the floor, he still could show the wise men of Persia—later damaged in an iconoclastic episode. In the earliest depictions, the Magi are shown wearing Persian dress of trousers and caps, usually in profile, advancing in step with their gifts held out before them, which is clear in the Ya'amun mosaic at the several undamaged edges.

The importance of this discovery in Jordan is that this mosaic floor is not paralleled in any site elsewhere, so we can say that it ranks among the rare or unique masterpieces of the world.

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<sup>8</sup> C. H. Kraeling, *Excavations at Dura Europos, Final Report VIII.2* (New Haven 1967) 74–80, 190–197.

<sup>9</sup> S. Westphalen, *Eastern Christian Art* 4 (2007) 108, pl. 17.