

The Mosaic Pavement at Girmil, Jordan: A Comparative Study

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AT GIRMIL in northern Jordan, a church dating to A.D. 591 has been found to contain an impressive and well-preserved mosaic pavement. We present here a comparative study of the pavement's motifs. The peculiarity of this mosaic is that the scenes are almost entirely of animals and plants, images that have escaped the iconoclastic destruction that befell many other Byzantine churches in Jordan.

The prosperous Byzantine period in Jordan witnessed major developments in economic and cultural activities, expansion in the number of cities and population, building of dozens of churches, etc. At Gerasa, mosaic church floors are found not only within the archaeological site but also in peripheral areas and rural towns, displaying the wealth and civilization of the city. The mosaic floor of the Girmil church represents an example of these churches constructed on the fringes of Gerasa.

The site is about 2 km southeast of Gerasa and about 1 km north of the small town of Houd. The 2013 excavations at Girmil directed by the Department of Antiquities of Gerasa¹ revealed the church in a small site surrounded by valleys, about 900 m above sea level. The site covers an area of about 5000 m² and has remains of varied architectural features (*fig. 1*), including caves, walls, tombs, water cisterns and wells, and stone quarries, and archaeological materials including pottery, column capitals, dressed stones, etc. The materials date use of the site to the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods, indicating continuous

¹ R. Harahsheh and L. Abu Azeizeh, *ADAJ* 58 (2014) 59–77 (in Arabic).



Figure 1: the site (after Harahsheh and Abu Azeizeh)

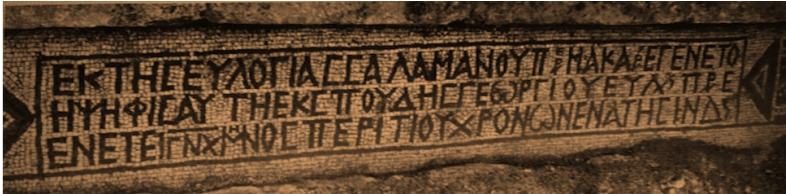


Figure 2. Girmil Church, inscription
(all photos provided by Harahsheh)

occupation throughout. However, it is worth noting the reuse of the tombs, stones taken from Roman constructions in building the church, and then the reuse of collapsed Byzantine stones in building the Umayyad habitation rooms above and around the church. The Girmil church is dated to A.D. 591 by a dedicatory inscription (*fig. 2*). A team has determined the provenance of the mosaic tesserae from their physical properties and microfacies:



Figure 3: Mosaic pavement, Girmil Church

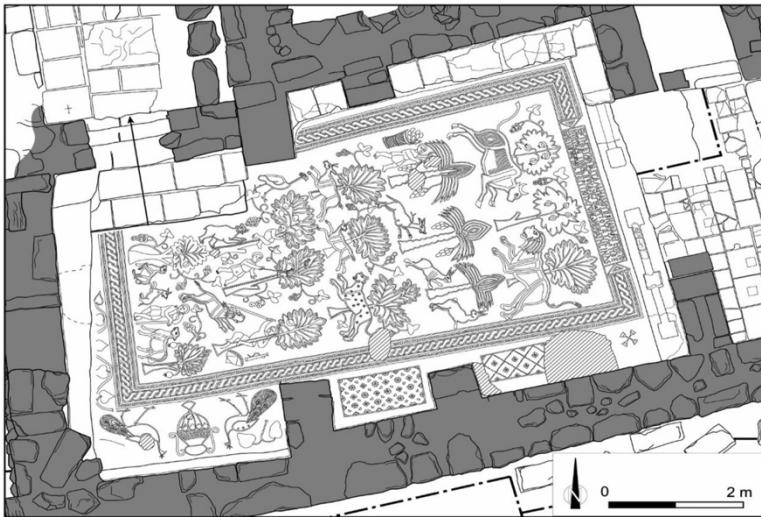


Figure 4: Girmil mosaic, drawing

the tesserae are of local white and colored limestone.²

The church (*figs. 3, 4*) is a rectangular hall with an area of about 90 m² (15 × 6 m), while the surviving mosaic floor covers

² K. al-Bashairh, W. Hwari, and M. al-Tamimi, *Jordan Journal of Earth and Environmental Sciences* 10 (2019) 227–233.

only about 48 m² (8 × 6 m). The floor is adorned with various motifs: animals in chase or combat, sheep grazing, the harvest of fruit trees, predators attacking laborers. It is framed by a double-strand guilloche border.³

This paper addresses this beautiful mosaic as a case study aiming to examine specific aspects and aesthetic values of the animal and plant motifs and to compare them with other Roman and Byzantine motifs in order to bring out the cultural interactions and exchanges that took place in the region.

Animal scenes

While images of animals and the chase or combat are as old as the beginnings of art,⁴ the Girmil mosaic is unusual in the region for the richness of its animal scenes.

Lion and bull



Figure 5: Lion and bull, Girmil church

The top-most scene, below the inscription, is of a lion and bull in confrontation (*fig. 5*). It shows the two animals face to face in

³ The two-strand guilloche border motif was widespread in Jordan during the Byzantine period, see M. Nassar and Z. al-Muheisen, *PEQ* 142 (2010) 182–198, and *GRBS* 53 (2013) 591–609; M. Nassar and N. Turshan, *PEQ* 143 (2011) 41–62; M. Nassar, *MAA* 13 (2013) 67–76, and *GRBS* 55 (2015) 414–430; M. Arinat and M. Nassar, *GRBS* 59 (2019) 493–506; M. Nassar and N. Turshan, *Adumatu* 39 (2019) 7–18.

⁴ J.-M. Chauvet et al., *The Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave* (New York 1996); J. Clottes, *Chauvet Cave: The Art of Earliest Times* (Salt Lake City 2003).

an attack position, beneath a pomegranate tree. The colours are dark red, light red, and dark blue against a white background.

The type of lion versus bull is found at other Jordanian sites of Byzantine date. So for example in the Church of Deacon Thomas at Mount Nebo (*fig. 6*).⁵ The colours there are red, green, brown, on a white background; the border surrounding the scene is a three-stranded guilloche, while at Girmil it is two-stranded.



Figure 6: Lion and bull, Mount Nebo

Two parallels of Byzantine date have been found at Madaba. In the nave of the Lower Baptistery Chapel (*fig. 7*)⁶ the facing lion and bull are beside vines with grapes, rather than pomegranates as at Girmil. The colours are red, dark red, green, grey, with a white background. In the Mosaic of the Paradise at

⁵ M. Piccirillo, *ADAJ* 32 (1988) 195–205, and *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1997) 187, pl. 266; L. A. Roussin, *The Iconography of the Figural Pavements of Early Byzantine Palestine* (Ann Arbor 1995) fig. 13.

⁶ M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Jerusalem 1989) 21–40; *Mosaics* 119, pls. 121, 122.



Figure 7: Lion and bull, Lower Baptistery Chapel, Madaba



Figure 8: Lion and bull, Mosaic of the Paradise, Madaba

Madaba (*fig. 8*), the animals are framed by two pomegranate trees.⁷

A comparable scene is found in the Synagogue of Beth Alpha (Scythopolis, 2nd half 6th cent.):⁸ there the lion and bull flank an inscription. In an example in the Church of Saint George at Houad (A.D. 568), the lion is biting the bull.⁹

Significantly, the scene of lion and bull is a good deal older, and widely diffused. We find it in the basilica at Hadrian's Villa

⁷ Piccirillo, *Chiese* 132–133; *Mosaics* 128, pl. 139.

⁸ D. Bahat, in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem 1981) 85; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden 1988) 390, and *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* (Leiden/Boston 2009) 200, 250, 289, fig. IX-1d.

⁹ E. Omari, *Journal of Mosaic Research* 5 (2012) 126; P. Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1988) 144, fig. 116.

(A.D. 120–130),¹⁰ and in the narthex of the basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis in Macedonia (2nd half 5th cent.).¹¹

The next scene lower shows a dog chasing two deer among palm trees (*fig. 9*). The colours are dark red, light red, and dark blue against a white background.



Figure 9: Dog chasing deer, Girmil church



Figure 10: Dog chasing deer, Mount Nebo

The motif of a dog chasing deer is rare in the region, seemingly found only in the Church of Deacon Thomas at Mount Nebo (*fig. 10*), of Byzantine date,¹² where we see one deer rather than

¹⁰ M. Aurigemma, *Villa Adriana* (Rome 1961); A. Belis, *Roman Mosaics in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles 2017) 35.

¹¹ E. Dimitrova, *Folia Archaeologica Balkanica* 3 (2015) 210, fig. 3.

¹² Piccirillo, *ADAJ* 32 (1988) 195–205; *Mosaics* 187, pls. 254, 263; Roussin, *Iconography* fig. 13.

two. The colours are red, dark red, green, grey, on a white background. The scene is also found elsewhere, thus a Byzantine example in Syria in the Bosra theater.¹³ There a farmer looks on as dogs chase the deer, amid flowers. Farther afield and earlier, a dog chasing two deer can be found e.g. in the House of Dionysos in Paphos (2nd cent. A.D.).¹⁴

Leopard chasing deer

The third row portrays a leopard chasing two deer, amid pomegranate trees (*fig. 11*). The colours are dark red, light red, and dark blue against a white background. This scene seems to appear in the region only in the Girmil Church.



Figure 11: Leopard chasing deer, Girmil church

Elsewhere, three similar designs of a leopard and deer can be cited. One is from Homs in Syria (now Chazen Museum of Art), dated to 450–462.¹⁵ Another is in the narthex of the contemporary basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis, showing a leopard standing over a fallen deer.¹⁶ A third is in the basilica at Delphi,

¹³ J. Dentzer-Feydym et al., *Bosra. Aux portes de l'Arabie* (Beirut/Damascus 2007) 63–66.

¹⁴ P. Pastorello and W. Schmid, in *The Conservation of the Orpheus Mosaic at Paphos, Cyprus* (Burbank 1991) 59–61.

¹⁵ Belis, *Roman Mosaics* 52; M. Rogers, *Elvehjem Art Center Bulletin/annual report 1972/1973* (1973) 42, fig. 8.

¹⁶ S. Kasovska, “Between the Tradition and Innovation: Christian Floor Mosaics at Heraclea Lyncestis from the Fourth to the Sixth century” (MA thesis Central European University, Budapest, 2007) 85–86, fig. 4; Dimitrova, *Folia Archaeologica Balkanica* 3 (2015) 214, fig.5.

dated to the fifth century, with a leopard devouring a deer.¹⁷

Lions attacking men

The fourth row of the mosaic shows men harvesting pomegranate trees, two of whom are climbing the trees in fear of attacking lions (*fig. 12*). The colours are dark red, light red, and dark blue against a white background. Such a scene seems to be found, both in the region and elsewhere, only in the Girmil Church.



Figure 12, lions attacking men, Girmil church

Agricultural motifs

Date palm harvest



Figure 13: Laborer cutting palm, Girmil church

The second row portrays three palm trees, with a laborer cutting one of them (*fig. 13*). In his left hand he holds his knife, in his right a cluster of the fruit; behind is a basket filled with the

¹⁷ See H. Miles, <https://helenmilesmosaics.org/mosaic-sites/mosaics-of-delphi/>.

palm dates. The colours are dark red, light red, and dark blue against a white back ground. Such a scene seems to be rare in the region.

Elsewhere, however, scenes of the date palm harvest can be found, and the motif is attested early: the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia at Palestrina (late 2nd cent. B.C.) puts the harvest in the setting of the Nile flood.¹⁸ In North Africa, a mosaic in the synagogue of Hammam Lif in Tunisia (6th cent.) adds a bird under the palm tree.¹⁹ In Italy, the ceiling mosaic of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna (6th cent.) contains a date harvest,²⁰ as do the apse of Santa Cecilia in Rome (8th cent.)²¹ and that of Santa Prassede in Rome (9th cent.).²²

Harvest scenes of other fruits—grapes and pomegranates—are more common in the region, with many in the Madaba area, e.g. in the Church of Saint Lot and Procopius at Mount Nebo (A.D. 557), a laborer picking grapes.²³ We find one example in Syria, in the Bosra theater, dating to the Byzantine period;²⁴ there, surrounded by birds, one man is harvesting dates while another holds a caged bird.

¹⁸ G. Gullini, *I mosaici di Palestrina* (Rome 1956); A. Steinmeyer-Schareika, *Das Nilmosaik von Palestrina und eine ptolemäische Expedition nach Äthiopien* (Bonn 1978); P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina. Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* (Leiden 1995); K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (New York 1999) 49–50, fig. 47; R. Kinzelbach, *Antike Naturwissenschaft und ihre Rezeption* 23 (2013) 139–191.

¹⁹ E. Bleiberg, *Tree of Paradise: Jewish Mosaics from the Roman Empire* (New York 2013) 25, 36, fig. 18.

²⁰ R. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism* (Leiden 2010) 112, fig. 3.11; E. Kitzinger, *Byzantine Art in the Making* (Cambridge 1995) fig. 104; A. Wharton, *ArtB* 69 (1987) 358–375; S. Kostof, *The Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna* (New Haven 1965) fig. 67.

²¹ E. Thuno, *Word & Image* 3 (2011) 280, fig. 1.

²² J. Fisher, *Art in Rome* (Newcastle 2019) 125–127, fig. 6.7.

²³ S. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem 1949) 39–41, 55–67; Piccirillo, *Mosaics* 164, pl. 204; Nassar and Turshan, *Adumatu* 39 (2012) fig. 2.

²⁴ Dentzer-Feydym et al., *Bosra* 63–66.

The symbolism of the palm is relevant. One of the earliest cultivated plants, evidenced already in the Saqqara tombs ca. 3200 B.C.,²⁵ it became for pagan Greeks and Romans a symbol of victory. For Christians, the palm tree is mentioned in the Bible three times: “and ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days” (Lev 23:40); “And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written” (Neh 8:15); “They took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord”(Jn 12:13).

Man and bird



Figure 14: Man and bird, Girmil Church

In the fourth row a man is shown standing under a pomegranate tree poking with a stick at a bird perching on one of the branches (*fig.* 14). He appears to be playing with the bird, or else trying to expel it for fear of its harming the fruit. The colours are

²⁵ S. al-Sharabasy and R. Rizk, *Atlas of Date Palm in Egypt* (Cairo 2019) 21.

red, dark red, green, grey, on a white background. Such a scene seems to be found only in the Girmil Church and does not recur in the region and elsewhere.

Shepherd at rest

In the bottom row, a shepherd leans on his staff with his right hand, between two fruit trees; nearby are two sheep and a dog (fig. 15). He looks to his right where a sheep is trying to eat leaves from a tree. The colours are red, dark red, green, grey, on a white background.



Figure 15: Shepherd, Girmil Church



Figure 16: Shepherd, Uyun Musa

The scene seems rare in the region. A good parallel is in the Byzantine Church of Deacon Thomas at Uyun Musa near Madaba (fig. 16).²⁶ There the shepherd, dressed in a short tunic,

²⁶ Piccirillo, *ADAJ* 32 195–205; *Mosaics* 186–187, figs. 253, 263; Roussin, *Iconography* fig. 13.

stands in the middle of a scroll of grape vines; the colours are red, dark red, green, grey, on a white background.

The scene of a shepherd can be found in more distant regions. Two examples are in Ravenna in Italy: in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (5th cent.) and in the basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo (6th cent.).²⁷ The symbolism of the shepherd was well established for Christians by the many mentions in the Bible, especially e.g. Jn 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," and Heb 13:20 "the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant."

Peacocks and amphora

Outside of the frame of these scenes is an amphora flanked by two peacocks (*fig. 17*). The lip is rounded and without decoration; the sides of the neck are straight, its lower part is convex and decorated with black lines; the base is conical. The uppermost decoration is a simple meander; below are finger- or leaf-shaped lines in dark red. The handles form an S shape. The colours used are red, dark red, and grey on a white background.



Figure 17: Amphora and peacocks, Girmil Church

Similar designs can be found at other sites in Jordan during the Byzantine period, for example in the Middle Church at Hayyan al-Mushrif (late 5th-early 6th cent.), where an amphora

²⁷ D. Deliyannis, *Ravenna in Late Antiquity* (New York 2010) 205, fig. 1b, and 271, fig. 96.

is between two pomegranate trees.²⁸ Another example is in the bath at Yajuz,²⁹ where two amphorae flank a pomegranate tree; the colours are black, white red, and dark red, against a white background. Elsewhere many parallels are found, thus in the Ma'on-Nirim Synagogue (A.D. 538),³⁰ in the Shellal Church in the Negev (561/2),³¹ and in the Armenian church in Jerusalem (Byzantine).³² Peacock decoration is found widely, e.g. in Italy in the ceiling of Santa Costanza in Rome (4th cent.),³³ and in Albania in the Butrint baptistery (6th cent.).³⁴

The biblical appreciation of the peacock was well known to the Byzantine artists. For example, Job 39:13, "Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich?" In 1 Kgs 10:22 (cf. 2 Chron 9:21), "For the king had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tarshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks."

Geometric decoration

The floor in the southern intercolumniation of the church has some geometric motifs, such as diamonds and cruciform designs (fig. 4). The colours are red, dark red, green, grey, on a white background. Diamonds and cruciform designs were numerous in Jordan and elsewhere in the Roman and Byzantine periods. One example is in the northern intercolumniation of the church at Ras ed-Deir (A.D. 599).³⁵

²⁸ Z. al-Muheisen, *Liber Annuus* 14 (1995) 519–522; P. M. Bikai and V. Egan, *AJA* 101 (1997) 532–533.

²⁹ Arinat and Nassar, *GRBS* 59 (2019) 505, fig. 28.

³⁰ M. Avi-Yonah, *Rabinowitz Bulletin* 3 (1960) 25–35; R. Hachili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* (Leiden/Boston 2009) 116, fig. VI-5.

³¹ M. Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* 3 (1933) 26–73, no. 306; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 117–118, fig. VI-6.

³² Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 119, fig. VI-7.

³³ K. Weitzmann, *The Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art* (New York 1979) 556, fig. 74.

³⁴ S. Pataci and E. Lafli, *Hadrianopolis IV* (Oxford 2019) 200–201.

³⁵ Z. al-Muheisen and M. Nassar, *GRBS* 54 (2014) 99, fig. 12.

Conclusions

The importance of the study of the Girmil mosaic derives from its firm date in 591 and its well-preserved human and animal motifs, undamaged by iconoclasm. The scenes are valuable sources on the crops cultivated and the animals maintained or seen during the Byzantine period in Jordan and the region. The Girmil artists exhibit great professional skill while employing only the colored limestone available locally. Comparison of motifs and designs improves our understanding of the relationship of the Girmil mosaic to others in Jordan and beyond.

The scenes combine motifs of old tradition, going back to the early Roman imperial age, with newly-created designs that appear at Girmil for the first time in the Byzantine period. Of particular interest are the similarities and differences revealed here. Some scenes seem to be rare in the region. Thus the scene of the dog chasing deer (*fig. 9*), for which we find only one parallel (Mount Nebo, *fig. 10*). The scene of the leopard chasing deer (*fig. 11*) is unique in Jordan, with only three parallels elsewhere. Moreover, the scene of the lion attacking men (*fig. 12*) sets Girmil apart, for it appears solely here. Additionally, the scenes of agriculture are rare in the area: for the scene of date palm harvesting (*fig. 13*) we can compare only one mosaic, in the Lot and Procopius church. The scene of the shepherd is rare, as we found only one parallel, Deacon Thomas at Uyun Musa. But that of the man and birds in *fig. 14* stands alone. The authors hope that these findings will contribute to the study of this significant artwork.

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