

# The Mosaic Designs of the Kufer-Jayez Church, Jordan

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**T**HE KUFER-JAYEZ CHURCH IN northern Jordan, dating to the Byzantine period, has revealed an impressive and well-preserved mosaic pavement. Kufer-Jayez is a large town 12 km north of Irbid, near Beit Ras (Capitolias). The pavement was lifted, transported, conserved, and exhibited at the Dar el-Saraya Museum in Irbid. We present here a comparative study of its artistic motifs. The peculiarity of this mosaic stems from its diversity, with geometric shapes and floral and faunal motifs. A number of the decorations are rare and unusual patterns, whether compared on a national, regional, or global level. Distinctive designs include geometric motifs such as turning wheels, windmills, and others, as well as birds that have survived the iconoclastic destruction that befell many other Byzantine churches in Jordan.

The church is located in the old town of Kufer-Jayez, now the western part of the town, adjacent to the old mosque. It was uncovered in a salvage excavation directed by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan in 2001. The work aimed to save the mosaic floor that was uncovered accidentally by construction activities, and to reveal the nature of the settlement. The site was in the front courtyard of a house built about 120 years ago in the style typical of the old village houses in Jordan, marked by a row of adjacent rooms and a front yard with an entrance. The house (like nearby houses) was built with reused stones from the same location.

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The mosque was built on a system of mounted archways. Residents of the area say, citing their ancestors, that the mosque was built on the foundations of a church—possibly because of earlier mosaics that so often signal a church. In addition, many sherds of pottery and glass vessels and small pottery figurines were discovered. To the south of the excavation area are large limestones deriving from Roman and Byzantine individual and mass graves.

The mosaic floor is formed of three layers installed on a preparatory layer of compacted red soil: from the bottom, the nucleus mortar layer of small pebbles, then the bedding layer of mortar rich in lime and fine-grained aggregates, then the *tesselatum* layer formed of the tesserae.

Despite the absence of architectural elements and the loss of the stones to later construction, the mosaic floor (*figs. 1 and 2*) indicates a basilica plan, which is normally composed of an apse, a nave, and lateral aisles divided by rows of columns, and an entrance at the west. However, the excavations found the apse only partly preserved, also the east side of the nave adjacent to the apse and part of the south aisle, while the north aisle was totally destroyed by the construction work of the house. The nave probably extended to the west under the west wall of the house and the street, while the south aisle extends to the west for 11 m, and most probably continues even farther under the entrance of the house. Despite these losses, the mosaic floor of the nave contains decorative elements worthy of comparative study.

## I. The Geometric Motifs

### *Looped circles and squares*

The panel is composed of 35 looped circles and squares distributed in a symmetrical design (*fig. 3*). It is formed of (7 x 5) bands of alternating circles and squares connected by knots. The colors are black, dark red, blue, and dark yellow, on a



*Figure 1:* Kufer-Jayez church pavement in situ, before lifting



*Figure 2:* Pavement exhibited at the Dar al-Saraya Museum

white background. This design appears to be rare in the area and elsewhere. Analogies can be found in Byzantine churches at a few other Jordanian sites, thus in the south aisle of the



Figure 3: Looped circles and squares, Kufer-Jayez

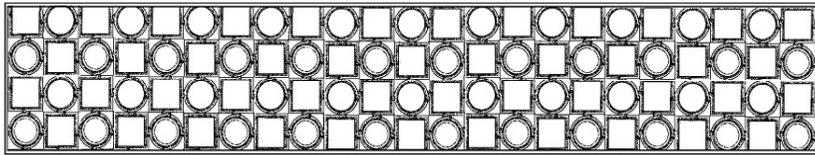


Figure 4: St Stephen church, Umm al-Rasas

church of St Stephen at Umm al-Rasas (*fig.4*), with a panel of 52 looped circles and squares, filled with fruit, leaves, flowers, small jars, and birds that were removed by iconoclasts.<sup>1</sup> Its design of looped circles and squares is more sophisticated than at Kufer-Jayez; the colors are black, dark red, and dark yellow.

A similar motif is found in the Khirbet al-Bediyeh church (A.D. 640), in the borders of the east end of the nave that surround the Greek inscription (*fig. 5*); the design consists of nine looped circles and nine squares.<sup>2</sup> At Khirbet al-Samra in the south intercolumniation of the St George church (637), a panel

<sup>1</sup> M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman 1997) 219, 238, pls. 345, 347; *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* (Jerusalem 1989) 282–301; M. Nassar, “Catalogue of Geometric Mosaic Pavements of Jordan during the Byzantine Period” (unpublished, n.d.) *fig. 2.3.3*.

<sup>2</sup> M. Nassar and Z. al-Muheisen, “Geometric Mosaic Ornament at Khirbet al-Bediyeh, Jordan,” *GRBS* 53 (2013) 591, 600, *figs. 4 and 9*; Nassar, “Catalogue” *fig. 2.3.4*.

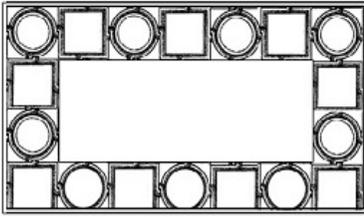


Figure 5: Khirbet al-Bediye

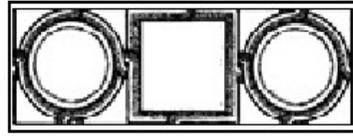


Figure 6: St George church,  
Khirbet al-Samra

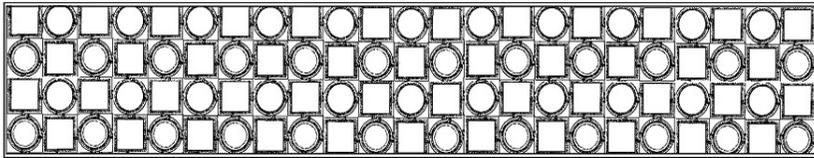


Figure 7: St Mary Church, Rihab

is composed of a looped square and two circles, filled with bird motifs (*fig. 6*); the colors are black, dark red, grey, and dark orange.<sup>3</sup> The motif also is in the south aisle of the St Mary church at Rihab (582/3; *fig.7*): twelve looped circles and squares are filled with geometric designs; the colors are black, dark red, grey, and dark orange.<sup>4</sup> The south aisle of the Petra church (447) shows similar looped circles and squares, which are filled with human figures, animals, birds, and fish; the colors are dark and light red and light blue.<sup>5</sup>

Two examples are found in Jerusalem, an earlier one in the

<sup>3</sup> J. Humbert, "Khirbet es-Samra du diocèse de Bosra," in *Christian Archaeology in the Holy Land, New Discoveries: Essays in Honour of Virgilio C. Corbo* (Jerusalem 1990) 467–474; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 306, figs. 600–602; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 2.3.5.

<sup>4</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 310–311; M. Nassar and N. Turshan, "Geometric Decoration Mosaics at Rihab," *Adumatu* 39 (2019) 11, fig.12; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 2.3.6.

<sup>5</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 334; T. Z. Fiema et al. (eds.), *The Petra Church* (Amman 2001) 219–270; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends* (Leiden 2009) 253.

south aisle of the First Church at Bethany (late 4<sup>th</sup> cent.),<sup>6</sup> and another in the St John the Baptist Chapel at the Russian Ascension Church (600).<sup>7</sup> In the latter the design is very close to that at Kufer-Jayez, with looped circles and squares filled with birds, flowers, and fruit; the colors are red, dark red, grey, black, and yellow. Finally, we can compare an example in the Basilica of Saint Euphemia at Grado in Italy (571–579), where the design is very similar to that found at Kufer-Jayez.<sup>8</sup>

*Windmill motif*

The fan shape makes a windmill of four blades, inside a looped square with white and black borders (*fig. 8*). The square is divided into four equal squares with each of the windmill blades occupying half of each square. The blades are dark red and black, on a white background, while the loops are black, dark red, and yellow.



Figure 8: Windmill motif, Kufer-Jayez

<sup>6</sup> S. Saller, *Excavations at Bethany* (Jerusalem 1957) pls. 15–17; A. Madden, “A Revised Date for the Mosaic Pavements of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem,” *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 182, fig. 24.

<sup>7</sup> A. Avital and H. Paris, “Cucurbits depicted in Byzantine Mosaics from Israel, 350–600 CE,” *Annals of Botany* 114 (2014) 206, 208, fig. 2.d.

<sup>8</sup> G. Cuscito, *Grado e le sue basiliche paleocristiane* (Bologna 1979) fig. 14; B. Killerich, “Visual and Functional Aspects of Inscriptions in Early Church Floors,” *ActaAArtHist* N.S. 24 (2011) 45–63.

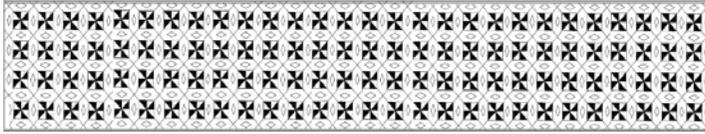


Figure 9: Church of the Apostles, Madaba

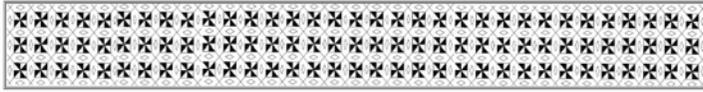


Figure 10: Church of Bishop Sergius, Umm al-Rasas

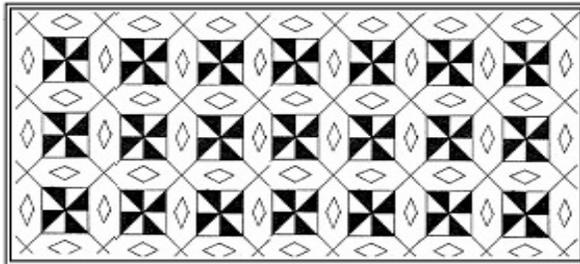


Figure 11: Church of the Priest Wa'il, Umm al-Rasas

Decorations with fan motif design were common in the Byzantine mosaics of Jordanian churches. At Madaba, the north aisle of the Apostles Church (578; *fig. 9*) comprises 112 (28 x 4) decorative windmills.<sup>9</sup> Two parallels are at Umm al-Rasas. One is in the north aisle of the Bishop Sergius church (587/8; *fig. 10*), with windmills of red, dark red, and black.<sup>10</sup> The other is in the apse of the Priest Wa'il church (586; *fig. 11*), with windmills in red, dark red, and black.<sup>11</sup> At Gerasa, the south room of the Bishop Isaiah church depicts windmills of red, dark red,

<sup>9</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 106, pl. 95; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 9.1.1.

<sup>10</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 234–235, pl. 365; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 9.1.2.

<sup>11</sup> M. Piccirillo, "Sesta campagna a Umm er-Rasas–Kastron Mefaa," *Liber Annuus* 41 (1991) 522–526; *Mosaics of Jordan* 242–243, pl. 396, 399; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 7.3.4.

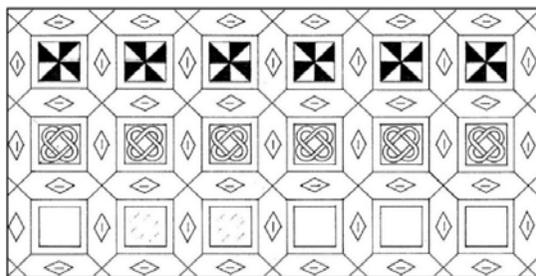


Figure 12: Church of Bishop Isaiah, Gerasa



Figure 13: Church of St Basil, Rihab

and black (*fig. 12*).<sup>12</sup> Finally, we find an example in the south aisle of the church of St Basil at Rihab (594; *fig. 13*), 42 windmills in red, dark red, black, and yellow.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Polychrome fan motif*

This motif consists of three sets of four differently colored curved blades; the four colors are black, red, white, and yellow (*fig. 14*). This design is rare in Jordan and elsewhere. A similar example is in the north aisle of the Tiberias/Hammat church (late 4<sup>th</sup>/early 5<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>14</sup> The pattern is also known in the northern Levant, in the House of the Phoenix at Antioch (early

<sup>12</sup> R. Clark, "The Church of Bishop Isaiah at Jerash," in F. Zayadine (ed.), *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981–1983* (Amman 1986) 303–341; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 294, pl. 566; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 7.3.9.

<sup>13</sup> 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, pl. 626; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 7.3.10.

<sup>14</sup> S. Miller, "The Mosaics of Tiberias and Hammat Tiberias during the Roman, Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods" (M.A. thesis, Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem 2011; online at academia.edu) 52, 56, 60, 77, fig. 46, pl. 9.4.



*Figure 14: Fan motif, Kufer-Jayez*

6<sup>th</sup> cent.); there the fan motif consists of ten blades colored in black, light and dark red, and yellow.<sup>15</sup> Another such motif is found in the nave of Basilica A at Chersonisos, Crete (late 5<sup>th</sup>/early 6<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>16</sup>

#### *Shield of squares motif*

This motif consists of 80 squares, in contrasting colors like a checkerboard, distributed in four concentric circles; the colors are dark red, black, and yellow (*fig. 15*). Although such a design is rare in the area and elsewhere, we find one example from the nave of the church of Khirbet Darayya (6<sup>th</sup> cent.), now in the Dar al-Saraya Museum, Irbid (*fig. 16*); there the shield consists of six circles, each with squares; the colors are light and dark red, black, and yellow, against a white background.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947) 351–355, pls. 83b, 135a, c; S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* (Toronto 1988) 25, pl. 120; S. Patacı and E. Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV Early Byzantine Mosaics and Frescoes from Northwestern Central Turkey* (Oxford 2019) 173, fig. 214.

<sup>16</sup> R. J. Sweetman, *The Mosaics of Roman Crete* (Cambridge 2013) 215–216, pl. 26.

<sup>17</sup> W. Karsneh, “Excavation of Khirbet Daraiya Church 1995, Samad,” *ADAĵ* 41 (1997) 30–34, fig. 18, in Arabic.



Figure 15: Shield, Kufur-Jayez



Figure 16: Khirbet Darayya

Farther afield, in the east aisle of the synagogue at Meroth in the Galilee region, only a fragment of the shield has remained intact (5<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>18</sup> An earlier example comes from the northern Levant: the floor of the House of the Amazonomachy at Antioch (4<sup>th</sup> cent.), consists of 32 squares distributed in five circles.<sup>19</sup> Their colors are black, dark red, grey, and yellow.

#### *Composite motif*

This decoration is made up of circles: the innermost contains a row of ten squares, while the next has twelve projections in saw-tooth shape (*fig. 17*); so far it resembles a roulette wheel. Framing this is a looped circle of four colored bands. The colors of this motif are black, dark red, and yellow, against a white background. It seems that this design was limited to the Kufur-Jayez church, for to the best of our knowledge, parallel examples are not found in Jordan.

<sup>18</sup> Z. Ilan, "The Synagogue and Beth Midrash of Meroth," in R. Hachlili (ed.), *Ancient Synagogues in Israel. Third–Seventh Century CE* (Oxford 1989) 24–26; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 78–79, fig. IV.15.

<sup>19</sup> Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* pl. cxxiii.a; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 172, fig. 17.



Figure 17: Composite motif, Kufer-Jayez

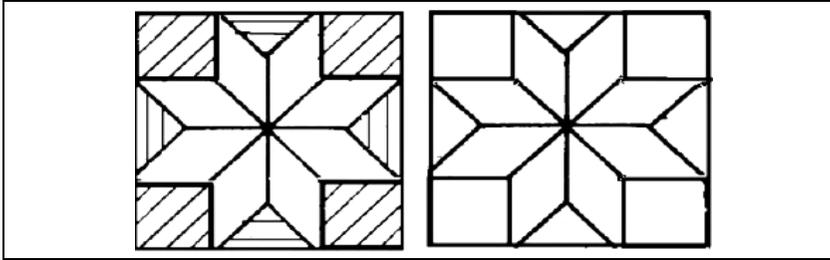


Figures 18a, b: Eight-lozenge star, Kufer-Jayez

### *Eight-lozenge star*

The motif is a star of eight pointed lozenges inscribed in a looped square forming four triangles and squares at the sides and at the corners of the square, respectively (*fig.* 18a). The four squares appear as cuboids in perspective. The perpendicular axes of the star are shaped like a cross (*fig.* 18b). The concentric design of the cross includes spaced and/or serrated arms terminating in tassels. The colors of this motif are black, dark red, and yellow. This design is rare in the mosaics of

Jordan, but we find a few similar examples, all of the Byzantine period. One is in the Glass Court of the Cathedral Complex at Gerasa (*fig.19*).<sup>20</sup> A second is in the church of Shunah al-Janubiyah, where the star decoration covered most of the nave floor (*fig.20*).<sup>21</sup> A third is in the Baths of the Herakleides church at Umm Qays (Gadara).<sup>22</sup>



*Figure 19: Glass Court, Gerasa*     *Figure 20: Shunah al-Janubiyah*

In the wider region, other Byzantine churches have this motif with four cuboids in perspective. Thus the nave of the Nativity at Bethlehem (1<sup>st</sup> half 5<sup>th</sup> cent.),<sup>23</sup> and Hall A of the Monastery of Lady Mary at Bet She'an (567–569).<sup>24</sup> The motif is also known in the northern part of the Levant: several examples of a star of eight lozenges with four cuboids are found in the Antioch area, thus in the House of the Drinking Contest at

<sup>20</sup> M. Biebel, in C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (New Haven 1938) 297–352; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 284, pl. 526; Nassar, “Catalogue” fig. 10.1.1.

<sup>21</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 322, pl. 665; Nassar, “Catalogue” fig. 10.1.2.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> W. Harvey, *Structural Survey of the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem* (Oxford 1935) fig. 102; B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Gentiles in Palestine* (Jerusalem 1971) fig. 49; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 147, 151, 152, 160, figs. 3, 4, 9.

<sup>24</sup> G. Fitzgerald, *A Sixth-Century Monastery of Beth-Shan (Scythopolis)* (Philadelphia 1939) 1, 5–9, pl. 2.

Seleucia (early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent.);<sup>25</sup> in Room 11 of Baths A (last quarter 5<sup>th</sup> cent.), where the colors are dark red and black;<sup>26</sup> in the north and south aisles of Basilica A (1<sup>st</sup> half 6<sup>th</sup> cent.), where the motif appears inside four square rosettes, the colors black, dark red, and yellow;<sup>27</sup> and in the east aisle of the Kaoussie church (387).<sup>28</sup> The east Odeon at Aphrodisias in Caria shows a similar motif.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, this motif was used during the Roman period before becoming a common design throughout Byzantine times; we find examples from the western provinces, dating to the first century, at Ampurias in Spain.<sup>30</sup>

### *Interlaced spindles*

This design presents one of the varieties of the interlaced spindle motif. Two interlaced spindles are inscribed in a looped square, so as to suggest, most probably, a version of the Cross; the colors are dark red and yellow (*fig. 21*). We find a parallel in the Baths of Herakleides at Umm Qais/Gadara (*fig. 22*): two interlaced spindles are inscribed in a circle and form a simple guilloche; the colors are red, dark red, and yellow.<sup>31</sup> Usually the motif consists of two interlaced spindles with loops or interlaced circles framing four spindles; this type of design is widespread in the region and beyond, thus in the south aisle of the church of Procopius at Gerasa (*fig. 23*).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> R. Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* (London 1998) 53, pl. 36; Pataci and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 46, fig. 48.

<sup>26</sup> S. Pataci, *Journal of Mosaic Research* 4 (2011) 27–30, and Pataci and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 12, 32, figs. 25, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Pataci and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 61, 76, 81, figs. 75, 93.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, *The Mosaics of Antioch* 45, fig. IVA 18d, pl. 133.

<sup>29</sup> S. Campbell, *The Mosaics of Aphrodisias* (Toronto 1991) 10, fig. 173b.

<sup>30</sup> Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 62, pl. 43.

<sup>31</sup> Lux, *ZDPV* 82 (1966) 64–70; Weber, *AA* (1990) 204–214; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 328, pl. 686; Nassar, “Catalogue” fig. 2.8.8.

<sup>32</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 392, pl. 560; Nassar, “Catalogue” fig. 2.8.7.



Figure 21: Interlaced spindles, Kufer-Jayez

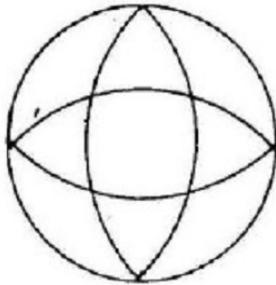


Figure 22: Baths of Herakleides, Gadara

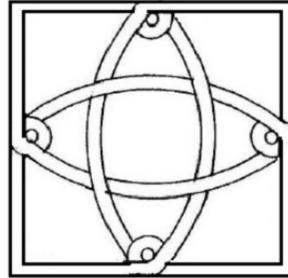


Figure 23: Procopius Church, Gerasa

*Solomon knot*

The motif is a simple knot composed of two closed interlaced and doubly interlinked loops, producing four crossings; it is enclosed in a looped circle of four segments (*fig.* 24). The colors are black, dark red, and yellow.

This design is found at several Byzantine sites in Jordan, for example in the north aisle of the Ya'amun church (*fig.* 25),<sup>33</sup> and in the north aisle of the church of Khirbat Mar Elyas (*fig.*

<sup>33</sup> M. Nassar and N. Turshan, "Geometrical Mosaic Pavements of the Church of Bishop Leontios at Ya'amun," *PEQ* 143 (2011) 57–58, figs. 19, 20; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 5.3.1.



Figure 24: Solomon knot motif, Kufer-Jayez Church

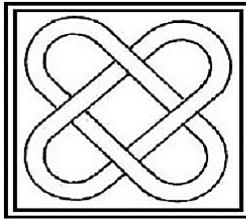


Figure 25: Ya'amun

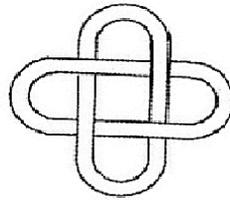


Figure 26: Khirbat Mar Elyas

26),<sup>34</sup> where the colors are light and dark red and dark grey, against a dark red background.

Similar decorations can be found at sites in the West Bank: in the nave of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem,<sup>35</sup> and in

<sup>34</sup> M. Nassar and A. Sabbagh "The Geometric Mosaics at Khirbat Mar Elyas: A Comparative Study," *GRBS* 56 (2016) 545, fig. 27; Nassar, "Catalogue" fig. 5.13.2.

<sup>35</sup> E. Richmond, "Basilica of the Nativity. Discovery of the Remains of an

the south aisle of the First Church at Bethany (late 4<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>36</sup> In the northern part of the Levant, examples are in the Cathedral of Apamea (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 4<sup>th</sup> cent.)<sup>37</sup> and in Bath E at Antioch.<sup>38</sup> Farther afield, the Solomon knot appears for example in the Villa at Halstock in Britain.<sup>39</sup>

*Swastika-meander*

The motif consists of four arms bent at right angles in left-facing direction and inscribed within a looped circle of four segments; the colors are dark red and black (*fig. 27*). The swastika-meander in a looped circle is rare in the area and elsewhere. But we do find similar patterns, usually inside other shapes such as octagons, lozenges, squares, and others. Two at



Figure 27: Swastika-meander, Kufer-Jayez

Earlier Church,” *QDAP* 5 (1936) 75–81, figs.1, 6; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 151, 174, figs. 3, 18.

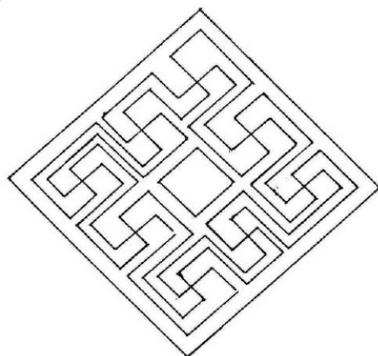
<sup>36</sup> Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 182–183, fig. 24.

<sup>37</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.

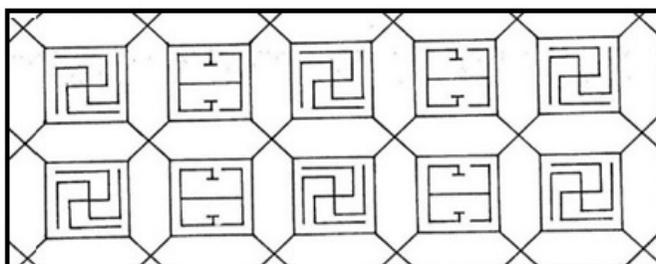
<sup>38</sup> Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* 260–277, fig. 157; Madden, *Ancient West and East* 11 (2012) 175, fig. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ling, *Ancient Mosaics* 69, fig. 48.

Gerasa are very similar to those in the Kufer-Jayez church. One is in the nave of the Synagogue-Church (530/1); the meander has eight swastikas inside a square (*fig. 28*).<sup>40</sup> The other is in the north intercolumniation of the Procopius Church (526), where the swastika-meander is inside interlaced octagons (*fig. 29*).<sup>41</sup>



*Figure 28: Synagogue-Church, Gerasa*



*Figure 29: Procopius Church, Gerasa*

### *Overlapping octagons*

This motif is formed of a looped square of four segments divided into four equal smaller squares, where each small square encloses an octagon enclosing five small squares, one in

<sup>40</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 291, pl. 553.

<sup>41</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 292–293, pl. 560. For further parallels see *GRBS* 53 (2013) 602–603; 54 (2014) 91–93; 56 (2016) 531–532.



Figure 30: Overlapping octagons, Kufer-Jayez

the center and the rest at the sides; the colors are dark red and black (*fig. 30*). In general, the design of overlapping octagons is widespread in the area and elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

*Diamond pattern*

This motif consists of four rows of serrated polychrome squares; the central part contains a semi-crosslet; the colors are dark red, yellow, and black (*fig. 31a, b*). The design is common in the area and elsewhere.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 31 a, b: Diamond pattern, Kufer-Jayez

<sup>42</sup> See *PEQ* 142 (2010) 184; *GRBS* 54 (2014) 91–92.

<sup>43</sup> *PEQ* 142 (2010) fig. 17b; *GRBS* 53 (2013) 596–597; *GRBS* 54 (2014) 100–102; *GRBS* 56 (2016) 531.

### *Crosslet*

The motif consists of eight rosettes: four are in the center of the looped square forming a diagonal crosslet with serrated arms, while the other four are at the corners of the square; the colors are dark red and black (*fig. 32*).

This design is rare; nevertheless, we find a few parallels. One is in the baptistery at Khirbat Mar Elyas (624), where the crosslets cover the floor; the colors are light and dark red, dark grey, and white.<sup>44</sup> Another is in the Jabal al-Akhdar chapel; the colors are dark red and black.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the nave of the chapel of Khirbet Munyah at Asfur, with colors of dark red and black.<sup>46</sup>



*Figure 32: Crosslets, Kufer-Jayez*

## II. Plants

Plant motifs decorated many mosaic floors of important Byzantine churches. In the Kufer-Jayez church we can see two themes: rosettes and fruits.

<sup>44</sup> *GRBS* 56 (2016) 529, 554, fig. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 269, pl. 500.

<sup>46</sup> M. Piccirillo, "Il complesso monastico di khirbet Munya" *RivIstArch* 59 (1983) 349–362; *Mosaics of Jordan* 299, pl. 589.



Figures 34a, b: Fruit in vessels, Kufer-Jayez



Figure 35: Fruit in vessel, Kufer-Jayez

### *Fruit in vessels*

Vessels with fruit are portrayed inside looped circles of four segments (*figs.* 34–35). The colors are dark red, black, and yellow. The motif is rare, but we can compare a design found in the nave of the Church of the Virgin Mary, Madaba (8<sup>th</sup> cent.);<sup>47</sup> there we see a tray of fruit and a knife, in colors grey, black, dark red, and yellow.

### *Pomegranates*

Two designs show pomegranates framed in looped double circles of four segments, a single pomegranate in one (*fig.* 36a),

<sup>47</sup> Nassar and Turshan, *Adumatu* 39 (2019) 7–18; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 64, pl. 20.



Figure 36a, b: Pomegranate, Kufer-Jayez

the other with three (*fig.* 36b); the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellow. In general, the pomegranate motif is widespread in the area and elsewhere. One example is in the Ya'amun church (late 5<sup>th</sup>/early 6<sup>th</sup> cent.), which shows two pomegranates inside a looped circle, in colors light red, dark red, and grey.<sup>48</sup>

The pomegranate's abundant seeds led to its use as a symbol of fertility, birth, and eternal life, and a solar emblem representing fertility (the womb) and lifeblood.<sup>49</sup> This is found in several cultures; e.g. the pomegranate tree was the source of life-giving waters in Mesopotamian religion.<sup>50</sup> In Greek myth the pomegranate was known as the "fruit of the dead"<sup>51</sup> and also associated with rejuvenation, while for Romans it was the fruit that burst to give glistening seeds. The pomegranate is mentioned in the Bible. "Then they came to the valley of

<sup>48</sup> See *GRBS* 52 (2012) 209, 212, 220, 222, *fig.* 6.

<sup>49</sup> M. Bruce-Mitford, *Signs and Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to their Origins and Meanings* (London 2008) 99, 121.

<sup>50</sup> A. Ruis, "Pomegranate and the Mediation of Balance in Early Medicine," *Gastronomica: the Journal of Critical Food Studies* 15 (2015) 23.

<sup>51</sup> N. Seeram, R. Schulman, and D. Heber, *Pomegranates: Ancient Roots to Modern Medicine* (London 2006) 168.

Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes; and they carried it on a pole between two men, with some of the pomegranates and the figs” (Num 13:23). “Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us into this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink” (20:5). “Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, henna with nard plants” (Song of Solomon 4:13), and “I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me; I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates” (8:2).



*Figure 37: Rosette motif, Kufer-Jayez*

### *Rosettes*

The rosette motif consists of four leaves separated from each other by four arrows, and these arrows form a cross. The rosette is framed by a segmented looped circle inscribed in a segmented square. Four small flowers are at the corners of the square; the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellow (*fig. 37*). This motif is not common. We find it in the northern Levant, with two examples in Antioch. In the House of the Buffet the

rosette motif is located in the center of the square; the colors are red, dark red, yellow, and grey.<sup>52</sup> In the House of Ge and the Seasons (2<sup>nd</sup> half 5<sup>th</sup> cent.) the rosette is in the center of the looped circle and square; the colors are red, dark red, yellow, and grey.<sup>53</sup>

In ancient Egypt the rosette represented the sun breaking forth after the night and the defeat of the abysmal darkness.<sup>54</sup> The earliest appearances of the rosette motif were in the early Fourth Dynasty. In Mesopotamia it first is seen on the cloak of Merdoch-Idinakhi of Babylon (ca. 1200 B.C.).<sup>55</sup> It has continued to appear during the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine periods and up to the present. For Christians, the rosette is mentioned several times in the Bible. “And you will make a pure gold rosette, and you will engrave on it with seal engravings ‘A holy object for Yahweh’” (Exod 28:36, cf. 39:30); Moses “placed the turban on [Aaron’s] head, and on [the front of] the turban he placed the gold rosette, the holy diadem, as Yahweh had commanded” (Lev 8:9).

### III. Bird Motifs

The Byzantine artist was interested in bird decoration, employed as part of scenes of daily life. Such scenes were widespread. The Kufer-Jayz church shows three species.

#### *Partridge*

The design has the partridge standing in the center of a looped square, apparently carrying food in its mouth (*fig. 38*); the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellow. This design is frequent in the area and elsewhere.

<sup>52</sup> Patacı and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 122, fig. 146.

<sup>53</sup> Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* fig. 139, pl. 81a, b; Patacı and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 122, 248, fig. 147.

<sup>54</sup> M. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (New York 1980) 78.

<sup>55</sup> A. Haddon, *Evolution in Art, as Illustrated by the Life-histories of Designs* (London 1895) 149, 163.



Figure 38: Partridge, Kufér-Jayez

In Jordan, two similar images are at Madaba. The inner intercolumnar panel of the Hippolytus Hall (1<sup>st</sup> half 6<sup>th</sup> cent.) has two facing partridges amid flowers; the colors are black, dark red, and yellow.<sup>56</sup> The Cathedral-Baptistery Chapel shows partridges surrounded by scrolls of acanthus leaves.<sup>57</sup> At Mount Nebo, in the nave of the Sts Lot and Procopius Church (557) the partridges are again surrounded by acanthus scrolls; the colors are black, dark red, and yellow.<sup>58</sup> In the North Church at Hesban we see two partridges, one in a cage, looking at each other; the colors are black, dark red, yellow, and gray.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> M. Piccirillo, “La Chiesa della Vergine a Madaba,” *Liber Annuus* 32 (1982) 373–408; *Mosaics of Jordan* 66, pl. 18.

<sup>57</sup> M. Piccirillo, “La cattedrale di Madaba,” *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Mosaics of Jordan* 118, pl. 119.

<sup>58</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 164–165, pl. 213.

<sup>59</sup> J. I. Lawlor, “The Excavation of the North Church at Hesban, Jordan,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 18 (1980) 65–76; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 250, pl. 422.

On the West Bank, an example is in the el-Maqrqesh chapel at Beth Guvrin (428/9) where the partridge is surrounded by scrolls of grape leaves and is eating the grapes.<sup>60</sup> Another is from Jerusalem, now in the Istanbul Museum: a partridge stands near Orpheus.<sup>61</sup>

In Syria, at Qalaat Seman (2<sup>nd</sup> half 5<sup>th</sup> cent.) we see a partridge inside an irregular octagon, in dark red, black, and green colors.<sup>62</sup> At Antioch, the north aisle of Basilica A (1<sup>st</sup> half 6<sup>th</sup> cent.) has two partridges, one depicted in the first square at the west, the other in the last square at the east.<sup>63</sup> In Lebanon, the Lower Church at Khan Khalde has a partridge standing near an amphora beside other birds such as a peacock,<sup>64</sup> and in the St Nicholas Cathedral at Saida the nave is composed of a grid of florets with partridges.<sup>65</sup>

### *Duck*

This motif has a duck at the center of a looped square, raising its wings while looking back and trying to run; the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellow (*fig. 39*). The image is widespread in the area and beyond. Two examples are at Madaba: in the nave of the Cathedral-Baptistry Chapel, scenes of daily life include ducks and other birds, the colors grey, black, dark red, and yellow;<sup>66</sup> and the four-trees panel of

<sup>60</sup> R. Hachlili, "On the Mosaicists of the 'School of Gaza'," *Eretz Israel* 19 (1987) 46, 49, 51, 53, and *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* fig. VI.11; M. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaics at El-Maqrqesh," in E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land I* (Jerusalem 1993) 197.

<sup>61</sup> M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine* (Jerusalem 1981) 319, pl. 50.

<sup>62</sup> M.-P. Raynaud, "A Birds Mosaic in Qalaat Seman," *Journal of Mosaic Research* 5 (2012) 180, fig. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Pataci and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis* IV 67, 72, figs. 77, 82.

<sup>64</sup> P. Donceel-Voûte, *Les Pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban* (Louvain-la-Neuve 1988) 386–387, fig. 373.

<sup>65</sup> F. Alpi, S. Kowalski, and T. Waliszewski, "Une église byzantine découverte à Anâne (Liban Sud)," *Syria* 75 (1998) 332, fig. 2.

<sup>66</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 118, pl. 119.



Figure 39: Duck, Kufer-Jayez

the mosaic of Paradise has two facing ducks, in black, dark red, and gray.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere in Jordan, the motif is in the chancel of the St Kyriakos Church at al-Quwaysmeh/Amman.<sup>68</sup> The nave of the Shunah al-Junubiyah church shows ducks on the sides of its octagon; the colors are dark red, black, and yellow.<sup>69</sup> In northern Jordan, the Qam Chapel shows a duck in the center of a vine scroll; the colors are dark red and gray.<sup>70</sup> In the West Bank, the House of Leontis at Bet She'an (mid 5<sup>th</sup> cent.) shows a man riding an animal and holding a duck in his right

<sup>67</sup> Piccirillo, *Chiese e mosaici di Madaba* 132–133; *Mosaics of Jordan* 128, pl. 139.

<sup>68</sup> M. Piccirillo, “Le chiese di Quweismeh – Amman,” *Liber Annuus* 34 (1984) 329–340; *Mosaics of Jordan* 268, pls. 489, 494.

<sup>69</sup> Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 322, pls. 666, 668.

<sup>70</sup> F. Trawneh, “Qam Salvage Excavation,” *Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology Yarmouk University* 9 (1990) 12; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 340, pl. 746.

hand; the colors are dark red and black;<sup>71</sup> similarly Room Six of the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> cent.).<sup>72</sup> In Lebanon, the Khan Khalde Church has a duck sitting near an amphora among other birds such as a partridge.<sup>73</sup> There are many examples at Antioch, such as in the north aisle of Basilica A (1<sup>st</sup> half 6<sup>th</sup> cent.) with a duck depicted in the second square at its west side and a partridge in the last square at its east side, the colors dark red, black, and yellow; another example is in the nave.<sup>74</sup> Such decoration is also known in North Africa, e.g. the nave of the East Church at Qasr-el-Lebya (6<sup>th</sup> cent.) shows a duck on the back of a fabulous crocodile; the colors are dark red, black, grey, and yellow.<sup>75</sup>

### *Rooster*

The motif represents a rooster standing in the center of a looped square; the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellow (fig. 40). This design is rare compared with those of partridges and ducks. Nevertheless, we find a few parallels. The nave of the Cathedral-Baptistery Chapel at Madaba depicts roosters in the center of a florets grid; the colors are dark red, grey, and yellow.<sup>76</sup> Another example is in the Khirbat al-Kursi church, which shows roosters with vine scrolls; the colors are dark red, grey, black, and yellow.<sup>77</sup> In Jerusalem, the nave of the Armenian church (6<sup>th</sup> cent.) has rows of vine scrolls, each dec-

<sup>71</sup> R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden 1998) 107, fig. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Z. Weiss, "The Nile Festival Building and its Mosaics," *JRA Suppl.* 49 (2002) 61, 66–67; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements* 107, pl. V.3.

<sup>73</sup> Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements* 386–387, fig. 373.

<sup>74</sup> Pataci and Laflı, *Hadrianopolis IV* 67, figs. 78, 113.

<sup>75</sup> E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum and J. Ward Perkins, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches* (Rome 1980) 126, fig. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Piccirillo, *Liber Annuus* 31 (1981) 299–322; *Mosaics of Jordan* 118, pl. 119.

<sup>77</sup> M. Piccirillo and K. Amr, "A Chapel at Khirbet el-Kursi – Amman," *Liber Annuus* 38 (1988) 361–382; Piccirillo, *Mosaics of Jordan* 265, pl. 476.



Figure 40: Rooster, Kufer-Jayez

orated with such birds; the colors are dark red, grey, black, and yellow.<sup>78</sup> We note, in the Bible, Proverbs 30:29–31: one of “the three things that are stately in their stride” is “a strutting rooster.”

#### IV. Jug

This motif consists of a jug within a looped square of four segments. The jug encloses at its center a rectangular checkerboard design; the colors are grey, black, dark red, and yellowish (*fig. 41*).

#### Conclusions

This study details a Jordanian site that contains distinctive Byzantine mosaic floors of various decorations made by skilled artists. It will represent an important reference for the study of mosaics pavements and parallel designs for future comparative work. Of particular interest are the similarities of the decorative

<sup>78</sup> H. Evans, “Nonclassical Sources for the Armenian Mosaic near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem,” in N. G. Garsoian et al. (eds.), *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period* (Washington 1982) 217–222; Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements*, fig. VI.7, pl. VI.3.



*Figure 41: Jug, Kufer-Jayez*

elements between Kufer-Jayez and Madaba churches. Some designs in the Kufer-Jayez mosaic are highly unusual or novel, including the fan polychrome motif (*fig. 14*), the composite motif (*fig. 17*), interlaced spindles (*fig. 21*), swastika-meander in looped circles (*fig. 27*), and fruit in vessel motif (*figs. 34, 35*). From this comparative study, it is possible to infer the shared knowledge of mosaic designers or artists and/or the itinerant mosaicists with deep knowledge of the mosaic designs widespread during the Byzantine period. The authors hope that these findings will contribute to the study of these significant designs.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The authors acknowledge the Department of Antiquities of Jordan for permission to study the mosaic floor.