

A NOTE ON THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN AT MADABA, JORDAN

by
Michele Piccirillo

With the arrival of the 'Azizat of Kerak, who in 1880 occupied the abandoned *tell* of Madaba, began the discovery of the ancient monuments of the city.

The news of the finding of a mosaic with inscriptions in the house of the Sunna' family, on the northern side of the Roman road which crossed the ruins from east to west, attracted the attention of scholars to Madaba.

The first to arrive was Germer-Durand in 1887. In the semi-darkness of the room, he saw for the first time the mosaic and inscriptions within a circular edifice.¹

Returning there in 1892, Séjourné succeeded in copying with greater care the three inscriptions of the church and even in photographing the central inscription.²

The dating proposed by Séjourné (312 A.D.) was questioned by Michon³ and by Clermont-Ganneau. The latter proposed the year 663.⁴

The inscriptions and a rough plan of the edifice were published once again in 1899 by don Manfredi, Roman Catholic pastor of Madaba⁵.

In 1905 Metaxakis drew up an accurate plan of the church in the urban context of the city.⁶

A synthesis research was prepared by Leclercq in 1931.⁷

The problems which arise for scholars with respect to the Church of the Virgin at Madaba are essentially three:

1. To define the plan of the edifice after a systematic excavation.
2. To put at the disposition of scholars a true and complete documentation of the dedicatory inscription from the outset of the discussion concerning the dating of the church and its mosaics.
3. To solve the problem of the strange letter or sign which in the inscription designates the hundreds.

The opportunity to obtain suitable documentation presented itself in 1973, when the Department of Antiquities bought and cleaned the room which until that time had been used as a garage.

The press-release which accompanied the end of the works, was used in 1975 for a somewhat polemic contre-note. This note went so far as to affirm, with great certainty, that the lines of the dedicatory inscription were seven, as stated by the scholars, and not eight as stated in the press-release.⁸

In 1979, with the help of the Department, I was able to clean the room once again and to take a general photograph of the mosaic and of the three inscriptions. Thus, I was able to verify that the lines were effectively eight in number and not seven, the first being hidden under the eastern wall of the Sunna' house.

The winter rains had necessitated the restoration of the monument. We decided to remove the ruins of the house built in the last century and to conduct a systematic excavation of the area in order to prepare a full restoration project (PL. XCII).

In July we succeeded in freeing the dedicatory inscription (PL. XCIII). Unfortunately the first five of six letters of each of the seven lines seen by scholars appear destroyed.

The first line, hidden under the wall, was fully preserved.

With probable restorations of the missing letters, we can translate:

1. At the time of our most pious father Bishop Theophane
2. was made this very beautiful mosaic work
3. for the glorious and sacred house of the holy and immaculate
4. queen mother of God through the zeal and attention of the loving people of Christ of this
5. city of Madabites, for the salvation, resurrection and pardon
6. of sins of those who have offered and those who

7. offer to this holy place. Amen., Lord. Completed
8. by the grace of God in the month of February of the year .74, the fifth indiction.

To what has already been said by scholars, we stress the historical importance of the discovery of the first line which gives the name of Bishop Theophane to whom, in all probability, belonged the bronze cross found in Madaba, now in the collection of the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem, which bears his name along with that of the donor, Paul.⁹

We already know of four bishops of the city, whose chronological order has been well established by the discoveries at Madaba and Nebo. Besides GAIANUS, who in 451 had participated in the Council of Chalcedon, we have ELIAS (531/32) JOHN (562) SERGIUS (576-596) and LEONTIUS (604-608).

Stylistically and on the basis of the inscription, I believe that the mosaic is to be dated to the seventh century. Thus, Theophane would occupy the last place after Leontius. We do not have sufficient evidence to establish a fixed date for him, thereby solving the problem of the strange sign which designates the hundreds in the inscription which bears his name.¹⁰

My opinion is that too many hypotheses have already been put forward to offer yet another: a future discovery may, we hope, clarify the situation.

Michele Piccirillo

NOTES :

1. J. Germer-Durand, "Nouvelles archéologiques de Jérusalem". *Le Cosmos*, XVII, Nouv. Ser.n.298, 1890, pp. 286-7.
2. P.M. Séjourné, "Medeba, coup d'oeil historique, topographique et archéologique", *Rev. Bibl.*, 1892, pp. 638-644.
3. E. Michon, "L'inscription en mosaïque de la basilique de Madaba et la mosaïque de Kabr-Hiram", *Rev. Bibl.* 1896, pp. 263-267.
4. Clermont-Ganneau, "La Mosaïque de Medaba", *Rec. Arch. Or*, II, 52-55. The scholar proposed two alternative solutions. The first, normally accepted by successive authors, sees in the strange sign which indicates the hundreds, a *sampi* with the value of 900, hence 974. Using the Seleucid era (never used in the mosaic inscriptions of the region) we have 663 with which, however, the fifth indiction given by the dedicatory inscription does not fit. The second, suggested in a footnote (page 53), is based on an improbable era of Madaba. Reading the strange sign as *sigma* or *taw*, we would have 274 or 374 which, with the supposed era of Madaba fixed at 183 A.D., would give 457 or 557 respectively.
5. G.Manfredi, "Piano generale delle antichità di Madaba," *Nuovo Bolletino d'archeologia cristiana*, 5 (1899) 149-170.
6. M. Metaxakis, "Madaba" *Nea Sion*, 1906, pp. 460-465.
7. H. Leclercq, "Medaba", *DACL* X,I, 1931, pp. 860-867.
8. C. Dauphin, "A note on the Church of the Virgin at Madaba Jordan", *PEQ* 1975, pp. 155-157.
9. F.M. Abel. "Croix Byzantine de Madaba", *Rev. Bibl.* 1924, pp. 109-111.
10. As we have stated there are two more inscriptions in the church. One in a medallion in the centre of the geometrical composition, which reads: "Looking to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and to whom she bore, Christ, supreme king, only son of the only God, purify the mind, flesh and deeds, so that you may purify with prayers the divine people". The second is only a line at the left side of the main entrance between the column and the wall: Holy Mary help your servant Menas".