

A NEW MOSAIC DISCOVERED IN MADABA

Report from
M. Piccirillo

As reported in a brief report in the ADAJ 1980, the Department of Antiquities, in collaboration with the Franciscan Biblical Institute, since 1979 is carrying out cleaning and excavation works on the Roman *cardo* of Madaba once occupied by the Church of the Virgin Mary and by the Church of the prophet Elias.¹

The mosaic floor of the church of the Virgin Mary at Madaba was the first mosaic floor of Jordan to be known to scholars. (Pl. CL, 1). It was found in 1887. Since then many scholars have studied the three inscriptions of the mosaic floor, but little interest was given to the history of the monument.

The Department of Antiquities acquired the site in 1972. In 1973-74 the area was partially cleaned. In 1979, Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director of the Department, decided to restore the building for the preservation of the mosaic. Therefore, it was necessary to define the plan of the ancient edifice, after systematic excavations which, since then were directed by

the writer. In the progress of the works further studies gave to me the opportunity to locate under the atrium of the church, the left part of a mosaic floor which is now in the Theatre Museum in Amman.² In the last two weeks of August 1982, in a rescue excavation, this mosaic floor was unearthed 1.30 cm. below the church level.³ (Pl. CL, 2; Fig. 1).

In an acanthus frame, decorated with hunting scenes and the Seasons on the corners, there are two rectangular panels with mythological scenes. The best preserved panel depicts Aphrodite, seated near Adonis, who threatens with her shoe the young Eros seized by a Grace. Two other Graces run after Erotes, while a young Peasant brings a partridge and fruits in a basket.

In the second panel, partially damaged when the front wall of the church was built, Phaedra and Hippolytus, accompanied by servants and handmaids, are represented.⁴ Unfortunately, only the name of Hippolytus remains on the right.⁵

1. M. Piccirillo, "A note on the Church of the Virgin at Madaba, Jordan", *ADAJ* XXIX (1980) 151-152, pl. XCII-III, where the main bibliography on the subject is given.
2. The main source for the discovery of the new mosaic is M. Metaxakis who wrote a long article on the antiquities of Madaba at the beginning of our century (in *Nea Sion* 1905, 454-473, photo XVIII, the text is in Greek).
3. My thanks are due to Dr. Adnan Hadidi and to the Officials of the Department for allowing the necessary permission and providing financial support to the work.
4. The subject of the mythological tragedy, narrated by Euripides in Greek and by Seneca in Latin, is summarized by A.S. Way, editor of Euripides' work in the Loeb Classical Library, n. 12, p. 159: "Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazon's, bore to Theseus, king of Athens and Troezen, a son whom he named from her, Hippolytus. Now this youth grew up of all men most pure in heart, reverencing chiefly Artemis the Maiden, God-

5. A large number of monuments (sculptures, frescoes and mosaics) illustrate the tragedy in the Greek-Roman and Byzantine Periods. They enable us to complete the scene of the mosaic of Madaba. Phaedra sits among a group of maid servants, while her nurse is delivering a message to Hippolytus, who is leaving for the hunt with his companions, with a spear in his left hand, and who makes a gesture of repulsion with his right hand, (see D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, I, Princeton 1957, pp. 71-75). A Byzantine mosaic with a similar scene was found at Sheikh Zoueda between el Arish and Rapha (*ibi*, p. 73, fig. 29).

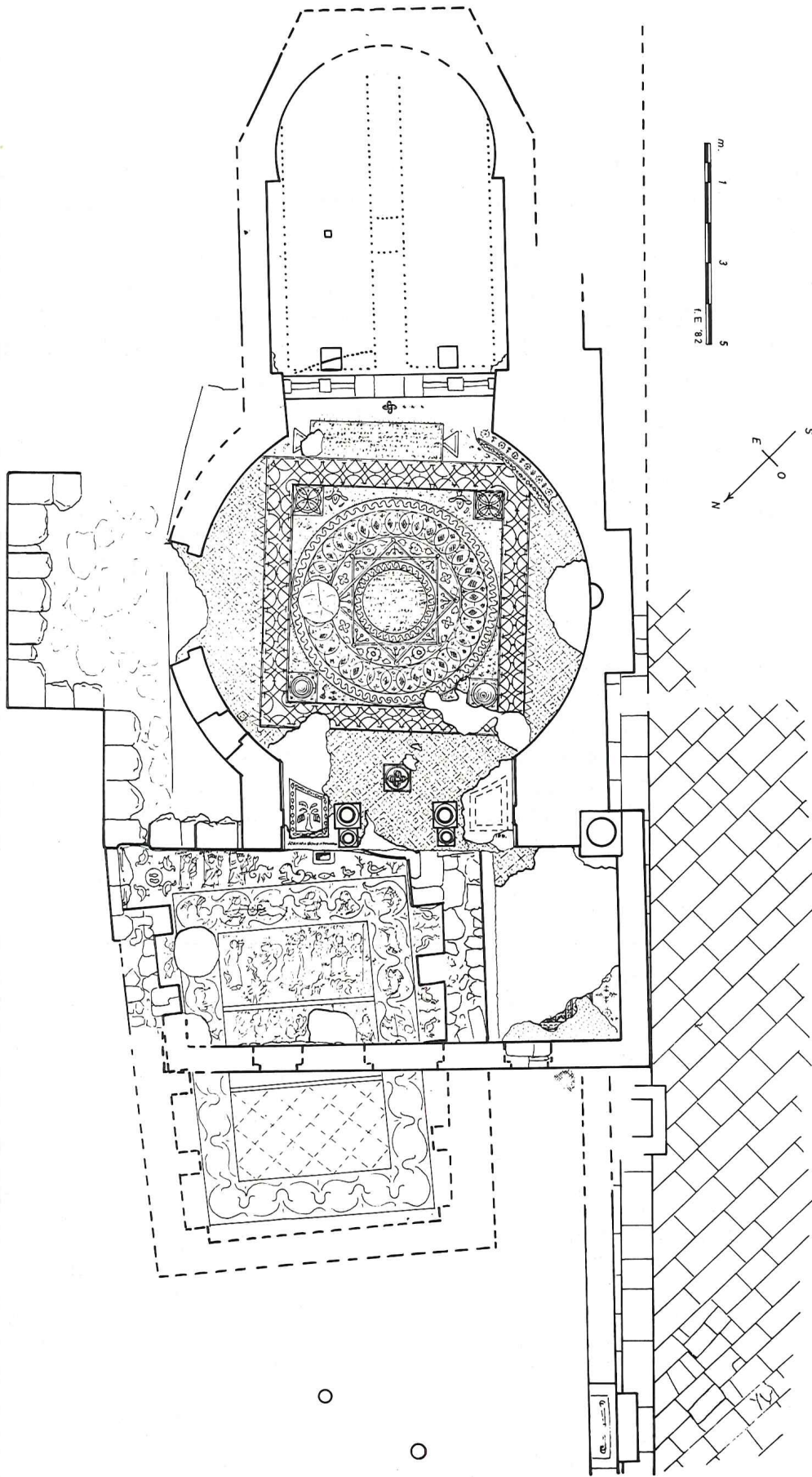


Fig. Ground plan of the Phaedra mosaic and the Church of Virgin Mary.

Outside the acanthus frame, near the eastern wall of the hall, together with birds, fishes and sea-monsters, there are the personifications of three cities seated on throne: Rome, Gregoria and Madaba, each one depicted as a Tyche with turreted crown on the head, handling a cornucopiae in the left hand and a cross in the right hand.⁶

The mosaic floor is one of the most important mosaics until now discovered in Jordan and one of the finest examples of the classical Renaissance at the time of Emperor Justinian in the Byzantine Empire.⁷ It is to be dated to the middle of the VIth Cent. A.D.⁸ It decorated an official hall, perhaps the Council Hall of the city of Madaba.

From the last excavation campaign we know better the plan of the church of the Virgin Mary and the history of the monument. In the II-IIIrd Cent. A.D. an exedra

was built on the northern side of the paved road stretching East-West in the middle of the town.⁹ In the Middle of the VIth Cen. A.D. a broad room (9 x 10 m. wide), with an entrance on the northern wall, was built and decorated with mosaics, on the western wall of the exedra. Later, at the end of the same century, the room was covered and the church of the Virgin Mary was built. The church which, took the place of the previous Roman and Byzantine monument along the road, was paved with mosaics¹⁰ It was paved anew, during the Ummayyad Period, in 662-663, at the time of bishop Teophanes, whose name we know from the first line of the dedicatory inscription discovered during the current excavations in 1980.

Michele Piccirillo
Franciscan Biblical Institute

6 For parallels of the same epoch see the four silver statuettes which represent Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch in the British Museum (in K. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality, the Catalogue*, Princeton 1979, pp. 176-177, no. 155). Rome ordinary wears the helmet (*ibi*, p. 174, no. 153, the photo of the ivory diptych, in the Vienna Museum, with the personifications of Rome and Constantinople). The Tyche of Madaba, wearing turreted crown and chiton leaving right leg bare, standing left foot on uncertain object, holding in left hand cornucopiae and in right hand a small bust, is struck on the coins of the city at the time of Emperors Caracalla, Geta and Elagabalus (A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 183-185, pls 39-40). We have no historical evidence to identify Gregoria. The city, between Rome and Madaba, has a foot-stool. On the basis of this sign of distinction and honour, we suggest, only as an hypothesis to be proved in the future, the iden-

tification with Constantinople, which on the coins has the left foot on a prow (see the coins of Constans II in *Enciclopedia dell'arte antica*, II, p. 919).

7. Cfr. G.M.A. Hanfmann, "The Continuity of Classical Art: Culture, Myth, and Faith", in *Age of Spirituality. A Symposium*, ed. K. Weitzmann, Princeton 1980, p. 75-99.
8. My dating is based on stylistic reasons. The mosaic, despite its uniqueness, is well placed among the mosaic of Madaba dated at the time of bishop John (562 A.D.). The acanthus frame has a good parallel in the frame of the chapel of St. Theodore in the cathedral (Piccirillo, *LA* 1981, 299-322, pls. 63-96 and *I mosaici di Giordania*, Roma 1982, 16-20).
9. It is the type of monument resulting from the archaeological evidence.
10. The first mosaic floor is dated by the name of a benefactor remembered in the dated inscription of the church of the prophet Elias (608 A.D.).