

An Epoch of Technical and Artistic Continuity in Jordan Between the Byzantine and the Umayyad Periods

The intense archaeological activity of the last decades in the Jordanian territory, amongst the many contributions towards a better historical understanding of the Byzantine-Umayyad period, has discredited clichés regarding the epoch of passage between the two periods.¹

In the context of the Colloquium and the subject of this paper, which I have proposed for your attention, I will limit myself to examining the mosaics and their accompanying dated inscriptions.

I do not doubt the historical conclusions based on the interpretation of results obtained through stratigraphical excavations. But I am convinced that for a historical epoch such as the Byzantine-Umayyad period, the written sources and, in their absence, the dated inscriptions are indispensable elements to further the research. Through the study of the written sources and the accompanying inscriptions in the mosaics of the epoch, we can obtain the keys which allow us to rectify the clichés, in such a way as to be able to affirm that this epoch today can be justly re-read as a period of continuity even if it had long been considered as a break point in the passage between the Byzantine and the Umayyad period. A conclusion which is confirmed by further research carried out.

The first cliché, which is seriously challenged by the discoveries of the inscriptions in the numerous churches found in the villages along the Syrian-Jordanian borders, is the wave of destruction of the ecclesiastical Christian buildings of the Syrian-Palestinian territory in 614, during the Persian invasion. A destruction, which historians and archaeologists saw as a general rehearsal of what happened after the battle of the Yarmouk in 636, so much so as to be unable to distinguish one from the other.²

Among the four churches initially discovered in the village of Rihāb by the then Department of Antiquities of Transjordan, the scholars noted the inscription in the mosaic at the church of St. Stephen which showed that the church was built and mosaiced in 620, that is during the Persian occupation which lasted from 614 to 629.³ The inscription in the mosaic rendered plausible the date, 624/25, read towards the end of the last century, by the American expedition of Butler, on the lintel of the church of St. George at Sama.⁴ Shrewd historians, like Fr. Abel, concluded that it was better not to extend to other regions what the contemporary sources narrated about the city of Jerusalem and other localities on the Palestinian coast.⁵ Life, at least in the village of Rihāb, had gone on undisturbed as it had been prior to the invasion. The subsequent discoveries of three more churches, that of St. John the Baptist (dated to 619), that of St. Peter and St. Constantine (both dated to 623) were, on the contrary, witness to a certain well-being in the village during the Persian occupation.⁶

The second historical cliché is the defining of the decisive battle of the Yarmouk in 636, which caused Syria-Palestine to pass from the political control of the Byzantines to that of the Arab-Islamic powers, as being a breaking point.

I see the first archaeological denial of such an interpretation, more controversial than real, in the inscriptions within the churches in the villages of Rihāb and Khirbat as-Samrā'. In the village of Rihāb the churches of St. Menas and of the Prophet Isaiah are dated to the times of archbishop Theodore, in the year 634. The churches of St. John, St. Peter and St. George at Khirbat as-Samrā' be-

¹ See *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam. VIIe-VIIIe Siècles*. Actes du Colloque International publiés par P. Canivet et J.-P. Rey-Coquay, Damas 1992.

² Pentz, P., *The Invisible Conquest: The Ontogenesis of Sixth and Seventh Century Syria*, Copenhagen 1992; Schick, R., *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule. A Historical and Archaeological Study*, Princeton 1995, pp. 20-47.

³ Avi-Yonah, M., Greek Christian Inscriptions from Rihab, *QDAP*, XIII, 1947, 68-72.

⁴ *AAES* III, A; 2, p. 44, n. 24.

⁵ Abel, F. M., *Histoire de la Palestine*, Paris 1952, II, pp. 388-392.

⁶ Piccirillo M., *Chiese e mosaici della Giordania Settentrionale*, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 63-96. The churches of St. John the Baptist and that of St. Constantine excavated by Mr. al-Hussan are not published yet.

long to these same times of Theodore. In the church of St George, one reads the date 634/635.⁷

One has to keep in mind that the city of Bostra, the metropolitan see of the Provincia Arabia, in whose territory the two villages were, was conquered in 634. We have also to keep in mind the time required to finish such works, which seem to me to have been carried out by the same equipe of mosaicists. From the inscriptions of the five churches we must historically deduce that the populations of the two villages kept on with their day to day living as if they did not understand or were not interested in what was happening around them at the eve of the military disaster of 636.

Scholars more interested in the material culture of the period have pointed out, in line with this historic interpretation which is more in conformity with reality based on the epigraphic discoveries, the continuity in the ceramic typologies of both epochs which follow the normal evolution of similar commonly used objects.⁸

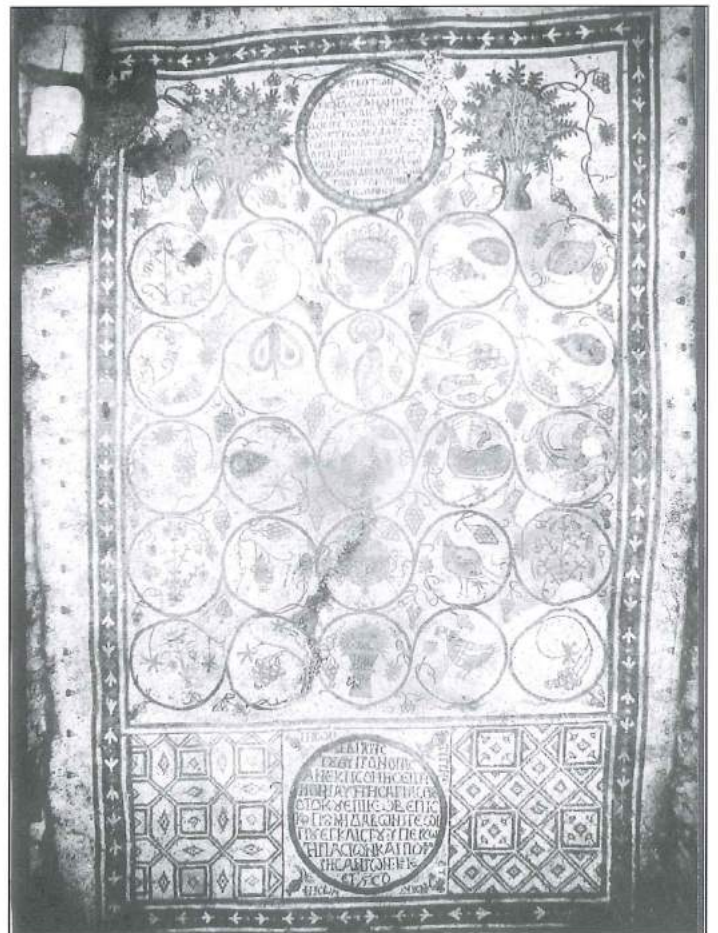
In the same framework of continuity I would like to bring to your attention the dated mosaic floors of the churches of the seventh-eighth centuries discovered to date in Jordan.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that up to 1986, the year in which we started our excavations at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, research was pointing to 719/720 as the most recent date read in a mosaic.⁹ The discovery of the inscription in the presbytery of St. Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ opened up a new epoch moving the date limit to 756 to the time of bishop Job of Mādabā.¹⁰ It also permitted to resolve the problem, which had remained suspended for a whole century, of the strange sign discovered in the inscription of the church of the Virgin in Mādabā.¹¹

This strange sign appeared again on Mount Nebo, in an inscription in the chapel of the monastery of the Theotokos which was recently excavated by us at Wādī al-Kanisah.¹² The date was accompanied by the name of the bishop Job of Mādabā, whom we knew was bishop in 756. The coincidence permitted us to calculate the date with the Byzantine era from the creation of the world and to recognize in the strange sign the figure 6000. According to this reading, the mosaic of the chapel of Nebo was dated to 762 at the time of bishop Job, and the mosaic of the church of the Virgin at Mādabā was dated to 767 at the time of bishop Teofanus.¹³



1. Wādī 'Ayn al-Kanisah: the Monastery of the Theotokos with the chapel on the right.



2. Wādī 'Ayn al-Kanisah: the Theotokos chapel-the two juxtaposed mosaics.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 74 -77; Piccirillo, M., *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman 1993, pp. 304-313.

⁸ See note 2 and Watson, P., Change in Foreign and Regional Economic Links with Pella in the Seventh Century A.D.: The Ceramic Evidence, in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam. VIIe-VIIIe siècles*. Actes du Colloque International publiés par P. Canivet et J.-P. Rey-Coquay, Damas 1992, pp. 233-248; Sodini, J. P. et Villeneuve, E., Le passage de la céramique Byzantine à la céramique Omeyyade, en Syrie du nord, en Palestine et en Transjordanie, *ibid.* pp. 195-218.

⁹ De Vaux, R., Une mosaïque byzantine à Ma'in (Transjordanie), *RB*

47, 227-58.

¹⁰ Piccirillo, M. e Alliata, E., *Umm al-Rasas Mayfa'ah I. Gli scavi del complesso di Santo Stefano*, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 242-246.

¹¹ Di Segni, L., The Date of the Church of the Virgin in Madaba, *LA* 42, 1992, 251-257.

¹² Piccirillo, M., Le due iscrizioni della cappella della Theotokos nel Wādī 'Ayn al-Kanisah sul Monte Nebo, *LA* 44, 1994, 521-538.

¹³ Di Segni, L., La data della cappella della Theotokos sul Monte Nebo. Nota epigrafica, *ibid.* pp. 531-533.



3. Wādi 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah: the inscription near the door of the Theotokos chapel with the four rivers of Paradise in the corners.

Thanks to these discoveries, Jordan today can boast of being the richest country in church mosaics from this period. The scholar can examine 11 programmes divided into three groups: 2 floors of the seventh century, 4/5 of the first half of the eighth century and three belonging to the second half of the same century. Notwithstanding their own particular characteristics, these works are an important witness to the continuity of the art of mosaic. From a cultural aspect they represent also a later expression of the uninterrupted continuity of an art began and developed during the Roman-Hellenistic epoch.

Technical Point of View

A first examination might tackle the technical differences between this group of mosaics and the mosaics of the preceding epoch.

Technically, in the church of St. Lot at 'Ayn 'Abāṭa, had we not the dates of the two inscriptions, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish chronologically the geometric composition of the north nave dated to 605 from the floral composition of the central nave dated to 689.¹⁴ The difficulty is further accentuated by the precarious condition of conservation of the mosaics at the moment of discovery.

The same problem is true for the church of Khildah between the upper mosaic dated to 670 and the fragment of the lower mosaic of the sixth century of which only some insignificant traces remained.¹⁵

As regards mosaics of the eighth century, on the other hand, the difference is evident when comparing the lower mosaic with the upper mosaic. This is the case in the

church of ash-Shūnah al-Janūbiyah, in the church of al-Quwaysmah, in the church of the Virgin at Mādabā, in the chapel of the Theotokos at Wādi 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah, and in the presbytery of the church of St. Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ.¹⁶

The evenness in the laying of the mosaic of the sixth century obtained by the use of accurately squared tesserae and the accurate choice of shades of colours, contrasts with the irregularity of the mosaics of the later period as a result of the use of irregularly cut tesserae which was necessarily reflected in the work itself.

In the church of St Stephen, I opted to date the lower mosaic to the sixth century precisely because of this technical difference. A lower mosaic, to be placed in relation to the bases of the small altar columns, which, in turn presuppose a church of the same period lying under the present edifice.¹⁷

It is pretty clear that such technical differences can be explained as a progressive evolution in the methodology applied to the work rather than as a break from the past.

The Iconographic Aspect

The continuity results also in the decorative programme and in the geometric and figurative motifs.

From the mosaic of Khildah, which certainly is not one of the best works of the series which we will examine, only the decoration of the northern hall remains. The programme follows the liturgical functional differentiation of the space with the apsed presbytery decorated with a series of vine scrolls departing from an amphora, with handles, between two rams which surround the altar.¹⁸

The hall is surrounded and subdivided in superimposed registers by a simple band of triflids. In the superimposed registers the compositions are based on the common motif of a couple of animals facing each other over a vegetal motif. All these are very simplified in respect to the parallel examples of the preceding period. Suffice it to confront the theme of the bull facing the lion of the second register which appears with a certain frequency in the mosaics of the region.

The iconographic centrality is given in the medallion of the Earth between two small trees. The personification presents a full standing figure dressed in a long tunic with its raised hands holding two flowers. If we compare it with the personification of the Earth found at the church of the bishop Sergius at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ¹⁹, we note first, the crown on its head made up of a garland of flow-

¹⁴ Piccirillo, M., *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman 1993, p. 336.

¹⁵ Najjar, M. and Sa'id, F., A New Umayyad Church at Khildah/Amman, *LA* 44, 1994, 560; Pls. 31-40.

¹⁶ Except for the mosaic floor of Khildah (Note 15) and the two mosaics of the chapel of the Theotokos in Wādi 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah (Note 12 and Piccirillo, M. and Alliata, E., *Mount Nebo. New Archaeological Excavations 1967-1997*, Jerusalem 1998, pp. 359-

364), see Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, pp. 320-323 (Shunah al-Janubiyah), 260f (Al-Quwaysmah), p. 50, 64f (Church of the Virgin in Madaba), pp. 218-239 (Church of St. Stephen at Umm ar-Rasas).

¹⁷ Piccirillo, M. and Alliata, E., *Umm al-Rasas Mayfa'ah I*, p. 91 f.

¹⁸ See Note 15.

ers and fruit. Here it becomes a series of small descending steps having lost the original classical symbolism of generosity and abundance of fruit as the characteristic of the Earth. The simplification is also evident in the two flowers held in both hands when compared with the same motif, in the left hand of Aphrodite, which we find in the Hippolytus Hall in Mādabā.²⁰

The same generalised simplification can be found in the first group of mosaics of the eighth century where the new style seems to have imposed itself together with other characteristics which we have tried to highlight. The programmes are based on vine scrolls or acanthus leaves and decorated with agricultural, pastoral or hunting scenes. Other programmes are based on a rectangle of flanked or intertwined circles and squares laden with flowers and birds. One of the preferred themes was the architectural representation which we find in the churches of al-Quwaysmah, in the church on the acropolis of Mā'in and in the church of St. Stephen at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ where the whole cycle of cities has been preserved. The pictures of benefactors, a theme dear to the preceding tradition, is greatly used in the nave of St. Stephen's.

In the last three mosaics of the series, the upper mosaic of the presbytery in the Church of St. Stephen, the chapel of the Theotokos in Wādī 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah, and the church of the Virgin, which are certainly dated to 756, 762 and 767, the technical characteristics are so equal that I tend to consider them as the work of the same equipe of whom we read the names in the inscription near the altar of St. Stephen: Staurachios of Hesban and Eueremios. The iconless decoration of the three programmes

seems to be the result of the style which imposes itself gradually during this period with an abundance in the use of geometric interlacing, a style which becomes the characteristic of the later Islamic art.

The choice of an iconless style can be exemplified in the four rivers of Paradise added in the corners of the medallion with the inscription in the mosaic of the chapel of the Theotokos at Wādī 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah.²¹ The classical personification presented the genius of the river crowned with vegetal motifs holding in his hand a rod and an amphora, from which water flows, while here, in this new evocative representation we find only the amphora,²² from which flows the water, with vegetal motifs and the name.

A possible exception to this figure-free situation might be the ducks which accompany the octagon with inscription at the centre of the Church of ash-Shūnah al-Janūbiyah. This too is characterised by a strong interwinding geometric composition. The lack of a certain date for the mosaic keeps us from inserting this mosaic in this group.

Basing ourselves on the dated mosaics we can say that the memory of the classical creativity of the Hellenistic-Roman epoch, which had nourished the artistic production of the preceding centuries, ends with the four amphorae at 'Ayn al-Kanīṣah in which I see the symbol of the end of an era. At least in Jordan this is the last hint to the continuity between the two epochs, the Hellenistic-Roman and the Arab which, even if divided by about one thousand years, are unified by the same artistic taste even if each keeps its proper identity.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 52 f.

²¹ Piccirillo, M. and Alliata, E., *Mount Nebo. New Archaeological Excavations 1967-1997*, Jerusalem 1998, p. 364.

²² As in the Chapel of St. Theodore in Mādabā (Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, p. 117, photos 112-115); in the Church of the Sunna'

Family (LA 43, 1993, pls 8-9, photos 11-13); in the Church of St. Sergius at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, p. 241, photo 390), and in the Church of St. Paul (Piccirillo, LA 47, 1997, pl. 34, photos 28, a-d).