

Restoration and Rehabilitation of Byzantine Basilica of Memorial Moses at Mt. Nebo, Jordan. Architectures and Mosaics by The Custody of Holy Land

Presentation Dedicated to Fr. Michele Piccirillo

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho (Deuteronomio 34, 1-8). Mount Nebo is located about 7km west of Mādabā town, here rises to 710 meters high Şiyagha hill with the ancient Memorial of Moses. In 1864, Duke De Luynes visited the ruins of Şiyagha and he gave it a first description in his book of stories, *Travel of the Duke*¹; before the end of the century, will be of decisive importance for the definitive historical identification of the site, the Diary of the Pilgrimage Egeria compiled in 1884 and the account of the life of Peter the Iberous. In 1932, through the work of Fr. Girolamo Mihaic of the Custody of the Holy Land, the hills of Şiyagha and Mukhayaṭ were purchased. The excavations in Şiyagha began on July 13, 1933, directed by Fr. Silvester Saller from the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum. He was later assisted by Fr. Bellarmino Bagatti. In three excavation campaigns – 1933, 1935 and 1937 – they unearthed and brought to

light the Basilica and the vast monastery². Fr. Girolamo greatly contributed to the success of the project together with the workers from the nearby Bedouin village, Kufayr al-Wukhyān today al-Fayşaliyyah, whose commitment over the decades has become a tradition, that continues to these days, 84 years later. Later, the restoration of the Basilica was implemented with the active participation of the inhabitants of the village of al-Fayşaliyyah. In 1963, after the interruption of activities due to the Second World War and the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, Fr. Virgilio Corbo launched a new phase of the project aiming at protecting the basilica by building a metal structure dressed of asbestos panels and ripping (*strappo*) of mosaic floors for further investigations. These investigations brought to light several subsequent levels of mosaic floors and various structures. With the outbreak of the Six-Day War of 1967, and the continuous political tensions through 1973, all archaeological campaigns were suspended and excavations on the Memorial of Moses were resumed only in 1976, under the lead of the late

1. M. le Duc De Luynes, Voyage d'exploration a la Mer Morte....I, Paris, 1874 Pp. 148.

2. Sylvester J. Saller O.F.M., The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, I, Jerusalem 1941.

FRANCO SCIORILLI

Father Michele Piccirillo.

For the following 31 years, until his death, Fr. Michele Piccirillo led several excavation seasons and maintenance and restoration campaigns. As the excavation in the summer of 1976 led to the discovery of the Ancient Diaconicon Baptistery the site was equipped for the reception of tourists and pilgrims³. Over the years, the mosaics detached during the earliest campaigns have been restored and re-casted on cement reinforced with metal mesh in 2007-08 Fr. Piccirillo launched his last project for the Şiyagha Hill that is here described and that is the fruit of 35 years of dedicated work. All the interventions implemented over almost nine decades gave a unique identity to the Memorial, a constant job in looking for compatible solutions combining sites preservation and pilgrims and visitors use.

In 2002 a competition was announced for the study and planning of a new protective structure for the sanctuary. The evaluation committee consisted of a group of architects with the consultancy of Franciscan archaeologists and in 2004 a book about the proposed projects was published *Un Progetto di copertura per il Memoriale di Mosè*⁴. Both the competition and the publication of the book were made possible by a fund from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Custody of the Holy Land. Ten interesting projects were proposed and examined in the following years. Between 2006 and 2007, the implementation of the project was assigned to the architect Roberto Sabelli and the Tamaricum Studio – architects Gianfranco Micalizzi, Nicoletta Puglisi, and Associates. I would like to acknowledge here the friends that Nebo has gained during the implementation of the project, and for the great help contributed to Fr. Michele in his numerous projects.

Restoration of the Shelter

The works for the restoration of the new

shelter begin in September 2007 with the rock geological analyzes and four months later the demolition of the old shelter, an iron structure and asbestos panels began by Father Virgilio Corbo in 1964. The new shelter is a steel structure supported by about 60 micro piles that reach a depth of between 6 and 10 meters. The exterior walls and roof are ventilated to regulate the heat during both summer and winter, while the interior space is made up of insulating material and lined with wood treated with fireproof product. The first phase of work included perforations to install about 60 micro-piles at the hands of a local firm, Abu Jaber, as well as the removal of the old iron and asbestos coverage. Subsequently, in 2010 the steel, wood and titanium zinc structures were installed together with the electrical system. In early 2012, the work was interrupted and the architects' firms replaced by studio Tre Erre, which formulated project variants, and concluded the work with a local firm, Whaji of Amman.

The Archaeological Restoration

The restoration began in the spring of 2008 with the recruitment of Boys from the neighboring village of al-Fayşaliyyah who actively collaborated with the project engaged in a sort of regularly-paid yard school. In 2009 the team started producing slaked lime on site for future conservation work. Virgin lime, purchased from a local company – Arab Company for Manufacture of Lime – was soaked in water using special tanks and had to rest for a minimum period of 6 months. The production of slaked lime has been an important part of the restoration work, a product that has been used as a binder for over 2000 years and has no contraindications, such as the presence of salts. Father Michele Piccirillo and Arch. Claudio Cimino have to be acknowledged for starting such production. They launched the

3. M. Piccirillo, *Liber Annus*, Jerusalem 1976, Pp. 281-305.

4. M. Piccirillo, *Un progetto di copertura per il Memoriale di Mosè*, Jerusalem 2004.

Madaba's Mosaic School in 1992 where slaked lime was produced for the first time in Jordan to be used in restoration. The Madaba's Mosaic School continued using slaked lime under the direction of Catreene Hamarneh (2004-2007).

Such production is thousand years old and has its roots in the Roman times; Byzantines and the Umayyads used it for their beautiful mosaics.

Restoration of Original Structures

The structures of the basilica were cleaned off all modern additions occurred since the seventies. Using old excavation photos, almost all the stone blocks reused for the elevation of the perimeter walls of the basilica were removed. Cement mortar was removed and replaced with a lime-based mortar. The columns of the central nave and the small movable pieces have been structurally restored and consolidated.

Restoration of Mosaics

Mosaics previously restored with the used of reinforced cement – see above – were first removed (Some of the floor sections were placed on the walls as part of the exhibition, some others were). These mosaics were cleaned and two layers of protective fabric were applied to the surface, and then cement mortar was removed. The mosaics to be exhibited on the walls of the basilica were divided in transportable sections and casted on a new support of aluminium and lime-based mortar. A metal frame with plywood panels on the walls of the new shelter was placed to support the mosaics panels. Mosaics sections were reassembled and the joints were closed with original and new tesserae. Other mosaics were placed on the floor on a lime-based bedding. With UNESCO'S support, Dr. Anna Paolini and Dr. Gaetano Palumbo led the conservation of the ancient mosaic of the Diaconicon Baptistery which was *in situ*. The treatment was more conservative and included surface cleaning and consolidating injections inbetween the mosaic mantle and mortar

bedding.

During the restoration work inside the basilica some mosaic fragments were found and treated in the same way as the mosaic of the Diaconicon Baptistery. Throughout the eight years of restoration, the work was closely followed by archaeologists of the Custody of the Holy Land: Fr. Michele Piccirillo, Fr. Carmelo Pappalardo, Fr. Eugenio Alliata, Davide Bianchi, aide and disciple of Fr. Eugenio. The archaeological restoration was carried out by Franco Sciorilli, Antonio Vaccalluzzo, with the help and support of Francesco Clemente, and the young men from al-Fayṣaliyyah: Kaled Al Wekhyan, Marwan Jammaleyeh, Hamza Moustapha, Taher Yousef, Mohammad Abadallah and many others who have contributed in recent years. The shelter reconstruction activity continued in two different phases of work, from 2010 to the beginning of 2012 by the Team of Friends of Nebo, with architect Roberto Sabelli, the Tamaricum Studio, Architects Gianfranco Micalizzi, Nicoletta Puglisi and Associates and, from the spring of 2012 onwards, by the studio Tre Erre, which includes the engineer Roberto Scotta, architects Sandro Pittin, Andrea Bozzo, and all those associated with their studio. The companies who worked for the first phase of the project are the following: for iron works, Tulino; for wood works, Davide Napoletano; for the roof, Adriano and Matteo Plaga; and for the electrical components, the Bellucci company. The second phase of the work was carried out by the Whaji Company of Amman.

Photographic References

Archivio SBF
Maurizio Villa
Carmelo Pappalardo
Franco Sciorilli
Francesco Clemente

Work Carried out by

Fr. Michele Piccirillo
Fr. Carmelo Pappalardo

FRANCO SCIORILLI

Fr. Eugenio Alliata
Abu Jaber
Roberto Sabelli
Tamaricum Gianfranco Micalizzi
TREERRE Roberto Scotta, Sandro Pittin,
Andra Bozzo
Wajih Amman
Giuseppe Tulino
Davide Napoletano
Matteo and Adriano Plaga
Leonardo Dimarco
Osama Hamdan
Franco Sciorilli and the al-Fayṣaliyyah
Young men
Antonio Vaccalluzzo
Davide Bianchi

YMCC of Yousef Mousa

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UNESCO Amman
Ass. Obelisco

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