

# The Byzantine Church at Swafieh

by  
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Last winter while digging in his garden in Swafieh, on the western edge of Amman, Mr. Ali Erar uncovered a portion of a beautiful mosaic floor. The portion uncovered, about two by three meters in size, contained bird, animal and human figures. The designs were well-executed and the floor is in a good state of preservation. It was decided to wait until Spring for further excavations when the weather conditions would be more favorable.

On April 27, 1970, the Department of Antiquities of Jordan began excavating at the site. The excavation was under the direction of Dr. Bastiaan Van Elderen, the resident director and annual professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Amman, Jordan, from March to August 1970. He was assisted by members of the Department of Antiquities, especially Mr. Yousof Alami and Mr. Hussein Qandil, and received excellent cooperation and encouragement from the Director-General, Mr. Yacoub Oweis.

Swafieh is a low-lying tell less than a kilometer south of the Wadi Seer Road between Amman and Wadi Seer. The remains of ancient buildings can be seen on various parts of the tell. Some wall of large undressed field stones suggest that at one time it was one of the many fortresses that were located on the western side of ancient Amman. The 1970 excavation on the tell was the first intensive investigation of the history of the ancient site. The 1970 season of digging lasted for nine weeks and produced the significant results described below.

## Archaeological History of the Site

Approximately 185 square meters of the tell were excavated in the 1970 season. Areas

to the north, east, and south of the mosaic were excavated to bedrock and a fairly clear picture of the history of the area recovered.

*Arabic Period:* After the removal of the surface and top soil, evidence of a brief occupation of the eastern portion of the site during the late Arabic Period (about A.D. 1200) was uncovered. The wall fragments of this period were not very extensive or impressive. However, directly below a much more extensive occupation of the entire area during the early Arabic was identified. Not only was this indicated by the large quantity of pottery (painted ware with geometric designs), but also by the various remains of walls, rooms, taboos, and floor levels. There is a strong possibility that this occupation extended over a great part of the tells.

*Byzantine Period:* When the entire preserved area of the mosaic floor was uncovered, it was possible to identify the floor as part of a Byzantine Church. In the eastern edge of the mosaic was a Greek inscription of two lines, a little more than half preserved. The preserved text reads: "In the time of the holy Thomas, bishop ... of the holy church, with zeal and labors..." A comparison of the designs and techniques in the mosaic with other dated mosaics in the Madaba area would date this church in the sixth century A.D. To the north and east of the mosaic there was evidence of an earlier mosaic about ten centimeters below.

The north, east, and west borders of the mosaic floor are preserved. Unfortunately, the south portion of the mosaic has been destroyed, possibly when the south wall of the church tumbled down. Further extensive dam-

(\*) See plates pp. 51-52.



age occurred when in early Arabic period the wall was rebuilt. the building stones having been dug out of the debris. In fact, it seems that at that time this south part of the church was completely cleared away to bedrock since early Arabic pottery was found on the bedrock where the mosaic floor had been disrupted. However, the bottom course of the south wall of the church was identified when a portion of the mosaic floor was found attached by plaster to the stones of the wall. The wall was constructed of large undressed field stones which were covered with plaster to make a smooth and straight face.

*Roman Period:* In the area north of the mosaic floor some one-course walls built directly upon the bedrock below the level of the mosaic were found. Potsherds in the context of these walls were from the Roman period. Apparently, there was a brief Roman occupation in this part of the tell directly on the bedrock—possibly in the late Roman period, possibly third century A.D.

## Description of the Mosaic

The outside measurements of the mosaic floor are almost  $9\frac{1}{2}$  meters by 5 meters. The layout consists of a large rectangular field of figures (human, bird, and animal) surrounded by a border about 80 centimeters wide. The outside measurement of this border on the north side is 7.61 meters and the east side has been calculated to be 5 meters. Outside this border is a band of about 40 centimeters wide of white mosaic with some geometric designs in it. On the east end the inscription was placed in this band just outside the border.

In the two preserved corners of the border are found human faces and it appears that the faces in the four corners of the border were the personifications of the four seasons—similar to representations in one of the Madaba churches. In the border on the north side were pairs of birds or animals facing each other. Apparently in the border on the east and west

sides animals and birds were facing to the middle .

As one enters from the west, he immediately sees a colorful amphora from which vines extend in a symmetrical circular pattern to enclose the various figures in the mosaic. To the left of the amphora is a large animal with remarkable blending of colors in its body. The claws and teeth are very realistically represented. Above this animal is a human figure leading a donkey with a basket of grapes. Above this is another human figure leading a camel. There are two other human figures represented in the mosaic—a camelgirl leaning on a staff with her right hand on her head and a boy with shoes holding a bow. Other animals represented are a saddled horse, a robust buck, an antelope, and a bird with outspread wings. In this rich variety of figures there is a wide range of color and the intricate designs and detail reveal a high quality of artistic workmanship.

All the designs in the mosaic floor are enclosed within the border except one which is oriented to the west on the western edge of the mosaic outside the border. In this design there are two pheasants facing a tree. This appears to have been in the entrance of the church and a few stones of the threshold were found at the edge of the mosaic. Further excavating along this western side revealed two rows of large stones laid on the bedrock. These seem to be the foundation stones of the west wall of the church.

## The Architecture of the Church

This church does not seem to have been the traditional basilical type of the Byzantine period. No pillars, capitals, or bases were found and the construction of the south wall suggests that this was a major outside wall of the church. The north wall is located 11 meters from the south wall and a little more than 5 meters from the north edge of the mosaic. Traces of installations along the north and

west walls suggest that perhaps there were chambers for the clergy in this part of the building. Since the apse area cannot be fully defined at the present time, the eastern elevation of the church cannot be hypothesized at this time.

The building does not seem to have been a large church. However, the beautiful mosaic floor would suggest that the church's overall appearance, at least inside, was very attractive and magnificent.

### **Significance of the Discovery**

The discovery of this mosaic and church is very significant for a number of reasons. It is the only clearly identified church structure in the vicinity of Amman, ancient Philadelphia, and is one of the best preserved mosaic floors in the area. Furthermore, the varied patterns and representations demonstrate interesting aspects of Christian art and craftsmanship. There was an apparent attempt to portray everyday life and activities in the art

of the church, rather than ponderous theological themes. Perhaps this reflects the close integration of the Christianity of these worshippers with their everyday experiences. From the standpoint of art, the mosaic displays the creativity and originality of the artisans in the vitality and expression of the figures. Furthermore, the total mosaic is very symmetrical, balanced, and well-planned — no figures are crowded or distorted because of lack of space or poor planning. These artisans were obviously master craftsmen.

This recently-discovered church near Amman has provided interesting new light in the study of the art, worship, architecture, history, and life of early Christianity. The 1970 excavations have made a small beginning in the recovery of the history of this ancient site on the outskirts of Amman. It is hoped that future excavations on the tell may further reveal the history, life and culture of the people who lived, worked, and worshipped here in the past.

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