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**THE MOSAIC AND PAINTING DECORATION
IN THE CHURCH OF SAINT STEPHEN
OF GAZA AND THE CHRISTIAN *ECPHRASIS*
(CHORICIUS OF GAZA, ASTERIUS OF AMASEIA,
NILUS OF SINAI)**

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At the beginning of my paper I would like to commend the old and noble classic by C.Bayet, *Recherches pour servir à l'histoire de la peinture et de la sculpture chrétiennes en Orient avant la querelle des iconoclasts* (1879). It paved the way for my work. Apart from Bayet's essential studies I would like to recall two more recent books which have made an outstanding contribution to ancient studies and to the humanities of the 20th century with their significant reflection and erudition. I am thinking of W.Speyer's *Büchervernichtung und Zensur des Geistes* and M.Pape's *Griechische Kunstwerke aus Kriegsbeute und ihre öffentliche Ausstellung in Rom* (1975). The evidence they have collected discloses a paralysing scale of the annihilation of works of art and art collections, books and libraries effected by diverse means, from criminal robbery through destruction to systematic and organised devastation. They have painstakingly assembled a vast databank of widely dispersed documentation and arranged it in a systematic and clear classification.

Some time after the dedication of St.Sergius' Church in Gaza, when Choricus delivered his first oration in honour of the founder Bishop Marcianus (before AD 536), the rhetorician was commissioned a second oration for the inauguration ceremonies, this time of St.Stephen the Martyr's Church also in Gaza. His dedicatory oration which contained a prolonged *ecphrasis* of the church became yet another panegyric speech in honour of the same man, Bishop

Marcianus, its founder¹. It is impossible to determine an exact date for the oration. All we know is that the speech was delivered in public in all likelihood between 536 and 548, that is a decade or two after his previous dedicatory speech (*LM I*)². St. Stephen the Martyr's was raised in the open country outside the city walls, on a hill surrounded by a garden (*LM II*, 28). The church's out-of-town positioning is also symptomatic of the location of other *martyria* in Syria and the Holy Land, as pointed to repeatedly by I. Peña in his book on the churches of Syria (1997), for example the Bizzos Church in Ruweiha dated in the 6th century.

Choricus devoted a large part of his *ecphrasis* on the Church of St. Sergius to the description of its rich figural decoration (*LM I*). Although his *ecphrasis* of St. Stephen's offers material interesting in many respects for studies of the Christian art of painting, its content is substantially limited. As a result we are unable to determine whether the church interior was actually only modestly decorated with mosaics and paintings, or whether - more likely - Choricus deliberately relegated the figural decoration, making it a secondary subject of his *ecphrasis*, and focusing on the architecture and its wooden and marble revetment.

Following Choricus' order, the pictures in the chancel are as follows:

1. The picture of 'everything the sea brings forth and all the tribute of the earth' (trans. C. Mango: ὅσα μὲν θάλαττα φέρειν, ὅσα δὲ γῆ πέφυκε συντελεῖν *LM II*, 34). It seems that this was a floor mosaic located along the east wall of the atrium (ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος), perhaps in the narthex, which is otherwise not specified in the description.

2. A mosaic composition of Christ flanked by two holy men, of whom one was St. John the Baptist. The mosaic covered the concave wall of the apse (*LM II*, 38, *ibid.* 45).

3. A Nilotic landscape with its wild life, which adorned the walls behind the columned porticoes, that is the walls in the side naves (ταύτην ἐπὶ τῶν τοίχων τὴν εὐφοσύνην αἱ στοαὶ σοι διδόασι) (*LM II*, 51) (the porticoes would give you this pleasure of looking at their walls, where ... etc. [the nilotic landscape is located]). Choricus adds that the aisles were well lit thanks to numerous and spacious windows.

¹ Marcianus also restored the Church of the Apostles in Gaza, and another small church outside the town, Glucker 1987, p. 55; *Laud. Marc. II* 17-18; *ibid.* 19-20; K. Stark, *Gaza und die Philistäische Küste*, Jena 1852, s. 625. Marcianus' building activities encompassed stoas along the streets of Gaza, a new bath-house, and a repair of the city walls, Glucker 1987, p. 55

² Kirsten 1894, pp. 7-24; Glucker 1987, p. 71, n. 204; Abel 1931, p. 23

At one point Choricus mentions a stone revetment which covered an elongated band running between the upper row of columns (γυναικονίτις) and the row of windows in the central nave. According to his information the band was adorned with animal figures (λίθων ἑτέρα προσθήκη θηρίων πεποικιλμένη μορφαῖς) (LM II, 48).

Passage No. 1 offers some difficulties in interpretation. Let us read it in its integral context: ‘These things the colonnade offers you on the right and left, while on its eastern wall you may see everything the sea brings forth and all the tribute of the earth: there is hardly anything you could look for that is not included, and a great deal that you would not expect to see. How faithful to nature is this art! What splendid, what charming execution! This rich adornment befits a sanctuary of such golden opulence’ (LM II, 34: trans.C.Mango). Now let us read the passage in the original version: ταῦτά σοι τῆς στοᾶς χορηγούσης ἐξ ἑκατέρας χειρὸς ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος δίδωσι βλέπειν, ὅσα μὲν θάλαττα φέρειν, ὅσα δὲ γῆ πέφυκε συντελεῖν, καὶ σχεδὸν μὲν ὁ ζητήσαντί σοι μὴ πρόσκειται, πολλὰ δὲ σοι μὴ κατὰ νοῦν ἐπιόντα θεάσει. ὦ τέχνης πολλήν πρὸς τὴν φύσιν παρρησίαν ἔχούσης, ὦ λαμπρότητος ἔργων ἡδονῇ κεκραμένης. ἔδει γὰρ τέμενος οὕτω πολύχρυσον ἔχειν ἐγκαλλώπισμα πλούτου.

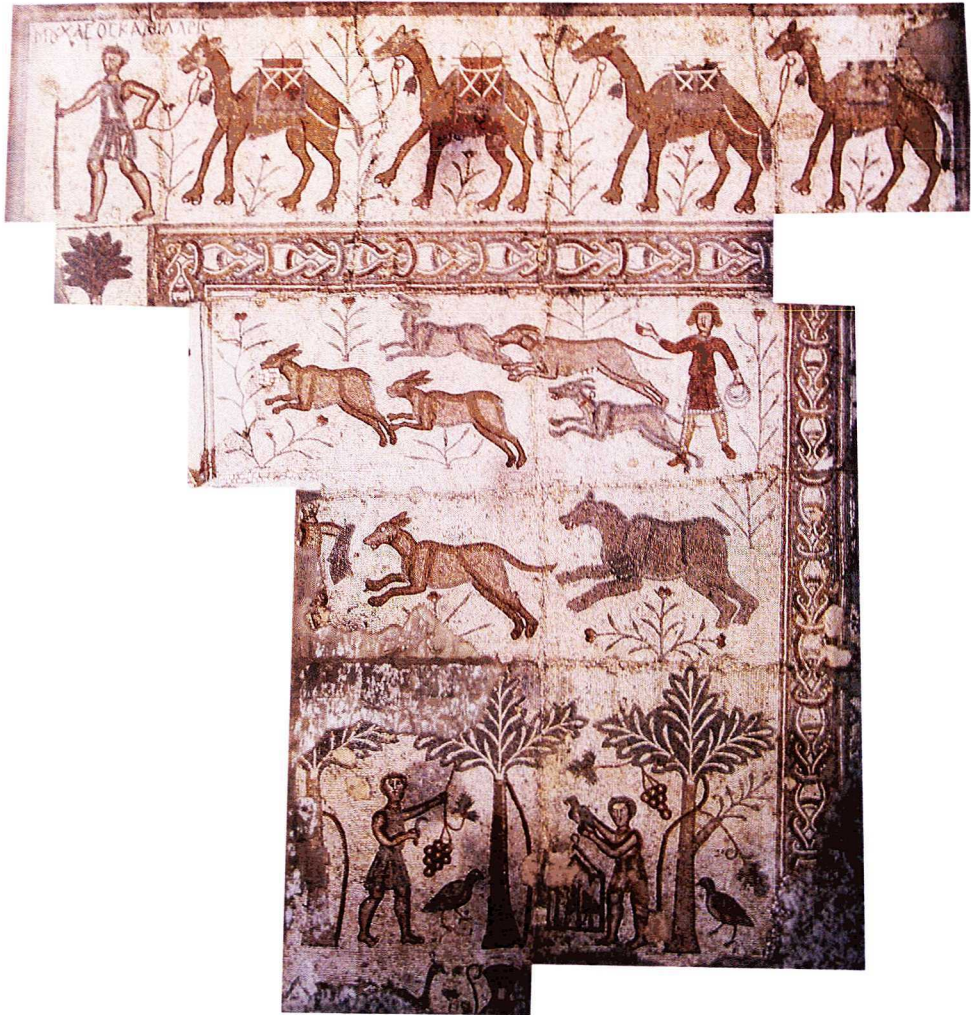
Downey appended the passage with the following commentary: ‘The eastern colonnade, on the side toward the church, was paved with the mosaics so popular at this time, showing the creatures and the foods produced by both the sea and by the land. Fruits, grains, vegetables, birds, fish and shellfish – all were portrayed in decorative patterns which illustrated the bounty provided for man by God. The mosaicists, with their consummate skill, were able to depict each plant, each bird, and each fish with the most accurate detail and most lifelike air’³. In my opinion Choricus was describing the mosaics located in the *narthex*, although he did not actually say so unambiguously. Downey surmised this from the context, applying the keen intuition of an art historian. I am of the opinion that the concluding words of the passage allude to a mosaic decoration (‘such a rich decoration befits a church adorned with so much gold’), and the gold in the church apparently refers to the mosaic decoration and coffer ceiling. Downey had in mind a colourful floor mosaic carpet (the colonnade was paved with the mosaics). Thus we can interpret the key passage ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος as referring to ‘the mosaics by the wall of the eastern portico, or along this wall.’

³ Downey 1963, p. 134



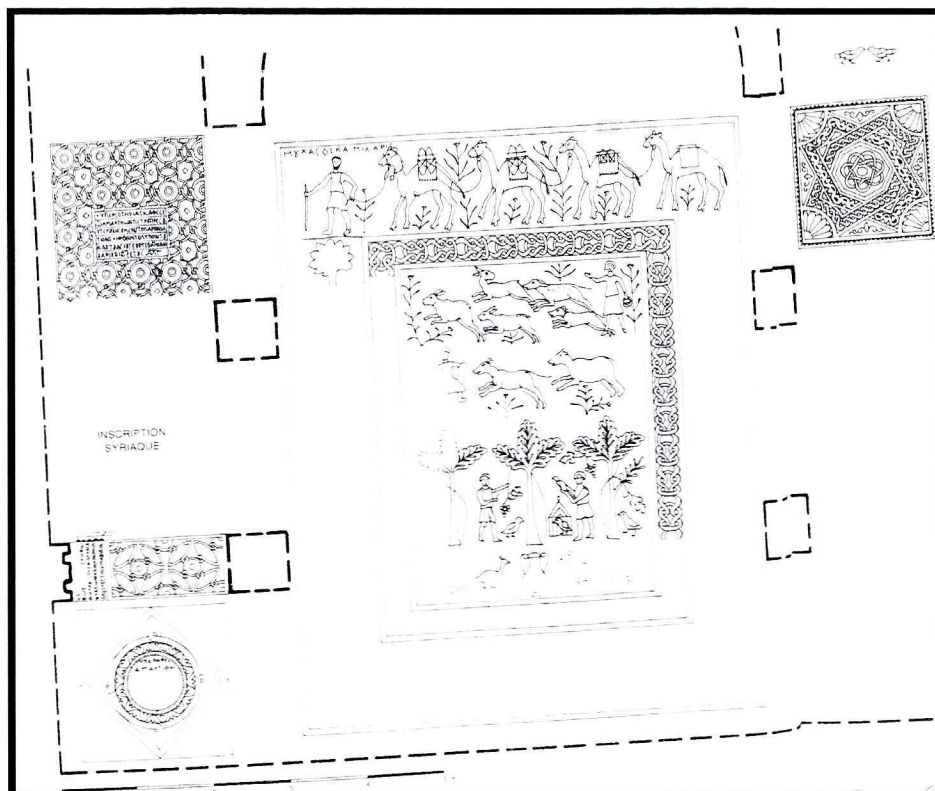
Pl.1: Pompei VIII,2,16. Marine scene. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, c.100 BC, Dunbabin 2006, fig.46

The question remains what the mosaic looked like, or more correctly which class of the mosaic decoration did it represent. Was it an *emblema* mosaic, which showed marine life, fish and shellfish, set against an impressive navy blue background, in a well known type of hellenistic mosaic decoration, as may appear judging by Choricus' highly generalizing and economic wording or an eloquent interpretation of Downey, which is suggestive of such an interpretation? **(Pl.1)**. I do not think so. I would say that St.Stephen's *narthex* mosaic decoration represented a popular Late Antique genre of floor mosaics which depicted hunting, pastoral, gardening, fishing or genre scenes. They were favourite subjects for the



Pl.2: Deir el-Adas, Church of St.George, Bosra Castle, AD 722, Donceel- Voûte 1988, fig.23

decoration of floors in churches, public buildings as well as private villas in late Roman Syria, Palestine and North Africa. Their bibliography consists of a vast collection of books and papers and is still growing. I would like to refer only to a couple of selected studies and examples: I. Lavin, *The Hunting Mosaics of Antioch and Their Sources* (1963), M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (1993), P. and M. Canivet, *I complessi cristiani di Huarte* (1980), J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie* (1977), K. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*



Pl. 3: The general pattern of the floor mosaic decoration, Deir el-'Adas, Church of St. George, Bosra Castle, AD 722, Donceel- Voûte 1988, fig.20

(1999), A. Ben Abed-Ben Khader, E. de Balande, A. Uribe Echeveria, *Image in Stone. Tunisia in Mosaics* (2003), the last-mentioned being one of the most impressive art books ever published.

Choricus' highly condensed wording may be supplemented with a commentary drawn from Asterius' sermon *de divite et Lazaro* (PG 40, 166-168). The rhetorician compares the richly woven garments of his time to the painted walls (ὡς τοῖχοι γεγραμμένοι) in the houses of people who wore such costly apparel (τὰς οἰκίας κοσμεῖσθαι). Their vividly coloured garments were adorned with a variety of animal forms and different figures (καὶ πάντων ζῶων τοῖς πέπλοις τὰς μορφὰς ἐνσημαίνεται, τὴν ἀνθινὴν καὶ μυρίοις εἰδώλοις πεποικιλμένην φιλοτεχνούσιν ἐσθῆτα). Asterius enumerates lions, panthers, bears, bulls, and dogs, pictured among the forests and rocks. Asterius also speaks



Pl.4: Hunting games, the overall pattern of the floor mosaic decoration, the Church of Mezra'a el-Ulia, 5th century, the National Museum of Aleppo, Donceel-Voûte 1988, fig.159

of hunters and all the subjects exploited by the art of painting to imitate nature (λέοντες καὶ παρδάλεις, ἄρκτοι, καὶ ταῦροι, καὶ κύνες, ὕλαι, καὶ πέτραι, καὶ ἄνδρες θηρακτόνοι, καὶ ἡ πᾶσα τῆς γραφικῆς ἐπιτήδευσις μιμουμένη τὴν φύσιν). I cannot resist a feeling that we are perfectly familiar with mosaics like the ones described by Asterius of Amaseia with his usual feeling for the beauty of the figural arts. I would like to refer to P.Douceel-Voûte's meticulous catalogue of the Syrian and Lebanese churches, and in particular to the carpet mosaic from the Church in Bir Abu-Radi (Kibuts Kissufim), which parallels and supplements Asterius' catalogue;⁴ a lion and a bull from the church in Sordje⁵; hunting and gardening scenes from the nave of the church in Deir-el-'Adas, which is crowned with a camel-tender leading four dromedaries (PI.2-3)⁶; or

⁴ Donceel-Voûte 1988, I, figs. 450-452

⁵ Ibid. Fig.453

⁶ Ibid. Fig. 20

a nave mosaic in the church of Mezra'a el-Ulia (PI.3-4) filled with a dense pack of running animals, all of which seem to illustrate Asterius' description. One can see bears, lions, bulls, panthers and dogs, and in addition hares, deer and long-horned antelopes.⁷ In this connection we can also refer to a splendid mosaic decoration in Saints Lot and Procopius' Church or the Chapel of Prester John on Mount Nebo with their catalogues of hunting games entwined in a prolific, highly decorative panoply of stylised palm or vine branches (PI.6-7).

The interpretation of the apsidal decoration, Number Two in Choricus' sequence, although evidently Number One in the theological hierarchy, is more complex. The passage runs as follows: ἔστι ἀμφοτέρωθεν ὁσίων ἀνδρῶν συνωρίς, ἐκάτερος τὰ συνήθη σύμβολα φέρων, ὁ μὲν τὸ τέμενος ἔχων ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῖς θεωμένοις, παρὰ δὲ τὴν λαϊὰν τὸν Πρόδρομον ὄψει (LM II, 38) ('Two holy men are represented, one on either side, each carrying his usual insignia: the one on the spectators' right with the church (τὸ τέμενος), while to the left you will see the Πρόδρομος (Forerunner)').

Choricus' allusive, indirect, highly rhetorical and metaphorical wording, as well as the idiosyncratic sequence of descriptive entities bring some questions which call for answers. Who was actually represented in the apse? Wessel in his paper *Apsisbilder* (1966) only wrote that in St. Stephen's of Gaza it was Christ enthroned who was represented in the apse between figures represented in the act of adoration, one of them being St. John the Baptist⁸. At yet another point of his synthetic paper Wessel referred to the scene of *traditio coronae martyrum* pictured in St. Stephen's of Gaza,⁹ that is Christ giving St. Stephen the martyr's crown. The cited passage contains nothing warranting such an interpretation. Mango (2004) imagined the scene in quite a different way: 'The person on the right is described as *ho men to temenos echon*. I understand this to mean "he who owns the church", i.e. St. Stephen, rather than "he who bears the church in his hand." The latter description would be appropriate to the image of the founder, i.e. Bishop Marcianus, but the absence of St. Stephen would be surprising.'¹⁰ Downey (1963) interpreted the two figures as 'the donor of the church, on the right, bearing in his hands the model of the building, with St. John the Forerunner on the left.'¹¹ Abel's translation of the passage (1931) 'l'un, à droite du spectateur, tenant l'église; l'autre, à gauche, représentant le Précurseur' is appended with a commentary which may only increase the reader's confusion: 'probablement

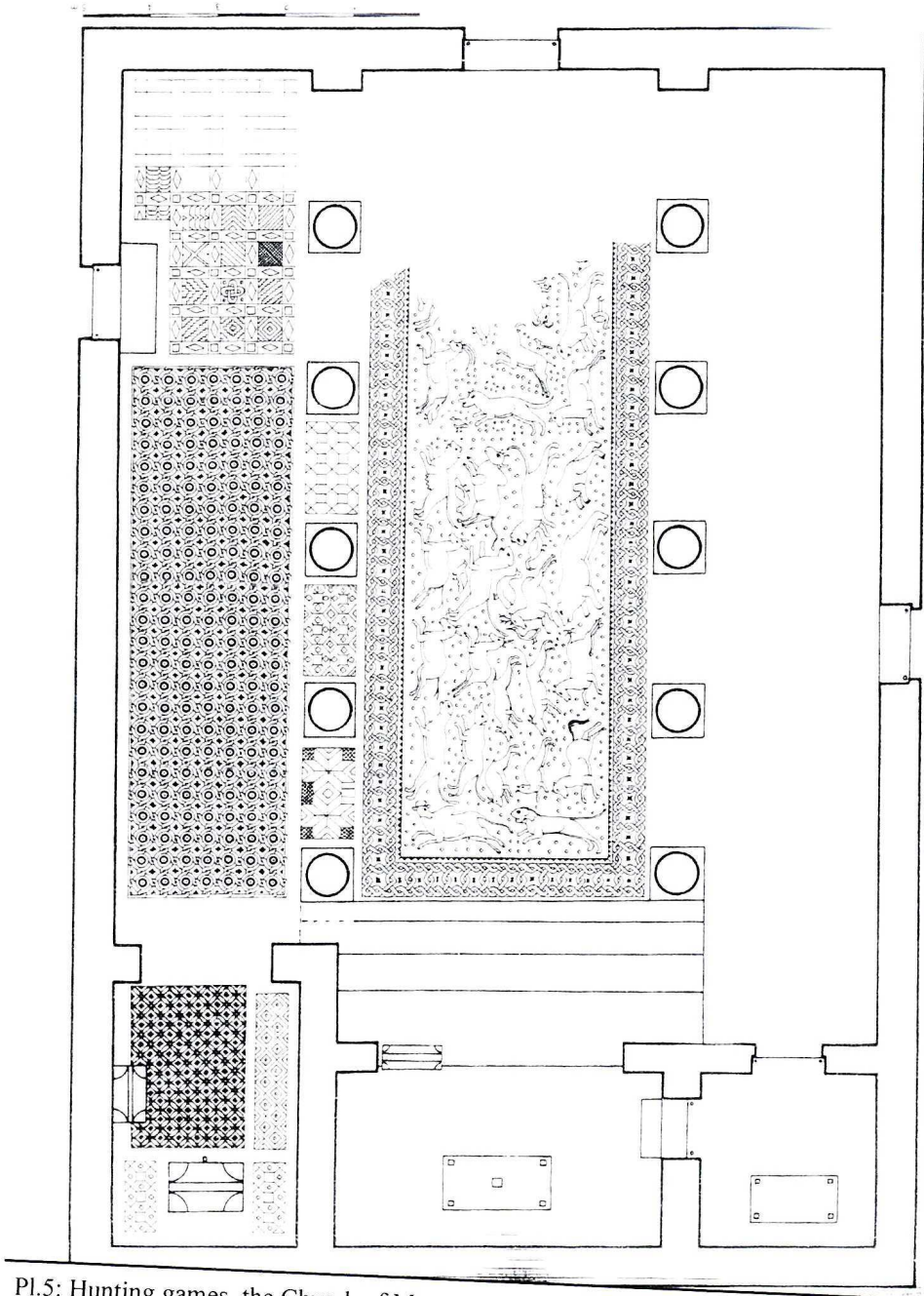
⁷ *ibid.* Fig.159

⁸ Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c.270

⁹ *Ibid.* c.280

¹⁰ Mango 2004, p.70, n.84

¹¹ Downey 1963, p. 136

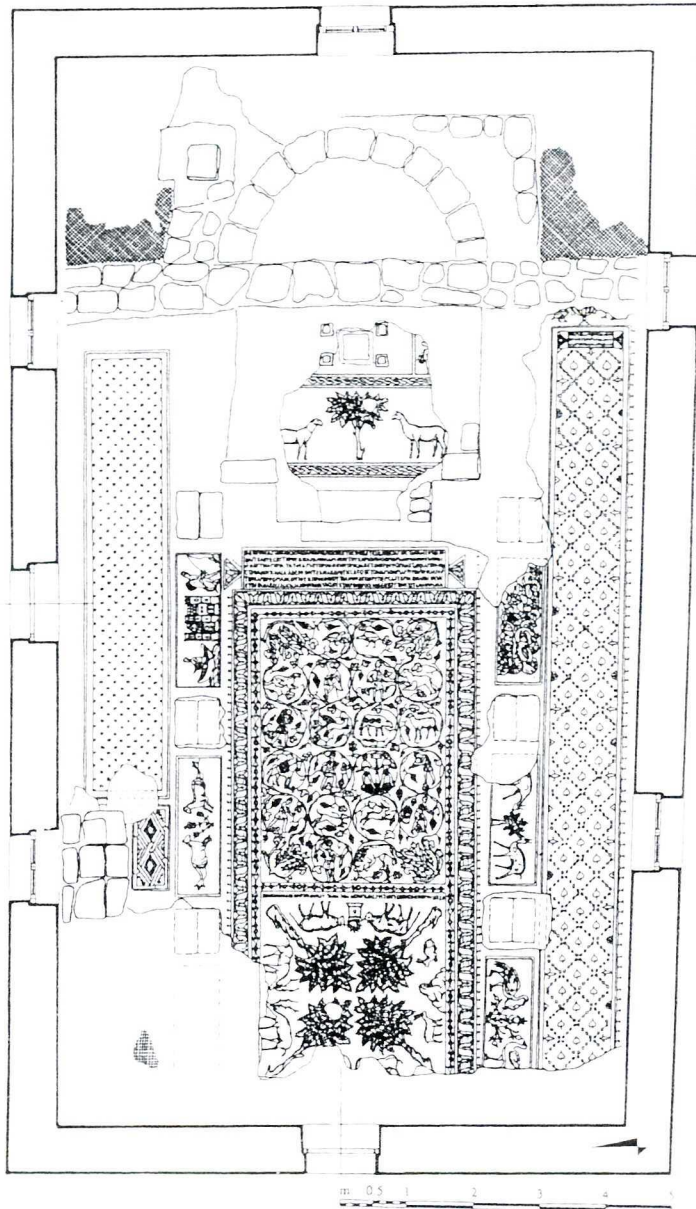


Pl.5: Hunting games, the Church of Mezra'a el-Ulia 5th century, the National Museum of Aleppo, Donceel-Voûte 1988, fig.149



Pl.6: Hunting games entwined in stylised palm and vine branches, the Church of St. Lot and St.Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet, AD 557, Piccirillo 1993

The mosaic and painting decoration in the church of Saint Stephen of Gaza...



Pl.7: The general plan of the floor decoration (Hunting games, The Four Trees of the Paradise, the Nilotic mosaic), the Church of St.Lot and St.Procopius on Mount Nebo, El Mukhayyet, 557, Piccirillo 1993



Pl.8: The Apsidal Mosaic of the Saints Cosma and Damian Church, Rome
(AD 526/530)

Saint Etienne tenant la représentation de sa basilique¹². ἔχων with an object is hardly metaphoric. It is a usual, colloquial usage meaning ‘a person with something in his/her hands,’ ‘by one (accompanying one)’. Consequently the meaning seems self-evident: ‘a person with the church (St.Stephen’s Church, τὸ τέμενος is preceded by the definite article).

Now let us make a short overview of some available analogical iconographic patterns, which include images of Christ and church founders. In S.Vitale of Ravenna (546/7) we find Christ enthroned on the globe flanked by two Archangels who introduce S.Vitalis and Bishop Ecclesius with the model of the church in his hands¹³. In the apsidal mosaic of the Santi Cosma e Damiano Church (526/530) St.Peter and St.Paul introduce two Martyrs from Kyros to Christ, who is descending from heaven (Pl.8). The composition also includes St.Theodore and the Founder Pope Felix IV, the latter with the church model. St. Peter and St. Paul and St.Lawrence, who leads the founder, Pope Pelagius II, also appear in the rainbow arch mosaic of S.Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome

¹² Abel 1931, p.24, n.7

¹³ Wessel, Apsisbilder 274

(578/90). The mosaic depicts St.Stephen and St.Hyppolytus¹⁴. Mango was quite right when he emphasised the obligatory presence of the church's patron in this kind of apsidal decoration. In every available instance (SS.Cosma e Damiano, S.Lorenzo, S.Vitale) the patron appears in the apsidal mosaic of the church.

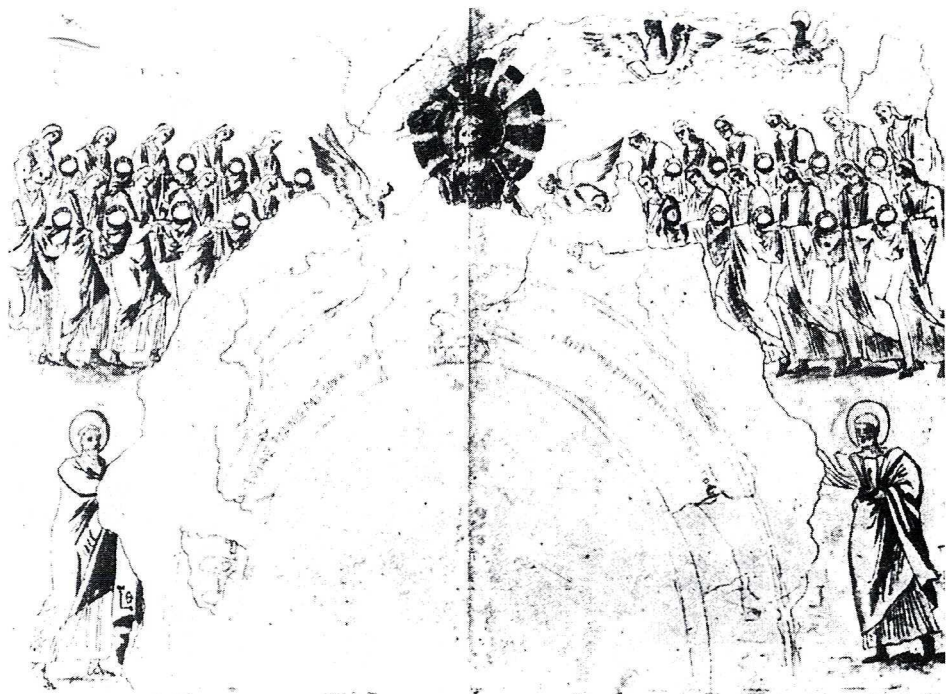
However, if we read Choricus' *ecphrasis* of St.Stephen's we learn that the apsidal mosaic showed Bishop Marcianus (with the church model) and St.John the Baptist, if we correctly read Πρόδρομος 'Prodromos' actually means the 'forerunner', one who goes ahead of someone else or others. Consequently it seems to have been St.John the Baptist, who 'prepared a way for the Lord, made his paths straight' (*Is.* 40,3), the Forerunner of Christ. However, 'prodromos' may also simply mean 'the first one.' It seems to me that perhaps Choricus in his highly metonymic language replaced πρωτομάρτυρ by πρόδρομος. Consequently the mosaic might have shown Bishop Marcianus with the church model and the Patron Saint, St.Stephen, which would be in agreement with the basic principles of Byzantine church decoration.

The next question is: where was the mosaic located? We have repeatedly said it was in the apse. This is not so self-evident, either. Mango (2004) argued that 'this representation was probably on the triumphal arch'¹⁵. Other commentators, however, speculate that it must have been an apsidal image.¹⁶ On re-reading the passage once again in its longer context, I think it can be demonstrated beyond all doubt that it was actually an apsidal composition. In chapter 37 (*LM II*) Choricus focused on the *templon*, the four porphyry columns, which separated the chancel from the nave, and immediately afterwards he passed on to the description of the apse. His description of the apse is quite confusing, as a result of his language which sounds artificial and pretentious, composed of curiously selected rare words and phrases, which only indirectly identifies a location in the apse. Mango and other translators resorted to bold paraphrases, to avoid making them sound unnatural. However, the problem with reading Gazan rhetoricians like Joannes in *Tabula mundi* or Choricus in the *Laudes Marciani* lies in that that they wanted to sound unnatural, extremely literary, extraordinary and striking with their archaising, forgotten or newly coined semantics, vocabulary, syntax and phraseology. The passage in question runs more or less as follows: 'the wall is distinguished by a varying concavity whose lower part rises in parallel up to the top (that is to the base) of the arch'. Choricus also says that a concave space of irregular shape (a half-cylinder joined with a quarter-sphere) adorns the wall behind the *templon*. Next the rhetorician briefly describes the above-discussed

¹⁴ *ibid.*c.277

¹⁵ Mango 2004, p. 70, n.84

¹⁶ Abel 1931, p. 24; Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c.270, 280; Downey 1963, p. 136



Pl.9: The Rainbow Arch Mosaic of S.Paolo fuori le mura, Rome, a drawing from 1634, Mid-fifth century AD, Miziołek 1993, fig.32

decoration, and, crucially, he continues: τοῦ κάτω δε μέρους παντοδαποῖς μαρμάρους ἀστράπτοντος λίθος τις (*LM II*, 38), ‘in the lower part below (the lower range of decoration) there is a marble revetment ... and a window in the centre, which is wide and tall (*LM II*, 39).’ It seems, then, that Choricus’ description reflects one of the basic principles of the Byzantine church decoration: a marble stone revetment up to the base of the arches, and a mosaic or painted decoration above it.

My guess is that the image of Christ flanked by two holy men was set on the concave wall of the apse. Abel (1931) linked the two holy men from Ch.30 with the image of Christ from Ch.45. The extensive passage between the chapters describes a hemispherical wooden structure, which was in some way related to the figures of the holy men and, it seems, to the image of Christ, who is described in the following words: ‘the painted icon of the Lord of the Universe was in the centre of the wooden structure’ (*LM II*, 45: εἰκόνας γεγραμμένης ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ προστάτου τῶν ὄλων). Abel concluded that the apse contained the image of Christ flanked by two saints and pointed to the rainbow arch mosaics

in S.Paolo fuori le mura in Rome as the closest analogy¹⁷. Let us examine this no longer extant image. We know it only from the drawing by an anonymous artist dated 1634 (PI.9),¹⁸ next from G.Ciampini's *Vetera monimenta*,¹⁹ and also from Rossini's engraving, which documented the destruction caused by fire of 1823²⁰. The original mosaic showed the bust of Christ in a *nimbus*, an image remarkable for its appearance of majesty and power, located over the top of the rainbow arch. The mosaicists who got the commission from Galla Placidia and the Pope Leo the Great (mid-5th century) pictured Christ as long-haired and bearded holding the cross in his hand²¹. Christ was adored by the 24 Old Men of the *Apocalypse* and two Saints, Peter and Paul, distributed symmetrically on either side (ἀμφοτέροθεν) at the base of the arch.

Abel also added that the apse of St.Stephen's of Gaza was incrustated by a wooden wainscoting²². In fact if we read ἀμφοτέροθεν 'on both sides,' (LM II, 38) as referring to Christ, then Abel might have been right in his interpretation of the web of intricate meanings coded into Choricius' description of, what he labels καινὸν σχῆμα (a novel construction) of κῶνος ἥμισυς, a half-cone (LM II, 41).

However, if we relate ἀμφοτέροθεν to the previous sentence, which contains the description of the apse (LM II, 37), then we are allowed to read the adverb in quite a different way, namely as 'on both sides of the apse'. Consequently the figures of the Holy Men would have been pictured on both sides of the apse, as suggested by Mango²³. And what would result from this it would be an unusual and unknown mosaic composition which included two Saints pictured on the rainbow arch, that is outside the niche, and an icon of Christ painted on wood and set under a wooden panoply crowning the apse.

Downey understood the text in a different way. He argued that Choricius actually described a wooden dome which 'rose at the eastern end of the church, over the apse, in the manner of the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem,'²⁴ and encompassed 'the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator, "the Ruler of all things" which

¹⁷ Abel 1931, p. 25, n.1

¹⁸ Miziołek 1991, fig.32; S.Waetzoldt, *Zur Ikonographie des Triumphbogenmosaikens von St.Paul in Rom*, München 1964, il.453 (no 835); Wilpert, Schumacher 1976, il.58, pp.87-8

¹⁹ Miziołek 1991, fig.31; Ciampini 1699, t.I, tab.68, pp.228-33; Waetzoldt 1961, il.9 p.20; Bovini 1971, il.36

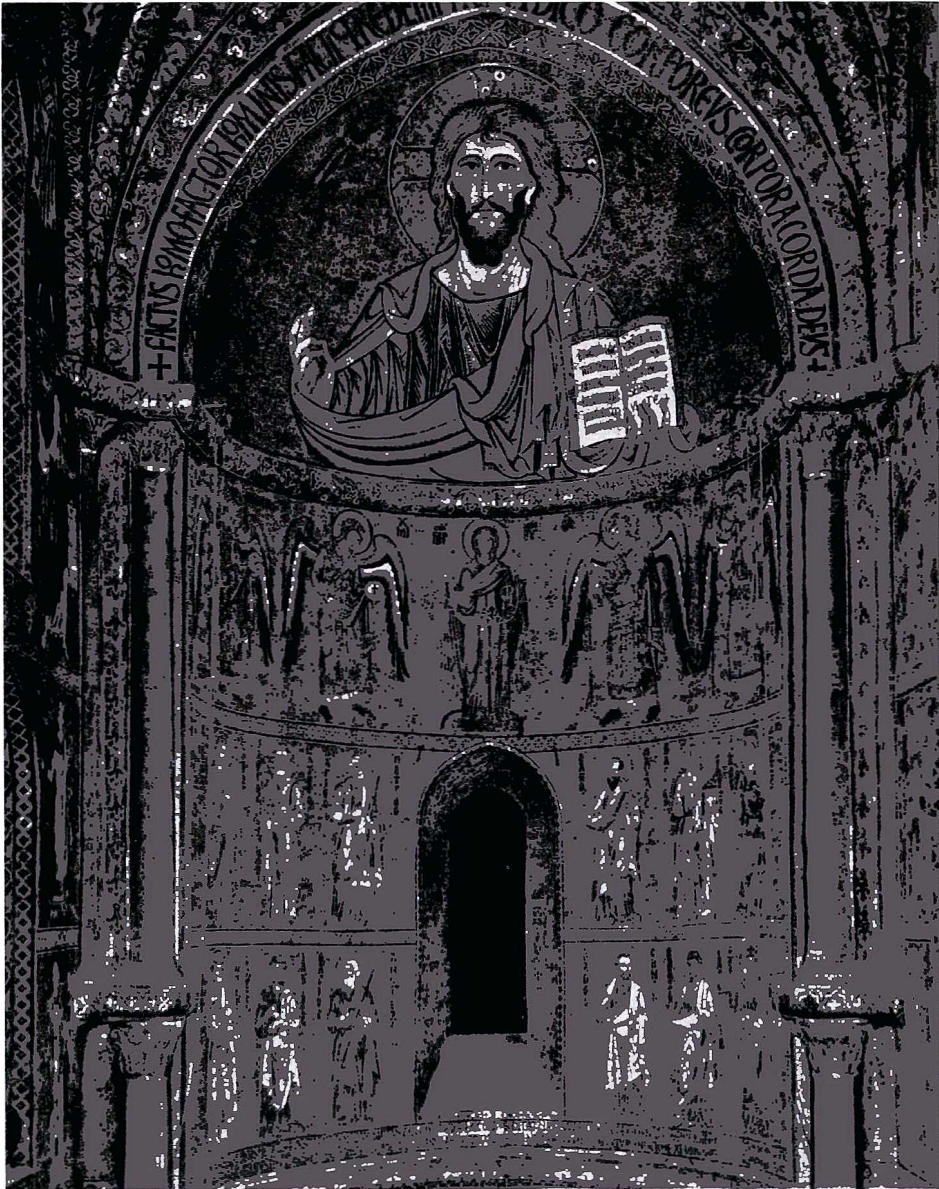
²⁰ Miziołek 1991, fig.30

²¹ *ibid.* pp.51ff.

²² Abel 1931, p.25, n.1

²³ Mango 2004, p.70, n.84

²⁴ Downey 1963, p.137



Pl.10: Pantocrator, the Cathedral of Cefalù, Sicily, Demus 1947, fig.48

filled the dome and formed the focus and the climax of the decoration of the church. This image, as the centre of the decoration of every Greek church, showed Christ with His gaze fixed upon the worshipers below ... The figure was designed so that it seemed tremendous in size, filling the whole dome²⁵. I have the feeling that it was the impressive beauty of the mosaic decoration contemplated in Cefalu (PI.10) or Monreale that strongly influenced Downey's reading of Choricus' text²⁶.

What did the προστάτης τῶν ὅλων look like? Choricus also added that χρυσὸς δε καὶ χρώματα τὸ πᾶν ἔργον φαιδρύνει τοῦτο (LM II, 45) ('Gold and other colours give brilliance to the whole work'), words suggestive of mosaic decoration. We can imagine the Ruler of the Universe, the Pantocrator or Cosmocrator from Gaza referring to a number of contemporary or roughly contemporary, analogical icons of Christ, as for example Christ on the throne of rainbow, in a *mandorla* and carried by the four Evangelical Creatures and adored by two Prophets, probably Isaiah and Ezechiel, in the apse of Hosios David in Thessaloniki (5th century);²⁷ Christ on the imperial throne in a *mandorla*, which is carried by two Angels in the Pantocrator's Cave in Latmos near Heracleia (7th century);²⁸ the young Christ enthroned between two Archangels in the altar niche in the Theodosius Chapel in Antinoe (mid-6th century);²⁹ or a powerful Christ from SS.Cosma e Damiano in Rome (526/30) (PI.8) pictured in the scene of the Second Coming, Christ who descends from heaven and calls to mind the pathos in the verses from Thomas da Celano's *Missa in commemoratione omnium animarum*: quando iudex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus; or finally the Christ from S.Pudenziana in Rome, seated below the *Crux gemmata*.

As if only incidentally ('I had nearly forgotten ...'), Choricus introduces the most interesting and detailed passage, which refers to the figural arts in his second oration in honour of Bishop Marcianus – a mosaic with a Nilotic landscape. ὁ Νεῖλος, αὐτὸς μὲν ὁ ποταμὸς οὐδαμοῦ γεγραμμένος, ὃν τρόπον ζωγράφοι γράφουσι ποταμούς, ῥεύμασι δὲ καὶ συμβόλοις τοῖς οἰκείοις ὑποφαινόμενος λειμῶσί τε παρὰ τὰς ὄχθας αὐτοῦ. καὶ γένη παντοίων ὀρνέων ὅσα τοῖς ἐκείνου πολλάκις λουόμενα ῥεύμασιν τοῖς λειμῶσιν ἐνδιαιτᾶται (LM II, 50) (the Nile, the river itself is nowhere portrayed in the

²⁵ *ibid.* pp.138f.

²⁶ Downey's reading was also criticized by Mango 2004, p.71, n.87, 'such an interpretation is not warranted by the text'

²⁷ Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c. 269; Ihm 1960, pp.182-4, Nr.XXXVIII, T.XIII, 1; Volbach 1958, p.70, Abb.133-135

²⁸ Ihm 1960, p.190f. Nr.XLIV; O.Wulff, *Die Malereien der Asketenhöhle des Latmos*, in: T.Wiegand, *Milet III*, Berlin 1913, pp.191-202; van der Meer 1938, p.273f. fig. 60

²⁹ Wessel, *Apsisbilder*, c. 271; Ihm 1960, p. 198, nr LI, T.VII, 3



Pl. 11: Tabgha, Church of Multiplication, second half of the fifth century AD, Dunbabin 2006, fig.207

way painters portray rivers, but is suggested by means of distinctive currents and symbols, as well as by the meadows along its banks. Various kinds of birds, that often wash in that river's streams dwell in the meadows, trans. C.Mango).

Nilotic mosaics were popular in Italy in the Hellenistic period, and in Roman Africa during Early Imperial times. From the 4th century on they had also become popular in the eastern provinces, in particular in the 5th - 6th century. Balty emphasises their wide territorial dispersion and longevity in Roman art.³⁰ In Jordan Nilotic landscapes appear on the floor mosaics from the 6th to the 8th century. The mosaics uncovered in Palestine are dated in general somewhat earlier, in the 5th - 6th century³¹. Thanks to the publications of Balty (1976, 1984) and Hachlili (1998) we have a fairly good idea of the Nilotic mosaic in the aisles of St.Stephen's in Gaza. What did it look like? Choricus observed that 'the river itself is nowhere portrayed in the way the painters portray rivers.' In other words, the mosaicists of St.Stephen's did not present a personification of the River Nile. As shown by Hachlili, the personified figure of the Nile may be regarded as characteristic of the Nilotic landscapes in Palestine (Bet Shean, Sepphoris), but not of Syrian and Jordanian Nilotic *paysages*, where there is generally no personification (with the exception of Umm-el-Manebi).³² Choricus mentioned 'all the various types of birds' swimming or taking a dip in the water, or resting on the meadows along the river.' His 'birds' may be interpreted by numerous analogies as 'cranes, herons, ducks' with a duck resting in a lotus cup as a favourite motif.³³ The latter appears on many Nilotic mosaics in Palestine (Sepphoris, Tabgha (PI.11), Bet Guvrin). 'The meadows' are suggestive of different plants as lotus flowers, nenuphars, or papyri. 'Lotus, papyrus and oleander plants fill the space in a similar manner in all the pavements and represent and distinguish the Nilotic landscape'³⁴. I had the good fortune of seeing the Nilotic mosaic of Tabgha *in situ* (5th century) (PI.11). This mosaic is conspicuous for the wide range of species it presents. It belongs to a class of Nilotic mosaics which call to mind pages of illuminated codices with atlases of birds. In Tabgha we can recognise a cormorant, a dove, ducks, a goose, herons, a swan and a flamingo killing a snake. The birds in the Nilotic mosaics are frequently depicted with the use of splendid, fresh colours for their plumage to cheer the eyes of the viewers (Sts. Lot and Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet (PI.12), Casa del Fauno in Pompeii (PI.13), Tabgha (PI.11)).

³⁰ Balty 1995a, p.245, bibl.n.1, p.245

³¹ Hachlili 1998, p.111

³² Hachlili 1998, table 1, p.108

³³ Hachlili 1998, p. 107

³⁴ Hachlili 1998, p.116



Pl.12: The Nilotic mosaic, the Church of St. Lot and St. Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet, Mount Nebo, AD 557, Piccirillo 1993

What does ‘with appropriate symbols’ (συμβολοῖς τοῖς οἰκείοις - *LM* II, 50) mean? These words clearly refer to some usual components of the Nilotic mosaic landscape, like the nilometer, crocodile or a sailing boat³⁵. The nilometer occurs exclusively on Palestinian mosaics, while the crocodile may be seen also in North African mosaic painting. It is interesting to observe that the crocodile is missing in the Syrian and Jordanian mosaic decoration³⁶. Choricus’ ‘appropriate symbols’ must have also referred to the usual representations of towns in the mosaics of Palestine and Jordan, as for example of a representation of Alexandria (Bet Shean, Sepphoris), of Alexandria and Memphis (Gerasa, Khirbet as-Samra)³⁷. Hachlili’s description of Sepphoris’ Nile as ‘one central stream consisting of ... wavy lines which divide the pavement and another thinner stream flowing down on the right side of the mosaic’³⁸ probably illustrates Choricus’ expression: ‘depicted with streams’.

Nilotic landscapes sometimes make up a highly complex and unified compositions. This is the case with St. Stephen’s decoration, as well as with the Tabgha (**Pl.11**), Gerasa and Scythopolis mosaic decorations. Sometimes they resemble narrow and elongated carpets (el-Haditha, Kafr Kama, the House of the Earth and Seasons in Antioch, Tell Hauwash, Halawa, Umnir el-Qubliye). Nilotic subjects may also appear as small, decorative images (*petits tableaux*)

³⁵ Hachlili 1998, p.107

³⁶ *ibid.* table 1

³⁷ *Ibid.* pp.111ff.

³⁸ *ibid.* p. 110



Pl.13: A Nilotic landscape, the floor mosaic in the Casa del Fauno, the National Museum of Naples, 2nd half of the 2nd century BC, Charbonneaux, Martin, Villard 1971, fig.166

applied in the intercolumnia of church interiors (Sts. Loth and Procopius' in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet (Pl.12)) or simply as *motifs de remplissage*³⁹. They were also frequently employed as additional decorative motifs in different kinds of mosaic adornments. In all those classes, whether of carpet mosaics, or decorative frames or small images we find both simple conglomerations of motifs collected together on a surface (Tell Hauwash, Halawa) as well as truly artistic creations (Tabgha (Pl.11), Khirbet el-Mukhayyet (Pl.12))⁴⁰.

The question remains whether Choricus' description refers to a painting or a mosaic decoration. St. Stephen's Nilotic mosaics were located on the walls of the naves: ἐπὶ τῶν τοίχων αἱ στοαί (LM II, 51). In his *ecphrasis* Choricus described the space of the aisles as well-lit by many spacious windows. To me the word φωτός (of light) suggests mosaics and their luminous effect.

Balty in her invaluable paper on the Nilotic mosaics (1995) raised the question of their interpretation. She asked if they carried an allegorical meaning. Basing on the archaeological material, she argued that the Nilotic mosaics had a purely decorative character, and that it was exactly this quality which brought them such a widespread and long lasting popularity. She emphasised that Nilotic mosaics have been found in pagan sanctuaries, private houses, synagogues and Christian churches⁴¹. It was Maguire who emphasised the allegorical meaning of the images of the Nile, 'the river which brings fertility' and which was also a symbol of creation. He also regarded the story of the Flight into Egypt as crucial to the

³⁹ Balty 1995a, p.250

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.251

⁴¹ *ibid.* pp. 249, 251, 252, 253

interpretation of the Nilotica in the Christian churches.⁴² In particular Maguire was inclined to interpret along these lines a pavement in the East Church of Qasr el-Lebia. Hermann also pointed to a substance of the *interpretatio Christiana* when he recalled that the Nile was believed to be one of the Four Rivers of Paradise⁴³. In her paper *Le cobra et la mangouste dans les mosaïques tardives du Proche-Orient* (1976) Balty herself adduced the motif of combat between ichneumon and cobra pictured on the pavement of the church in Karlik, Cilicia. The motif was employed as illustrative of the Messianic ideal of the Peace of Christ which will fill the animal kingdom with the coming of Messiah according to the vision of Isaiah (65,25). *φιλῖα τῶν ζῴων* can be also illustrated by the mosaic decoration in the churches of El-Mukhayyet and Ma'in. In the latter the landscape was explained by the related biblical inscription⁴⁴. Balty also recalled ichneumon chapter in the *Physiologus Graecus*. The anonymous author of the *Physiologus* wrote that the ichneumon rolls about in the mud before a fight with cobra, which should be interpreted as a figure of the incarnated Christ and His confrontation with Satan. *The Physiologus* was very popular from the 2nd century AD on. In the church of Zahrani a section which contains an ichneumon and cobra was located in the central part of the mosaic pavement⁴⁵.

The literary sources may sometimes throw an interesting sidelight on this phenomenon, which reveals a clearly religious background. The corpus of documents collected for the needs of the Seventh Nicean Council (787) preserved the *Letter ad Olympiodorum Eparchum* (Ep.61 in PG 79, cc.577-580), a document which originated in the early 5th century, and in all likelihood was compiled by Abbot Nilus of Sinai (or, as more recently preferred, from Ancyra).⁴⁶ However, the *Letter to Olympiodorus* which is known from the *Documents of the Council* (787) is missing from the voluminous corpus of Nilus' letters (PG 79, 81-581). Nilus expressed his decisively hostile attitude towards the fishing, hunting and other types of genre scenes in church decoration. We can deduce that his ban must have also encompassed Nilotic landscapes. There cannot be any doubt about that Nilus was strongly against such decoration in Christian churches. The question remains whether the abbot from Sinai had such decorations whitewashed as argued by Thümmel, or simply preferred the imagery inspired by the Old and New Testament stories, as documented by the extant version of Nilus' letter. Thümmel argued that this version was forged by the iconodule-oriented Nicean

⁴² Hachlili 1998, p. 118; Maguire 1987, pp. 43-44; 50-55

⁴³ Hermann 1959, p. 64-67; Hachlili 1998, p.118

⁴⁴ Balty 1995b, p. 220

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.224

⁴⁶ Thümmel 1978, p. 11; cf. a complicated issue of the letter's authenticity discussed by Thümmel 1978: Nicephorus quoted Neilus' letter to Olympiodorus in his writings, *adv. iconomachos* 14; *antirrhesis* 425; *elenchos* Paris gr.1250, Alexander 1953, Hennepf 1969

Fathers (787). Thümmel's argument on the *Letter to Olympiodorus* is worth adducing, because it reflects more general difficulties which face the reader of texts on Christian images. The Fathers of the 787 Council classified this letter together with the writings of Epiphanius and declared it a forgery made by the iconoclasts. The writings of Theodotus of Ancyra (5th century), attributed to him by the iconoclasts, were also recognised as forged by the Fathers in Nicea (787).

Thümmel turned their argument upside down. In his view all three sources were original and aniconic. These writings must have created an embarrassing problem for the participants of the Council. The reputation of their authors called for the reinterpretation or intervention in the text, which was eventually done, as Thümmel argued. In this way the original content of Nilus', Epiphanius' and Theodotus' teaching was subsequently intentionally distorted. The documents were rewritten for the good of the icon defenders, Thümmel concluded.⁴⁷

Let us follow Thümmel's analysis and reconstruction of the allegedly integral text: Nilus recalls the design of the church decoration presented to him by the Prefect Olympiodorus. Concluding, the author gives the following advice: '(1) (...) represent a single cross in the sanctuary, i.e. in the east of the most-holy church (...) (2) [fill the holy church on both sides with pictures from the Old and the New Testaments, made by an excellent painter, so that the illiterate who are unable to read the Holy Scriptures, may, by gazing at the pictures, become mindful of the manly deeds of those who have genuinely served the true God, and may be roused to emulate those glorious and celebrated feats (...)] (3) And as for the nave, which is divided into many compartments of different kinds, I consider it sufficient that a venerated cross should be set up in each compartment; whatever is unnecessary ought to be left out.'⁴⁸ Thümmel argued that part (2), which expresses the usual iconodule arguments, sounds contradictory to the part (1) and (3), which contain the iconoclast views. The application of figural decoration in churches for an educative purpose, used as a *Biblia pauperum*, became an argument popular with and widely adduced by the defenders of icons. We know it from the works of Nilus' contemporaries, e.g. Paulinus of Nola, Basil the Great, Gregory the Great, or later John of Damascus.⁴⁹ Thümmel concluded that the Letter's integral content and argument must have run something like this: (1) Olympiodorus was going to raise a *martyrion* and adorn its nave (the profane space) and chancel with crosses and a hunting scene to please the congregation, (2) Nilus answered that the chancel should remain

⁴⁷ Thümmel 1986, p.14

⁴⁸ Mango 2004, p.33; *PG* 79, 577-80

⁴⁹ Thümmel 1956, p.18

unadorned (3), while the chapels along the side naves could be adorned only with single crosses.⁵⁰ Thümmel believed that Nilus also wanted to have the wall of the chancel whitewashed. This passage was allegedly removed from the original text by its new editors.⁵¹ In Thümmel's view passages (1) and (3) were characterised by Nilus' smooth and skilful rhetoric, while passage (2) was not.⁵²

ἱστοριῶν δε παλαιᾶς καὶ νέας διαθήκης πληρῶσαι ἔνθεν καὶ ἔνθεν χειρὶ καλλίστου ζωγράφου τὸν ναὸν τῶν ἁγίων ὅπως ἂν οἱ μὴ εἰδότες γράμματα, μηδε δυνάμενοι τὰς θείας ἀναγινώσκειν γραφὰς, τῇ θεωρίᾳ τῆς ζωγραφίας μνήμην τε λαμβάνωσι τῆς τῶν γνησίως τῷ ἀληθινῷ θεῷ δεδουλευκότων ἀνδραγαθίας, καὶ πρὸς ἄμιλλαν διεγείρονται τῶν εὐκλεῶν καὶ ἀοιδίμων ἀριστευμάτων.

I have cited passage (2) in Greek, because I do not share the feeling that its language or style is inferior to the previous or successive passage. It is certainly not inferior to the section Thümmel believed came from the original author.

I have presented the argument put forward by Thümmel because it is illustrative of the problems we frequently face when confronted with Patristic texts on images. Uspienski aptly observed the emergence of a very confusing situation in Byzantine iconoclast studies which has resulted from different ideological attitudes and research methodologies. At a very early stage of the textual criticism Nicephorus was already arguing that part of Epiphanius' corpus of writings was inauthentic. John of Damascus had rejected it as fraudulent. The old divisions have survived for centuries and it does not seem that they will be overcome in the near future. Holl argued for the authenticity of the entire *Corpus Epiphanicum*, while on the contrary Ostrogorsky rejected many texts as spurious and late. Florowski identified numerous interpolations introduced by the iconoclasts.⁵³ Thümmel was convinced of the very opposite, that is, that the iconodules were responsible for interpolations in the texts of the Early Church Fathers. The entire tradition was reworked, reshuffled, discussed time and again, and sometimes distorted or censored.⁵⁴ All too often the Byzantine art historians

⁵⁰ Thümmel 1956, p.19

⁵¹ Thümmel 1956, p.17

⁵² Thümmel 1956, *ibid.*

⁵³ Uspienski 1993, n.34, p.100

⁵⁴ Speyer 1971, p.43, n.2, John Moschus dedicated his poem *Pratum spirituale* to Sophronius. In the result of it John was cited as Sophronius by the *Nicenum Secundum*; In fact it is frequently difficult to decide with certainty about the authorship or authenticity of the texts on icons. The traces of forgeries are detectable even after long centuries. In a sermon delivered in honour of St. Basil of Caesarea Amphilochius of Iconium (390/5-398/404) preached that images of the Saints were not being painted in his time, but their glorious deeds were spoken of and

take these texts for granted, they also take for granted their chronology and authorship, which are not self-evident by far.⁵⁵ If we trust the tradition passed on by the great erudite defender of icons Nicephorus, who cited the *Epistula ad Olympiodorum* three times in his works, it was Nilus Sinaiticus who compiled this letter.⁵⁶ Nicephorus would surely not have accepted Thümmel's reconstruction. This can be stated beyond all doubt.

However, the passage of the letter we are interested in the context of St. Stephen's of Gaza looks integral and original. It goes as follows: εἰκόνας ἀναθεῖναι ἐν τῷ ἱερατείῳ καὶ θήρας ζώων παντοίας τοὺς τοίχους πληῖσαι ... ὥστε βλέπεσθαι κατὰ μὲν τὴν χέρσον ἐκτεινόμενα λῖνα, καὶ λαγωοὺς, καὶ δορκάδας, καὶ τὰς ἐξῆς φεύγοντα ζῶα, τοὺς δε θηρᾶσαι σπεύδοντας, σὺν τοῖς κυνιδίοις ἐκθύρως διώκοντας; κατὰ δε τὴν θάλατταν χαλῶμενα δίκτυα, καὶ πᾶν γένος ἰχθύων ἐλιευόμενα, καὶ εἰς τὴν ξηρὰν ἐξαγόμενα χερσὶν ἀλιευτικαῖς (to fill the walls... with all kinds of animal hunts so that one might see snares being stretched on the ground, fleeing animals, such as hares, gazelles, and others, while the hunters, eager to capture them, pursue them with their dogs; and also nets being lowered into the sea, and every kind of fish being caught and carried on shore by the hands of the fishermen, trans. C.Mango - PG 71, c.577 C). This passage offers us one more literary comment on the above discussed mosaic decoration in the *narthex* of St. Stephen's of Gaza.

Let us read one more passage from the same letter, which speaks of 'the pictures of different birds and beasts, reptiles and plants' (PG 71, 577 D). This passage clearly reflects the class of mosaics which encompassed Nilotic landscapes. The opinion of a venerable ecclesiast on the decoration project of a newly founded church was decisively negative. However, the growing number of mosaic pavements adorning the floors of the numerous churches in the Christian Orient, which have been uncovered for recent decades in Israel, Jordan and Syria, strongly contrasts with Nilus' attitude and clearly speaks of a prevailing vogue for figural decoration in Christian buildings.

An interesting testimony from the early the 9th century is remarkable for the same spirit of rejection and dislike for floral and animal decoration in the Christian churches and can be regarded as representative of Nilus' attitude. Its author, Stephen the Deacon, was actually an iconodule and adversary of the iconoclasts. Let us read the whole relevant passage in Greek: τοῦ δε τυράννου

described. The sermon survived in a Syriac version: Zetterstéen 1915; Zetterstéen K.von, *OrChr* 1934, pp.67-98 (German translation)

⁵⁵ Cf. Hohlweg, Ecphrais, *RBK* 47; Downey, *RACH* 4,937

⁵⁶ Thümmel 1956, p.17, n.7, p.11

τὸν σεβάσμιον ναὸν τῆς παναχράντου θεοτόκου τὸν ἐν Βλαχέρναις κατορῦξαντος τὸν πρὶν κεκοσμημένον τοῖς διατοίχοις ὄντα ἀπὸ τε τῆς πρὸς ἡμᾶς τοῦ θεοῦ συγκαταβάσεως ἕως θαυμάτων παντοίων καὶ μέχρι τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀναλήψεως καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος καθόδου διὰ εἰκονικῆς ἀναζωγραφήσεως καὶ οὕτως τὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἅπαντα μυστικὰ ἐξάραντος ὀπωροφυλάκιον καὶ ὄρνεοσκοπεῖον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐποίησεν. Δένδρα καὶ ὄρνεα παντοῖα θηρία τε καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ἐγκύκλια διὰ κισσοφύλων, γεράνων τε καὶ κορωνῶν καὶ τῶν τῶν ταύτην περιμουσώσας ἴν', εἶπω ἀληθῶς ἄκοσμον ἔδειξεν (*V.Stephani Minoris* 53).⁵⁷

'The tyrant (sc. Constantine, V 741-775) destroyed the holy sanctuary of the Immaculate Mother of God in the Blachernae, the walls of which were once adorned with painted images that started from God's coming to us, through all His miracles up to the Ascension and the Descent of the Holy Spirit. In this way he removed all the holy deeds of Christ and converted the church into a barn or an aviary. He made mosaic images of trees, birds and all kinds of animals together with ivy leaves, cranes, crows and peacocks, so that, let me say this, he could make it really ugly.'

We can be sure that some Christians in the 5th/6th century expressed the same scornful opinions on the presence of the decoration in the Church of St. Stephen of Gaza, authorised by Bishop Marcianus, in the church founded by the Prefect Olympiodorus, in the Church of St. Lot and Procopius in Mukhayyet, or the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Tabgha.

A feeling of irresistible and ultimate disaster returns to the mind of a solitary wanderer who feels lost in time and space when he stands among the still majestic ruins of St. John's Church in Ephesus, once one of the greatest churches in Christendom. The same feeling is shared by the traveler who helplessly moves around the ruins of the once grand Justinianic Basilica of St. Mary Theotokos or the almost entirely destroyed architectural structures of the rock sanctuary of the Seven Sleeping Brothers in Ephesus, which even today impresses the visitor with its arresting charm... when in vain he searches for any material trace of the legendary Church of the Apostles in Istanbul; when he stands before the still identifiable rocky chapel where Christ took a rest from the crowds in the once famous sanctuary of the Sermon on the Mount, a sanctuary frequented by ancient pilgrims and now almost forgotten by Christians themselves; when he enters the nave of St. Philip's *martyrion* in Hierapolis, which still overwhelms the observer with the beauty of its crystalline architectural forms.

⁵⁷ Hennephof p.27

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