

Christian Mosaics in Early Islamic Jordan and Palestine: A Case of Regional Iconoclasm

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The floor mosaics in catalogue number 79 provide two examples from the roughly sixty Byzantine and Umayyad-era churches in Jordan and Palestine that show signs of extensive alterations to their content. While inscriptions and images of inanimate objects are untouched, depictions of animal and human figures have been altered in a variety of ways. In some cases, the tesserae composing them have been deliberately scrambled and reused to "pixelate" faces, limbs, and torsos; in others, images of animate beings have been replaced by vegetation, sometimes by transforming background motifs into the primary subject; in a fascinating minority of cases (including cat. no. 79), animal and human figures have literally been transformed into flowers and plants.

Recent studies of these alterations suggest that the majority occurred approximately between the 720s and 760s; after this date, new mosaics laid in churches of the region generally make use of geometric and vegetal imagery.¹ The nature of the alterations and of their indiscriminate focus on images of all animate beings, from humans to fish and even crustaceans, suggests that the concerns underlying them were quite different from those that motivated contemporary metropolitan Byzantine Iconoclasts, who objected to images of Christ, the Virgin, saints, and angels.² The replacement of images of animate beings by trees and vegetation does recall complaints made against the Iconoclasts in Constantinople for replacing images of the saints with those of birds, animals, and trees,³ but, conceptually at least, the elevation of secondary vegetal elements to the status of primary subjects in the altered church mosaics is also close to the spirit of mosaics newly commissioned for Umayyad mosques (figs. 101, 102). Perhaps more significantly, parallels for the unusual tendency to transform figures into flowers or plants exist in the alterations to figurative materials reused in Umayyad and early Abbasid mosques. In the Aqsa Mosque in

Jerusalem, for example, zoomorphic figures on capitals reused in the eighth century were transformed into vegetation by recarving or by the addition of stucco leaves.⁴ This emphasis on vegetation in the ornamentation of sacred space recalls certain hadith, or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570–632), that promote depictions of trees as alternatives to images of living beings.⁵ A particularly relevant tradition recommends removing the heads of figurative images to render them treelike. The similarity is based on a common incapacity for breath or life (*ruh*) rather than a formal resemblance, but this visually striking image of metamorphosis occasionally inspired the literal transformation of animal and human figures into plants and trees in the Islamic world.⁶

The transformative practices to which mosaics from Umayyad-era churches and mosques bear witness may of course precede the hadith, being canonized within rather than inspired by them. However, although the principle of removing part of an image to obviate the danger of idolatry was enshrined in earlier rabbinical tradition, and vegetal imagery might occasionally substitute for figurative representation in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religious art (cat. no. 190), the idea that fragmented figures become treelike is specific to the imagery and worldview of the hadith.⁷

Even if the nature of the alterations suggests a relation to early Islamic critiques of the image, this does not imply either a relation to the edict against images reportedly issued by the caliph Yazid II (r. 720–24) (see Flood, p. 244) or the involvement of Muslims.⁸ On the contrary, the careful nature of these alterations suggests that they were undertaken by the Christian communities who used the churches, perhaps even by the original mosaicists. In two cases the interventions include the addition of the cross, a far greater source of friction between Christians and Muslims than images.⁹

It therefore seems likely that these alterations to church mosaics were undertaken in response to the aniconism of Muslim places of worship, as has been proposed for similar changes to figural imagery in Early Islamic Palestinian synagogues.¹⁰ Alternatively, the modifications of Christian mosaics in ways that conform to the prescriptions and proscriptions of the hadith may reflect the sharing of churches between Christians and Muslims, a phenomenon acknowledged in hadith that prohibit Muslim worship in churches containing images.¹¹ The changes to the mosaics may also engage with more active critiques of Christian iconolatry that evidently had an impact on Christian communities living under Umayyad rule as early as the 680s, when some of the Christians of Edessa refused prostration to icons.¹² The relevant hadith promoting the depiction of trees were evidently known to Christians, for they are invoked defensively in a passionate justification of Christian image veneration written in Arabic about 800 by Theodore Abu Qurrah, Chalcedonian bishop of Harran (cat. no. 81).¹³

Against this background it is worth noting that the alterations not only preserve the overall iconographic program but also consistently leave a sufficient remainder (such as ears, legs, or tails) to identify the original subject (cat. no. 79)—a deliberate choice, no doubt, since most of these changes were executed with such skill that the process could have been more comprehensively masked.¹⁴ The startling presence of remnant animal parts might therefore indicate either a lack of internal consensus on images among the Christians frequenting the churches or a subversive resistance to external pressures that nevertheless conformed to the spirit of Muslim critiques. Enabling one to reconstruct the original as a mental image, present under erasure, this solution reconciled not only two phases of the mosaic but perhaps also two distinct conceptions of what was acceptable in a place of worship.¹⁵

79A, B. Two Mosaics with Examples of Iconoclasm

Jordan, 719–20 and later
Stone tesserae

Provenance: From the nave (A) and the north room (B) of the church on the acropolis, Ma'in, Jordan. For conservation purposes, the mosaics were moved to the Madaba Archaeological Park in the 1970s.
Madaba Archaeological Park, Jordan

A. Mosaic Depicting Nikopolis Set over an Altered Animal

113 × 118 cm (44½ × 46⅞ in.)

Inscribed: In Greek, ΝΙΚΩΠΟΛΕΙΣ (Nikopolis)

Condition: The central portion is in good condition, but there are losses to the border areas.

B. Mosaic Depicting an Altered Ox

127 × 205 cm (50 × 80⅞ in.)

Inscribed: In Greek, ΚΑΙ ΛΕΩΝ ΩΣ ΒΟΥΣ ΦΑΓ' (εταί) (And the lion shall eat straw like the ox)

Condition: The central portion is in good condition, but there are losses to the border areas.

Each of these fragments originally formed part of a floor mosaic laid in the church on the acropolis of Ma'in in 719–20. The upper part of A depicts a schematic architectural scene identified in Greek as Nikopolis, one of eleven cities east and west of the Jordan River, bordered by large fruit trees. The lower part of the mosaic witnesses a remarkable later transformation—a feline, once set between swags of acanthus and a cornucopia, has had its torso, tail, and hind legs erased through the replacement of the original stone tesserae. Where the cat's body once was, two lilylike flowers and a small tree grow from a wedge-shaped white ground; only its head and front paws remain. The original design of fragment B featured a lion confronting an ox—an illustration of the messianic vision described in Isaiah 11:7

and 65:25, sources of the inscription in B. The ox was later replaced by a small tree, visible at the bottom left of the scene growing above the remnant tail and hooves, which project conspicuously across the trunk of a pomegranate tree the upper portion of which also seems to have been added in the second phase of the mosaics.

The specific transmutations of animals into plants seen here relate to alterations found in other mosaics, among them those in a basilical church at Khirbat 'Asida near Jericho and in the Church of Saint Stephen at Umm al-Rasas (fig. 11).¹ In all these cases, images of animate beings were either replaced by or actually transformed into plants or trees (see Flood, p. 117).

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¹ Baramki and Avi-Yonah 1934; Ognibene 2002.

References: (A) de Vaux 1938, pp. 244–45, pl. XIII; Buschhausen 1986, p. 126, cat. no. 3; Piccirillo 1992, pp. 196–201, figs. 303, 305; Schick 1995, pp. 398–400; Duval 2003b, pp. 276–77, figs. 29–30; (B) de Vaux 1938, pl. XI i; Buschhausen 1986, p. 228, cat. no. 16; Piccirillo 1992, pp. 196–201, figs. 301, 302; Schick 1995, pp. 398–400; Brubaker and Haldon 2001, p. 33, fig. 22; Shiyab 2006, pp. 104–6, fig. 24; Brubaker and Haldon 2011, pp. 111–12, fig. 5.

80. *Sacra Parallela*

Constantinople (?), 9th century

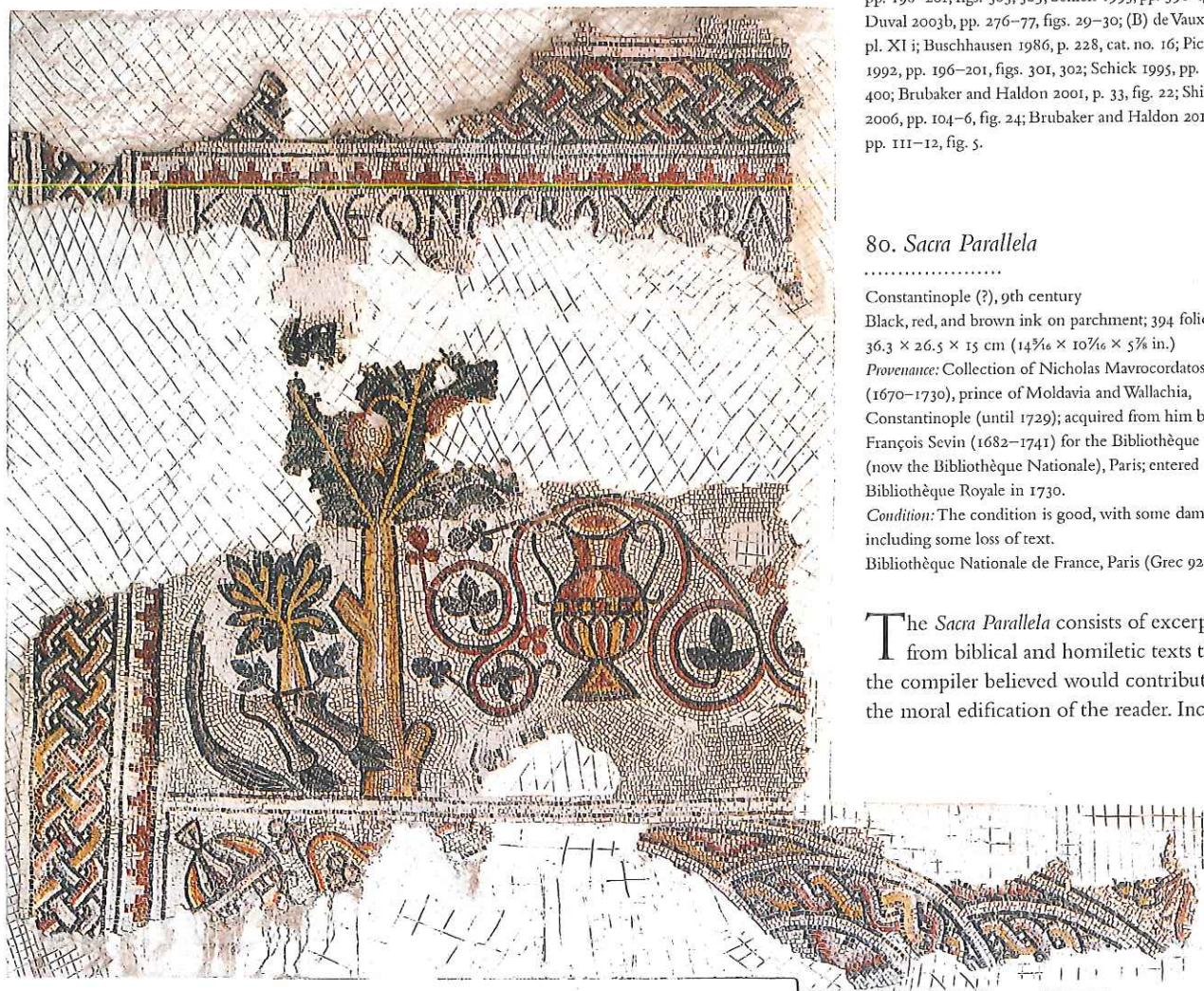
Black, red, and brown ink on parchment; 394 folios
36.3 × 26.5 × 15 cm (14⅜ × 10⅞ × 5⅞ in.)

Provenance: Collection of Nicholas Mavrocordatos (1670–1730), prince of Moldavia and Wallachia, Constantinople (until 1729); acquired from him by Abbé François Sevin (1682–1741) for the Bibliothèque Royale (now the Bibliothèque Nationale), Paris; entered the Bibliothèque Royale in 1730.

Condition: The condition is good, with some damage, including some loss of text.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (Grec 923)

The *Sacra Parallela* consists of excerpts from biblical and homiletic texts that the compiler believed would contribute to the moral edification of the reader. Included



79B



79A

BYZANTIUM AND ISLAM

AGE OF TRANSITION

7th–9th Century

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