

From Wilderness to Paradise: A Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at
Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya



From Wilderness to Paradise

A Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at
Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya

Jane Chick

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Cover: The images on the front cover are six of the fifty panels from the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. From left to right: a stag holding a serpent in its mouth; a personification of *Ananeosis* (renewal); a Nilotic scene; a leopard; a satyr with a *pedum*; and a sea-monster. These panels offer a small taste of the eclectic mix of images to be found in the pavement. Photos Author.



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Contents

List of Figures	iii
Acknowledgements	ix
1. Introduction	1
Overview of the Mosaics.....	1
The Large Mosaic Pavement	3
Pavements in the Northeast Annex and Sanctuary	4
Northeast Annex.....	4
Sanctuary	4
Dating	12
2. Cyrenaica	20
Geographical Context	20
Christianity in Cyrenaica.....	21
The Archaeological Site at Qasr el-Lebia	23
West Church.....	25
East Church	27
3. Reading the Mosaic Pavement	30
Imagery and Literature in Late Antiquity	30
<i>Varietas</i>	32
Layout of the pavement.....	34
4. Iconographic Analysis	40
Ocean and Nile	40
Ocean	40
Nile	49
Personifications – <i>Kosmesis</i> , <i>Ktisis</i> and <i>Ananeosis</i>	53
<i>Kosmesis</i> and <i>Ktisis</i>	55
<i>Ananeosis</i>	69
The Rivers of Paradise.....	75
Geon	75
Phison	75
Euphrates	75
Tigris.....	75
Kastalia and the Eagle	86
Kastalia	86
Castalian Spring at Daphne	87

Castalian Spring at Delphi	88
Kastalia at Qasr el-Lebia.....	88
The Eagle and its Prey	91
A Musician, a Leopard and a Satyr	94
Architectural Representations	98
<i>Pharos</i>	99
Pedimented Building.....	101
<i>Polis Nea Theodorias</i>	105
Castellated Building.....	105
Two-by-Two	106
Ostriches.....	106
Horses	107
Sheep	108
Bulls.....	109
Lions.....	110
Stags.....	112
Gazelles.....	113
Anomalies.....	114
5. Overall Programme.....	116
The Journey: Wilderness to Paradise	117
Wilderness	117
Paradise	120
6. Architectural Setting and Hypotheses	126
Architectural Setting	126
Hypothesis 1: The Large Mosaic as the Pavement of part of an Episcopium	128
Hypothesis 2: The Large Pavement as Part of a Baptismal Complex.....	129
Conclusion	136
Bibliography	137
Index	149

List of Figures

1. Introduction

Fig. 1.	Large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. As shown in Illustrated London News, December 1957	1
Fig. 2.	Fifty Panels from the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Author	2
Fig. 3.	Detail of border from the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	3
Fig. 4.	Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author	5
Fig. 5.	Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	5
Fig. 6.	Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	6
Fig. 7.	Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	6
Fig. 8.	Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	7
Fig. 9.	Inscription by the doorway in the west wall of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author ...	7
Fig. 10.	Inscription by opening into tomb chamber to the north of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	8
Fig. 11.	Inscription by doorway at the east end of northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	8
Fig. 12.	Sanctuary pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	9
Fig. 13.	Sanctuary pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	10
Fig. 14.	Sanctuary Pavement, Central Church, Cyrene. Copyright © The Society for Libyan Studies 2021	10
Fig. 15.	Altar base and mosaic at time of excavation. East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. From Illustrated London News, December 1957.....	11
Fig. 16.	Inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	12
Fig. 17.	<i>Polis Nea Theodorias</i> , in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	13
Fig. 18.	Sheep in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	14
Fig. 19.	Gazelle in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	14
Fig. 20.	Bull in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	15
Fig. 21.	Lion in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	15
Fig. 22.	Ram in front of a tree, from a chapel in Madaba, Jordan. Author	15
Fig. 23.	A leopard in front of a tree in the north aisle of a church in Kissufim, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author	16
Fig. 24.	<i>Kosmesis</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	16
Fig. 25.	<i>Ktisis</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	16
Fig. 26.	<i>Ananeosis</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	17
Fig. 27.	Geon in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	17
Fig. 28.	Euphrates in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	17
Fig. 29.	Tigris in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	17
Fig. 30.	Phison in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	18
Fig. 31.	Kastalia in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	18
Fig. 32.	Crocodile and bull combat scene, House of Leontis at Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author	19

2. Cyrenaica

Fig. 33.	Map of Libya. Public Domain.....	21
Fig. 34.	House of Hesychius, Cyrene. Author.....	22
Fig. 35.	Baldaccino beneath the church at Umm Heneia el Garbia. Author	23
Fig. 36.	Arcades under the church at Umm Heneia el Garbia. Author	24

Fig. 37.	Approach to Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	24
Fig. 38.	Plan of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/2/7 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS.....	25
Fig. 39.	Exterior of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	26
Fig. 40.	Interior of West Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	26
Fig. 41.	Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author.....	27
Fig. 42.	Benches in northwest annex, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	28
Fig. 43.	Solea, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	28
Fig. 44.	Double orthostats, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	29

3. Reading the Mosaic Pavement

Fig. 45.	Anicia Juliana on the dedication page of the Vienna Dioscurides. Public Domain.....	31
Fig. 46.	Inscription above west doorway in Santa Sabina, Rome. With permission of Web Gallery of Art.....	32
Fig. 47.	Plant scroll in Armenian chapel Jerusalem. Public Domain.....	35
Fig. 48.	Church of Ss Lot and Procopius, Khirbet al-Mukhayyat, Jordan. Author.....	36
Fig. 49.	Qabr Hiram mosaic. Now in Louvre Museum, Paris. Public Domain. G. Garitan.....	37
Fig. 50.	Panel with border. Photographed before the panels were lifted. Illustrated London News, December 1957.....	37
Fig. 51.	North aisle, Byzantine Basilica, Petra. Author.....	38
Fig. 52.	South aisle, Byzantine Basilica, Petra. Author.....	38

4. Iconographic Analysis

Fig. 53.	Arrangement of oceanic and Nilotic images in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author ...	40
Fig. 54.	Transept, Basilica A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis. Photo S. Curtis.....	42
Fig. 55.	Teatro Maritime at the Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Author.....	43
Fig. 56.	Detail of the marine <i>thiasos</i> in the Teatro Maritime at Villa Adriana, Tivoli. Author.....	43
Fig. 57.	Okeanus from Ain Témouchent near Sétif, Algeria. Now in the Museum of Antiquities, Algiers. Author.....	44
Fig. 58.	Sea-monster, large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	45
Fig. 59.	Sea-monster, large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	45
Fig. 60.	Sarcophagus from the Cemetery of St. Calixtus, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museum. Author.....	46
Fig. 61.	Loculus slab from the Cemetery of Praetextatus, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museums, Rome. Author.....	46
Fig. 62.	Odysseus mosaic, House of Leontis, Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author.....	47
Fig. 63.	Merman in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	47
Fig. 64.	Phorkys mosaic from the Trajan Baths of Acholla. Now in the Bardo Museum, Tunis. Public Domain. D. Jarvis.....	48
Fig. 65.	Nilometer in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, Israel. Author.....	50
Fig. 66.	Alexandria in the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, Israel. Author.....	50
Fig. 67.	Nilotic imagery at east end of north aisle in the church at Tabgha, Israel. Author.....	51
Fig. 68.	Nilotic imagery in the Villa Silin, Libya. Author.....	51
Fig. 69.	Detail of oceanic border, Basilica, A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis, Greece. Photo S. Curtis.....	52
Fig. 70.	Oceanic and Nilotic panels in the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	52

Fig. 71.	<i>Kosmesis</i> and <i>Ktisis</i> flanking a representation of <i>Polis Nea Theodorias</i> with <i>Ananeosis</i> below. Large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	54
Fig. 72.	<i>Ktisis</i> and <i>Kosmesis</i> from Ras al-Hilal. Now in the Museum at Susa (Apollonia). Author	56
Fig. 73.	<i>Kosmesis</i> , <i>Ktisis</i> and <i>Ananeosis</i> from Taucheira. Photo Dr. W. Wootton.....	57
Fig. 74.	<i>Ktisis</i> . House of Eustolios, Kourion, Cyprus. Author	58
Fig. 75.	<i>Ktisis</i> . House of <i>Ktisis</i> , Antioch. Author	58
Fig. 76.	<i>Ktisis</i> Villa of the Amazons, Urfa, Turkey. Author	58
Fig. 77.	<i>Ktisis</i> . Now in The Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain, Wmpearl.....	59
Fig. 78.	<i>Ktisis</i> . From Jiyyeh, now in the Beiteddine Palace, Lebanon. Public Domain	60
Fig. 79.	Consular diptychs of Aerobindus and Probus Anastatius. Public Domain - Musée de Cluny and Bibliothèque Nationale de France	63
Fig. 80.	Female portrait from The Upper Chapel of Priest John at Wadi' Afrit, Jordan. With permission from The American Center of Research, Jordan	63
Fig. 81.	City personifications, Hippolytus Hall, Madaba, Jordan. Author	64
Fig. 82.	Theodosia and Georgia in the Orpheus Mosaic from Jerusalem, now in the Archaeological Museum. Archaeological Museum. Public Domain	64
Fig. 83.	Mosaic pavement depicting female donors Kissufim, western Negev 578 CE stone and glass IAA 1977-416 Collection of Israel Antiquities Authority Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Elie Posner	65
Fig. 84.	Mosaic in the Church of St Demetrius, Thessaloniki, Greece. Author	67
Fig. 85.	Mosaic in a field at Gasr Bandis in Cyrenaica. Author	68
Fig. 86.	Panel showing two women holding offerings. Gasr Bandis, Cyrenaica. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. <i>Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica</i> , with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies.....	68
Fig. 87.	Male figure next to the female figures at Gasr Bandis, Cyrenaica. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. <i>Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica</i> , with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies	68
Fig. 88.	<i>Ananeosis</i> from the Constantinian Villa, Antioch. Now in Hatay Mosaic Museum, Turkey. Author.....	70
Fig. 89.	Tyche mosaic from Beth She'an, Israel. Now in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Author	70
Fig. 90.	Votive relief of Gadde from Dura Europos. Public Domain, Yale University Art Gallery.....	71
Fig. 91.	<i>Ananeosis</i> above the eagle in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	71
Fig. 92.	Tableau of nine panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	73
Fig. 93.	Birds pulling festoons from a basket in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	74
Fig. 94.	Daniel with festoons behind him. Pécs (Sopianae), Hungary. Author	74
Fig. 95.	Geon in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	76
Fig. 96.	Phison in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	76
Fig. 97.	Euphrates in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	76
Fig. 98.	Tigris in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	76
Fig. 99.	Apse mosaic, Hosios David, Thessaloniki. With permission from David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy	78
Fig. 100.	Two sarcophagi from Sant'Apollinaris in Classe, Ravenna, Italy. Author	79
Fig. 101.	Sarcophagus in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy. With permission from Carola Jäggi, Zurich University	79
Fig. 102.	Geon in the baptistery at Jabaliyah, Israel. With permission from Jean-Baptiste Humbert....	80
Fig. 103.	Baptistery at the Episcopal Basilica, Stobi, Macedonia. Author	81
Fig. 104.	Apotropaic phalli on a street corner in Leptis Magna, Libya. Author	82
Fig. 105.	Phallus carved on a pier outside a cave, thought to have been a Mithraeum, on one of the main streets in Tiddis, Algeria. Author	83

Fig. 106.	Naked hunter, Sepphoris, Israel. Author	84
Fig. 107.	Border in Basilica A (Basilica of Dometios), Nikopolis, Greece. Photo S. Curtis	85
Fig. 108.	The eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	87
Fig. 109.	Personification of Kastalia in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	87
Fig. 110.	Section of the apse mosaic at Hosios David in Thessaloniki, Greece. With permission from David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy	90
Fig. 111.	Personification of Summer, in the Byzantine Basilica at Petra, Jordan. Author	91
Fig. 112.	Section of south aisle in the Byzantine Basilica at Petra, Jordan. Author	92
Fig. 113.	Nave mosaic, Tayibat al-Imam, Syria. Author	93
Fig. 114.	Satyr, Musician and Leopard in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	95
Fig. 115.	Section of the Sheikh Zouède mosaic, Eretz, Israel. With permission from Marek T. Olszewski	97
Fig. 116.	The <i>Pharos</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	100
Fig. 117.	Reverse of a Tetradrachm of Commodus. AD 177-92. Public Domain	100
Fig. 118.	A <i>Pharos</i> mosaic from Ostia Antica, Italy. Author	101
Fig. 119.	Loculus cover from the Coemeterium Jordanorum, Rome. Now in the Vatican Museums. Author	102
Fig. 120.	Boat heading for the <i>Pharos</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	102
Fig. 121.	Pedimented building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	103
Fig. 122.	Ampulla from the Abbey Museum, Bobbio, Italy. Public Domain	104
Fig. 123.	Glass chalice from Palestine, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum. With permission from Dumbarton Oaks Museum	104
Fig. 124.	Above a door in the south wall of the church at Ras al-Hilal, Cyrenaica. Author	104
Fig. 125.	One remaining support for curtain rod above a door in the east wall in Siret el Giambi Monastery, El Beida, Cyrenaica. Author	104
Fig. 126.	<i>Polis Nea Theodorias</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	105
Fig. 127.	Castellated building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	105
Fig. 128.	Plan showing position of castellated building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	106
Fig. 129.	The three architectural representations on the central axis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	107
Fig. 130.	Ostriches at either end of a row of panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	108
Fig. 131.	Horses flanking the pedimented building in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	108
Fig. 132.	Sheep flanking inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	109
Fig. 133.	Bulls flanking sheep and inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	109
Fig. 134.	Bulls flanking a pedestal, Umm Hartain, Syria. With permission from Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar	110
Fig. 135.	Lions flanking the eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	111
Fig. 136.	Mosaic in Basilica D in Byllis, Albania Byllis. With permission from Neritan Ceka	111
Fig. 137.	Stags flanking the lions and the eagle with its prey in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	112
Fig. 138.	Stag with a snake in its mouth in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	113
Fig. 139.	Stag with snake in the Great Palace Mosaic, Istanbul. Author	113
Fig. 140.	Gazelles flanking <i>Kosmesis</i> , <i>Ktisis</i> and <i>Polis Nea Theodorias</i> in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	114
Fig. 141.	Bear in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	114
Fig. 142.	Mismatched 'pair' of animals in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	115

5. Overall Programme

Fig. 143.	Large fish at entrance to east end of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	117
Fig. 144.	Entrance to north aisle, Sabratha, Libya. Author	117
Fig. 145.	Threshold to south aisle, Basilica A, Amphipolis, Greece. Author	117
Fig. 146.	Doorway into the space paved by the large mosaic, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	118
Fig. 147.	Panels by the entrance to the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	118
Fig. 148.	Arrows marking the symmetry that emerges further west in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	119
Fig. 149.	Peacock and wreath on the central axis of the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	120
Fig. 150.	Pedimented building marking the change from Ocean to Nile in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	121
Fig. 151.	Nilotic and Paradisiacal imagery in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	122
Fig. 152.	Honour guard flanking the central axis in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	123
Fig. 153.	Tableau of nine panels in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	124
Fig. 154.	Arriving at Polis Nea Theodorias, flanked by <i>Kosmesis</i> and <i>Ktisis</i> . The large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	125

6. Architectural Setting and Hypotheses

Fig. 155.	Plan of the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia showing the proposed partition. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author.....	126
Fig. 156.	Strip of vine scroll mosaic to the west of the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	127
Fig. 157.	Photograph of showing the small marble tiles. From the Illustrated London News, December 1957	128
Fig. 158.	Episcopium chapel, Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia. Author.....	130
Fig. 159.	Episcopium chapel, Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia. Author.....	130
Fig. 160.	Plan of the East Church Cyrene with location of baptistery and Crocodile/ bull combat scene. From Ward-Perkins, J.B. and R.G. Goodchild 2003. <i>Christian Monuments of Cyrenaica</i> , with permission from the Society of Libyan Studies. Annotations by author ...	131
Fig. 161.	Peacocks by east doorway in northeast annex, East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. Author	132
Fig. 162.	Butrint Baptistery. With permission from The Butrint Foundation.....	133
Fig. 163.	Ceiling mosaic in San Giovanni in Fonte, Naples, Italy. Author	134
Fig. 164.	Baptistery at Butrint with possible consignatorium. With permission from the Butrint Foundation.....	135
Fig. 165.	Mosaic by door between baptistery and adjacent hall at Butrint. With permission from The Butrint Foundation.....	135
Fig. 166.	<i>Kosmesis</i> and <i>Ktisis</i> at the end of the journey, Qasr el-Lebia. Author.....	136

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1. Introduction

In the spring of 1957, a group of labourers working at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya came across part of a polychrome mosaic pavement. Subsequent excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Cyrenaica revealed a sixth-century church 'containing the finest and most interesting set of Christian mosaics yet found in Libya' (Fig. 1).¹

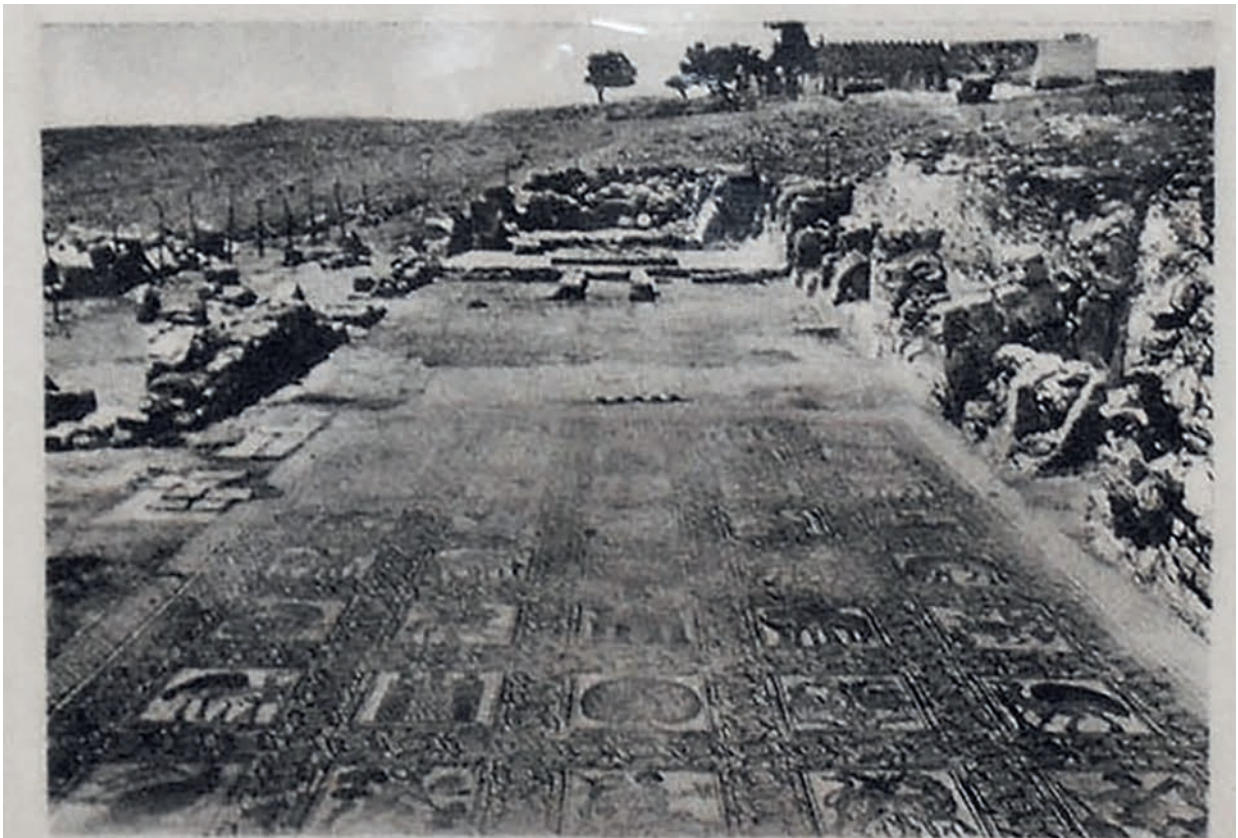


Fig. 1. Large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. As shown in Illustrated London News, December 1957

Overview of the Mosaics

Three fields of mosaics were excavated in the so-called East Church at Qasr el-Lebia. The mosaic from the sanctuary is now displayed in the West Church at Qasr el-Lebia, the pavement from the northeast annex has been moved to the floor of a small museum at the site, and the panels from the large pavement—the focus of this study—have been lifted and now hang like pictures in a gallery on the walls of the museum (the borders of the large pavement have been left *in situ*). It was the opinion of the excavators that all three fields of mosaics were laid at the time the complex was constructed.²

¹ Illustrated London News, 14 December 1957

² Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 273-76. The dating of the mosaics is discussed later in this chapter.

FROM WILDERNESS TO PARADISE



Fig. 2. Fifty Panels from the large pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. Author

The Large Mosaic Pavement

The large pavement is a remarkably rich and complex work that survives almost in its entirety (**Fig. 2**). It is composed of a grid of ten rows of five panels, all tied together by a continuous border of interlocking roundels (**Fig. 3**).³ Each panel contains a different image and they are all orientated to be viewed from the east and arranged to privilege the central east-west axis of the mosaic. Aquatic imagery is ranged around three sides of the pavement, architectural representations punctuate the images of land and sea, and a mix of real people and personifications populate the mosaic landscape. Given its laudatory introduction by the excavators, subsequent studies have been surprisingly dismissive. In an initial article about the pavement John Ward-Perkins suggested that more than half of the fifty panels were purely decorative, that the pavement comprised a random selection of images from a mosaicist's pattern book and that the imagery had little or no symbolic meaning.⁴ Over the following decades the floor was described as 'a heterogeneous assembly of unrelated pictures',⁵ as a work of the 'second order',⁶ as



Fig. 3. Detail of border from the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

³ Each panel measures between c.65cm² and c.67cm² and the whole pavement is roughly 11 m x 5.5 m.

⁴ Ward-Perkins 1958, 190

⁵ Goodchild 1961a 219

⁶ Mathew 1965, 86

having no coherent programme,⁷ and as lacking any organised planning.⁸ Some scholars have allowed that the pavement could be understood to represent God's creation,⁹ and Henry Maguire, who flagged it up as one of the 'most intriguing and puzzling of the works of art to have come down to us from the Justinianic period', has published a cogent analysis of the pavement as an example of a so-called 'Earth and Ocean' composition.¹⁰ On the whole, however, the panels have only been considered piecemeal.

Pavements in the Northeast Annex and Sanctuary

The two subsidiary pavements—those from the northeast annex and the sanctuary—have received much less attention than the large pavement and although they are not central to this study, they are relevant to discussions about the context and interpretations of the large mosaic.

Northeast Annex

The northeast annex was attached to an antechamber at the east end of the north aisle and had openings in its east, west and north walls (**Fig. 4**). The mosaic, now in the museum at the site, is bordered by a series of interlocking shapes, containing birds, fish and poised squares, with Nilotic flora and fauna in the interstices (**Fig. 5**). A wide inner border is inhabited by a variety of creatures, including a camel, harts or gazelles with bells around their necks, a stag holding a serpent in its mouth and peacocks, and these are interspersed with flowering shrubs and fruiting trees (**Fig. 6**). A hunter and his dogs are depicted in the west range of the border. At the centre of the pavement is a Nilotic scene with two men in a coracle-like boat harvesting lotus blossoms (**Fig. 7**), while a third figure hangs on to the tail of a bull that a crocodile is trying to snatch from the riverbank (**Fig. 8**). Several of the motifs have been highlighted by the inclusion of bright green glass tesserae.

There are three inscriptions in the pavement, one by each opening. By the doorway in the west wall an inscription in a *tabula ansata* is orientated to be read by visitors entering the annex (**Fig. 9**).¹¹ Another inscription is positioned by the entrance to the rock-cut tomb chamber to the north of the annex (**Fig. 10**).¹² A third is orientated to be read by those leaving the annex and entering an unexcavated suite of rooms to the east (**Fig. 11**).¹³

The mosaic in the northeast annex was almost certainly laid at the same time and by the same atelier as the large pavement in the adjacent room. A number of motifs are virtually identical, for example, harts with bells around their necks, a stag with a serpent in its mouth, trees, Nilotic elements, and the border around the inscription in the west doorway. In addition, inscriptions in both pavements mention an indiction year three.

Sanctuary

The mosaic in the sanctuary was arranged around a central altar base. Trees growing from the four outer corners of the tableau denote diagonal axes and the overall composition comprises four repetitive, but

⁷ Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 37

⁸ Dunbabin 1982, 613

⁹ Grabar 1962, 138; Stucchi 1975, esp. 400-02

¹⁰ Maguire 1987, 44-55

¹¹ 'Lord of the hosts be (or you are) with us, our succour, God of Jacob, mighty God, eternal God, be (or you are) the shield of your servant Theodorus the new deacon(?)'. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 283

¹² 'Your witnesses were trusted; that greatly adorns your house'. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284

¹³ 'This good work also came into being in the time of Theodorus the most holy new bishop. In indiction year 3'. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284

1. INTRODUCTION

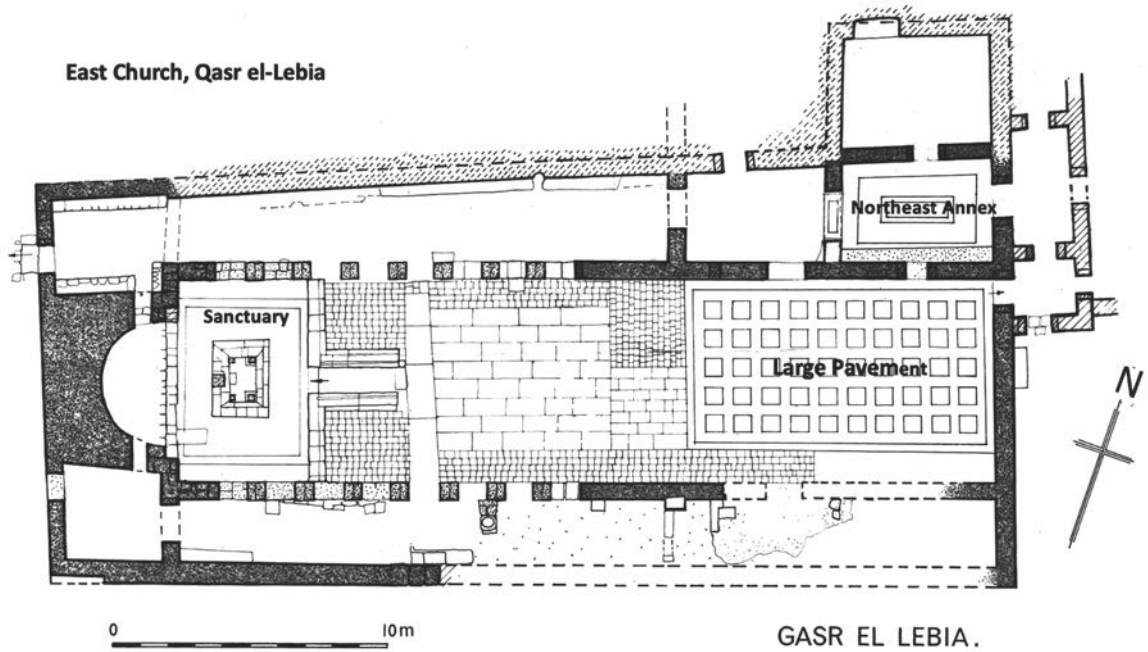


Fig. 4. Plan of East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. D20/5/10/17 from BILNAS Archive, reproduced with permission from BILNAS. Annotations by author



Fig. 5. Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 6. Northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 7. Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

1. INTRODUCTION



Fig. 8. Detail of central panel in the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

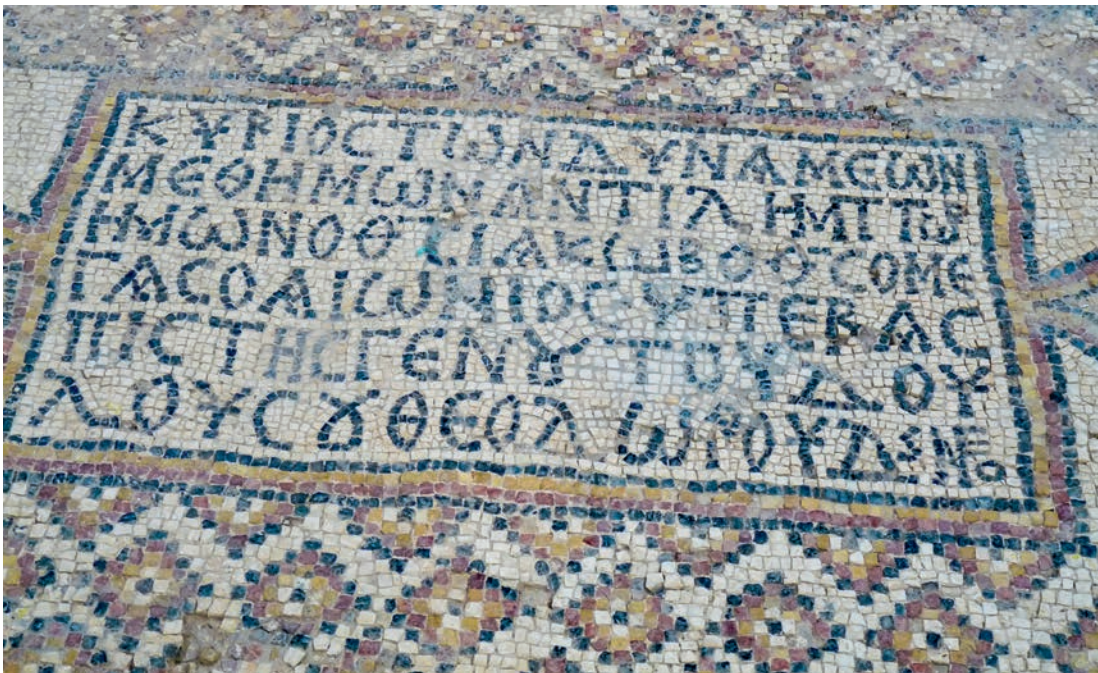


Fig. 9. Inscription by the doorway in the west wall of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 10. Inscription by opening into tomb chamber to the north of the northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 11. Inscription by doorway at the east end of northeast annex, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 12. Sanctuary pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

not identical, figured panels inhabited by a variety of birds and animals (**Fig. 12**). Each panel features two stags flanking a decorated roundel containing, on the north, south and west sides, a jewelled cross, and on the east side, an inscription.¹⁴ Birds with festoons in their beaks sit on top of the roundels with another pair below (**Fig. 13**).

Although the assumption has been that all three fields of mosaics in the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia were contemporaneous—both with each other and with the construction of the church—certain aspects of the sanctuary mosaic argue against this. This pavement is less schematic than the other two; even though the trees provide a degree of separation between the four sides of the mosaic, the images are not ordered into registers or contained within frames. None of the images common to both the large pavement and the mosaic in the northeast annex are repeated here and the borders are completely different. The pavement actually bears more resemblance to a mosaic paving the sanctuary of the Central Church at Cyrene than to the other two pavements at Qasr el-Lebia (**Fig. 14**). Here, the mosaic is also arranged around a central altar base and it is also roughly divided into four sections by trees. Nilotic scenes feature on the north and south sides of the pavement but otherwise the flora and fauna are reminiscent of those found at Qasr el-Lebia. There is also a roundel containing a cross to the east of the altar base, in this case flanked by peacocks rather than stags, but the birds below the roundel

¹⁴ The inscription was already badly damaged at the time of excavation but reads: '[This] work [too] [came into being] in the time of [the very holy] and pious Bishop Theodorus'. Translation by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 284



Fig. 13. Sanctuary pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 14. Sanctuary Pavement, Central Church, Cyrene. Copyright © The Society for Libyan Studies 2021

1. INTRODUCTION



Fig. 15. Altar base and mosaic at time of excavation. East Church, Qasr el-Lebia. From Illustrated London News, December 1957

are almost identical to those at Qasr el-Lebia.¹⁵ Ward-Perkins and Richard Goodchild believed that the mosaic in the sanctuary of the Central Church at Cyrene was laid when the church was built and, based on the similarities between this pavement and that in the sanctuary at Qasr el-Lebia, dated the Central Church at Cyrene to the Justinianic period.¹⁶ Sandro Stucchi, however, dated the Central Church and the mosaic to the second half of the fifth century.¹⁷ If then, the sanctuary pavement at Qasr el-Lebia were to take its date from the Central Church in Cyrene—rather than the other way around—it is possible that it could predate those at the east end of the East Church complex.¹⁸

If the sanctuary pavement in the East Church at Qasr el-Lebia is understood to predate those at the east end of the building, it would help to explain why, when the church was excavated, the pavement in the sanctuary was partially obscured by the base for an altar (**Fig. 15**). At some point after the mosaic had been laid the altar base was enlarged and a step was added on the west side. The new base was laid on top

¹⁵ For the East Church at Cyrene see Alföldi-Rosenbaum and Ward-Perkins 1980, 115-17. The pavement was in a very poor state of repair when the author visited in 2010, but has since been partially restored by a local team from the Department of Antiquities of Cyrene in 2020: *Libyan Studies*, vol. 52, 2021, 182-87

¹⁶ Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 157

¹⁷ This was based on the evidence of its masonry technique: Stucchi 1975, 382-83

¹⁸ Although the use of trees to create a diagonal axis does appear in other sixth-century pavements, it was already popular in the fifth century and hence its use here does not necessarily substantiate a sixth-century date. Fifth-century examples include the ibex mosaic at Caesarea: Hachlili 2009, fig. IX-6; and the fifth-century *Megalopsychia* mosaic in the Yakto Complex at Daphne in Syria: Hachlili 2009, fig. VII-7

of the mosaic, truncating the jewelled crosses, rendering the inscription on the east side illegible, and beheading stags and birds. It is not known when this happened or what, if anything, was used to cover the remaining mosaic, but it seems unlikely that headless deer, incomplete crosses and a fragmented inscription would have been considered suitable ornamentation for a functioning sanctuary. Given the ambiguity about the date of this mosaic, it is conceivable, although no more than conjecture, that the west end of the church was already extant when the large hall and subsidiary rooms at the east end of the complex were added, and that the sanctuary underwent refurbishment at this time. The excavators noted that the west end of the nave had been paved with large marble slabs, evidenced only by imprints in the ground at the time of excavation,¹⁹ and it is possible that these may have extended into the chancel area, covering the disrupted mosaic pavement.

Dating

The East Church and its mosaics have been dated to AD 539-40 on account of two references to an indiction year three; one in the northeast annex (see above) and the other in a dedicatory inscription near the centre of the large pavement (Fig. 16).²⁰ Extrapolating a date from indiction years is not straightforward and at Qasr el-Lebia there is no stratigraphic evidence and no recorded coins or ceramics to corroborate this date.²¹ The currently accepted dating relies on a circular argument that postulates that an image of *Polis Nea Theodorias* (The new city of Theodorias) in the central panel at the west end of the pavement represents the town in which the church was built, and that this settlement was renovated and renamed in honour of the empress Theodora (d.548), in her lifetime and during the reign of Justinian (r.527-565) (Fig. 17). This assumption has been perpetuated by modern scholarship: Gervase Mathew wrote that ‘in the 6th century this [*Polis Nea Theodorias*] was the small Episcopal see of Olbia and in 539 it was renamed in honour of the reigning empress as the New City of Theodorias’;²² A.H.M. Jones states that in Cyrenaica, Justinian ‘created a new—and very small—city west of Cyrene, called Theodorias’;²³ and Paul Magdalino confidently claims that ‘although not mentioned by Procopius, this [*Polis Nea Theodorias*] was almost certainly one of the cities refounded by Justinian’.²⁴ Settlements in other parts of the empire



Fig. 16. Inscription in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia.
Author

¹⁹ Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 277

²⁰ The inscription has been transcribed and translated by Reynolds in Ward-Perkins and Goodchild 2003, 282. Indiction years specified the position of a year within a taxation cycle. These cycles were either five or fifteen years and they were calculated from different dates in different regions. An indiction year alone is, therefore, not reliable dating evidence. For discussions about indiction years: Blackburn and Holdford-Stevens 1999, 769-70; Meimaris 1992, esp. 32; Whitby and Whitby 1989, esp. 10

²¹ Although a few coins have been recorded at other Cyrenaican sites with comparable mosaics, they are generally too badly corroded to be of use for dating purposes. For example, see, Widrig 1975, 69-70

²² Mathew 1965, 86

²³ Jones 1937, 362. Jones does note, however, that Hierocles and Georgius, when listing sixth-century cities, ignored Theodorias and recorded only the five old cities.

²⁴ Magdalino 1988, 105

1. INTRODUCTION



Fig. 17. *Polis Nea Theodorias*, in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

are known to have been renamed in honour of the empress,²⁵ but even though Justinian's reputation for *renovatio*, and for church-building in particular, makes it tempting to credit new or renovated ecclesiastical buildings of the sixth century to the emperor, imperial initiatives in Cyrenaica appear to have been focused mainly on defending boundaries and fortifying the region in order to restrain 'barbarians in that quarter from making sudden and unexpected inroads into the Roman territory.'²⁶ There is no mention of any church building and there is nothing, other than the mosaic itself, to tie either Justinian or Theodora to *Polis Nea Theodorias*.²⁷ As Joyce Reynolds has pointed out, although it is 'a very tempting conjecture that Justinian built a fort here [at Qasr el-Lebia], there is no positive evidence for it'.²⁸

However, as well as the indiction year mentioned in the inscriptions, certain diagnostic features help to substantiate a sixth-century date for the pavement. One of its most distinctive aspects is its grid formation. Pavements organised as grids appeared across the central Mediterranean region in the late fifth and first half of the sixth centuries, especially in Albania, Epirus Vetus and Greece,²⁹ and although the mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia is not precisely matched elsewhere, it does nonetheless fall into this category.³⁰ The pattern of interlocking roundels that frame the panels was also popular in the sixth century and while the recurrence of this pattern does not necessarily signal direct influence or contact between the different regions, it does help to corroborate the sixth-century date assigned to the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia (see Fig. 3).³¹

²⁵ John Malalas notes that in AD 528 'the Roman Emperor renamed the fortress known as Anasarthon, *Theodorias* after the Augusta, having granted it city status': *Chronographia*18:32, cited in Jeffreys *et al.* 1986, 259. In *De Aedificiis*, VI.5, Procopius records that the inhabitants of Béga (*Vaga*) in Proconsularis renamed their town *Vaga Theodorjada*, cited in Stewart *et al.* 2005, 162. Grabar mistakenly associated Qasr el-Lebia with the town of *Vaga*: Grabar 1968b, 47

²⁶ Procopius *De Aedificiis* VI.2: Stewart *et al.* 2005, 155. Procopius also records that in Cyrenaica, Justinian instigated the rebuilding of the city walls at Berenike and Tauchaira, the building of two forts and two fortified monasteries on the southern frontier of Pentapolis, the renovation of the aqueduct at Ptolemais and the installation of a bath house at Berenike: Procopius *De Aedificiis* VI.2: Stewart *et al.* 2005, 153-56

²⁷ It is thought that Theodora accompanied Hecebolus, governor of Pentapolis, to Apollonia but nothing more is known of her time there: Sarris 2007, 39. See also Potter 2017, 57

²⁸ Reynolds 2001, 171

²⁹ Including a pavement from the church of St. Paraskevi at Kozani in Greece, now on display in the Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki; the nave of the Basilica of Thyrsos at Tegea in Greece: Spiro 1978, 182-83; the narthex of Basilica A and the nave pavements of Basilicas D and E at Byllis in Albania: Muçaj and Raynaud 2005, 383-98; the nave of the Vrina Plain Basilica, Butrint in Albania: Mitchell 2019, 336-57; the narthex of the Episcopal Basilica and the nave of the Extra Muros Basilica at Stobi in Macedonia: Kolarik 1987, 295-306; and the north aisle of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis in Macedonia: Gjorgjievska 2008, 64-67

³⁰ Grid mosaics have also been found in Roman villas but unlike the fifth- and sixth-century examples, they tended to comprise mainly geometric patterns (for example, the Drunkenness of Hercules mosaic in Vienne, Dunbabin 1999, 77), and on the whole, imagery was orientated to be viewed from all sides of the room, for example, the so-called Rustic Calendar from Saint-Romain-en-Gal: Dunbabin 1999, 80

³¹ Similar borders have been found in the north aisle of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis: Gjorgjievska 2008, 64-67, and also in the narthex pavement of the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi: Kolarik 1987, 295-306. Blocks of these roundels were used in



Fig. 18. Sheep in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author



Fig. 19. Gazelle in front of a tree in the large pavement, Qasr el-Lebia. Author

A number of panels in the pavement depict animals positioned in front of trees as though suspended on poles in the manner of merry-go-round horses, an arrangement that was particularly fashionable in the sixth century (**Figs 18–21**). Examples from elsewhere include a ram in a chapel in Madaba, Jordan (**Fig. 22**),³² a bull and a lion in the chancel of the sixth-century Church of Deacon Thomas at Mount Nebo, also in Jordan,³³ and a leopard in the pavement in the north aisle of the sixth-century church at Kissufim in Israel (**Fig. 23**).³⁴

Notably, there are eight personifications in the pavement at Qasr el-Lebia. There are three abstract concepts: *Kosmesis* (adornment), *Ktisis* (foundation),³⁵ and *Ananeosis* (renewal), (**Figs 24–26**) four Rivers of Paradise (**Figs 27–30**), and Kastalia, nymph of Apollo's oracular springs (**Fig. 31**). Personification was a common theme in Late Antique visual culture, but it was not until the very end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth centuries that these figures began to migrate from secular contexts to ecclesiastical settings. Personifications of Earth and ocean, the seasons and months, rivers, and abstract concepts, regularly featured in the ornamentation of sixth-century churches and the personifications at Qasr el-Lebia can be seen as part of that development. Of note is the fact that until the very end of the fifth century the Rivers of Paradise were almost always depicted as four streams flowing from the Mount of Waters and were generally confined to the walls or vaults of churches. It was only from the beginning of the sixth century that they began to appear on floors and to take the form of personifications.³⁶ Another detail

the sixth-century Church of Küçük Tavşan Adsi at Bodrum in Turkey: Andaloro and Pogliani 2011, 19; and in the sixth-century Plaosnek Basilica at Ohrid in Macedonia, for a general discussion on Plaosnek basilica see Bakovska 2010

³² Piccirillo 1997, 128, fig. 138

³³ Church of Deacon Thomas, Mount Nebo: Piccirillo 1997, fig. 266

³⁴ Kissufim: Hachlili 2009, pl. VII-7

³⁵ *Kosmesis* can also mean 'order' or 'governance': Guarducci 1975, 673. *Ktisis* can also mean 'creation' and, more rarely, 'possession' and 'acquisition': Leader-Newby 2005, 240; Stucchi 1975, 401

³⁶ For example, in the sixth-century polyconchal Plaosnek church at Ohrid in Macedonia, the Rivers were depicted as mask-like heads spewing water from their mouths: Bitrakova-Gozdanova 1975, 55–57; in the sixth-century basilica of Thyrsois at Tegea in Greece they were depicted as half-length, semi-naked figures: Maguire 2012, 42–43