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THE NILOTIC MOSAIC
IN SAINT STEPHEN'S CHURCH OF GAZA
IN CHORICIUS' DESCRIPTION*

Some time after the dedication of St.Sergius' Church in Gaza, when Choricus delivered his first oration in honour of the founder Bishop Marcianos (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 also contained a prolonged *ecphrasis* of the church became yet another panegyric speech in honour of the same man, Bishop Marcianos, 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.

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

² Kirsten C., *Questiones Choricianae*, Breslau 1894, pp. 7-24; Glucker C., *The City of Gaza...*, p.71, n.204; Abel F.-M, *Gaza au VIe siècle d'après le rhéteur Chorikios*, *Revue Biblique* 40, p. 23.



Fig. 1. The Nilotic mosaic in the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish, Tabgha, 5th century.

The church was a timber-roofed, triple-nave basilica supplied with upper galleries (γυναικωνίτις) and provided with a spacious square atrium (προτεμένισμα)³, which consisted of four columned porticos (τέτρασι στοαῖς ἀβρυνόμενον), and a façade strengthened with two towers (πύργοι). Choricus did not forget to add that the columns of the atrium gleamed ‘whiter than snow’ (Il. 20, 437) (LM II, 31). Let us note a couple of other architectural details. A high staircase led pilgrims up from the road to the western portico of the atrium (πλήθος βαθμῶν) (LM II, 29). Twin towers like the ones which once

flanked the main western entrance to the Church of St. Stephen are still preserved in a number of Syrian churches from the same period, and have always been regarded as characteristic of the Syrian Christian architecture⁴. Peña in his recent valuable study *Lieux de pèlerinage en Syrie* (2005) enumerated to a number of such towered basilicas, as for example the church in Qalb Lozeh, Ruweiha (6th century) or Turmanin. The architectural complex of St. Stephen’s in Gaza also contained a sacristy (οἶκος ὑπηρέταις ἱερουργίας) with an entrance leading from its southern portico. It also encompassed the bishop’s reception hall, and an *auditorium* (χώρος εἰς πρόσρσιν) lo-

³ Abel F.-M, *Gaza au VIe siècle*, p. 26; Mango C., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453. Sources and Documents*, Toronto.2004, p. 55.

⁴ Mango C., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p.68, n.72 bibl.; Butler H., *Early churches in Syria*, Princeton 1929, p.210ff.; Lassus J., *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie*, Paris.1947, 235ff.; Abel F.-M, *Gaza au VIe siècle*, p. 26 apparently interpreted the text as if it were pointing to the towers flanking the propylon, the opening propylon which led to the atrium. Consequently he had in mind the west wall of the atrium that crowned the staircase. The grammar of the passage does not preclude such a reading. The usual interpretation which refers to a towered basilica of the ordinary Syro-Palestinian type seems to be a natural solution to the locus under discussion. Abel F.-M, *Gaza au VIe siècle...*, p. 23, n.3, was aware of this construction element, Diehl C., *Manuel d’art byzantin*, Paris 1925, vol. I, 31; Downey G., *Gaza in the early sixth century*, Norman University Oklahoma 1963, p. 134.

cated among the trees of the garden (*LM II*, 33). In the church interior Choricus' attention was attracted by four porphyry columns (χρώμασιν ἐσθῆτος βασιλικῆς, *LM II*, 36), which separated the chancel from the central nave. The central nave was closed off by a semicircular apse covered with a semi-dome (*LM II*, 37)⁵. Choricus' description of the side walls in the central nave is particularly impressive and rich in technical terminology: 'Lofty columns (κίονες ὑψηλοί), an architrave (σύνδεσμος) connecting their capitals (τὰς κορυφάς); above it, a wall riveted with marble (μαρμάρους); a second range of columns; another stretch of masonry decorated with animal figures (θηρίων πεποικιλμένη μορφαῖς); arched windows (θυρίδες ἐν ἀψίδων γενόμεναι σχήματι) – these added together make up the height (of the church)' (*LM II*, 48, trans.C.Mango). The walls of the basilica were crowned with a coffer ceiling (ξύλα γὰρ ἐνταῦθα πολυτελῆ καλαθίσκοις κεκαλυμμένα) (*LM II*, 53) ('here are costly timbers covered with coffering' trans.C.Mango)⁶.

Choricus devoted a large part of his *ecphrasis* on the Church of St.Sergius to the description of its rich figural decoration. 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:

The picture of 'everything the sea brings forth and all the tribute of the earth' (trans.C.Mango: οὐσα 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.

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).

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 εὐφροσύνην αἰ στοαί 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.

⁵ Downey G., *Gaza*, p. 136.

⁶ Abel F.-M., *Gaza au VIe siècle*, p. 27.

In this paper I would like to focus exclusively on St. Stephen's nilotic mosaic.

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 Marcianos – 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 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 art⁷. 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 century⁸. 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)⁹. 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 motif¹⁰. The latter appears on many Nilotic mosaics in Palestine (Sepphoris, Tabgha, Bet

⁷ Balty J., *Thèmes nilotiques dans la mosaïque tardive du Proche-Orient*, in: *Mosaïques antiques du Proche-Orient. Chronologie, iconographie, interprétation*, Paris 1995, p.245.

⁸ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements of Nilotic Scenes on Byzantine Mosaic Pavements in Israel*, PEQ 113, p.111.

⁹ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, table 1, p.108

¹⁰ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p. 107.



Fig. 2. The birds in the Nilotic mosaic. The Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet, AD 557.

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'¹¹. I had the good fortune of seeing the Nilotic mosaic of Tabgha *in situ* (5th century) (Pl.I). 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 Nilotic landscape in the Church of S.John the Baptist also included herons and ibises¹². 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 (Pl. II-III), Casa del Fauno in Pompeii, Tabgha).

We have already mentioned a duck resting in a lotus flower as a favourite subject. It returns time and again in the Nilotic landscapes. The ichneumon pictured in combat with a cobra may be regarded as yet another figural component of mosaic decoration¹³. This motif appears on a largely destroyed Ktisis mosaic in Antioch¹⁴, in the churches of Qabr Hiram (St.Christopher's) and Zahrani, on the Orpheus mosaic from Jerusalem kept in the Archaeological Museum

¹¹ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p.116.

¹² Balty J., *Thèmes nilotiques*, p.247.

¹³ Balty J., *Le cobra et la mangouste dans les mosaïques tardives du Proche-Orient*, in: Balty 1995, pp. 217-226 = *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 25, 1976, p. 217, n.1; Aymard J., *La querelle du cobra et de la mangouste dans l'Antiquité*, *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome, Antiquité* 71, pp.227-262.

¹⁴ Balty J., *Le cobra et la mangouste...*, p.218, n.6 bibl.

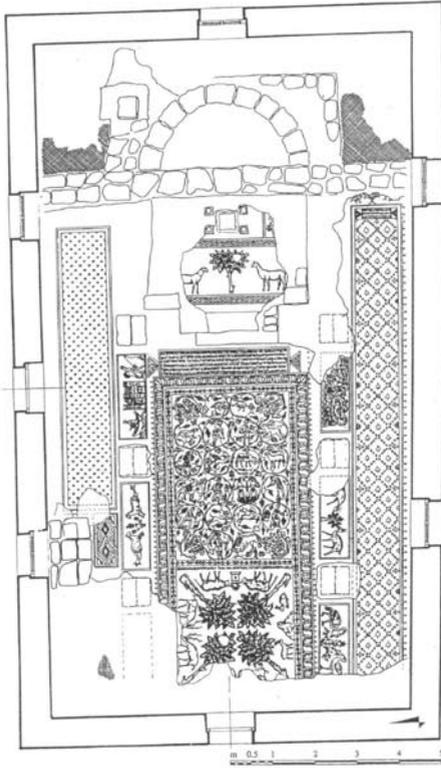


Fig. 3. Hunting games entwined in stulised palm and vine branches, the Four Trees of the Paradise and the Nilotic mosaic in the Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet, AD 557.

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 decoration¹⁹. 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 Mem-

of Istanbul, and also in Shahba, El-Mukhayyat, Ma'in, in the Michaelion of Huarte and in the Casa del Fauno in Pompeii. In Tabgha the cobra fights with a pelican¹⁵. I am going to return to this point in the discussion of decorative qualities and a possible religious symbolism of the Nilotic mosaics.

Sometimes we may be justified in suspecting a reflection of the Orientalist painters. This seems to be the case in a detail showing a cow attacked by a crocodile on a river bank. Such a motif was identified by E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum on a mosaic from Kyrene¹⁶. In all likelihood the image was inspired by a painting by Nealces mentioned in Pliny the Elder's *History of Art* (*HN* 35,138). The old master painted a donkey and a crocodile waiting in ambush¹⁷.

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 boat¹⁸.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁶ Balty J., *Le cobra et la mangouste*, p.246, n.8.

¹⁷ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p.115; E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum, J.Ward-Perkins, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches*, 1980 p.46; P. Mayboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 1995, pp. 100, 371-372, nn.18-19.

¹⁸ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p.107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, table 1.

phis (Gerasa, Khirbet as-Samra)²⁰. 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'²¹ 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, 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*) applied in the intercolumnia of church interiors (Sts. Loth and Procopius' in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) or simply as *motifs de remplissage*²². 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, Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) (Pl. I-III)²³.

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 churches²⁴. To illustrate her thesis, she drew attention to the mosaic from Collemaancio in Italy (2nd century AD) remarkable for its purely decorative character, namely its symmetrical arrangement which consists of two hippopotami and two crocodiles set against one another around a square central field²⁵. Balty further argued that it was exactly the mosaics'

²⁰ Ibid., pp.111 ff.

²¹ Ibid., p. 110.

²² Balty J., *Thèmes nilotiques*, p.250.

²³ Ibid., p.251.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 249, 251, 252, 253.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 251, Pl.36,2, n.30, p.249; S.Aurigemma, *Les Thermes de Diocletien et le Musée National Romain*, 1955, pp.30-31, pl.X-XI.

non-religious character which proved decisive for their popularity in the period when Christians were looking for decorative patterns suitable for their churches, while hitherto popular mythological subjects were out of the question²⁶. Consequently Balty was not inclined to believe in their Christian symbolism²⁷. This latter argument of hers may well be illustrated by a charming story of a young mosaicist (μουσωτής) who ‘was removing the old mosaic from the wall representing the story of Aphrodite’ (ιστορίαν ἔχοντος τῆς Ἀφροδίτης) (*Vita S.Eutychiei* 53) in a private villa in Amaseia, because the owner of the house was going to convert it into a chapel of the Archangel Michael and the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. When the mosaicist ‘had cut out the picture of the unclean Aphrodite (τὸ θέμα τῆς ἀκαθάρτου Ἀφροδίτης), the demon that resided in it struck his hand which became inflamed and swollen.’ The story continues that the young artist was healed by St.Eutychius, whose icon he painted and hung on the wall of the new sanctuary in Amaseia²⁸. We can legitimately suspect that it was a mosaic image of St.Eutychius which adorned the sanctuary’s interior. The pagan mosaics were erased.

Hachlili in her industrious and helpful overview of the Nilotic mosaics which have been uncovered in Israel, in general followed Balty’s line of interpretation. Hachlili emphasised that the 5th-6th century Nilotic mosaics inherited from the Hellenistic period lost their original pagan religious meaning (the worship of the Nile divinity) and acquired various new meanings in the changed cultural milieu. She stressed the fact that the Nilotica created ‘a general phenomenon of mosaic pavement art in Israel’ and that they were found ‘in different kinds of buildings, pagan, Jewish and Christian’²⁹. Hachlili also adduced some alternative opinions, which differ from her own and Balty’s views. They seem to be more important for the Nilotica in St.Stephen’s of Gaza, that is the literary description, while Hachlili and Balty were preoccupied exclusively with the archaeological material. 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 interpretation of the Nilotica in the Christian churches³⁰. In particular Maguire was

²⁶ Balty J., *Thèmes nilotiques*, p. 252.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.253.

²⁸ PG 86 II, 2333-2336, *Vita S.Eutychiei*, Patriarchae Constantinopolitani ab Eustathio Presbytero; Eng.trans. Mango C., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire...*, p.133ff.; Eustathius lived in exile in Amaseia in the years 565-77.

²⁹ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p.118.

³⁰ Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p. 118; Maguire H., *Earth and Ocean. The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art*, London 1987, pp. 43-44; 50-55.

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 Paradise³¹. However, 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). $\phi\iota\lambda\acute{\iota}\alpha\ \tau\acute{\omega}\nu\ \zeta\omega\acute{\omega}\nu$ 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 inscription³². 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 pavement³³. The mosaic pavement in the nave of the church in Huarte near Apamea is illustrative of the efforts undertaken by the donors and priests to assimilate pagan floral and animal 'atlases' to the realm of Christian art. The image of Adam at the centre of the nave just before the altar and at the end of the profane space transformed the atlas of animals and birds into the

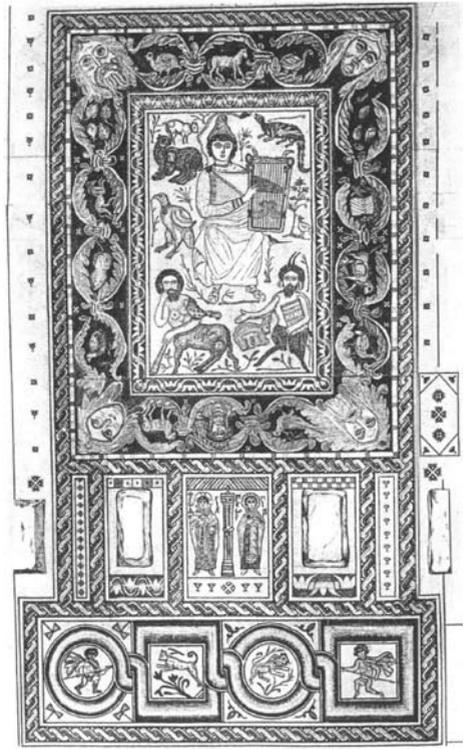


Fig. 4. The Orpheus-Christ mosaic from Jerusalem, 5th-7th century, The Archaeological Museum of Istanbul.

³¹ Hermann A., *Der Nil und die Christen*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 2, 1959, p. 64-67; Hachlili R., *Iconographic Elements*, p.118.

³² Balty J., *Le cobra et la mangouste*, p. 220.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.224.

Christian Paradise from the Book of Genesis³⁴. The Orpheus-like Christ is a variation on the subject. He plays on a lyre among peaceful animals entranced by his voice and music on the large mosaic uncovered in Jerusalem and now kept at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, an unforgettable experience of artistic perfection for the visitor to the Museum (Pl. IV)³⁵. It is interesting to observe that the central *emblema* with Orpheus has been frequently published without its original setting, which endows the image with a strikingly pagan appearance. And only in its full ideological context, with the two female figures in a nimbus, named Georgia nad Theodosia, represented below Orpheus, and dressed in *palliae* and *dalmaticae*, which can be read as allusive of their Byzantine court milieu, allows the viewer to identify the person of Christ in the otherwise very pagan looking image of Orpheus. A similar mosaic with Orpheus was also found in Shahba (Philippopolis) and still remains *in situ*³⁶.

There is evidence that those seemingly 'neutral' and 'purely decorative' mosaics were nonetheless carefully observed. The human figures which made up a usual component of the mosaic decoration in many churches of Palestine and Jordan (e.g. in Scythopolis, Beit Jibrin, Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) were intentionally avoided in the region of Apamea, as corroborated by the empty boats on the River Nile (Umnir)³⁷. 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 Neilos of Sinai (or, as more recently preferred, from Ancyra)³⁸. However, the *Letter to Olympiodorus* which is known from the *Documents of the Council (787)* is missing from the voluminous corpus of Neilos' letters (PG 79, 81-581). Neilos expressed his decisively hostile attitude towards the fishing, hunting and other types of genere scenes in church

³⁴ Canivet P. et M., *I complessi Cristiani di Huarte*, Rivista di archeologia Cristiana 56, 1980, fig. 9, 11.

³⁵ Avi-Yonah M. 1981, *Art in Ancient Palestine. Selected Studies*, Jerusalem 1981, no. 133, pp. 319f. Pl. 50, 51.

³⁶ Balty J., *Le cobra et la mangouste*, p.222.

³⁷ Balty J., *Thèmes nilotiques*, p.252.

³⁸ Thümmel H., *Neilos von Ankyra über die Bilder*, Byzantinische Zeitschrift 71, 1978, p. 11; cf. a complicated issue of the letter's authenticity discussed by Thümmel 1978: Nicephorus quoted Neilos' letter to Olympiodorus in his writings, *adv. iconomachos* 14; *antirrhesis* 425; *elenchos* Paris gr.1250, Alexander P., *The Iconoclastic Council of St.Sophia (815) and Its Definition (Horos)*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 7, 1953, Hennepf H., *Textus byzantini ad iconomachiam pertinentes*, Leiden 1969.

decoration. We can deduce that his ban must have also encompassed Nilotic landscapes. The discussion which absorbed Thümmel's attention mainly regarded the letter's integrity and authenticity and consequently does not seem to be central to us. There cannot be any doubt about that Neilos 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 Neilos' letter. Thümmel argued that this version was forged by the iconodule-oriented Nicean Fathers (787).

However, the passage of the letter we are interested in 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 ἐκθύμως 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 Neilos' attitude and clearly speaks of a prevailing vogue for figural decoration in Christian buildings. Neilos was not isolated in his opinion among his contemporaries. His attitude was shared by Epiphanius of Salamis and Theodotus of Ancyra, who were later referred to by the iconoclasts as authorities in the theological discussions on the cult of icons. An interesting testimony from the early 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 Neilos' attitude. Its author, Stephen the Deacon, was actually an iconodule and adversary of the icono-

clasts. The passage runs as follows: ‘He (Constantine V) converted the church (of Saint Mary of Blachernae) into a storehouse of fruit and an aviary, for he covered it with mosaics of trees and all kinds of birds and beasts, and certain swirls of ivy-leaves enclosing cranes, crows and peacocks’ (trans.C.Mango)³⁹. 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 Marcianos, in the church founded by the Prefect Olympiodorus, in the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Tabgha (Pl.I), or in the minor church of Khan Khalde. They must have ironically asked themselves or their companions: is this a church or an aviary? Certainly this attitude represents only a special current within a larger stream. In the Early Church we also find those who accepted Christian art in general, and what is more even admired and encouraged Christian artistic creativity. Asterios of Amaseia, Gregory of Nyssa, Paulinus of Nola or Marcianos of Gaza may be mentioned in this context. Bishops like Gregory of Nyssa or Marcianos of Gaza were men of authority wielding a certain degree of executive power. Thus we have a spectrum of contemporary opinions on church decoration in the history of the Early Church.

The *interpretatio Christiana* of the Nilotic landscapes must have certainly played its role in the discussion on church decoartion. However, the aesthetic component was of great importance. The sacred geography of Paradise and the Holy Family in Egypt integrated with the purely decorative qualities of the mosaic carpets or wall paintings in the churches of the Christian Orient. They blended together in a way proper to the *beaux arts*. A visitor to the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Tabgha realised how impressive they were. They opened up to the viewer a paradise of exotic birds, rendered with love of colour and shape, and the opulence of floral forms delineated with care and sensitivity to their natural beauty. In this mysterious garden of art forms the viewer can forget about their possible religious meaning, enchanted by their shapes, colours and composition. In the same way St.Augustine in his *Confessions* complained about the beauty of voices and music of the Psalms, which distracted the attention of believers during church ceremonies.

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³⁹ Vita S.Stephani iunioris, c.1120.