THE SHELLAL MOSAIC IN THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

STYLE AND IMAGERY

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The so-called "Shellal mosaic", at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, is the floor of a sixth century, Byzantine church, discovered in the western Negev area of what is now Israel. It is one of many such mosaic pavements dating from the fourth to the sixth century A.D., scattered around the Mediterranean area. A large concentration of such pavements, bearing very similar designs of birds and animals on a ground of a vine trellis issuing from an amphora, are found in Palestine. These can all be dated, by inscription or by archaeological means, to within the early Byzantine period, between about 515 and 575 A.D. Many fall directly within the period of rule of Justinian (527-565 A.D): the Shellal floor, dated to 561-2, is one of these. The fact that almost identical designs are found in early Christian churches, as well as in synagogues and private houses, raises the question as to whether they carry iconographic meaning or whether they are purely decorative continuations of earlier pagan artistic tradition.

The purpose of this study was to establish the place and role of the Shellal mosaic in the corpus of Justinianic, Palestinian floor mosaics. This has involved a comparison of the Shellal floor with other mosaic pavements, to establish whether or not it shows the influence of Constantinople or is a provincial work. It has also involved the examination of the geographic, historical and economic situation in the area at that time to discover what Hellenistic, Byzantine or Oriental traditions may have influenced the design. Attention has been devoted to workshop practice and technical methods in sixth century Gaza and customs of patronage, to determine the function of the pavement. An examination of
archaeological data and historical documents was undertaken to establish the historical and geographic background to the church and its floor, and classical and patristic texts were studied as sources for the interpretation of the iconography of the mosaic.

**Discovery of the Mosaic**

The Shellâl mosaic was discovered by soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division on the 17th. April, 1917, during the second Battle of Gaza. It was found at the summit of a small conical hill overlooking the Wadi Ghazzah, or Wadi of Gaza, about 22 kms. south-east of Gaza itself. A British Army officer stationed in the area at the time, described Shellâl as desolate, with blinding glare and clouds of dust sweeping through nearly all day in the summer, but remarks that it must always have been an important site, both as a crossing of the Wadi and as the site of an excellent spring of water. (1)

The mosaic was discovered by an Australian soldier during the establishment of a visual signalling station on the small hill overlooking the ford. (2) It was buried beneath a two metre layer of clay and debris, but had been partially uncovered by Turkish soldiers in the course of building a gun emplacement. During this operation they had dug two parallel trenches diagonally across the buried pavement, causing considerable damage to it.

2. Despite some dispute over the identity of the discoverer of the mosaic, it seems that the credit must go to Corporal (later Sergeant) E.E. Lovell-Shore, who was in charge of the party of signallers and who reported the find. See his letter to the War Memorial, dated 14th. March, 1954.
The task of excavating the site was undertaken by the Rev. W. Maitland Woods, the senior Church of England Chaplain to the Australian forces in Egypt and an amateur archaeologist. The mosaic was photographed, but its situation on the top of the hill made it impossible to photograph a complete overall view. (1) Two drawings were made: the first, by Sapper F. L. McFarlane of the New Zealand Wireless Troop, which now hangs beside the mosaic in the Australian War Memorial; the second was an "unnofficial" drawing by Capt. M.S. Briggs. (2) [Fig.1] While neither drawing is completely accurate, they are of inestimable value to the study of the mosaic, because substantial areas of it were either destroyed or removed in the period between its discovery and its subsequent lifting and eventual dispatch to Australia, and these drawings supply a record of lost areas. (3)

General Description of the Mosaic

The overall dimensions of the mosaic panel are 8.23 metres by 5.49 metres. (4) The design consists of a grape vine trellis growing out of an amphora. [Fig.2] The trellis is made up of forty-five medallions arranged in nine rows each of five medallions containing protomai of animals and birds, facing inward towards the central row, which contains baskets of fruit,

2. Published in ibid, p.187 and Trendall op.cit., Pl.1b.
3. McFarlane's drawing only allows for seven rows of medallions within the vine trellis and it does not include all the surviving border motifs or, in fact, the outside border at all. The motifs on either side are inaccurate and the border panels are not in correct alignment. Briggs supplies even fewer of the border motifs. Both, however, supply details of areas which had disappeared before the mosaic arrived in Australia.
4. The main field of the pavement is 6.3m. by 3.55m. The inner border is .46m wide and the outer border is .51m wide.
a chalice or crater and a bird in a cage. The main field is surrounded by a border of perspective or isometric double maeanders alternating with square panels containing various motifs. (1) Outside that is another, geometric border of circles and diamonds linked by a line of alternating black and white tesserae. (2) At either end of the mosaic was an inscription, set in a "tabula ansata" and centred on the central axis of the design. Of these, the inscription at the top of the mosaic consists of four lines, of which a little more than the left half survives. The inscription at the lower end originally had nine lines, but at the time of discovery, only a few letters survived at the right end. Of these, only the top five letters can now be seen in Canberra: the remaining portion of the inscription is in St. John’s Cathedral, Brisbane.

The Building

The mosaic formed the nave panel of what can be identified by the surviving inscription as a Christian church. (3) As far as can be ascertained, no systematic excavation of the site has been carried out and definite information as to its siting and structure is not available. The orientation of the church was probably roughly east-west as was usual (4) and examination of


2. Ibid, patterns C1a, and I6.

3. The inscription at the east end ascribes donation to clerics.

4. See A. Ovadiah, Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land, Bonn, 1970. There are a few exceptions, e.g. the churches at nearby Magen were oriented north-south. See the communication from V. Tsaferis regarding Magen in "Chronique
contemporary churches and synagogues in southern Palestine give an indication of its plan. These are all basilicas with a nave and two aisles and with either inscribed or external apses. (1)

The fact that the base of a column of white stone was found among the debris on the south side of the hill suggests that the Shellal church, too was of the basilican type. (2) From available information it is not possible to assess whether the Shellal church had an internal apse with diaconicon and prothesis, as at Umm Jerar, at Khirbet 'Ain Hanniya, south of Jerusalem, or at Khirbet Kufin near Hebron, or whether it was of the type of Khirbet 'Asida or Khirbet el-Hubeila, in the Bethlehem-Hebron district, with external apse. (3)


2. Briggs op.cit., p. 185. The column base, now also in the Australian War Memorial, measures 55cms. square and about 6cm. deep and is surmounted by an ovolo. The shaft of the column is 50cms. in diameter.

3. The apses at Kissufim and Magen are not documented. For the Central Negev, see previous note.

4. There does not appear to be any evidence for Ovadiah's figures of 15m by 8m. This could be a misinterpretation of the mosaic
fragments of vertical marble skirting which were in place at the time of discovery, it would seem to have run right up to the west wall. The surrounding floor must have been paved with stone, as traces of a yellowish marble or limestone surround were found on the north and east sides and there is no evidence that the columns impinged on the space of the mosaic. This would make the nave at least a little wider than the mosaic panel. It was also suggested by Trendall that the mosaic panel may have run up to the chancel rail. (1) If this was the case, there would almost certainly have been a chancel area equivalent to the distance between columns, between the rail and the apse. (2) This would give the church similar dimensions to the other churches mentioned and would indicate that it would have had four or five pairs of columns separating nave and aisles. (3) The extension of size. See Ovadiah, Corpus, p.163.

1. Trendall, op. cit., p.12. This would suggest that the eastern inscription projected through the opening into the sanctuary.

2. This was standard practice in the smaller churches of southern Palestine, see Ovadiah, Corpus, for plans, Avi-Yonah, Encyclopedia, individual places and vol.1, p.305, and Negev, "Central Negev", op. cit., plates XVI and XVII. At Umm Jerar there was another small, mosaic panel in the sanctuary, see Dalton, op. cit., plates on p. 9.

3. The average size of these churches is about 10 to 12 m. wide and 12 to 16 m. long. The dimensions at Umm Jerar were not recorded: at Magen, the earlier church was trapezoid and atypical though 7 m. wide at the narthex facade and 14 m. wide at the asidal end and had 5 pairs of columns; the later church was 12 metres wide, its length not known at publication date. Kissufim measures 16 by 13 metres and had 5 pairs of columns. Taking into account the measurements at Hazor, near Ashdod, where the overall size of the hall (with external apse) was 12.5 by 10.5 metres divided into a nave, 5 metres wide and aisles each 2.5 metres wide, with three pairs of columns, we have a breakdown which perhaps was close to Shellal. The hall of the church at 'Ain Hanniya was 15 by 10 metres, with five pairs of columns, that at Khirbet 'Asida was 12 by 9 metres with four pairs of columns. The entire foundations at Khirbet Kufin measured 20 by 12 metres - the number of columns is not known as the walls had been demolished below floor level - while those at
the lower inscription beyond the level of the mosaic panel indicates that it protruded outwards through the west door and into the narthex as did the inscription panel at the monastery of the Lady Mary at Bet-Shean. The narthex was probably enclosed rather than colonnaded; while Choricius describes a colonnade at the west end of St. Stephen at Gaza, the smaller, provincial churches had enclosed narthexes pierced by doorways. (1)

Maitland Woods reported gathering several baskets of black and white tesserae from the site. (2) Briggs observed that the south-east corner of the church must have eroded and also spoke of "thousands of mosaic tesserae" among the debris. (3) This raises the question as to whether there were other mosaic decorations in the aisles. (4) The pavements discovered in the same year, in the similar small church, at Khirbet Umm Jerar, which also crowns a small hill overlooking the Wadi Ghazzah, consist of elaborate nave and sanctuary panels, while those of the side aisles have a simple geometric pattern of diapers containing diamond shapes on a white ground. (5) The aisles at Kissufim are also paved with mosaic, as are those in the older church at Magen. (4) Capt. F.M. Drake, who documented the Umm Jerar pavement, also saw the Shellal pavement in situ. In his report of a third pavement at Deir Dakleh, that church is likened el Hubeila were 16 by 12.5 metres with four pairs of columns. For all these churches and others see Avi-Yonah, Encyclopedia, op.cit., p.303ff, and Ovadiah, Corpus. 1. Ibid, p.305 for plans.
5. Even the narthex had mosaics at Magen. Tzaferis, op.cit., p.107.
to both Shellal and Umm Jerar in having large numbers of coarse mosaics round about. (1) It would seem then that the church at Shellal, as well as its elaborate nave panel, may have had the aisles paved in white mosaic, probably with a simple geometric pattern, while the rest of the floor was paved with marble or limestone slabs.

The church would have been built of stone, the main building material of southern Palestine. (2) Following the usual practice, it was probably not quarried specifically for this building, but would have been re-used from earlier buildings on the plain below. (3) In its turn, much of the stone from the church may have been removed for building elsewhere as were the columns from Magen and the building stone from the churches at Elusa, a little further south. (4) This could explain why only the one column base was found at the site.

The Inscription.

There are inscriptions at both eastern and western ends of the mosaic panel. These were set in "tabulae ansatae", the most common setting for inscriptions of this period. (5) The western (lower) panel measures 1.9m wide: it is too badly damaged to gauge the exact length, but it can be estimated at about 1m. (6) The ansae are almost totally destroyed. The location of the

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3. See infra, p.22 for earlier inhabitation of the area.
6. By the height of the letters and the number of rows. At Kissufim, the seven-lined inscription measures 1.6 by .62m.
mosaic on a wall makes an exact measurement of the upper inscription almost impossible. (1)

Only four of the letters of the lower "tabula ansata" survive as part of the mosaic: they are 10cms high and 8-8.5cms wide, with intervals of about 6cms between each letter. The letters are of the type which C.W.Welles has tabled as Byzantine Oval alphabet. (2)

The letters in the upper inscription show some discrepancies, e.g. Δ in ΤΟΝΩΔΗ and Δ in ΔΑΐΔΑΛΗ in the top row; Α in the top row and Α in the second row. Both types of "alpha" are consistent with sixth century epigraphy and appear together, in similar fashion, on a marble slab from Gerasa. (3) The Α type appears in a Gazaean inscription dated to 503-4A.D. (4), although the most common form appears to be Α in this period. The same mixture of "alphas" that we see on the Shellal inscription appears on other Gazaean monuments. (5)

The triangular Δ also appears in two other marble inscriptions from Gaza. (6) The combination of the straight sided Θ and the Δ is also found in the synagogue at Gaza (7), although the usual Gazaean form seems to be Ω.

1. The steeply sloping floor of the enclosure in which the mosaic is housed makes the setting up of a ladder impossible and scaffolding would be necessary. The eastern inscription panel is about .5m high and approx. 2.5m wide, estimated on the the width of the lower inscription and the size of the border panels.
5. Ibid., figs.4898, & 4897, dated to 662, indiction 1, (600A.D.)
6. Ibid., figs. 4902 & 4885. It is seen on the pavement at Bettir, near Jerusalem, Ibid., vol.12, pt.1, fig. 8553. Welles dates this straight sided type at Gerasa to about 533.
There are no breathings used in the Shellal inscription and only two abbreviations, both S-type, interpreted as -ατος and -εστάτος by Alt in 1929. (1)

The inscription dates the mosaic to 622, according to the era of Gaza, i.e. 561-562 A.D. (2) The date is written from right to left. This is a common feature of Gazaean inscriptions which Kraemer notes as a "stylistic quirk" of the Seleucids. (3) It may be for this reason that Gazaean inscriptions do not commonly name the era of Gaza specifically, although this does occur. (4)

Several attempts have been made to reconstruct the inscriptions. (5) The damage to the lower panel is too extensive to attempt any reconstruction although Lagrange suggested that the surviving word in the second row, ΙΑΚΑΝ, might be a reference to the Bene-Iacan mentioned in Numbers 33:31-2. (6)

This seems unlikely as this passage lists stations on the Israelite's route from Egypt. As they did not follow the route through the Wadi Ghuzzah and Bene-Iacan is near the Egyptian border, not far from Nessana, this passage seems inappropriate.

The usual practice was to place an exhortatory passage of

2. The era of Gaza dates from the foundation of Roman Gaza on 28th. October, 61 B.C., under Aulus Gabinius, proconsul of Syria, when the freedom of the city was proclaimed by Pompey.
4. e.g. in the mosaic of the central aisle at Kissufim, see R.Cohen, Op.Cit., p.105. Also see Cabrol, Op.Cit., vol.VI, col.711 and fig.4888.

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scripture, or a verse from the Psalms at the western end. (1)

The eastern inscription, before the altar or the chancel screen, was usually dedicatory and the Shellal inscription adheres to this custom. With one exception, Alt’s reconstruction seems to be a likely solution. His transcription is (2):

\[+ διαφύλαξε τον νεόν δασφύλει [ψηρώσει διεκλάσ] μηρακ ὁ ποίησε ὑπάτους ἡμῶν ἐπίσκοπος...]
καὶ ὁ θεοφάτης ἀρχόν παρεκβίον ὁ πρεσβύτερος καὶ παράμονον]

The word \(\text{Πρεσβύτερος}\) has been constructed on the basis of one surviving letter, recorded only in the drawing by McFarlane and which Alt interpreted as a \(\Pi\). The surviving letter would appear to be an \(\zeta\) (3) and a possible alternative would be \(\varepsilon \cdot \varepsilon \cdot \varepsilon\) (4), a priest of a higher rank than a presbyter. (5) This alteration would not change the translation, which would read literally as:

“This temple has decorated with a rich mosaic our most holy bishop ... and the most God-loving George, priest and sacristan, in the year 622 of the era of Gaza, in the 10th. year of the indiction. (6)

The bishop, whose name is lost from the inscription, would have been the Bishop of Gerar, a bishopric established with the creation of the three Palestines, about 400 A.D. This was the closest ecclesiastical centre to Shellal, with its centre at

1. See infra, p.45.
3. Although this section of the inscription has been restored, the original drawing by Macfarlane shows an \(\zeta\) and the beginning of another letter.
4. This term could also be used for a bishop. Obadianos is mentioned as \(\text{Πρεσβύτερος}\) in the inscription of the vine trellis pavement at Bet Guvrin. See F-M. Abel, Revue Biblique, (1924), pp.597 & 598, n.1. Also Leontias, the \(\text{Πρεσβύτερος}\) at St. Elias at Madaba, see Ibid, (1930), p. 476.
5. \(\text{Πρεσβύτερος}\) was a popular term in the Justinianic period and was frequently used by both Procopius of Gaza and Procopius of Caesarea. See Abel, n.4, above.
6. The year of the indiction is missing from the panel, but can be replaced with the knowledge of the year and by comparison with other Gazaean inscriptions.
nearby Orda. (1)

**Technique**

The actual structure of the mosaic seems to have been in dispute. Briggs described the substratum as consisting of two layers: one of concrete made with large white rounded pebbles from the wadi, many of them 12-24 cms. long, topped by a layer of white cement, apparently composed of lime and ash, into which the tesserae were pressed. (2) However, Chaplain Maitland Woods listed three layers: the first of rubble, the second of grey cement and the top one of thin, white plaster. (3) Avi-Yonah later counted the Shellal work among the few Palestinian mosaics to omit the upper layer of white plaster. (4) This seems to be an error because, in his catalogue of mosaics, Avi-Yonah lists three layers. (5) We should perhaps accept Maitland Wood’s account as he was the person actually in charge of the excavation. Three layers in the order in which he cited them were the usual foundations of a well laid mosaic pavement and, as Avi-Yonah has shown, most Palestinian pavements were laid according to this rule. (6) The excellent state of preservation of the Shellal floor before the Turkish trenches were dug through it is an indication of firm foundations.

5. Ibid., p. 345, no. 306.
6. Ibid., p. 374.
The workmanship in the "opus tessellatum" of the pavement is of high quality. The tesserae are small and closely set, and range from 90 to 210 tesserae to the square decimetre. (1) This puts the mosaic into the category of finest quality work in Avi-Yonah's classification but well below the count at Kissufim, which has 114 to the square decimetre for the most part, but as many as 240 for certain details. (2) Most of the tesserae are marble which, according to Avi-Yonah, is not usual in Palestinian mosaics, no doubt because of its expense. Marble was imported and therefore local limestone was more commonly used. (3)

A different situation seems to have existed in sixth century Gaza. This city had a busy and cosmopolitan seaport at the end of the caravan routes from the East and Egypt and trade was carried on with all the Mediterranean countries. By the sixth century it had become very wealthy and, with the destruction of the temple of Marnas and the building, on the same site, of the cathedral, called the Eudoxiana, by Bishop Porphyry in 402-7 A.D., it had a large Christian population. (3) Churches were built and only the most costly materials were used in their construction. Marbles of different colours were imported from different places in the Greek world, as Choricius of Gaza recounts. (4)

1. There are about 90-100 tesserae to the square decimetre on background and borders, 180 in the centre of the guineafowl and 210 in the hair of the man in the lower border.
2. Ibid., p. 374. For Kissufim see Cohen op.cit., p.106.
4. Choricius, writing in the early 6th. century, describes marble from the Proconnesus (white with a blue grey vein), Lacedaemonia
At least some of these marbles may have been used for the tesserae of the Shellal mosaic. The colours used are white, black, yellow, brown various pinks and reds, blue grey and several shades of green. It was suggested at the time of its discovery that the bright green tesserae were of malachite, perhaps imported from Egypt. (1) This is unlikely to have been imported. Exploration of the surface area of the Wadi Besor has revealed the presence of a quantity of malachite fragments. More has been found at Abou Matar near Beersheba. (2) Malachite has also been identified in the mosaics at Kissufim. (3) Maitland Woods also mentioned the presence of glass tesserae in the pheasants at Shellal (4) The many shades of colour in the mosaic have been very skilfully blended to give an, at times, almost imperceptible shading, which imbues the work with a great vitality. This is enhanced by the method of laying the tesserae with two, three, or even four rows following the outline of the figures, while the areas of filling out are very small. (5)

**Mosaic Workshop at Gaza**

Although some of the materials used appear to be from the (green porphyry), Carystis, in southern Euboea (several shades of green), Caria (dark red with white bands) and Thessaly (green serpentine). See the extract from Choricius, "Laudatio Marciani", 1,17ff, in C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453*, New Jersey, 1972, p. 63 and n. 43, and p.32, n. 38.

2. J. Perrot reports the finding in stratigraphic observations at one of two points investigated between the Besor bridge and Tell el-Far'a in *Revue Biblique*, 69, (1962), p. 389.
4. Letter dated 7th. November, 1921. Vitreous paste is also used at Kissufim and at Umm Jerar. Dalton, op.cit., p.3.
immediate vicinity, the other technical characteristics apply to the pavements cited by Avi-Yonah as being the products of a single workshop centred in Gaza (1), although they apply to many other early Byzantine mosaic pavements in Palestine as well.(2) Avi-Yonah's suggestion has been taken up by Ovadiah, who, examining the same pavements, including Hazor, but not that of the Armenian Chapel, agrees with the hypothesis. (3) In many ways it does seem valid. There is a definite clustering of pavements in southern Palestine and the Gaza strip all dated between about 515 and about 576. (4) Gaza, as we have seen, was a thriving city with a large and well-to-do Christian community. (5) There was work for an atelier of mosaicists, with the decoration of the big Gazaean churches described by Choricius and the many churches which were built in the area during the next half century. Avi-Yonah based his hypothesis on the strictly horizontal arrangement of the vine trellis, the clearly defined central axis and the absolutely symmetrical arrangement of the animal and/or bird motifs. Certainly, in comparison with any of the other Palestinian vine trellis mosaics, the "Gazaean" works

1. Ibid., p.362-375 for comparative material. Avi-Yonah cites Bet Guvrin, (Bet Jibrin) the Armenian Chapel, Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, Shellal, & Khirbet 'Asida, as well as the synagogue at Gaza and that at Ma'on in "Une école de mosaïque à Gaza au sixième siècle", published in La mosaique greco-romaine, Paris, 1965, p.377ff., and reprinted in Art in Ancient Palestine, p. 394ff.
4. The synagogue at Maiumas, the port of Gaza, seems to be the earliest with a dated inscription of 569 of the era of Gaza, which is 508-9 of the Christian era. Kissufim, (576 A.D) is one of the latest.
are differently composed. In some floor mosaics the trellis is arranged more as a border with medallions forming an infill. (1) (Fig.3) The floor of the second chamber to the Baptistery of Zahrani in Lebanon follows the same principle with the amphora as the central motif. (2) They would appear to derive more from vine rinceau borders such as those in the House of the Vine Rinceau at Antioch, adapted to cover the whole floor. (3) Other vines, e.g. from the church of Kabr-Hiram near Tyre in Lebanon, (575 A.D.) spring from four amphorae in each of the corners (4), or, in the case of SS. Lot and Procopius at Mekhayyat, from four tufts of acanthus, and are laid down as rows of trellis which can be seen as vertical or horizontal, without distinction. (5) (Fig.4) This principle applies even where the vine springs from a single source at the base of the panel, as at Bet-Shean. (6) Where a vertical axis is introduced, as in the church of Elias, Mary and Soreg at Jerash, where a palm tree is the central motif, it serves to divide the vine trellis into two distinct sections (Fig.5), without the integrated composition of the Gazaean mosaics, where the central, vertical axis is created by a

1. e.g. the sixth century pavement at Ain-el-Bad, Syria, now in the National Museum, Damascus. J. Balty, Mosaiques Antiques de Syrie, Brussels, 1977, p.138.
6. Both the mosaic in Synagogue II and that in room L. of the monastery of the Lady Mary show the vine springing from an amphora. In the panel over the Byzantine tomb chamber the vine arises from an acanthus tuft. Avi-Yonah, Encyclopedia I, plates on pp. 223, 224 & 227.
different design of the intertwinnings of the vine, by the
different motifs and the symmetrical arrangement of the animals
and birds facing towards it. [Fig.6] In all the other mosaics,
the motifs are randomly placed without any regard for symmetrical
placement. Another feature of this Gazaean style is that the
amphora lies within a medallion formed by the vine; in the other
mosaics the amphora stands free. (1)

While these comparisons do establish a distinctive
composition for Avi-Yonah’s and Ovadiah’s group of mosaics of the
"School of Gaza", they both ignore the fact that a mosaic
workshop would be expected to produce more than one design and it
would be necessary to carry out more exhaustive comparisons of
other mosaic pavements within the Gaza region to fully establish
the argument. There are other mosaics in the Shellal area, which
may derive from the Gaza workshop but their designs are found
further afield. (2)
The question remains whether these mosaics were produced from a

1. This is one problem in attributing Bet Guvrin and Jerusalem to
the "School of Gaza". At Bet Guvrin the medallions of the top row
arise from the row below, rather than horizontally. The amphora
does not lie within a medallion at either place.
2. The border around the central panel at Umm Jerar is the same
pattern of alternate circles and squares interconnected by
running loops, which comprises the overall design of the older
church at Magen. The same pattern appears in the 5th or 6th
century cave mosaic at the laura of Theoctistus on the Wadi
Mukellik, about 15 kms. east of Jerusalem, and at Bethany. It
also forms the lower border of the Jerusalem Orpheus mosaic and
occurs on another mosaic on the Mount of Olives. Illustrations
in Dalton, op.cit., p.5, Revue Biblique, 85, (1978) Plate XII,
following p.109, Revue Biblique, 86, (1979), p.463 and
S.J.Saller, Excavations at Bethany, Jerusalem, 1957. The Mount of
Olives work is cited, but not illustrated in ibid., p. 463, in
Dalton, op.cit., p.4, and Avi-Yonah, Mosaic Pavements, no. 117.
The pattern is Avi-Yonah’s J2. The Orpheus mosaic now in the
Museum of Istanbul, is illustrated in Avi-Yonah, Art in Ancient
Palestine, plates 50 & 51.
Gazaean workshop or from one or more different workshops. Whatever the workshop of origin, these designs and others which appear on southern Palestinian floor mosaic can be found in Egypt, in Coptic art of the fourth to sixth century and in earlier Egyptian tomb and palace paintings. (1)

**Origins of the Design.**

It seems possible to trace the source of the Gazaean style as well. Lavin has shown that these types of overall vine trellis with animals and birds in the roundels developed in North Africa as the outcome of the Roman black and white, floral design floors as seen in the School of Trajan and the Baths of the Seven Sages at Ostia, being superimposed onto an indigenous tradition of pattern and colour. (2) A second century pavement at El Djem, (ancient Thysdrus) in Tunisia, would certainly seem to bear this out. (3) The trellis of a vine, without leaves or grapes, is superimposed onto a second series of delicate, leafy roundels, each circular medallion carrying an animal, bird or basket of fruit. (Fig. 7) In the mosaic of Asinus Nica (c. 400) at Djemila, the trellis grows from two amphorae, one at either end of the long pavement. (4) This vine has leaves, but no grapes, but it

1. See for example, the catalogue of the Brooklyn Museum, *Late Egyptian and Coptic Art*, Brooklyn, 1943, 1974, plate 50, details of the ornament on a coptic tunic (date) and the interrelationship of such items as plate 38, Acc. no. 26.735 and the complicated pattern on the central panel of the mosaic at Bettir, south-west of Jerusalem, in *Revue Biblique*, 1910, plates 1& 2, repeated in Cabr6, *op.cit.*, vol.12, pt.1, illust. 8553.
does have something of the structure of the Gazaean mosaics in that the medallions formed by the central line of vine linking the amphorae are larger than the two rows on either side, creating a strongly marked axis. [Fig.8] That this is negated by the arrangement of the figures and animals to face in opposite directions can probably be explained by the situation of this pavement in a frigidarium where it would have been seen from all sides. In the Palestinian churches and synagogues it was necessary to arrange the motifs to be seen from a fixed position from the door.

In both of the North African mosaics, the vine stems cross over each other in the same manner as the central axis of the Gazaean compositions: from this spring horizontal rows, reminiscent of the vine rinceau border so familiar on Hellenistic and Roman architecture, Roman sarcophagi and other types of mosaic floor. Unlike the Djemila pavement, the roundels of the Palestinian mosaics do not completely close. (1) It seems that this horizontal arrangement of the rows and the open roundels can be traced to Egypt: a fact not surprising in a city like Gaza with a large Egyptian population. (2) An artistic tradition dating back at least to the reign of Amenhotep II, (1450-1425 B.C.) and continued in the ceiling designs of Theban tombs of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., involves row after row of unclosed roundels forming a wave pattern with a palmette motif in

Blanchard-Lemée is alone in dating this mosaic to the mid-sixth century.
1. Ibid., p.90. More obvious at Jerusalem and Ma'On than Shellal.
2. Mark the Deacon, op.cit. p. 68, remarks on the number of Egyptian wine merchants at Maiumas in his day.
centre. (1) [Fig.9]

Trendall talks of a "horror vacui" in the Shellal floor. (2) In fact, the Gazaean group of vine trellis pavements exhibit an order and restraint which is notable when compared with, for example, the composition at Justinian's Basilica at Sabratha. Here, in a church of royal endowment, built to celebrate the reconquest of Africa in 533, there seems to be a combination of North African and Constantinopolitan elements: the "horror vacui" is as marked here as on the column capitals in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

Several other elements of the Gazaean mosaics relate to works in North Africa, especially Tunisia. The peacocks holding the necklace and surrounded by floral sprigs in the panel above the vine trellis at Bet Guvrin, find a very close counterpart in the nave mosaic in the Basilica of Cresconius at Djemila. (3) The unusual type of sunk-necked amphora which appear at Shellal, Khirbet 'Asida and Room L of the Monastery of the Lady Mary at Bet-Shean, are similar to one in the Baptistery at Djemila. (4) These similarities, over such a geographical range, could, perhaps, indicate the use of pattern books. (5) But oriental

1. See W.M. Smith, Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A study of the relationships between the arts of Egypt, the Aegean and Western Asia, New Haven, Conn., 1965, fig. 51b.
2. Trendall op.cit. p. 25.
4. Ibid., plate XXIc. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaic Pavements", p.364, only cites the first two examples.
5. There is no evidence that such books were used in this period. However, Ernst Kitzinger, "The Role of Miniature Painting in Mural Decoration", in K. Weitzmann, ed., The Place of Book Illumination in Byzantine Art, Princeton, 1975, p.99ff. and J.M.C. Toynbee, Animals in Roman Life and Art, London,1973, pp.288 & 292-3, argue for the use of pictorial guides in workshops.
influences are also apparent in these floors. Although unrelated or individual animals, in profile, can be seen in the 2nd. century pavement at El Djem, the convention dates back to the animal style of Susa I and Susa II, from whence it passed to Palestinian Bronze and Iron Age pottery. (1) The heraldic positioning of these profile animals also originated in oriental art, originally as a solution to filling a triangular area, where they would flank a sacred tree. It was this tradition which passed into Greek art and was thus disseminated around the Mediterranean (2). Such oriental conventions were transmitted to Gaza by the Assyrians and Persians, both of whom had ruled the city in the past. (3) Sassanian motifs, particularly the fluttering ribbons, occur on several Palestinian pavements, and although not at Shellal, they are found on the neck of the giraffe at Gaza and the dove at Umm Jerar.

This symmetry of arrangement contrasts with the realism of the animals. Trendall remarks that the treatment of both beasts and objects at Ma'on is more realistic and less stylized than at Shellal, just as the grapes and vine leaves are more naturalistic: he attributes this to the later date of Shellal. (4) A look at both mosaics raises a query as to whether the elephant or guineafowl at Ma'on are really more naturalistic than, perhaps, the tigress, the goats or the sheep and, certainly, the guineafowl, at Shellal. The animals and birds at

2. Ibid. p.48.
4. Trendall, op.cit., p. 24, Ma'an is dated to c. 538 on numismatic evidence.

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Ma'on demonstrate the trend, during the sixth century, to greater stylization, owing to orientalising trends. (1) Surface patterning became more obvious, and this is seen in the leopardess at Ma'on, which, despite its delightfully active pose as it slides to a halt within its roundel, has spots which conform to a decorative convention. (2) At Sheilal, while the peacock’s tail adheres to a decorative pattern, there is nothing stylized about the stripes of the tigress or the feathers of the guinea fowl. These can only be described as realistic and all the other birds and animals can be readily identified by form, shape of head and colour of fur or feathers. The same realistic portrayal, vitality and attention to detail is seen in the Lebanese mosaic from Ka‘br-Hiram (575 A.D.) and in the Good Shepherd panel at Jenah (late fifth century). Chehab ascribes this phenomenon, in Lebanon, to Phoenician naturalism (3); in Gaza it was probably fostered and prolonged by the Alexandrian interest in natural history, which manifests itself in Timotheus of Gaza’s sixth century treatise on animals.

The border patterns are very common on floor mosaics throughout Palestine and presumably were standard designs. The lozenges of the outer border originate in Attic vase painting as early as 700 B.C. while the origins of the concentric circles are obscure. The isometric maeander, derives from sixth century B.C. architectural decoration of Greece and Asia Minor. (4)

2. Ibid., p.55, states that a favourite method of stylization was to transform some natural characteristic into a regular pattern.
3. Chehab, op.cit, p.335.
4. Ovadiah, Patterns, pp.100,125 and 143.

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The Geographical Location of the Church.

The combination of greco-roman, oriental, Egyptian and North African influences and their presence in a floor mosaic can be understood in a cosmopolitan city like Gaza, which had Greek speaking residents of Egyptian, Greek, Latin and Jewish origin, and a trading link between East and West. It is less easy to understand the presence of an almost identical pavement in such a remote location as Shellal. It is, therefore, necessary to determine what Shellal was like in the sixth century.

The situation of the church, on its small hill "in a wild and lonely gorge", puzzled the early archaeologists, although Briggs noted its proximity to a ford across the wadi, "that many travellers must have taken as they went from Egypt towards Jerusalem" (1) Trendall states that the church is situated on the main road from Jerusalem to Egypt. (2) This is confusing because his map shows the main highway running up the coast, the ancient "Via Maris", while Shellal is well inland. It stands at a bend in the Wadi Besor or Wadi Shellala, (3), where even today, the road from Beersheba and Ofaqim to Ma'on and the coast, crosses the wadi: it is now known on Israeli maps as 'En Besor. (Fig.10) But the other major international road followed the route of the ancient Way to Shur. This followed the Sinai route from Egypt passing through Nessana (modern Nizzana). From there a route led to Beersheba and on through Hebron to Jerusalem. (4)

2. Trendall, op.Cit., p.9. There is another Shellal on the modern highway, 1 or 2kms south of Deir Balah. The Shellal of the mosaic is some 15 -18 kms inland.
3. The Wadi Besor, with the Wadi Seri'a form the Wadi Ghazzeh.
More importantly for our purpose, travellers to Gaza could leave the road before the modern turnoff at Be'er Mash'abbim and follow the Wadi Besor along the whole of its length, ultimately passing through Shellāl. This was the route taken, too, by the caravans from the East and from Aila (Eilat). The reason for the choice of this route lies in the presence of a permanent water supply along the wadi. Shellāl is an Arabic place name which the Anzacs called "Bubbling Springs" and which Abel translates as "cascades". (1) It is the site of deep wells and springs and at this spot three water sources form rivulets. After the scarce and often brackish water of the desert, the area along the wadis between Beersheba and Gaza has a plentiful water supply and the Wadi Ghazzagh has many permanent watering places. The wadi also provided ease of travel from one town to the next along the flat areas running among the rocky crags of the upper Negev and the southern Judean wilderness. In this area all the caravan routes converged: not only the route from Egypt to Jerusalem via Beersheba and Hebron, but also the routes from the east, passing through Beersheba and from Eilat, through Elusa (Haluza) to the busy Mediterranean seaport of Gaza. Another important road crossed the wadi at Shellāl. This linked the row of Byzantine

1. Maitland Woods, quoted in the Adelaide Advertiser, 20th August, 1919. Also F.-M. Abel, Géographie de la Palestine, tome 1, p.151. "Cascades" is perhaps rather too loose a translation for what is the source of small streams. However, as Aharoni, cit., p.26 points out, for a day or two, or more frequently for a few hours, after rain, the wadis in this area turn into dangerous torrents and waterfalls or cascades would appear. See also Israel: Official Standard Names Gazetteer, no. 114, published by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, Washington D.C, 1970, wherein the site of Bir esh Shellale is classified as a well. On the other side of the wadi, 'Ein esh Shellale is a spring, and the Hebrew name, En Besor, also means the Besor spring.
forts which formed a line between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, as a protection against the marauding Bedouin. The road between Mennois, about 2kms south-east of Khan Yunis and Birsama, the military Headquarters of the Salton Gerariticon, at Khirbet el-Far, a little to the east of Shellal, must have passed below the hill on which the church was perched. (1) Shellal was not, therefore, an isolated spot in the midst of the desert: it must have been a much frequented watering place and one of the main crossings of the wadi.

Despite this, there does not appear to have been an important town at this spot in the sixth century although the area of the Wadi Besor shows evidence of continuous occupation since the Bronze Age. (2) There is nothing on the Madaba mosaic map to indicate an a town of any size and the Piacenza Pilgrim, writing in about 570 A.D., must have passed right down the wadi as he journeyed from Gaza to Elusa and makes no mention of anything noteworthy in the area. (3) Sharuhen (Tel el Far'a), 2kms further south, was an ancient city which belonged to the tribe of Simeon and is mentioned in Egyptian records (4), but there is no evidence of large scale occupation later than the first century A.D. The only Byzantine discovery was a clay stopper which was picked up on the surface of the mound. (5) However recent work is

4. Joshua, 19:6. The Egyptians recorded it as the scene of a great victory over the Hyksos. As well, palaeolithic remains and tombs of the 18th-20th. dynasties have been excavated there. See Abel, op.cit., 2, p.451 and Avi-Yonah Encyclopedie vol. 4, p.1074ff.  
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showing how greatly the population of these southern fertile areas increased during the Byzantine period, with the increased protection of the forts and more effective administration. While Barsama was the military centre of the area, Orda, only five or six kilometers to the north-east of Shellal, was the administrative and ecclesiastical centre, of an area which, as Salton Gerariticon, kept the name of the ancient city of Gerar and gave its name to the episcopacy. (1) Major centres such as Orda were surrounded by small satellite rural communities and it would seem that Shellal was such a settlement.

The other inhabitants of the area were monks. The monastic and eremitic tradition had begun in Palestine in the early fourth century under the aegis of St. Hilarion of Gaza, (c.291-371) who, having been sent to Alexandria to complete his education, came under the influence of St. Anthony. In 306 he returned to his native country, accompanied by a few monks and, giving up all his possessions, retired to the desert about seven miles from Maliumas, the port of Gaza. (2) There he lived a life of rigorous asceticism. His fame spread and St. Jerome tells us that it was was because of Hilarion’s example that monasteries began to appear throughout Palestine and “all the monks eagerly hastened

over to him." (1) As other monasteries grew up in the area, Hilarion began to visit them "on stated days before the vintage". He travelled at least as far down the Negev as Elusa, "accompanied by a great procession of monks" and is reputed to have converted the city and founded the church there. (2) In travelling around in this way, Hilarion began a tradition which was still continued in the period of the Shellal mosaic. St. Dorotheus of Gaza, (born c. 506- died c. 560-80), who lived for many years in the monastery of Seridos at Thawatha, the birthplace of Hilarion, about 5 kms south of Gaza near the mouth of the Wadi Ghazzah, was archimandrite of the area, and, as such travelled to all the monasteries within his charge. (3) By the sixth century there were large numbers of monks in this part of Palestine (4) : the monastic life was universally admired and men and women gave up their possessions to embrace the ascetic life. This could be either in a "coenobium," where they lived together in a community, or in a "laura", where individuals lived as anchorites in isolated cells in varying degrees of enclosure. The two were not mutually exclusive: monks would often move on to the eremitic life after years of training in the community. (5)

1. Ibid., p.263.
2. Ibid., p. 263.
4. P.F. Anson, The Call of the Desert, London, 1964, p.36 states that by 518 there were at least 100 monasteries under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem alone and the total number of religious was not far short of 10,000.
5. As was the custom in Seridos' monastery at Thawatha. The Great Old Man, Barsanuphius, after many years in his cell,
Many of these monasteries must have been along the Wadi Ghazzah and its tributaries. Not only was there water and the "fissured cliffs" (1) of the area provided caves for living, but this area of the western Negev was considered sacred. It was part of the land of Judah: Abraham and Isaac both spent long periods at Gerar, the Philistine city of Abimilech, (2) and Abraham was regarded by the early monks as being the precursor of monasticism (3): as well, the whole region was associated with David, and hence with his descendant, Jesus. (4)

The Function of the Church.

Janine Balty has commented that the vine trellis motif seems to have been chosen above others to decorate funerary chapels in Palestine. (5) Although this applies to such churches as the Armenian Chapel in Jerusalem, the inscription at Shellal is dedicatory and does not suggest a funerary function. (6) The remains of a stone sarcophagus, containing a skeleton, was found beneath the eastern inscription and further excavation could reveal others. (7) People, especially donors, were commonly communicating with the outside world only by letters dictated to Seridos, finally sealed himself up completely in his cell between 540 and 543 - fifty years later he was believed to be still living alone with God, in his cell. Dorotheos, op.cit., p. 56.

2. Genesis, chs. 20 and 26. The patriarchs came to Gerar in times of drought, because of the water supply.
3. Dorothee, op.cit., p. 15.
4. In the ancient country of the Philistines the victories of David had great importance. After the destruction of Ziklag, (Siqlq, Abel II, op.cit., p. 445.) David followed the Amalekites over the Brook or Torrent (or Ravine) of Besor. 1 Samuel 30:9. Modern point of view comes more and more to associate this spot with the Shellal area, as naming on modern maps bears out.
7. Other skeletons, including the skulls of children, were found, but they were on top of the floor.

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buried in their churches. (1) With this population in the valley it is more likely that the church at Shellal was either part of a monastery or a local church. In the absence of archaeological evidence we cannot discount the possibility of a monastic complex on the site. However, ascetics belonging to a "laura" would have used the local church. By the end of the fourth century, the pilgrim nun, Egeria, makes it clear that monks and nuns shared the worship in the churches of Jerusalem (2): even the ascetics of the desert would appear at churches for Easter and special festivals. (3)

Although Egeria was citing events between 381 and 384, there is nothing to suggest that monks were less likely to attend village churches in the 560's. Palladius, writing his Lausiac History in 419-20 describes how the Palestinian solitaries were visited by their superior during the week, but they met together in church to assist at the celebration of the Liturgy and the Divine Office on Sundays and Feast Days. (4) In addition, the eastern inscription of the Shellal pavement names George as a priest. This perhaps, more than anything else, directs us towards the idea of a village church. Monks as donors to churches were usually designated as such on the dedicatory inscriptions. They were usually lay-people who were only ordained if they were appointed abbot or hegumen of the monastery, or became priests, or bishops. They are then given their appropriate title in the

1. For example, five skeletons were found under the floor in the church at Nessana. Kraemer, OR.Cit., pp.9-10.
3. Ibid., p.118.
inscriptions. (1) If the Shellāl church was a monastery the donor would be more likely to be named as a monk than a priest, as the was the donor Theodore, at Kissufim. (2) Where another dedication of a paramonarius occurs, in the church of SS. Cosmas and Damianus (built 533) at Jerash, it is in a town church. (3) Saul, deacon and paramonarius, was also donor of a secular church at Jerash. (4) Finally, Egeria described a church in a situation very similar to the Shellāl of the sixth century:

"On the way I saw a valley running down to the river Jordan, remarkably beautiful and very well kept, and it was full of vines and trees because there was plenty of good water there. In it was a big village...; it is in the middle of a plain, and in the centre it has a fairly small hillock shaped like a big tomb. On top is a church, and below, all around the hillock, are huge, ancient foundations though only a few communities live there now." (5)

It seems most likely that the church at Shellāl was the parish church of a small farming community, which may have been shared by monks in the neighbourhood. It may also have served as a wayside chapel to travellers passing through the wadi, and its location may have been considered sacred to David.

1. Titles such as "abbot", "hegumen" or "monk" appear. Avi-Yonah, Mosaic Pavements, p. 371 and Mosaics 335A, monastery, Bet-Shean, abbot; 20(2), Monastery of the Lady Mary, Bet-Shean, hegumen; 98, Jericho, funerary inscription. Avi-Yonah cites two monks, on mosaics nos. 11 & 115, at 'Auja el-Hafir and the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem. It has to be noted that Avi-Yonah's corpus of mosaic pavements was published between 1932 and 1935. Since that date much excavation has been carried out and many new facts ascertained but Asher Ovadiah's updated Corpus of Mosaic Pavements in Palestine is not yet available. Egeria, p. 110 describes the presbyter at Salem as being in charge of the place from the time when he was a monk.

The Problem of Interpretation of Gazaean Mosaics.

An important problem in the study of the Shellalah and other related mosaic pavements is whether they can be read as a coherent iconographic programme, or whether they have a purely decorative function. Trendall, in his discussion of the imagery of the Shellalah floor, remarked that the animals and birds were introduced more as ornaments than emblems and, "though at times they undoubtedly have some symbolic significance, it would be unwise to lay too much stress upon it or try to press the symbolism too far". (1) In this he voices an opinion expressed by other writers in their discussions of these vine trellis floors, with their variety of birds and beasts. (2) Biebel argues that any attempt to give strictly Christian symbolism to such motifs as the peacock, vine and grapes, must take into account the fact that these motifs were used indiscriminately in churches, villas and synagogues. (3) He also cites the protest of St. Nilus to the Eparch, Olympiodorus, at the beginning of the fifth century, regarding the proposed decoration of his church with scenes of hunting: instead Nilus recommended scenes from the Old and New Testament which would serve those who could not read. (4) But Biebel overlooks the fact, mentioned in the same article, that Olympiodorus' decorative scheme also included saints and animals and birds. Nilus' reply referred specifically to the hunting scenes and this, perhaps, can be interpreted differently. Because

1. Trendall, op.cit., p.17.
the excesses which took place at the games and at feasts ran counter to Christian morality, the hunting of animals for these events were censured by the Church from an early period. It is not surprising, therefore, that Nilus should have objected to such imagery in a church, nor unlikely that, where isolated incidents occur on church pavements, such as the dog chasing the hare at Shellal, the motif may have taken on a didactic meaning.

Biebel also cites the commendation of Choricius that the artist of the mosaics in St. Sergius in Gaza rejected the "birds of the poets, the nightingale and the cicada, so that not even the memory of these fabled birds should intrude upon the sacred place" as evidence of a definite attempt to exclude any subject matter which might have pagan significance. (2) But how then to explain the presence of a scene of Orpheus among the animals with Pan and a centaur, on a floor mosaic with portraits of obviously Christian donors dressed in Byzantine Court dress (3), or Sol and Luna in the midst of a calendar mosaic in a monastery. (4) The answer is that these motifs must have been re-interpreted into Christian terms.

The fact is that not all classical literature was frowned upon. St. Jerome advocated the study of Virgil and even strict moralists such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil accepted a

1. The Council of Carthage, in 419, entered a plea in the Codex Ecclesiae Africanae to put an end to spectacles. This remained an issue within the church until, at the Council in Trullo in Constantinople (680-1), laity and clergy were ordered to avoid "the spectacles of hunting" on pain of excommunication. W. Smith & S. Cheetham, Dictionary of Christian Antiquities, vol. 1, London, 1908, p.800.
3. The Orpheus mosaic from Jerusalem, now in the Constantinople Museum. See Mosaic Pavements, no. 133.
Greek education as normal for children. (1) The position of the Church on the subject of Hellenic literature was stated by St. Basil, when he said that "one should cull from ancient literature everything that is conducive to virtue, while rejecting all examples of licentiousness and, in particular, all the tales concerning the discord and amatory adventures of the gods". (2)

It is in this context that we must view the comments of Choricius about the nightingale. It is not that the nightingale has pagan significance while partridges have none. As I hope to show, partridges did have specific symbolic value among Christians at this time. The reason is that the story of the metamorphosis of Procne into a nightingale, as recounted by Apollodorus, appears in an Attic comedy. It is a story of rape, jealousy and murder and, as such it had no part in Christian morality. (3)

Christian interpretation of the classical writers is evident in the writings of the Gazaean scholars of the end of the fifth and the sixth century. During this period Gaza was one of the main centres of learning. Because of its close proximity to and associations with Egypt, Gazaean scholars had been previously been sent to Alexandria to be educated. St. Hilarion had done so c. 300 A.D, and, at the end of the fifth century, the three great scholars, Procopius of Gaza, (c. 475 - c. 538) Zacharias Rhetor (died. 536) and Aeneas of Gaza (died. 518) had all trained in

1. St. John Chrysostom even recommended that many elements of Christian doctrine should not be taught to a Christian boy until he was past the age of fifteen. C. Mango, Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome, London, 1980, pp. 132-3.
3. In Ovid's version of the story, it is Philomela, Procne's sister, who becomes the nightingale.
rhetoric in Alexandria, as had Timotheus of Gaza, writing during the reign of Athanasius (491-518). (1) They had then returned to Gaza to teach. Their interests were broad: that they knew natural science and mathematics as well as rhetoric and theology, is apparent from their writings, and they clearly had an interest in art. Choricius, a student of Procopius, wrote the description of the architecture and art of the two new Gazan churches which has already been mentioned. His master, Procopius addressed a panegyric in classical manner to the Emperor Anastasius and wrote a formal lament on an earthquake in Antioch. (2) He also wrote a complicated description of a clock at Gaza and another of two paintings depicting mythological scenes. This interest in art is important from our point of view. It is demonstrated again by another scholar, John of Gaza, (early sixth century) who wrote a hexameter account of a great painting in a public bath in Gaza. This was an allegorical painting, representing the world with personifications of Wisdom, Virtue, the Moon, the Four Winds, Earth and her children. In their midst was a representation of the Cross. John described this work in Christian terms beginning with a Christian introduction. Whether, as Downey suggests, the cross was a later addition to a pagan work, or whether it was part of the original composition is immaterial. (3) What is important is the fact that, in sixth century Gaza, a work of art, with pagan motifs could be interpreted in Christian terms. It

1. For St. Hilarion, see Jerome, op.cit., p.246. Also Downey, Gaza, p. 107-8. The later scholars all seem to have been in Alexandria in the late 480's and early 490's. Zacharias, later Bishop of Mitylene and Timotheus, were students of Horapollo and Aeneas studied under Hierocles.
2. Ibid., p. 109.
3. Ibid., p. 111. Downey gives no source.
demonstrates the practice of Justinian's belief in the unity of faith and culture, the Christianizing of the Greek tradition, made explicit in the Decree of 529, which closed the School of Athens and forbade the teaching of classical philosophy by scholars who were not Christian. (1)

The theological writings of Procopius of Gaza indicate that the scholars of Gaza were also involved in symbolic analogies of natural life. For example, when talking of the Mandrake root, he says:

"the man-shaped root deep under the earth signifies that those who die unto the world for Christ's sake breathe forth the sweet odour of their good works. It also signifies that the dead who sense the glorious coming of Christ let the fragrance of their resurrection rise upwards". (2)

Procopius' interpretation of the mandrake comes very close to the allegorical methods of the Physiologus. (3) This was the work of a writer who infused ancient, pagan folklore about animals, and pseudo-natural science, with Christian moral and mystical teaching: it achieved enormous popularity and widespread dissemination. But evidence shows that the Physiologus almost certainly derived from Alexandria (4): Horapollo, the teacher of at least two of the Gazan scholars, wrote a treatise on hieroglyphics and the related symbolism of animals: and some fifteen of his legends are common to the Physiologus. Whether

4. Ibid, pp. xvi-xvii.
Timotheus of Gaza knew the Physiologus, or gained his similar information from Horapollo, is not possible to say. Nevertheless it would be surprising if the Alexandrian educated scholars of Gaza did not know this book and were not influenced by its ideas.

The writer of the Physiologus, as with many other Christian writers was influenced by the Neoplatonic thought which developed during the first two centuries A.D. But Platonism also had a special relevance to the Jews, because, as Clement tells us, Plato derived his belief in God from the Hebrews. (1) It was Philo, spokesman of the Hellenized Jewish scholars of Alexandria from whom the Christian exegetes, and in particular Clement of Alexandria and Origen, derived their allegorical way of interpreting the scriptures. (2) That this kind of Neoplatonism was important to the Gazaeans is apparent in their works. While Procopius, as we have seen, used the Neoplatonic idea of equivalents in his commentaries on the books of the Old Testament, Aeneas wrote the Theophrastus, a strange work in which a Greek philosopher, a pupil of Aristotle, is converted to Christian ideas of immortality and the resurrection. His style shows that he was familiar with the works of Plato and Plotinus, as well as Gregory of Nyssa. (3) Zacharias also wrote a similar work called Ammonios, in which, in a setting reminiscent of Plato's Phaedrus, he created a dialogue between a Neoplatonist Philosopher and a jurist, about the eternity of the world. (4)

2. Curley, op. cit., p. xvi.
3. Downey, Gaza, p. 112.
4. Ibid., p. 112.
This flowering of the intellectual life of Gaza and its dependence on Neoplatonic thought can, perhaps, be explained by the presence of Peter the Iberian in the city until his death in 499. A Georgian by birth, he was educated in Constantinople and was a pupil of Proclus, the great scholar of Plato. Proclus, too, had been educated initially in Alexandria, and then in Athens. A pagan, he developed a personal theosophy, celebrating all the important religious festivals of all the nations. As his pupil, Peter the Iberian must have learnt a great deal of pagan mysteries and mythology, as well as the writings of Plato. He brought this knowledge with him when he came to the monastery of Seridos at Thawatha. He later became Bishop of Maiumas, and ended his life in a monastery between Gaza and Maiumas. The Neoplatonic influence that such a man would have had in the community is increased in view of Honigmann's thesis that Peter was, in fact, Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite.

For the current purpose, Dionysius' writing on The Celestial Hierarchies is particularly relevant: Dionysius talks of "the symbolism which depicts the Celestial Intelligences in the likeness of beasts". (2) He talks of the lion, the ox, the eagle, and horses, in terms very similar to those of the

1. E. Honigmann *Pierre l'Ibérien et les écrits du Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite*, Brussels, 1952 pp. 10-25. Whether or not Honigmann is correct, Dionysius was one of the Gazaean circle at that time: his writings were first quoted in Constantinople in 533 by supporters of Severus of Pisidia, later Patriarch of Antioch, who, during the 490's was in a monastery near Maiumas. He was a close friend of Zacharias Rhetor and of John Rufus, Peter the Iberian's biographer, and successor to the bishopric of Maiumas. See D.J.Chitty, *The Desert a City*, Oxford, 1966, pp.104-5 and pp.119-120, notes 44-59.

Physiologus, and finishes with the words:

"If we had not to bear in mind the length of our discourse, we might well describe the symbolic relations of the particular characteristics of animals already given, and all their bodily forms, with the powers of the Celestial Intelligences according to dissimilar similitudes: for example, their fury of anger represents an intellectual power of resistance of which anger is the faintest echo; their desire symbolizes the Divine Love; and in short, we might find in all the irrational tendencies and many parts of irrational creatures, figures of the immaterial conceptions and single powers of the Celestial Beings. This, however, is enough for the prudent for one mystical interpretation will sufficiently serve as an example for the explanation of others of a similar kind." (1)

It becomes apparent that sixth century Gaza was an intellectual centre for a group of men whose custom and training inclined them to explain the mysteries of the universe, the Scriptures and their theology, in symbolic terms. They had a knowledge of animal folklore from the natural history treatises of the Greeks and the Egyptians as well as an obvious interest in interpreting art in Christian terms. It seems quite possible that they might translate their teaching into images.

There was no shortage of these images: hunting, Dionysiac and Orphic compositions all provided animal models, as did the "peopled" vine scrolls themselves. Toynbee and Ward-Perkins have commented that perhaps the majority of pagan vine scrolls "are the tangible expression of the complex of ritual observance and after-life speculation which constituted Dionysiac cults". (2) Murray too, has observed that the vine appears in restricted context, usually Dionysiac. (3) In this sense it is found in the

1. Ibid., p. 66-7.
3. Sr. C. Murray, Rebirth and Afterlife: a study of the
House of the Laberii at Uthina, (Sousse), and at Djemila, in a pavement which has a central scene of the murder of Ambrosia by Lycurgus and other panels of the mysteries of Dionysius, in a room which is believed to have been a cult centre of the mysteries of Bacchus. It appears, too, in part of a five-panelled floor in a second century hall at Melos which belonged to a society of Dionysiac "mystae", and as one of the pavements at Piazza Armerina in Sicily, where erotes appear as vintagers in the medallions formed by the trellis. In this context it has connotations of immortality.

The vine motif was adopted at an early stage into Christian funerary art. (1) The funerary character of the pagan motif and its Christian association with resurrection and life after death, is expressed by both Clement of Alexandria and Cyril of Jerusalem. Clement talks of ignorance and truth, representing them in Platonic terms of Dionysiac analogy in which religious ignorance is equivalent to drunkenness, Christian salvation to sobriety. (2) The same theme is followed by Cyril:

"They are drunk with a sober drunkenness, deadly to sin, and vivifying to the heart, a drunkenness quite contrary to that of the body. The latter induces forgetfulness of the known but this imparts knowledge of the unknown. They are drunk from drinking the wine of the spiritual vine, which says: 'I am the vine, you are the branches.'" (3)

In the Jewish world, it is apparent that, from the third and fourth centuries on, a relaxation of the strict transmutation of some pagan imagery in early Christian funerary art., Oxford, 1981, p. 68.
1. Where it is found in the catacombs and on sarcophagi such as the mid-3rd. century Tomb of the Julii in the Vatican necropolis at Rome, Tomb M.
2. Protrepticus, XII, 92P.
interpretation of the second commandment occurs:

"A stone ornamented with pictures you shall not place in your land to bow down upon it. However, a stone on which figures and likenesses are carved you may put on the floors of your sanctuaries, but do not prostrate yourself on it". (1)

Jewish art appears more frequently in the areas around the major cities: it is absent in the rural setting of the upper Galilee. This would appear to indicate the influence that the great cities of the Roman Empire may have had on their Jewish population. (2) Goodenough has shown that such Jewish art, as it appears in tombs, consists for the most part of crudely executed motifs, which, in their similarity to those in the Christian catacombs and in their lack of artistic skill, must carry special significance, which he identifies with hope of resurrection and a life after death. (3) Meyers and Strange, in their discussion of the excavations of the Jewish necropolis at Bet She'arim (Sheikh Ibreik) and, in particular, in the inscriptions in Catacomb 20, where the rabbinic leadership of Bet She'arim was buried, note evidence of both the notion of resurrection and immortality of the soul. The formulae of these inscriptions...

"... build a strong case for Jewish assimilation of the Hellenistic notions of afterlife. These formulas were no mere Greek versions of Hebrew ideas; they were consciously borrowed from their pagan neighbours. Undoubtedly, the precise implications which these formulas conjured up in the minds of the Jews were not quite identical with those which were present in the minds of the pagans because the religious system of each was different. Moreover, it is quite likely that the Jews consciously modified pagan elements they found to

2. Ibid., p.154.
be incompatible with their religious beliefs." (1)

If this applies with inscriptions, would it not also apply in art in a culture with no indigenous artistic tradition, which would lead to an adaptation of pagan motifs to Jewish beliefs? It is inconceivable that, in a Hellenistic city such as Gaza, with its cosmopolitan and intellectual character, Jews would not have known the neoplatonic-Jewish ideas of Philo, that it was possible to reconcile religious and philosophical systems which appeared opposed in content. Neoplatonic ideas had as much meaning to a Jewish community as to a Christian. As we have seen, Clement of Alexandria stated that Plato derived his conception of God from the Jews, and Philo used an allegorical style of scriptural interpretation which was later taken up by the Christians. That similar ideas pervaded both religions in the sixth century becomes obvious with the comparison of the mosaic pavements of the Orpheus mosaic from Jerusalem and the synagogue of Gaza. Both depict Orpheus, playing a harp; but while the Christian (and possibly earlier) panel shows him wearing the traditional Phrygian cap, with Pan and a centaur below him, in a more obviously pagan composition, the Jewish version has him crowned and nimbed, in the manner of a Byzantine emperor. Beside him his name is written - David.

The theme of Orpheus is important, both for the Shellal mosaic and its Jewish counterpart at Ma'on. Orpheus was the author of a religion based on the written word; the prophet of a

mystery cult which was a modification of the mysteries of Dionysus. (1) But instead of indulging in Dionysiac orgies, Orphism taught a doctrine of personal salvation, firstly through initiation, and then through a life of asceticism and virtue. (2) With its obvious analogies to Christian belief, the Orphic "Logos" passed to the Hellenized Jews of Alexandria and the Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, who associated the syncretism which had already taken place between Orpheus, Dionysus and Helios with their own doctrines. Thus Orpheus, the tamer of animals, was linked to the Good Shepherd and, through his descent into Hades, with Christ; Dionysus, through his suffering and death, was associated with the Passion of Christ.

But the theme of Orpheus was as relevant to the Jews as to the Christians. Dupont-Sommer has shown that the idea of David as Orpheus had been taken up by the Essenes at Qumran as early as the first century, B.C. and relates it to the messianic passage in Ezechiel, 34:23-24:

"Then I will set over them a shepherd to take care of them, my servant David; he shall care for them and become their shepherd. I, the Lord, will become their God, and my servant David shall be a prince among them". (4)

For the Jews, the image of David as Orpheus carried messianic promise. (5) For the Christians the same meaning, with Christ as

2. Ibid., p. 196.
3. A. Dupont-Sommer, Le myth d'Orphée aux animaux et ses prolongements dans le Judaïsme, le Christianisme et l'Islam, Rome, 1975. p.7, bases this hypothesis on a non-canonical psalm found in one of the Qumran scrolls.
4. Ibid., p.10-11.
5. Goodenough, op. cit., vol.12, pp.161-63 associates the Orpheus with animals and a vine at Dura Europus with mystical expectation of afterlife.
the new David, was made explicit by Eusebius, in the fourth century, when he compared the "Saviour of All", with Orpheus. (1) The animals and birds in the vine trellis would then also be associated with the Orphic theme. Friedman notes that the types of animals and birds became less miscellaneous and certain ones began to recur. (2) That they carried connotations of afterlife is borne out by their presence in catacombs and on funerary monuments. (3) These are the animals on the Gazaean mosaics.

The relevance of this theme to the Gazaean group of mosaics is made explicit in the synagogue at Maiumas, where the vine trellis with its birds and animals form the aisle panels on either side of the David/Orpheus panel in the nave. At the smaller and later synagogue at Ma'ôn the design of the aisle panels at Gaza has been expanded to form the central panel of the nave. The panel at Shellal follows this same pattern. It seems likely that the Ma'ôn synagogue may have derived its design from the large synagogue at Gaza. Whether Shellal adopted this from the synagogues or whether from an earlier Christian work, perhaps in the Eudoxiana, remains a mystery. (4)

The vine trellis design of the Gazaean mosaics is versatile,

2. J.B.Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970, p.41 cites examples - sheep, the peacock, the dove and the eagle. The latter appears in the central axis of the Armenian chapel, Jerusalem.
4. Which seems unlikely in view of the open antagonism between Christians and Jews in this period, Mango, *Byzantium*, p. 91-2. The Gazaean churches have been not been located; there were mosaics in the baptistery at St. Sergius, as Choricius, I,24, Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p.61, tells us although he does not give any idea of the design.
in that it could be modified to any size. It is also decorative. But, in the intellectual climate of Gaza, and with the tradition of metaphorical interpretation that they adhered to, it seems unlikely that such a pavement design would be devoid of meaning.

It is also unlikely that the meaning was no longer understood at Shellal. It is likely that the donors, a bishop and a high ranking priest, would have been men of education. As well, Dorotheos of Gaza was probably still alive and even active, in the area. (1) Dorotheos was solidly grounded in the thought prevailing among the sophists of Gaza. He may have completed his education in Gaza, and may even have taught in the schools there. (2) But he certainly had extensive knowledge of Greek writings, the early Greek and Cappadocian Fathers, and the apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers and, throughout his own writing holds to the allegorical explanations of the scriptures used by the Fathers. (3) He, and presumably others in contact with him, would have understood any meaning of the mosaic design.

1. Dorotheos' date of death is not known and is placed loosely between 560 and 580.
3. See for example, "The commentary on an Easter Hymn of St. Gregory Nazianzen", in Discourses, p.220ff. Dorotheos knew the writings of Aristotle and Epictetus, among the Greek writings. Among the Church Fathers he talks of St. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius, John Chrysostom, Mark the Hermit and Zosimus, as well as "the second Clement", (pseudo-Clement) and the apophthegmata of the Desert Fathers. He also must have known Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, the Abbot Isaiah, and John Cassian. See Deuvreg, p.41, n.5 and pp.42-3. There was also contact between the scholars of Gaza and the monasteries. Aeneas of Gaza used to visit the Abba Esaias in his cell at Bet Daltha, near Thawatha, to discuss problems about Plato, Aristotle & Plotinus. Chitty, op.cit., p.75, cites "Vita Esaiae", ed. Brooks, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scr. Syr. Sser.3,t.25, p.12.
Iconography.

It is possible that the lower inscription would have thrown light on the interpretation of the floor. Kitzinger said that the Christian "titulus" was an essential and integral part of the work of art to which the verses refer. (1) While the Orpheus imagery would give an interpretation of the pavement as Paradise, perhaps re-enforced by the inscription at Magen, (2) inscriptions on some other Palestinian mosaic floors quote verses of the Psalms or other passages of Scripture, relating them to the Creation of God, or to the "Peaceful Kingdom" of Isaiah. (3)

At this point it is necessary to note that the theology of the sixth century was a complex series of interconnecting ideas. Thus, the story of the Creation was linked to the Flood and Noah's ark, as well as to Paradise. As well, the same artistic imagery was used to give visual expression to these themes. (4) But these were then linked to ideas of Baptism and Salvation and also to the Passion and death of Christ and the Resurrection. (5)

The various animals and birds, too, can be ascribed individual

1. Kitzinger, Nikopolis, p.102, n.78
2. However, at Magen, where birds, animals and fruit fill a geometric ground, the words are "This is the gate of the Lord; the victors shall make their entry through it". This passage from Psalm 118:20 is preceded in verses 16-18 by specific reference to "raising up" from death.
3. At the synagogue at Gaza the words "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it..." (Psalm 24:1) appear. At Ma'in the inscription is from Isaiah, 11:7, "the lion shall eat straw like the ox", see Crowfoot, PP.Cit., p.143.
4. For example, the "peopled" acanthus scroll, with very similar motifs on the Noah's Ark pavement at Misis/Mopsuestia - see illustrations in L.Budde, Antike Mosaiken in Kilikien, Recklinghausen 1969, vol.2, and the Romano-Christian panel of an ivory diptych, now in the Louvre, which depicts Adam as Orpheus with the animals. See Toynbee, Animals in Roman Life and Art, London, 1973, p.294 and plate 138.
5. See, for example, H.Rahner, Greek Myths and Christian Mystery, London, 1963, who makes these analogies clear.
symbolic value, either related to their widespread funerary use or according to the kind of moral analogy described by Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite. It therefore seems possible that these interconnections could not only be apparent in the Shellal mosaic, but that it could be interpreted at different levels, both exegetic and moral.

Professor Ernst Gombrich, discussing the question of levels of meaning, has stated that, while exegetics attributed the employment of the distinct four senses to Holy Writ, and Dante wished them applied to his great poem, he knows of no medieval or Renaissance text which applies this doctrine to works of art. (1)

On the other hand, J.B. Friedman has argued that the ideas behind the visual image are often more fully expressed outside the world of visual arts, in literature, philosophy and history: in other words, in sources which tell us something about the people and circumstances which produced the art. (2) In discussing the Orpheus motif, Friedman suggests its connection with death and the afterlife; he also hypothesises that a secondary symbolism connects the lyre of Orpheus with the body of neoplatonic ideas about the harmony of the universe and the return of the soul to its celestial home. (3)

If the answer to the problem of levels of meaning lies in literary sources, it is necessary to take into account the writings of the early Fathers of the Church. Both Origen and Jerome had spoken of a threefold interpretation of the

3. Ibid., p.76.
In his First Conference of Abbot Nesteros (written c.495), John Cassian talks of four levels of meaning inherent in everything, which he illustrates by analogy with the city of Jerusalem. (2) For Cassian, theoretical knowledge is divided into historical interpretation and the spiritual sense. This is divided again into tropological, allegorical and anagogical meanings. He describes the historical level as the doctrinal sense, and the simplest, "under which is contained no more secret sense"; the anagogical sense is that in which words are applied to things future and unseen; and the allegorical sense is revelation of the true meaning of the historical narrative, in terms of the Eucharist. (3) There is no way of knowing whether Cassian’s levels of meaning can be employed in reading the Gazaean vine mosaics. But Cassian had returned to his monastery in Bethlehem, following his first long sojourn in Egypt, when he met Abba Nesteros. Jerome, too, as we have seen, applied levels of meaning to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Hypatius of Ephesus, writing in the first half of the


2. Gibson explains, Ibid., p. 437, n.1, that Cassian derives his divisions from the same version of Proverbs 31:21. By this system Jerusalem is, historically, the city of the Jews; allegorically divided into historical interpretation and the spiritual sense. Scriptures. Bearing in mind the practice of the Christian as the Church of Christ; anagogically as the heavenly city of God. For Cassian the tropological sense is the moral explanation "which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching", and in this sense Jerusalem is "the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise or blame from the Lord under this title".

3. Ibid., p. 438.
sixth century, suggested that visual aids, such as painting or sculpture, could be used to teach "simple folk", the elements of their faith, "for the sake of their spiritual salvation", and that material adornment allows "every order of the faithful to be guided in suitable manner and to be led up to the Godhead." (1)

In view of this, could it not be argued that the pavement at Shellal served a didactic purpose, expounding the mysteries of Christianity? And that material beauty could be used in an exegetical and moral way, which would be understood at their own level by "every order of the faithful", to guide "some men ... towards the intelligible beauty"? (2)

If this is the case, the scholars who interpret the vine trellis mosaics of Palestine as the created world (3), the Garden of Eden, or the peaceful kingdom of Isaiah's prophecy are correct. (4) But the Creation is analogous to the doctrine of salvation and also to the Church: "As his will is creation and is called the universe, so his desire is the salvation of men and is called the Church." (5) St. Paul links the universe with the Church and introduces the idea of the Church as a microcosm, an idea which is perpetuated in the architecture and decoration of the Byzantine church, as it was described, both by Choricius and by the Syriac hymn on the cathedral at Edessa. (6) The floor of

1. Hypatius of Ephesus, "Miscellaneous Enquiries", in Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire, p.117.
2. Hypatius, op.cit., p.117.
5. 1 Thessalonians, 4:3.
6. Mango, Art of the Byzantine Empire, pp. 57-60, & p.63. Choricius, 1,38, says that the dome of St. Sergius "imitates the visible heaven." Also A. Grabar, "Le témoignage d'une hymne syriaque sur l'architecture de la cathédrale d'Edesse au VIIe.
the church does, by this analogy, represent the created world. But by syncretism of ideas, if the Creation is linked to Baptism and a new life in Christ, the "peopled" vine trellis would expound the Christian doctrine of death and resurrection in Baptism, and salvation through the Cross of Christ.

The Imagery of The Main Field of the Shellal Mosaic.

The amphora and other types of vases were used as funerary symbols from ancient times. The amphora represents the "waters of life" and, as such, becomes a baptismal font. (1) The origins and context of the vine have already been discussed in terms of its Dionysiac and funerary context, but Toynbee and Ward-Perkins comment on a pair of column fragments in Istanbul. One of these shows secular subjects of peasants with animals in the scrolls while the other has Biblical scenes including the Baptism of Christ. (2) This would indicate that the vine too, has baptismal associations. The vine grows from the water of life and becomes, itself, the tree of life, which was inhabited by beasts and birds. (3) It is as the tree of life that the vine signifies the siècle et sur la symbolique de l'édifice chrétien", in Cahiers Archéologiques, vol. II, (1947), 41ff. Ibid., pp.29-39 contains a French translation of the hymn by Dupont-Sommer.

1. As in the catacombs in the Via Latina, at Rome, cub. M & F, where a fountain springs from the water in an amphora. In cub. F, the amphora is flanked by a deer. A similar composition frequently appears in Baptisteries, where the fountain is replaced by a grape vine and flanking deer or peacocks, as seen at Djemila and at Ravenna. At the church at Bet Guvrin, stags flank the vine urn and peacocks flank an inscription at the upper end of the panel. For a discussion of the fountain, see P. Underwood, "The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels" in Dumbarton Oaks Papers no.5, (1950), pp. 43-158.


passage from St. John ..."I am the vine, and you are the branches"; the same passage to which Clement of Alexandria applied Neoplatonic and Dionysiac analogy. (1)

The basic teaching of the Christian faith is that, in baptism, the believer dies to the old life of sin and rises to a new and eternal life in Christ. As St. Paul said:

"Know you not that we who are baptised in Jesus Christ are baptised into his death? For we are buried together with him by baptism into death: that, as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also may walk in newness of life". (2)

That the amphora actually contains the baptismal water is apparent from the small cross, forming the ribs of a grape leaf, which lies above the mouth of the amphora reminding us that water without the cross of Christ is ordinary water, not baptismal water and that "the water of the baptismal font is consecrated by the sign of the cross". (3)

The cross, as such an insignificant feature, seems curious. It is obvious that it was not disguised as a result of the Theodosian Decree of 427. (4) Large and very obvious crosses appear on many contemporary church floors in Palestine. (5) It

2. Romans, 6:3-4.
3. Rahner, op.cit., p. 78 cites St. Ambrose' question to the newly baptised in De Mysteriis, 4:20 and St. Augustine, Contra Julianum, VI, 19, 62.
4. Codex Theodosianus, 1, tit. viii, which forbade the use of the Cross on floors where it would be walked on.
5. These were often in places where they would be walked on. A large cross lies in the centre of the upper level of the Glass Court at Jerash; other crosses appear in the main field or borders of the church of St. John at Jerash, at St. George, El-Mukhayet, 'Ain Karim and Shavei Zion, north of Accho; at Ain-el-Bad (Hama), in Syria - now in Damascus - there is a large cross at the east end; while at Umm Er-Rus, 20kms. S.W of Jerusalem and not far from Shellal, there is a large cross on the centre of the floor, with small crosses in squares at the end of each arm.
would seem, rather, to reflect the words of the pseudo-Areopagite when he warns the initiated Christian who has passed through the Mystagogia, against careless talk ... "Guard the mysteries of the hidden God so that none who is not initiated may partake therein, and to make this sure, ... speak in holy illumination". (1) By this insignificant cross, the analogy to baptism would only be apparent to the faithful: to the uninitiated, the floor would appear a familiar decorative pattern.

Grapes are not the only fruit of the vine. Heads of grain are suspended on either side of the central axis and horizontally across the lowest row of medallions. (2) These carry a reference to the bread and wine of the Eucharist and introduce the theme of death. As Rahner points out, the mysteries of Baptism are linked to the altar of sacrifice and both to the wood of the cross. (3) St. Paul uses the metaphor of grain to answer the question "How are the dead raised? In what kind of body?" His reply is still read as part of the funeral service...

"The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a naked grain, perhaps of wheat, or of some other kind; and God clothes it with the body of his choice, each seed with its own particular body ... So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown in the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown in an animal body,

1. Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, Ecclesia Hierarchia, I,1, quoted in Rahner, op.cit., p.39.
2. There are two kinds of grain depicted. One is green, the other brown. They could refer to two different kinds of grain, or to living and dead grain, see n.4.
3. Rahner, op.cit., pp. 39 and 65. He explains that the Water of Life gushes forth at the foot of the Tree of Life, but life was only given to the water through Christ’s atoning death upon the cross "so that he might sanctify the water through his sufferings". (quotes Ignatius of Antioch, Ad Ephesios, 18,2.)
it is raised as a spiritual body." (1)

In this way, as the seed of the grain perishes through burial in the earth to regenerate into a new plant, so the faithful, through baptism, are reborn into a spiritual form.

As we have established, the vine is the Tree of Life; the Tree of life is the Cross. At this point Neoplatonic thought pervades theology. Irenaeus explained that it was through the wood of the cross that the Logos was revealed to all men and united Jews and Greeks in a single God. (2) In the mystery of the cross, the cosmos of the Greeks and the Bible of the Jews converge upon each other. In distinctly neoplatonic terms St. Paul expressed messianic salvation in cosmic terms:

"He rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, in whom our release is secured and our sins forgiven. He is the image of the invisible God; his is the primacy over all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities and powers: the whole universe has been created through him and for him. And he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him. He is, moreover, the head of the body, the church." (3)

In short, situated as it was in the microcosm of the church, it seems that the Shellal floor may depict the Created World, or even the earthly Paradise. But with all the ramifications of early theology it would become an allegorical explanation of the doctrine of salvation through the Christian mysteries.

1. 1 Corinthians, 15:35-44.
The Motifs.

The individual motifs, within the roundels, appear in differing combinations with other animals and birds on contemporary Palestinian animal pavements. (1) However, they appear to signify moral characteristics illustrating a way of life which would ensure salvation.

Three baskets of fruit appear in the central axis. The fruit in the donkey pannier and lower basket cannot be identified, a normal characteristic on these pavements. (2) The upper basket, from which the fruit is destroyed, may have contained grapes; an almost identical basket, overflowing with grapes, appears on the Armenian chapel floor in Jerusalem and very similar ones appear in vintage scenes, as at Ss. Lot and Procopius at Mukkhayet and in the Monastery of the Lady Mary at Bet-Shean. Where they appear in the vintage scenes at Piazza Armerina, they have specifically Dionysiac connotations.

The pannier can also be traced to the ancient and pagan world. Donkeys carry such panniers in Dionysiac scenes of the vintage with their implication of everlasting life. (3) Birds pecking at grapes have the same meaning. (4) In this instance the basket does not contain grapes but some other red and green fruit: the birds, in colour, posture and shape resemble wood pigeons. The pagan origins would seem to relate to Demeter and Persephone rather than Dionysus, especially as the pigeon was regarded as being sacred to Persephone. (5) The same idea of

2. Ibid., p.368.
death and resurrection into new life, implicit in the mysteries of Demeter as in those of Dionysus, seems to apply.

The centre basket is of the type called "dudh" in Hebrew and "kalathos" in Greek. These were used as offerings to Demeter. In Egypt too, a basket of fruit was offered to ensure that the crew of Re would row the dead to the next world. (1) In a Biblical sense, Amos had a vision of a basket of ripe summer fruit, which was the prefiguration of death before the messianic age. (2)

The other motifs of the central axis are a krater and a bird in a cage. As a mixing vessel for wine and water, the krater would seem to have Eucharistic significance. But it does not look like wine in the vessel. It is possible that it is either milk or milk and honey. Milk and honey was both a Dionysiac fluid (3) and an offering to the dead. (4) It was also offered to the neophytes as part of the rite of Baptism. (5) Clement of Alexandria likens milk, mixed with honey, to the Logos, which is also the Blood of Christ, so it does become a Eucharistic symbol and as such, salvation. (6)

There has been much written concerning the bird in the cage

2. Amos 8:1.
4. See Homer, The Odyssey, Book X.
5. Smith & Cheetham op. cit. vol.2, p. 1185, cite Tertullian, De Corona Militum, 3. Also Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogia, 1,vi. This practice was still in operation in the Egyptian rite in the seventh century.
6. Clement of Jerusalem, Protrepticus, 1:39,41,44,45,50 and 6:51. See also Goodenough, op. cit. vol.6, pp.118-121, in which he discusses the concept of salvation through nursing and the continuation of the idea in the writings of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Frances de Sales. This whole concept springs from Gnosticism. See the relationship in the Odes of Solomon, XIX, 2-3, in Ibid., p.121 and n.155. The Odes are believed to be a Christian Gnostic text from the 2nd. century, E. Henneke, New Testament Apocrypha, G.B., 1965, 1975, vol.II, p.809.
motif since Andre Grabar published his paper on the subject. (1) He cites St. Augustine's Soliloquies, (I,14,24) which talks of the spirit needing to break out of the prison of the body and take wing to reach the heavenly light. He also notes that other neoplatonists such as Porphyry and Proclus as using the same metaphor. To back his thesis, Grabar used illustrations of a funerary vase and a sarcophagus and several mosaics. (2) [Fig.1] What Grabar failed to take into consideration was the fact that, while his first two examples show an unmistakeable dove in, or on, the cage, the others depict an equally unmistakeable partridge. (3) [Fig.12] As we have seen in all the sources, the partridge symbolizes evil or the devil. It does not fit the interpretation of the soul; nor does it fit the alternative interpretation that, in the synagogue, it represents divine protection for the Jewish community.

As an alternative, Avi-Yonah suggests that, either the bird is in a trap, or that, as in all the Gazaean mosaics where it appears in the central axis with the baskets of fruit, it is an offering to God. (4) Saller also suggests that the bird is a

2. From Cabrol-Leclercq, op.cit., vol.II, figs.1830 & 1831, and mosaics from the church of Elias, Mary and Soreq at Jerash, from Justinian's basilica at Sabratha, from a sixth century church on Corfu, and the pavement at Misis (Mopsuestia) in Cilicia, as well as the synagogue at Ma'On. There are many more examples of birds in cages around the Mediterranean, ranging from the vine rinceau border of a sixth century mosaic at Fondo Tullio, near Aquileia, in Italy, (P.L.Zovatto, Mosaici Paleocristiani delle Venezie, Udine, 1963, p. 125-6), at Deir Soleb, Syria, where it occurs twice in the border, but where the bird seems to have left the cage, (Saller & Bagatti, op.cit., p.237), on the pavement of the Armenian Chapel, near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, at Khirbet 'Asida and in the synagogue at Gaza; and, of course, at Shellal. The only exceptions are at Shellal, Jerusalem & Tullio.
hunter's decoy, because, at Madaba at least, the bird is too big for the cage. (1) In the church of Elias, Soreg and Mary, at Jerash, he suggests that the ruse has been successful, because another bird has approached the cage and is looking in. (2)

The partridge as a decoy is well documented by the early writers: so is its evil and malicious nature, whereby it lures its friends into the hunter's trap. St. Basil notes that "the partridge has a treacherous and jealous voice, maliciously assisting the hunters to seize the prey." (3) But it also seems to signify the sins of the flesh. (4) The theme is given relevance for the synagogue, by the passage from Ecclesiasticus:

"Bring not every man into thine house: for the deceitful man hath many trains. Like as a partridge taken [and kept] in a cage, so is the heart of the proud; and like as a spy, watcheth he for thy fall: for he lieth in wait and turneth good into evil, and in things worthy of praise will lay blame upon thee ... Take heed of a mischiefvous man, for he worketh wickedness ..." (5)

A closer observation of the Shellal bird reveals, however, that it is not a partridge. It appears to be a smaller bird, coloured grey and buff like the pigeons below, but of a different species, judging by its shape and posture, and its small, black beak. Certain identification is not possible, although it seems

2. _Ibid._, p.271.
4. e.g. Aelian, _On Animals_, 4:16, Oppian _Cynegetica_, 2,317, and Timotheus of Gaza, 7:10, 17:2, 50:3. Oppian tells that the partridge and the gazelle are friends, but the hunter sets the partridge to decoy the gazelle and vice versa, to the detriment of both as they both get caught. This love for each other is put down to passion and alien desire, which brings its own punishment. (Cyn. 2, 405 & 428) Aelian says that the partridge uses the arts of a Siren to lure others into the trap. However, if the decoy bird is a hen, the wild hens counter the challenge with their cries and rescue the cock, who is kept from the trap by the love of friends, not by passionate love.
to be a songbird of some kind. However, its very lack of specificity gives the impression that the type of bird is not of crucial significance: rather, it is its place in the cage which is important. As many species of birds were used to trap others of their own kind, the same meaning of treachery and evil would apply. It can be related to the passage in Jeremiah:

"For among my people there are wicked men, who lay snares like a fowler's net and set deadly traps to catch men. Their houses are full of fraud as a cage is full of birds". (1)

The message of the bird in the cage, to Jew and Christian alike, would seem to be a warning against the consequences of sin. As Dorotheos of Gaza explains, using the analogy of an eagle caught in a net:

"Can the hunter not strike it down whenever he pleases? So it is with the soul: if it has one passion set into a bad habit, the enemy [i.e. the devil] at any moment he pleases strikes it down, for he has the upper hand over the soul through that passion." (2)

Although the bird in the cage is difficult to identify, the other creatures present no problems. They are:

Row 1 - Peacocks with (left) a partridge and (right) a grey dove.
Row 2 - Sheep and goats.
Row 3 - Pheasant (phasianus colchisis) and purple gallinule (gallinule porphyric porphyrio)
Row 4 - Lion and tigress.
Row 5 - Guineafowl (numida meleagris) and flamingos (phoenicopteros).
Row 6 - Hounds with hare and gazelle.
Row 7 - Cock.

2. Dorotheos, "Discourse XI", op.cit., p.181
Rows 8 and 9 are missing from the mosaic. All that remains of the animal in the right roundel of Row 4 is a cloven hoof. It is possible that the cock in Row 7 was matched by a hen in the right roundel, as is found in the Armenian Chapel, Jerusalem.

The symbolic meaning of some of the birds and animals is well known. The peacock, flanking a grapevine appears on numerous tombs and sarcophagi and is widely recognised as a symbol of eternal life. Pheasants too, appear in the same situations and seem to carry much the same meaning. (1) The partridge, as we have seen, represents evil or the devil (2), while the sheep is a well known Christian symbol for the good or just person. The meaning of the some of the other creatures is rather more obscure.

The dove in the right roundel of the first row is only known from Macfarlane's drawing. It appears grey in colour. The Physiologus tells us that the grey dove signifies penance. (3)

The composition of the panel, with the motifs of the lower register leading in to the amphora and central line of 1. There is little reference to the pheasant in literary sources, but it occurs very commonly on numerous pagan and Christian tombs and sarcophagi. The pheasant was believed to have been introduced to Europe from Phasis in Colchis, by the Argonauts. As all the heroes, including Orpheus and Heracles, were present on this expedition it must be presumed that the pheasant's association with these heroes led to an association with life after death. Orpheus, we have seen as a type of Christ. Herakles attained apotheosis through his labours, and so achieved immortality.

2. All the bestiaries see the partridge as symbolic of the devil, deceitful and treacherous. Its association with evil is found in Jeremiah 17:11. The Physiologus, XXXII, Curley, op. Cit., p.47 says, "Flee the devil, that is, the partridge, and you will come to your rightful parents, the prophets and apostles".

3. Ibid., ch.I, pp.64-5. "The ashen dove signifies the prophet Jonah preaching to the Ninevites and performing penance in a hair shirt and ashes". The association lies in the fact that Jonah means a dove.
offerings, does seem to present a coherent message: renunciation of the devil and repentance of sins which were the first part of the rite of baptism, through which the neophyte would come to eternal life. (1)

Sheep and goats seem to have associations with immortality for both the Egyptian and Greco-Roman world. (2) The same kind of domestic sheep and goats appear on Roman sarcophagi, both pagan and Christian, usually in a pastoral setting with the shepherd. (3) In the Orpheus context of the Shellal mosaic they would represent the flock, the followers of Christ.

The Purple Coot, on the other hand, carries quite specific meaning as a symbol of chastity and a sacred bird. (4) Aelian tells us that it "is admitted into a temple and roams unconfined, moving about as a sacred creature within the precinct". (5)

Lions appear on many mosaic pavements, in a variety of places and situations. (6) They frequently appear on pagan funerary sculpture, where they are related to afterlife as companions of Dionysus. The lion hunt appears as well on sarcophagi, where it is an allegory of the victory of the soul over death. (7)

2. Goodenough, op.cit., vol.12, pp146-7
3. Toynbee, op.cit., figs.140 & 141.
5.Ibid., III,42 says that it would not mate in public and the male was so upset if it observed infidelity in a married woman that it would hang itself.
6. Such as the hunting and Orpheus mosaics of the Mediterranean and the Striding and Beribboned lions of Antioch, and the opposed lions of the synagogues at Beth Alpha, Hammat Gader and Ma'on. The lion is the most commonly occurring animal on Palestinian mosaic pavements, according to Avi-Yonah, Mosaic Pavements, p.367.
7. Toynbee,op.cit., p.66.
synagogues, too, lions illustrate the passage, "Judah is a lion's
whelp" (1), and appear as guardians of the Torah scrolls. This is
undoubtedly because of the belief that the lion sleeps with its
eyes open. (2) This interpretation also recalls the words of
Psalm 121:4, "He who guards Israel will neither slumber nor
sleep".

For the Christian meaning, Physiologus relates the lion to
Christ, who, while He physically slept on the cross, kept watch
always in His divine nature. (3) Another dimension is added with
the belief that the lioness gives birth to a dead cub. After	hree days the father arrives and, breathing into its face, he
awakens it. In this, the lion is an explicit symbol of the
resurrection.

The tigress occurs more commonly than the tiger in Greco-
Roman art. (4) She is associated with Dionysius and often draws
his chariot (5), and so takes on eschatological meaning. But
another curious belief documented by Timotheus of Gaza says that
the tigress does not mate normally, but "bears after conceiving
of the wind." (6) This would certainly appear to introduce the
3. Curley, op.cit., p.4, relates this to Matthew 26:64.
4. In both Greek and Latin poetry and literature, the word
"tigris", is always feminine.Tigresses, often with their cubs,
are found on hunting mosaics as far afield as Piazza Armerina in
Sicily, (end 4th, early 5th. century), the Megalopsychia and
Dumbarton Oaks Hunt from Antioch (c. 450 & 500 respectively), and
the mosaic from the Great Palace mosaic at Constantinopile, (? 578-582). The motherhood of the tigress is always obvious.
5. Toynbee op.cit p. 70 notes Virgil "Eclogues", 29,30 that
tigresses drew Dionysus' chariot in his Indian triumph.
Rabinowitz, Paris, ..., ch.9:3, p.24. This was a widespread
belief in the ancient world. Oppian says he does not believe it.
doctrine of the immaculate conception of Christ.

The guineafowl in the fifth row is most realistically executed. Despite an absence of literary comment, guineafowls are found on funerary monuments. It was an offering to Isis, which indicates an association with death and a blessed afterlife. (1)

It also signified mourning which was considered a virtue by the Byzantines. (2) Mourning is also a reference to the messianic prophecy of Jeremiah: "I will turn their mourning into gladness, I will relent and give them joy to outdo their sorrow." (3)

The flamingo seems to be symbolic of resurrection. It appears on all the "Gazaean" mosaics, as well as others. (4) Toynbee notes that the flamingos on the Little Circus mosaic at Piazza Armerina could be a metaphor for resurrection. (5) The flamingo secretes a blood-like fluid from its mouth (6), which Florence McCulloch relates to the blood and water of salvation and eternal life. (7) Flamingos have also been associated with the phoenix.


2. Mourning was considered a virtue by the Byzantines, because, as St. John Chrysostom explains, spiritual wisdom, sobriety and a realisation that "we are nothing and our wickedness is inexpressible" are to be gained from a house of mourning. St. John Chrysostom, "Concerning the Statues, Homily XV, 4", in St. Chrysostom, The Nicene & Post Nicene Fathers, vol.IX, pp.439-40. This derives from the words of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, 7:13, and from the Beatitudes, "blessed be they that mourn", see Matthew, 5:4.


5. Toynbee, pp.cit., pp.281-2, associates the meaning of this pavement with the third century, Dionysiac pavement in Cologne, where the flamingos seem to represent spring, itself is a metaphor of resurrection.


because of their colour. (1)

On first appearance, the hunting medallions of the sixth row seem closely related to the many hunting mosaics of Antioch and North Africa. However, closer scrutiny shows a difference. The hare has a playful, rather cheeky expression on its face: the gazelle and right hand hound are standing still, not running. (2) The panels would seem to carry some other meaning.

The Greeks associated the hare with Dionysus and it was hunted and eaten in Dionysiac rites. (3) As such it became a funerary symbol as the belief in immortality became more general. (4) But the hare is a crafty trickster, it is licentious, and the Jews regarded it as an unclean animal. (5) It would seem to be a metaphor for sin.

The gazelle, on the other hand, is symbolic of resurrection (6) and, as the Physiologus tells us, represents the Lord, because it knows from afar whether those who approach come in guile or friendship even as Christ knew Judas was coming to

2. The right hand hound is missing from the mosaic, but it appears in both the early drawings.
4. They appear on late antique sarcophagi e.g. that of Junius Bassus, (359A.D.) in the Vatican, a tomb painting south of Rome and and in vine scrolls as on a pilaster in the Lateran collection and on the throne of Maximianus in Ravenna. See Toynbee, \textit{op. cit.}, p.201-2.
5. Aelian remarks that the hare confuses its tracks to escape the huntsman and "by some kind of natural sagacity ... tricks men so very craftily." Aelian, \textit{op. cit.}, VI,46-48, vol. 2, p.67. Timotheus adds that it changes its sex from male to female, that the doe is continually having intercourse and becoming pregnant, even while carrying a foetus in the womb, and that the hare is a coward, who keeps its eyes open while asleep. Timotheus, \textit{op. cit.}, ch. 18, p.28. To the Jews, too, the hare was unclean, because it was believed to chew the cud and did not have cloven hoofs. Leviticus 11:6 & Deuteronomy 14:7.
6. See the story of the raising of Tabitha in Acts 9:36-41. The Greek form of Tabitha is Dorcas, which means a gazelle.
betray him with a kiss. (1)

Dogs are "grateful and constant in friendship" and have long been considered a symbol of faith. (2) If the hare signifies sin, the hound on the left is chasing it away. The dog on the right is not chasing the gazelle, but rather standing looking at it. It would seem that the dog is the faithful companion of Christ. "Faithful" was the term applied to the baptized Christian. (3) In this sense the motifs appear to carry the message that the baptized Christian must chase away sin and follow Christ. (4)

The cock, in the Greco-Roman world, was a bird of Apollo.

1. Physiologus, XXII, p. 33ff. This comment relates to a story by Oppian, Cynegética, II, 315ff., and 427ff. and reflected in Timotheus', op.cit., ch.17, p.27, that gazelles and partridges are friends; they live together in the vales and the partridge cools the gazelle with the flapping of its wings in the hot weather. However the hunters set the partridge as a decoy to snare the gazelle and in this way the partridge betrays its friend.


3. As distinguished from the "catechumen", who was undergoing indoctrination prior to baptism.

4. It is possible that there is a neoplatonic element here. Timotheus of Gaza begins his chapter on dogs with the information that the dog is an animal of Hermes, see Timotheus', op.cit., ch.26, p.33. Hermes, as the "psychopomp" descended into Hell and returned again. But Hermes was identified, at least as early as the time of Plato, with the Egyptian god, Thoth, the Lord of Rebirth, who weighed the hearts of the dead at the Last Judgement. The Neoplatonists regarded the Egyptian Hermes as the source of all knowledge and thought: they saw him as the Logos embodied. To the early Church Fathers he brought the Word of God and, as the Logos became linked with Christ, see G.R.S. Mead, Thrice-Greatest Hermes, London, 1906, 1964, vol.3, pp.135-175, quotes the Fathers from Justin Martyr on. Hermes Trismegistus (the Thrice-Greatest) was the reputed writer of several works, one of which, The Poemandres, or the Shepherd of Men, relates to the Good Shepherd image of Christ. See also The Divine Pymander of Hermes Trismegistus, The Shrine of Wisdom, ed. London, 1923. The dog was also an attribute of Asklepios, Toynbee, op.cit., p.123. But he too, as the healer of souls, was a major figure in the Hermetic texts and was also identified with Christ, the Healer.
Because it heralded the rising sun, it acquired resurrection significance. (1) This meaning was adopted by the Christian church, because Christ was believed to have risen from the dead at cock-crow. In addition, it has overtones of repentance, as in the case of St. Peter, and of the Day of Judgement. (2) If, as seems possible, the corresponding bird on the right was a hen, it would signify Christ who longs to gather His children under his wing, as the hen gathers her brood. (3)

The Border.

In the synagogue at Ma'on, the Jewish liturgical symbols appear in the area below the Torah niche. At Shella'l, the motifs of the borders also seem to be liturgical, bearing out the baptismal and Eucharistic theme of the field. These begin at the western entrance and moving up the side to the Eucharistic motifs in front of the altar.

Of the first panel, inside the entrance, enough remains to recognise the bust of a man with the Greek letters Χ Ω on either side of his head. The excavators of the mosaic identified this figure as Christ, but, as Trendall points out, in view of contemporary feeling on the subject, it is unlikely that a representation of Christ would be placed in a doorway where everyone would walk on it. (4) The alternative suggestion, that

1. Goodenough op.cit., vol.6, pl.266, notes cocks on an Attic, black-figure, Dionysiac vase in the British Museum. They also appear on tombs e.g. at Bet Guvrin, one pagan, the other Christian.
2. All these themes were taken up by Prudentius, (c.405) in his Hymn, "Ad Galli Cantus", published in A.S. Walpole, Early Latin Hymns, Hildesheim, 1966, Hymn 20, p.117-119, quotes from Cathemerinon 1.
4. Trendall, op.cit., p.16.
it is a donor portrait, is based on a similar representation of the paramonarius, Theodore, at SS. Cosmas and Damianus at Jerash. (1) Saller points out that while, in the fourth century, bishops were tonsured, by the sixth century the custom had become more general and was used by all the ranks of the clergy and even lay monks. (2) This certainly applies to the priest John in the church of the Priest John at Mākkaibāt, who is nimbed as well. But Theodore is not tonsured; neither is Elias, in the church of Elias, Mary and Soreq at Jerash, who is dressed in a paenula and, like Theodore, carries a thurible. Their hairstyles are similar to that at Shellal. It seems more than possible that the figure at Shellal is the paramonarius, George.

Trendall has interpreted the lettering in the panel as the monogramme for χαὶ Γέ and translated it as "greetings" or "rejoice". (3) It can also be translated as "hail". It is possible that there was other lettering in the lower corners; perhaps monogrammes for Ο Θοῦ or ΒΟΥΘΟΥ. These were the words cried out by the catechumens as they turned from the darkness of the west, outside the baptistery, into the light within, as the first part of the baptismal service. (4)

The panels on either side of the man contain hanging floral

wreaths. Crowns or wreaths have an ancient connection with death and afterlife. (1) In Christian usage, neophytes were crowned with chaplets during the baptismal rite. (2) The fact that the wreaths are suspended may relate to the embargo placed on the wearing of crowns as "the custom of the Greeks and Jews". (3)

The white dove represents the Holy Spirit as it descended on the head of Christ at his baptism. (4) The sprig of leaves in the same panel is probably a sprig of olive. (5) The dove brought a spray of olive to Noah as a sign of new life after the flood. By analogy, Christ was the second Noah. (6)

The two corner panels held a chalice and an amphora with a sprig of greenery. (7) The chalice may have held the ointment used during Chrism (8) : the amphora may have held the sprinkling

1. Goodenough op.cit., vol.6, p.140. Crowns of green leaves were placed on mummies by the Egyptians and, according to the Book of the Dead, signified immortality. J.Daniélou, Primitive Christian Symbols, London, 1964, pp.1-24, has shown that Jewish use of crowns at the Feast of Tabernacles is connected with eschatological hope and M. Avi-Yonah & Z. Baras, The World History of the Jewish People, New Brunswick, 1975, vol.7, p.329, note the wearing of crowns by pilgrims when they carried first fruits to Jerusalem, especially at the Feast of Tabernacles, when they wore olive wreaths.


4. In the early churches, a silver dove was often suspended above the font. Smith & Cheetham, op.cit., vol.1, p. 576 note that St. Basil had one made for this purpose.

5. Trendall, op.cit., p.16. There is no conspicuous resemblance, but see Avi-Yonah, Mosaic Pavements, p.367, "Plants are usually more difficult to determine than animals."

6. See e.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechesis XVII", 9-10 who expounds this doctrine.

7. The chalice is badly damaged and the amphora is known only through Macfarlane's drawing.

8. Chrism was the anointing with an unguent of oil and balm, after the immersion of baptism to symbolise that the soul was "sanctified by the holy, quickening Spirit." Cyril of Jerusalem Mystagogical Lecture, III,3. Also Tertullian, De Baptismo 7-8.
water. In this case the green sprig is probably hyssop. (1)

The side borders hold types of fruit which could represent the offerings of first fruit made during the service. First fruits were offered to departed ancestors and heroes in the Greek world. (2) The Jews offered them at the Feast of Tabernacles, which had eschatological significance. (3) The green band around the fruit at top left may indicate that this is a first fruit. In Jewish custom and possibly also in Christian, the method for setting apart first fruits was to bind them with grass reeds. (4) As well as the liturgical offering of first fruits in Christian practice, it was a frequently used metaphor for the resurrection for the virtuous: "Christ was raised to Life - the firstfruits of the harvest of the dead." (5) and ...

"These are men who ... have kept themselves chaste, and they follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been ransomed as the firstfruits of humanity for God and the Lamb". (6)

It seems possible to ascribe eschatological meaning to the individual fruits, as far as they can be identified. Figs, as found in the lower left panel, were given an involved neoplatonic meaning in the Physiologus which relates them to the resurrection. (7) The pomegranate was believed to have sprung

1. Sprinkling with water and hyssop was part of the baptismal ritual. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechism III,1. See Psalm 51:7 "Take hyssop and sprinkle me that I may be clean". Hyssop relates to Noah, Hebrews 9:19, and the crucifixion, John 19:29. For these last two refer King James version; the New English translation replaces marjoram for hyssop.
5. 1 Corinthians, 15:20.
7. The panel must have contained four figs, of which two survive,
from the blood of Dionysus. (1) As such it would signify death and resurrection. It was also an attribute of Persephone, and symbolizes the return of spring and the rejuvenation which is expressed, in Christian terms, in the expectation of resurrection and immortality. (2)

The object in the upper left panel was described by Trendall as a pilgrim's sandal. (3) Closer observation makes it apparent that it too, is some kind of fruit. It seems to be some kind of gourd, or other hard skinned fruit, such as would meet the requirements of "shell-fruits". (4) Gourds are symbols of salvation according to their Biblical associations with Elisha and Jonah. (5)

The one remaining fruit on the south border does look, as Trendall suggested, very like an artichoke. (6) No specific reference to an artichoke has been found. (7) The flower and leaf of the artichoke are very similar to the thistle: if the same meaning applies it would signify the punishment of sin by eternal

and another fruit, the round shape of which can only be determined by the two rows of surrounding tesserae. Physiologus, ch. XXIX, p.41. bases his interpretation on Amos 7:14. The point of his story is clarified by the new translation of the Bible: "I am ... a dresser of sycamore-figs".
3. Trendall, op.cit., p.16.
4. Smith & Cheetham, op.cit., vo. 1, p.702, cites the so-called Apostolical Constitutions, VII.29.
5. 2 Kings, 4:38 and Jonah, 4:6.7
6. Trendall, op.cit., p.16.
7. Although the Mishnah cites it as a "diverse plant" when grown in a vineyard: it is unclean."Kilaim" 5:8 follows Deuteronomy 22:9 and Uktzin 1:6 lists the stalk of the artichoke as unclean for one handbreadth - it is a handle but not a protection. See The Mishnah, pp.34 & 786.
death. (1)

Fruit appears very commonly in these Palestinian mosaic pavements, but is not always easy to identify. Avi-Yonah was only able to define almonds, a lemon, pomegranates and a fruit which he calls a "trunja". (2) Saller and Bagatti have also identified melons which have been cut open at the churches of the Priest John and St. George, at Mekkhayot and at Bet Guvrin. (3) Another "cut" fruit appears at Deir Mukelik. (4) Pomegranates appear frequently, for example, in the basket with the handle, at Ma'on and at Masada, where figs and citrus are also represented. (5) There does not seem to be any other artichoke or anything quite like the fruit at top left. (6)

The top row of border panels can be related directly to the liturgy of the Eucharist. The surviving motifs are the chalice of bread in the central panel and the divided fish in the two panels to the left of it. The symbolism of the fish as Christ and the relationship of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes as a prefiguration of the Eucharist are well known, but this rendering of the divided head and body seems to be unique. The only

1. Genesis 3:17-18. Although the artichoke as a motif appears unique, a similar design appears on a tomb (Goodenough, op.cit., vol.3, fig.97) where a similar object grows above what appears to be a sickle moon; on a tombstone from Gaza, of 608 A.D. where stylised palm trees rest on a similar crescent shape, Cabrol-Leclercq, op.cit., vol.1 check, p.707, fig. 4887.)


6. Although black and white photographs make absolute distinctions uncertain. This question may be solved by A. Ovadiah, Corpus of Mosaic Pavements, when available.
analogous Christian example seems to be in the ivory panel of the
Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes on the chair of Maximianus at
Ravenna, where only the front half of the fish lies on the plate.
It seems that the divided fish on the Shellal mosaic may relate
directly to the words of the Divine Liturgy: "This is my body
which is broken for you". (1)

It seems possible, then, that the popularity of the vine
scroll pavements, peopled with animal, birds, or even with human
figures, may have been for their didactic nature as well as for
their obviously decorative function. Where different motifs, such
as personifications of the seasons, vintage or hunting
scenes, appear in the roundels, it may be quite possible to
attribute similar or related meaning to them. Where the same
kinds of animals and birds occur in geometric settings, they
would still imbue the floor with moral precepts and
eschatological hope. (2)

It seems then, that the theme of the Shellal floor is of a
fairly standard kind, which may have served the purpose of
illustrating the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.

**Meaning in Houses and Synagogues.**

It has already been established that, where the vine trellis
appears in houses, it is associated with a Dionysiac theme with
its hope of immortality. It has to be argued that, in the
synagogues too, it could carry the same kind of eschatological
meaning as it does in the Christian church. All the motifs can

1. Downey, *Gaza*, p.156.
2. Even in a very plain, geometric pavement such as Umm Jerar,
one of the border panels contains a phoenix.
find Old Testament, or related, justification. For example, the vine itself relates to Psalm 80:8-9 "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt ..." and Isaiah 5:1-7, "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is Israel and the men of Judah are the plant he cherished".

As we have seen, many of the animal and bird motifs have a meaning as relevant to a Jewish community as to a Christian. Where different animals appear, they too can be interpreted in a similar way. The elephant and giraffe appear as wonders of the created world. (1) But they too, are Dionysiac. (2) Furthermore, the Physiologus likens the male and female elephants to Adam and Eve and Timotheus provides a moral reference which would be very appealing to the Jews - elephants are law abiding and follow their leader. (3) Even the wild ass, kicking up stones, signifies evil, because it kills the new born males. (4) The Physiologus equates it with the devil. (5)

But more than a similar understanding of folk-lore, Jews and Christians shared a practice which cannot be ignored. That is, that Jewish practice baptised proselytes after a programme of baptismal instruction (6): the rite, as Daube points out, had a moral and spiritual significance by the Tannaitic era. (7) The Jewish catechist learnt that by initiation, by renouncing his former life and the unholy world around him and by keeping the

1. They were sufficiently noteworthy to warrant a note in Timotheus, ch.24,2, p.31, recording the passage through Gaza of 2 elephants and a giraffe, on their way to Constantinople in 496.
2. See Toynbee, op.cit., pp.49, 142 and plates 8 & 65, where they appear in the Indian Triumph of Dionysus, on the second century sarcophagus, now in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.
4. Timotheus, ch.22, p.29.
7. Ibid., p.121.
law and the Commandments, he would be exalted "when history comes to an end". (1) For them, the afflictions and sufferings of the present lie between the glory of Israel in the time of David and Solomon, and the Messianic reign in the future, foretold by the prophets. (2) We must see, then, in the presence of David as Orpheus, with the animal vine panels in the synagogue of Gaza, an expression of this. And, as Goodenough has shown, even the presence of the cult symbols - the menorah, lulab and ethrog - on the floor at Ma'on, indicate eschatological hope. (3) The vine mosaics of the synagogues would therefore carry the same meaning as those of the churches: through baptism and by an established code of behaviour, the initiate would achieve eternal life.

The Mosaic and its Social Context.

If the Shellal mosaic can be read as a coherent programme, it remains to ask why such a programme would have been chosen and why a bishop and a priest should have funded the decoration of the Shellal church in such a way.

A motivating force in the early Byzantine era which had been gaining momentum since the third century, was the belief in the impending end of the world. (4) This event would be presaged by the appearance of the Antichrist, by warfare, famines, pestilence

1. Ibid., p.132-3.
2. Ibid., p.118.
3. Goodenough, vol.4, p.44.
4. Mango, <i>Byzantium</i>, p.201. Since the third century the idea had prevailed that the world would last six thousand years, on the analogy of the Six Days of Creation. Ibid., p.204. This would bring the end of the world at about the year 500 allowing for differing systems of computation. When the waiting period was prolonged, into the reign of Justinian, the approach of the Apocalypse seemed even more likely.
and earthquakes. (1) During the reign of Justinian, war, plague
and earthquake all occurred. (2) Procopius of Caesarea even drew
the inference in the Secret History that Justinian was the
Antichrist. (3)

The ideal way for a man to procure the safety of his soul at
the Last Judgement was to sell his possessions and to become a
monk. An alternative was either give the money to the poor, or to
build, renew or decorate a church to the glory of God. That this
was a popular way of ensuring salvation is evidenced by the
dedicated inscriptions of Palestinian mosaics. (4) These mosaic
pavements were a popular form of donation. As Crowfoot has
explained, they were not the most expensive form of church
decoration but they were decorative and colourful. (5) People
who could not afford to build a church could provide panels of
mosaic paving of a size and quality in accordance with their
means: they were even able to record their beneficence in an
inscription. These mosaic have survived, where the more expensive
marble pavements have not. They were dismantled and used again
elsewhere.

Many of the Palestinian mosaics were donated by bishops and
clergy. (6) Their position in the community was both honourable
and onerous. As Mango explains:

"...the priest alone had the faculty of administering

1. Matthew, 24:4-8.
2. There was an earthquake in Antioch in 526, another in
Constantinople in 557. Plague broke out in 542-3. Ibid., p.204.
3. Procopius of Caesarea was educated in Gaza. Procopius, Secret
History, viii,13:xii, cited in Mango, Byzantium, p.204.
5. Crowfoot, op.cit., p.117. The large churches were paved with
slabs of marble or stone which "looked like marble".
baptism, forgiving sins and performing the liturgical sacrifice. His task was to instruct his flock and to protect the poor, and to instruct not only by means of words, but also by example. Since he was everybody's servant, he had to be humble; since his shortcomings were evident to all, he had to lead a blameless life. He needed to be experienced, patient and vigilant... [and] he had to remember that in the end he would give accounts for his stewardship and, like all men, ran the risk of eternal damnation." (1)

The bishop, and the priest George, decorated their church with a mosaic pavement the purpose of which was to glorify God and His Creation and to beautify His temple on earth. It was also a step towards ensuring salvation for themselves. It seems that they not only chose a design which would represent the beauty of the world, but one which was an illustration of the mysteries of the faith by which they lived and a visual reminder of the rewards of a virtuous life.

Conclusion.

The Shellal mosaic is one of many mosaic pavements which were made to decorate churches in Palestine during the sixth century. Many of them have a similar grape vine trellis design, composed to form roundels which are "peopled" with humans, animals and birds. The group of these mosaics, in the area around Gaza, in southern Palestine, show an arrangement of the vine trellis and the protomai of animals and birds which is particularly symmetrical and ordered. As these are dated within a period of about fifty years, it seems quite possible that they were the product of a single workshop of mosaicists, working out of Gaza.

The question of whether the composition of the Shellal mosaic is of provincial or metropolitan origin gives rise to another

query as to whether there was a metropolitan style as early as
the sixth century. The mosaics of Gaza derived from elements of
Greco-Roman, North African and oriental art at a time when the
art of Constantinople was itself developing from a number of
similar influences. The long association of Gaza with Egypt and
centuries of rule by Assyrians and Persians before the
Hellenistic period, contributed to the Gazaean style. As well,
the position of the city as a major Mediterranean seaport, at the
end of the caravan routes from the east, brought continuing
contact with all the neighbouring countries and contributed to a
local style of mosaic design. This combined naturalistically
rendered animals and birds with a geometrically stylised
framework.

The prosperity of Gaza during the sixth century was a major
factor behind the production of so many mosaic pavements in the
area at this time. As well, the entrenched eschatological belief
in a period of war, plague and earthquake led to the building and
decoration of numbers of churches throughout Palestine in the
hope of personal salvation. These were frequently donated by the
clergy, as was the pavement at Shellāl.

Most of the mosaic pavements of the period belong to churches
or synagogues in small towns and rural areas. The Shellāl church
was not isolated in the sixth century: it stood beside a busy
river crossing on a major caravan route. It probably served a
rural population as well as a number of ascetics who inhabited
an area which was well populated in this period. As far as can be
ascertained without further excavation, the small church, of
which the Shellāl mosaic formed all or part of the nave, was of
the size and architectural style which is characteristic of
most of the sixth century churches of southern Palestine.

The mosaic too, when viewed in the context of other
Palestinian mosaic pavements of the same period, has to be seen
as having features in common with these. It is a work of average
quality. It is of similar technique and design to many others and
quite possibly follows a similar iconographic reading. In every
way it is typical of mosaic pavements which were placed on
Palestinian church and synagogue floors in the sixth century.

For the most part, the mosaic pavements of Palestine have
been examined from a formalist viewpoint. This method of
analysis, while charting a chronological development of style,
has accepted these floors as being "purely decorative". Scholars
have set aside the possibility that they may have served a
didactic and symbolic function. There is no doubt that the
Shellal mosaic is decorative and of considerable aesthetic
appeal. It is also a very successful design in its adaptability
to any size of mosaic panel. But it seems that scholars have
ignored the intellectual climate of sixth century Palestine, and
Justinian's determined promotion of the "unity of faith and
culture", in ascribing purely decorative value to these mosaic
pavements. Even where they occur in houses and synagogues it
seems that similar symbolic meaning might apply.

For the Shellal mosaic, given its location close to the
intellectual centre of Gaza, with its strong ties between the
schools and the Church and with its neoplatonic bias, it seems
very likely that it would have had a greater purpose than mere
decoration and that it can be read as a coherent iconographic
programme. There seems no reason why such a programme would not have been understood completely by the clerical donors and to varying degrees by the congregation.

On the evidence presented here, it seems that the meaning and function of sixth century Palestinian mosaic pavements should be the subject of a searching re-examination.
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All biblical quotations are taken from The New English Bible.

Illustrations 1, 2, 2a, 6a, 12 & 13 are copied from A.D. Trendall, The Shellal Mosaic; 3, from J. Balty, Mosaiques Antiques de Syrie; 4, 5, 6b, & 6c from M. Avi-Yonah, Art in Ancient Palestine; 7, from
Colloques Internationaux, La mosaïque gréco-romaine; 8, from M. Blanchard-Lemée, Maisons à mosaïques du Quartier Central de Diemula; 9, from W.S. Smith, Interconnections in the Near East; the map in fig. 10 is reproduced from Baedeker’s Israel; and fig. 11 from F. Cabrol & H. Leclercq, Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, vol. III.
Fig. 1.
(a) From the coloured drawing by Sapper F. L. McFarlane.
(b) Drawing by Captain M. S. Briggs (from "The Burlington Magazine").
Fig. 2.

The Shellal Mosaic
Fig. 2a. The inscription at the east end of the floor. (a) In situ, (b) in its present position.

Fig. 3. Am-\textit{el} Bad (Hama), Syria.
Fig. 4. El Mukhayyat. Church of the Saints Lot and Procopius.

Fig. 5. Gerasa. Church of Elias, Mary and Soreg.
Fig. 6 (a)
Armenian Chapel, Jerusalem.

Fig. 6 b. Ma'on, Synagogue.
Fig. 6c. Gaza: the synagogue.
Fig. 7. El Djem (Thysdrus)

Fig. 8. The Asinus Nica Mosaic, Djemila
Fig. 9.

Three designs on ceilings of Dynasty XVIII Theban tombs and leatherwork from tomb of Nebnefer, an official of Amenhotep II.
1830. — Vase d'argile sur lequel est représentée une cage.
D'après Boldetti, Osservazioni sopra i cimiteri, 1720, p. 154.

1831. — Oiseau sur une cage. Sarcophage.
D'après Bosio, Roma sotterranea, p. 52.

Fig. 11. Illustrations from Cabrol-Leclercq, cited by A. Grabar.

Fig. 12. Partridge in a Cage at Mahon.

Fig. 13. The Bird in a Cage at Shellal.