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Tomasz Polański

The Jan Kochanowski University of Humanities and Sciences
Kielce

THE MOSAIC AND PAINTING DECORATION
IN THE CHURCH OF SAINT STEPHEN
OF GAZA

Some time after the dedication of St.Sergius' Church in Gaza , when Choricus delivered his first oration in honour of the founder Bishop Marcianos (before AD 536), the rhetorician was commissioned a second oration for the inauguration ceremonies, this time of St.Stephen the Martyr's Church also in Gaza. His dedicatory oration which also contained a prolonged *ecphrasis* of the church became yet another panegyric speech in honour of the same man, Bishop Marcianos, its founder ¹. It is impossible to determine an exact date for the oration. All we know is that the speech was delivered in public in all likelihood between 536 and 548, that is a decade or two after his previous dedicatory speech (*LM I*) ². St.Stephen the Martyr's was raised in the open country outside the city walls, on a hill surrounded and surrounded by a garden (*LM II*, 28). The church's out-of-town positioning is also symptomatic of the location of other martyria in Syria and the Holy Land, as pointed to repeatedly by I.Peña in his book on the churches of Syria (1997), for example the Bizzos Church in Ruweiha dated in the 6th century.

The church was a timber-roofed, triple-nave basilica supplied with upper galleries (γυναικωνῆτις) and provided with a spacious square atrium (προτεμένισμα) ³, which consisted of four columned porticos (τέτρασι στοαῖς ἀβρυνόμενον), and a façade strengthened with two towers (πύργοι). Choricus did not forget to add that the columns of the atrium gleamed 'whiter than snow' (*Il.* 20, 437) (*LM II*, 31). Let us note a couple of other architectural details. A high staircase led pilgrims up from the road to the western portico of the atrium (πλήθος βαθμῶν) (*LM II*, 29). Twin towers like the ones which once flanked the main western entrance to the Church of St.Stephen are still preserved in a number of Syrian churches from the same period, and have always been regarded as characteristic of the Syrian Christian architecture. ⁴ Peña in his recent valuable study *Lieux de pèlerinage en Syrie* (2005) enumerated to a number of such towered basilicas, as for example the

church in Qalb Lozeh, Ruweiha (6th century) or Turmanin. The architectural complex of St.Stephen's in Gaza also contained a sacristy (οἶκος ὑπηρέταις ἱεροουργίας) with an entrance leading from its southern portico. It also encompassed the bishop's reception hall, and an *auditorium* (χωρος εἰς πρόσρσιν) located among the trees of the garden (*LM II*, 33). In the church interior Choricus' attention was attracted by four porphyry columns (χρώμασιν ἐσθῆτος βασιλικῆς, *LM II*, 36), which separated the chancel from the central nave. The central nave was closed off by a semicircular apse covered with a semidome (*LM II*, 37) ⁵. Choricus' description of the side walls in the central nave is particularly impressive and rich in technical terminology: 'Lofty columns (κίονες ὑψηλοί), an architrave (σύνδεσμος) connecting their capitals (τὰς κορυφάς); above it, a wall riveted with marble (μαρμάρους); a second range of columns; another stretch of masonry decorated with animal figures (θηρίων πεποικιλμένη μορφαῖς); arched windows (θυρίδες ἐν ἀψίδων γενόμεναι σχήματι) – these added together make up the height (of the church)' (*LM II*, 48, trans.C.Mango). The walls of the basilica were crowned with a coffer ceiling (ξύλα γὰρ ἐνταῦθα πολυτελῆ καλαθίσκοις κεκαλυμμένα) (*LM II*, 53) ('here are costly timbers covered with coffering' trans.C.Mango) ⁶.

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

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

1. The picture of 'everything the sea brings forth and all the tribute of the earth' (trans.C.Mango: οἷσα μὲν θάλαττα φέρειν, ὅσα δὴ γῆ πέφυκε συντελεῖν - *LM* II, 34). It seems that this was a floor mosaic located along the east wall of the atrium (ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος), perhaps in the narthex, which is otherwise not specified in the description.
2. A mosaic composition of Christ flanked by two holy men, of whom one was St. John the Baptist. The mosaic covered the concave wall of the apse (*LM* II, 38, *ibid.*45).
3. A Nilotic landscape with its wild life, which adorned the walls behind the columned porticoes, that is the walls in the side naves (ταύτην ἐπὶ τῶν τοίχων τὴν εὐφροσύνην αἰ στοαί σοι διδῶσι) (*LM* II, 51) (the porticoes would give you this pleasure of looking at their walls, where ... etc. [the nilotic landscape is located]). Choricus adds that the aisles were well lit thanks to numerous and spacious windows.

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

Passage No. 1 offers some difficulties in interpretation. Let us read it in its integral context: 'These things the colonnade offers you on the right and left, while on its eastern wall you may see everything the sea brings forth and all the tribute of the earth: there is hardly anything you could look for that is not included, and a great deal that you would not expect to see. How faithful to nature is this art! What splendid, what charming execution! This rich adornment befits a sanctuary of such golden opulence' (*LM* II, 34: trans.C.Mango). Now let

us read the passage in the original version: ταῦτά σοι τῆς στοᾶς χορηγούσης ἐξ ἑκατέρας χειρὸς ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος δίδωσι βλέπειν, ὅσα μὲν θάλαττα φέρειν, ὅσα δὲ γῆ πέφυκε συντελεῖν, καὶ σχεδὸν μὲν ὁ ζητήσαντί σοι μὴ πρόσκειται, πολλὰ δὲ σοι μὴ κατὰ νοῦν ἐπιόντα θεάσῃ. ὡ τέχνης πολλὴν πρὸς τὴν φύσιν παρρησίαν ἔχουσης, ὡ λαμπρότητος ἔργων ἠδονῇ κεκραμένης. ἔδει γὰρ τέμενος οὕτω πολύχρυσον ἔχειν ἐγκαλλώπισμα πλούτου.

Downey appended the passage with the following commentary: ‘The eastern colonnade, on the side toward the church, was paved with the mosaics so popular at this time, showing the creatures and the foods produced by both the sea and by the land. Fruits, grains, vegetables, birds, fish and shellfish – all were portrayed in decorative patterns which illustrated the bounty provided for man by God. The mosaicists, with their consummate skill, were able to depict each plant, each bird, and each fish with the most accurate detail and most lifelike air’⁷. In my opinion Choricus was describing the mosaics located in the *narthex*, although he did not actually say so unambiguously. Downey surmised this from the context, applying the keen intuition of an art historian. I am of the opinion that the concluding words of the passage allude to a mosaic decoration (‘such a rich decoration befits a church adorned with so much gold’), and the gold in the church apparently refers to the mosaic decoration and coffer ceiling. Downey had in mind a colourful floor mosaic carpet (the colonnade was paved with the mosaics). Thus we can interpret the key passage ὁ πρὸς ἥλιον ἀνίσχοντα τοῖχος as referring to ‘the mosaics by the wall of the eastern portico, or along this wall.’

The question remains what the mosaic looked like, or more correctly which class of the mosaic decoration did it represent. Was it an *emblema* mosaic, which showed marine life, fish and shellfish, set against an impressive navy blue

background, in a well known type of hellenistic mosaic decoration, as may appear judging by Choricus' highly generalising and economic wording of Choricus or an eloquent interpretation of Downey, which is suggestive of such an interpretation? (Pl.I). I do not think so. I would say that St.Stephen's *narthex* mosaic decoration represented a popular Late Antique genre of floor mosaics which depicted hunting, pastoral, gardening, fishing or genre scenes. They were favourite subjects for the decoration of floors in churches, public buildings as well as private villas in late Roman Syria, Palestine and North Africa. Their bibliography consists of a vast collection of books and papers and is still growing. I would like to refer only to a couple of selected studies and examples: I.Lavin, *The Hunting Mosaics of Antioch and Their Sources* (1963), M.Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (1993), P. and M. Canivet, *I complessi cristiani di Huarte* (1980), J.Balty, *Mosaiques antiques de Syrie* (1977), K.Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (1999), A.Ben Abed-BenKhader, E.de Balande, A.Uribe Echeveria, *Image in Stone. Tunisia in Mosaics* (2003), the last-mentioned being one of the most impressive art books ever published.

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

(λέοντες καὶ παρδάλεις, ἄρκτοι, καὶ ταῦροι, καὶ κύνες, ὕλαι, καὶ πέτραι, καὶ ἄνδρες θηρακτόνοι, καὶ ἡ πᾶσα τῆς γραφικῆς ἐπιτήδευσις μιμουμένη τὴν φύσιν). I cannot resist a feeling that we are perfectly familiar with mosaics like the ones described by Asterius of Amaseia with his usual feeling for the beauty of the figural arts. I would like to refer to P. Douceel-Voûte's meticulous catalogue of the Syrian and Lebanese churches, and in particular to the carpet mosaic from the Church in Bir Abu-Radi (Kibuts Kissufim), which parallels and supplements Asterius' catalogue;⁸ a lion and a bull from the church in Sordje⁹; hunting and gardening scenes from the nave of the church in Deir-el-'Adas, which is crowned with a camel-tender leading four dromaderies (Pl.II)¹⁰; or a nave mosaic in the church of Mezra'a el-Ulia filled with a dense pack of running animals, all of which seem to illustrate Asterius' description. One can see bears, lions, bulls, pantheras and dogs, and in addition hares, deers and long-horned antelopes.¹¹ In this connection we can also refer to a splendid mosaic decoration in Sts Lot and Procopius' Church or the Chapel of Prester John on Mount Nebo with their catalogues of hunting games entwined in a prolific, highly decorative panoply of stylised palm or vine branches (Pl.III).

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

Choricus' allusive, indirect, highly rhetorical and metaphorical wording, as well as the idiosyncratic sequence of descriptive entities bring some questions which call for answers. Who was actually represented in the apse? Wessel in his paper *Apsisbilder* (1966) only wrote that in St.Stephen's of Gaza it was Christ enthroned who was represented in the apse between figures represented in the act of adoration, one of them being St. John the Baptist¹². At yet another point of his synthetic paper Wessel referred to the scene of *traditio coronae martyrum* pictured in St.Stephen's of Gaza,¹³ that is Christ giving St.Stephen the martyr's crown. The cited passage contains nothing warranting such an interpretation. Mango (2004) imagined the scene in quite a different way: 'The person on the right is described as *ho men to temenos echon*. I understand this to mean "he who owns the church", i.e. St. Stephen, rather than "he who bears the church in his hand." The latter description would be appropriate to the image of the founder, i.e. Bishop Marcianos, but the absence of St.Stephen would be surprising.'¹⁴ Downey (1963) interpreted the two figures as 'the donor of the church, on the right, bearing in his hands the model of the building, with St.John the Forerunner on the left.'¹⁵ Abel's translation of the passage (1931) 'l'un, à droite du spectateur, tenant l'église; l'autre, à gauche, représentant le Précurseur' is appended with a commentary which may only increase the reader's confusion: 'probablement Saint Etienne tenant la représentation de sa basilique'¹⁶. ἔχων with an object is hardly metaphoric. It is a usual, colloquial usage meaning 'a person with something in his/her hands,' 'by one (accompanying one)'. Consequently the meaning seems self-evident: 'a person with the church (St.Stephen's Church, τὸ τέμενος is preceded by the definite article).

Now let us make a short overview of some available analogical iconographic patterns, which include images of Christ and church founders. In S.Vitale of Ravenna (546/7) we find Christ enthroned on the globe flanked by two

Archangels who introduce S.Vitalis and Bishop Ecclesius with the model of the church in his hands¹⁷. In the apsidal mosaic of SS. Cosma e Damiano (526/530) St.Peter and St.Paul introduce two Martyrs from Kyros to Christ, who is descending from heaven (Pl.IV). The composition also includes St.Theodore and the Founder Pope Felix IV, the latter with the church model. St. Peter and St. Paul and St.Lawrence, who leads the founder, Pope Pelagius II, also appear in the rainbow arch mosaic of S.Lorenzo fuori le mura in Rome (578/90). The mosaic depicts St.Stephen and St.Hyppolytus¹⁸. Mango was quite right when he emphasised the obligatory presence of the church's patron in this kind of apsidal decoration. In every available instance (SS.Cosma e Damiano, S.Lorenzo, S.Vitale) the patron appears in the apsidal mosaic of the church.

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

The next question is: where was the mosaic located? We have repeatedly said it was in the apse. This is not so self-evident, either. Mango (2004) argued that 'this representation was probably on the triumphal arch'¹⁹. Other commentators, however, speculate that it must have been an apsidal image.²⁰ On re-reading the passage once again in its longer context, I think it can be demonstrated beyond

all doubt that it was actually an apsidal composition. In chapter 37 (*LM II*) Choricus focused on the *templon*, the four porphyry columns, which separated the chancel from the nave, and immediately afterwards he passed on to the description of the apse. His description of the apse quite confusing, as a result of his language which sounds artificial and pretentious, composed of curiously selected rare words and phrases, which only indirectly identifies a location in the apse. Mango and other translators resorted to bold paraphrases, to avoid making them sound unnatural. However, the problem with reading Gazan rhetoricians like Joannes in *Tabula mundi* or Choricus in the *Laudes Marciani* lies in that that they wanted to sound unnatural, extremely literary, extraordinary and striking with their archaizing, forgotten or newly coined semantics, vocabulary, syntax and phraseology. The passage in question runs more or less as follows: 'the wall is distinguished by a varying concavity whose lower part rises parallelly up to the top (that is to the base) of the arch'. Choricus also says that a concave space of irregular shape (a half-cylinder joined with a quarter-sphere) adorns the wall behind the *templon*. Next the rhetorician briefly describes the above-discussed decoration, and, crucially, he continues: τοῦ κάτω δε μέρους παντοδαποῖς μαρμάροις ἀστράπτοντος λίθος τις (*LM II*, 38), 'in the lower part below (the lower range of decoration) there is a marble revetment ... and a window in the centre, which is wide and tall (*LM II*, 39). It seems, then, that Choricus' description reflects one of the basic principles of the Byzantine church decoration: a marble stone revetment up to the base of the arches, and a mosaic or painted decoration above it.

My guess is that the image of Christ flanked by two holy men was set on the concave wall of the apse. Abel (1931) linked the two holy men from Ch.30 with the image of Christ from Ch.45. The extensive passage between the chapters describes a hemispherical wooden structure, which was in some way related to the figures of the holy men and, it seems, to the image of Christ, who is

described in the following words: ‘the painted icon of the Lord of the Universe was in the centre of the wooden structure’ (*LM* II, 45: εικόνας γεγραμμένης ἐν μέσῳ το προστάτου τῶν ὄλων). Abel concluded that the apse contained the image of Christ flanked by two saints and pointed to the rainbow arch mosaics in S.Paolo fuori le mura in Rome as the closest analogy²¹. Let us examine this no longer extant image. We know it only from the drawing by an anonymous artist dated 1634 (Pl.VI),²² next from G.Ciampini’s *Vetera monumenta*,²³ and also from Rossini’s engraving, which documented the destruction caused by fire of 1823²⁴. The original mosaic showed the bust of Christ in a *nimbus*, an image remarkable for its appearance of majesty and power, located over the top of the rainbow arch. The mosaicists who got the commission from Galla Placidia and the Pope Leo the Great (mid-5th century) pictured Christ as long-haired and bearded holding the cross in his hand²⁵. Christ was adored by the 24 Old Men of the *Apocalypse* and two Saints, Peter and Paul, distributed symmetrically on either side (ἀμφοτέροθεν) at the base of the arch.

Abel also added that the apse of St.Stephen’s of Gaza was incrustated by a wooden wainscoting²⁶. In fact if we read ἀμφοτέροθεν, ‘on both sides,’ (*LM* II, 38) as referring to Christ, then Abel might have been right in his interpretation of the web of intricate meanings coded into Choricus’ description of, what he labels *καὶνὸν σχῆμα* (a novel construction) of κῶνος ἥμισυς, a half-cone (*LM* II, 41).

However, if we relate ἀμφοτέροθεν to the previous sentence, which contains the description of the apse (*LM* II, 37), then we are allowed to read the adverb in quite a different way, namely as ‘on both sides of the apse’. Consequently the figures of the Holy Men would have been pictured on both sides of the apse, as suggested by Mango²⁷. And what would result from this it would be an unusual

and unknown mosaic composition which included two Saints pictured on the rainbow arch, that is outside the niche, and an icon of Christ painted on wood and set under a wooden panoply crowning the apse. Downey understood the text in a different way. He argued that Choricus actually described a wooden dome which 'rose at the eastern end of the church, over the apse, in the manner of the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem,'²⁸ and encompassed 'the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator, "the Ruler of all things" which filled the dome and formed the focus and the climax of the decoration of the church. This image, as the center of the decoration of every Greek church, showed Christ with His gaze fixed upon the worshipers below ... The figure was designed so that it seemed tremendous in size, filling the whole dome'²⁹. I have the feeling that it was the impressive beauty of the mosaic decoration contemplated in Palermo or Monreale that strongly influenced Downey's reading of Choricus' text³⁰.

What did the προστάτης τῶν ὄλων look like? Choricus also added that χρυσὸς δε καὶ χρώματα τὸ πᾶν ἔργον φαιδρύνει τοῦτο (*LM* II, 45) ('Gold and other colours give brilliance to the whole work'), words suggestive of mosaic decoration. We can imagine the Ruler of the Universe, the Pantocrator or Cosmocrator from Gaza referring to a number of contemporary or roughly contemporary, analogical icons of Christ, as for example Christ on the throne of rainbow, in a *mandorla* and carried by the four Evangelical Creatures and adored by two Prophets, probably Isaiah and Ezechiel, in the apse of Hosios David in Thessaloniki (5th century);³¹ Christ on the imperial throne in a *mandorla*, which is carried by two Angels in the Pantocrator's Cave in Latmos near Heracleia (7th century);³² the young Christ enthroned between two Archangels in the altar niche in the Theodosius Chapel in Antinoe (mid-6th century);³³ or a powerful Christ from SS.Cosma e Damiano in Rome (526/30) (Pl.IV) pictured in the scene of the Second Coming, Christ who descends from heaven and calls to mind the pathos in the verses from Thomas da Celano's

Missa in commemoratione omnium animarum: quando iudex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus; or finally the Christ from S.Pudenziana in Rome, seated below the *Crux gemmata*.

As if only incidentally ('I had nearly forgotten ...'), Choricus introduces the most interesting and detailed passage, which refers to the figural arts in his second oration in honour of Bishop Marcianos – a mosaic with a Nilotic landscape.

ὁ Νεῖλος, αὐτὸς μὲν ὁ ποταμὸς οὐδαμοῦ γεγραμμένος, ὃν τρόπον ζωγράφου ἰγράφουσι ποταμούς, εὔμασι δὲ καὶ συμβόλοις τοῖς οἰκείοις ὑποφανόμενος λειμῶσί τε παρὰ τὰς ὄχθας αὐτοῦ. καὶ γένη παντοίων ὀρνέων ὄσα τοῖς ἐκείνου πολλάκις λουόμενα εὔμασιν τοῖς λειμῶσιν ἐνδιδαιτᾶται (*LM* II, 50) (the Nile, the river itself is nowhere portrayed in the way painters portray rivers, but is suggested by means of distinctive currents and symbols, as well as by the meadows along its banks. Various kinds of birds, that often wash in that river's streams dwell in the meadows, trans. C.Mango).

Nilotic mosaics were popular in Italy in the Hellenistic period, and in Roman Africa during Early Imperial times. From the 4th century on they had also become popular in the eastern provinces, in particular in the 5th - 6th century. Balty emphasises their wide territorial dispersion and longevity in Roman art³⁴. In Jordan Nilotic landscapes appear on the floor mosaics from the 6th to the 8th century. The mosaics uncovered in Palestine are dated in general somewhat earlier, in the 5th – 6th century³⁵. Thanks to the publications of Balty (1976, 1984) and Hachlili (1998) we have a fairly good idea of the Nilotic mosaic in the aisles of St.Stephen's in Gaza. What did it look like? Choricus observed that 'the river itself is nowhere portrayed in the way the painters portray rivers.' In other words, the mosaicists of St.Stephen's did not present a personification of the River Nile. As shown by Hachlili, the personified figure of the Nile may be

regarded as characteristic of the Nilotic landscapes in Palestine (Bet Shean, Sepphoris), but not of Syrian and Jordanian Nilotic *paysages*, where there is generally no personification (with the exception of Umm-el-Manebi).³⁶ Choricius mentioned 'all the various types of birds' swimming or taking a dip in the water, or resting on the meadows along the river.' His 'birds' may be interpreted by numerous analogies as 'cranes, herons, ducks' with a duck resting in a lotus cup as a favourite motif³⁷. The latter appears on many Nilotic mosaics in Palestine (Sepphoris, Tabgha (Pl.V), Bet Guvrin). 'The meadows' are suggestive of different plants as lotus flowers, nenuphars, or papyri. 'Lotus, papyrus and oleander plants fill the space in a similar manner in all the pavements and represent and distinguish the Nilotic landscape'³⁸. I had the good fortune of seeing the Nilotic mosaic of Tabgha *in situ* (5th century) (Pl.V). This mosaic is conspicuous for the wide range of species it presents. It belongs to a class of Nilotic mosaics which call to mind pages of illuminated codices with atlases of birds. In Tabgha we can recognise a cormorant, a dove, ducks, a goose, herons, a swan and a flamingo killing a snake. The Nilotic landscape in the Church of S.John the Baptist also included herons and ibises³⁹. The birds in the Nilotic mosaics are frequently depicted with the use of splendid, fresh colours for their plumage to cheer the eyes of the viewers (Sts. Lot and Procopius in Khirbet el-Mukhayyet, Casa del Fauno in Pompeii, Tabgha).

We have already mentioned a duck resting in a lotus flower as a favourite subject. It returns time and again in the Nilotic landscapes. The ichneumon pictured in combat with a cobra may be regarded as yet another figural component of mosaic decoration⁴⁰. This motif appears on a largely destroyed Ktisis mosaic in Antioch,⁴¹ in the churches of Qabr Hiram (St.Christopher's) and Zahrani, on the Orpheus mosaic from Jerusalem kept in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, and also in Shahba, El-Mukhayyat, Ma'in, in the Michaelion of Huarte and in the Casa del Fauno in Pompeii. In Tabgha the cobra

fighters with a pelican (Pl.V)⁴². I am going to return to this point in the discussion of decorative qualities and a possible religious symbolism of the Nilotic mosaics.

Sometimes we may be justified in suspecting a reflection of the Orientalist painters. This seems to be the case in a detail showing a cow attacked by a crocodile on a river bank. Such a motif was identified by E.Alföldi-Rosenbaum on a mosaic from Kyrene⁴³. In all likelihood the image was inspired by a painting by Nealces mentioned in Pliny the Elder's History of Art (*HN* 35,138). The old master painted a donkey and a crocodile waiting in ambush⁴⁴.

What does 'with appropriate symbols' (συμβολοῖς τοῖς οἰκείοις - *LM* II, 50) mean? These words clearly refer to some usual components of the Nilotic mosaic landscape, like the nilometer, crocodile or a sailing boat⁴⁵. The nilometer occurs exclusively on Palestinian mosaics, while the crocodile may be seen also in North African mosaic painting. It is interesting to observe that the crocodile is missing in the Syrian and Jordanian mosaic decoration⁴⁶. Choricus' 'appropriate symbols' must have also referred to the usual representations of towns in the mosaics of Palestine and Jordan, as for example of a representation of Alexandria (Bet Shean, Sepphoris), of Alexandria and Memphis (Gerasa, Khirbet as-Samra)⁴⁷. Hachlili's description of Sepphoris' Nile as 'one central stream consisting of ... wavy lines which divide the pavement and another thinner stream flowing down on the right side of the mosaic'⁴⁸ probably illustrates Choricus' expression: 'depicted with streams'.

Nilotic landscapes sometimes make up a highly complex and unified compositions. This is the case with St.Stephen's decoration, as well as with the Tabgha, Gerasa and Scythopolis mosaic decorations. Sometimes they resemble narrow and elongated carpets (el-Haditha, Kafr Kama, the House of the Earth

and Seasons in Antioch, Tell Hauwash, Halawa, Umnir el-Qubliye). Nilotic subjects may also appear as small, decorative images (*petits tableaux*) applied in the intercolumnia of church interiors (Sts. Loth and Procopius' in Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) or simply as *motifs de remplissage* ⁴⁹. They were also frequently employed as additional decorative motifs in different kinds of mosaic adornments. In all those classes, whether of carpet mosaics, or decorative frames or small images we find both simple conglomerations of motifs collected together on a surface (Tell Hauwash, Halawa) as well as truly artistic creations (Tabgha, Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) ⁵⁰.

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

Balty in her invaluable paper on the Nilotic mosaics (1995) raised the question of their interpretation. She asked if they carried an allegorical meaning. Basing on the archaeological material, she argued that the Nilotic mosaics had a purely decorative character, and that it was exactly this quality which brought them such a widespread and long lasting popularity. She emphasised that Nilotic mosaics have been found in pagan sanctuaries, private houses, synagogues and Christian churches ⁵¹. To illustrate her thesis, she drew attention to the mosaic from Collemancio in Italy (2nd century AD) remarkable for its purely decorative character, namely its symmetrical arrangement which consists of two hippopotami and two crocodiles set against one another around a square central field ⁵². Balty further argued that it was exactly the mosaics' non-religious character which proved decisive for their popularity in the period when Christians were looking for decorative patterns suitable for their churches, while

hitherto popular mythological subjects were out of the question⁵³. Consequently Balty was not inclined to believe in their Christian symbolism⁵⁴. This latter argument of hers may well be illustrated by a charming story of a young mosaicist (μουσωτής) who 'was removing the old mosaic from the wall representing the story of Aphrodite' (ἱστορίαν ἔχοντος τῆς Ἀφροδίτης) (*Vita S.Eutychiei* 53) in a private villa in Amaseia, because the owner of the house was going to convert change it into a chapel of the Archangel Michael and the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. When the mosaicist 'had cut out the picture of the unclean Aphrodite (τὸ θέμα τῆς ἀκαθάρτου Ἀφροδίτης), the demon that resided in it struck his hand which became inflamed and swollen.' The story continues that the young artist was healed by St.Eutychius, whose icon he painted and hung on the wall of the new sanctuary in Amaseia⁵⁵. We can legitimately suspect that it was a mosaic image of St.Eutychius which adorned the sanctuary's interior. The pagan mosaics were erased.

Hachlili in her industrious and helpful overview of the Nilotic mosaics which have been uncovered in Israel, in general followed Balty's line of interpretation. Hachlili emphasised that the 5th-6th century Nilotic mosaics inherited from the Hellenistic period lost their original pagan religious meaning (the worship of the Nile divinity) and acquired various new meanings in the changed cultural milieu. She stressed the fact that the Nilotica created 'a general phenomenon of mosaic pavement art in Israel' and that they were found 'in different kinds of buildings, pagan, Jewish and Christian'⁵⁶. Hachlili also adduced some alternative opinions, which differ from her own and Balty's views. They seem to be more important for the Nilotica in St.Stephen's of Gaza, that is the literary description, while Hachlili and Balty were preoccupied exclusively with the archaeological material. It was Maguire who emphasised the allegorical meaning of the images of the Nile, 'the river which brings fertility' and which was also a symbol of creation. He also regarded the story of the Flight into

Egypt as crucial to the interpretation of the Nilotica in the Christian churches.⁵⁷ In particular Maguire was inclined to interpret along these lines a pavement in the East Church of Qasr el-Lebia. Hermann also pointed to a substance of the *interpretatio Christiana* when he recalled that the Nile was believed to be one of the Four Rivers of Paradise⁵⁸. However, in her paper *Le cobra et la mangouste dans les mosaïques tardives du Proche-Orient* (1976) Balty herself adduced the motif of combat between ichneumon and cobra pictured on the pavement of the church in Karlik, Cilicia. The motif was employed as illustrative of the Messianic ideal of the Peace of Christ which will fill the animal kingdom with the coming of Messiah according to the vision of Isaiah (65,25). $\phi\lambda\acute{\iota}\alpha\ \tau\acute{\omega}\nu\ \zeta\omega\acute{\omega}\nu$ can be also illustrated by the mosaic decoration in the churches of El-Mukhayyet and Ma'in. In the latter the landscape was explained by the related biblical inscription⁵⁹. Balty also recalled ichneumon chapter in the *Physiologus Graecus*. The anonymous author of the *Physiologus* wrote that the ichneumon rolls about in the mud before a fight with cobra, which should be interpreted as a figure of the incarnated Christ and His confrontation with Satan. *The Physiologus* was very popular from the 2nd century AD on. In the church of Zahrani a section which contains an ichneumon and cobra was located in the central part of the mosaic pavement⁶⁰. The mosaic pavement in the nave of the church in Huarte near Apamea is illustrative of the efforts undertaken by the donors and priests to assimilate pagan floral and animal 'atlases' to the realm of Christian art. The image of Adam at the centre of the nave just before the altar and at the end of the profane space transformed the atlas of animals and birds into the Christian Paradise from the Book of Genesis⁶¹. The Orpheus-like Christ is a variation on the subject. He plays on a lyre among peaceful animals entranced by his voice and music on the large mosaic uncovered in Jerusalem and now kept at the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, an unforgettable experience of artistic perfection for the visitor to the Museum⁶². It is interesting to observe that the central *emblema* with Orpheus has been frequently published

without its original setting, which endows the image with a strikingly pagan appearance. And only in its full ideological context, with the two female figures in a nimbus, named Georgia nad Theodosia, represented below Orpheus, and dressed in *palliae* and *dalmaticae*, which can be read as allusive of their Byzantine court milieu, allows the viewer to identify the person of Christ in the otherwise very pagan looking image of Orpheus. A similar mosaic with Orpheus was also found in Shahba (Philippopolis) and still remains *in situ* ⁶³.

There is evidence that those seemingly 'neutral' and 'purely decorative' mosaics were nonetheless carefully observed. The human figures which made up a usual component of the mosaic decoration in many churches of Palestine and Jordan (e.g. in Scythopolis, Beit Jibrin, Khirbet el-Mukhayyat) were intentionally avoided in the region of Apamea, as corroborated by the empty boats on the River Nile (Umnir) ⁶⁴. The literary sources may sometimes throw an interesting sidelight on this phenomenon, which reveals a clearly religious background. The corpus of documents collected for the needs of the Seventh Nicean Council (787) preserved the *Letter ad Olympiodorum Eparchum* (Ep.61 in PG 79, cc.577-580), a document which originated in the early 5th century, and in all likelihood was compiled by Abbot Neilos of Sinai (or, as more recently preferred, from Ancyra). ⁶⁵ However, the *Letter to Olympiodorus* which is known from the *Documents of the Council* (787) is missing from the voluminous corpus of Neilos' letters (PG 79, 81-581). Neilos expressed his decisively hostile attitude towards the fishing, hunting and other types of genere scenes in church decoration. We can deduce that his ban must have also encompassed Nilotic landscapes. The discussion which absorbed Thümmel's attention mainly regarded the letter's integrity and authenticity and consequently does not seem to be central to us. There cannot be any doubt about that Neilos was strongly against such decoration in Christian churches. The question remains whether the abbot from Sinai had such decorations whitewashed as argued by Thümmel,

or simply preferred the imagery inspired by the Old and New Testament stories, as documented by the extant version of Neilos' letter. Thümmel argued that this version was forged by the iconodule-oriented Nicean Fathers (787).

However, the passage of the letter we are interested in looks integral and original. It goes as follows:

εἰκόνας ἀναθεῖναι ἐν τῷ ἱερατείῳ καὶ θήρας ζῶων παντοίας τοὺς τοίχους
πλήσαι ...

ὥστε βλέπεσθαι κατὰ μὲν τὴν χέρσον ἐκτεινόμενα λῖνα, καὶ λαγωὺς, καὶ ἰδορκάδας, καὶ τὰς ἐξῆς φεύγοντα ζῶα, τοὺς δὲ θηρᾶσαι σπεύδοντας, σὺν τοῖς κυνιδίοις ἐκθύρως διώκοντας; κατὰ δὲ τὴν θάλατταν χαλῶμενα δίκτυα, καὶ πᾶν γένος ἰχθύων ἐλιευόμενα, καὶ εἰς τὴν ξηρὰν ἐξαγόμενα χερσὶν ἀλιευτικαῖς (to fill the walls ... with all kinds of animal hunts so that one might see snares being stretched on the ground, fleeing animals, such as hares, gazelles, and others, while the hunters, eager to capture them, pursue them with their dogs; and also nets being lowered into the sea, and every kind of fish being caught and carried on shore by the hands of the fishermen, trans.C.Mango - PG 71, c.577 C). This passage offers us one more literary comment on the above discussed mosaic decoration in the *narthex* of St.Stephen's of Gaza.

Let us read one more passage from the same letter, which speaks of 'the pictures of different birds and beasts, reptiles and plants' (PG 71, 577 D). This passage clearly reflects the class of mosaics which encompassed Nilotic landscapes. The opinion of a venerable ecclesiast on the decoration project of a newly founded church was decisively negative. However, the growing number of mosaic pavements adorning the floors of the numerous churches in the Christian Orient, which have been uncovered for recent decades in Israel, Jordan and Syria, strongly contrasts with Neilos' attitude and clearly speaks of a prevailing vogue for figural decoration in Christian buildings. Neilos was not isolated in his opinion among his contemporaries. His attitude was shared by Epiphanius of

Salamis and Theodotus of Ancyra, who were later referred to by the iconoclasts as authorities in the theological discussions on the cult of icons. An interesting testimony from the early the 9th century is remarkable for the same spirit of rejection and dislike for floral and animal decoration in the Christian churches and can be regarded as representative of Neilos' attitude. Its author, Stephen the Deacon, was actually an iconodule and adversary of the iconoclasts. The passage runs as follows: 'He (Constantine V) converted the church (of Saint Mary of Blachernae) into a storehouse of fruit and an aviary, for he covered it with mosaics of trees and all kinds of birds and beasts, and certain swirls of ivy-leaves enclosing cranes, crows and peacocks' (trans.C.Mango).⁶⁶ We can be sure that some Christians in the 5th/6th century expressed the same scornful opinions on the presence of the decoration in the Church of St.Stephen of Gaza, authorised by Bishop Marcianos, in the church founded by the Prefect Olympiodorus, in the Church of St.Lot and Procopius in Mukhayyet, or the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Tabgha. They must have ironically asked themselves or their companions: is this a church or an aviary? Certainly this attitude represents only a special current within a larger stream. In the Early Church we also find those who accepted Christian art in general, and what is more even admired and encouraged Christian artistic creativity. Asterios of Amaseia, Gregory of Nyssa, Paulinus of Nola or Marcianos of Gaza may be mentioned in this context. Bishops like Gregory of Nyssa or Marcianos of Gaza were men of authority wielding a certain degree of executive power. Thus we have a spectrum of contemporary opinions on church decoration in the history of the Early Church.

The *interpretatio Christiana* of the Nilotic landscapes must have certainly played its role in the discussion on church decoartion. However, the aesthetic component was of great importance. The sacred geography of Paradise and the Holy Family in Egypt integrated with the purely decorative qualities of the

mosaic carpets or wall paintings in the churches of the Christian Orient. They blended together in a way proper to the *beaux arts*. A visitor to the Church of Multiplication of Loaves and Fish in Tabgha realised how impressive they were. They opened up to the viewer a paradise of exotic birds, rendered with love of colour and shape, and the opulence of floral forms delineated with care and sensitivity to their natural beauty. In this mysterious garden of art forms the viewer can forget about their possible religious meaning, enchanted by their shapes, colours and composition. In the same way St. Augustine in his *Confessions* complained about the beauty of voices and music of the Psalms, which distracted the attention of believers during church ceremonies.

Ilustracje:

Pl.I: Pompei VIII,2,16. Marine scene. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, c.100 BC.

Pl.II: Deir el-'Adas, Church of St.George, Bosra Castle, AD 722.

Pl III: Nebo, Church of SS Lot and Procopius, 8.65x16.25m., Mid-sixth century AD.

Pl.IV: The Apsidal Mosaic of SS Cosma and Damian, Rome (AD 526/530).

Pl. V: Tabgha, Church of Multiplication, 5.50x6.50m., Second half of the fifth century AD.

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

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

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

³ Abel 1931, p. 26; Mango 2004, p. 55.

⁴ Mango 2004, p.68, n.72 *ibid.*; Butler 1929, p.210ff.; Lassus 1947, 235ff.; Abel 1931, p. 26 apparently interpreted the text as if it were pointing to the towers flanking the propylon, the opening propylon which led to the atrium. Consequently he had in mind the west wall of the atrium that crowned the staircase. The grammar of the passage does not preclude such a reading. The usual interpretation which refers to a towered basilica of the ordinary Syro-Palestinian type seems to be a natural solution to the locus under discussion. Abel 1931, p. 23, n.3, was aware of this construction element, Diehl, *Manuel I*, 31; Downey 1963, p. 134.

⁵ Downey 1963, p. 136.

⁶ Cf. Abel 1931, p. 27.

⁷ Downey 1963, p. 134.

⁸ Donceel-Voûte 1988, I, figs. 450-452.

⁹ *Ibid.* Fig.453

¹⁰ *ibid.* Fig. 20.

¹¹ *ibid.* Fig.159.

¹² Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c.270.

¹³ *Ibid.* c.280.

¹⁴ Mango 2004, p.70, n.84.

¹⁵ Downey 1963, p. 136

¹⁶ Abel 1931, p.24, n.7.

¹⁷ Wessel, *Apsisbilder* 274

¹⁸ *ibid.*c.277

¹⁹ Mango 2004, p. 70, n.84.

²⁰ Abel 1931, p. 24; Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c.270, 280; Downey 1963, p. 136.

²¹ Abel 1931, p. 25, n.1.

²² Miziołek 1991, fig.32; S.Waetzoldt, *Zur Ikonographie des Triumphbogenmosaikens von St.Paul in Rom*, München 1964, il.453 (no 835); Wilpert, Schumacher 1976, il.58, pp.87-8.

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- ²³ Miziołek 1991, fig.31; Ciampini 1699, t.I, tab.68, pp.228-33; Waetzoldt 1961, il.9 p.20; Bovini 1971, il.36.
- ²⁴ Miziołek 1991, fig.30.
- ²⁵ *ibid.* pp.51ff.
- ²⁶ Abel 1931, p.25, n.1
- ²⁷ Mango 2004, p.70, n.84.
- ²⁸ Downey 1963, p.137.
- ²⁹ *ibid.* pp.138f.
- ³⁰ Downey's reading was also criticized by Mango 2004, p.71, n.87, 'such an interpretation is not warranted by the text'.
- ³¹ Wessel, *Apsisbilder* c. 269; Ihm 1960, pp.182-4, Nr.XXXVIII, T.XIII, 1; Volbach 1958, p.70, Abb.133-135.
- ³² Ihm 1960, p.190f. Nr.XLIV; O.Wulff, *Die Malereien der Asketenhöhle des Latmos*, in: T.Wiegand, *Milet III*, Berlin 1913, pp.191-202; van der Meer 1938, p.273f. fig. 60.
- ³³ Wessel, *Apsisbilder*, c. 271; Ihm 1960, p. 198, nr LI, T.VII, 3.
- ³⁴ Balty 1995a, p.245, bibl.n.1, p.245.
- ³⁵ Hachlili 1998, p.111.
- ³⁶ Hachlili 1998, table 1, p.108
- ³⁷ Hachlili 1998, p. 107.
- ³⁸ Hachlili 1998, p.116.
- ³⁹ Balty 1995a, p.247.
- ⁴⁰ Balty 1995b, p. 217, n.1; Aymard 1959.
- ⁴¹ Balty 1995b, p.218, n.6 bibl.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* p. 218.
- ⁴³ Balty 1995, p.246, n.8.
- ⁴⁴ Hachlili 1998, p.115; E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum, J.Ward-Perkins, *Justinianic Mosaic Pavements in Cyrenaican Churches*, 1980 p.46; P. Mayboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 1995, pp. 100, 371-2, nn.18-19.
- ⁴⁵ Hachlili 1998, p.107.
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.* table 1.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp.111ff.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 110.
- ⁴⁹ Balty 1995a, p.250.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.251.
- ⁵¹ *ibid.* pp. 249, 251, 252, 253.
- ⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 251, Pl.36,2, n.30, p.249; S.Aurigemma, *Les Thermes de Diocletien et le Musée National Romain*, 1955, pp.30-31, pl.X-XI.
- ⁵³ Balty 1995a, p. 252.
- ⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.253.

⁵⁵ PG 86 II, 2333-2336, Vita S.Eutychiei, Patriarchae Constantinopolitani ab Eusthatio Presbytero; Eng.trans. Mango 2004, p.133ff.; Eusthatius lived in exile in Amaseia in the years 565-77.

⁵⁶ Hachlili 1998, p.118.

⁵⁷ Hachlili 1998, p. 118; Maguire 1987, pp. 43-44; 50-55.

⁵⁸ Hermann 1959, p. 64-67; Hachlili 1998, p.118.

⁵⁹ Balty 1995b, p. 220.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.224.

⁶¹ Canivet 1980, fig. 9, 11.

⁶² Avi-Yonah 1981, no. 133, pp. 319f. Pl. 50, 51.

⁶³ Balty 1995b, p.222.

⁶⁴ Balty 1995a, p.252.

⁶⁵ Thümmel 1978, p. 11; cf. a complicated issue of the letter;s authenticity discussed by Thümmel 1978: Nicephorus quoted Neilus' letter to Olympiodorus in his writings, adv.iconomachos 14; antirrthesis 425; elenchos Paris gr.1250, Alexander 1953, Hennephof 1969.

⁶⁶ Vita S.Stephani iunioris, c.1120.