

New discoveries in mosaics in the territory under Palestinian Authority

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Introduction

Palestine is still in its nascent stages, and this period of difficult political conditions and transition, is characterized by a general underestimation of the importance and value of its cultural property and history and by the absence of binding legal regulations.

The lengthy period of Israeli military occupation, still in force in the majority of the territory, has severely undermined the Palestinian cultural heritage, with the destruction of historical landmark structures in large or small urban or rural centres.

The areas that have been under Palestinian administration for the last few years, however, have not experienced better practices. Many heritage sites were destroyed in the process of intensive construction and rapid economic development. Little, if any, attention was paid to the maintenance, conservation or valorization of cultural property, and, consequently, through abandonment, degradation, neglect and vandalism, the majority of archaeological and historical sites and traditional buildings in Palestine are extremely poorly preserved.

There have been, however, several new discoveries and some efforts have been made to preserve and valorize them. We will attempt to give a quick overview of the mosaics found during recent excavations in the territory under Palestinian Authority.

Unfortunately, with the exception of the Gaza Strip and Khirbat Shuwayka, the results of excavations have not been published and there is no specific information concerning the mosaics.

Peace Centre – Bethlehem

In 1998, the Palestinian Authority launched a series of construction activities in Bethlehem in view of the 2000 Jubilee. In the main square, the old police station in front of the Church the Nativity was demolished in order to construct a building to host a

“Peace Centre”. During construction, portions of two mosaic floors were found. Work continued and the ground floor of the Centre now serves as shelter for the mosaics. Both floors are paved with white tesserae enclosed in a frame of black tesserae. The external frame is decorated with rosebuds and a Salomon knot. The mosaics date to the 5th/6th century AD.

Beit Jala

During building works towards widening a road in the centre of the small town of Beit Jala near Bethlehem, a Byzantine mosaic floor came to light. A band of guilloche frames a rectangular field with geometric decoration. Excavation did not follow the discovery and it is not known if the room was part of a larger complex. After the discovery, the mosaic was covered with earth.



Bir Al Hamam - Nablus

The site is located on Mount Gerizim, southwest of Nablus. It was discovered during the construction of a huge private villa and was excavated in 2003 by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities in cooperation with Al Najah University of Nablus. It is a large complex paved mostly with stone slabs as well as two mosaic floors. The larger floor, 8.60 x 3.40 m, is decorated with geometric motifs and a Greek inscription framed by a 20 cm wide wave pattern. A small panel at the entrance of the room is decorated with bunches of grapes. The stone tesserae are brown, dark and pale grey, dark and pale pink, red and white, and there are a few blue and green tesserae of glass paste. The surviving mosaic floor in the second room measures 8 x 1.8 m and is decorated with geometric motifs and rosebuds on a white background. There are three Greek inscriptions, one of which is almost completely destroyed, which recall the donors. The excavators have dated the mosaics to the 5th/6th century AD. The villa now shelters the site and the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Unesco have worked towards preserving and enhancing it.



Yanon Mosque

Khirbat Yanon is located southeast of Nablus. During the construction of a mosque on the site of an earlier mosque, a mosaic floor came to light. This had been damaged in the past by the walls of the mosque. It was probably the floor of a three-aisled Byzantine church. The decoration of the mosaic floor, one of the most beautiful in the territory, includes geometric and vegetal elements, among which a palm tree.

Khan Wakala – Nablus

A section of a mosaic floor came to light during conservation work in Khan al Wakala, an Ottoman caravanserai in the heart of the old city of Nablus. The fragment, carrying geometric decoration, is almost 1 m² and extends under the neighbouring building, which also dates from the Ottoman period. The mosaic is now protected by a structure and, when the conservation works are completed, it will be open to the public.

Deir Abu Ghanam – Jericho

The site is located north of the oasis of Jericho. It was accidentally discovered during construction works and it was excavated in 2003 by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities. Various loci were found, mostly paved with mosaic floors decorated with simple geometric elements in black and white tesserae. After the excavations, the floor was covered with earth.

Khirbat Shuwayka – Ramallah

The site of Khirbat Shuwayka is located on the south side of Ramallah/el-Bireh. A monastic complex probably existed there, and mosaic tesserae were found in virtually every locus. The white colour, mostly in medium to large cubes, is predominant, and there are smaller black and red tesserae. One of the mosaic floors has a white background with a simple geometric design of intersecting diagonal lines in black, forming squares.



Gaza Strip

Ancient Gaza was for centuries a very important political and commercial centre. It was located on the coast of Palestine on the route to Egypt, the last halt before entering the desert. These last fifteen years have been particularly fertile thanks to the ample size of the excavations, jointly conducted by the Department of Antiquities of the Palestinian National Authority and the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem.

In 1995, the Department of Antiquities excavated a Byzantine site near Jabaliyah, north of Gaza City, and found three distinct buildings forming part of a religious complex: a three-aisled church, a diaconicon and a baptistery. A mosaic inscription commemorates the laying of the pavement in the church and permits the dating of the mosaics to the beginning of the 8th century AD. The workmanship is of exceptional quality. The remains of the pavement, spared by the iconoclasts, depict wild game, beautifully drawn birds and rustic country scenes. The diaconicon is decorated with the most elaborate

mosaic of the whole complex, depicting humans and animals. An inscription dates the pavement of the diaconicon to the middle of the 5th century AD.

In April 1995, the Department of Antiquities uncovered a Byzantine mosaic pavement between the old city of Gaza and the seashore. It is made of large coloured marble cubes and is decorated with geometric motifs, mainly circles and squares. The pavement is partly damaged. Southwest of this mosaic, a floor made of rubble mixed with lime and ashes was found, and other mosaic pavements were reported in the area.

In June 1995, a mosaic was discovered in the centre of the village of 'Abasan al-Kabira, 4 km from Khan Yunis. The excavated area measures c. 9 x 4 m, it is partly damaged, and it is made of very fine coloured cubes of marble and different kinds of stone and glass. It shows geometric and floral designs, birds, cups filled with fruit, as well as parts of the platted band that framed it. In the centre of the pavement, there is a Greek inscription dating it to the month of May 606 AD.

Tell Umm 'Amir, four miles south of Gaza City, was excavated by the Israeli Antiquities Office in Gaza, between December 1991 and January 1992. In November 2001, Palestinian archaeologists of the Department of Antiquities, assisted by French archaeologists, unearthed an undamaged 5th-century mosaic at the site which is believed to be the location of one of the oldest monasteries in the Middle East, first founded in the 4th century by St. Hilarion. In the centre of the site lie three mosaic floors with intricate geometric patterns. It was on these that the last of the three churches discovered was built.

Finally, a mosaic was uncovered on the west side of the coastal road between Deir al-Balah and Khan Yunus. The pavement measures c. 4 x 5 m. and is made of white marble tesserae.

Other important discoveries have been made near the Erez crossing into Israel. Among these, there are mosaic pavements that appears to have been part of a large Byzantine complex including a church, chapel, halls and rooms for religious and domestic use. The mosaics, the earliest of which is dated to AD 444, show scenes of hunting, pastoral life and agriculture.