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Mosaic Pavements of Byzantine Churches Near Aleppo, Syria

Analytical and Comparative Study

Doctoral Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the mosaic pavements of Byzantine churches in Aleppo and its surrounding region, viewing them as an integral part of the artistic and cultural heritage of the Christian East, such as al- MazrÝa Al-ÝUliya, Tell ÝAmārana, al-Nabgha, Deir QinnsrÐn (Qinnasrin Monastery), Zamka, ÝElî Bîskê, ÝUqlat al-Bwydr, and Tell BÁjr, and al- MankÙba, which were discovered between 2000 and 2011 by joint efforts of the Directorate of Antiquities and Museum of Aleppo and foreign archaeological missions. All the mosaics discovered date back to the early Byzantine era. The research argues that the Aleppo mosaics represent a distinct local artistic tradition, rather than a mere imitation of Antiochene or Constantinopolitan models.

The significance of this research lies in its examination of the history, characteristics, general attributes, and prominent decorations of mosaic pavements in early Byzantine churches of Aleppo, based on the results of recent archaeological excavations conducted by national

and international missions. Researchers conduct a comparative analysis with mosaic schools in the Levant. Additionally, this research examines the Hellenistic, Roman, and local influences in northern Syria, exploring the religious, artistic, and economic implications of these influences. It examines the various techniques employed in the artistic creative application of early Byzantine mosaic materials, as well as the restoration and conservation of mosaics and the identification of raw materials used in mosaic manufacturing through modern discoveries.

Furthermore, the research examines the conditions and provides suggestions for improved restoration and display of these mosaics, comparing them to church mosaic pavements in Jordan, Palestine, and Antioch. The investigation of factors causing damage and deterioration is conducted, aiming to identify scientific foundations for restoration, maintenance, and treatment processes through proposed and diverse programs studied herein to address these issues effectively.

The analysis reveals a strong continuity between Classical artistic traditions and Early Christian iconography, showing how ancient motifs – such as vines, peacocks, and geometric compositions – were reinterpreted within a new spiritual framework. The study concludes that the mosaic art of Aleppo embodies both the continuity of classical heritage and the emergence of a distinct local Christian identity, making it a key chapter in the broader history of Byzantine art in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The research encompasses multiple axes:

Documentary study: Examining sources, books, and archaeological reports focusing on early Byzantine church mosaic pavements, the emergence, and evolution of this art form, various schools dealing with mosaics, techniques for mosaic creation and preparation, general characteristics, essential decorations, and mosaic subjects.

Comprehensive analysis of the status and challenges faced by all mosaic pavements, along with their

documentation and development of solutions and suggestions to address these challenges, while formulating restoration and conservation plans.

Keywords: *Byzantine churches, mosaic pavements, archaeological excavations, comparative analysis, Hellenistic influence, Roman influence, local influences, religious implications, artistic implications, mosaic techniques, restoration, conservation, raw materials, Animal Motif, Geometric Motif, Plant Motif, Syria, Pebble mosaic, Tesserae.*

INTRODUCTION

Mosaic pavements represent one of the finest artistic achievements of Late Antiquity architecture in the Levant, particularly within ecclesiastical contexts during the Byzantine period.

Between the 4th to 6th centuries AD, Christianity flourished throughout northern Syria, leading to the construction of numerous churches decorated with elaborate mosaic pavements.

The region surrounding Aleppo became an important religious and cultural landscape where local artistic traditions interacted with Classical Greek, Roman, and Early Christian influences. These mosaics were much more than decorative floors. They reflected theological concepts, social identity, local craftsmanship, and the economic prosperity of Christian communities.

Although many Byzantine mosaics have been discovered throughout Syria, the churches near Aleppo have received comparatively limited scholarly attention despite the remarkable discoveries made during archaeological excavations between 2000 and 2011. This observation became the starting point of my research.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although numerous Byzantine church mosaics have been excavated near Aleppo, previous studies have generally focused on individual sites rather than the entire region.

Major research gaps include:

- Lack of comprehensive comparative analysis

- Limited documentation of artistic characteristics.
- Insufficient study of construction techniques.
- Lack of conservation assessment.

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Syria is home to a vast array of Late Antique and Byzantine mosaics, many of which have only recently been discovered. This research relies on the earlier studies and the author's excavation and restoration experience, contributing to the broader understanding of Byzantine mosaic artisanry in the region.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Conduct a comprehensive study of the excavated church mosaics in Aleppo.
- Compare these mosaics with others in Syria and the Levant.

- Analyses decorative patterns, tracing influences from Hellenistic-Roman traditions and local Syrian innovations.
- Investigate manufacturing techniques, raw materials, and deterioration factors, while also dealing with the damage and possible treatments.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on:

- Archaeological and historical literature review and previous studies on Byzantine mosaics.
- Comparative analysis of Byzantine mosaics in Syria and the Levant
- Examination of published excavation reports and visual documentation
- Iconographic and stylistic analysis

- Fieldwork aimed at re-documenting mosaic pavements, assessing their current condition, and proposing conservation plans.

ABOUT STRUCTURE

The thesis is organized into Dedication, Acknowledgement, Abstract, Observations on the Transcriptions, Table of Contents, List of Figures, Maps, Introduction, and eight chapters:

Chapter I: Geographical And Historical Framework of Northern Syria and Previous Studies

Chapter II: History, Techniques, and Development of Mosaic Art.

Chapter III: Characteristics and Themes of Early Byzantine Mosaics.

Chapter IV: Early Byzantine Ecclesiastical Architecture and Mosaic Art.

Chapter V: Techniques Used in Early Byzantine Mosaic Craftsmanship.

Chapter VI: Damaging Factors of Mosaic Pavements and Treating Methods

Chapter VII: Mosaic pavements of early Byzantine churches near Aleppo through the archaeological excavations, including al-MazraŶa al-ŶUlia, the mosaic pavement of Tell ŶAmÁrana, the mosaic pavement of the church of St. John Martyr (al-Nabgha), Deir QinnsrĐn (Qinnasrin Monastery), al-MankÙba, ŶUqlat al-Bwydr, Zamka, Tell BÁjr, and Elî Bîskê.

Chapter VIII: Comparative and Analytical Study.

The research also includes the conservation recommendations, main findings, conclusion with a list of abbreviations, and bibliography.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the early Byzantine period (4th–7th century AD), Aleppo formed part of a vibrant Christian landscape in northern Syria. Churches were built in both urban and rural contexts, often featuring richly decorated mosaic

floors like those discovered in sites such as northern Syria and the Orontes valley region.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MOSAIC PAVEMENTS

Byzantine mosaic pavements in the region typically display:

- **Geometric motifs** (interlocking, circles, guilloches, rhombuses) are common and prominent features across the mosaic pavements of Aleppo's Byzantine churches.
- **Floral and vegetal motifs**: Natural environment scenes depicting wildlife and trees; a basket of fruit; grapevines and clusters symbolizing eternity and rebirth; a palm tree symbolizing victory over spiritual adversaries.
- **Animal Motifs**: Animal motifs include leopards, bears, hares, dogs, and birds, peacocks, bulls, and lions.
- Use of local limestone and colored tesserae.

In northern Syria specifically, much of the mosaic is less pictorial and more geometric compared to centers such as Antioch or Constantinople.

FUNCTION AND SYMBOLISM

Mosaic pavements were not purely decorative; they had multiple roles:

- **Liturgical function:** guiding movement within the church space.
- **Symbolic meaning:** representing paradise, divine order, and sacred geography.
- **Social function:** reflecting donor status and community identity.

COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

Aleppo mosaics should be understood within the broader tradition of:

- Northern Syrian rural churches (Apamea, Idlib region).

- Byzantine mosaic tradition of the Levant.
- Early Christian mosaic art in the Eastern Mediterranean.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Limited surviving material in Aleppo itself.
- Heavy reliance on preliminary archaeological reports.
- Loss of original mosaic contexts due to urban development and conflict.

MAIN FINDINGS

The principal findings of this dissertation may be summarized as follows:

- The mosaic pavements surrounding Aleppo represent a coherent regional artistic tradition rather than isolated archaeological discoveries.

- Their decoration demonstrates a remarkable continuity between Classical artistic heritage and Christian symbolism.

- Geometric ornament dominates the decorative programs, while floral and animal motifs communicate important theological concepts.

- Technical analysis confirms the high level of craftsmanship achieved by local workshops.

- Finally, the study demonstrates that effective conservation is essential for protecting this archaeological heritage for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes northern Syria, particularly Aleppo, as a key region for understanding the Late Antique and Byzantine church mosaics from the 4th to 6th centuries AD.

The mosaics display intricate artistic motifs, reflecting cultural and religious influences from northern Syria and the Levant. Excavations have uncovered diverse designs, including geometric, floral, animal and architectural motifs, showcasing exceptional craftsmanship and vibrant colours.

Preservation efforts highlight the need for interdisciplinary approaches, although ongoing conflict in Syria threatens these historical sites. We hope for stability in Syria to allow further excavation and restoration of mosaics, and to publicly display the mosaics stored in the Aleppo Museum.