The Mosaics of the Syrian Coastal Region: A Comparative, Analytical and Comprehensive Study

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- **Previous studies.**

Research on these panels remains limited. One of the panels from Ghellineh, currently displayed at the National Museum of Damascus, was discussed by Janine Balty in her study on Syrian mosaics (*La mosaïque antique au Proche-Orient I. Des origines à la Tétrarchie*, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, 2(12.2), 1981), and later revisited in her subsequent works on the same subject. Two other panels, now housed in the Museum of Tartus, were examined by Hans R. Goette in *Alpheios in Syrien: Zu einem Mosaik in Tartus* (*Damaszener Mitteilungen*, 5, 1991, 71–80), where he focused on the Alpheus and peasant panels. He also briefly mentioned all four panels in a collaborative volume (*Tartus und sein Hinterland. Archäologische Forschungen in der syrischen Küstenregion von der Antike bis ins Mittelalter*). More recently, Gatiers' study of the Orontes River (*Géographie mythologique de l'Oronte*, *Syria*, 2016, 249–269) also references one of these panels. However, none of these works provides a comprehensive analysis of all four panels within a single study. While the River God panel of Orontes has been frequently discussed, the meaning of the horns remains unexplained, for which an alternative interpretation will be proposed

here. In addition, the Tethys panel and its iconography have received little scholarly attention.

As for ’Ain al-Helweh, the mosaic was published by Maher Jbaa in *A New Mosaic from Ain El-Helweh in Latakia, Syria* (ICCM, 2017), where he primarily addressed the restoration process without engaging in a detailed thematic or iconographic analysis.

In contrast, Courban documented and dated the mosaics at Ras al-Bassit in *Une nouvelle fouille française sur la côte syrienne : a-t-on retrouvé l’antique Posideion à Ras el Bassit ?* (*Archéologia*, 116), but his discussion focused mainly on broader historical questions rather than the motifs themselves. Beaudry’s doctoral thesis, *La basilique de Ras el Bassit, une église paléochrétienne sur la côte de Syrie du Nord* (2004), likewise emphasized architectural aspects, with particular attention to the minaret and Jewish features of the synagogue. Similarly, Anna Chock, in her doctoral thesis *Khirbet el-Libneh: étude architecturale et archéologique des vestiges protobyzantins (Tartous-Syria)* (2015), concentrated on the architectural remains of the site. The same tendency is evident in the study of mosaic fragments discovered in the Church of Bahr al-Midan by Redwan and Ahmad (*L’église de Bahr el-Midan: Résultats des campagnes de fouilles du service des Antiquités de Lattaquié (2010–2016)*), where the analysis did not focus on iconographic interpretation. In this context, Massoud Badawi’s article *L’église de ʿAin Salem dans la région de Gabala (Jablé, Syrie)* (*Syria*, 2019) is

also relevant, as it examines the mosaics of the church of ʿAin Salem. Although Badawi provides a comprehensive study of the site, its architecture, and its archaeological findings, his treatment of the mosaics remains relatively general, particularly regarding the symbolic interpretation of certain scenes, which require further investigation. Badawi has also contributed studies on related contexts, including the Bath of Jableh (*Les thermes de Gabala (Jablé – Syrie)*, in *25 siècles de bain collectif en Orient. Proche-Orient, Égypte et péninsule Arabique*, ed. S. D. M.-Fr. Boussac, 2014), as well as the Byzantine-level remains at Tell Tweini (*Le niveau byzantin de Tell Tweini (chantier B) Tweini II / Niveau 3, Studia Orontica* XVIII, 2019).

Additionally, Komait Abdallah's study of the tomb mosaic at Amrit (*Pavement de l'époque romaine en Syrie côtière: La mosaïque d'Amrit*, in É.-P.-B. Vassal (ed.), *Art et Archéologie du Proche-Orient hellénistique et romaine*, 2018) offers an extensive analysis, concluding that the mosaic reflects Egyptian influence, particularly through the interpretation of the goddess's name as Neith. This interpretation will be reconsidered, and an alternative suggestion will be proposed in the present study.

Overall, while these studies contribute valuable information, no comprehensive study examines the coastal Syrian mosaics as a unified corpus, leaving gaps in chronology, interpretation, and regional comparison.

❖ **Problem of the Research**

The study faces several challenges, particularly regarding the availability and quality of archaeological data related to new discoveries. Many mosaic panels discovered during emergency or earlier excavations are poorly documented, with unclear photographs, incomplete records, and a lack of precise information regarding their original contexts. In several cases, mosaics have been removed from their original locations and are now stored without adequate contextual data.

Furthermore, illegal excavations and the absence of systematic surveys at certain sites have hindered the reconstruction of coherent site plans and archaeological sequences. Additional difficulties arise from incomplete documentation of associated material such as pottery shards and coins, as well as gaps in museum records concerning certain mosaic panels and fragments, whose provenance and discovery contexts remain unclear. These limitations collectively restrict the ability to conduct a comprehensive contextual and comparative analysis of the mosaic corpus

❖ **Research purposes:**

1. **Documentation of mosaics on the Syrian coast:** Survey both newly discovered and previously published mosaics,

reassess their dating, and evaluate the authenticity of pieces with uncertain provenance.

2. **Periodization and analysis:** Establish a chronological framework for the mosaic corpus.
3. **Characteristics of Roman and Proto-Byzantine mosaics:** Examine their features and compare them with those of neighbouring regions to identify local specificities versus external influences.
4. **Architectural context:** Analyse mosaics in relation to their architectural settings, where possible, considering function, motifs, inscriptions, and spatial organization.
5. **Historical interpretation:** Study the distribution, function, and quantity of mosaics to understand regional patterns and their relative scarcity compared to neighbouring areas.
6. **Comparative overview of the Lebanese coast:** Include the Lebanese coast as part of the broader Levantine mosaic tradition to provide comparative insights within a shared historical and cultural framework.

❖ **Methodology.**

This study adopts a comparative analytical approach based on multiple sources of data. The primary data were collected from archival materials in the governorates of Latakia and Tartus, including records from the Departments of Archaeology, excavation reports, and documentation related to mosaic discoveries. In

addition, published studies and reports by excavators and researchers were consulted in order to verify and supplement information concerning earlier discoveries.

Fieldwork was conducted where possible, with site visits carried out to selected locations, including Khirbet al-Libneh, al-Mintar, and Corniche Baniyas, in order to observe the archaeological context and confirm available data.

The collected material was organized geographically according to the two governorates (Latakia and Tartus), and within each governorate, the sites were further classified chronologically into the Roman and Proto-Byzantine periods. A general synthesis of the available studies was then undertaken to provide an overall framework of mosaic production in the Syrian coastal region.

A comparative analysis was then conducted between the Syrian coastal material and that of nearby regions, particularly Lebanon, focusing on motif vocabulary and distribution patterns in order to assess regional similarities and differences and to better understand the development of mosaic traditions in the broader Levantine context. This analytical framework also considers patterns of distribution and preservation that may help in understanding variations in the quantity of mosaic remains across regions.

Finally, a tabulated framework was developed to organize the mosaics according to their chronology and archaeological context, in order to facilitate analysis and comparison. The resulting tables are

presented at the end of the thesis, prior to the bibliography. Each table includes key information such as site name, location, archaeological context, chronological attribution, and descriptive notes on the mosaic motifs and decorative features.

❖ **The Architectural Context.**

The mosaic pavements of the Syrian coastal region belong mostly to the Proto-Byzantine period (4th–6th century AD). Their architectural contexts can be summarized as follows:

- **Baths:** Ghillineh; Jableh Bath.
- **Tombs:** Amrit.
- **Synagogue:** Ras al-Bassit.
- **Churches:**‘Ain Salem; Bahr al-Midan; Shabatliyeh; Khirbet al-Libneh (most likely a church).
- **Industrial / agricultural installations (wine presses):** Tall Talyn; Wata Ibtilleh; Hraysoon; Tall Tweini.
- **Undetermined or not yet fully studied contexts:**
    - ‘Ain al-Helweh (possibly a villa or public building)
    - Banyas (Northern Corniche), possibly a villa
    - Al-Mintar, possibly a church
    - Al-Sha ‘ara
    - Al-Ghamqah neighbourhood (Tartus city)
    - Al- ‘Innabeh area (Latakia city)

- At-Tabiyyat area (Latakia city)
- Additional Tow fragments from construction works in Latakia city
- Mosaic pavement from Ras al-Bassit
- Tall Darruk

- **Unknown provenance:**
  - Three mosaic panels confiscated and now displayed in the Tartus Museum

❖ **Chronological Context.**

The mosaic pavements of the Syrian coastal region can be broadly divided into Roman and Proto-Byzantine periods. The chronological distribution can be summarized as follows:

Roman period (2nd–3rd century AD):

- ’Ain al-Helweh (Hadrian period, 2nd century AD)
- Jableh Bath
- Ghillineh (3rd century AD)
- Amrit (3rd century AD)
- Mosaic pavement from Ras al-Bassit

Proto-Byzantine period (4th–early 7th century AD):

- Ras al-Bassit

- ‘Ain Salem
- Bahr al-Midan
- Shabṭliyeh
- Khirbet al-Libneh
- Banyas (Northern Corniche)
- Al-Mintar
- Al-Sha ‘ara
- Al-Ghamqah neighbourhood (Tartus city)
- Al- ‘Innabeh area (Latakia city)
- At-Tabiyyat area (Latakia city)
- Tall Talyn
- Wata Ibtilleh
- Hraysoon
- Tall Tweini
- Tall Darruk
- Additional fragments from construction works in Latakia city
- Three mosaic panels confiscated and now displayed in the Tartus Museum

❖ **Themes Employed**

Human Representations. The panels depicting human figures all belong to the Roman era, specifically to the Severan period. Four of these panels are from the Ghillineh Bath, and two are from the Amrit

tomb. These panel showcase the artistic method prevailed at in the Severan Period: the violent contrast between the zones of shadow and light emerges, and most importantly the Pathetic expressions that animate their faces.

Amrit Tomb. Two panels depict unidentified male and female busts in three-quarter view. The male figure was identified as Hermes and The female figure shows strong iconographic similarities to the Earth goddess Ge, particularly through fertility-related attributes such as the calathos, vegetal motifs, and the cornucopia. However, the accompanying inscription complicates this identification. The previous interpretation links the inscription beginning with "NE" to a theophoric name associated with the Egyptian goddess Neith (and by extension Tanit), and concluded that the figure of Neith preceding Hermes may symbolize the transition from earthly existence to a celestial realm for the deceased. Nevertheless, this interpretation presents several difficulties. Neith does not appear to have been widely recognized in the Levant region where Tanit was worshipped, and the iconographic elements present in the mosaic—such as the calathos and cornucopia—are not clearly associated with Neith. Moreover, no clear mythological relationship links Neith or Tanit with Hermes.

This research proposes an alternative and more plausible interpretation, identifying the inscription with Nemesis (Νέμεσις), a deity widely attested in the Syrian provinces during the 2nd and 3rd

centuries AD. Epigraphic evidence from coastal sites such as Arwad confirms her local worship. Associated with justice, balance, and retribution, Nemesis was prominent in both imperial and funerary contexts. The cornucopia, with its symmetrical arrangement of fruit, may tentatively be interpreted as evoking equilibrium and distributive justice, concepts associated with Nemesis. At the same time, certain vegetal elements, such as pomegranates and apples, recall Demeter and her association with fertility, seasonal cycles, and the underworld. Together with Isis, who shares aspects of fertility, protection, and funerary significance, these references contribute to a broader syncretic framework. The cornucopia is one of Isis characteristic that likely created in the 3rd century BC. Accordingly, the representation of Nemesis-Isis/Demeter in a tomb aligns with the role of Hermes as the guide of souls to the underworld. This interpretation reflects influences from both Greek and Egyptian mythologies, indicating complex cultural interactions in the ancient Near East.

Ghillineh. The first panel represents Tethys, the sea goddess associated with the fertile power of oceans, identified easily by her indicators of a pair of wings on both sides of her head and a Cetus covering her neck. Tethys in full-body resembling mosaics of the second and beginning of the third century.

The figure in the second panel is a reclining bearded river god holding reeds and crowned with vegetation, confirming its

identification as a river deity. Previous interpretations include Nile or Oceanus (Goette) and Orontes (Balty, supported by Gatier). However, Oceanus is unlikely due to the absence of his characteristic attributes, while the Orontes identification is problematic since he is typically depicted as a youthful, beardless figure emerging from waves in the Tyche of Antioch tradition and related iconography.

The presence of horns is the key feature supporting an identification as Achelous, a horned river god frequently represented in Greek art in anthropomorphic or hybrid forms. His association with Heracles, where one horn becomes the cornucopia, reinforces the symbolism of abundance. Moreover, Herodotus' comparison between the transformative power of the Achelous River and the Nile further supports this interpretation and justify the iconographical similarity. Although the composition shares certain fertility motifs with Nile imagery, the horned head and Greek iconographic tradition provide stronger evidence for identifying the figure as Achelous rather than Orontes.

The third panel depicts a seated couple identified by inscription as Alpheus, an unusual representation compared to the standard depiction of the river god pursuing Arethusa. The identity of the accompanying female figure (ΠΙ) remains uncertain.

Previous interpretations have suggested either Pegai or the Peloponnese. While both remain uncertain due to the lack of clear

iconographic parallels, this study considers Pegai a plausible interpretation, as it is attested in literary sources such as Pausanias, and the depiction of less prominent locations could still occur in Syrian mosaics, as demonstrated by parallels such as the river god Eurotas and his consort in Antioch. Nevertheless, the identification cannot be confirmed with certainty in the absence of supporting iconographic evidence.

The fourth panel depicts a pastoral scene accompanied by an inscription for a shepherd. These four panels are particularly interesting because they make this bath in the Levant unique in depicting these themes—three marine deities alongside a pastoral scene. This raises intriguing questions about the purpose of these depictions. It is more plausible, that the depiction represents famous Greek rivers, a fitting subject for adornment in a bathing facility.as for the pastoral scene Unfortunately, the scene is destroyed, so we cannot read it.

- **Aquatic Scenes**

Aquatic imagery is represented most notably by the ‘Ain al-Helweh panel, which depicts a rich marine scene with numerous identifiable Mediterranean fish species. As the only known example of its kind in Syria from the Hadrian period, it departs from the more common representation of marine deities, instead reflecting a decorative adaptation of widespread Roman aquatic themes typically used in

baths and water-related settings. The composition, structured by dolphins, suggests a primarily ornamental function rather than a naturalistic depiction of daily life.

Another scene appears in the ‘Ain Salem church, where fish and an octopus are shown amid waves flowing from an urn. Unlike typical Proto-Byzantine depictions—where fish appear in Nilotic scenes or as decorative motifs—this composition is unique in the Levant. Within a Christian context, such imagery may carry symbolic meaning, particularly associations with baptism and the salvific power of water.

- **Animal representations**.

Three scenes are represented. The first, from the al-Mintar pavement, depicts a gazelle facing another animal, likely a bird; however, due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence, little can be inferred from this composition. The same applies to the al-Sha’ra pavement, where a bull and a dog are depicted; however, the panel is also damaged, limiting any further interpretation. The third from the church of ‘Ain Salem, presents a more complex and coherent iconographic program within the central nave. The mosaic is organized as a large square carpet divided into four panels, each illustrating different themes. The north-eastern panel shows animals arranged in registers around trees, suggesting a harmonious natural environment. The south-eastern panel depicts an aquatic scene with fish and an octopus amid waves issuing from an urn. A damaged panel includes a peacock

beside a vessel, while the western panel features a geometric composition with crosses and decorative patterns. Taken together, the ‘Ain Salem mosaics form an integrated program rather than isolated scenes. In line with scholarly interpretations of early Christian pavements, such as those proposed by Olszewski and Donceel-Voute, the imagery may reflect a symbolic vision of viewing the church's architecture as a representation of the inhabited Earth (the nave) and the celestial realm (the sanctuary), with Eden situated at the eastern end of the nave, serving as a bridge between Earth and Paradise. Within this framework, the eastern nave panels in particular showcases several panels depicting symbolic scenes: an aquatic scene representing salvation through baptism, a peacock symbolizing immortality and eternal life, and peaceful animals amidst vegetation, interpreted as an earthly paradise. This interpretation finds resonance with biblical narratives: John 3:5, where Jesus tells Nicodemus, a Pharisee, that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are “born of water and the Spirit”. Thus, the representation of paradise signifies the salvation granted to true believers and their entry into heaven, where they experience eternal life and the presence of God.

- **Vegetal and geometric motifs**

Geometric and vegetal motifs typically reflect the decorative trends of their time, such as octagon compositions, interlaced circles, the

rosebuds grid, and scale compositions, sometimes incorporating local innovations. However, the following observations can be noted.

1- The grid of serrated simple fillets of squares of four tesserae was not common in Syria during Proto-Byzantine times. Yet, among the available mosaics, we see it used in three examples. Also, it was used in the octagon composition from Khirbet al-Libneh in which the octagon sides are serrated of poised squares (each of four tesserae), which reflect a prevalence of this type of grid.
2- The square scalloped pattern the scales white and no rosebuds or other filling motifs, making it unique.
3- There are unique patterns
    1- The composition of a square enclosing a circle which contain a ring of four small circles around a central one.
    2- The composition of a circle enclosing two intersecting squares one of which is a curvilinear square, and at their intersection is another a square loaded with a design of four squares inclosing a diamond.
    3- The outlined orthogonal pattern of circles linked axially by short braids.
    4- The star-bearing square with an eight-pointed star—formed by four triangles (filling motif).

❖ **Work shop**

Unfortunately, the available mosaic pavements are not sufficient to determine whether there is a workshop in the Syrian region. However, it is possible to speculate based on the differing prevalence and unique patterns observed, notably exemplified in Corniche Banyas, where old motifs are employed in new variations and new patterns are introduced that are not seen in other places. In fact, the entire mosaic program is intriguing, particularly due to the insistence on the coffering ceiling effect. This insistence is reminiscent of the mosaics found in Cilicia from the second century, although the motifs themselves differ.

Nevertheless, it's more likely that the mosaics of Khirbet al-Libneh and al-Mintar were crafted by the same hand and likely originated from a local workshop. This conclusion is supported by several consistent elements observed in both panels. Firstly, there is a uniform use of a similar range of colors (blue-gray, red, white) with the same sequence in some patterns. i.e., the shape of the rosebuds varies, but a blue-gray color is consistently used for the stem and a red color for the upper part in both panels. Similarly, while the compositions of the overlapping circles differ, they are executed in the same sequence of colors: blue-gray, white, red, and blue-gray again. Additionally, both mosaics tend to depict patterns with more empty space rather than compact filling, exemplified by the use of simple all-over patterns on a white background, such as the grid of filets, and a grid of circles linked by guilloche in al-Mintar, along

with a composition of interlaced and interloped circles and other compositions of adjacent octagons in Khirbet al-Libneh. These recurring elements strongly suggest a common artisan. Additionally, they employ motifs that are not found elsewhere, like the outlined orthogonal pattern of circles linked axially by short braids and the stars bearing square with an eight-pointed star, suggesting the presence of a local workshop.

As for the comparison between the Syrian coast and present-day Lebanon (ancient Phoenicia), both regions generally followed the prevailing motif trends of their time, with local variations that may be regarded as regional innovations. However, these innovations are not identical. Some similarities can be observed, such as the cross motif in Zahrani Church, which resembles a panel from Corniche Banyas despite differences in its filling motifs, and the grid pattern in the mosaics of al-Mintar, which shows affinities with examples from Khan Khaleh while remaining distinct. Although it is tempting to propose stronger connections between the two regions, the available evidence suggests the presence of local workshops that likely did not operate across different areas

- **The distribution of the mosaic in the Syrian coast region**

The relatively low number of mosaic discoveries along the Syrian coastal region, compared to other parts of the Levant such as Lebanon, can be understood in light of both historical and archaeological factors. Major coastal cities such as Laodicea

(Latakia), Gabala, Balanea (Banyas), Arados, and Antarados flourished from the Hellenistic through the Roman and Proto-Byzantine periods, benefiting from urban development, trade, and imperial patronage, particularly under Septimius Severus. Archaeological evidence, including architectural remains, bishoprics, and workshop signatures (e.g., Asklépiadès of Arados), indicates a sustained cultural and artistic tradition in the region.

Despite this prosperity, mosaic discoveries often remain accidental due to continuous habitation, urban overbuilding, natural disasters such as earthquakes, and later destruction or reuse of materials. Evidence of tesserae across multiple sites further suggests widespread mosaic production that is no longer fully preserved. Looting, illegal excavations, and limited documentation, especially in recent decades, have also contributed to the loss of material.

The disparity between coastal and inland regions may also reflect differences in urbanization, economic conditions, and the spread of Christianity, as mosaics are more frequently associated with urban houses, baths, and churches, which were more prevalent along the coast. In contrast, mountainous regions appear less urbanized and less integrated into these cultural and religious trends, though limited archaeological exploration may also account for the scarcity of finds. Overall, the current distribution of mosaics likely reflects both ancient patterns of settlement and preservation biases rather than an accurate measure of their original extent.

The Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) is currently conducting a survey in Tartus Governorate, although it has been interrupted due to the ongoing situation in Syria. Until the results are published, interpretations remain tentative. Nevertheless, mosaic discoveries in Syria are predominantly concentrated along the coast, a region strongly influenced by Hellenistic traditions and flourishing during the Roman and Proto-Byzantine periods. The presence of wineries, baths, and churches along the coast points to a relatively prosperous and well-developed society in antiquity.

❖ **Publication**

1. Mosaic Discovered on the Northern Corniche of Baniyas City (Tartus Governorate) in Syria *AIEMA*,2024(under publication).
2. Unpublished mosaic fragments on display in the museums of Latakia and Tartus, *AIEMA*,2024.
3. Two Fragmentary Mosaic Panels from the Syrian Coast Region (al-Sha'ra and al-Mintar), *the Near Eastern Archaeology I*, (under publication).
4. Mosaic Decoration of three churches discovered in Latakia Governorate, *Cradle of Civilization*, Damascus, 2024. (Arabic) (under publication).
5. The Representation of Ge and the four Seasons on the Syrian Mosaic, *Historical Studies Magazine*, 2015 (Arabic).