

HIPPOS - SUSSITA

Sixth Season of Excavations

July 2005



Zinman Institute of Archaeology

University of Haifa



אוניברסיטת חיפה • המכון לארכיאולוגיה ע"ש זינמן
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA • ZINMAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
The <i>Forum</i> Area and the <i>Decumanus Maximus</i> (FRM & DME)	8
Excavation along the South Wall (SWL).....	13
The South-West Church (SWC)	15
The Hellenistic Compound (HLC).....	23
Inscription of a Flagstone.....	30
North-West Church Complex (NWC)	32
The mosaic inscription of Antonia, a deaconess.....	51
Conservation of Wall Plasters and Mosaic Floors in the NWC in 2005	54
Patterns of the mosaic pavement in the nave of the NWC	61
North-East Church Complex (NEC).....	65
Conservation Report for the 6 th Season	76
Conservation Report of Metal Objects from the 6 th Season	80
Petrography of the plasters from Hippos	82
Geoarchaeological studies and radiocarbon determination from Hippos	92
Ground-penetrating Radar Tests in Hippos	99
The Coins Catalogue.....	108
Pottery Report	113

Patterns of the mosaic pavement in the nave of the NWC

One of the main lines of conservation plan for the sixth season of fieldwork at the NWC was to complete basic stabilization and preservation treatments in the nave of the church. The area has not been exposed in its entirety since 2002, when it was covered with a protective layer of earth, so that only small exposures were made where needed for the proceedings of conservation. This year was the first time when the whole nave, including the chancel area, was carefully cleaned to expose all the extant parts of the mosaic floor. Gentle sweeping also revealed some areas where very fragile mortar bedding had survived. A general plan of both the mosaic floor and patches of the mortar bedding was drawn to illustrate the fragmentary state of its preservation (fig. 88).

The mosaic decoration of the nave connected with the second phase of the church and dated to the second half of the 6th century¹ was composed of simple geometrical and floral patterns.

The chancel floor was decorated with a flower-motif carpet: a diagonal grid of small red roses with four-petalled red florets at the crossings, and four-fold roses in each square between the flower chains. The floral carpet was framed by a red double-line border, a three-strand guilloche in red, yellow and greenish gray, and by a yellow double-line border. The outer field was decorated with a line of red diamonds. A comparable floral pattern appears quite frequently (in a number of variations) on mosaic floors of Jordan, specifically at Mount Nebo: Old Diaconicon of the Basilica of Moses (530)² and the Theotokos Chapel (first decade of 7th century)³, in the monastery of Siyagha (end of 6th century)⁴, in the churches of 'Uyun Musa valley: the Church of Deacon Thomas, the Lower and Upper Church of Kaianus (6th century)⁵, as well as in the Church of the Lions in Umm al - Rasas (574 or 589)⁶.

Due to very poor state of the mosaic which survived only in the eastern and the southern parts of the chancel, without a slightest trace of even a mortar bedding elsewhere, we cannot be sure whether the same pattern was occurring in the whole chancel area, or if

¹ J. Mlynarczyk, "Hippos (Sussita): Exploration of the North-West Church Complex (Areas NWC and OPB) in 2002", *Swiatowit IV (XLV)*, 2002, p.75

² M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman 1997, p. 146

³ *Ibidem*, p. 151

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 192

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 186-191

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 236

there was a different decoration in the middle. The above-mentioned parallels can not resolve this question due to a big variety and freedom in decorating chancel floors. In creating graphic reconstruction, the simplest version has been adopted, in which the floral pattern filled the whole area inside the *guilloche* frame (fig. 87).

The fragments of mosaic pavement remaining in between the chancel and the main entrance to the church account for about 15% of the whole nave area. The motif of floral carpet was repeated here as well, differing from the chancel pattern only in that inside the squares of the flower grid, red *fleurettes* are found instead of the four-fold small roses. This pattern is framed by two red lines and a wide looped *guilloche* composed of three ribbons: red, yellow and greenish gray; the whole is enclosed with a double yellow line. Similar *guilloche* frames can be found in some churches situated both in Syria: in Deir es- Sleib, Basilica A (5/6th century)⁷ and Hir esh- Sheikh (beginning of 5th century)⁸, and in Lebanon: in Khaldé (6th century)⁹ and Nebha (mid 7th century).¹⁰

Every intercolumnar panel in the North-West Church had its own decoration; however, only one of the panels has entirely been preserved, filling the fourth northern intercolumniation as counting from the east. It represents eight interlacing octagons, each one containing a double square in the middle and a diamond on the four sides. Identical panel appears in the Church of Holy Apostoles in Madaba (dated to 578)¹¹, while fairly similar motifs can be found in the intercolumniations of the church in Mazra'a el-'Oulia, Syria (late 5th century)¹² and on the pavements of Lebanese churches of Khan Khaldé (6th century, see above) and Zahrani (according to P. Donceel-Voûte, dated to late 4th century).¹³ Also in the sixth intercolumniation of the same northern colonnade of our church some poor panel remains can be seen, specifically, a fragment of one of the eight circular motifs enclosed by a narrow frame.

More geometrical compositions appear in the southern colonnade. Between the southwestern corner of the main chancel and the third column counting from the east, traces of three diamonds can be seen: two of them are red, divided by a black-and-yellow one. The fourth intercolumnar panel was filled with simple diagonal stripe decoration; a

⁷ P. Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban. Décor, Archéologie et Liturgie*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1988, p. 65

⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 131

⁹ *Ibidem.*, pp. 375, 380

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 402

¹¹ M. Piccirillo, *op. cit.*, p. 106

¹² P. Donceel-Voûte, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹³ *Ibidem.*, p. 436

pattern of successively white, salmon-pink, red, white, yellow and black parallel lines was surrounded by a narrow red frame. The same intercolumnar decoration can be found in the Khirbet Moûqa church in Syria (late 4th century).¹⁴

Only circa 15% of the fifth *intercolumnium* decoration of the southern colonnade survived the damage caused by the earthquake of 749, but it can easily be identified as a deltoid made of two red and two yellow looped ribbons. Its central section might have been filled with a geometric or floral design. This kind of pattern, with different modifications, decorates intercolumnar spaces in such churches as the Basilica of Moses, Mt. Nebo (6th century),¹⁵ the church of Al-Khadir, Madaba (6th century),¹⁶ the West Church in Yesilah (east of Irbid, without datation; East Church at the same site is dated to 518).¹⁷ The sixth intercolumnar panel is composed of eight pink-and-yellow joined octagons in black-and-red frame. This design might have been related to that of the sixth *intercolumnium* in the northern colonnade. Less than ¼ of this fragment survived, so it is unknown what motifs were contained in the octagonal compartments, except two of them which are still preserved: a square shape and a red rounded fruit representation.

The last intercolumniation survived in about 30%; there, we can see two fields filled with colourful stripes identical to those of the fourth *intercolumnium*. The two fields differ in just the density of the stripes. It is very likely that the panel in question consisted of four compartments.

Careful cleaning of the nave revealed also patches of the mosaic bedding. Lime mortar with the addition of pebbles and admixture of the waste from *tesserae* cutting was used here as a binding agent.¹⁸ The preserved bedding was in very bad condition, tending to break and crumble, its area not exceeding 15% of the whole surface of the nave. However, precisely this element yielded most important information, because the bedding was still carrying in places the clear imprints of lost *tesserae*. This shed some light on the nature of decoration of the destroyed central part of the nave. It is certain that the area located in the middle of the nave was decorated with a pattern distinctly

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, pp.161, 163, 165

¹⁵ M. Piccirillo, *op. cit.*, pp. 146, 148: intercolumniation patterns closely resembling by general style those found in NWC.

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*, pp. 129 - 130

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*, p. 341

¹⁸ M. Aniszewski, "Mosaic floor in the North- West Church – Technical Examinations", in A. Segal *et al.*, *Hippos – Sussita, Fifth Season of Excavation, September 2004 – October 2004*, Haifa 2004, p. 73-75.

different from the rosette grid pattern. Small extant patches of the central pattern, displaying a knot of two-strand twist, fragments of circles and of a frame, were found at ca. 3.30 m. to the east of the main entrance to the church, on the axis of the nave. Located nearby, there were scanty remains of a curved diamond stripe. All these elements gave us the presumed image of a central panel with a medallion in the middle, a kind of composition quite common in decoration of the mosaic floors in a good number of Byzantine buildings.

The examination of the tesserae imprints on preserved bedding fragments confirmed this hypothesis and allowed us to reconstruct both the extent of the panel and the general design of its pattern. After defining the corners of the panel by analyzing the tesserae imprints on the bedding (fig. 89), it became clear that the dimensions of the central field were 3.14 by 3.05 m. The medallion was composed of interwoven two-strand *guilloche* and a sort of diamond stripe (fig. 87). This kind of interlacement must have created eight smaller circles and, most likely, a large circle in the centre of the medallion. Similar composition is found in a building at Beit Gemal/Khirbet Jiljil (5th century?),¹⁹ in the northern aisle of St. George church in Houad, Syria (second half of 6th century),²⁰ and in the lower church of Kaianus in 'Uyun Musa Valley in Jordan (early 6th century).²¹ However, the closest parallel comes from the above-mentioned church of Khirbet Moûqa in Syria, where it adorns the western of two panels (4.0 m by 4.40 m. each) in the nave. The small circles in the Syrian example are filled with bird representations. Unfortunately, it will remain unknown what motifs were filling the corners and the circles of the central composition in the North-West Church. Taking into consideration general stylistic trends of the floor decoration during the second phase of the church, it is most likely that geometrical or simple vegetal motives were used there. In the central field of the medallion, a commemorative inscription might have been inserted.

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¹⁹ According to A. Strus (personal communication)

²⁰ P. Donceel – Voûte, *op. cit.*, p. 142

²¹ M. Piccirillo, *op. cit.*, pp. 189-190



Fig. 79, Hippos, NWC, the *martyrion* chapel, probes revealing remains of earlier painted decoration.



Fig. 80, Hippos, NWC, collection vat of the winery, three layers of hydraulic plaster: [A] the lowermost one of good quality, [B] thick layer containing crushed potsherds, [C] thin external coating. Note hatches on layers [A] and [B]



Fig. 81, Hippos, NWC, collection vat of the winery, steps descending to the pool. State after basic stabilization treatments.



Fig. 82, Hippos, NWC, one of two storage compartments of the wine press complex. Note the plaster coating damaged by the IDF trench.



Fig. 83, Hippos, NWC, The nave. Setting up the mortar bands has stopped the "domino effect"- i.e. the crumbling up of the tesserae and gradual decreasing of the floor area.

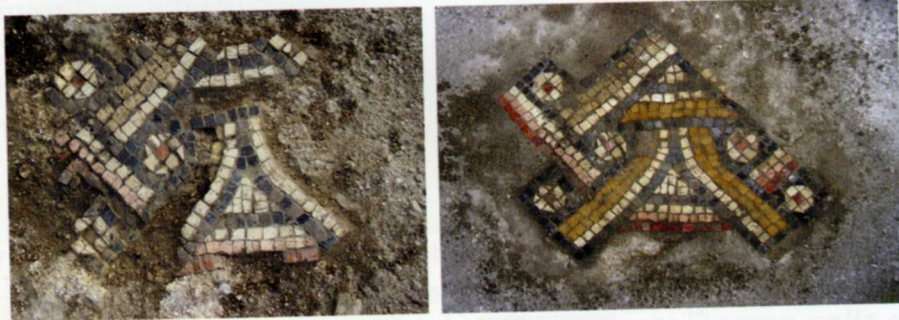


Fig. 84, Hippos, NWC, The nave. Reconstructed part of the border: a *guilloche* chain is the only fragment of the floor which has remained in the north-east part of the nave.

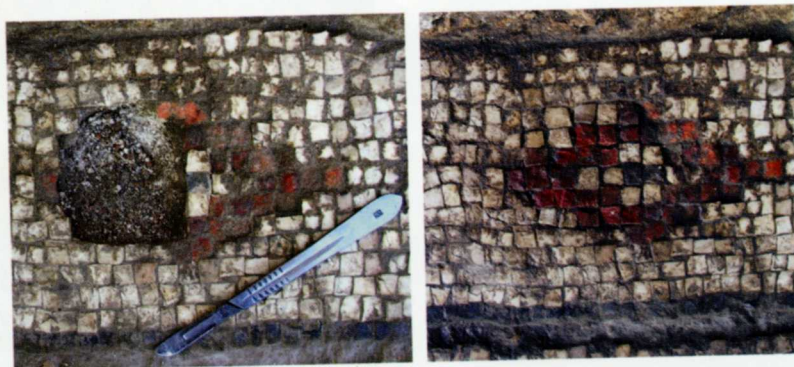


Fig. 85, Hippos, NWC, The presbytery. Reconstruction was made possible due to a clear arrangement of the *tesserae* and the recurrence of the pattern.



Fig. 86, Hippos, NWC, The northern annexe. A part of a medallion, situated in the central part of the room, was renovated.

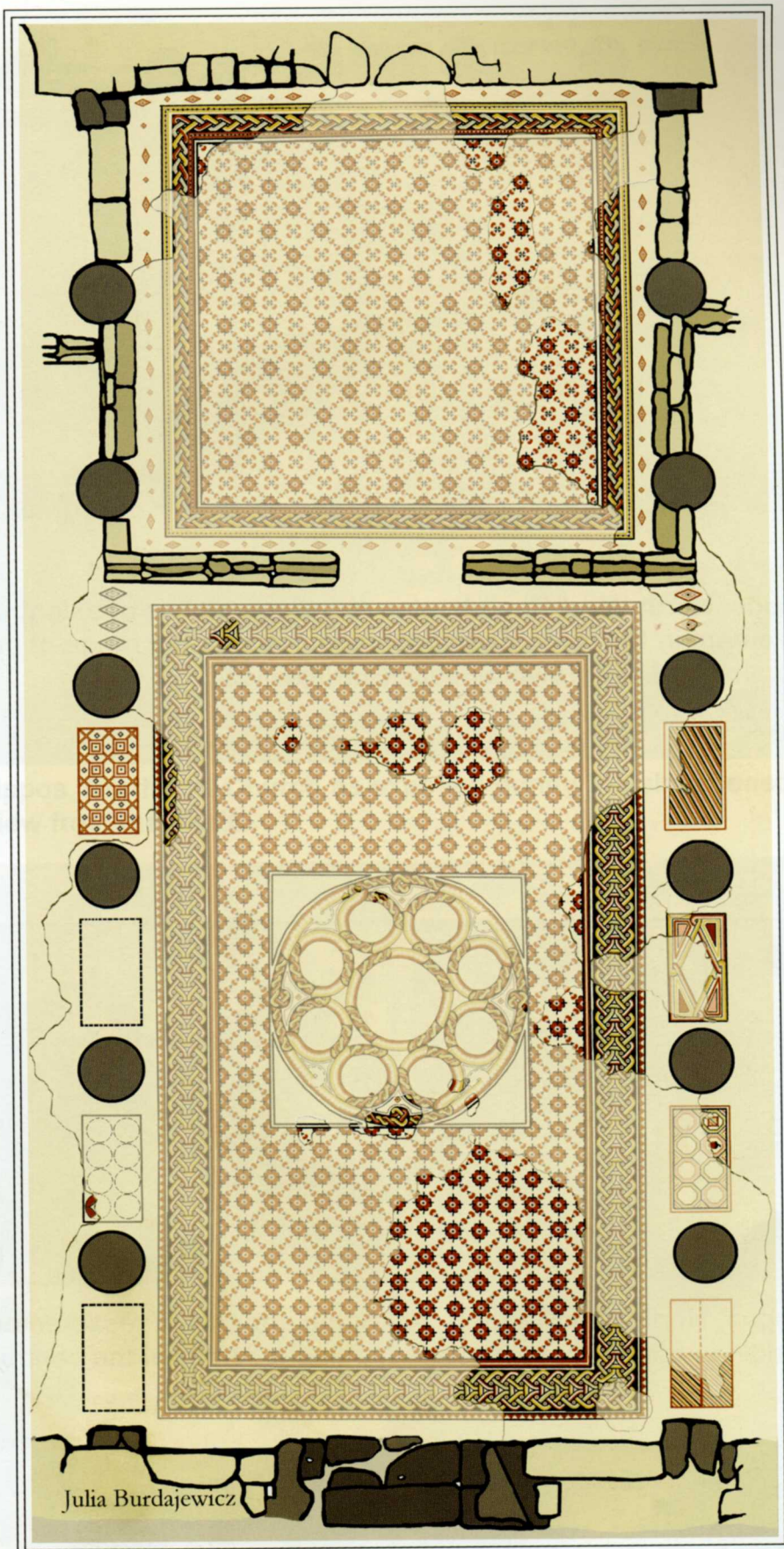


Fig. 87, Hippos, North-West Church, graphic reconstruction of mosaic carpet in the nave [drawn by Julia Burdajewicz].

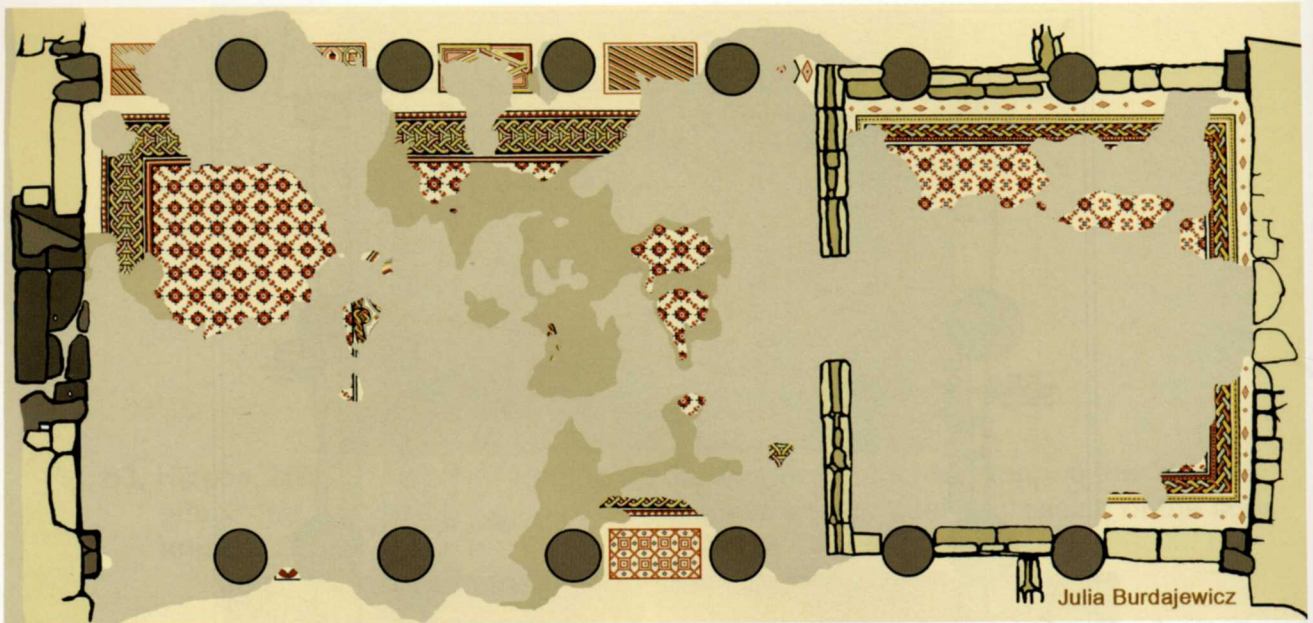


Fig. 88, Hippos, North-West Church, plan showing patches of extant mosaic pavement in the nave. Dark gray colour marks the range of preserved mosaic bedding [drawn by Julia Burdajewicz].



Fig. 89, Hippos, North-West Church, analyzing imprints of *tesserae* on the bedding of lime-based mortar: defining a corner of the central panel.