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Discovery, Preservation, and Study of Mosaic Pavements in the Gaza Territory

Véronique Blanc-Bijon¹, Patrick Blanc²

Since 1995, as part of the cooperation between Palestine and France archaeological campaigns were undertaken in the Gaza Territory, at the request of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine, with the support of the French Ministry of Foreign and European office and the Consulat général de France in Jerusalem. Under the auspices of the École biblique et archéologique française (EBAF), on sites where mosaics floors were unearthed Father Jean-Baptiste Humbert asked conservation and restoration interventions are counted by the workshop of the Musée départemental Arles antique (ACRM / MDAA), and EBAF proposed that the study of those pavements was undertaken with the cooperation of the Centre Camille Jullian in Aix-en-Provence.

Our interventions have been conducted through the logistics of the Palestino-French archaeological cooperation mission to Gaza firstly co-directed by Mr. Moin Sadeq, on behalf of Mr. Hamdan Taha, General Director of Antiquities of Palestine, and Father Jean-Baptiste Humbert. We are indebted to the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, the Consulat général de France, the White Fathers community in Sainte-Anne and the EBAF, especially to Jean-Baptiste Humbert, whose supports and help do have never failed to us.

The main sites

Abasan

When begun the cooperation en 1995, there were fragments of two pavements uncovered in Abasan Al-Kabirah (Piccirillo in *Gaza à la croisée des civilisations* 2007: 178): we did clean, consolidate them, and work on missing trench walls. Dated by an inscription to 606, the pavements are kept *in situ* and the Department of Antiquities built a hard protection over them.

Abu Barakah (“Deir El-Balah”)

A church paved with figural and geometrical mosaics were uncovered on top of a dune. Because of important risks of destruction -and it was finally destroyed- the Department of Antiquities asked us to lift the main pavement, with an inscription bringing a datation for the implementation of the whole decoration. The pavement was sent to Arles, in France, to be restored in 586. And it was an occasion to practice such urgent interventions with our Palestinian colleagues (Blanc in *Gaza méditerranéenne* 2000: 130-135).

Jabaliyah / Mukheitem

Since December 1996, the Department of Antiquities in Gaza excavated a wide church at Jabalyah with many magnificent figured mosaics, and asked Father Jean-Baptiste Humbert to collaborate (Humbert Hassuneh *et alii* in *Gaza méditerranéenne* 2000: 121-126; Piccirillo in *Gaza à la croisée des civilisations* 2007: 180-183; Merlet 2012). Some 17 inscriptions in

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mosaic give the evolution of the decoration from 496 to 732 (Saliou 2000). It was the beginning of our interventions with the *in situ* preservation of all those pavements. The Department of Antiquities has open the site to the public, and built the future museum.

Nuseirat

Since 1991, elements of an important monastery came to light in the sand around Tell Umm el-‘Amr; the Department of Antiquities made excavations in 1995-1997. Then a Palestino-French archaeological cooperation began in 2001 and is still going on (Elter Hassoune 2004; Elter 2012; Elter Al-Utol 2014)³.

A first church was built in the memory of Hilarion of Gaza on the site of the small hermitage Hilarion had built himself following Jerome, *Life of St. Hilarion*, on his return from Egypt after 306. This church was recovered by several levels, and finally by the great extension of a pilgrimage complex during the late VIth century.

Before entering the choir of the first church is an inscription that recalls the name of Hilarion; in the central nave is mentioned the donor, Nestorios⁴. This level is dated a little time after the saint's death in 371-372 and the return of his body to Gaza, so somewhere in the last quarter of the IVth century. Under a white monochrome mosaic from a late period was uncovered a mosaic fragment paving a corridor; the inscription allows to link it to a probable baptistry of the first church period.

A second period of mosaic pavements occurs when was build a crypt to the east of the church. The choir was then rectified and raised up. It is significant that the mosaicists paved this new choir taking up the general pattern of the last panel of the nave of the preceding period which were then recovered by slabs of grey limestone, but the catalog of different fill designs is richer, colorful and more various. Excavations have also delivered some evidence of the presence of wall decorations in both painting and mosaic related to this period, which must be placed in the first half of the Vth c.

During the second part of the VIth c., the monastery became a center of an important pilgrimage. The church was greatly enlarged, its entrance organized around an *atrium*, and houses and bath for pilgrims are built. The main nave is paved with marble as the outside court of the *atrium*, lateral naves and galleries of the *atrium* covered by mosaic pavements.

Conservation and *in situ* preservation

The cooperation in the field was continuous from 1995 to 2006, and even now keeps on going (Blanc in *Gaza méditerranéenne* 2000: 127-135; Blanc 2014). Firstly in 1995, we were asked to establish an inventory of *in situ* preserved mosaics of the Gaza Territory, indicating their state of preservation, but also the needs and means to implement their protection. It was therefore launched a broad collaboration for the safeguard and enhancement of mosaics discovered mainly on four archaeological sites: Abasan, Jabaliyah, Abu Barakah, and Nuseirat. A major aspect was the training of Palestinian conservators. So the program has allowed:

- to form a team of specialized Palestinian technicians able to make emergency interventions to safeguard ancient mosaics;
- to intervene in emergency situations, as was the case at Abasan, Abu Barakah, and Jabaliyah...;
- to intervene during excavations in coordination with archaeologists;

³ A complete publication of the excavations of Hilarion monastery is in preparation. For the mosaics, see Blanc-Bijon 2015, forthcoming.

⁴ All the inscriptions are studied by Catherine Saliou.

-to receive for training in Arles four Palestinian restorers of the Department of Antiquities;
-to restore pavements and present them to the public either on site at Jabaliyah and Nuseirat, or in exhibitions (*Gaza méditerranéenne* 2000, shown in some four places in France; *Gaza à la croisée des civilisations* 2007).

Discover and identify

Often a site buried for hundreds of years is revealed by a construction project, the extension of a road... This is how archaeological programs start. Archaeologists dig, put to light pavements and other remains, call for specific skills, e.g. restorers. At Nuseirat, in 1995, the Department of Antiquities of Palestine uncovered mosaics under a dune. Some twenty years after, the site has been excavated through cooperation between the Department of Antiquities, the University of Gaza, and EBAF, with the support of various international organizations such as UNESCO. Today, two archaeologists are on the ground: Fadel Otol and René Elter.

Documentation and control

Once a pavement brought to light, it is essential that the conservator-restorer realizes a conservation status that should be documented with the help of archaeologist and various take holders who will conduct specific studies. This first report must identify problems, and establish protocols, determine the necessary equipments, and propose a program of interventions. One principle we applied is to always place as imperative to find locally materials for interventions.

Consolidate and clean

According to the state of conservation of the pavement, cleaning precedes or follows consolidations. These affect the different layers of the support made with mortars, tesserae adhesion to bed lying... In some cases, the materials used for tesserae need also to be consolidated, in particular glass.

Trying to preserve pavements in their archaeological context needs to work also on the architecture, the walls of the rooms paved with mosaics. In Abasan, the adobe walls were missing, and only a few part of the foundations were kept.

In regions poor in stone for buildings, stones used for roman walls were often reused in later constructions. In Jabaliyah, all the stones were gone, and the mosaic pavements alone allow visualizing the extension, give the plan and help to understand the function of spaces. To strengthen pavements maintained *in situ*, and give back legibility to the overall plan of the remains, it has been necessary to restore the foundations of the walls. For that no doubt can exist on the authenticity of these, they were done in modern rubble, which were covered with lime mortar.

Uncover, cover, discover, shelter

Conserve, preserve *in situ* also requires to take in account the site as a whole, by a necessary spatial planning including protection of the pavements. It is the maintenance of a site that can ensure proper preservation.

As long as the site is excavated, archaeologists need to cover / discover the pavements several times. Then the most effective solution is a thick layer of clean sand, preferably resting on a textile or synthetic mesh interfacing between pavements and covering materials. The removal of this temporary coverage must be done carefully. With regular control, monitoring, it may be appropriate for a while. But it is imperative to consider in a short time setting up shelters.

The question of the shelters arises regularly on archaeological sites. There are many architectural solutions, all of which require regular monitoring, also specialized personnel for maintenance.

Lifting and restoration

On some sites, at the request of the archaeologists or for any other reasons, it may be necessary to lift a pavement to allow the continuation of the search, or simply to protect it to destruction. At Nuseirat, in the choir of the first church, we had to remove some panels to allow the discovery of an earlier state. In Abu Barakah, the situation was more difficult: during an intrusion of Israeli army, the site was destroyed; and we had only the opportunity to lift and safeguard the main nave.

The contribution of the study of pavements for the knowledge of ancient mosaicist work

The study of a mosaic pavement must be done in connection with its context, and should not be understood only as bi-dimensional, but needs to include the support whose characteristics may sometimes identify some technical workshops habits.

The statumen

In Jabaliyah, the project was to preserve and present to public the whole site *in situ*, so pavements were not lifted, and archaeologists have only a few information provided by examination of the stratigraphy. It is all different at Nuseirat, and the first level of support called *statumen* usually consists of stones, and such *statumen* layer was found under mosaic pavements of the first period church. While for the pavements of the wide expansion phase of the basilica, at the end of the VIth c., a specific workshop used terracotta elements, in this case ultimate use of amphorae whose study is in progress. The supports made of terra cotta were implemented in two galleries of the *atrium* and in the North nave of the new church: these three pavements have been made probably by the same workshop, or at least belong to a same program.

Glass tesserae analysis

All building materials (stones, mortars, glass...) used to built the different levels in Hilarion monastery were studied under the direction of Jean-Michel Mechling, from the University of Lorraine in Nancy. For building of such wide dimensions as the one of the enlargement, there probably were several workshops working together. One of these was using tesserae cutted in a yellow glass of a specific composition, material only found in three floors: the South nave, for the border of trifid chalices or some details of leaves in a circular panel interrupting the geometric composition; the North nave, where such glass tesserae were implemented for small patterns decorating the strips connected to walls; and in the pavement of a small irregular room opening South of the *atrium*, evidence that this pavement was contemporary of the great basilica.

The same yellow glass was also used in the border of the mosaic of the Gaza synagogue, now on display at the Good Samaritan Museum. Analysis would however be necessary to ensure the composition of the synagogue tesserae.

During the XIIIth international colloquium on mosaic held in Madrid in September 2015, we presented with Elisabetta Neri a program conducted in Paris at the Center of Research and Restoration of French Museums (C2RMF), stressing the importance of such analyzes on tesserae of IVth to VIth centuries, aiming to identify the manufacturing techniques and the origin of the gold leaf.

Preparatory sketches

The restoration phases following the removal of Abu Barakah mosaic revealed other remains of the work of Gaziot mosaicists. Many traces of pigments were kept at the back of tesserae: yellow under the giraffe, brown under the elephant, red ocher under the foliage itself...

If the mosaicist was probably used to see cocks, birds, and dogs, he had perhaps never seen tiger, elephant or giraffe (even if some traveled by the harbor of Gaza to Constantinople, e.g. two giraffes for Anastasius in 500, see Gatier 1996). To guide him when putting tesserae in place, the overall decoration was painted on the *nucleus* layer.

In Abu Barakah pavement, an inscription of two lines in Greek letters had been prepared on the *nucleus*, drawn with red ocher; but one detail does not appear on the completed mosaic: under the first line, a red line also guided the mosaicist, and the black tesserae used for letters were arranged slightly offset from the preparatory drawing. Examined by Catherine Saliou, this inscription refers to sponsors, two laics, George and Philip, and brings a date: the mosaic pavement was completed in the month of Artemision, in the year 646 of the era of Gaza, so between April 26th and May 25th 586 (Saliou 2008).

Borders and patterns

For the study of the geometric patterns, searchers from the Centre Henri Stern of the CNRS have proposed for nearly forty years to use a common vocabulary, and published two volumes of terms translated into many languages (*Décor* 1 and 2⁵) to help description of ancient mosaics in a view of creating a database. Some borders and patterns used by the Gaziot mosaicists are extremely common, and need be modulate in the light of the examination of fillings, so one will be very careful in using chronological arguments other than archaeological ones, before trying to identify specific habits of mosaicists.

In the Vth century, is spreading in Syria-Palestina a vocabulary where one can found specificities behind the choices and preferences of Palestinian mosaicists, but also their influences (Balty 2003; Sabagh Ayash Balty *et alii* 2008). Around Jerusalem, we saw an intensive use of oblique grids drawn with rosebuds as in Syria or, more often, trichromatic bouquets of florets (*Décor* 1, pl. 125): those grids were particularly employed for pavements of big dimensions such as for Christian basilicas. Palestinian workshops used them many times.

One could also look at other compositions as those with intersecting circles (*Décor* 1, pl. 237-239), so common everywhere. At Nuseirat, it was used for the first church in the IVth c. as for a gallery of the *atrium* belonging to the late VIth c.; in a room of the baptistery at Jabaliyah, a pavement, dated by an inscription to 548-549 and realized by two named mosaicists, Victor and Kosmas, also used the same pattern but with a completely different effect given by the drawing and the fillings.

Another very common pattern is the adjacent scales (*Décor* 1, pl. 215-219). It develops in composition of squares of scales (*Décor* 1, pl. 219f). Under the influence of Antioch workshops, the Palestinian mosaicists employed it several times. Among others, two examples from Jerusalem: in the co-called baptistery of Eleona's church dated to IVth c., the pavement has a fineness that the later panel in the neighboring field of the White Fathers, at Mount of Olives, has not. This same pattern is still implemented at Jabaliyah, probably in the late VIth c. And, we find it again in Hisham Palace at Jericho. We could have added several

⁵ Project developed after the publication of a former one, see *BullAIEMA* IV, 1973.

other pavements presenting the same pattern: Shiqmona so close to the Antioch example; the central nave of the church in Bethany... or Khirbet Midras on the way from Jerusalem to Gaza. This composition was very appreciated during three centuries by mosaicists working in the area, mainly in Palestina Prima, who expressed their art beside the constant trichromatic colors, with red background, through animation from their own giving by fillings in the white scales as well as in the red curved octagons.

We also encounter less frequent geometric compositions such a variation of intersecting circles bringing up crosses (*Décor* 1, pl. 244f). These crosses, sometimes showing just the white background, can be jeweled as on a pavement from Ste-Marie-la-Probatique, where the crosses clearly appear on the pavement (Dauphin 2005; 2011); a similar pattern can be seen in the central nave of the monastery of St. Martyrius (actually in Ma'ale Adumim settlement). At Nuseirat, in the choir of the first level, mosaicists implemented a pattern that also features crosses, but from a different composition, of circles and lozenges, which does not seem to have, up to now, parallel. So we might believe that it could be a creation of the Gaza mosaicists...

The so-called "School of Gaza" of the VIth century was discussed in the 1960s', and defined particularly by vast compositions of scrolls with animals and birds, composition with a very marked axiality (Avi-Yonah 1975). It is now possible to add several new pavements to the corpus: the nave of Abu Barakah dated from 586, and also a pavement of a room belonging to the Hilarion complex in Nuseirat, from the late VIth c. or shortly thereafter. As in Shelall mosaic (today in the museum of Canberra, Australia) for example, on the first row, we find peacocks on both sides of an axial vase from which springs a foliage whose spirals are retained by loops. In medallions, animals appear associated by pairs, alternating quadrupeds and birds; between the first and second rows, birds occupy all remaining spaces. On the central axis, a cart of eggs seems to be a constant. Contrary to what was thought in the 1960s', and although if in Nuseirat mosaic several images are destroyed, presence of human character can be observed sometimes. With those scrolls, we can observe the richness and variety of drawings of animals, sometimes realistic, sometimes less.

On the contrary, the design of the large, and later, pavement of the central nave of Jabaliyah, badly damaged likely by iconoclasm, presents a completely different conception and hand. If in Abu Barakah, Nuseirat, Shellal... most animals are standing in a circle, in the original drawing of Jabaliyah they were passing through the composition, in connection with neighboring circles. This Jabaliyah mosaic was more narrative.

At Nuseirat, in the new basilica of the great extension of the VIth century, the geometric pavement of one aisle is interrupted by a large circle with an inscribed polygon showing a complicated meander. The panel is not complete, but we see, in the outside rank, leaves with various fruits. Those leaves are like offerings supports. Such leaves appear also on a pavement of the Worcester House Hunt, room 2, in Daphne near Antioch, dated in the Vth century, in a presumably private and non-Christian context, as evidenced by the personification of Ge, reminding abundance of the Earth (Levi 1947).

Another use of *hedera* leaves which seems to us very specific to the region is the regular seedling of leaves, all from the same size and orientation. The heart-shaped leaves often appear in mosaic pavements, but are never -until now- used in seedlings such as in Palestine, reminiscent of compositions in rosebuds, or the parrots beribboned, from Antioch or Madaba.

This pattern was studied by Mrs. Dauphin (Dauphin 2005) about the mosaic of the upper level of Ste-Marie-la-Probatique in Jerusalem, pavement the author dates between 614 and 637, with several parallels (Shelomi in Galilee, Umm Jerar...). But recent discoveries in Palestine brought new elements to this study. In the church of Abu Barakah, les aisles (unfortunately lost) were decorated by a seedling of red and black *hederae*, arranged in lines of either color. The same pattern appears also at Abasan, in 606: the leaves are of two colors, green and black. In the final decoration period of the basilica of Hilarion in Nuseirat, a pavement presents groups of four red leaves irregularly interrupting the unity of a seedling of black leaves. In other cases, the leaves are uniformly colored in red as in the *Dominus fleuit* in Jerusalem, or in Taybeh (?) where the pavement is incompletely preserved, and in a late Jabaliyah pavement on which orange zones result of an antique good quality restoration. In Jericho, there are such leaves in the synagogue pavement but bipartite, red and black, and in a very different seedling organization. All these pavements clearly reinforce the impression of a particularly popular pattern used in Palestine during the late VIth or early VIIth century. And one might think that these are not works of a single mosaicist, but of a workshop. In these plant series, a pavement from Abasan is quite unique and very rich, showing alternatively small heart-shaped leaves and large veined leaves. If we find similar veined leaves e.g. in a mosaic of the Orthodox monastery on Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, they are not organized in such a regular seedling.

Back to the safeguard of pavements

We cannot stress enough that, despite difficulties, it is necessary to maintain pavements on their original site. At Nuseirat, after removal of mosaic panels to allow the excavations going on, we have proceeded to their replacement, otherwise fragments have finally disappeared. When the site can be preserved, it is essential not to "forget" to put back the removed elements of mosaics, even plain white ones, to restore the cohesion and integrity of the site. But in some cases, it may be impossible to maintain the pavement *in situ* for its own safety, because of the construction of a modern building, or because the site will be destroyed.

We will remember the rescue operation on the sand dune of Abu Barakah. The excavation was done urgently, the site, a church and its pavements were at great risk. Besides, the dune was flattened quickly thereafter. This removal allowed us to train our colleagues from Gaza to such interventions. Through this emergency intervention, the mosaic of the main nave of the church was saved. The mosaic has left the territory of Gaza and was transferred to a new support, restored in the workshop of Arles museum by a team of Palestinian and French conservators. The restored mosaic has been exhibited many times in France and Switzerland. These exhibitions helped to raise international awareness to the richness and importance of the Palestinian archaeological heritage, especially the one of Gaza.

But it is in their original contexts that mosaics should naturally be presented to the public. For this, one must design and realize an adequate protection. This is what was done at Jabaliyah where a site museum was built, with spaces for excavation equipment, for the staff ... Today a large roof covers most of the pavements. For exhibitions abroad was realized a detailed model.

If enclosing the site ensures its security, to open it to public, first of all to schools, allows that could be taken into account by everyone the legacy of the Elders on every shore of the Mediterranean, and legacy that we have to share the knowledge with future generations. It is certain that all situations are not similar. The Gaza strip is unlike any other Mediterranean

coastline. And it happened to us to get back to work after that ravages of men have struck again remains belonging to our common heritage.

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