

Appendix

A figural mosaic in the synagogue at Khirbet Wadi Hamam

Uzi Leibner and Shulamit Miller

The floor of the synagogue is decorated with a magnificent mosaic, one of the few discovered to date in synagogues of 'Galilean' type.¹ The mosaic was already severely damaged in antiquity and large portions of the N and W aisles were replaced with a simple plaster floor. The portions of the mosaic that survived in these aisles were not covered over but instead incorporated into the later floor, leaving 'islands' of mosaic in the plaster. It appears that at the time of the renovation the community lacked the means to repair or replace the mosaic, but the remains, although badly damaged, were considered sufficiently important to be preserved as far as possible. No other such instances of ancient preservation of synagogue mosaics are known to date. No trace of a plaster floor was found in the E aisle or in the nave, so it appears that the mosaic survived in these parts of the building until it went out of use.

The bedding of the mosaic, composed of grey mortar and pebbles, has been preserved throughout the hall, indicating that the original mosaic covered the entire floor. Either this bedding or the later plaster floor were encountered throughout most of the hall.² Some 30 fragments of the mosaic pavement have survived in various areas (fig. 1), including the remains of 4 Aramaic inscriptions, sections of geometric and floral decorations, and figural scenes. On the basis of the stratigraphic evidence (see above) the mosaic is to be dated to the late 3rd or early decades of the 4th c., a date which makes it the earliest synagogue figural mosaic yet known.

We focus here on three figural scenes, all otherwise unattested in ancient synagogues: one in the E aisle, depicting craftsmen at work, and two in the W aisle, one a battle and the other a maritime scene. All three scenes have been badly damaged, making their reconstruction and interpretation difficult. A close study of the surviving remains, however, provides much evidence bearing on the composition, iconography and interpretation of the mosaic, and sheds new light on Jewish art of late antiquity

The plan of the mosaic

Although only c.6% of the mosaic has been preserved, the information provided by the c.30 fragments that survive enables us to reconstruct the basic design and layout of the entire floor. Each fragment was measured, drawn and photographed; its precise location was determined using a Total Station and then transferred to a plan of the structure (fig. 1). From technical and stratigraphic observations it is clear that all of the fragments belong to a single, continuous pavement that originally covered the entire floor of the building.

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- 1 Small portions of mosaics have been found in the 'Galilean' synagogues of Horvat 'Ammudim (Levine 1981, 80) and Meroth (Ilan 1987, 55).
 - 2 During the renovation the plaster floor was laid directly on the mosaic's original bedding. The two are easily distinguishable, however, for the bedding is composed of fist-sized pebbles in grey mortar containing a large quantity of ash, while the plaster floor is creamy white and contains slaked lime and tiny bits of aggregate.