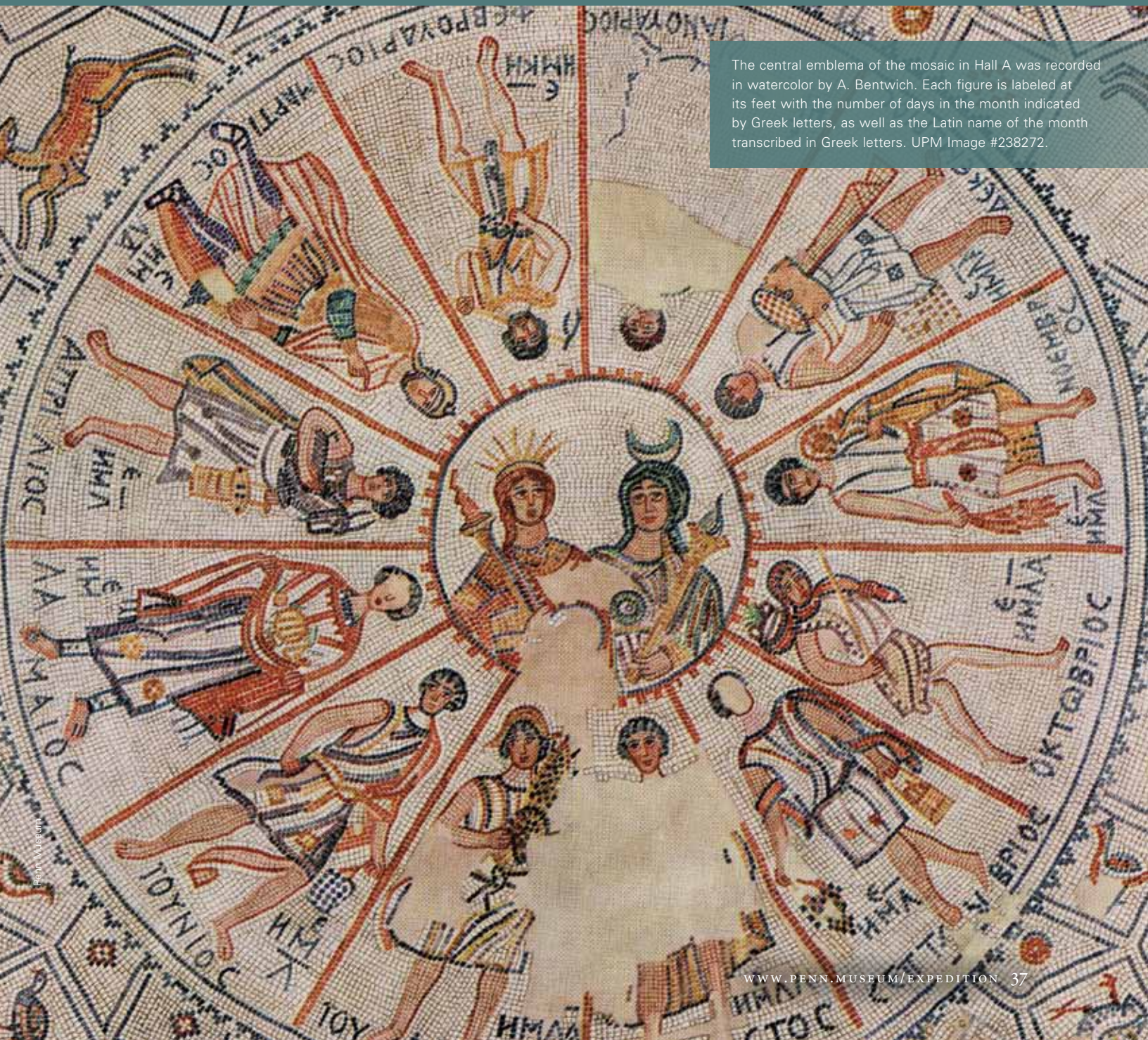


Time, Memory, and Mosaics at the Monastery of Lady Mary

BY STEPHANIE HAGAN

The central emblem of the mosaic in Hall A was recorded in watercolor by A. Bentwich. Each figure is labeled at its feet with the number of days in the month indicated by Greek letters, as well as the Latin name of the month transcribed in Greek letters. UPM Image #238272.





A series of small steps, seen on the right in this excavation photograph, leads to the monastery's entrance. The location at the city wall put it at some remove from the tell, visible in the distance. UPM Image #238269.

Late Antique Beth Shean provides ample evidence of a religiously heterogeneous population. Even as Christianity was becoming established as the dominant faith, we find traces of cultural and artistic exchanges with other religious groups. The floor mosaics of a 6th century monastery find their best comparisons with synagogue pavements, raising the possibility that the same artisans may have worked for both Christian and Jewish patrons.

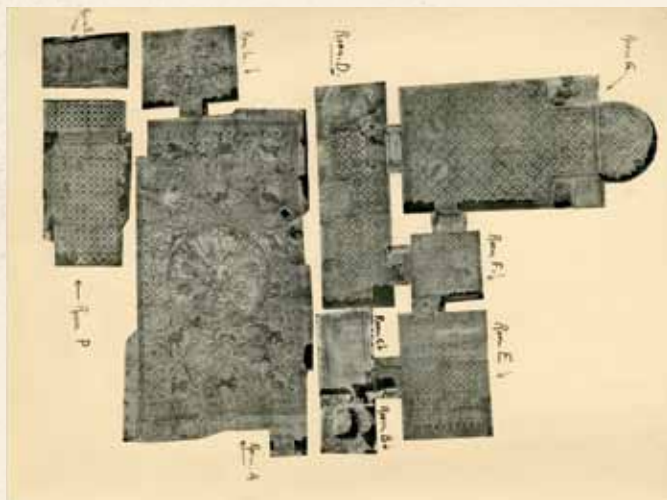
IN THE FALL OF 1930, Gerald Fitzgerald's excavation team was working in the Northern Cemetery when they made a "wholly unexpected discovery": a wide stone gateway at the northernmost edge of the cemetery, which led into a room with a mosaic inscription. Fitzgerald wrote from the field, "[W]hile the inscription appears suitable to a church or a tomb, the disposition of the rooms would rather suggest a house or villa. In any case the finding of so large an extent of mosaic paving at this point is a most gratifying surprise." This discovery led Fitzgerald's team to unearth neither a tomb nor a domestic complex, but rather a 6th century monastery, which Fitzgerald called the Monastery of Lady Mary, after its founder. The monastery's rich mosaic floors are among the last figural decorations carried out in a religious or municipal building in Beth Shean. Not only do these mosaic pavements provide an example of early Byzantine church decoration untouched by Iconoclasm, they also display a hybrid Romano-Judeo-Christian iconography that appears to be unique to this city.

The doorway discovered by Fitzgerald's team opened onto a small stone-paved vestibule through which one passed into

the monastery, with a pair of steps leading up to the floor of the largest room, Hall A. This hall was likely an open-air courtyard, around which the other rooms of the monastery were arranged. Running along the western side of this hall were the monastery's kitchen and refectory. To the north was a small room that enclosed a marble tomb, as well as a larger room (Hall L), with its floor covered in a vine motif surrounding scenes of the vintage. The eastern half of the complex contained the monastery's single-nave chapel and a cluster of rooms of uncertain function, which may have been dormitories or working rooms for the monks in residence.

The pavement of Hall A is the most remarkable of the monastery's floor decorations. The mosaic consists of a series of octagonal and rhomboid compartments, which frame images of birds, fruit, leaves, and exotic animals. At the center of the mosaic composition is a calendar, which is laid out as a circle divided into 12 equal sections. Each section contains a full-length figure who carries out a labor suited to the month. For example, February, represented by a bearded figure wearing a short tunic, carries a rake or hoe; a shepherd carrying a goat and a bucket for milk personifies the month of April; July wears a short tunic and cap and holds a sheaf of corn over his shoulder; September carries a bunch of grapes and a seedbox; December is a sower with a seedsack in hand.

The calendar mosaic of Hall A paved the floor of a courtyard or atrium space that was likely open to the sky. UPM Image #30087. See page 37 for the watercolor of the central part of this mosaic.



Above, a photographic montage prepared by the excavators shows the positions of the mosaic floors in plan. Right, this small (1600 m²) cenobitic, or communal, monastery is valuable as an example of an urban monastic foundation, a category for which archaeological evidence is scant. The monastery is named not after the Biblical Mary, but after its aristocratic founder, whose name is known to us from inscriptions at the site. Plate II from G. Fitzgerald, 1939.



Clockwise from left to right: At the center of the calendar mosaic are personifications of the sun and moon. November and December are represented by figures doing work appropriate to the season. The imagery of the hunt complements the calendar mosaic's plant motifs, suggesting man's use of earth's abundance for sustenance. The vine likely represents the people of the church, with the depictions of labors representing man's dominion over nature. In this detail, a shepherd plays his pipe to the amusement of his dancing dog. An African leading a giraffe reminds us of the goods, animals, and people that came to Beth Shean from near and far, thanks to the city's strategic location.

Calendars are common on church pavements of the period. Figuring divine time by way of the earth's seasons, they display the recurring, cyclical order of the cosmos within the microcosm of the church. The circular format seen here, however, is unprecedented in a Christian context, while it is quite typical of the zodiac pavements found in synagogues in the region, including those at Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, Na'aran, Khirbet (Horvat) Susiya, Husifa, and Sepphoris. The zodiac may have appealed to Jewish congregations over the Roman calendar because it did not require them to represent the human figure, and stressed the symbolic or cosmic over the literal illustration of the passage of earthly time. At the Monastery of Lady Mary, the calendar's design takes on the usual circular *form* of the zodiac, while filling it with the more typical Roman *content* of the labors of the month.

The monastery's calendar also shares with contemporaneous Jewish zodiac pavements its peculiarly pagan content: at the center of the circle is a pair of busts, each holding a torch, the sun (Helios) at left and the moon (Selene) at right. Other Christian calendar pavements do not contain this feature, and the tolerance of pagan imagery suggested by this

(continued on page 42)



The mosaic in Hall L displays an inhabited vine scroll motif. This composition is common in both Arabia and Palestine in the 6th century, and was perhaps meant to offer a pavement version of an overhead pergola. UPM Image #30096.

Israeli Antiquities Authority (top), Penn Museum (bottom)

TREASURE BENEATH THE FLOOR

By Jane Hickman

Although the Monastery of Lady Mary is best known for its fine mosaics, another discovery awaited Fitzgerald's team as they excavated the floor of Room H, a small room adjacent to the chapel. A gold chain and bracelet were recovered along with a cache of ten gold coins, a bronze censer, and other objects. The hoard, perhaps the church treasure, had been buried sometime before the Arab invasion in 636 CE.

The gold chain has been described as a necklace or a belt. Broken at one end, its preserved length is 89 cm, just over 35 inches. It consists of 33 pierced elements (one incomplete) and a central ornament made from a wire ring encircling four filigree hearts or leaves. A small circle of gold wire is soldered inside each heart. The elements are decorated with engraved lines, and a row of dots was likely made with a small punch. A broken loop-in-loop chain, soldered to one end of the necklace or belt, includes 23 links. A close examination of the pierced elements reveals evidence of light tracing, consistent with techniques used in creating this type of Byzantine or Late Antique jewelry. The artisan used a pointed tool to incise a thin line down the center of each element and also outlined the shapes he would cut. Chisel marks on the edges of the perforations indicate how the openings in the metal were made. Aimilia Yeroulanou, who believes the gold chain is a belt, indicates that the decorative motif used for the cut-out elements is vegetal. Palmettes, a common design in jewelry of this time, are depicted here with elongated, stylized leaves.

JANE HICKMAN is Editor of *Expedition* and a specialist in ancient jewelry.

For Further Reading

Yeroulanou, A. *Diatrita: Gold Pierced-work Jewellery from the 3rd to the 7th Century*. Athens: Benaki Museum, 1999.



The gold necklace recovered from the floor level of Room H is a fine example of Byzantine pierced work. UPM Object #31-50-212.





Monastery above the Cemetery - Mosaic with Peacocks in the Chapel near the W. Door. H 70.



Above, the entrance to the chapel shows a pair of facing peacocks. Because they were believed to have immortal flesh, and shed their feathers every year only to regrow them in the spring, they were seen as an allegory of resurrection and are common in early church decoration. UPM Image #30029. Left, the floor of the chapel is paved with a carpet of birds. Inscriptions at the eastern corners of the chapel indicate the locations of burials. UPM Image #30095.

depiction is surprising. It seems the presence of the sun and moon personifications in a Christian context may be influenced by the appearance of Helios in Jewish zodiac pavements. While scholars have identified Christian motifs borrowed in Jewish contexts, this mosaic may demonstrate a more even-sided exchange, and certainly suggests that in the diverse metropolis of Beth Shean, the same workshops were employed by patrons of all religious inclinations.

The more conventional mosaic pavements at the monastery are no less significant for our understanding of the site. The floor of the chapel is blanketed with birds in round medallions. Near the eastern end of the apsidal space are mosaic inscriptions that suggest this is the burial place of Lady Mary and her family, and indeed, beneath the inscriptions were found multiple burials. The decoration of the chapel is quite suited to a funerary context. Besides illustrating the bounty and variety of God's creation, birds can represent the ascending souls of the deceased.

The location of a burial near the altar is highly unusual for a Byzantine church: interments were typically only allowed in the nave or the narthex, away from the sanctuary. It was common, however, for the founder of a church or monastery to make a donation in exchange for burial on the grounds, and to enjoy a contracted period of prayer or a prescribed number of memorial masses on her behalf once she was deceased. (Female donors are well represented in this period, as we know from inscriptions in Jordan.) In 538 the Emperor Justinian would legislate that founders also make provisions for ongoing operation costs, such as lighting, conduct of services, support of clergy, and building maintenance. Even absent this legislation, a donor would be wise not to be stinting in her gift, since the size or value of a donation reflected her status and affected the permanence of her memory. Those who occupied the monastery benefitted in perpetuity from the patrons' donations, even as their prayers and petitions assured the spiritual well-being of their benefactors.

The monastery's location at the northern edge of the city suggests isolation, but in fact there were several churches in the vicinity built in the same period. Despite these patrons' clear dedication to Christianizing the landscape of Beth Shean, the decoration of the Monastery of Lady Mary testifies to the free interchange between Christian and Jewish artisans, as well as to the incursion (or persistence) of pagan imagery in a rapidly Christianizing but still religiously heterogeneous city. 🏠

For Further Reading

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- Hachlili, R. *Ancient Mosaic Pavements*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.
- James, F. W. "Lady Mary Monastery, an Early Christian Church at Beth Shan." *Expedition* 5:1 (1962): 20-24.