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A Birds Mosaic in Qalaat Seman

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Pilgrims' Baths are excavated since 2008 in Qalaat Seman, dating from the same period than the whole site (end of 5th century), they are partially dug. A large mosaic covers a courtyard surrounded by three galleries (circa 200 m²). Around 60% of the space is presently visible. The two excavated galleries present the same simple geometric pattern. In the contrary, the court is covered by a large pattern of adjacent octagons and squares. The originality and interest of this mosaic lays in the filling motifs of the octagons: each of them contains alternatively a bird or a vegetal motif. The birds present many different types and orientation, with bright colours and lively attitudes. The vegetal motifs between birds display trees, bushes and flowers. Some of them are replaced by an empty birdcage with open door. Geometric elements fill the peripheral compartments. This aviary presents an original interpretation of the mosaics showing birds, frequent in the surrounding of Antioch or Apamea, but presenting other forms. We will try to study examples of similar theme in order to locate the workshop of Qalaat Seman among the rich Near East mosaic production.

Keywords: Mosaic, Syria, Birds, Baths, Byzantine Period

New directions for the studies on the site of Qalaat Seman were taken recently. The director of the site J.-L. Biscop¹ and his two collaborators P.-M. Blanc² and D. Pieri³ decided to expend their excavations outside of the sanctuary's mandra, (Figure 1) on ruins situated on the west slope of the sanctuary. The latter structures appear to belong to baths⁴, linked to pilgrimage, with a complex of four cisterns (quarries reused as reservoirs), situated between the mandra and the baths. The main access to the ensemble diverges from the Sacred Path lane just before the Triumphal Arch, running south/north and ending in front of it⁵.

The baths are composed of two neighbouring buildings (Figure 2). The southern one is rectangular, very ruined and not excavated yet. A portico flanks it on the west side. The second one represents the main part of the complex. It has been excavated since 2008, under the direction of P.-M. Blanc. Its architectural organisation depends largely on its location on the steep slope. The building lies on an artificial terrace, maintained on the west side by a retaining wall overhanging the slope, which suffered significant damage from repeated earthquakes. The building is mainly rectangular, with small technical spaces projecting out of its perimeter (north latrine, west *praefurnium*, and east water tower). It consists in a large open courtyard surrounded on three sides (north, east and west) by porticoes supported by columns (ca. 200 m², more than half of the total surface). The entrance room is located in the southeast corner of the building and opens in the south end of the oriental portico. The west portico is flanked north and south by two latrines (the north one added later). The court is largely open on the southern side by three arches on vaulted cold rooms, yet to be excavated. A single door introduces to the heated area of the ensemble, located in the south: a shower room and two small pools, flanked west by a boiler tank with the *praefurnium* underneath (opening down the slope). A water tower is built against the vestibule, and gathers the waters from the upper cistern. Large stairs climb directly east of the entrance, hollowed out of the rock, offering perhaps to the users of the baths an ambulatory,

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1 J.-L. Biscop, Architect, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, chef du Département des Systèmes d'Information Patrimoniaux, succeeded in 2007 to J.-P. Sodini (University Paris-I, Member of AIBL Paris) at the head of the mission. Sodini 2007.

2 P.-M. Blanc, Archaeologist, responsable of the team Archéologie du Proche-Orient hellénistique et romain, CNRS -UMR 7041, ArScAn.

3 D. Pieri, Archaeologist-ceramologist, University of Paris I-Sorbonne.

4 First interpreted as fortification, these ruins were recently attributed to baths, located 100 m lower than the main entrance. Presence of ashes in the slope immediately west of the main building, location of a battery of cisterns and a water tower and discovery of heating pipes confirmed this hypothesis. Cf. Biscop Blanc, in press.

5 This lane could have served both to the inhabitants of the village and to the pilgrims, that were probable users of the baths.

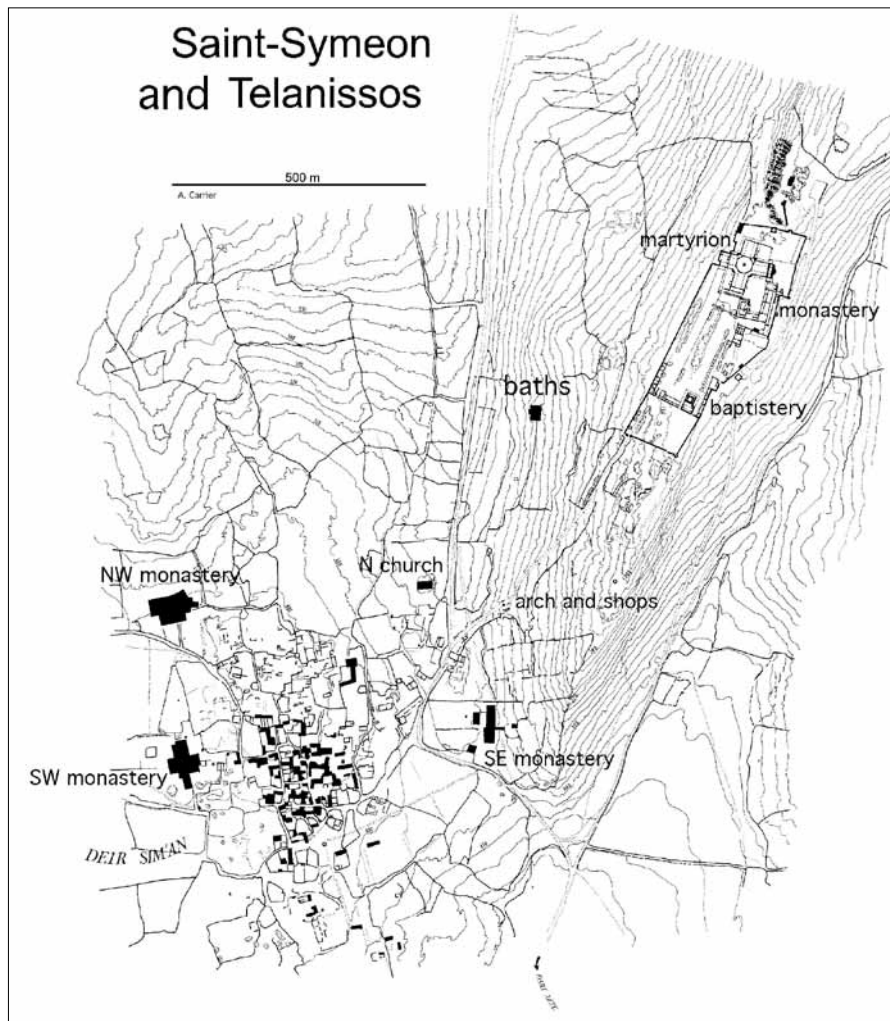


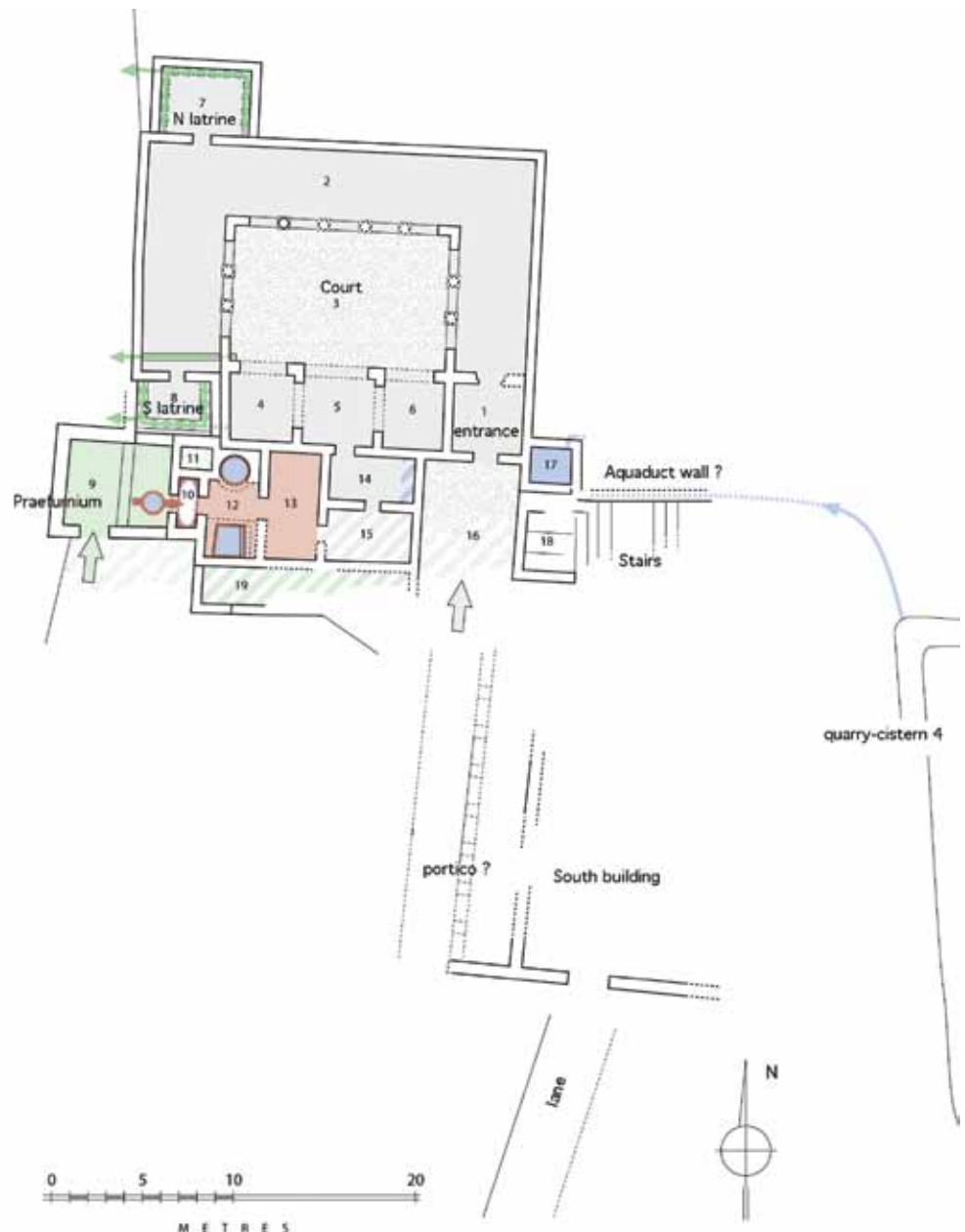
Figure 1
Plan of the site of Qalaat Seman
(Syria) (A. Carrier).

sort of *pallestra* restricted in surface by the morphology of the relief. The latter installation is probably linked to the first south building with portico.

The mosaic of the ensemble court-porticoes is a homogeneous ensemble (Figure 3), made at once by the same workshop. The court and the north and west porticoes have the same level, with mosaic intercolumniations. On the contrary, the Eastern portico, not yet excavated, presents a higher floor level (18 cm higher): the columns on this side are built on a *stylobate*. This levels' disparity between the east portico and the others could be the sign of a special layout and decoration for this privileged place, at the entrance.

The West retaining wall of the Baths bears traces of sequential earthquakes, with landslip in the slope, which partially destroyed the structures, and resulted in the subsidence of the mosaics, significant gaps and deformations (Figure 4). The rest of the mosaic is in a remarkable state of preservation. There are few antic restorations. A thick layer of calcite on a large half of the courtyard's pavement, and multiples traces of burning did not allow for good photographs, in spite of a very long and unrewarding scraping. This opaque layer often makes the motifs hardly legible and is the result of a long stagnation of calcareous waters, probably after the collapse of the building and the abandon of the place. We have much to discover after a professional intervention on the field, and until then it will be difficult to give a real idea of this beautiful mosaic. We plan to come next time with a team of restorers, in order to complete the study

Figure 2
Plan of the Baths (Archaeologic
mission of Qalaat Seman)



and documentation of the whole space after the end of the excavations and the whole cleaning.

The floor was laid directly after the architectural campaign, as outer margins show. Patterns are geometric, with figurative filling motifs limited to the centre of the courtyard. The design is regular and well-drawn, with no mistakes or hesitations in the corners⁶. The geometric repertory is not original but colours present a fine hue that stands out from the very white ground and the black lines⁷. Outer-margins are set up perpendicularly to the walls, characteristic that we find in the whole ensemble (porticoes, court and intercolumniations).

⁶ This quality is particularly visible in the court, where guilloches of the pattern turn with precision.

⁷ The tesserae's materials were not studied yet, but white is a local stone; red, yellow and pink are terra cotta, and other stones make the light pink, grey, light green, ochre and two shades of grey. These colours stand out on a very white ground, with dark black lines.

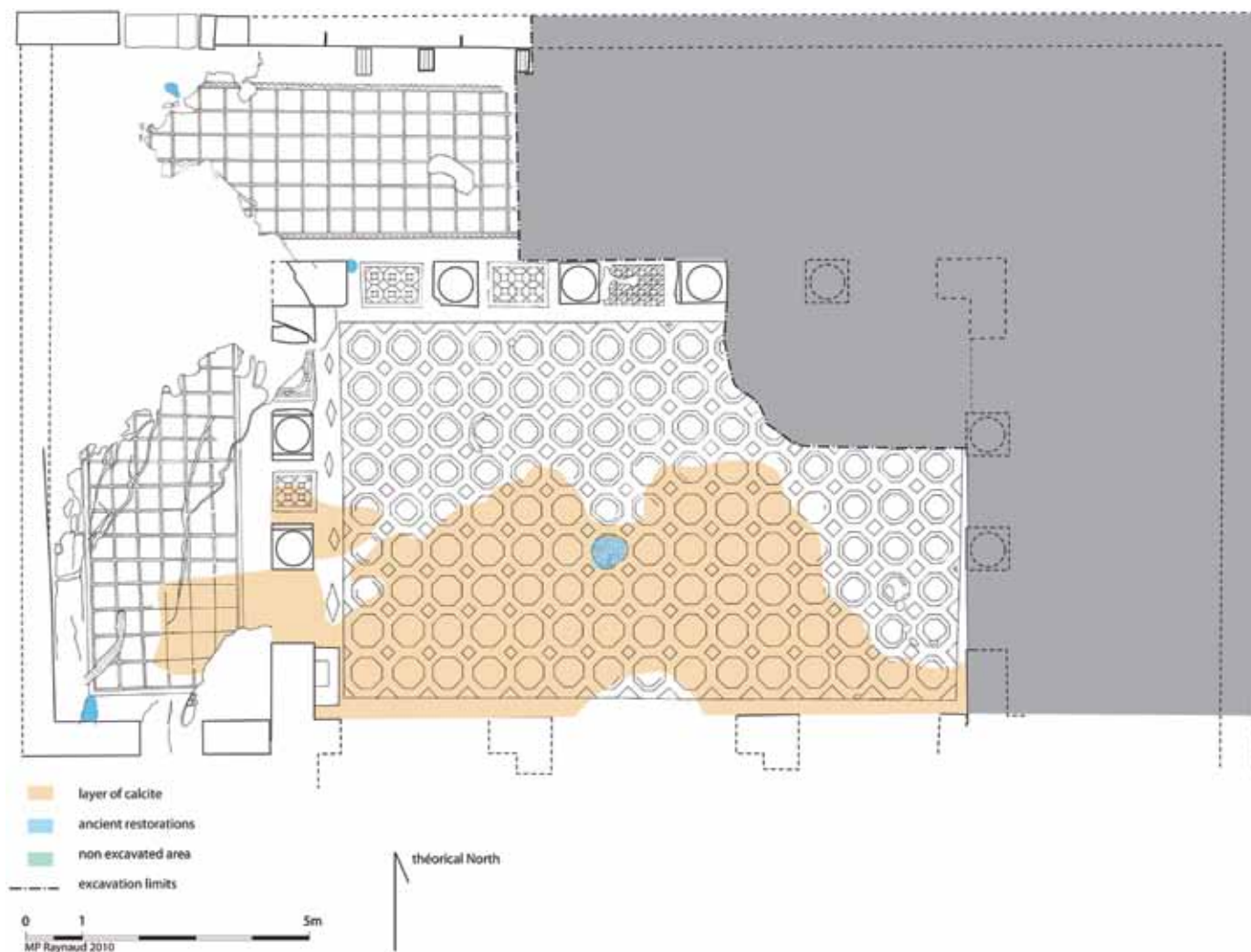


Figure 3
Layout of the courtyard's mosaic,
with indication of antique
restorations and location of the
layer of calcite (MP Raynaud).

Figure 4
Ensemble excavated in 2010
(MP Raynaud).



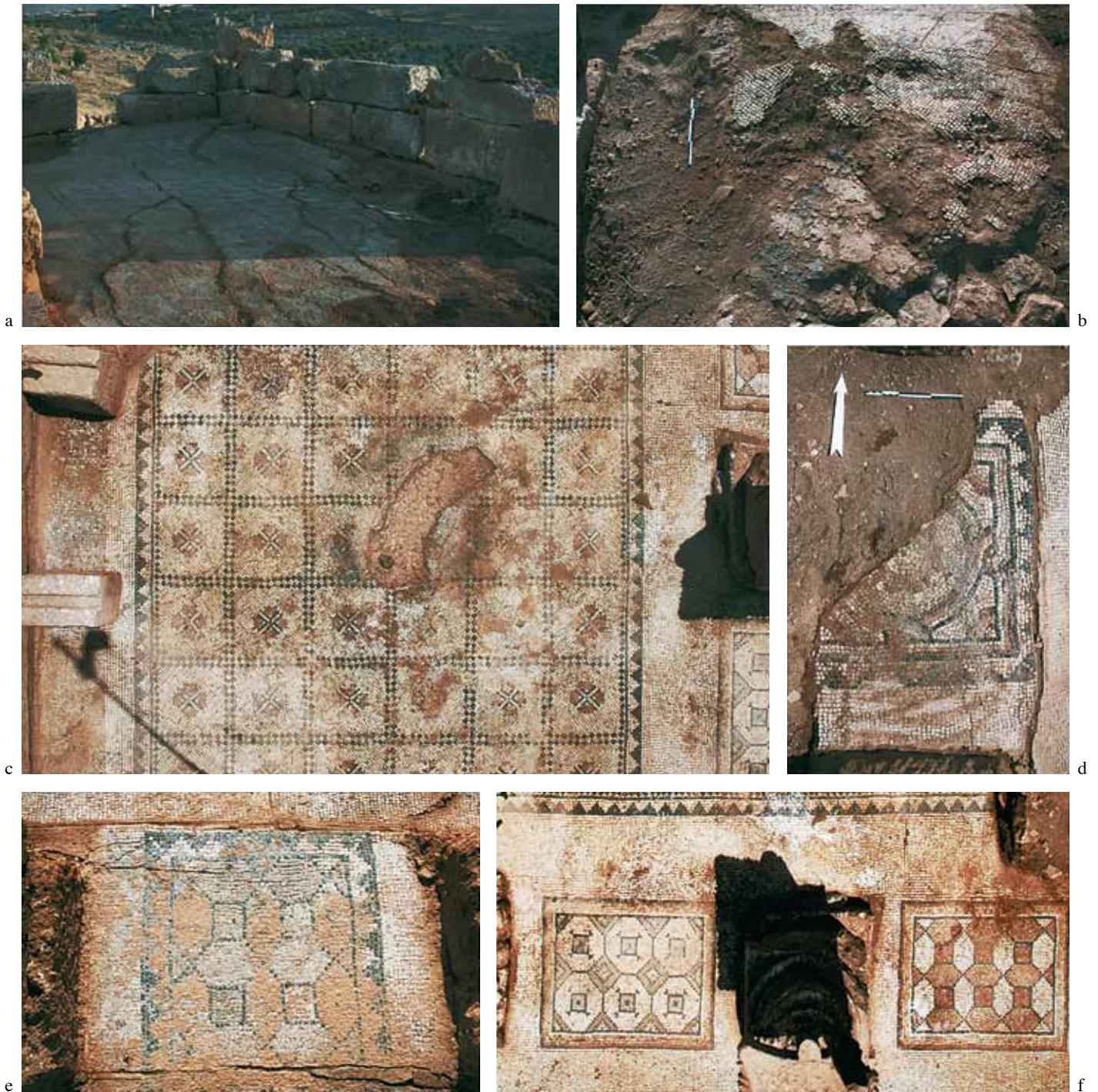


Figure 5a and b
state of preservation of the west
part of the porticoes; c: décor
of the porticoes; d, e and f:
intercolumniations (MP Raynaud).

The two excavated porticoes have a similar décor (Figure 5c); it is a very simple grid of double cables designed by poised four tesserae, which determine square compartments (six units wide). Each square contains a floret with red and pink heart shaped petals. A thin line of triangles outlines the ensemble. The decor is common and discreet, airy and regular, adapted to a circulation space. Eight intercolumniations carpets have been exposed yet, five on the west side and three on the north side of the courtyard. They all contain geometric patterns of the rainbow style⁸.

⁸ Octagons and squares, intersecting octagons, trapezoids around a square, solids in perspective, centralized interlaced motifs.



Figure 6
a: pattern of the courtyard;
b, c and d: vegetal elements;
e: overall view of the court
from the East (MP Raynaud).

The state of preservation of the courtyard is good, but the calcite hides half of the motifs (Figures 4, 6e). Outer margins of the court are white, of various widths, and decorated by polychrome lozenges on the west. It is worth noting the absence of a border. An orthogonal grid pattern of octagons creating poised squares covers the surface, traced by a thick guilloche (Figure 6a). A polychrome band surrounds each octagon. The small poised squares contain a dentilled square or sometimes a red and white chessboard.

Within the two first peripheral rows (Figure 7), octagons contain an alternation of geometric and vegetal motifs (bushes and flowers). On the contrary, the centre of the composition is ornamented by the alternation of birds and vegetal motifs (mainly trees) in staggered rows. We noticed a few irregularities, like the substitution of cages instead of trees in three occurrences.

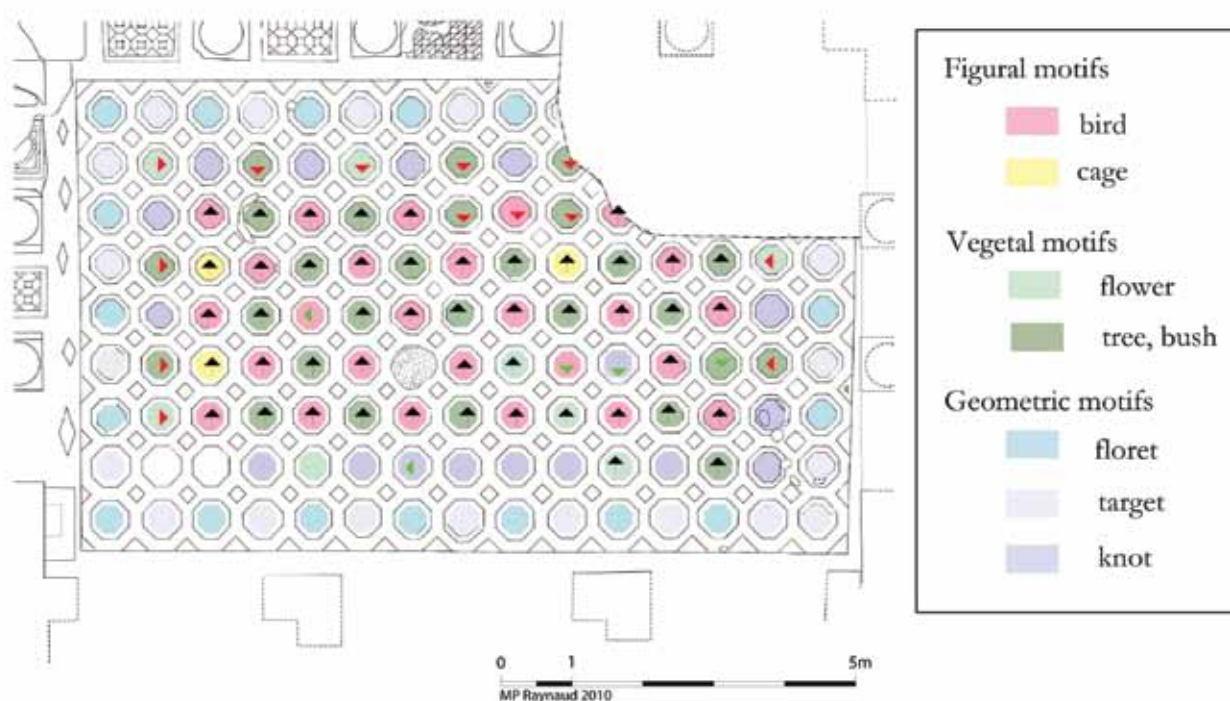


Figure 7
Scheme for the identification
and orientation of figured
motifs of the courtyard
(M.-P. Raynaud).

The birds belong to different species⁹ (Figure 8): among the savage birds (7 individuals), are an eagle¹⁰, a hoopoe, three chukar-partridges, two small passerine (sparrows?). Many aquatic species (11 units) are displayed: seven ducks, one purple gallinule, two white herons (or ibis?), a pelican (?). Domestic species are also largely figured (8 birds): a turtledove, a pigeon, two guinea fowls. Four green parakeets with a red ribbon around the neck, in a “Persian way”, appear as tamed animals. They don’t appear in pairs (male and female), as seen in many examples, like in Petra’s Church mosaics, probably linked to Noah’s ark cycle. The birds are most often represented in a lively position, walking, bent down, or looking back. The eagle is represented facing forward with open wings¹¹. All kinds of graphic artifices are used here, from the stippling to the dotted line, the stripes and the gradation of colours.

As usual, the repertory of vegetal catalogue is poor (Figures 6b, c and d), with simple flowers, trees and bushes; we recognize a pear tree, a pomegranate tree (?), four vines; the other are not recognizable, partly because of the opaque layer of calcite covering the mosaic (Figure 6e).

The orientation of the figural motifs appears to make sense (Figure 7). The spectator must be in each portico to perceive the peripheral trees and bushes in the right position: they are displayed in a concentric disposition, and this tends to draw attention toward the centre. On the contrary, most of the other central figures and trees are oriented to be seen from the south. The disposition of some motifs (principally geometrical ones), seems to be the products of the artist’s whims.

⁹ Only one more bird should be uncovered by clearing of the rest of the court; the other cancelled octagons will present vegetal and geometric elements, as supposed by their location.

¹⁰ Eagles are particularly frequent in this rocky region.

¹¹ On birds’ iconography, see Maguire 1987: 57-66. On the various kind of birds, Tammisto 1997; Fiema et al. 2001. About birds of prey, Hachlili 2009: 141-142.



eagle



Chukar-partridge



purple gallinule



Ducks



ibis (?)



parakeet, with rubans



guinea-fowl

This building date to the time of the Sanctuary's construction¹², shortly after the death of Saint Simeon in 459: the main construction period for the various buildings of the whole site of Qalaat Seman took place during the second half of the 5th century (470-90 AD), with a remarkable unity of style and technique. After the destruction of the western portico (collapse of the roof), the building was reoccupied during Umayyad and Abbasid periods. With fallen large blocks

Figure 8
Various birds of the courtyard
mosaic (M.-P. Raynaud).

¹² Capitals found in the Baths are very close from these found in the *martyrion* and some mouldings recall the decoration of the main gate.

aligned by way of walls, with a circulation surface (pavement) composed of flat-ten reused blocks¹³.

The birds are the main iconographic theme for the court pavement. The representation of birds is a favourite theme in mosaic history. We will make a fast review of the various types of such subject and conclude with the originalities of the Qalaat Seman pavement and its place in the mosaic evolution in near East.

Images of birds, fishes or any animal are related to the will for describing the sensible world, either in pagan or Christian context. We observe such representations since the Hellenistic period, in separate *emblema* or filling compartments. Viktor Daszewski (Daszewski 2005: 1143-1152) showed how in Egypt the drawing of birds was done in the continuity with the Pharaonic styles of painting, with different forms, one juxtaposing realistic images, and the other more imaginary like in Nilotic scenes. The theme became soon traditional, probably linked to the taste of “savants” from Alexandria for zoological observations: animal species were imported from distant countries and acclimated to the royal gardens. This fashion could have overspread in the Mediterranean from there (Guimier-Sorbets 2005: 567-577).

Since then, the tradition for depicting birds never disappeared, even when fashion privileged other subjects in the mosaic. One similarity in birds’ or fishes’ representations in mosaics is the special attention to anatomic details. In the contrary, images of quadrupeds are often less worried about realistic exactitude and naturalistic attitude: it is enough if the spectator can identify them.

We shall not deal here of birds playing a secondary role in a scene or pattern (part of a landscape, a chase, a mythological or symbolic scene or a border). I shall limit myself to the pavements whose main subject is bird. They can take the form of a “tableau”, gathering various species into a frame, on a free open ground. They also can belong to a scene around a central element (vase, basket, fountain, fruit or tree)¹⁴. Birds can populate acanthus or vine scrolls¹⁵, among other figural representation, or be spread among a “jonchée” (spray of flowers)¹⁶. The declination of various natural volatiles offers more or less developed forms: in most examples, birds are just present to ornament few compartments, simply for a decorative purpose. They are generally surrounded by various objects (fruits, baskets, vases, trees, cages) other animals (principally fishes, but also quadrupeds) and human figures¹⁷.

Qalaat Seman’s example is obviously of a different kind: birds, and deliberately only birds, fill the multiple compartments of a vast geometric pattern. Their role is perhaps to provide a review of bird species, which belongs to an iconographical cycle.

This exclusive representation of birds in a geometric pattern, without other components is relatively rare: among them we can cite the mosaics of Kom el-dick (Egypt, Hellenistic period), Italica (Spain), Delphi or Hypati (Greece), Byllis

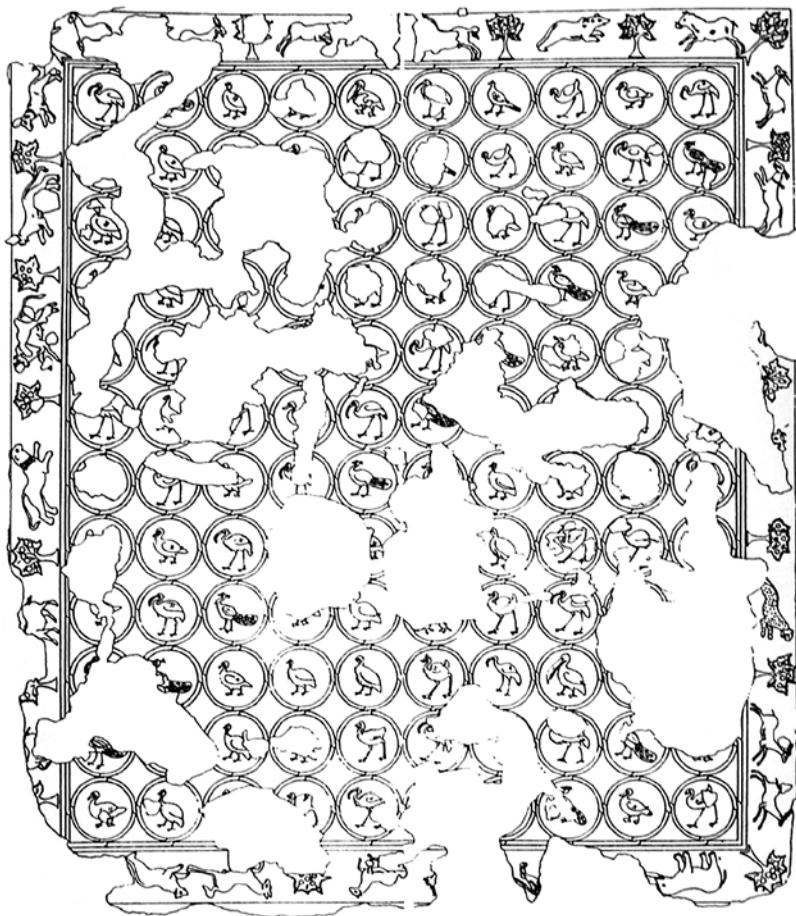
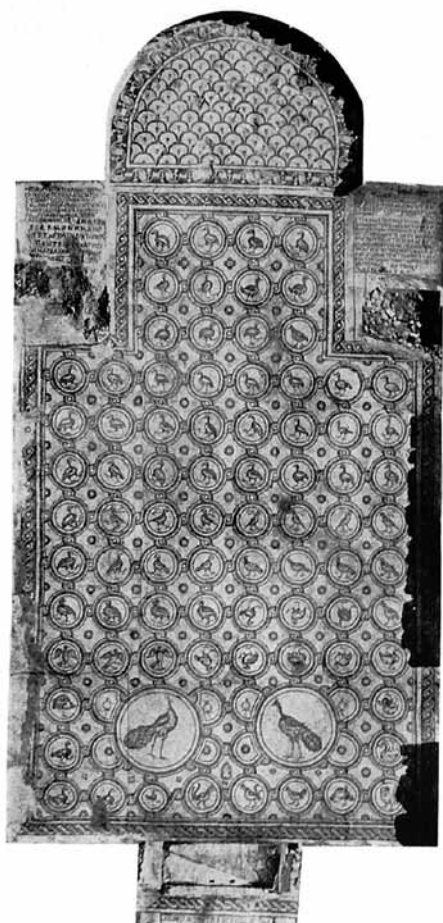
13 The presence of more than 160 huge blocks above the mosaic delayed the clearing of the pavement in 2010, but it brought precious information on reoccupation phases (habitation and pen). The eastern portico and the northeast corner of the court, covered by two meters of rubble and stones, should be excavated during a next campaign.

14 We have multiple examples of such images, particularly frequent in Antioch mosaics.

15 We have many examples in Near East, mostly after the beginning of the 6th century AD, like Qabr Hiram Church and Khan Khalde (Lebanon), Be’er Shem’a and Jerusalem Armenian Church (Israel), Ain el Bad (Syria).

16 Like in the vault of the Mausoleum of Constantia, in Rome (Italy).

17 For example in the Church of Petra (Jordan).



(Albania, basilica A), Zahrani (Lebanon) or Rayân (Syria). The best examples of such a cycle can be found on two later mosaics of ancient Palestine (Figure 9); the first is at Beth She'an (Monastery, Israel), with 82 birds in a composition of interlaced circles, organized in lines dating to the first half of the 6th century; the second is in a Byzantine villa of Caesarea Maritima (Israel), where it is possible to see 120 medallions of a similar pattern (dating to the end of 6th century) (Hachlili 2009, 269).

Do these juxtaposed images illustrate zoological lists? Are they presented in a scientific purpose? P. Donceel-Voûte called it a “portraits gallery” with an encyclopaedic concern. She cites an attested scientific literature on the subject, such as zoological corpuses (bestiaries)¹⁸. Another interpretation of the accumulation of birds' images could be the presentation of an ideal aviary, collecting various species: it is a habit known to be well established in Late Antiquity. The rigorous description of each anatomic detail witnesses the taste for catalogues, the ensemble intending to serve as a “leçon de choses”. Birds are meaning because they form a group, not on an individual basis, except when one of them is specially emphasize by an artifice. Such enumeration can also be interpreted as representation of a perfect world, particularly in a Christian context, but in such an example, birds are usually among other kinds of animals and vegetation.

18 Donceel-Voute 1988. She cites an illustrated Treaty of zoology, the manuscript of Vienna *Vindob. Med.Gr.1*, from the beginning of the 6th century (around 516) dedicated to princess Juliana Anicia: it contains the herbarium of Dioscoride, a text about plants virtues, the two Treaties of Nicander (wild animals and Alexipharmaka), a Treaty on the fishes by Oppien and the *Ornithiaca* of Dionysios on birds, well illustrated (p. 476, note 4 and 5).

Figure 9
a: mosaic of Beth She'an Monastery (Israel); b: villa in Caesarea Maritima (Israel) (from Hachlili 2009, fig. XI-7 and XII-14).

Figure 10
Cages, in Qalaat Seaman and
other examples in Near East
mosaics (ph. MP Raynaud and
from Hachlili 2009, pl. VI-13).



But perhaps, the role of the birds of Qalaat Seman Baths was only to entertain the bathers before they entered in the baths themselves. The cold and heated rooms are very exiguous, and we can suppose that in a case of a crowd, they had to wait before using the pools.

The special position of birds one beside another in the mosaic of Qalaat Seman does not seem significant. Here nothing is done to give a particular importance to any figure. There are not real rows of similar individual in Qalaat Seman¹⁹.

We saw that different species were described here: aquatic and wading species, domestic fowls, passerines, and decorative tame parakeets. Many of these never lived in the barren countries that surround the site. This observation proves that the repertory of this mosaic was codified and had little to do with a representation of the local environment. If the birds of this mosaic are realistic, we observe that this naturalism is restricted by deliberate adoption of a neutral ground, with no evocation of any floor or immediate environment. Trees and plants in separate compartments assume this role.

¹⁹ We observed nevertheless that in the west part of the mosaic, the disposition of figures tends to an order (north-south line of parakeets and cages around a duck, line of partridges and vine bushes, line of ducks, and line with two guinea-fowls); but the eastern part do not present any regularity or alignment.

The three cages constitute an interesting element²⁰, whether frequent in the Near East mosaics (Figure 10). Their presence diminishes the zoological purpose that the pavement otherwise would serve: more narrative, they recall how prized hunting occupations were, both for alimentary reasons and to satisfy a taste for capture and collection of wild animals. Here the cages are open and empty. They belong to the cycle of bird entertainment or are linked to the vocabulary of Xenia. Cages are the unique figural motifs other than birds; there are, in the mosaic of Qalaat Seman, no vases or basket, fountains or basin.

This pavement is not easy to align in the main decorative trends in Near East. It belongs to the end of the 5th century (contemporaneous to the sanctuary, as revealed by many details). The overall unitary conception of the decoration of the courtyard is typical of the 5th and 6th centuries in near East, far from the previous taste for compartmentalizing space into rich juxtaposed carpets dear to the Hellenistic tradition. This illustrates the deep change of organization that followed (particularly in N Syria) the disastrous earthquake of 458²¹. This period of active re-building establishes new fashions, with an obvious booming of animal repertory. However, in Qalaat Seman the choice of a rigid geometric pattern does not heed to the contemporaneous new fashions:

- no free landscape of juxtaposed animals on a neutral ground, that is very common in Syria after 460.
- no covering peopled vine which flourished in Near East a little later, from the beginning of the 6th century.
- no complicated geometric interlaced pattern that were so prized, particularly during the first half of the 5th century in Syria.
- no “semis” of flowers or buds.
- and no symbolic scenes, so common, even in a pagan context.
- the rainbow style, falling out of favour during this period, is relegated to the intercolumniation carpets and a few secondary peripheral motifs (chessboards, target like rosettes), sign of some conservatism in the end of the 5th century when this style was almost abandoned..

The mosaics of the baths of Qalaat Seman are not representative of the new evolution of the pavements in Near East at the end of 5th century: rather, they present a conservative character in the overall structure of the pavement. We recall that one of the originalities of the whole architectural ensemble of Qalaat Seman site, is the fact that it was realised in a very short time by a group of accomplished architects and workshops working together. This team was very likely summoned from outside Syria, in order to create the prestigious pilgrimage centre, which resulted in important religious and economical repercussions. The recent research points to a team coming from Constantinople. If so, we could imagine that the mosaicists were also coming from abroad²². This hypothesis is re-enforced by the fact that we find poor significant comparisons with local pavements, from mosaic’s centres such as Hama, Antioch or Apamea.

The result in the mosaic of the baths is a successful balance between the rigidity of the frame and the grace and charm of the lively birds. We hope that other mosaics will soon be discovered on the site, to enlarge our knowledge of this particular production.

20 For the iconography of cages see Grabar 1966; Donceel-Voûte 1988: 387 note 3, 482; Hachlili 2009: 140-141.

21 On the evolution of mosaics in Syria: Balty 1984; Balty 1995; Balty 1989, Donceel-Voûte 1988.

22 But either we did not find yet in Constantinople close examples to this mosaic.

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