The Early Christian Mosaics of Cyprus

by Demetrios Michaelides

The spectacular Roman mosaics that have been discovered throughout Cyprus during the past 25 years have overshadowed the later, Christian mosaics of the island. Christian mosaics, in fact, are being found just as frequently, in secular as well as religious buildings, and are actually more numerous. Moreover, in spite of the fact that they are mainly geometric and generally without representations of the human figure, they are equally important.¹

Figural representations are virtually absent from the decoration of both secular and religious buildings of the early Christian period in Cyprus. The fifth-century mosaics of The First Bath of Achilles from the Villa of Theseus at Nea Paphos² (Daszewski 1972: 204–10, plate 37b, 1988: 72–75, figures 35 and 36; Michaelides 1987a: 44, number 50, plate XXXI, 1987b: 247, 1.7.f, plate LXI:5) and The Toilet of Venus from the baths of a house at Alassa

This mosaic from the Complex of Eustolios is unusual in that it shows a human figure. It is the bust of Ktisis, who personifies the Foundation or the Building Power, and belonged to a family of similar personifications, such as Power, Manliness and Renewal, that were popular in the fourth century. All photographs courtesy of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus.

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Below: A fragment of a panel from the nave of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa at Nea Paphos. In it can be seen a deer drinking water in a flowery meadow. Above is an inscription quoting Psalm 42:1. Above: Another mosaic decoration from the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa shows early geometric designs of the Christian era.
The only fully excavated secular building belonging to the early Christian period is the Complex of Eustolios at Kourion.

(Hadjisavvas in Karageorghis 1985: 952, figure 89; Michaelides 1987a: 45, number 51, plate XXXII, 1987b: 239, A.1, plate LX.4) are the only known secular mosaics of Cyprus that carry the old tradition of mythological representations beyond the late fourth century C.E. The other known mosaics feature living creatures, such as four-legged animals, birds and fish, as well as inanimate objects like baskets and kantharoi. With but a few notable exceptions, these symbols are secondary and mostly decorative, although some are imbued with strong religious symbolism. One such motif is represented by the pair of sandals depicted in the north aisle of the Basilica of Ayia Trias at Yialousa (Papageorghiou 1967: 4–9, Michaelides 1987a: 39–40, number 44, plate XXVIII). In Christian times this pagan symbol often decorated bath building, but also came to symbolize pilgrimage, both in this world and from this world to the next.

Floor Mosaics
The only fully excavated secular building belonging to the early Christian period is the Complex of Eustolios at Kourion (Rupp 1982; Michaelides 1987a: 40–42, numbers 45–47, plates XXVIII–XXIX). Its mosaic decoration, which is predominantly geometric and dates to the early fifth century C.E., has little to distinguish it from that of contemporary church buildings. Different species of fish and numerous birds (guinea-hen, dove, pheasant, magpie, partridge, duck, and others) are represented in the various designs. They are, however, of secondary significance even though some, or all, may have a symbolic meaning (Michaelides 1987a: 41, number 45, plate XXVIII). Several mosaic inscriptions in this building are of particular interest. One states that the building has girt itself with the venerated symbols of Christ, while another mentions Eustolios as the benefactor and apparently compares his return to his native Kourion with the visits to the city of its former patron, Apollo. Such inscriptions illustrate the perseverance of the pagan tradition as well as this crucial, albeit late, period of transition from the old beliefs to the new religion (Mitford 1971: numbers 201–06; see, also, Bagnall and Drew-Bear 1973: 238–43). As far as the rest of the decoration in this complex is concerned, the only unusual element is the representation of the bust of Ktisis, personifying the Foundation or the Building Power, which occupies the most prominent place in the frigidarium of the baths (Michaelides 1987a: 42, number 47, plate XXIX, 1987b: 241, E.2). It belongs to a large family of similar personifications, such as Power, Manliness, and Renewal, that became popular in the fourth century, when their symbolic meanings were backed by philosophical ideas. This is the only example of its type in Cyprus, but the genre is quite common in many parts of the Christian world, especially in the eastern Mediterranean and most notably at Antioch, where several personifications, including that of Ktisis, have been found, dating from the fourth to the sixth centuries C.E.3

Of the early mosaic floors decorating Cypriot churches, only those from the first phase of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa at Nea Paphos, dating to the fourth century and depicting Christian allegories, can be considered as figural representations. The human figure was rigorously avoided, however, probably because in the late fourth century, after the brief flowering of figural art during the reign of Constantine, the iconoclastic tendencies of the early Christian Church became more strongly manifest. Iconoclasts considered the placing of sacred images and the human figure on floors as blasphemous. This view eventually led to the Iconoclastic Controversies, which lasted from 726 to 843 C.E., and banished all figural works of art from the decoration of churches. The floor decoration of the nave of the fourth-century phase of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa included a series of figural panels, of which two have come to light (A. Papageorghiou in Karageorghis 1976: 47, 1977: 776–79, figure 114; Michaelides 1987a: 34–5, numbers 36 and 37, plate XVI, 1988: 92–3). Both are fragmentary, but their messages cannot be missed. One represents a deer drinking water in a flowery meadow. Above it is a Greek inscription quoting the first verse of Psalm 42: “As the hart [male red deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God,” which makes the symbolic meaning of the scene quite clear. The remnants of the adjacent panel show a ram and a vine laden with bunches of grapes while an inscription from John 15:1, “I am the true vine” explains the allegorical meaning of the panel. A second inscription tells us that the mosaic was made as a result of a vow of Hesychios, an otherwise unknown donor. This is one of many such inscriptions from the early Christian buildings of Cyprus which remain as yet poorly explored source of important information on the makers and the commissioners.
Some of the early Christian mosaics of Cyprus were probably destroyed while many buildings were redecorated.

of such mosaics, as well as on the buildings they decorate.4

The remaining decoration of the fourth century phase of the basilica is geometric, as is that of the later phases. An examination of the patterns used during these different periods serves to illustrate how geometric decoration, from a rather reserved and somewhat heavy start in the fourth century, had developed into a light but rich and exuberant style by the sixth century. This development is illustrated by the pattern consisting of intertwining cables, guilloches, or other such linear motifs that form a regular succession of large circles and curvilinear octagons separated from each other by smaller circles. The design has a long history, in Cyprus it is found in the House of Dionysos at Nea Paphos, dating from the late second or early third century C.E. Here the version is quite elaborate, with all the compartments (large and small circles and curvilinear octagons) occupied a variety of geometric fillers and objects, mainly household utensils [Michaelides 1987a: 18, number 13, plate VI, 1988: 139, figure 60, Daszewski and Michaelides 1988: 30–1, figure 18]. The design gradually became tighter and the secondary circles so small that they left no room for decorative fillers. In the fourth-century phase of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa, the pattern was made plainer in all respects: traced by simple cables, filled with very stylized motifs, and rendered with a very limited variety of colors [Megaw 1976a: 11, plate VI, Michaelides 1988: 139, figures 13 and 19]. A much more closely knit version, without elaborate fillers, is found in the mosaics of the fifth/sixth-century phase of the building under the Basilica of Soloi [Tran Tam Tinh 1985: 16, figure 68; Michaelides 1988, figure 61]. The fifth-century example from the Episcopal Basilica at Kourion [Michaelides 1988: figure 62], meanwhile, with inserts that are much reduced in variety and size, has the lightness and intricacy that are characteristic of this and other similar interface designs of the sixth century. It is also very similar to an example in the baptistery of the Church of Zahra in Lebanon [Chehab 1958, 1959: plate LII]. The best example of the very widespread, evolved form of this design can be seen in two floors from Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Pefia, a site on the southwest coast of Cyprus. One is in the nave, and the other in the baptistery (Michaelides 1988: figures 63 and 64). Of particular interest is the fact that this last example is practically identical to a similarly dated pavement from the House of the Phoenix at Antioch (Levi 1947: plate CXXXV).

This precise motif is not found in the sixth-century phase of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa, but other patterns are found here that belong to the same family. One of these consists of interlacing cables forming a network of circles and diamonds separated by curvilinear octagons [Megaw 1976a: 17, figure 30; Michaelides 1987a: 47, number 54, plate XXXIII, 1988: figure 23]. An even more complicated interlace pattern that belongs to this characteristically sixth-century group is seen in the baptistery of Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Pefia [Megaw 1976a: 16–17, figure 19, Michaelides 1987a: 50, number 59, plate XXXVI, 1988: figure 67]. It consists of a network of squares linked with each other and interlocked with distorted, cross-like curvilinear motifs, a complex design that finds a close parallel in the Church of Ghine in Lebanon [Chehab, 1958, 1959: plate Cl.2]. In fact, the closest parallels to the Roman and early Christian mosaics of Cyprus are found in countries along the eastern Mediterranean coast, especially in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. These connections naturally evolved as a result of political and administrative factors, as well as the geographical proximity of the island to the eastern Mediterranean coast. It is surprising, however, that the closest parallels come from the area around Antioch, [modern-day Antakya in Turkey], a city whose church was opposed by the Church of Cyprus throughout the early Christian period. The long fight of the Church of Cyprus against the Church of Antioch’s claim of supremacy came to an end only in 488 C.E., when the Byzantine emperor Zenon confirmed the complete and absolute independence of the Church of Cyprus.

With regard to figural decoration, the two fourth-century panels from the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa are unique among the early Christian mosaics of Cyprus. Others must have existed but have not yet been excavated or do not survive. Some were ravaged during the Iconoclastic period, while others were destroyed during the rebuilding or redecoration of many of these buildings in the fifth and sixth centuries. Re-decoration was often necessitated by earthquakes but must have also been dictated by changes in fashion. For example, with the greater availability of highly prized marble in the sixth century, several earlier mosaic floors, especially those decorating important parts of a building, were covered up by new marble pavements. These
Another sixth century example was found in the Basilica of Chryso-
politissa. The pattern is not the same, but it is similar to that found at Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Peyia.

These mosaics were found in Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Peyia and date to the sixth century. By then, geometric design had evolved almost into an art form, as these beautiful examples attest. Left: This one was found in the Baptistery, while the other example below shows an even more complicated interlace pattern.
were made either of large, plain slabs, or of differently colored marbles cut in different shapes and fitted together so as to form complex geometric (and sometimes figural) designs. This is a technique known as *opus sectile*. This can be observed in the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa, where the fourth-century allegorical panels in the nave were covered in the sixth century by *opus sectile* floors.

Nothing similar to the figural decoration in the allegorical panels from the basilica of Chrysopolitissa can be seen in the following period. In the sixth century, however, there was, to a certain extent, a revival of the *emblema* type of composition and a subtle return to the figured representations of earlier times (Kitzinger 1965: 349–51). This can best be seen at Basilica A of Ayios Yeoryios of Peyia. In this now remote part of the island, in an as yet unexplored township, the name of which is still unknown, three basilicas were excavated more than 30 years ago. Each building was lavishly decorated with bases, columns, and capitals, all made of Proconnesian marble and all worked in the area around Constantinople and exported ready-made to Cyprus. The excavation at Basilica A has, moreover, brought to light chancel screen panels, or offering tables, reliquaries, and an ambo [a kind of pulpit] also made of Proconnesian marble.5 Parts of the floor decoration of this basilica and its baptistery have been preserved and they constitute one of the most important series of mosaics on the island. These mosaics, together with the marble furniture of all three buildings, make these basilicas one of the best representatives of the sixth century metropolitan style in Cyprus—a phenomenon clearly reflecting on the building program initiated by the great Byzantine emperor Justinian. In the surviving decoration there is a rich variety of complex geometric designs, while three different parts of the basilica include representations of birds, fish, and other animals. The first is in the atrium where, in the center of a series of rather banal and somewhat colorless geometric designs, there are four rectangular panels, arranged two by two, each representing a rampant animal facing the center. At the top there is a wild boar and a bear, below a lion and bull (Michailides 1987a: 48–49, number 56, plate XXXIV, 1988: 94–95, figure 9). It is not clear if these animals symbolize something, but similar representations—iconographically and stylistically—have
Many buildings of this era had lavish mosaic decorations on their walls, but these rarely survived to modern times.

been found in several sites in the eastern Mediterranean, including the fifth/sixth-century Basilica of Leontios at Awza‘i in Lebanon (Chehab 1958, 1959: 127, plate LXXXVII). The same idea is also seen in the floor decoration of the sixth-century Basilicas of Masticharis and Skandarion on the island of Cos (Pelekanides and Atzaka 1974: plates 40 and 45).

The meager remains of a series of animal representations have been found in the nave of Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Peya. The decoration originally consisted of a rainbow cable forming 40 small panels, each containing an animal and a tree. Only a few of these were found intact, and most have since disappeared [Michaëlides 1987a: 49, number 57, plate XXV, 1988: 95–97, figure 10]. Those that remain have rather crude depictions of deer and lions that contrast with the much finer quality of the remaining decoration. A. H. S. Megaw has suggested [1976a: 15] that these animal panels must be part of an allegory of the Peaceable Kingdom of Isaiah 11:6–7: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”

A similar idea lies behind the decoration of the floor of the bema, the part of the church containing the altar [Michaëlides 1987a: 49, number 58, plate XXXV, 1988: 97–98, figure 11]. Here, a stylized floret trellis is filled with a great variety of small creatures, such as birds and fish, as well as fruit, baskets, and small geometric motifs. Larger animals or objects were avoided probably because of their size. This decorative scheme, which started in pagan times, eventually came to symbolize the Christian paradise—a very apt theme for this part of the basilica. The representation of sea creatures is not uncommon, but the excessively large number and variety found here must be attributed to the fact that this is the basilica of a harbor town. It is clearly for the same reason that the basilica also included a marble ambo bearing an inscription, which states that it was put up “for the blessing of sailors” (Megaw 1974: 72, figure 18, 1976a: 16). A similar floor design is found in the cemetery basilica near Ayia Varvara at Amathous [Michaëlides 1988: 81, n.3, 129], but the best examples of this kind of decoration are found along the eastern Mediterranean coast. One particularly splendid specimen is the fifth-century mosaic of the Striding Lion at Antioch (Levi 1947: plate LXXIVa).

Wall Mosaics

A small transept basilical adjoining the baptistery of Basilica A of Ayios Yeoryios has preserved the only known Cypriot example of figural wall opus sectile. Very little of it survived, but enough remains to show that the decoration included representations of flowers, jewelled crosses, and standing figures of Saints [Megaw 1976a: 20, figure 34; see also Asemakopoulou-Atzaka 1980: 106, 147, plate 533cd; Michaëlides 1987b: 240, B.1, plate LXI:3].

Most of the buildings I have mentioned, as well as many others where mosaic floors have been found, must have had an even more lavish mosaic decoration on their walls. This kind of decoration was more costly and much richer because it was made with more expensive materials, including differently colored glass tesserae and tesserae of gold, silver, mother-of-pearl, and other materials. Moreover, free as it was from the restrictions imposed on floor decoration, wall decoration had much more complex and important figural representations. Rarely have such mosaics survived into modern times for two primary reasons: because the walls they decorated have long since collapsed and because such decorations were systematically destroyed during the Iconoclastic era. The only substantial survivors from this period are found in areas that for some reason were kept out of the controversies or were too far away from their center, Constantinople. One large group is found in Ravenna and Rome, Italy. These mosaics have been touched up and restored to such a degree, however, that it is difficult to visualize their original aspect. For examples of untampered Byzantine wall of the pre-Iconoclastic period, which reflect the style of the metropolis, we must turn to the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai and to a few churches in Cyprus. These escaped destruction because the Arab presence on the island, from the seventh to the tenth century, meant that the decrees of the Byzantine emperors were not effective there.

Until 1974, Cyprus was in the unique position of having four early Christian buildings in which part of the original wall decoration in mosaic had been preserved. Two of these, however, have since been either partly or totally destroyed. The less well-preserved are now exhibited at the Kourion Museum.
The mosaics of Lythranksomi and Kiti are among the most important monuments of Cyprus.


The best preserved of the early Christian wall mosaics of Cyprus were the sixth-century conches and intrados of the apses of the Churches of Panayia Kanakaria at Lythranksomi [Papageorgiou 1966: 17–19, figure 9, Sacopoulo 1975; Megaw and Hawkins 1977; Megaw 1985: 174–84, figures 2–5, Michaelides 1987a: 54–55, numbers 67 and 68, plates XXV and XL, 1987b: 242, H.1.a and b] and Panayia Angeloktis at Kiti [Papageorgiou 1966: 17, figure 8, Megaw 1985: 184–92, figures 6–11, Michaelides 1987a: 55–56, numbers 69 and 70, plates XXVI and XLI, 1987b: 240, C.1]. The villages of Livadhia and Lythranksomi are in northern Cyprus in an area that since 1974 has been occupied by the Turkish Army. Unfortunately, the decoration of these buildings, as well as that of many other churches in this part of the island, has been systematically damaged or destroyed. The mosaics of Panayia tis Kyrras, for example, have disappeared completely, and those of Panayia Kanakaria have been looted and, to a great extent, destroyed [R. Cormack in Van der Werff 1989: 28]. Mosaic fragments from the church at Lythranksomi were the focus of a recent legal battle in Indianapolis, Indiana, where the fragments were put up for sale after they had been carelessly removed from the walls of the church and illegally exported, first to Europe and then to the United States. The court ruled that the purchase of these mosaics had been illegal and ordered their return to the Church of Cyprus.

The mosaics of Lythranksomi and Kiti are among the most important monuments of Cyprus, their significance going well beyond the shores of the island. Not only are such works extremely rare, they also preserve unique iconographic features. The mosaics in the conch [the domed roof of the semicircular apse] of Panayia Kanakaria showed the enthroned Virgin Mary with Christ on her knees inside a mandorla [a shining aureole]. Two archangels stood on either side in a landscape of palms and other trees against a golden background. The intrados [interior curve of an arch] was decorated with 13 medallions set in a vegetal band. The central medallion has not survived, but it probably depicted a cross, while the six medallions on either side depicted the Twelve Apostles. The rather adult-looking Christ is very unusual, but the most important element is the aureole around the Virgin, a unique feature in Byzantine art. It may represent the “woman clothed with the sun” described in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelations, in which case the apostles would be the “crown of twelve stars” that witnessed Christ and the Virgin Mary. This is by no means certain, however, and the true meaning of this mosaic is much debated.

The best preserved of all these apse mosaics is the one decorating the Church of Panayia Angeloktis at Kiti. The Virgin Mary is depicted in the conch, standing on a stool which is depicted in such a way as to make her appear as if standing in mid-air. She is of the well-known Hodegetria type, and is holding Christ in her left hand. The archangels stand beside her against a gold background. Michael is on her right and Gabriel on her left. They are dressed as philosophers and have wings made of peacock’s feathers—a symbol of immortality. Each holds a scepter and offers a globe surmounted by a cross—an emblem of world dominion—to Christ and the Virgin. The composition is completed by a representation of the Fountain of Life on the intrados, where pairs of ducks, beribboned parrots [a Persian symbol of terrestrial power], and deer are shown drinking from a series of fountains. This is yet another allegorical representation of Psalm 42, already encountered in the fourth-century decoration of the nave of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa at Nea Paphos. One especially important and rare feature of this mosaic is the fact that the Virgin Mary is named HAGHIA MARIA [Saint Mary], a title conferred upon her after the Council of Nicaea of 431 C.E.

These wall mosaics are among the finest expressions of early Chris-

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This charging bear dates to the sixth century and was found in the atrium at Basilica A at Ayios Yeoryios of Peyia. The mosaic also had representations of a wild boar, lion and bull. The symbolization of these animals is unclear.

Christian art that have been found to date. Together with other examples of church decoration, such as the marble furniture and mosaic floors of the basilicas at Ayios Yeoryios of Peyia, they reflect the spirit of their time and, moreover, illustrate the administrative, religious, and cultural orientation of Cyprus toward Constantinople in the sixth century C.E. It was as a result of the provincial reorganization by the emperor Justinian, in fact, that the governor of Cyprus ceased to function under the Comes orientis (Count of the Orient) at Antioch and came under the direct control of the central government of Constantinople, thus breaking the age-long link between Cyprus and Antioch.

These works also illustrate the end of a long mosaic tradition on Cyprus, which started in the late fourth century B.C.E. and, after spanning more than 900 years, came to an abrupt end with the Arab invasions of the early seventh century C.E.

Notes


2 Nea Paphos is the site of modern-day Kato Paphos usually referred to as Paphos. Palaepaphos (old Paphos) is the site of modern-day Kouklia about 15 kilometers (about 9 miles) southeast of Paphos.

3 The personification of Ktisis is found in the Constantinian Villa, the House of Ge and the Seasons, the House of the Sea Goddess, and the House of Ktisis (Levi 1947: 255, plates LXIc, LXXXII, CXXXII, and LXXVa).

4 Some discussion of the inscriptions in the early Christian mosaics of Cyprus can be found in J.-P. Caillet (1983).

5 On the architecture and decoration of these buildings see, primarily, A. H. S. Megaw (1960: 348, plates XXXIX and XL,
This mosaic dates to the second quarter of the sixth century and was found at Panayia Kanakaria in Lythramkomi.

Kitzinger, E. 1965 Stylistic Developments in pavement mosaics in the Greek East from the Age of Constantine to the Age of Justinian. 1974–76.


1987a Cypriot Mosaics (Cyprus Department of Antiquities, Picture Book No. 7). Nicosa: Department of Antiquities of Cyprus.


