

Book review

FROM WILDERNESS TO PARADISE: A SIXTH-CENTURY MOSAIC PAVEMENT AT QASR EL-LEBIA IN CYRENAICA, LIBYA

By Jane Chick. *Archaeopress Archaeology, Oxford, 2024. ISBN 9781803277301 (paperback), 9781803277318 (eBook), pp. 168, 166 colour figures. Price: £35.00 (paperback), Open Access PDF eBook*

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As the title of this book makes clear, its subject is the so-called ‘Large Mosaic Pavement’ of Qasr el-Lebia in ancient Cyrenaica, present-day eastern Libya, one of the most important surviving examples of late antique floor mosaics in North Africa. The pavement consists of 50 panels in total, now displayed on a wall in the site’s West Church, but originally part of a larger floor belonging to the East Church. The highly diverse subject matter of the panels has caused confusion among researchers and, coupled with the decontextualised state of the separate panels that ‘now hang like pictures in a gallery’ ⁽¹⁾, has hindered an overarching interpretation of the monument. In this publication, Jane Chick reunites all the panels and places them back into their architectural context. The great merit of this work is its emphasis on the idea that the ‘Large Mosaic Pavement’ of Qasr el-Lebia is not merely a random collection of images with no symbolic meaning or coherent design. Rather, it is a carefully planned and thoughtfully composed visual document of great importance to its creators and users.

The book is structured in six chapters of varying lengths, accompanied by a bibliography and an index. It is richly illustrated with 166 high-quality colour figures (not least the carefully composed Figure 2, a digital re-composition of the panels in their original arrangement), making it a visually lavish monograph, even if some repetition occurs among the figures. The subject of late antique mosaics theoretically demands such detailed illustration, but it is rare to encounter such a comprehensive collection of fine photographs showcasing the examples and parallels discussed. Notably, many of the photographs were taken by the author herself, whose extensive travels both within Cyrenaica and to other regions around the Mediterranean demonstrate a profound knowledge of late antique mosaics and, more broadly, late antique visual culture, which is evident throughout the volume.

Chapters 1 to 3 primarily serve as a foundation for the discussion. Chapter 1 introduces the mosaic and its setting, reviewing all evidence for a sixth-century dating. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Cyrenaica, one of the least researched and understood regions of Late Antiquity. It also discusses the known remains of the Qasr el-Lebia settlement, which are largely limited to its two churches. Chapter 3 explores how imagery was produced, used, and interpreted during Late Antiquity. While the chapter touches on important and expansive topics, it is too brief to fully address them, leading to some generalisations. For instance, more nuance regarding the audiences of literary and visual production in Late Antiquity, regional variations (if any), and differences among societal groups and genders would have enriched the discussion. Similarly, the treatment of spolia presents the scholarly debate in a somewhat oversimplified manner. That said, the chapter offers important insights into how late antique audiences, ‘accustomed to adopting strategies of elucidation and abstraction’, engaged with imagery, where ‘meaning often involved a complex syntax rather than a straightforward linear development’ (32). Chick convincingly highlights that late antique populations were familiar with fragmented information and could interpret these fragments far more easily and creatively than

we are inclined to today. Additionally, the chapter examines the compositional scheme of the Qasr el-Lebia mosaic and compares it with other contemporary mosaics across the Empire, preparing the reader to appreciate the multifaceted interconnectedness of the mosaic's panels.

Chapter 4, which at over 70 pages constitutes the bulk of the book, examines each of the panels – and, when applicable, related panels – in turn. Each iconographic motif is explored in depth, with references to known parallels from within the province and, in most cases, from other provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire. With a few exceptions, such as the personification of *Kosmesis* (55–57), the motifs are indeed part of a broader visual culture. Given the pavement's rich diversity of motifs and themes, this chapter also serves as an introduction to late antique mosaics more generally, making it valuable for both specialists and non-specialists alike.

These pages are filled with interesting observations, including, but not limited to, the discussion of the depiction of personifications closely resembling elite women (60–69), comments on the *mappa*, which is suggested here to have been an attribute of donorship (66), an analysis of what made it acceptable for Christians to depict the Rivers of Paradise on the floor to be trampled upon (78–81), and a discussion of the reception of nudity in Late Antiquity, particularly in late antique ecclesiastical settings (82–86). Indeed, considering that completely naked figures had become rather rare in these later centuries, it is difficult to explain why there is a concentration of four naked river gods, with genitalia clearly displayed, alongside a naked female personification clustered together within this ecclesiastical context. This is the first instance in which Chick's hypothesis regarding the purpose of the mosaic as a whole appears, when she alludes to the undressing of catechumens during the baptismal ritual.

The chapter also provides several examples of how the interpretation of panels changes and, at times, is only possible when seen in combination with adjoining panels. For instance, the meaning of *Ananeosis* is enriched by its combination with a depiction of a city and the personifications of *Kosmesis* and *Ktisis* above her (69–75); an eagle with prey takes on deeper meaning when seen in combination with the nude personification of the Castalian Spring (86–94). Yet, meaning does not always become clear when looking only at immediately adjoining panels. For example, although the panels depicting a musician, a leopard, and a satyr are contextualised with examples from elsewhere and can be argued to have some relation to one another (94–98), their significance in the Qasr el-Lebia pavement only becomes clear when the author eventually places them back into the overall composition in the following chapter (119). The same is true for the architectural representations of the Pharos (complete with bronze statuary), a pedimented building, a walled settlement, and the depiction of Polis Nea Theodorias (98–106).

Chapter 4 thus lays the foundation for the synthesising discussion of the Qasr el-Lebia mosaic's iconography in Chapter 5. The author here adopts a phenomenological approach, which is highly productive and is convincingly presented as the key to unlocking the meaning of the mosaic and its separate panels. This mosaic (and no doubt many mosaics from this and other periods) simply does not make sense without interaction with the protagonists, the actual human beings, walking over it (123). The argument could have been further strengthened by adding detail about the bodily movements of a visitor travelling over the visual programme, for instance, by engaging with the actual sizes of the individual panels and combining them with physical steps forward. Also, if the pavement covers the entire floor of the space and all elements contribute to the whole, what does this imply for the further outfitting of the room? This, however, does not detract from the fact that Chapter 5 offers an engaging description of the physical and spiritual journey undertaken by users of the space.

Chapter 6 then returns to the architectural setting of the mosaic and presents the hypothesis that it can be best understood as a space connected to the baptismal ritual. Taking into account the position of the space in relation to the nave and the probable location of a baptistery to the east of the church, the author suggests that the space with the large pavement functioned as a *consignatorium* – the transitional space where the newly baptised were confirmed by the bishop before joining the community gathered in the body of the church.

Although the author is very careful in making this suggestion and points out all remaining uncertainties, this hypothesis is entirely convincing.

This monograph has numerous strengths, chief among them its clear and accessible language. The author provides straightforward descriptions of the distinct motifs, scenes, and their compositions, as well as their architectural context. The argument is meticulously structured throughout, with interpretations that are always carefully measured. The author consistently assumes, both implicitly and explicitly, that the creators and layers of the mosaic were fully aware of their intentions. The arrangement of the panels, with their thoughtfully chosen motifs in specific locations, is seen as deliberate, avoiding the simplistic explanation that artists made errors to account for elements that remain difficult to understand. As already mentioned, the book also excels in its rich contextualisation of the mosaic pavement and its individual motifs, complemented by abundant illustrations.

The study would have benefitted from the inclusion of more technical details. While the analysis of the mosaics' iconography is comprehensive, basic facts such as the number of tesserae per square centimetre, the materials used, and their potential origins are not provided. Admittedly, given the museum context of the mosaics, this would have been challenging, but hypotheses regarding the origins of materials, work crews, and sources of inspiration would have been valuable. Similarly, the size of the mosaic and the individual panels is relegated to a footnote (Chapter 1, note 3), even though such information is integral to a phenomenological approach. Finally, there are a few typographical errors throughout the volume (for instance: note 25 on p. 13 is missing a space, and 'the' is repeated twice on p. 49). That being said, these minor critiques do not detract from the overall quality of the work. This is an excellent, thoughtful, and authoritative analysis of a fascinating sixth-century document.