

DAVID AARON



Byzantine Mosaic Panel

Byzantine Empire

Circa Early 5th Century A.D., possibly Antioch or Apamene

Stone

H:79cm W:200cm

A rectangular Byzantine mosaic, comprising six lines of Greek text in black and red tesserae set within a blue rectangular frame against a white background. The second line down is in red, the rest in black.

The inscription translates as: 'In the year 727 [probably 415/416 A.D.] the most sacred church was paved with mosaics, under the most venerable bishop Alexander, under John the periodeutes, Antiochos the priest, Stephen the deacon, Benjamin the cantor, and Thalassios the steward of Cyril'. The text terminates with a stylised palm frond in black.

The art of the mosaic flourished throughout the Byzantine Empire (330-1453), building on Hellenistic and Roman practices with significant technical advances to transform the mosaic into a powerful form of personal and religious expression. The Byzantines expanded the range of materials that could be used as tesserae, adding gold leaf and precious stones to their more ornate designs. Before the tesserae were laid, the foundation was prepared in multiple layers. The final layer was formed of a fine mix of crushed lime and brick powder, like cement. While this surface was still wet, artists traced the outlines of the design into the surface, before carefully positioning the tesserae into the final image.

Two main types of mosaic survive from this period: wall mosaics in churches and palaces, made of glass tesserae against gold leaf, and floor mosaics crafted from stone. The vast majority of extant mosaics are of religious nature, and feature similar subjects to painted icons and manuscript miniatures from the time. These were never placed on the floor, as it was unacceptable to walk upon images of sacred figures. Floor mosaics often featured geometrical patterns and animals, as well as scenes of hunting and venatio. Based on the materials used for this aniconic panel, it is likely it was placed in the floor of the church it was dedicated to, as a record of the other mosaics installed around the walls.

Literature:

Sheila McNally, *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin*, LVIII (1969), p. 5, no. 1.

Pierre Canivet, 'Nouvelles Inscriptions Grecques Chrétiennes à Hūarte d'Apamène (Syrie)', *Travaux et Mémoires*, 7 (1979), Centre de Recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, p. 352, note 4.

Pauline Donceel-Voûte, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban. Décor, archéologie et liturgie*, Publications d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Art de l'Université Catholique de Louvain, 69 (1988), p. 467, fig. 446.

H. W. Pleket and R. S. Stroud (eds.), *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, vol. 40 (Amsterdam, 1990), p. 550, no. 1773.

Jean Bingen, 'Sur quelques Mosaïques Inscrites d'Apamène', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 95 (1993), p. 123.

Denis Feissel, 'L'épigraphie des mosaïques d'églises en Syrie et au Liban', *Antiquité tardive*, 2 (1994), p. 288.

Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais, 'Mosaïques inscrites paléochrétiennes de la Syrie du Nord-Ouest', *Syria*, 73:1/4 (1996), p. 105, Inscription no. 2 ter.

Ancient Sculpture and Works of Art, Sotheby's, London, 7 December 2021, Lot 29