Jane Chick: From Wilderness to Paradise. A Sixth-Century Mosaic Pavement at Qasr el-Lebia in Cyrenaica, Libya. Oxford: Archaeopress 2024. X, 155 p., 166 ill. £ 35.00. ISBN: 978-1-80327-730-1.

This short book sets out to analyse the meaning(s) of a mosaic pavement found in a Christian cultic complex dated to the sixth century, in Qasr el-Lebia (Roman Cyrenaica, current Libya). Despite its narrow focus, the book is a fascinating read, as both the mosaic in itself and its treatment by the author offer yet another confirmation of the wonderful complexity of Christian art produced during the reign of Emperor Justinian I (r. 527–565).

Measuring ca. 10 x 5 metres, the pavement contains fifty separate scenes, arranged in ten rows of five square panels. Organised symmetrically around the central row of ten panels, the scenes make for a strange, heterogeneous combination even for this period of iconographic creativity. This diversity and the seemingly blatant 'unchristian' character of some of the scenes led most of the past scholars who analysed the mosaic to believe that the selection was not made following a coherent concept. Jane Chick takes the opposite stance, arguing instead for a deliberate design and pointing to the visual culture of the time as characterised by both diversity – e.g., *varietas*/ποικιλία – and a passion for creating artworks that afforded several readings. This was particularly true of the art produced under Justinian when, as pointed out by Henry Maguire, "some works of art exhibited a kaleidoscopic shifting and overlapping of meanings, and in particular a use of ambiguous symbols to reconcile religious and political ideas."[1] This captures perfectly the character of the mosaic at Qasr el-Lebia, which combines references to urban centres, political activities, and nature in ways that amount to a religious discourse.

After introducing the mosaic and its past interpretations (pp. 1–19), Chick presents the cultic complex in relation to other Christian spaces in late antique Cyrenaica (pp. 20–29). Although concise, the text is thorough and benefits from a copious visual documentation. With 166 figures over 136 pages, most of them in colour, the book provides the reader with the necessary support to understand the mosaic, its location, the individual scenes, and the multiple analogies Chick uses to build her argumentation.

1 H. Maguire: Earth and Ocean. The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art. University Park, PA/London 1987 (Monographs on the Fine Arts 43), p. 83.

The introductory chapters are followed by a systematic analysis of the panels realised by topic, while also dwelling on each individual scene. Chick marshals an impressive range of parallels from across the late Roman/early Byzantine world to reconstruct the potential meaning of the scenes. Following the arrangement of the scenes, from east to west, aquatic scenes are discussed first (divided into Nilotic and Oceanic, "Ocean and Nile", pp. 40–53). Personifications ("Personifications – *Kosmesis*, *Ktisis* and *Ananeosis*", pp. 53–75) and "The Rivers of Paradise" (pp. 75–86) are discussed next, followed by more singular images, such as a representation of the water nymph Kastalia ("Kastalia and the Eagle", pp. 86–95) – who was associated with the cult of Apollo and prophecy – and is depicted here in a lascivious manner that is hard to reconcile with the Christian nature of the space. Panels showing various buildings/cities and animals make up the other categories that afford rich interpretations, given also the important number of extant analogies and various potential readings of the scenes. Chick addresses them methodically, pointing out each time which symbolism seems to match best the overall programme of the pavement. In a short chapter, Chick proposes a coherent reading of the mosaic, which she claims is revealed as one follows the path of the late antique viewer, from the north-east corner towards the west ("Overall Programme", pp. 116–125). Her interpretation, based on the common meaning ascribed to these scenes in the culture of the time and on their specific combination at Qasr el-Lebia, points toward a catechetical function of the pavement. Drawing on ultimately indecisive details, Chick proposes that the space with the mosaic, which previous scholars saw as an extension of the church's nave, was a separate room used as a *consignatorium*; i.e., the space where neophytes were taken after undergoing baptism. To support her thesis, in the final chapter Chick points out the baptismal dimension of the scenes and overall programme, drawing again on extensive analogies ("Architectural Setting and Hypotheses", pp. 126–136). While the baptismal quality of the scenes and overall programme is credible, the size, location, and rich decoration of the space seem to point to a more varied use than just the post-baptismal confirmation.

At the church of Santa Sabina in Rome (ca. 430), the nave's doors are decorated with panels representing Old and New Testamentary miracles, as well as several other scenes, with particular focus on water. The selection of scenes and the presence of an adjacent baptistery indicates that the narthex and its decoration targeted several categories of audience: passers-by (since

the narthex also functioned as an urban passageway), non-baptised or penitent Christians relegated to the narthex during the central part of the Eucharistic liturgy, catechumens receiving instructions prior to baptism, and neophytes being taught the meaning and implications of the initiation. The several potential meanings of the images and the overall programme allowed for interpretations to be elaborated for each of these categories. A similar dynamic can be imagined for the large space at Qasr el-Lebia, with the post-baptismal function and interpretation offered by Chick being one of several and enabling further analyses of possible readings.

Chick's interpretative exercise thus takes the reader on a fascinating journey, as she pieces together potential meanings in order to reconstruct the mosaic's experiencing by newly baptised Christians, under the guidance of local clerics who would have revealed to them the Christian symbolism of the scenes and of the overall programme. While the range of meanings available to us is limited by the extant sources, making it thus impossible to ascertain all potential interpretations, Chick's effort is worthwhile since late antique viewers, too, would only have been able to grasp part of the meanings. The book thus has the great merit of drawing attention to the varied interpretations of Justinianic art by members of the lay audience; a dimension in need of further attention, since most scholarship to date focused on understanding this art through the prism of the erudite but small intelligentsia of the time. Thus, the book will hopefully serve as a model for future analyses of late antique art, to shed further light on the polysemy that represented one of its main features.

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