MOSAIC PAVEMENTS ADORNING BUILDINGS IN
THE HELLENISTIC–EARLY ROMAN PERIOD

CHAPTER ONE

The Land of Israel in the Second Temple period was first under Hellenistic dominion, and later under Roman. Herod and his dynasty ruled Judaea, with sporadic rule by Roman procurators between 37 BCE and 70 CE. Herod the Great, the son of Antipater, an Edomite, succeeded the last of the Hasmonaean kings and High Priests, Mattathias Antigonus, becoming king in 37 BCE with the support of the Romans. He was able to extend his rule over most of the Land of Israel and even beyond; he built extensively in other countries as well as at home. The Jews greatly disliked Herod because of his foreign origin, and his being an usurper who had replaced the legitimate Hasmonaean kings. Educated in Rome and admiring Graeco-Roman culture, Herod began his building projects accordingly: luxurious palaces, as well as towns with institutions such as theatres, hippodromes and gymnasia were constructed. The Herodian period is remarkable for its extensive building and its ornamental art. Herod’s dynasty continued to exert power in Judaea and several other provinces. Agrippa I ruled in 44-41 CE, and Agrippa II from 50 to ca. 100 CE.

Hellenistic-Roman culture greatly influenced the upper classes (of all the Near Eastern countries), as attested to by the predominance of Hellenistic-Roman architecture and by the use of Greek language and institutions, which affected many aspects of everyday life. However, resistance to the intrusive culture was strong, because of the force and vitality of the Jewish religion which controlled the community’s activities. Judaism also conceptually dominated its decorative art so that neither figurative nor symbolic representations were depicted.

Second Temple period mosaic art is characterized by a mixture of local traditions and Hellenistic-Roman features and is purely decorative (Hachlili 1988: 65-67). The various ornamental devices and the repertoire of motifs were part of the general stream of Roman art, especially its provincial and eastern tributaries. Decoration in Herodian architecture attests to the influence of Roman art. Hellenistic tradition, moreover, survived into the later Herodian period. A locally developed style is encountered in mosaic art as well as funerary art, on tomb façades, on ossuaries and on sarcophagi. The style of Jewish art followed the basic Oriental elements such as the ‘endless’ and ‘all-over’ patterns; symmetrical stylization and horor vacui.

Decoration of buildings, palaces, houses and bathhouses of the Second Temple period was mainly by wall paintings, stucco-plaster mouldings, and ornamental floor pavements. The decorative elements, motifs, and designs are characterized by aniconic designs, a total lack of animate motifs, and symbolic emblems. This stems from the reluctance of all Jews, including the ruling families such as that of Herod and his dynasty, based on the biblical prohibition of ‘no graven image’ (Ex. 20: 4; Deut. 4: 16; 27: 15), to decorate any building or tomb with religious or iconic symbols.

A. Floor Pavements

Mosaics were first used to decorate floors in the late 2nd century BCE–1st century CE (Hellenistic-early Roman periods, Second Temple period) in palaces, houses, and bath buildings. Two types of floor pavements are found in such buildings: mosaic pavements and floors paved in opus sectile.

Mosaic pavements were most frequently used in bathhouse rooms and vestibules, where water flowed.

Mosaics

Mosaics decorated the floors of Second Temple period structures, in Herodian palaces as well as
in the private homes of the upper class Jerusalemites.1

The earliest mosaic pavement (mid-1st century BCE) was discovered in the main room (a sort of tepidarium) of the Hasmonaean bathhouse at Jericho (Netzer 2001: 39, fig. 39); it consists of a crudely-fashioned and simple mosaic floor with geometric design in black and red on a white ground (pl. I.2a). The mosaic was framed by a red monochrome band; a central panel contained a chessboard lozenge framed by a red band with another frame of serrated sawtooth pattern with chessboard squares at the corners. Two side panels had a design of alternating black, red, and white squares.

Mosaic Pavements Decorating Herodian Palaces

Masada

Several mosaic pavements were found at Masada, among them three polychrome mosaic paved rooms at the Western Palace (Yadin 1966: 84,124-5, 129; Foerster 1995: 140-158, figs. 252-259, pls. XII-XV).

The first is an anteroom (Oecus 456) leading to a reception hall, paved with a half destroyed mosaic floor consisting of a reddish tessarae ground with polychrome central panel (pl. 1a); the inner panel on a black ground contains a square with a circle rendered with intertwining six-petals rosettes; the corner spaces are decorated with palmettes. This square was enclosed by a schematic floral scroll border band containing alternating vine leaves, pomegranates, and bunches of grapes (or ivy leaves). Thirteen additional geometric frames on a white ground surround the inner panel.

The second mosaic is located in the bathhouse corridor of the Western Palace (room 449) and portrays a square medallion of black tessarae circling an eight-petalled heart shaped rosette enclosed within a square (pl. I. 1b). Four geometric pattern frames on a white ground surround the inner square panel.

The third pavement, in bathroom 447, is a simply designed mosaic depicting two frames, the outer red, the inner black, on a white ground (fig. I-1) (Foerster 1995: pl. XV: 15a).

In the Northern Palace and bathhouse, four simple black and white mosaics of black hexagons cover the upper terrace floor (fig. I-2).

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1 Some mosaic fragments, mostly tesserae were discovered at Tel Anafa (Upper Galilee) and a mosaic of black and white tesserae was found in the bathhouse of the Stucco House dated to the late 2nd century BCE (Weinberg 1971: 97-98; Herbert 1994: 64-65, pls. 38,40).