Nilotic scenes are a recurrent theme on mosaic pavements, wall paintings, wall and floor mosaics, reliefs and miscellaneous objects (Schneider 1937: 66-78; Whitehouse 1979 provides a comprehensive catalogue on the subject; Baltý 1984; Roussin 1985: 299-316; Meyboom 1995: 8-19,41-42, 83; Versluys 2002 with up-to-date bibliography).

Here the term ‘Nilotic’ applies to Nilotic landscapes which contain a limited number of elements, including the personification of the Nile, architecture of buildings or a city, a boat, beasts, birds, vegetation, and people. The tradition of Nilotic scenes dates to the Hellenistic period, and the earliest examples of ancient Nilotica are the 2nd- and 1st-century BCE mosaics at Palestrina and Casa del Fauno; the 2nd-century BCE Nile mosaic of Palestrina portrays in detail Aethiopia and Egypt during the inundation of the Nile. The Byzantine artists continued to use and adopt Classical and Hellenistic imagery, among them Nilotic episodes, sometimes with a much broader variety of elements from the Nilotic repertoire.

In this chapter the elements in Nilotic scenes are assembled, and the different designs and theories ascribed to the main issues, such as the form, time, function, and significance of the theme (Hachlili 1998), are assessed.

A. The Pavements

The Nilotic scenes portrayed on the mosaic field or on the border appear on several pavements found in Israel: in a Jewish house, in churches, and in pagan structures. All are dated to the 5th-6th centuries except for the later mosaic part in the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris, dated to the late 3rd or early 4th century CE (Hachlili 1998: 106-107).1

Beth-She’an, the House of Leontis. A Jewish house-synagogue complex dated to the mid-5th or early 6th century at Beth-She’an depicts in hall 3 a mosaic field of three panels (pls. V.1, XII.1; fig. V-1). The upper panel shows two scenes from the Odyssey, representing the Homeric tales of Odysseus and the sirens and Odysseus and the Scylla. The central panel is occupied by a Greek inscription within a circle, surrounded by birds, with a five-armed menorah. The lower panel contains a Nilotic scene rendering the personification of the river Nile, a towered building inscribed ‘Alexandria’ in Greek, a Nilometer, a scene of animal combat, typical Nilotic plants and birds, and a sailing boat with a figure and vessels (Zori 1966: 131-132; Whitehouse 1979: 139-140, M45; Adler 2003: 40-80).

Tabgha, the Church of the Multiplying of the Loaves and Fishes. The mosaic pavements of the north and south transepts (fig. V-2a,b) consist of two similar compositions depicting elements of Nilotic scenes: typical Nilotic flora and fauna, a city building with gate and towers, a tower, a Nilometer, and a pavilion rendered on a white background. The pavement is dated to the second half of the 5th century CE (Schneider 1937: 58-63, plan 3, tables A, B; Kitzinger 1976: 54; Whitehouse 1979: 140-141, M46).

Haditha chapel. Only the border of the mosaic has survived, showing a Nilotic scene (pl. V.2b) consisting of a man fighting an animal, a city representation inscribed ἙΓΥΠΤΟϹ ‘Egypt’ in the corner of the pavement; a sailing boat containing two figures and vessels, as well as typical Nilotic plants, fish and birds; the mosaic is dated to the second half of the 6th century (Avi-Yonah 1972; Whitehouse 1979: 138-139, M44).

Sepphoris, the Nile Festival Building. This public secular structure contains a mosaic pavement in Room 6 depicting a Nile landscape and celebration other date to the 5th and 6th centuries, when the genre was relatively popular, while only a few examples from other regions originate in this period.

1 Versluys (2002: 245) concludes that the mosaic pavements with Nilotic scenes in the Near Eastern Roman provinces show a different chronological distribution (diagram 6). Only one example dates to the 4th century; all the
scene on its upper section, and a hunting scene on the lowest part (Weiss and Talgam 2002: 61-73, 83-85).

The mosaic field is partially divided by water and structures into three parts (pl. V.3): two registers display the Nile festival celebration and the third renders hunting scenes. The upper part shows the personification of Egypt, as a partly naked woman leaning with her right arm on a fruit basket and holding a cornucopia in her left (pl. VIII.1a). On the left the Nile river, Nilus, reclines on a hippopotamus with the water streaming from his mouth; several putti, one marking the level of the floodwater on a Nilometer, is rendered in the centre, surrounded by Nilotic flora and fauna; fishes, birds, and a crocodile are scattered around in the river water. The flowing Nile water divides this upper register from the central part in which the celebration of the flood is represented; a youth and two horsemen, one male and Semasia the lead rider, bring the news to the city of Alexandria. The horsemen advance from a column surmounted by a statue towards a gate flanked by two towers and Pharos, the lighthouse, with a flame, representing ‘Alexandria’ as indicated by the Greek inscription. The arrival of Semasia indicates that the flood has reached the mark. The procession celebrates the festival of the coming of the inundation of the Nile, which will vouchsafe a successful crop (Mayboom 1995: 71-75, 147-149; see also Dvorjetski & Segal 1995: 100-103, for Talmudic literature on the Nile festival).

The third register contains another stream of Nile water flowing diagonally through the area to the right of the column and the lowest section, which portrays hunting scenes of animals and their prey. Although the iconography is divided between the Nile celebration and hunting scenes the mosaic maintains the effect of a harmonious and integrated composition.

From the archaeological evidence the Nile Festival Building was constructed in the early 5th century CE (Netzer and Weiss 1992a, 1992b; 1995: 166-171; Weiss and Talgam 2002: 60), however, ‘the stylistic analysis of the mosaics is ambiguous in this regard’ (Weiss and Talgam 2002: 85). On stylistic grounds Merrony (2003: 55) suggests the 6th century, as does Bowersock (2004: 766) on the grounds of his reading of inscription 1 (Di Segni 2002, 2005b), found at the West entrance to the building; according to this, he argues, the house belonged to the daughter of the governor Procopius (517/8, governor of Palaestina Secunda).