The ‘inhabited scroll’ became one of the most widespread motifs during the 6th century CE, and appeared throughout the Levant; it was especially popular on mosaic floor carpets of synagogues and churches, but also decorated floors of villas, baths, and funerary chambers. The motif is also referred to as ‘peopled scroll’ and ‘rinceau’. It originated in Hellenistic and Roman art, and developed in the mosaic art of North Africa (Avi-Yonah 1936: 19-20; Toynbee and Ward Perkins 1950; Maguire 1987: 60), apparently from the Hellenistic garland with vine leaves and grapes (Levi 1947, I: 490-517; Dauphin 1987: 183-212; Merrony 1998: 446-448).

The inhabited scroll is designed as a symmetrical and geometrically patterned and rigid carpet composition covering the entire floor evenly (Kitzinger 1965b: 24). Vine branches and trellises issue from an amphora or an acanthus leaf, or from four amphorae or acanthus leaves, one in each corner. They form regular, almost geometrically circular, medallions. These are occupied by animals, birds and objects that contribute to the harmonious and integrated impression and sense of uniformity created by these carpets. The scrolls are inhabited by images framed within their curls consisting of animals, birds, various objects, and occasionally human figures in genre scenes, such as hunting, and rural activities (see the extensive research of the inhabited scroll theme by Dauphin 1976, 1978a, b, 1980, 1987, 1994: 10-13).

The inhabited vine scroll design was commonly used on religious and secular structures in the Levant, especially during the 6th century, on church and synagogue pavements; it is almost absent from villas (Merrony 1998: 443-4).

The popularity of the motif is explained by Biebel (1938: 302) ‘by its variable form capable of indefinite extension in a vertical or horizontal direction according to the space to be filled, and at the same time the definite rhythm and compactness which it achieves by the repetition of the circular medallions’ (see also Kitzinger 1976a: 70-71; 1977: 89; on the development of the inhabited scroll motif in border and field mosaics see Dauphin 1987: 183-185; Lists 2, 4, 6, 10, 12, 13).

Biebel (1938: 302-3) divided this motif into two types: the medallions issuing from one central point, an amphora or an acanthus leaf, or spreading out from four amphorae or acanthus leaves, one in each corner (also Toynbee and Ward-Perkins 1950). Lavin (1963: 218-222) further defined these two groups, showing the vertical nature of Biebel’s first group and the diagonal nature of his second (see also Dauphin 1976b, 1987: 188-189; Merrony 1998). Levi (1947: 504-516) describes the progression and ‘the complete degeneration of the vegetable motif into a purely ornamental element’. Dauphin (1987: 184-185) contends that in Arabia and Palaeaestina a 6th-century innovation consisted of a border of inhabited acanthus scrolls enclosing an inhabited vine field on the same mosaic pavement (see Table VI-1,2). The overall motif of the inhabited scrolls on mosaic pavements was treated as a unit, with the accent on the point of departure of the scrolls—again, by a vase or acanthus leaf flanked by birds or animals or by vases or acanthus leaves stemming from four points. Dauphin (1987: 191) summed up thus: ‘the pavement has become a “carpet” dominated by a repetitive, geometricized pattern, thus a “carpet design”’. Merrony (1998: 463) argues that ‘in Roman villae, the vine was associated with vintage scenes, whilst on Early Byzantine Christian pavements, the vine was essentially used as a compositional device’.

A. The Compositions

The principal design of the inhabited vine scrolls mosaic floors fields is an all-over pattern of a conservative and stereotype space composition, which divides the floor into formalized, geometricized circular medallions of vine-trellis and can be assembled into five distinctive groups according to

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1 In this study ‘inhabited scroll’ is preferred to ‘peopled scroll’, coined by Toynbee and Ward-Perkins 1950; see also Dauphine 1978a: 400 and n.4.
the compositions, schemes and content (Hachlili 1987).

The five compositions are divided into groups I-III, in which the vine scrolls issue from one point, from a vase rendered at the base of the design. In group IV the vine scrolls issue from one point, as in groups I-III, or lack a point of issue. In group V the vine scrolls issue from four vases or acanthus leaves, each positioned in a corner of the composition (see Dauphin 1976a: 114-115 for her classified types of scroll work; 1976b for the method of laying the inhabited scrolls mosaics; 1987: 188-189, Lists 12,13).

*Group I* (pl. VI.1; figs. VI-1-4; Table VI-1) consists of mosaics executed in long narrow naves (Hachlili 1987: 46, composition II). To this group belong the following mosaic floors:

The southernmost aisle of the Gaza-Maiumas synagogue dated to 507/8 by inscription, consists of an inhabited vine scroll carpet with three columns and at least eleven rows of medallions in the surviving composition (pl. VI.1; fig. VI-1). The design is composed of alternating rows of animals and birds, sometimes with animal chase scenes, also in the central column (Avi-Yonah 1966; 1975a: 377-378; Ovadiah 1969).

Most of the medallions of the Gaza-Maiumas synagogue contain beasts and birds; because of the destroyed base the listing of rows begins at the top of the composition. The arrangement is of three animals in the medallions of each row, connected horizontally, especially the animal chase scenes in rows 2, 4, and 8. In the other rows a bird or a beast in the centre is flanked symmetrically by two animals facing each other in an antithetic composition. In row 9, in contrast to other inhabited scroll designs, the peacocks flank an inscription (commemorating the donors Menachem and Yeshua, sons of Jesse) instead of a vase; likewise row 5, in which a bird cage flanked by a pair of partridges is depicted in the central medallion. The central axial column shows no objects except the bird-cage and an inscription; the destroyed central medallions in rows 10 and 11 show remains of birds’ feet.

Naturalistic and impressionistic renditions characterize the Gaza pavement, and are also apparent in the spirited animals, which burst through the bounds of the medallions. They include a lioness and her cub (row 8), a pair of giraffes flanking a zebra (row 6), a tigress, and a