



ACROSS THE  
MEDITERRANEAN –  
ALONG THE NILE

VOLUME 2

STUDIES IN EGYPTOLOGY, NUBIOLOGY AND LATE ANTIQUITY

DEDICATED TO LÁSZLÓ TÖRÖK

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 75<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

*Edited by*

*Tamás A. Bács, Ádám Bollók and Tivadar Vida*



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*László Török*  
(photo: Csaba Villányi and Zalán Péter Salát)

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Tamás A. Bács, Ádám Bollók and Tivadar Vida

Institute of Archaeology, Research Centre for the Humanities,  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

and

Museum of Fine Arts

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DATE PALMS, DEER/GAZELLES AND BIRDS IN ANCIENT  
MESOPOTAMIA AND EARLY BYZANTINE SYRIA.  
A CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHIC SCHEME AND ITS SOURCES  
IN THE ANCIENT ORIENT<sup>1</sup>

Gábor Kalla

*Two artworks of two different genres made almost two thousand years apart from each other serve as a point of departure for this study. One is a floor mosaic made in early Byzantine Syria in the sixth century A.D., and found in the monastery of Tall Bī'a, the other is an incised ivory pyxis from the Middle Assyrian period, dated to the thirteenth century B.C. Date palms, one or more hoofed creatures and birds in a heraldic posture are focal elements on both. The comparison of the two designs and the analysis of the symbolic role of individual motifs in Mesopotamian and early Christian-Byzantine culture indicate that the similarities between their iconographic schemes are not mere chance. Although direct influences can certainly be rejected, we may assume a persistent visual tradition which included also the design on the pyxis; furthermore, despite the different overall meaning, the similarly strong symbolic content of certain elements in Christianity made them suitable for reinterpretation and thus they probably had an invigorating influence on Byzantine art.*

**Keywords:** Middle Assyrian; ivory; early Christian; Byzantine; mosaic; symbolism; date palm; deer; gazelle; rooster; dove; garden; Paradise

Two artworks of two different genres made almost two thousand years apart from each other serve as a point of departure for this study. One is a monumental work of art made in early Byzantine Syria in the sixth century A.D. (Figs 1–2), the other is a minor artwork from the Middle Assyrian period, dated to the thirteenth century B.C. (Fig. 3). This comparison may seem astounding, and I am fully aware of the methodological pitfalls of drawing parallels based merely on formal attributes. Similar symbolic elements can have different meanings in two different cultural milieus. At the same time, it is almost a *cliché* to point out the roots of Christian symbolism in Classical Antiquity, which itself has its foundations in the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup> The mechanisms by which this Near Eastern background exercised its influence often elude us. Although in most cases, we cannot trace the connections that appear from time to time like an underground stream gushing to the surface, iconographic motifs such as the ones discussed here can shed some light on these relationships. Neither can we reject the possibility that these surprising similarities are not genetic, but are rooted in common mental patterns.

Any methodologically sound comparative analysis can only begin with a discussion of this motif in its two original cultural contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> This topic is hardly unfamiliar to the Jubilant because I presented an earlier version of this article at the meeting of the Society for Classical Antiquity Studies on March 18, 2013. I am grateful to Ádám Bollók for his help in making many of the cited works accessible to me.

<sup>2</sup> An excellent overview can be found in László Török's monograph (TÖRÖK 2005), which was a great source of inspiration for the present study.



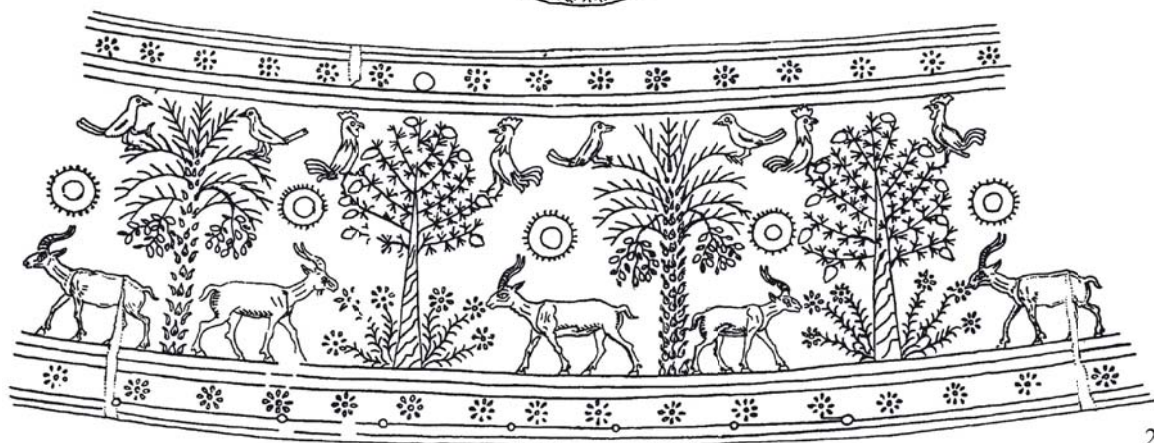
*Fig. 1. Funeral building east of the church of the monastery, Tall Bī'a, Syria (author's photo)*



*Fig. 2. Floor mosaic of the funeral building in Tall Bī'a, earlier sixth century A.D. (author's photo)*



1



2

Fig. 3. Middle Assyrian ivory pyxis from Tomb 45, Assur, thirteenth century B.C. (Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin) (1. author's photo; 2. after HALLER 1954)

## THE THIRD MOSAIC OF THE TALL BĪ'A MONASTERY

The first point of departure is an Early Byzantine floor mosaic found among the ruins of a Syrian Orthodox monastery at Tall Bī'a, part of a building east of the chapel, which I excavated as a member of a German team in 1993 (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The original, smaller edifice may have been built of mudbricks,<sup>4</sup> which was eventually demolished and replaced with a larger construction of fired bricks. The building was attached to the church at this time or later.<sup>5</sup> In its original, free-standing form, the edifice could have served as a mausoleum, a function suggested by the building's location in the cemetery area<sup>6</sup> and the fact that this mosaic could hardly have been part of the monastery's inner area for iconographic reasons.<sup>7</sup>

The almost intact, 4 m by 3.1 m large mosaic floor is of exceptional quality (Figs 1–2). A scene depicting a fallow deer grazing under a date palm occupies the entire middle field showing a meadow depicted with stylised flowers<sup>8</sup> and a deer munching berries from a shrub. Two huge clusters of dates hang from the tree; underneath them are doves standing in front of each other, picking fruits off two shrubs.

A broad, boldly vivid polychrome border encloses the middle field,<sup>9</sup> flanked by two bands with different motifs on the longer sides.<sup>10</sup>

A pair of antithetic doves appears above the date palm, with a central crossed floret and a Greek name, *Symeonis*, between them. If the building is interpreted as a mausoleum, this could be the name of the deceased; otherwise, it perhaps refers to a patron.

In order to shade the main motifs – the deer and the palm tree – the mosaicist used several colours to create lively forms. Tesserae of eight different colours were used for the palm leaves alone. The date clusters cast shadows, as does the palm tree's distinctive twisted trunk.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive description of the monastery complex, see KALLA 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to examine the foundations of the original building, and thus we do not know its exact dimensions. The building's interior dimensions were probably identical with the size of the mosaic.

<sup>5</sup> The second building with a trapezoidal plan (three sides are 5 m long, the fourth is 5.5 m long) did not incorporate the entire mosaic for some reason, but did not damage it. Its walls made of mortar and square fired bricks were later quarried away down to the foundations. We only found the imprint of the lowest course of bricks some 30 cm under the level of the mosaic. Fortunately, the plundering only damaged the edges of the mosaic carpet. In the second building, a 1.2 m by 1.2 m podium of fired brick was erected on the mosaic's eastern side. It was plastered with lime and decorated with simple painted linear patterns, as its surviving lower part testifies. This second building was probably a mausoleum too, cf. KALLA 1999, 104–141.

<sup>6</sup> Rows of mausoleums had probably stood in the south-eastern part of the complex, on a clearly identifiable plateau. Immediately next to the building with the mosaic, we found a similar building; fragments of its painted walls were also brought to light. The foundations of another tomb were uncovered to their south.

<sup>7</sup> Mammals are also portrayed on the mosaic pavement, which were probably prohibited in rooms with liturgical functions (narthex, sanctuary), where the imagery was restricted to birds and fishes (KALLA 1991; KALLA 1999, 135–140). For the iconographic concepts of the Syrian Orthodox Church, cf. MUNDELL 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Dulière's type fl. 1: DULIÈRE 1974, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Swastika-meander of spaced single returned swastikas executed in a band of guilloches and a shaded band with a square in each space. Only on the two shorter sides are the squares replaced by rectangles. Almost all the squares are filled with different polychrome patterns: saltires, knots, different rainbow patterns, octagons, and central crossed florets (the description of the geometric patterns follows BALMELLE–PRUDHOMME–RAYNAUD 1985).

<sup>10</sup> The left side has a row of octagons with inscribed squares, the right side an ivy scroll.

The style of this magnificent work recalls the floor mosaic of the annex chamber of Basilica A in Rusāfa (Sergiopolis), similarly decorated with an animals-in-the-garden scene,<sup>11</sup> although the composition of the latter is more extensive, with significantly more creatures depicted.<sup>12</sup>

Although an exact date is not inscribed on the mosaic, its creation can be placed between 509 and 595 based on the monastery's architectural history, between its first and second building phase, both of which are dated by inscriptions,<sup>13</sup> although with closer stylistic ties to the first phase.<sup>14</sup>

### A MIDDLE ASSYRIAN PYXIS FROM ASSUR

The second example is a well-known, oft-cited small artefact, an ivory pyxis with a diameter of 6.4 cm, standing 8.4 cm tall, bearing an engraved scene on its side.<sup>15</sup> The scene depicts two date palms and two conifers framed by rosette rows (*Fig. 3*). Beside the pines are gazelles grazing on shrubs terminating in rosettes, in a symmetrical arrangement. Perched atop the trees are birds facing each other, presumably hens on the palms and roosters on the pines. The rayed disks appearing among the trees are generally believed to be depictions of the Sun.<sup>16</sup> This interpretation is dubious because there are four discs and because the lid of pyxis bears an identical disk with shrubs sprouting from it, resembling the main scene. The shrubs are again topped with rosettes, indicating a transcendent theme in the period's art.

The gazelles and birds, the rare jungle fowl in particular,<sup>17</sup> as well as the infinite row of the trees together depict a garden, perhaps a botanical garden populated with unusual, exotic plants and animals.

The context of the pyxis is again an important factor when interpreting the scene. The pyxis was found in a Middle Assyrian tomb by a German expedition led by Walter Andrae in 1908. The vaulted tomb was unearthed in an intact condition (Gruft 45 = Ass. 14630); it was the wealthiest of the 1100 burials excavated in the city.<sup>18</sup> Although the published grave plan displays the last two interments only, it was a family grave used over several generations, containing the skeletal remains of nine adults and one child. Andrae linked the hundreds of grave goods (jewellery, stone vessels, pins and combs, and the pyxis discussed here) to the last two deceased, although there is no unequivocal evidence to support this claim. These two skeletons were discarded without an anthropological examination; the excavators identified the individual on the left side as a male and the one on the right side as a female. The pyxis, probably used as a container for cosmetics, lay beside the latter individual (its wooden lower part had perished).

The tomb did not contain epigraphic relics; however, the written archives found in the house built above it had belonged to a high-ranking official, a certain Bābu-aha-iddina, suggesting that the tomb had most probably belonged to his family.<sup>19</sup> He was one of the most influential persons

<sup>11</sup> See ULBERT 1986, 134, Taf. 39; BRANDS 2002, Taf. 1, 3.1–2.

<sup>12</sup> My suggestion, originally raised by Thilo Ulbert, that both mosaics had been made in the same workshop (KALLA 1999, 141) was rejected as being unfounded by Gunnar Brands (BRANDS 2002). True enough, the finer details of the Rusāfa mosaic floor are of much better craftsmanship, but the quality of the Tall Bī'a mosaic is also exceptional. Only a very wealthy family could have afforded to hire skilled craftsmen for the project.

<sup>13</sup> See KREBERNIK 1991; KALLA 1999.

<sup>14</sup> The sizes (under 1 cm), the petrography and the colours of the tesserae are similar to mosaic 1, which can be associated with the first building phase, and they differ significantly from mosaic 2, which can be linked to the second building phase. The register under the fallow deer contains a reduced version of the floral semis filling the entire middle field of mosaic 1, a characteristic trait of the Syrian mosaic style at the end of the fifth century A.D. (BALTY 1984, 465–466). These arguments favour a date in the early sixth century A.D.

<sup>15</sup> ANDRAE 1954, 135–137; JAKOB-ROST 1992, 152; ARUZ 1995a; FELDMAN 2006, 24–26.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. ANDRAE 1954, 135.

<sup>17</sup> This pyxis bears the first known depiction of the rooster in this region: COLLON 1995, 70.

<sup>18</sup> ANDRAE 1954.

<sup>19</sup> PEDERSÉN 1992.

of the thirteenth century B.C., a chancellor (*sukkalmah*), who played a decisive role in the politics of the emerging Assyrian Empire. In view of the above, it seems likely that the family's personal belongings reflected the official symbolism of power. Although the pyxis represents the minor arts, its iconographic scheme could have mirrored reliefs, murals or some other genre of the *artes maiores*.<sup>20</sup>

#### PARALLEL ICONOGRAPHIC SCHEMES

The similarities between the iconographic schemes of the Byzantine mosaic and the Assyrian box are obvious: a hoofed animal is grazing on a bush under a date palm, the latter with symmetrically set birds above it. The differences are also apparent: there are two kinds of trees on the pyxis, the grazing creatures are arranged around the pines, not the palms, the hoofed animals are gazelles instead of deer, and the bird species are also different in the two compositions. Lastly, there is only one ruminant on the mosaic: the mosaicist chose to reduce<sup>21</sup> the antithetic composition,<sup>22</sup> perhaps because of a lack of space; nevertheless, the birds above the trees retained their symmetrical arrangement.

In the next sections, I shall compare the more important elements of the two depictions, with short overviews of their possible range of meanings in the ancient Western Asian and the early Christian cultural milieus.

##### *The date palm*

The date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) was of paramount economic value in ancient Mesopotamia, and its importance did not fade in the next millennia. It is an emblem of fertility: date fruits are highly nutritious, rich in vitamins and trace elements, its sugar content is above 50 percent in the dried state, hence it is a primary sweet in southern Mesopotamia.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from fertility, the symbolic value of the date palm comes from its physical properties. An average tree is 15 meters tall, but it can grow to an imposing height of 25 meters. The huge, fan-shaped leaves of the date palm create a micro-ecological niche, with some species living only in their shadow in order to prevent heat damage. The tree is a perfect start for building a garden: in southern Mesopotamia, a garden is equated with date orchards.<sup>24</sup>

Another important aspect of the plant is its vitality. It can thrive on relatively infertile soils, reaching an age of up to a hundred and, in some cases, even 150 years.<sup>25</sup> Its trunk is covered with cicatrices forming the characteristic twisted pattern, and an extremely flexible structure.

Similarly to humans, the date palm is a dioecious species with separate staminate (male) and pistillate (female) plants.<sup>26</sup> It produces good yields under an average annual temperature of

<sup>20</sup> Among the relatively modest examples of Middle Assyrian art, the artefacts from this tomb play a pivotal role: JAKOB-ROST 1992, 152–158; HARPER ET AL. 1995, 81–97; FELDMAN 2006. Joan Aruz (ARUZ 1995a) contends that the form of the pyxis and the garden motif betoken Egyptian influences. However, Marian H. Feldman's arguments for a Western Asian cultural koine is probably closer to the truth (FELDMAN 2006).

<sup>21</sup> One of the square fields (C2) on the mosaic pavement in the Cathedral of Cyrene has a plain version of the reduced scheme: only a deer and a date palm are depicted (ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM-WARD-PERKINS 1980, 101, Pl. 20.1).

<sup>22</sup> A similar, but complete composition is known from one of the chapels of the Church of Saint George, Mount Nebo (see below).

<sup>23</sup> VOLK 2003–2005; STRECK 2004.

<sup>24</sup> VOLK 2003–2005; FÖLDI 2012, 55–67.

<sup>25</sup> The exceptional germinating ability of date stones is exemplified by the story of the tree called Methuselah in Israel. Some of the date stones unearthed in the Masada fortress, which held out until the end in the Jewish War, were successfully germinated after forty years of storage. Eventually, after a few years, these seedlings were planted under the sky, and thus became symbols of rebirth in Israel. Cf. SALLON ET AL. 2008.

<sup>26</sup> FÖLDI 2012, 55–57.



21–23 °C, and for this reason, its economic cultivation is restricted to southern Iraq and Iran.<sup>27</sup> In northern Iraq and Syria-Palestine,<sup>28</sup> the tree is generally cultivated as an ornamental species offering shadow, hence there are more single-standing specimens. In this respect, the question emerges whether the symbolic value of dates can be derived from its economic importance or whether it was a Babylonian impact on the empire's fringes.

A more recent comprehensive study about the symbolic role of dates in Mesopotamian culture is still lacking.<sup>29</sup> this gap can hardly be filled by this study, and I shall only briefly address a few important questions.

The Akkadian poem, *The Date Palm and the Tamarisk*, is about the disputation between the two plants, each declaring its superiority: the date palm boasts that it provides shadow for the courtyard of the king's palace and that music is played in its shade.<sup>30</sup> The shadow is a synonym of protection in this cultural milieu.

Literary texts often refer to the date palm's resilience: no storms can break its trunk, even if it bends to the ground under the force of the wind, and neither can it be uprooted. In the narrative *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, the menacing strength of the mythical giant bull is expressed by his ability to break date palms. A passage in the *Maqlû*, a Mesopotamian incantation text, instructs patients to chant the following: "May the date palm that withstands all winds release me",<sup>31</sup> again possibly referring to the plant's magical powers. We know of a ritual that the king could only perform in the presence of a date palm, while other rituals made use of the tree's different parts such as offshoots and fronds that embodied growth and fertility in magical practices.<sup>32</sup>

The date palm appears in several contexts on representations that are sometimes difficult to decipher. It can refer to a narrow or a wide setting for a scene such as a garden or even a complete landscape. One intriguing example for the garden context can be seen on an ivory comb, which came to light together with the pyxis, suggesting that they had been part of the same set (*Fig. 4.1*).<sup>33</sup> The two sides of the comb are decorated with incised scenes portraying a procession of six priestess and musicians, all wearing tall polos, moving towards a figure (sadly preserved fragmentarily). They perform a rite under palm trees – one tree on standing on one side and two on the other betokening a garden. The single tree accentuates the offshoot sprouting from the stem, whose magical significance was mentioned above. Two figures hold bunches of dates in their hands, suggesting that the palm played some role during the ritual. The scenes are framed with rosettes, similarly as in the case of the pyxis.

The Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs are prominent examples of palm trees denoting landscapes – in these cases, they indicate that Babylon was the setting of the depicted events (*Fig. 4.2*).<sup>34</sup> Cylinder seals from this period also utilised them as markers of Babylon.<sup>35</sup>

Date palms could refer to specific persons as well. As the "King of the Trees", date palms embodied the person of the king. The palm tree is the symbol of kingship on Achaemenid cylinder

<sup>27</sup> Or in the more distant Egypt. There is an ongoing debate in scholarship whether there was any date fruit production in Assyria, but there is no conclusive evidence as yet: GIOVINO 2007, 91–102.

<sup>28</sup> With the exception of a few oases with special microclimates such as Palmyra in Syria and Jericho in Israel.

<sup>29</sup> A long outdated monograph (DANTHINE 1937) can still be used as a springboard. The *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* has an entry ("Dattel"), also written before the war, and a relatively new "Palme" entry. However, neither has an archaeological section and thus neither covers symbolism, although the latter does discuss the role of date palm parts in magical practices: VOLK 2003–2005, 289–230. BLACK–GREEN 1992 does not mention the date palm among the symbols.

<sup>30</sup> STRECK 2004, 255–256.

<sup>31</sup> STRECK 2004, 274.

<sup>32</sup> STRECK 2004, 272–273; VOLK 2003–2005, 289–290.

<sup>33</sup> ANDRAE 1954, 137–139; ARUZ 1995b; FELDMAN 2006, 27–29.

<sup>34</sup> On the palace reliefs, Mediterranean plants (grapes, figs, etc.) in a rugged landscape denote Israel, Judah or the West in general, while mountainous regions dotted with oaks refer to the North.

<sup>35</sup> COLLON 1995, 72–74.

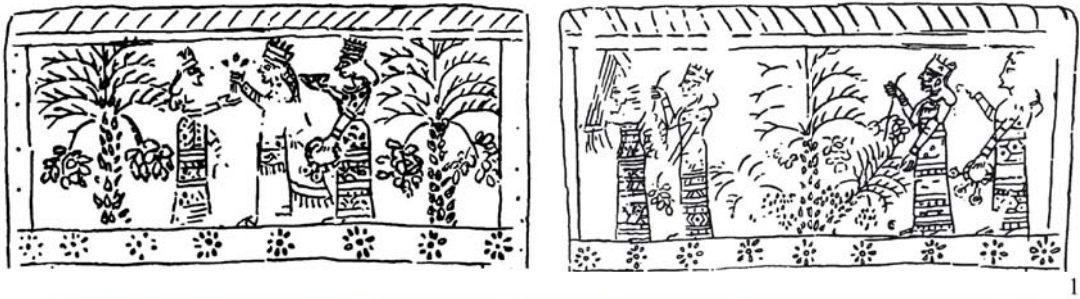


Fig. 4. 1. Middle Assyrian ivory comb from Tomb 45, Assur, thirteenth century B.C.; 2. Assyrian campaign in Babylonia. Relief from the Southwest Palace, Nineveh, seventh century B.C. (British Museum, London); 3. Royal hunt. Cylinder seal of Darius, sixth–fifth centuries B.C. (British Museum, London) (1. after HALLER 1954; 2. author's photo; 3. after DEHAYE ET AL. 1973)

seals, usually shown standing beside the actual ruler (*Fig. 4.3*).<sup>36</sup> Associating the plant with particular deities is a more difficult task. We know that a god of the Early Dynastic period called “Lord of the date palm tree” (dLugal-ġišimmar) was later identified with Nergal, the lord of the underworld,<sup>37</sup> but no depictions of this deity are currently known.

Date palms were complex religious symbols as well, as evidenced by their replicas made in metal at the gates of temples,<sup>38</sup> or by their depictions of moulded bricks on temple court façades.<sup>39</sup> The meaning of the palms in this context is obscure, but their location and a Susanian (Elam) example from the twelfth century B.C. imply an apotropaic function. In the latter case, the date palms are held by human-headed bulls (*kusarikku*) on the moulded brick reliefs of the façade (*Fig. 5.1*).<sup>40</sup> According to certain assumptions, these façades were intended to evoke the sacred gardens that surrounded the temples.<sup>41</sup>

Depictions of date palms in the arts appear during the third millennium B.C., predominantly on cylinder seals. Their representation, often together with various deities, is more common among the naturalistic scenes of the Akkadian period (twenty-fourth–twenty-third centuries B.C.) than during other periods (*Fig. 6*).<sup>42</sup> It is unclear whether they symbolised a god or a garden, although the latter seems more probable.

Although there is a close connection between the date palm and the stylised tree/Assyrian Sacred Tree,<sup>43</sup> this issue will not be discussed here, in view of the many ramifications of the latter.<sup>44</sup> What must be noted is that this artificial, composite tree had been erected as a standard in temples and that it encapsulated the entire life cycle of the date palm into a single image.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it had become a symbol of fruitful trees in general, and hence of abundance.<sup>46</sup> The Assyrian Sacred Tree played a highly important role in ruler cults: for example, the reliefs of the North-West Palace in Kalhu identify it with the ruler as a source of abundance (*Fig. 5.2*). There was a constant, vibrant association between the naturalistic and stylised representations, they could refer each other continuously, and because of this link, both depictions have to be considered in its interpretation.

<sup>36</sup> ROAF–ZGOLL 2001, 285–287.

<sup>37</sup> VOLK 2003–2005, 290.

<sup>38</sup> Two copper palms erected in the temple of Šamaš in Larsa are known from a year name from the Old Babylonian period (“Year (Gungunum) brought two copper palm-trees into the temple of Šamaš”: VOLK 2003–2005, 290).

<sup>39</sup> Cf., for example, the well-preserved façade of the temple court in Tall al-Rimah: OATES 1967, 88–90, Pls XXXII–XXXIII, XXXVI, XL.

<sup>40</sup> HARPER–ARUZ–TALLON 1992, 141–144. The apotropaic nature of Mesopotamian façades with palm trees is implied by a gate relief from Tall al-Rimah, on which the goddess Lama appears between two palms: OATES 1967, 76–78, Pl. XXXVI.a. Lama was a protective goddess: BLACK–GREEN 1992, 115. In Stephanie Dalley’s opinion, they impersonated the male and female variants of the palm tree, together with a relief representing a male deity and a palm tree: DALLEY 2013, 67–70.

<sup>41</sup> DALLEY 2013, 67.

<sup>42</sup> One well-known scene depicts two seated deities and a palm tree between them, with snakes behind them (COLON 1987, 36–37, *Fig. 112*). This composition is often regarded as the antecedent of the Garden of Eden, cf. *Fig. 6*. Another scene portraying a tree surrounded by several gods is believed to be a representation of the spring equinox (MICHEL–DANSAC–CAUBET 2013, 2–3, *Fig. 1*), but this argument, based solely on the presence of the tree, is not convincing since the offshoot growing from the stem should also be present.

<sup>43</sup> Cf., e.g., the diadem segments recovered from the sarcophagus in the Queen’s Tomb II at Kalhu/Nimrud. These segments depict a palm and a stylised tree next to each other: HUSSEIN 2016, Pl. 38. Furthermore, in Neo-Assyrian astroglyphs, both the date palm and the stylised tree stand for the ruler: ROAF–ZGOLL 2001.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed discussion of these issues and an exhaustive bibliography, cf. GIOVINO 2007. Before the first millennium B.C., formal variability was much greater because considerably more plant species were incorporated into this artificial composite tree. For an old but comprehensive survey, cf. DANTHINE 1937. For the West Asian antecedents to the stylised tree from the second millennium B.C., cf. KEPINSKI 1982. Both monographs discuss the naturalistic representation of palm trees.

<sup>45</sup> PORTER 1993; WINTER 2010, 166.

<sup>46</sup> PORTER 1993.



Fig. 5. 1. Moulded brick relief of a bull-man (*kusarikku*) and a date palm, façade of the Inšušinak-temple, Susa, twelfth century B.C. (Paris, Louvre); 2. Stylised tree. Relief from the North-West Palace, Kalhu, ninth century B.C. (British Museum, London) (1. after HARPER-ARUZ-TALLON 1992; 2. author's photo)



Fig. 6. Garden scene with date palms and gods, cylinder seal, Akkadian period(?), twenty-fourth–twenty-third centuries B.C. (after [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org))

In sum, date palm representations in Mesopotamia convey a highly complex web of meanings. They could denote a garden, sometime the setting of certain rites, they could be an expression of abundance, fertility, power and protection, as well as of magical power. In contrast to the Egyptian tradition,<sup>47</sup> there is barely any reference to their funerary character.

The role of date palms in early Christian symbolism is similarly a less explored topic, lacking a comprehensive overview.<sup>48</sup> As an important element in both Jewish<sup>49</sup> and Christian<sup>50</sup> symbolism, scholarly attention quite understandably often focused on the palm branch. According to Petra von Gemünden (who based her arguments mainly on the written sources), palms had five basic connotations in Jesus' time: reference to a person or a community (Israel), a cult symbol (*lulav*), a symbol on coins and seals,<sup>51</sup> a token of victory,<sup>52</sup> or the symbol of life. The latter will be important for the interpretation of the Tall Bī'a mosaic, although the first meaning will also play a role because the palm can refer to a woman or a righteous person in the Old Testament.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the rich literary background, written sources can only contribute to a general interpretation of the palm trees on the floor mosaics in question; the early Christian-Byzantine representations should be examined in their own contexts.

On early Byzantine artworks, date palms could denote a region. The palm trees appearing on the famous mosaic map of Madaba (Jordan) indicate the date-growing areas around the Dead Sea, mostly oases such as the Jericho area (Fig. 7),<sup>54</sup> although this connotation can be extended to the entire Holy Land. A similar role can be ascribed to the trees displayed on the apsis mosaic of the original fourth-century S. Pietro in Rome, on the two small apsis mosaic decorations of Sta Constanza, for example, beside the buildings symbolising Bethlehem and Jerusalem (Fig. 8.1),<sup>55</sup> and on the *traditio legis* representation.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>47</sup> See WALLERT 1962, 129–139.

<sup>48</sup> There is no separate entry for date palms in the *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, and neither does the entry "Baum" contain a detailed description, perhaps because the palm lost its iconographic importance in later times.

<sup>49</sup> Together with the menorah, the shofar, the incense shovel and the *ethrog* (a citrus fruit), the palm branch (*lulav*) was part of the essential ritual paraphernalia of a synagogue. These items play an important role during different festivals and made their appearance in funerary art as well: HACHLILI 1988, 256–268, esp. Table 3b. The branch probably symbolised the Jerusalem to come: VON GEMÜNDE 1998, 45–49.

<sup>50</sup> In the Gospel of John, when Jesus was approaching Jerusalem as a king (John 12:13), the rejoicing crowd held palm branches in their hands, which in this case symbolised life over death. For the wider context and symbolic interpretation of this scene, cf. VON GEMÜNDE 1998; VON GEMÜNDE 2005.

<sup>51</sup> This formal group cannot be really fitted into the classification system and overlaps with the second and third groups. In rabbinic literature, the palm tree is a metaphor for Israel. With its bunches of fruits, the tree symbolised fertility on Jewish coins; after the repression of the Jewish revolt, it became a symbol for Judea and the Jewish people for the Romans: on the *Iudea capta* coins it referred to the reconquered province and its people: VON GEMÜNDE 1998, 44–50; FINE 2005, 140–145.

<sup>52</sup> For the palm frond as a token of victory in Classical Antiquity and Jewish culture, cf. VON GEMÜNDE 1998, 51–54; MILLER 1979, 35–58.

<sup>53</sup> VON GEMÜNDE 1998, 44. In the latter case, there are some particularly fine metaphors that emphasise the old age fertility of date palms: Ps 92:12–14.

<sup>54</sup> PICCIRILLO 1992, 81–95, particularly Fig. 62.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. OAKESHOTT 1967, 69–72, 76–69, Abb. 29, 40–41. Later, in the sixth century, the trees denote the landscape in the same way as on the arch mosaic of the S. Vitale presbytery in Ravenna, under the buildings that represent Bethlehem and Jerusalem: MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS 2010, 248–250, Fig. 87. Curiously, palm trees do not appear in representations of Bethlehem and Jerusalem in Syria; cf. the Church of the Holy Martyrs, Tayibat al-Imam: ZAQZUQ–PICCIRILLO 1999, 445–446, Figs 3–5. It seems likely that there was no need to denote the region in this area.

<sup>56</sup> Palm trees are intrinsic elements of the iconographic scheme showing Christ handing the law to Peter (*traditio legis*), cf. WEITZMANN 1979, 556–557.



Fig. 7. Jericho. The Madaba mosaic map, sixth century A.D. (after PICCIRILLO 1992)

The palm branch appearing among the simple early Christian symbols represented triumph over death, a fusion of Jewish and Classical tradition. Branches with doves also appear in the funeral symbolism of the Roman catacombs.<sup>57</sup>

For our purposes, depictions of whole trees are more interesting. The Ravenna sarcophagi are crucial for deciphering their symbolism. An early group of these sarcophagi, dated to the earlier fifth century, bear figural compositions on their sides. One side shows finely carved palm trees with fruit clusters accompanying Christ and the apostles, not unlike on Roman mosaics.<sup>58</sup> The other side only has symbols such as peacocks flanking a Christ monogram with palm trees behind them.<sup>59</sup> Later, in the second half of the fifth century, only symbolic representations were used. Instead of Christ and the apostles, lambs, a cross or monogram of Christ appear among the palm trees (Fig. 8.2), while the trees themselves were sometimes replaced by grapevines and peacocks.<sup>60</sup> These substitutions indicate the interchangeability of palms with grapes, suggesting a common conceptual background.

This relationship is well expressed on several floor mosaics from North Africa and Jordan. The mosaic of Theodulos,<sup>61</sup> excavated in Sousse (Tunisia), offers an interesting variant of the inhabited scroll (Fig. 9.1). The inhabited scroll composition usually features interlacing vine stems forming medallions filled with different motifs in a symmetrical, geometric arrangement.<sup>62</sup> This mosaic, probably dating from the sixth century,<sup>63</sup> has not only grapevines, but also a palm tree rising from

<sup>57</sup> MILBURN 1988, 41.

<sup>58</sup> ZUCCHINI-BUCCI 1968, 29–31, 33–35, n. 10–11, 14–15. In the *traditio legis* scene, the palm tree simultaneously represents the life force and the landscape itself. A composition on a glass bowl confirms this interpretation: Christ is shown standing on a rocky mount with two apostles at his side; the river Jordan flows under them: WEITZMANN 1979, 559–560. This scene refers to the baptism as well as to the place of this event, the Holy Land.

<sup>59</sup> ZUCCHINI-BUCCI 1968, 32–34, n. 13d–14d.

<sup>60</sup> ZUCCHINI-BUCCI 1968, 42–44, n. 22–24.

<sup>61</sup> PARRISH 1980.

<sup>62</sup> A highly geometricised version of the inhabited scroll with the vines dissolving into shaded bands can be seen in the monastery sanctuary of Tall Bī'a. Here, the kantharos and the two peacocks were set into different medallions: KALLA 1999, 138–140, Abb. 10–12.

<sup>63</sup> The dating is based on the fact that the inhabited scroll is a typical iconographic scheme of the sixth century: HACHLILI 2009, 111–147.



1



2

Fig. 8. 1. Mosaic with the representation of the traditio legis, Santa Constanza, Rome, fourth century A.D.;  
2. sarcophagus with date palms, lambs and the Chi-Rho monogram, Ravenna, fifth century A.D.  
(1. author's photo; 2. source: internet)



Fig. 9. 1. Mosaic of Theodulos, Sousse, Tunisia, sixth century A.D. (Sousse, Archaeological Museum); 2. date palm flanked by two goats, mosaic from the Church of Saint George, Mount Nebo, sixth century A.D.; 3. palm tree rising from a kantharos, mosaic from the presbytery of the Chapel of Elias, Maria and Soreg, Gerasa, sixth century A.D. (1. source: Wikimedia Commons; 2–3. after PICCIRILLO 1992)

a kantharos flanked by peacocks behind them. The two plants virtually blend into a whole. Similar motifs are known in Jordan as well.

In Umm al-Rasas, the apsed presbytery of the Church of the Palm in the southern part of the Twin Church is adorned with a mosaic that gave the building its name.<sup>64</sup> This inhabited scroll is reduced to six medallions, where the palm tree grows behind an amphora<sup>65</sup> flanked by peacocks, similarly to the Sousse depiction. Visitors entering the Church of Saint George on Mount Nebo/Khirbet el-Mukhayyat beheld a reduced inhabited scroll in the northern aisle. On this mosaic, the palm tree

<sup>64</sup> PICCIRILLO 1992, 241–242, Figs 392–393.

<sup>65</sup> The vine scroll often grows from an amphora instead of a kantharos, cf. HACHLILI 2009, 111–147.



rises from inside the kantharos, again set between the two antithetic peacocks.<sup>66</sup> The floor mosaic of the presbytery of the Chapel of Elias, Maria and Soreg in Gerasa lacks an amphora or kantharos: the vines are sprouting from and entwining the trunk of a palm tree. The peacocks are standing directly in front of the tree (Fig. 9.3).<sup>67</sup> This arrangement suggests that the date palm stands for the vessels that contain the water of life or the Eucharistic wine. The vine scroll, the kantharos/amphora and the peacocks, symbols of eternal life, ascribe a similar meaning to the palm tree.

Palm trees rarely make an appearance on church floor mosaics, where other fruit-bearing trees are much more common, particularly pomegranate trees and cypresses.<sup>68</sup> One of the chapels of the Church of Saint George (Mount Nebo) in Jordan is furnished with a mosaic that has a composition, although a fully symmetrical one, similar to the one at Tall Bī'a. The date palm is flanked by two goats instead of deer, a pair of doves appears above the tree and the background is filled with different plants (Fig. 9.2).<sup>69</sup> This building most likely functioned as a tomb chapel,<sup>70</sup> pointing to the popularity of palm tree motifs in funerary contexts as compared to others. It is not mere chance that the tree appears on North African tomb mosaics, perhaps as a substitute for the kantharos.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, on early Christian depictions, the date palm could refer to the Holy Land, but it was also a symbol of the life force and of the promise of eternal life. It played a particularly important role in funerary contexts.

#### *Roosters and doves*

The rooster appearing on the Assur pyxis (Fig. 3.2) is presumably a jungle fowl, an ancestor of the present-day chicken (*Gallus gallus domesticus*), whose original habitat was the territory between eastern India, south-western Asia and China.<sup>72</sup> This creature is quick, flies high and roosts in trees that are inaccessible to terrestrial predators. Although the presence of this fowl is documented from the third millennium B.C. onward in the region, it remained an exotic animal, often kept for the sake of cockfights, until the first millennium B.C.<sup>73</sup> The bird is rarely depicted and this is the first instance from this region; in later times, its appearance usually alludes to Iran or more easterly lands.<sup>74</sup> The other bird on the pyxis can probably be regarded as the hen counterpart of the cock jungle fowl,<sup>75</sup> although another species such as a dove is likewise plausible. The Sumerian word for junglefowl, DAR.LUGAL (literally royal dar-bird), *tarlugallu* in Akkadian, appears in lexical lists originating from the late third millennium B.C., but only written down from the nineteenth century B.C.<sup>76</sup> It is possible that another bird name, DAR.ME.LUH.HA (Indian dar-bird), which appears together with the former in the lists, also denoted this jungle fowl. If this is indeed the case, we have textual evidence from the Third Dynasty of Ur (twenty-first century B.C.) which mentions the feeding of this bird, as well as for its use as a model for ivory sculptures,<sup>77</sup> the latter clearly pointing to its symbolic significance.

<sup>66</sup> SALLER-BAGATTI 1949, 74–76, Pl. 28.3; PICCIRILLO 1992, 178–179, Figs 244, 246.

<sup>67</sup> PICCIRILLO 1992, 269, Fig. 572; HACHLILI 2009, 131, Fig. VI.16.

<sup>68</sup> These species appear on the mosaic pavement of the monastery church narthex at Tall Bī'a: KALLA 1991; KALLA 1999, 135–138.

<sup>69</sup> PICCIRILLO-ALLIATA 1998, 327–328, Fig. 136; PICCIRILLO 1992, 178–179, Fig. 250.

<sup>70</sup> This function is suggested by the Greek and Semitic, and perhaps Arabic version of the *in pace* formula inscribed on the mosaic: HACHLILI 2009, 203.

<sup>71</sup> YASIN 2005, 443, Fig. 16.

<sup>72</sup> COLLON 1995, 70; ARUZ 1995a.

<sup>73</sup> PERRY-GAL 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Its ancient Greek name is "Persian bird": EHRENBURG 2012, 53. Its depiction appears on incense burners from the Achaemenid period and later, cf. ÖZGEN-ÖZTÜRK 1996.

<sup>75</sup> ARUZ 1995a.

<sup>76</sup> VELDHUIS 2004, 176, 189, 190, 196.

<sup>77</sup> VELDHUIS 2004, 234–235.

An interesting text known as the “Bird-call” links the *tarlugallu*-bird to the god Enmešarra,<sup>78</sup> who in another variant of the text is mentioned together with the *suššuru*-bird, a creature seldom referred to.<sup>79</sup> According to lexicographical identifications, the latter bird could have been some kind of (wild) dove.<sup>80</sup> Enmešarra is an underworld god, member of an ancestral generation of deities who fought for power against Enlil according to an earlier tradition, and against Marduk in a later one. He was captured and exiled to the underworld.<sup>81</sup> He is simultaneously a representative of both the Underworld and of the Cosmos before the creation.

Another god appears in close association with the rooster. The other version of the above-mentioned “Bird-call” text names the *tarlugallu* as the bird of Nuska (Nusku).<sup>82</sup> Aside from his role as the emissary of the god Enlil, he is the god of fire and light, symbolised with a lamp. He is called the god of the night as well, and in some traditions he appears as a child of the ancient pantheon.<sup>83</sup> In first-millennium B.C. imagery, the rooster often stands on a lampstand instead of a lamp – the two were interchangeable – which clearly associates the bird with Nuska.<sup>84</sup> Altogether, the rooster on the pyxis can have several allusions: an exotic environment, the primordial world, or the Otherworld and the night.

While the rooster-on-the-column iconographic element appears in depictions with a narrative character, referring the Biblical story of St. Peter’s denial,<sup>85</sup> the motif itself was not given a prominent individual role in more abstract symbolic contexts.<sup>86</sup> On Early Byzantine floor mosaics, the rooster is only one of the many birds depicted, even though we might think that exactly because of the Biblical allusions, it would have a more distinguished role.<sup>87</sup> The rooster appears in zoological catalogue-type artworks,<sup>88</sup> depicting a host of different animals.<sup>89</sup> The first mosaic of Tall Bi’a can be assigned to this category, where it appears among the forty-nine depicted birds species. Elsewhere, its presence is usually rare and generally restricted to rural landscapes, and almost never accorded a focal presence.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>78</sup> “The cock is the bird of Enmešarra. Its cry is: You sinned against Tutu”: LAMBERT 1970, 113. Tutu stands for Marduk in this case. The text is known from different versions of the Neo-Assyrian period (ninth–seventh centuries B.C.), but there could have been earlier antecedents, similarly to most of the so-called canonical texts.

<sup>79</sup> LAMBERT 1970, 114–115

<sup>80</sup> STRECK 2012.

<sup>81</sup> WIGGERMAN 1992, 287–289. Several other epic poems also describe his defeat: LAMBERT 2013, 291–298, 326–328.

<sup>82</sup> LAMBERT 1970, 114–115.

<sup>83</sup> STRECK 2001.

<sup>84</sup> EHRENBERG 2012, 57–62.

<sup>85</sup> The motif has antecedents in Classical Antiquity: CALLISEN 1939.

<sup>86</sup> In contrast, the rooster-on-a-stand is a key motif among the Yazidis, most likely as a consequence of the direct impact of ancient Near Eastern traditions: EHRENBERG 2012, 61.

<sup>87</sup> For a critique of the strictly Biblical text-based interpretations of floor mosaics, cf. DAUPHIN 1978; WALISZEWSKI 2001, 264

<sup>88</sup> For this imagery, cf. HACHLILI 2009, 269.

<sup>89</sup> The cock/rooster mostly appears in similar depictions of the zoological catalogue type portraying a host of creatures (cf. HACHLILI 2009, 269), e.g. Syria/Lebanon: Zahrani (DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 431, fig. 430); Israel: Jerusalem, the “Armenian” church (HACHLILI 2009, 119, Fig. VI.7); Jordan: Esbus, North Church (PICCIRILLO 1992, 251, Figs 422, 428, 433–434), Petra Church (WALISZEWSKI 2001, 236–237, 313, with further examples).

<sup>90</sup> One exception is the upper part of the main field of the mosaic pavement in the Church of Amos and Kasiseus, Mount Nebo, where the two sides of a four-columned aedicula’s tympanum are flanked by roosters facing two trees, an imagery usually having doves (PICCIRILLO 1992, 174–175, Fig. 228). Pasquale Testini interprets this scene as a Paradise depiction (TESTINI 1986, 167–168, Abb. 135).

Although the birds on the palm trees on the pyxis are not unequivocally doves,<sup>91</sup> it seems instructive to briefly cover the symbolic role of doves in ancient Western Asia, since it illustrates how deeply this Christian iconographic element is rooted in local traditions. The domestication of the rock dove (*Columba livia*) probably goes back to Neolithic times. Representations of this bird, although in many cases with some uncertainty regarding species identification, occur in great numbers from the fourth millennium B.C. onwards in Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine.<sup>92</sup>

Doves are often encountered as votive statuettes, or perching atop terracotta house models. They are commonly associated with female goddesses, most often with Ištar, the goddess of war and sexuality, and her local counterparts (Ašera, Aštarte, Anat and, later, Atargatis) in particular since at least the earlier third millennium B.C.<sup>93</sup> During the second and first millennia B.C., one of the most characteristic iconographic schemes appearing on reliefs, terracottas and cylinder seals has these birds perching on the shoulders of the goddesses. In other cases, they accompany the deities. The voice of doves is associated with mourning in Mesopotamian literature, one common formula being “the women mourn like doves.”<sup>94</sup> The symbolic significance of doves is usually linked to their role as messengers since ancient Mesopotamian times,<sup>95</sup> although their fertility aspect was at least as important. There is firm archaeological evidence that pigeon dung played a pivotal role in fertilising land across semi-arid climatic zones from ancient until Byzantine times.<sup>96</sup>

The dove is one of the major symbols in Christian iconography and quite certainly one of the most oft-depicted avian species. There is no need to review in detail this broadly known and well-studied topic here: in sum, we may say that it represents the Holy Spirit<sup>97</sup> and denotes the baptism of Christ by St. John, or baptism in general.<sup>98</sup> The bird can stand for the figure of Christ, Mary, or the apostles (*Fig. 10*).<sup>99</sup> A dove bearing an olive branch in its beak is a popular symbol for the promise of salvation and peace.<sup>100</sup> It appears on altar screen decorations, where it personifies the Holy Spirit.<sup>101</sup> Despite its prominent role among the basic early Christian symbols (dove, fish, ship, anchor, fishermen),<sup>102</sup> doves were not accorded a privileged position on Syrian-Palestinian church floor mosaics, often being merely one of the many portrayed bird species.

<sup>91</sup> Doves are difficult to identify, particularly when the representation is not coloured. “Aus der großen Masse der ziemlich einheitlich wiedergegebenen Vögel wird immer wieder versucht, die T(aube) zu isolieren, was selten eindeutig gelingt”: SEIDL-ZIFFER 2012, 481.

<sup>92</sup> WINTER 1977; SEIDL-ZIFFER 2012.

<sup>93</sup> PINNOCK 2000.

<sup>94</sup> STRECK 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Among others, similarly to Noah’s tale, Utnapištim sends a dove in the Akkadian flood tale on Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic. Sending messages with doves appears on the Early Dynastic Stele of the Vulture as well: VELDHUIS 2004, 289–292; STRECK 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. GERMANIDOU 2015, from the steadily growing literature. Large columbariums have been identified on several archaeological sites in the Near East, especially in Israel.

<sup>97</sup> This aspect is mirrored by the Eucharistic dove, used in Eastern Christianity, a golden or silver metal dove placed above the altar or the baptismal font. Its widespread use in the Syrian Orthodox Church was controversial: according to Severos, patriarch of Antioch, “the Holy Ghost should be not designated in the form of a dove.” An excellent artwork, made in the sixth century, is known from the Attarouthi Treasure: EVANS-RATLIFF 2012, 41–43. For a discussion of the representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove, cf. MAGUIRE 1987, 5–6.

<sup>98</sup> The debate over whether the dove’s beak could be the source of the baptismal water or of the holy oil has no relevance for the present study, cf. JENSEN 2011, 112–115.

<sup>99</sup> On the sixth-century mosaic of the baptistery in Albenga, twelve doves surround the Chi-Ro monogram (*Fig. 10*), referring to both the baptism and the Apostles: JENSEN 2011, 206–209, Fig. 5.16.

<sup>100</sup> POESCHKE 1972; TESTINI 1986, 164. The various illustrations of the story of Noah depict the dove in this manner, with an oil branch in its beak: HACHLILI 2009, 65–72.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Basilica D, Rusāfa/Sergiopolis, from this region: WESTPHALEN 2000, 355–356, Abb. 18a, Taf. 81b.

<sup>102</sup> These are the symbols that Clement of Alexandria recommended for finger-rings: MILBURN 1988, 1–7, 279.



Fig. 10. Twelve doves surrounding the Chi-Ro monogram, mosaic of the baptistery in Albenga, sixth century A.D. (author's photo)

Nevertheless, doves were given a significant role in the funeral symbolism of early Christian catacombs.<sup>103</sup> The tomb mosaics of North Africa represent an important group for this study. These mosaics covered epitaphs, partially or wholly, which were placed in church floors.<sup>104</sup> One characteristic group among the several iconographical types of these decorations repeat the same motifs, namely roses, doves and peacocks,<sup>105</sup> principally in the church of Kélibia. Their grave inscriptions contain the *in pace* formula.<sup>106</sup>

In many cases, the birds, mostly doves or peacocks, are depicted in antithetic pairs flanking different Christian symbols (cross, cross with alpha and omega, Chi Rho monogram, wreath, etc.).<sup>107</sup> Other representations show doves perching on kantharoi drinking water, or a plant sprouts into an inhabited scroll from the kantharos.<sup>108</sup> There are examples of birds sitting on the shoulders of the deceased,<sup>109</sup> evoking the above-mentioned pagan tradition. In sum, doves appear in connection with death well before the Christian era, and they obviously became symbols of blessedness and peace in the afterlife. When shown with a kantharos, doves are interchangeable with peacocks,<sup>110</sup>

<sup>103</sup> POESCHKE 1972, 242; MILBURN 1988, 37, Fig. 21b.

<sup>104</sup> For this custom, cf. YASIN 2005; YASIN 2009, 69–100.

<sup>105</sup> DUVAL 1976, Figs 5, 20; YASIN 2005, 442.

<sup>106</sup> For the correspondence between the brief epitaph formulas and the narrow repertoire of iconographic symbols, cf. YASIN 2005, 442.

<sup>107</sup> DUVAL 1976, Figs 11, 15; YASIN 2005, Fig. 15.

<sup>108</sup> DUVAL 1976, Fig. 35; YASIN 2005, Fig. 14.

<sup>109</sup> DUVAL 1976, Fig. 22.

<sup>110</sup> Although they can also occur together, as on the fifth-century Syrian mosaic fragment in the Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin, where doves are perching on the kantharos, flanked by peacocks

in the same way as the palm tree is interchangeable with the kantharos, and thus these birds represent the life force as well. The iconographic scheme of tomb mosaic no. 35 at Kélibia is a visual expression of the close association between the life force and the promise of salvation. Under the commemorative inscription enclosed within a wreath is a dove with an olive branch in its beak flying between two palm trees; there is a peacock under the dove, while a kantharos with a plant emerging from it, the by far the most common motif of the epitaphs at Kélibia, can be found underneath (Fig. 11).<sup>111</sup>

#### *Gazelle and deer*

Together with the onager, the gazelle on the pyxis represents the world of the steppe, the untamed land. On tablet I of the Gilgamesh epic, Enkidu, the untamed savage, is characterised as a companion of the gazelles.<sup>112</sup> The god Šakkan, master of wild animals, particularly gazelles, is mentioned in several texts as an underworld deity, or he appears as Nergal, lord of the underworld.<sup>113</sup> The associations of these two deities are based on the well-known connection between the steppe and the underworld in Mesopotamian thought. The god Utu turns the pastoral god Dumuzi into a gazelle, enabling him to flee the demons who eventually find him, and Dumuzi descends to the underworld.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the gazelle can symbolise both the world beyond the cities and the underworld.

Gazelle representations are rare and ambiguous in Mesopotamian visual art, and in many cases, it is difficult to establish whether the portrayed species is a bull, an ibex or a gazelle.<sup>115</sup> In many cases, it presumably denotes wild animals, often together with the wild goat,<sup>116</sup> sometimes in funerary contexts, as for example on the famous diadem of Pu'abi from the Early Dynastic Royal Cemetery of Ur, tomb PG 800, on which the golden figures of bearded bisons, wild sheep, gazelles and deer form a row (Fig. 12.2).<sup>117</sup> The relative scarcity of gazelle depictions<sup>118</sup> highlights its special meaning on the pyxis. (For the contemporaneous heraldic compositions showing the animals flanking the tree, see above, in the discussion of the palm tree.)



Fig. 11. Date palm with doves, tomb mosaic no. 35, Kélibia, Tunisia, sixth century A.D. (source: internet)

(<http://embarkkiosk.chazen.wisc.edu/VieO13817?sid=1326&x=1121896&port=383>; accessed July 7, 2017).

<sup>111</sup> YASIN 2005, 443, Fig. 16. Another arrangement with similar elements can be seen on a sarcophagus from S. Apollinare in Classe, dated to the sixth century, on which a pair of peacocks drink the water of eternal life gushing from a kantharos, with the Chi-Rho monogram above them, two crosses in niches on the sides and two palm trees complementing the scene: BOVINI 1954, 61–63, Fig. 52.

<sup>112</sup> Gilgamesh I: 109–111, 175–177: GEORGE 2002, 544–545, 548–549.

<sup>113</sup> BLACK–GREEN 1992, 172; GEORGE 2003, 850–851.

<sup>114</sup> ALSTER 1972; BLACK–GREEN 1992, 72–73; COHEN 2005, 130.

<sup>115</sup> Especially in the so-called animal combat scenes, featuring richly diverse portrayals of lions attacking ruminants: KARG 1984, 39–62; COLLON 1987, 27.

<sup>116</sup> Gazelles and ibexes appear in a row on the relief of a silver cup from the Royal Graves of Ur (U. 11795, WOOLLEY 1934, 573, Pl. 217).

<sup>117</sup> WOOLLEY 1934, 89, 565, Pls 140–141. Emphasising the find's funeral character, Andrew C. Cohen associates these animals with the Dumuzi–Inana mythological cycle: COHEN 2005, 127–138.

<sup>118</sup> Dominique Collon has suggested that the different animals depicted in some contexts, for example on the so-called dynastic seals, could represent certain cities or regions, while the gazelle evoked Babylonia for the Assyrians: COLLON 1995, 70–72.



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Fig. 12. 1. Rampant deer flanking a stylised tree. Mosaic inlay of a harp, Royal Cemetery of Ur, twenty-sixth century B.C. (British Museum, London); 2. bearded bison, wild sheep, gazelle and deer, gold ornaments of the diadem of Pu'abi, Royal Cemetery of Ur, Tomb PG 800, twenty-sixth century B.C. (University Museum, Philadelphia); 3. grazing deer, ivory panel of a chair from Kalhu, eighth–seventh-century B.C. (1. after READE 1991; 2. after ZETTLER–HORNE 1998; 3. after HERRMANN 1992)

The gazelle became a popular figure in early Byzantine art,<sup>119</sup> especially on floor mosaics, and it seems likely that its popularity can be traced to the Song of Songs, in which the gazelle symbolises grace and beauty. Scenes with a pomegranate tree and gazelles can be found on several mosaics in the churches on Mount Nebo,<sup>120</sup> in many cases as an alternative for deer, which had the same attributes as gazelles.

Representations of deer are far more common in Mesopotamian art than of gazelles, precluding even the possibility of a brief overview. I shall here focus on one highly important iconographic scheme, the “Tree of Life” or, more precisely, the “Tree of Abundance” scene,<sup>121</sup> in which two ruminants rear towards a stylised tree, in a symmetrical arrangement.<sup>122</sup> First appearing in the Early Dynastic period,<sup>123</sup> this imagery became widely popular, although with varying intensity at different times, throughout Western Asia up to the Sasanian period. I shall here discuss a single group of objects, the mosaic-inlaid artefacts (harps, lyres, gaming boards, boxes) from the Early Dynastic Royal Graves of Ur. On these, the stylised tree stands on a mountaintop, with the rampant animals, generally wild goats and bulls, but occasionally also deer, arranged in an antithetic composition (*Fig. 12.1*).<sup>124</sup> Other scenes on these artefacts portray lions attacking these creatures, alluding to a symbolism of death. In other words, abundance and fertility<sup>125</sup> appear simultaneously with death and demise. One variant of this symmetrical arrangement around a tree, in this case with gazelles, can be seen on the Middle Assyrian pyxis. The motif of grazing deer often appears on the eighth–seventh-century B.C. ivory carvings of a Syrian workshop (“Intermediate Group”) (*Fig. 12.3*).<sup>126</sup>

Deer are known to have played an important role in early Christian symbolism.<sup>127</sup> Christian authors emphasise that because of their antlers, deer are one of the noblest creatures, they live for long, they are shy and swift.<sup>128</sup> As an allegory, deer can stand for the faithful placing their trust in God, referring to the famous passage in Psalm 42.<sup>129</sup> Deer representations occur on domestic artefacts as well as on architectural sculptures and mosaics. Here, I shall only mention the iconographic scheme of deer drinking water, often an allusion to baptism, similarly to doves, explaining their important role in the decorative programme of baptisteries. The North African mosaics are particularly relevant from this perspective. On these mosaics, deer are depicted drinking the water flowing from rocks or from kantharoi.<sup>130</sup> In one baptistery in Jordan, gazelles are represented instead of deer in front of the baptismal font, indicating that they were interchangeable.<sup>131</sup> Scenes of deer drinking from fountains were not restricted to baptisteries for they appeared in other rooms of churches as well (*Fig. 13.1*).<sup>132</sup> A Syrian floor mosaic of superb workmanship portrays a rock

<sup>119</sup> WALISZEWSKI 2001, 226.

<sup>120</sup> E.g. the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius: PICCIRILLO–ALLIATA 1998, 349, Fig. 200.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. WINTER 2010, 164–165.

<sup>122</sup> Other examples of this scene, with illustrations, can be found in DANTHINE 1937, 104–108. However, a modern study on this topic is still lacking.

<sup>123</sup> KARG 1984, 71–72.

<sup>124</sup> WOOLLEY 1934, Pls 96–100; READE 1991, 61, Fig. 64.

<sup>125</sup> For the interpretation of the first millennium B.C. variants of the “Tree of Abundance”, cf. WINTER 2010, 163–183.

<sup>126</sup> The workshop’s carvings bearing this motif have been found at Hadatu in Syria and in the palaces of Kalhu (Nimrud), the Assyrian capital: HERRMANN 1992, 38–39, 112–114, Pls 76–79.

<sup>127</sup> For a detailed discussion of this symbolism, cf. DOMAGALSKI 1990.

<sup>128</sup> DOMAGALSKI 1990, 12–19.

<sup>129</sup> “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.” (Ps 42:1).

<sup>130</sup> E.g. the baptistery of Bir Ftouha (JENSEN 2011, 216–218, Fig. 5.21) and the baptistery of La Skhira (JENSEN 2011, 2018–219, Fig. 5.22).

<sup>131</sup> The New Baptistery Chapel of the Basilica of Moses: PICCIRILLO 1992, 150; PICCIRILLO–ALLIATA 1998, 296–300, Fig. 70.

<sup>132</sup> E.g. in the nave, as in the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, Mount Nebo: PICCIRILLO 1992, 164–165, Fig. 213; PICCIRILLO–ALLIATA 1998, 345–346, Fig. 192.



Fig. 13. 1. Deer drinking from fountain, mosaic in the nave of the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, Mount Nebo, sixth century; 2. garden with pomegranate, apple, fig and pear trees and animals. Mosaic of the Paradise of Madaba, ca. sixth century A.D.; 3. the mosaic in the narthex of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia, sixth century A.D. (1–2. after PICCIRILLO 1992; 3. after MAGUIRE 1987)

with four deer quenching their thirst from four rivers.<sup>133</sup> One variant of the inhabited scroll has the amphora flanked by deer instead of peacocks.<sup>134</sup>

Fifth-century sarcophagi often depict deer drinking from streams, together with other condensed symbolic scenes.<sup>135</sup> One side of a sarcophagus from Ravenna shows deer sitting under the *crux gemmata*, flanked by peacocks and palm trees;<sup>136</sup> another has deer drinking the water of life from *kantharoses* on the back side.<sup>137</sup>

It would appear that similarly to their antecedents in Antiquity, deer expressed the duality of life and death as well as the promise of eternal life in one strand of early Christian symbolism.

#### *Garden scene*

The context of the iconographic elements in both artworks is the garden as a conceptual frame. This context is more obvious on the pyxis, while only a single palm tree can be seen on the mosaic. As mentioned in the above, the field under the fallow deer is part of a floral semis that usually fills the entire carpet as shown by a mosaic found in the narthex of the same monastery. On depictions

<sup>133</sup> Church of the Holy Martyrs, Tayibat al-Imam: ZAQUZUQ–PICCIRILLO 1999, 445–446, Figs 3, 5.

<sup>134</sup> Chapel, el-Maqerqesh, Beth Guvrin: HACHLILI 2009, 125, Fig. VI.11.

<sup>135</sup> E.g. “peacocks, garlands, palm trees, empty thrones, christograms, deer drinking at streams, or a lamb standing upon a rock from which four rivers flow”: JENSEN 2011, 87. Cf. also DOMAGALSKI 1990, Taf. 24.

<sup>136</sup> S. Vitale, Sarcophagus of Ecclesius: DOMAGALSKI 1990, Taf. 31.c.

<sup>137</sup> BOVINI 1954, 30–31, Tav. 11.d.



in the distinctive Syrian mosaic style of the late fifth century, the middle field is populated by trees and animals, with stylised flowers in the monochrome background,<sup>138</sup> suggesting that the discussed artworks similarly depict a detail of a garden scene, which evokes the complete iconographic scheme.

In order to compare and clarify the two iconographic schemes and their range of meanings, a discussion of the garden scenes of the two cultural spheres seems in order. Various aspects of Mesopotamian gardens have become a widely popular research theme, which can hardly be covered in full here.<sup>139</sup> There were three basic types of gardens in Mesopotamia: the productive garden, the pleasure garden (royal garden) and the sacred garden (garden of the gods). The gardens par excellence were date palm orchards in Babylonia because, given the region's hot and dry climate, other fruit-bearing trees and vegetables could only grow in the partial shade provided by palm trees.<sup>140</sup>

Among non-economic gardens, the sacred type probably appeared first in the third millennium B.C., in which date palms and other fruit-bearing trees were planted. The gardens of gods were planted with rare and exotic species from neighbouring regions and in this sense, they functioned as a botanical garden as well.<sup>141</sup> There are many references to the special magic rites that were practiced in these gardens.<sup>142</sup> Combinations of game parks and botanical gardens as part of the building programmes of royal palaces are first mentioned from the end of the Middle Assyrian period. Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 B.C.) is the first to write about such an undertaking, which became increasingly elaborate, ultimately leading to the creation of the hanging gardens, one of the wonders of the ancient world.<sup>143</sup>

The first representations of sacred gardens can be identified with scenes of date harvests (Fig. 14.1) in ritual contexts on cylinder seals of the Akkadian period (twenty-third century B.C.).<sup>144</sup> It is possible that other representations of palm trees accompanying gods similarly alluded to gardens of this type.

One of the most famous Mesopotamian garden scenes is a mural adorning the facade of the throne room in Mari in Syria, dating from the eighteenth century B.C. (Fig. 14.3).<sup>145</sup> In the centre, Zimri-Lim accepts the insignia of kingship from the goddess Ištar, both shown standing in a garden with male and female palm trees and mythic creatures. Part of a flying dove can be seen above one of the palms, and the symmetrical composition suggests that the bird's counterpart was also depicted, but did not survive the past millennia. Under the main scene, the water of life with fish depictions flows from aryballoes held by water goddesses. This garden was obviously conceptualised as part of the metaphysical world, placing royal power into a cosmic frame, even if it was in all likelihood modelled on a sacred garden.

The ivory comb, presumably part of the same set as the pyxis, offers an unusual example of garden representations (Fig. 3.1).<sup>146</sup> The two sides of the comb are decorated with incised scenes portraying a procession of six priestesses wearing tall polos and musicians towards a figure that is regrettably fragmentary. They are performing a rite under palm trees: one tree on one side and two on the other indicate the setting in a garden. The single tree has an accentuated offshoot

<sup>138</sup> BALTY 1984.

<sup>139</sup> Most of the textual and visual information is available for Neo-Assyrian royal gardens, but these shall only be touched briefly here. For a summary of Mesopotamian gardens, cf. MARGUERON 1992; for Assyrian gardens and the issue of Semiramis' Hanging Garden, cf. DALLEY 2013.

<sup>140</sup> MARGUERON 1992, 56–61. For the economic value of date orchards, cf. FÖLDI 2012.

<sup>141</sup> MARGUERON 1992, 61–68.

<sup>142</sup> Only a single garden of this type was identified archaeologically in Assur, in the courtyard and surroundings of a building for the *akitu* festival, outside the settlement: MARGUERON 1992, 61–63.

<sup>143</sup> MARGUERON 1992, 71–74; DALLEY 2013.

<sup>144</sup> BOEHMER 1965, 125, 191, Abb. 708–710.

<sup>145</sup> MOORTGAT 1959, 11–12, Taf. 12.

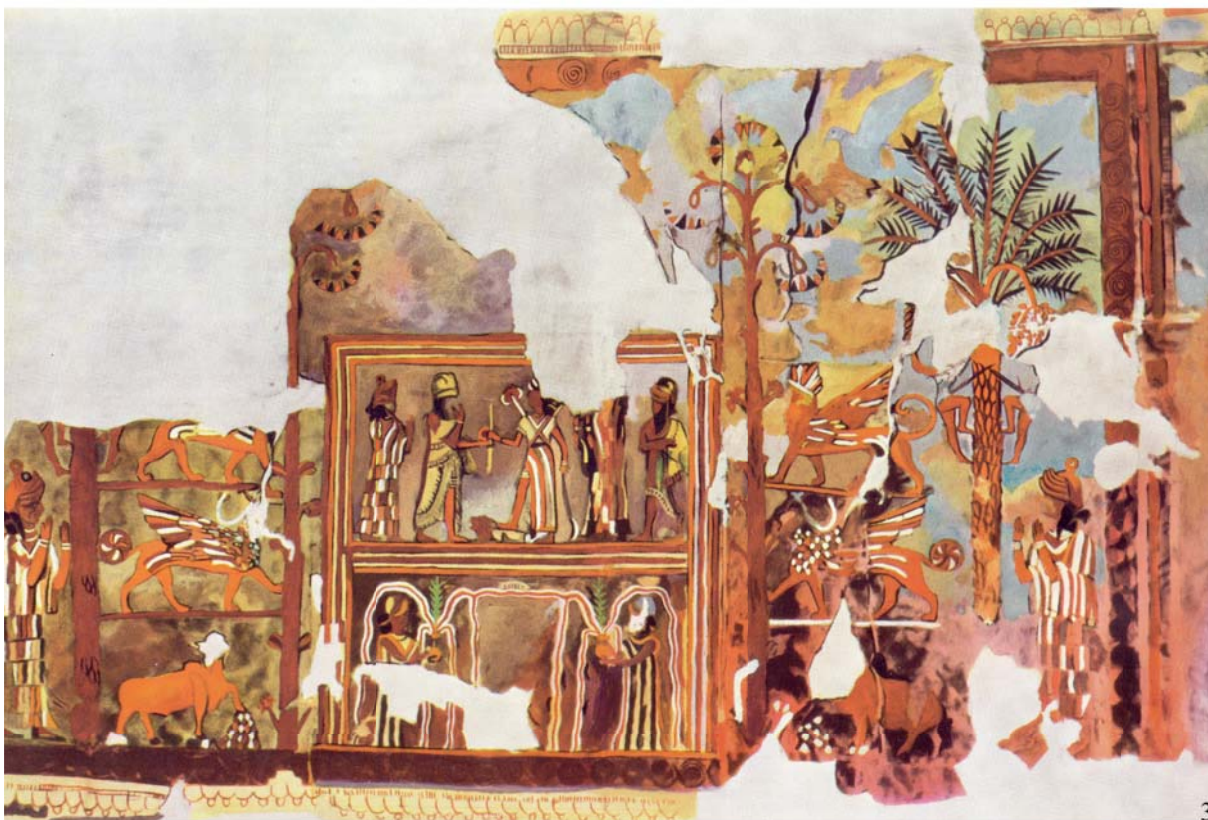
<sup>146</sup> ANDRAE 1954, 137–139; ARUZ 1995b; FELDMAN 2006, 27–29.



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Fig. 14. 1. Date harvest, cylinder seal, Akkadian period, twenty-third century B.C.; 2. Assyrian queen with a servant girl in a palm garden, Middle Assyrian cylinder seal, thirteenth century B.C.; 3. Zimri-Lim accepts the insignia of kingship from the goddess Ištar in a heavenly garden. Palace of Mari, Syria, eighteenth century B.C. (1. after BOEHMER 1965; 2. after PORADA–COLLON 2016; 3. after MOORTGAT 1959)

sprouting from its trunk, whose magical role was discussed in the above. Two figures hold bunches of dates in their hands, implying that the palm played a major role in the ritual. The scenes are framed with rosettes, similarly as on the pyxis.

Preparations for a court ritual can be seen on a Middle Assyrian cylinder seal whose infinite impression depicts a seated queen wearing a mural crown holding a mirror in her hand and a servant girl standing before her, both set between two palm trees (Fig. 14.2).<sup>147</sup>

The scene on the pyxis can be assigned to the same context. The conifers shown in addition to the cultivated date palm are not economic plants and their combination suggests that the setting is neither a productive garden, nor a forest. The gazelles in the composition would imply that the

<sup>147</sup> PORADA–COLLON 2016, 128, Pl. 56, Ma17.

ivory carver strove to create a mixed botanical and zoological garden in this iconographic scheme. Together with the scene on the comb, the depictions were probably modelled on a divinity's sacred garden. This imagery of a date palm, a conifer,<sup>148</sup> a gazelle and a rooster expressed the eternal duality of abundance and fertility on the one hand, and of death and demise on the other. This is particularly intriguing because the conceptualisation of the otherworld as a garden is wholly alien to Mesopotamian religious thought. While it seems possible that this pictorial scheme was influenced by Egyptian concepts,<sup>149</sup> it is more probable that these connotations were of secondary importance and that the scene alluded to magic practices with an apotropaic nature performed in a garden. At the same time, the gazelle and the tree recall the "stylised tree" depictions, in which the tree stands atop a mountain flanked by two rampant ruminants in a symmetrical arrangement (see above). This heraldic composition is transformed into an infinite arrangement in this case. An interpretation invoking a complete cosmos is perhaps acceptable: taken together, the duality of earth and sky, the rare tree and bird species as evocations of distant lands possibly refer to the entire terrestrial realm. The *imago mundi* nature of Mesopotamian botanical gardens and game parks is well known. Nevertheless, this iconographic scheme offered the possibility of later reinterpretations.

Early Christian garden imageries<sup>150</sup> were obviously inspired by the Old Testament Garden of Eden motif, with contemporary gardens and the image of an earthly Paradise intensely influencing each other. Two periods can be distinguished in visual interpretation, one before and one after iconoclasm – here, I shall focus on the former. Early Christian authors drew from several literary sources, both Biblical and pagan, in their conceptualisation of Paradise as described in Genesis. They imagined it as a place without seasons, where the climate is always mild, watered by four rivers issuing from one spring. Visual representations of this garden were popular in early Byzantine art, but later they only appeared as book illustrations.<sup>151</sup> The Garden of Eden was imagined as a park abounding in trees, particularly fruit-bearing trees, and filled with various other, unspecified flowers also growing there. Certain apocryphal sources denote the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as a fig or a palm tree,<sup>152</sup> most likely inspired by illustrations. Yet, the fourth-century *Hymns on Paradise* by St. Ephrem the Syrian make no mention of date palm trees.<sup>153</sup>

In the early Byzantine world, the Garden of Eden was frequently depicted as a magnificent secular garden with pomegranate, apple, fig and pear trees (*Fig. 13.2*),<sup>154</sup> often with cypresses and various other species, although palms were among the rarely represented species.<sup>155</sup> Thus, the date palm was not a basic constituent of garden illustrations.

<sup>148</sup> The role of this tree is unclear; a botanical identification would be crucial, but for the time being, this representation is unparalleled.

<sup>149</sup> Several artefacts betraying Egyptian influence were recovered from the grave: FELDMAN 2006. Although Joan Aruz assumes Egyptian antecedents for the gardens (ARUZ 1995a), we know from literary sources that botanical gardens were known in northern Mesopotamia well before that time. Nevertheless, given that funeral gardens played an important role in Egypt (WALLERT 1962, 129–139), it seems quite likely that their picture schemes had exercised a strong impact.

<sup>150</sup> For an introduction to the growing literature on Byzantine gardens, cf. LITTLEWOOD 2002. For an excellent overview with a discussion of the depictions, cf. BRUBAKER–LITTLEWOOD 1992.

<sup>151</sup> MAGUIRE 2002, 23–29.

<sup>152</sup> BRUBAKER–LITTLEWOOD 1992, 237–238.

<sup>153</sup> See BROCK 1990.

<sup>154</sup> These four tree species can be seen on the Mosaic of the Paradise of Madaba in Jordan. The four trees grow from the four corners, recalling the four rivers; among the trees there are animals in a "Tierfrieden" scene: PICCIRILLO 1992, 128, Fig. 139. A similar diagonal composition with four fruit trees can be found on the nave mosaic of the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, Mount Nebo (*Fig. 13.1*), on which one of the animal pairs are deer drinking from the river: PICCIRILLO 1992, 164–165, Fig. 213; PICCIRILLO–ALLIATA 1998, 345–346, Fig. 192.

<sup>155</sup> It appears, for example, on one of the most ambitious Paradise compositions, the narthex mosaic of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis (Macedonia), on which it is one of the nine depicted tree species: BRUBAKER–LITTLEWOOD 1992, 241, Abb. 80. The palm is shown among fruit trees in the middle field of

Animals are important elements of garden scenes. Deer are often shown drinking from the mountain spring, from which the four rivers of Eden originate (see above). The iconographic schemes with several animal species can be divided into two main types. The first is a peaceful coexistence, inspired by Isaiah's eschatological vision (*Tierfrieden*),<sup>156</sup> the other has allegorical scenes of predators chasing ruminants (animal chase) or hunting scenes.<sup>157</sup> The latter two reflect the multiple levels of meanings in garden scenes, for these display neither the primordial Paradise, nor the coming one, but denote the actual world and, on a different cognitive level, they allude to the Creation and the power of God. Although peopled by humans, the natural world was created by God, who gave the power over his creatures to humans (Gen 1:26). In this sense, the garden became a symbol of the Earth's completeness.<sup>158</sup> The grand mosaic carpet in the narthex of the Great Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis (Macedonia) evokes the duality of the profane earthly world and the coming Paradise (Fig. 13.3).<sup>159</sup> In a garden filled with different trees, ruminants are attacked by predators, while some details allude to a particular season and the constant changes of nature. The fishes of the border suggest that the middle field is surrounded by an ocean, hence the mosaic represents the inhabited world. The imagery in the centre is a condensed depiction in a medallion-like composition framed by acanthus branches: an amphora, flanked by a deer and a doe, from which vine scrolls grow, with the peacocks and the doves between them in the usual symmetrical arrangement. The entire middle field and its elements represent the promise of eternal life, alluding to baptism as well as to the coming Paradise not literally, but in an abstract manner (Fig. 15.1).<sup>160</sup> The inclusion of the deer in this composition displays its prominent role in the image of heavenly Paradise. Viewed from the perspective of Psalm 42:1, the deer personifies the faithful who yearns to be near God, while being, at the same time, an embodiment of afterlife on depictions. The animal combat and hunting scenes<sup>161</sup> had another symbolic message, reminding of the transitory nature of life on Earth, evoking death and demise, which can only be vanquished by divine salvation.<sup>162</sup>

Birds are not always depicted in garden scenes;<sup>163</sup> however, on some mosaics such as the floor mosaic of the Tall Bī'a monastery narthex, solely birds are shown. During the sixth century, the

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a mosaic portraying also animals and humans from Israel: Jabaliyah Diakonikon: HACHLILI 2009, Fig. VII.10.a.

<sup>156</sup> Isa 11:6–8. For a brief overview of the depictions, cf. WISSKIRCHEN 2009.

<sup>157</sup> HACHILI 2009, 155–168.

<sup>158</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 57–72. The popular "Earth" personifications are obvious signs of this meaning. For the Syrian examples, see the index in DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988.

<sup>159</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, Figs 42–49; BRUBAKER-LITTLEWOOD 1992, Abb. 80; DIMITROVA 2006, Figs 1–6.

<sup>160</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 36–40.

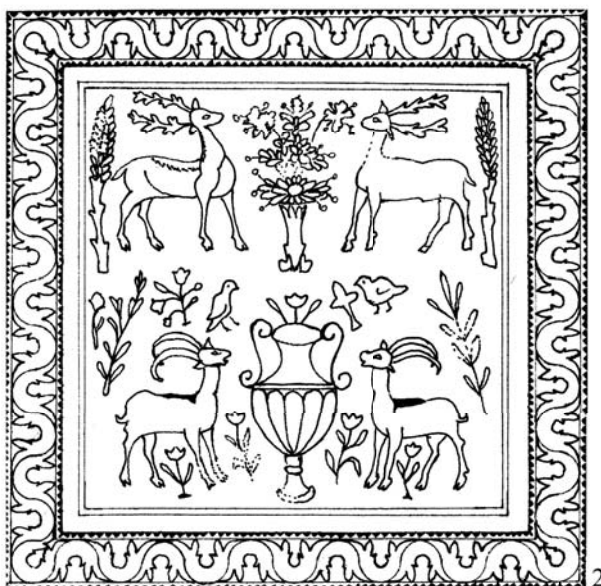
<sup>161</sup> Hunting scenes (HACHLILI 2009, 155–169) expressed the prestige of the patron, and were hence popular decorations of secular buildings, explaining the representations of a multitude of exotic animals (cf. HACHLILI 2009, 168–170). Because the same mosaicists manufactured the artworks for different customers, it was easy to transfer and reinterpret compositions in different contexts. The polyvalence of symbols allowed more than one interpretation. Hunting in a funerary context could denote victory over death (TÖRÖK 1998, 18), while in church aisles it could represent earthly dangers (DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 485–488). The multitude of different animals mirrored the wondrous diversity of the world, the marvel of God's handiwork (for this Christian view, cf. MAGUIRE 1987, 39; PICCIRILLO 1989, 337–340; HACHLILI 2009, 287). The question arises as to whether real game parks had any effect on these depictions. Although most of our data concerning game parks come from later Byzantine periods (see ŠEVČENKO 2002), they quite certainly also existed in earlier Byzantine times.

<sup>162</sup> DIMITROVA 2006.

<sup>163</sup> For example, on the nave mosaic of the Church of al-Khādir in Madaba, only animals and humans appear among the twenty-one trees, mostly representing different species (e.g. date palms). Although the figural representations were destroyed during the iconoclasm, it is clear that birds had not been originally portrayed (PICCIRILLO 1992, 129, Fig. 142; BUSCHHAUSEN 1986, Taf. III). In contrast, a multitude of animals, different kinds of birds among them, were crammed around three fruit trees on the floor mosaic of the Church of St. John Baptist in Oum Hartain (Syria). Only the doves were shown in heraldic pose (DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 192–201, Figs 170–174, Pl. 11).



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2



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Fig. 15. 1. Deer and peacocks flanking an amphora, the centre of the mosaic at Heraclea Lyncestis, Macedonia, sixth century A.D.; 2. ibexes and deer flanking an amphora, Church of Rayān, fifth century A.D.; 3. rampant goats flanking a tree, stucco from a Sassanian palace, sixth–seventh centuries (Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin) (1. source: Wikimedia Commons; 2. after DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988; 3. author's photo)

formerly uninterrupted field of the iconographic scheme of inhabited scrolls dissolved into separate medallions, in which bird depictions became more common. This visual scheme also transformed the unified garden imagery into a wholly symbolic scene.

Let us now examine how the mosaic of the mausoleum in Tall Bī'a can be interpreted in the light of other garden depictions. It is rather difficult to link the similar, non-narrative Christian

depictions to textual sources, and hence to interpret them.<sup>164</sup> It must be borne in mind that symbols, by their very nature, can convey multiple meanings, and this polysemy allows for many associations. The ambivalence and ambiguity<sup>165</sup> of certain symbolic elements on floor mosaics such as images of animals and plants left ample space for multiple interpretations for their audiences. It has been suggested that the meaning conveyed by certain iconographic motifs and programmes to donors, artists, members of the clergy and the faithful should be investigated separately, as should whether a particular composition had a symbolic or a purely decorative function.<sup>166</sup> Mosaicists, who immortalised their names on their work as a token of their self-esteem,<sup>167</sup> drew from pagan antecedents as well as from designs originally made for secular purposes. In many cases, they designed their artworks too,<sup>168</sup> although their customers could choose from among the alternatives offered to them. The same representation could be interpreted in markedly different ways, no doubt depending on the levels of literacy and theological knowledge among the donors and the communities using the churches.<sup>169</sup> Clear-cut intentions are mirrored in inscriptions, particularly those with Biblical quotes. In some instances, it is quite apparent that the designer of the artwork was a qualified theologian rather than an artist.<sup>170</sup> At the same time, some disagreement could have arisen between the intentions of the donor and the community actually using the decorated spaces; similarly, with the passing of time, some elements of the mosaics could be perceived to be less expressive and replaced.<sup>171</sup> In other cases, influential theologians or holy men objected to the highly profane concepts of church decoration of the officials commissioning the work.<sup>172</sup>

In the case of the Tall Bī'a mosaic, the situation is somewhat clearer because the space itself was not sacral, and therefore it was not necessary to consult with or reach an agreement with the monastery's authorities.<sup>173</sup> At the same time, reaching an agreement with the recipient community was an important element because the tomb chapels and their decorations were commemorative monuments of the local communities.<sup>174</sup> The iconographic schemes had to be meaningful to the urban community that interred its loved ones in these monuments and visited them.<sup>175</sup>

On this mosaic, we see the representation of the garden reduced to a composition arranged around a single tree, where the peacefully grazing deer evoke Isaiah's Animal Paradise. In choosing the comparatively rare palm tree, the mosaicist and the patron perhaps followed an interpretation

<sup>164</sup> Early theological and exegetical literature can be of aid in their interpretations. In many cases, different non-narrative images mediated the same concepts: JENSEN 2000, 32–63.

<sup>165</sup> For the ambivalence and ambiguity of symbols, cf. MAGUIRE 1987, 10–13.

<sup>166</sup> This was raised particularly in connection with the inhabited scroll; currently, it is accepted that this scheme had a symbolic value: DAUPHIN 1978; HACHLILI 2009, 286–288.

<sup>167</sup> Cf., e.g., DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 470–471; HACHLILI 2009, 244–249.

<sup>168</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 14.

<sup>169</sup> DAUPHIN 1978. Tomasz Waliszewski argues for three levels of reception in the case of church iconographic programmes: simple believers who saw the motifs as decoration, people with some schooling in theology, who were familiar with the symbolic meaning of some motifs, and the highly educated, who understood the whole programme: WALISZEWSKI 2001, 264–265. Although it is important to highlight that individual elements of a scheme gain their full meaning in the whole composition, drawing a sharp distinction between the recipients can be misleading since there could be intensive interaction between the representatives of different "levels": simple folks could have received guidance from the more educated during church services, and the recognition of their surroundings on the mosaics must have been a source of delight too.

<sup>170</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 14–15.

<sup>171</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 7–8. An extreme example is the iconoclasm during the eighth–ninth centuries when animal representations were removed from the mosaics: HACHLILI 2009, 209–217.

<sup>172</sup> MAGUIRE 1987, 5–6.

<sup>173</sup> This dichotomy is obvious, for there were no representations of mammals inside the monastery, only of fishes and birds (see above).

<sup>174</sup> Similarly to the North African funerary basilicas and their tomb mosaics. For their role in the identity of communities, cf. YASIN 2009, 69–100. For the visitation of contemporary Egyptian tombs, cf. TÖRÖK 1998, 43.

<sup>175</sup> Symeonis was probably an inhabitant of the nearby Callinicum.

of this tree as a source of life, a variant of the kantharos motif. The antithetic doves are accorded a prominent role, suggesting that they were possibly abstract symbols of the sky alluding to the entirety of the Earth, a recurring theme in many full garden scenes (see above). Aside from the context of a funerary building,<sup>176</sup> the overall composition of the scene aids the interpretation because the message is conveyed by the joint presence of polysemic symbols whose many dimensions can be unravelled and deciphered from their relationships to each other. As we have seen, each element can express the life force and the otherworld simultaneously. To the baptised faithful, the deer and the dove denoted the powerful promise of eternal life in baptisteries.<sup>177</sup> Together with the palm tree, these motifs often appear in funerary contexts too. As a result, the entire composition expresses the ambivalence of life and death, together with a Christian response, the promise of eternal life represented by the garden scene evoking the image of a heavenly Paradise.

The appearance and prominence of the otherwise rare palm tree in the composition calls for an explanation. The Paradise scene of the narthex mosaic of the Tall Bī'a monastery church only has pomegranate and cypress trees, conforming to the predilection for fruit-bearing trees. The prominent role accorded to palm trees is not unattested in the early Byzantine period, and similar, although fully symmetrical compositions are known from funerary contexts too.<sup>178</sup> It seems feasible that what we have here is an adopted element or complete iconographic scheme rooted in much earlier times. The decorative scene on the pyxis sheds light on one possible antecedent.

#### THE SURVIVAL OF A MESOPOTAMIAN ICONOGRAPHIC SCHEME?

Looking at the possible meanings of the mosaic's entire composition, we can discover a close relationship with the representation on the pyxis. As we have seen, the garden provides the mental frame in both cases, while the sum of their elements (the palm tree, the grazing ruminants and the birds) set the scenes in the world in its entirety. In both cases, fertility and the life force were probably particularly important among the possible interpretations of the palm tree. Early Christians could have been inspired by several sources when placing the palm tree in a funerary context, among which Jewish culture undoubtedly played a decisive role. In Hellenistic-Roman times, the palm tree was accorded a prominent role not only in the imagery of synagogues,<sup>179</sup> but in Jewish funerary symbolism too, with their stylised versions appearing in ossuaries as well as in other types of tombs.<sup>180</sup> The concept itself was most likely rooted in ancient Near Eastern traditions and, as we have seen, its antecedents can be found in much broader contexts.<sup>181</sup>

Taking the mosaic's iconographic scheme, particularly its wholly symmetrical variant as the one on the mosaic of the Funerary Chapel of the Church of Saint George (Mount Nebo, *Fig. 9.2*),<sup>182</sup> we can restrict the context of borrowing to Mesopotamia.

This type of antithetic iconographic scheme, the heraldic composition, is a distinctive trait of Mesopotamian and related cultures. It was not merely a formal element, but the result of a

<sup>176</sup> The locations of the compositions too had their special meaning. In Syria, aisles represented the earthly, presbyteries the heavenly domain, and this idea played a role in the liturgy as well: DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 485–488.

<sup>177</sup> Palm trees appear on baptism fonts where they denote the spring season, along with olive (winter), fig (summer) and apple trees (autumn), cf. JENSEN 2011, 270. Knowing that according to early Christian thought, there were no seasons in Paradise, this representation could only have alluded to the earthly domain.

<sup>178</sup> Funerary Chapel of the Church of Saint George (Mount Nebo), see page 883–884.

<sup>179</sup> Cf., e.g., the synagogue floor mosaics of Ma'on in Israel (HACHLILI 2009, Figs VI\_2, VI\_5) and of Hammam Lif in North Africa (BIEBEL 1936).

<sup>180</sup> Cf., e.g., VON GEMÜNDEN 1998, 58–60, Abb. 11–14.

<sup>181</sup> One of these contexts could have been Egypt (cf. VON GEMÜNDEN 1998, 56–57). For palm trees in Egyptian cemetery gardens, cf. WALLERT 1962, 129–139.

<sup>182</sup> See above.

particular visual perspective, which expressed the world's intricate relationships condensed into a few expressive symbols. This perspective overrules narrativity, which was usually restricted to the ideology of power. Individual motifs are almost timeless, resurfacing from time to time and again becoming dominant. The tree on a mountaintop, flanked by animals facing each other, is an abstract symbol of this type.

The symmetrical designs and antithetic compositions so characteristic of Jewish art in Hellenistic-Roman times can be explained by this Oriental background.<sup>183</sup> The widespread popularity and extensive use of heraldic motifs<sup>184</sup> in the eastern regions during early Byzantine times can be similarly derived from this Oriental tradition. One eloquent example is provided by the ten antithetic bird pairs on the narthex floor mosaic at Tall Bī'a and the mosaic of the south-eastern chapel in Church of Rayān from the fifth century (Fig. 15.2). The axis of the wholly symmetrical composition is an amphora and a flower-tree, with two ibexes at the bottom and two deer on top facing each other, and birds between them. The mosaic has a stylised floral background and two trees denote the space.<sup>185</sup>

It might seem something of a contradiction that the depiction on the pyxis does not wholly conform to this formal framework. It represents another Mesopotamian artistic trait, the predilection for endlessly repeated images that virtually dissolve into decorative ornament, commonly applied on cylinder seals. The decoration of the Middle Assyrian pyxis is a good example of this imagery, blending symmetry and continuity by exploiting the cylindrical form.

The assumed relationship between the iconographic scheme of the Tall Bī'a mosaic and the depiction on the Middle Assyrian pyxis does not mean a direct adoption of the elements, but rather that the pyxis represents a visual tradition with a multitude of possible forms, the heraldic composition among them. Exactly because of the interchangeability of motifs, deer could have been replaced by gazelles already in Mesopotamian culture.

The reconstruction of the mechanisms by which the adoption occurred is a more problematic issue. The two thousand years long gap lacking closer parallels between the two artworks makes any suggestions highly uncertain.

Bearing this in mind, it is nevertheless clear that early Christian art with its classical and Jewish roots rested on a much broader ancient Near Eastern foundation. Obviously, any impacts did not flow from one direction only: the Hellenistic tradition, *sensu lato*, was in constant interaction with the Oriental one, from the Orientalising period through the classical and Hellenistic period to the Roman and Byzantine period. Hellenistic formal elements became dominant, even if used for expressing local contents.

The syncretistic religious traditions of Hellenistic northern Mesopotamia and Syria adopted and preserved several Mesopotamian elements. One excellent example is Palmyra, where ancient Babylonian gods such as Nabû and Nergal were venerated,<sup>186</sup> and the New Year festivities in the temple of Bel were held in the Babylonian fashion,<sup>187</sup> implying that the earlier symbolism had survived in some form, although in a Hellenistic garb. We can assume impacts from contemporary Sassanian Iran, which maintained mutually intensive cultural contacts with Byzantine lands. This region was similarly imbued with Hellenistic element, although it would appear that there was a predilection for condensing major compositions into smaller ones, covering smaller surfaces.<sup>188</sup> One good example is the appearance of the ancient Mesopotamian motif of rampant goats flanking

<sup>183</sup> HACHLILI 1988, 366–368.

<sup>184</sup> For an overview of the motifs, cf. HACHLILI 2009, 199–208.

<sup>185</sup> DONCEEL-VOÛTE 1988, 264–265, Pl. 12.

<sup>186</sup> TEIXIDOR 1979, 106–114.

<sup>187</sup> DIRVEN 1997.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. the inhabited scroll in mosaic art and the related motifs in metalwork as well as the stuccos adorning buildings. Suffice it here to recall guinea fowl enclosed within a medallion, which was interpreted as a Zoroastrian symbol in Iran, cf., e.g., DEMANGE 2006, 56, 122–123. For Byzantine mosaic floors, cf.



a tree on Sassanian stuccoes (Fig. 15.3).<sup>189</sup> This cultural milieu would have been conducive to the creation of an artefact bearing images of a date palm, two deer and two birds, in the vein of ancient traditions. No matter whence the impulse originated, from a contemporary object or an old artwork still visible at the time, the individual motifs would have been familiar and well understood. It seems unlikely that the mosaic had been the very first example of this iconography in a Christian context – rather, it was one in a series of an already existing type. The originally Oriental iconographic scheme was translated into a typical Hellenistic form, as shown not only by the artistic details of shading, but also by the much looser symmetry of the overall design. All in all, although an accidental likeness cannot be ruled out, it seems rather unlikely in the light of the arguments presented in the above.

Finally, let me allude to one of László Török's most influential studies:<sup>190</sup> the mosaic represents an eloquent example of the transfiguration of orientalism, or, perhaps better said, of the transfiguration of helleno-orientalism, a theme accorded little scholarly attention from a Mesopotamian perspective.

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WALISZEWSKI 2001, 250–251, 319, 324, with further examples. Silk was one of the well-known mediums of the spread of various motifs.

<sup>189</sup> Pieces of the same series acquired through the antiquities trade are now housed in several museums: DEMANGE 2006, 55–56. For the earlier Mesopotamian examples of the iconographic scheme, see above.

<sup>190</sup> TÖRÖK 2005. László Török was pioneering in this field too. His studies offer convincing evidence that local early Christian culture was based on the syncretism of Pharaonic Egypt and Hellenism and its transformation, cf. also TÖRÖK 1998.

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