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Aniconism on Early Christian Floor Mosaics in the Mediterranean

Abstract

Non-figural, aniconic, motifs are an essential and communicative part of early Christian floor mosaics that have experienced serious devolution in the past decade. Until recently scholars have considered them decorative without giving any further consideration to their possible meaning and function. But in recent years this approach has been reevaluated and therefore changed our understanding of both floor mosaics and aniconism. As a result, they have been placed in the broader map of early Christian art, culture and religion and are no longer considered a pure decoration. This paper discusses the power and meaning of aniconic motifs (such as the cross, circle, Solomon's knot, quatrefoils, interlace, meander, etc.) on early Christian floor mosaics in the Mediterranean. It proposes that aniconic motifs could be observed as symbols, which are deeply imbued with magical agency and as a denotation of divine presence without figural image.

Key words: *aniconism, early Christianity, floor mosaics, ornaments, symbols, apotropaic*

The most recent events that include migrations, refugees, civil wars, revolutions, just to name some, have transformed our world, especially the Mediterranean, into a defragmented and chaotic place to live. Events like these have occurred in the past and from the European perspective the Roman *mare nostrum* is seen as a place of exchange and mobility, but also as a zone of long-lasting conflict, if we consider major conquests and expansions that consequently led to the development of contemporary demographic and socio-cultural stratification. The divisions, especially the spatial ones, encouraged new research approaches of an area that has been, until recently, marginalized and that, among others, include the analysis of migrations in the early Christian period through aniconic motifs on floor mosaics.[1]

1 From an art historian point of view aniconic motifs are constantly changing due to social and cultural transformations (as a sign of foreign influence or perhaps an artistic moment desiring a change is in question). It is, as J. Trilling points out, "a historical process in which everyone participates", J. Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective*, Seattle 2003, 47. Then he adds "The more complex and cosmopolitan the society, the more strands of network of traditions is likely to have (…)", ibid., 49.

The Mediterranean, as we know it, is defined by its geography, the sea which is its central reference point, including shores, islands and straits that both connected and divided the space into regions and cities. Our perception of this area is defined by the legacies of earlier divisions, which continue to frame our research along the borders of culture, language, art, etc. Therefore, we need to elaborate the production and reproduction of 'borders' in and around the Mediterranean with a constant reminder that artistic, as well as historical and archaeological approaches are still largely unknown, unrecognized and unrelated within this space. But by investigating the imagery and the beliefs of the people living within those borders (their fears, desires, hopes and dreams) we can learn about the dynamics of migrations. In this paper we intend to pursue the depth and meaning of one of the aspects and different stages that are a result of movements and migrations of people and their ideas, through space and time. With the analysis of aniconic motifs on floor mosaics in early Christianity, as symbols which are, as we believe, imbued with magical agency and a denotation of divine presence, we intend to consider the role of individuals and groups and gain insight into their daily practices and experiences, their beliefs, fears, prayers and hopes through imagery. They can provide trajectories that might give us insight into the communication networks, organizations, places of production, etc.

Aniconism[2] in ancient and early Christian art marks the existence of the divine presence through the use of non-figurative or aniconic images, and as such has long been observed by former researchers in particular as an echo of the primitive[3], primarily Greek, heritage.[4] In other words,

2 M. Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity. Oxford studies in ancient culture and representation*, Oxford 2012; ead., Aniconism and the Idea of the Primitive in Graeco-Roman Thought and Practice, in: *Divine Images and Human Imagination in Greece and Rome*, ed. J. Mylonopoloulos, Leiden 2010, 63-86; H. Maguire, Magic and Geometry in Early Christian Floor Mosaics and Textiles, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 44 (1994), 265-274; O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament,* Princeton 1992; E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, Ithaca 1979; R. E. Kolarik, *The Floor Mosaics of Eastern Illyricum*, *Hellēnika* 26 (1980), 173-203, esp. 180; M. M. Epstein, Jewish Visuality: Myths of Aniconism and realities in Creativity, *Conversations* 11 (2011), 43-51, https://www.academia.edu/2440536/Jewish_Visuality_Myths_of_Aniconism_and_Realities_of_Creativity.

3 The word 'primitive' can be understood in two ways. On one hand, it can mean a positive change on which time had no influence, or in the other it may be viewed negatively, as something completely backwards (barbaric) and therefore qualitatively worse than 'advanced' representative strategies. Supporters of the negative interpretations aniconism belong to the circle of Winckelmann, considering it inferior to a much more civilized figural art, precisely because it does not contain natural forms, see. M. Gaifman, Aniconism and the Idea, 63-86; id., *Anicomism in Greek Antiquity*, passim; H. Maguire, *Magic and Geometry,* 265-274; O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Oranament,* passim; E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*.

4 It should be noted that the earliest Greeks worshiped 'symbols' that have marked and acknowledged the divine presence. It was only later that they turned to respect stones above all or baetylia (which is oriental in origin), but then gave way to such aniconic figural representations of deities, which

aniconism was 'condemned' as a form of art that belonged to the early stages of development of art *per se* and as a type of performance that is not affected by the forces of rationalization and cultural progress. Aniconism was used as a method of understanding the Greeks and their religious customs and ideas, and was practiced as a counterweight to figural art. An attempt to elucidate the nature of ornaments and geometric objects, with consideration of the profound transformation in its significance, proved to be difficult. But using historical backgrounds permeated with philosophy, theology and literature, weaving across visual arts we could grasp the true meaning and mediation of ornaments. Namely, ornaments are understood as the order, which reveals 'the justice and harmony of the cosmos'[5] with the focus on the relation between the artwork and a beholder. It is more than just pure aesthetics or decoration, as we look within the broader map of both the Greek and Christian world.[6] This point in Greek philosophy and consequently in art had a huge influence on early Christian understanding of the world later represented on floor mosaics, as we shall return to this subject later in this paper.

It is important to note that within Greek philosophical ideas we came to realize that divinity resides inside the monument in the form of aniconic objects. Also, the space where an aniconic monument resides, usually a pillar or a stone, is connected to a certain divinity implying at the same time that it is the only place where worship can be carried out and where divine presence is permanent.[7] Herodotus informs us that the Greeks

will have its peak in anthropomorphic representations of the classical period of Greek art. Studies of prof. Mettinger indicate that aniconic performances of Greek art are actually heritage of the Middle Eastern culture, reflected in sanctuaries in the open air and whose iconic symbolism consists of stones, sacred trees and shrines. These iconic symbols are neither anthropomorphic nor zoomorphic but are recognizable as conventional labels of the sacred space, and the presence of holiness through the sacrifices, praying and others, see T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image?: Israelite Aniconism and its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, Stockholm 1995.; id., The Absence of Images: the problem of the aniconic at gades and its religio-historical background, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 21 (2004), 89-100; M. Gaifman, *Aniconism and the Idea,* 63-86; *Word and Image in Ancient Greece*, eds. N. K. Rutter and B. A. Sparkes, Edinburgh 2000.

5 C. L. Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance,* Leiden 2015, 3.

6 E. M. Kavaler, *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470-1540,* New Haven 2012, esp. 4-5, 50-113, 199-229. He writes about late Gothic ornament as 'pictures of geometry (…) which encourages the viewer to discover the underlying system of proportions (…) and restore a sense of order', ibid., 56-58. Cf. O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament,* 154, where he states that ornament is the embodiment of geometry.

7 Modern scholars tend to interpret and perceive the art of aniconism of stones, columns and wood as a continuum of ancient traditions that preceded the worship of figural imageries. Pausanias wrote about aniconic art using the term 'argoi lithoi' as he called the 'raw' (unprocessed) stone which was worshiped, making a difference between 'agalma' (statue) and 'argoi lithoi' (unprocessed stone), see. F. Hartog, *Mirror of Herodotus: the Representation of the Other in the Writings of Herodotus*, Berkeley 1988.

learned from the Egyptians, thanks to close trade links, about the anthropomorphic representations of deities.[8] By the second century AD Clement of Alexandria in the first part of his famous trilogy *Warning Gentiles* (4, 40), in a very demeaning sense, indicates that the worship of aniconic objects is a sign of primitive.[9] But, regardless of the concept of the Greco-Roman tradition, anti-pagan culture of the early Christians shaped our modern perception of this phenomenon. Aniconic art essentially encompasses all forms and phenomena in art and religion concerning the worship of non-figurative subjects (such as stones), symbols[10] (cross, Solomon's knot, quatrefoils, circles and others), empty space, calligraphy, geometric ornaments or any kind of absence of figural representations, which is today still present in Islamic and Jewish cultures.[11] All these types of aniconism are not always consistent nor can all be used in order to explain and understand ancient art or the antique perception of this phenomenon. But we are led to believe that aniconism is here so as to stand in opposition to figural, anthropomorphic art. Geometry and ornaments as forms of aniconic art continued to live in this period and had an extremely important role in setting and designing a scene for visual representations. Actually, geometry has developed into a separate, independent, field of study because, as the Greeks believed, its sovereignty (which was not only the subject of philosophical discourse) was created by the existence of a particular matter, the Soul, which produced its ideas and forms.[12] It became a part of the overall corpus of aniconic floor mosaics, which is most prevalent in early Christian art. Geometric shapes gained importance *in rebus divinis*.

8 Ibid.

9 R. Grigg, Aniconic Worship and the Apologetic Tradition: A Note on Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira, *Church History* 45/4 (1976), 428-433, esp. p. 428; Origen, *Contra Celsum,* ed. H. Chadwick, Cambridge 1953, 4.31; 7.64; Tertullian, *De idololatria,* ed. S. Thelwall, Createspace Independent Publishing Platform 2015, 4. See also L. Nasrallah, The Earthen Human, the Breathing Statue: The Sculptor-God, Graeco-Roman Statutary, and Clement of Alexandria, in: *Beyond Eden: The Biblical Story of Paradise [Genesis 2-3] and Its Reception History*, eds. K. Schmid and C. Riedweg, Tübingen 2008, 126-133; *The Ancient Mysteries*, ed. M. W. Meyer, Philadelphia 1999, 209-210, 243-254; E. Bevan, *Holy Images,* London 1940, 88.

10 The Greek noun 'symbolon' is derived from the verb 'symballein' meaning 'to throw together, bring together, put together' also 'to collect' and 'to compare', see. G. Ladner, Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: a Comparison, *Speculum* 54/2 (1979), 223. Here symbol as a term indicates a highly spiritual and mystical sign described in the work of Dionsysius the Areopagite 'On the Heavenly Hierarchy', see. Ibid, 224.

11 R. S. Hendel, Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel, in: *The Image and the Book. Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of the Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. K. Van der Toorn, Lueven 1997, 205-228; T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, passim.; id., *The Absence of Images,* 89-100.

12 E. A. Zaitsev, The Meaning of Early Medieval Geometry: From Euclid and Surveyors' Manuals to Christian Philosophy, *Isis* 90/3 (1999), 523.

By adopting pagan, polytheistic ideas, Christianity, with the use of different images, media and in different contexts, showed the diversity and high quality of work, which has survived throughout the Mediterranean. In order to promote Christian faith and dogma through the 'intelligible language' of a believer, Christians appropriated and reinterpreted pagan tradition. Church fathers, philosophers, theologians and writers had a major role in this process. The ecclesiastical tradition of exalting geometry, as a mean of cognition i.e. comprehension, is described in numerous exegetes such as Origen, Augustine, Boethius, Cassiodorus and others. They used geometry and metaphysics to shape the act of creation (especially if we consider that the word *γεω-μετρεω* in Greek means 'measuring of the world'). Since the act of creation is described in Hexameron[13] in the 1st century AD another kind of exegesis revives and it includes the presentation of artistic creation through geometry, but in the late Middle Ages by way of an example in the miniatures, God as the architect of the world is literally presented with calipers and a compass in His hands.[14] This understanding of God as the architect of the cosmos is found in Scripture, Proverbs (8: 27-29): "*I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep*."[15] By using calipers God creates the most perfect shape - a circle which in early Christianity has also an allegorical meaning because it contains all the other geometric shapes, and accordingly the cosmos (*orbis terrarum*). Here the world is ornament, in the 'sense of everything'.[16] Aniconic motifs or ornaments in Greek and early Christian understanding represent 'universal ordering' that is 'the created world as an exemplar of ornament and paradigm for works of artifice'.[17]

Subsequently aniconic objects or patterns enter into a concept of meaning, an idea that occupied the thoughts and papers of modern scholars. Here we must note that ornaments are and should be seen as motifs (patterns) but they also carry cosmological meaning that goes further to the act of creation as Plato writes in Timaeus 28b "*the fairest of all that has become*". By creating

13 C. L. Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament,* 41.; F. Robbins, *The Hexaemeral Literature,* Chicago 1912.

14 Bible moralisée. God the Father measures the world, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2554, fol.1r, in: *Romanesque. Architecture, Sculpture, Painting*, ed. R. Toman, Cologne 1997, 448.

15 E. A. Zaitsev, *The Meaning of Early Medieval Geometry,* 536, 540.

16 C. L. Guest, *The Understanding of Ornamen,* 39.

17 Ibid*,* 12, esp. 43-44. Here through the hexaemeral tradition the ornament of the world fills it with living creatures; and stars are associated with ornaments as Plato calls them embroidered ornament (*kosmon pepoikilimenon*). Basil personifies the earth as the 'universal mother' when speaking of the ornament of vegetal life.

rhythm (rhythmically repeated cycle[18]) and using symmetry the 'power' of ornament increases.[19] Geometric patterns that are repeated are believed to have a magical function, in terms of apotropaic, protective, especially when they are found on early Christian floor mosaics, textiles and objects of everyday use.[20] In other words, geometrical patterns have a magical function in the apotropaic sense of the word.[21] As Oleg Grabar in his study of Islamic ornament 'The Mediation of Ornament' discusses Plato's description of Eros as *daimon* or a figure for mediation of ornament. Eros, or putto, is an activating force "who links ornament in speech as a means of manipulation with love and magic".[22] Therefore, magic and ornaments have the same purpose in procuring advantages by magical means concerning the universal order. What remains as an open issue, around which in the early Christian period a heated debate developed, relates to the determination of which symbols, motifs or ornaments carry magical powers. Of course, providing an answer is impossible due to the fact that numerous archaeological sites demonstrate the existence and use of different amulets, apotropaic symbols, and papyrus with witchcrafts.[23] It is our belief that geometrical motifs such as a circle, cross, Solomon's knot, quatrefoils and others, that are dominant on most early Christian monuments, are considered to have evolved from a "magical and mythological awareness of human development" in the drawings of abstract and geometric forms, which were later expressed in anthropomorphic forms.[24] Therefore, we tend to believe that magical significance of these ornaments contains important meaning in the art of the Christian world.[25] Here we must note that magic and magical symbols have a lot to do with Slavic culture that contributed much to the meaning and dissemination of

18 C. H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology,* New York 1960, 188.

19 J. Erdeljan, B. Vranesevic, Eikōn and Magic. Solomon's knot on the Floor Mosaic in Herakleia Lynkestis, *IKON 9* (2016), 99-108. With the most recent researches we associate repetition with mechanical process but in reality it increases the power of a symbol depicted.

20 H. Maguire, *Magic and geometry,* 265-274; id., *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A. D. 843-1261*, eds. H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom, New York 1997, 290; *Byzantine Magic*, ed. H. Maguire, Washington, D. C. 1995.

21 H. Maguire, *Magic and geometry,* 265; id., *Byzantine Magic,* passim; W. R. Caraher, *Church, Society, and the Sacred in Early Christian Greece*, Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University 2003, 158, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file%3Faccession%3Dosu1057071172%26disposition%3Dinline

22 C. L. Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament,* 55.

23 J. Kirsten Smith, *Visual Strategies in the Greek Magical Papyri: The Productive Integration of Image and Text*, 2000, https://www.academia.edu/7051973/Visual_Strategies_in_the_Greek_Magical_Papyri_The_Productive_Integration_of_Image_and_Text

24 Д. Миловановић, Орнаментална перцепција света, in: *Освежавање меморије,* ed. id., Belgrade 2013, 15-16.

25 H. Maguire, *Magic and geometry,* 265-274; id., *The Glory of Byzantium,* 290.

talismans and magical texts in the Byzantine world, and they are to this day left unexamined.[26]

Through word-image order ornament is conceived and appears in art through large geometric (aniconic) carpets, which spread from the eastern Mediterranean to the area of present-day Greece, and then to the Balkans. This primarily refers to the churches in Epidaurus, Daphnousion, Pisidian in Antioch, only to find their place on almost every floor mosaics in large centers such as Stobi, Herakleia Lynkestis, Caričin Grad, Philipy, Philipopolis, Sandansky, Amphipolis, etc. If we take as an example geometric ornaments on floor mosaic of the palace in Apamea in Syria (fig. 1) we can see the sun disc of eight rays in the middle of the floor. This motif can also be found in the papyri, magical amulets or jewelry, jewelry boxes, etc. Then the motif of concentric circles, as we can see on the floor mosaic in Beit Méry (fig. 2), is also very common on mirrors, with the function of warding off evil.[27] Another symbol that appears on this mosaic is Solomon's knot, represented twice in a squared form.[28] This motif framed by concentric rings can be found in Herakleia Lynkestis (fig. 3) where, as demonstrated, carries apotropaic meaning[29] and the church at Shuneh Nimrin in Jordan where Solomom's knot is followed by the inscription 'God with us'.[30] Other examples include northern transept of the basilica D and G in Nea Anchialos, in Epidaurus, in Theotokou in Thessaly (placed at the entrance to the nave with a starry disc and a tree, and in the center a peacock), Episcopal basilica and baptistery in Philipopolis, just to name some.[31] The cross is one of the most common motifs like in the Basilica with transept in Caričin Grad (fig. 4) or in Episcopal basilica in Stobi (fig. 5), than quatrefoil, interlace, etc. Numerous aniconic pagan symbols of the time served in the defense against evil forces and can be seen on amulets, papyri, as well as

26 H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*, 155-178.

27 H. Maguire, *Magic and geometry,* 267.

28 E. Kitzinger, The Threshold of the Holy Shrine: Observations on Floor Mosaics at Antioch and Bethlehem, in: *Kyriakon, Festschrift Johannes Quasten II,* eds. P. Granfield and J. A. Jungman, Münster 1970, 639-647, esp. 641-642.

29 J. Erdeljan, B. Vranesevic, Eikōn and Magic, passim; H. Maguire, *Magic and Geometry,* 268; G. Cvetković-Tomašević, Mosaïques Paléochétiennes récemment découvertes à Héracléa Lynkestis, in: *La mosaïques gréco-romaine,* II, Paris 1975, 385-99, figs, 183-192

30 M. Piccirillo, A Church at Shuneh Nimrin, *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 26 (1982), 335-342; id., *I mosaici di Giordania*, Rome 1986, 94.; H. Maguire, *Magic and geometry,* 268.

31 H. Maguire, Profane Icons: The Significance of Animal Violence in Byzantine Art, *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 38 (2000), 25; Е. Кесякова, Мозай от епископската базилика на Филипопол, in: *Изследвания в чест на Стефан Бояджиев*, ed. S. Stanev et al., Sofia 2011, 173-210, esp. 196.; W. R. Caraher, *Church, Society, and the Sacred,* 158.; Г. Цветковић-Томашевић, *Рановизантијски подни мозаици. Дарданија – Македонија - Нови Епир,* Belgrade 1978.

objects of everyday use. Mostly they can be traced at the entrances, thresholds, city walls, etc.[32] If we rely on the meaning of the sacred (religious) symbols, as explained by M. Eliade, we will see that he supported the idea that each symbol has multiple meanings, especially when pointing out that many scholars have tried to explain *coincidentia oppositorum*.[33]

We can conclude that with the rise of Christianity numerous pagan motifs were incorporated on church floor mosaics. What has changed is the conception of perceiving aniconic objects, geometrical patterns and ornaments that goes beyond their aesthetic and artificial display. Crosses, squares, circles, and other motifs had a role not just to sustain figural images but also, as recent finds show, protect beholders and catechumeneons. They become the manifestation of one's desires and hopes, a medium between forces of good and evil. We have to add that our understanding of ornaments and their meaning has yet to be discovered with the analysis of Christian writings and preserved material culture. We hope that, in the future, we will provide answers and change our perspective of early Christian art as a whole. But, absolute confirmation and definition of aniconic motifs, at this point, is rarely possible as their meanings are transitory and change within different cultures.

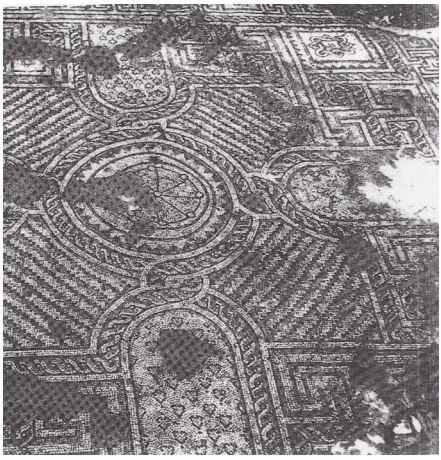

Fig. 1: Floor mosaic with a sun disc in its center, Apamea, Syria (from Maguire, 1994, fig. 3)

32 Д. Миловановић, *Орнаментална перцепција света*, 24; С. Јаблан, Љ. Радовић, Класификација орнамената, in: *Освежавање меморије*, ed. Д. Миловановић, Belgrade 2013, 73; С. Мартиновић, Орнамент измештен из времена и простора, in: *Освежавање меморије*, 45-68; *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Cain and N. Lenski, Aldershot 2009, 237-248.

33 M. Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, New York 1961, 39.

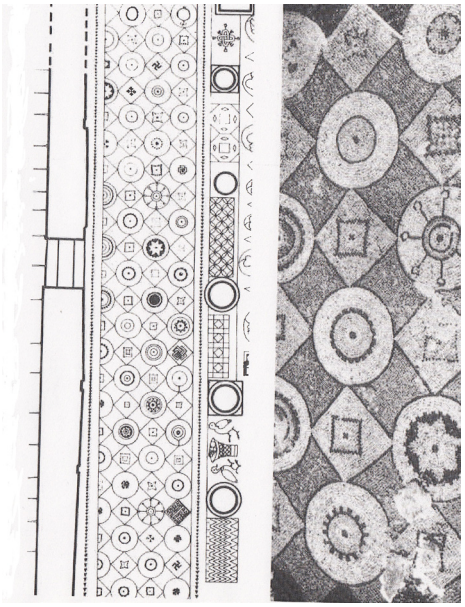

Fig. 2: Floor mosaic with an eight-rayed star, Beit Méry, Lebanon (from Maguire, 1994, fig. 2)

Fig 3: Floor mosaic with Solomon's knot from the catehumeneon of the Large Basilica, Herakleia Lynkestis, FYR Macedonia (Wikimedia Commons)

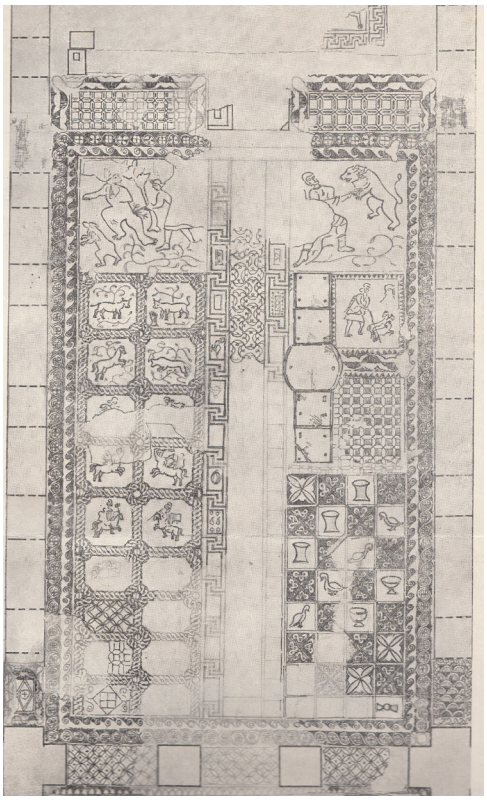

Fig 4: Basilica with transept, Caricin Grad, Serbia (from Мано-Зиси, 1952-1953)

Fig 5: Episcopal basilica, Stobi, FYR Macedonia (Wikimedia Commons)