

Zeitschrift: Cahiers d'archéologie romande
Herausgeber: Bibliothèque Historique Vaudoise
Band: 85 (2001)

Artikel: Some characteristic traits of a mosaic workshop in early Christian Cyprus
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-836077>

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Some characteristic traits of a mosaic workshop in Early Christian Cyprus

Demetrios MICHAELIDES

The numerous mosaics excavated in Cyprus during the last few decades have enabled us to identify some of the mosaic workshops active on the island during the Roman period¹. The recognition of similar workshops making mosaics during the early Christian period has proved more difficult despite the fact that a very large number of pavements survives. This is probably due to the fact that their products, being almost exclusively geometric, had to rely on an ever-increasing inventiveness and variation of motifs, so that the chances of finding different buildings with floors that employ identical patterns and combinations of motifs are much fewer.

There are certain patterns, such as the adjacent scales with rosebuds (*Décor*, 215), that are found in many 5th/6th century buildings². The same can also be said for the latchkey pattern of swastikas with single returns, with the decoration of the vertical and horizontal spaces between them creating the effect of an interlace (*Décor*, 189 a)³. Such similarities, however, do not concern us since they do not necessarily indicate the product of one mosaic workshop, but simply reflect the favour that certain patterns enjoyed in the Eastern Mediterranean during that period. The present paper will discuss one exception to this rule, where the mosaics of two different buildings can be shown to be the product of one and the same workshop.

The monuments in question are the Basilica of Ayias Trias, near Yialoussa, and the so-called Annex of Eustolios at Kourion. Both came to light a long time ago and both remain unpublished, although short reports give precious information for their interpretation. The two buildings lie at two different ends of the island, a distance over 155 km as the crow flies which, by Cypriot standards, is very far. Ayias Trias is on the Carpas peninsula on the East, not far from the northern coast, while Kourion is on the southern coast towards the West.

The Basilica is situated c. 3 km west of the village of Ayias Trias, in an area where chance discoveries witness a flourishing ancient community. The name of this settlement is unknown, as is that of the dedicatee of the basilica. The structure was excavated between 1963 and 1972 by Athanasios Papageorgiou for the Department of Antiquities⁴. It is a three-aisled basilica (ill. 1)

¹ For those of Paphos, see D. MICHAELIDES, "New mosaics from Paphos", in *VIIe Colloque International sur la mosaïque (AIEMA), Tunis, 2-8 octobre 1994* (forthcoming).

² For examples and the use of the motif in Cyprus, see D. MICHAELIDES in W.A. DASZEWSKI and D. MICHAELIDES, *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus*, Ravenna 1988, p. 130-134.

³ E. g. the examples from the "Byzantine House" (D. MICHAELIDES, *Cypriot Mosaics*, Nicosia 1992, p. 98, pl. 55) and the North Portico of the Atrium Basilica of Chrysopolitissa (unpublished) at Paphos.

⁴ I would like to thank Mr. Papageorgiou for permission to study the mosaics from his excavation. On the building and its decoration, see D. MICHAELIDES in W.A. DASZEWSKI and D. MICHAELIDES, *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus*, Ravenna 1988, *passim*. and p. 89 for previous bibliography. More recent references include : D. MICHAELIDES, "Cypriot mosaics : local traditions and external influences", in E. PELTENBURG (ed.), *Early*

measuring 21,5 x 14,5 m, with aisles separated by five sandstone columns and terminating in semicircular apses. It is preceeded by a narthex and a large atrium, and is provided with a diakonikon, a baptistery and several other accessory rooms. Mosaics survive in a vestibule, the narthex, the diakonikon, the central nave and the two aisles.

ILL. 1

There are two striking things about the mosaic floors of this Basilica. The first is their strictly aniconic character, allowing only for a depiction of pomegranates and pairs of sandals in the north aisle⁵. The other is the rich use of the so-called rainbow style. This is found throughout the building but it is most prominent in the central nave, where the colouring but also the patterns themselves seem more developed. In fact, the mosaics of the basilica seem to fall into two groups : the first consists of those of the aisles, the narthex and the diakonikon, and the second of those of the nave and the vestibule. Both groups find parallels in late 4th and early 5th century Syro-Palestinian mosaics⁶. A date in the early 5th century for the first group is supported by a coin of Honorius, found in the foundation of the mosaics of the North aisle⁷, while it would seem that, as A.H.S. Megaw has already proposed, the second group, that is the mosaics of the nave and the vestibule, was made during another phase slightly later in the same century⁸.

The decoration of the nave (ill. 2) is of particular interest in the present context. It consists of a long central panel framed by three wide decorative frames. In front of the step into the sanctuary, the white band separating the two outermost frames bears the inscription : ΗΡΑΚΛ(Ε)ΙΟC ΔΙΑΚΟΝΟC ΕΥΞΑΜΕΝΟC ΕΠΙΟΙΗCΕ ΜΕCΟΧΩΡΟΝ ("the deacon Herakleios made the middle part as a result of a vow").

ILL. 2

The central panel has a uniform pattern of tangent saltires of intersecting spindles with an inscribed poised convex square, creating the effect of intersecting circles (*Décor*, 246 a). The first decorative frame (ill. 2 and 3) consists of a single large T-meander made of an asymmetrically shaded band (*Décor*, 34 b). The second is made of large scalloped squares (*Décor*, 40 e but with a double latchkey meander).

Society in Cyprus, Edinburgh 1989, p. 285, ill. 32. 17 ; D. MICHAELIDES, *Cypriot Mosaics*, Nicosia 1992, p. 78-80, pl. 44. See also note 5 below.

⁵ On the sandals, as well as the references above, see also K.M.D. DUNBABIN, "Ipsa deae vestigia... Footprints divine and human on Graeco-Roman monuments", *JRA* 3, 1990, p. 85-109, esp. p. 86 ; D. MICHAELIDES, "Paphiaca II, A : A foot imprint from Paphos", *RDAC*, 1991, p. 191-192, pl. L. 2.

⁶ Some parallels are listed in A.H.S. MEGAW, "Interior decoration in Early Christian Cyprus", in *XVe Congrès International d'Etudes Byzantines. Rapports et Co-rapports*, Athens 1976, p. 12-13.

⁷ A. PAPAGEORGHIU, "Η Παλαιοχριστιανική καὶ Βυζαντινὴ Ἀρχαιολογία καὶ Τέχνη ἐν Κύπρῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔτη 1965-1966", *Apostolos Barnabas* 28, 1967, p. 83.

⁸ A.H.S. MEGAW, *op. cit.*, Athens 1976, p. 13.

ILL. 3

All these panels are decorated with rich rainbow motifs, except one, in front of the main entrance from the narthex, which has a five-line inscription (ill. 4) reading : AETIC EYΘA/AIC EYTYXI/ANOC EYΞA/MENOI THN E/YXHN AΠEΔOKAN ("Aetis, Euthalis and Eutychianos, having made a vow, have fulfilled it").

ILL. 4

By contrast to the Basilica of Ayias Trias, which seems to be a building in a rural area, the so-called Annex of Eustolios, is found in one of the most important cities of ancient Cyprus. The excavation of the complex was carried out in two main phases by the University Museum of Pennsylvania University : one in 1935 and another from 1948 to 1950⁹. The building takes its name from the Eustolios mentioned in a mosaic inscription, but its precise nature remains a puzzle. Situated in one of the most important quarters of the city, right next to the theatre with which it is related, it seems to have had both a public and a private character.

The building (ill. 5) and its mosaic decoration, as they survive today, are the result of a major reconstruction of an earlier structure, dating to the end of the reign of Theodosios II (408-450 AD). There are two distinct but closely integrated parts : a bath complex on the higher, northern level, and a luxurious residence on a lower level to the south. The residence to the south is articulated around a large open courtyard with a central fountain. Of the porticoes surrounding it, that on the south continues into a long corridor which links the building with the theatre on its west. A large room to the East of the courtyard has been identified as a triclinium, while a large, apsed room in the SE corner, with a superb view of the underlying coast, was probably a reception hall. Unfortunately, the rooms along the south side have tumbled down the very steep precipice. Mosaics survive in the Entrance Vestibule, the Long Hall and a Basin of the baths ; and in the West, South and East Porticos, and the Triclinium of the residence.

ILL. 5

The Annex is entered through a Vestibule paved with a geometric mosaic including a large central panel with an octagon flanked by squares and lozenges¹⁰ enclosing the welcoming inscription : ΕΙΣ(ΑΓΕ)/ΕΠΑΓΑ(ΘΩ)/ΕΥΤΥΧΩΣ/ΤΩΟΙ(ΚΩ). The Hall of the baths has a long carpet in the centre, framed and articulated into four panels by an eight-strand guilloche. The damaged southernmost panel preserves four-pointed stars, the squares in their centres filled

⁹ S. PELEKANIDES and P.I. ATZAKA, Σύνταγμα τῶν Παλαοχριστιανικῶν Ψηφιδωτῶν Δαπέδων τῆς Ἑλλάδος I. Νησιωτικὴ Ἑλλάς, Salonica 1974, p. 143-144, with previous bibliography. Add to this : D.W. RUPP, "Eustolios Complex-Area VI", in H. WYLDE SWINY (ed.), *An Archaeological Guide to the Ancient Kourion Area and the Akrotiri Peninsula*, Nicosia 1982, p. 132-139 ; *A Guide to Kourion* (The Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation), Nicosia 1987, p. 30-3 with many colour photographs ; D. MICHAELIDES, *Cypriot Mosaics*, Nicosia 1992, p. 81-87, pl. 45-47. See also note 11 below.

¹⁰ M. BLANCHARD, J. CHRISTOPHE, J.-P. DARMON, H. LAVAGNE, R. PRUDHOMME, H. STERN, *Répertoire graphique du décor géométrique dans la mosaïque antique* (BullAIEMA 4), Paris 1975, no. 583.

with rainbow motifs (*Décor*, 184 f). The second panel (ill. 6) has a pseudo-emblema with a partridge set in a field with a pattern of tangent saltires of intersecting spindles, creating the effect of intersecting circles, the resulting convex squares filled with rainbow motifs (*Décor*, 246 a).

ILL. 6

The next panel has a diagonally set spaced swastika-meander with double returns (*Décor*, 190 a), and finally, the northernmost panel, has a medallion traced by a guilloche, decorated with a personification of KTICIC, the Building Power or Creation. The entire floor of the small basin (ill. 7) to the east of the hall is decorated with a large wave-motif in rainbow colours (*Décor*, 112 e).

ILL. 7

The mosaics of the residence are less well preserved. Little survives of the floor of the triclinium where several elaborate bands frame a large central field with a pattern of crosses and irregular octagons (*Décor*, 180 b). Of the presumed four panels of the West Portico of the atrium, there are remains of only two, exhibiting interlace designs and rich rainbow colouring. In the South Portico (ill. 8), a strip with a row of poised squares interlaced with two interlaced undulating bands (*Décor*, 79 b) frames five panels.

ILL. 8

The larger one in the centre (ILL. 9) has a pattern of crosses and irregular octagons worked in a swastika-meander (*Décor*, 180 g). The square panels on either side have a pattern of tangent saltires of intersecting spindles, creating the effect of intersecting circles (*Décor*, 246 a); and those further out, are filled with scalloped squares (*Décor*, 219 f).

ILL. 9

Of the five panels of the East Portico two survive almost intact. One has a large medallion with an interlace, with, in the corners, very naturalistically rendered birds (ill. 10).

ILL. 10

Birds, as well as fish, also decorate the well preserved southernmost panel (ill. 11).

ILL. 11

The frame of this room is of great interest. It consists of a double latchkey meander separated by rectangular and square panels (*Décor*, 40 e but with a double latchkey meander) decorated with a rich variety of rainbow motifs. The frame also incorporates three inscriptions: A very damaged one mentioning Eustolios who donated baths to Kourion; another, on the

threshold leading from the East Portico to a lost room on the south, saying that "The sisters Reverence, Temperence and Obedience to the Law tend this exedra and the fragrant hall". Finally, a third inscription, paving the passage from the East to the South Portico, says: "In place of big walls and solid iron, bright bronze and even adamant, this house has girt itself with the much venerated symbols of Christ"¹¹. Generally speaking the mosaic decoration of the Annex of Eustolios is of particular importance since it illustrates how pagan decoration was gradually displaced by Christian dogmas even in non-religious buildings: aniconic, except for Ktisis and the birds and fish, the decoration of the Annex of Eustolios has nothing in it that would offend a Christian.

Unlike the mosaics of Ayias Trias, those of the Annex of Eustolios appear to have been made during one and the same phase. Unfortunately the inscriptions do not mention a date and the benefactor Eustolios is otherwise unknown. There are, however, coins from under the floors, the latest of which come from the reign of Theodosios II and bring the date of these mosaics very close to that of the floors of Ayias Trias¹².

Yet more interesting for our present purposes are the striking similarities between this decoration and that of the nave of the Basilica of Ayias Trias. Even the use of inscriptions, not a common feature of Cypriot mosaics by any means, links the decoration of these two buildings¹³. It is, however, the rainbow motifs and colouring that really bring the decoration of these two buildings together. In fact, in some cases the patterns and their rendering, as well as the way in which they are combined, are identical.

The pattern of tangent saltires of intersecting spindles, creating the effect of intersecting circles, in the centre of the nave of Ayias Trias (ill. 2), is very similar, especially in the rainbow fillers, to both the partridge panel from the Hall of the Baths (ill. 6), and the South Portico of the Annex of Eustolios (ill. 8 and 9). The scalloped squares of Ayias Trias, are identical to those of the two panels in the South Portico at Kourion (ill. 2-4 and 8-9)¹⁴. Even the boldness in the rendering and colouring of the T-meander of one (ill. 2-3) finds a reflection in the rendering of the poised squares interlaced with two interlaced undulating bands of the other (ill. 8 and 9). Above all, however, it is the bands of double latchkey meander separated by rectangular panels framing the nave of the Basilica and the East Portico of the Annex of Eustolios that are identical (ill. 2-4 and 10-11 respectively). The rendering of the meander is the same, as are several of the rainbow motifs filling the panels. Even the insertion of inscriptions in the panels between the

¹¹ On the interpretation of these inscriptions, see T.B. MITFORD, *The Inscriptions of Kourion*, Philadelphia 1971, nos 201-215; and R.S. BAGNALL and T. DREW BEAR, "Documents from Kourion: A review article", *Phoenix* 27, 1973, p. 97-117 and 213-244.

¹² A.H.S. MEGAW, "Interior decoration in Early Christian pavements in Cyprus", in *XVe Congrès International d'Etudes Byzantines. Rapports et Co-rapports*, Athens 1976, p. 13.

¹³ See F. HADJICHRISTOPHI, "Mosaic inscriptions on Early Christian pavements in Cyprus", in A.A.M. BRYER and G. S. GEORGHALLIDES (eds), *"The Sweet Land of Cyprus". Papers given at the 25th Jubilee Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1991*, Nicosia 1993, p. 419-420.

¹⁴ For the use of the scalloped square in Cyprus, see D. MICHAELIDES in W.A. DASZEWSKI and D. MICHAELIDES, *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus*, Ravenna 1988, p. 135-138.

meander is the same in the two monuments. Finally, one could also mention that the rainbow wave motif paving the entire floor of the Basin at the Annex of Eustolios, is found in one of the panels of the frame of the nave of Ayia Trias (ill. 7 and 3).

These and other similarities between the mosaics of the two buildings leave no doubt that the decoration of the nave (at least) of the Basilica of Ayias Trias was made by the same workshop that decorated the more or less contemporary Annex of Eustolios. This is very important since it shows that workshops travelled considerable distances within the island. Even more importantly it shows that one and the same workshop could decorate both a religious building, like the basilica, and a civic or private building, like that of Eustolios. Clearly, this workshop must have decorated other buildings too, and there are some possible candidates, amongst which an unpublished building at Lambousa¹⁵, but further study is necessary before this can be established.

DISCUSSION

David Parrish : Voyez-vous des rapports de style entre les mosaïques que vous avez montrées et les productions des ateliers de la Syrie et de l'Asie Mineure de la même époque ?

Demetrios Michaelides : Yes, certainly. Cypriot mosaics of the Roman period were already closely linked to those of the Syro-Palestinian coast, and the connections continue during the Christian period too. Antioch remained a major source of influence.

Wiktor Daszewski : 1) It would be interesting to see if there were workshops working for Christian and pagan buildings. Were they the same workshops or not ? In any case, the decoration of pagan buildings seems to be somewhat different in terms of subjects and even geometric ornaments. 2) Similar geometric motifs appear also in Pelusium in a late Roman bath excavated some years ago by the Egyptian Antiquities Department.

¹⁵ See D. MICHAELIDES in W.A. DASZEWSKI and D. MICHAELIDES, *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus*, Ravenna 1988, p. 121, ill. 44.

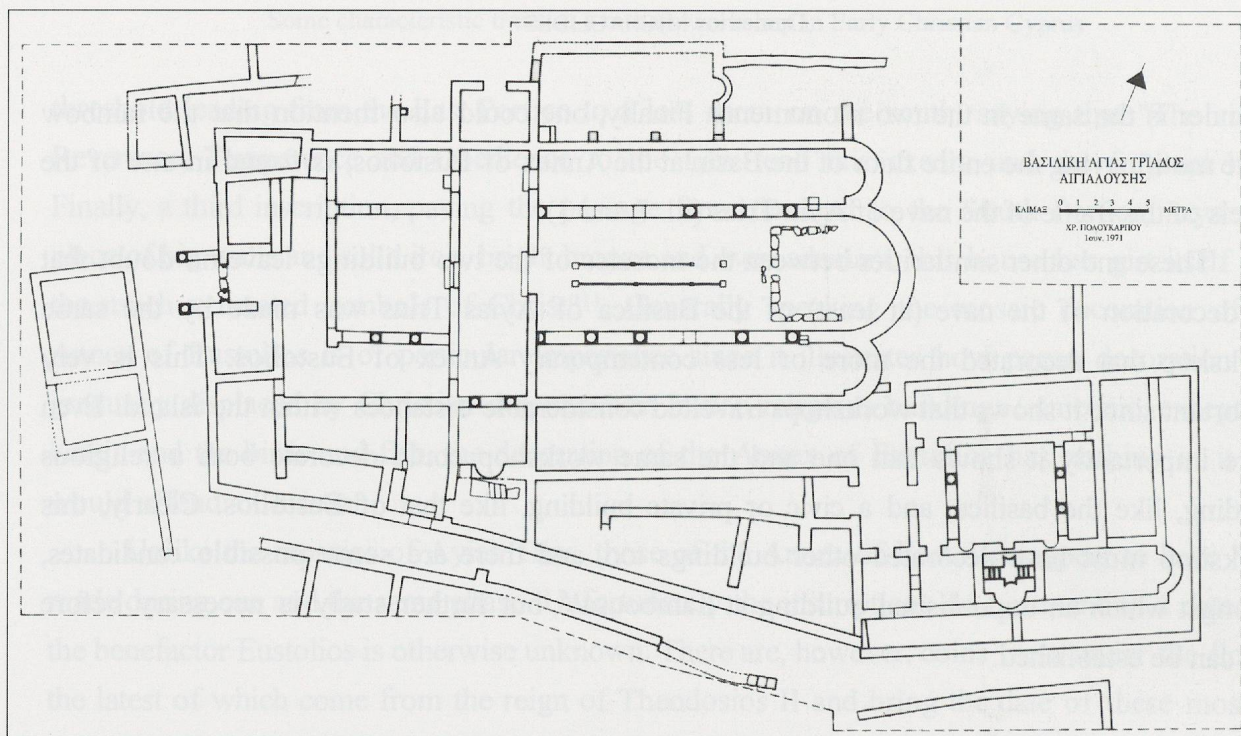


Fig.1. Basilica of Aya Trias : Plan.



Fig.2. Basilica of Aya Trias : General view of nave.



Fig.3. Basilica of Ayias Trias :
Frames around central panel of
nave.

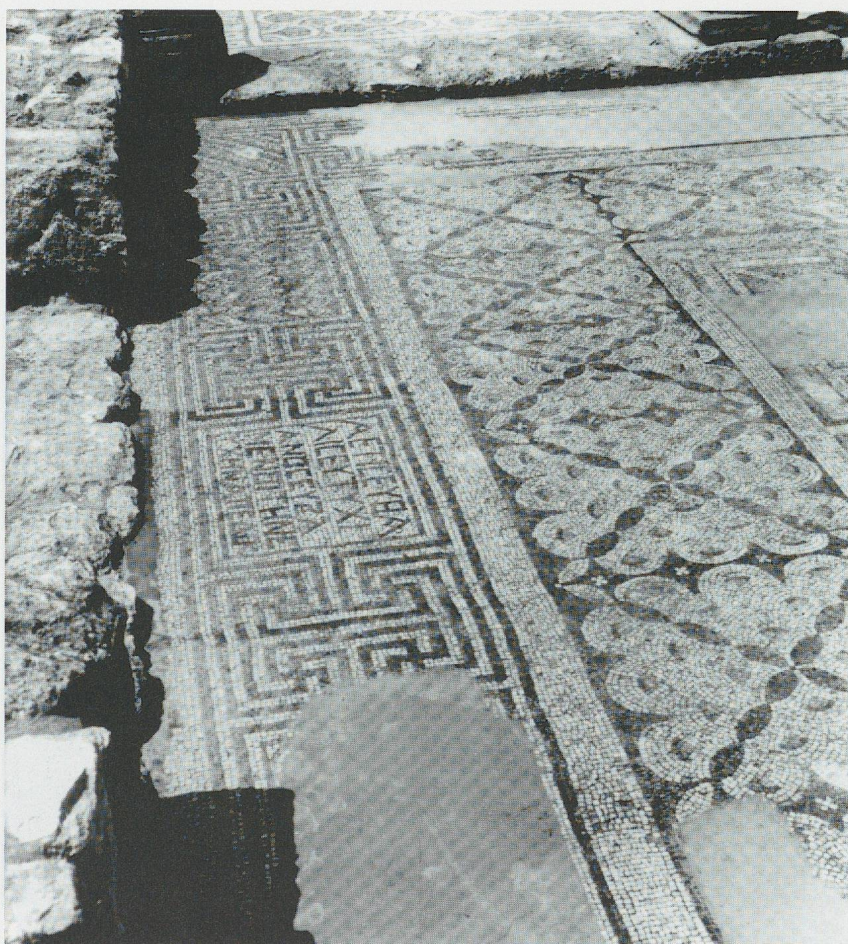


Fig.4. Basilica of Ayias Trias :
Frames around central panel of
nave including inscription.

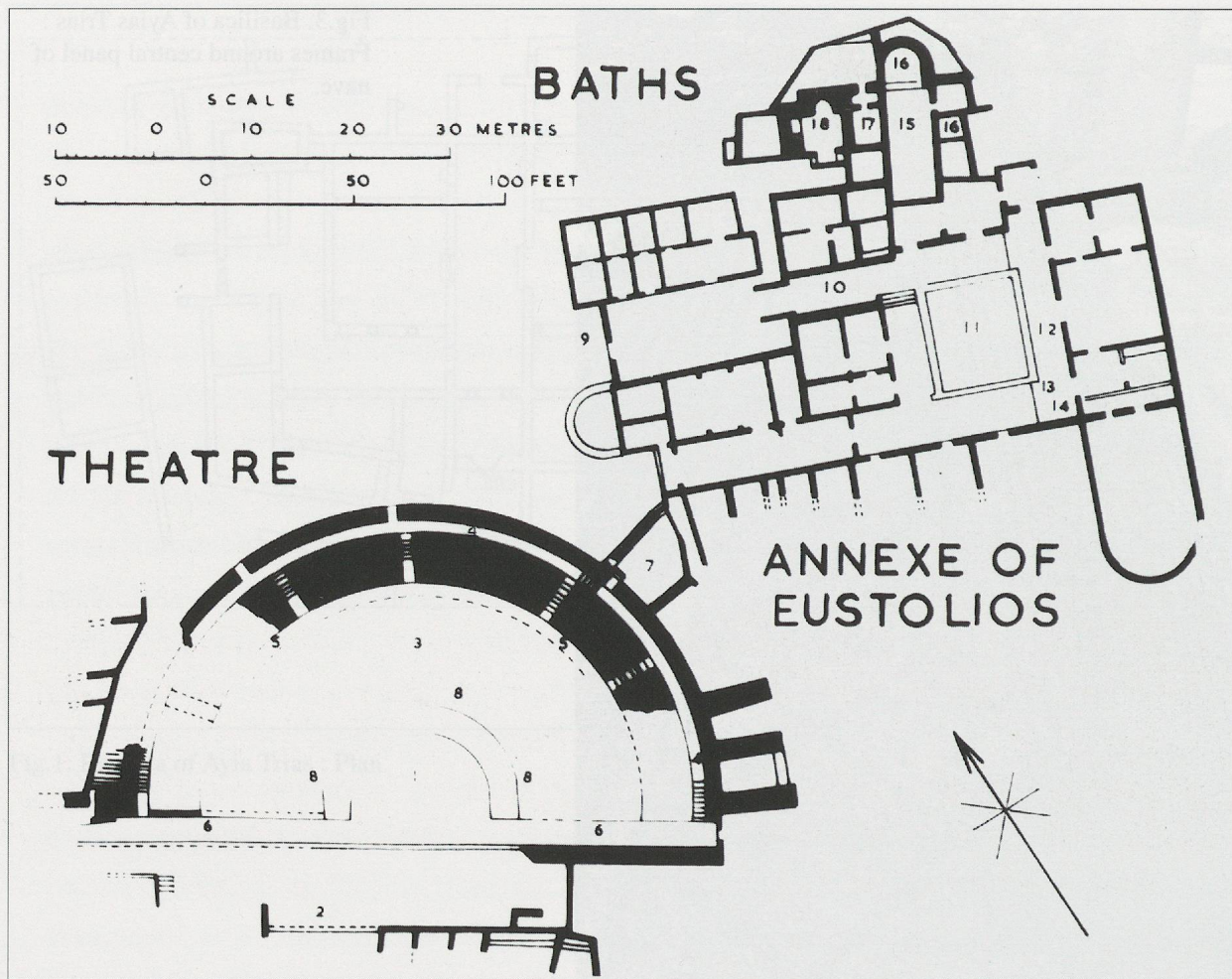


Fig.5. Annex of Eustolios : Plan.

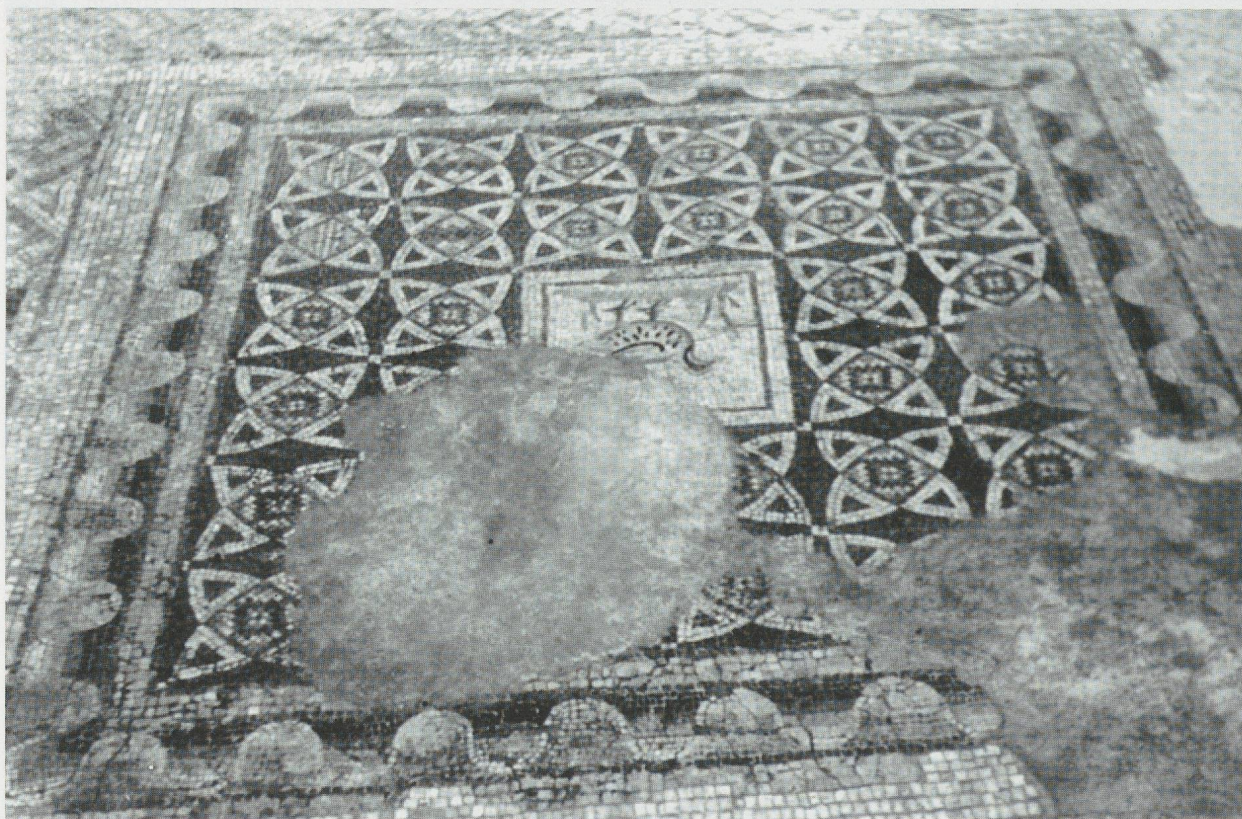


Fig.6. Annex of Eustolios : Partridge panel from Hall of the baths.



Fig.7. Annex of Eustolios : Small Basin.

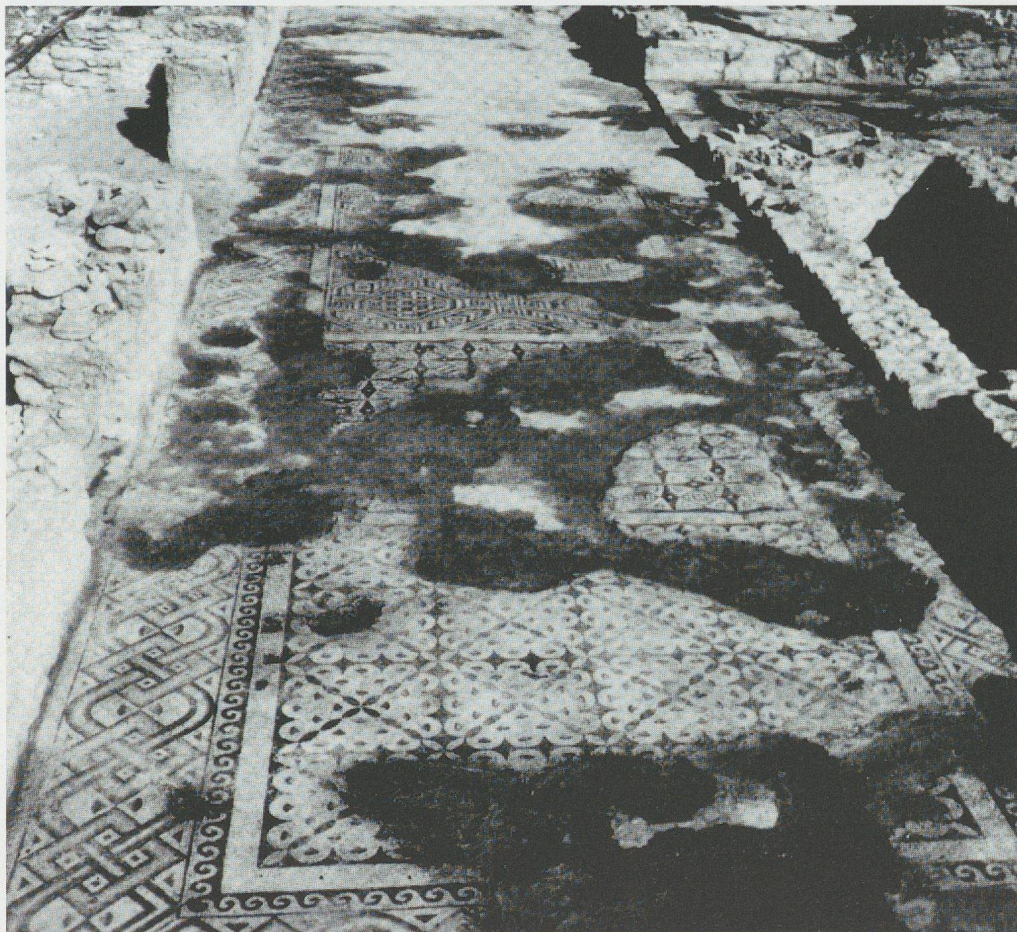


Fig.8. Annex of Eustolios :
General view of
South Portico.

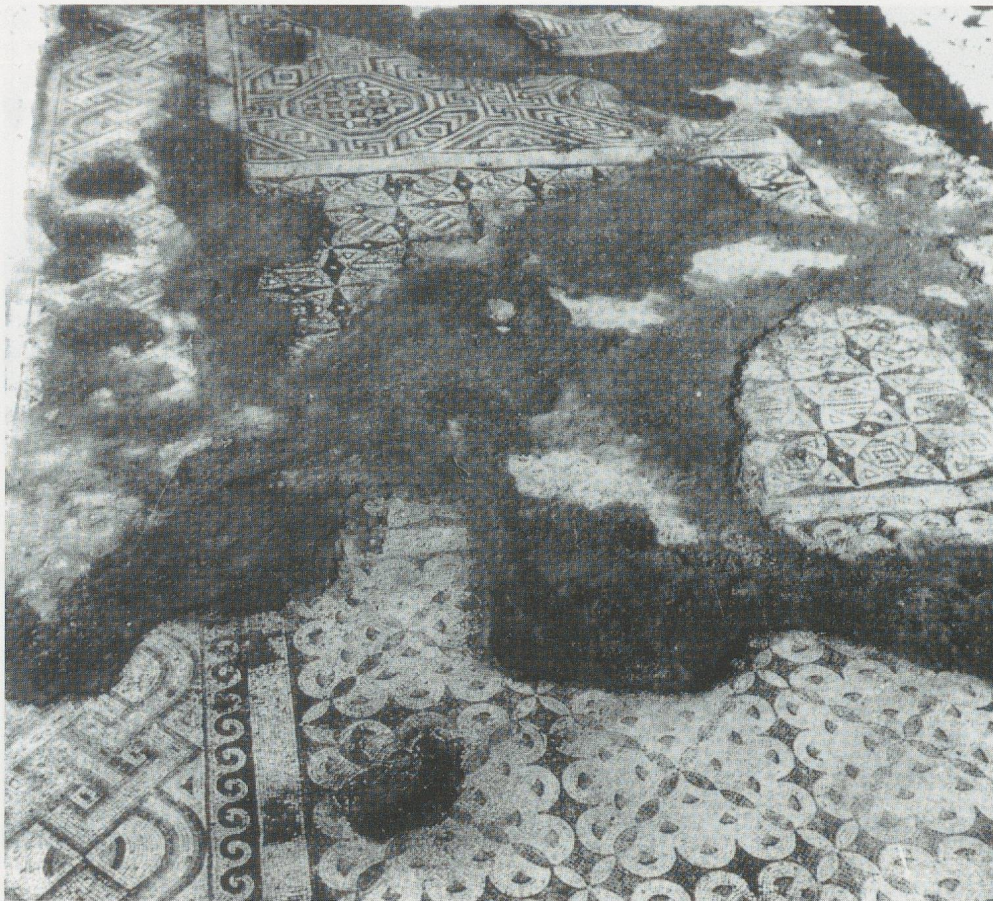


Fig.9. Annex of Eustolios : Details of panels of South Portico.

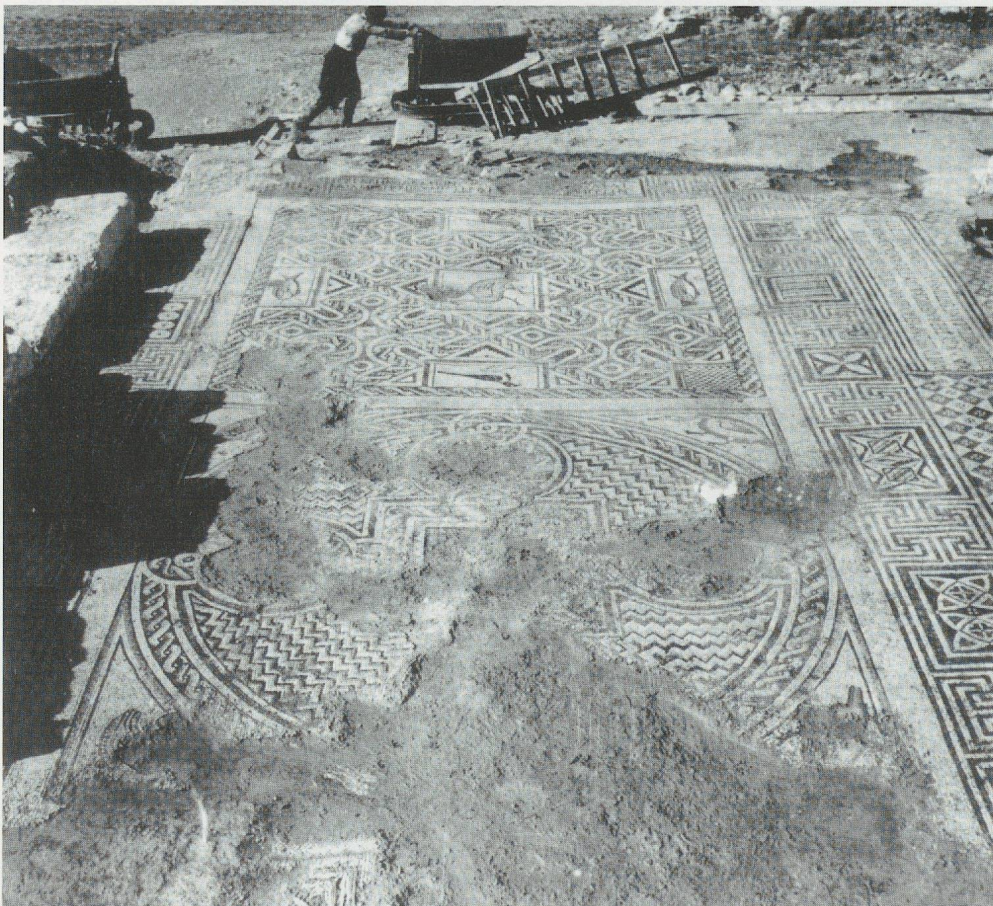


Fig.10. Annex of Eustolios : General view of East Portico towards north.

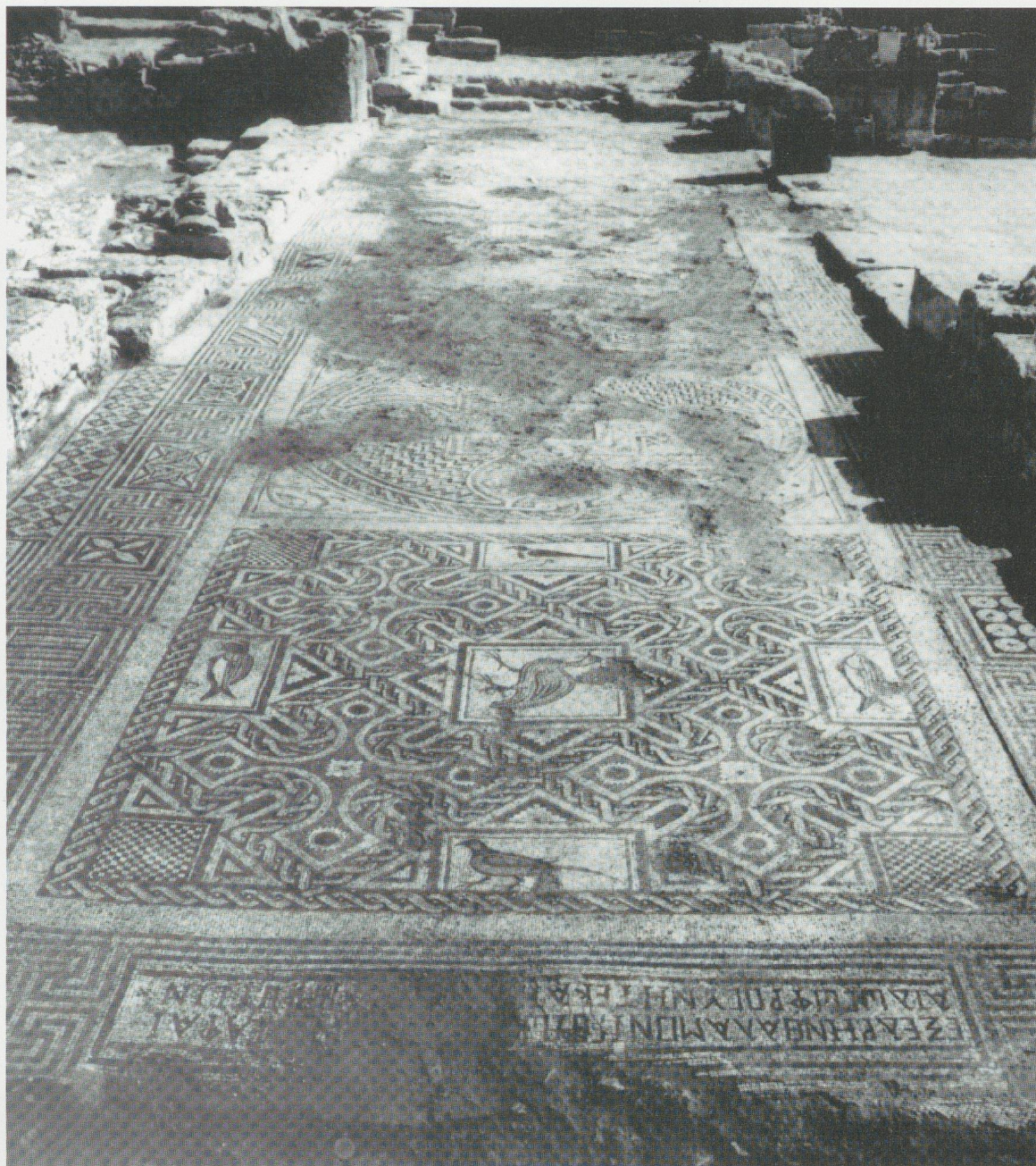


Fig.11. Annex of Eustolios : General view of East Portico towards south.