

REVIEWS

G.W. Bowersock, *Mosaics As History: The Near East From Late Antiquity to Islam*, Cambridge, MA/London, Harvard University Press, 2006, 146 pp., 118 colour ill. ISBN-13: 978-0-674-02292-8, ISBN-10: 0-674-02292-0. \$22.95/€20.70

This small-format book, the 16th in the series *Revealing Antiquity*, is a pearl in the bookshelf of ancient mosaics. G.W. Bowersock, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History at Princeton, gives the interested reader an excellent overview of the current issues in the study of Eastern mosaics, while at the same time providing the specialist with a fresh look upon old problems.

Professor Bowersock approaches mosaic art in the Near East during Late Antiquity as historical documents that are no less informative than literary texts and inscriptions. His multi-disciplinary task is concerned with those elements that may be conceived as having the potential of uniting the various populations of the region into one society. The book includes four discussions: *Maps, Myths, Cities* and *Iconoclasms*, followed by a concluding chapter.

The first chapter focuses upon one of the most unique representations within mosaic art, the Madaba map. Bowersock rightly observes that the Madaba mosaic, more than a documentation of biblical sites, is representing the contemporary landscape, its geography and topography. Bowersock does not suggest a new interpretation of this unique representation, but convincingly liberates it from the biblical constraints that influenced such interpretations in the past. He mainly stresses the function of the map, with its urban density, as a means of reminding the contemporary beholders that they are all part of a collective Hellenic cultural realm.

The same fact is, in the second chapter, emphasized in relation to the representation of myths. While in churches the appearance of pagan imagery is limited to personifications, mosaics in the private domain show that the cycles of myths around Dionysus and Heracles, as well as Achilles, and the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus were highly popular. Bowersock attributes the choice of these artistic representations to the popularity of mimic theatre in Late Antiquity. Supported by contemporary literary evidence he illustrates how the Christians tolerated Dionysian performances as a means of leisure and relaxation.

The third chapter, on 'Cities', continues and deepens the discussion that has already been evoked in the first chapter, regarding the geographical orientation

and cultural self-awareness of the inhabitants, with a glimpse into the early Islamic period of the region. The observation that most cities are depicted in a generic manner that shows no individual iconography makes the few cases in which particular topographical elements identify a specific city all the more interesting. The ancient viewer was thus probably capable of recognizing the depiction of the city of Jerusalem even without the label mentioning its name. The situation is different when the city is depicted in the form of a personification. This brings the discussion back to the mosaic of Phaedra and Hippolytus, where three city personifications are depicted seated majestically, identified by the labels 'Rome', 'Gregoria' and 'Madaba'. The enigmatic name of Gregoria leads Bowersock to attempt a new interpretation. The identification of Madaba (Jordan) is beyond doubt and may be explained as a local pride, a somewhat pretentious attempt on behalf of the commissioner to place his home-city among the leading cities of the empire. The argument that 'Rome' refers to the 'new Rome', that is, Constantinople, may be tenable. The identification of Gregoria, however, remains a mystery, and Bowersock's identification of it as Antioch, after her celebrated patriarch Gregorius, is no more than an interesting suggestion. Bowersock, however, correctly draws the reader's attention to the phenomenon that cities in antiquity often had more than one name simultaneously. Sepphoris, mentioned by Bowersock for its mosaics, is a good example. Its Roman name, Dio-Caesarea, was never in use in Jewish sources. The Jewish name of the city, preserved in the name of the modern Arab village, was Tsippori (meaning: "the bird-like"). The Talmud explains this name as expressing the position of the city on a hill higher than its surroundings. The name Tsippori, however, was only employed by Jews among themselves. The same is true for Beth Shean (Scythopolis) and Shchem (Neapolis, which name is preserved in the Arabic 'Nablus'), in which cases the Jewish population employed the biblical names. If the name Gregoria has a similar function, this might identify the owner of the house and the commissioner of the mosaic as being of a certain ethnic origin or belonging to a specific social group. But if, as Bowersock suggests, this was the name of the city in search of its individuality, it would be expected to have some literary support. The important conclusion of this chapter, however, lies in its demonstration of continuity of collective Hellenic culture more than a century after the Arabic conquest.

The fourth chapter of the book focuses upon the Umayyad period and one of its most debated problems: iconoclasm. It is especially the motivation for defacing the images on the mosaics that Bowersock addresses in this section. Whether iconoclastic activity in this region was a result of the edict of the Umayyad caliph Yazid II (reigned 720-724), who issued a ban on the representation of figurative images, or the ban applied five years later by the Byzantine Emperor Leo III upon the representation of Christ, the Virgin and the Saints was apparently a matter for controversy already in Antiquity. Yazid's edict, however, was abolished by his successor. It thus appears that the edict was only in force for a short period, and the material evidence indicates that the removal of images was done in a rather careful manner, sometimes leaving the outlines of the images recognizable, while

in some instances, the removal is far from complete. The removal, in churches as well as synagogues, was apparently executed by the communities themselves. At the same time, palatial Muslim art shows that the Umayyad rulers themselves did not avoid figurative images in their own dwellings, and even human figures were not considered offensive in that context. Thus the question behind the motivation of Yazid to impose such a ban upon the non-Muslims in his realm is an interesting issue. Bowersock's suggestion, that Muslims were using synagogues and churches for their own needs is in itself intriguing. It would certainly explain why a Muslim ruler saw fit to make churches conform to the strict decoration limitations that were applied upon mosques, but it also grasps an aspect of daily life of a society in the midst of a process of social and political changes.

The concluding chapter promotes the idea that the Hellenic culture, of which the use of the Greek language is only one aspect, was the unifying factor of Near Eastern society in Late Antiquity. Bowersock is clearly aware of the enormous diversity of that society and the political changes that swept the region during the centuries since the introduction of Hellenism. Palestine and Transjordan included various ethnic groups as well as a wide range of religions and conflicting religious sub-streams, ranging from Hellenic to Arab pagans, Jews, Samaritans and diverse Christian groups, living together in a border-region that was a continuous field of military conflicts. Despite this, Bowersock conceives the Hellenic past as a unifying cultural factor that transcended the diversity and enabled the various groups to live together and create a mosaic of social fabric, a truly multi-cultural society. Bowersock illustrates his point throughout the book with an insight of scholarly magnitude that provides a genuine reading pleasure.

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