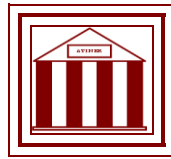


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**On the Origin of Early Christian  
Artistic Tradition in Byzantine  
Chersonesos**

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## **On the Origin of Early Christian Artistic Tradition in Byzantine Chersonesos**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the considerable number of well known Byzantine centres, systematic archaeological research has been conducted in only few of them, Chersonesos-Kherson being one of them. More than 150 years of excavations at the site have resulted in the discovery of a significant number of artifacts. Among them a prominent place is taken by Christian churches. The elements of ornament, sculpture, monumental painting and mosaics which have remained intact allow us to assume about the origin and development of the artistic tradition. The early Byzantine mosaics are a subject of special interest.

The main goal of this article will be to represent and analyse early Christian symbols of mosaic in Chersonesos-Kherson and in Syrian's monuments. The Byzantine mosaics of Chersonesos churches are those of peculiar interest, thus they always draw the researchers' attention. It would seem difficult to add something further to this but the authors came across some materials dedicated to the early Christian mosaics of Syria. Study and comparison of the floor mosaic of the early Christian centres of Syria and Tauris, in combination with other kinds of sources, has uncovered a lot of new material regarding the process of the establishment of the artistic tradition of the early Byzantine Chersonesos.

To sum up, one can state with certainty that close contacts between the eastern provinces of the Empire and Chersonesos – Kherson made a substantial impact on many aspects of the city's life, together with the spread of Christianity from the East. These artistic traditions were reflected in fresco paintings of the Chersonesos early Christian crypts and in the mosaic floors of later churches. The existence of the artistic tradition was definitely reflected in the compositions of the floor mosaics of Chersonesos and Syria churches. In regards to the aforementioned information, we could conclude that the systems of floor mosaics paintings in Syria and Chersonesos have a common source. Moreover, it would be logical to suggest that most of the artists belong to the Syrian artistic "school".

**Key words:** artistic tradition, mosaic, early byzantine art, early Christian art, Chersonesos, Kherson, Syria

Despite the fact that there is a considerable number of well-known Byzantine centres, a systematic archeological research has been conducted in only a few of them, particularly in Chersonesos-Kherson<sup>1</sup>. A discovery of a significant number of artifacts was the result of more than 150 years of excavations, among which prominence of place is taken by Christian churches. The elements of ornament, sculptures, monumental paintings and mosaics that have been preserved intact make it possible to surmise about the origin and development of the artistic tradition. The Byzantine mosaics of Chersonesos churches those of peculiar interest, thus they always draw the researchers' attention<sup>2</sup>. Their fullest description is given in the monograph by O.I. Dombrovskiy<sup>3</sup>. It would seem difficult to add something further to this but the authors came across some materials dedicated to the early Christian mosaics of Syria. Studies in the field of the early Christian floor mosaics in Syria and Tauris, in combination with the other kinds of sources, has uncovered a lot of new material regarding the process of establishing of the artistic tradition of the early Byzantine Chersonesos.

The text about the lives of the Kherson's bishops provides the basis for assuming that the first six bishops arrived in Chersonesos from Jerusalem. Thus, the text shows the ways of Christianity being introduced into the city and the influence of the Eastern tradition on the formation of the community.

The city had close economic ties with Asia Minor, which is proved by multiple archeological finds<sup>4</sup>. Continuous contacts, exchange of goods, active visits to Chersonesos by the Eastern tradesmen naturally led to the development of cultural exchange.

A considerable number of both written and archeological sources allow us to acknowledge positively the spread of Christianity in the region of the Middle

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<sup>1</sup>Foss C. Archeology and the "Twenty Cities" of Byzantine Asia // AJA. 1977. Vol. 81. P. 469 – 486; Bouras Ch. City and Village: Urban and Architecture // JOB. 1981. T. 31/2. P. 616 – 627; Romanchuk A.I. Issledovanija Hersonesa – Hersona. [Research Chersonesos - Kherson]. Part 2. Ekaterinburg, 2007. P. 133 - 145.

<sup>2</sup>Uvarov A. Hristianskaja simvolika. [Christian symbolism]. Moscow, 1908; Bert'e-Delagard A.L Drevnosti Juzhnoj Rossii. Raskopki Hersonesa [Antiquities South Russia. Excavations Chersonesos] // MAR. St. Petersburg, 1893. V. 12. P. 56 -74; Aynalov D.V. Razvaliny hramov [Temple ruins] // Monuments of Christian Chersonesos. M. 1905. V. 1, P. 137-143; Leiter M. Iz materialov po izucheniju mozaichnyh polov Hersonesa Tavricheskogo. [From the materials for the study of the mosaic floors of Chersonesos]. Kharkiv, 1928; Strzheletskiy S.F. Antichnye pamjatniki Hersonesa iz raskopok 1950 g.[Chersonesos ancient monuments from the excavations in 1950] // VDI . 1951 . № 2 . P. 136-139; Jacobson A.L Rannesrednevekovyj Hersones: ocherki istorii material'noj kul'tury. [Early Medieval Hersonissos : Essays on the History of Material Culture] // MIA. 1959. V. 63; Jacobson A.L. Srednevekovyj Hersones (XII-XIV vv.) [Medieval Chersonesos (XII-XIV centuries)] // MIA . Moscow-Leningrad, 1950. V. 17. P. 67-89 .

<sup>3</sup>Dombrovski O.I. Vizantijskie mozaiki Hersonesa Tavricheskogo [Byzantine mosaics Chersonesos.] Poznan, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Kadeev V.I. Hersones Tavricheskij. Byt i kul'tura (I – III vv. n. e.). [Chersonesos. Life and culture (I - III centuries. A.C.)] Kharkiv, 1996. P. 57 - 59; Kadeev V.I., Sorochan S.B. Ekonomicheskie svjazi antichnyh gorodov Severnogo Prichernomor'ja v I v. do n.e. – V v. n.e. (po materialam Hersonesa).[Economic ties of ancient cities in the Northern Black Sea in the I. BC - V in. A.C (based on the Chersonesos)]. Kharkiv, 1989. P. 38 - 46.

East during the first centuries of the Common era<sup>1</sup>. The foundations of Christian artistic thinking had their beginnings in Syria [Ainalov 1900]. The late Hellenistic monuments of Palmira and Dura-Europos were unanimously called "Oriental forerunners of Byzantine art"<sup>2</sup> by a number of scientists. J. Strzygowski substantiated to a well-known statement about the values of Parthian sacred art for East by stating: "What Hellas has contributed to the art of antiquity, to the same extent, Iran brought the contribution to the art of the new Christian world"<sup>3</sup>.

A range of themes and decorative elements in Hellenistic mosaics was formed and passed from one master to another. The technology of the mosaic work itself suggested availability of "portfolios" which contained replicas of themes and ornamental combinations. The miniature of late Antiquity and early Christianity<sup>4</sup> is particularly written in Kurt Weitzmann's research. As is noted in the murals of Dura-Europos, not only the compilations of outline drawings but also book illustrations served as a basis for monumental designs<sup>5</sup>. Syncretism of Hellenistic motifs, originating on the banks of the Euphrates, and the Eastern methods of space depiction are well distinguished in the sacred art of Palmira, Dura-Europos, and Edessa<sup>6</sup> and transferred into other parts of the empire. This continuity was natural and logical and largely because the mosaics of Syria and the Black Sea region are closely related to each other.

A considerable number of the early Christian monumental pieces of art have been preserved in the museums of mosaics in Marra and Apamea. Their collections are composed of mosaics that were collected in "dead cities" which are situated in the north of Syria between Aleppo and Hama (Apamea in 4th – 5th centuries)<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, analysis of themes, methods and prototypes of

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<sup>1</sup>Bolotov V.V. Lekcii po istorii Drevnej Cerkvi. [Lectures on the History of the Ancient Church.] K., 2007. P. 253 - 258; Dvorkin A. Ocherki po istorii Vselenskoj Pravoslavnoj Cerkvi. [Essays on the history of the universal Church.] Nizhny Novgorod, 2005. P. 122 - 124; Posnov M. E. Istorija hristianskoj Cerkvi (do razdelenija cerkvej – 1054). [History of the Christian Church (before the separation of church - 1054).] Brussels, 1964. P. 79 - 81; Rostovtzeff M. I. Dura - Europos and its Art. Oxford, 1938. P. 127 - 130; Bongard-Levin G.M., Gaibov V.A., Koshelenko G.A. Rasprostranenie hristijanstva na Vostoke (v svete issledovanija pamjatnikov Dura Evropos) [Distribution christianity in the East (in the light of the study sites Dura Europos)] // VDI. 2005. V 3. P. 58 - 72.

<sup>2</sup>Brested M. Oriental Forerunders of Byzantne Art Syria. 1922; Breasted J. H. Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Painting. Chicago, 1924; Rostovtzeff M. I. Dura – Europos and its Art. Oxford, 1938. P. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Strzygowski J. Orient oder Rom: Beitrige zur Geschichte der Spitantiken und Frihchristlichen Kunst. Leipzig, 1901. P. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Weizmann K. Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination. NY, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>Weitzmann K. The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art. Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990.

<sup>6</sup>Chekal A.G. Epigrafika v sakral'nom i pogrebal'nom iskusstve Pal'miry i Dura-Europos. [Epigraphy in the sacred and funerary art of Palmyra and Dura-Europos] // Shodoznavchi studii. News of Harkovskoï derzhavnoï akademii design i Mistetstvo: / by general. Ed. Danilenko V.Y. Kharkiv 2008. № 9 (Vip.1). P. 56-68.

<sup>7</sup>Abdallah Hadjar. The Church of St. Simeon the Stylite and other archaeological sites in the mountains of Simeon and Halaqa, S.L, 1995. P. 1-6.

Chersonesos depictions testifies to a certain semantic and esthetic link of the artistic tradition. This subject matter has recently become of interest to scientists. Specifically A.E. Filippov examines in his works<sup>1</sup> the influence of Dura-Europos monumental art on the wall-paintings of the early Christian crypts of Chersonesos.

Examination of the Chersonesos-Kherson monuments gives us grounds to state that ornamental motifs, such as depictions of grape vines, bunches of grapes, birds, animals and bowls predominate in the stylistic design of the mosaic floors of basilicas. The range of colors was represented by red, black, blue, yellow, dark cherry.

The symbol of a bird, which is very often a personification of a human soul<sup>2</sup>, is wide-spread. Pigeons can be singled out as the symbol of the Holy Spirit. The peacock reflects the belief in immortality, which is based on the idea of the imperishability of its flesh. A peacock with an extended tail symbolizes the sky of stars<sup>3</sup>.

Amongst those depictions that occur most often, special attention should be paid to the “bowl” (the Countryside Cruciform Church, Basilica in Basilica, Basilica1935) (see Figures: 1-5). The cup symbolizes the Eucharist in Christian teaching "The Lord's flesh and blood". It is extremely significant that the depictions of the vessels, including those with the birds drinking from them, were the motifs for both Chersonesos and Syrian mosaics (see Figures: 1-8). They could symbolize the teaching of Christ and the immortality given by him (peacocks drinking from bowls).

**Figure 1.** *Chersonesos. A Vessel*



<sup>1</sup>Filippov A.E. Rospisi rannehristianskih sklepov Hersonesa Tavricheskogo v kontekste hudozhestvennoj tradicii: sintez s arhitekturoj, simbolika, liturgicheskaja osnova. [Early Christian painting crypts Chersonesos in the context of artistic tradition: the synthesis of architecture, symbolism, liturgical foundation] // Ocherki istorii hristianskogo Hersonesa. Essays on the History of the Christian Chersonesos. St Petersburg, 2009. Volume 1. Issue. 1. P. 193-322.

<sup>2</sup>Sorochan S.B., Zubar V.M., Marchenko L.V. Zhizn' i gibel' Hersonesa. [Life and death of Chersonesos.] Kharkov, 2000. P. 614.

<sup>3</sup>Uvarov A. Hristianskaja simbolika. [Christian symbolism]. Moscow, 1908. P.52.

**Figure 2.** *Chersonesos. A Bowl with a Growing Grape Vine*



**Figure 3:** *Chersonesos. A Bowl in a Triangle*



**Figure 4.** *Chersonesos. A Bowl with Birds and Grapes*





**Figure 5.** *Chersonesos. Peacocks with a Bowl*



**Figure 6.** *Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). Peacocks with a Bowl*



**Figure 7.** *Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). Peacocks with a Vessel*





**Figure 8.** *Chersonesos. Peacocks with a Garland. Crypt “at the Site of N. I. Tur*



A significant place in early Christian symbolism is also presented by the vegetative images. Garlands of laurel leaves, flowers and trees symbolize the settings of the heavenly kingdom, paradise<sup>1</sup>. A wreath was the symbol of victory (laurel wreath), also victory over death,<sup>2</sup> and it often symbolized martyrdom. Framing with grape leaves and bunches was also widespread (Basilica in Basilica, the Countryside Cruciform Church, Basilica 1935, Basilica 1932, the Western Basilica) – and were the symbols of Christ's teaching<sup>3</sup> (Christ the wine maker).

There are also depictions of the diamond with rings on it (symbol of eternity<sup>4</sup>) and the anchor (symbol of Hope<sup>5</sup>).

One of the images was the “cross”. A resolution of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, 680-681 A.D., banned depictions of the cross on the floor. This aspect can be testified in the mosaics of the Uvarov's Basilica, the Countryside Cruciform Church, Basilica in Basilica, where such depictions were presented. The above mentioned themes can be found both in the floor mosaics of the Chersonesos churches and in the fresco paintings of the painted crypts (see Figures: 5, 8).

Mosaic carpets covered with a pattern were discovered in Basilica in Basilica and in the Uvarov's Basilica (see Figures: 9, 10). They demonstrate patterns that are completely identical with the floor mosaics in Syrian museums (see Figures: 11, 12). Similar links can be identified in the motifs of the framing of the mosaics (Chersonesos (see fig. 3, 13), Apamea (see fig.12).

As indicated above, a widespread theme was the depiction of the bowl. One of the variants is a bowl in a triangle (Apamea (see Figures 14, 15), Chersonesos (see Figure 3). Vessels with grapevine are known from the mosaics of Basilica 1935 (pic.1), similar themes are presented in Syrian mosaics as well (see Figure 7).

<sup>1</sup>Uvarov A. Hristianskaja simbolika. [Christian symbolism]. Moscow, 1908. P. 46.

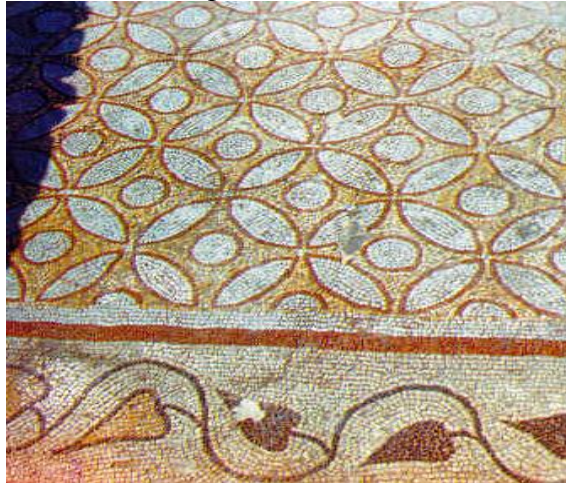
<sup>2</sup>Xoll J. Slovar' sjužhetov i simbolov v iskusstve. [Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art.] M., 1996. P. 123.

<sup>3</sup>Uvarov A. Hristianskaja simbolika. [Christian symbolism]. Moscow, 1908. P.34.

<sup>4</sup>Xoll J. Slovar' sjužhetov i simbolov v iskusstve. [Dictionary of subjects and symbols in art.] M., 1996. P. 367.

<sup>5</sup>Biederman G. Enciklopedija simbolov. [Encyclopedia symbols] M., 1996. P. 435.

**Figure 9.** *Chersonesos. «The Carpet» in Basilica*



**Figure 10.** *«The Carpet» before the Uvarov's Basilica*



**Figure 11.** *Museum of Mosaic in Marra (Maraat an-numan). «A Carpet»*





**Figure 12.** *Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). Patterns*



**Figure 13.** *Chersonesos. Patterns*



**Figure 14.** *Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). A Bowl in a Triangle*



**Figure 15.** *Museum of Mosaic in Apamea (Hama). A Bowl in a Triangle*



Compositions with the depictions of birds and a bowl are of particular interest. The earliest depictions of peacocks are known from the wall-painted crypts of Chersonesos (mid 4 – 5 centuries (see Figure 8)). Such mosaics covered the floors of the Holy Theotokos church in Vlahern (see Figure 5). Mosaics of similar composition were discovered in Syrian churches (see Figures: 6, 7). Moreover, we can speak about a relatively early date for the creation of mosaics with the depiction of crosses, which were also included in the composition (see Figures: 16, 6).



**Figure 16.** *Chersonesos. A Cross*



**Figure 17.** *Museum of Mosaic in Mara (Maraat an-numan). Crosses*



To sum up, one can state with certainty that close contacts between the eastern provinces of the Empire and Chersonesos – Kherson made a substantial impact on many aspects of city life, together with the spread of Christianity from the East. These artistic traditions were reflected in fresco paintings of the Chersonesos early Christian crypts and in the mosaic floors of later churches. The existence of the artistic tradition was definitely reflected in the compositions of the floor mosaics of Chersonesos and Syria churches. In spite

of some differences in the depiction of individual elements, the design, in general, is identical. All this allows us to maintain that the system of floor mosaics paintings in Syria and Chersonesos has a common source. And, what is more, it would be logical to suggest that most of the artists belong to the Syrian artistic “school”.

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