SOME IDEAS ON THE PRESERVATION OF THE MADABA MOSAIC MAP

The preservation of a cultural heritage site entails guaranteeing its proper present and future conservation as well as its use, enjoyment and study. As they are often contradictory, it is not always easy to attend to all of those objectives. The Madaba Mosaic Map is undoubtedly a cultural treasure of universal value whose preservation constitutes a challenge. As a piece which has reached us in a relatively good state of conservation, harmonizing these different requirements should constitute an item of concern.

The purpose of this brief discussion is to call attention to some of those problems and to note several possible solutions. None of these are at the moment indispensable nor constitute an inseparable set of measures to be taken. They are, rather, subjects for debate which may potentially be applied in a progressive manner, as one of the greatest problems commonly faced is financial.

Due to its intrinsic value, the Mosaic Map is an object which may also be considered a museum piece. However, it has constituted, in the past and present, an architectural element, meaning that it is integrated into a space which serves the same purpose since the origin of the mosaic. The present-day Church of Saint George occupies the same site and has a plan similar to that of the original sixth-century church for which the mosaic was created. The mosaic continues to form part of its flooring and is of both symbolic and didactic value, although the latter is presently of less consequence than during the period in which it was constructed. The mosaic continues to be a functional element in the building and continues to play an important part in the activities carried out there. This particular aspect is especially noteworthy considering it as an object that has existed for more than fourteen centuries.

Moreover, we must necessarily reflect upon the fact that the mosaic is of interest to both scholars and tourists alike, for which several requirements and problems arise whose resolutions should be contemplated in relation to the use of the building. The mosaic represents a unique document of extraordinary historical and artistic value. One of the most important problems is not the scientific research of the site, but rather its condition as a tourist attraction.

The greatest problem, however, faced by the Madaba Mosaic Map is undoubtedly its immediate environment. As a piece of inestimable value, immersed in an architectural medium which serves the same function for which it was created, it is presented as if it were removed from its proper environment. The mosaic is neither integrated into the present architecture of the church, nor may be contemplated using what may be considered museological criteria.

Diverse reasons explain that situation, which is fundamentally due to the atmosphere created by the furniture and decoration of the Church of Saint George. The first such situation we may point out is an inadequate flooring of ocher-colored paving slabs of terrazzo whose homogeneity and texture contrast excessively with those of the mosaic. The colors and materials of the church’s interior are likewise inappropriate, e.g., the polished marble bases of the pilasters, synthetic paint on the walls in a dominant light blue shade, nineteenth-century-style chandeliers, furniture painted in loud colors with synthetic paint, etc. In summary, the general atmosphere is scarcely in harmony with the mosaic and far from what might be considered the proper ornamentation for the original Byzantine church. Nor does the environment provide a setting which enhances rather than detracts from the value of such an important archaeological piece.

There are two ways to better integrate the mosaic into its present environment. One way might be to recreate the atmosphere of the original sixth-century building, which would allow the piece to form part of the church as an integrated element. However, since this aspect is not well-known, we must consider how the modern-day mentality conceives this space. We might expect a conceptual problem to arise with regard to the users of the building, whose cultural sensibility would necessarily be different from that of the sixth-century church-goers. Their reaction to such a change would, therefore, be unforeseeable. The mosaic, after all, forms part of a place of worship that is still in use.

Another possibility would be to adapt the piece separately from its environment by employing museographic techniques of temporary use during public visiting hours. Even in this case certain changes in the

Left: The Madaba Mosaic Map in the Church of the Greek Orthodox Community in Madaba.
general environment would be necessary, especially concerning the area immediately surrounding the mosaic. We shall take a closer look at some of the possible interventions.

The part which most directly affects the mosaic is the building’s flooring. We have already mentioned the difficulty of harmonizing the terrazzo and the mosaic. In addition to gaps caused by iconoclastic destruction, which have been reintegrated using plain mosaics (without drawings), the map presents other more recently-made gaps and the contact with the terrazzo are filled with mortar. At least the area of the church where the mosaic is situated should have a different flooring. Here, we have two alternatives. One could be to pave the surface with mosaic treated simply and without formal representations, and in any case clearly marking the borders of the original mosaic. Different methods of implantation may be implemented, perhaps by tracing general lines which would help to clarify the representation shown on the map such as the Mediterranean coastline or the lines delineating the rivers. This reintegration should be carried out, however, with a clear distinction between the original and recreated parts. The type of mosaic to be adopted should be in a shade similar to that used in the background of the map. A differentiation may be established by using tesserae of a slightly different shape, for example, somewhat larger ones. A fringe of mortar between 5 and 10 mm wide could be used to separate the old from the new, treating the interior gaps in a similar way.

Other solutions for the flooring would be to use a material different from that of the mosaic, but of a poorer quality and texture, in order to highlight the original, which would be contrary to the effect caused by the present situation. The problem with using a poorer quality material of a possibly rougher texture, such as mortar or perhaps “opus signinum” is that it would be less functional in the church due to greater difficulties in its maintenance. Rustic ceramic flooring is rarely used in Jordan. In any case, the area in which the flooring should be renovated would be reduced to a transversal fringe in the naves of the church which would be slightly bigger than the existing preserved mosaic.

Another architectural element to be modified is the wall finish. We suggest that the marble veneer and the present paint be replaced by a plastering of lime mortar with a smooth color finish, in order to achieve a quality texture which does not need to be painted, but is somewhat more rustic than the present finishing materials. This renovation of the finish materials should be accompanied by the replacement, or at least a modification, of the furniture in the church’s interior. The shiny brown paint of the wooden benches should be removed, leaving the wooden furniture in its natural color and texture. The pulpit, the altars and the enclosure of the iconostasis should be treated in a similar manner using elements and forms within the Orthodox liturgical tradition and avoiding modern forms and decoration of poor artistic quality. Elements whose substitution or elimination should also be considered are the chandeliers, which could be replaced by more efficient and discreet lamps. All of the above-mentioned should be applied to the choir and its balustrades, eliminating the wire netting.

Among the elements which must be replaced most immediately is the barrier presently used to keep the visitors from stepping on the mosaic. The wooden posts and the plastic chain used for this purpose prove to be indecorous due to their form and, especially, their colors. A new barrier could be made with glass elements or even metallic bars that may be dismantled or perhaps a bronze structure which could be set into the ground in order to avoid having to use the obstructive bases used in the present structure. Instead of the existing chain, a cord, a rope, which would be more discreet, or even a metal chain should be used rather than a plastic one.

All of these initiatives would serve to provide a better quality environment within the church’s interior, although they might be expected to conflict with the tastes of the current users of the church. In any case, these interventions which should be discussed and negotiated with the church hierarchy and the parishioners. Other possible solutions, especially in the case of opposition to the above-mentioned interventions, might consist in an almost museographical adaptation of the mosaic, independently from the present surroundings. This would be based mainly on the type of lighting. The overall lighting of the church could be dimmed in order to lessen the negative effects of the entire area as well as of the existing interior decoration. On the other hand, the correct lighting focused on the mosaic would serve to highlight and draw attention to the piece itself. This system would not be too expensive to install. A disadvantage, however, would be its need for permanent maintenance, the immediate replacement of light bulbs once they have burnt out, as well as the cost of the electricity. In any case, these expenses could be covered by charging a small entrance fee or by installing a coin-operated lighting system. A brief audiovisual program might also be included which would be designed to light up and explain the different areas of the map. This type of system would cause a great sensation and it would not be difficult to find a sponsor to finance the installation and the audiovisual program. The cost of
system's maintenance would be covered by the fee paid by its visitors.
In addition to these initiatives designed to enhance the mosaic, a general presentation of its contents should be provided using explanatory panels. The installation of an audiovisual system might reduce the need for the panels; however, in any case, these didactic methods always help to improve the comprehension of the material and provide a deeper analysis for those visitors having greater interest in the subject.
The entire didactic device, as well as the shop where publications and reproductions of the map are sold, might be located in a building outside the church in order to preserve its sanctity. This construction may consist of a mobile kiosk with panels fixed onto posts or be integrated into one of the permanent buildings near the church.

As you may have observed, our proposal is aimed mainly at improving the conditions for visiting this exceptional historical document. Due to the restoration which the site underwent in the 1960's it would seem that no specific intervention is required at the moment to guarantee its preservation in the near future. The interest generated by this unique archaeological piece among investigators, users of the church, as well as among visitors interested in history, geography and other aspects of the map, or those who are simply curious, make it necessary to improve the conditions of the site. It is estimated that the costs involved would not be excessive and, therefore, should not represent an obstacle for the adequate valuation and presentation of the Madaba Mosaic Map.

Antonio Almagro