

Fountain-of-Life Mosaics from Macedonia

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The fountain of life is the most common figural subject among the mosaics of Greek Macedonia, FJR of Macedonia and neighboring regions during the later fifth and first half of the sixth century. The pavements vary in quality, style and details of imagery. The sheer number of examples, however, makes it possible to compare them and assess the activity of various workshops in the region, their evolution and influences. The fountain of life compositions illustrate the words of Psalm 42, part of the baptismal liturgy, and are often appropriately located in baptisteries and associated rooms. Others occupy a variety of ecclesiastical and residential contexts. Two examples stand out in quality and complexity. The mosaic of the Ohrid Tetraconch's baptistery has varied images of the fountain of life combined with personifications of the rivers of paradise. It does not have local parallels in quality or style. Another singular example is the central motif of the narthex mosaic in the Large Basilica at Heraclea Lyncestis featuring a vessel with vines set on acanthus leaves and flanked by a stag and a doe, as well as a pair of peacocks. The elaborate compositions, the quality of workmanship and the use of a great variety of materials, including glass, in these two examples suggest that they were laid by two separate workshops from cosmopolitan centers and/or were the work of wall mosaicists.

A workshop centered at Stobi was responsible for the fountain of life mosaics in the Baptistery and House of Psalms there as well as an example at Edessa in northern Greece. The Stobi baptistery mosaics depict both deer and peacocks flanking fountains. Mosaics recently found on the floor of a baptismal font (Figure 1) and in the apse of a chapel at Plaošnik in Ohrid are similar to the Stobi group, but somewhat cruder, probably made by a secondary workshop. A mosaic from the monumental Episcopal Residence at Heraclea may also have been influenced by the Stobi group.

A second workshop whose floors are quite different also worked at both Heraclea and Ohrid. A pavement from a chapel of the Large Basilica at Heraclea features another version of the fountain of life (Figure 2). Here the vessel containing an elaborate vine scroll is flanked by a stag and a doe with a fawn. Floors in two chapels of the Ohrid Tetraconch have variations of the fountain of life with very similar deer. The same workshop or its successor later worked at Byllis in Albania.

The increase in demand for mosaic pavements in the region during the second half of the fifth and the first half of the sixth centuries, when significant amounts of capital were expended in building and decorating church buildings, provided commissions for several different mosaic workshops. Some probably came from major centers and had limited local influence. Local groups seem to have remained active over several decades, moving from site to site in the region. Other mosaics were laid by successors of more established workshops.

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Figure 1. Fountain of Life from the baptismal font at Plaošnik in Ohrid



Figure 2. Fountain of Life from the NW chapel of the Large Basilica at Heraclea