

CHAPTER NINE

MOTIFS IN JEWISH SYNAGOGUE ART

Synagogue art motifs appear on architectural elements such as lintels, friezes, and mosaic floors, as well as on funerary art. Explicit tendencies betray themselves in the persistent selection by the Jews of Late Antiquity of heraldic and antithetic symmetrical designs. The popular and common motifs in Jewish synagogue art indicate a constant preference for particular themes in the ornamentation (Hachlili 1988:335–346).

The motifs consist either of a single image or object or of a combination of several antithetic or heraldic elements and include: (1) fauna—animal motifs: the lion, bull, eagle, and others; (2) human figures; (3) mythological motifs; (4) genre motifs; (5) flora—plant ornaments; (6) geometric motifs.

Several sources are posited for the motifs used in Jewish art:

- Tradition and the continuation of popular motifs descended from Jewish art of the Second Temple period, mainly geometric and plant motifs.
- Decorative patterns and motifs taken from contemporary arts (Graeco-Roman, Syrian, and Nabatean) but devoid of their symbolic context and significance.
- The persistent selection by the Jews of Late Antiquity of heraldic and antithetic symmetrical designs.
- Pattern books, reflected in the stylized postures and representations of animals, plants, and other designs. At the same time, some of the motifs were probably directly copied from nature.

1. FAUNA—ANIMAL MOTIFS

Animal motifs appear frequently in Jewish art—on wall paintings, sculpture, reliefs, and mosaics, where they are usually depicted in a prominent position, frequently flanking the Torah shrine, the Ark of the Scrolls, and inscriptions (Hachlili 1988:320–346).

The most common animal motifs are the exalted creatures—the human, lion, bull, and eagle, which appear in early Near Eastern art as well as in Jewish and Christian art. In pagan arts they possess religious symbolism as astral, zodiac, and solar symbols, but in both Jewish and Christian art they are deprived of this aspect and acquire different connotations.

Human and animal figures as hybrid creatures appear in early Near Eastern art in various forms; especially significant are the animals rendered on ivories and sculpture, where they are found also as the side-supports of chairs or thrones. This tradition, slightly altered, continued later in the form of a king or deity's throne flanked by the regal animals, the lion and the eagle being especially popular. The biblical Cherubim possibly belong to this tradition and are identified with similar hybrid creatures (Hachlili 2008:25*, 34*–40*).

The four exalted creatures—the human, the lion, the calf/ox, and the eagle—are first described as a tetramorphic creature in the portrayal of the throne-chariot (*Merkabah*), a throne in motion (with no mention of the ark) in Ezekiel's vision (Ez. 1:5–12, 10:20–21), where each has four faces and four wings; the four faces include a human one, a lion on the right, an ox on the left, and an eagle; two of the spread wings touch one another and two cover the bodies. They have legs and "... the feet of each were like a single calf's hoof" (Ez. 1:7). In the later description (Ez. 10) they are described as

Cherubim, and the face of the ox is omitted and replaced by the face of the Cherub (Ez. 10:14). In Ezekiel's vision of the Temple model (Ez. 41:18–20, 25), images of the Cherubim appear on the walls and doors, each pair flanking a palm tree, and each Cherub has two faces: one of a human and the other one of a lion.

The Chariot—*Merkabah* vision also appears on a scroll fragment found at Qumran (4Q385 6 [earlier 4]) designated Pseudo (or Second)—Ezekiel (Dimant & Strugnell 1990; Dimant 2000). The text of this fragment is dependent on and close to the version in Ezekiel chapter 1, as preserved by the Massoretic Text.

Scholars interpret the choice of these creatures by their symbolic traditional characteristics. The prominent animal images in Jewish art, although sometimes transferred from pagan art, lost their pagan meaning and acquired new values through the influence of biblical and midrashic literature (Hachlili 1988:346; but see Yuval-Hacham [2007:76–80], who maintains that the eagle which ornamented synagogues “is a symbolic representation of the power and might of the God of Israel”).

The following commentary may explain part of the reason for the prominence of these four particular motifs and their continued use in Jewish art:

In the Babylonian Talmud, Hagiga 13b, we find:

”מלך שבחיות ארי, מלך שבבהמות שור, מלך שבעופות נשר, ואדם מתגאה עליהן והקדוש ברוך הוא מתגאה על כולן ועל כל העולם כולו” (בבלי, חגיגה י”ג, ע”ב).

For a Master said: The king of the wild animals is the lion; the king of the cattle is the ox; the king of the birds is the eagle; and man is exalted over them; and the Holy One, blessed be He, is exalted over all of them, and over the whole world. (BT Hagiga 13b, Complete Soncino English Translation of the Babylonian Talmud)

A similar account is given in Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 23:13:

The Four most exalted of all living creatures is man; of birds, the eagle; of cattle, the ox; and of wild beasts, the lion. All of these received royalty and had greatness bestowed upon them, and they set under the chariot of God. This is the meaning of ‘For he is highly exalted’.

The lion, bull, and eagle, which are the most frequent animal motifs encountered in Jewish art, appear in flanking positions, juxtaposition, or confrontation (when in an antithetic motif) and take many shapes. These creatures possess religious symbolism; they are most often rendered separately. There are only a few examples in Jewish art that portray them in flanking, juxtaposition or confronting episodes.

1.1 *Lions and Lionesses*

Lions and lionesses are a common theme in ancient art, including Jewish art, where their most common depiction is connected with the Torah shrine (Hachlili 1988:321–328; 1995:186–7; 2008a:25*, 34*–40*).

Lions in sculptures, reliefs, and mosaics are rendered in several standard types of ornamentation: (1) in the round as part of the Torah shrine ornamentation; (2) in symmetrical antithetic composition flanking the Torah shrine, a menorah, a vase, a tree, a bull's head, or a human figure; (3) in pairs flanking inscriptions; (4) as single decorative motifs; (5) in hunting scenes.

1.1.1 *In the Round as Part of the Torah Shrine Ornamentation*

Lions in three-dimensional or free-standing sculpture or in relief, possibly as part of the Torah shrine ornamentation, are found in Galilean and Golan synagogues.

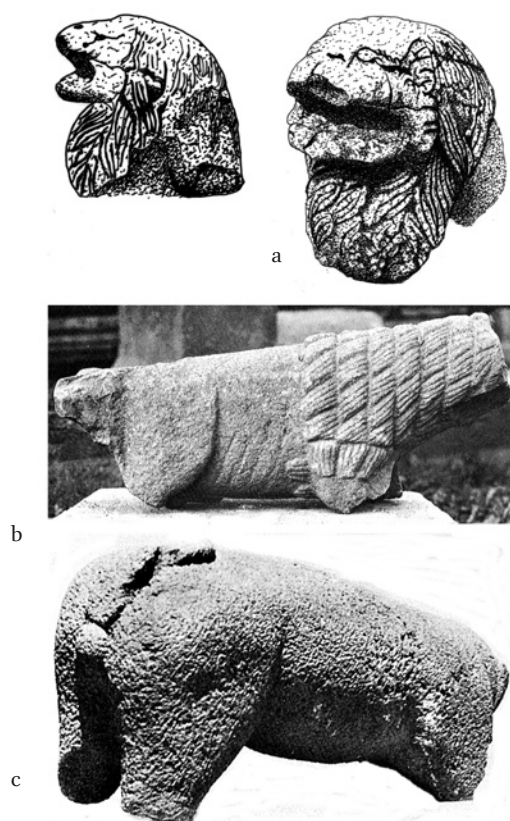


Figure IX-1. Lions: a. Stone lion head, Bar'am; b. Basalt lion, Korazim.

Lions, both in the round and in relief, were found in Galilean synagogues. Three fragments of lions, one of them a lioness, were discovered at Korazim (Fig. IX-1b): a seated lion with a schematic mane, whose head is broken; a fragment of the rear body of a lion; and a broken part of a lioness's body. Yeivin (2000:22*, 27*, 53, 62–3, plan 14, Figs. 125–127, Pl. 25:1, 2, 3) suggests that they flanked the niche of the Torah shrine. As for the second aedicula platform (*bema*, *iztaba*), he proposed that it had a gabled roof decorated with a conch and a wreath, and probably a pair of sculpted lions in recesses on the sides, one of which was recovered. Similar fragments of a lion in the round are found in Capernaum; a head was found at the Bar'am synagogue (Fig. IX-1a) (Hachlili 1988:Figs. X-8-11). Sukenik (1949:21, Fig. 5) proposes that the Capernaum lions may have flanked the entrance of the synagogue or the Torah shrine, as depicted in the Beth Alpha mosaic floors. Maoz (1995:47–49, 143, Pl. 108:2) suggests that these lion reliefs were positioned on the façade close to the portal.

Lions and lionesses engraved in high relief, which might have had three-dimensional heads, have been found at several Golan synagogues.

A lion in high relief from Kanaf (Fig. IX-2a), found in secondary use, is shown striding, one foreleg raised, the stylized mane covering its neck, front, and foreleg. The body, forelegs, and hind legs are preserved. The head and hindquarters are missing (H—38; L—83; W—37; IAA no.85–1500; Hachlili 1995:Fig. 38). A similar lion, but in a reclining position, was found at Beth-Lavi (Maoz 1995:Pl. 31). A reclining lioness with teats is engraved in profile on a basalt relief from 'En Nashut (Fig. IX-2b); her stylized mane covers the neck and front part of the body, her hind legs are bent under the body with the tail curled on them. The head and forelegs are missing (H—50; L—80; W—40; IAA no. 87–6802;



Figure IX-2. Golan basalt reliefs: a. Striding lion, Kanaf; b. Lioness, 'En Nashut.

Maoz 1981:110; 1995:Pl. 71:1; Hachlili 1988:327, Pl. 90; 1995:Fig. 39). Similar in pose and execution to the 'En Nashut lion is a three-dimensional fragment of a reclining lion from Hafar, carved in profile; only the upper part and two legs survived and its mane is stylized (H—48; L—36; W—28; Hachlili 1995:Fig. 40). A lioness suckling her cub is carved on a relief found at Qusibiyye, in secondary use. The lioness adopts a schematic striding pose, in profile but with head en-face. One foreleg is raised and the hind legs are in a standing position. A stylized mane of parallel curving lines covers the neck and front part of the body. The cub is carved like a miniature lioness, upside down and suckling. The cub pose recalls the composition on the 'En Nashut orthostat (H—37; L—65; W—50; Hachlili 1995:no. and Fig. 41).

A fragment of a relief of a standing lion was found at Umm el-Qanatir; the only surviving parts are the front of the body and the forelegs (H—52; L—75; W—26; Hachlili 1988:324, Fig. X-8; 1995: no. and Fig. 42). The fragment probably comes from a sculpture that served as a guard next to the structure of the Torah shrine. Kohl and Watzinger (1916:127–129, Figs. 259) reconstructed the lion relief as flanking the upper window on the façade of the synagogue.

These lion reliefs depicted as guarding figures were probably part of the aedicula decoration, as seen on the Beth Alpha mosaic pavement, where lions flank the ark.



Figure IX-3. Stone orthostat relief, 'En Nashut.

A different and unique lion on a stone orthostat (Fig. IX-3), was found at 'En Samsam, but probably stood originally in the 'En Nashut synagogue in the Golan. This three-dimensional lion is carved in frontal position, with a head, forelegs, and a neck and body covered by a stylized mane. One side of the orthostat is engraved with an heraldic design of two eagles flanking a scene of a man holding his hands up, flanked by a lion to the left and a lioness and her cub to his right. The two rather square eagles are represented with their heads turned to the centre, their wings outspread, and their feathers stylized; the eagle on the left is eating grapes (Hachlili 1988:173, 321–322, Fig. IX-24b, Pl. 88; 1995:203, no. 37; 2009:80–81, Fig. IV-17a).

The lion and lioness stride in profile; both have stylized manes of parallel lines and very small heads. The lion's tail is carved close to the hind leg, the lioness's tail is curved up above its rear. A cub is carved upside-down under the lioness. The human figure is shown frontally with hands raised, and its right hand holds the lion's head. Traces of red paint remain. The orthostat might have been used as a base for the Torah shrine (see Hachlili 1988:275, 277–8, Fig. IX-24b).

The scene on the side of the orthostat was interpreted by Ilan (1969:185) as Daniel in the Lions' Den, although the depiction of a lioness and her cub in this narrative is unique.

Lions connected to the Torah shrine scene appear on several reliefs on aedicula lintels: a pair of rampant lions in the spandrels flanking a pediment ornamented with a rosette and a conch are carved on the aedicula lintel of the Galilean synagogue of Nabratein (Fig. IV-49); the lion on the right rises on its hind legs, roaring and lashing its tail; of the left lion, only the head and mane was preserved (Meyers et al. 1981a:238–39; Meyers and Meyers 2009; Younger 2009:84, 88–92, Fig. 27, photo 26).

A damaged relief of a lioness was found at Nabratein (Fig. IX-4); its body, a rear leg, and the tail survived, and the body is covered with round discs (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:105, Fig. 201; Younger 2009:87, photo 29, who dates it to the 3rd to 4th c. CE); it probably is a lintel fragment with a design comparable to the H. 'Amudim main portal lintel (Fig. IX-7a).

A lion assaulting an animal with a bird looking on decorates an unusual column base (Fig. IX-5a) found at the Umm el-Qanatir synagogue in secondary use. The column was found hidden under the stairs of the southern entrance portico and probably belonged to an earlier period of the building (Ben David et al. 2006:116–117). A schematic lion is carved on a gable corner found at Korazim. The lion's head is rendered *en face* and the body in profile (Fig. IX-5b). May and Stark (2002:242, Pl. 21:no. 93, Pl. 22) place it above the column of their reconstructed 'Seat of Moses' complex (Fig. IV-32b).

Lions are carved on an aedicula lintel from Rafid, flanking the carved Syrian gable. The composition resembles the Nabratein lintel; on the left is a leaping lion and another lion is engraved beside the gable top on the right (Suknik 1935:Pl. XXIIIa; Hachlili 1995:no. and Fig. 62).

A lion at Zumimra is depicted beside a pillar which might have been part of an aedicula. The lion is rendered lying down on the column, although the column is depicted in a vertical position

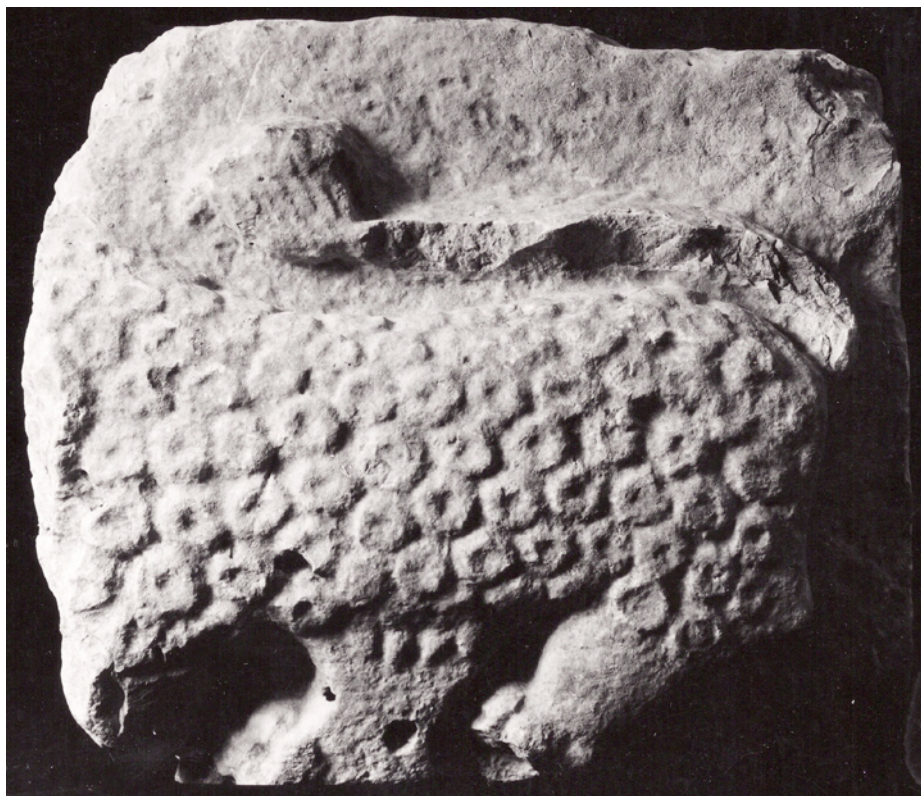


Figure IX-4. Damaged relief of a lioness, Nabratein.



Figure IX-5. Lions: a. Column base decorated with a hunting lion and a bird, Umm el-Qanatir; b. Lion on a gable, Korazim.



Figure IX-6. Lion depicted beside a pillar, Zumimra.

(Fig. IX-6). The relief is probably part of a Torah shrine (Maoz 1981:104; 1995:Pl. 44:3; Hachlili 1988:184; 1995:no. and Fig. 64).

1.1.2 *Flanking in Symmetrical Antithetic Composition*

A symmetrical heraldic motif of lions flanking objects, such as a menorah vase, tree, bull's head, or human figure, is a frequent occurrence in Jewish synagogal and funerary art. Lions flanking a vase or trees are carved on lintels from H. 'Ammudim (Fig. IX-7a), Capernaum, and H. Sumaqa (Fig. IX-7b) as well as on the mosaic floor of the Beth She'an small synagogue B (Fig. X-5). A carved lion beside two seven-branched menoroth appears on a lintel from 'En Nashut (Fig. VI-44) (Hachlili 1995:no. and Fig. 9).

A symmetrical repetition of representations of lions in an antithetic composition, flanking various objects and figures, is also common on mosaic floors.

A pair of lions flank the ark at Beth Alpha in unidentical symmetry; see the similarity to the depiction of the zodiac lion on the right (Fig. VI-4a, IX-8b). Similar depictions are found on gold glasses from catacombs in Rome. Lions flank a menorah at Ma'on-Nirim (Fig. VI-43, IX-8c). Lions flank a human figure in the Daniel scene at Na'aran, and probably also at Susiya (Fig. VIII-15a, b); a lion and a lioness suckling her cub flank a human figure on the side of the stone orthostat from 'En Nashut (Fig. IX-3—and description above). A pair of lions flank an inscription at Hammath Tiberias B (Fig. IX-8a). Similar compositions appear on some of the Beth She'arim sarcophagi. A representation of a lion decorating a Torah shrine can be seen in a carving on a catacomb wall at Beth She'arim (Fig. IV-35). These depictions of flanking lions probably signify guardians.

1.1.3 *Flanking Inscriptions in Pairs*

A pair of lions, each clutching a bull's head and flanking the remains of a Greek inscription in a wreath (Fig. IX-9a) is rendered on the first band of the Sepphoris synagogue nave mosaic pavement (Weiss and Netzer 1966:16–17; Weiss 2005:61–65). A similar rendition of a pair of lions clutching bulls' heads appears on a carved stone from Tiberias (Fig. IX-9b) (Hachlili 2009:199, Fig. IX-2).

Pairs of lions flank inscriptions on the mosaic pavements at the entrance to the synagogue of Hammath Tiberias B, the upper panel of Hammath Gader, and Band 1 at Sepphoris. On the Beth Alpha entrance panel, a lion and a bull flank the inscription (Fig. IX-10).

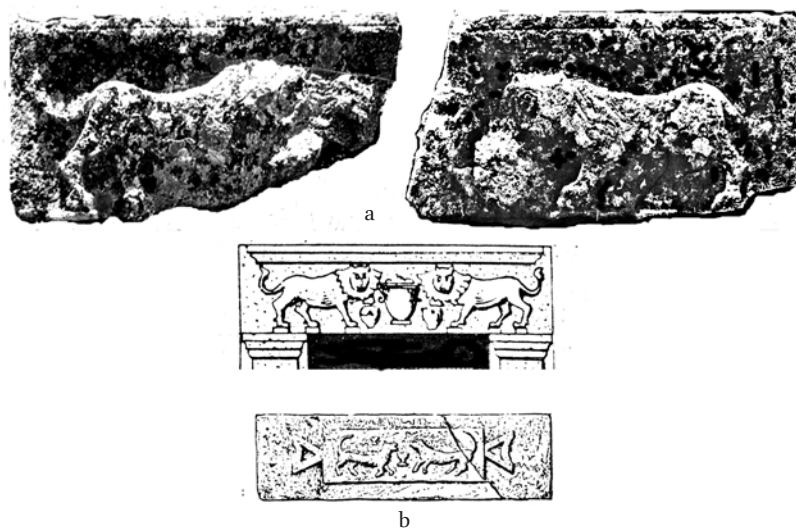


Figure IX-7. Lions flanking vase on lintels: a. H. 'Ammudim; b. Sumaqa.



Figure IX-8. Lions on mosaic pavements: a. Hammath Tiberias; b. Beth Alpha; c. Ma'on-Nirim.

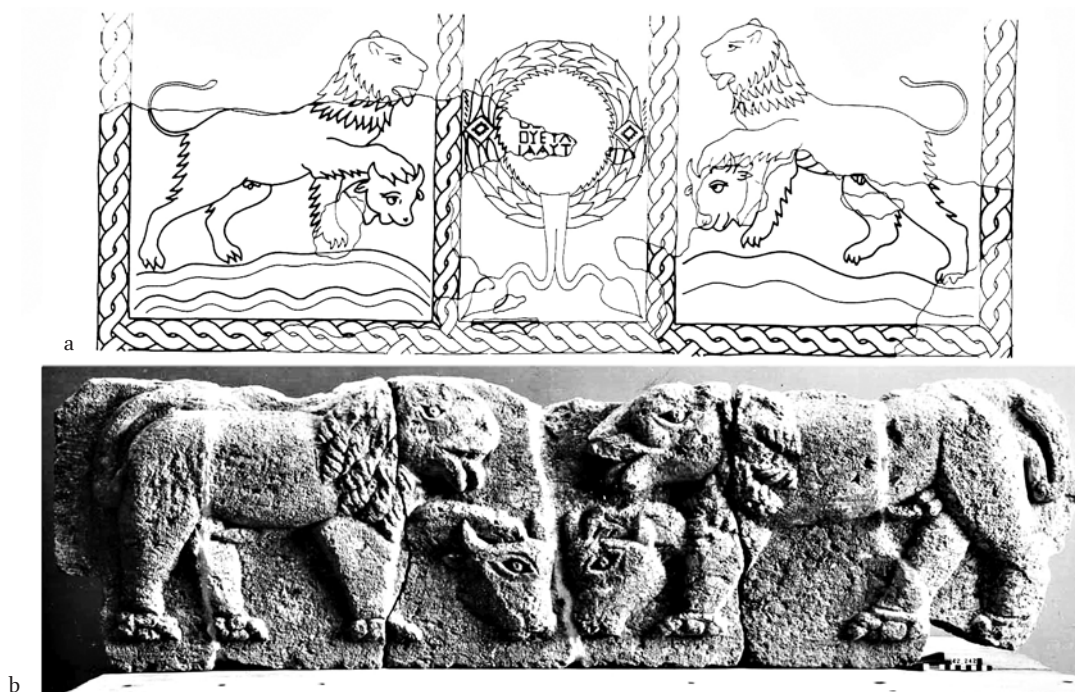


Figure IX-9. Flanking lions placing their paws on bull heads: a. Sepphoris mosaic; b. Tiberias stone.

1.1.4 Single Decorative Motifs

The lion is also encountered as a single motif decorating friezes, lintels, reliefs, and mosaic pavements. Mutilated front bodies of lions in half profile with heads *en face* were found at Korazim, carved on the gable frieze (Fig. V-15a); a lioness was found on an inner frieze fragment (May 2000:116, 141, nos. 7, 8, 39, Fig. 78, 81, Pl. 6:2, 3, 15:6, Fig. 1:13–15). An almost identical composition is found on a Capernaum relief (Fig. V-15b) (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Pls. 29, 31; Orfali 1922:Figs. 77, 80, Pl. 47; May 2000:116).

A Corinthian capital with a carved lion's head probably belonged to the Japhia synagogue (Suke-nik 1951:15, Pl. X). A seated lion is carved on a relief from Umm el-Qanatir. A lion's head (probably a mask) set inside a wreath is carved on a lintel from H. Tuba (now in Safed). A lion emerging from a leaf and acanthus pattern is carved on a lintel from Rehov (Fig. IX-11).

On mosaic pavements, some biblical scenes and zodiacs depict lions and lionesses. A lioness listens to King David's music in the Gaza mosaic pavement (Fig. VIII-13). Lions appear on the zodiac panel representing the Leo sign in Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias, Na'aran, and Sepphoris (Figs. VII-16, 17).

1.1.5 Hunting Scenes

Hunting scenes on inner frieze fragments were found at Korazim (Yeivin 2000:no. 36, Fig. 103, Pl. 15:3; May 2000:111, Fig. 1:1), among them a lioness being attacked by a centaur and a lion or lioness attacking a bull (now broken) on inner frieze fragments (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Fig. 99c; May 2000:112–3, Fig. 1:3). Lions in hunting scenes appear in the Gerasa mosaic (Fig. VIII-8).

The popularity of the lioness in Jewish art should be noted and the preferred motifs include a lioness suckling her cub, a scene encountered on carved basalt stones at Korazim within a part of the

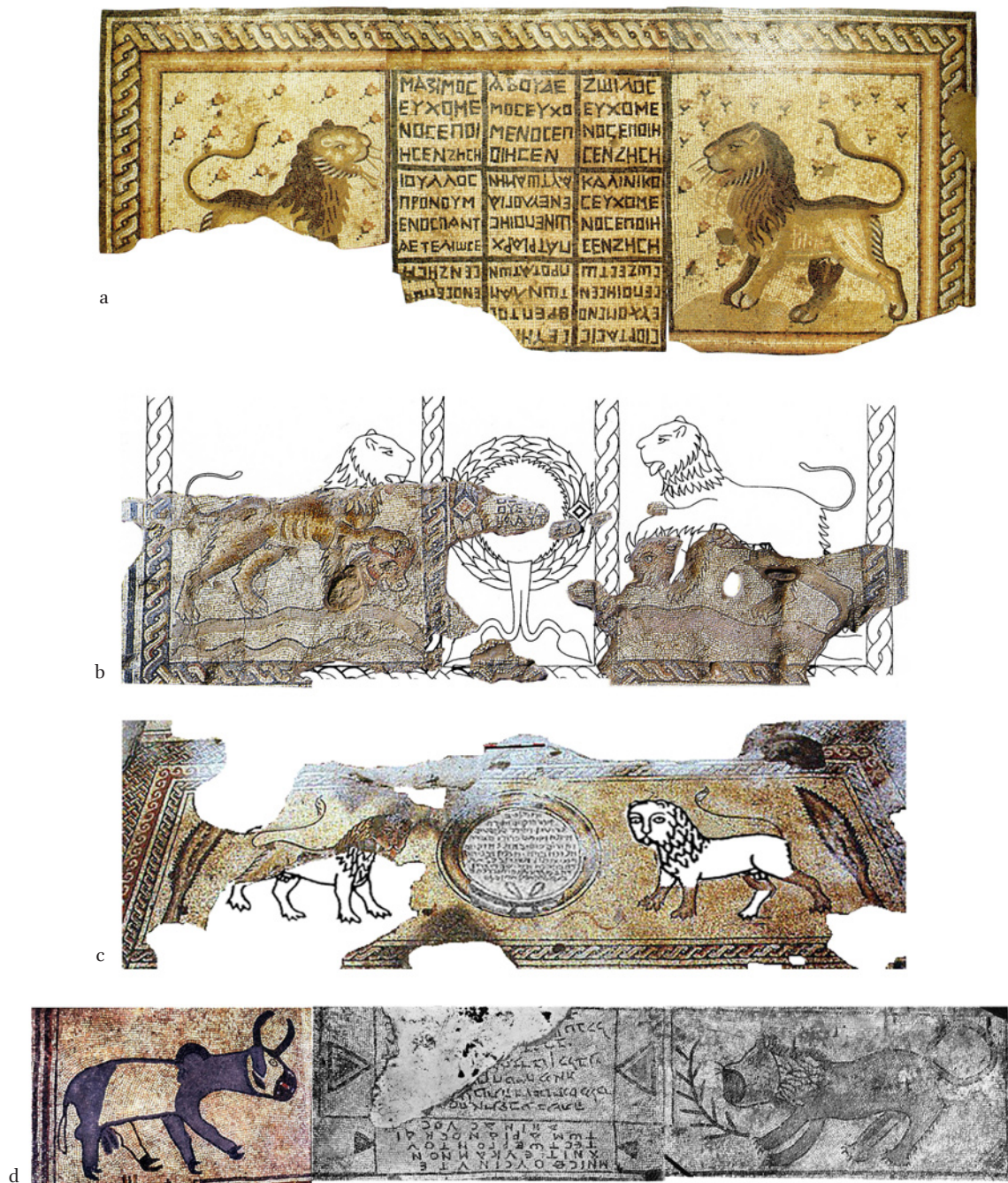


Figure IX-10. Lions flanking inscriptions on mosaic pavements: a. Hammath Tiberias; b. Sepphoris; c. Hammath Gader; d. Beth Alpha.

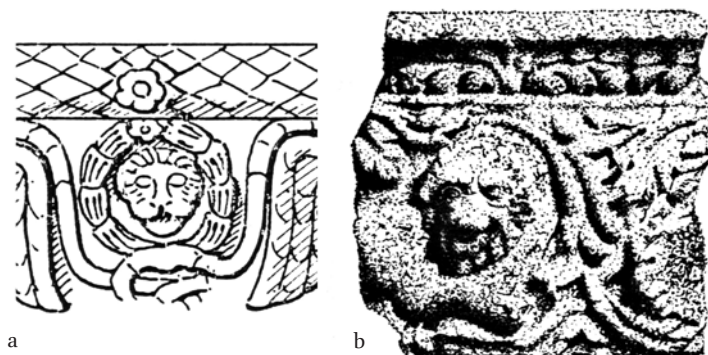


Figure IX-11. Lions' heads: a. H. Tuba; b. Rehov.

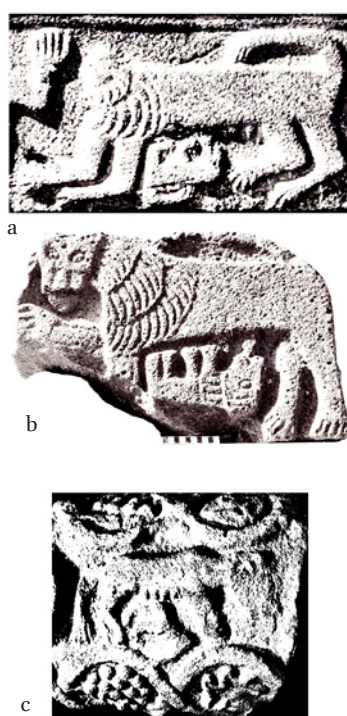


Figure IX-12. Lioness feeding her cub: a. 'En Nashut; b. Qusibiyye; c. Korazim.

inner frieze (Fig. IX-12c) (Yeivin 2000:no. 39, Fig. 106, Pl. 15:6; May 2000:116, Fig. 1:13). Noteworthy also are the lioness depictions peculiar to Golan sculpture (Fig. IX-12a, b) described above (Hachlili 1995:203, no. and Fig. 41).

A number of scenes on mosaic pavements portray a lioness with cubs suckling or running alongside her. A lioness suckles her cub in a medallion on the Gaza inhabited vine scroll (Fig. IX-13a). On the inhabited vine scrolls pavement at Ma'on-Nirim, a leopardess is rendered in a medallion whereas her cub is near her but outside the medallion (Fig. IX-13b) (Hachlili 2009:166–168). A hunting lioness is included on the Gerasa mosaic border (Fig. VIII-8), which indicates that they were chosen as decorative motifs.



Figure IX-13. Lioness and her cub on mosaic pavements: a. Gaza; b. Leopardess and her cub, Ma'on–Nirim.

The lions are shown with bodies in profile and heads *en-face*, although on most of the examples the heads are missing. The lions are leaping, striding with one foreleg raised, or lying down with bent legs. Lions are portrayed in both stylized and realistic manners (Avi-Yonah 1981a:53–54). Stylization is achieved in two ways: (1) The adoption of a selected pose, in this case the most common oriental pose, that is, body in profile with head and face turned toward the spectator (examples come from H. 'Ammudim and Qusibiyye (Figs. IX-7a, 12b)). Many lions are depicted in the Assyrian convention, which has the left and right limbs moving simultaneously (see the lions at H. 'Ammudim, Hammath Gader, Beth Alpha, Beth She'arim (Figs. IX-7, 10)). (2) The showing of the details of the lion's body covered by a pattern.

The stylization of the lions and lionesses is seen in the rendering of the mane in a pattern of parallel carved lines (Figs. IX-1–7). The carved mane is depicted schematically, in a pattern of curls in regular groups of rows or tresses (Bar'am, Korazim, 'En Nashut (Figs. IX-1, 3)), and seems to be a local Galilean and Golan characteristic (May 2000:112). The lion on a limestone relief (perhaps a lintel) from the Nabratein synagogue has a circle-patterned mane covering the whole body (Fig. IX-4).

The style of the 'En Nashut carving (Fig. IX-3) is unusual: the lion and lioness have proportionally very small heads, large bodies and paws, long tails, and manes portrayed by several carved lines. The lion, engraved from the front and side, has small eyes and ears and a symmetrical, schematic mane.

The ferocity of the lions is sometimes emphasized in their pose and stylized depiction. To demonstrate their ferocity the lions on the Nabratein aedicula lintel (Fig. IV-49) are represented rampant, with the right lion rising on its hind legs, roaring, its tail lashing. The 'En Nashut lion torso (Fig. IX-3), seen from the front, has its mouth open and its tongue protruding,

Most of the lions are depicted with their tails upcurved. Exceptions are lions with their tails held down: the left-hand lion in Daniel in the Lions' Den in the Na'aran mosaic (Fig. VIII-15a), the left-hand lion on the 'En Nashut orthostat (Fig. IX-3), and the lioness on the 'En Nashut relief (Fig. IX-2b). It is interesting to note that the lionesses are usually rendered with exactly the same stylized mane as the lions (Figs. IX-1–13). May (2000:112) is probably right in stating that the mane defines the species (lion), while the teats mark the gender.

The lion is the symbol of Judah, the guardian and protector (Avi-Yonah (1960a:23; 1960b:30 note 19)); this may explain the lions flanking the Torah Ark in Beth Alpha and the menorah at Ma'on-Nirim (Figs. VI-3a, 43). Possibly the lions flanking inscriptions at Hammath Tiberias, Sepphoris, Hammath

Gader, and Beth Alpha (Fig. IX-10) also represent protectors. Goodenough (1958, VII:29–37, 78–86) proposes that the lion represents a protector and indicates “the ferocious but saving power of the God of the Torah.” Lions flanking Jewish symbols may have had a significance beyond a merely decorative function, thus attaching the attributes of guardian and protector to the lions known already from ancient Near Eastern art. These finds seem to indicate that the lions were consistently selected to adorn synagogues in their capacity as power motifs or images of vigil; some hint of the tradition of the lion symbolizing Judah, probably plays a part in these representations.

1.2 *The Eagle*

The eagle is a well known motif in ancient art, including Jewish art, and is found decorating different artifacts: lintels, windows, Torah shrines, and various examples of funerary art. Two types of eagles are found in synagogue art, one with spread wings, the other with wings joined to the body.

Eagles in sculpture and mosaics are rendered in several standard types of ornamentation: (1) in the centre of synagogue lintels; (2) in pairs, in heraldic antithetic composition flanking the Torah shrine or a wreath; (3) carved on capitals; (4) carved on top of gables; (5) as an ornamental motif.

1.2.1 *The Centre of Synagogue Lintels*

Almost all the eagles on reliefs are found in Galilean and Golan synagogues: An eagle with spread wings and garlands is seen on the lintel soffit of Gush Halav (Fig. IX-14) (Meyers et al. 1990:84, Figs. 25, photo 40); comparable, but damaged, eagles are carved on the lintel of the northern doorway and on the soffit of the central lintel of the Roman temple at Kedesh in the Galilee (Ficher et al. 1984:Pls. 29:1, 37:1, 2).

An eagle with wings joined to the body, positioned as the central figure, is carved on the Capernaum lintel (Orfalli 1922:Fig. 54); today it has been nearly obliterated (Fig. V-12a center).

On synagogue lintels in the Golan, eagles appear in several forms. Single figures carved on lintels were found at Dabura and Jaraba (Kochavi 1972:263; Hachlili 1995:nos. and Figs. 29, 30). Eagles from Qusibiyye and Jaraba engraved on relief fragments, are shown frontally. Their heads and part of their legs are missing; their bodies are round and the joined wings are totally covered with stylized overlapping feathers (Fig. IX-15a, b) (Hachlili 1987:37, no. 13; 1995:nos. 26, 27). A similar eagle appears on a relief at Umm el-Qanatir (Figs. IX-18, 19b) (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:127, Fig. 258, found in secondary use, Kochavi 1972:283). Two more eagles found at Qusibiyye are mentioned by Ilan (1987:106–7; 1991:108, Fig. 2). Two eagles carved on lintels were found at Ahmadiyye by Schumacher (1888:72, Figs. 8, 9; now lost).

1.2.2 *Flanking in Heraldic Antithetic Composition Pairs*

Several lintels depict eagles in antithetic composition, flanking a wreath or a disc: On a lintel from the Meroth synagogue Beth Midrash, a high relief of two damaged headless eagles flanking a wreath with a Hercules knot and ending with an ivy leaf was found, face down and broken in two (Fig. V-7c). Beneath the decoration was a Hebrew inscription “Blessed shall you be you be in your comings; blessed shall you be in your goings” (Deut. 28:6) (Ilan and Damati 1987:75–7; Ilan 1989:32–3, Figs. 16, 17).

A basalt lintel found in a private house in Hirbet Tuba (now at Safed) is carved with two harrier eagles holding snakes in their beaks, flanking a wreath that frames a lion’s head (Fig. IX-16a). Avigad (1954:18–19) maintains that this lintel was taken from a Galilean synagogue. However, it might have originally belonged to a Golan synagogue, as it is carved in basalt; moreover, the carving of the lintel

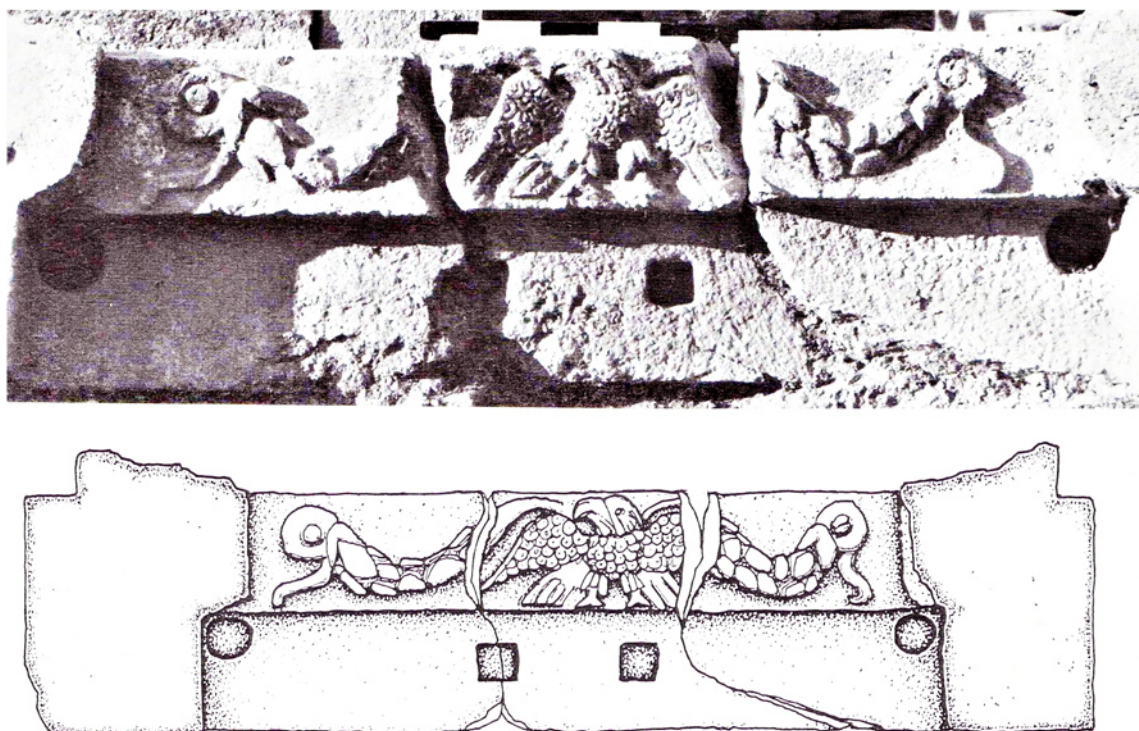


Figure IX-14. An eagle depicted on a lintel soffit, Gush Halav.

façade fits the Golan type of entrance lintels and the heraldic composition of the harrier eagles is similar to the Golan examples from Dabura (Fig. IX-17a–b) (Hachlili 1995:Figs. 32–33). A lintel from Japhia has a pair of eagles holding small discs in their beaks and flanking a wreath, each of them separate within a metope (Fig. V-5d).

A lintel fragment from Dabura (found in secondary use) depicts a richly carved, stylized eagle with spread wings (one is missing) and head facing left. Its beak holds a wreath; its legs are close together. The neck, body, wing, and legs are covered with stylized feathers (Fig. IX-16b). Two fish are carved next to and below the wing. An Aramaic inscription carved above the wing reads: “Made the gate” (H–60, L–108. Kochavi 1972:265; Urman 1972:20–21, Pl. 6, A; Hachlili 1988:332, Fig. X-20b; 1995:no. and Fig. 28).

Two harrier eagles in heraldic composition, holding snakes in their beaks and flanking a wreath, are depicted on two Dabura lintels. On one lintel in secondary use, two harrier eagles are carved at both ends flanking a wreath; each eagle holds a snake in its beak and the snakes interwine into a stylized wreath with a hercules knot, its top terminating with the snakes’ heads (Fig. IX-17a). Inside the wreath and beside it is the inscription “Eliezer ha-Qappar/this is the school/of the Rabbi.” Both eagles are depicted with their heads turning towards the centre, their bodies round, wings spread upside down and feathers highly stylized in a criss-cross pattern (H–43, L–168, W–26. no. 87–6276; Kochavi 1972:265; Urman 1972:16–23; Hachlili 1988:206–7, Fig. VIII-46b; 1995:no. and Fig. 32).

The other Dabura lintel (now lost) renders two harrier eagles with heads turned aside, holding snakes in their beaks. The eagles’ spread wings flank a stylized round wreath with a four-petaled rosette (Fig. IX-17b). This composition and execution recalls the other Dabura lintel (Maoz 1981:110; Hachlili 1988:206–7, Fig. VIII-46c; 1995:no. and Fig. 33). Two crudely engraved harrier eagles flank a round disc on a lintel from Kafr Harib (Fig. IX-17c) (Hachlili 1995:no. and Fig. 34).



Figure IX-15. Eagles on Golan reliefs: a. Qusibiyye; b. Jaraba.

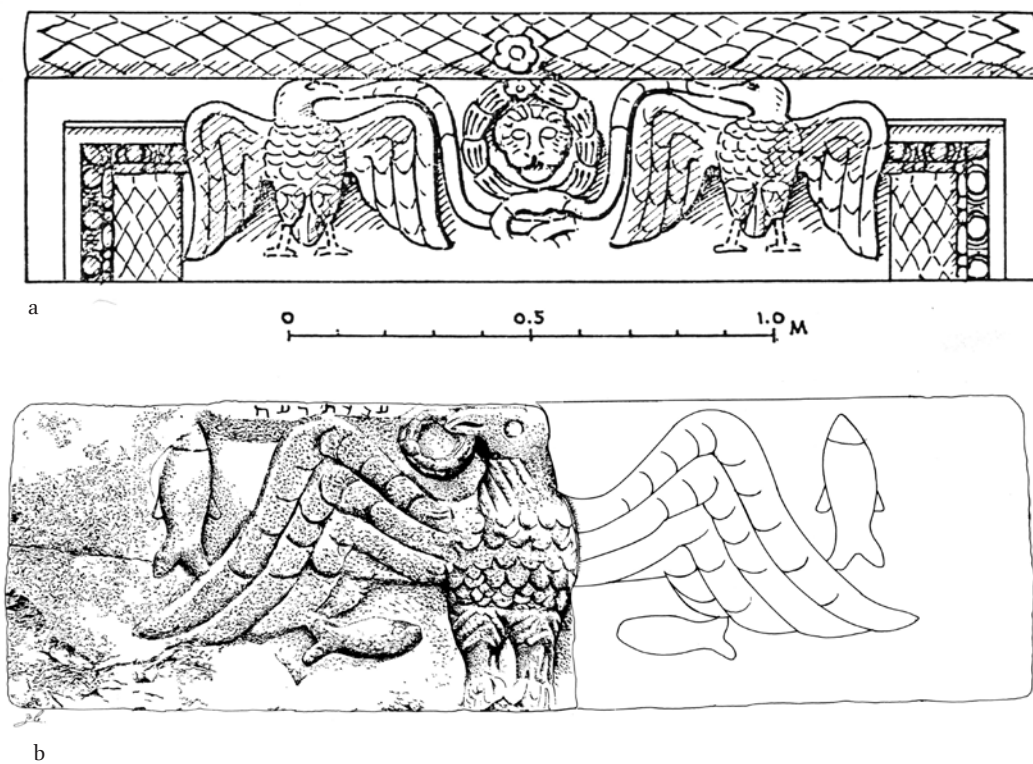


Figure IX-16. a. A pair of harrier eagles flanking a wreath, H. Tuba; b. Stylized eagle with spread wings, Dabura.



Figure IX-17. Pairs of harrier eagles: a-b. Dabura; c. Kafr Harib.



Figure IX-18. Eagle on capital, Umm el-Qanatir.

1.2.3 *Carved on Capitals*

Eagles are part of the Torah shrine ornamentation. A stylized eagle is carved on a double-column capital from Umm el-Qanatir (Kochavi 1972:283; Hachlili 1988:184, Pl. 23; 1995:no. and Fig. 31); the eagle is engraved with its head to the right and wings spread, and the body and wing feathers are stylized (Fig. IX-18).

The double-column capital probably belonged to an aedicula (Fig. IV-38) (Hachlili 1988:184, Fig. IX-24c; see the reconstructed aedicula by Ben David et al. 2006:115). The 'En Nashut lion orthostat has two eagles, one on each end, flanking a heraldic scene of a human figure and lions (Fig. IX-3, 19a). The eagles in both these reliefs are stylistically similar and may have been carved by the same workshop, although the capital from Umm el-Qanatir is of better quality.

At Hirbet Tuba, a gable flanked by a pair of head-damaged eagles with spread wings decorates an aedicula or perhaps a window lintel; the gable is decorated with two amphorae at its base with wine scrolls stemming out of them (Ilan 1991:32, Fig. 2). A basalt window (or an aedicula) fragment from the ed-Dikke synagogue has a small eagle carved on the side. Aedicula lintels decorated with Syrian gables flanked by eagles were found also at Ghadariyye and Rafid (Hachlili 1995:nos. and Figs. 58–61). An eagle is depicted on the façade of a console fragment from Khawkha (Ilan 1987:93). A large eagle depicted on a relief probably belonged to Dabura (Ilan 1991:79, Fig. 2).

1.2.4 *Carved on Top of Gables*

Single, large, attached three-dimensional eagles decorate the gable apex facades of synagogues. At Korazim, fragments of an eagle body with spread wings and tail have survived, with the eagle depicted on the apex of the exterior gable frieze of the south façade (probably flanked by two lions on the sides of the gable frieze fragments) (Fig. IX-20) (Yeivin 2000:16*, Fig. 77, 81, Pl. 6:1; May 2000:116, Fig. 1:17).

Two eagles are probably carved on the mutilated key stone of the arch at Capernaum (Goodenough 1953, III:Fig. 465). Other eagles were found at Umm el-Qanatir (Schumacher 1888:Fig. 134; Kohl and Watzinger 1916:127, Fig. 258, reused; see also Kochavi 1972:283) and on fragments of an arch at 'En Nashut (Maoz 1980:23; 1995:Fig. 69, 4). The eagle with long short-feathered wings depicted on top of the gable fronts is characteristic also in Syria (Dentzer-Feydy 1992:Figs. 4, 25, 26).

1.2.5 *Ornamental Motif*

The eagle is encountered as a single motif decorating various architectural parts and mosaic pavements. Single eagles with wings outstretched carved in shallow relief are depicted on basalt lintels found at Dabura and Hafar (Fig. IX-21). Their heads turn to the left and their bodies are disproportionate.

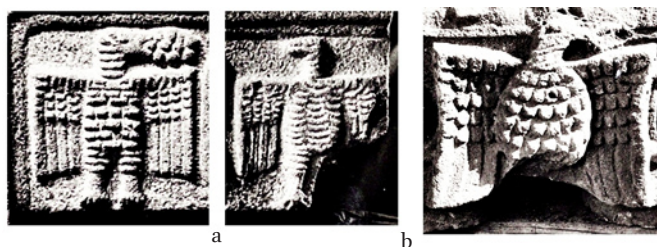


Figure IX-19. Eagles: a. 'En Nashut orthostat; b. Umm el-Qanatir capital.



Figure IX-20. Eagle on gable apex, Korazim.

A pair of eagles facing each other holding a garland is carved on a cornice at Capernaum (Fig. IX-38). A carved eagle decorates one of the west door jambs of the southwest entrance at H. Shem'a (Fig. IX-22) (Meyers et al. 1976).

At Nabratein synagogue the sculpted stone heads of a bird (a falcon or eagle) and a sheep were found (Young 2009:92, photos 27, 28); they probably decorated elements of the early portico, protruding from relief bodies, perhaps column capitals or lintels.

At Korazim on a part of the inner frieze there is an eagle with joined wings holding a human figure; the relief is broken and parts are missing (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Pl. 99f; Yeivin 2000:no. 27, Fig. 107, Pl. 14:1; May 2000:116, Fig. 1:16). May maintains the composition has comparisons and identifies it with the abduction of Ganymede by Zeus.

On the Ma'on-Nirim inhabited scroll mosaic pavement, the eagle is depicted within a medallion. Here it is rendered in frontal pose, its head turned towards the left, wings spread and legs apart. A ring with a bulla hangs around its neck. Similar eagles are depicted on another synagogue mosaic at Japhia (Fig. IX-23a, b) and on pavements at El Maqerqesh, Beth Guvrin, Jerusalem, and Petra (Hachlili 2009:141, Pl. VI.14).

The majority of the eagles depicted in Jewish art are rendered according to oriental stylization (Avi-Yonah 1981a:56–59). Inveterately, they are carved with bodies turned towards the spectator, their heads turned aside, their wings spread or joined to the body, and their legs apart. The body, wings, and upper part of the legs are patterned by either cross-hatching or carved dots so that the body features become a geometric pattern. Only the two H. Tuba (Safed) eagles are depicted more naturalistically (Fig. IX-16a). The wings of the two eagles on the 'En Nashut orthostat and on the Umm el-Qanatir double column (Fig. IX-19) are almost square in shape and emerge from the eagle's neck (Hachlili 1995:nos. 31, 37). The eagles on the Dabura and Hafar lintels (Fig. IX-21) have their heads turned to the left, wings spread, and their short necks, bodies, and legs are covered with stylized feathers. The eagles are out of proportion with their small bodies and short legs.

Pairs of harrier eagles (short-toed) flanking a wreath or a disc are engraved on two Dabura and Kafr Harib lintels (Fig. IX-17). Those found on the two Dabura lintels each hold a snake in its beak,

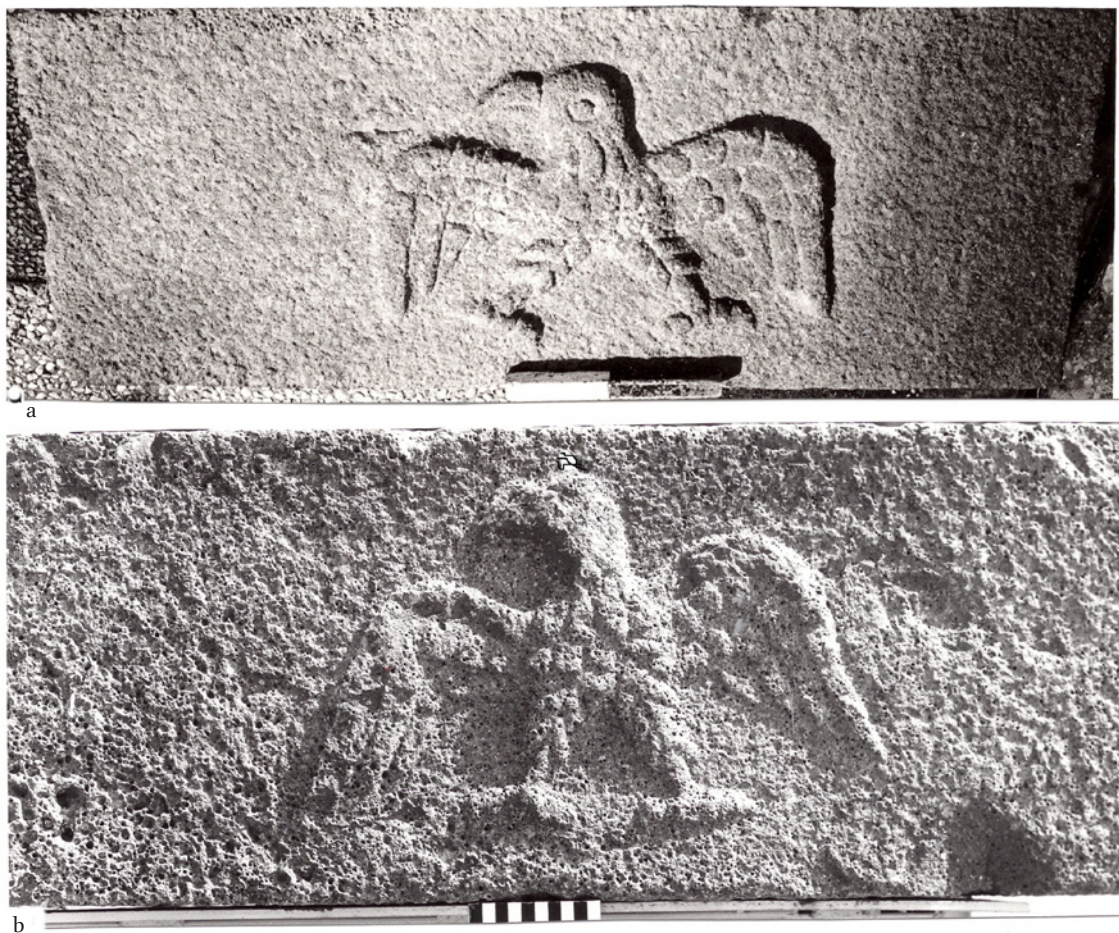


Figure IX-21. A single carved eagle: a. Dabura; b. Hafar.

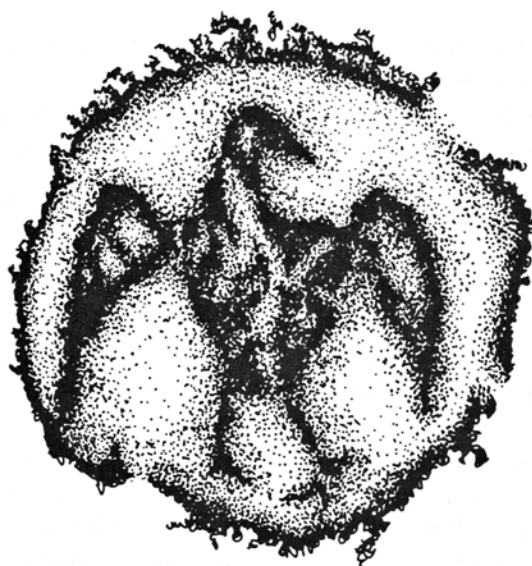


Figure IX-22. Eagle, H. Shem'a.

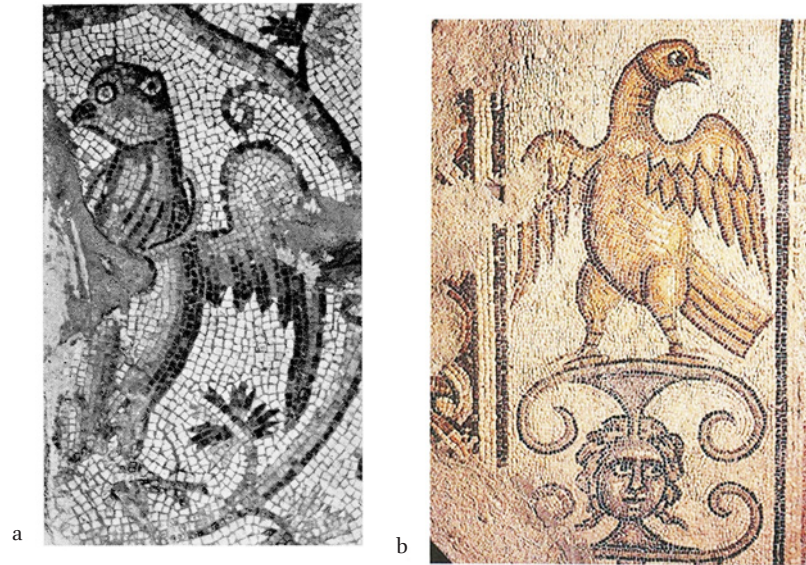


Figure IX-23. Eagles on mosaic pavements: a. Ma'on-Nirim; b. Japhia.

their heads turn toward the center or aside, their bodies are round, and their wings spread, with feathers highly stylized in a criss-cross pattern. The Dabura lintel eagle has its wings spread upside down. A similar harrier-eagle beside a wreath with a Hercules knot is depicted on a lintel fragment found at the Hippos-Sussita South-West Church; the eagle is holding the end of the wreath ribbon, which is shaped like an elaborate vine branch. The excavators (Segal et al. 2005:16, Fig. 49) note that the lintel might have originated in a synagogue that had existed under the church, or that it was transferred from a synagogue that once stood nearby.

The Golan eagles are carved in a characteristic stylized uniform fashion which seems to represent a common design used also in a few Galilee and several Syrian examples. They are depicted with circular body in frontal position, the head in profile turning aside; sometimes the beak holds a grape bunch and the wings are spread close to the body (only on the Dabura lintel (Fig. IX-16b) are the wings spread further from the body). The body and upper wings are engraved in a stylized overlapping rounded feather pattern; the lower part of the wings is carved with parallel lines. The neck is rendered with horizontal, vertical, or slanting parallel lines. The eagle's legs are depicted with an upside down V-shaped pattern. The carving of the eagles on the Dabura lintels (Fig. IX-17a, b) is crudely executed and both the body and the wings are incised in a cross-hatching pattern. The eagles engraved on the 'En Nashut orthostat (Fig. IX-3) are square and schematic, as is the rest of the composition, and their legs are covered with parallel lines. The Dabura capital is similar. The harrier-eagle is peculiar to Golan art (Fig. IX-17).

The Golan eagles are comparable to basalt carvings in Syria, in the Ledja (Butler 1919, part 7, ill. 355), and in the Hauran (Dunand 1934:Pls. IV-19, XII-35, 37, 38, XXIX-125; Bolelli 1986:318–320, Figs. 364–367). It is interesting to note that in Nabatean art, the carved eagles are rendered more naturally (Glueck 1965:144, 471–4, 479, 489, Pls. 10a, b, 34a, 138, 140–143).

The eagle is a familiar oriental religious motif in ancient art, being a well-known astral and solar symbol depicted on many pagan monuments. In pagan tombs the eagle has symbolic connotations—it is responsible for carrying the soul of the deceased to heaven. Goodenough (1958, VIII:121–142) maintains that the eagle is a symbol of immortality. Yuval-Hacham (2007:80) does not prove her proclamation that the eagle which decorates synagogues of the Roman and Byzantine period “is a symbolic representation of the power and might of the God of Israel.”



Figure IX-24. Bull: a. Beth She'an B small synagogue; b. Beth Alpha.

In synagogues the eagle motif decorated different artifacts—lintels, windows, and Torah shrines, and various examples have been found in the Beth She'arim funerary art (Avigad 1976:142; Avi-Yonah 1981a:65). However, in Jewish art it was deprived of its religious symbolism and became a purely decorative motif.

1.3 *The Bull/Ox*

In pagan art the bull is a lunar symbol, and in Syrian and Nabatean art it is associated with Hadad or Jupiter Heliopolitanus (Avi-Yonah 1981:65; note the symbolic association of the bull illuminating the hope of immortality, Goodenough VII, 1958:1–28). In Jewish synagogue and funerary art it is devoid of such symbolism, most probably being a decorative motif in a pattern book (Hachlili 1988:328–329).

A bull and a lion are flanking the Greek and Aramaic inscription at the Beth Alpha synagogue entrance (Fig. IX-10d, 24b). Taurus—the bull as a zodiac sign—appears in the zodiac depicted on the synagogue mosaic pavements of Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha and, in severely damaged form, at Sepphoris and Na'aran (Figs. VII-14, 15). A bull is rendered within a medallion on the left in the last row of the Beth She'an B small synagogue inhabited scroll mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-24a).

Bulls' heads grasped by a pair of lions are shown at the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic on Band I and on a stone relief from Tiberias (Fig. IX-9).

A bull's head motif appears in the center between the volutes in the upper part (instead of the central calyx) of two Corinthian capitals found at Hammath Tiberias Stratum II synagogue (Dothan 1983:33, Fig. 3:H, Pl. 9:2, no. 11).

A bull's head in the center of a wreath appears on a lintel from Qusibiyye together with a bird placed on the string of the wreath, which is tied with a Hercules knot (Ilan 1991:108:Fig. 1), similar to the wreath with a lion's head on the lintel from H. Tuba (Fig. IX-16a). The above animals, which figure prominently in Jewish art, lost their pagan meaning and acquired new values under the influence of biblical and midrashic literature.

1.4 *Horned Animals*

Horned animals flanking objects such as vases and trees constitute another popular motif on both synagogue and church mosaic pavements. The Beth She'an B synagogue inhabited scroll pavement depicts goats (one badly damaged) flanking an amphora (Fig. IX-25a). Sheep flank the Torah shrine panel on the Susiya mosaic pavement (Fig. V-46a); only the one on the right survived fully (Fig. IX-25b). The flower behind the sheep resembles the flowers behind the stags at Na'aran where a repaired mosaic panel at the entrance of the nave mosaic pavement depicts two unidentical stags facing each other among flowers (Fig. IX-25c). Deer also appear in the animal chase frame friezes at the Beth She'an B small synagogue (Fig. V-38).

1.5 *Animal Chase Theme*

Animal friezes with chase scenes are rare in Jewish art, and scenes of humans hunting animals are not found. In Roman and Byzantine art (see Lavin 1963), however, hunting and chase scenes are popular. Avi-Yonah (1942:111) maintains that Assyrian friezes influenced this motif of Roman art.

Animal chase scenes usually depict two animals, one chasing the other. This type of motif, which appears in both religious and secular structures, uses several recurring themes: wild beasts chasing domesticated animals and wild beasts assaulting their prey (Hachlili 2009:135–136, Table VII-2, Pls. VII-5–6, 8). Animal chases are common in inhabited scroll medallions where each animal is depicted in a separate medallion. Three animal chase scenes appear in the medallions of the inhabited scroll mosaics at the Gaza synagogue pavement, including the only depictions of a pair of animals attacking their prey found so far in a synagogue mosaic: a tigress chases a donkey in row three, a pair of dogs chase a deer in row seven, and two leopards chase a horse in row nine (Fig. IX-26). Although each of the animals is rendered in a separate medallion, the scenes are lively, naturalistic, and full of movement.

Scenes of beasts chasing animals also appear on the animal frieze borders of the Beth She'an B small synagogue and the Gerasa synagogue mosaic pavements. At the Beth She'an B small synagogue, the narrow mosaic border shows (Fig. V-38) a bear catching the rear legs of a fleeing deer, a dog chasing a hare, and a tiger jumping on an animal (destroyed); in all three cases the hunting beast grasps its victim by the legs. The animals are portrayed in vine medallions issuing out of four amphorae placed in the four corners of the border.

An animal frieze depicting beasts chasing smaller animals survived on the outer border of the vestibule mosaic of the Gerasa synagogue (Fig. VIII-8): a bear pursues a wild ass, a lioness pursues a wild ass, a cheetah chases a 'cloven-hoofed animal', a lion chases a bubale, and a leopard pursues a 'cloven-hoofed animal' (Biebel 1938:319–320; Piccirillo 1993:290, Fig. 547).

A hunting and chasing scene is depicted on a damaged fragment of the inner frieze at Korazim (May 2000:111–113, Fig. 1, 103, Pl. 15:3).

Interestingly, exotic animals such as elephants, giraffes, and zebras seldom appear on mosaic floors in antiquity; they do appear, though, in synagogues decorated with the inhabited scroll design on their pavements: elephants are rendered in a heraldic posture in the mosaic at Ma'on-Nirim and an elephant appears in the border at Beth She'an B (Fig. IX-27); a pair of giraffes flank a zebra in the medallions of row six of the Gaza mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-26b).

2. THE HUMAN FIGURE

Human figures were portrayed in a stylized manner: each part of the body was considered as a discrete element, body proportions were disregarded, and each limb was rendered separately.

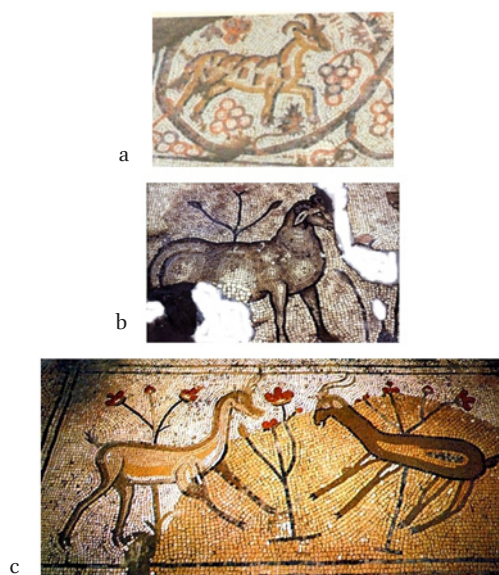


Figure IX-25. Horned animals on mosaic pavements: a. Beth She'an B; b. Susiya; c. Na'aran entrance.



Figure IX-26. Animal chase scenes, Gaza mosaic.

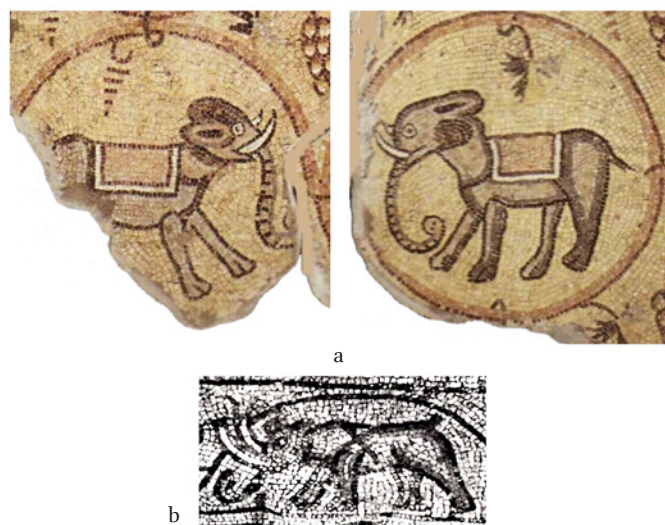


Figure IX-27. Elephants: a. Ma'on; b. Beth She'an B.

Human figures are portrayed on carved reliefs (lintels and friezes). At Korazim on the interior frieze, a head with curled hair is depicted within an acanthus medallion (Fig. IX-28a) (May 2000:114–115, Figs. 1:8; Yeivin 2000:Fig. 107, Pl. 14:1, wrongly identified as a medusa head); three other heads in medallions are portrayed elsewhere on the frieze (May 2000:114–115, Figs. 1:9–11) as well as several scenes involving human figures, such as medallions depicting vintage and wine production (see below, Fig. IX-30) (May 2000:113, Fig. 1:4–7).

A relief from Dabura, found in second use, depicts a crudely stylized human figure holding objects in its hands (Fig. IX-28b; Kochavi 1972:266; Hachlili 1995:no. 47). The figure is carved in frontal position; it has a square body, round head, small legs with big feet, and long arms. The man holds a wreath(?) in his left hand and a round-shaped object in his right. Next to the man is a stele-like carving. The Dabura figure resembles the man carved on the 'En Nashut orthostat, which depicts a crudely carved figure in the center, flanked by lions and eagles (Fig. IX-3). Its head is disproportionately small, as are the animal heads, and its left hand is disproportionately large. A head is rendered within a double meander band on the capital of a diagonal fluted column from Qasrin synagogue (Fig. IV-20b; Hachlili 1995:no. 48.1).

Another motif depicting human figures consists of the Nikae, flying winged Victories flanking a wreath, portrayed on lintels and on a sarcophagus. Two fragments of a lintel were found at ed-Dikke (Fig. IX-29a). On the left side of the lintel, the winged Nike, its dressed lower body bent, holds a wreath. The right side was found by Schumacher (1888:Fig. 29), but is now lost (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:115, Figs. 222 and 223; Hachlili 1988:206–207, Fig. VIII-45b; 1995:no. 45). Another set of winged Nikae is carved on a lintel from Rama (Fig. IX-29b).

The Nikae are rendered angularly, with faces depicted schematically and hands holding wreaths. The carved figures exhibit the characteristic conventions of Oriental art: an oversized head, body and face portrayed en face, legs in profile, arms attached unnaturally to the body, and few details depicted. Their wings spread out behind. The reliefs are flat, schematic, and crudely carved. The uniformity of their portrayal on the lintels of Rama and ed-Dikke, and probably on the Bar'am damaged lintel (Fig. V-7a, b) as well as on the Beth She'arim sarcophagus suggests strongly that this motif must have existed in a pattern book. Though identical in form to similar pagan motifs, they are different in meaning. The Nikae/Victories in Jewish art may have been, as Avi-Yonah maintains (1973:127),



a



b

Figure IX-28. a. Head within an acanthus medallion, Korazim; b. Human figure, Dabura.



a



b



Figure IX-29. Nikae engraved figures: a. ed Dikke; b. Rama.

representations of the triumph of the faith, evoked by the Triumph of the Emperor as depicted on Roman arches. They may also have been associated with angels or cherubim (Avigad 1976:285).

Several human figures are found in mosaic floors in the biblical scenes and zodiac panels. On the zodiac panel, human figures and protomes are used for depicting the seasons, the signs of the zodiac, and the sun god. The four busts of the seasons in Hammath Tiberias B, Beth Alpha, and Sepphoris (Figs. VII-11, 12) have exactly the same face, differing only in clothing, hair style, and attributes. The personification of the seasons is a frequent motif in ancient art. The zodiac signs represented by human figures are Gemini, Virgo, Libra, Sagittarius, and Aquarius (Figs. VII-14–21). The Hammath Tiberias B zodiac is depicted in a Hellenistic-naturalistic style: the bodies are rendered in natural postures, the head turned freely to the side; the faces are expressive, the folds of the dress fall naturally, and the jewellery is representative of the fashion of the period (Fig. X-15). At Sepphoris the figures are also quite naturalistic, but their portrayal is cruder (Fig. X-20): the heads face frontwards while the body is presented in profile. By comparison, the unique Beth Alpha mosaic with its zodiac and biblical scenes renders the figures according to the Oriental perception (Fig. X-22): the bodies are shown in front view, the legs and feet in profile, the face round, the eyes enlarged. The hair is not shown as an intrinsic part of the head which is large in proportion to the body, the arms are shown sideways and attached unnaturally to the bodies, and there is no difference in the portrayals of men, women, or youths.

King David in Gaza (Fig. VIII-13) is shown in a conventional depiction of Orpheus stylized as a Byzantine emperor; David in Meroth is shown as a Byzantine warrior (Fig. VIII-14). A human head is depicted on the Japhia mosaic (Fig. IX-23b), where it is used purely as a decorative and stylized motif. In the House of Leontis several figures are depicted: Odysseus, the Sirens, and a personification of the Nile (Fig. IX-39, 40). The human figures are similar to those depicted in room L of the sixth century CE Beth She'an Christian monastery. They have the same face and hair, all look sideways, and all are portrayed in quite naturalistic postures which convey their actions (see Hachlili 2009:254–264, for the Beth She'an artists).

It is important to call attention to the phenomenon that the inhabited scrolls or geometric sections in synagogue pavements do not contain any human images, although human figures do appear in other panels on the same pavements, in the contexts of biblical scenes and zodiacs (see Na'aran, or the nave floor at Gaza). During the same period, inhabited scrolls on some church pavements in the Beth She'an area and Caesarea as well as in Arabia depict human figures (Hachlili 2009:111–147).

3. GENRE MOTIFS

Only a few genre motifs are depicted in synagogue reliefs and pavements. At Korazim several scenes involving human figures appear on parts of the inner frieze (May 2000:113, Fig. 1:4–7): the frieze, though mutilated, clearly shows four medallions depicting vintage and wine production (Fig. IX-30), one filled with a figure with a staff, and three vintage scenes each of which depicts a pair of figures either holding or picking grapes with the third couple from the left treading grapes. Four vintage scenes are depicted on the Korazim inner frieze, carved within four vine scrolls medallions (May 2000:113, Fig. 1:4–7, no. 37, Fig. 104, Pl. 15:4).

This is the only scene in Jewish art of figures carrying out vintage actions, whereas they are a regular part of mosaic floors in Christian art, in churches and monasteries (Hachlili 2009:Pl. VII-1–4).

Humorous and realistic genre subjects are rendered on the running border of the Beth Alpha mosaic pavement: A figure holding a goose is depicted within a vine scrolls medallion on the left border (Fig. IX-31, 32b). A hen strutting along with her four chicks behind her is rendered in the lozenge medallion in the upper part of the border.



Figure IX-30. Vintage scenes carved on the hall inner frieze, Korazim.

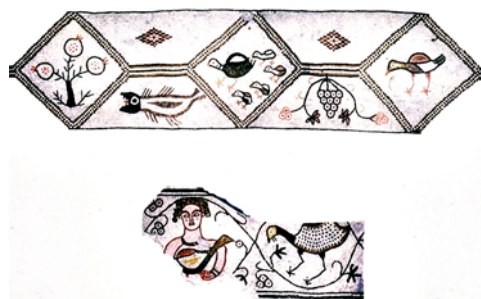


Figure IX-31. Genre subjects rendered on the running border, Beth Alpha.

A hen lays an egg into a water vessel in the center of the eighth row of the Ma'on-Nirim synagogue inhabited scrolls mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-32a).

Each of these three motifs is unique and may represent the artists' own initiative and imaginative contribution to these mosaic floors. These refreshing innovations contrast sharply with the frequently used conventional motifs taken from pattern books.

4. BIRDS

Birds are widespread in ancient art, and Jewish artists commonly used them. In fact they appear to be one of the artists' favorite motifs (Avigad 1976:144–145, Pls. 2, 3, 33:1, 44:4). By the Second Temple period birds are already being used in Jewish art, for instance in the wall painting of the Goliath Tomb at Jericho (Hachlili 1985).

Birds are depicted in heraldic scenes, flanking a menorah, on a chancel screen from Tiberias (Fig. IV-64). On the Torah shrine panel at Beth Alpha, birds flank the Ark (Fig. VI-3a). On three stone plaques (mirror frames) they appear flanking a menorah and two Torah shrines (Hachlili 1988:335–337, Fig. VIII-50e, x, 25–27, Pls. 36, 89, 102).

On the Beth She'an B mosaic floor birds appear in several locations (Fig. IX-33): they flank an inscription and a vase; they are depicted with ribbons around their necks, filling the spaces between the medallions and the inner row of the mosaic border. The outer row is filled with objects: a bird appears in a medallion flanking the menorah; birds fill the lozenges of the lower row of the wide frame. Birds surrounding an inscription are encountered in the House of Leontis, which is part of the small synagogue building (Hachlili 2009:Pl. XII-4b).

At the Gaza, Ma'on-Nirim, and Beth She'an B synagogues, birds fill many of the medallions on mosaic pavements with inhabited scroll designs (Figs. V-36–38, Hachlili 2009:112, 116, 125, Figs. VI-1,

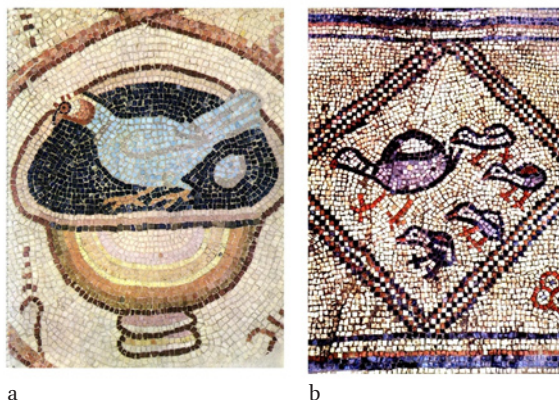


Figure IX-32. Genre motifs: a. Ma'on-Nirim; b. Beth Alpha.



Figure IX-33. Birds on the mosaic pavements of Beth She'an B: a, c. Synagogue, b. House of Leontis.

5, 10). Several birds fill the border medallions of the Beth Alpha mosaic pavements (Fig. IX-31), and a bird fills one square in the border fret pattern of the Ma'oz Hayim mosaic pavement (Fig. VI-28a). On the Noah's Ark pavement at Gerasa, a row of birds is shown leaving the ark (Fig. VIII-8). The 'En Gedi mosaic pavements display groups of birds in pairs on the emblem of the main mosaic, and a single bird in the centre of the small mosaic (Fig. IX-34).

Birds are portrayed inside the octagons of a geometric mosaic in the Susiya synagogue (Gutman et al. 1981:12).

Birds pecking at grapes are carved on two Golan lintels, one from Kanef and the other from 'En Nashut (Fig. IX-35), both found in second use. At 'En Nashut, a stylized bird pecks at a cluster of grapes and on a protruding part of the relief, on the right, a fifteen-petaled rosette is engraved. On the lower part of a lintel of the side entrance at Kanef (Hachlili 1995:Fig. 35, 36) a vine scroll with stylized leaves, clusters of grapes, and two heraldic birds pecking at grapes is carved. A third such depiction of a bird was seen on a now lost Korazim lintel (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Fig. 86). The motif of a bird pecking grapes was popular also in Syrian and Nabatean art (Butler 1916, II:Figs. 326, 327, 330).



Figure IX-34. Birds, 'En Gedi mosaic.



Figure IX-35. Birds pecking grapes: a. 'En Nashut; b. Kanaf.

Birds are usually depicted in the Oriental style. Carved birds' bodies are circular in shape and are shown from the side. Stylization is represented by patterning of body and wings.

Symbolic connotations and figurative significance have been conferred on the bird motif by several scholars. Goodenough (1958, VII:24, 41, 42) and Avi-Yonah (1960b:29 note 16) maintain that the bird is associated with the soul of the deceased. However, birds appear in various combinations,

both in heraldic fashion and as a single motif on lintels and mosaic floors, filling spaces of lintels and medallions; they are also part of Jewish scenes portraying menoroth and Torah shrines, which would seem to rule out the idea of any symbolic significance. Birds apparently served as decorative motifs, probably taken from pattern books or from a catalogue sketch book used by the artists.

4.1 *The Bird-in-Cage*

The bird-in-cage is one of the most common recurring motifs on the pavements with the inhabited scrolls design, being found at the Gaza and Ma'on-Nirim synagogues (Figs. V-36–37) (and churches of Groups I, II) where it is usually depicted in the central axial column (Hachlili 2009:140–141, Pl. VI-13, Figs. VI-1, 3–9). The cage has various styles and usually appears with a bird inside and the door closed, as at Ma'on-Nirim and Gaza (Fig. IX-36a, b). The bird-in-cage appears on other mosaics beside those on the inhabited vine scrolls compositions, and one such example is found in the centre of a hexagonal medallion in the geometric panel of the Na'aran synagogue mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-36c).

Some scholars argue that the bird-in-cage signifies the human soul imprisoned in its body and yearning for release; others see it as representing the soul of the blessed (or the donors), to be read as a funerary motif (Grabar 1966; Donceel-Voûte 1983; Maguire 1987:65; Hunt 1994:121). Yet this motif also probably reflected some hunting custom, such as the use of a bird in a cage as a decoy (Saller & Bagatti 1949:271; Avi-Yonah 1960:29, n. 16). This interpretation is reinforced by the content of two medallions on the inhabited acanthus border of the Nahariya church pavement; the left medallion shows a hunter with an empty cage behind him, and in the adjoining medallion there is a club aimed at a bird (Dauphin 1978:Pl. 7; Dauphin and Edelstein 1984, volume 35–36:Pl. XXVII). Supporting the idea that the bird-in-cage was used as a decoy, the cages at Gaza and Ma'on-Nirim (and at churches such as Shellal, Jerusalem, and 'Asida) are placed in the axial central column and are flanked by birds in the same row (Hachlili 2009:Pls. VI-13, 19a). Thus, the frequent use of the bird-in-cage theme in company with birds and several episodes of bird catching indicate that it was part of the bird repertoire or catalogue in the pattern/model books with which the mosaicists worked.

4.2 *Peacocks*

Peacocks appear in various forms, in both Jewish and Christian mosaic pavements:

- (a) The peacock as a motif frequently appears on mosaic pavements flanking an amphora or acanthus which are depicted in the central medallion placed, at the center base of the design; the amphora was the issuing point for the vine trellis, which made up the rest of the inhabited vine scrolls composition. At the Ma'on-Nirim synagogue, a pair of peacocks of which only one, with two feathers on its head, survived, is rendered walking towards the vase, its long, folded tail extending into the lowest central medallion of the inhabited scroll mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-37a) (Hachlili 2009:139–140); at the Gaza synagogue a peacock protrudes somewhat from the medallion flanking a Greek inscription (Fig. IX-37b). In some cases, the body appears in one medallion and the spread tail in another; there are similar peacocks at Shellal, with a small partridge placed above the tail (Hachlili 2009:Pl. VI-1). This is a recurrent motif in many mosaics and may appear in different parts of the pavement.

The synagogue pavement of Huseifa has, in its lower (unfortunately damaged) panel, a depiction of vine branches with grapes; in its lower corner two peacocks (of which only the heads survived) face each other (Avi-Yonah 1934:Pl. 43, Fig. 1).

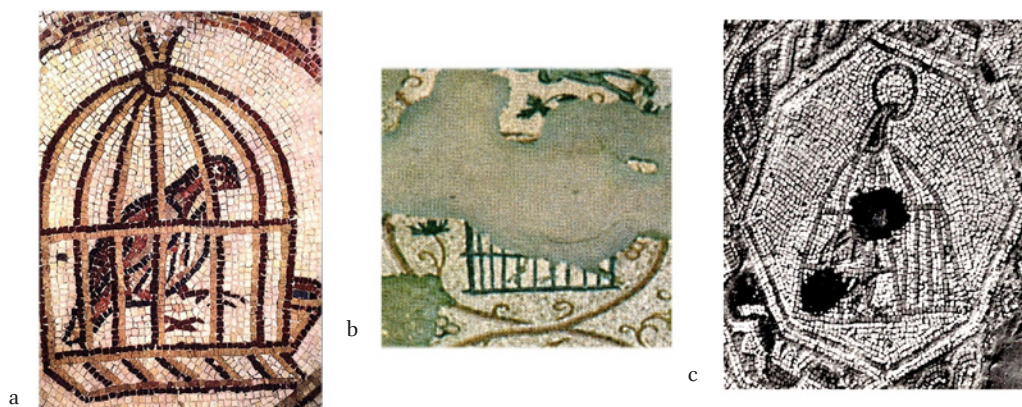


Figure IX-36. Bird-in-Cage: a. Ma'on-Nirim; b. Gaza; c. Na'aran.

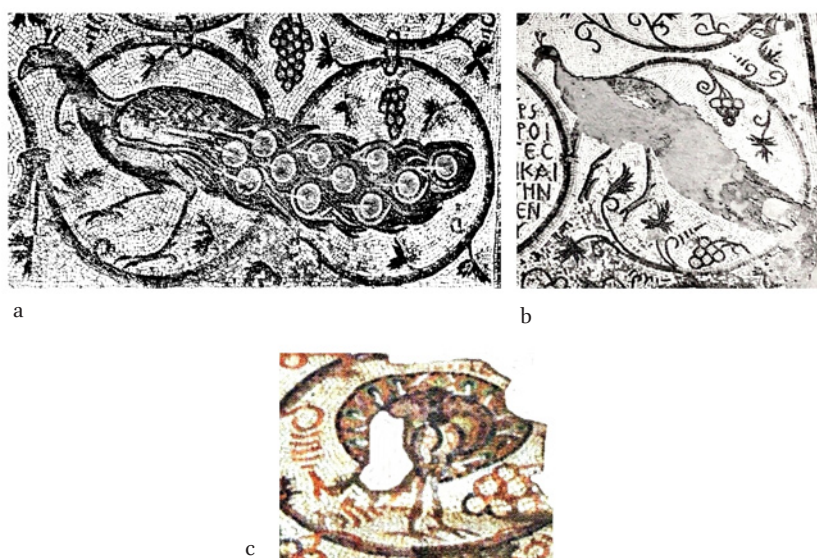


Figure IX-37. Peacocks on inhabited scrolls pavements: a. Ma'on-Nirim; b. Gaza; c. peacock en face, Beth She'an B small synagogue.

- (b) A stylized representation of this motif is the peacock *en face* with an open tail spread out behind, depicted in the central medallion of the upper row on the mosaic pavement of the Beth She'an B small synagogue, above the menorah medallion (Fig. IX-37c). The *en face* peacock is often portrayed on inhabited scrolls mosaic pavements at Gerasa, Antioch and Apamea in Syria, and in North Africa.
- (c) A single peacock is carved on a door-jamb from Qasrin next to a baseless five-branched menorah (Fig. III-16). The peacock's posture is unusual, and it is presented, in profile, standing on its tail with legs joined together at its side, and pecking at a cluster of grapes. Above the menorah a curved line ending in a spiral is carved. This might be a decorative design or it might represent a snake. The door-jamb was found in second use in the Qasrin village (Hachlili 1995:187, no. and Fig. 4).

Though peacocks had some symbolic significance (Goodenough 1958, VIII:52–58), it seems that they were simply utilized as flanking objects, having been taken from a pattern book of heraldic sketches, while the *en face* peacock was probably used to fill spaces in medallions.

4.3 Fish and Dolphins

There are depictions of fish in both synagogue and funerary Jewish art. At Korazim, fish are carved on one of the gable cornice parts and on a fragment of the inner frieze (May 2000:117, Fig. 1:19a, b). Fish are carved on some reliefs from the Golan: at Dabura, one fish is carved on the lintel in profile beside an eagle and another is carved on a stone; two fish are portrayed on a stone from Rafid; and fish tails flank an eagle on a lintel from Ahmadiyye (drawn by Schumacher). Fish are also portrayed as the sign of Pisces in the zodiac mosaics of the Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias B, Na'aran, and Sepphoris synagogues (Figs. VII-20, 21). A fish depicted in the border of the Beth Alpha mosaic pavement (Fig. IX-31) is similar to the fish on the zodiac.

Dolphins, a widespread motif in Greek and Roman art, are also popular in Nabatean reliefs and in Jewish art. On the Japhia mosaic floor, a dolphin fills the space between the circles of the tribal symbols (Fig. VIII-17). Heraldic dolphins flanking a wreath are portrayed in similar manner on the narrow side of two sarcophagi—the 'Menorah' and 'Nikae' sarcophagi. The mosaic floor in front of Beth She'arim catacomb 11 depicts four dolphins filling the corners of a square (Goodenough 1953:Figs. 84–85).

Scholars are divided as to the meaning of the fish and dolphin depictions. Goodenough (1956, V:11, 26) maintains that the fish is a sacred or magical symbol. He contends that the dolphin in pagan art suggests the loving concern of the deity with bringing people into a happy life after death. He proposes that the Jews see the dolphin as 'a symbol of hope for themselves and their loved ones' and may have called it Leviathan; one explanation, found in a Talmudic reference, is that the dolphin represents fertility. Fish and dolphins symbolize the sea (Avigad 1976:149) and could also have been apotropaic. They are employed as decorative motifs, especially for filling empty spaces, and are probably taken from patterns in sketch books of motifs used in antiquity.

5. MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS

Mythological scenes, which represented the revival of Classical and Hellenistic traditions and prototypes, are found typically on pavements of mansions; only rarely do they occur in synagogues and churches (Hachlili 2009:229–230). In synagogues, several carved mythological creatures—sea goats, centaurs, and medusa heads—have been found:

The centaur is usually represented as a half human-half animal figure. A Capernaum lintel is carved with what are considered to be centaurs, now mutilated (Fig. V-12a). Several centaurs are depicted on the frieze fragments at Korazim (May 2000:111, 115–116, Figs. 1:1, 12; Yeivin 2000:Fig. 105, Pl. 15:7). On a stone fragment from Bar'am (Fig. IX-41) a centaur is depicted on the lower right edge. The sign of Sagittarius on the Sepphoris zodiac is shown as a leaping centaur shooting an arrow from a bow (Fig. VII-19) (Hachlili 2009:42–43). Eros figures, Zeus–Serapis, and the Rape of Ganymede are carved on a part of the inner frieze at Korazim (May 2000:115–116, Figs. 1:8, 9, 16). The head on the Japhia synagogue mosaic is interpreted as a medusa head (Fig. IX-23b). A sea-goat is depicted next to a pair of eagles on a cornice fragment from Capernaum (Fig. IX-38).

Orpheus, the mythological singer who charmed wild animals with his playing of the lyre, has parallels in Jewish art. On the Gaza synagogue mosaic, David, in an adoption of the mythological-pagan figure of Orpheus, is attired and crowned as a Byzantine emperor, seated on a throne and playing



Figure IX-38. Sea-goat next to a pair of eagles, cornice fragment, Capernaum.

the lyre (Fig. VIII-13). Facing him are animals, of which only a lioness, a serpent, and a giraffe have survived.

In the Jewish House of Leontis complex at Beth-She'an, mythological scenes from Homeric poems of the *Odyssey* appear on the upper panel (Fig. IX-39, 40) (Zori 1966:128–9; Adler 2003:55–68). In a scene of Odysseus and the sirens, Odysseus is bound to the mast of his ship, while below and to the left a naked Nereid rides an ichthyocentaur. The lower scene on the same panel shows Odysseus fighting the monster Scylla, beside a siren playing a flute. Interestingly, it is the only scene from the Homeric poems found on a mosaic pavement in Israel, and appears on the floor of a Jewish house. The lower panel ornamentation consisted of Nilotic scenes (Hachlili 2009:97–109). The Beth She'an room decorated with the Odysseus and Nilotic themes served for secular, perhaps communal, purposes.

The purpose of the themes decorating the pavement of this room are a subject of debate: To Avi-Yonah (1975:54), the scene suggested that Byzantine Jews appreciated Homeric poetry. The pavement ornaments might have been the donor Leontis's way of describing his voyage from Alexandria, possibly his native city, to Beth-She'an (Roth-Gerson 1987:34, 38). Jentel (2000:248) contends that the mosaic is a donation from Leontis (whose name appears on a Greek inscription on the middle panel), a rich merchant, and that the mythological episode represents his own or his ship's sea voyage to Egypt or to Italy. Adler (2003:125–128) argues that the Odysseus scenes in this house may be associated with water. Another possibility is that these scenes were chosen because they were the most attractive among the designs in a contemporary sketchbook of mosaic designs (Hachlili 1988:301, 393).

Various accounts are given for the mythological episodes found on the ornamentation of Jewish and Christian art. Some of the mythological motifs penetrated Jewish imagery through the influence of Midrashic literature (Breslavi 1967:120–129). Goodenough (1958, VIII:115–116; 1968, XII:148) contends that mythological motifs symbolize mystical and eschatological hopes in Judaism, as well as signifying immortality. Piccirillo (1993:23–26) contends that mythological episodes found on Early Byzantine church floors in Arabia can be explained by the Classical Renaissance under Justinian. Merrony (1998:460–465), however, maintains that “there is good reason to suppose that a deeper symbolic meaning underlines these scenes.”

When all the possibilities are considered, the most likely explanation is that these mythological images, though borrowed from pagan art, were taken from pattern books as purely decorative patterns devoid of any previous symbolic content that might have attached to them (Hachlili 1988:344; Weiss and Talgam 2002:73–83).



Figure IX-39. House of Leontis mosaic, Beth She'an.



Figure IX-40. Odysseus on the upper panel, Nilotic themes on the lower panel, House of Leontis, Beth She'an.

6. FLORA—PLANT ORNAMENTS

Plant motifs were a common element of ancient ornamental art (Avi-Yonah 1948:146–165; 1950:49–58), including Jewish art. They were used in architectural ornamentation, mosaic pavements, and as funerary decoration. Plant motifs were either adopted from earlier Oriental designs or imitated local flora. Their form and composition were sometimes stylized into abstract or geometric patterns. Floral and vegetation motifs were considered suitable for aniconic expression, for repetitive patterns, and for filling spaces. The repertoire of plant ornaments included independent and recognizable species as well as imaginative compositions and repetitive over-all motifs which sometimes changed into geometric patterns. Plant motifs included vine scrolls, grape bunches, floral scrolls, wreaths, and garlands (Hachlili 1988:317–320; 2009:11–12).

6.1 *The Vine*

Most popular among the plant motifs is the vine which appears in Jewish art as early as the Second Temple period. It is generally stylized; the bunches of grapes and leaves are arranged unnaturally in various geometric forms, sometimes so regularly rendered that the effect is of an abstract pattern (Hachlili 1985:119–123). One type of grape cluster is typical of Jewish art: a central bunch flanked by two smaller bunches.

Vine branches, leaves, and grapes are popular motifs found on architectural fragments. This vine motif is even more popular in funerary art and appears in the wall painting in the Goliath family tomb in Jericho (Hachlili 2005:Fig. IV-5), on tomb façades in Jerusalem, and on some sarcophagi and ossuaries (Hachlili 2005:Figs. III-29, 35).

The most common motif is the vine scroll, either carved on stone or depicted on mosaics. Examples occur on synagogue lintels such as at Kanef, Korazim, Nabratein, and Qasrin (Fig. V-8). The Kanef entrance frame has a stylized over-all vine scroll pattern (Fig. V-22c). At Umm el-Qanatir vine scrolls issuing from a vase are carved on both columns of the Torah shrine (Fig. IV-38). On mosaic floors the vine scroll is found on the left side border at Beth Alpha; and the inhabited scroll pavements in particular use vine scroll medallions (Figs. V-36–38). Avi-Yonah (1960b:32) maintains that the vine branch pattern served as a carpet design, meant to lead up to the symbols, as at Ma'on-Nirim. The vine in Jewish art is plainly an ornamental design used to decorate confined spaces or to cover complete floors. Its only symbolic connotation might be its position as one of the “seven species” (Deut. 8:8; Avigad 1976:2; but see Goodenough, 1956, VII:26ff., who associates the vine with mystic Dionysian cults).

6.2 *The Wreath*

The wreath in antiquity symbolized victory and peace. In Hellenistic funerary paintings and reliefs the wreath was a common motif which signified immortality. The wreath was also one of the most common motifs in Jewish decorative art, used already in the Second Temple period (Hachlili 1985:123–124). In early depictions the wreath, frequently ending with a Hercules knot, is found alone, whereas in later renditions it is usually depicted as a central motif flanked by figures such as Nikae, dolphins, eagles, bull heads, vine scrolls and a menorah, on lintels of various synagogues, among them Bar'am, Capernaum, and Nabratein. Various motifs are also shown inside these wreaths, including the lion head, menorah, conch, geometric designs, and an inscription (Figs. V-7, 9, 18, IX-16a); see, for instance, carved lintels with wreaths flanked by eagles and by Nikae at ed-Dikke and Rama (Fig. IX-29), or by amphorae, pomegranates, and rosettes at Qasrin, Tayibe, and Yahudiyye (Fig. V-9). Several wreaths decorate the inner frieze basalt fragments and the menorah lintel from Korazim. Most

of them end in a Hercules knot, some have human figures inside them, and others have geometric patterns or are empty (Figs. V-18, 19) (May 2000:129–130, Fig. 9, nos. 28–31, 48).

6.3 *The Garland*

The garland is a common decorative pattern in Graeco-Roman art. In Jewish art it is used only sporadically. The upper part of the main façade lintel at Capernaum is carved with a series of garlands (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Fig. 18). On the soffit of the Gush Halav synagogue lintel there is an eagle flanked by garlands (Fig. IX-14). It is also found on several sarcophagi at Beth She'arim (Avigad 1976:Pls. XLI, XLII, XLV, XLVII, XLVIII, LI).

7. SELECTED GEOMETRIC ORNAMENTS

7.1 *The Rosette*

The rosette is the most prominent motif in Jewish art and could be said to exemplify it. Executed with the aid of a compass, the rosette developed from a traditional geometric motif (Avi-Yonah 1950:67–72). Three-, six- or multi-petaled rosettes, interlaced six-petaled rosettes, and polychrome schematic rosettes enclosed in a circle, occur in almost all Jewish art forms. The rosette was very common in Second Temple period art, appearing on mosaics, architectural decoration, stone tables, and one was found on a sundial in Jerusalem (Avigad 1983:Figs. 116, 185). It continued in use in later periods as well. In funerary art, it is the motif which most frequently occurs on ossuaries (Rahmani 1994:39–41; Hachlili 2005:100–102; 2009:8–10).

Several carved rosettes have been found on lintels at the H. 'Amudim synagogue (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Figs. 140, 141), Qasrin, and Tayibe (Fig. V-9; Hachlili 1995:nos. and Figs. 2, 50). At Korazim several rosettes are carved on parts of the inner frieze and the gable (May 2000:127–8). Some sarcophagi from Beth She'arim also carry carved rosettes. It was apparently a strictly decorative design, devoid of any symbolism (Avi-Yonah 1981a:97–99).

Other geometric motifs include meanders, waves, guilloches, lozenges, and hexagons. They are depicted on mosaics, often as borders.

7.2 *Inhabited Double Meander*

The inhabited double meander motif was popular in carved architectural decorations on lintels, capitals, and architraves in the Galilee and Golan synagogues, as well as in Syrian Roman art. It can be seen in the stone from Bar'am (Fig. IX-41) and on the Naveh lintels.

Meander bands are found decorating columns, lintels, and reliefs in Jewish art of the Golan: on the capital and base of a double fluted column (AF 33) from Qasrin (Figs. III-27, IV-20b) (Hachlili 1995:nos. and Figs. 48); as a meander band on one side of the upper part of a pedestal found at Pehorah that was probably originally from 'En Nashut (Fig. IV-16; Ilan 1980:118); on an architrave at ed-Dikke (Kohl and Watzinger 1916:Figs. 235, 236); on lintels from Naveh (Goodenough 1953, vol. III:621, 623; Hachlili 1988:215, Fig. VIII:54); on a door-post stone at Dabbura (Maoz 1981b:109); and in the circular design on the side of the Kanef doorpost (Fig. V-22c). One is carved on a Second Temple period capital from the Gamla synagogue (Fig. II-12). The inhabited double meander is common on border designs of mosaic pavements, such as those at Susiya and Ma'oz Hayim (Figs. IV-48, VI-28a, VII-10). These meander bands are filled with various motifs: geometric, floral, a vase, a face and, in one instance, a seven-branched menorah (on a lintel from Naveh). A meander filled with floral patterns, animals, and humans was found on a relief from the Bar'am synagogue (Fig. IX-41).



Figure IX-41. Inhabited double meander motif on stone, Bar'am.

Architraves and reliefs decorated with the double meander are found in the Hauran at the beginning of the second century. For example, the friezes found at Sia carved with a human face and an animal filling the meander (Dunand 1934:Pl. XXVIII-155, 156); the entrance façades at the basilica of Qanawat, the Temples of Mushnef and Atil (Dentzer-Feydy 1986:287–288, 297, Pls. XIII, XIVb, XVa); the Inkhil palace (Butler 1915, IIA, 5:ill. 282, 286); and the Tychaion of Is-Sanamen (Butler 1915:Pl. XIX). All are dated to the second century (Dentzer-Feydy 1986:287–288, 297). Slightly later examples include the Ataman tomb (Butler 1915:ill. 280) dating to the late second—early third century and the lintel at Mutaiyyeh dating to the third to fourth centuries (Dentzer-Feydy 1986:307–308, Pl. XXIIIId). The double meander appears to have been very popular in the second century, continuing sporadically throughout the third and fourth centuries in the Hauran and Syria (Dentzer-Feydy 1986:287–288, 297, 307–308; 1989:470–473).

The motifs used in synagogue ornamentation were limited in their variety. Though a pattern book/copybook was likely the shared source for these motifs, and that mainly for the representations of animals, plants, and other ornamental shapes, it is quite likely that some motifs were directly copied from nature. Heraldic and antithetic symmetrical designs were constantly selected for synagogue ornamentation, often with unidentical symmetry. Literary traditions such as the Midrashim and Agadot, as well as the reuse of popular motifs employed during the Second Temple period, mainly geometric and plant ones, provided a common source of inspiration for later synagogue art. However, certain contemporary Graeco-Roman, Syrian, and Nabatean decorative patterns and motifs were also used, while their symbolic significance was disregarded.