



In 2026, we celebrate the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Visitor Centre, housing the unique early Christian mosaics of the Episcopal Basilica in Plovdiv, built about 17 centuries ago. This is one of the most significant monuments of early Christian art in the world.

With its 2,000 square meters of floor mosaics displayed in situ, the Episcopal (Bishop's) Basilica features the largest early Christian mosaics from 4th and 5th century exhibited on site (in situ). The floor mosaics were laid in two layers, one on top of the other – lower layer from the 4th century and upper layer from the 5th century. Today most of the layers are separated and the mosaics are displayed on both floors of the Visitor Centre.

The upper layer mosaics are the largest church floor mosaics from the 5th-century in the world to be displayed in situ. Their main feature - the mosaic carpet with birds - is the largest mosaic carpet with birds discovered to date. The mosaic panels with birds are regarded as a generalised symbol of the Garden of Eden. This booklet aims to familiarise visitors to the Episcopal Basilica with the early Christian symbols in its mosaics. Some of the depictions of these symbols here are unique in both craftsmanship and composition.

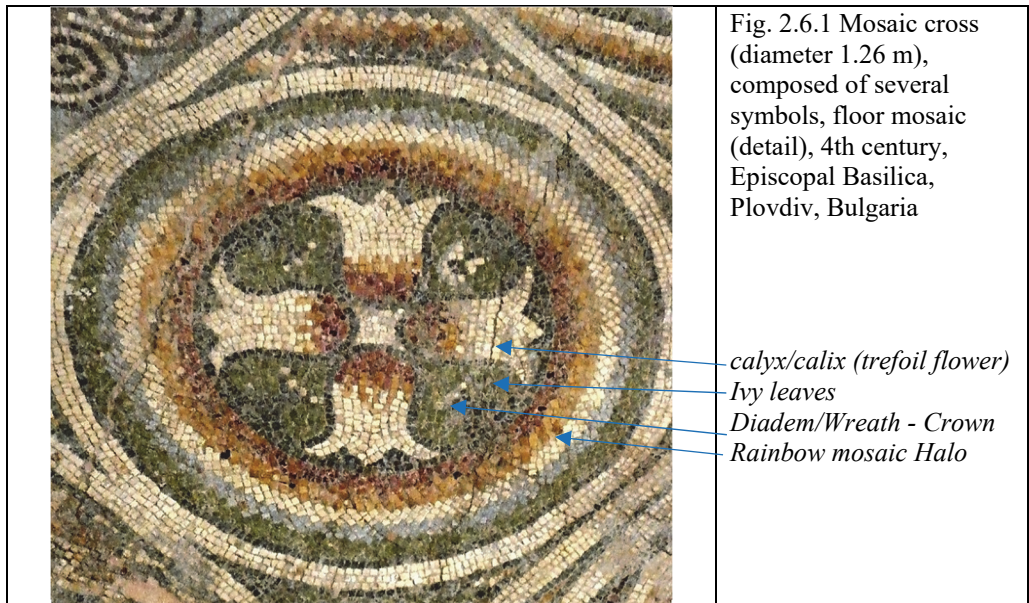
*The publication is dedicated to all
those who contributed to the
discovery, restoration, preservation
and promotion of this unique
monument of early Christian art.*

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there would have been a similar rhombus with a rainbow mosaic on the other side of the Episcopal inscription.

2.6 CROSS

The last symbol from the lower layer of mosaics that we will examine here is the most important one. It is the unique mosaic cross - the largest mosaic cross from the dawn of Christianity found to date.



Let us try to look at this mosaic cross through the eyes of Christians from the 4th century. Edicts of Toleration were in force, but the religion was disliked by pagans, and Christians made up only 10% of the population of the Roman Empire. Times were difficult and in such a situation, everyone sought to find an external enemy. Thus, the majority (non-Christians) found it in the minority (Christians). Naturally Christians at that time would expect that the tolerance existing at the moment could be stopped and the persecutions could begin again. So they continued to display mainly symbolic signs and "Covert crosses". The placement of a large mosaic cross in the Episcopal Basilica was a brave act by the local Christians (but they still placed the cross on the periphery of the mosaic).

The cross itself consists of four white trefoil flowers (*calyxes*, symbolising the Holy Trinity). The white color symbolises light, purity and innocence.

3. SYMBOLS IN THE UPPER LAYER MOSAICS (5th century)

Most likely, the need for placing a second layer of mosaics (above of the first layer) was mainly related to the destruction caused by the earthquake in 447 AD. In this regard, and in connection with the stylistic assessment of the mosaics, the second layer of mosaics is logically dated to the middle or second half of the 5th century. The total area of the mosaics uncovered from this layer is over 1400 sq.m. The most frequently displayed part of these mosaics is the mosaic floor in the central nave in front of the altar area of the Episcopal Basilica - the exceptionally beautiful mosaic carpet with birds. This 5th-century mosaic “carpet” measures approx. 13m x 17m. It includes 165 medallions (most of which are preserved). Of these at least 102 feature birds (77 of which are well preserved). This mosaic carpet with birds is the largest of its kind found to date in the Christian world. The second largest such panel is in a 6th-century chapel found in the 1930s in Bet She'an (Israel) – the carpet (approx. 6m x 9m) includes 82 panels with birds (well preserved), but is not currently open to tourists.

The restoration team of Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva showed that the tesserae of these mosaics are also made of multicoloured stones from the Rhodope Mountains. Some of these mosaics are exhibited on the ground floor of the Episcopal Basilica Visitor Centre, and others on the first floor of the same building (so that the mosaics from the lower layer can be seen).

Here we will describe some very interesting symbols in these mosaics.

3.1 MOSAIC CARPET WITH BIRDS

There are many Christian symbols associated with birds. This symbolism continues and adapts to Christianity the highly developed pre-Christian ornithological symbolism.

The Christian symbolism of birds is generally associated with the human soul and its connection with the Divine (the wings of angels are borrowed from the image of a bird). The allegory of birds (as heavenly beings) with the kingdom of God and the teachings of Christ is expressed in the Gospel of Apostle Luke: “...*What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.*” [Luke 13:18-19].



Fig. 3.1.1 Detail of the mosaic carpet with birds, floor mosaic (detail), 5th century, Episcopal Basilica, Plovdiv, Bulgaria (see also some of the birds on the inside of the booklet cover)

The mosaic carpet with birds (Fig. 3.1.1) is perceived as a generalised symbol of the Garden of Eden. The fact that birds can both fly and walk (and, in the case of frequently depicted water birds, swim) adds a complementary symbolism to birds associated with freedom.

Mosaics depicting birds are common in the eastern Mediterranean, associated with religions in the Middle East and Egypt. Large mosaic carpets with birds can be found in homes (for example, in Caesarea, Israel - a villa with a 6th-century floor mosaic with 120 frames depicting different birds); in synagogues and in churches (e.g. the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, Scythopolis - Beth She'an, Israel - a 6th-century floor mosaic with 82 birds, well preserved). The mosaics were made using books with patterns/templates that were exchanged between mosaic workshops. This is probably why many mosaics far from Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean feature images of birds from these places. The patterns were actually standardised drawings on papyrus or parchment. In an ancient papyrus from the 3rd century BC (from Egypt during the Ptolemaic period), the owner of a house describes in detail the decoration of two