



Stamp issued by the State of Israel reproducing the zodiac mosaic from the Beth Alpha Synagogue, a few miles southwest of Beth Shan

LADY MARY'S MONASTERY

An Early Christian church at Beth Shan excavated by a University Museum expedition

by FRANCES W. JAMES

That the Roman Empire enjoyed a long Indian summer in its distant province of Palestine is sometimes overlooked. Even before the fall of Rome in the fifth century A.D., Jerusalem, geographically immune to the barbarians and emotionally magnetic as the center of Christendom, had embarked on its unparalleled conquest of the human mind and heart. The rule that "all roads lead to Rome" was now reversed, and pious folk from every province of the Empire flocked to the Holy Land to devote themselves to pilgrimage, disputation, prayer and good works. Sacred topography owes much to these newcomers whose urge to visit each and every shrine resulted in invaluable extra-Biblical geographical treatises.

Their acts of piety resulted also in the foundation of churches and monasteries commemorating every possible event in either Testament; many others were no doubt built on the happy philosophy that "the better the place, the better the deed." This may account for the endowment, about the third quarter of the sixth century A.D., of a monastery by one "Lady Mary," just within the city walls of Scythopolis, the ancient Beth Shan.

In the zodiac floor of the atrium, the months revolve counterclockwise around the personified sun and moon. The latter are both feminine, while the figures representing the months all appear to be masculine. Pagan zodiacs are known from the early Empire, but by the time the Lady Mary floor was laid, all elements unacceptable to Christianity had been eliminated. Here, January stands at one o'clock. While his figure is all but obliterated by a patch made in antiquity, his sandals remain, as attribute of cold weather.

Largest of some ten cities leagued together as the New Testament's Decapolis, Scythopolis was capital of Palestina Secunda; an episcopal see; and is said to have rivalled Jerusalem in size, population, and commerce. It had a wall some two and a half miles in perimeter, many monasteries and public buildings. The ancient Bronze Age acropolis—where the body or the armor of Saul may have been exposed—formed the nucleus of the booming Roman town. Atop this citadel, in the disconcerting way that Christian sanctuaries had of springing up on pagan shrines, stood one of Palestine's rare round churches.

When discovered in 1930 by G. M. FitzGerald, director of the University Museum expedition, only the lowest courses of the walls and the splendid mosaics of Lady Mary's monastery survived. But what mosaics! A network of improbable birds paved the chapel itself; a calendar with the personified months revolving around the sun and moon covered the floor of the courtyard or atrium; while scenes of the vintage carpeted still another chamber. Was this preoccupation with time a premonition that time was running out? For even Palestine's Indian summer had to end. Lady Mary's monastery lasted little more than fifty years; apparently it did not survive the Arab conquest of A.D. 636, though there is no evidence that it was destroyed; rather, it seems to have fallen into decay with the event.

The mosaics live on, however, unforgettable in the enchantment of their somewhat naive designs. Happily, they were not taken up to be mixed with other exhibitions in a museum, but today remain on their cliff above the Jalūd, looking out over Esdraelon toward Gilboa, on view to those who still journey to the Holy Land as pilgrims.



(Above left) **JANUARY AND FEBRUARY.** Patched in antiquity and apparently also disturbed later, January, on the left, retains his essential attribute: sandals, symbolizing cold wet weather. February's two-pronged fork or rake is difficult to interpret.

(Above) **MARCH AND APRIL.** March is a warrior leaning on his shield, while April is shown as a gentle shepherd carrying a kid. This attribute for April goes back in tradition at least as far as classical Greece.

(Left) **MAY AND JUNE.** May carries what are possibly fruits or flowers. June appears to hold a bunch of grapes.

(Below left) **SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER.** September carries the basket and knife of the vintage. High-stepping October carries attributes difficult to identify; earlier calendars show this tenth month as a fowler.

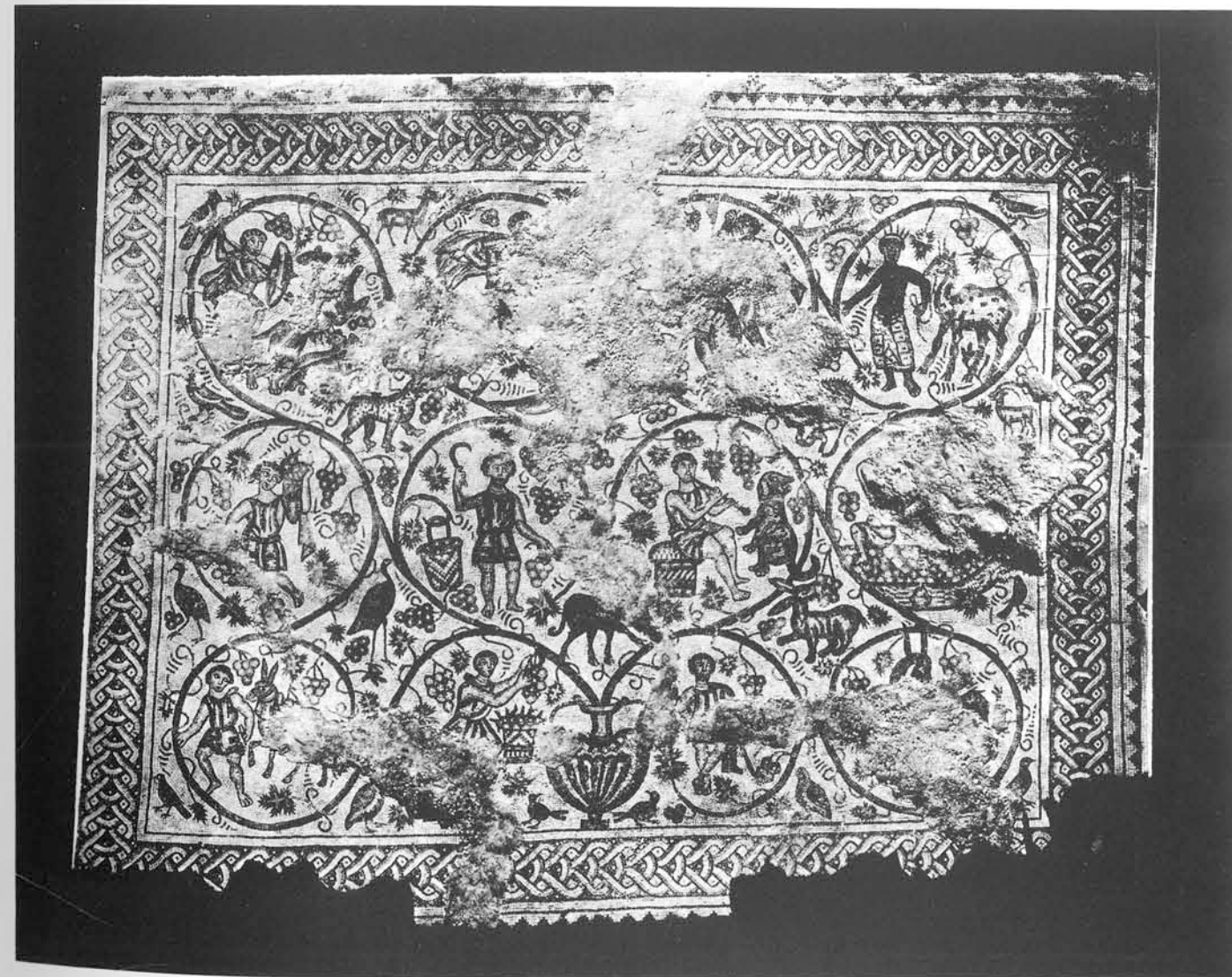
(Below) **NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER.** On the Lady Mary mosaic, the attributes of November are obscure. Elsewhere, he is often represented as a ploughman. Beisan's December, however, follows in proper sequence as a sower, scattering his seed just as the peasants of Beisan were doing in the neighboring fields when this figure was brought to light.



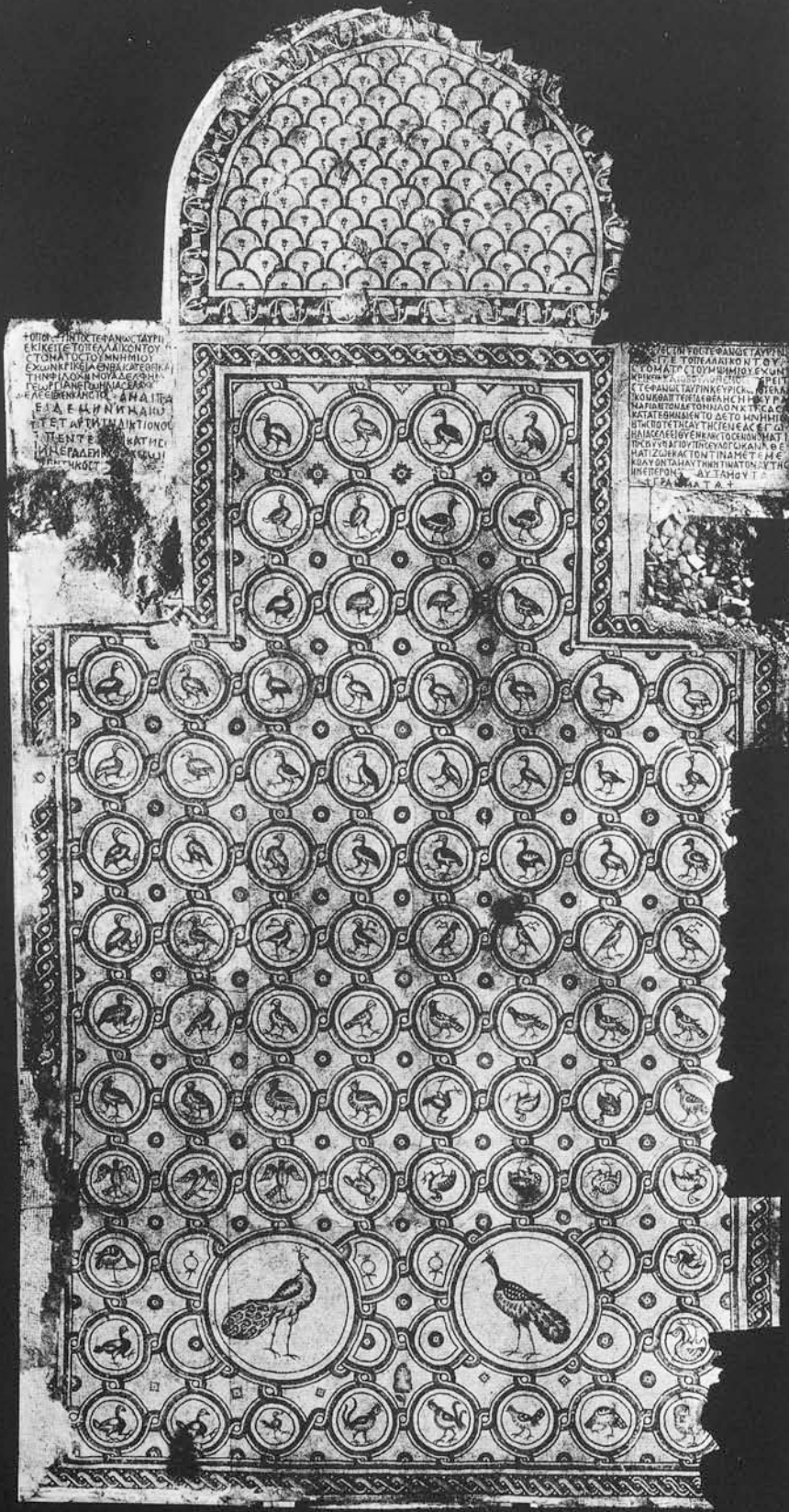
Fruits, birds, baskets, bells, vegetables, and other objects of daily life fill the spaces of the geometric tracery surrounding the zodiac of the atrium. The water jar just below the feet of December clearly represents a vessel well known to archaeologists excavating in Palestine.



Girel or camraffe? The more familiar camel seems to have scored over the giraffe which the artist apparently was attempting to depict. The giraffe was probably known to the Palestinian artisan only by hearsay.



Trellis designs may have originated in the stylization of the shadow cast on the floor of a pergola by an overhead vine. The pattern originated in Africa during the early Empire. With the rondels formed by the tendrils arranged in naturalistic asymmetry in the early examples, by the Byzantine period the medallions are placed with geometric precision. In both periods, the design was often enlivened by cupids serving as vintagers.



Best preserved of all the Lady Mary mosaics is a network composed of eighty small birds and two outside peacocks. Each bird is enclosed in a medallion which is linked with others on all sides to form an overall carpet. Puzzle for an ornithologist, this mosaic covered the floor of the chapel.



Minted at Constantinople is this gold coin of Phocas (A.D. 602-610), the last Emperor but one to rule Palestine. The hoard included four more coins of Phocas, two of Maurice Tiberius (A.D. 582-602), and three of Heraclius (A.D. 610-641).



When a stone-paved floor was stripped, apparently in antiquity, a rich hoard of gold hidden beneath the paving went unnoticed. It included this chain, a bracelet, and ten gold coins. The gold was probably hidden during the Arab conquest of A.D. 636, when Palestine's link with the Roman Empire was severed.