



A Church of the Iconoclast (?) Period in Byzantine Isauria

Michael Gough

Anatolian Studies, Vol. 7. (1957), pp. 153-161.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0066-1546%281957%297%3C153%3AACOTI%28%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>

Anatolian Studies is currently published by British Institute at Ankara.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/biaa.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A CHURCH OF THE ICONOCLAST (?) PERIOD IN BYZANTINE ISAURIA ¹

By MICHAEL GOUGH

THE ROCK-CUT CHURCH of Al Oda (the Red Room) does not seem to have been visited in the past by any European traveller.² In September, 1953, on the advice of Bay Neşri Atlay, then headmaster of the Primary School at Mut, a party consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Gough, Mr. Michael Ballance and Mr. David Wilson visited the site and made a preliminary investigation. It was then decided to carry out a full examination at a later date, and this was done in August, 1955. The work was under the immediate charge of Mr. Martin Harrison of Lincoln College, Oxford, who also made reproductions in water-colour of some of the paintings and of the mosaics.³

GENERAL DESCRIPTION (Fig. 1)

Al Oda was once the central place of worship for a community of monks who settled in the natural caves that honeycomb two cliffs, separated by a deep gorge, some 1,000 metres above the valley of the Göksu (Calycadnus). It is 28 Km. north-west of Mut in the *vilayet* of İçel, a few hundred metres down a steep descent from the main road between Silifke and Karaman.

The approach to the church itself is difficult today, as a number of ledges which served as footpaths between one part of the monastery and another have split off from the rock, and there is no bridge (as once there must have been) over the gorge separating the two cliff faces. This prevented us from examining as many of the monks' cells as we should have wished, but the majority of those which we did see were natural caves in the cretaceous limestone which had been artificially shaped and enlarged. Some of them had traces of an outside wall on the side that gave access to the footpaths, and presumably all of them would originally have been protected against the weather in this way.

The Red Room itself had been a very large cave of irregular shape which was adapted by extensive cutting to suit the liturgical needs of a church. The floor and wall surfaces were carefully finished to take a

¹ For generous financial grants to the 1955 expedition my thanks are due to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, to the Trustees of the Leverhulme Research Fund, the Russell Trust and a private subscriber. I should also like to express my gratitude to Mr. Seton Lloyd, Director of the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara and to the Turkish General Directorate of Museums and Antiquities for their unfailing help and, finally, to my wife whose plan and sketch of the interior of Al Oda illustrate this paper.

² A very brief account of Al Oda is given by the present writer in "Early Churches in Cilicia", *Byzantinoslavica* XVI, 2 (1955), pp. 210-11.

³ I am indebted to Mr. Harrison for permission to use photographic reproductions of these water colours to illustrate the text.

mosaic pavement and paintings respectively ; the ceiling, on the other hand, was more roughly prepared, and the plaster had consequently to be laid on a comparatively uneven surface. Here (whether by design or not it is hard to say) the appearance of the paintings alters with variations in the lighting, and so relieves any monotony resulting from the regular arrangement of the various motives.

ALODA

THE MONASTERY CHURCH

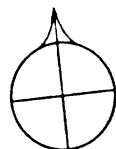
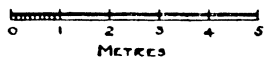


FIG. 1.

There are two main entrances to the church ; one directly from the east by an interior rock-cut passage, the other to the south from an exterior ledge, now largely broken away, which connected two groups of cells to the south-east and south-west of the church itself. The southern wall, which contained the door, is now almost completely lost, though the seating for blocks and a few stones *in situ* at the western end make it certain that this

wall existed. The rest has tumbled away down a precipitous slope into the small plain of Maliye, about 300 metres below.

The main axis of the church, which is apsidal, is from east to west and, excluding a rectangular chamber at the west end, is *c.* 14·70 metres in length. Over the "nave" the ceiling is 7·20 metres in height above pavement level, but only 5·15 over the apse. There are also several irregularities in the plan. Most prominent among these is a large curved recess facing northwards. This recess, which is raised *c.* 1·90 metres, is approached by a flight of ten steps (Fig. 2). Cut into the rock, at its northern face, is a

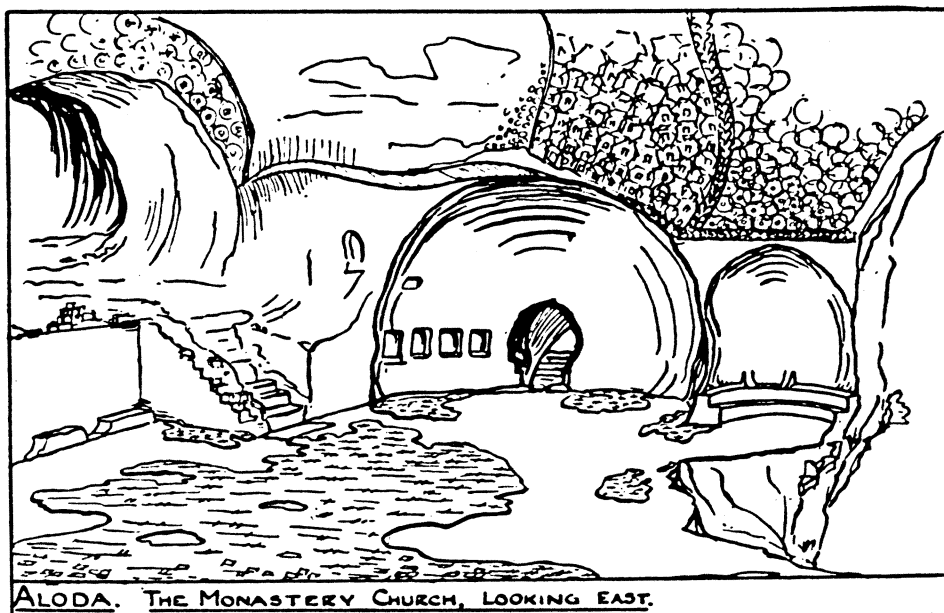


FIG. 2.

sarcophagus, possibly the tomb of the monastery's founder or of some other prominent personage. In this detail it resembles the small church at Ayaş, and also a similar cave church at Alahan, both of which have similar burials in an apsidal recess.⁴ The southern side of the recess at Al Oda was probably walled off as far east as the flight of steps, and a quantity of fallen debris to the depth of a metre was found in the course of excavation.

Another curious feature is the absence of the usual *Presbyterbank* round the main apse at the east end, and the provision of such seating along the northern wall of the "nave" below the raised recess, and also round a

⁴ See M. Gough, *A Temple and Church at Ayaş*, *AS.* IV (1954), p. 61 and Pl. III, 1. The cave church at Alahan (Kodja Kalessi) is to the north-west of the monastery complex. It was partially examined in 1955 and found to contain several sarcophagi in the nave as well as in the apsidal recess.

smaller apse in the south-east.⁵ This peculiarity was probably due to the existence of the door at the east end, since the bench there could not have been continuous round the apse as custom demanded (Fig. 2). Apart from five niches in the eastern apse, and two smaller ones at the opposite end of the church, and a few small ledges (possibly for lamps), the walls are otherwise featureless, though over the door into the rectangular western chamber the rock was cut back to form an arch and given special decorative treatment.

THE PAINTINGS

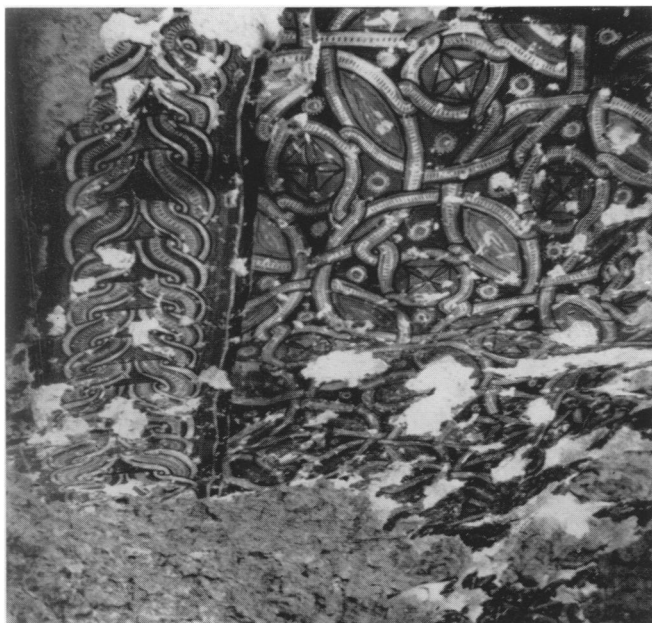
The paintings of Al Oda are its most striking feature, both walls and ceiling being covered with decoration of a non-representational, yet recognizably Christian character. This is arranged in panels separated from each other by bands of black, each panel being filled with its own recurrent motive, so that the total effect is of a sumptuous Oriental carpet laid over an irregular surface. In the eastern apse the paintings have been virtually obliterated by smoke ; but the ceiling was probably decorated with a design of interlinking circles and squares, each with a rosette or cross in its centre. On the southern wall of the same apse a large medallion enclosing an ox's head is visible ; this is presumably an Evangelist symbol. In the northern recess, where only the ceiling is out of reach, the walls have been stripped bare. The " nave " has suffered least, and on the upper part of the walls and on the ceiling enough of the painting remains for a thorough reconstruction of the whole design to be possible. The painting was done in tempera on a finely smoothed lime plaster which was strengthened by the addition of straw. The paint (in a simple colour scheme of black, plum, red, yellow and green) has survived well, apparently with little fading.

The southern area of the ceiling is bordered by a chain of overlapping lyre-shaped elements.⁶ Immediately inside it is an elaborate design of interlinked and interlocking circles, each with a central cross of the Maltese type.⁷ (Pl. Xa). In a single instance a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, can be seen at the centre. (Pl. Xb, in the second circle of the top row.) Beyond is a panel of simple interlinking circles, each with a single looped cross set against a background square ; each square is enclosed in a dotted circle itself inside a leafy quatrefoil frame. In each of the spaces between

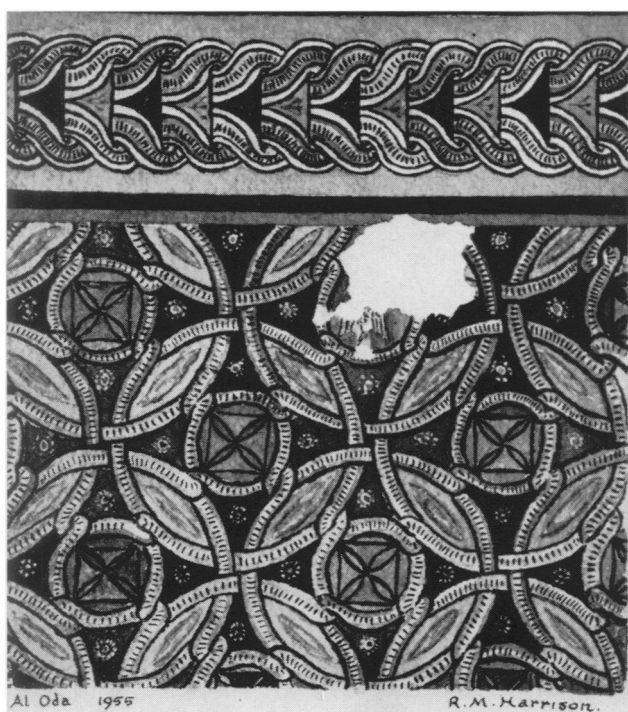
⁵ The northern bench was built of rubble masonry cased in white plaster and painted with a trailing scroll design in red. The seating in the south-east apse was rock-cut, but was similarly coated with painted plaster. In the centre was a single seat with arm rests.

⁶ This motive is known, in its simple form, as early as the second millennium B.C. See Wace, *Mycenae* (1949), Pl. 57a. As a recurrent element in Mediterranean art, see Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (1947), Vol. I, pp. 472-5, and especially nn. 286-9.

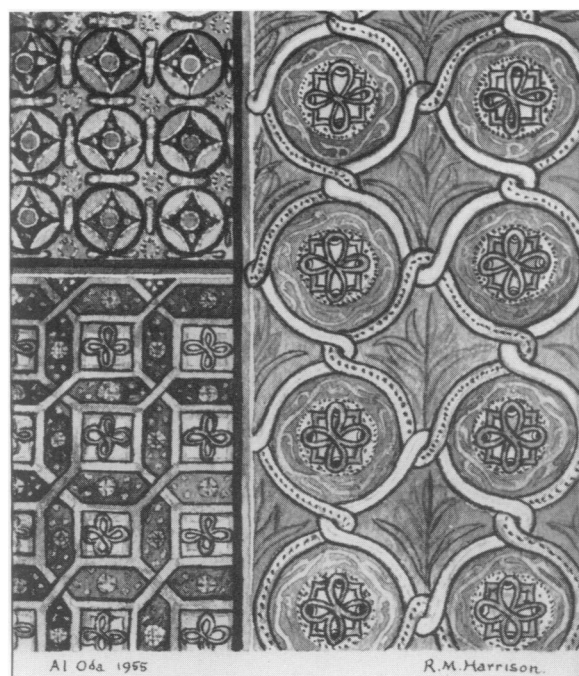
⁷ This is fundamentally an elaboration of the simple motive of intersecting circles found at Pompeii as early as the first century B.C. See also Levi, *op. cit.* Vol. II, Pls. IIb and c, IXa, for exx. of the first and second centuries A.D. Between the sixth and tenth centuries, geometric decoration by means of interlacing bands was common currency in the Middle East, the Mediterranean and much of Northern Europe, where it appealed to the nomads with their strong tradition of non-representational art. A most interesting parallel to the Al Oda motive is to be found in stone at Ertazminda in Georgia ; see Baltrusaitis, *L'Art Médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie*, Paris (1929), Pls. III (6) and IV (8).



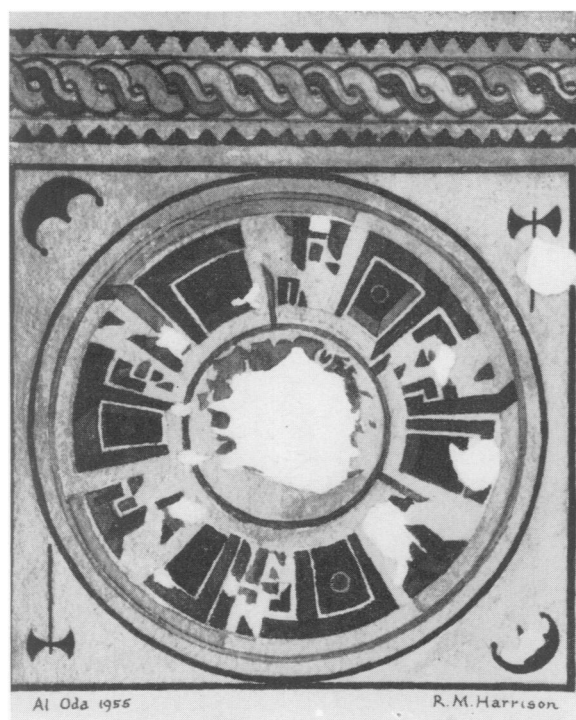
(a) Painted ceiling at Al Oda. Border motive and intersecting circles.



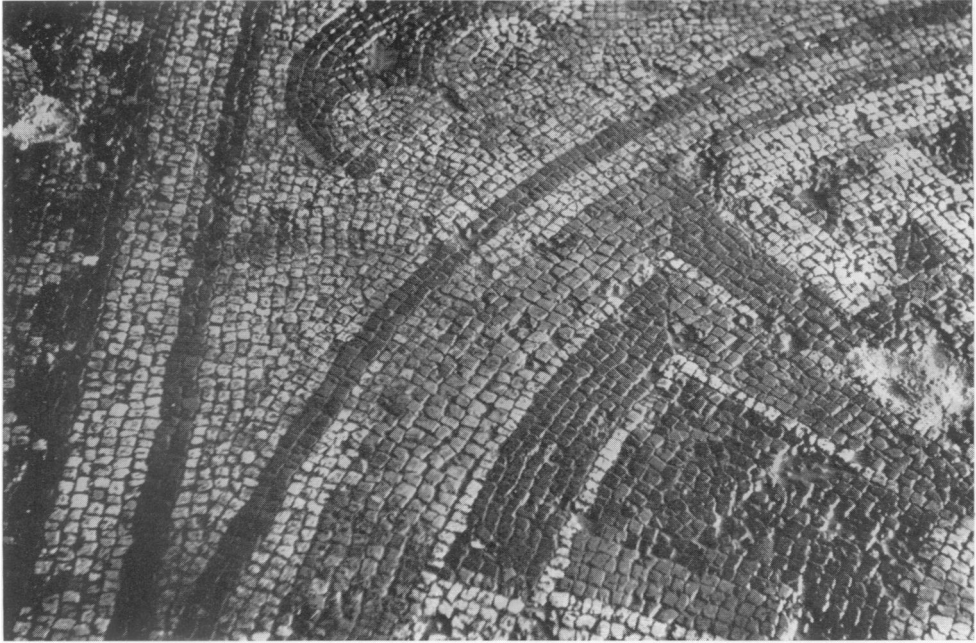
(b) Painted ceiling at Al Oda. (Water-colour.)



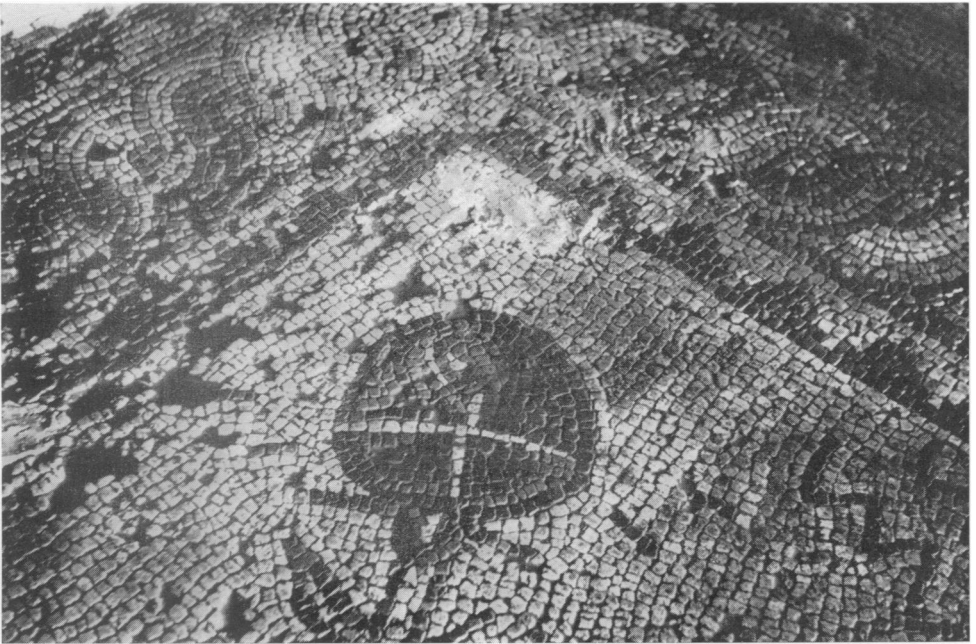
(a) Painted ceiling at Al Oda. (Water-colour.)



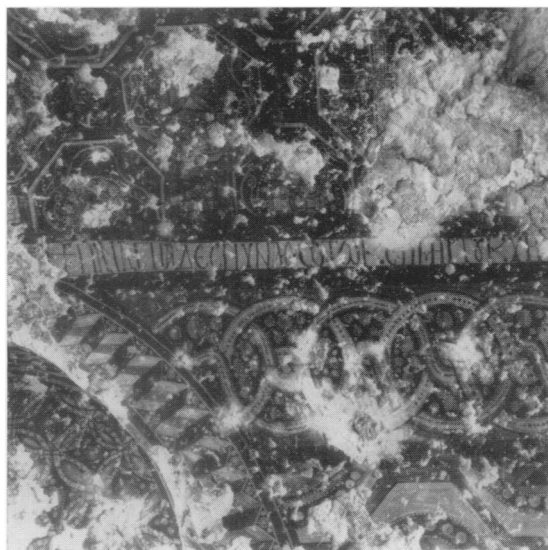
(b) Floor mosaic at Al Oda. Main segment of design.
(Water-colour.)



(a) Floor mosaic at Al Oda. Detail of main design with *pelta*.



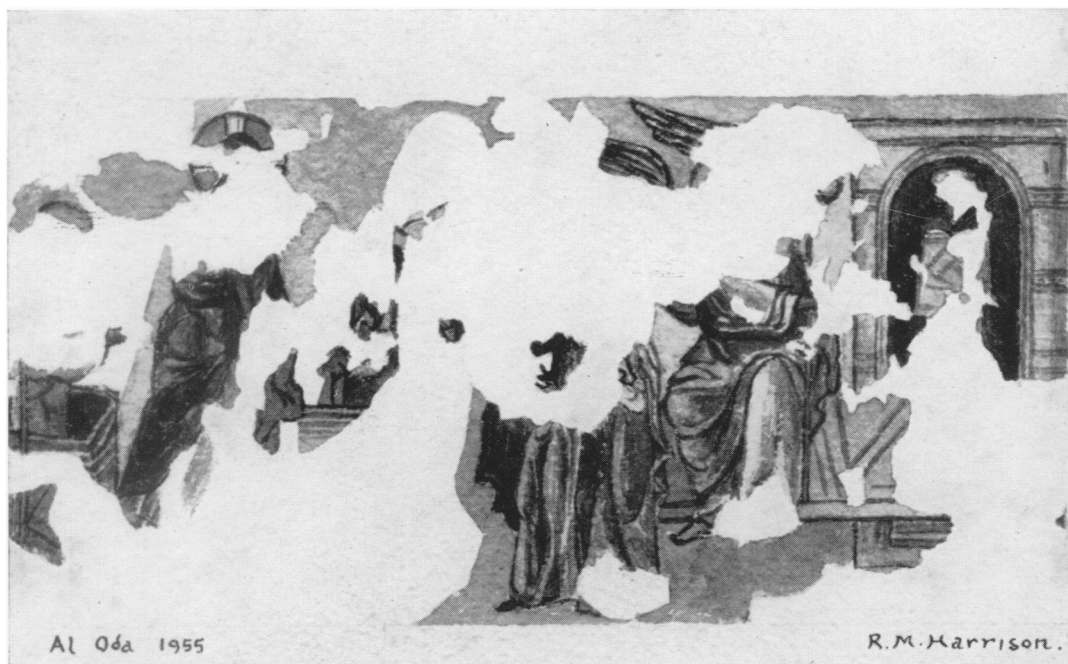
(b) Floor mosaic at Al Oda. Detail of main design with pomegranate (?).



(a) Paintings at Al Oda and inscription.



(b) Paintings from Kızıl Kaya. Salome washes the infant Christ.



(c) Post-iconoclast painting at Al Oda. Left : the Harrowing of Hell. Right : the Holy Women and Angel at the Sepulchre. (Water-colour.)

the circles is a single upright leaf.⁸ (Pl. XIa.) Higher on the ceiling, and adjoining the last panel, are intersecting octagons, each with a looped cross in a central square and, separated from the last motive by a framing band, overlapping circles including stellate crosses. (Pl. XIa.) At the crown of the vault, incorporated in octagonal and circular frames, are large Latin crosses. The abstract character of the work, and the prominence of the cross as virtually the only Christian symbol, make it likely that the painting dates to the eighth or early ninth century when, as Dalton said, "the iconoclasts . . . even falsified letters of the Fathers to prove that it (i.e. the cross) should form the sole mural decoration of churches."⁹

THE MOSAIC

In 1953 the floor of Al Oda was covered with a deep layer of goat dung ; at the south-western corner of the church, however, a small fragment of discoloured mosaic was found, which suggested that a mosaic pavement might originally have covered the entire floor. It was therefore decided to clear this systematically during a subsequent campaign.

Work began on 5th August, 1955, when a trial trench (5·80 × 0·75 m. on a north-south axis) was dug in the central area of the church. (Fig. 1.) As it turned out, there was an accumulated deposit of 0·42 m. above the floor surface. The first 0·32 m. consisted of goat dung, the next 0·06 m. of a hard whitish chalk-like substance in which were embedded a few pellets of goat dung, while the last 0·04 m. was a charred layer which rested on the floor itself. Two smaller trenches were cut on the following day, slightly to the west of the first, and the same stratification was observed.

From 7th until 11th August work was suspended owing to an accidental outbreak of fire in the goat dung.¹⁰ When it could be continued on 12th August, it was found that the fire had solved the main problem of the stratification. As a result of the new burning two new layers had formed above the old ; on top was whitish ash containing a few unburned pellets of goat dung, while below was a black sediment. It was therefore clear that the two earlier levels had been the result of a similar conflagration, and that the hard chalk-like layer was ash under compression. Considering the accumulation of goat dung represented by this hard layer, the earlier fire must have taken place some time after the thirteenth century, the date of a Seljuk coin found in a crack in the mosaic in the northern recess. It is impossible to say when the church was finally abandoned but it was certainly derelict before the earlier burning, since well over a half of the original mosaic pavement had been destroyed. At one place (Fig. 1) there

⁸ This motive is, of itself, of no great intrinsic interest, apart from the foliate sprays enclosed in the rhomboid figures which separate the circles. It is perhaps significant that two close parallels exist, one in stone, in the Gagik church in Ani, which is dated to c. 1000, and another, in wood, from Georgia, now in the Tiflis Museum. See Strzygowski, *Altai-Iran und Völkerwanderung* (1917), pp. 130-2 and 218-9, Abb. 126 and 183.

⁹ *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, p. 388.

¹⁰ Probably started by a cigarette end, thrown down by either my wife or myself, or by one of the workmen.

were tiles laid flush with the mosaic, and this probably represents an early repair.

When completely cleared and scrubbed clean the mosaic pavement was not without interest. The abstract motives which covered it had been anticipated ; not so their almost purely pagan associations. If in fact they had not been designed to follow the main divisions of the church the mosaic might well have been thought to antedate the frescoes. On the other hand, the coarseness of the tesserae (forty-nine on average to the square decimetre) was not inconsistent with an eighth or early ninth century date.¹¹

Owing to the irregular dimensions of the church floor the artist filled the area nearest the walls with plain white tesserae ; the width of this outer band was, for obvious reasons, variable. Framing the whole decorative scheme was a guilloche (0.46 m. wide) in three strands of black, russet and yellow. Immediately within this was a zone (0.97 m. wide) of alternating rhomboid figures in grey and russet, each with a white cross framed in black at its centre. Adjacent to this zone, and framing the main design of the mosaic was a band of white, 0.39 m. in width. The border area, then, was simple and iconographically non-committal.

The main decorated area, however, was striking. (Pl. XIb.) Essentially this consisted of a series of huge circles (each 1.99 m. in diameter) running from east to west. Each circle was set in an elaborate square frame, measuring 2.91 m. across. One circle was almost intact, and this was divided into a series of wedge-shaped panels which, by the arrangement of colour and shading, had been given something like a three-dimensional effect. In the centre, enclosed by a ring, had been originally an irregular figure which had been hacked away, possibly by an early generation of treasure seekers. At the corners of the square frame were double axes and *peltae* diagonally opposed (Pl. XIIa).¹² The colour scheme was again of the simplest, being confined to black, white, russet and yellow. Only one corner of the adjacent square was still preserved, and in this was, probably, a pomegranate quartered by a white cross. (Pl. XIIb.)

POST-ICONOCLAST PAINTINGS

At the western end of the church, painted over the original murals

¹¹ Cf. figures published by Levi, *op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 632-4. The average number of tesserae per square decimetre tends to decrease from the second half of the fifth century. Forty-nine is exceptionally low, even for border patterns which were normally coarser than the rest of the mosaic.

¹² Perspective in geometrical and quasi-architectural motives is not unusual, though the pattern described above seems to be unique. The *pelta*, or Scythian shield, has a very wide distribution from the first century B.C. down to the Middle Ages. It was particularly popular in the peripheral provinces, and nowhere more so than in Britain. For its survival see T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art* (1938), pp. 36 ff ; also R. B. K. Stevenson's allusion to the motive in Pictish art, published in Wainwright, *The Problem of the Picts* (1955), pp. 101-6. The double axe occurs as early as the House of Pansa in Pompeii, and in company with the *pelta* on several Antiochene mosaics ; see Levi, *op. cit.* Vol. II, Pls. CIII f and CVII a. In the Corbridge Museum is an inscribed slab decorated with a *pelta*, into which has been stuck a double axe ; there is a similar example in the Museum of Vaison-la-romaine.

with non-representational motives, are three panels with scenes taken from the New Testament. At the highest level is a Deposition, so badly damaged that no useful record of it could be made. The picture below, which was copied in water colour by Mr. Harrison, combines two separate scenes :— (i) the Harrowing of Hell and (ii) the Angel and Holy Women at the Sepulchre ¹³ (Pl. XIIIc). The lowest panel is almost obliterated. The style of the surviving work is less like that of the Cappadocian murals than those of the Latmos group, and if there is in fact any chronological connexion between them the date (c. 10th century) provides a useful *terminus ante* for the non-representational paintings. Curiously, another cave painting at Kızıl Kaya, about 20 km. from Al Oda, is much more reminiscent of Cappadocia. This is a Nativity, and I publish the figure of Salome washing the infant Christ in a basin, for comparative purposes (Pl. XIIIb).

Although it seems likely that Al Oda may be one of the few examples of a church conforming in its decorative scheme to the limitations laid down by the iconoclasts, the general lack of securely dated comparative material makes absolute proof difficult. In its support can be cited the mosaics of St. Irene in Constantinople where the cross takes the place of honour in the conch of the apse, and also of St. Sophia in Salonica where there was a cross in the same position (replaced in the ninth century by a figure of the Virgin). It is, of course, certain that there were many other such examples at Constantinople and in its neighbourhood during the time of the proscription of the images, but the subsequent reaction was strongest in the capital, and so little remains.

Faced with uncertainty, most scholars have, very naturally, either avoided committing themselves or have supported the theory that ascribes to the iconoclast emperors the patronage of secular as opposed to religious art. D. Talbot Rice is almost alone in suggesting that secular art too may well have received little encouragement in the iconoclast period, and ascribes the revival of interest in Classical subjects during the later Macedonian renaissance to a natural reaction.¹⁴

At the same time, scarcity of evidence does not mean that no hope exists of discovering the truth. Dalton mentions some chapels of Cappadocia which are unambitiously decorated with crosses. These he dates to the ninth century, adding that such simple adornment might "be the result of iconoclastic sentiment",¹⁵ and it is hard to disagree, at any rate in this

¹³ For a similar combination of the two scenes in a Cappadocian fresco, in Karabaş Kilise, see G. Jerphanion, *Les Églises Rupestres de Cappadoce* (1929), Pl. 199 (2).

¹⁴ *Byzantine Art*, p. 23.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 388. Closest in feeling to Al Oda are the murals of Haghios Vasilios and Haghios Stephanos. In the former a great cross takes pride of place on the ceiling, while an inscription, with letter forms like those of Al Oda, runs round the top of the walls. On the ceiling of Haghios Stephanos is the interlaced circle motive, this time with included rosettes, but the treatment is coarser than at Al Oda. See Jerphanion, *op. cit.*, Pls. 154-5. At Göreme, the archivolt of the main entrances into Tokalı and Elmalı Kilise is decorated with the perspective step pattern to be seen in the same position above the door into the West Room at Al Oda. (*Ibid.*, Pls. 33 and 132.)

case, since it is so distinct from the representational art that flourished in that area in later centuries. But while the paintings of these Cappadocian chapels sometimes suggest a deliberately impoverished art, those of Al Oda are of high quality, and represent a borrowing from Oriental sources, in this case possibly due to contact with the Moslems, who were at this time securely in possession of the neighbouring territory of Cilicia as far west as the frontier post of Lamos. Many of the motives are, of course, known from Roman and Hellenistic mosaics of the Early Christian period, often in a simplified form ; but their origin is almost certainly to be found in the decorative textiles of Iran in which interlinking circles were frequently used in the setting out of a design. Combinations of geometrical figures were no less popular in pierced stonework and relief, but the most interesting examples and those closest in feeling to the Al Oda paintings belong for the most part to the early centuries of Islam.¹⁶

I have pointed out above (p.) the importance of the scenes from the New Testament painted at the west end as providing a *terminus ante quem* for the other paintings. There remains the question of a *terminus post quem*. This is provided by the painted inscription of which a considerable length survives undamaged on the west wall (Pl. XIIIa). In it the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the twin epithets of Θεοτόκος and Μητήρ τοῦ Κυρίου, the first of which indicates a date after the condemnation of Nestorianism by the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.¹⁷ Admittedly this leaves a long period during which the murals might have been executed, but a very early date can probably be rejected if the character of the floor mosaics is also considered. This has nothing in common with examples from late fifth and early sixth century churches in the neighbouring territories of Syria and Cilicia, most of which still used a pattern-book style of decoration in which the representation of animals played a prominent part.¹⁸ The Al Oda mosaic, on the other hand, seems to be deliberately austere, as if the craftsman had been limited to the use of those traditional motives which completely lacked any specific association with Christian iconography. Again in favour of a date in the iconoclast period are the paintings of New Testament scenes on the west wall, apparently as a strong reaction against the character of the earlier murals.

The influence of the Islamic ban on figural art is often cited as having been a potent factor in the rise of iconoclasm, and there can be little doubt that it was ; if only because in the early years of the Omayyad caliphate

¹⁶ See above nn. 7 and 8. Coptic textile motives may also have played a part.

¹⁷ The complete inscription reads (until a break in the plaster) Παναγία Δέσποινα Θεοτόκε Μη(τη)ρ τοῦ Κυ(ρίου). The lettering appears later than that used in any of the Antioch mosaic inscriptions. Cf. Levi, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 627-9. It does, however, much resemble the lettering of the eighth century inscription in the apse of the Church of St. Irene at Constantinople. See Dalton, *op. cit.*, Fig. 227, where the forms of Κ, Δ, and Μ are noteworthy.

¹⁸ For exx. see Levi, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Pl. LXXXVII-LXXXIX (the Martyrium at Seleucia on the Orontes) ; Gough, *op. cit.* pp. 59-62, Pls. V and VI ; also Fig. 5 ; also Herzfeld and Guyer, *M.A.M.A.* II, pp. 106-7, Pls. 104-5 (a *paradeisos* in the " Cathedral " at Corycus).

the Moslems had been conspicuously successful in their military adventures, while the Christians, with their devotion to the images of the saints, had not. Even without the spur of Moslem rivalry, however, the Byzantine Empire had become progressively orientalized since the end of Justinian's reign, and the early Caliphs were prepared to commission Byzantine artists and craftsmen in the adornment of their most magnificent buildings (e.g. the Omayyad mosque at Damascus and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem). It would not be surprising if some Christian communities in Asia Minor had, in return, adopted a purely Oriental decorative scheme for their churches and chapels, and it is, I believe, permissible to recognize in the Al Oda paintings a direct link with the Eastern territories of Islam which themselves contributed in no small measure to the underlying spirit of the iconoclast revolution.