

**THE ELEPHANT MOSAIC PANEL
IN THE SYNAGOGUE AT HUQOQ:
OFFICIAL PUBLICATION AND INITIAL INTERPRETATIONS**

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>JRA's</i> Editorial Preface	7
Authors' Acknowledgements	19
1. Introduction	21
2. Context and description of the mosaic panel	23
3. Biblical, Maccabean, and Alexander interpretations	44
4. The legacy of the Hasmonaeans in the synagogue at Huqoq	62
5. Conclusion	81

***JRA*'s Editorial Preface¹**

A principle at stake: the genesis of the present publication (J.H.)

The “elephant mosaic” in the E aisle of the synagogue at Huqoq has aroused enormous interest among both scholars and laymen since it began to be uncovered in 2013 during the early stages of the excavation, with the last parts of it being exposed during the summer of 2015. The present *JRA* publication has been expedited as the result of some unusual circumstances. At the start of May 2017, the director of the Huqoq Excavation Project, Jodi Magness, became aware of an academic article written by two scholars (Asher Ovadiah and Rosario Pierri) who are completely unaffiliated with the project, in which they offered their own interpretation of this particular mosaic panel, based upon a photograph which appeared for a short time on the National Geographic Society website in the context of a publicity interview with Magness. The issue of *Liber Annuus* (vol. 66, nominally for the year 2016) had already been printed and the final offprints had already been circulated by Ovadiah in the form of a digital pdf, even though the printed copies of the journal had not yet been distributed and the digital edition of vol. 66 had not yet been placed on the Brepols website for subscribing institutions to access.² Thanks to the high principles and exceptional generosity of the Superior of the convent in Jerusalem, Fr. Massimo Pazzini, Dean of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, who had been placed in an impossible dilemma by Ovadiah, the whole issue of *Liber Annuus* was sent for reprinting in early June after omitting that particular article.

Already in the late summer of 2016, the authors of the present *JRA* publication, Karen Britt and Ra’anan Boustan, the particular team members entrusted with the publication of the synagogue mosaics by Magness, had completed a long scholarly article on this panel and submitted it to *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. Their article was refereed by that journal and the two authors responded to suggestions and criticisms from two external referees, sending in their revised manuscript in December 2016. Final acceptance of the article by that journal, however, had not occurred by early May 2017 when the article by Ovadiah and Pierri came to Magness’s attention.

In view of the time-lag that was still expected to occur before the Britt/Boustan article could possibly appear in print with the other journal, and hoping to anticipate further unauthorized publications of the mosaic panel, on May 29, 2017, *JRA* proposed to Magness and the authors an expedited publication in its supplementary series subject to *JRA*’s customary editing and relaying of editorial advice to the authors. *DOP* kindly made available its own readers’ reports, as is explained below (p. 19) by Britt and Boustan. The publication process at *JRA* was placed under additional stress by an (authorized) article written in French by Estelle Villeneuve, to be accompanied by colour photographs of the same panel, for the October/November issue of *Le Monde de la Bible / Welt und Umwelt der Bibel*, a magazine that reaches a wide audience of laymen as well as professionals. The edited “first proofs”, with questions incorporated, were received by the authors on July 7, followed on July 11 by other in-house feedback from *JRA*. After making a first set of corrections,

1 The specific authorship of each part of this preface is indicated by the initials for J. H. Humphrey and K. Bolonnikova at the end of each section.

2 *Liber Annuus* is published by Edizioni Terra Santa in Milan, but printed and distributed by Brepols in Turnhout.

on August 6 the authors received a substantial report from an esteemed *JRA*-appointed referee. The authors implemented as many of the latter's points as the desired publication schedule would allow, stating that they plan to take into consideration the important suggestions made by the referee in their future work on the elephant panel. As a result, *JRA* cannot take responsibility for, and does not endorse, some of the arguments and judgments being presented here. For the sake of assisting the Huqoq project to claim its rightful privilege to publish first the materials that it alone uncovered, *JRA* consented to proceed with publication of the text in the form that its authors desire.

Indeed, the initial offer was made by *JRA* only because of the principle at stake, one that affects all Roman archaeologists, and indeed others. That principle is that the archaeologists engaged in an authorized excavation have both the responsibility and the exclusive legal right to provide, within a reasonable period of time, the first scholarly publication of their own discoveries. This long-observed principle or 'honour code' has been threatened by the advent of the digital age. It would seem that the protocol for what other scholars may do with original material that somehow appears on a website, whether as part of a news release given to the press by those responsible for the discovery, a news release put out by the home university or other sponsoring institution of the project in question, or simply as a photograph taken on an archaeological site by a visitor without permission, has not been clearly delineated. With the demand for open access and the expectation for instant announcements of brand new discoveries, it may be time for the major archaeological bodies to draw up accepted rules of behaviour with respect to the publication rights pertaining to new discoveries. In the present case, the longstanding principle was undermined by certain individuals who argue that, once a photograph of a discovery has been uploaded on the Internet, then the discovery in question has been "published" and anyone is free to write their own academic article about it. If archaeologists working on a legal excavation have to be constantly on guard against unauthorised photographs being taken on site, or if they must decline to give initial information to the local department of antiquities or to share significant discoveries with *bona fide* news organisations, and must even seek to conceal important discoveries until their own scholarly publications have appeared in print, then the long-accepted norms under which excavations have always operated will be destroyed, access by visitors to ongoing excavations will be denied, and all those interested in the past will be the poorer for it. It is clearly not in the interests of our discipline as a whole that the heavy investment made by a project as a whole and the many years of work dedicated by its team members to the preparation of the publication of remarkable finds should be "scooped" by individuals unaffiliated with the project. (J.H.)

**Background information for readers of this work:
the story of earlier public announcements and earlier publications on the "elephant panel"**

While the present *JRA* publication by Britt and Boustan is the first authorized scholarly publication of the "elephant mosaic", it is not the first publication, nor is it the first time that news of this discovery has been disseminated. Many readers will, understandably, be less interested in the issue of who has the right of first publication, and more interested in learning as much as possible about the discovery itself and how it should best be interpreted. This is why we provide here some background information about previous commentaries on the mosaic panel. As publisher of the present work, *JRA* cannot pretend that many public discussions about the interpretation of this unique panel have not already taken place, and it would like all the publicly available interpretations of the panel