

## Medieval Floor Mosaics at Bizere Monastery A Brief Survey<sup>1</sup>

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*The mosaics in Bizere contain certain interpretations of Byzantine motifs and a series of traits also shared by floor mosaics in the Adriatic area.*

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**B**IZERE MONASTERY is one of the medieval monasteries founded in Arad County which almost completely disappeared between the sixteenth century and the present day. Its site was gradually identified approximately 15 kilometers from Arad, south of the Mureș Valley, on the territory of Frumușeni village.<sup>2</sup> There, in the Middle Ages, a branch of the river formed an island where Benedictine monks founded around the year 1100 an abbey named Bisra, Bistra or Bizere.<sup>3</sup> The spot is known as Hadă (“island,” in Turkish) or Fântâna Turcului (Turk’s well).

The written documents on Bizere monastery are scant and full of gaps. The most important of them contains the first written reference to a *monasterium de Bisra*, dating from 1183. Other documents speak of its abbots from 1235 (*abbas de Byzere*) and 1323–1332. Another charter indicates the patron saint of the church and the monastic order—*monasterium Sancte Marie de Bizere ordinis Sancti Benedicti*—in 1423. A few other charters sug-

gest that the monastery owed its wealth (at least in the twelfth century and in the first half of the thirteenth) to royal privileges connected to the salt trade in the Mureş Valley. The number of monks inhabiting the monastery, 35, appears only once, in 1235, in a period when their abbot involved them in his conflict with the local bishop of Cenad (1233–1236). Then, a series of documents issued between 1337 and 1342 and then in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries give some clues on how the monastery was administered. It is very telling that in 1507 a governor took the place of the abbot, and in 1557 this title became an honorific for clerics.<sup>4</sup> The end of the monastery—inferred from the same sources and from analogies with similar cases—was probably due to old internal dysfunctions, the advance of the Ottoman conquest north of the Danube, and finally achieved by the rising Reformation.

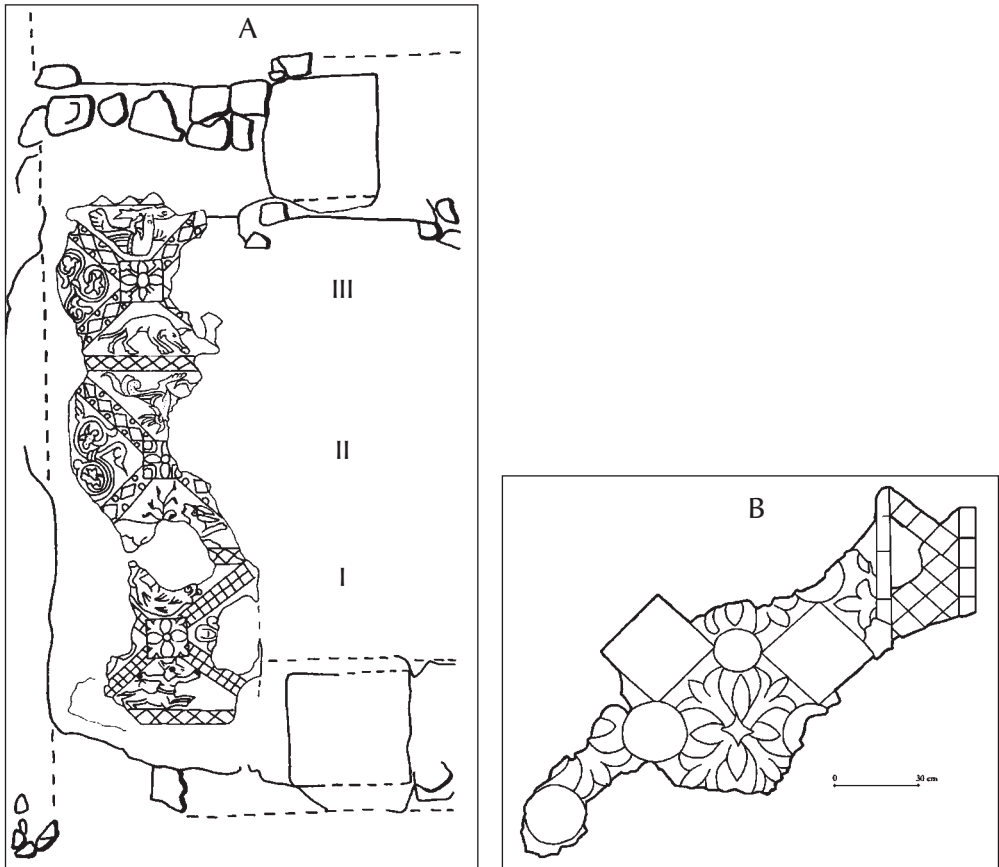
Under these circumstances, the most important data on the extinct Bizere monastery are provided by the archaeological investigations first performed in 1981 and then yearly from 2001 until today.<sup>5</sup> These documents are a different sort of source, difficult to question as regards, for instance, the history of the institution, but contributing considerably—and incomparably—to the history of architecture and medieval art.

After its decline in the sixteenth century, the monastery fell into ruin and became a quarry for building materials as well as an attraction for treasure hunters. In general, these operations were so bold that only negative imprints remained, even from the most resistant structures, such as the walls and the foundations. So, the general image of the church and most of the complex is that of foundations dismantled often to the last stone, layers of debris turned upside down, graves completely emptied, scattered bones, wide surfaces of broken brick floors, remains of building materials—mostly hewn stone, but also remnants of carved stone, frescoes, pieces of pavements, and fragmentary ornaments whose original functions are hard to understand.<sup>6</sup> Besides all these, two surfaces of pavement mosaic, differing in size and in their components, appear as exceptions—first of all because they remained *in situ*.<sup>7</sup> They belonged to the main church of the abbey—a basilica with Romanesque features. Three pairs of pillars with square sections separated the space. The naves continued with a sanctuary, also divided into three parts; a rectangular choir was flanked on its entire length by two side apses ending in semicircles. The choir ends with a main apse whose foundation's remnants make it similar to a rotunda. The church is estimated to have measured ca. 13.50 m in width and 26.50 m in length. The sanctuary occupied more than half of its length.

First, in order of discovery, was a part of the pavement in the basilica's central nave which covered a portion between the former western wall and the first pair of pillars (A). Shortly afterwards followed the discovery of the second surface,

smaller in size, in what later turned out to be the southern apse (*B*). The two surfaces of mosaics will be named according to their locations.

The pavement mosaic was only one part of the church's decoration; the remainder consisted of carved ornaments of polychrome stone furniture, as well as wall mosaics with various shapes of slabs, some simple, some even incised. At the same time, one cannot exclude that the walls could have been covered with *tesserae* mosaics.



A. Drawing of the nave's mosaic

B. Drawing of the apse's mosaic

**T**HE NAVE'S mosaic measures a maximum of 4.50 m from north to south and around 1.50 m from east to west. It consists of parts of three approximately square panels (with sides measuring about 1.50 m) separated from each other by decorative strips (*A*). All three panels have the same white marble background and display color combinations of natural red, dark

blue-gray and black, white, light blue, yellow, and dark green. All the motifs were well highlighted by simple rows of *tesserae* with dark blue-gray and dark green shadings.

Destruction has damaged the frames in different proportions, so that in four of them the drawings have vanished completely and four others are partially preserved. Other degradations were noted on the contours of the drawings and on the geometric shapes where, unfortunately, the siliceous stone used (dark green) has become very fragile and left many gaps instead of *tesserae*.

Inscribed in the center of each panel like an emblem is a small square with lines radiating out, seen in fragments of decorative strips which form four trapezoidal spaces, each of them enclosing a bestial figure, real or fantastic, or an acanthus spray. The general impression is that all the figures were facing eastwards. The interior of each central square features a cross, although they differ somewhat from each other. One has ovoid forms in the arms of the cross (the southern panel), another one has pointed arms; others are combined at the corners with floral or geometric motifs. In the case of the middle panel, a floral cross is inscribed into another cross with widened ends.

The first southern panel (*A/I*) has diagonals obtained through the alternation of white and dark squares. The trapezoid at the southern end contains a galloping hybrid quadruped. It has the legs of a horse or a donkey, a human torso and a dog's or a wolf's head. The lower part, the legs and the head, were represented in profile; the torso and a round eye with a well-marked eyebrow are seen from the front. Both hands, one stretching in front and the other behind, seem to be holding something (keys, serpents?), but only three rows of *tesserae* are discernible on the right. The bust starts with a girdle, continues with what seem to be breasts, and at the neck one can discern the angular closing of a garment.

The next pictures, on the right and left, contain only a few remnants of two vegetal ornaments against the same white background. On the northern side, however, corresponding to the cynocephalus monster, parts of the body of an animal resembling a bear seem to be discernible. Its spine is curved and we can see the back legs; the fur is partly marked by lines united in a bundle. The upper part of the head, with the ear and the eye, is represented frontally. From its location in the upper part of the picture and the position of the body, this animal might have been accompanied by another, possibly its prey.

On the next two panels (*A/II, III*) the diagonals starting from the central squares contain only a row of co-tangent rhombuses. Within the triangles thus formed, a pair of slightly elongated lobes appear. In the southern trapezoid of the middle panel, similarly to the decoration with the bear, a large part of a stylized plant is visible, and also the bodies of two animals. One is a torso with light blue fur and a turned head seen in profile, possibly a feline (lion?); the other is

a running rabbit with long, pricked-up ears. The lower part of the picture has been destroyed, along with important parts of the bodies of the animals and the plant featured here as a Tree of Life.

The next, eastern picture is missing, like almost half of the square emblem. However, important parts of the western and northern pictures are preserved. The first contains an acanthus spray in the shape of an “S” with the ends markedly turned inward and terminating in two corollas. The stalk, treated here, exceptionally, in relief, with *tesserae* a little higher than the background, bifurcates the filling of the remaining space with a semipalmette. The *tesserae* in the southern corner were dislocated and a part of the spray has been lost with them.

The next picture, on the northern side, was damaged on the eastern edge, but the rest of it still shows a beast resembling a dragon with a well-shaped body, moving, trying to catch another animal located in front of it, only the tail of which remains visible. The two legs end in claws; the body, rendered with clear lines which seem to indicate the beginning of a wing, narrows toward an elegant tail divided into three parts; two of them form downward volutes, and the third is stretched toward the angle of the trapezoid. The chest and tail were decorated with rows of dark grey dots, a mode of ornamentation employed at the spray’s corollas. Its mouth is wide open, with a pointed upper jaw. Large, pointed ears and a pair of segmented horns curving forward complete the head.

The last panel (*A/III*) preserves intact the southern trapezoid, with the side view of another quadruped, possibly a wild boar, shown while moving. It has a long tail, hooves, an elongated snout, large ears and an eye resembling those of the other animals. In this case, as it probably happened with the feline and the bear, it is obvious that the drawing was filled with one color, a shade of red.

To the west is another acanthus spray, differing in shape and treatment from the one in the second panel. Here the spray is richer, having three curls, and the third lacks the flower. The artistry is inferior to the previous one. The trapezoid was damaged here on the long side and at the corner of the base.

To the north, a bird (probably an eagle) feeding on a fish is depicted in a frame damaged on the northeastern corner and slightly in the field. The feathering, resembling fish scales, is rendered in different, mixed colors, displayed in the clearly contoured drawing by the dark green tone. The decoration with dots also appears here on the wing; the same sort of round eye is made for both figures. The bird’s neck is bent down, with the beak and the left claw catching the fish; the right claw, raised at the level of the neck, suggests movement. In the case of the eagle, manifest care was taken that the figure be inscribed within the lines of the trapeze; the fish’s body is elongated, almost parallel to the base, thus balancing the image.

The mosaic in the southern apse was found at the edge of the ingress to the southern aisle, along with part of a strip that framed it. It was preserved in a maximum size of  $1.60 \times 1.50$  m, with an irregular shape, although enough to make out three motifs (one geometric and two floral) combined in a carpet-shaped polychrome mosaic (*B*).

The same sorts of stones as in the nave's mosaic were used for the contour of the ornaments. In fact, with two exceptions, those colors are also found here, rendered by the quarried stone and *tesserae* stones. The exception is a violet stone with white-pink and red veins. One massively encounters white marble *tesserae* used as a background, featuring motifs in the shape of suns with beams spreading in different directions. The circles of these suns meet the angles of large square, red bricks (with sides measuring 28 cm) set in the corners. The petals, some of which modulate their pointed tops inwardly, are adapted to the spaces left by the polychrome floral motifs. These main motifs are combinations of trifoliate petals arranged diagonally or crosswise, and simple petals with pointed tops; all of them spread from a central dark blue-grey rhombus with elongated points. Other groups of two small palmettes were chosen in order to fill the empty spaces remaining on the margin of the "carpet."

The surrounding strip also presents a mixture of *opus tessellatum* and *opus sectile*. Triangular or square groups made of *tesserae* of a certain color are adjacent to two rows of small red or dark-grey stones (the dimension of the header is 5 cm); all are arranged within two parallels made of quadrangular, narrower pieces with similar colors.

**A**T THIS state of research, a few conclusions regarding the floor decoration and its relationship to the building it belonged to are possible. The nave's mosaic helps to locate a former entrance to the church, for which no other indication exists. The position of the spray in relief at the western end of the central nave and its state of preservation, the accentuated wear on the southern square and the alignment of the cloister to the south set one of the entrances into the church on the southern side, corresponding to the empty place between the first two pillars of the nave.

The initial pavement was gradually destroyed, even while the church was in use. One of the causes could be the practice of allowing burials inside the church, but certainly it was not the only reason for the destruction. Flooding could have also caused such damage.

The positions of both surfaces with mosaics, the great number of fragments typical of the pavement discovered within the perimeter, and their diversity in shape (eight-shaped, half circles, almonds, quadrangular slabs of stone, circle segments, other geometric shapes) indicate that the church was entirely covered

with mosaics of at least two types. We also suspect that not only the church had mosaic pavements, but some part of the cloister too, in the stage contemporary to its construction. Of the shapes mentioned, the eight-shape and the half circles appeared more frequently, in various spots within the perimeter of the cloister.

The various materials of the mosaics had varied origins, but they are not totally clarified at this moment. The final word of the specialists' analysis is not available yet and just a few observations can be made. We supposed that the white marble and other stones were imperial porphyry (used for a leaf of the apse's mosaic) and serpentine (with few isolated discoveries) are *spolia* from a still undetermined Roman site. Other colored stones were gathered from the waters of the Mureş River. A lot of stone scraps show that mosaic components were prepared on the building site. Similarly, the bricks necessary for the mosaic could have been prepared locally. Well baked and using sand as an additive, their superior quality distinguishes these bricks from similar materials used in other floors in the complex.

Large, dark green stones, from which pieces for the drawings were cut, were found in the foundation of the southern apse and a considerable number of scrap *tesserae* were found in the filling of the wall situated on the south side of the church. These two observations allow the conclusion that the mosaics were planned from the outset of the building of the church and the northern side of the cloister was erected at approximately the same time.

The two preserved surfaces of mosaics differ to a certain degree in their motifs, design, technique and quality. In the apse, the mosaic is nonfigurative, composed of other geometric and floral motifs than the nave's mosaic; its decorative character is more obvious. It also combined *opus tessellatum* with *opus sectile* and included bricks, while the fragment of the nave's mosaic features just *opus tessellatum* in varied stones.

These variations are acceptable in a pavement mosaic, and do not necessarily represent signposts for a different chronology, or the products of two different workshops. In both cases we observed the polychromy (with nine distinct colors), the same shapes of the *tesserae*, the same white marble background for ornaments and a similar stratigraphy of the ground.

Differences in the quality of workmanship are also noticeable in the nave's mosaic, between the southern panel and that of the following two, as concerns the drawings and the choice of colors. This might be explained by the employment of different workers. In the southern part, the diagonals have chessboard squares or simple rhombuses instead of rhombuses and pearls. Also, the combination of colors is not as elaborate as in panels II and III, and the figures in the southern end were not framed as well as in other cases (the eagle, the plant sprays, the dragon etc.). In panels II and III, the quality of the drawing and the

concern for conferring as much brilliance as possible is obvious on some of the figures by the combination of different colors (for example, the eagle and the fish, the wild boar with red stones on white marble). Exceptionally, in the western part of panel II, the central row of plant sprays was created in relief and was less degraded through usage than the southern part of the mosaic in the central nave.

Problems regarding the symbols of shapes and colors are raised especially by the nave's mosaic, in which one can recognize a Christological representation (the eagle with fish), the Tree of Life accompanied by animals and a Cerberus (the dog-headed hybrid) and the animal fight in the case of the dragon, bear and lion, each chasing a rabbit. The presence of some motifs such as crosses, squares and circles, bestiary figures which appear repeatedly not only in mosaics, but also in other components of architecture or carvings indicate that these should be discussed in a broader context, provided by all that can be recovered from the site. Finally, we could determine whether the shapes borrowed from the Western medieval bestiary had here a symbolical meaning or a merely decorative function.

The morphology of figural or nonfigural elements of these mosaics could be detected in paintings and wall mosaics, floor mosaics and miniatures, stone carvings, jewelry or textiles from the late Classical period to the Byzantine and the Romanesque ones. For example, the floral crosses of the apse's mosaic remind us of the same motifs in the mosaics cathedral of Aquileia (Italy, 4<sup>th</sup> century) and the white background in *opus tessellatum* combined with palmettes, circles and rhombuses reminds of San Vitale's (Ravenna, Italy) deambulatory pavement.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the division of the nave's mosaic into rectangular panels with central emblems containing floral crosses connecting others ornaments as bands with their decoration of rhombuses and pearls seems to correspond to the plain view of a vault. Such models could be found first with Hosios Loukas (Greece, beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century) which influenced the repertory of ornaments in Venice.<sup>9</sup> Afterwards, we find successive panels of floor mosaics separated into triangles, palmettes arranged as crosses and crosses formed by lobes in the floor mosaics of the Benedictine church of San Nicolo at Lido (Venice, middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>10</sup> Besides the employed shapes, similarities in the technique of pavement mosaics can also be found in the area of Aquileia and Venice (Venice—church of St. Mark and St. Zachary, Murano—St. Donato church, Torcello—church of the Virgin Mary). Venice, as well as Aquileia and Pomposa, constituted an environment where the floor mosaics workshops mixed the *opus tessellatum* with the Byzantine *opus sectile* in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, very close to the formal or iconographic characteristics of the nave's mosaic of Bizere is the Arabic decoration of the coronation cloak of



Roger II of Sicily (1133–1134) embroidered with the same S-shaped acanthus sprays together with the beast-fight theme (a lion and a camel) joined to the Tree of Life.<sup>12</sup> The same vegetal ornaments were popular enough in enamels, sculptures and Western paintings of the twelfth century, such as the paintings vaults and arches of the royal crypt of San Isidoro in Leon (Spain, 12<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>13</sup> But, despite the numerous formal analogies between the mosaics in Bizere and the Byzantine or Romanesque ones from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, one can not indicate, in the present state of research, any direct affiliation to a certain workshop.

The mosaics in Bizere, created by masters who must have had a Benedictine connection, contain certain interpretations of Byzantine motifs and a series of traits also shared by floor mosaics in the Adriatic area. Nevertheless, they differ from the latter in style, iconography, and technique. The polychromy, the quality of the drawings and arrangements between geometrical frames and their motifs (vegetal or figurative), the uniform distribution of colors within the frame of the drawings, the creatures of the bestiary which populate the nave's mosaic together with vegetal ornaments, and the uncommon relief revealed a mature level of floor mosaic art in Romanesque style. These features contain a chronological message linked to the coins discovered in different places of the abbey. The oldest ones were minted by the kings Stephen II (1116–1131) and Bela II (1131–1141) of Hungary.



## Notes

1. The first publication of the floor mosaics discovered in 2003 at Bizere appeared in 2006—I. Burnichioiu and A. A. Rusu, *Mozaicurile medievale de la Bizere/The Medieval Mosaics from Bizere/Die mittelalterliche Mosaiken von Bizere* (Cluj-Napoca)—with the aim of securing resources for investigations and the preservation of the site. The text of this first publication on the topic is amplified and enhanced here. An academic book, including an extensive catalogue of the mosaics and the remains of the church, is being prepared.
2. The memory of the place has been lost gradually and recovered after many attempts, from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. For details and bibliography: A. A. Rusu and G. P. Hurezan, *Biserici medievale din județul Arad* (Arad, 2001), 161–163; Zs. Móré Heitel, “Monostorok a Maros mentén: Adatok,” in *Paradisum plantavit: Bencés monostorok a középkori Magyarországon* (Pannonhalma, 2001), 268.
3. The origin of the name, identical to the name of an extinct neighboring village (mentioned in the papal tithe lists from the fourteenth century), is unknown. The

first name is thought to sound Slavic, the second one still has no satisfactory explanation.

4. Rusu and Hurezan, 159–160; *Paradisum plantavit*, 484–485. A new study of the written sources of Bizere monastery is A. A. Rusu, I. Burnichioiu, and C. Ionescu, *Mănăstirea Bizere. I* (Cluj-Napoca, 2011).
5. The archaeological investigation was mainly proposed and carried out by specialists from two institutions: the Institute of Archaeology and Art History of Cluj-Napoca and the Museum Complex of Arad. In 1981, the year of the first campaign, the team was led by Mircea Rusu (Cluj-Napoca) with the participation of Mircea Barbu and George Pascu Hurezan (Arad). From 2001 onward the investigations have been carried out by Adrian Andrei Rusu (Cluj-Napoca), with George Pascu Hurezan, Peter Hügél, Florin Mărginean (Arad), Ileana Burnichioiu (1 December 1918 University, Alba Iulia) as team members.
6. Even so, the researchers identified the most important part of the monastery near the eastern part of the island. In the northern part of the investigated area, a quadrangular building resembling a palace was identified and further on, oriented approximately parallel to it, a funeral chapel and a three-nave building, which turned out to be the main church. South of this, fragments of the cloister's foundations were uncovered (with a portico, a courtyard with a *labavo*, the refectory and other outbuildings). Between the main church and the palace, near the chapel, a cemetery gradually developed. Afterward, at a considerable distance west of the remnants of these buildings, lay the vestiges of a well with a tower built above it, which provided one of the local toponyms (*Fântâna Turcului*). The complex did not end with the tower to the west, as the archeologists confirming other building structures with unidentified functions in its area.
7. They belong to the only medieval mosaic that was discovered in Romania *in situ* until now.
8. See *La basilica San Vitale a Ravenna* (Modena, 1997), figs. 651–653.
9. X. Barral i Altet, *Les Mosaiques de pavement médiévales de Venise, Murano, Torcello* (Paris, 1985), 92; N. Chatzidakis, *Greek Art: Byzantine Mosaics* (Athens, 1994), 13, figs. 59, 62–63; O. Demus, *Studies in Byzantium: Venice and the West*, vol. 2 (London, 1998).
10. Barral i Altet, *Venise, Murano, Torcello*, 20–21, plan I.
11. H. Stern, “Le Pavement de la basilique de Pomposa (Italie),” *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Âge* 18 (1968): 157–169; X. Barral i Altet, “La Mosaique de pavement médiévale dans l'abside de la basilique patriachale d'Aquilée,” *Cahiers Archéologiques: Fin de l'Antiquité et Moyen Âge* 26 (1977): 105–116; id., *Venise, Murano, Torcello*, 90–91; P. Hill, *Venetian Colour: Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass 1250–1550* (New Haven–London, 1999), 35; Ch. Kleinhenz, ed., *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia* 2 (New York–London, 2003): 738–739.
12. F. Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought: To the End of the Middle Ages* (London, 1971), 270, fig. 163.
13. R. Walker, “The Wall Paintings in the Panteón de los Reyes at León,” *Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): 200–235.

**Abstract****Medieval Floor Mosaics at Bizere Monastery: A Brief Survey**

Bizere monastery is one of the medieval monasteries founded in Arad County which almost completely disappeared between the sixteenth century and the present day. Its site was gradually identified approximately 15 kilometers from Arad, south of the Mureş Valley, on the territory of Frumuşeni village. The positions of both surfaces with mosaics, the great number of fragments typical of the pavement discovered within the perimeter, and their diversity in shape (eight-shaped, half circles, almonds, quadrangular slabs of stone, circle segments, other geometric shapes) indicate that the church was entirely covered with mosaics of at least two types. The mosaics at Bizere, created by masters who must have had a Benedictine connection, contain certain interpretations of Byzantine motifs and a series of traits also shared by floor mosaics in the Adriatic area. Nevertheless, they differ from the latter in style, iconography, and technique. The polychromy, the quality of the drawings and arrangements between geometrical frames and their motifs (vegetal or figurative), the uniform distribution of colors within the frame of the drawings, the creatures of the bestiary which populate the nave's mosaic together with vegetal ornaments, and the uncommon relief revealed a mature level of floor mosaic art in Romanesque style.

**Keywords**

Bizere abbey, Benedictine order, Middle Ages, floor mosaics, pavement, bestiary, Romanesque art