

ECA 2



Eastern Christian Art

in its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts



PEETERS

EASTERN CHRISTIAN ART

North-West Church in Hippos (Sussita), Israel: Five Years of Archaeological Research (2000 – 2004)

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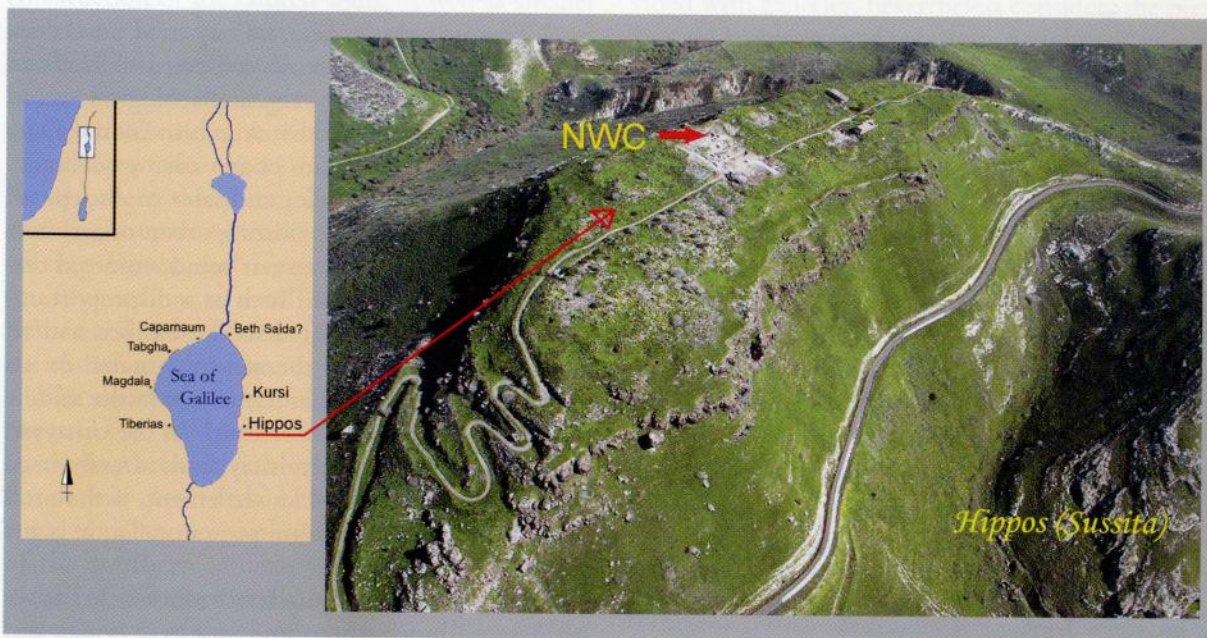
Two kilometres to the east of the modern kibbutz Ein Gev on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel there rises a picturesque mountain with the ruins of an ancient city on its top (at ca 350 m above the level of the lake; Pl. 1)¹. Founded in the Hellenistic period, it was known under the Greek name of Hippos (or Antiochia Hippos during Seleucid rule) or under the Aramaic name of Sussita. After the conquest of the area by the Romans in 66/67 B.C., the city became one of the Greco-Roman towns of the Decapolis group. By the time of the council of Seleucia (A.D. 359) Hippos was already known as an episcopal see².

In 2000, archaeological excavations at Hippos began as a joint Israeli-Polish project headed by Arthur Segal (Zinman Institute, University of Haifa), with Jolanta Mlynarczyk (Polish Academy of Sciences and Institute of Archaeology of

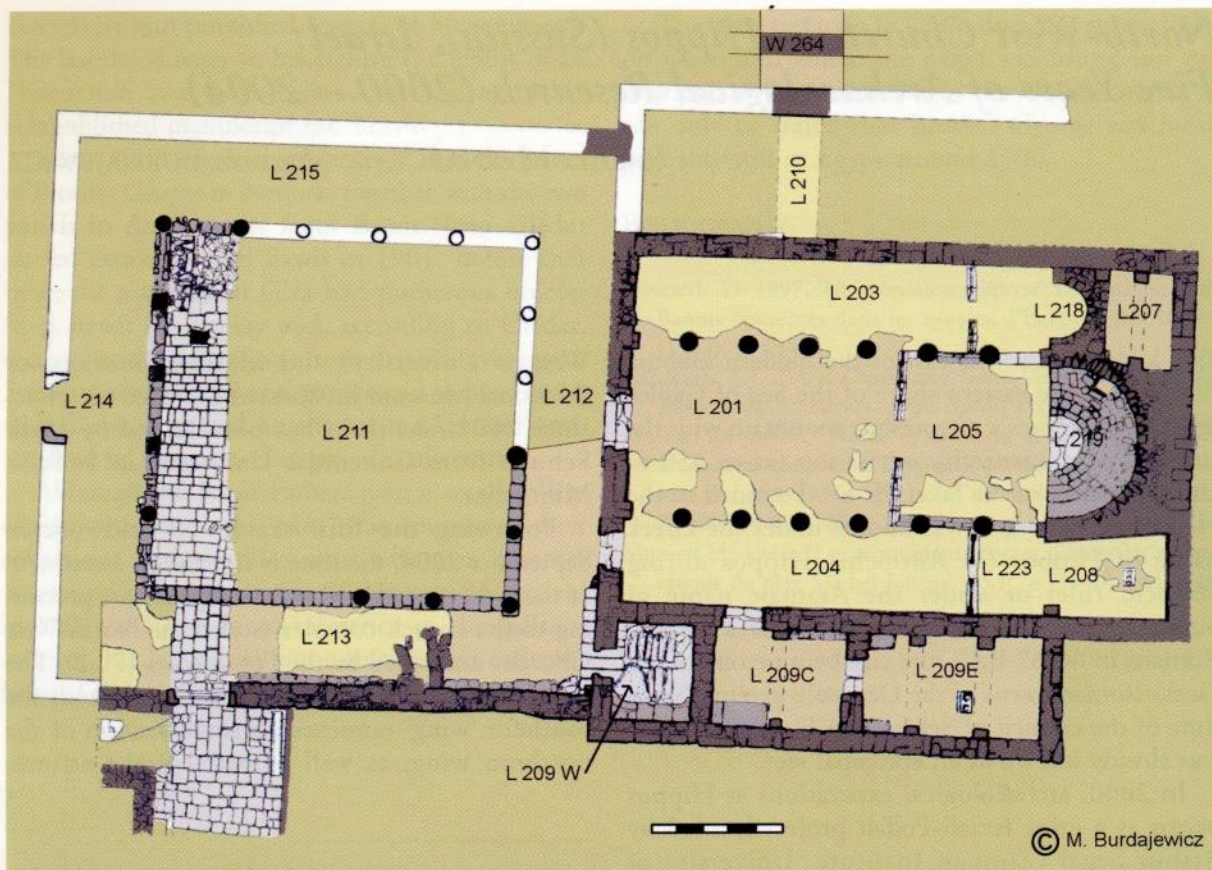
Warsaw University) and Mariusz Burdajewicz (National Museum in Warsaw) as the co-directors; since 2001, the team has been joined by Mark Schuler from Concordia University in St Paul, Minnesota.

Following the fifth season of fieldwork in September 2004, the time is ripe for an assessment of the hitherto gathered archaeological data pertaining to the church complex (styled the North-West Church) unearthed by the Polish team (Pl. 2). The entire basilica has been uncovered along with the southern 'wing' (annexes), a small section of the northern wing, as well as parts of the atrium.

- ¹ Our warm thanks go to Ms Iwona Zych, Warsaw, for revising the English of this paper.
- ² Bagatti 1971, 94; see also Epstein 1993.



Pl. 1. *Geographical situation of Hippos and view of the site with location of the North-West Church (aerial photo courtesy by Michael Eisenberg, University of Haifa)*



Pl. 2. Plan of remains of the North-West Church, 2004 (yellow: mosaic floors; white: unexcavated walls)

Besides the church itself, we have explored an area outside the northern wall of the church and a part of an olive oil and wine press abutting the church compound on the south³.

LOCATION AND GENERAL PLAN OF THE NORTH-WEST CHURCH

The church was built in what was an important spot of the city, north of the main public square (*agora*), on the site of what appears to have been a pagan sanctuary. Among the literary sources confirming such practices, one can quote *Panarion* of St Epiphanius from Salamis mentioning Joseph

from Tiberias, who in his own city tried unsuccessfully to transform a temple dedicated to Hadrian into a church⁴. In turn, the archaeological record has yielded evidence of the church in coastal Dora being built on the remains of an earlier pagan sanctuary dedicated to Apollo, and later to Asclepius⁵.

It may have been the existing urban or architectural arrangement that, to our mind, enforced certain peculiarities of plan, such as a disproportionately big atrium compared to the basilica and an additional entrance to the atrium situated on its southern side (the main entrance was in the middle of the western side of the atrium). In the Umayyad period, however, the city may have already been changing into a village-like settlement, if the presence of a vast wine and olive-press installation is any proof.

The North-West Church is a three-aisled basilica flanked by northern and southern wings and preceded by a spacious square atrium consisting of a courtyard surrounded by four porticoes with six

³ Segal/Młynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2000; Młynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004. See also the website: www.hippos.w.pl or www.susyam.webpark.pl.

⁴ *PG*, 41, 425-428; Bagatti 1971, 71-72; cf. also Manns 1990, 557.

⁵ Dauphin 1999.

columns to a side (Pl. 2). The basilica with its internal apse is divided into three aisles by two rows of six basalt columns each. It seems clear that the northern and southern wings flanking the basilica were an integral part of the original design of the compound. The northern annexes of the church have not yet been uncovered; the southern 'wing', however, is known to have consisted of three rooms. A doorway connected the central and eastern rooms and they were accessible from the southern aisle only. The entrance to the western room, situated on axis with the southern portico, led from the atrium. The room was planned apparently as a 'funerary chapel', with twin cist tombs constructed below the floor and covered with basalt beams. The overall plan of the church compound is best paralleled by that of the church at neighbouring Kursi⁶.

In terms of relative chronology, the existence of the church was comprised between that of the pagan sanctuary and the earthquake that destroyed the town of Sussita. The date of this event, assumed generally to have taken place on January 18 of A.D. 749⁷, has been confirmed by objects – coins and pottery, the latter including oil lamps – found in sealed contexts deposits in the church.

CONSTRUCTION CHARACTERISTICS

Both limestone and basalt blocks were used in the construction of the church walls, as well as smaller undressed stones. The central apse was built of basalt ashlar; some walls were constructed entirely of limestone blocks (e.g. most of the southern wall of the church along with the southern wing), others of limestone blocks on a basalt substructure (among these, the eastern wall of the church, apparently built upon an earlier wall of basalt ashlar). Mixing basalt and limestone of different size (mostly medium to small) and shape (often irregular) seemed to be a feature of the latest additions to the church architecture.

The doorways (thresholds and doorjambs) were constructed of basalt material, mostly reused (including architrave blocks used as doorjambs). Basalt was also used in the construction of the engaged pillars supporting the arches in two rooms of the southern annexe (209C and 209E), the arches of the northern sacristy (Room 207), the entrance arch of the southern sacristy (Room 208), as well as the pilasters that carried the springing of the outer arcades in the colonnades. The arches of

the southern annexe and the northern sacristy were constructed of limestone, while the arch in the southern sacristy was built of basalt blocks. The columns in both the basilica and the atrium were composed of basalt drums with basalt capitals; in the basilica, they stood on bases of white marble.

The existence of galleries above the aisles is securely attested by large pieces of white monochrome mosaics lying ca 0.20-0.30 m above the floor of the two aisles. Similar evidence of an upper storey was found, for example, in the hermitage of *hegumenos* Procapis on Mount Nebo⁸. As no remains of gallery banisters were found in our church, they may be presumed to have been made of timber.

The presence of the galleries seems to suggest that there were no clerestory windows above the nave; if so, the only source of light for the nave would be the windows situated in the facade, and, indirectly, also the windows in the walls of the galleries. In this case, the lighting of the ground floor in the aisles would be even weaker still, some light coming only from the nave and the outer doors (when open). This kind of disposition of the windows in a church is depicted on a mosaic in the Church of Saint Stephen in Um al-Rasas (Kastron Mefaa)⁹. It should be noted, however, that the reconstruction of both the Northern and the Central churches in Herodion, which were also provided with galleries, nevertheless considers the presence of a *clerestorium*¹⁰.

Unlike the basilica with its gabled roof covered with terracotta tiles (as attested by numerous finds of both *tegulae* and *imbrices*), the side wings had flat roofs, a fact confirmed by the scarcity of roof tiles excavated from the debris in the southern annexe. The roof was presumably made of clay, lime mortar and organic material (reeds) on wooden beams supported on stone arches. The annexes must have been provided with windows, the possible location of which (at the top of the walls?) must be considered in strict correlation with the visual reconstruction of the adjoining winery.

⁶ Tzaferis 1983, plans 4-5.

⁷ Amiran/Kallner 1950, 223-246; cf. also Tsafirir/Foerster 1991, 127.

⁸ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2002, Fig. 36; Piccirillo/Alliata 1990, Figs 10-11.

⁹ Piccirillo 1993, Fig. 347.

¹⁰ Netzer 1990, Figs 4 and 15.

DECORATION AND LITURGICAL FURNITURE OF
THE CHURCH

The architectural decoration of the church was apparently limited to the capitals of the columns, which represented a regional Byzantine-period version of the Ionic order¹¹. The basalt stone of the colonnades in the basilica was covered with painted plaster. Specifically, one of the capitals still preserves some red-painted plaster above a wreath of green leaves¹², while the column

drums have remains of green ornaments (vegetal scrolls or imitation of veined green marble?). Many fragments of painted plaster pertaining to the decoration of the walls were found in the debris of the northern aisle, the southern sacristy (the *martyrion* chapel), and in the easternmost part of the *diakonikon*.

Mosaics

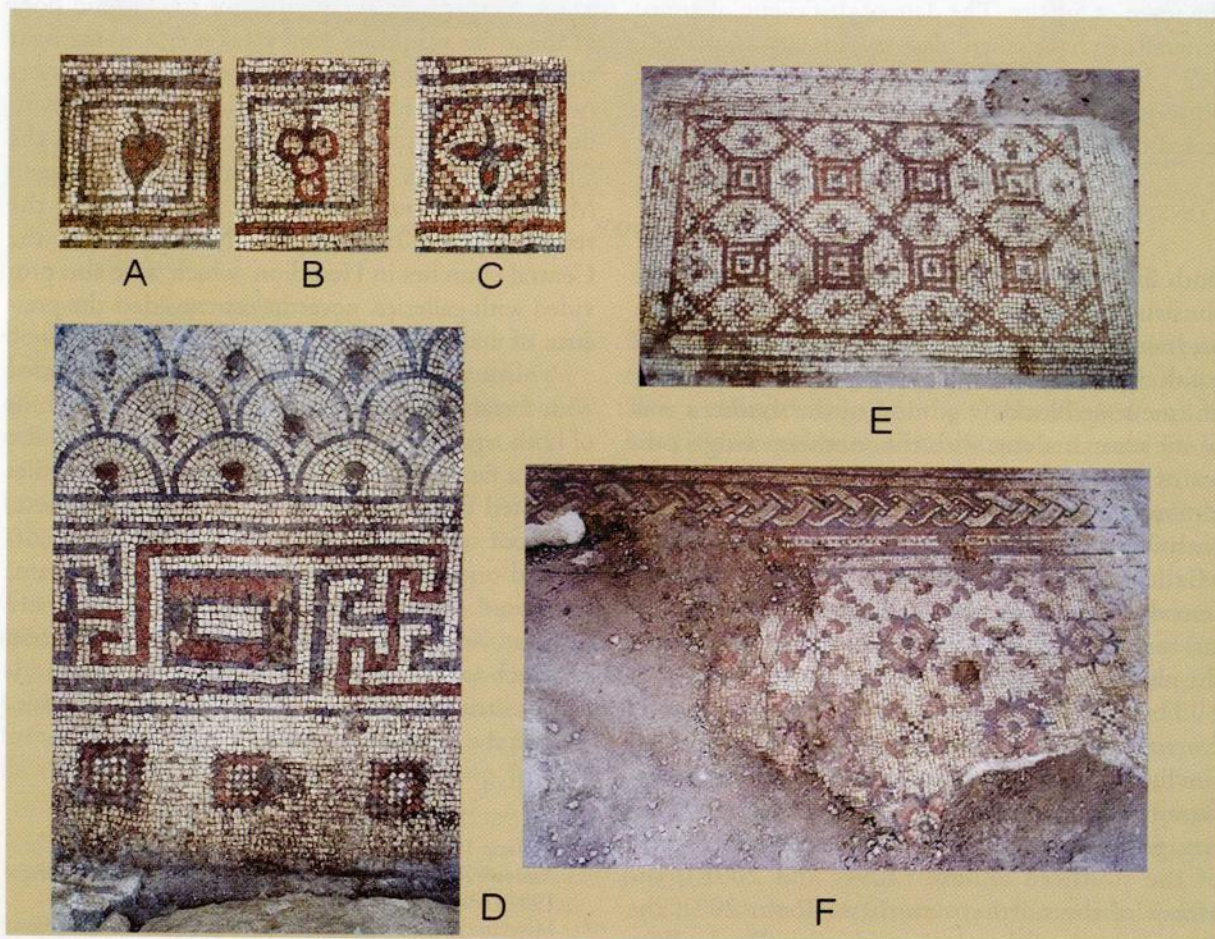
The floors of the basilica and the porticoes of the atrium were paved with mosaics. Of the mosaic floor in the nave only a few patches remain. They indicate that the central 'carpet' (or carpets)¹³, framed by a rich quadriplaited guilloche (Pl. 3F)¹⁴. The chancel area or *bema*, which projects up to the middle of the fifth intercolumniation (counting from the west), was no less destroyed than the nave.

¹¹ Comparable to the Ionic capitals from Der'a in southern Syria: Dentzer-Feydy 1990, Figs 39-41.

¹² Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2003, Fig. 50.

¹³ Avi-Yonah 1933-35, H7.

¹⁴ Similar to B12, Avi-Yonah 1933-35.



Pl. 3. Samples of motives used in decoration of the mosaic floors in the church (A-D: northern aisle; E: one of the northern intercolumniations; F chancel area of the nave)

To judge by the preserved parts of this mosaic floor, the pattern was similar as in the nave¹⁵.

The decoration of the mosaic floor in the northern aisle consists of a large central panel filled with fan-shaped elements outlined in dark¹⁶, each with a flower bud inside (Pl. 3D). The panel frame is filled with double swastikas¹⁷, alternating with rectangles, each of the latter containing different, purely geometrical motifs with the exception of three featuring floral elements (grape, heart-shaped

leaf, and trefoil leaf). The only intercolumniation panel of the northern aisle that has survived, the fourth one counting from the west, is filled with eight interlacing octagons, each containing a double square in the centre and a diamond on its four

¹⁵ Segal/Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2000, Figs 36-37.

¹⁶ Avi-Yonah 1933-35, J3.

¹⁷ Avi-Yonah 1933-35, A19; see also Ovadiah/Ovadiah 1987, 232.



A



B



C

Pl. 4. Mosaic inscriptions commemorating donations by Petros (A), Hedora (B) and the deceased (?) deaconess Antona (C)

sides¹⁸. The same pattern occurs also in the narthex of the church in Bahan/Khirbet Kafr Sibb¹⁹. Similar motifs appear on the sixth-century mosaics in the churches of Khan Khaldé and Zahrani, both in Lebanon, as well as a late fifth-century mosaic in the church of Mezra'a el-'Oulia in Syria²⁰.

The floor of the northern apse is filled with a tri-colour (red, black and yellowish/white) chessboard pattern²¹. In the southern aisle, the mosaic floor continues the general pattern of the northern aisle. The central 'carpet', in almost perfect condition, is filled with scales, each with a rose bud inside²², similar to those in the northern aisle, but devoid of dark outlines. All the way around the central carpet of scales runs a simple guilloche frame²³.

The intercolumniations of the southern aisle contain rectangular mosaic panels. The first intercolumniation (counting from the west) has a 'diagonal' pattern consisting of small squares²⁴. The decorative panel of the second intercolumniation seems to be divided into six (?) octagons. Only two of them are preserved: one contains a square filled with diagonals, another depicts probably an apple or pomegranate. In the third intercolumniation panel, a rectangle contains a diamond inscribed with interlacing lines. The fourth intercolumniation panel virtually repeats the pattern of the first one. The pattern of the fifth intercolumniation is rather illegible; it consists probably of a combination of diamonds and crosslets. Finally, a frieze of simple geometrical figures composed of crosslets and tiny triangles runs along the southern side of the chancel.

The floor of this aisle contains also two mosaic inscriptions in Greek, which commemorate donations made by two individuals²⁵. A one-line inscription in a *tabula ansata* extending across the aisle at

the height of the fifth intercolumniation and facing west, commemorates an offering made by Petros (Pl. 4A). Another inscription was placed at the inner edge of the aisle, in front of the third intercolumniation, but facing the nave, not the aisle. It is also written in one line and mentions a woman by the name of Hedora (or Heliodora?; Pl. 4B).

The mosaic floor of the southern sacristy is filled with a 'carpet' of slightly trapezoidal outline which repeats the pattern of the southern aisle with the only difference that here the 'guilloche' border is thicker and is framed on both sides by a thin black line. Additionally, the space between the mosaic 'carpet' and the walls of the chapel is of unequal width, and is partly decorated with alternating lozenges and diamonds, the latter with crosslets protruding from the angles.

The mosaic floor under the archway separating the southern sacristy from the chancel part of the southern aisle was repaired at some time, but since no attention was paid to the proper restoration of the original pattern, it will of necessity remain unknown to us.

The mosaic preserved in the southern portico of the atrium displays a 'carpet' of simple geometrical composition: a diagonal grid of squares outlined with a double line of black cubes, each square containing a diamond (?) at the centre²⁶. The same mosaic pattern is found in the monastery at Bet Shean²⁷, in the church at Horvat Hesheq in Upper Galilee²⁸ and in the narthex of the church in Nebha in Lebanon, probably of the earlier seventh century²⁹. The colours used in the execution of the atrium floor were limited to white, black, blueish-grey, pink and orange-brown. At mid-width of the corridor, a Greek inscription is inserted in a diagonal grid; it was intended to be read while moving eastwards, toward Room 209W and the basilica. The text (black letters in five lines comprised in a square frame consisting of a narrow black line) commemorates an offering (*prosfora*, clearly a financial contribution to the paving of this portico) made for the eternal rest (*huper anapauseos*) of Antona (misspelling for 'Antonia?') the deaconess (Pl. 4C).

Chancel screens

Near the eastern end of the northern aisle, the chancel screen was found, installed on the mosaic as the final arrangement of the church. The marble screen was set in a base built of limestone, and consisted of two panels and two screen posts (each 1.09 m

¹⁸ Avi Yonah 1933-35, H3; cf. also Ovadiah/Ovadiah 1987, 244.

¹⁹ Ovadiah/Ovadiah 1987, Pl. 7.

²⁰ Donceel-Voûte 1988, 380, 430, 181-182, Figs 358, 429, 154 respectively.

²¹ Segal/Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, Figs 34-35.

²² Avi-Yonah 1933-35, pattern J3.

²³ Avi-Yonah 1933-35, pattern B2.

²⁴ Avi-Yonah 1933-35, pattern A9 and A15.

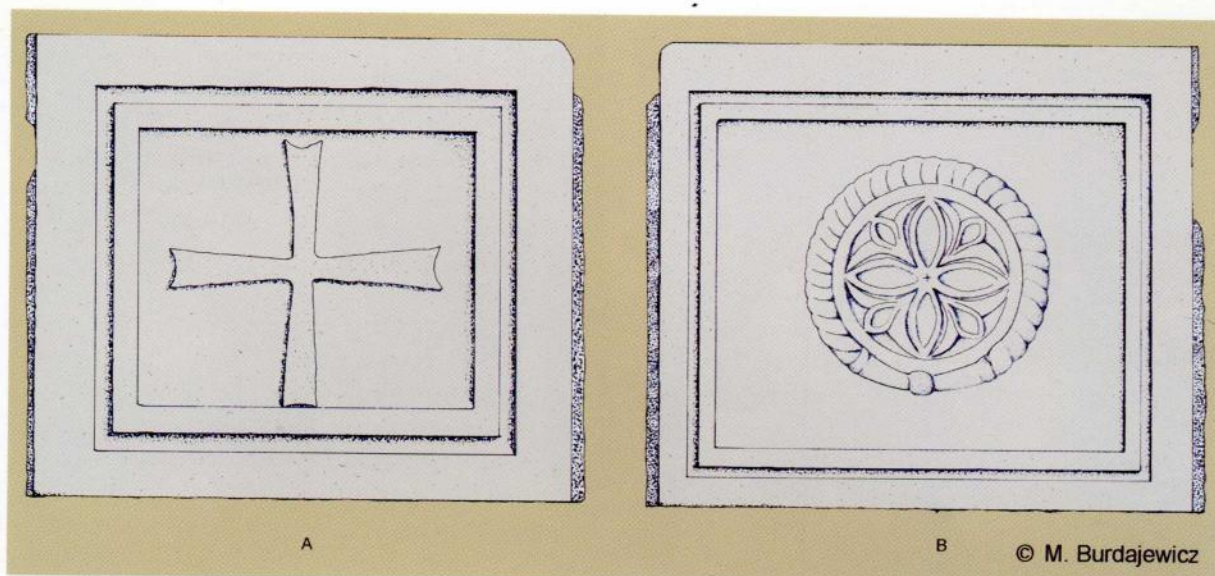
²⁵ Lajtar 2002.

²⁶ Ovadiah/Ovadiah 1987, 165, Type A.

²⁷ FitzGerald 1939, Pl. XII.

²⁸ Aviam 1990, Fig. 24.

²⁹ Donceel-Voûte 1988, 396, Fig. 381.



Pl. 5. Two sides of a marble chancel screen from the northern aisle: the eastward side (A) and the westward one (B)

high). The southern chancel screen, broken into three restorable parts (dimensions: 0.80 × 0.95 m), has a cross in relief on its eastward face, and a rosette in a wreath on the westward one (Pl. 5). The wreath is rendered in a schematised style common to the churches of the Byzantine period (see below), while the rosette is combined with a fleur-de-lis. A similar motif, in which, however, the cross is more clearly accentuated, appears on the panels from the church at Horvat Hesheq³⁰, from the Temple Mount excavations in Jerusalem³¹, from Nessana³² and from the church of the Deacon Thomas at 'Uyun Musa in the Mount Nebo region³³.

Of the northern chancel screen in the northern aisle only a corner remains. The inward sides of the chancel posts have iron rings fixed to them to pass a chain (?) closing off the entrance to the sanctuary. It seems that the posts used to carry two colonettes, comparable to those found in the southern aisle (see below).

At the height of the sixth column, the southern aisle is closed by a marble balustrade belonging to a lateral chancel (Pl. 6). It consists of two screens and four posts fixed to their base with pieces of lead. The base is built of reused marble blocks derived from a monumental building of Roman date (second century A.D.?), to judge by the remains of relief decoration on the eastern faces of two long blocks. Of these, the southern one still preserves a deeply drilled

ornament of acanthus scrolls (Pl. 7). The southern chancel screen (0.90 m high) was found standing *in situ* between two posts. Its western face has a 'Maltese' cross with grooved arms inside a simple ring and a wreath composed of a triple row of laurel leaves tied with a ribbon (Pl. 6). Such a laurel wreath surrounding a cross (*stephanostaurion*) is common on chancel screens in the churches of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*. Just to mention some examples: from Sussita itself; in the church of the Monastery of Kyra Maria, Tel Iztabba³⁴; Khirbet el-Mird³⁵, as well from the Temple Mount excavations in Jerusalem³⁶; Mampsis³⁷ and in the Petra Church³⁸. The screen's eastern face bears a similar cross (its arms, however, left ungrooved) surmounting the tripartite Golgotha mound; the left-hand side of this panel left unfinished, with traces of chiselling (Pl. 7). A close parallel to this representation is found on chancel screens from Tabgha³⁹, Horvat

³⁰ Aviam 1990, Fig. 20.

³¹ Peleg 2003, Pl. I.21. 6.

³² Colt 1962, Pl. XIX:5.

³³ Acconci 1998, 515, 534, cat. nos 125, 127, 169.

³⁴ Israeli/Mevorah 2000, 73-74 and 130.

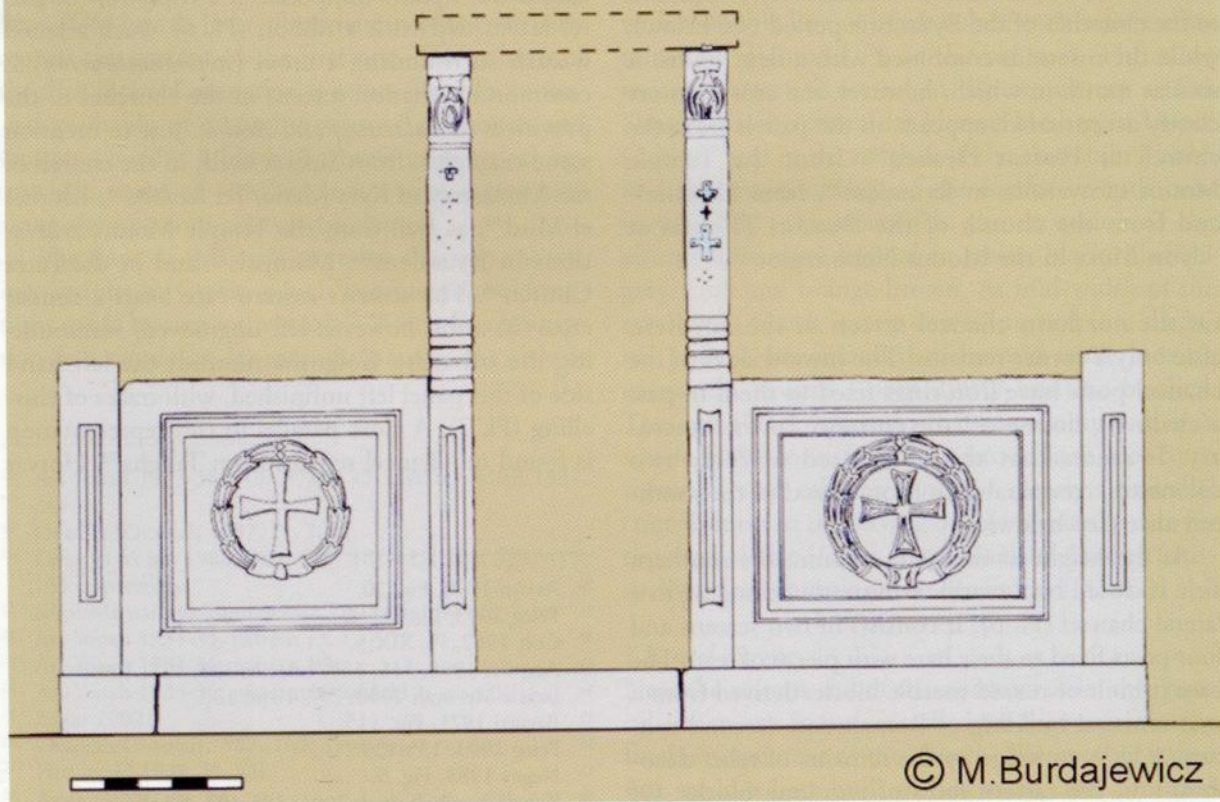
³⁵ Bagatti 1971, Fig. 115.

³⁶ Peleg 2003, 135-139.

³⁷ Negev 1988, Fig. 9.

³⁸ Kanelloupolos/Schick 2001, 195-197, Figs 5 and 10.

³⁹ Bagatti 1962, 121, Fig. 16:5.



Pl. 6. Restored chancel screen of the southern aisle complete with columnettes



Pl. 7. Eastern side of the southern chancel screen in the southern aisle; reused Roman-period block with acanthus scrolls



Pl. 8. Detail of the columnettes of the southern aisle, with silver crosses fixed on them

Bata in Carmiel of the sixth century⁴⁰, and Khirbet ed-Deir⁴¹. A similar representation, flanked by gazelles, appears also on a chancel screen from the sixth-century Church of St Lazarus in Nahariya⁴². From Horvat Karkara, Galilee, comes a fragment decorated with a ram lowering its head before the cross which surmounts the tripartite Golgotha hillock⁴³.

The northern chancel screen (0.90 m high) was found broken into several pieces by stones tumbling from the southern wall. On the western face there is a representation of a 'Maltese' cross in a bound wreath, differing from the other screen only in the cross arms not being grooved and the wreath lacking a ring inside. The screen's back (eastern) side was left undecorated.

The outer chancel posts (0.92 m high) are reused small pillars with vertical flutings on one face and

stylised acanthus capitals. The inner monolithic posts were considerably higher and of a different form. Their upper parts, from slightly above the level of the screen top, were shaped as colonettes with moulded bases and 'Corinthian' capitals. Similar capitals of the chancel screen post are known from the church at Horvat Hesheq, Upper Galilee⁴⁴, and, rather more elaborate, from the Theotokos chapel on Mount Nebo⁴⁵. Together with a horizontal bar (of wood?) which they used to carry, they formed a sort of doorway, its total height

⁴⁰ Israeli/Mevorakh 2000, 42.

⁴¹ Habas 1999, Pl. 3: 3-4.

⁴² Dauphin/Edelstein 1993, 51.

⁴³ Israeli/Mevorah 2000, 73-74.

⁴⁴ Aviam 1990, Fig. 7.

⁴⁵ Acconci 1998, 507, cat. nos 99-102.

amounting to 2 m (0.18 m for the chancel base and 1.82 m for the inner post-colonettes) above the level of the mosaic floor. The broken colonettes were found in the debris with small votive crosses made of silver still affixed to their shafts with bronze pegs: three crosses (and holes to mount the fourth one) on the southern colonette (Pl. 8), two crosses (plus holes for the third one) on the northern colonette. Evidence for fixing the metal crosses on chancel screen posts comes also from the church at Horvat Hesheq⁴⁶ and from the Mount Nebo excavations⁴⁷. From the eastern faces of the inner posts there protrude iron rings fixed to lead pegs, intended to mount a low wooden door: two rings for hinges in the southern post, and one for a hook in the northern post.

Reliquaries

The two reliquaries found one on top of the other in the eastern part of the southern sacristy identify this room as a *martyrion* chapel. The upper reliquary is a sarcophagus-like chest of white marble (L. 0.25 m, W. 0.16 m, H. 0.10 m), divided into three rectangular compartments, and covered with a gabled lid finished with four acroteria. In the top of the lid, there is a circular opening into which a bronze pin was inserted. Inside, in one of the compartments, a few tiny bones were found (Pl. 9). This reliquary represents the most common sarcophagus-like type known from the churches in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*⁴⁸.

The lower reliquary in Loc. 208 is bigger, made of a pink limestone block (L. 0.56 m, W. 0.45 m, H. 0.24 m) inserted into the floor of the room (Pl. 10). Its southern part was destroyed by falling blocks during the earthquake. Inside a raised edge, the upper surface has three compartments, each of them originally with its own lid. Above the central

bowl-shaped depression, a broken circular lid was found. Made of raw beige clay (with the addition of an organic material, apparently straw), it had a central opening. Under this lid, fragments of another circular lid with an opening in the centre were found. The bowl, shaped like an inverted cone, was filled with earth, brown-coloured in the upper part, and reddish brown at the bottom. The lateral compartments, of which only the northern one survived intact, were rectangular. The well-preserved northern compartment had a rectangular lid exactly fitting its rim; in addition to this, there was also an upper lid, made of a broken slab of the same soft pink stone.

On the western side of the reliquary a 'Greek' cross was represented in relief; marking the centre of the cross is a grooved square with a circular hollow at the centre (possibly for inserting a gem). At the four corners of the reliquary, square holes for marble legs were sunk into the mosaic floor. Two of the legs were recomposed from smaller fragments to their total height of 1.10 m. Two others are preserved only partially (Pl. 10). All of them are carved in a similar way: they have cubic bases, above which there is a simple decoration consisting of horizontal incisions forming three strips; the shaft which is slightly ellipsoidal in section, is crowned with a capital decorated on all four sides with a sort of schematic lotus flower. The leaves, two on each side, curve inward forming a mandorla-like ornament. The decorative motif is frequent on the capitals of altar legs in the Byzantine period. However, the execution can vary from a naturalistic style, like in Nessana⁴⁹ and the Mount Nebo region⁵⁰, to a very schematic one, like in the monastery at Khirbet ed-Deir⁵¹ and on Mount Nebo⁵².

No fragments of an altar table supported on these legs were found, unless an originally marble altar was replaced later by a wooden one. The type of reliquary, of relatively large dimensions, inserted into the floor, is rather rare in Palestine, and the closest parallels can be found in some churches in Jordan, for example in Gerasa, in the church of Sts Peter and Paul and in the church of Sts Cosmas and Damian⁵³. A third reliquary, made of white marble, was found on the floor of the northern apse. It is of the same type exactly as that found in the *martyrion* chapel described above; one of its three compartments contained a small glass bottle with tiny pieces of bones⁵⁴.

⁴⁶ Aviam 1990, 358, 370, Figs 8 and 27.

⁴⁷ Acconci 1998, 509, cat. no. 105.

⁴⁸ Burdajewicz 2004, 278-279; see also Michel 2001, 72-78; Bagatti 1971, 253.

⁴⁹ Colt 1962, Pl. XVIII:3.

⁵⁰ Acconci 1998, cat. nos 99-101.

⁵¹ Habas 1999, 119, Pl. 1.

⁵² Acconci 1998, 534, cat. no. 173.

⁵³ Kraeling 1938, 245, 253, Pl. LI:a; Michel 2001, 74, 257, Figs 237, 238. See also Burdajewicz 2004, Figs. 6-7.

⁵⁴ Segal/Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2000, Figs 47-48.



Pl. 9. Marble reliquary from the martyrion chapel with bronze pin



Pl. 10. Limestone reliquary inserted in the floor of the martyrion chapel with restored supports of a mensa

Marble furniture found in the church

In the course of the excavations, many stone fragments of the original furniture of the church were found in different contexts in the church. The most important group was uncovered in the northern apse. Apart from the reliquary mentioned above, the assemblage included the marble supports (legs) and a large part of the *mensa* of an altar table, all broken into pieces. The altar table represented a type very common in the Byzantine period. The *mensa* is rectangular and shaped with external frames of different width (narrow band, fillet and *cyma reversa*) and a wide sunken surface in the centre. The best parallels with similar mouldings can be found, e.g. in the monastery at Khirbet ed-Deir in the Judean desert⁵⁵, at Mount Nebo⁵⁶ and in Petra⁵⁷. The table was supported by four colonettes which could be restored to their full height; their shafts are oval-sectioned, while the capitals are decorated with schematised vegetal elements (stylised lotus flowers) and terminate in a cubic abacus. The bases of the colonettes are square, and right above them, there are three simple incisions, which form smooth strips of decoration. The parallel colonettes come from the church at Horvat Hesheq⁵⁸, Khirbet ed-Deir⁵⁹, Mount Olive in Jerusalem⁶⁰, Mampsis⁶¹, Mount Nebo/ʿAyn al-Kanisah⁶² and Petra⁶³.

Bronze lighting devices

A bronze oil lamp in the shape of a dove found on the floor of the chancel area of the northern aisle apparently used to hang between the chancel screen

and the altar (Pl. 11). A similar lamp is part of the collection of the Flagellation Museum at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem⁶⁴. Another parallel is constituted by a lamp found in the North Cemetery in Firka, Nubia, dated to the fifth and sixth centuries⁶⁵.

Two complete bronze chandeliers or *polykandela* were found in the church. One of them, complete with chain, was discovered below the blocks of the fallen arch, which separated the *martyrion* chapel from the chancel area of the southern aisle (Pl. 12A). It takes on the form of a circular frame with six round openings for inserting glass oil lamps. The outer rim has three loops to hold chains ending in hooks. A close parallel comes from Beth Shean⁶⁶. Another *polykandelon* was found in upright position against the eastern wall of the *diakonikon*; lacking its chain, it must have been stored in this place as an item of value. It is of a larger diameter, intended for nine glass oil lamps. The frame is composed of circular openings for lamps alternating with solid triangles (Pl. 12B)⁶⁷.

Of interest is a group of bronze objects uncovered in the *diakonikon* in the southern wing of the church. It included a bronze jug or decanter typical of the Umayyad period (Pl. 13A). Closely similar vessels are known from Pella, dated to the second quarter of the eighth century⁶⁸, from Beth Shean, dated to around A.D. 749⁶⁹ and from the Monastery of Saint Martyrius at Maʿale Adummim⁷⁰. Another object, a bronze censer (Pl. 13B), is of a common Byzantine type, shaped as a bowl with ribbed body and three loops on the rim for a suspension chain (which was not found). A parallel censer comes from Jericho⁷¹; other examples of the type are known, among others, from Saqqara in Egypt and Amman in Jordan⁷². The third bronze find is a medium-sized bell with an iron heart, similar to a bell from Beth Shean (Pl. 13C)⁷³.

The furniture of the church such as the marble screens and posts of the lateral chancels, three reliquaries, the altar table, bronze lighting devices and many other objects (not mentioned here) of metal, glass (Pl. 14) and pottery (Pl. 15), were found *in situ* in sealed destruction deposits. Their role in identifying the function of particular rooms of the church compound in the final period of its existence is crucial (see below).

⁵⁵ Habas 1999, 119-123, Pl. 1.

⁵⁶ Acconci 1998, 489, cat. no. 61.

⁵⁷ Kanellopoulos/Schick 2001, Figs 6-7, 21.

⁵⁸ Aviam 1990, Fig. 7.

⁵⁹ Habas 1999, 119-123, Pl. 1.

⁶⁰ Bagatti 1971, Fig. 123.

⁶¹ Negev 1988, Photo 98.

⁶² Acconci 1998, 534, cat. no. 173.

⁶³ Kanellopoulos/Schick 2001, Fig. 23.

⁶⁴ Bagatti 1939, 54.

⁶⁵ Kirwan 1935, 194, Pl. XXI.

⁶⁶ FitzGerald 1931, Pls XXVII: 4 and XXXVII: 4; cf. also Israeli/Mevorah 2000, 108, 109.

⁶⁷ See also parallel from Beth Shean: FitzGerald 1931, XXXVII: 1.

⁶⁸ Smith/Day 1989, 118, Pl. 62.9.

⁶⁹ Tsafirir/Foerster 1991, 127, Fig. 117.

⁷⁰ Magen 1993, 193.

⁷¹ Israeli/Mevorah 2000, 98; Bagatti 1971, Fig. 135.

⁷² Bénazeth 2001, 292-294, nos 249-251.

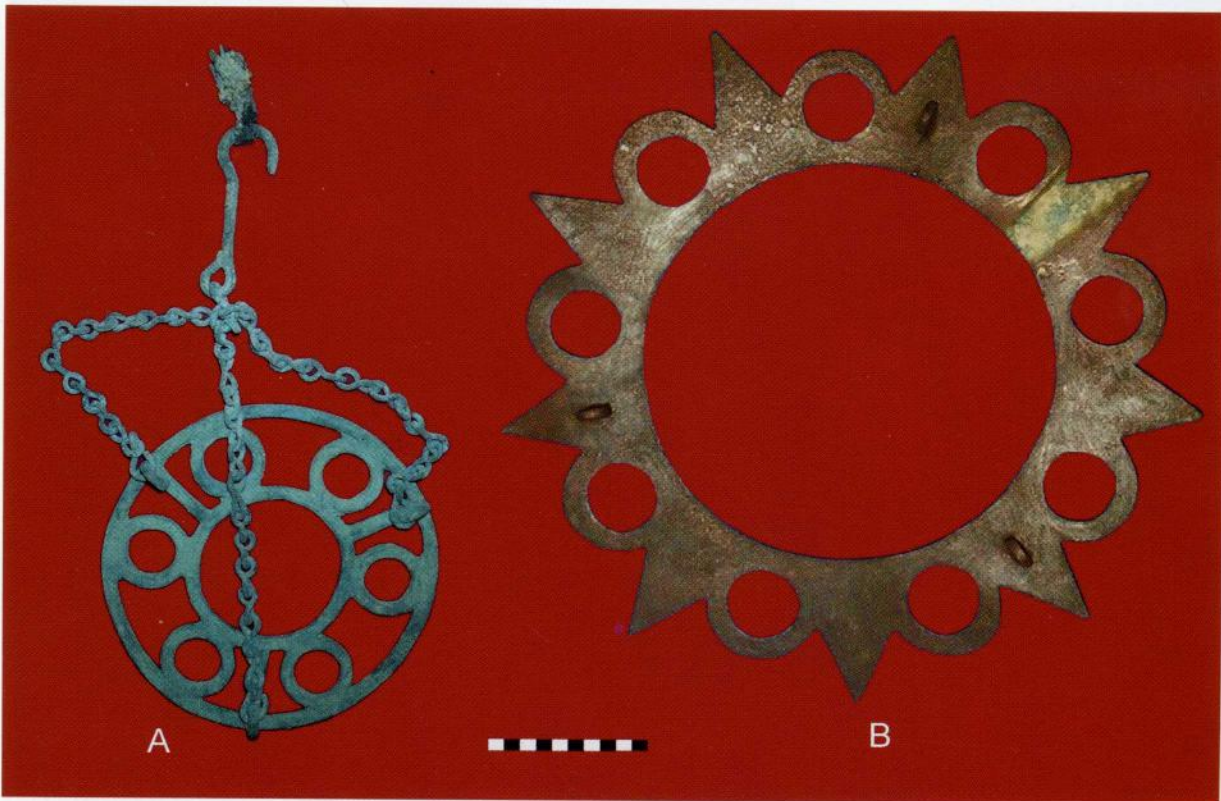
⁷³ FitzGerald 1931, Pl. XXXVIII: 2.



Pl. 11. Bronze lamp found in the chancel area of the northern aisle



Pl. 13. Bronze objects found in the diakonikon

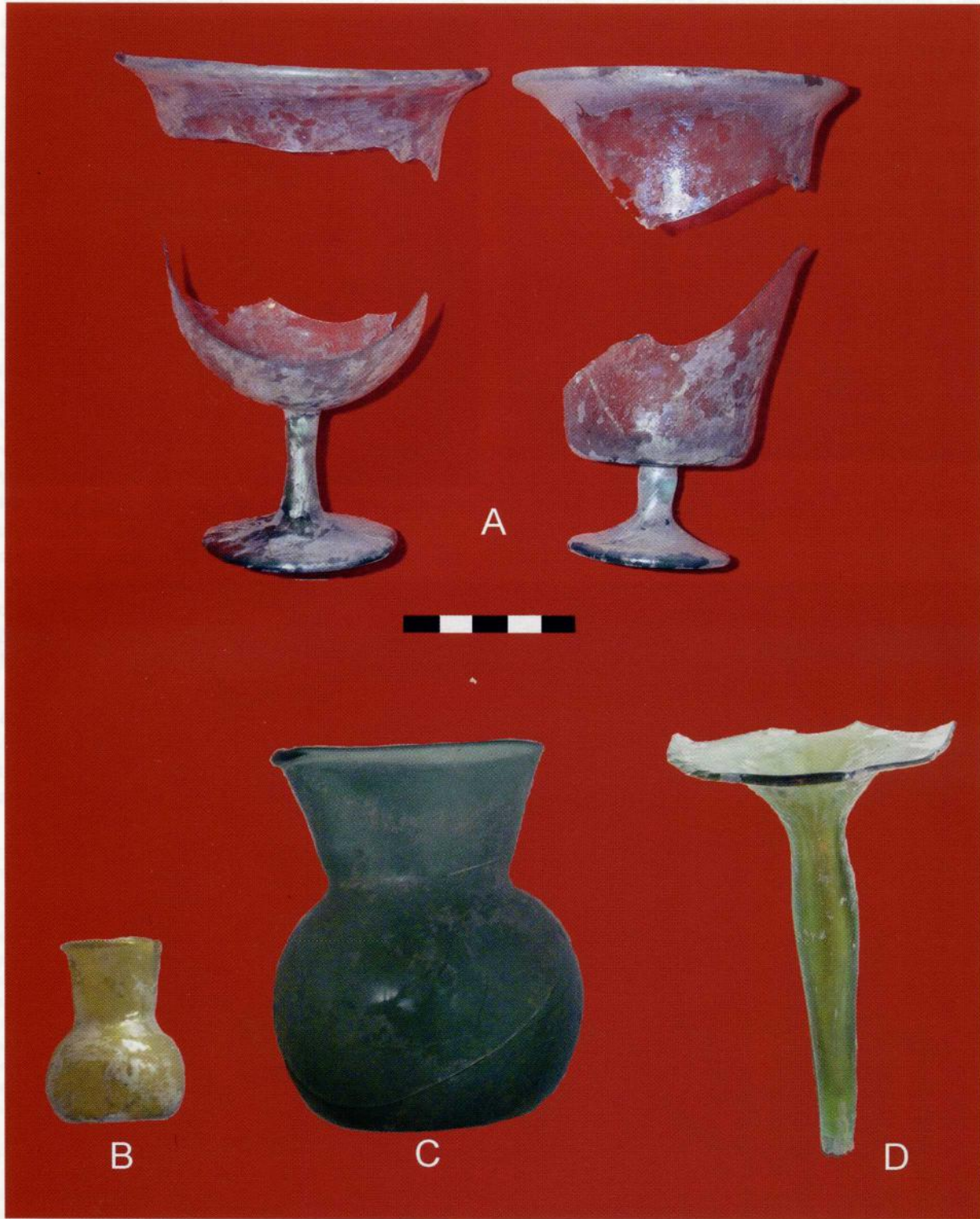


Pl. 12. Two bronze polykandela, found in the entrance of the martyrion chapel (A) and stored in the diakonikon (B)

Early Byzantine period. They include a small silver
 four found under the chancel area, and associated

Byzantine 2004

Byzantine 2004, Byzantine 2004, 14, 11, 11, 11



Pl. 14. Glass vessels from the church



Pl. 16. Pottery vessels found in the diakonikon

THE PHASING OF THE CHURCH SITE

The phasing of the church site is based mainly on relative chronology, with very few points of reference to absolute dating.

Pre-church structures

1. The earliest remains at our site, apparently of Hellenistic date, are few and cannot be dated with any precision due to the lack of sufficient material from sealed deposits. One can mention parts of a pavement (?) re-used as a floor in the cist tombs in Room 209W, as well as an east-west wall and an earthen floor associated with it under the main chancel of the basilica⁷⁴, originally believed to be of Early Roman date.

2. Better legible remains are those dating to the Early Roman period. They include another, upper floor found under the chancel area, and associated

with a wall constructed of basalt blocks (later used as the western substructure of the apse). This floor corresponds with the level of another floor (F 268) located below the atrium, securely dated to the beginning of the first century A.D. and clearly associated with the western wall of what appears to be the *naos* (cella) of an Early Roman temple. Parts of the eastern wall of the same building were reused as two benches in Room 209E. Other elements apparently pertaining to the same architectural phase include an east-west wall (W 264), possibly a portico stylobate and associated floors discovered just to the north of the church⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ See Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2003, 32, Fig. 19; Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2004.

⁷⁵ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, 11, Fig. 47.

North-West Church

1. The date for the construction of the church has yet to be determined, the more so that the destruction and/or abandonment of the pagan sanctuary need not have been necessarily followed immediately by the installation of the church. Actually, the site did not yield any data relevant to the period comprised between the construction of the cella at the beginning of the first century A.D. and that of the church (fifth century?; early sixth century?).

According to the original design, if reflected by the plan of the church at Kursi, the central apse was flanked by rectangular sacristies (*pastophoria*) the width of each of them encompassing the joint width of an aisle and a side wing. A particularly interesting feature is a small doorway connecting the apse with the northern sacristy; its function has not been satisfactorily explained. The chancel was contained within the nave, with a rectangular *bema* probably elevated two steps above the nave floor, like in the Church of Bishop Malechius at Mukawir, Jordan⁷⁶.

The basilica had three doorways in its western wall, leading respectively to the nave and the aisles. Each aisle further had an inner doorway to communicate with the adjoining annexes. Although no earlier mosaic floor was found in the church, the bedding for an earlier floor was tentatively identified in several places at ca 0.10 m below the extant mosaics; this earlier floor corresponded to the top level of the marble pedestals for the columns.

2. The second architectural phase saw the introduction of important changes in the church plan. It seems that both sacristies became reduced in size; the northern one was also cut off from the aisle by a wall, so that a small room (probably a *skeuophylakion* or treasury) was created. It was accessible only through a low and narrow doorway in the wall of the apse, concealed behind a high *synthronon* (consisting of three to four rows of seats) which was constructed inside the main apse. A lateral apse was built at the eastern end of the shortened northern aisle, while the doorway at its western end was

blocked. The *bema* became lower and slightly expanded to the west as well as to the sides, so that its edges abutted two easternmost intercolumniations. It also seems that the atrium achieved its final form during that period, and its porticoes received mosaic floors (with the commemorative inscription for Antona the deaconess). At the same time, the basilica was paved with the extant mosaics, including the inscriptions of two donors (Petros and Hedora) in the southern aisle. This phase is tentatively dated to the last quarter of the sixth century on the grounds of the stylistic similarity between our mosaics, mainly the framing motifs in the northern aisle, and the floors of the baptisteries in Kursi⁷⁷ and at the 'cathedral' at Sussita⁷⁸, paved in A.D. 585 and A.D. 591 respectively. The inscriptions record the names of three members of the local Christian community, among them a female church assistant, clearly representatives of the town elite.

3. During the third phase, which should be dated to an earlier (?) part of the seventh century, the chancel was expanded to embrace the eastern ends of both aisles in a T-shaped manner. This new arrangement necessitated the blocking of the doorway that used to connect the northern aisle with its annexe(s). The chancel screens and posts installed across the two aisles were made of imported marble; there is no doubt, however, that they received their relief decoration in a local (Byzantine Palestinian) workshop. While the limestone base for the chancel screen-and-posts in the northern aisle was placed simply on the top of the mosaic floor⁷⁹, the chancel base of the southern aisle, which consisted of reused blocks of a marble frieze from a monumental Roman building, was inserted deeply into the mosaic floor. Behind the screen, a slightly trapezoidal room on the southern side of the apse served as a *martyrion* chapel. At its rear, a large reliquary of pink limestone with a jewelled (?) cross carved on the face was inserted in the mosaic floor, and a marble altar table was set above it.

4. The fourth phase of the church followed some damage to the building, possibly caused by an earthquake, after which the mosaic pavement in the *martyrion* chapel had to be repaired. Probably also the painted decoration of the *martyrion* walls and the entrance arch was executed at the same time; according to radiocarbon (C^{14}) dating of a wall plaster sample from the entrance to the *martyrion*, this happened after A.D. 690⁸⁰. Unlike the *martyrion*, however, the nave seems to have been left unrepaired.

⁷⁶ Piccirillo 1993, Fig. 418.

⁷⁷ Tzaferis 1983, 28-29, Pls XI: 3 and XII: 4.

⁷⁸ Epstein/Tzaferis 1991, 92-93, Figs 3-5.

⁷⁹ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, Fig. 28.

⁸⁰ Analysis performed by Ms D. Nawrocka of the Institute of Geology, Department of Dynamic and Regional Geology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan.

A striking contrast noted between the extremely poor state of its preservation (lack of any liturgical equipment; mosaic floor almost entirely destroyed) compared to the fairly good state of the aisles cannot be attributed only to the defensive military activity on the site in the 1950s.

Therefore, it is possible that the nave, damaged and perhaps left without a roof, assumed the functions of an atrium. The atrium itself, used long after its mosaic floor was destroyed and divided into smaller units, apparently served domestic purposes (mainly food processing, perhaps also production of lime?). Domestic use was extended onto the southern tomb in Room 209W, clearly reused as a wine cellar. Actually, one can even presume that the atrium (as well as this particular room) did not belong to the church anymore, as suggested by the presence of a basalt high-backed chair installed at the entrance to the southern aisle, instead of the entrance to the atrium, as one would expect.

The end of this phase is marked by the devastating earthquake of A.D. 749 to which we owe a precious record of the final years in the church's functioning. This is a record of continued worship despite growing pauperisation of the local Christian community. All the marble elements of the church furniture considered unnecessary for liturgy were gradually removed to be burnt into lime, although a lime kiln remains to be located. A layer of pure lime was found in the western end of the northern aisle in association with a marble slab⁸¹. Not far from it, in two different spots, there were the marble supports of an altar once standing above the reliquary in the southern *martyrion*.

The large reliquary inserted into the floor of the *martyrion* chapel had been emptied of its contents to become a sort of pedestal for a portable reliquary made of marble, shaped as a miniature sarcophagus. Judging by a long bronze pin left in the opening of the lid, the latter apparently served to distribute the blessing (*eulogia*) *ex contactu*. The cult of martyr(s) in this place is further emphasized by a complete *polykandelon* of bronze found under a collapsed arch, as well as small votive crosses of silver fixed onto the colonettes crowning the chancel screen⁸².

The northern apse, found filled with marble elements of the church furniture, was probably used for celebrating of the Eucharist during the final days of the church. Contrary to our initial impression that the marbles had been stored here in readiness for burning into lime, we now think that liturgy

continued to be performed here with a superb bronze lamp in the shape of a dove hanging in front of the altar. The marble *mensa* on its four legs was still used as an offering table despite missing a large piece from the slab. A marble reliquary closely similar to that from the southern sacristy and found complete with its contents⁸³ must have been placed on a stone support under the altar.

Finally, the two rooms in the southern wing, accessible from the southern aisle (with a masonry couch for the night guardian opposite the entrance), clearly functioned as a *diakonikon* right from the start. Their contents, sealed by the earthquake, have become the most eloquent testimony to the life of mid-eighth century Christians⁸⁴. The two rooms yielded no less than 104 pottery items. Some of them were unused objects, commissioned for the church (jar lids, terracotta lamps), the others clearly contained offerings brought by the faithful (many cooking pots and casseroles with lids, a few storage jars). They crowded the smaller outer room to the extent that some of them had to be left outside it, against the wall of the aisle⁸⁵. Some elements of church equipment (censer, bell) and iron tools were also kept in the room.

While the outer *diakonikon* room served mainly as a receiving and storing place for the offerings, the precise function of the much larger inner room is open to discussion. Pottery vessels found there, definitely fewer than in the first room, were concentrated in the vicinity of the doorway and along the southern wall. In several places decomposed timber remains were found above the floor, presumably coming from some kind of furniture, perhaps also from ceiling beams. Analysed samples of the timber have been identified as cedar (*Cedrus Libani*) and/or fir (*Abies*)⁸⁶. Actually, the inner *diakonikon* room could have been multi-functional, being used for communal meals, for storing sacred objects and, as recent discoveries seem to indicate, as a baptistery once its eastern part was suitably adapted⁸⁷.

⁸¹ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, 8.

⁸² Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2002, 19, Figs 8 and 35; Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2003, Fig. 44.

⁸³ Segal/Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, 3, Figs 47-48.

⁸⁴ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2003, 29-31; cf. also Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2004.

⁸⁵ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2001, 11.

⁸⁶ By Ms D. Nawrocka from the Institute of Geology, Poznan.

⁸⁷ Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2004; see also Mlynarczyk/Burdajewicz 2003, 29-31.

To recapitulate, there can be no doubt that the exploration of the North-West Church is crucial to the understanding of the life of Christian communities in the eastern Galilee/south-western Golan on the eve of the Islamic conquest and during Umayyad rule. On the other hand, future fieldwork is expected to bring data on the obscure period during which this famous Dekapolis town changed from pagan to Christian.

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