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BETWEEN SEA AND DESERT:
ON KINGS, NOMADS, CITIES AND MONKS

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF JOSEPH PATRICH

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THE “AREA B MONUMENT” OF ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS: A CHURCH WITH A CRYPT?

Anne Michel

INTRODUCTION

This contribution reexamines the case of the archaeological remains in Area B at Abila of the Decapolis (modern Quwaylbah) and in particular the problem of identifying their nature. The site lies about 15 km north–northeast of Irbid (Jordan), near the village of Hartha,¹ about 25 km east of the sea of Galilee and 4 km south of the Yarmouk river. The topography of Abila is composed of two tells (Tell Abil and Umm al-‘Amad) separated by an extensive depression opening on a wadi.

Occupation levels in Abila can be traced back to the Neolithic period, but it turned significant in Hellenistic times when the city became part of the Decapolis. In 63 BCE it was conquered by Pompey.

Though the Roman city was somewhat important, the exposed Roman vestiges of the imperial period in Abila are scarce, with most remains dating from the Byzantine, Umayyad, and Abbasid Periods (Mare 1992:309). In the Byzantine period, Abila was part of the ecclesiastical province of Palestina II, and its importance is attested by the fact that the local church was governed by a bishop. Four of them are known to us: Solomon,² Nicostratus,³ Alexander,⁴ and an anonymous one (Vailhé 1912:120; Wineland 2011:28, 29; Van Elderen 1989:2–5). At least five (or six) churches dated to this period have been excavated up to present, as well as a “bath/nymphaeum complex”

(Mare 1994a:365; Mare 1996:262; Mare 1997:305; Mare 1999:456).

A first description of the vestiges was given in 1888 by Gottlieb Schumacher, who also published the first general plan of the site (Schumacher 1889:30–32; plan reproduced in Mare 1982:52, Fig. 7). However, its archaeological study and the excavations began only in 1980, under the direction of W. Harold Mare, Covenant Theological Seminary, Saint-Louis, and continued up to 2004. A new Jordan Summer Studies Program including archaeological excavations has been running since 2006 and is now directed by David Vila (John Brown University, Siloam Springs, Arkansas).⁵

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION OF THE REMAINS

The archaeological remains here under discussion are located on the northwestern slope of Tell Umm al-‘Amad in the cavea of the so-called “theater.”⁶ (Fig. 1). They have been progressively excavated in 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994 and 1996 under the supervision of B. Van Elderen (Mare et al. 1987; Mare 1987b; 1989–1991; 1994a; 1996, 1997, 1999). The excavations remained incomplete for security reasons, making their interpretation difficult.

The Upper-level Building

Located on a quite sharp slope, the building was thus built on two superposed levels (Figs. 2, 3) along a street paved with basalt stones descending toward the east.

1 UTME 7691, UTMN 36198, PGE 231.600, PGN 231.90., JADIS n° 2323.003.

2 He signed, in 518 CE, the Synodal Letter of John of Jerusalem against Severus of Antioch (Le Quien 1740:703).

3 He signed at the council of the three Palestines, called by Patriarch Peter against Anthimum in 536 CE (Le Quien 1740:703).

4 He probably succeeded Nicostratus in 538 (Le Quien 1740:703).

5 http://www.jbu.edu/majors/biblical_and_theological_studies/faculty/?id=3747 consulted on January 24, 2017.

6 32°40'50.8"N 35°52'08.7"E.



Fig. 1. Abila. Aerial view of the archaeological remains in Area B (© APAAME_19980521_DLK-0054 © David L. Kennedy, Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East).

The upper level of the building is poorly preserved, and only its northeast corner and a salient apse can be easily identified. It consists of an about 19 m long and 1.10 m wide wall running west–east (W01).⁷ It is built of rectangular ashlar blocks and is preserved four courses high at its eastern end and about eight courses high at its western end where a rectangular room (about 7.2 m north–south x 5.3 m west–east) extends to the north of the main building (Fig. 2). The walls of this northern room (W02, W03), preserved to a height of three or four courses, present a masonry very similar to that of the north wall of the main building (W01). A second room may have flanked the former on the north. In the corner of the northern rectangular room with the north wall of the main building are the remains of a small platform which

⁷ I restituted the dimensions according to the scale of the partial plan published in Mare 1991:210, Fig. 4, approximatively deducing from it the other measures of the building by measuring the remains on the aerial photographs taken by the APAAME mission.

could have been accessed by a poorly preserved staircase made of four steps (Fig. 4). The western and southern walls of the main building either did not survive or are still hidden beneath fills and debris. The south wall may be identified with a masonry running parallel to the northern wall, at a distance of about 19 m, and aligned with the south wall of the small room flanking the apse to the south (W04). However, the identification remains uncertain since the wall is almost entirely buried and only its top is visible (Fig. 1).

Further south, the wall remnants of an additional space abut the main building. Unfortunately, it was only partially excavated, and we do not have precise information about it (W05-W06).

The state of preservation of the remains does not allow any restitution, neither the entrances to the northern rooms nor those to the main building. It is possible that the doors leading to the latter had been placed in the still buried walls.

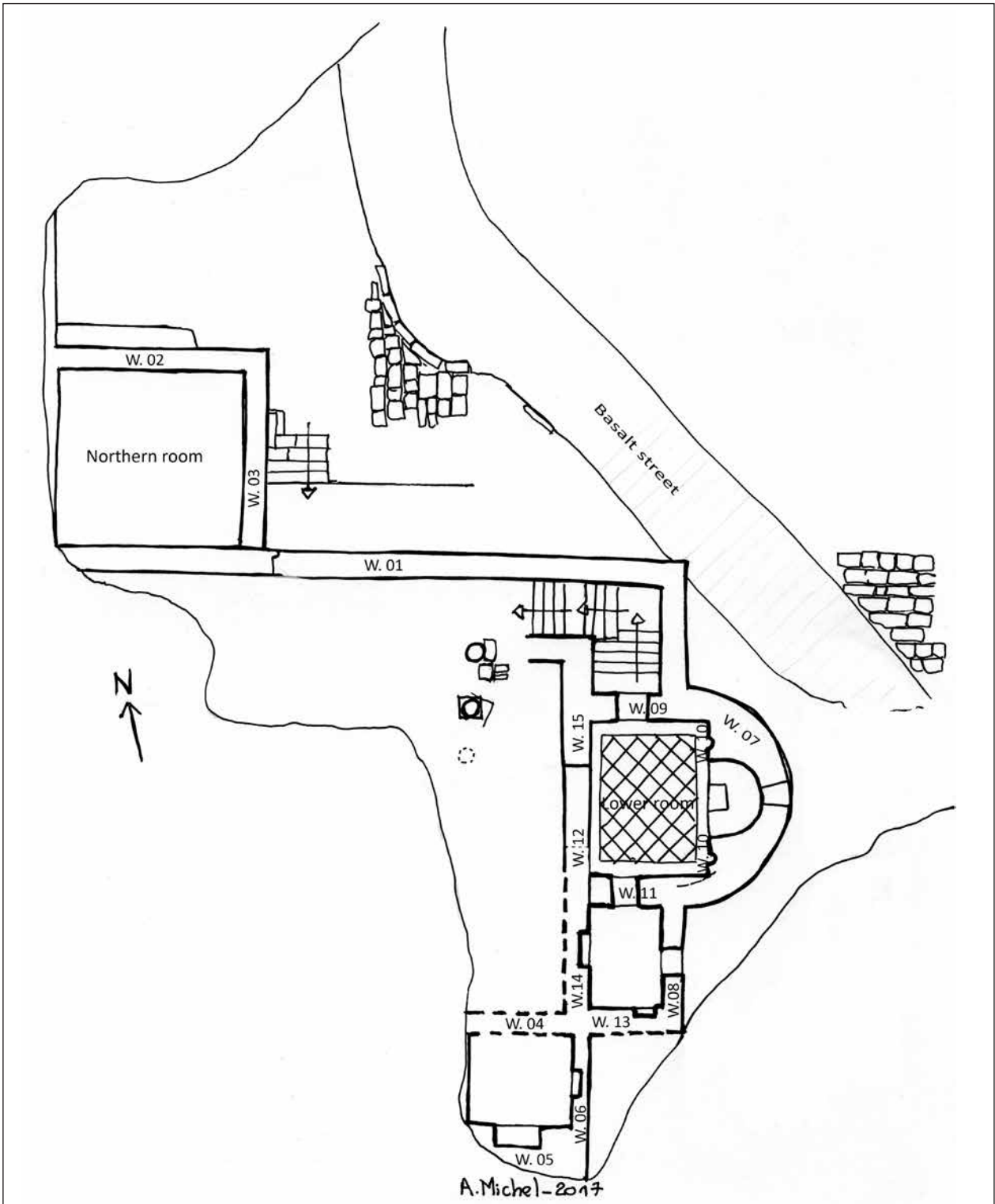


Fig. 2. Abila. Schematic design of the building in Area B (drawing: A. Michel). The drawing was made based on the partial plan published by Mare (1991:210, Fig. 4), the aerial photograph of the site, and some notes taken at the site in the 1990's.



Fig. 3. Abila. The building in Area B. View from the north in 1992 (© A. Michel).



Fig. 4. Abila. The rooms and the stair to the north of the Building in Area B, at its western edge in 1997 (© A. Michel).

There is very little evidence of the main building's floor level. It is perhaps indicated by the upper step of the staircase discovered in its northeast corner (Fig. 5), and by the base of a column that seems to be placed at the same level, located further southwest of this staircase and more or less aligned with the north edge of the apse (Fig. 5). A second column, south of the first one, may also be associated with the same construction.⁸

The Lower-level Structures

To the east, the building ends with a salient apse preserved only in the lower level of the building (W07; Fig. 6). The apse is about 7 m wide and built of large ashlar limestones laid in six courses, with an alternating pattern of two high courses followed by a flat one, a high one, and another flat one. The sixth, flat course, was adorned with poorly preserved, slightly prominent moldings (Fig. 6). It is similar to the projecting course in the apse of the Church of Saint Theodor in Jerash. The elevation atop this last course is virtually unreadable due to the presence of a tumble of stones, perhaps the rests of a semi-dome (cupola). In its center is an arched opening that could be the remains of an arched window (Fig. 7). The wall extending further south of the apse was only partly excavated. A small door, surmounted by a narrow window looking like an arrow slit, opens in this wall's lower part.

In the northeastern corner of the upper building, a bent flight of stairs descends to a lower room. Four – or three (?) – steps lead to a small landing, leading, in turn, to three additional steps opening on a second landing in the corner of the building (Figs. 1, 2, 5). After a 90 degrees turn southwards and five further descending steps, one enters a short corridor (?) which opens, through an archway, on a rectangular lower room (4.30×3.75 m; Fig. 8). To the south, aligned on the same axis, a second archway, very similar to the first, leads to a small rectangular chamber. In the eastern wall of the chamber, a partially excavated door opened on the outside, south of the building's apse, in W06.

The four walls of the first lower room are preserved to a height of 4 m. They present numerous traces of that would need a careful stratigraphic wall analysis to precise the building's development. The north,

east and south walls (W09–W11) present a very similar masonry of great ashlar blocks laid in regular courses, six to eight of these still preserved today. Immediately to the east of the two archways, the remains of two arch springings that sustained the ceiling of the room are preserved on the upper part of the north and south walls (W09, W11; Fig. 8). In the eastern wall (W10), a large archway opens on a semicircular domed niche or apse (1.50 m wide x 1.20 m deep) inscribed in the salient apse mentioned earlier. Though now partially destroyed, a small window may originally have opened in it (Mare 1991:211). In the ground of the niche is a squarish cavity. It is hard to say if it was initially there or if it is only the result of degradation. In the eastern wall of the room, the large niche is flanked on each side by a small, shallow, semicircular niche.

Unlike the east wall, the west wall of the room (W12) does not show any uniform masonry. At approximately a third of the wall's length, measuring from its northern end is a vertical split extending over its entire height (Fig. 9). South of this split, the masonry is composed of eight courses of large rectangular ashlar blocks. Toward the southern end of the wall, a blocked arcade, partially hidden by the southern wall of the room, abuts the western wall. This feature suggests a reconstruction, or more probably, the reusing of older structures when the room was laid out. Indeed, from a bird's-eye viewpoint, one can see that this split seems to represent the corner of an older construction (Fig. 1). North of the split, the western W15 is associated with the northern W09 and the staircase.⁹

The excavations have revealed that the pavement of the lower room was covered with white and black limestone slabs arranged in a checkerboard pattern and surrounded by a black, 60 to 70 cm wide border (Mare 1991:211). This refined pavement hints at a prestigious space. Only scarce traces of the wall decoration remain. Three small holes, visible in the southern part of the western W12, may be interpreted as marks left by the once affixed stone or marble inlays (Fig. 9). In the northern part of this wall, on the other side of the split, traces of plaster were still preserved during the excavations (Mare 1991:211).

The archway in the southern W11 of this lower room opens to another small rectangular chamber. In its east wall (W08), a partially excavated door

⁸ The heights of the vestiges still visible in the 1990s and nowadays disappeared should be checked by taking the measures with a total station. However, it is doubtful this second column is still *in situ*, as it seems to be integrated into a rough masonry that looks like a small, later wall built on a soil stratus.

⁹ Unfortunately, no good photographs are available to enable distinguishing the nature of the masonry on the northern part of the western wall.



Fig. 5. Abila. Staircase going down to the lower room. View from the north, in the building in Area B in 1992 (© A. Michel).



Fig. 6. Abila. The building in Area B. View from the northeast in 1990 (© A. Michel).

covered by a lintel, with a small arrow slit above the latter, opens on the street to the south of the apse (Fig. 7). The walls of this second room are preserved slightly above those of the first one. Inside, a 3 m high, rectangular, vaulted niche is placed in the west W14. It is plastered, and two painted Greek letters are seen on the upper curve of the niche.¹⁰ A bench-

¹⁰ Mare (1996:262) interprets the letters ΔΙ as a part of the spelling of *Zeus* “in oblique case” suggesting that a statue of *Zeus* was once at that place.

like or jump masonry still runs along the lower part of the west W14. A second niche is also set up in the south W13. It is rectangular (about 0,40 x 0,70 m) and has a reused molded lintel.

On the northeast, the corner of the building cuts the basalt street, implying that it was constructed at a later date. An archaeological probe under the basalt slabs of the street revealed a deep channel lined with calcar stones. The soil between the upper part of these calcar stones and the basalt slabs contained mostly



Fig. 7. Abila. The door and the arrow slit in the eastern wall of the building in Area B in 1997 (© A. Michel).



Fig. 8. Abila. The rectangular lower room with the apse. View from the west in 1992 (© A. Michel).

Byzantine sherds mixed with some others dating to the Roman and Umayyad periods (Mare 1991:211).

The Stratigraphic Sequence

Though difficult to synthesize, the building's occupation stratigraphic sequence, the material

remains and the study of the architecture indicate that the structures were occupied for a long time, from the Roman to the Medieval Ayyubid-Mamlouk period.

The stratigraphic sequence of the lower rectangular room with the apse is better known than that of the upper level of the building. The checkerboard floor

was covered by a brown soil containing numerous large, dressed building blocks and sherds, mostly Byzantine, mixed with some attributed to the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ayyubid periods. Above this layer, a wall divided the lower room into two parts and isolated the eastern one. In this part, a one-meter thick ashy layer was found, associated with numerous tabun fragments, two intact tabuns, and Ayyubid and Mamluk sherds (Mare 1991:211). The pottery collected in the apse of the lower room as well as in the staircase leading to this room dated mostly to the Byzantine period but it was mixed with some sherds dating to the Hellenistic, Roman, Umayyad and Late Islamic periods (Mare 1987a: 209).

Less information is available on the pottery found in other parts of the building. Sherds attributed to the Umayyad period predominated among those uncovered on the stair leading from the upper level to the lower rooms (Mare 1991:211).¹¹ In the upper construction, the soil erosion did not make it possible to isolate the mixed ceramic material extending from the Early Bronze Age to the Ottoman period (Mare 1987a: 208, 209). Among the material revealed in the various probes was a marble foot attributed to a classical statue (Mare 1988:456). At the western end of the building, two “almost perfectly preserved Naxian marble altar screen posts (sic) (square with knobs) and a well preserved Naxian marble column were found under the mass of debris which had come down the steep slope of the theater cavea; the columns had two Christian crosses incised on it” (Mare 1990:473).¹²

Chronology and Interpretation of the Remains According to the Excavators

From both the material remains and the architectural analysis of the vestiges, it appeared evident to Van Elderen, the archaeologist in charge of the excavation of area B in the 1980s–1990s, that the building had known a multi-sequential occupation. He proposed the following sequence: arranging of the street with a drainage system (Phase 1); construction of a first building corresponding the southern part of the lower

¹¹ The information seems to stand in contradiction with what Mare published in 1987 (Mare et al.1987:209). A possible explanation might be that, perhaps, there were more Umayyad sherds in the upper part of the stair, excavated first, and more Byzantine ones in the lower part of the stair leading to the lower room.

¹² Unfortunately, neither drawings nor photographs have been published.



Fig. 9. Abila. Area B. The western wall of the lower room with the blocked arch in 1992 (© A. Michel).

room’s west wall with the later blocked arcade W12, perhaps contemporary to the basalt paved street (Phase 2). The lower room with the checkerboard floor was subsequently constructed, as were the adjoining rooms to the south and the north, the staircase and the adjoining walls leading to the upper building (W07–W11, W13, W15) which extended further west (W01 to W03; Phase 3). According to Van Elderen, this third phase postdates the street. Later, the eastern part of the lower room was reused as a cooking area (Phase 4). Based on the pottery finds, Van Elderen attributed Phase 1 to the Late Roman–Byzantine periods, Phase 2 to the Late Byzantine–Umayyad periods, Phase 3 to the Late Umayyad–Abbasid periods, and lastly, Phase 4 to the Ayyubid–Mamluk periods (Mare 1991:212).

This theoretical chronological model partially conditioned, since, the interpretation of the vestiges. The following publications show the hesitations

of the archaeologist. The first campaigns had been devoted to the identification of the remains of the Roman theater. Its existence was suggested by the form of the slope that looked like a cavea, and from Schumacher’s 1888 statement, where he affirmed to have seen some of the seats (Schumacher 1889:30; Mare 1988:456; Mare 1990:47). These seats were never found by the excavators (Mare 1990:473). The only remains which could be attributed to the Roman Imperial period are a marble foot found during the 1988 excavations (Mare 1988:456; Mare 1991:208; Mare 1992:363) and, according to the excavator, also the vaulted plastered niche in the lower room, to the south of the apse (Mare 1996:262). This niche is located in the same masonry as the blocked arcade, in the west wall of the lower room with the apse (W14 = W12). However, this contradicts the attribution of the west wall to the Late Byzantine–Umayyad periods (Mare 1991:212).

The basalt street covers a water channel ascribed to the Byzantine period that does not seem to be part of the same system as the street (Mare 1991:211). The basalt street is partly covered by the building with the apse’s corner and is therefore considered earlier than the building. Mare proposed to identify the whole building, in its later form—probably based on the pottery evidence—as an “Umayyad palace” in use up to the Abbasid and Ayyubid–Mamluk periods. He supposed that the apse might have been “part of an earlier Byzantine basilica which was later incorporated in the palace” (Mare 1988:456; Mare 1992:363). The hypothesis evolved slightly after Piccirillo suggested that in their original form, the remains were those of a Byzantine church and crypt (Piccirillo 1991:115; Piccirillo 1993:332). The discovery, among the material found in the probe in the western part of the complex, of the two marble “altar screen posts” and the marble column incised with two crosses led Mare to propose that “there was a church or some other ecclesiastical installation built in or near the theater cavea at a time earlier than the Umayyad building” (Mare 1990:473; Mare 1993:212, 213),¹³ but in 1991 the apse was still considered a “defense tower” (Mare 1991:212), and some years later as an “Umayyad palace/fort” (Mare 1997:305; Mare 1999:455).

¹³ However, the preliminary notes published up to present do not ascertain the exact provenance of the material: the reports specify that this marble fragments “were found under the mass of debris which had come down the steep slope of the theater cavea.”

After visiting the site in 1991, 1994 and 1997, I accepted the interpretation proposed by Piccirillo (Michel 2001:118), as did Wineland (Wineland 2001:37; Wineland 2011:30, and footnote 17). The proposal has not been accepted by Chapmann and Smith (2009:525, footnote 1), who report that the current excavation team does not identify the Byzantine or Umayyad structure in Area B as a church; but on the other hand the structure is indicated as a “bishop’s palace” in their site plan (Chapmann, Smith 2009:526, Fig. 1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

What can be concluded about these archaeological remains and their interpretation as a church with a crypt, as Piccirillo proposed, or as an Umayyad palace, as suggested by Mare? Evidently, the fact that the excavation remained incomplete and the way it was led—by opening successive small probes over a long period—make data interpretation difficult, and further careful stratigraphic examination of the masonries would be necessary. Nevertheless, according to the documents published by the excavation team, it is possible to propose a general development sequence for the masonries that slightly differs from Mare’s proposal. It is evident that architectural structures were used for a long time and reshaped several times.

The architectural stratigraphy visible in the lower room allows restituting a first construction that includes the arch (W14=W12) which was later blocked. This construction seems to have been later replaced by a building built on two levels. This building includes the lower room with the apse and the adjoining room to the south; the northeast staircase leading to the upper level; and the upper-level building which extends to the west, connected on this side with two rooms built to its north. Unfortunately, the excavation method applied at the site, i.e., the opening of non-connected probes, does not allow us to ascertain whether these structures belonged, or not, to a larger complex that included the fragments of masonries which emerge to the south. That this building was reoccupied for domestic purposes in Medieval times is shown by the level with tabuns found in the eastern part of the lower room with the apse. The coarse wall erected on a soil layer—visible in the upper building, approximatively aligned with

the north edge of the apse at the beginning of the 1990s—could also be ascribed to that period (Fig. 3).¹⁴

However, the chronology and the function of the structures in the Byzantine, Umayyad and Abbasid periods remain problematic.¹⁵ The excavators of the site consider that the building was erected at the beginning of the Umayyad period, based on the pottery finds from the excavation, though they note that the lower room with the apse yielded mainly Byzantine sherds in the apse (Mare 1991:210, 211). The arch, later blocked (W12), is ascribed to the Byzantine period, though it belongs to the same wall as the vaulted niche (W14) attributed to the Roman Imperial period. Indeed, the structures and material that can be attributed to this last period remain very scarce, except for the marble foot and the “classical architectural pieces” reused in the later building. Because of the presumed late date of construction, the excavators do not consider these structures as Christian, yet the Byzantine (and Umayyad) pottery revealed in the lower room with the apse was found among large, fallen building blocks (Mare 1991:211) most probably belonging to a destruction level. This suggests that the construction could be dated earlier than the Umayyad period.¹⁶

The structure may have been reshaped or restored and still occupied in the Umayyad period (Mare 1991:211)¹⁷ but probably not as an Umayyad palace with defense towers.¹⁸ Indeed, considering it as such is difficult, taking into account the usual location and configuration of Umayyad residences¹⁹ in the Bilad al-Sham. In fact, Umayyad palaces such as Mchatta, Umm al-Walid, al Qastal, Qasr al Hayr al-Sharqi, Qasr al-Hayr a Gharbi and Jabal Says are located in rural areas and are usually isolated (Genequand 2012:236–242); they are not constructed in urban centers as is the case with Abila. These constructions are generally quadrangular, and their outer walls

are surrounded by semicircular towers. The towers, usually massive, are only exceptionally fitted out with some installations, such as the latrines in Mchatta (Bujard 2008:21, 22, Figs. 10, 11). Furthermore, the towers are regularly aligned along the outer wall, with most often one tower at each corner, unlike what is seen in Abila.

Thus, even though the building may have been reshaped and reused in the Umayyad period, another interpretation of the archaeological remains should be sought, and Piccirillo’s proposal, i.e., that these remains could be those of a church with a crypt, should be reconsidered. Indeed, the angled stair leading down to the small rectangular room with a niche inscribed either in its east wall or a salient apse, sometimes illuminated by a small window, is a disposition very similar to the one present, in the Near East, in the rare Byzantine churches associated with a crypt.

The nearest comparable examples are to be found in the North Church of Rehovot-in-the-Negev (Figs. 10, 11), in the Negev desert (Tsafrir 1988:50–59; Tsafrir 1993:301); in Horvat Berachot (Fig. 12) in the Hebron region (Tsafrir and Hirschfeld 1979:315, 316; at Khirbet Bureikat-Migdal Oz in Gush Etzion²⁰ and in St. Elianus crypt (Figs. 13, 14) in Madaba, Jordan (Piccirillo 1989:70–74). In these four cases, the crypts were situated under the choir of the upper church. They were rectangular rooms of comparable proportions (about 3–3.5x4.5 m and approximately 3–4 m high), very similar to those of the building’s lower room in Abila’s Area B. Like Abila’s structure, the crypt of Madaba ended with an apse, while the one in Rehovot-in-the-Negev had a small circular niche in its eastern wall. In Madaba and Horvat Berachot, as in Abila, the construction of the church along a slope allowed illuminating the crypt with a small window, located in the eastern wall. The layout is also similar to that of a crypt identified under the five-aisled Church in Gadara of the Decapolis (Fig. 15; Weber 1995:1275–1277, Fig. 1; Weber and Hübner 1998:445, 446; Al-Daire 2001:553–555), though slightly different in shape and dimensions due to the reusing of an earlier Roman hypogeum. Here, the hypogeum was reused for the body of the crypt, and an apse with a surrounding corridor

14 This wall seems to have disappeared on more recent photographs.

15 The sampling of mortar for single grain OSL analysis could help specify the date and chronology of the different parts of the building. The method has been recently tested with success in some monuments dating from the fourth to the tenth centuries CE in Southern France (Cf. Urbanová 2015; Urbanová and Guibert 2015; Urbanová and Guibert 2016; Urbanová, Cantin, Guibert and Michel 2016).

16 However, nothing can be ascertained without a careful study of the excavation data.

17 This is suggested by the predominant number of Umayyad and later sherds found in the northern staircase during the 1988 excavations.

18 I would like to express my thanks to Jacques Bujard and Denis Genequand for the fruitful discussions we entertained on this matter.

19 Except for the residence on Philadelphia’s-Amman acropolis, which presents a different layout.

20 The church was first identified in 1977, and was re-excavated in march 2016. Cf. <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/64322/colorful-mosaic-uncovered-unique-byzantine-church-gush-etzion-biblical-zionism/#MHWgCxIirFG0pSiD.97> and <https://archaeofeed.com/2016/03/colourful-mosaic-discovered-in-a-byzantine-church/> consulted on June 23, 2017.

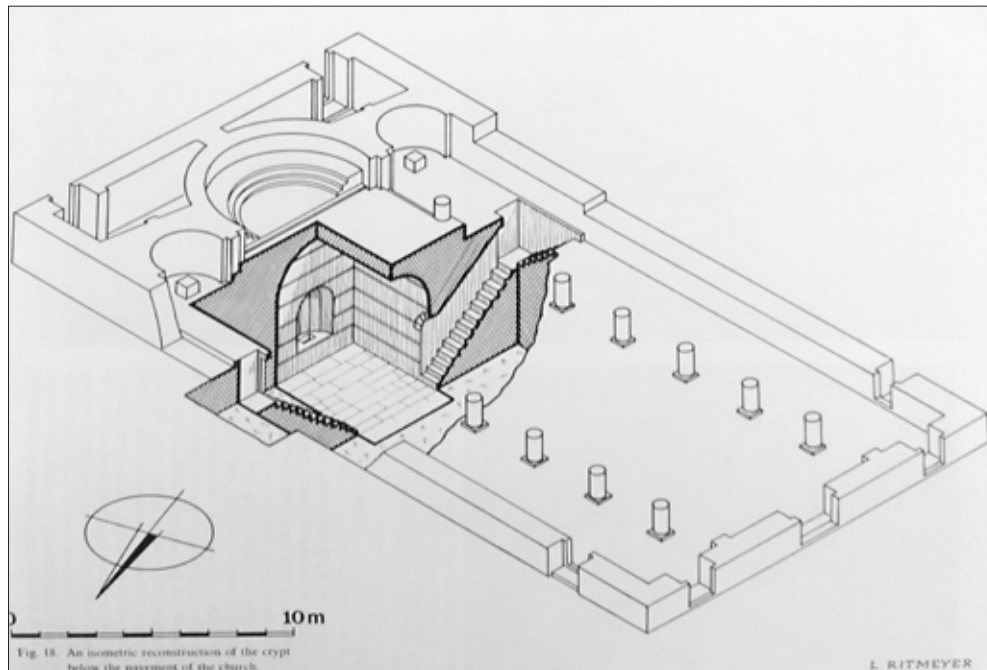


Fig. 10. Rehovot-in-the-Negev. Axonometry of the church and the underneath crypt (drawing: L. Ritmeyer, after Tsafir 1988:52, Fig. 18).



Fig. 11. Rehovot-in-the-Negev. The cavity in the ground of the niche in the eastern wall of the crypt (after Tsafir 1988:56, Ill. 74; Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

was built in the former pronaos; the apse was under the apse of the upper five-aisled church.

Another parallel can be found also in St. Hilarion's monastery in Gaza, though both the layout and the dimensions of the crypt are different (Elter and Hassoune 2004:380–382; Elter and Hassoune 2005:28–30; Elter and Abd el Rhadan 2007:132–134; Elter and Hassoune 2011:195, 196). Here, the crypt was placed under the choir of the upper church when this latter was renewed. It has a cruciform shape (11,5 m long x 20,5 m wide; Figs. 16, 17). The eastern arm ends in an apse which was once pierced by a small window.

Unfortunately, very few of the original fittings in these crypts are known. In Madaba, the apse was one step higher than the rest of the crypt. In Horvat Berachot, only the mosaic pavement still bears witness to the high prestige of the space. In Gaza, the insertion of a sarcophagus left cuttings in the apse's wall, and the eastern part of the crypt was isolated using a chancel screen. In Rehovot-in-the-Negev, a cavity in the niche's ground in the east wall of the crypt is very similar to the one seen in Abila. This cavity is interpreted by the excavators as the *loculus* for a reliquary (Tsafir 1993:301).



Fig. 12. Horvat Berachot. The crypt. View from the west (after Tsafrir and Hirschfeld 1993:216).

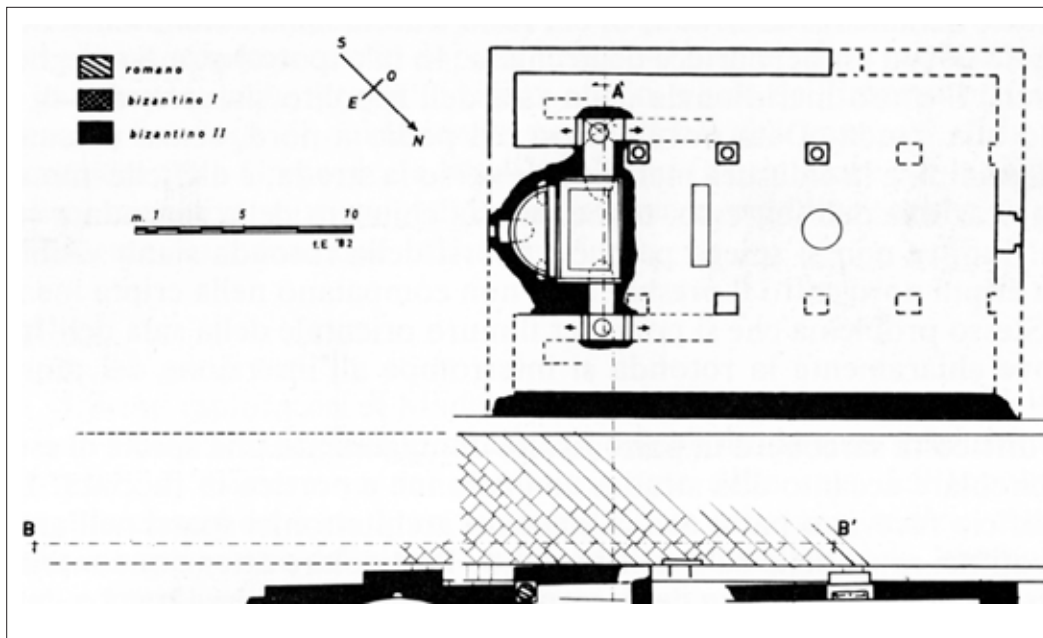


Fig. 13. Madaba. Plan of Elias Church showing the crypt (© Allianta. Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Jerusalem, after Piccirillo 1989: 62).



Fig. 14. Madaba. The crypt of Elias Church. View from the west (© Piccirillo. Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Jerusalem, after Piccirillo 1993:128, Fig. 130).

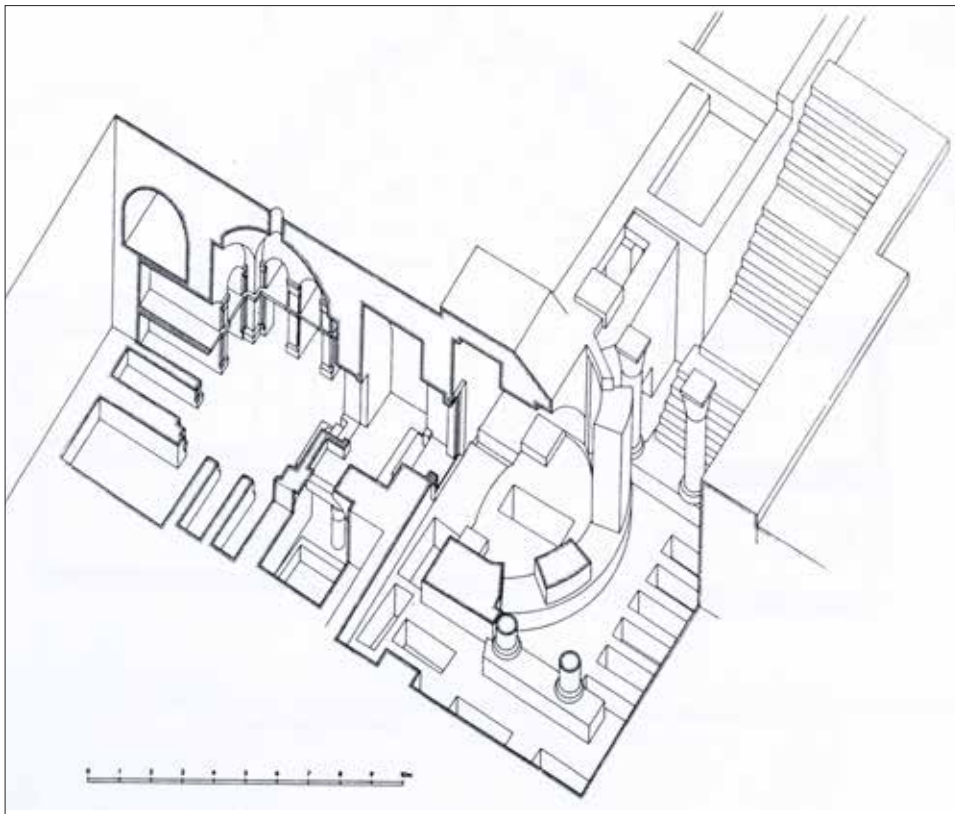


Fig. 15. Gadara of the Decapolis. Axonometry of the church (after Weber 1995:1278, Fig. 1).

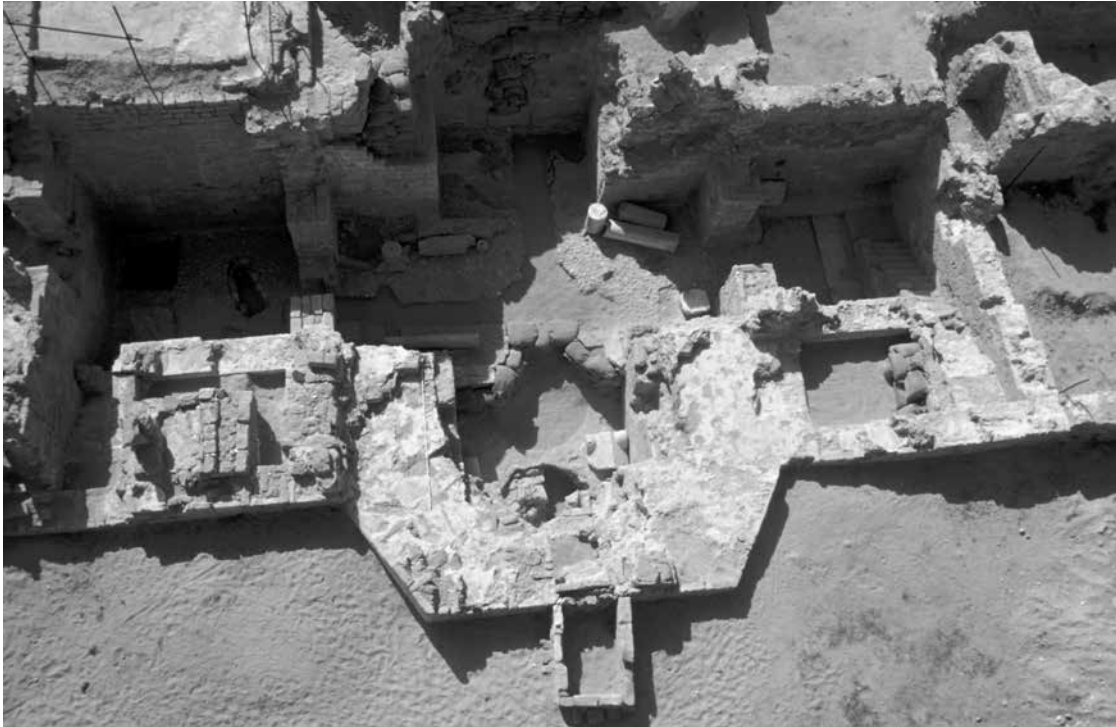


Fig. 16. Gaza, Umm el 'Amr. The crypt of St. Hilarion's monastery. View from the east (© R. Elter/2002).

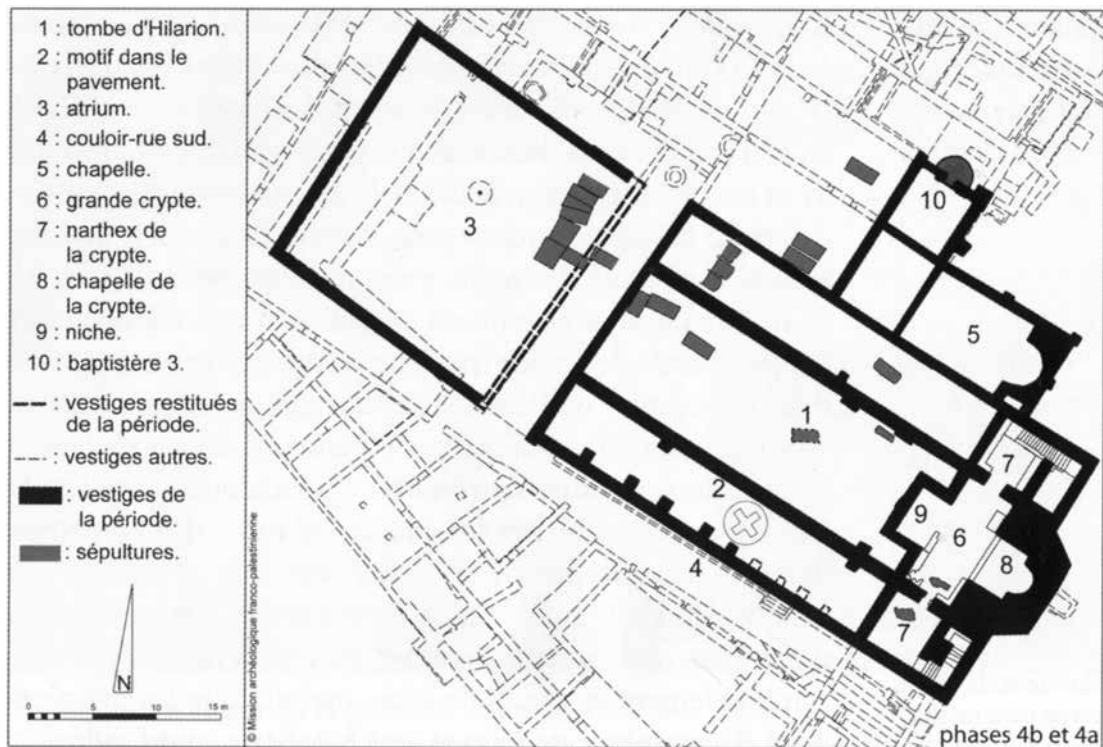


Fig. 17. Gaza, Umm el 'Amr. Plan of Phases 4b and 4a at the church of St. Hilarion's monastery (© R. Elter/ Mission Archéologique Franco-Palestinienne).

In the case of Abila, no liturgical furnishing remained in place—which no doubt would attest to the presence of a crypt devoted to Christian worship—except for the chancel posts and the column incised with a cross found out of their original context further west in the upper building. However, these, as well as the column base in the upper building—preserved at the same level as the top of the stair, perhaps indicating the level of its pavement—could point to a Christian building. Moreover, the location of the lower room east of the building, at a lower level to be reached by an angled stair; its general plan—a rectangular chamber with an apse in its eastern wall; the fine quality of its pavement; and the presence of a cavity in the ground of the apse are features very similar to those encountered in Byzantine crypts throughout the Near East (Sodini 1981:439–441; Michel 2001:34, 35; Comte 2012:87).

Taking into consideration that there was a majority of Byzantine sherds in the destruction layer beneath the Medieval reoccupation layer in the lower room, these archaeological remains could be those of a crypt related to a Christian basilica with a salient apse. The beautiful checkerboard floor would fit well with such a prestigious place, and the cavity in the apse would fit well with a reliquary. The stairs would be required for the flow of the pilgrims visiting the church to venerate the relics. From this perspective, Abila’s crypt slightly differs from the cited parallels where the crypts could be reached from the eastern end of the lateral aisles of the church by descending two lateral stairs – a disposition that allows a one-way flow. Nonetheless, this is not enough to rule out the proposed identification of the vestiges in Abila, as access systems with a unique stair descending to a crypt are also known, for example in Gadara, where the crypt was accessed, at first, directly from the north by a stair opening on the outside. Moreover, in Abila, the lower space could be entered either by descending the stairs leading from the upper building to the lower structures, or from the outside, through the southern room of the lower chamber.

Of course, due to the lack of precise information, until now this interpretation cannot be proved. A careful reexamination of these archaeological remains is necessary. This would enable not only to advance in their interpretation but also to understand their integration, through time, in a larger complex – perhaps a large residence building, or an ecclesiastical complex, as once evoked by Mare (Mare 1994:363) and as is also suggested in the plan of the city published by Chapmann and Smith (2009:526, Fig. 1).²¹

Thus, if the remains in Abila could be identified with those of a crypt, they should be added to the small group of crypts located under the altar and with an eastern access, identified by Sodini (1981:439–441) in the Levant. The precise architectural superposition of the crypt and the choir remains quite rare in these regions and supposes a unique architectural project, different from the numerous examples of pre-existing sacred or holy places and tombs integrated into religious buildings during their construction such as the grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem; Shepherd’s Field near Bethlehem; the church of the Eleona on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem; the church of Lot in Dayr ‘Ayn Abata in Jordan, and the more recently excavated churches.²²

From a functional and liturgical perspective, the remains of Abila should be integrated into a larger study of the development of Late Antique crypts associated to churches in the Near East that cannot be carried out in this contribution dedicated to the identification of the archaeological remains in Abila. Indeed, the sanctification of holy places or tombs played a major role in the development of the cult of the saints and martyrs, which manifests itself in other regions, with no holy places, in the cult of relics. Consequently, emphasizing the existence of these Late Antique crypts and their role in the development of pilgrimage and the devotion to relics is important, as this architectonic setting is generally considered as an architectural feature specific to Medieval Western Europe.²³

21 For example, the probable ecclesiastical residence in Bosra, recently studied by Piraud-Fournet (2010; 2014:366–370; 2016).

22 For example Khirbet Deir Sam’an; Ḥorvat Midras in the Judean foothill; Umm Leisun Monastery near Jerusalem; or Ḥorvat Hani in the Shephelah in South Samaria.

23 For a recent approach of the history of the crypts in Late Antique Gaul, see Sapin 2014. The author explores the Late Antique crypts to understand the development of Romanesque crypts in France.

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