

THE 1978 EXCAVATION OF THE HESBAN NORTH CHURCH

by
J. Lawlor

INTRODUCTION

The 1978 Hesban North Church Project was sponsored by Baptist Bible College of Pennsylvania and endorsed by the American Schools of Oriental Research/American Center of Oriental Research and the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The success of the project was due to the co-operation of many people. The major contributors to the project were Mrs. Dorothy Graham of Buffalo, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Fuller of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Mr. and Mrs. Gary Doverspike of Mayport, Pennsylvania; Mrs. Ruth Rothberg of Hallstead, Pennsylvania and Mr. Devon Stryker of Elkart, Indiana. Their confidence and financial support were genuinely appreciated.

The core staff consisted of John 1. Lawlor, Director (Baptist Bible College of Pennsylvania); Lawrence T. Geraty, Senior Advisor (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan); Larry G. Herr, Archaeologist (Adventist Seminary, Manila, Philippines); Bert DeVries, Architect (Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan); Mojahed Mohaisen, Department Representative (Madeba, Jordan); and Mohammed Adawi, Camp Manager and Chief Cook. The expertise of Drs. Geraty, Herr, DeVries, Mojahed Mohaisen, and Mohammed Adawi was a major contributing factor to the success of the field work.

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Square supervisors were Eric Cuenin, Linnea Fagerberg, Dennis Gilliland, Andre Girgus, Beth Haley, Denise Herr, David Kemp, Al Leslie, Ray Meyer and Leino Pakala. They were assisted in the field work by twenty Jordanian workmen graciously provided by the Department of Antiquities. The field work began 19 June and ended 14 July, 1978.

The existence of a Byzantine church north of Tell Hesban was confirmed by a sounding done in 1976 as part of the Andrews University Expedition to Heshbon. The probe of 1976 had established the existence of three strata at the site: an Ayyubid/Mamluk cemetery, and Umayyad complex and the Byzantine church. While the church was the primary focus of attention, the extent of the Ayyubid/Mamluk cemetery and the nature of the Umayyad complex were secondary matters for investigation.

AYYUBID MAMLUK

The 1976 probe of the apse sector of the church produced a series of cist burials, some of which contained well-articulated, extended human skeletons. This season's work demonstrated that the burials were not confined to the apse sector of the church; numerous burials were located both to the north and the south of the apse in the region of the north and south side chambers, as well as throughout the nave. The majority of these cist burials, which were oriented generally east-west, were located from 0.5 m to 1.5 m above the Byzantine level although a couple were found immediately above the nave mosaic. The excavation of these burials produced a number of artifacts such as beads, rings, earrings, and ceramic pieces, (see Figs. 1, 2 for ceramic profiles and interior decorative patterns). At least three of the ceramic pieces bore the evidence of having been repaired in antiquity. Two of the burials were noteworthy in that bowls had been positioned at the right side of the head so as to allow the head to actually rest against the bowl, (Pl. LVIII, 1).

UMAYYAD

A two-course Umayyad wall running east-west was encountered during the 1976 probe. The lower course sat directly on the mosaic floor in the apse. This wall, Locus 29, butted against

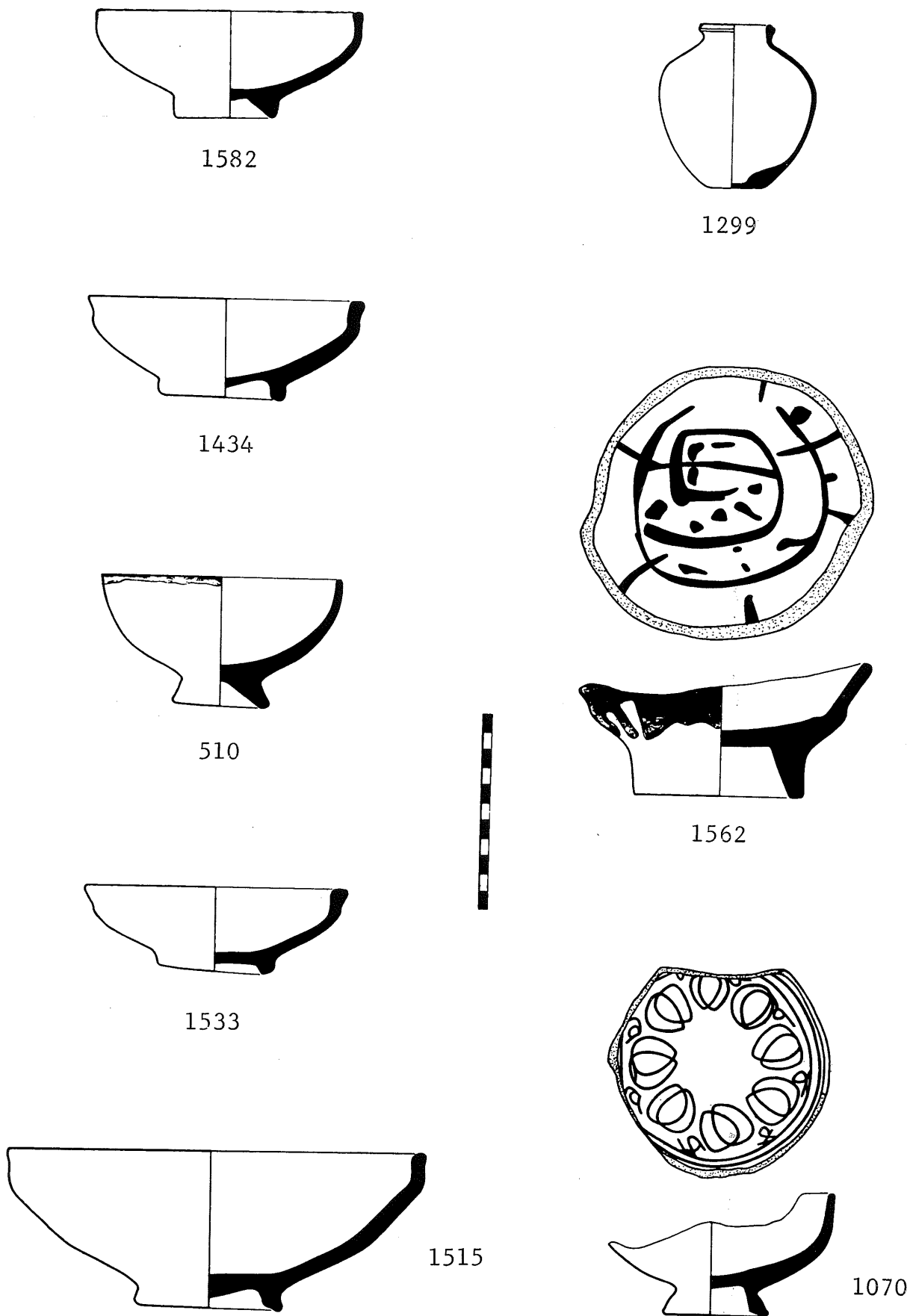
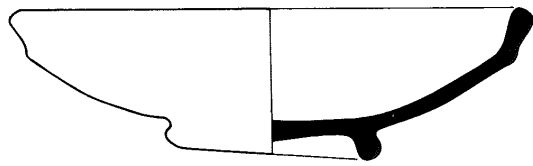
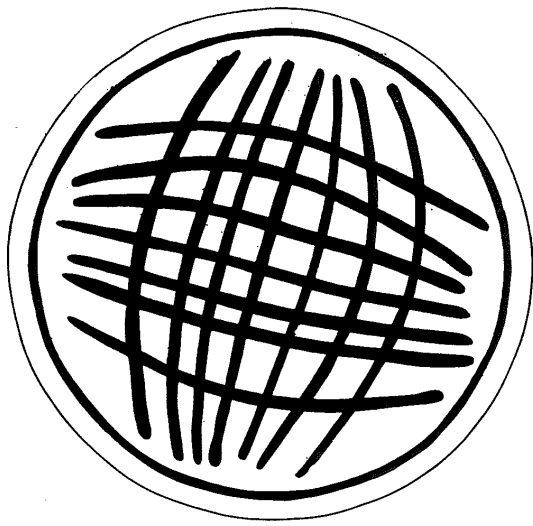
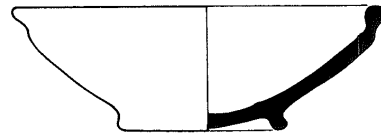
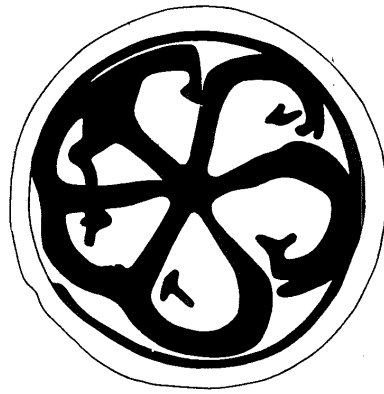


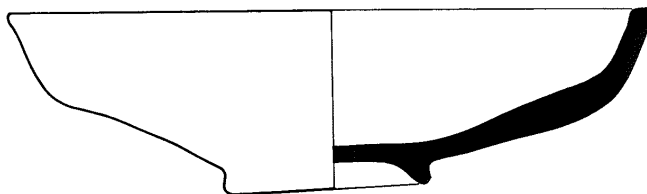
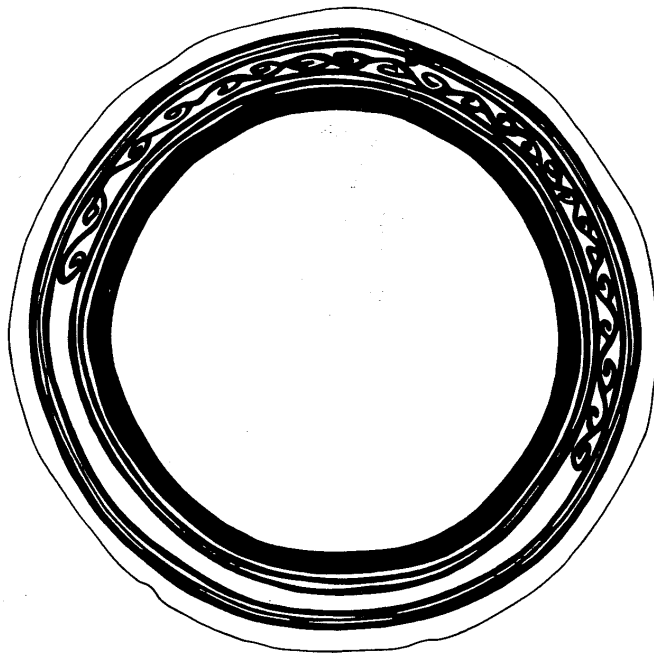
Fig. 1. Ayyubid/Mamluk and Umayyad pottery; mostly from cist burials.



975



575



1534

Fig. 2. Ayyubid/Mamluk pottery; mostly from cist burials.

another two-course Umayyad wall which lay in a north-south direction. This latter wall was designated Locus 28. In the squares which were laid out west of the 1976 probe, squares D, E, and F respectively, the east-west Umayyad wall was found to butt against the west face of Wall 28 and then continue running westward throughout the entire length of the church; its overall length was ca. 21 m. In each square the wall sat directly on the mosaic floor of the Byzantine church; however, it was not two courses high over its entire length. West of Wall 28 as far as the chancel steps it was one course; ca. 3 m of the wall at the east end of the nave were two courses; the remainder of the wall westward was one course. The greater part of the wall was made of semi-well-dressed stone although one complete column drum and three capitals were used in the construction of the western half of the wall. Shorter, one-course walls lay in a north-south direction between the north side of this wall and the south face of column bases four and six¹ in the northern half of the church. The facts that the south face of the dressed stones was laid quite evenly and that the capitals were laid on their sides with their tops in line with the south face of the wall would suggest that the south face of this east-west wall was intended as the exposed face (Pl. LVIII, 2).

The primary question for consideration in connection with this complex of walls has to do with their function. One possibility is that the Byzantine church was reused in the Umayyad Period as a domestic complex; the walls in question would then have served as house and room dividers. The major problem with this suggestion is the absence of domestic debris. A second possibility is that the earlier church was reused as an Umayyad mosque. Further analysis of the available data will perhaps yield some important clues to the solution.

One of the major achievements of 1978 season's work in connection with the Umayyad stratum was the identification of four Umayyad phases in the region of the south side chamber of the church (Pl. LVIII, 3). The earliest Umayyad use of the church was represented by the complex of walls immediately on top of the mosaic floor, Locus 39 in Square C, found throughout the church. The next three were represented by three plaster surfaces: Loci 29/31, 25/26, and 21 (bottom-to-top sequence), found only in Square C (Fig. 3). Closer analysis of the ceramic evidence may be helpful in dating more precisely the four Umayyad phases.

BYZANTINE

The existence of an Early Christian Church at this site was confirmed through the probe of 1976. Neither the extent nor the state of preservation of the remains was known. As a result of the work of the 1978 season, it was established that the architectural features of the church as well as its mosaic floors were very well preserved.

Architecture. The overall plan of the Hesban church was that of a typical basilical style church, complete with apse-chancel, side chambers, nave, side aisles and narthex (Fig. 4).

Apse/chancel. The inscribed apse which was preserved 3.12 meters above bedrock, contained fragments of three tiers of what probably was at one time a five-tiered synthronon. The five-tiered synthronon in the church at Siyagha provides a fine example of this particular architectural feature.² The apse was 3.0 m deep (from the chord to the west face of the apse wall), and approximately 6.0 m wide at the chord, (Fig. 4). The west face of the lowest course of the synthronon was plastered; three different layers of plaster were distinguishable.

The chancel which was elevated two steps (.52 m) above the nave measured 6.0 m deep (east-west) and 7.50 m wide (north-south). It extended westward from the chord of the apse 6.0m, the equivalent of two and one half bays (Fig. 4). Grooves and post holes for fenestrade and anchor posts, respectively, were present in the top step at the west end of the chancel.

The chancel contained evidence of an altar installation immediately west of the apse chord. Six altar post sockets, three on each of the north and south sides of a well-preserved reliquarium, were identified (Fig. 4). One of the marble altar posts was discovered in Square C, the area of the south side chamber.

Side chambers. The east end of the church contained two side chambers, one north of the apse and one south (Fig. 4). Both were approximately of the same size, ca. 4.50 m wide (north-south) and 2.50 m deep (east-west). The exposed plan clearly indicates that neither side chamber extended westward into either side aisles beyond the line created by the chord of the apse and the west face of the side chambers. Each opened upon its respective side aisle through what were probably arched entrances; neither side chamber opened directly into the apse. Both

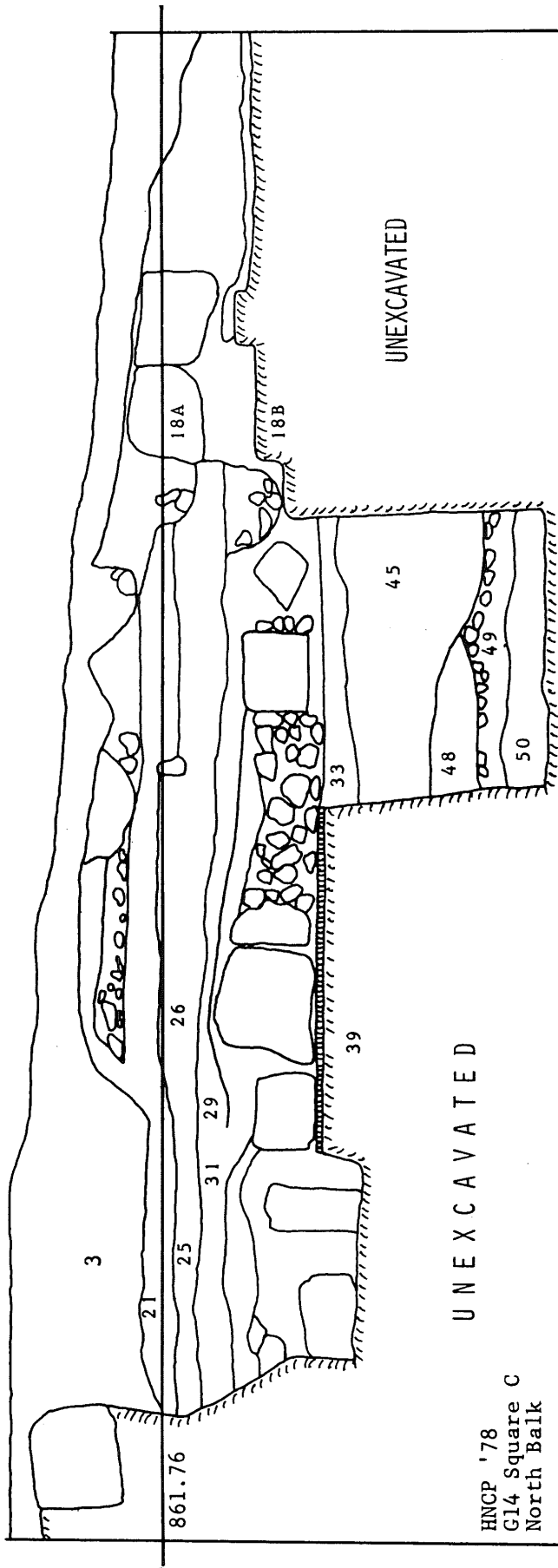


Fig. 3. North balkdrawing of Square C showing the four Umayyad surfaces.

side chambers had exits through the east wall of the church and there was clear evidence that each had a mosaic floor at the time the church was in use.

Nave. The width of the nave was 7.5 m; its length was 15.75 m. North and south stylobate walls, on east-west orientation, supported a total of 16 column bases — eight on each wall. Similarity between the Hesban and Siyagha churches was found to exist on this point.³ The entire length of the north stylobate wall was exposed; all eight column bases were *in situ* (Pl. LIX, 1), and the easternmost base had .75 m of its column still standing. Only the three easternmost bases on the south stylobate wall were exposed, but all three still supported fragments of their columns. The average distance between each column base was 1.5 m. The main entrance to the church was at the west end of the nave.

Side aisles. The north side aisle was 4.90 m wide, while the width of the south aisle was 4.50 m; both aisles were 21.30 m long. The width of the side aisles in relationship to the width of the nave was greater than in many fourth-sixth century churches.⁴ The entrance through the west wall of the church into the north side aisle was exposed. One was projected at the west end of the south side aisle also, although that particular region was not excavated (Fig. 4).

Narthex. A 4.3 m wide narthex was located outside the west end of the basilica (Fig. 4, and Pl. LIX, 2). Three column bases, .80 m square, were *in situ* in a north-south line 3.50 m west of the west wall of the basilica. Two of the column bases were located south of the east-west axis line, and one north. A plaster lined water channel lay between the two southernmost column bases, and sloped in a northeasterly direction, running under the main western entrance to the church (Pl. LIX, 3). This would suggest that a cistern was situated under the west end of the nave; this however, was not confirmed.

Mosaics. Two levels of mosaics were preserved in the apse and chancel. The upper mosaic was composed of two main panels ca. 4 m long and was divided by a single line Greek inscription stretching north-south across the chancel directly west of the altar. The eastern panel had interlocking cloverleaf patterns at both ends with a simple flower-bud design characterizing the mosaic of the altar area. The western panel featured large trees at both ends, with a large, well-executed urn in the center of the panel (Fig. 5). All this was bordered by a pattern of continuing and interlocking swastika-like designs. The lower mosaic was exposed in a 1.5 by 2.5 m probe in the apse. It was located ca. 0.10 m below the upper mosaic and featured a sevenline Greek inscription in a circle surrounded by a twisted rope-like pattern. Gazelle-like animals faced the inscription on the north and south, and gently bent trees hovered over both (Pl. LXIII, 1).

The nave mosaic featured a double border. The outer border was a series of interlocking circles ca. 0.25 m in diameter; a similar pattern was discovered in the mosaic in Room B of the church in Ma'in.⁵ The inner border was composed of a series of large (ca. 0.60 m in diameter) medallions in which birds of various kinds were featured (Pl. LXIII, 2). On all but two of those medallions which were uncovered, the birds had been defaced, with plaster or mosaic patch replacing them. This was thought to be the result of iconoclastic efforts. Another large urn was part of the nave mosaic, along with various geometric patterns and designs. At the east end of the nave, directly in front of the chancel steps, a four-line Greek inscription was uncovered.

Inscriptions. Three inscriptions were uncovered; two were located in the apse/chancel, the other at the east end of the nave. The first inscription was a seven line Greek inscription located in the apse on the lower mosaic (Pl. LXIII, 1). It read:

ΥΠΕΡ
ΣΩΤΗΡΙ
ΑΣΦΙΛΑ
ΔΕΛΦΟΥ
ΚΑΙ ΗΛΙΟΥ
ΥΙΟΥ
ΑΜΗΝ

In translation, the inscription reads: "For the salvation of Philadelphos and Elios his son, Amen."

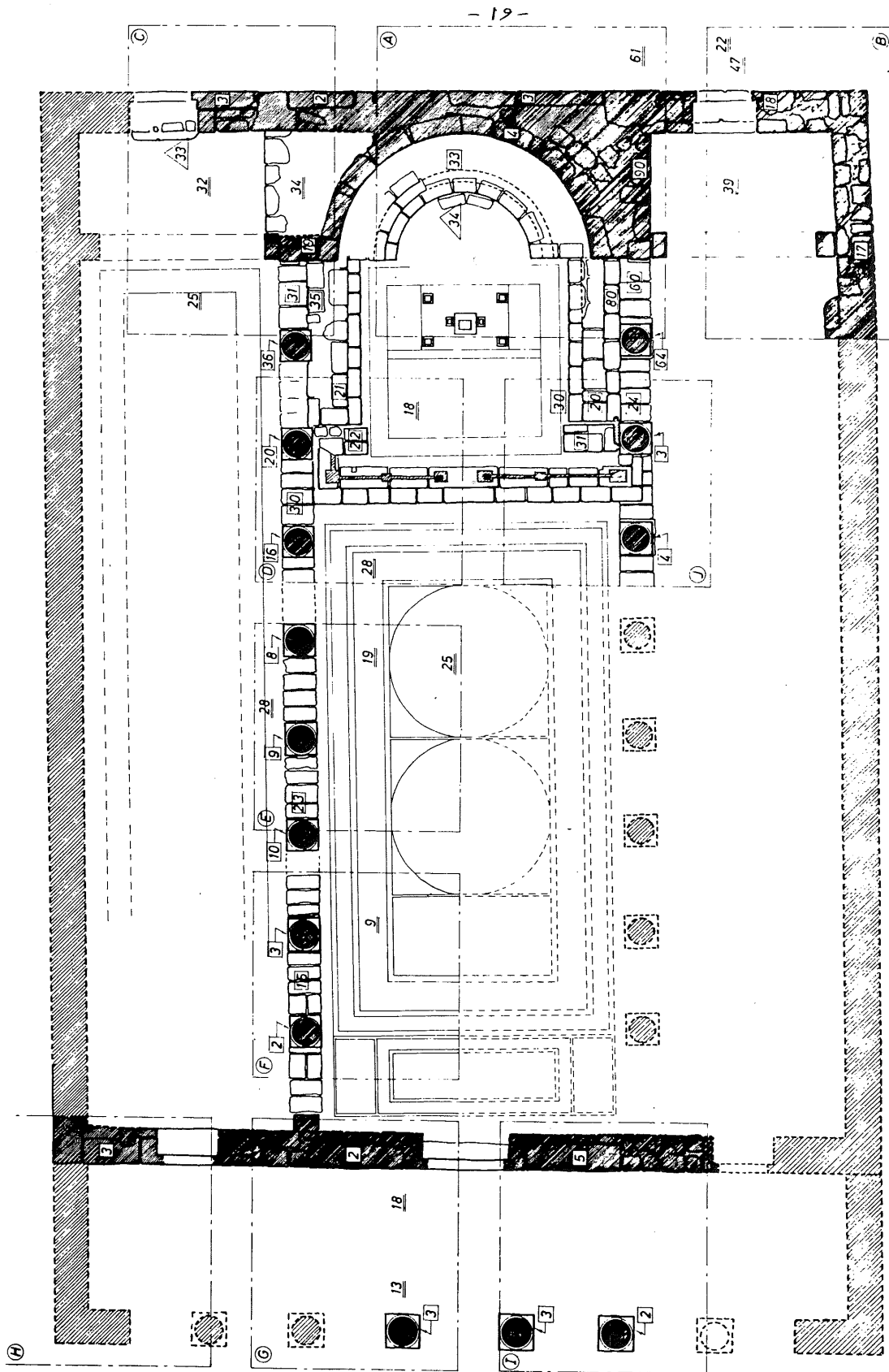
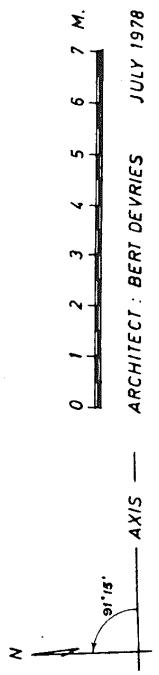


Fig. 4. Plan of the Hesban North Church.



The second inscription was located at the east end of the nave, directly in front of (east of) the chancel steps. It was four lines in length; the first line was complete, the last three lines were broken in places (Pl. LXIII, 3). It read:

†ΥΠΕΡΣΩΤΗΡΙΑΣΤΟΥΕΥΛ^ς ΠΡΕΣ^ς
 ΠΑΠΙΩ(ΚΑΙ) ΠΡΟ(ΣΦΟΡ)Κ(ΑΙ)ΕΝΕΥΣΕΒΙΑ
 †ΙΧΘΥΣ(. . .)ΣΩ(. . . .)ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛ
 ΦΟΥΜΑΙ(ΚΑΙ)ΠΑ(ΝΤΟΣΤ)ΟΥΟΙΚΟΥΑΥΤΟΥ

While parts of it were missing, the majority of those parts can be reconstructed, based on comparative material from Siyagha,⁶ as well as the context of the inscription. A probable translation of the four lines would be:

“For the salvation of the blessed presbyter
 Papio and for an offering and in piety
 Christ (remember) Philadel-
 phos and all his house/family.”

Some observations are in order. First, the letter style of these first two mosaics was the same except for the ‘alphas.’ These two inscriptions were probably contemporary. Second, while the first inscription made no use of abbreviations, the second one did. The “slanted sigma” indicated that “ΕΥΛ” and “ ΠΡΕΣ ” were both abbreviated terms; the former an abbreviation for ευλογητος (blessed), the latter an abbreviation for πρεσβυτερος (elder/presbyter). Third, the use of ΙΧΘΥΣ in the inscription raises some questions. In light of its customary use at an earlier period (first and second century), what was the significance of its use in a probable mid-sixth century context? Does its use have any bearing on the date of the church?

A third inscription was found on the upper apse/chancel mosaic. It was nearly four meters in length, stretching across the chancel in front of (west of) the altar. A .95 m portion of it was broken out in the northern half and a .20 — .25 m portion of it was broken out at the south end (Fig. 5). As excavated, it read:

ΕΠΙ(ΑΝΕΝΕΩΘΗΚΑΙΕΤΕΛΕΙ)ΩΘΗΤΟΑΤ^ς ΘΥΣΙΑΣΤ^ς ΣΠΟΥΔΗΙΩΑΝΝΟΥΔΙΑΚΥΠΕΡΣΩΤΗ^ς ΤΩ
 (. . .) ΡΠΟΦΟΡ^ς

Once again, comparative materials,⁷ as well as context, suggest a possible reconstruction of the major segment that was lost. A probable reconstruction/translation would be: “At the time of the renewing and finishing of the holy altar by the zeal of John the deacon for the salvation of... and for an offering”. The existence of the upper mosaic approximately 10 cms. above an earlier one clearly indicated that the apse/chancel sector of the church had gone through a remodeling phase.

One further observation regarding this third inscription was that the style of lettering was noticeably different from that of the first two mosaics. The letters of this single line inscription were all the same height and were executed with much more style. This was particularly noticeable in the letters “ Ω”, “ Θ ” and “Υ ”. The letter style in this inscription was very similar to the letter style of the two inscriptions in the Theotokos chapel at Siyagha.⁸ No datelines appeared in any of the inscriptions.

Artifacts. A total of 269 objects were registered; the collection included pottery, stone, rings, beads, earrings, glass, ivory carvings and coins. Of note were some of the ivories, an altar post, the reliquary and some of the coins.

Ivory carvings. Well established Byzantine soil layers in Square C, the square in which the south side chamber was located, yielded numerous ivory carvings, many of which gave evidence of having been inlaid at one time. The corpus included five bishop heads with mitres, averaging 6 cms high and 3-4 cms wide (Pl. LX); four carvings of what appeared to be miniature columns varying in length from 9-13 cms and 1½ cms wide (Pl. LXI); and one 17 cms by 3½ cms showing a sea creature swallowing a fish (Pl. LXI). Its design was similar to that of the sea creatures leaping around Thalassa, the goddess of the sea, pictured in the center of the mosaic floor of the Apostle’s Church in Madeba.

Altar post. A marble altar post was recovered from the south-side chamber (Pl. LXII, 1). Its height was .93 m, the circumference near the bottom was 32 cm, and it tapered gently to a 28 cm circumference near the top. The motif at the top was that of a lotus plant on each of the four

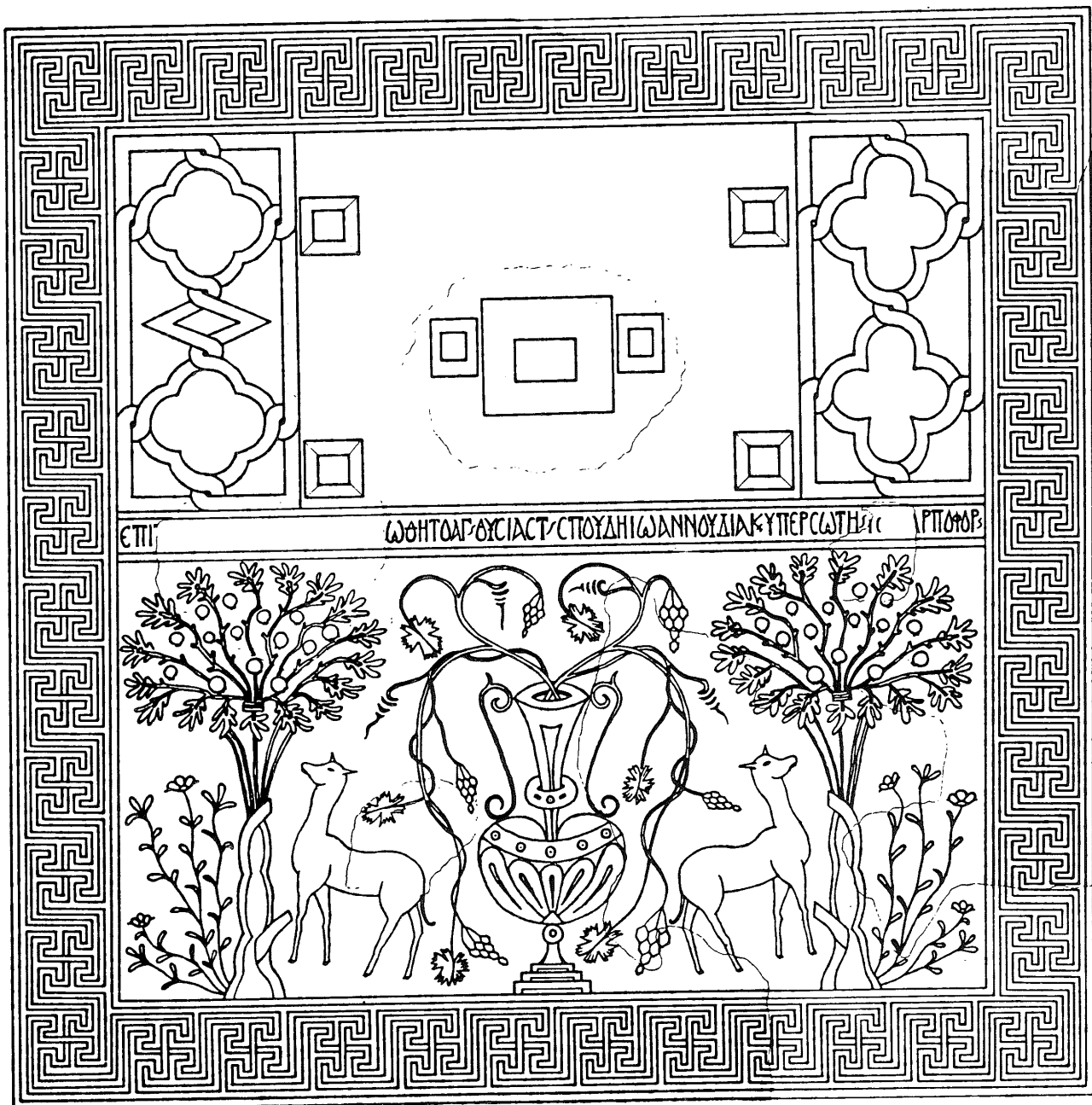


Fig. 5. Architect's drawing/reconstruction of the upper chancel mosaic.

sides. Exact parallels are to be seen in the Siyagha church⁹ and the recently excavated church at Ma'in.¹⁰

Reliquary. The reliquarium contained a marble ossuary (Pl. LX11, 2), the base of which was 24.6 cms by 17.3 cms¹¹ and was divided into two compartments, one was 9.2 cms by 11.1 cms, the other was 8.2 cms by 11.1 cms. Each corner of the 7.9 cms high gabled lid featured a "horn" and both sloping sides of the lid were decorated with raised crosses. The smaller of the two compartments contained a silver reliquary, oval shaped, 11 cms by 6.7 cms by 5.5 cms (Pl. LXII, 3). Its lid, decorated around its rim with a twisted rope pattern, also bore the image of a well-proportioned Byzantine cross. A cleaning of the lid revealed an inscribed "A" and "Ω" at the base of the cross and an inscribed geometric pattern beneath the cross. The contents of the reliquary were an ashy material, a human patella from a right leg, and a human tooth. Perhaps the kneecap belonged to a saint who was remembered as a person of prayer. Tests of the ashy substance have ruled out the possibility of their being cremation remains. The practice of depositing relics of saints under the altar was common during the fifth and sixth centuries; although the discovery of them *in situ* is unusual.

Coins. A total of fifteen coins was recovered during the 1978 season of excavation. Seven of those, after cleaning, were identifiable. Those seven have been catalogued as follows:

- Obj. 39: G14 A. 20:95
 Soil description: Light, yellowish brown (10 YR 6/4); slightly moist
 Pottery reading (pail 95): Um.; Byz.
 Coin description: Gallienus: 267 CE/Antoninianus; Mint of Asia
 REV.: LVNA LVCIF; Diana walking right
- Obj. 87: G14 A. 45:80
 Soil description: Pinkish grey (5 YR 6/2); sandy
 Pottery reading (pail 80): UD bods.
 Coin description: Justin II: 575/6 CE (Year XI)
 Follis: Mint of Cyzicus
 (remains of iron in hole at 12:00)
- Obj. 184 G14 A. 42:138
 Soil description: Reddish brown (5 YR 5/3); fairly loose, soft; moist
 Pottery reading (pail 138): Few Um./Byz.; Byz. dom.
 Coin description: REV.: type, SECVRITAS REPUBLICAE : 364-75 CE
 Victory to right, holding wreath
 Emperor and mint uncertain
- Obj. 186 G14 B. 10:18
 Soil description: Reddish brown (5 YR 5/4); gritty, silt loam
 Pottery reading (pail 18): 1 Ab.; Um.; Byz.
 Coin description: Justinian II: 538-40 CE (years XII and XIII)
 Follis: probably mint of Constantinople
- Obj. 187 G14 A. 42:138
 Soil description: Reddish brown (5 YR 5/3); fairly loose, soft; moist
 Pottery reading (pail 138): Few Um./Byz.; Byz. dom.
 Coin description: OBV. : obliterated
 REV. : type, CONCORDIA AVGG Cross
 ca. 400 CE
- Obj. 188 G14 C. 46:70
 Soil description: Yellowish red (5 YR 5/6); clayey; damp
 Pottery reading (pail 70): Byz. dom.; ER; 12P
 Coin description: Constantinian family: 341-46 CE
 REV. : type, VICTORIAE DD AVGGQNN
 Two victories, facing, holding wreaths
- Obj. 189 G14 E. 1:2
 Soil description: Grayish brown (2.5 YR 5/2); hard, clumpy; dry
 Pottery reading (pail 2): Ay./Mam.; Um.; few Byz.
 Coin description: Caesarea Maritina: 3rd cent. CE
 OBV. : Bust of emperor
 REV. : Eagle displayed, within wreath, SPQR

CONCLUSION

No dateline appeared in any of the three inscriptions, thus making the assignment of a firm date to the construction or remodeling of the church very difficult. Preliminary ceramic analysis as well as architectural similarities to the church at Siyagha and the Byzantine churches in the area of Hesban suggest an approximate date of A.D. 550 for the construction of the Hesban North Church. The remodeling of the apse/chancel area, represented by the upper chancel mosaic, perhaps occurred 25-50 years later (A.D. 575-600). Further and closer investigation of the available evidence should shed more light on this particular question.

Personnel from the Department of Antiquities have lifted the upper chancel mosaic and are presently working on its reconstruction at the Museum at Madeba. The remainder of the mosaic has been covered in order to protect it from weathering and vandalism. A second season of excavation for the purpose of completing the excavation of the church is presently under consideration.

NOTES

1. The column bases were numbered consecutively from east to west, first along the northern stylobate wall, and then along the southern stylobate wall.
2. S. J. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo: Part I: The Text*, Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1941. (Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, No. 1), p. 48. *Ibid: Part II: The Plates*, Pl. 39:1.
3. S. J. Saller, *Memorial of Moses* 1: pp. 59-64.
4. The ratio in the Siyagha church was that the combined width of the side aisles equalled the width of the nave.
5. M. Piccirillo and M. Roussan, "A Byzantine Church at Ed-Deir (Ma'in)," *ADAJ XXI* (1976): 181, Pl. XXVII: 1.
6. M. Piccirillo, "New Discoveries on Mount Nebo," *ADAJ XXI* (1976): 59, pl. XV.
7. S. J. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo (Khirbet-el-Mekhayyat)*. (Jerusalem: The Franciscan Press, 1949) p. 173. Saller, *Memorial of Moses* I: 254; II: Pls. 109, 116.
8. S. J. Saller, *Memorial of Moses* I: p. 254; II: Pls. 109: 1, 2; 110:1; 116: 1, 2, 3.
9. These were shown to this writer by Michelle Piccirillo while visiting work at Siyagha in July 1978.
10. M. Piccirillo and M. Roussan, "Ma'in," *ADAJ XXI* (1976): 176, pl. XXII: 1.
11. Dr. A. Eran makes the following observation concerning these measurements: "Two of the measurements stated are easily interpreted in Roman units: 24.6 cm is a dextrans (exact value 24.67 cm) and 17.3 cm is a septum (exact value 17.27 cm) while 19.1 cm compares with 7¾ uncial (exact value 17.27 and 18.48 cm). The correlation might still more clearly appear for the last dimension if the lid of the reliquarium will be measured separately." Quoted from a letter received from Dr. Eran, dated June 19, 1979.