

A CHURCH AT SHUNAT NIMRIN

by
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By chance, during the summer of 1980, a bulldozer, digging on the western slope of tell Nimrin in the village of Shuna el-Janubiyeh, brought to light traces of a mosaic pavement. The prompt intervention of the Department of Antiquities saved what proved to be the first important archaeological testimony of the settlement in the Byzantine-Umayyad periods.¹

The name of the tell calls to mind Bet-Nimra, the city founded, according to the Bible, by men of the tribe of Gad in the steppes of Moab (*Num.* 32:26; *Jos.* 13,27)² The identification is confirmed by the statement of Eusebius, who wrote in the IVth Cent. A.D.: "Today Bet-Nimra is the city of Bethnamaris, on the other side of the Jordan, five miles to the north of Livias".³ On this basis, we are able to say that in the Byzantine epoch the village belonged to the territory of the bishopric of Livias. In the Targum it is called Bet Nimrin.⁴

The Church (Fig. 1; Pl. CIII, 1)

The excavations led by the Department of Antiquities were limited to the area of the mosaic floor, which proved to be part of a three nave church (18.45 x 13.52 m.). The surrounding wall was almost entirely destroyed, as were the doors. The presbytery with the two side chapels is elevated some 30 cm. above the level of the church's nave and was enclosed by a chancel-screen with columnets and posts in Nebi Mousa stone (Pl. CIX, 1-4). The church had an apse, but it was not possible to determine whether the polygonal shape which we show in the plan is original or created by an open

water-channel which passed later on the outside of the wall.

The Mosaic Pavement

The bulldozer caused damages in the north and central nave. Unfortunately, irreparable damage was also done to the dedicatory inscription in the center of the geometrical composition.

The mosaic floor in the central nave is enclosed in a guilloche border and is divided into three panels. The first, nearest the presbytery (Pl. CV, 1) is composed of interlacing squares and ellipses with circles, decorated with diamonds, flowers and notched motifs. The second consists of two large interlacing squares from the central octagon of the church, where the dedicatory inscription is found (Pl. CIV, 1). The trapezoidal panels on the sides of the octagon, were decorated with ducks, roughly designed and executed (Pl. CV,3; Pl. CVI, 1-3). In the third panel, a composition of eight-pointed stars, alternating with squares, encircle a smaller octagon with an inscription around an interlacing double knot (*Solomon's seal*; Pl. CVIII, 2). In front of the north-western corner of the presbytery, can still be noted part of the surround of a first mosaic floor from a previous period, to which also belongs the area immediately in front of the chancel-post decorated with florets (Pl. CV, 1-2).

In the southern nave, we find a composition asymmetrically arranged. The first panel, with juxtaposed octagons decorated with diamonds, forms an angle around two of the church's pillars, decorated, on its western border, with an inscription in large black letters on a white

1. The Hashemite Kingdom of the Jordan. Scale 1:250,000, Sheet 1, Amman, 146-210. I wish to thank Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Dr. Ghazi Bisheh and the Inspector of Es-Salt Mr. Saad Hadidi, of the Department of Antiquities. A Special thank to Fr. Eugenio Alliata of the Franciscan Biblical Institute, who prepared the drawings of this

article.

2. F.M. ABEL, *Géographie de la Palestine*, Paris 1938, II, 278; "De Tell Nimrin au Zerqa", *RB* 1910, 543-545.

3. *Onomasticon*, 44, 16 (ed. Klostermann).

4. Talmud of Jerusalem, *Shebi'it*, IX, 2.

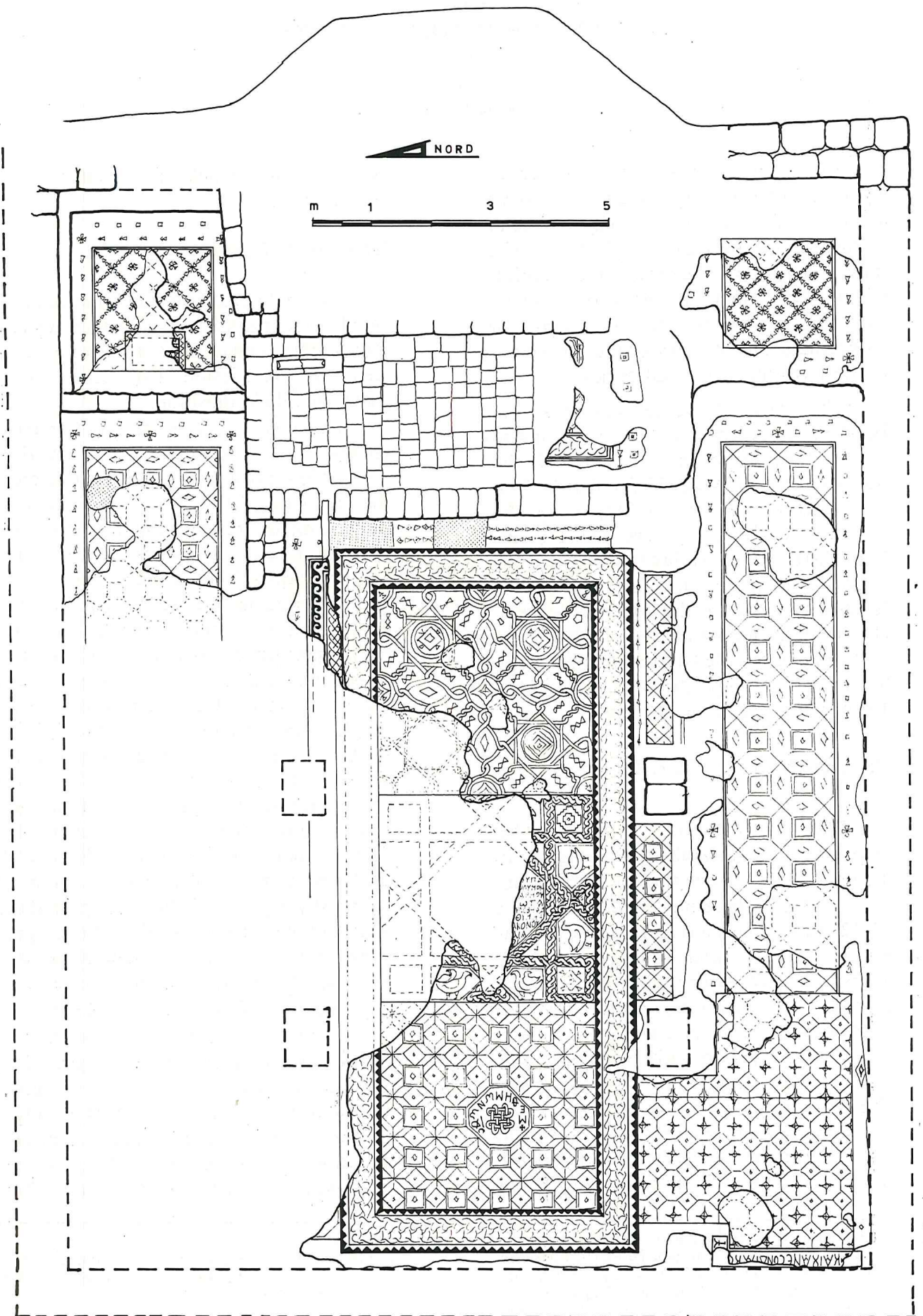


Fig. 1. Plan of the Church excavated at Shunat Nimrin (E. Alliata).

background (Pl. CIV, 4; Pl. CVII, 1). Not only does the panel occupy the space of the nave, but extends to the area between the two pillars and goes on to end at the border of the central nave mosaic. On the eastern side, it is joined to a uniform rectangular panel of interlacing octagons which form squares and oblong exagons, reaching the step of the southern side-chapel (Pl. CVII, 2).

Asymetry is also noted in the rectangular geometric panels among the pillars between the two naves. While one of them is joined to the border of the central nave, the second remains too isolated in relation either to the southern or central naves. The remaining white space is in part filled with florets.

The decoration of the northern nave

would have been parallel to the southern one, judging from the remaining strip on the eastern border, with the same motif of interlacing octagons (Pl. CIV, 3).

The side-chapels are both decorated with diamonds and florets (Pl. CIV, 3; Pl. CVII, 2). In the northern chapel, an inscription was added in a later period, covering a rectangular opening below it (Pl. CVII, 3).

Originally, also the presbytery pavement had a mosaic floor, as can be seen from the few traces of interlacing design, found together with the present lithostrotos pavement in Nebi Mousa stone, which reuses posts from the earlier chancel-screen (Pl. CIV, 2; Pl. CIX, 2).

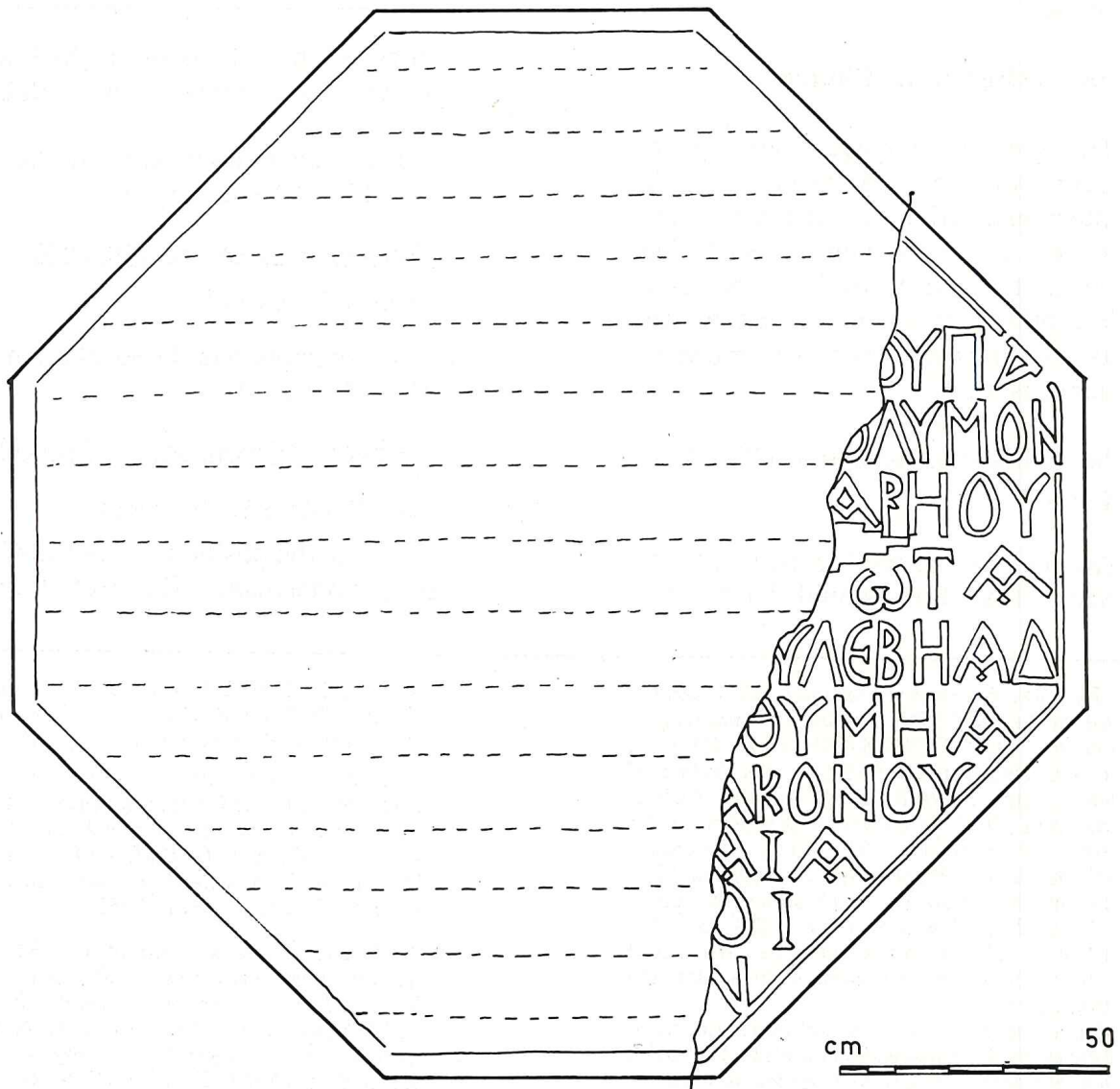


Fig. 2. The dedicatory inscription.

We have, therefore, evidence that the mosaic floor of the church has traces of two different periods. On careful examination of the mosaic from the technical point of view, taking also into account the general anomalies of the composition which have been noted, one can conclude that various elements from the earlier mosaic floor were incorporated into the second one. I believe, in fact, that the panels of both side-chapels, the motif on the eastern borders of the side naves and the corresponding intercolumn area, are contemporary with the interlacing design fragments in the central nave and in the presbytery. Additional proof of this can be noted in the difference of decoration in the space between the panels of the naves and the southern wall: the earlier decoration has florets, the second diamonds.

The Inscriptions in the Church

The greatest damage done by the bulldozer was the destruction of the dedicatory inscription of which only a few letters and words remain in each line, insufficient to extract any historical data, which would have been the first for the Livias bishopric,⁵ not to mention Bethnamaris itself.

A. The dedicatory inscription (Pl. CVIII, 1; Fig. 2).

The text was divided in two parts by diamonds. Therefore would have been

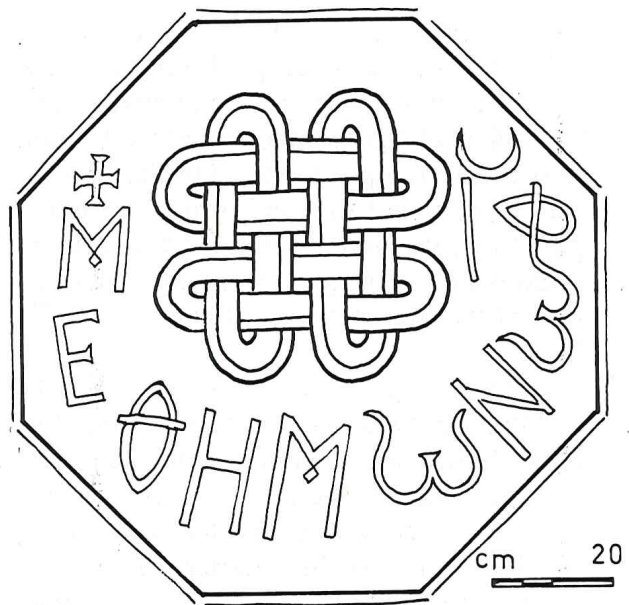


Fig. 3. Inscription B.

composed of 14 lines from which we read only the word *deacon* in the 10th line.

B. The second inscription in the central nave (Pl. CVIII, 2; Fig. 3).

+ Μεε' ἡμῶν ω Θεός
+ *God (is) with us*⁶

C. The inscription in the southern nave (Pl. CVIII, 3; Fig. 4).

+ Καὶ Χανέσον διακό(νο)υ
+ *and CHANESON deacon.*

From the position, CHANESON must be a personal name.⁷ The inscription is lack-

⁵ H. Relandi, *Palestina in Monumentis Veteribus usutata*, in UGOLINI *Thesaurus Antiquitatum Sacrarum*, VI, p. DCCCXXXV; M. Le QUIEN, *Oriens Christianus*, III, 656-658. The bishop of Livias (identified with tell er-Rameh, ABEL, *Géographie*, II, 273) *Letoius* was present at the council of Ephesus (431 A.D.). *Pancratius* participated in the Robber Synod of Ephesus (449 A.D.) and his signature is also found on the acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) *Zacchary* was bishop of Livias in 536, when he participated in the council of Jerusalem held under the Patriarch Peter.

⁶ A similar expression with the addition of the name *Emmanuel* is found carved on lintels (J. LASSUS, *Inventaire Archéologique de la région au nord-est de Hama*, Paris 1935, p. 127; on some lead ampulla of Monza, of Palestinian origin (DACL,

XI, 2, coll. 2759-2763); on a lead from Beisan (G.M. FITZGERALD, *A Sixth Century Monastery at Beth Shean*, 1939, pl. IV, Fig. 3).

The name *Emmanuel*, which in Hebrew corresponds to our Greek inscription, is carved on the barrack's tower in Umm el-Jimal (AAES III, A, 3, p. 147). Cfr. B. BAGATTI, "Espressioni bibliche nelle antiche iscrizioni cristiane della Palestina", *Liber Annus* 1953, 144.

⁷ A. XANOSEUS is listed in F. PREISIGKE, *Namenbuch enthaltend alle griechischen, lateinischen... Menschnennamen*, Heildberg 1922-Amsterdam 1967, col. 471. A personal name of Arabian origin, HNS. (خنوص, *sucking pig*) in G. LANKASTER HARDING, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions*, Toronto 1971, p. 229.

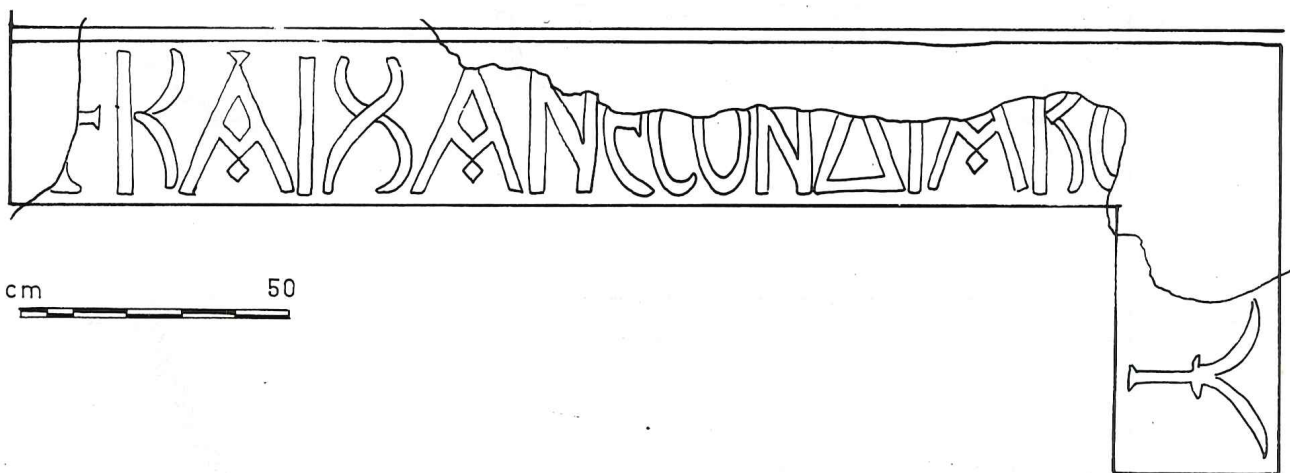


Fig. 4. Inscription C.



Fig. 5. Inscription E.

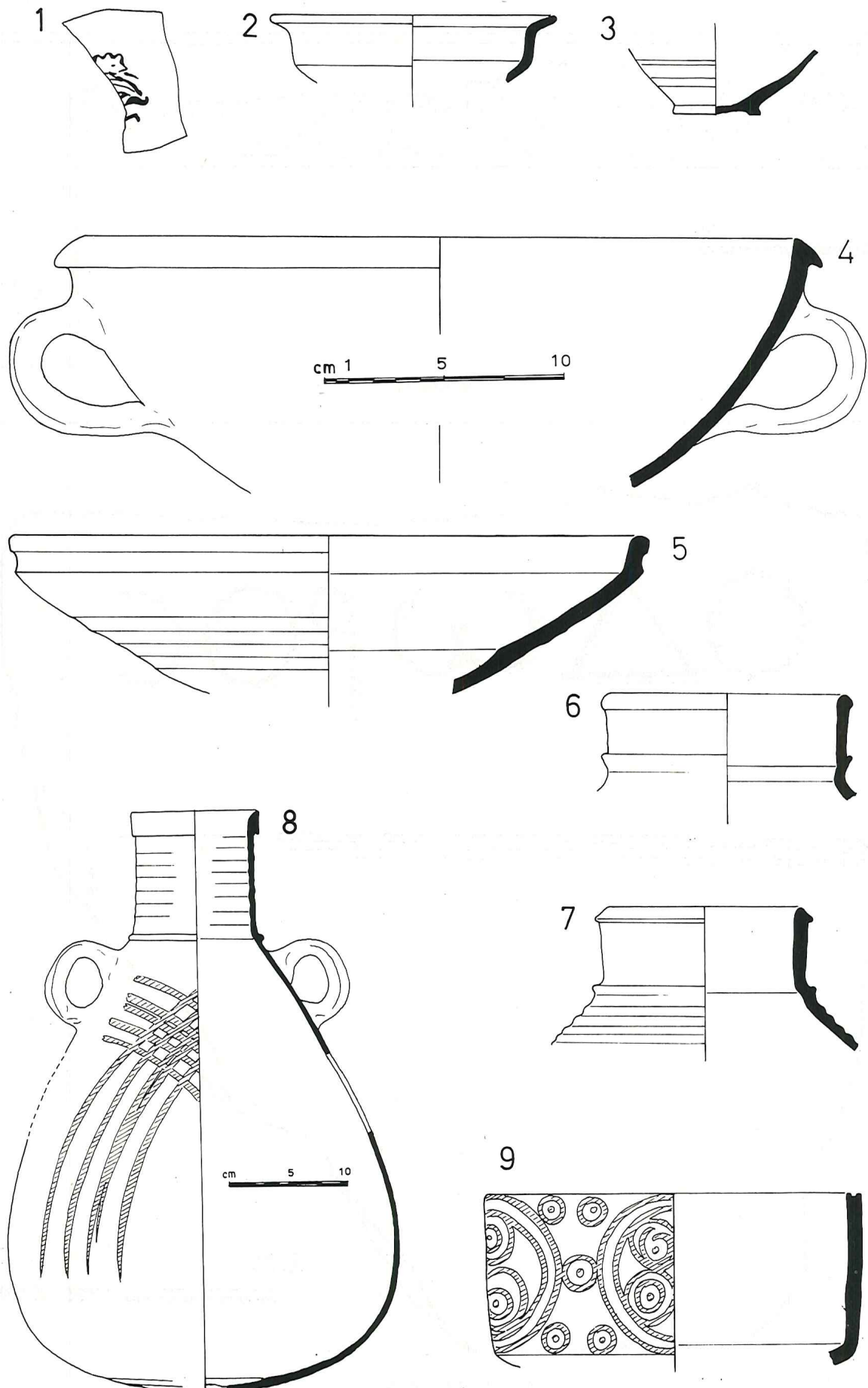


Fig. 6. Pottery sherds found in the excavation of the church.

ing of the first line, possibly inside door-post.

D. Remains of letters in the northern side-chapel (Pl. CVII,3).

E. The inscription carved on a fragment of Chancel-screen (Pl. CIX, 3; Fig. 5).

[ΘΕ]ÓΔΩΡΟΣ [The] odoros⁸

Pottery Sherds (Fig. 6; Pl. CX, 1-2).

The pottery sherds give a good chronological picture of the occupation of the area from the Byzantine to the Umayyad Periods, with glazed pottery of a later epoch.

1. Seal on *terra sigillata* ware (Fig. 6,1). Peacock with head turned backwards. Red granulous core. We have not found any parallel to this seal in the published material east and west of the river Jordan (S. LOFFREDA, "Stampi su terre sigillate del IV-VI, secolo in Palestina", *Studia Hierosolymitana*, Jerusalem 1976, I, 176-196. The peacock on page 186, n.59, is similar.) According to HAYES (*Late Roman Pottery*, London 1972) similar seals are dated to the V-VIth Cent. A.D.).
2. Small cup rim, crenated (Fig. 6, 2). Fine reddish core, strong firing, coloured red on outside (H. SCHNEIDER, *The Pottery at the Memorial of Moses, Mount Nebo, Jerusalem 1950*, p. 70, n. 267; p. 68, fig. 6, n. 6: dated VIth Cent. A.D.).
3. Cup base with ring bottom (Fig. 6, 3). Gray core on inside, coloured red on outside.
4. Basin with cutcurved rim and double loop-handles with band combing (fig. 6,4). Yellowish core (SCHNEIDER, *The Pottery*, 71-87, fig. 7-8).
5. Bowl with crenated walls (Figs. 6, 5). Yellow core (V. CORBO, *Gli scavi di Kh. Siyar el-Ghanam*, Jerusalem 1955, 67-70, fig. 21)?
6. Neck of jar, with collar at base (Fig. 6, 6). Red core, well-fired, (*QDAP* 10 (1944) P. 77, fig. 3).
7. Neck of jar, similar to preceding, with combing on the walls (Fig. 6, 7). Yellow core, well fired.
8. Neck of jar, painted with red lines on yellowish background (Fig. 6, 8; Pl. CX, 1). Red core, well-fired (SCHNEIDER, *The Pottery*, p. 114, fig. 13, n.5; D.C. BARAMKI, "The Pottery from Kh. el-Mefjer", *QDAP* 10 (1944) 77, fig. 3).
9. Painted cup (Fig. 6, 9). Red metallic ware, decorated in red circles on yellowish background (SCHNEIDER, *The Pottery*, p. 114, fig. 13, n. 5; *QDAP* 10 (1944) p. 85, fig. 7).

Dating of the Church

The technical workmanship of the earlier mosaic floor associates this pavement with the mosaic floors of the VIth Cent. A.D.⁹.

The later phase of the mosaic is related with mosaic floors of the VII-VIIIth Centuries so far discovered in Jordan. To the late dating point the utilization of the previous mosaic, the less careful technical workmanship, the preference of geometric motifs with knotted interlace decoration, the richness of accessory decorative elements, such as florets or diamonds,¹⁰ and

found in mosaic floors of later periods, as in the church of the Virgin at Madaba (M. PICCIRILLO, *ADAJ* 1980, pl. XCII), at Quweismeh (S. SALLER-B. B. BAGATTI, *The Town of Nebo*, Jerusalem 1949, pls. 42-43), at Khirbet el-Mafjar (R. W. HAMILTON, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*, Oxford 1959, pls. LXXVI-XCIII), and in the new mosaics discovered by Ghazi Bisheh at Qasr Al-Hallabat.

the position of the inscriptions in central octagons of the central nave or at the entrance of the southern nave.¹¹

In conclusion, I believe that the church

was built in the VIth Cent. A.D., and was later restored during the VII-VIIIth Centuries A.D. in the Umayyad Period.

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11. In the two churches discovered in Jordan surely dated from the Umayyad Period, the dedicatory inscription is found either on the west end of the southern nave, (as at Quweismeh, dated 717, S. SALLER, "An Eight-Century Christian Inscription at Quweismeh near Amman,

Transjordan", *JPOS* 1948, 137-147) or at the entrance of the central nave (as in Ma'in, *RB* 1938, 227-258). In the church of the Virgin at Madaba, we found a medallion with inscription in the center of the geometrical composition (*ADAJ* 1980, pl. XCII).