

# THE Umayyad Churches of Jordan

by  
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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to collect the archaeological evidence which sheds some light on the life of the Christian community of Jordan during the Umayyad Period.<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of churches and mosaic-floors dated to the Umayyad period in Jordan constitutes historical evidence emphasizing the conciliatory attitude of tolerance prevalent toward the Christian community on the part of the public authority. This discovery shows the continuity of presence in the region of masons and mosaicists who built and decorated the sacred edifices both of Christians and Muslims along with the palaces of the Caliphs spread throughout Jordan. The traces of the iconoclastic movement found in the mosaics of Jordan pose a religious and historical problem of an uneasy solution, although it helps to focus the research.

The French scholar Clermont-Ganneau, who was the first to point out the existence of Christian monuments during the Umayyad period, discussing the dating of the church of the Virgin at Madaba in 1898, suggested reading the strange sign which in the dedicatory inscription stands for the hundreds as a *sampi* worth 900. On the basis of the Seleucid era, the church would have been terminated in February 662/3, the forty-second of the Umayyad era.<sup>2</sup> Let us read what the scholar wrote in order to respond to the possible objections that could be raised to his dating: "...until now it has always been repugnant to admit that such work could have been executed under Arab domination. But it is a mistake to lose sight on the fact that this domina-

tion was, initially, very mild with respect to the Christian population, who were left all of their religious liberties... We do not see why suddenly, from one day to the next, the Christians of Syria who had accepted, at times willingly, the light yoke of primitive Islam, would have ceased to decorate and even build churches".

Archaeological research in Jordan during the last century has proven that the scholar was right. Until now we have excavated the following Christian monuments built during the Umayyad Period in Jordan:

- The church of the Virgin at Madaba.
- The lower church in the village of el-Quweismeh, Amman.
- The church on the acropolis of Ma'in, Madaba.
- Part of the mosaic-floor of the church found at Shuneh el-Janubiyeh in the Jordan Valley.
- The unknown edifice built at Rabbat Moba, Kerak in 685/6.

This archaeological evidence therefore parallels the literary texts of the same epoch that deal with the relations between the Christian subjects and the Muslim authority.

## The Oil Lamps of Jerash

One of the first proofs of the Christian presence in Jordan during the Umayyad period was published by Clermont-Ganneau in 1898. It is an oil lamp type with a cross on the bottom together with an Arabic inscription which reads: *صنعه داود بن مصطفى بجرش سنة خمسة وعشرين ومئة* "Work of David the son of Mustafa at Jerash in the

<sup>1</sup> For a first attempt at this particular problem, see M. Piccirillo, *I Mosaici di Giordania dal I all'VIII secolo d.c.*, Il Veltro Editrice, Roma 1982, p.

24-28.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, "La mosaïque de Madaba", *RAO* II, 1898, p. 52-55.

year 125 of the Hejira".<sup>3</sup>

### The Church on the Acropolis of Ma'in

In 1934 Mufaddy Mousa el-Haddadin, while building his new house on the acropolis of Ma'in, to the south-west of Madaba, brought to light the mosaic-floor of a church which was later studied and published by Fr. Roland De Vaux of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

In the main hall which is about 10.00 m. broad by 17.00 m. long, were visible traces of the central carpet closed in a double border. The internal one was decorated with hunting scenes. The external with a series of ecclesiastical edifices spaced with trees and identified by label inscriptions in Greek with cities and villages of the region to the east and to the west of the Jordan river. At the moment of the discovery, were still visible the following edifices: Nicopolis, Ascalon, Maiuumas, Gaza, Odora, Cherachmoba, Areopolis, Gadoron, Esboun, Bellemounim... (Fig. 1).

Those edifices interpreted as bishops of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and studied from the view point of historical geography, misled the archaeologist in the dating of the mosaic-floor. In the *tabula ansata* with the dedicatory inscription survived the letters of the dating. The work was finished "in the third indiction of the year 614". With the era of the Provincia Arabia the above mentioned year corresponds to 719/720 at the time of Umar II (717-720). According to Fr. De Vaux such a dating would refer to the restoration after the iconoclastic destruction, while the original pavement has to be dated to the end of the sixth century or even before the

middle of the seventh century.

The discovery of the contemporary pavement at el-Quweismeh dated without doubt to 717/718 and a careful study of the mosaic during the recent restoration carried out by my team, has convinced me of the artistic unity of the work. The *tabula ansata* with its inscription is certainly part of the original work. The new motifs added during the restoration can easily be defined.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, based on technical considerations, I would go on to affirm that the same team of mosaicists who worked out the original mosaic could be responsible for the restoration. It is sufficient to compare the trees among the edifices with the similar trees of a restored area.

The house built by the Haddadin family prevented Fr. De Vaux from drawing a complete plan of the church which seemed rather singular with the central and unique nave in direct communication with the sides.

### The Lower Church at El-Quweismeh

At el-Quweismeh (Fig. 2,3), 500 m. north of the known Roman mausoleum, Fr. Saller and Bagatti of the Franciscan Institute, from 1940 on paid several visits to the house of Mr. Haddid where remains of a mosaic floor of a church were uncovered.<sup>6</sup> In 1948 Mr. Ibrahim Abu Jabir, then inspector of Antiquities, handed over to Fr. Saller a copy of the dedicatory inscription of the church that he quickly published for its historical importance.<sup>7</sup> "By the providence of God, by the diligence and care of the most holy priest and economos Tzobeos Khobeos, the entire fabric of this most holy church

<sup>3</sup> RAO II, 1898, 47-51. The reading was rectified by Fr. Antonio Battista on a second specimen of the same type in *PAM* No. 38-187 (in B. Bagatti, *I Monumenti di Emmaus el-Qubeibeh e dei dintorni*, Jerusalem 1947, 141; M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e Mosaici di Giordania, I*, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 46f.). See also B. Bagatti, "Lucerne fittili a testa di cavallo in Palestina (secc. VII-VIII)" in *RAC*, 46 (1970), p. 87-95; "Un 'inedita lucerna bronzea a testa di cavallo", *RAC* 58 (1982) p. 127-130; *ADAJ* XXVI (1982) p. 134, Pl. XXXVII.

<sup>4</sup> R. De Vaux, "Une mosaïque Byzantine à Ma'in",

*RB*, 1938, p. 227-258, pls. XI-XVI.

<sup>5</sup> We worked at Ma'in during the summers 1981 and 1982 (see *LA*, 1981, p. 350, no. 5, tav. 109, foto 2, and *LA*, 1982, p. 510).

Fr. Saller reached the same conclusions in 1949 (cfr. S. Saller-B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, Jerusalem, 1949, p. 134, fn. 1 and p. 256).

<sup>6</sup> "The Christian Remains at el-Quweismeh" in *Town of Nebo*, p. 251-268, pls. 42-44.

<sup>7</sup> In a lecture at a meeting of the Palestine Oriental Society later published in *JPOS*, 21 (1948) p. 138-147.

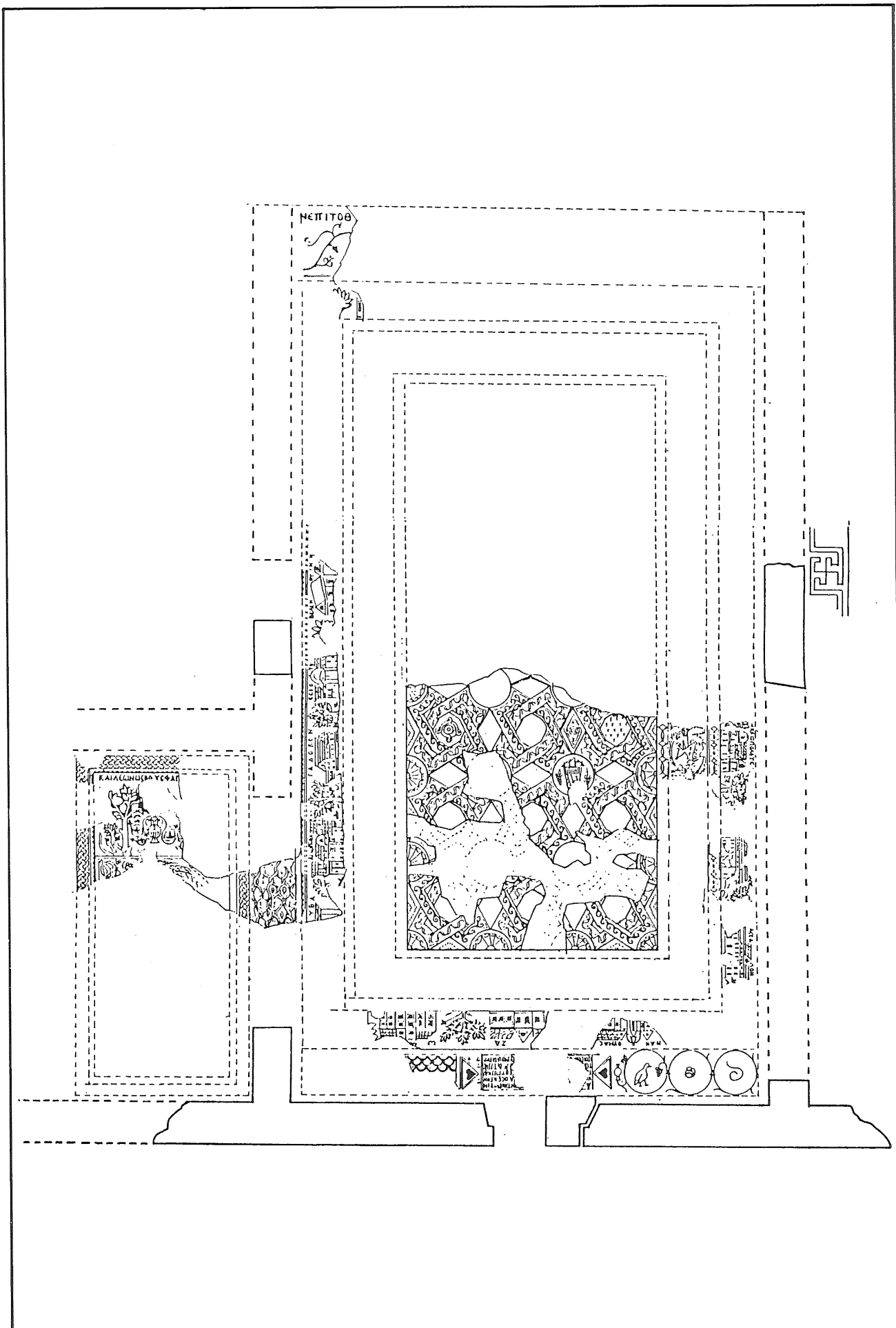


Fig. 1: Ma'in: The Church on the acropolis. (By Fr. Eugenio Alliata, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum).

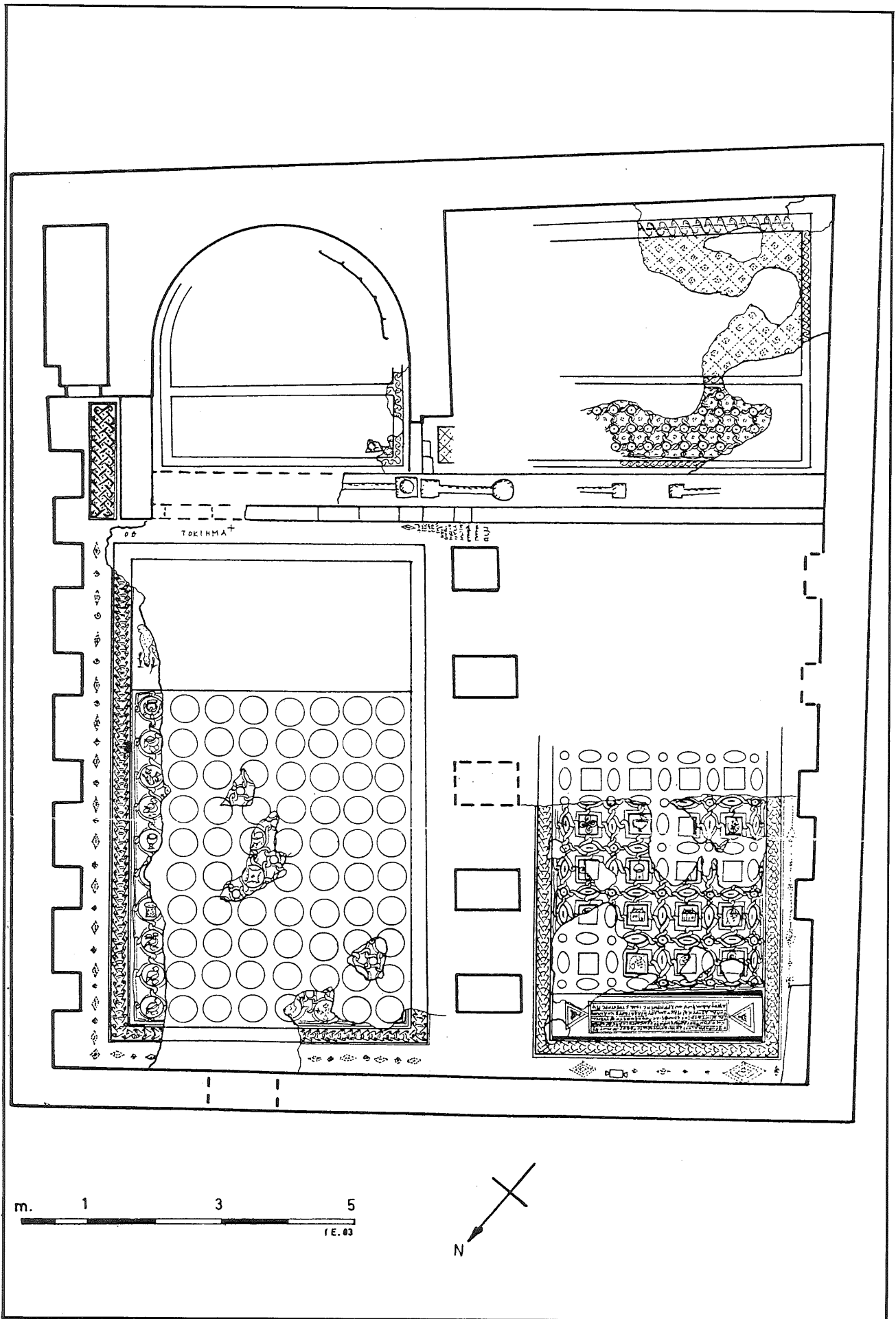


Fig. 2: Quweismeh: The lower Church. (By Fr. Eugenio Alliata, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum).

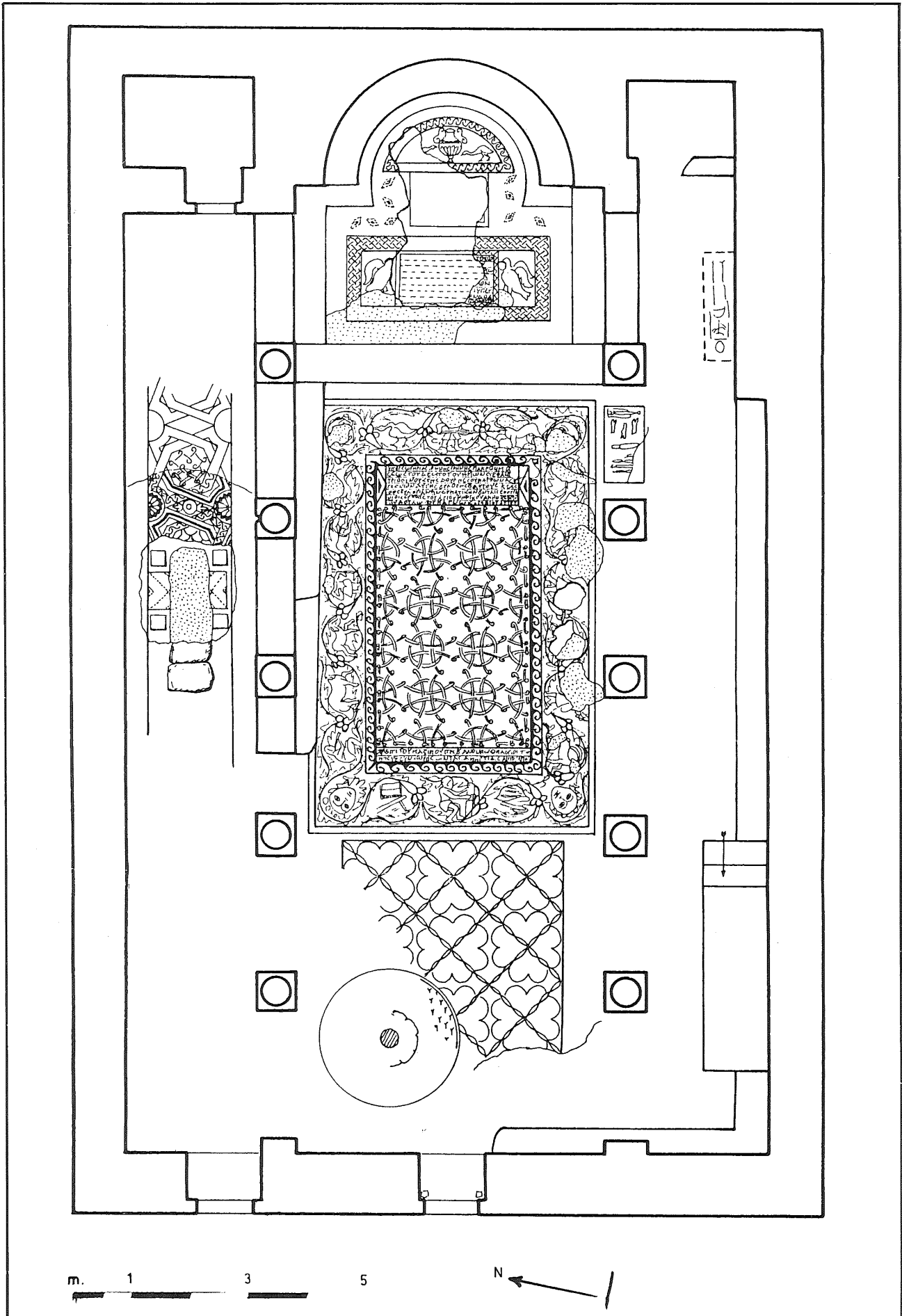


Fig. 3: Quweismeh: The upper Church of Saint Kiricos. (By Fr. Eugenio Alliata, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum).

was restored from the foundations and paved with mosaics for his own welfare, and that of Macedonius and Habbibas and John, his brethren in Christ, during the first indiction of the year 780”.

Such a year corresponds with the Pompeian era of Philadelphia Amman to 717/718, at the time of Umar II. With that inscription Fr. Saller published later a second Greek inscription and a Syriac inscription from the same mosaic. However he could give only a summary description of the edifice that resulted anomalous with respect to the plans of the churches of the region. “If the western wall of the rooms stands on the foundations of the old wall of the south as it seems to do, then the church would have been rather short and wide...” wrote Fr. Saller.

The excavation work conducted during the summer of 1982 among the ruins of the house abandoned and reduced to a dug pit, has produced results of great historical value for the Christian architecture of Jordan during the Umayyad period.<sup>8</sup> The plan of the church is truly singular. We have a main apsidal hall, flanked on the southern side by a second surrounding of the same length which for the lack of a separating wall is to be considered properly as an aisle rather than a chapel. The unity of the edifice is further on strengthened by the double step of the balustrade that runs continuously from north to south throughout the width of the church.

Such anomalies prevent us from cataloguing this church as a double church, a type of building already known in the region. The two surroundings are separated by the mosaic-floor of the pavement which are differently decorated. A setting of interlaced circles with flowers, birds, cups and baskets decorates the main hall closed to the east by a rectangular panel with animals and plants. A setting of interlaced lozenges and squares with edifices, flowers and geometric motifs deco-

rated the southern room.

As a mark of difference between the two compositions, we note the lack of animal motifs in the decoration of the southern room. This difference however does not seem to me a sufficient element to distinguish two periods in the decoration. In my opinion the church was conceived as a single unit of building and decoration.

This plan which could have its origin and functional explanation in the liturgy, could clarify the anomalies of the church on the acropolis of Ma'in and other singularities which we have noted in other churches of the region. In the church of St. Mary in the village of Rihab Bene Hasan, dated to 582, the central hall in a successive restoration, was closed by a continuous wall that separated it from the northern aisle reduced to a chapel<sup>9</sup>. The same has occurred at Samra in the central church, recently excavated by the archaeologists of the Ecole Biblique.<sup>10</sup> The same reduction with the addition of a plastered bench along the partition wall, is visible at Quweismeh in the upper church excavated during the summer 1982 by the Department of Antiquities.<sup>11</sup>

We can conclude that the lower church of Quweismeh with its singular plan dated to the Umayyad period situates architecturally such reductions of the sacred edifices, albeit their liturgical functional explanation is still not clear to us. Later on such a plan may help in an architectural and functional reexamination of the double churches until now found in Jordan such as at Umm el Jimal and Umm er-Rasas.<sup>12</sup>

### The Church at Shuneh el-Janubiyeh

By chance during the summer of 1980 a bulldozer digging on the western slope of the Tell Nimrin in the village of Shuneh el-Janubiyeh, brought to light traces of a mosaic floor which proved to be part of a three nave church.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> M. Piccirillo, “Le chiese di Quweismeh-Amman,” in *LA* 1984, 329-346, tav. 33-49.

<sup>9</sup> M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e Mosaici di Giordania*, I, p. 82 ss, tav. 72.

<sup>10</sup> *LA*, 1982, p. 498-501, tav. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *LA*, 1982, tav. 126, foto 3.

<sup>12</sup> For the double church of Sabha and Um el-Jimal, see *AAES* II, A, 2, p. 112-115; II, A, 3, p. 179-182; for that of Um er-Rasas, *Town of Nebo*, p. 247.

<sup>13</sup> M. Piccirillo, “A Church at Shunat Nimrin”, *ADAJ*, 1982, p. 335-342, Pls. CIII-CX.

On careful examination of the mosaic from the technical point of view, we concluded that the mosaic shows traces of two different periods juxtaposed to each other. I believe, in fact, that the decoration of both side-chapels, the motif on the eastern borders of the side naves and the corresponding intercolumn areas, are contemporary with the interlacing design fragments of the central nave, to be dated to the second half of the sixth century.

To the later phase of the mosaic floor belongs the decoration of the central nave of the church divided in three panels enclosed in a guilloche border and the decoration of the juxtaposed octagons decorated with diamonds of the southern nave.

This phase technically and stylistically is related to mosaic floors of the seventh through eighth centuries so far discovered in Jordan. The preference of geometric motifs with knotted interlaced decoration, the richness of accessory decorative elements, such as florets or diamond and the position of the inscriptions, point to a late dating of the mosaic in the Umayyad Period.

### **The Inscription of Rabbat Moba, Kerak**

In 1968, Dr. Fawzi Zayadine recovered two lintels with Greek inscriptions probably originating from ecclesiastical buildings.<sup>14</sup> Both have in fact the name of the bishop of the town. The first inscription is dated to "the year 492 after the earthquake", that is to the year 597/598.

In the second he read: "At the time of Stephen our most holy metropolitan has occurred the construction, at the time of the 15th indiction of the year 585". This year with the era of the Provincia Arabia corresponds to 687 of our era that is to the time of Abd el-Malik Ibn Marwan (685-705).

### **The Church of the Virgin at Madaba**

The last building we present is the

complex of the church of the Virgin at Madaba.<sup>15</sup> The mosaic floor of this church was the first mosaic of Jordan to be known to scholars. Since 1887 many scholars have studied the three inscriptions of the mosaic visible in the house of the Sunna' family on the Roman Road of Madaba, but little interest was given to the history of the monument, for the dating of the mosaic and of the church.

The Department of Antiquities acquired the site in 1972. In 1973-74 the area was partially cleaned. In 1979 to provide the Department with a suitable plan of the edifice in order to restore the building for the preservation of the mosaic, we began systematic excavations. After removing the ruins of the house built on the spot in the last century, we succeeded in defining the complete plan of the church and in reading the dedicatory inscription until then partly hidden under a wall.

We could also see the evidence that the mosaic floor with the inscriptions has been added in a later stage to the first mosaic floor of the church. The traces of the sixth century mosaic are still visible in the main nave of the church and in the narthex of the church along the southern wall. In the course of the work, further evidence gave me the opportunity to locate under the narthex of the church a public hall of the town of Madaba decorated with a beautiful mosaic floor with the myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus. This hall and the church were built on a monument of the Roman period.

From the last excavation campaign we can define the history of the monument in this way:

1. In the second and third centuries A.D. an exedra was built on the northern side of the paved road stretching East-West in the Middle of the town.
2. In the middle of the Sixth century a broad room with entrance on the northern wall, was built and decorated with mosaics on the western wall of the exedra.
3. Later, at the end of the same century

<sup>14</sup> F. Zayadine, "Deux Inscriptions Grecques de Rabbat Moab (Areopolis)" *ADAJ*, 1971, p. 71-76.

<sup>15</sup> M. Piccirillo, "La Chiesa della Vergine a Madaba", *LA*, 1982, p. 373-408, tav. 39-82.

the room was covered and the church of the Virgin Mary built and decorated with mosaics.

4. The church was paved anew during the Umayyad Period in 662/3 at the time of bishop Theophanes with whom ends the list of the bishops of Madaba.

The reading of the dating in the dedicatory inscription suggested in 1898 by Clermont-Ganneau is archaeologically, stylistically and epigraphically well based.

### Conclusion

From this short review of the principal archaeological evidence that sheds light on the life of the Christian community during the Umayyad period in Jordan, we shall draw some historical conclusions.

1. From the dedicatory inscription of the church of the Virgin we are informed that at Madaba in the second half of the seventh century there existed an organized Christian community under a bishop and that this community had the possibility of decorating with care a sacred place. The same information is found on the lintel found at Rabba for the southern region.
2. From the central inscription in the church of the Virgin in which one can read: "Looking to the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and to whom she bore Christ, supreme king, only son of the only God, purify the mind, flesh and deeds, so that you may purify with prayers the divine people", we should conclude that in the apsidal wall which stands in front of the main door visible to those entering the church, existed in 662/3 an icon of the Mother of God in paint or in mosaic.
3. The churches of Ma'in and Quweismeh demonstrate that already in the begin-

ning of the eighth century Christian edifices were built and decorated. From the decoration of the mosaic floors of the two churches with birds and human figures we can affirm that the order to destroy them is to be put to sometime after 719/20, the date of the construction and decoration of the church of Ma'in.

4. The life of the Christian community continued also after the execution of that ordinance. The mosaic floors were restored and the churches officiated, as evidenced by the restoration of the mosaic all over the towns and villages of Jordan, and by the humble oil lamps made at Jerash.

This archaeological evidence integrates sufficiently the contemporary literary sources. Let us recall a few of them.

1. On the juridical and normative plan the conciliatory attitude of the Umayyad authority was codified in the so-called Covenant of Umar.<sup>16</sup> In practice the action inspired by these principles varied from place to place, from caliph to caliph, from one governor to another. Therefore acts of persecution also are to be recalled.
2. At the time of Walid I (705-715) the unpleasant event of the martyrdom of St. Peter of Capitolias occurred in which, besides the cruelty of the final execution, the conciliatory attitude of the authority is highlighted.<sup>17</sup>
3. On the plan of the ecclesiastical organization we have the letters sent by Pope Martin after the council held at the Lateran in Rome in 649 to the bishops of Jordan, to John of Philadelphia-Amman, to Theodore of Esbus and Anthony of Bacatha. The Pope authorized John of Philadelphia-Amman to organize anew the ecclesias-

<sup>16</sup> A. S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and their non Muslim Subjects, A Critical Study of the Covenant of Umar*, 1970.

<sup>17</sup> J. T. Milik, "Saint Pierre de Capitolias", in *LA*, 1960, 170-173. "Libre à toi de reconnaître comme

Dieu Jésus qui est un homme et un esclave du Créateur. Mais pourquoi blasphémer notre religion et appeler notre pacifique prophète maître d'erreur et père du mensonge?" said the Caliph to Peter.



tical hierarchy of the region.<sup>18</sup>

4. The dates of the mosaics of Ma'in and Quweismeh are important chronological data to give credit to the Christian sources that attribute the order of destroying the images of the region to Yazid II who, as is written in a Syriac Chronicle, "ordered to destroy in his

empire all the images and figures be they of bronze or of wood or of stone as those painted in colours".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Migne, *PL*, 87, 154-167.

<sup>19</sup> See A. Grabar, *L'iconoclasme Byzantin. Dossier Archéologique*, 1957, 105. S. Gerö, *Byzantine*

*Iconoclasm during the reign of Leo III*, Louvain, 1973, p. 59-84; V. F. Fazzo, *La giustificazione delle immagini religiose*, Napoli, 1977, p. 343-364.