

THE 1996 SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

by
W. Harold Mare

INTRODUCTION

The tenth season of excavation at Abila of the Decapolis-Quwayliba (Fig.1), northern Jordan¹ was conducted from June 15 to August 3, 1996, with W. Harold Mare, Director, and the Abila Archaeological Project, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, as principal investigators.² As a large site, ancient Abila extends about 1.5 km north-south and about 0.5 km east-west, consisting of two tall and a saddle depression in between.³

Research into the Ancient Name of Quwayliba/Abila of the Decapolis before the Hellenistic Period

The ancient site of Quwayliba/Abila of the Decapolis is a large one and represents an archaeological history from 3500 BC to AD 1500 and beyond. Its classical name, according to an inscription in stone excavated at Abila and determined from classical literature and local tradition, was Abila. We deduce that the pre-classical name was Abal/Abel (from which the name Abila derived), plus an additional element: *Abal* in Abal/Abel in Arabic and Hebrew means "green," "lush," "meadow," (something connected with water, as evidenced by the ancient, pre-classical names of sites con-

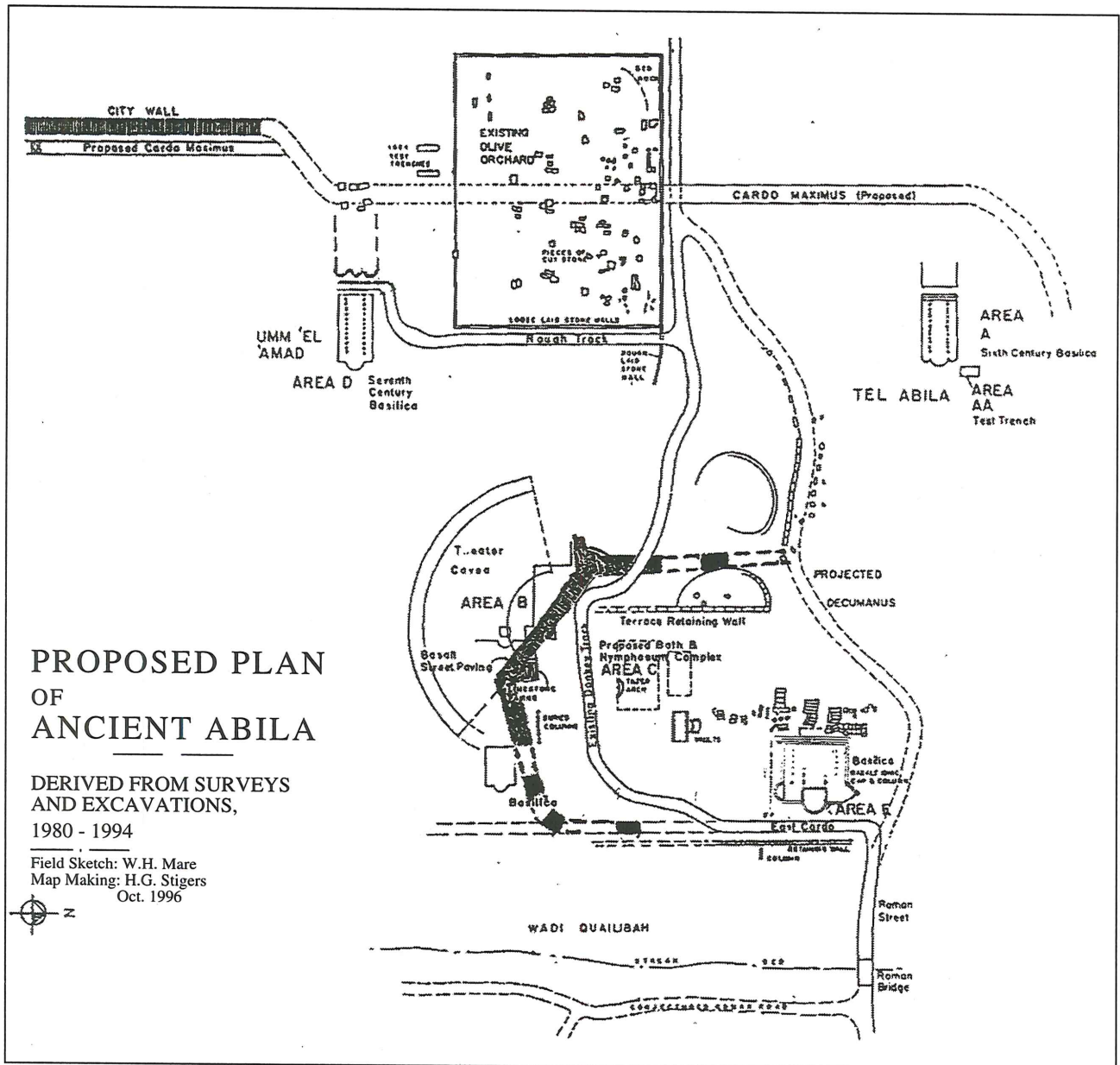
nected with the Jordan River System, such as Abal Bayt Maacha (in the Ḥūlwa region of the Jordan River above the Sea of Galilee), Abal Maholah (near Bayt Shān) in the Jordan Valley, Abal Shittim (just north of the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley), and Abal Karamim near the az-Zarqā' River which flows into the Jordan River. Abila with its copious spring, Ayn Quwayliba whose waters flow into the Yarmūk River and then, combined with the Yarmūk River, to the Jordan, is thus also a part of this Jordan River System, and thus also could have had the attribution attached to it of "green," "lush." The consonantal elements, *alif*, *ba'*, *lam* would in the classical period be supplied with the internal *iota* (Abil) and, thus with the Greek/Latin suffix *alpha/a*, would produce the classical name Abila. As for an additional suffix which would be added to the Arabic name *Abal*, we have yet to find an inscription excavated at Abila which includes this suffix element, which, if found, would then make the pre-classical name *Abal*_____.

Objectives

Three major objectives of the 1996 Abila excavation were: 1) research of the physical remains found at Abila (ceramic evidence, stratigraphic profile, architectural remains,

1. Abila/Quwayliba on the Wādī Quwayliba is an archaeological site located about 15 km north-north east of Irbid and 4 km south of the Wādī al-Yarmūk.
2. The excavation season was also sponsored by Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary, Ohio, and by Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan,
3. Our extensive survey and excavations since 1980, together with the identified location of many building remains visible in all directions all over

the site, point to the fact that habitation at Abila existed in various degrees from archaeological period to archaeological period, on the two tall and in the saddle depression as well as east to west on both sides of the stream which flows from the spring in the main valley, Wādī Quwayliba, north to the al-Yarmūk Valley. Ancient Abila has a long archaeological history extending from about 3500 BC to AD 1500. This was the tenth season of excavation at the site.



**PROPOSED PLAN
OF
ANCIENT ABILA**

DERIVED FROM SURVEYS
AND EXCAVATIONS,
1980 - 1994

Field Sketch: W.H. Mare
Map Making: H.G. Stigers
Oct. 1996

1. Plan of Ancient Abila.

human and zoological remains, geographical, faunal and floral evidence, numismatic specimens, inscriptional evidence, soil analysis, geological profile, etc.) all of which will help us understand better the cultural history of Abila and its satellite area; 2) cultural resource management by which we will salvage as much as possible of the physical remains at Abila which have been disturbed by unlawful digging and looting (as in the churches, baths/nymphaeum, theater cavea, necropolis, etc.); and 3) a

well-planned educational program, including initial instruction in theory and techniques of excavating; bi-weekly lectures in camp on historical, cultural and archaeological subjects, and a comprehensive touring program on weekends to many of the archaeological sites in Jordan. In addition, some students in a field 'practicum' program earned three to five hours of college or graduate school credit.

Detailed objectives for the 1996 Quwayliba/Abila of the Decapolis Excavation area

by area included the following: to determine the extent and depth of the Bronze Age settlement on Tall Abila; to determine more fully the full nature of the baths/nymphaeum complex from the ruins in the civic center; to untangle the mysteries of the theater cavea which has built within it a finely constructed Umayyad palace/fort and a classical period statue niche (for Zeus), and has at its northern extremity a Roman period plaza/street over which was built a Byzantine street; to excavate further, reconstruct and conserve some of the Byzantine churches excavated; to excavate unlooted tombs and salvage other robbed tombs – through the 1996 season we have excavated 90 tomb complexes, graves, and tomb area installations.

The objectives accomplished in the Abila of the Decapolis excavation in 1996 were as follows:

1. Tall Abila (the North Tall), Area AA
(Susan Ellis-Lopez)

Through further excavation in the deep trench of AA 1 (now about 12 m deep) just north east of the apses of the Area A sixth century AD basilica and in the further probe just outside the south acropolis wall south of the Area A basilica's plaza, the excavation team determined that the Early and Middle Bronze Age (3200-1550 BC) settlement on Tall Abila extended at least from the east side of the basilica 50 to 75 m west and included the area along the south acropolis wall. We also determined through excavation farther east of the AA 1 deep trench that the Bronze Age periods here were succeeded by later periods, including some evidence of Late Bronze, and then considerable evidence of the Iron Age, Hellenistic, Early and Late Roman, Early and Late Byzantine, and Islamic periods (Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ayyubid/Mamluk). The pottery retrieved from the AA strata was prolific, especially from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, Hellenistic times and the Roman and

Byzantine periods.

2. Saddle Depression. The Baths / Nymphaeum Complex, Area C (John R. Lee)

At the massive baths/nymphaeum ruins in the central civic center, excavation showed that the complex of buildings was quite extensive and that there were, especially on the east side, a number of collection/settling tank vaults into which, through sluices, water came through the extensive underground water tunnel system from the Quwayliba spring located at the south end of the south tall, Umm al-'Amad. Further probing into Area C 2 exposed another meter of the up right column there, but no foundation floor there upon which the column rested has yet been found. Further probing just to the east of the main vaults in C 12, 17 and 24 uncovered parts of paved flooring, and a tile floor in C 16 where there was a small water channel leading into part of a bathing complex. The team opened a probe at C 20 to try to locate the north-east corner of the bathhouse complex, but further work will have to be done here in 1998.

3. The Saddle Depression. The Theater Cavea, Area B (Bastiaan Van Elderen)

In the theater cavea complex on the south edge of the central civic center complex the excavation team discovered that the finely constructed Umayyad palace/fort had an additional room (Area B 37) built into the cavea just south of the room paved with the flagstone checkered floor (B 6), near and just below the Zeus statue niche (B 28). At the north edge of the theater cavea the team's excavating revealed that the mosaic plaza (B 24, 26, 35, and 36) just east of the Roman plaza/street was quite extensive, extending north and east to make a plaza of about 12 x 12 m, secondarily bordered on the north and east by secondary wall elements composed of reused column drums and capitals (Fig. 2). On the north of the



2. Panorama of the Roman Plaza, Area B.

secondary north wall the mosaic continued north and also west into the west balk B 38 - 40); on the top of the mosaic here a later well-constructed stairway had been built. Excavation here further uncovered a surface water channel which ran east-west. At the extreme top edge of the theater cavea we opened up a probe (M 2) which extended a meter down the slope of the cavea to test G. Schumacher's statement that in 1888, when he made his survey of Abila, he saw a few seats in the cavea⁴ this probe is in its preliminary stages with no definite result yet forthcoming.

4. The Saddle Depression. The Byzantine Basilica, Area E (Clarence Menninga)

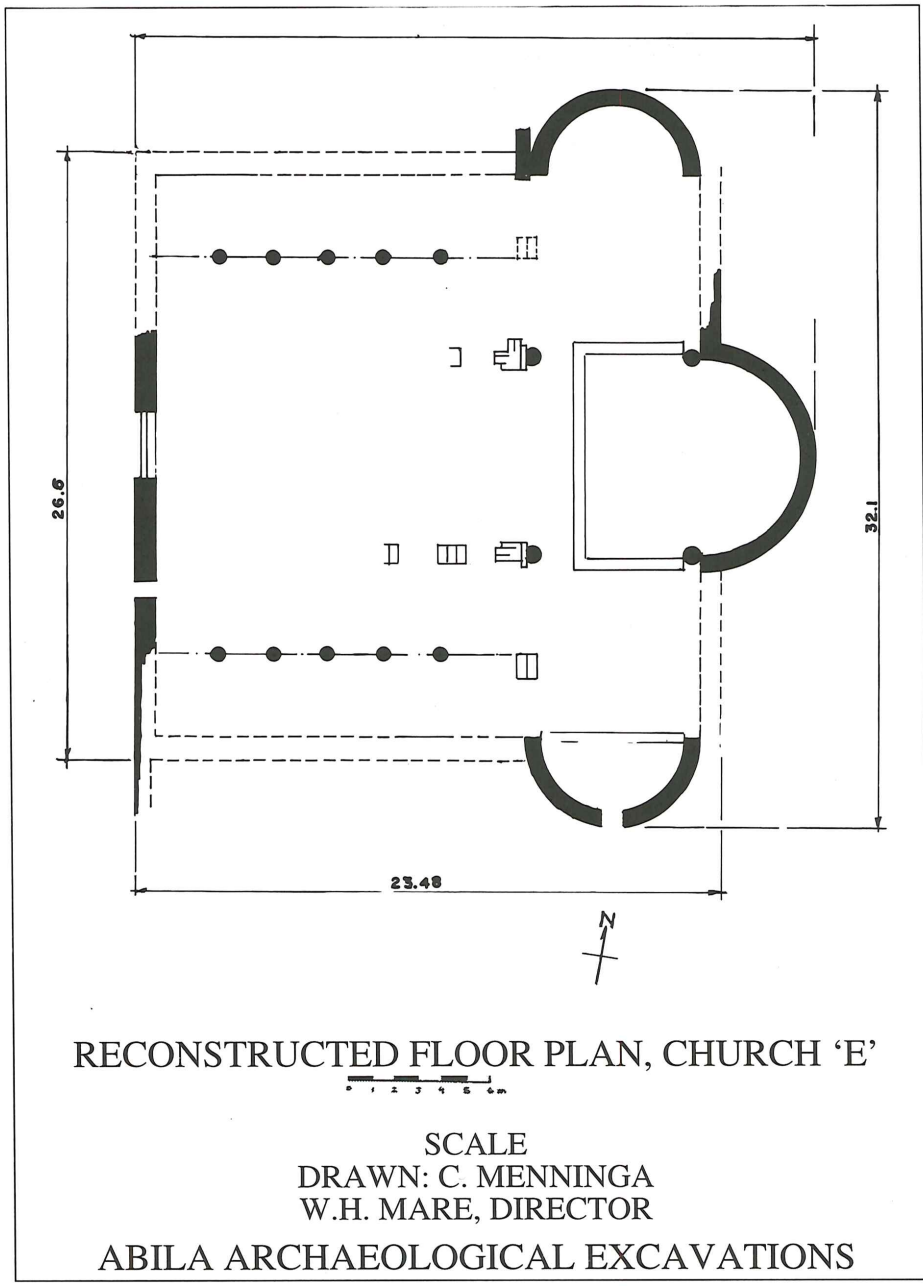
In excavating in the Area E cruciform basilica (Fig. 3), with its five aisles, located in the central civic center down near the Roman bridge, the main and south aisle thresholds on the west side of the church were uncovered, together with a threshold leading from the south wall of the basilica into the south aisle of the church; excavation

uncovered remains of pavement both inside and outside of the main threshold. Also the excavators here uncovered an additional room, with stone pavers, attached to the church just west and north of the north side apse of this cruciform basilica.

5. Umm al-'Amad (the South Tall), Area D (Robb Ludwick)

Excavation was expanded in the Area D basilica on the south tall, Umm al 'Amad (Fig. 4). The excavators found attached to the north outside wall of the Area D church another apse structure oriented east, no doubt part of a small chapel for special religious services; also found here was another surface water channel used to collect rain water from the roofs of the public buildings and carry it into the cistern located just to the north of the basilica. Probes were opened to expose the north wall of the basilica in its entirety. The south wall of the basilica was exposed as well. Excavation has shown that there were three north side thresholds leading from the north wall into

4. G. Schumacher, *Abila of the Decapolis*, PEF. London 1888: 30.



3. Plan of the Area E Basilica.



4. Area D Basilica, looking west from the Central Apse.

the north aisle of the church, and two south side thresholds leading from the south wall into the south aisle of the church; a third threshold on the south wall, in reverse, leads outward into south auxiliary rooms used by the religious officiants.

6. Umm al-‘Amad (The South Tall), Area DD (David H. Vila)

Further excavation was conducted in the Area DD triapsidal basilica, just to the west of, and at a lower elevation than, the Area D church; this lower elevation suggests that this church had been built at an earlier period, and the absence of any column drums or capitals in the ruins, fortifies this hypothesis, suggesting that its column drums and capitals were taken and used in the building of the nearby Area D basilica, located just to the east and higher up. In this Area DD basilica the excavating team uncovered the main and the north and south aisle thresholds on the west wall of this basilica. A large section of marble flooring was found just inside the main threshold. Also, a second cistern was found within the church itself (the first cistern was found within the basilica in 1994). Squares were opened up along the north aisle of the church in an attempt to uncover the exact location of the north wall of the church, but evidence for this wall has not yet been found. It is unclear yet what kind of plaza and/or stairway on the west may have led up to the main and side thresholds.

RECONSTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION

In an endeavor to reconstruct and conserve some of the Abila site, including the large plaza before the theater cavea, and some of the church remains excavated at Abila, considerable quantities of excavation

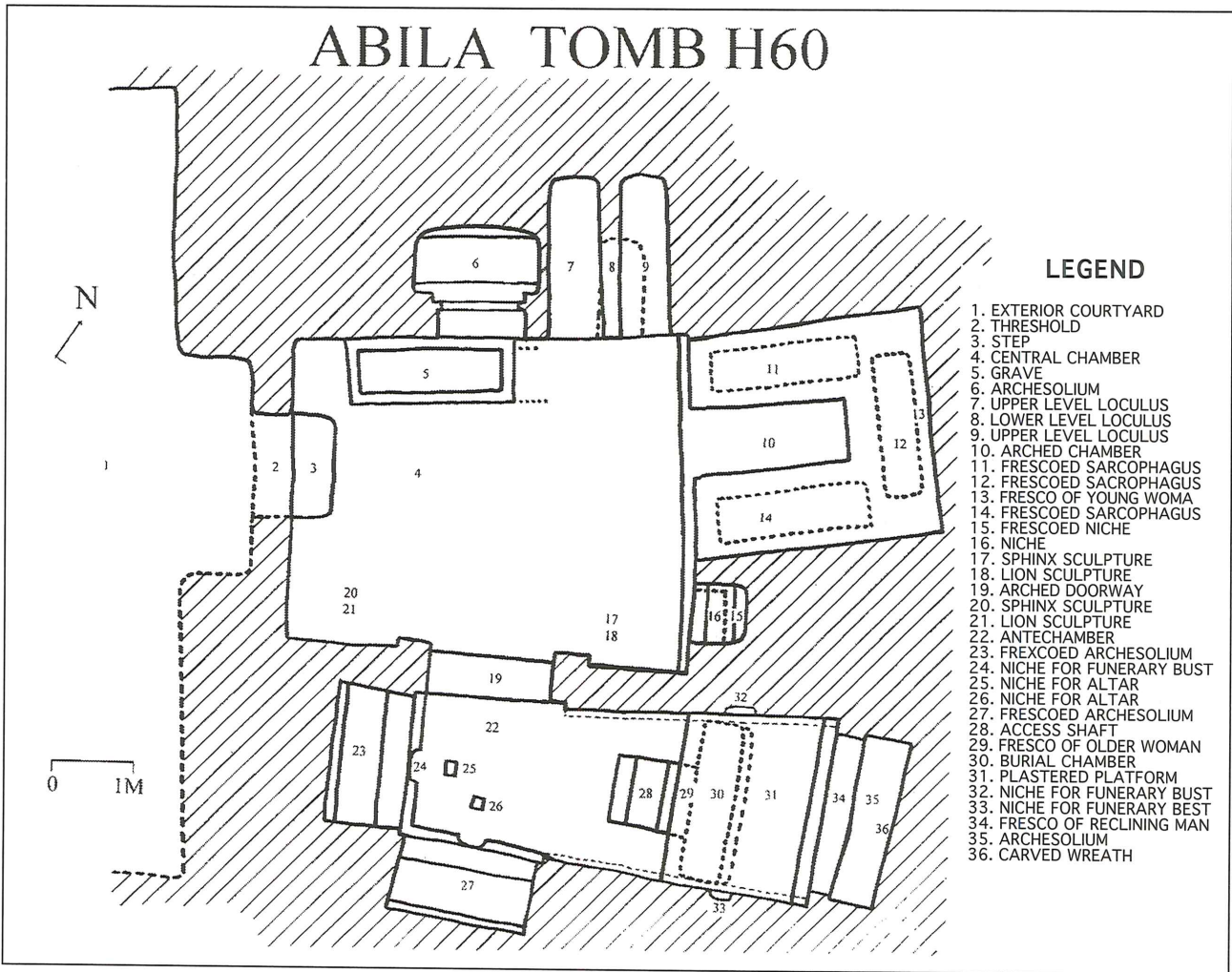
debris and surface debris were removed from these areas and reconstruction of part of the outer walls of the Area D church was undertaken, and a protective iron and barbed wire fence was installed by the Department of Antiquities around the acropolis of the south tall, Umm al-‘Amad, to protect the Area D and DD churches and other architectural remains nearby.

7. Tomb Excavations. Areas H (Robert W. Smith)⁵

In the tombs area along the east slope of Wādi Quwayliba, just to the north-east of Tall Abila, considerable surface debris was removed to uncover limestone ledges into which many ancient tombs all along this wadi slope were cut. The tomb excavation staff was able to salvage the remains of several looted Roman/Byzantine tombs and installations and also to excavate one or two unrobbed tombs. Of particular significance was Tomb H 60, located north-east of Tall Abila about one third of the way up the ca. 90 m high 45 degree east slope of Wādi Quwayliba, a tomb which the tomb excavation team excavated extensively. Tomb H 60 was a Late Roman tomb complex, reused in Byzantine times (Fig. 5) with a large rectangular central chamber (ca. 4 m by 5 m) and loculi and arcosolia burial niches cut into the limestone walls; on the north wall of the central chamber one small arcosolium and three loculi were cut, and into the floor of the central chamber a single burial niche was cut. Parts of many frescoes survived, still attached to the walls of the arcosolium on the southeast side of the central chamber and on the tops of the three plastered sarcophagi cut into the horizontal bed of this large arcosolium; on the back wall of this south arcosolium was an exquisitely painted young woman within a medallion; the fragment of an inscription below, conveyed a

5. A comprehensive article on Tomb H 60 will be written for *ADAJ* by R. W. Smith, Tomb Excava-

tion Supervisor.



5. Top Plan of Tomb H 60 (by R.W. Smith).

message of good cheer to the woman.

Partial remains of frescoes are also to be seen in a south secondary rectangular gallery reached through an ornate arched doorway leading off from the south-east wall of the central chamber. This gallery had arcosolia cut into three of its walls, with several sarcophagi cut into the horizontal beds of the arcosolia. On the walls and surfaces of the plastered sarcophagi, frescoes were painted, with parts of these frescoes and their plaster backing to be seen still attached to the walls and other surfaces of the arcosolia niches; other parts of the frescoes had fallen and were resting on the floor. The frescoes portrayed medallions with portraits of ladies, motifs of flowers, animal figures, such as birds, etc., and parts of inscriptions. The large carved, oval entry way

into this south-east chamber of the Tomb H 60 complex, is ornamented on each side with carved figures of lions/lionesses and angel type sphinxes and wreaths. Preservation procedures were conducted.

The Educational Program (Robert W. Smith)

An extensive educational program included lectures, featuring senior staff members, scheduled twice weekly centering on different disciplines, such as geology, epigraphy, the archaeological history of Abila developed through historical period by historical period, ancient coinage, tomb excavation, expertise in the recording system, etc. Weekend educational trips for the staff included Jarash, 'Ammān, 'Ajlūn Castle, Pella and the Jordan Valley, Gadara, Umm

aj- Jimāl, the Desert Castles, and an extensive trip to Petra, 'Aqaba, Wādī Ramm, etc.

Acknowledgements

The excavation was undertaken under the gracious supervision of Dr Ghazi Bisheh, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and assisted by Mr Sultan Shureidah, Irbid District Inspector of the Department of Antiquities. The 1996 Abila Staff used the facilities of the Secondary Girls School in Hartha, through the kind arrangements of the Department of Antiquities and the Ministry of Education of Jordan.

The American Staff consisted of 32 members⁶ augmented by the local staff cook and his assistant and by the 50 to 55

local workmen hired for the various labor tasks in the field and in camp.

The 1996 Abila Excavation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the Director-General, Dr Ghazi Bisheh to Mr Sultan Shureidah, to all the Department of Antiquities, and to all of the Abila Staff for their splendid work which made the 1996 season a success. We also extend our thanks to Dr Wesley Ulrich, M.D., Ms and Aileen Coleman, R.N., for their medical assistance and support in storing all of the Abila Excavation equipment at the Annoor Hospital in al- Mafraq, Jordan.

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6. Of the American Staff of 32 persons, the Senior Staff consisted of W. Harold Mare, Director, Bastiaan Van Elderen, Calvin Seminary; John R. Lee, St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York; Clarence Menninga, Calvin College, Michigan; Robert W. Smith, Florida Christian College, Kissimmee, Florida; Susan Ellis Lopez, Heritage College, Mabton, Washington; David H. Vila, St. Louis University; D. Robb Ludwick, Covenant Seminary; Timothy Snow, Cincinnati Bible Seminary; Dar Brooks Hedstrom, Miami University, Ohio; and George Van Voorhis, St. Louis. The Staff members' positions were as follows: Director, W. Harold Mare; Area Supervisors: Susan Ellis Lopez, Area AA Supervisor; Bastiaan Van Elderen, Area B Supervisor; John R. Lee, Area C Supervisor; Robb Ludwick, Area D Supervisor; David Vila, Area DD Supervisor; Clarence Menninga, Area E Supervisor; and Robert W. Smith, Tomb Area Supervisor. Square Supervisors included: Robert Berry, Ted Carruth,

Heidi Chua, Beth Cooley, Maria Deutschmann, Heather Erickson, Jessica Glover, Tammy Harman, Judith Herzog, Mark Hill, Aaron Hill, Ian Janssen, Charles Kading, Kevin Morrow, William Pierson, Risa Sankawa, Joseph Thomas, George Van Voorhis, Mary Van Voorhis, Barbara Wannemacher, Bruce Wannemacher, and Harrietann Weller. The Specialists were: Ceramicists, W. Harold Mare, Bastiaan Van Elderen and Susan Ellis Lopez; Architect, Robb Ludwick; Epigrapher, Bastiaan Van Elderen; Osteologist, Heidi Chua, M.D.; Geoarchaeologist, Clarence Menninga; Photographer, Timothy Snow; Registrar, Dar Brooks Hedstrom; Draftsmen-Artists, Robert Smith and other members of the Staff; and Educational Director, Robert Smith. The Support Staff consisted of: the Department of Antiquities Representative, Sultan Shureidah; the Camp Manager, George Van Voorhis; the Medical Advisor, Wesley Ulrich, M.D.; and the cook and his assistant.