

# THE 1995-1996 EXCAVATION OF DAYR AL-QAṬṬĀR AL-BYZANTĪ A PRELIMINARY REPORT

by

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with contributions by Jan Svensson

## Preface

This preliminary report is based on the results of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition to al-Lisān Peninsula in August 1995 and November–December 1996. The main goal of the expedition was the excavation of the Byzantine monastery referred to as Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī (JADIS no.1907.007). The excavation in Dayr al-Qaṭṭār comprised parts of the main church, a chapel with a well-preserved mosaic floor as well as other constructions and find material from the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The project work also included a thorough investigation of hermitages in the surroundings of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and an excavation of a larger hermitage referred to as Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba.

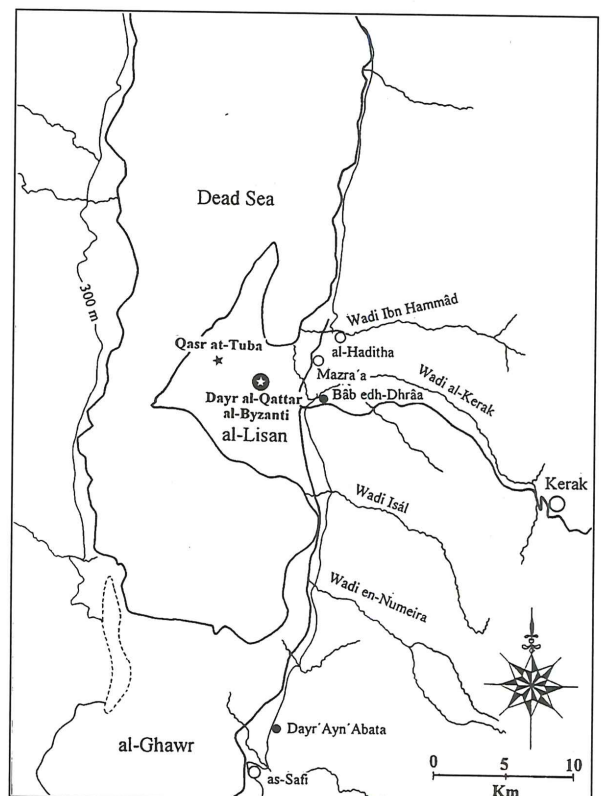
The Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is an independent archaeological project, initiated in 1994 by the authors of this report, who also function as field directors. The project is connected with the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. We also receive continuous advice from the Department of Earth Science and Tectonics at Uppsala University. The authors' first visit to al-Lisān and its immediate surroundings was carried out in late October and early November 1994.

Apart from the excavation of the monastery, the main goal of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is a study of the al-Lisān area from a long-term perspective. This preliminary report will concentrate on the excavation of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī and the hermitage Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. Parallel with the excavation of the monastery, a minor survey of Bronze Age remains was carried out during 1995, covering the coastal area to the

east and north of the village of al-Mazra'a. The survey was performed for the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (Kaliff and Holmgren 1995) (Fig 1).

## Presentation of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī is located on al-Lisān about 6 km west of the village of al-Mazra'a, Palestine Grid East 196.100 and North 075.100. The peninsula, with its white desert-like environment, is characterised by rift valleys and rapidly eroding sediments. The monastery is situated on a plateau with an open view of the surrounding landscape and the Dead Sea. The free-



1. Map showing the southern Dead Sea region (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

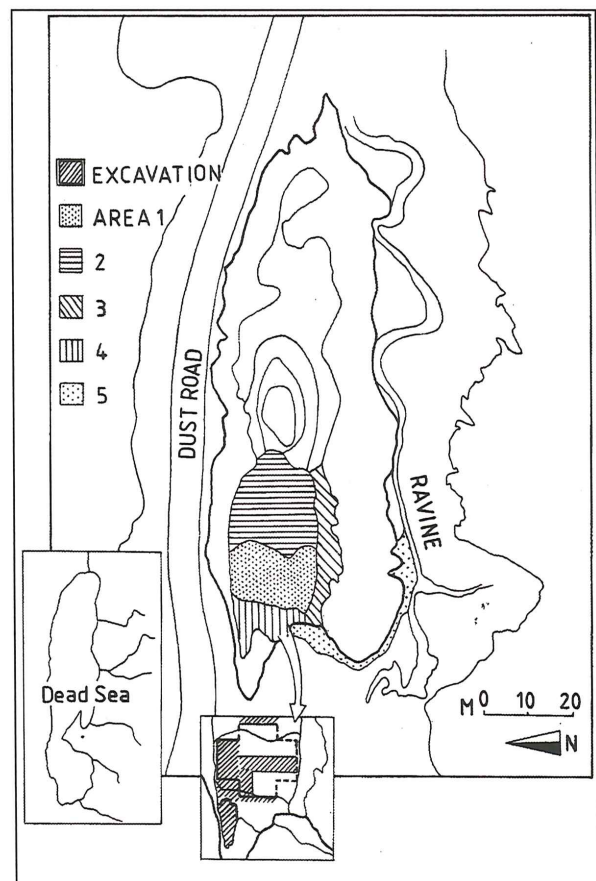
standing plateau is a product of small wadis rapidly dissecting the ground, partly consisting of old soft lake sediments (beach rock). Mudbrick walls and debris from the later phases are visible all over the surfaces of the plateau. The dry and salty environment is a key to the exceptionally good preservation conditions for various organic materials. Accordingly, the artefacts found during the excavation include a great many items of wood, clothing and other organic materials.

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār was first mentioned in the literature by Alois Musil, after travelling in the al-Ghawr in 1898 (Musil 1907: 164). Musil was taken to the place by a local guide, referring to the site as el-Kerje (al-Qeryeh). The site has also later been briefly referred to by F.-M. Abel (1929), but no scientific excavations have ever been carried out before. Unfortunately, some illicit excavations have taken place, causing some damage to the site. The monastic activities cover a large area that includes different hermitages and possible burial grounds, some with more than one kilometre in between. Dayr al-Qaṭṭār is therefore to be interpreted as the main monastery – a centre for a large monastic community in the al-Lisān area.

In the following text the two different seasons of excavation will be presented separately. Accordingly, we will present the trenches and different phases in the order they were excavated. A concluding discussion will synthesize the results from the different trenches at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, as well as an effort to integrate the result from Dayr al-Qaṭṭār with the hermitages (Fig 2).

### The Excavation of 1995

The aim of the 1995 excavation was to get an idea of the extent of the main site and its different structures and phases. Accordingly, the site was divided into five main working areas (Areas 1-5), due to the topography and different exposed structures.



2. Map showing Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanti and its location on al-Lisān Peninsula. Areas and trenches are marked with different patterns (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

The summit of the site was named Area 1 and a somewhat lower plateau on the eastern side Area 2. The slopes on the southern and western sides were called Area 3 and 4 respectively. Ancient dumping areas at the bottom of the ravines on the southern and western side of the site were named Area 5 (Fig. 1).

During 1995 two major soundings were opened: A long trench (16 x 4 m, trench 1) was opened in the central part of the summit (Area 1), with a maximum elevation of about -360 m bsl. Trench 2 (12 x 6 m) was opened on a protruding plateau at the western slope (Area 4). The documentation was done using a specially designed system, based on Swedish excavation standards. All key features are identified with certain letters in addition to the running numbers. On the plans presented with the report, the fol-



lowing key features are used: W = wall, G = floor level, L= locus, F=fill, E=other construction, R=disturbance, MA=marble, WD=diagnostic wood. There are no fixed points showing the more precise elevation within the area. A fix-point 5 m below the lowest spot of the site is used as reference (zero) for the elevations marked on the plans.

#### *The Islamic Phases of Trench 1*

The latest phase of trench 1 exposed part of a building from the Early Islamic period (Umayyad-Fatimid period), including reused Byzantine stone and wooden details (Fig. 2). A characteristic feature was the vast accumulations of organic debris and wooden constructions from buildings. A C<sup>14</sup> sample taken from a wooden floor has been dated to AD 960–1030 (1 sigma calibrated result; Beta-77994). The dating was performed by the laboratory at Beta Analytic Inc. in Miami, USA. The preserved wooden details show remains of walls and roof constructions (L4). The beams of the roof were made out of palm trunks, supporting slender logs and bamboo roofing.

Findings from many reused artefacts, mosaic fragments and marble construction details indicated the presence of a church in this location (Area 1) with a central position in the monastery, during the Byzantine period. Some of the marble pieces are presumably remains from the altar region of the church. The reused marbles include pieces from a chancel screen and from the pulpit. Similar pieces were found in the basilica of Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭā (Politis 1992: 281ff).

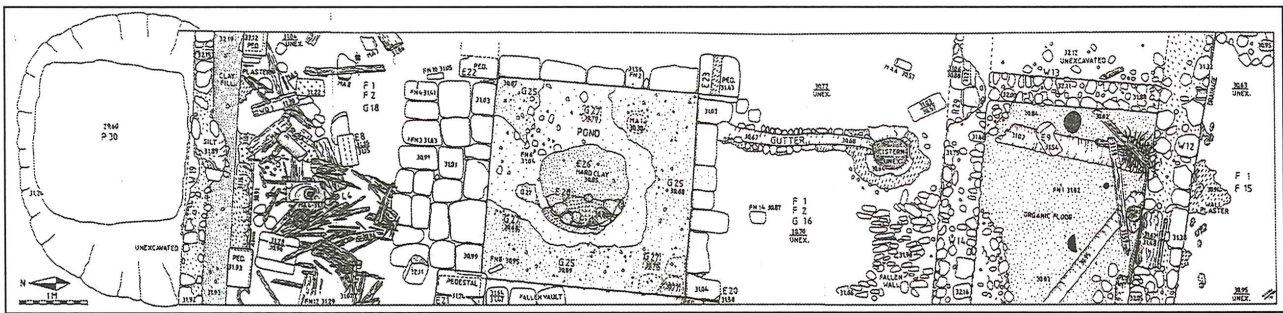
Common in trench 1 were scattered tesserae of different sizes. Some examples of glass tesserae were also present, including relatively rare gold and colours such as green and blue. Tesserae of different colours, including gold, have been documented in several buildings in Madaba, Jarash, Pella, Mar Elias, Umm al-Hadamus, Umm ar-Rasas as well as in Petra (Picirillo 1993:

19). The golden tesserae found in trench 1 indicate the presence of wall mosaics, possibly in connection with the semidome of the sanctuary.

Trench 1 shows a square pond in a central position within a building. It is flanked by four pedestals (E20-23) originally supporting vaults. Towards the north another two pedestals following the same symmetrical pattern were discovered. These two pedestals were connected by a low mudbrick wall, resting on a stone wall from an earlier phase. The pedestals and the foundation of the mudbrick walls make it clear that Byzantine blocks were reused in this phase. A circular decorative construction (E28) marks the centre of the pond. The bottom was covered with thick plaster in two layers with gravel in between. Collected rainwater from the pond was led through a gutter and stored in the cistern found immediately to the south of the entire construction. Under the bottom of the pond an Early Byzantine capital (MA1) was uncovered (Fig 3).

#### *Trench 2 - A Byzantine Chapel*

Already during our inspection of the site in 1994, we discovered parts of a preserved mosaic floor, on a plateau on the western slope (Area 4). We therefore decided to open another major trench (trench 2) at this location. The excavation of trench 2 revealed the lower parts of a Byzantine chapel with a partly preserved mosaic floor (Fig.3). This chapel was probably a sanctuary attached to the main church (Fig. 4). The remains consist of a nave, separated from a chancel and a small apse by a threshold (W8). The nave was preserved for a length of almost 6.5 m in an east-west direction and for a width of about 3 m. The steep cut on the northern side of the chapel has destroyed about one third of the entire construction. The original size of the nave was about 7 x 4 m, and the chancel about 1 x 4 m. Attached to the eastern part of the chancel was the small apse, about 2 m in di-



3. Trench 1 with Early Islamic phases excavated in 1995 and its extension to the east in 1996. Note the well-preserved wooden constructions. (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

ameter (Fig 4) .

Our present working theory is that the ground structure of the chancel with its apse was built during the sixth century, when a fine multicoloured mosaic floor consisting of small and medium-size tesserae seems to have formed different icons (G5-7). In the next phase, probably during the seventh or eighth century, the major part of this mosaic floor was reorganized, perhaps in order to reduce some of its icons. This was most likely on account of one of the Byzantine iconoclasts (e.g. Meyendorf 1979: 71ff). The floor of the nave seems to have consisted of large monochrome tesserae from the earliest phase and onwards (G4). In the chapel one single cross symbol from the earliest mosaic phase was left in front of the altar. In the apse the floor showed clear marks from the altar (E14). There are some traces of fire on the older parts of the floor, as well as in surrounding debris from the same period. The well-documented earthquake of AD 749 is the likely cause of the destruction of a major part of the monastery, as it had an enormous impact on the al-Lisān area (Talbot 1994). A tentative explanation is that the fire was a result of this event.

Apparently the chapel was rebuilt after the fire and the monastery seems to have continued as a Christian sanctuary into the Early Islamic periods, a common phenomenon recognizable in several Byzantine sites in Jordan (e.g. Kaegi 1992: 88ff). During the chapel's latest phase the coloured mosaics were covered with thick plaster and

in the southern wall of the nave (locus 15) a small niche was constructed (Fig 5).

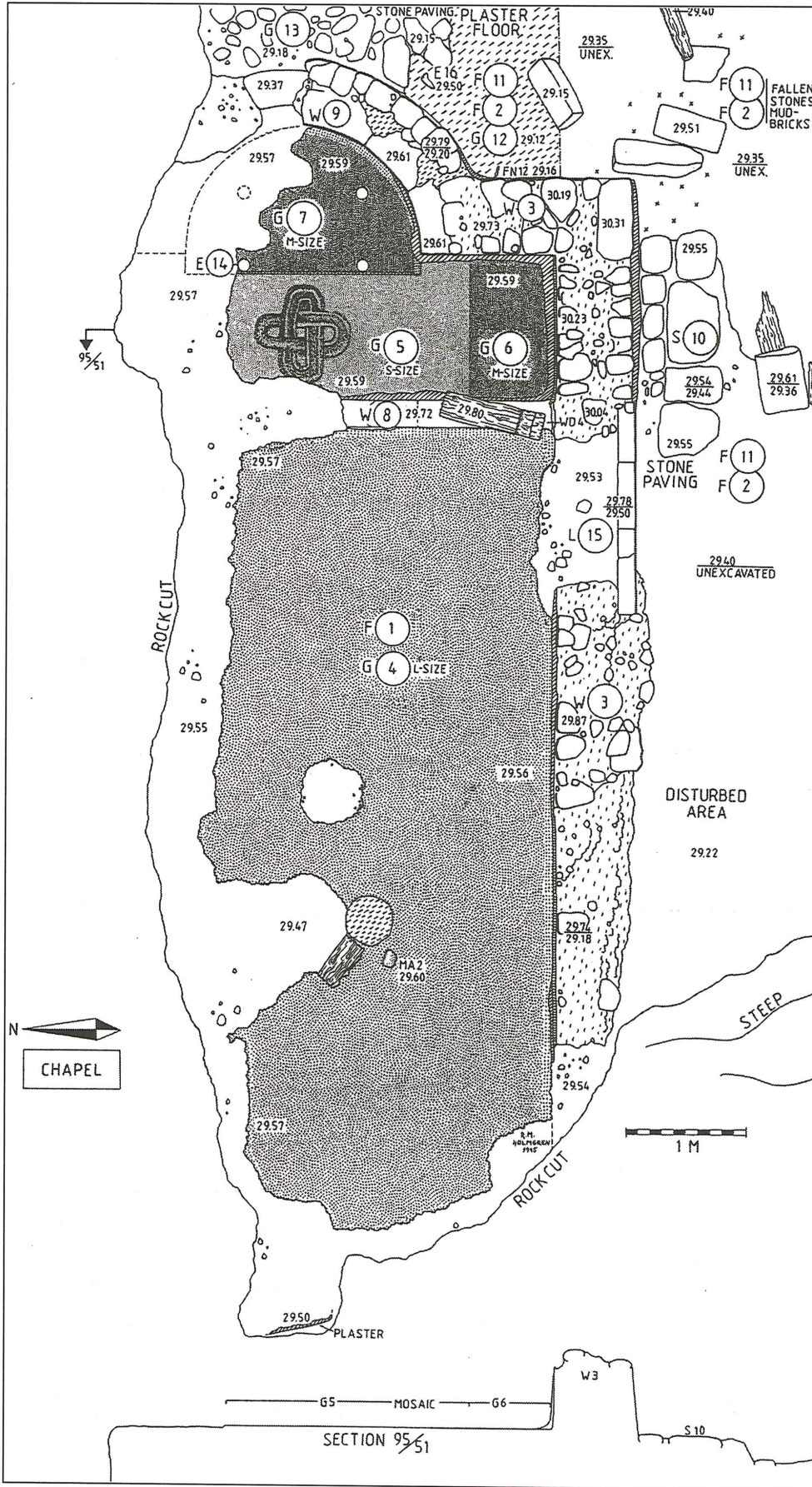
#### *Debris in Area 5 - New Light from an Old Lamp*

The main body of artefacts as well as bone material was found in four separate areas with debris. Plenty of glass and organic material were detected besides pottery from different kinds of vessels. All of the material found in these areas could be dated to the Early and Late Byzantine periods. Frequent finds among the organic material were fragments of clothing, such as wool and linen, ropes, plaited work and fish bones.

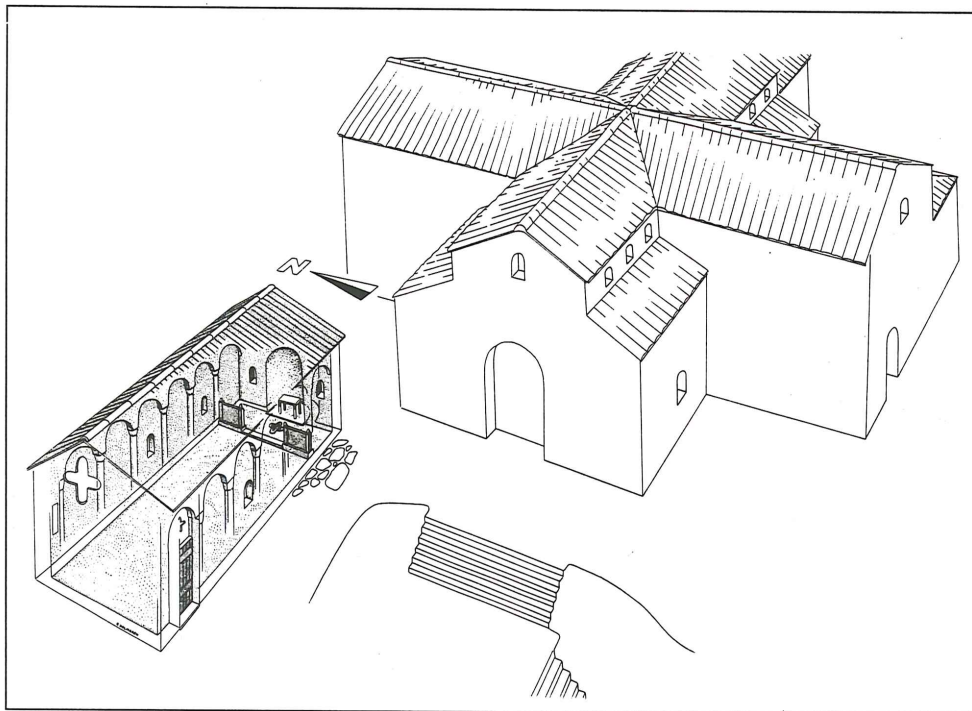
A brief study of the bones shows the presence of cattle, pig, sheep, goat, domestic fowl and fish. Most interesting are large amounts of bones from the parrot fish (*Scaridae*) a parallel to the finds at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abātā (Politis 1992: 284). An extensive analysis of the bones will be presented in the final report of the excavations of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanti.

Most of the material from Area 5 is still being processed, but one of the most interesting finds will be presented here. The interpretation below is based on the work of Jan Svensson (1995). Among waste material from the Byzantine period a fragment of a ceramic lamp was found (Fig. 5). On the fragment six Greek majuscules can be seen, which makes it a rare find. It is possible to interpret the inscription as (1)...XΦΘΗ..., (2)...XγΦΕΝΙ... or as (3)...ΛγΦΘΗ. Ac-





4. The ground structure of the Byzantine chapel in trench 2. Different loci of the mosaic floor are marked with letters and numbers referred to in the text (Drawing: R. Holmgren).



5. Reconstruction of the Byzantine chapel, in relation to the position of the hypothetically reconstructed main church (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

According to interpretation (1), the inscription could be part of an acrostic or a toponym. According to interpretations (2) and (3), words or part of words could be read. So far there are no reasons to follow an explanation in line with interpretation (1), but either interpretation (2) or (3) could be plausible.

Regarding interpretation (2), the majuscules could be read ...XγΦENI..., that is “?under a?”. The combination of the preposition ὑφ and the cardinal ἐν upon a lamp points at a quotation from the Bible, namely Mt 5:15: “Neither do people light a lamp and put it *under* a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” Contradictory to this are the preceding and following majuscules and the fact that the quotation speaks about *the* bowl according to the Greek text. Further, there is no space on the lamp for the entire quotation.

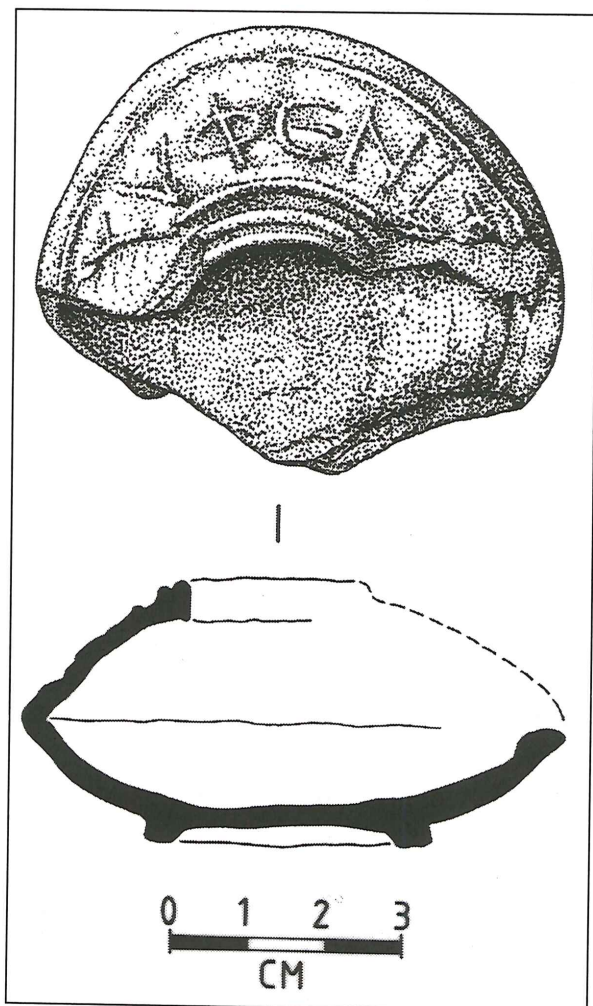
Interpretation (3) allows for a reasonable understanding of the inscription. The majuscules ...ΛγΦΘΗ appear as the ending of a verb, that is ἀποκαλυφθη. Although lamps with inscriptions are rare, a similar example has an inscription saying that the

light of Christ may shine for everyone (Riesenfeld 1962: col. 1440-1441). This is not a biblical quotation, but a biblical allusion. Taken that this may be the case concerning this lamp too, and that the verb should be related to ἀποκαλυπτω, the inscription could be an allusion to Lk 2:32, where old Simeon says about the child Jesus: “A light for the revelation to the Gentiles.”

If the lamp had a liturgical function within the daily Hesperinon (the Evening Prayer), of which this ode “the song of Simeon” probably formed a part, the inscription would be very pertinent. Considering the space on which majuscules could be inscribed on the lamp, the entire inscription would not have been longer than: ΑΠΟΚΛΥΦΘΗΤΟΦΩΣ, that is with modern minuscules: ἀποκαλυφθη το φως, “May the light be revealed” (Fig.6).

No other inscriptions were found during this year’s excavation, but fragments of black and white mosaics indicate the presence of a floor with inscriptions. These fragments, together with a large number of tesserae and some preserved multicoloured units, were discovered in a pit (P30) im-





6. Find no. 9: Byzantine lamp with part of a Greek inscription (Drawing: R.Holmgren).

mediately north of trench 1. The pit is the result of looting activities.

### The Excavation of 1996

During the two months' work of 1996 we enlarged the trenches opened during the first season and managed to get a relatively clear view of different buildings and phases on the site. Accordingly the work of this season also included the documentation of some satellite hermitages and the excavation of the previously mentioned large hermitage of Qaṣr at-Ṭūba. Initially we will describe the excavation in Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and present the work in the hermitages in a separate section below.

In Dayr al-Qaṭṭār the work continued in trenches 1 and 2. Both the old trenches were

enlarged and two new trenches (T3 and T4) were also opened. The different trenches showed a clear picture of the later Islamic phases as well as of the limits and ground structure of a cruciform Byzantine church. The trenches will be presented separately with their different phases (Fig.7).

### Trench 1 - Islamic Building and a Byzantine Crypt

During 1996 the northern part of trench 1 was extended towards west. The upper level in this area was an extension of the L4 described above, the courtyard with the pond and an additional room towards the west, both from the Islamic phase containing the C<sup>14</sup> dated wooden floor. Although the floor was dated to between 960 and 1030, the walls and other stone constructions could have a somewhat earlier dating. What remains clear is that this phase as a whole belongs to the post-Byzantine period.

L4 and L44 in the extended part of T1 exposed a lot of preserved wood, similar to the material discovered in 1995. Two carved wooden details were found: one beam with cross-shaped patterns in relief and one round wooden decoration with a cross. Three more examples of the latter were discovered in the extension of trench 2, described below. None of these objects was destroyed or even marked by fire. This



7. View towards the south-east showing the excavated chapel in the foreground and the walls of the cruciform church in the background (Photo: SDE).



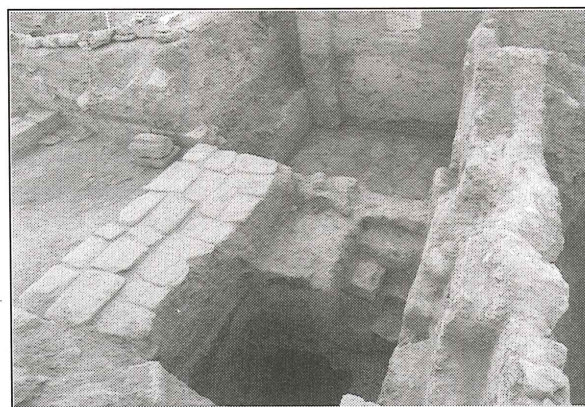
supports the hypothesis that the site remained a Christian sanctuary well into the Islamic period. Besides finds of wood, a few Byzantine marbles were discovered in the fill. L4 and L44 rested on plaster floors, G45 and G46. G45 was connected to the stone pavement north of the pond and G46 belongs to the same level. A mudbrick wall with an entrance, separating L4 and L44, rested on an earlier Byzantine wall within the church.

In order to get a clear picture of the Byzantine phase in this part of T1, the thin plaster floor G45 was removed. Beneath G45 was a 0.70–0.75 m thick fill of the typical al-Lisān marl (F47). This fill contained no finds of any kind. It was separated from the lower fill of the same kind (F49) by a thin layer of organic material (O48). The organic material may be the remains of a collapsed inner roof. F49 showed remains of different bronze hangers, most probably lamp-holders, originally fastened into the collapsed roof. The Byzantine church floor (G50), exposed beneath the fill, was formed out of huge irregularly cut stone slabs, neatly fitted together.

Beneath L4 north of the pond a test trench was dug through G18 (same level as G45 and G46), in an area where looting activities had taken place during the time between our two working seasons. No major damage had been done but the floor level and part of the pond had been removed. To protect the northern frame of the pond with its stone pavement we did some restoration work with cement. The test trench covered the area between W19 and the stone pavement. The upper fill (F37) beneath G18 showed complicated lenses of ashy material. Starting at the same level as the previously described church floor (G50), there is a cut into the deeper lying bedrock (al-Lisān beach rock). The opening in the bedrock was approximately 1.5 x 1.5 m, making up the entrance to a crypt beneath the floor of the church. The crypt was entirely filled up,

with an ash-layer (A39) in the upper part of the entrance and a fill (F40) with major bone deposits (B38) in its deeper layer. The ash-layer contained several fragments of glass lamps, besides some scattered bones, the latter probably originating from the interior of the crypt. The vast majority of the recovered bones consist of human foot and hand bones, although all skeletal parts of the body are represented. The osteological analyses shows remains of at least 20 individuals, according to the present number of *cupoideum*. Most of the deceased were middle-aged. Almost no traces of strain or inflammation in the bones could be detected.

The find of selected bones supports the presence of more than one crypt within the church, with similarly organized bones, forming ossuaries with separated bones from different parts of the body. Among the bones were found some fragments of iron nails and resin, probably originating from coffins. In this context three small worked bone decorations were also discovered. In the top of the fill containing bones (B38) a hen's egg was found, probably put there as a deliberate symbol. The egg is still today a common symbol of the resurrection in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches (Fig. 8).



8. View towards the west during the 1996 season, showing the three different phases in trench 1. In the foreground is a test trench leading down to the entrance of the crypt, beneath the church floor. The stone pavement to the left belongs to the latest phase. In the background is the extension of T1 showing the level of the original church floor (Photo: SDE).



In the deepest part, close to the bottom of the crypt, the fill contained some pottery that could be dated to the Early Bronze Age period. Among the pottery were two almost complete EB I vessels with a shape similar to the pottery represented in the Bāb adh-Dhrā' material. It is still unclear whether the pottery was a secondary deposit in the crypt or if the crypt itself is constructed out of an Early Bronze Age chamber tomb. No tombs of this kind have been registered on al-Lisān so far. The crypt very much resembles some of the small hermit dwellings in the surroundings of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. A probable interpretation would be that this crypt originally formed part of an older hermitage, later incorporated in the church of the monastic centre.

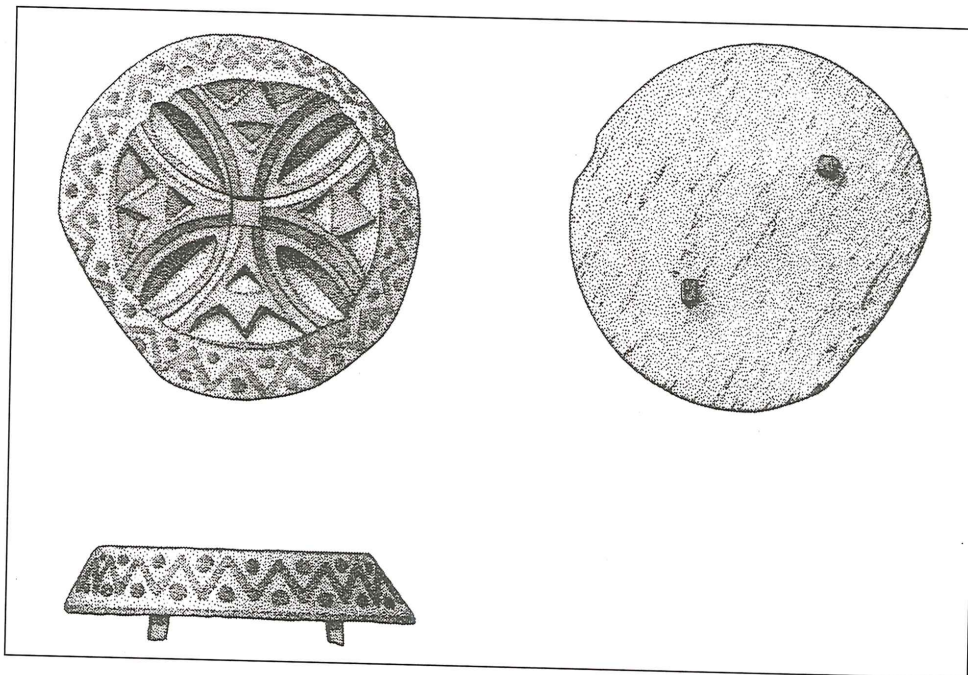
*Trench 2 - The Northern Wing*

The original T2 with its chapel was extended towards the east during the 1996 season. It covered three separate rooms in the northern wing of the main church and a stone-paved courtyard in the gap between the chapel and the church. The courtyard makes a connection between the chapel and the original walls of the main church. It was covered by debris and scattered ashlar

blocks and palm trunks from fallen parts of the building. The occurrence of unburnt wood, resting on the stone paving, suggests that this area was used into the latest phase.

The northern wing was divided into three different rooms, two more narrow chambers on the flanks and a somewhat larger room in the centre. Except for the northern limit of the wing, no walls forming the rooms were visible from the surface. After removing the top soil, a disturbed layer due to illicit excavations (R17), a division into separate rooms was clearly visible. R17 showed material from all the periods represented on the site. Among the finds from this layer could be noted a Byzantine carved and painted wooden decoration, resembling the Saint George's cross (Fig. 9).

The stratigraphy in the three rooms followed the same pattern, and we have preliminarily distinguished three different phases. The upper layers show activity in the partly filled-up rooms, probably contemporary with the latest phase in T1. One *in situ* find of a complete cooking pot showed a temporary level of activity in the western room. A working hypothesis is that the northern wing was used for different domestic activities around the now somewhat



9. Painted wooden decoration, 15cm in diam., resembling a Saint George cross (Drawing: R. Holmgren).



smaller central building, during the latest phase of activities on the site. The upper level in the rooms was formed due to the dumping of debris, partly burnt material from the older building. The fill in the rooms contains layers of more or less ashy material as well as finds of pottery, bronze, marble, wood and cloth. The fill shows material from the Byzantine as well as the earliest Islamic periods. This indicates that the filling of the rooms was done deliberately on one and the same occasion. Worth mentioning among the find material in the fill is a hanging glass lamp, fragments of a removed and later dumped mosaic floor and a purse made of green-coloured linen. The pattern on the partly burnt mosaic fragments shows mainly scalloped patterns, in black,



10. View towards the west inside the middle room of the northern wing (of the rebuilt church) with a preserved door into the eastern room and a blocked door to the left, leading into the hall of the church. Note the drainage beneath the floor level and the post-hole, probably for a support of a wooden floor (Photo: SDE).

white and red (Fig. 10).

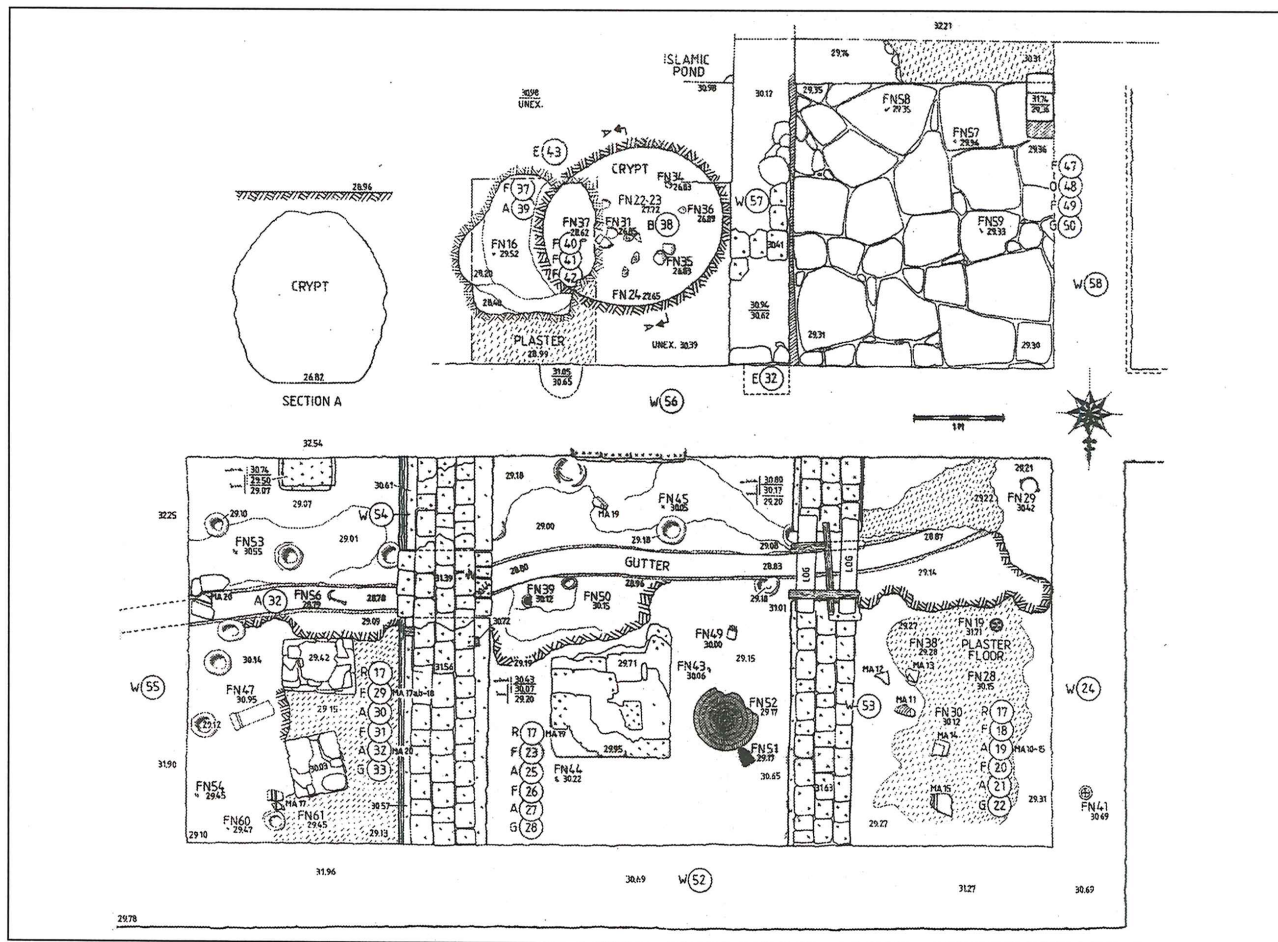
The earliest detected phase in the northern wing was represented by the floor level (G22, G28, G33) and the original stone walls of the Byzantine church, resting on bedrock. Mudbricks later added on top of the remaining stone walls show a restoration of the partly destroyed church, during the Late Byzantine or Early Islamic period. The rebuilt walls are still standing to a height of 3 - 3.5 m. Three different doors between the rooms were found, with parts of their wooden frame still in place. The door between the eastern chamber and the middle room had been deliberately blocked during this phase. This was also the case with the larger door into the hall of the church, which was smoothly closed with bricks and plaster. Other added features were two rectangular roof supports in the eastern room and a square mudbrick installation in the middle room. The function of the latter is unknown. On the floor west of the installation was discovered a complete carpet made of plaited work.

A drainage channel was cut into the floor level/ bedrock, running from the courtyard outside the chapel, under the church wall and through the three rooms in an east-west direction. Originally a wooden floor may have covered the rough bedrock as well as the drainage. This was also indicated by some bowl-shaped features made in bedrock – probably post-holes for wooden supports (Fig. 11).

#### *Trench 3 - The Baptistery*

An additional trench 3, measuring 8.5 x 5.5 m, was opened in Area 2. The features excavated on this side of the church were covered by a relatively thin layer of wind-eroded marl and debris from fallen walls. Three features of major interest were present in trench 3. After removing the marl and debris the eastern limit of the church aisle became visible. The western limit of T3 followed the church wall with one ex-





11. Plan showing trenches 1 and 2, with the crypt, the church floor and three different rooms of the northern wing (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

ception, where a small section was extended into the eastern part of the church. Due to this the width of the eastern part of the nave could be measured to a total length of 9 m. This section is planned to be extended into the aisle itself during the next excavation season.

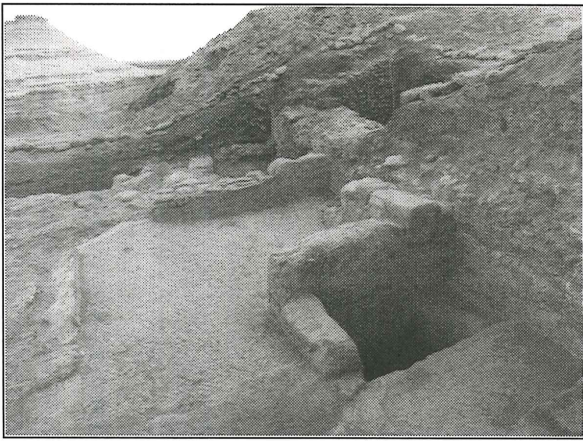
Directly east of the church, and built in connection to its wall, was discovered a baptismal font fitted into a relatively well-preserved mosaic floor made of large monochrome tesserae. The mosaic floor was laid with carefully made plaster at its edges and had the shape of a shallow basin. The font itself, measuring 0.8 x 0.5 m, consisted of a stone construction covered with fine plaster. The construction of the baptistery contained part of a column and other reused material. It is therefore probable that the now documented structure belongs to the second

church phase, built after the fire.

Immediately south of the baptistery a steep cut into bedrock with remains of additional stone and drainage structures suggests the presence of a cistern in this area. The shape and size of this feature are still very uncertain, and it has to be further investigated. Also this part of T3 will be extended during the next excavation (Fig. 12).

#### Trench 4 - Islamic Constructions

Trench 4 was opened in the area just outside the western front of the church. It covers a narrow strip between the wall and the debris in the slope of Area 4. The area excavated in T4 may originally have formed a narthex to the Byzantine church, but in a later phase other constructions, such as probable supporting walls, seem to have been added. The supporting walls may have been



12. View towards the south showing the bapistry with the baptismal font in the centre of the picture (Photo: SDE).

added in order to strengthen the projecting church wall in the latest phase.

The fill outside the wall consisted of fallen mudbrick and wooden pieces from the latest building phase. Among this were discovered two objects of special interest. The fill close to the wall contained an Abbasid gold coin in connection with some smaller fragments of cloth. A preliminary examination dates the coin to the Muslim year of 136 or 186 (AD 757 or 807). The coin is partly worn, so it is difficult to distinguish which of the two possible datings it is.

The second noticeable find in T4 was a small rectangular cloth with an Arabic text embroidered on it. The text was interpreted by F. Zayadine. According to his interpretation, the Arabic text says: "belongs to Fadl, son of Imram". The cloth could originally have been a label for marking a dress or some other belonging.

#### *Hermitages with Inscriptions*

In a small wadi 200 m east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār we found inscriptions in the marl walls of two adjacent hermitages. The hermitages were built in connection with a cave discovered during our survey of the Dayr al-Qaṭṭār surroundings in 1995. Neither the hermitages nor the cave have been described or mentioned in earlier literature. The cave extends at least 50 m into the salty

bedrock beneath the marl sediments. Thick layers of sediment and bat excrement on its floor show that it has been undisturbed for centuries. A narrow passage leads from the entrance into a larger chamber of a considerable height – like a natural gallery.

The two hermitages, making several small cells, are cut into the marl ridges; one on the opposite side of the cave entrance and one on the right-hand side of the entrance. In December 1996 we documented inscriptions in the walls of three of the most vulnerable cells – continuously threatening to collapse as a result of erosion and earthquakes. During the next season, planned for August 1997, we will make a more thorough investigation of the hermitages in this location as well as of the cave itself. A tentative explanation for the cave is that it originally served as a dwelling, perhaps for one of the first hermits to settle on this spot. The inscriptions and graffiti in the adjacent hermitages indicate that the place eventually developed into a pilgrimage.

Among the carvings, many crosses can be discerned, as well as a picture of a building or a reliquary. Some of the cross forms among the graffiti could be interpreted in different ways, as the mark of the monks, scribbles by pilgrims or as antitropaic, exorcising marks. Also among the carvings a group of letters are discernible. We will here present drawings of the graffiti from the three cells (Nos 1-3) separately, with suggestions for an interpretation made by Jan Svensson. Cells 1–2 were located next to each other in the hermitage opposite the cave and cell 3 with a position to the right.

Cell 1: Among different shapes of crosses the usual Latin cross is found, also with triangular endings on each of the arms, which makes the crosses resemble the Saint George's cross. In another Latin cross a ring can be seen around the longer downward cross arm. Among the crosses a group of letters are discernible. This group could hardly be interpreted in another way but the



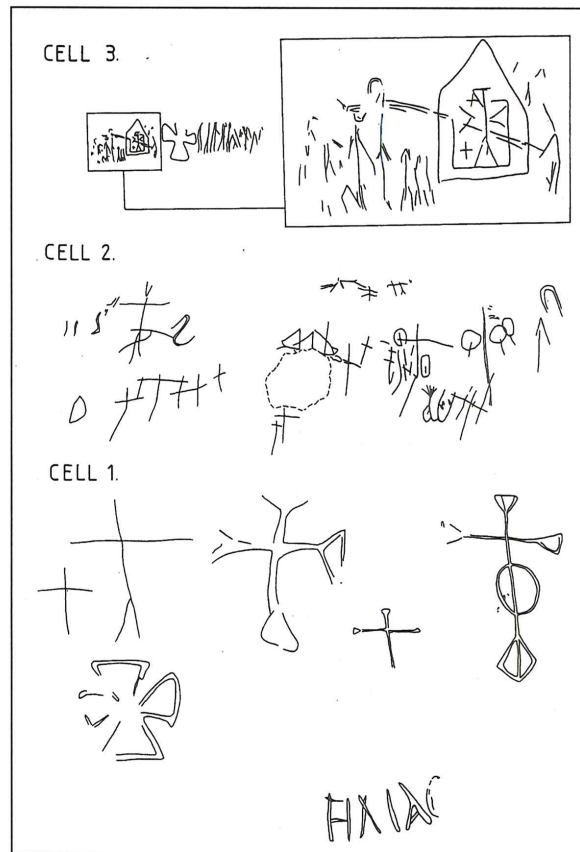
Greek ΗΛΙΑΣ, that is, Elias. Within monastic life it is common to understand the prophet Elias as a prototype. Furthermore, the personage of the wilderness, John the Baptist, is presented as Elias *redivivus* by Jesus (Mt 17:12, 13). Therefore it is not astonishing that this name emerges out of the graffiti at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. Nevertheless one has to consider that one of the patriarchs of Jerusalem in the early sixth century in fact was called Elias.

Cell 2: As in cell 1, a great many different crosses are present. One example is the *waw*-cross, that is a cross shaped like the Hebrew letter of the same name. As graffiti it is discernible as a ring with a line going out from it. The letter *waw* is also the figure 6 and as the Gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified on the sixth day of the week, this shape of the cross appears to be a symbol with many meanings.

Cell 3: The most comprehensible among the graffiti in this cell could be interpreted as a picture of a building or a reliquary with crosses upon it and surrounded by some personages. It is possible that the crosses on the building or the reliquary together form the pattern of the so-called Jerusalem cross. The building or the reliquary is surrounded on both sides by possible personages and furthermore there is a cross in the shape of a Saint George's cross on its right-hand side (Fig. 13).

**The Excavation of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba**

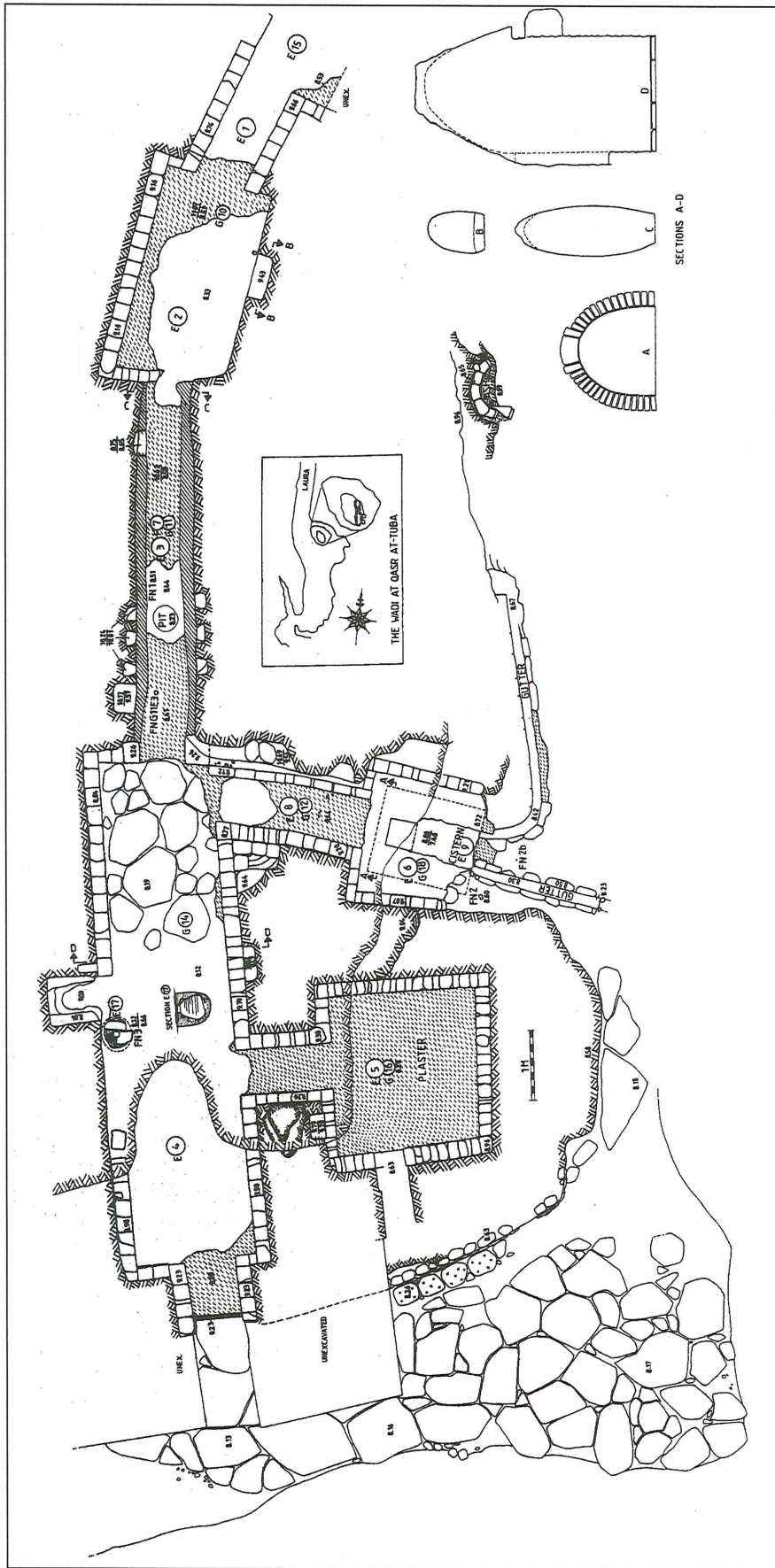
The large hermitage of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba is located about 3 km north-west of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, approximately 34.5° N-S and 65° E-W. The hermitage and the connected chapel are cut into a bastion-shaped sediment formation in one of the small rift valleys running down to the Dead Sea. Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba was discovered in 1928 by F.-M. Abel (1929) while exploring the al-Lisān area. In the 1929 edition of *Revue Biblique* he published a plan of this site and a short description, apparently after a brief survey in



13. The graffiti and inscription from cells 1-3. Not to scale. Drawing and interpretation: SDE.

the field. Our excavation and documentation of the site show a partly different shape of the hermitage and also new rooms, never documented by Abel during his survey. The site has recently been briefly described by Konstantinos Politis (1995), in a preliminary report concerning the removal and conservation of some inscriptions from the wall of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. One of the inscriptions mentions four Greek names, Agapios, Konstantinos, Makarios and Ioannis, most probably four of the hermits that dwelt at this site during some period (Politis 1995) (Fig. 14).

Before our work in November-December 1996 no excavation had been carried out on the site. Unfortunately there were traces of older illicit excavations. The different rooms and constructions of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba are cut out of the ground, and a major part of the structure is still standing, but now in a weak condition due to natural erosion and

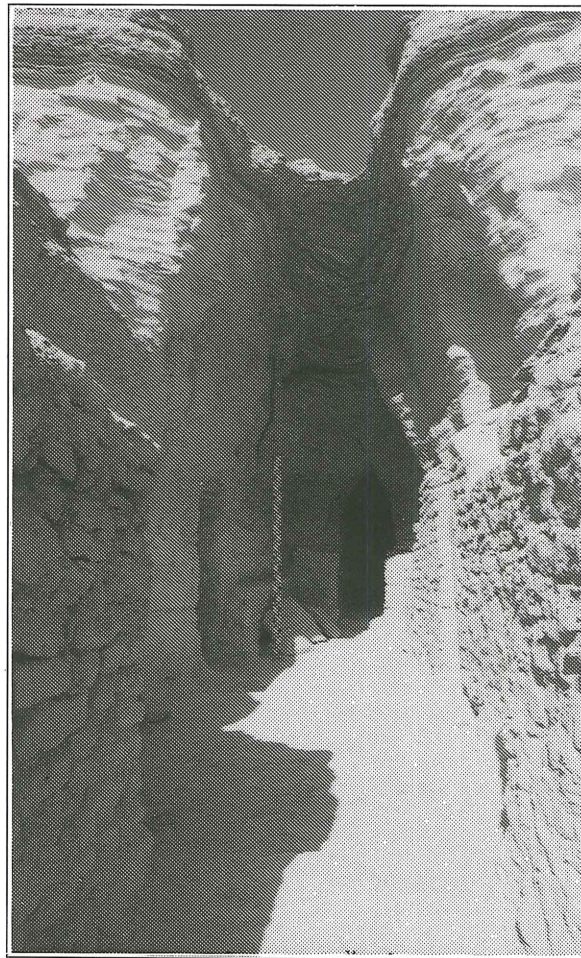


14. Plan showing Qaṣr at-Ṭūba with its different rooms and a courtyard towards south (Drawing R. Holmgren).



geological activities (Talbot 1994). The typical beach rock (soft laminated marl) of the al-Lisān is excellent for constructing dwellings and other structures. Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba shows a larger and partly preserved chamber in the south (E4) and a smaller intact room (E2) in the north. E4 has a inner height of 3 m, with standing inner brick walls to a height of 2 m, which makes it a more imposing room compared with the rest of the site. E4 has a partly preserved stone pavement while the other rooms have plaster floors. There is a great deal to suggest that this larger chamber had the function of a small chapel. E4 and E2 are connected by a narrow passage (E3), almost 5m in length. Both E4 and E2 have entrances, from the south and the north respectively. Still today this gives a cooling flow of air through the chambers and the passage. This must have been of vital importance for the hermits dwelling in this extremely hot environment. Both of the rooms as well as the passage were partly filled up with fallen parts of roofs and walls. Part of the passage seems to have been deliberately filled up during some period. A lot of material had to be transported out of the site (Fig. 15).

Beneath debris and eroded material from the building, immediately east of the chapel, remains were discovered of two separate and now collapsed rooms. Both rooms were originally cut out of the marl but constructed with inner brick walls and plaster floors. The southern room (E5) had a narrow opening towards the south, connecting it with a stone-paved courtyard outside. Cut into marl beneath the floor level of the northernmost of the collapsed rooms (E6) was discovered an intact cistern, for collecting rainwater. Two gutters are connected to the cistern, one inflow and one drain to protect the cistern from overflowing. The rectangular cistern was roofed with a brick vault and two layers of carefully made covering plaster on its inside. In the floor above was a small rectangular opening connecting



15. Towards the north showing the southern entrance to the chapel of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. In the background is the entrance to the passage leading to the northern chamber (Photo: SDE).

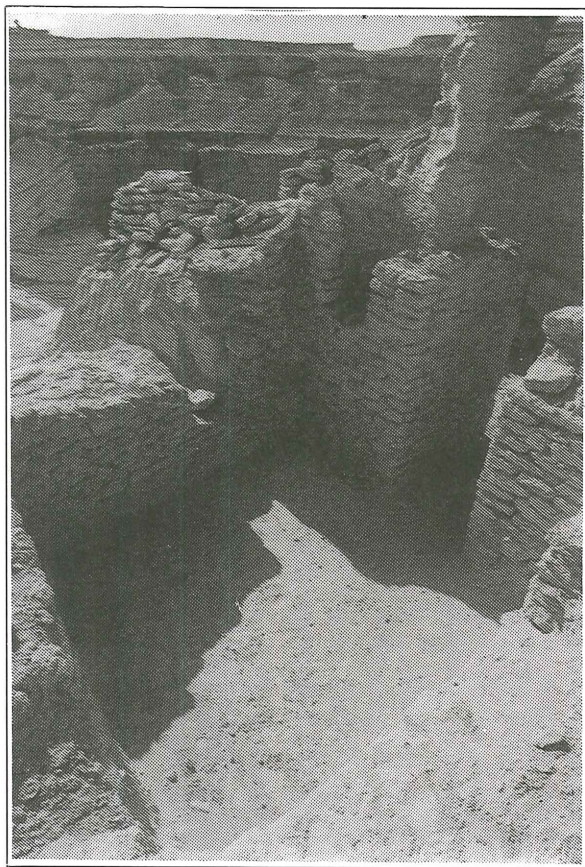
the room with the cistern.

On the floor level immediately south-east of the cistern was found a small rectangular papyrus (8 x 5 cm), with four lines of text. The preserved text is enigmatic and is probably part of a somewhat larger papyrus. In consultation with some experts regarding the papyrus we have had some suggestions that the text is Syriac and others that it is an early form of Arabic script. The papyrus is still under investigation but it is to be hoped that in a near future we will be able to present a plausible interpretation of the text. Another thin bundle of small papyrus fragments was found in the filling of the passage E3. This papyrus is now under conservation by Jaakko Frösén at the University of Helsinki, Finland. The papyri



now found are the first ever discovered in the al-Lisān and may, therefore, be of vital importance for the understanding of monastic activities in this area (Fig. 16).

The presumed chapel (E4) is the largest room on the site. Located in this room were also the wall inscriptions removed in 1995 (Politis 1996). Some inscriptions are still *in situ*, among them a cross immediately east of the entrance to the passage E3. Of special interest during the excavation of the chapel was the find of a complete jar, dating to the Late Byzantine period, dug into the floor. The jar was found close to a small niche in the western wall with the orifice connected with the floor level and nicely fitted in with small stones and a wooden piece covered by plaster. In the bottom of the jar was a carefully made round hole, which suggests that this installation was used as a piscina. The



16. The south-eastern room in Qaṣr at-Ṭūba after removal of the collapsed wall and roof. View to south-west with marl ridges in the background. (Photo: SDE).

niche in the wall may be understood as a prayer niche or even as the place of an altar. Fragments of a chalice found on the floor in E3 are another indication of liturgical vessels in use in the chapel.

Near the gutter on the eastern side of the site were documented the remains of a cooking place. No such installation was detected in our survey and investigation of possible dwellings in the near surroundings. This is interesting for the interpretation of Qaṣr at-Ṭūba as a central building and chapel for some surrounding hermitages. According to the Rules of Gerasimus, the monks came together to celebrate the liturgy only on Saturdays and Sundays. On these days they ate cooked food. During the rest of the week each one prayed and worked individually without access to fire (Svensson 1997). Qaṣr at-Ṭūba could be interpreted as a centre of its own within a hermit community. Several possible hermit cells cut out of the slopes of nearby ridges form the typical pattern of a *laura* (e.g. Hirschfeld 1992 and Patrich 1995), located on the slopes of the rift valley.

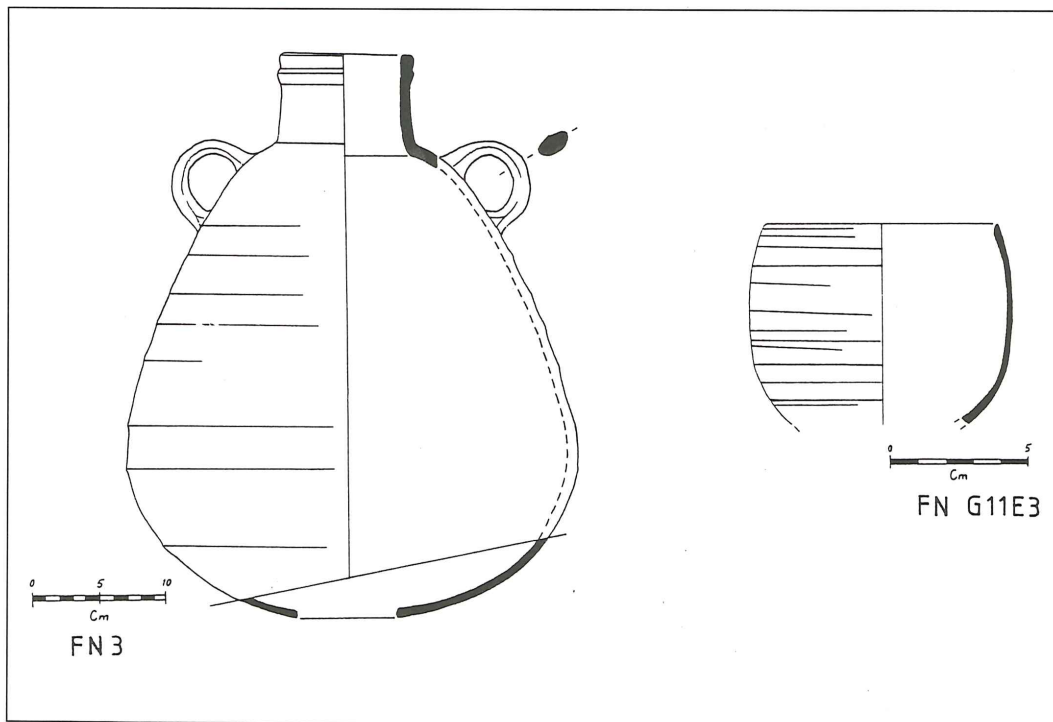
In sediment walls of the rift valley just beside Qaṣr at-Ṭūba were found three small chambers or niches with rectangular deepenings in the floor. A tentative interpretation is that the niches form burial chambers where some of the hermits were buried, although no skeletal remains were found during our examination (Fig. 17).

### Conclusion

The work at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār during 1995-1996 revealed three distinct phases: one represented by the original cruciform church and the chapel. After a fire the church was rebuilt in a somewhat more modest fashion. During the latest phase the function of the site is unclear. This phase is represented by rooms built on a higher level and the presence of a large amount of preserved wood.

Besides Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, the work of 1996 also included the documentation of some





17. The Late Byzantine jar, installed in the floor of the chapel of Qaṣr at-Ṭūba, and a small cup of very fine ware (Drawing: R. Holmgren).

hermitages. In the vicinity of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār some wall inscriptions were found in two different hermitages, located near a cave – the latter also a possible hermit dwelling. In addition, the relatively large hermitage and chapel of Qaṣr at-Ṭūba, located at a distance of about 3 km to the north-west of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, was also excavated and recorded. The most interesting finds on this spot were two papyrus fragments, still under conservation and interpretation.

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanti could be seen as an analogy to Dayr ‘Ayn ‘Abāṭā near Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi. The latter has been identified as the basilica at Lot’s cave according to the Mādabā Map and an inscription in the mosaic floor (Politis 1992 and 1993). One could postulate that Dayr al-Qaṭṭār was also mentioned on the Mādabā Map - one of the now missing pieces. Dayr al-Qaṭṭār could be a parallel to Lot’s cave and built in line with the same tradition. As a basilica was erected on the site believed to be the cave where Lot and his daughters took refuge after the destruction of Sodom, some attention is likely to have been shown to the presumed location of the destroyed city itself. Our hypothesis is

that one of the reasons for choosing al-Lisān as the location for intense monastic activities was a Byzantine tradition concerning the location of the destroyed cities of the plain, Sodom, Gomorrah, Adma and Zeboim, mentioned in Genesis. Similar thoughts were mentioned by F.-M. Abel, referring to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār (el-Qéryeh) when describing the hermitage of Qaṣr at-Ṭubā (Abel 1929, p. 248). The monastery and the attached hermitages on al-Lisān are at the same time an example of a hermit society similar to the desert monasteries known from Egypt and the Judaeen desert. There is of course a natural link between the desert environment preferred for ascetic life by the hermits in Egypt and in the Judaeen desert as well as on al-Lisān.

There are also other indications of a connection between Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanti and the Byzantine tradition of the destruction of Sodom, also discussed by Jan Svensson (1997). In the list of fathers gathered for the Council of Nicaea in 325, the name Sodoma is mentioned among the bishoprics of the province of Arabia (Abel 1938: 198). Abel interpreted this as a mis-

writing of Zoara (Ghawr as-Safi), which later on, during the days of the Jerusalem Patriarchate, must have been the closest seat of a bishop to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī. In the list of fathers gathered at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and at the Synod (an ecclesiastical meeting of regional importance) of Jerusalem in 518, the bishop of Sodoma is lacking, but instead the bishop of Zoara turns up (Abel 1938: 201). All the same, the identification of Sodoma with Zoara in the Nicaea case is not entirely convincing. One could instead tentatively understand Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī as the former seat of the bishop of Sodoma. This is even more probable considering the excavation results showing Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as a monumental church within a large monastic complex. An early dating of the original church and hermitages is also supported by some of the pottery finds from Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and also by the possible Roman road passing near the site, first mentioned in literature by A. Musil (1907: 166). It is also unlikely that the Byzantine identification of the place of Lot's refuge, that is Zoara, was also identified as the destroyed city of Sodom.

The use of Bronze Age material in the crypt of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār could also be an analogy to Dayr 'Ain 'Abātā and Lot's cave, where the church was built next to a cave containing Bronze Age burials. A hypothesis is, therefore, that the Byzantine monks looked upon the frequent Early Bronze Age remains as evidence for the Old Testament history connected with the area. In this case they could either have brought material to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār from tombs in the vicinity, or otherwise modified an Early Bronze tomb on the spot and constructed the crypt out of it. All the same, the most probable interpretation of the crypt is that it originally formed one of the early hermitages on the site. The tomb of the founding father was sometimes marked by a special building, or he was buried in the cave in which he had spent his life (Patrich 1997: 44). This is also

indicated by the shape of the crypt, resembling some of the hermit dwellings in the vicinity as well as in the surroundings of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. A plausible explanation for the selected and reburied bones from the crypt is that they were removed at some time from original burials in different hermitages and put into a collective ossuary in Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. This is a tentative explanation for the possible emptied graves at Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba and the presence of other half-filled hermit cells, without any traces of bones.

### Acknowledgements

The extensive results achieved during the three months of excavation in 1995 and 1996 were made possible by the generous offer of Dr Ghazi Bisheh, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, to provide the project with local workers. We are very grateful for this. Our cooperation with the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm has been essential for the good results achieved during our expeditions. We therefore express our sincere gratitude to the Director of the Museum, Dr Bengt Peterson, for his genuine interest and continuous support. The excavation was also very much facilitated by The Arab Potash Company's generous attitude. We would especially like to thank Nasser Sadoun, Deputy Managing Director, for providing us with accommodation in Potash City.

The archaeological and the administrative work was much facilitated by the efforts of Khalil Hamdan, a very dear colleague and representative of the Department of Antiquities. We look forward to continuing our cooperation in the seasons to come. We are deeply touched by the participation of Tuve Skanberg, MP and Member of the Swedish Parliament's Cultural Committee, for his archaeological work as well as actually risking his life during the excavation of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. Many thanks also to Hans Spinhofen, trenchmaster, for his sharp archaeological



eye. Special thanks also to every member of our local staff, who never lost their enthusiasm and good spirit under the hot sun of al-Lisān.

Some finds from the excavation have been analysed by Jan Svensson, experienced in early monastic and patristic material and the author of some valuable texts and commentaries regarding the project. His profound knowledge of the historical context has been of essential importance for our interpretations. Special thanks go Dr Christopher Talbot, Professor of Tectonics of Uppsala University for continuous scientific advice based on his vast experience of the regional geology. We are also grateful to Helena Hedelin, from The Museum of National Antiquities of Sweden, for the osteological analyses of the bone material from Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, and for providing us with valuable information. We also want to thank Drs Pierre and Patricia Bikai for their help and for providing a stimulating research environment in ACOR.

Special thanks also to Dr Zbigniew Fiema and especially Dr Robert W. Daniel for his efforts concerning our papyrus finds.

We also want to show our appreciation to Konstantinos Politis, from the British Museum, for sharing his knowledge of the area as well as his equipment, and Dr Pamela Watson, then at the BIAAH, who helped us with contacts and information.

Last but not least we would like to show our gratitude to TRH Prince Raad and Princess Majda, for encouraging our work and making our stay in Amman a very pleasant experience.

The English has been revised by Alan Crozier.

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