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Between Here and There: Locating Abila of the Decapolis in the Past, Present and Future

To begin I would like to thank Dr. Monther Jamhawi and many people at the Department of Antiquities who have worked with us over the years, especially in recent years Eng. Amjad Bataineh Director of the Irbid Office and Mr. Emad Obeidat Director of the Bani Kinannah office of the DoA. In addition, David Kennedy and his colleagues at the Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East have produced excellent aerial photographs of our site which – given our proximity to the Syrian border are difficult to obtain otherwise; and also to John Brown University for financial and institutional support of the excavation.

The 2016 season of excavation at Abila of the Decapolis in Northern Jordan will mark 36 years and 18 seasons of excavation at this important Decapolis site. Work began at Abila in 1980 under the lead of Harold Mare of Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri and continued under him until his passing in 2004. The excavation was then directed by David Chapman, also of Covenant Seminary until 2008. I have been working with the Abila Excavation since 1990 and was named director beginning with our 2010 excavation season. From its' founding the Abila Archaeological Project was incorporated in the United States as an independent, non-profit organization with a Board of Directors who provided funding and support for the organization. In 2013, the Abila Archaeological Project was "adopted" by John Brown University, an independent, liberal arts college in Northwest Arkansas and is now an official program run by the University. An endowment was also set up at John Brown University to fund the ongoing work of the excavation, especially supporting the production of final publications and the conservation/restoration and presentation of the site. The future of work at Abila looks bright, but before I get too far, I'd like to present a survey of where we've come from and what we are currently doing at the Abila.

The site is located in northwest Jordan approximately 20km east of the Jordan Valley and 5km south of the Wādī al-Yarmūk. We are 20km north of the modern city of Irbid, and along with Pella/Ṭabaqat Faḥl, Gadara/Umm Qays, Capitolias/Bayt Rās, and to the east a bit further Umm al-Jimāl, form an important "northern constellation" of significant archaeo-

logical sites in northwest Jordan[1].

During the first two seasons of excavation at Abila, work focused on surveys of the site. The coverage of the initial survey in 1980 was deemed to include a little over 20% of the entire site, working out from what was thought to be the city center producing a total of just over 33,000 sherds from Early Bronze through the Modern period. Somewhat surprisingly, of the total sherds that were collected nearly 95% were dated between the 4th and 8th centuries AD[2]. Excavation since that time has not yielded numbers quite so high for those periods of occupation, but nonetheless, these do appear to be the periods of densest occupation at the site. The intent of this initial survey was to locate areas of interest in what was thought to be the center of the city.

During the summer of 1982, a regional survey was conducted under the leadership of Michael Fuller that attempted to locate the site of Abila within the broader settlement patterns of the area. This survey laid out four transects extending 2.5km from the urban center of the site. Among the findings were several farmsteads, a wine press, animal pens, many tombs, various cisterns, several water tunnels, among many other indicators that there was a substantial "suburban" population surrounding Abila, especially during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods, with occupation in various areas stretching from Early Bronze down to the Ottoman period. From work done by Michael Fuller and more recently by Bernhard Lucke, population estimates for the site at its peak range from 10,000-15,000 people, based primarily on the size of the urban footprint, water supplies, and the excavated tombs[3].

After these initial surveys, excavation focused on the apex of the north and south talls, where it was clear that there was significant occupation. In time, excavation uncovered one large basilica on the north tall, two basilicas on the south tall, one more just east of the south tall, and then one more down by the Roman bridge east of the north tall. There is also what appears to be a Christian monastic complex in what we call Area B, that we are tentatively dating to the late seventh or early eighth century. (FIG. 1).

The work on the north tall, which was labled Area A began in 1982 and it soon became clear that the structure was a Byzantine basilica with significant earlier and later use. In 1994 a life sized statue of Diana/Artemis was found in the area, and so excavators assumed that the area was once home to a Roman temple. In addition, coins minted at Abila all of which date between the middle of the 2nd and the first quarter of the 3rd century AD commonly depict a large Roman temple at the site[4]. Most of the excavation of the basilica in Area A was done during the 1990s, but one final season was needed in 2006 to answer a few lingering questions – namely, our quest for some clear indication of Roman occupation. That season we excavated a few sealed loci beneath a limestone paved plaza just south of the basilica and encountered clean Late Roman pottery calls dating that plaza, at least, to the period in which we hypothesize there was a Roman temple[5].

Although several of the early seasons of excavation of the basilica on the north tall were directed by various archaeologists, most of the area was excavated by Dr. John Wineland.

1. The best recent study of the broader region, including Abila, is that of David Kennedy's *Gerasa and the Decapolis: A Virtual Island in Northwest Jordan*. London, Duckworth: 2007.

2. See especially W. H. Mare, D. W. Roller, C. J. Lenzen, A. McQuitty, J. J. Davis, M. J. Fuller, K. D. Smith, N. B. Fuller, W. W. Winter, and C. E. Rowe, "Abila Excavation: The Second Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1982). A Preliminary Report," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin;* New Series, Part I, 21 (1983):5-68; Part II, 22 (1983): 5-64; and pages 10-20 of John Wineland's, *Ancient Abila: An Archaeological History.* Oxford, Archaeopress: 2001.

3. Bernhard Lucke's work that includes a discussion of Michael Fuller's earlier research on the population estimates for ancient Abila can be found here: *Abila's Abandonment*. Anthology of Scientific Publications and Research Papers, RPR 14, Chair of Environmental Planning, BTU Cottbus, Cottbus, 2002.

4. See Wineland, Chp 6 for a discussion of this. For images of the coins, *see* F. de Saulcy, *Numismatique de la Terre Sainte,* (Paris: Rothschild1874), plate 16.

5. See Robert Smith's "Possible Evidence of Roman Emperor Worship at Abila" *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 54: 499-503; and David Chapman's "Roman Remains at Decapolis Abila: an Update on Twenty-Eight Years of Excavations." ARAM 23: 11-25.

1. Aerial Photograph of Abila of the Decapolis Provided by the Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (APAAME).

The structure is a tri-apsidal basilica, with all three apses facing east, and measures 35 meters from the outer edge of the central threshold to the outside edge of the central, salient apse and 20 meters from the outside edges of the north-south walls. Excavation in 1992 focused on the western edge of the basilica and an atrium measuring 16 meters by 20 meters was uncovered, paved with the larger 3cm square tesserae commonly found in the atriums of the churches at Abila. Wineland proposes that the church continued in use until the massive earthquake that struck the region in the middle of the 8th century, after which it was used for domestic occupation into the early Abbasid period. Somewhat surprisingly, no dated inscriptions have been found in any of the five churches at Abila, and four of them, including the Area A church have no inscriptions relating to the church structure whatsoever. The only inscription found in Area A was what we call the "Abila stone," a limestone fragment with an inscription that mentions "Abila." Pierre-Louis Gatier notified has written recently of a discovery at Jarash of an inscription that bears significant similarities to our "Abila stone" such that, he suggests the author of the epigramme in the inscription at Jarash likely also authored that on our "Abila Stone"[6] The lack of datable inscriptions at the site has made sequencing the construction of the churches at Abila a very difficult task. As soon as funds are available, our plan is to construct a shelter over the Area A basilica and, to the extent we are able restore and reconstruct the *opus sectile* flooring.

The Area D church, located on the apex of the southern tall -often called Umm al-'Umud- was first excavated beginning in 1984. Initial squares located several capitals, a few with inscribed crosses, and numbers of tumbled columns. From the direction and lay of the columns, and from depressions in the floor surfaces uncovered in later seasons, the excavators concluded that the church likely suffered catastrophic damage during the mid-8th century earthquake. As seasons progressed this structure was determined to be a tri-apsidal church, with all the apses facing east. The length of the sanctuary from threshold to the outer edge of the central, inscribed apse is 38m, with a width of 20m, slightly larger than the Area A church. A narthex extends three meters to the

6. For this see Pierre-Louis Gatier and Jacques Seigne, "Un Exceptionnel Document D'Architecture a Gerasa (Jerash, Jordaine). *Syria* 92 (2015): 263-77, Abila stone inscription discussed on P. 273-276.

west of the western wall under a roof which was supported by four monumental columns, and an atrium extends 6 additional meters to the west. The flooring in the atrium is similar to that in the other churches at Abila, consisting of the larger 3cm square primarily white tesserae. Along the south side of the structure a number of pastophoria were located and excavated. On the outer edge of the northwest of the church the baptistery was found. The flooring of both aisles and the nave is *opus sectile*. The narthex, pastophoria, and the baptistery all have mosaic flooring, some of which contains designs of baskets of fruit, geometric designs, and floral motifs. As in the Area A church, excavators determined that after the collapse of the structure in the mid 8th century, it was used for domestic occupation into the Abbasid period. Numbers of whole objects dating to the mid eighth through the ninth centuries were found in the pastophoria, primarily storage jars. Work in this church was completed in 2008. As with the Area A church, our plan is to erect a shelter over the structure and then restore and reconstruct the floor surfaces, which in this structure is primarily *opus sectile* in the nave, and then do more work conserving the mosaic flooring in the pastophoria (FIG. 2).

During the 1992 season, while excavating along the western edge of the atrium of the Area D church, what appeared to be the top of a monumental staircase was visible from the surface. Upon further exploration excavators landed upon what appeared to be part of an apse, and no evidence of a staircase was found. So, work there was halted until the 1994 season when excavation resumed under the label of Area DD.

Work in DD uncovered a basilical structure measuring 19.5 meters from the threshold to the edge of the central, inscribed apse and 15 meters from the edges of the north and south aisles. This is the smallest of the church structures at Abila. The north and south aisles were covered in a carpet mosaic flooring, while the nave was paved with sheets of marble 1m by 60 cm and 1 cm thick, large portions of which remained *in situ*. The structure is tri-apsidal but curiously, unlike all the other tri-apsidal churches at Abila where the nave apse is somewhat larger than the other two, in this church all three apses are of identical size. I am not aware of any other church structure in Jordan where the three apses are identical, and in Anne Michel's corpus of trans-Jordanian churches and several other sources, there are no parallels[7]. I welcome any

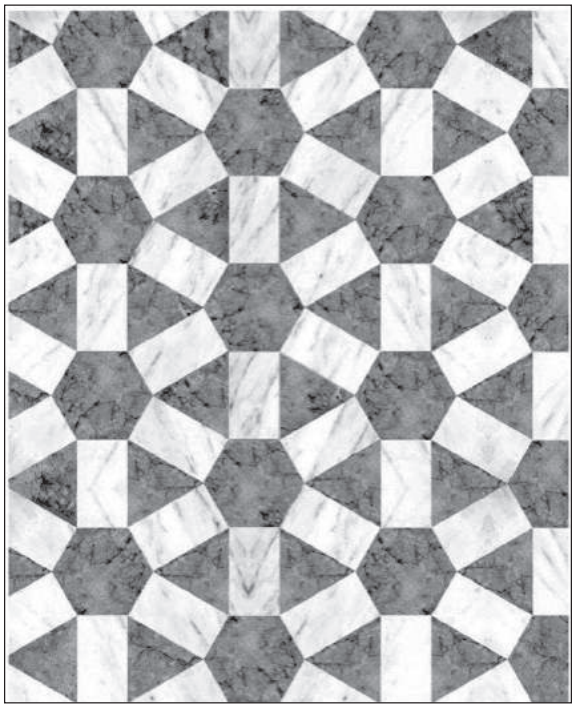
2. Aerial Photograph of the South Tall, Depicting the Area D and Area DD Basilicas. Photo Courtesy of APAAME.

7. See Anne Michel's Les Églises d'Époques Byzantine et Umayyade de Jordainie. Bibliotheque de l'Antiquité Tardive. Brepols: Turnhout, 2001.

suggestions about the implications of this. The only distinguishing feature of the central apse is that it is raised approximately 30cm with steps leading up only from the nave. Curiously, several stylobates were uncovered *in situ*, but there were no capitals, columns, or bases. And so we are assuming that this structure probably fell into disuse and was robbed out to build the basilica in Area D, described previously. We also found an empty sarcophagus that was placed across the eastern end of the North aisle that had been used for mixing plaster, again, probably for use in the construction of the Area D church. As with the two previously described churches, this structure also had significant domestic occupation during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. We located both an upper and nether grindstone, numbers of ash pits, several storage containers, as well as significant pottery dating to the Umayyad period, and even more dating to the Abbasid period, including some whole Abbasid period objects, dating into the 9th and 10th centuries. Structural modifications to the north aisle and nave, especially, with walls bisecting both gave evidence of the domestic use of the structure after it had ceased being used as a church. Significant also was the finding of numbers of whole glass lamps and a bronze ewer with a handle in the shape of a panther/leopard. They were sitting on 15cm of soil above the church floor, and so our assumption is that they were from the church in Area D and were for some reason, stashed in the ruins of the Area DD church possibly at the mid 8th century earthquake. Work in the Area DD church was completed in 2006.

Due east of the south tall, another church structure was located in the year 2000 and was labeled Area G. Work there continues until today and we expect that at least one or two more seasons of excavation will be needed to complete this Area. This structure is Abila's only single apsed church. The structure measures 29.5m from the west threshold to the outer edge of the salient apse, and 19.5m from the north to the south walls. A narthex of 4.5m was excavated during the 2006 and 2008 seasons. The pastophoria along the south of the church are still under excavation and so its dimensions are not clear yet. The nave of this church, like that of our Area DD church was paved with marble. The north and the south aisles were paved with *opus sectile*, significant amounts of which remained *in situ* (FIG. 3). Within the apse we located a sarcophagus which although had all of the sealing stones on the top in place when it was uncovered, was empty. A well preserved ambo was situated along the southern edge of the nave, five meters west of the altar screen. Regrettably, in just a few months after our probe under the ambo was completed and nothing was found, looters came and tore the whole structure to pieces. The eastern end of the south aisle ends in a chancel screen which is situated two meters from a flat wall. There was no evidence of any paint on the fragments of plaster that remained on the wall.

Excavation during the 2012 and 2014 seasons focused on general clean-up of the area,



3. Reconstruction of the Pattern of the *Opus Sectile* Flooring in the Area G Church Courtesy of Mr. Ronnie Rama, Abilene Christian University.

including the removal of numbers of balks, and then the excavation of the attached rooms on the south side of the structure. Three squares were opened and we were able to trace two of these down to a floor surface. In the process, numbers of secondary walls were exposed – drawn, photographed, and removed – which give evidence of some level of occupation, probably domestic, after the structure ceased functioning as a church. A probe was also taken in the atrium revealing a nice *opus sectile* floor surface. Our 2016 season will continue to expose the rooms on the south side and the atrium.

A final area of excavation that I will discuss is the basilica in what we call Area E. This area was first located and excavated in 1990, and excavation has continued every season down to the present[8]. We hope that with one or two more seasons, we will be able to complete our work here.

The church in Area E is tri-apsidal, though unlike the other churches at Abila, this one has the north and south apses facing north and south respectively – in a clover leaf, or cruciform shape. The structure measures 25.4m from the threshold to the outer edge of the central apse and 26.6m from the edges of the north and south walls of the sanctuary, being wider than it is long with four aisles and then the nave. To the west, a narthex measuring 5.5m extends to the back retaining wall that runs up against the side of the northern tall. Two cisterns were located in the narthex, one on the north and the other on the south sides. And on the west wall we uncovered what appears to be a "seat" built into the wall. Along the south of the structure pastophoria were excavated. Numbers of crosses were carved into walls and columns. And interestingly, along the south wall three niches were located. Two of them had been filled with plaster in antiquity leaving only one open. In informal conversations with Bethany Walker, Gideon Avni and a few other scholars and they all confirm my suspicions that it niche is likely a mihrab and that possibly the room was converted into a *musalla* during the early Islamic period[9]. (FIG. 4) A sample of the plaster from the central niche which contained three charred olive pits has been removed and at the time of this writing is being tested for a more secure date. In the SW corner of the structure a chapel was located. The floor was paved with black and white checkerboard squares and there was an altar screen set up in the middle of the room adjacent to a small column. (FIG. 5) Throughout the church, most of the floor surfaces were paved in sheets of marble, and on many of the standing walls there were hooks for hanging marble facing also. A few, but not many ashlars were uncovered with the remains of painted plaster on them. During the 2010 season of excavation, irregularities observed on the outside of the east wall of the structure led

4. Image of the south wall of the Area E church, taken by Cheryl Eaton. The image depicts three niches, two of which were filled in at some point in antiquity.

8. For a description of the early stages of the excavation of this structure *see* Clarence Menninga, "The Unique Church at Abila of the Decapolis," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67 (2004): 40-49; and David W. Chapman and Robert W. Smith, "Continuity and Variation in Byzantine Church Architecture at Abila: Evidence from the 2006 Excavations" Pp. in Fawwaz al-Khraysheh (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan Vol. X*.: 2009: 525-533.

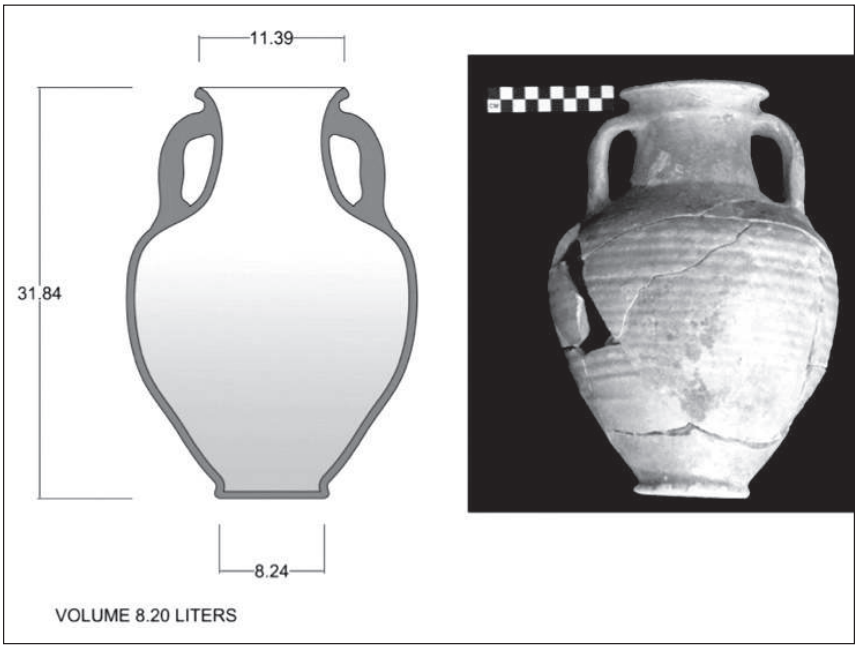
9. Though there are not many examples of churches that functioned simultaneously as churches and as places for Muslim prayer a few examples from the southern Levant and Palestine do exist. For a discussion see, David Vila's, "The Byzantine-Islamic Transition at Abila of the Decapolis." *ARAM* of the Oriental Institute at Oxford University, 28.1(2016): 157-66; and the relevant bibliography there.

5. Image of the chapel in the SE corner of the Area E church, taken by Cheryl Eaton.

our lead excavator in this area to hypothesize about the phasing of the structure, and so a probe was taken three meters on the opposite side of that wall, in the interior of the church. That probe landed on a paved mosaic surface and so squares were opened in the north and south aisles that revealed what we are fairly certain is an earlier church located one meter below the one being excavated. Crosses in the middle of the "aisles" as well as an altar screen with a cross in front of it in the north "aisle" seem to confirm such a view. No more work was done on this lower church because of a desire not to disturb the "upper" church. Various things have led us to conclude that the upper church was destroyed in the mid-eighth century earthquake. The lay of columns as they were being excavated, indentations in the floor surfaces from ashlars that fell from a significant height, as well as numbers of whole objects, all with dates consistent with the mid-8th century, seem to confirm that this (FIG. 6).

Work during 2014 season of excavation focused on the northern side of the structure and we will continue there during the 2016 excavation season. Eventually, these squares revealed nicely paved mosaic surfaces. At present we are not certain what the function of these rooms might have been. Although it is more common to find pastophoria along the south sides of churches in the Transjordan, there are some examples of churches where they are on the north side of the structure, but excavation is still too early on to be able to discern the exact function of these rooms.

A final project in Area E last season was an exploration of a number of inscriptions, both Greek and Arabic that are to be found on various surfaces in the area. Andrea Zerbini and Firas Bqain are working on the Greek and Arabic inscriptions respectively. Publication of the Greek inscriptions should be completed by the



6. Reconstructed green glazed pot from the mid 8th century found crushed under likely earthquake destruction.

end of this year, with the Arabic inscriptions following shortly thereafter.

In conclusion, the churches at Abila provide important comparative material for those working in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods in Jordan and beyond. I trust that the impending publication of our findings will be an aid to better understanding this important period in the history of northwest Jordan and the region more broadly.
