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A Byzantine-Umayyad Monastery and a New Interpretation for the Cistern in Area III on Tall Zar‘ā

The excavation on Tall Zar‘ā which is part of the ‘Gadara Region Project’ was initiated by D. Vieweger in 2003. Since then, 18 excavation campaigns have been conducted by the Biblical Archaeological Institute Wuppertal and the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology under the directorship of D. Vieweger and the author (Vieweger and Häser 2017). Three areas were opened: Area I in the west, Area II in the north and Area III in the south of the tall. In Area I, a sequence of 25 strata was excavated covering a time span from the Early Bronze Age II to the Ottoman period. In Area II, 10 strata were uncovered dating from the Iron Age IIC to the Ottoman period. In Area III, the sequence is shorter and covers the time from the Roman-Byzantine to the Ottoman period.

Below faint traces of an Ottoman and Mamluk stratum in Areas I and II, a large complex of rooms dated to the Byzantine and Umayyad periods was found, which obviously served for living and storage. The sequence of strata is similar in Area III, but the Mamluk presence is much more intensive. The large complex of rooms which is found in all three areas was originally interpreted as a Byzantine villa, with

the main building in Area III and the living and storage rooms in Areas I and II.

However, an unexpected discovery in Area III brought the real nature of the building complex to light. Excavation of Area III began with a test trench in the summer of 2007 and continued during a two-week summer campaign in 2008; the field director for both seasons was U. Rothe. On the last day of the 2008 campaign, a mosaic medallion was uncovered which could not be excavated at that time. It was therefore covered with plastic and a thick layer of soil. However, due to continuous looting, the mosaic was partially uncovered again. In 2014, it was decided to continue the excavations in Area III in order to clarify the northern extension of the Byzantine-Umayyad building complex and – in accordance with the wishes of the Department of Antiquities (DoA) – to remove the mosaic medallion from the site and store it in the museum. This work was carried out under the direction of U. Rothe and with financial support from the CBRL. The recovery was undertaken by experts from the DoA, under the auspices of Amjad Bataineh. Restoration work has since been carried out by Mohammad al-Shiyab and

Ziad Aziz of the DoA. The mosaic is currently in storage at the Dār as-Saraya Museum in Irbid (Rothe *et al.* 2017).

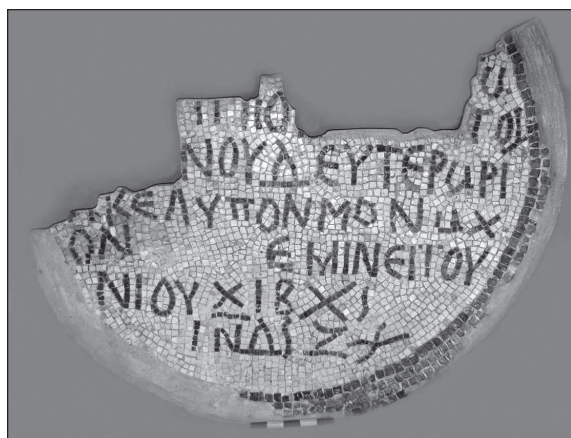
In preparation for recovery, a thick and very hard layer of chalk was removed from the mosaic. Only after this removal did it become obvious that the medallion bore a Greek inscription. The mosaic is comprised of white, black and red medium-sized stones. It became clear from the finding context that this inscription is derived from an older, no longer existing mosaic floor which was incorporated in a new floor. Interestingly, this inscription was not destroyed, but covered by a chalk layer in order to hide it (FIG. 1).

Andrea Zerbini (Rothe *et al.* 2017) has kindly transcribed and translated the inscription as follows:

[Two more lines?] | [- - -][.α|[- - -ca. 6 - - -]
 [...]ιο[- - -c. 6 - - -] τοῦ | [...]νου δευτεραρίου καὶ
 λυποῦ μοναχοῦ ἐν ἔν) μινεῖ Ἰουνίου χιβ’
 χ(ρόνων) | ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ζ’

“(the work was carried out under?) ... (and) Ioan]nes (?), the deuterarios, and all the other monks in the month of June, year 612 in the time of the 7th indiction (AD 709)”

Andrea Zerbini has chosen the era of Capitolias for the dating, since it agrees with the 7th indiction mentioned in the inscription. If this date



1. Mosaic with Greek inscription (TZ 310527-006) found in Area III on Tall Zar‘ah (photo: K. Takeshi).

is correct, previous studies regarding Capitolias may have to be re-examined, which A. Zerbini will deal with elsewhere.

However, there is another possible date using the Pompeian era, as suggested by J. Niehoff (pers. com.). If his suggestion is correct, the date would then correlate with the year 548/549 AD.

Examination of the building’s stratigraphy and of the archaeological finds is not yet finalised, therefore it is not possible at this point to categorically state which date is accurate. It must also be pointed out that this inscription refers to “a work” which might be the foundation of the building, but was more probably the construction of the mosaic floor. Therefore, the date of the mosaic inscription gives only a *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the building.

However, the inscription does make it clear that the large building complex in Areas I, II and III was actually not a Byzantine villa but a monastery. The mosaic medallion was probably situated inside a former church which was completely re-modelled in later times. The finds context of the medallion is a mosaic paved courtyard with installations which drained water into a large vaulted cistern below the floor.

Comparing the location of this mosaic medallion with similar inscribed medallions at other sites such as the monastery of the Holy Theotokos in ‘Ayn al-Kanīṣah (Piccirillo 1994) or the church of St. George at Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1997: 178–179), it is obvious they are always situated either in the main nave, the side nave close to the entrance or the chancel, or inside the *intercolumnia*. Only one inscription which is similar to these has been found outside a church; it was uncovered in the second church at Hayyān al-Mushrif – also called the “monastery” (Al-Muheisen 1997). However, this inscription was situated in an atrium close to the church.

Due to these comparisons and the layout of the extant remains, the author proposes that

the mosaic medallion at Tall Zar'ā was located close to the entrance of the main nave of a two or three-aisled church with a narthex to the west. The portion of the chancel and apse which is presumed to have been to the east may possibly lie beneath later wall remains. There are further rooms at the southern side of the church. The northern side has not been excavated to the depth of the Byzantine stratum.

After examining the buildings in Areas I and II, the author believes they developed from three very simple houses, each with two rooms, (or possibly one) together with a courtyard, to a large complex of rooms and courtyards oriented almost north-south. They have several installations, for example tabuns and large basins, and appear to indicate use as a rural living and working quarter.

Pottery sherds of African Red Slip Ware, Late Roman Coarse Ware and Jarash Lamps, as well as glass finds, prove that the inhabitants were not poor, but shared the facilities of a prosperous population (Kenkel 2012; Rothe *et al.* 2017).

How does the monastery on Tall Zar'ā fit into the picture of the monastic situation in Jordan in the Byzantine and Umayyad periods?

The Christian monastic movement started in the 4th century AD in Egypt. Very soon it had extended to the neighbouring regions. It was a movement against the wealthy lifestyle of the rich and a renunciation of secular life. People lived alone or in small groups in caves or simple shelters. Later, they congregated in larger communities.

The oldest evidence for monks in the area which includes modern Jordan stems from the account of the pilgrim Etheria, who probably travelled through the Holy Land *ca.* 400 AD. She described the church at Şiyāgha and the monks living in caves in the surrounding area. It appears that there was no monastery close to the church at this time. However, the account of the so-called Peter the Iberian who travelled to Mount Nebo during the first half of the 5th cen-

tury AD led M. Piccirillo (1992: 18) to assume that a monastery was there at that time.

With regard to archaeological evidence of monasteries in Jordan, B. Hamarneh (2012, 279, 290–292) listed forty-two examples belonging to the Byzantine provinces of Arabia and Palaestina prima, secunda, and tertia.

The dating of these monasteries is difficult. B. Hamarneh (2012: 294 fn. 4) assumes that the so-called monastery of St. Sergius and Bacchus at Umm as-Surab is the earliest of them. The dedicatory inscription is engraved on the lintel of the main entrance to the church and gives the date of 489 AD. However, this inscription probably only refers to the church itself (King 1983: 115, 124). The adjacent rooms are later attachments, and without excavation an Umayyad date for them cannot be excluded. Even the designation as a monastery is questionable.

The correlation of inscriptions with architectural remains is always difficult, since it is seldom clear which part of the building the inscription refers to. The dating of churches and monasteries by architectural features is also inadequate, since none of them show a distinct datable development. Therefore, churches and monasteries can only be dated in ranges of centuries. With this in mind, we can state that most of the known monasteries in Jordan were founded in the 6th and early 7th centuries. There is no sudden end to the monastic movement, rather a gradual abandonment after the Islamic conquest. The latest evidence of a monastery in Jordan is a literary source. Leontius of Damascus mentioned the abbot Anba Cosmas from the monastery at al-Quwaysmah in the vicinity of Amman at the beginning of the 9th century (Piccirillo 1997: 266–267; Hamarneh 2012: 285–286).

Although the date of the monastery on Tall Zar'ā has not been fixed yet, it can be posited that it was in use between the 6th and the 8th century, as are most of the other monasteries in Jordan.

M. Piccirillo's (1992: 21) research into the

locations of foundation, and the character of monasteries in Jordan, resulted in a division of three major groups: the large *coenobion*, the small *dayr* near a village, which remains primarily agricultural, and the hermitage or *laura*, which are essentially rupestrian or semi-rupestrian.

Piccirillo only assigned Dayr Şiyāgha to the first group, but the monastery at Jabal Hārūn should be included in this group as well, as intensive excavations have shown (Fiema *et al.* 2016). Both of them are examples for the connection of monasteries to Biblical sites.

M. Piccirillo's second group is the largest one. It includes monasteries like Dayr al-Kanīṣah south of Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1992: 22; Piccirillo 1994). The characteristic features are their location outside the village in the vicinity of agricultural plots of land from which the monks made their living. In most cases, the villages are built on top of pre-existing Roman villages in the large wadis running from the Jordanian Highlands to the Jordan Valley.

In many instances, they are located close to roads which connect the Jordan Valley with cities, for example Gerasa, Capitolias or Abila. The environment was suitable for agriculture and herding. These were not places for an isolated ascetic life separated from the community. Instead, the monks and nuns were responsible for the pastoral care of the villagers. In addition to their religious duties, the monks and nuns supported themselves with agriculture, which is proved by wine- and oil presses found within the monastic complexes (Hamarneh 2012: 284).

The third group comprises hermitages which are thought to have existed close to Mount Nebo. Since there are only a few extant remains, they are very hard to detect and difficult to date.

A significant hindrance to the assessment of the actual size and arrangement of monasteries – not only for the hermitages – is the current state of research and excavation for these sites. In most cases, only the actual churches have been excavated, not the adjacent rooms. In oth-

er instances, all visible rooms were seen as one large coenobitic complex, although they are actually later, non-monastic additions. Moreover, archaeological finds such as pottery and glass sherds, metal objects *etc.* have been published for only a few sites.

Therefore, the excavation of a monastic complex on Tall Zar'ā together with structures used for storage and living quarters, enables new insights into the daily life of a monastic community to be drawn. In general, the location, architecture and finds are well suited for inclusion within M. Piccirillo's second group of monasteries. It was situated outside a city and surrounded by arable land. The monastery on Tall Zar'ā also agrees with his observation that these monasteries were founded in the wadis connecting the Jordan Valley with the Jordanian Highlands and on routes leading to the cities.

One can only speculate about the administrative affiliation of the monastery on Tall Zar'ā:

If the assumption that the era of Capitolias was used in the mosaic inscription is correct, the monastery on Tall Zar'ā would have belonged to the diocese of Capitolias; on the other hand, if the Pompeian era is correct, the monastery would have been part of the diocese of Gadara.

Regarding the building history of the site where the monastery was founded on Tall Zar'ā, a new hypothesis was developed after a closer examination of the large vaulted "cistern" which was uncovered in Area III during the earliest investigation of Tall Zar'ā. It is constructed from fine masonry and measures 6 m from north to south and 10.4 m from east to west. Its height from the bottom to the inlet is 5.75 m. It is covered internally with several layers of hydraulic plaster. The inlet is built of four ashlar and a drainage channel which was secondarily cut into the mosaic floor of an Umayyad courtyard – the former nave of the church – leading the water inside the cistern. This vaulted chamber appeared to be, without question, a cistern. However, the excavators had never been able to

explain why the inhabitants would build such a large cistern when there is a permanent spring only 50 m away. Even more curious is the fact that P. Keilholz’s (2014) research in Gadara proves that no other cistern was built with ash-lars. Of the more than one hundred registered cisterns in the study, all were cut into the rock, and such a rock-cut cistern would also have been possible on Tall Zar‘ā.

Therefore, an alternative interpretation of this vaulted chamber seemed to be required. Subsequent investigation proved that the masonry can be compared not only with Roman vaulted shops found in Capitolias and Gadara, but also with the vault of the substructure supporting the Hellenistic temple in Gadara (FIG.2).

As a result of these comparisons, the author proposes that the vaulted chamber on Tall Zar‘ā was not originally built for use as a cistern, but as the substructure of a large building which probably dates to the Roman period. S. Schütz (in preparation) identifies the main building of a Roman villa in Area II. In this respect, it cannot be excluded that we are dealing with another, even larger and more elaborate, building in Area III, which would have been destroyed during the foundation of the Byzantine church and re-modelled as a cistern after the transformation of the church nave into a courtyard in the Umayyad period.

Since the quality of construction for this building surpasses all others on the whole of Tall Zar‘ā, the author proposes that it is the sub-



2. Vaulted substructure/cistern in Area III.

structure substructure of a Hellenistic and/or Roman sanctuary, perhaps ritually connected to the permanent spring in the middle of the tall, which must have been a miraculous phenomenon for the inhabitants of the region. The connection of sanctuaries with water is well represented, e. g. in Hammat Gader and at other sites (el-Khourī 2010; Weber 1997). The visual connection between Gadara and Tall Zar‘ā may support this assumption, as it is an important factor for other sanctuaries such as al-Qabū and ‘Arqūb ar-Rūmī in the vicinity of Gadara (Bührig 2016: 105–107).

Further investigation is needed in order to clarify the layout of the monastic complex in Area III and the evaluation of a Hellenistic/Roman sanctuary on Tall Zar‘ā.

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