

A Large Urban Residence from Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Mādabā

Introduction

By the mid-seventh century AD the character of the Near East had changed forever. The Byzantine Empire, the dominant force in the region for the previous three centuries, had been defeated by the Muslim armies invading from the east, and the flourishing Christian communities of central Transjordan came under the control of the Umayyad caliphs based in Damascus. Their fate had once been thought to be quite dismal, until interest in the transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule gained increasing scholarly attention (Bisheh 2001; Shboul and Walmsley 1998; Shahid 1995, 2001). Previously this period had been characterized as a time of decline accompanied by an abatement in settlement, a degeneration of public institutions, and a reduction in population. However, the evidence produced by numerous archaeological projects, working in the region over the past 20 years, dispels this idea, presenting instead a period of continued prosperity.

The large amount of excavated material from the Mādabā region provides compelling evidence for this new view (e.g. Bisheh 1994, 2000; Piccirillo 1985, 1986a, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2002; Piccirillo and Alliata 1994, 1998; Saller 1941; Saller and Bagatti 1949). The Byzantine period was one of extensive prosperity in the area, during which the town of Mādabā reached its greatest extent. The city was the see of a bishop, who controlled a diocese that extended to the northwest as far as Mount Nebo, to the southwest to include the sites of Mā'in, 'Ayn al-Qattār, and Mukāwir, and to the southeast to incorporate the settlements of Nitl, Dhibān, and Umm al-Raṣāṣ.

The Byzantine – Islamic Transition and the Churches of the Mādabā Region

The mosaic pavements that adorn the churches

of the Mādabā region provide an invaluable resource for dating the building activity of the sixth through the eighth centuries AD. Many of these floors contain inscriptions that give a precise date for the foundation of the building and for any renovations that were carried out subsequently. It is from these sources that we learn of the continued prosperity of the Christian communities of Mādabā. The inscriptions of the eighth century depict a period of sustained building activity where older buildings were renovated and new mosaic floors were installed, complete with updated dedicatory inscriptions.

The Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Raṣāṣ presents one such example. The building was most likely constructed in the late sixth century, but an inscription in the nave confirms that it was rededicated in 718AD. A second inscription, located in the apse, provides a date of 756AD for the repaving of this area. Architectural and ceramic evidence indicate that the courtyard west of St. Stephen's was transformed into a church, known as the Church of the Courtyard, in the early eighth century, probably in conjunction with the rededication of the basilica. A chapel was also constructed to the south of this church in the mid-eighth century (Piccirillo 1991; Piccirillo and Alliata 1994).

The Acropolis Church at the site of Mā'in contains an inscription with a date of 719/720AD. It is unclear whether this refers to the dedication of a new pavement, or a rededication associated with alterations executed in order to conform to iconoclastic law (de Vaux 1938; Piccirillo 1985; Schick 1995: 398-399). In any case, it testifies to some form of ecclesiastical building activity at Mā'in in the eighth century.

The Monastery of the Theotokos at 'Ayn al-Kanīsa was constructed in the mid-sixth century, at

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and the bones themselves do not yield much meat, making it unusual that they were transported only for food. Thus, we have support for trade in the region with Egypt.

Destruction

Unfortunately, artifactual remains from the destruction of al-‘Umayrī house are extremely limited and tell us very little about who mounted the assault on the site. The five bronze points deserve further study, but at this point can tell us nothing definitive about those who used them, whether local or foreign. This task is especially difficult as we continue our efforts to understand who occupied al-‘Umayrī, *let alone* who attacked the place.

It may be that further analysis of the human remains discovered in the house could prove helpful. However, it appears that the four individuals — two adults, one likely male, a juvenile and a child — may well have been unlucky inhabitants of the house who were killed before the building was torched and collapsed. Future DNA research will at least be able to determine relationships among them.

Conclusion

Thus, there are preliminary indications that, by viewing cultural interaction through the windows of the four-room house at Tall al-‘Umayrī, we can see limited evidence of exchange. The subsistence economy of the Late Bronze Age / Early Iron Age transition placed severe restrictions on the possibility or practicality of significant trade with tribal or state entities at any distance away from the site.

However, signs of interaction do exist. We can argue for regional sources for the fabric and patterns on some of the collared pithoi, particularly the Ḥisbān area. From further away we can posit exchange of ground stone tools, perhaps the Karak, Mukāwir or northeastern desert regions. The Jordan River was probably the source for construction reeds and maybe even one of the types of fish whose bones were uncovered in the large midden. Syria or Canaan might provide the origin of the house design itself. Finally, Egypt appears to have provided not only the other fish bones, but also the alabaster jug as well as the stamped jar-handle impression and possibly the bronze statue fragment, although Canaanite parallels might explain the statue. Further research will contribute more to our understanding of cultural exchange and how we

should interpret its significance for economic and political realities.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges the support of many people and organizations for the work leading to this article, but especially wants to single out: The Walla Walla College Faculty Research Grants Program for nearly two decades of financial assistance with the Mādabā Plains Project excavations at Tall al-‘Umayrī; the Council of American Overseas Research Centers for a senior fellowship (2002) to study early Iron 1 architecture in Jordan; my fellow directors of MPP-al-‘Umayrī; and Pierre and Patricia Bikai and the staff of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman.

[Except where indicated otherwise, all figures are used courtesy of Douglas R. Clark or the Mādabā Plains Project-al-‘Umayrī].

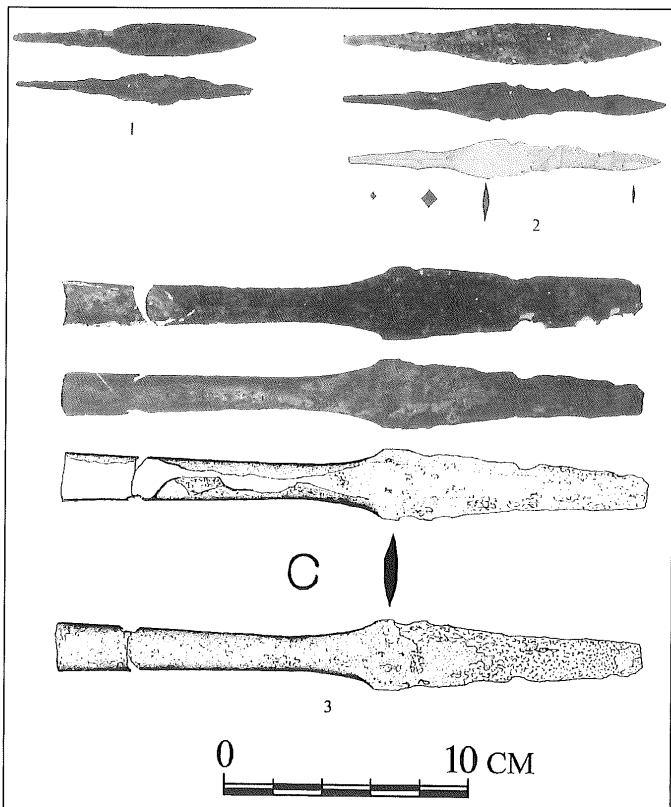
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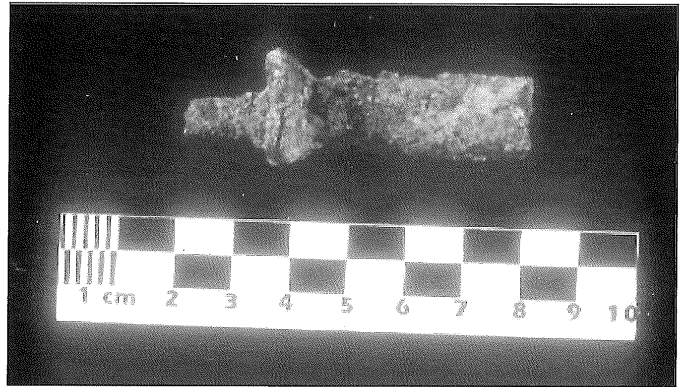
nean seas. Thus, we are able to establish that some type of exchange occurred to bring Egyptian and likely northeastern Mediterranean artifacts to the four-room house at al-'Umayri. This assessment, however, is incomplete and awaits study of the remaining seals/impressions from the midden. These remains without *in situ* security can only help us in marginal ways to draw conclusions about wider cultural connections.

Metals are not highly represented at al-'Umayri house. Besides unidentifiable fragments, two categories of metal objects might carry potential: five bronze weapon points and the bronze legs and feet of a male deity statue. The bronze points — three spear, one lance and one arrow (FIG. 14) — belong to the destructive phase of our treatment of the house and deserve further study before we can say much at all about original provenance.

The 6cm high legs and feet should carry more potential (FIG. 15). While bronze male deities surface occasionally and typically represent gods like Reshef or Baal, or some variation thereof, further research may well provide additional connections among al-'Umayri's household items of worship and those belonging to surrounding groups at the time. Potential ties with Egyptian as well as Ca-



14. Five points recovered in the destruction debris of al-'Umayri house.



15. Bronze feet and legs of statue of a male deity.

naanite sources are likely (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 116).

Remains of flora and fauna, particularly those providing food, might suggest something about interchange. However, carbonized seeds found in the storeroom of the contemporary "Building A", adjacent to the four-room house, revealed evidence of the following foods: wheat, barley, broad bean, grape (pits and skins), poppy, corn cockle, sweet *'ilba*, lentil, vetch, green bean and flax (Clark 1997: 64). Nothing indicates non-local sources for these food groups.

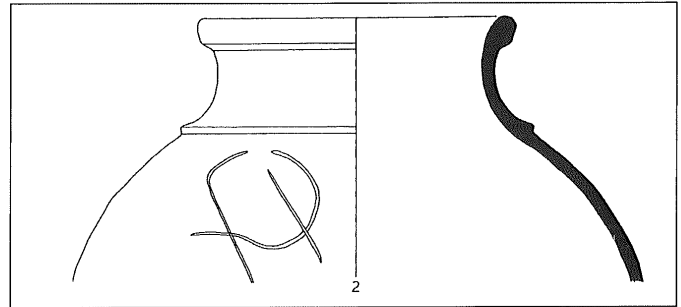
Animal remains contribute to a wider representation of influences from beyond the region of the tell. The massive midden, located east of the house, produced 25,000 bones, many of which have not yet been studied. Of the thousands thus far analyzed (Peters *et al.* 1997), 98.6 percent were domestic mammals. Wild mammals accounted for 1.3 percent — wild cat, lion, wild boar, Mesopotamian fallow deer, aurochs, goitred gazelle and gazelle. How many of these might be found locally is an intriguing question. The same can be said for the small number of bones from wild birds (15) — ostrich, garganey, buzzard, chukar partridge, rock dove and pigeon.

But it is very clear that the four fish bones recovered from the midden derive from elsewhere. Two bones represent a cyprinid 70cm long, likely from the Jordan River (Peters *et al.* 1997: 313-314) and the other two come from a centropomid 1.4m long, a Nile perch (Peters *et al.* 1997: 314). There is no evidence in the pre-LB/Iron Age remains from the Near East of this type of fish and there is no indication that these bones derived from anywhere other than the Nile River. This is especially interesting, according to Peters *et al.*, since there were other fish available from sources closer than the Nile



11. Iron 1 collared pithos, restored at the Walla Walla College Archaeology Lab.

all currently being reconstructed in the Archaeology Lab at Walla Walla College in Washington State. Neutron Activation Analysis on several of these demonstrates that most derive from local sources of clay, although some come from the area around Ḥisbān, several kilometers away (Gloria A. London: personal communication). We are also able, at least preliminarily, to assign limited inscribed patterns on a few of the pithoi to the Ḥisbān region (FIG. 12). Iron 1 collared pithoi have been found throughout ancient Palestine and Transjordan at mostly hill-country sites and are thus popular forms

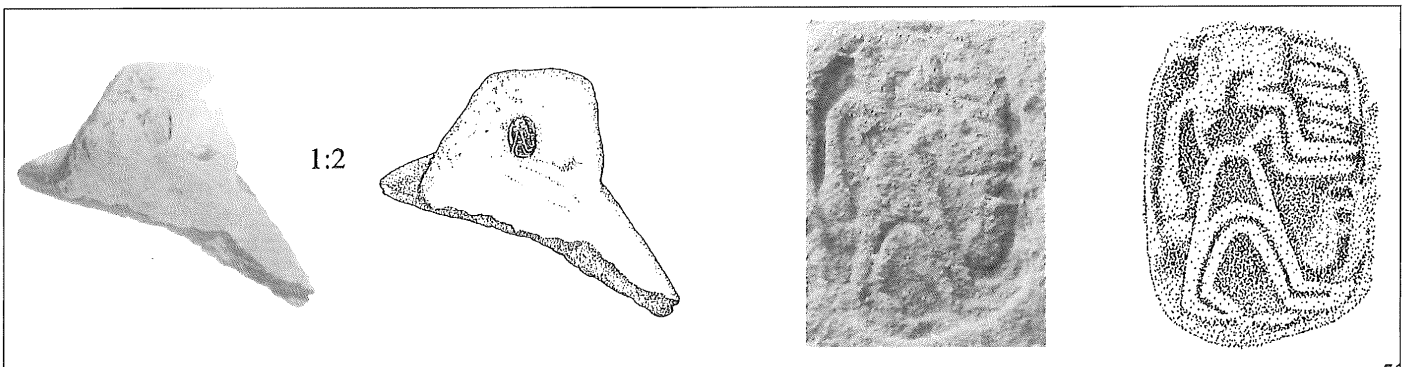


12. Inscribed pattern on one of the 60-70 collared pithoi.

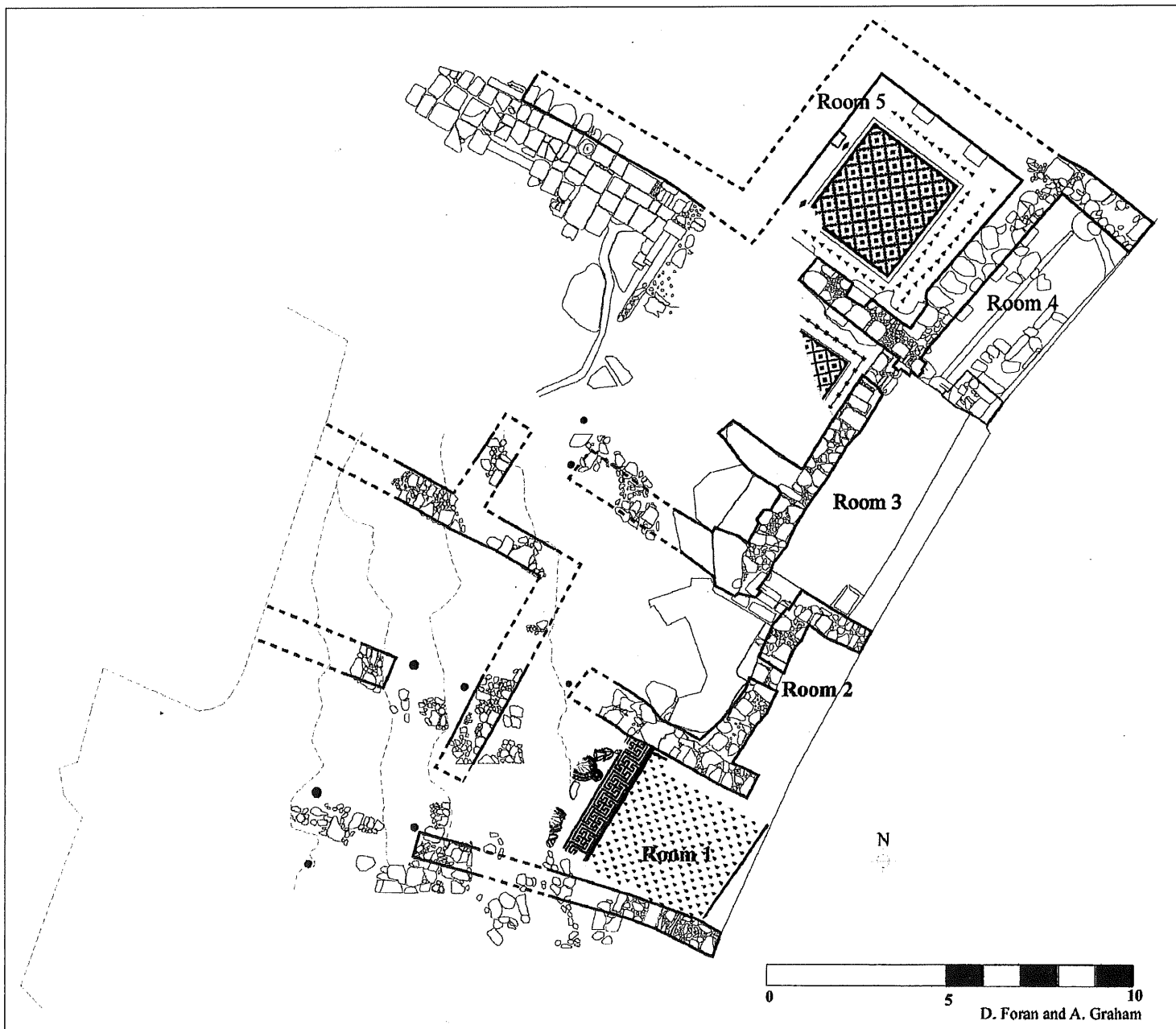
of storage in many places. Tracing cultural influence and exchange in the invention and manufacture of collared pithoi is challenging in many ways and space will not allow us to do so here.

Ceramic (as well as tuff) seals and seal impressions (Eggler *et al.* 2002) account for a small number of artifacts connected with al-'Umayrī four-room house, although only one can boast stratigraphic integrity; many (seven) of the others surfaced in mixed contexts at the location of the house (five of these in a huge foundation pit dug during the Roman period into the debris of the Iron 1 house), yet others nearby and still others elsewhere on the tell, some in stratified remains, some not. Impression 5133, a stamped jar handle discovered near the center of the house in second-story destruction debris, pictures a striding human figure (FIG. 13), possibly of Egyptian origin (Eggler *et al.* 2002: 274-275).

In addition, while not directly attached to the house, a massive midden located nearby to the east and most likely used by inhabitants of the house and others, boasted several seals and impressions, only one of which has been published to this point (Eggler *et al.* 2002: 284-285). A horned quadruped was carved into the sole of a small, human-foot-shaped piece of yellow tuff, with parallels throughout the Aegean and northeastern Mediterra-



13. Stamped jar handle seal impression.



1. The West Acropolis Mansion of Mādabā.

The area to the west of Room 3 was accessed through a door in the north-west corner of the room. A wall with a bedrock foundation divided this space in two, the southern portion of which was paved with a plain white mosaic floor. The northern section had a polychrome pavement that was partially removed in the 1980s, leaving only the northeast corner intact. The extension of the northern wall of Room 3 preserved a plaster facing that concealed a clay water pipe embedded in the stonework behind it.

The second storey over Room 4 was paved with a practically intact white mosaic. The eastern edge of the floor sealed directly against the pre-classical fortification wall, and was bordered by free-stand-

ing walls on its north and west sides. This upper pavement sat on a series of large roofing slabs, which were supported by three arches anchored to the walls of the room below. The first storey floor was hewn directly out of the bedrock, and the entrance to the room was located in its southern wall. Three large stone bins were installed to the east of this doorway. A channel cut down the center of the floor led to a shallow basin located directly below a window in the northern wall. A large ceramic pipe protruded from the deep ledge beneath this window. This pipe led into a plaster-lined basin that was connected to a narrower east-west pipe in the northern wall. This smaller pipe directed the water west, inside the northern wall, then south, beneath

the facing of the western wall, and would eventually have connected with the clay pipe in the northern wall of Room 3. The basin presumably served as a catchment area in which the flow of water could be controlled.

Room 5 was paved with a polychrome mosaic portraying a grid-pattern of flowers enclosing squares. Traces of arch supports were uncovered along the northern and southern walls of this room, each of which was outlined by a border of two rows of tesserae. These springers had obviously once supported two large arches that had in turn supported a ceiling, and possibly a second storey.

A large flagstone floor was built to the west of the rooms previously described. Two drains carved directly into the bedrock, and fed by a large channel equipped with a series of check dams, ran beneath the floor, which clearly formed the central courtyard of the complex.

The exposed bedrock to the south of the flagstone floor is marked by a number of stone retaining walls and platforms. These installations would have served to complement the bedrock in this area, which descends in step-like terraces to the west. Flat surfaces would have then been created for the floors in this part of the complex. Though fragmentary, the walls in this area help to delineate the parameters of the rooms that once formed this southern wing of the building. The bedrock was also dotted with a number of deep holes, which were probably used as door sockets, designating different entryways and thus facilitating the identification of traffic patterns within the complex.

In the Early Islamic period, in the mid to late seventh century, this building underwent a series of renovations and repairs. A vault built of stone blocks was inserted between the existing walls of Room 1 to help support a second storey paved with a white plaster floor. The base stones of the vault were laid directly on top of the first floor mosaic, and the upper portion of the structure blocked the window in the southern wall and the doorway in the northern wall that once led to Room 2.

Portions of the western wall and doorway to Room 2 were repaired and refinished with finely cut stone ashlar. A retaining wall was added to the north side of the southern wall of Room 3, presumably in order to support the original construction. This addition blocked both the southern doorway into Room 3 and the basin in its southeastern corner.

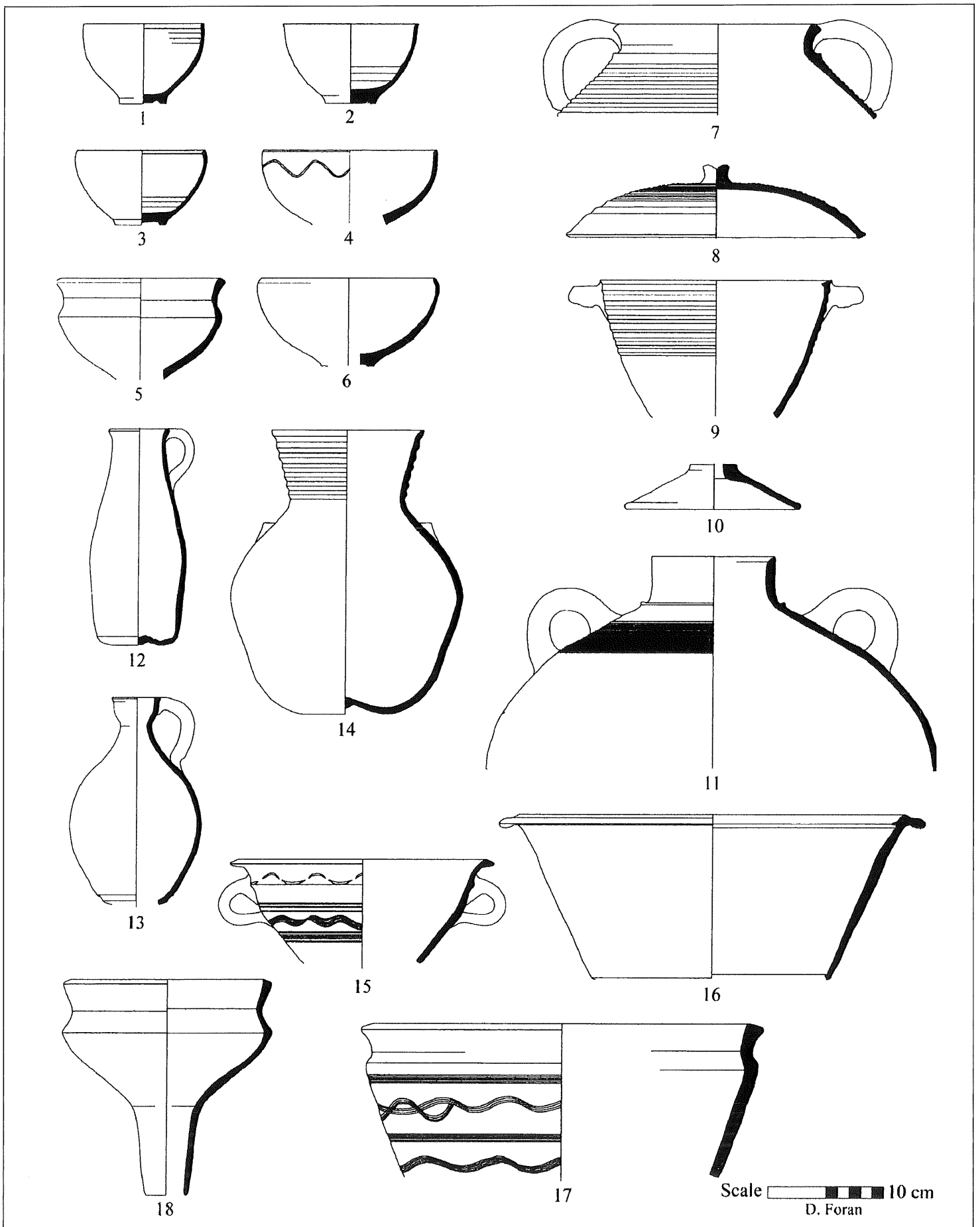
The mosaic floor of Room 5 was subjected to a number of repairs, appearing as mortar patches, during this second phase of occupation. A stone basin was also embedded into the mosaic floor midway along the western side of the room. The tesserae surrounding this installation are significantly larger than those of the polychrome pavement, indicating that it was a later addition. A small plastered niche was incorporated into the southeast corner of the room. The upper portions of the niche were destroyed in antiquity. However, traces of plaster were found still adhered to the walls behind it, providing evidence that the niche had once stood at least 2 m in height, and possibly had even reached the ceiling directly above it. This installation was decorated with painted designs executed in yellow, red, and black, traces of which are still preserved on its inner surface.

The building on the western slope of Mādabā's acropolis has been identified as a residential complex. Its familiar layout, comprised of rooms of varying sizes concentrated around a large courtyard, coupled with the lack of any evidence related to public activity confirm this identification. The size of the building, the care employed in its construction and the lavishness with which it was decorated denote its affluence. This structure can therefore be referred to as Mādabā's West Acropolis Mansion.

Ceramics

The pottery recovered from the West Acropolis complex consists predominantly of material that dates to the sixth through mid-eighth centuries AD. A variety of common ware forms have been found in the building (FIG. 2). These common wares appear to remain relatively unchanged throughout the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, further supporting the idea of a smooth transition between the two periods. Included in the assemblage were several cups with ring bases, cooking pots, casseroles with lids, storage jars and their accompanying lids complete with ventilation holes, jugs, large and small basins, and one large funnel.

Certain wares characterize the building's final phase of use, during the mid-seventh to early eighth centuries AD. Painted examples are distinguished by an orange or buff coloured fabric decorated with dark red or brown paint. The most popular patterns chosen for these vessels include rectilinear or curvilinear motifs and alternating bands of geometric



2. Common Wares of the sixth to mid-eighth centuries.

lesigns. Commonly painted forms include small amphora (FIG. 3: 1-3), bowls (FIG. 3: 4, 8-9), and cups (FIG. 3: 5-7). A small collection of candle-tick-style lamps (FIG. 3: 10-11), which typify this period, were also recovered.

The ceramics distinctive of the post-abandonment phase of the complex date to the mid-eighth to ninth centuries AD. Painted wares are characterized by a pale-coloured fabric decorated with a dark reddish brown paint. The designs in these later styles are far more intricate than their predecessors, consisting of complicated arrangements of geometric patterns. It is also curious to note that in this later phase, painted decoration is limited to a single vessel type: the straight-walled cup (FIG. 3: 12-15). Many fragments of mould-made lamps were also recovered from this period (FIG. 3: 16-17). The motifs on these examples include grapevines and pomegranates.

Several glazed ware bowls were also recovered (FIG. 3: 18-20). The glaze is usually found on the inside of the vessel, and appears in a variety of colors, including green, white, black, and blue. The most common designs on these vessels consist of large dots, as well as rectilinear and curvilinear lines. These vessels belong to an Early Islamic glazed ware tradition typical of the eighth and ninth centuries AD.

Small Finds

A large corpus of objects has been recovered from the West Acropolis Mansion. In addition to a variety of ground-stone tools (FIG. 4: 1-2), several high status artifacts have also been uncovered. A large bronze ewer (FIG. 4: 3) was found resting on the arthen floor of Room 2. The vessel was supplied with a heavy, ornate handle that was attached to its lid via a small chain. A carved, stone Eucharistic bread stamp was discovered while clearing the agstone floor. The cone-shaped piece measures approximately 5cm in height and 3cm in diameter. The bottom of the stamp was decorated with a cross set inside a circle (FIG. 4: 4)

A small human figurine (FIG. 4: 5) carved of one was found in the channel running underneath the flagstone paving of the courtyard. Originally, it was most likely equipped with moveable arms and legs. The figurine also has pierced ears and a hole that enters through the top of its head and exits at the back. The top of its head is unfinished, perhaps indicating the addition of a headdress. Figurines

such as this are usually identified as dolls and are well known from the Byzantine world (e.g. Petrie 1927: 62, pl.55).

A second bone-carved item, a small plaque (FIG. 4: 6) depicting a standing male figure holding a spear and a shield, was uncovered at the southern end of the bedrock ledge. The military-style clothing portrayed suggests that the figure represented was a soldier or government official, or possibly a military saint. Ivory-carved plaques depicting military figures, such as this one, have been uncovered at a number of sites in Jordan, including al-Ḥumayma (Foote 1999) and the port city of Ayla (Whitcomb 1994: 28-31).

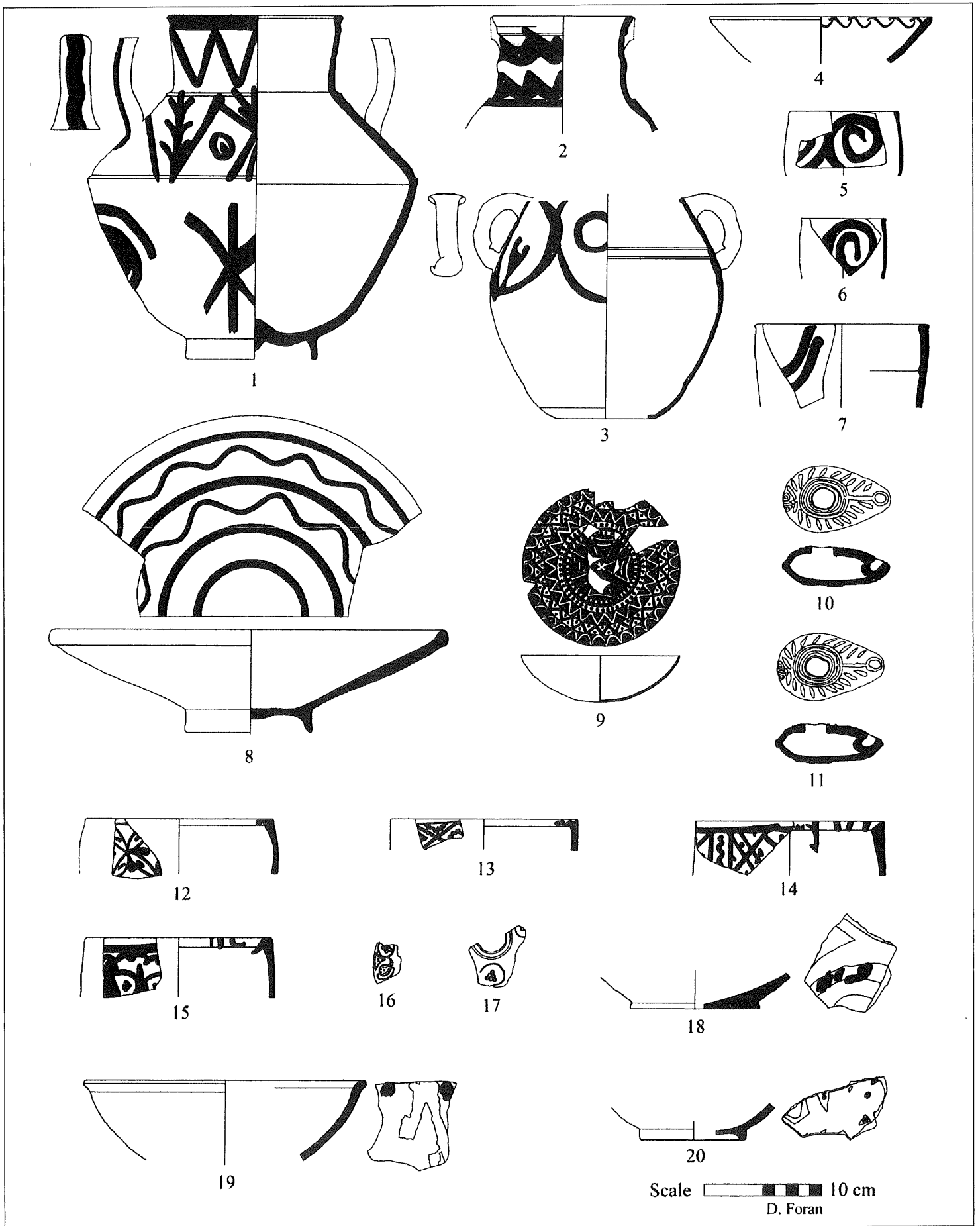
A large corpus of painted plaster fragments (FIG. 4: 7-9) has been assembled from the West Acropolis building. Through the efforts of Dr. Nola Johnson, several letters in a Late Greek script have been identified. Dr. Johnson has also isolated a number of fragments of a Greek cross, as well as the border that framed the inscription. To date, several syllables have been identified, however, the exact nature of this inscription however has yet to be determined.

The Urban Domestic-Building Tradition

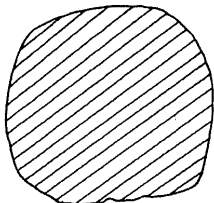
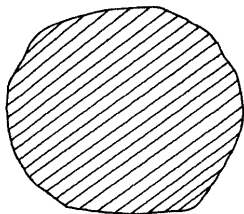
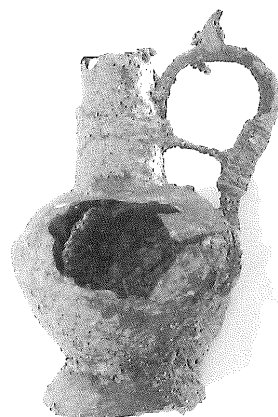
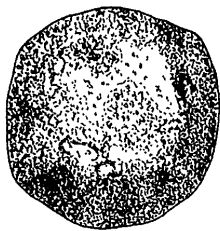
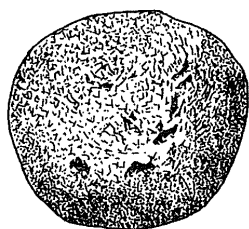
The Mansion on Mādabā's West Acropolis is an example of a widespread tradition characteristic of the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, in which large domestic structures were built in urban settings (Hirschfeld 1995, 1999). The Burnt Palace of Mādabā (Bisheh 1994; Piccirillo 1986b) provides an important parallel with which to compare the West Acropolis complex. Both complexes were composed of various-sized rooms paved with mosaics built around a central courtyard equipped with an extensive drainage system.

The presence of large residential complexes within an urban context is not limited to the Mādabā region. Similar structures have been identified elsewhere in Jordan, including sites such as Tall Jāwā (Daviau 1994), Umm al-Jimāl (de Vries 1993), Pella (McNicoll *et al.* 1982: 123-139, 1992: 163-170; Walmsley *et al.* 1993; Watson 2002; Watson and Tidmarsh 1996), and Jarash (Gawlikowski 1986). The same phenomenon also appears at a number of sites in the southern Levant, including Qasrin (Killebrew *et al.* 2003), Bayt-Shān (Sion and Said 2002), Chorazin, Giv'at Orha and Horvat Kanaf (Galor 2003).

The presence of these large residential complex-



3. Painted/Glazed Wares and Lamps of the sixth to mid-eighth centuries.



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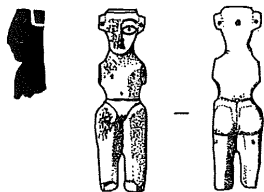
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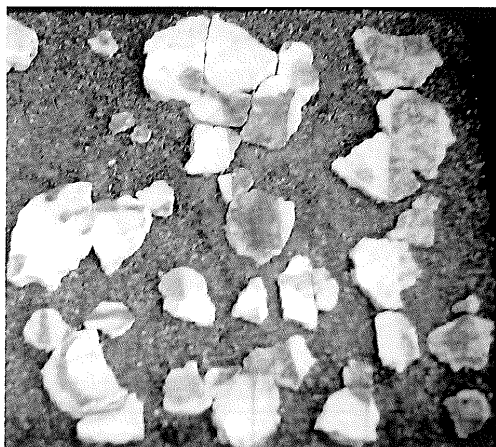
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Scale  10 cm
D. Foran

. Small Finds from Mādabā's West Acropolis Mansion.

es within urban contexts argues for the existence of a powerful aristocracy that thrived between the fifth and eighth centuries AD. This group played an important role in the religious life of the community in which it lived. They were largely responsible for funding the construction and renovation of the many churches that lined the streets of these Byzantine cities, and their names are prominently displayed in the numerous inscriptions that cover the floors of these monuments (Dauphin 1980; Saradi-Mendelovici 1988).

Conclusions

The flourishing building activity that the Mādabā area experienced in the sixth and early seventh centuries attests to a thriving Christian population. The securely dated mosaic pavements of the region provide concrete evidence of the smooth transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule, and the continued prosperity of the Christian community. To complement this abundance of material, attention must now be concentrated on the secular and domestic environment. The complex uncovered on Mādabā's west acropolis, though it was clearly renovated in the mid to late seventh century, is a testament to this continued prosperity. A substantial investment was made in order to refurbish this building. Repairs were made to the walls and mosaic floors of the building, and plaster installations were added to certain rooms within the complex. The incorporation of the vault over Room 1 and the retaining wall between Rooms 2 and 3 also altered the traffic patterns within the structure.

The changes witnessed in the West Acropolis Mansion are symptomatic of what was occurring on a larger scale throughout the region. The alterations made to the complex certainly indicate a re-structuring of the building, perhaps to accommodate the needs of a growing family, a shift in the functional use of the building, or a change in ownership. In the mid-seventh century, the introduction of a new ruling power from the East brought about gradual changes that manifested themselves in the architectural and artistic traditions of the region. Despite the fact that the Christian communities of Mādabā now paid their taxes to Damascus, they continued to renovate their homes, tend to their fields and flocks, and practice their Christian faith. Thus, Mādabā's West Acropolis Mansion, like the numerous mosaic-paved churches of the region, bears witness to a community that experienced change in

the late seventh century, but which did not experience decline until the late eighth century.

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