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Continuity and Variation in Byzantine Church Architecture at Abila: Evidence from the 2006 Excavation

As early Christianity crossed through Jordan, it often produced monumental structures. Among the remains of Abila in Palaestina Secunda, the Byzantine churches stand out as some of the most remarkable finds. Abila was once the seat of a bishopric (Wineland 2001: 64-66, 76-78), and previous excavation seasons have confirmed the considerable importance of Christianity within the culture at Abila in the Byzantine era. The 2006 excavation focused on four of the five known churches in preparation for a volume on the churches of Abila.¹ This paper presents a brief, preliminary, comparative analysis of our architectural findings from all five churches.

Tri-Apsidal Churches in Areas A, D and DD

The prominent position of Christianity at Abila has been recognized since the excavations from the 1980's. Important church structures surmount the city's twin tall(s) – the Area A church atop Tall Abil (the northern tall) and the Area D and Area DD churches near one another atop Umm al-'Amad to the south (FIG. 1). Previous seasons defined the footprints of these three churches – showing them each to represent tri-apsidal three-aisled basilicas, with apses at the eastern end of each aisle. While the A and D churches evidence a larger central apse in the nave with smaller symmetrical apses in the narrower side aisles (a common Byzantine design), remarkably in the DD church the three aisles and inscribed apses are identical in size (FIG. 2; Vila 1995: 103-104).

In these three churches, chancel screens were employed to separate the sacred space of the central apse (with its altar) from the nave of the church.

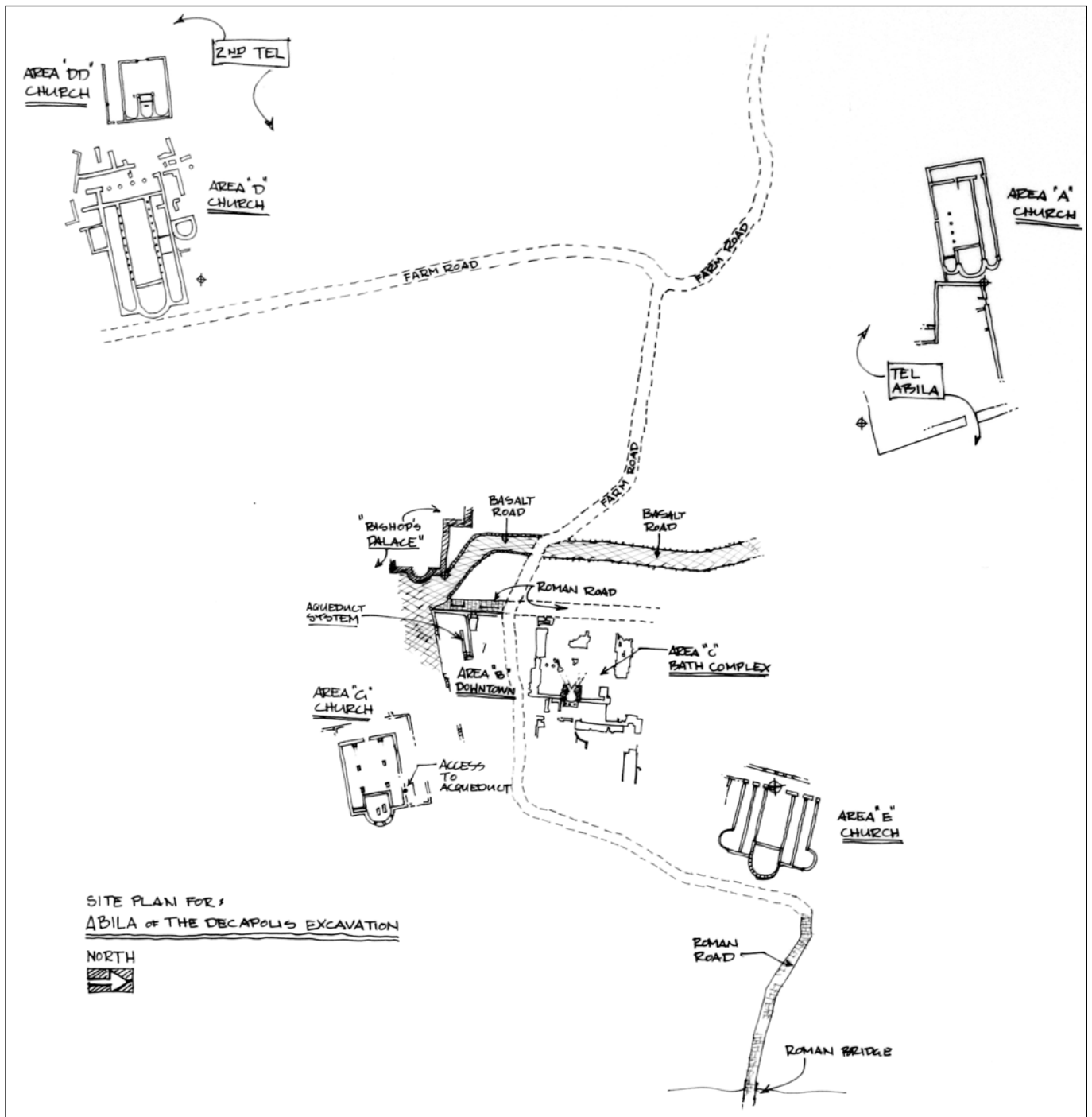
In each case, the side aisles were divided from the central aisle (or nave) by two rows of supporting columns. There were twelve columns on the stylobate line in both Areas A and D. The columns from the Area DD church had been removed in antiquity for reuse (Vila 1995: 104). The columns in Area A appear to have been a combination of limestone and basalt. The columns in the Area D basilica alternated limestone and basalt. The Area A and D churches both evidence a narthex, and all three of these churches open upon public plazas with mosaic surfaces made of large white tesserae lightly decorated by dark tesserae set in a thin diagonal design (note the vivid description in Winter 1988: 59). The Area D basilica evidences an *opus vermiculatum* mosaic applied to the walls of its central apse (Winter 1990: 38, 41). Further signs of extensive wall and ceiling mosaics were found in the Area DD church.

Flooring in the sanctuaries of the A, D, and DD churches was typically *opus sectile*. However, the south aisle of the DD church evidenced some mosaic. Mosaics were also exposed during excavations in the attached side chambers north and south of the Area D church – both geometric and floral / faunal patterns are found (for a good comparison see the report in Winter 1992: 26-36). A geometric mosaic with Byzantine crosses was found in the courtyard of the Area A church.

The original excavators dated the Area A church to the sixth century and the Area D church to the sixth or even to the seventh century (Winter 1992: 34-35). Due to evidence of traumatic collapse, both the A and D basilicas appear to have been destroyed during the earthquake of AD 747 / 748. Less cer-

¹ In 2006 work occurred in all churches except Area A. The current excavation team does not identify the Byzantine or Umayyad

structure in Area B as a church (*contra* Michel 2001: 118).

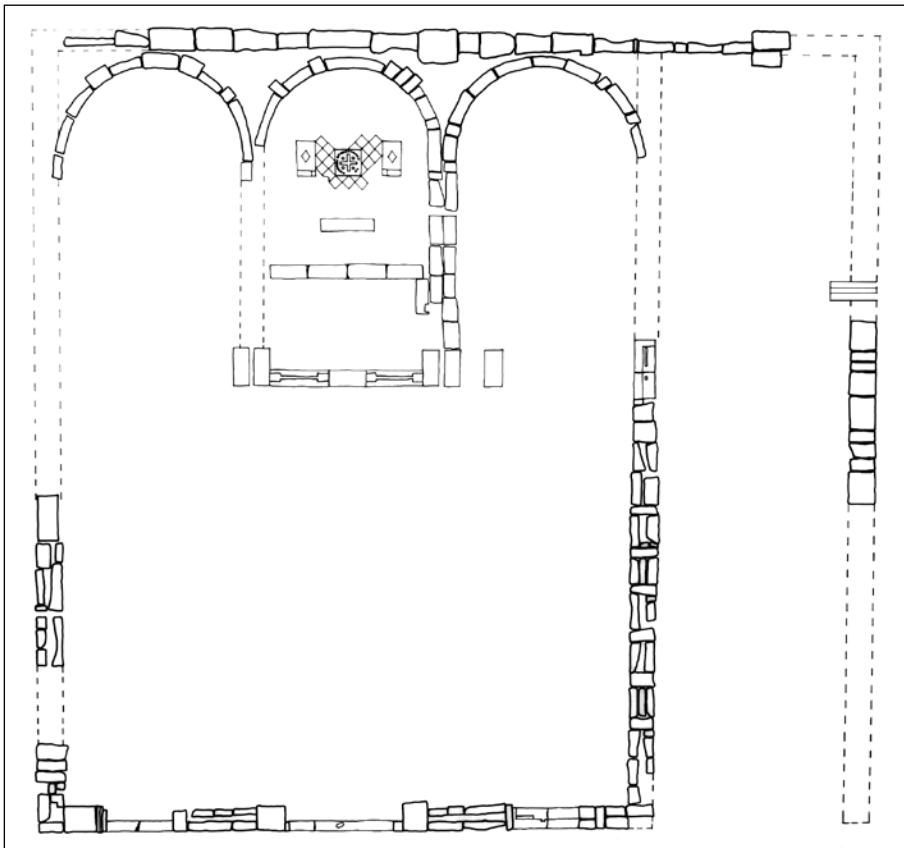


1. Overview of the Abila excavations showing five Byzantine churches. The Area A basilica to the north (top right) lies atop Tall Abil. Areas D and DD lie atop the southern Tall Umm al-'Amad, with the Area G church on northeastern slope of that hill. The Area E basilica is below Tall Abil *en route* to the Roman Bridge further to the east.

tain is the decommissioning date of the DD church. Given the lack of any columns found in situ, some have postulated that the columns from the Area DD church were removed in antiquity to build the D church (e.g., Mare 1997: 308). However, excavation this past season indicates that the DD church

also had an external mosaic plaza on its west identical to the one outside the narthex of the Area D church (making both churches appear to have been in existence at the same time). These large white mosaic floors (with diagonal dark-colored bands) in front of the A, D, DD churches all appear to be

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2. Area DD church top plan showing three identical inscribed apses.

Late Byzantine/ Umayyad.

Initial reports indicated that the three apses of the Area D church were built upon bedrock, suggesting that the church in its present form was the first monumental structure in its location (Winter 1990: 41). However, later excavation yielded some slight evidence of a previous Roman period installation below (Winter 1992: 32-33). Nevertheless, the Area A church is clearly built upon several meters of material filled-in during the Byzantine era; it may be the second church to stand on this site, and excavators have postulated a Roman temple further below (Wineland 2001: 27-28, 1989: 56-59, 1990: 29; also cf. Hummel 1986).

Water collection channels are associated with both the A and D churches. Two cisterns were found beneath the DD church (Mare 1997: 308) and a large cistern lies just north of the Area D basilica. It is probable that the Area A church also possessed a cistern, most likely under its north aisle, though excavations have yet to verify this.

Although there are many features that are similar between these three tri-apsidal colonnaded churches, there are also some areas of divergence. As noted above, the DD church possesses three

apses of identical size – a strikingly unusual feature. The construction materials vary from a primary use of basalt alone (in Area A; also see below on Area G) to a primary use of both limestone and basalt (in Area D). The dimensions also vary between the churches. For example, the Area D church is roughly thirty-eight meters long and twenty meters wide with a narthex extending a further nine meters (Wineland 2001: 34). The Area A Basilica is approximately thirty-three meters long and twenty meters wide with a narthex of 5.25m (Smith 1983: 28-31).

The Area A church apparently stood above and apart from any attached structures. A number of secondary walls from various periods abut the DD church, making the analysis of this quite complex. However, it appears that, at least in the earliest stages of its construction, the DD church had an attached room to the south. Most substantially, the north and south doorways on the Area D church lead into at least four attached chambers (FIG. 3). One of these was likely a baptistery (perhaps the small single-apsidal room to the north), with the other chambers constituting small chapels, a vestry, and conceivably ecclesiastical living quarters.



3. Crane shot of the Area D church looking west. Note the *opus sectile* flooring, the alternating limestone and basalt columns, and the attached rooms on the north and south.

Just by examining these three churches, one can observe continuity and variation in the Abila churches. These three share a general tri-apsidal, three-aisled, colonnaded basilica form. They also have analogous mosaic plazas at their entrances, comparable internal decoration features, roughly equivalent access to water and similarly prominent locales atop the twin tells of Byzantine Abila. However, there are significant variations between these churches – not just in the size of their basilicas, but also in their connectivity to attached structures (note the important rooms attached to the Area D church) and in their internal design (note the three identical-sized apses in Area DD).

The Five-Aisle Area E Church

The bulk of new church excavation in 2006 occurred in the Area E and G churches. This is not the place to report our complete findings; rather, the following descriptions focus on material most pertinent to our architectural comparison of the Byzantine church buildings.

The Area E church lies to the southeast below Tall Abil, *en route* to the Roman bridge further to its east (see again FIG. 1). The sanctuary of Area E was excavated in the 1990's, and the 2000 season revealed the narthex (FIG. 4). This basilica is unique at Abila for possessing five aisles and three apses – the apses appearing in a cloverleaf pattern (one each pointing north, east, and south).² Ana-

logs to this pattern are rare in the Middle East (for a suggested comparison see Menninga 2004: 43). A few other five-aisled churches are known in Byzantine Palestine, including one at Umm Qays (Patrich 2006: 375); however, the cloverleaf is more rare (perhaps cf. Scythopolis), and the combination of five aisles and a cloverleaf apse design appears quite innovative.

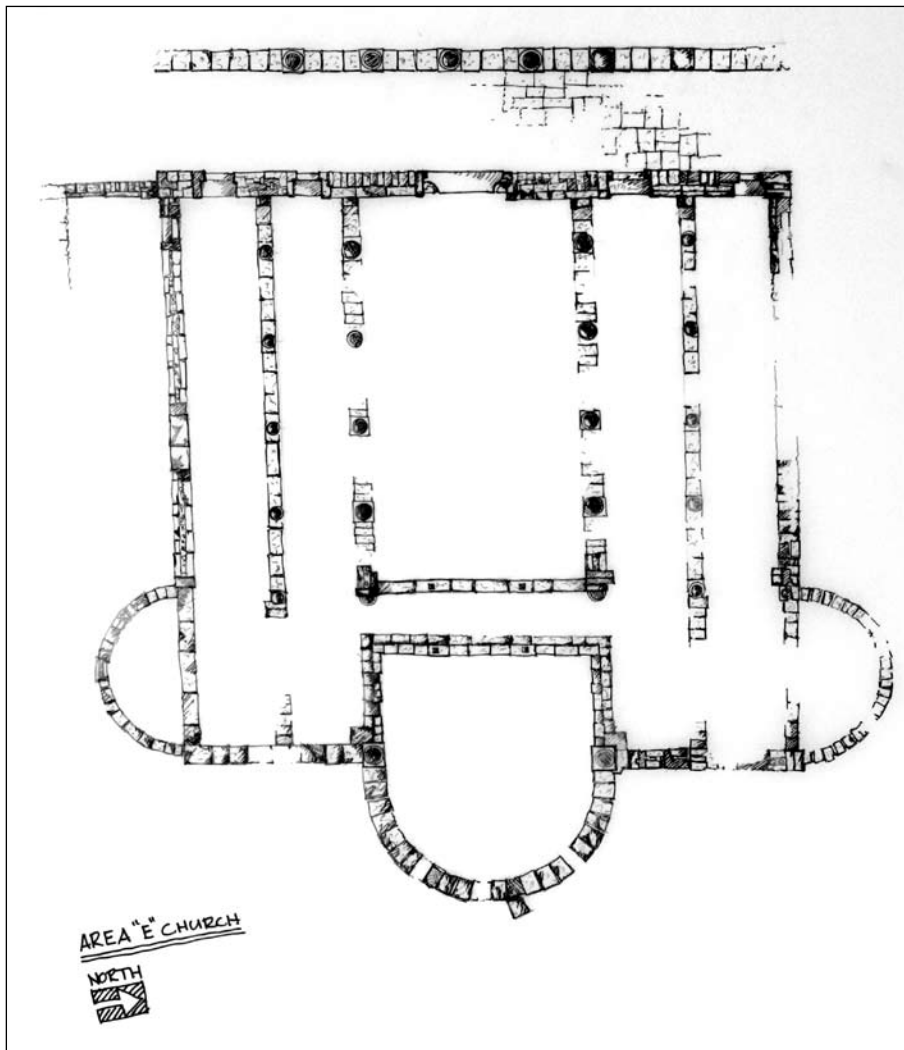
Screens separated off each of the apses, along with the altar, as sacred space. Four colonnades define the aisles from one another. Marble flooring made from large rectangular pavers is still evident in the southwest corner of the sanctuary. During all the various seasons of excavation, pottery analysis indicated Early and Late Byzantine (as well as occasional Late Roman) sherds at or below the floor level (e.g. Deeds 1991: 21). The interior walls of the church and its narthex still contained examples of metal hooks used for securing marble revetment. In addition to the three entrances from the west, doorways were built into the north and south walls of the basilica; some previous excavation had been done amidst the heavy collapse at the northern sealed doorway.

The goals in this church last season were to identify attached rooms on the southern exterior of this basilica, and to probe the material between the narthex and the huge (ten meter high) terrace wall to the west of the church. The fact that this Area E church had been shifted a few degrees off from

² The designation “cloverleaf” comes from Menninga (2004: 43).

Earlier it was called a “cruciform” church (Mare 1997: 306).

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4. Area E top plan before 2006 excavation. Note five aisles and three-apses in a “cloverleaf pattern”.

the eastern orientation of the other Abila churches was likely due to the church’s alignment with this retaining wall. This curious orientation also opens the possibility that, since the eastern wall of the Area E Church suggests some modifications in its foundation; the current basilica might have been built by expanding an earlier structure.

Along the south side of the church we can now verify the existence of a large attached room to the west with a plastered floor entered from the southwest corner of the church. This large room (approximately 18m long and 10m wide) was constructed for ecclesiastical purposes and could accommodate a large group of people. Like the interior of the church, this room was originally paved with marble tiles at the western end. It also had a raised area of limestone pavers at the east end. The marble paved floor was largely broken up by falling masonry and was subsequently covered with a 2cm layer of plas-

ter. In this second phase of the use of the room, it continued to be a large open area that could have accommodated a crowd. It also continued to be decorated with Christian symbols, as evidenced by a cross in the center of the western wall and a second one on a limestone column drum. Two large, rounded-topped, niches (approx. 1m wide, 35cm deep and 1.25m tall) were built into the southern wall of this room. While one niche was carefully plastered shut in antiquity, the other was left open and was used as a cooking or industrial fire pit in later times when the room’s roof had collapsed.

The room also contained a black marble reliquary that had been moved from its original location of use (FIG. 5). The reliquary was found lying on the plastered floor upside down. When it was still functioning as a reliquary, it had been set deeply in a floor and stood proud about 20cm – as indicated by a mortar line that still adheres to the side

of the stone. The cover for this three-chambered reliquary was not found. The shape of the bottom of the reliquary suggests that it had been carved from a capital.

This large southern room possesses essentially rectilinear lines, except that a peculiar doorway on the east end leads through a curved passage into a paved smaller area at the southeast of the church that lies south of the south apse of the church basilica. Further excavation is required to understand the function of this smaller area and its relation to the south apse, where it seems to have been connected by a doorway that was apparently cut after the building was constructed.

Excavations in the plaza west of the church's narthex led to the discovery of the wellhead to a



5. Area E reliquary discovered in southern attached room during 2006 season.



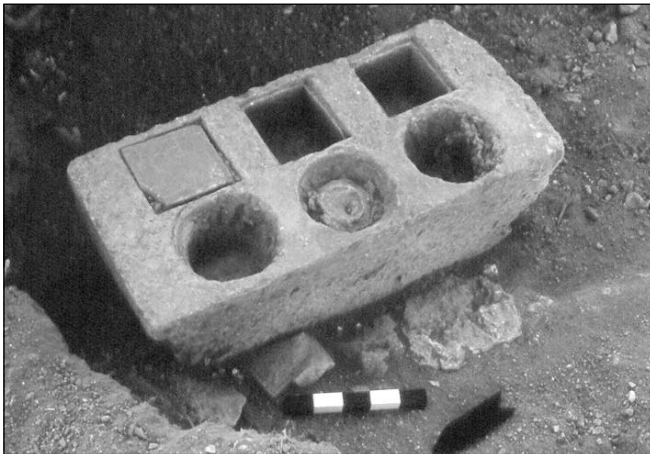
6. Area G church looking east. Note single nave apse with martyrion, and pier construction. Excavation squares in the foreground are in the narthex area. On right (south) is an ambo, and behind this there is a screened flat wall at eastern end of south aisle.

cistern. The cistern was roughly six meters deep, and it had been fed in antiquity by an approximately 20cm wide channel running down the side of the retaining wall. An intriguing niche was also found cut into the nearby retaining wall, and a bench seating area was exposed flanking it. This small plaza area west of the Area E church was limited in size but decorated with greater sophistication than those outside the other churches of Abila.

The Single-Apse Area G Church

The Area G church was once thought to have been a small martyrion, but it surprised us all in its scope and size (FIG. 6). Previous excavation had identified a single apse, in which was found a martyrion and a six-chambered reliquary (FIG. 7). Underneath this apse exists the apparent terminus of a large water channel running about two kilometers from the nearest natural spring ('Ayn Quwayliba). By the end of the 2006 season it was clear that the Area G church was actually a large three-aisled basilica, supported by piers, with a single apse to the east and a narthex to the west. Several squares exhibited the presence of *opus sectile* flooring, and all squares indicated a plaster substrate in preparation for the original *opus sectile*. Probes beneath the flooring exhibited Early and Late Byzantine sherds. The walls hint at marble revetment in the interior of the sanctuary and in the narthex.

On the south side of the central aisle lies an octagonal limestone base to an ambo (a platform for



7. Area G six-chambered reliquary found in church apse.

the reading of Scripture). Although it has been suggested that ambos were installed on the northern side of the nave in Palestine, and on the southern side in Arabia (Piccirillo 2000: 59; Michel 2001: 81), the Area G church ambo is located on the south which may indicate a mingling of influences in Palaestina Secunda. The octagonal shape of the ambo base is also rare, since these are usually thought to follow hexagonal, square, or circular forms (Patrich 2006: 380). Large basalt thresholds still mark the doorways that led from the narthex into the sanctuary and larger basalt lintels, which originally spanned the doorways, lay collapsed among the remains of the limestone walls. The location of the church, approximately halfway up the northeastern slope of Umm al-‘Amad, necessitated the construction during antiquity of a foundation wall on the eastern end of the church (especially beneath the apse). There may be adjacent rooms south of the basilica, since we discovered openings along the southern wall in the last days of excavation in 2006.

This form of construction was unusual for Abila on several counts. It appears that vaulting below the northern end of the Area G church provided the necessary platform for the church itself. This church possesses in its martyrion the most substantial evidence of a martyr cult yet discovered at Abila (though it is possible that a sarcophagus found in the vicinity of the Area D sanctuary belonged to that church). The single-apse form is unique at Abila, as is the pier-based construction, and an ambo is not testified elsewhere at this site.

However, several of these features are found

elsewhere in Byzantine churches in neighboring Palestina Arabia, in northern Jordan. For example, an early Byzantine church at Rihāb has a single-apse three-aisled basilica with supporting piers (al-Husan 2002: 71-94). In fact, several churches in the vicinity of modern al-Mafraq were found to have single apses and to have supported their roof with piers of stone rather than columns (based on our travels to view these in 2006 and cf. plans in Piccirillo 1993: 304-313). Nevertheless, the main difference between our Area G church and these other churches in Jordan are that they possess attached rooms (pastophoria) off the side aisles on the east (adjacent to the central apse). Perhaps such a feature was not feasible at Abila, given that the eastern edge of the church was suspended over the slope of the hill? Nevertheless, the lack of dual pastophoria in a single-apse design may also be witnessed in the fifth-century Amman Citadel Church and especially in the seventh-century Bishop Genesius Church at Jarash (conveniently described in Balderstone 2007: 24, 42; also see Michel 2001: 269-272, 278-280).³

Continuity and Innovation

This paper is principally interested in the variety and similarities of church designs at Abila. One common factor in all the churches was their connection to water. Cisterns exist beneath the DD and G Churches, the E church has a cistern wellhead in the atrium just west of its narthex, and the D church lies not far south of a large cistern atop Umm al-‘Amad. Even the Area A church is bordered to the north by a water channel used for collecting water atop Tall Abīl; likely this Area A church also lies near (or possibly over) a cistern at the terminus of its water channel.

All churches unearthed heretofore follow basilica designs with their entrances on the west and their nave apse on the east. Even the one clear example of a martyr church (Area G) followed basilica architecture rather than a centralized design. Four of these churches are three-aisled basilicas, but one (Area E) is five-aisled. Evidence of narthex entrances exists for four of these churches (Area DD is a likely exception here).

The principle variation among these basilicas concerns the number and location of apses. Four

³ Other possible parallels are listed in Patrich (2006: 377n), who follows Michel (2001: 28). Early published reports of the Church of St Thomas at Ṣa‘ad also suggested a similar design (Rose and

Burke 2004: 21), though this was later corrected to include a diakonikon and a prothesis on either side of the central apse (Rose *et al.* 2007: 424).

are tri-apsidal, whereas one possesses only a single apse at the head of the nave (Area G). Among the tri-apsidal churches, the five-aisled Area E is the only one to have a cloverleaf plan (as opposed to the more standard design where the north and south apses form the eastern heads of the side aisles). Also, the Area DD church possesses the remarkable feature of having three eastern apses of identical dimensions. Four of the churches relied on supporting columns, whereas only the Area G church employed piers to separate the aisles from the nave. Three of the churches (Areas D, E, and probably G) evidence attached rooms. On most matters the churches atop the tall(s) show greater continuity in architectural design than those below.

All the churches possess their own forms of decoration. *Opus sectile* flooring is present in all five churches, though only partial samples of such flooring remain in each. Mosaics appear in attached rooms (Area D) or in the public access-ways near the churches (Areas A, D, DD, E), and occasionally in a side aisle of a church (DD). Area E and G churches evidence brackets employed to hang marble revetments on the walls (cf. Mare 1999: 456). The walls of the D and DD churches were not found sufficiently intact to speculate on wall decorations in these churches. Some decorative motifs serve ecclesiastical functions. This is especially true with the chancel screens used to separate the sacred space of the apses. Only the Area G church clearly indicates the use of a permanently installed ambo for reading Scripture. With the discoveries of 2006 we now have two examples of reliquaries used to house holy objects in the churches (from the Area E and G churches).

The Abila Churches of Areas E and G, which do not have side apses flanking the central apse at the east end of the building, both display an intriguing development by screening off areas at the flat-walled, eastern end of their side aisles. At the ends of these aisles the restrictive screens and the vertical posts are gone but the hard limestone foundation course remains, showing the placement of the posts and the screen sections. The fact that these eastern walls are separated off as sacred space (without ob-

vious entrances or exits) has led us to speculate that these walls may have been adorned with icons.

Church structure alone appears insufficient for dating these ecclesiastical buildings. One might postulate that the single-apsed Area G church was one of the earlier designs at Abila. However, although the final basilica form of the Area G church (with its single apse) appears simpler than the other churches,⁴ it required a substantial commitment of resources to construct this expanded Area G church over such a water system and on the slope of a hill. Its simplicity of design may have been affected more by its location than by its era of construction. Furthermore, the original excavation assessments have suggested that the Area A and D churches were among the latest monumental Byzantine structures at Abila (from the sixth or even seventh century). Yet, despite their prime location, the A and D churches do not seem as structurally complex as the E church, which was probably among the most unique basilicas in the region. Most of these buildings appear to have suffered a similar calamitous demise during the earthquake of AD 747 / 748 (although the DD church may have been decommissioned earlier). Thus, at least most of these basilica churches were in simultaneous use through the end of the Byzantine era and up to the end of the Umayyad period.

Perhaps the most substantial conclusion we can reach is to admit that, among the currently exposed structures at Abila, the differences in church design are all fairly conservative variations on the basilica style. With the possible exception of the reliquary and martyrium discoveries, and the various ways screens are employed, there is currently no substantive reason to suspect theological motivations for structural variations. Rather these seem to depend on the level of opulence desired in church design.

As Byzantine ideas of sacred space flowed through Jordan, they left their footprint behind. There was also regional variation within Jordan itself. The use of local materials (or the reuse of previous materials found near Abila) helped determine building construction. However, local creativity also took the basilica form and reshaped it into a

4 On the basis of the simplicity of the Area G church, one might assert that it was Early Byzantine, such as the examples of the St John of Studius basilica in Constantinople or the much larger one at the Archeiropoietos basilica in Thessalonica (Mango 1978: 36-40). A closer example might be the one at Maresha (Kloner 1993). The examples near al-Mafraq were mentioned above. However,

simplicity of design does not necessarily mean a more ancient date of construction. Note that the single-apse churches already mentioned in this paper included the fifth-century Amman Citadel Church and the seventh-century Bishop Genesis Church at Jarash.

variety of designs that were employed roughly contemporaneously in Byzantine Abila.

The unearthing of a fifth basilica during the 2006 excavation season has revealed further such variation in local design and, additionally, testifies to ecclesial wealth at Abila. Indeed, the wealth these churches possessed in their structures and their proximity to and control over significant water resources bear witness to the social importance of the church at Abila from the fourth to eighth centuries.

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