

POSSIBLE EVIDENCE OF ROMAN EMPEROR WORSHIP AT ABILA

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An installation found at Abila provides possible evidence of Roman emperor worship, local architectural creativity and a view of a structure which once stood in Palmyra. This installation is located on the east side of the Wādi Quwaylibah opposite the civic center of Abila which lies between Khirbat Umm al-‘Amad to the south and Tall Abil to the north.¹ This installation was excavated by Dr. W. Harold Mare in 1998.² Unfortunately the study of this structure has been sidelined by his death and the structure is just a heap of rocks smothered by thistles, under appreciated by scholars of the Decapolis and tourists. Evidence suggesting its significance as a part of local municipal adoration of the emperor Hadrian during the second century is presented in this article.

The Abila architectural installation under consideration is essentially a more than 25 meter long hall oriented on an east-west axis³ that opens to the west (**Fig. 1**). The structure is largely made of local sawn limestone ash-lars that comprise the side walls. The masonry is preserved up to a height of up to 2.39 meters above the floor level in six well-bonded courses. The side walls are preserved to a greater height to the east as they are protected by the slope of the soil on the side of the wadi. This long hall between the parallel walls is generally 5.05 meters wide. Entering the installation from the west the limestone side walls are not parallel and are inferior in construction but still encompass a special space that is 15.60 meters long. This hall retains some evidence of having been paved with rectangular paving stones

that were laid perpendicular to the side walls. A 45cm wide and 10cm deep circular stone basin cut into the exposed bedrock on the south side of the entrance suggests that there might have been some expectation of ritual washing prior to entrance. The outer section of the hall enclosed an area ca. 78.8 square meters. This outer section of the installation is separated from the inner more special area to the west by a wall that is bonded to the side walls of the structure. This wall that cuts perpendicularly across the hall was punctuated by a ca. 1.10 meter wide doorway. The basalt threshold remains in place and the pivots for the doorway demonstrate that two 65cm doors wide swung open into the interior chamber to the east. The inner more private section of the installation is 10.05 meters long and its better masonry encloses an area of ca. 51.43 square meters.⁴ Thus, the interior more secluded space is roughly two-thirds that of the exterior space of the structure. At the east end of the structure is a limestone wall with a well cut basalt insert. This basalt insert is the aspect of the structure that is of particular interest in this discussion. The basalt installation forms the center of the eastern wall. In it there is a large recessed semicircular niche which has an integrated bench along its sides and it was once covered by a half-dome ceiling. The 2.35 meter wide niche is flanked by integrated pilasters made of four courses of vertical ash-lars that rise before voussoirs begin arching over the seating area. The flanking pilasters have bases and capitals that are integrated in the structure. The engaged pilasters were made to appear as if they are sup-

1. The structure described in this article is located at E 769328.7727 N 3619508.055
2. W. Harold Mare, "The 1998 Season of Excavations at Abila of the Decapolis" *ADAJ* XLIII (1999):451-458

on pp.452-453.
3. 276 degrees 45 minutes 30 seconds.
4. This calculation includes the threshold and the floor space of the vaulted apse.

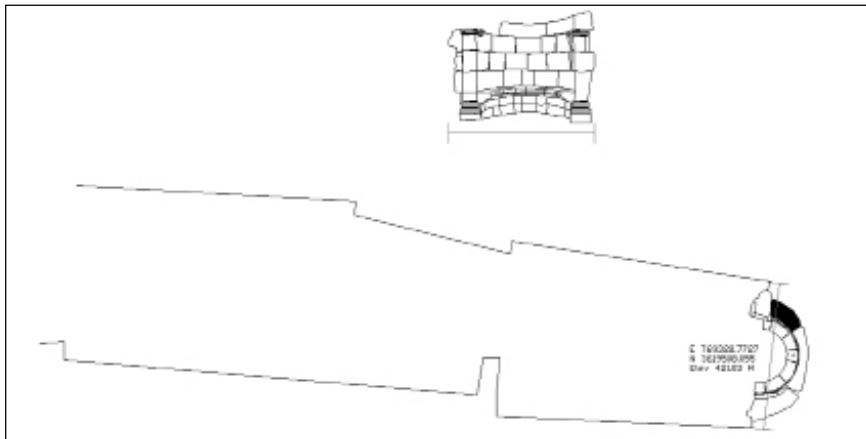


1. View of the basalt niche looking west down the hall (photo by the author).

porting the half-dome which was comprised of eighteen tightly fitting wedge-shaped stones locked in place by a semi-circular keystone. The sides of the keystone have projections that locked it into grooves cut in the flanking voussoirs of the arch at the front. The semicircular bench beneath the half-dome is 32cm wide and 48cm above the floor level and can easily accommodate up to five adult persons. The front edge of the stone bench is eased and shaped in such a way as to suggest that it is cushioned. The narrow stone bench and vertical back to the niche would have tended to cause persons to lean inward and does not provide particularly comfortable seating (**Fig. 2**).

In the excavation reports there is no record of evidence regarding possible roofing of the structure. No voussoirs of a stone vault or large nails from a wooden roof were reported. It appears to be possible that the structure was open at the top. The orientation of the hall and basalt niche would seem to have made the structure a likely venue as a chapel in the Byzantine era but no exclusively Christian symbols were found in the artifacts within the structure. The presence of Byzantine era glass lamp fragments, however, led Dr. Mare to suggest “this installation may have been a small enclosed Byzantine religious shrine.”⁵ The pottery discovered in the installation includes representations from the Roman,

5. Mare p. 453.



2. Reconstruction of the niche and bench (by the author and Tawfiq al-Hunaiti).

Byzantine and Umayyad periods. The rough integration of the basalt installation within rough limestone workmanship in the east wall raises the possibility that this may not have been the original location of the niche structure. The fine workmanship in basalt would generally suggest that the whole face would have been originally made of basalt ashlar. It is possible that the niche could have been a component from a larger basalt structure from which it was recycled or reconstructed after one of the earthquakes that rocked the region in the Late Roman period. The structure appears to have served as a public venue until the collapse of Abila's urban vitality. That collapse was promoted by the great earthquake of 749AD and decline in regional wealth that came with the transition from the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus to the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad.

The physical evidence at Abila points towards the structure as being an installation that provided a special area with limited access and seating that overlooked the civic center. Probes excavated by Dr. Mare disproved his working hypotheses that the niche was part of an entrance to a mausoleum or a nymphaeum served by a large cistern upslope.⁶ No inscriptional evidence has been found in the structure. An inscription

found in secondary usage in Palmyra, Syria, however, raises the intriguing possibility that this structure was originally made for emperor worship and that the structure was a prototype that was copied in Palmyra to honor the emperor Hadrian. Hadrian had a long association with the Levant as he served as the governor of Syria in 117AD and then travelled through the region in the years 129-130AD,⁷ observing his realm and promoting a greater sense of Roman identification among his subjects. In the Decapolis the largest monument testifying to the local devotion to this emperor is the triple-arched gate on the south side of Gerasa.

The nine-line Greek and two line Palmyrene inscription that raises possibilities for the Abila installation was found in 1861, by M. le D'Levy, on a 45.5cm square limestone block incorporated in the wall of a mosque in the village of at-Ṭayyiba on the outskirts of Palmyra (Fig.3). The mosque was constructed of stones that were recycled from the ruins of the Roman era city. This inscription is noted in major discussions of inscriptions from Syria.⁸ The framed inscription was removed from the mosque wall and passed through various hands⁹ until it was acquired by the British Museum in 1858, where it continues to be conserved.¹⁰ The inscription

6. Mare, p. 453.

7. *Augustan History* 13, *Cassius Dio* 69.

8. See *Corpus Inscriptiones Graecae*, Number 1430 or R. Cagnet, et al. *Inscriptiones Graecae Ad Res Romanas Pertinentes*, (The Scholar's Reference Edition: Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1975, reprint of the 1906 edition), #1057, p. 405. W. H. Waddington, *Inscriptions* p. 609 #2631.

9. The British Museum records that it acquired the inscription from William Chaffers who obtained it from

a collection of the Earl of Bessborough.

10. The inscription is identified by the registration number 1858,0817.1 BM #125025 and an image and details may be viewed at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?objectid=282178&partid=1&IdNum=1858%2c0817.1&orig=%2fresearch%2fsearch_the_collection_database%2fmuseum_no__provenance_search.aspx



3. Basalt installation from the west (photo courtesy of the British Museum).

up to this point has been a subject in the discussion of what cities comprised the Decapolis since Pliny omits the city of Abila from his first century listing and Ptolemy includes it in his second century enumeration.¹¹ This inscription that identifies a man as being from “Abila of the Decapolis” together with coins and an inscription with the name Abila found at the site at the Wādī Quwaylibah is a component in the argument of the Abila excavators to include Abila as a member of the Decapolis.¹² John Wineland has produced an English translation of the Greek inscription and argues convincingly that the “Agathangelos of Abila” refers to the specific name of the patron rather than an anonymous “good messenger” which translates the name. Wineland’s translation reads “To the thundering God (Zeus) for the safety of Trajan Hadrian Sebaste the lord. Agathangelos of Abila of the Decapolis built this vaulted arch and set up this bench, out of his own expenses, in the year 445 (and) the month of Leos.”¹³ Wineland explains that the chronological indications on the inscription identify the monument dedication period as August/ September of 134AD since

the Palmyrenes employed the Seleucid era and the Macedonian system of naming the months. This would make the dedicated structure a memorial to the emperor who had already left the region to return to Rome. Wineland, speculating on the nature of the structure observed, “It may be a dedication inscription of a public structure like a vaulted arch with an associated bench that Agathangelos funded,”¹⁴ but he prefers that the monument dedicated in Palmyra was a funerary structure in an archesolium.¹⁵ It is unlikely; however, that an expatriate Decapolitian Abilaite like Agathangelos living in Palmyra would have anything to brag about in having built a tomb for himself out of his own resources. As a patron of a public structure built for the purpose of honoring the deified emperor who had safely returned to Rome, Agathangelos of Abila would have reason to leave a public inscription.

The British Museum identifies the inscription produced by Agathangelos as a commemoration of a “votive *lectisternium*” in which a banquet was presented in honor of the deified emperor whose symbolic presence was recognized with the aid of a bust or a recumbent

11. See S. Thomas Parker, “The Decapolis Reviewed”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 94(1975); 439.

12. W. Harold Mare, “The 1980 Survey of Abila of the Decapolis.” *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 17(1981):12 reasserted this in his “Abila: A Thriving Greco-Roman City of the Decapolis” *ARAM* 4:1&2

(1992):57-77 and was followed by John Wineland, *Ancient Abila: An Archaeological History*. (BAR International Series #989) Archaeopress: Oxford, 2001.

13. Wineland, Pp. 60-61.

14. Wineland, p.61.

15. Wineland, p.61.

statue. The practice of “spreading a couch” and serving food before reclining statues of the gods appears to have been adopted in Rome in the period of the Republic as a means to propitiate the gods.¹⁶ By the period of the Empire the custom in Rome, following contemporary eating practices, appears to have moved towards *sellister-nium* in which the image of the deity was seated rather than reclining.¹⁷ In the Levant in places like Palmyra and the Decapolis the custom of eating on a couch for banquets probably persisted in the Second Century.¹⁸ The exact nature of the devise built for repose under the vault mentioned in the inscription is not specified by Agathangelos. A structure built for sacred meals honoring the emperor and thereby, in contemporary thought, fostering civic well-being would be the type of structure that would bring public praise upon its patron and explain the erection of a monumental inscription.¹⁹

The structure found at Abila fits the description of what Agathangelos of Abila made in the Palmyrene inscription. It comprises a bench or couch under a vaulted arch. The bench in the

Abila installation would have provided a sturdy venue for a bust of the emperor or statue of the emperor to be placed as a banquet was presented and shared by civic leaders. The representation of the emperor would have been graced not only with the votive banquet but it would also be reminded of the source of the benefaction by the view of the city. While many small vaulted niches may be found in monumental Roman period architecture in Jordan, and vaulted niches of similar size were constructed on either side of the south face of the Triumphal gateway dedicated to Hadrian outside of Gerasa²⁰, the installation at Abila is unique in its integration of a bench under the vault. The basalt installation found at Abila could be an example of or even a prototype for the structure commemorated by Agathangelos in the Palmyrene inscription. The architectural details point towards the possibility that the installation at Abila overlooking the city center was originally constructed as a venue for municipal emperor worship and that it continued to serve a civic function even after the emperors of Rome lost their aura of deity.

16. Livy 5.13 indicates that the practice was adopted by the Romans in 399 BCE.

17. Tacitus *Annals* 15.44 in his description of sacred banquets as a part of Nero’s response following the burning of Rome before Christians were identified as culprits so as to divert blame from the Emperor himself.

18. A fresco of a man reclining on a couch next to a table was found on the painted wall of an archesolium at Abila in 1996. See Harold Mare and Robert Smith, “A Roman Tomb at Abila of the Decapolis.” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* XIV (1998): 309-317.

19. The most extensive study of Roman emperor veneration is that of Duncan Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: studies in the ruler cult in the western provinces of the Roman Empire*. 4 vols. Leiden:E.J. Brill, 1987-2005. In this study he provides important insight on the adoration of emperors but does not highlight any parallels to the Abila structure in the western part of the Roman world.

20. It is possible that in the Gerasa gateway niches benches were not integrated in the masonry but were free standing.

