

JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH AREA NEW EVIDENCE Regarding The Basilica and Four Piers

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Introduction

The report published by the author and Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos in ADAJ 47/2003 focused on the analysis of the Architectural Evidence in an area of unique importance concluding that memorial churches were built in the original site of the Baptism of Jesus (John The Baptist Church Area).

Further investigation and excavations associated with the intended restoration works for 2004 have brought to light new evidence as regards the basilica and four piers (Mkhjian and Kanellopoulos 2003: figs. 2, 7, 9, 12, and 13) that in turn suggested a unique design of the basilica connected through a staircase to the east with a cruciform baptistery (4 piers) (Fig. 1).

The present study focuses on the validity of this theory concentrating on the recent finds, comparative studies and pilgrims' accounts.

Results of Excavations/ June 2003

Excavations were carried out at the eastern end of the Basilica to investigate its eastern end before its restoration, in order to protect the inner floor remains and arrive at a better understanding of the basilica and its plan.

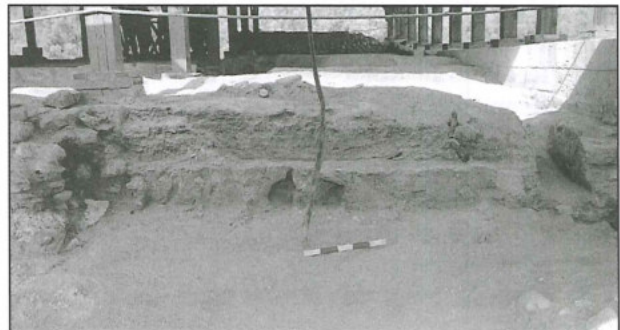
The most important results were:



1. The remains of the four piers (Cruciform Baptistery), staircase and basilica (from the east).

- 1- The discovery of the original mortar with clear indications of the stones that had disappeared at the eastern end of the northern aisle, hence leading to a more precise end of the basilica's eastern walls for both the northern and southern aisles. (Fig. 2)
- 2- The discovery of two relatively large masses of the bedding of the central aisle disconnected from its original floor by 20 centimeters (horizontally) and settled by about 30 centimeters (Figs. 3, 4).

Hence indicating devastating earthquakes¹ that disconnected the central aisle from the staircase.



2. The original mortar at the eastern end of the northern aisle (from the east).



3. The bedding of the central aisle disconnected by 20 centimeters horizontally.

¹ A field research through a cooperative agreement between DoA. and ACOR conducted by Dr. Tina Niemi and Alexander Dahne /University of Missouri (May 2004).



4. The bedding of the central aisle settled about 30 centimeters (from the south).

- 3- The discovery of the original mortar at the northeastern corner of the central aisle running eastward (at 90 degrees to the above mentioned mortar of the northern aisle). Hence showing that the central aisle did not stop where both the northern and southern aisles ended, but extended further east (Fig. 5).

Comparative Studies

Basilicas

Many different forms of basilicas evolved throughout history. Whereas early Christians had different ground plans for their basilicas, (St. Stefano Rotondo in Rome / round building; St. Vitale in Ravenna / octagonal building; Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem / octagonal central space over the Cave of the Nativity on to a five-aisles basilica, and many other forms), today a basilica is understood to be a church building which has the following main properties:

- It must be longitudinal and must have several aisles.
- The nave must be raised, with a clerestory, an area with windows.



5. The northeastern corner of the central aisle running east (from the northeast).

- The main entrance must be at one narrow end and the sanctuary at the other.

Baptisteries

Baptisteries had different sizes and shapes too. Originally baptism could take place anywhere that running water could be provided, but later, as baptisms were performed in groups and for adults, they had to be of a certain minimum size and varied in shape and design (octagonal, round, square, cruciform, etc.).

In centralized buildings the baptismal font was set into the floor, frequently being cruciform having steps at the western and eastern ends. However, baptisteries could also be independent buildings, free-standing, or attached to a church, (S. Giovanni in Fonte / Rome; Hagia Sophia/ Constantinople, Qal'at Sam'ān/ Syria, etc.).

Pilgrims Accounts

Arculfus (AD. 670, PPTS Vol. 3: 36- 38) said: "... a stone bridge is carried on arches to the bank, across which men go to the cross and **descend by a slope to the bank** as they return. At the edge of the river is a small square church, built, as is said, on the spot where the garments of the Lord were taken care of at the time He was baptized. This is raised, so as to be uninhabitable, **on four stone vaults, standing above the waters, which flow below**. It is protected above by slacked lime, and below, as has been said, is supported by vaults and arches. **This church is in the lower ground of the valley through which the river Jordan flows...**"

Epiphanius (AD 675, p. 74) said: "To the East of Jericho about eight miles away is the Jordan, and there is a **small fort containing a large church, The Holy Trinity**. **On the riverbank is a church of The Forerunner**".



6. The remains of the mosaic floor in the apse of the basilica just to the west of the altar.

St. Willibald (AD 754, PPTS Vol. 3: 27) said: "A church stands there now, raised up high on stone columns, and underneath the church is now dry ground. Where our Lord was baptized in this very spot".

Abbot Daniel (AD 1106-1107, PPTS Vol. 4: 27) said: "...upon an elevation on the east side, there is a little chapel with an altar. This marks the place where John the Forerunner baptized our Lord Jesus Christ. The place where Christ was baptized is distant from the river Jordan as far as a man can throw a small stone ...".

Conclusion

- The description of Arculfus of a slope, and a small square church built on four stone vaults standing above the waters which flow below might fit well with the four piers, staircase and ramp that was used as a cruciform baptistery at the place where the Lord was baptized. This theory would be reinforced by the fact that hundreds of cross marks were found in the lower parts of the two Northern piers that survived.
- The large church (the Holy Trinity) on a small fort described by Epiphanius might fit with the Basilica (the only piece of mosaic remaining in the apse area depicts a vase out of which 3 Palmette leaves appear, that might resemble the Holy Trinity/ Fig. 6). The Church of The Forerunner on the riverbank also fits the description of Arculfus.
- The church described by St. Willibald being raised up high on stone columns, with dry ground underneath at the spot where our Lord was baptized, also fits well with the descriptions of both Arculfus and Epiphanius adding that there is dry ground underneath, an indication, perhaps, that the river had moved away.
- Abbot Daniel's reference to a little chapel with an altar at the place where John the Forerunner baptized our Lord might well fit the Chapel located over the northwestern pier. But it is interesting to note the distance from the river being as far as a man can throw a small stone. Because it is a clear indication that the river constantly changed its course. This was also documented through the floods in February and March 2003. At the same time, the persistence of the believers to build churches in this specific point (the four piers) and to use it as a baptistery shows that they believed

it was the spot where Jesus was baptized by John.
- All the above leads us to suggest that a unique monumental cruciform baptistery was built with a church on top linked through a staircase with the Basilica to allow believers to descend with their sins to be baptized with running water at the spot they believed Jesus was baptized.

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