

## EXCAVATIONS AT DEIR 'AIN 'ABAṬA 1991

by  
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### Introduction and Objective

The third season of excavations at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa in Ghor eṣ-Ṣafi took place in September, October and November 1991. The main objective was to reveal the entire mosaic floor and associated building in Area F discovered in 1990 (Fig. 1; Pl.I,1).

### Area F

After the initial clearing of Area F.I (excavated in 1990) of rubble from erosion and vandalism, extensions to this trench were made to the south and east. Quite soon the tops of three apses were revealed which were built into the east side of the mountain. This delimited our excavations and brought to light a new building comprised within Area F (Fig. 2; Pls. I,2; II,1). The divisions include, F. II immediately to the south where the main and largest apse was located, F.III the extension of F.I eastwards into the mountain, and F.IV the third apse on the south end of the building next to Area A.IV, the northern end of the reservoir.

In spite of the huge mass of stone and slopewash, excavations were carried out stratigraphically and all architectural stones were plotted in order to help understand how the building collapsed. Each stone was numbered, registered, described and photographed *in situ* before removal. This will facilitate any future reconstruction of the building and provide useful masonry information.

As we descended into the layers of rubble it became obvious that there was no real destruction, but rather a gradual collapse and ruin of the building due to the natural pressure of the mountain. Once the floor levels were reached the relative lack of finds contributed to the abandonment theory.

In the F.III extension of F.I, we discovered the first mosaic inscription above the geometric designs. It is enclosed by a *tabula ansata* and is four lines long, naming the Bishop Iakovos and Abbot Sozomenos during

the time of the paving, and is dated April A.D. 606. In the centre of the apse beyond the inscription is an open entranceway without a door, standing to its full height. The capitals on either side are adorned with "Maltese"-type crosses. The lintel, which we replaced, also had a similar engraved cross in the centre and was flanked by two rosettes.

Beyond the entranceway lay a cave cut into the mountain whose sides had been plastered (Fig. 3). Two niches on either side contained a number of pottery oil lamps and glass fragments. The floor was covered by a multi-coloured mosaic without regular design. The north side had a stone lining and after digging behind it we found more lamps, glass and human bones from an earlier phase of the cave. At a depth of 55 cm we reached the conglomerate bedrock of the mountain. In the centre the deposit continued to several stone slabs which presumably concealed a tomb. This was not excavated.

Area F.II was the largest area excavated and it consisted of the chancel and nave. It was not surprising to find the white marble chancel screen (Pl.II,2) still *in situ* in places along with many of its fragments in the immediate area. One of the two white marble chancel posts was discovered complete (Pl.III,1) along with many pieces of the other. A rarer find was the pulpit whose base survived *in situ* with many of the decorative soapstone fragments (Pl.III,2) and collonettes nearby. Much of the chancel screen and the pulpit were assembled and are now on display at the Karak Museum. Unfortunately, none of the altar was found though it was evident where its four legs stood.

Two mosaic pavements were revealed during excavations. The upper one in the chancel has depictions of ducks, birds, a peacock and a lamb all intertwined with vines and grapes (Pl.III,3). The lower part of this mosaic is destroyed but may have portrayed a second peacock flanking the opposite side of a large vase (a common Christian theme). In

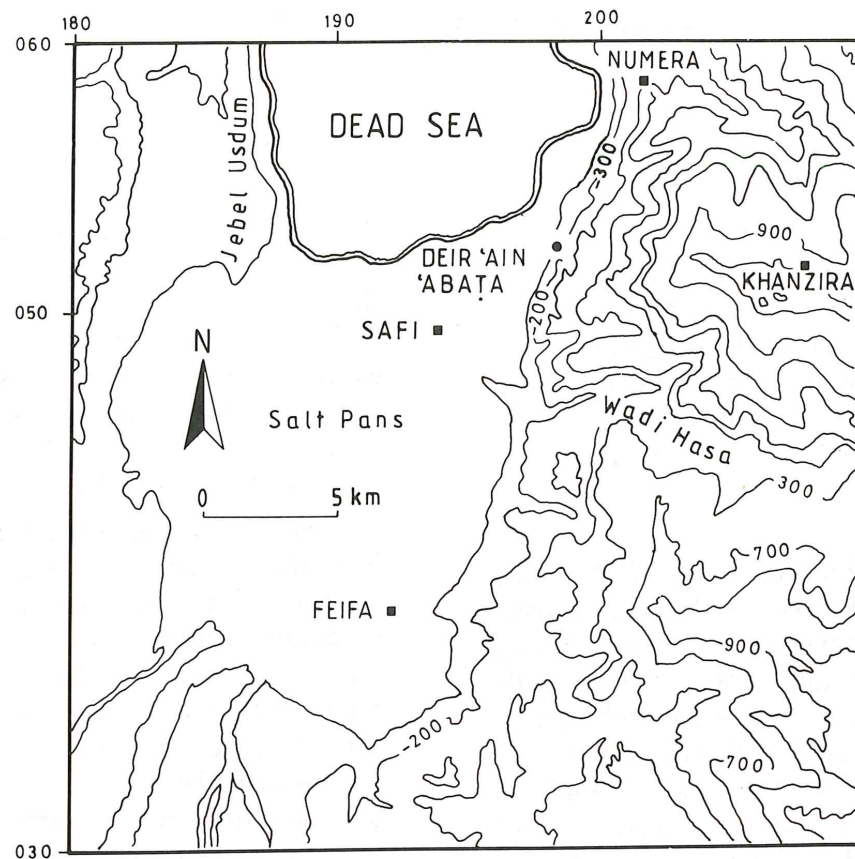


Fig. 1. Location of Deir 'Ain 'Abata.

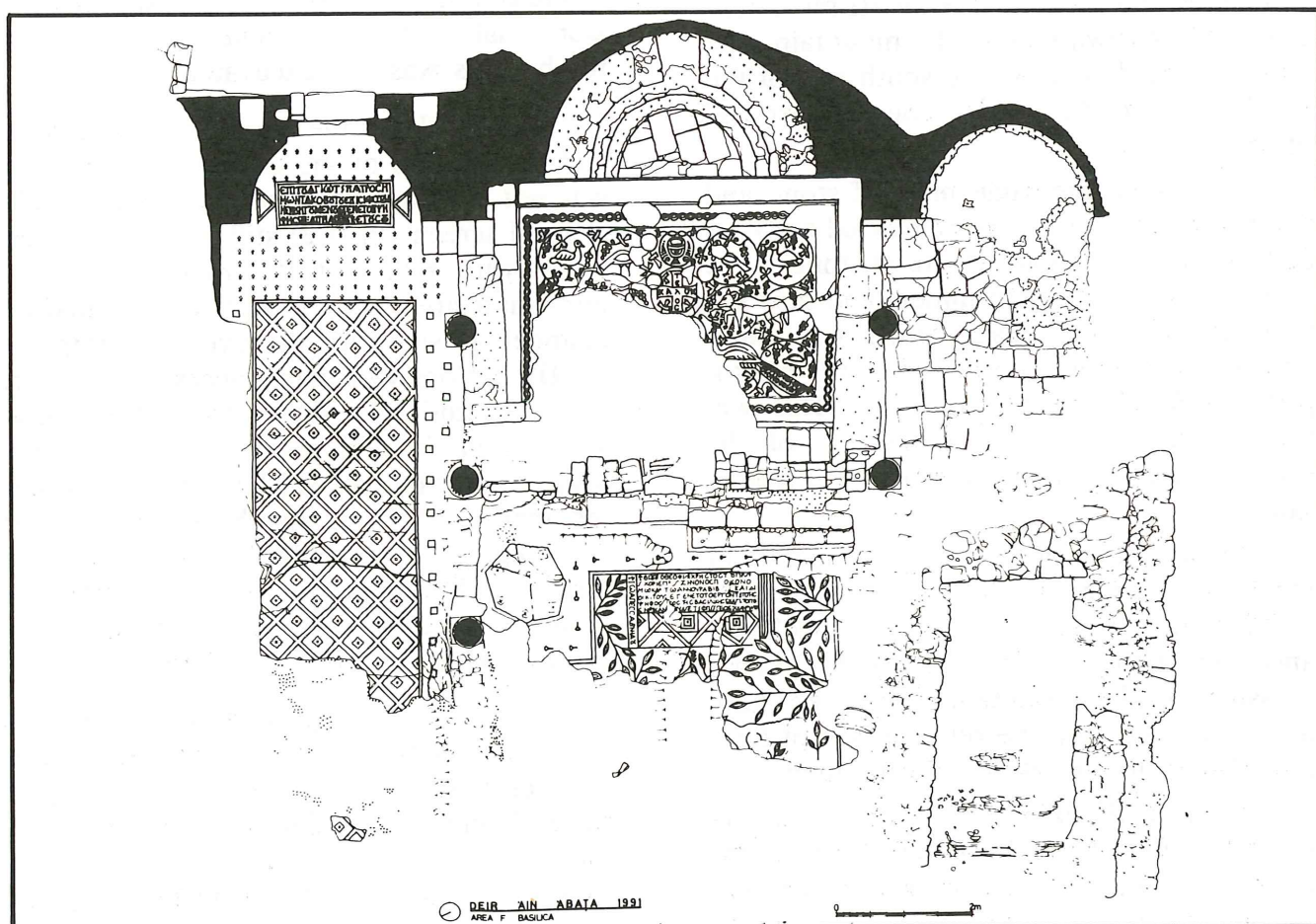


Fig. 2. Top plan of Area F, the basilica-church. Cave entrance at the upper left hand corner.



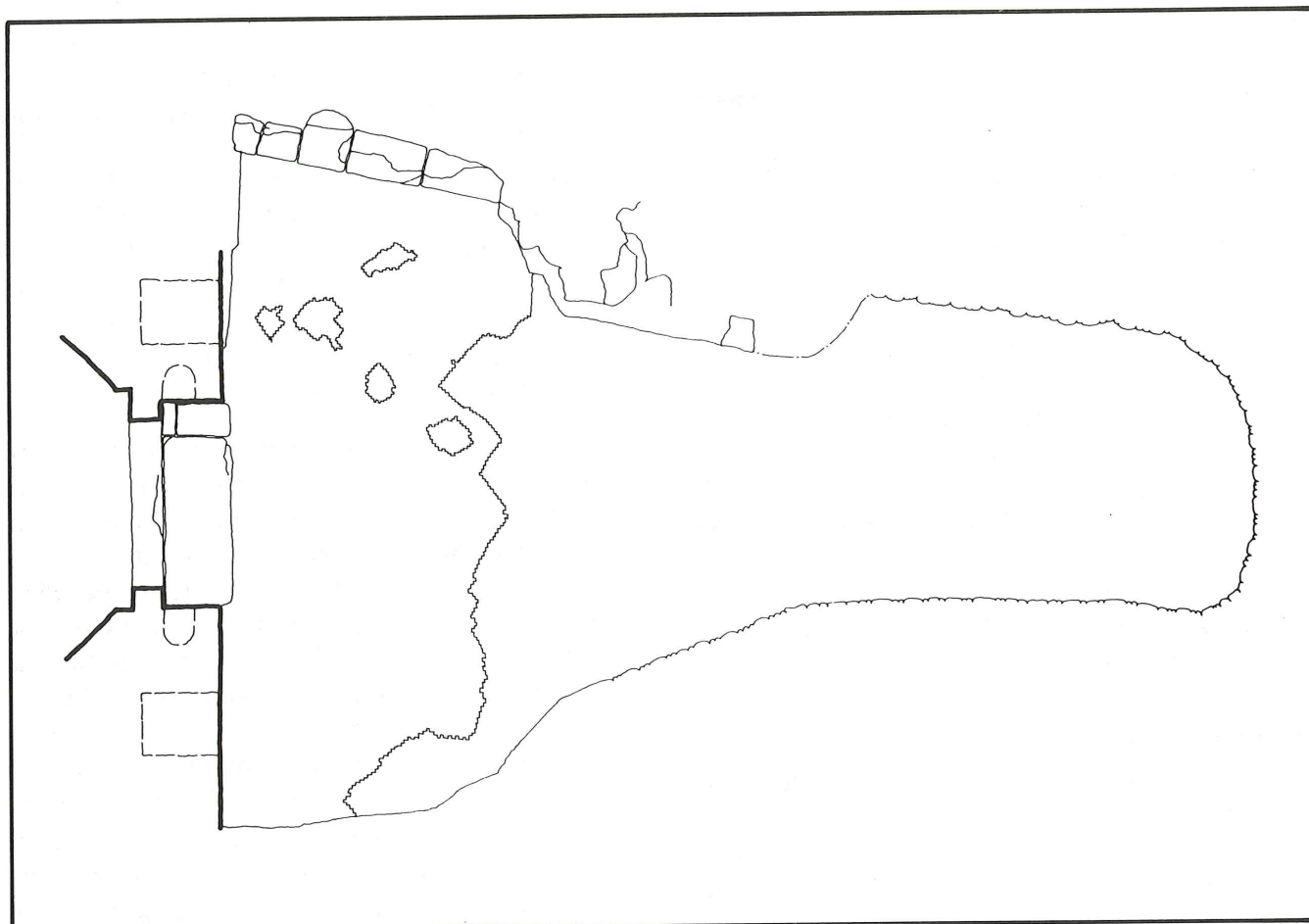


Fig. 3. The cave, Area F.III.

the centre precisely where the altar stood, a chalice is depicted above a cross inscribed with the Greek words ΤΕΛΟΣ ΚΑΛΟΝ. This may be translated as a wish for our last days on earth to be good ones.

Few finds aside from architectural remains were retrieved, and it seems even more obvious that the building was completely cleared before it collapsed. Roof tiles were the most common finds. The lamp and lamp fragments discovered on the floors belonged to the Abbasid period (Pl. IV,1, top left).

At the lower end of F.II in the nave lies the second mosaic paving with another inscription surrounded by floral designs reminiscent of painted decoration on Nabataean pottery. This inscription is six lines long and lists names of church officials associated with the 'Basilica' at the time of its construction in May A.D. 691. Unfortunately the western edge of the floor was destroyed along with the building which collapsed down the mountain side.

The third apse on the south end of the

building (Area F.IV) had a sandstone slab floor. The back end was robbed out, revealing the conglomerate bedrock. The central part of the apse had a niche, though not very deep, and it was probably flanked by two small limestone columns which were found in the rubble. Although much of this area was in bad condition, the remains of a walkway into the reservoir could be distinguished. Further to the west three wooden roof beams (all of palm) were found *in situ* running north-south. These beams would have spanned across the reservoir (Area A) serving as a roof and perhaps even as a walkway above the seven arches of the building from which water could be collected.

#### Area A

A limited amount of work was carried out in the north-eastern part of Area A in order to complete the top plan of the reservoir excavated in 1988 and 1990, and establish the connection with the structures in Area F. The three most northern arch stubs built into

the conglomerate bedrock on the eastern side of the reservoir were revealed (Pl.IV,2). Immediately above these was a large rectangular basin (A.IV 2.1) cut into the bedrock with a channel leading through the arches and into the reservoir. Both the channel and floor of the basin were plastered and apparently formed part of the water catchment system. The north wall of the reservoir was also exposed and showed evidence of two building phases. No entrance or doorway was found, though these may have been removed during the reconstruction. The only surviving connection between Areas F and A is a stone-built platform covered by sandstone slabs extending along the conglomerate bedrock to the top of the basin. This may have therefore been used as a water-collecting area.

### Conservation

Particular emphasis was given to conservation work at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa during the 1991 excavation season. The first job was to repair the damage done by vandals since the last season. The two columns uncovered in 1990 had been completely uprooted and rolled over. The broken bases and column drums were joined back together and reset in their original positions. Smashed sections of the mosaic pavement were stabilised with cement.

Stabilising the mosaic was one of the biggest jobs during the 1991 season and it had to be carried out continuously as the floor was being exposed. This was especially important at the western edges of Area F which eroded downslope. Other work carried out on site included cementing the apse walls, removing inscribed and painted plastered surfaces on column drums and walls, and taking impressions of carved decorations and inscriptions in rubber latex.

Conservation work done at the house included assembling soap-stone collonettes, marble chancel screen fragments and pulpit decorations, desalination of ceramic lamps and other pottery and mechanically cleaning lamps, bronze coins and a collonette capital.

### Animal Bones

The study of the faunal remains from

Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa are of some importance considering that few Byzantine sites have environmental analyses. It is even more significant when one takes into account the fact that even less excavated sites have had extensive sieving carried out on them. The Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa excavations had complete dry-sieving of all stratified deposits to 2mm and the majority of the animal bones recovered came from well sealed deposits. It therefore is ideal study material.

In 1991 a generous grant from the Wainwright Fund of the Oriental Institute, Oxford University, enabled a study of the animal bones from Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa to begin. The analyses are being conducted by Mark Beech on the mammal bones, Kevin Rielly on the bird bones and Brian Irving on the fish bones. The preliminary results show that out of a total of 41,285 bones, 4823 belonged to mammals, 4001 to birds and 968 to fish. The species tentatively identified include *Equus* sp(p) (horse), *Bos* sp(p) (cattle), *Sus* sp(p) (pig), *Ovis* sp(p)/*Capra* sp(p) (sheep/goat), *Ovis* sp(p) (sheep), *Capra* sp(p) (goat), *Capreolus Capreolu* L. (Roe deer), *Dama dama* L. (?*D.d mesopotamicus*) (Fallow deer), *Vulpes* sp(p) (?*V. rupelli*) (fox), *Lepus* sp(p) (hare), *Gallus gallus* L. (domestic fowl), *Perdix perdix* L. (partridge), *Coturnix coturnix* L. (quail), ? *Burhinus oedicnemus* (stone curlew), ? *Glareolidae* (? *Cursorious cursor*) (one of the pratincoles, or cream-coloured courser), *Columba livia Gmelin/Columba oenas* (rock/stock dove), ? *Streptopelia senegalensis* (palm dove), ? *Alaudidae* (lark), ? *Accipitridae* (vulture), *Scaridae* (parrot fish) *Serranidae* (groupers) and some smaller freshwater fish probably from local springs and wadis. The final analysis will not only include more accurate species lists and osteological analyses, but also an insight into the type of farming employed and its relative importance to the monastic settlement at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa. Furthermore, trading links can be made by the presence of fish coming from the Red and Mediterranean seas, and hunting practices can be investigated from the evidence of wild species found in the remains.

### Summary and Conclusions

The excavation of Area F and complete



exposure of all the mosaic floors and architecture have brought to light a new building at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa. The three apses, two rows of columns lining a central nave flanked by two side aisles, form a typical basilica plan. The chancel, pulpit, mosaic representations and Byzantine Greek inscriptions lead to the conclusion that the building in Area F was an early Christian church.

The date of construction for the church can be placed in the seventh century A.D. by the two mosaic inscriptions. On the evidence of early Abbasid pottery and glass found on the mosaic floors, it can be postulated that the church stopped functioning in the late eighth century A.D. The earlier pottery belonging to the fifth-to-sixth centuries A.D. was only found below the mosaic floor. This, along with the apparent walls and arches underneath the mosaic and a number of re-used, inscribed architectural stones indicate the existence of an earlier building on the same spot.

The discovery of a basilica-church perched high on a steep cliff over the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea just north-east of the modern town of aṣ-Ṣafi (ancient Zoar) identifies Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa as the site of the Church and Monastery of Agios Lot as depicted on the sixth century A.D. mosaic map at Madaba. Furthermore, the cave which the church was built around can be associated to the traditional story of Lot and his daughters.

#### The Staff

The excavation team consisted of Nabil Baqa'ain, Department of Antiquities representative; Ray Bradbury, architect; Thomas Muir, architect; Olympia Theophanopoulou, conservator; Jean Bradbury, draughts-person;

Jad al-Yunis, site assistant and Iannis Meimaris, epigraphist. Locally hired workmen included Irbahim Muslim Hashoush, Mohamed Ali Hashoush, Mahmoud Hamdan Hashoush, Maher Salman Hashoush, Abdel Hafez Yousef Hashoush, Ramsi Hata Hashoush, Issa Ahmed Mnasir, Moussa Ahmed Maradat, Moussa Muslim Maradat, Khalil Moussa Bowat, Msbah Moussa Bowat, Issa Jumah Shamalat and Tael Shaher Khalifat; the project was directed by the author.

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The author of this report is grateful to Dr. Safwan Tell, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities for granting permission to continue excavations at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa.

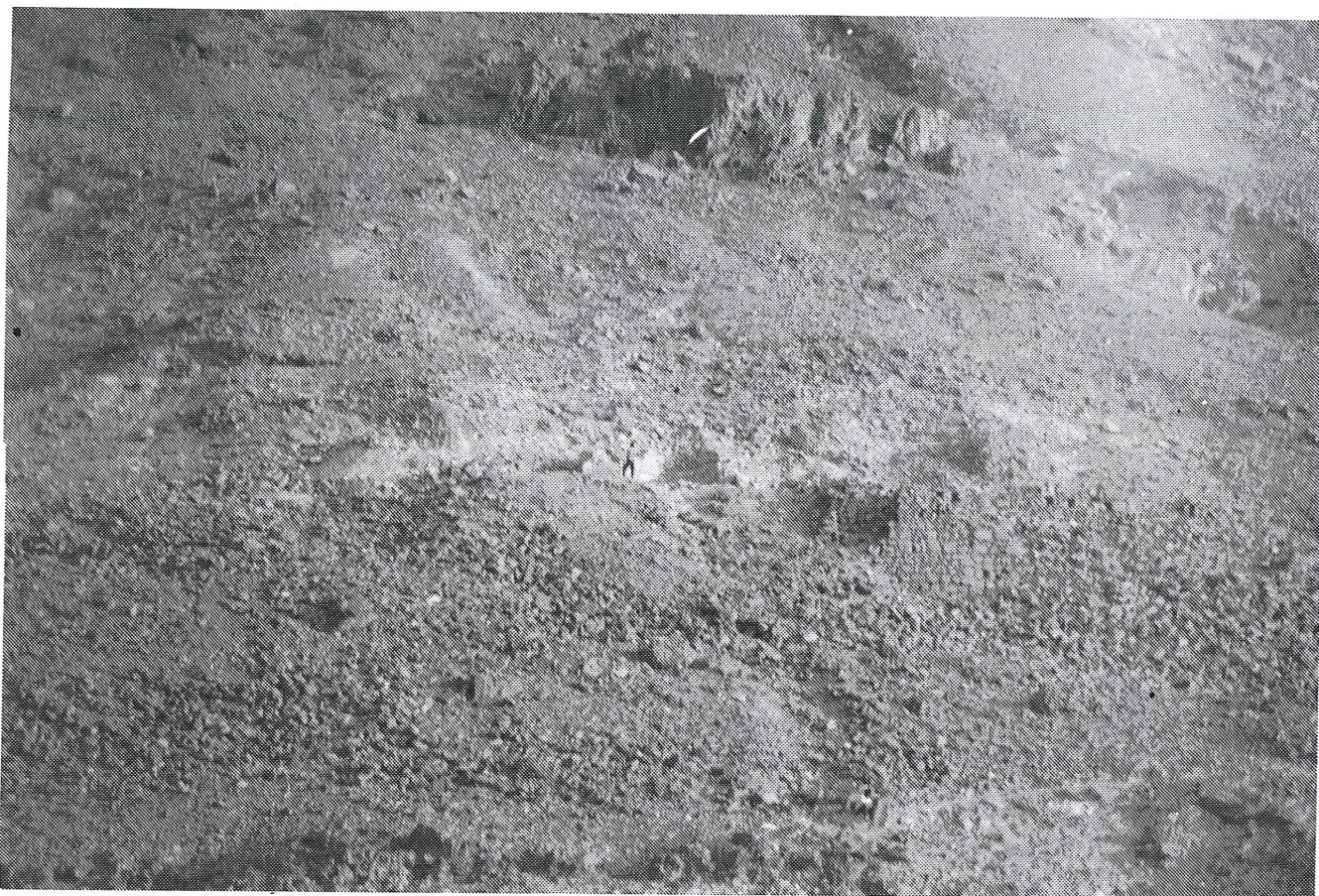
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- 1991b Excavations at the Monastery of St. Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa, Jordan. *LA* 40 (in press).





1. Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa from the west (photo: K.D. Politis).

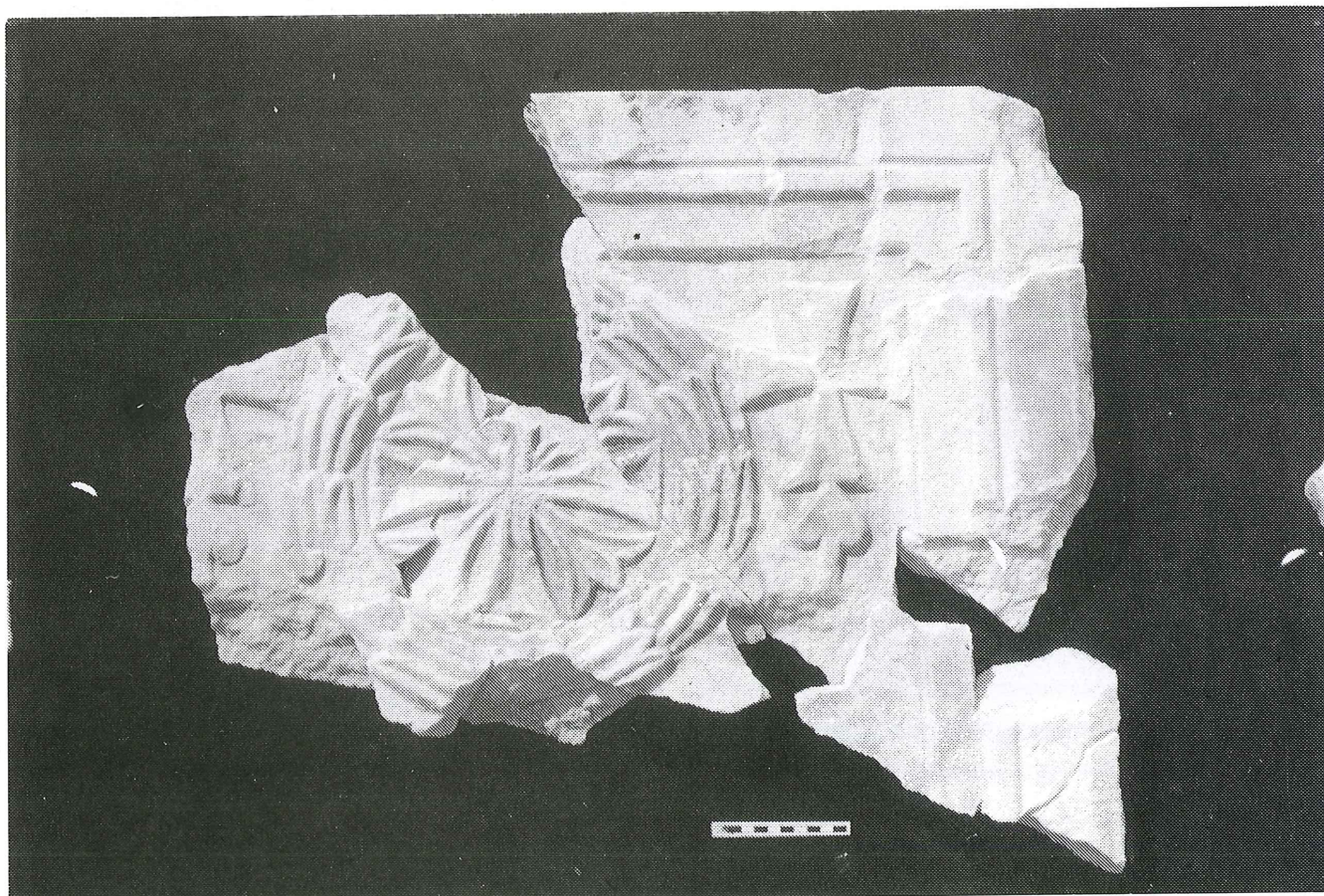


2. Area F from the north-west. The basilica-church and cave (photo: K.D. Politis).



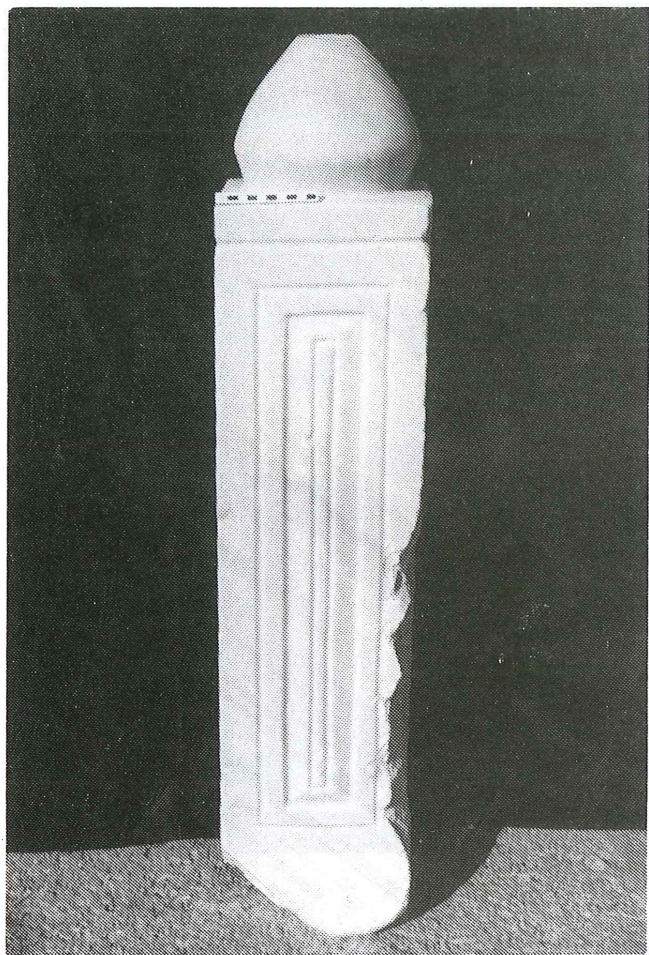


1. Area F. from the east. The basilica-church chancel (photo: K.D. Politis).

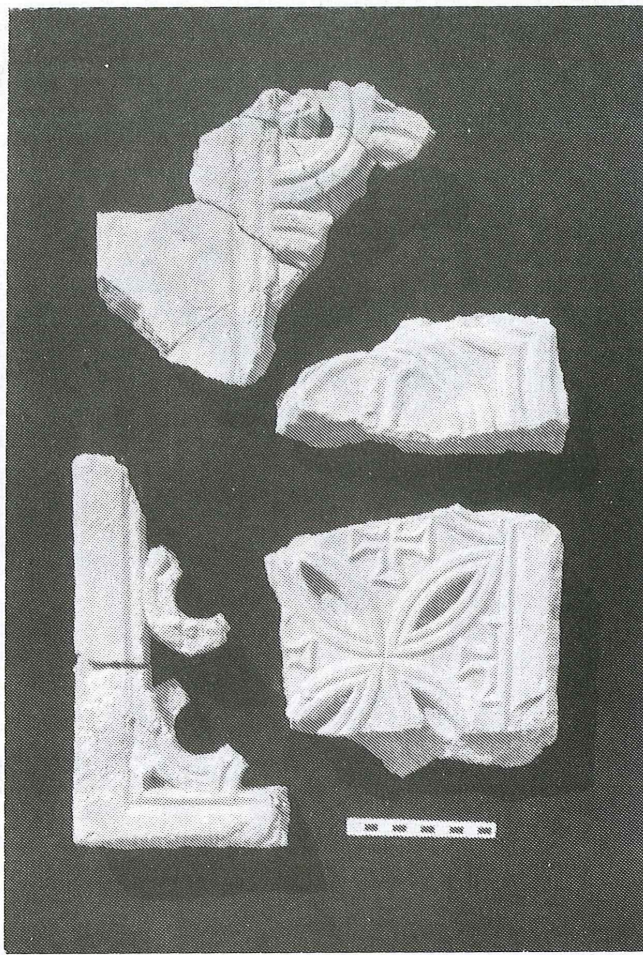


2. White marble chancel screen: assembled section. Area F.II (photo: K.D. Politis)





1. White marble chancel post from area F.II (photo: K.D. Politis).



2. Talc/soapstone decorations from the pulpit, Area F.II (photo: K.D. Politis).



3. Mosaic pavement detail from the chancel, Area F.II. Duck, bird, lamb with halo, chalice and cross with ΤΕΛΟΣ ΚΑΛΟΝ inscription (photo: K.D. Politis).





1. Ceramic oil lamps from Area F (photo: K.D. Politis)



2. North-eastern end of the reservoir (Area A. IV) with arch stubs and basin (photo: K.D. Politis).