

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2014 AND 2016 EXCAVATIONS REVEALING PROCESSIONAL WAYS IN THE ABILA AREA E PILGRIMAGE COMPLEX

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Introduction

The ongoing Abila Excavation¹ at Quwaylibah, north of Irbid, Jordan exposed significant architectural remains and artifacts during the two short excavation seasons of 2014 and 2016 in the ecclesiastical complex space surrounding the Five-Aisle Pilgrimage Church identified as Area E (**Fig. 1**). These discoveries illuminate ritual activities which took place during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods, in a place considered sacred by both Christians and Muslims, as well as the salvaging activities in the early Abassid era following the great earthquake of AD 749. The expedition continues to build evidence for the ritual activities in the complex, and to evaluate the modern esoteric traditions associated with the site (Smith 2016: 219-232). This report particularly addresses the exposed processional passages within the pilgrimage complex.

The Excavation

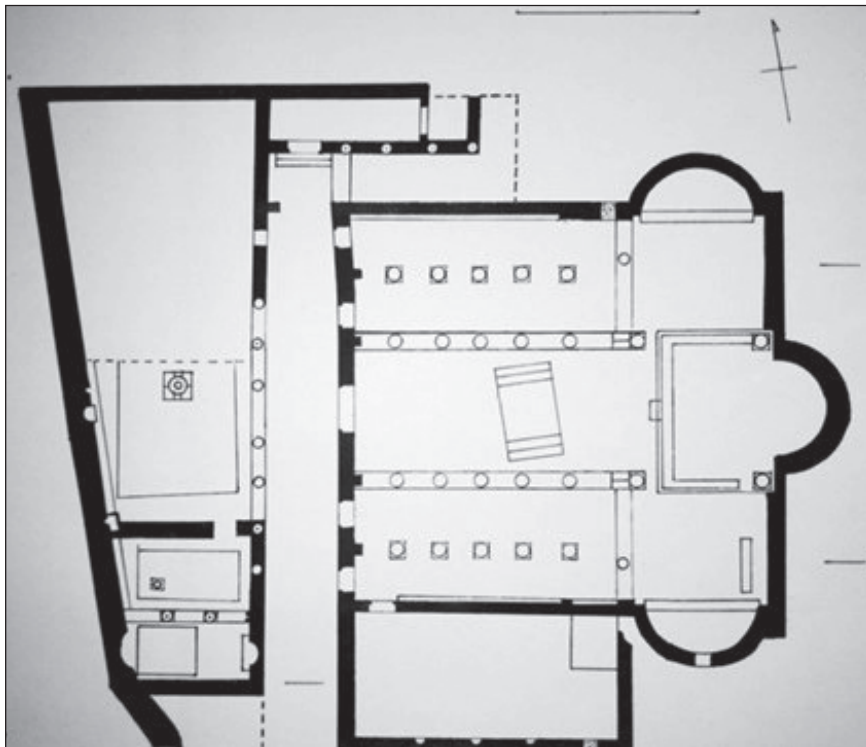
In 2014, excavations in Area E took place in four units, and revealed portions of the processional ways walked by pilgrims and clerics. In 2016, the Abila expedition worked in two additional units that exposed more of the passageways. The excavators expanded units E98,

E108 and E118 beyond the typical “squares”, in light of the monumental architecture that was evident prior to excavation. These six-meter long units lie on the northwest corner of the five-aisled pilgrimage church (**Fig. 2**). They expose the northern extension of a north-south walkway, which provided access to the five doorways of the five-aisle Pilgrimage Church under a covered portico on its east side, as well as access to the “Western Chapel,” the “Atrium Court” and other special ritual spaces to the west. A preliminary report on the ritual spaces exposed during the 2016 excavations in Squares E87, E88 and 78 will be presented in a later report in *ADAJ*.

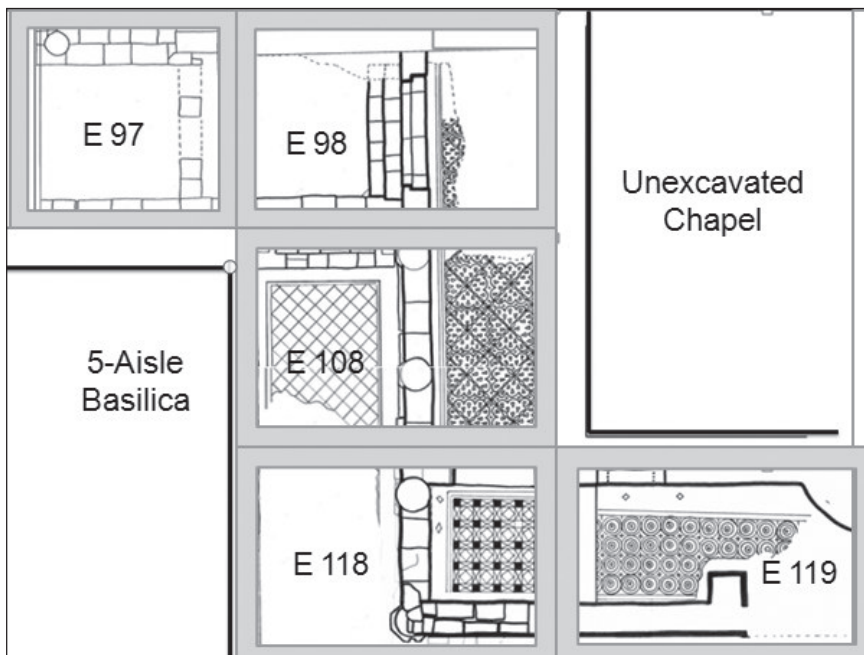
The essential stratigraphy was the same in all of the excavation units. On the surface is a layer of jedder soil (Munsell 2.5YR 5/2 Weak Red), which reflects erosion and the centuries of pastoral activities that took place within the city, as Abila declined in population and reverted to a more agriculturally dependent economy during the Abassid and Mamluke periods (Luke and Schmidt 2017). This layer contains a variety of worn pottery sherds, primarily from the Late Byzantine and Umayyad eras. A thicker layer of lighter colored, lime-rich sediment covers the area beneath the topsoil. This layer

1. The Abila Archaeological Expedition was initiated in 1980 by Dr. W. Harold Mare from the Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, MO, and is now directed by Dr. David Vila from John Brown University, Siloam Springs, AR. All research conducted at Quwaylibah, the site of ancient Abila in the Bene Kenana District, is authorized by a permit granted by the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (DoA), under the auspices of the Director General, Dr. Munther Jamhawi. The author of this report has been the Area E Supervisor from 2006 to the present. During the 2014 and 2016 seasons, Emad Obeidat from the Bene Kenana District served as the lead, on-

site DoA representative for Area E. The work described in this report was also made possible through the concerted efforts of men from the surrounding communities, who labored in the warm weather before Ramadan in 2014, and the hotter weather immediately after Ramadan in 2016. Area E excavation staff members in 2014 included: David Clodfelder, Amanda Cox, Josafat Guillen, Adam Henley, Kari Miller, Daniel McCarley, Eric Seevers, Mic Silvers, Wesley Skopp, and Andrea Zerbini. Excavation staff members in 2016 included: Dr. Maxie Burch, Michael Bennett, Melissa Endicott, Josafat Guillen, Marissa Johns, Gabrielle Marcy, Jacob Russell, and Henry Vila.



1. The main architectural features of Area E, as drawn in 2014. (Created by the author).



2. The excavation units highlighted in this preliminary report. (Created by the author).

is material that washed down the slope of Tall Abila in the aftermath of the devastation of structures upslope, filling in and around a very thick stratum of disarticulated architectural elements. Within that later stratum, the excavators recovered some small intact ceramic and glass objects as they worked down towards the flooring which marked the surfaces of the

processional ways that had served pilgrims to the Area E complex. The mid-eighth century floor surfaces of the processional ways abut the walls of the complex mark the end of the vertical exposure. No durable ritual items remained *in situ* on the flooring. Many sawn caliché ashlar and occasional column fragments were found scattered on the flooring,

and a cache of metal items beneath a fallen monolithic limestone column indicate that the processional walkways, like the rest of the adjacent structures, were heavily salvaged in the period following the earthquake. Survivors, who retained memories of where reusable resources were located, mined the site soon after the earthquake. Precious metal ritual objects, concentrated in sacred spaces, were high priority targets. Other more common utilitarian metal objects such as iron nails and lead piping also represented value. Large dimension timbers from the doors and roofing were similarly valued, and extracted from the site. In a community seeking to rebuild, the marble *opus sectile* flooring and marble wall veneers were a resource from which the lime, used for mortar in walls and plaster for cisterns, could be produced. The preserved areas of flooring in the processional walkways of Area E are, as a result, those not finished in marble. In contrast, Abila salvagers did not find colored tesserae from mosaic floors worth recovering.

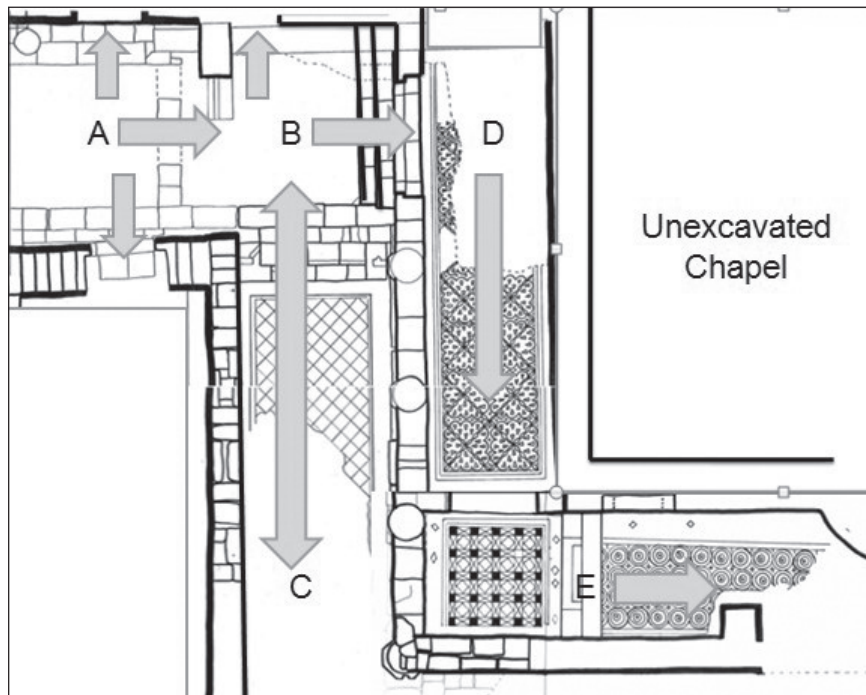
The Architecture of the Processional Passageways

The architectural remains exposed in the 2014 and 2016 excavations constitute the lower portions of the walls of monumental structures which had been built over earlier structures,

reusing some spolia and large quantities of newly sawn ashlar. The preserved walls indicate that the structures flanking the processional passages were subject to significant modifications, as the Area E Complex served religious devotees as well as the purposes of local Bishops and other patrons of ecclesiastical construction at Abila. The huge investment of energy, creativity and resources indicate that worshippers venerated the destination at the north end of the processional on the western end of the complex, and that their movement through the passages was an integral part of the pilgrim experience (Fig. 3).

The Walls of the Processional Passageways

The exterior walls of surrounding structures form the sides of most of the processional passages in Area E, although two walls of Area E were constructed by the builders specifically to create protected passages. Since the walls described here proceed through multiple excavation units, and are known by several different locus numbers, they will be identified in this report by alphabetic designations (Fig. 5). The c. 4-meter wide, north-south passage exposed in Square E97 is a continuation of the portico covering the entrances of the five-aisle pilgrimage church. On the west side of the square, the six-column colonnade of



3. Directions of movement in the Processional Ways on the northeast side of Area E. (Created by the author).

recycled, second-century marble and granite monolithic columns capped with Corinthian capitals which supported the portico ended, and a wall of closely fitted, sawn limestone ashlar continued northward on the same line as the colonnade. This continuing wall will subsequently be identified as “Wall A.” Most of Wall A is preserved to a height of four courses, and formed the western limit of excavations in 2014. The western wall of the passage retains evidence of being finished with a thin coat of plaster. A 1.3 meter wide entrance into a space to the west punctured Wall A at a point opposite the doorway to the northernmost aisle of the central pilgrimage church. The ritual space which lay beyond the threshold in Square 87 (excavated in 2016) will be discussed in a separate report. About one meter north of the doorway in Wall A, opposite the northwest corner of the central church, a short wall projects perpendicularly about one meter into the passage. In the floor at that point, a portion of an East-West limestone threshold lies *in situ*, suggesting that at one time a doorway controlled access to the transitional intersection in Square E98.

The western exterior wall of the Area E Pilgrimage Church formed the east side of the pedestrian passage; it will subsequently be identified as “Wall B.” The section of this wall from the doorway to the northernmost aisle to the north end is made of recycled stones. The builders hid the poor quality of their construction behind a thick application of mortar and vertical Proconesian marble veneer affixed to the wall with molybdochalkos (copper and lead alloy) clamps. At the northwest corner of the five-aisled pilgrimage church, the exterior wall turns perpendicularly and runs unbroken for almost twenty meters to the east; it will subsequently be identified as “Wall C.” Six courses from this exterior wall of the five-aisled church are preserved; it stands to a height of c. 2 meters and the exterior is finished with plaster. The plastering technique used on Wall C involved three steps. First, a 5 millimeter thick layer of light grey lime mortar with small carbon inclusions was first spread across the face of the ashlar wall. Into this, the plasterers impressed ribbed body sherds from bag jars and cooking pots, with the ribbing facing outwards. The ribbed exterior surfaces of the imbedded

potsherds helped to provide a surface to which the thinner, smooth white finish-coat of plaster could adhere.

Wall A of the processional passage continues to the north in Square E98. On the west side of the passage, just past the previously mentioned projection, a c.1.3 meter wide doorway punctures the wall. The ritual spaces exposed in units E88 and E87 which lie to the west will be the subject of a later report. Subsequently, Wall A proceeds c. 1.5 meters northward from the threshold, until it encounters a west-east wall line, which is subsequently identified here as “Wall D.” On the east side of Square E98, from the northern exterior wall of the Pilgrimage Church (Wall C) to a point three meters to the north, there is an opening with no obstructing wall until the previously mentioned west-east Wall D is encountered. Wall D is comprised of six uniform courses of limestone ashlar, custom-fitted to fill the gaps between standing limestone columns set at c. 2-meter intervals. The column drums have a torus at the bottom, and rest on bases which have an octagonal plinth surmounted sequentially by a torus, fillet, scotia and a double torus. Wall D stands c. 2 meters in height, and continues east into Squares E108 and E118. Wall D rises from a founding course of hard hematitic limestone. The octagonal bases of the limestone columns also stand on this course of stones, which is the lowest exposed course, and appears to be the stylobate of a previously existing colonnade. The gap between the northern exterior side wall of the five-aisled pilgrimage church (Wall C), and the parallel Wall D formed of ashlar filling inter-columnal spaces, creates a c. 3 meter wide passageway extending to the east which is exposed in the southern half of Squares E108 and E118 (**Fig. 4**).

An east west running exterior wall of an ecclesiastical structure is exposed on the northern ends of Squares E98 and E108. This wall, c. 2.3 meters north of Wall D, will subsequently be identified as “Wall E”, and is primarily comprised of tightly bonded, newly cut caliché ashlar; it has five preserved courses. Wall E forms the north side of a processional passage, was finished in the mid-eighth century with a thin surface of lime plaster, and did not incorporate flat body sherds as did the exterior

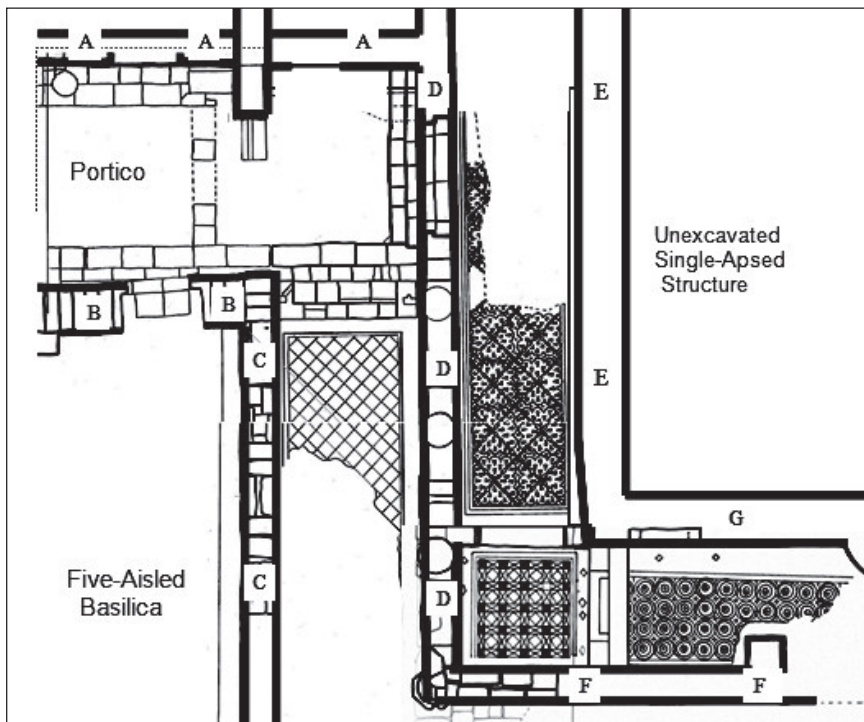


4. Wall D, built on the stylobate, with ashlars filling the inter-columnal spaces and the mosaic flooring of Passage C in Square E108. (Photo: the author, 2014).

finish on Wall C. Exfoliation of much of the plaster in Square 108 reveals a vertical crack of unbounded ashlars, the reuse of a basalt ashlar, and a slight change in the direction of the wall at a point c.1 meter from the east side of Square E108. These indicators evidence a modification of Wall E, with an extension to the east. Wall E terminates at an opening marked by a masonry projection; the absence of pivot holes in the limestone threshold suggests that there was no door at this transition.

Excavations at the northern end of Square E118 in 2014 exposed a section of a north-south wall, which begins at the east end of Wall D and

proceeds northward. This wall, subsequently identified as “Wall F”, is comprised of irregular, recycled limestone ashlars. While the wall is thick, it is inferior in quality to all the aforementioned walls. It was not constructed with tightly fitted, uniformly sized sawn ashlars. Instead, small thin pieces of limestone were chinked between the courses to level the variously sized boulders and ashlars. The excavator’s hypothesis is that Wall F, which had been damaged by one the earthquakes which struck the region c. AD 726 -746, was in the process of being reconstructed, and not yet completed by the finishing plaster coating in AD 749. The rebuilt Wall F appears to have largely survived the subsequent, more severe seismic event in spite of its inferior construction, because of the orientation of the wall. In 2016, excavation resumed in Square E118 and continued northward in the western half of Square E119. These excavations revealed four additional meters of Wall F to the north and its lower courses. Wall F preserves no evidence of interior plastering. The rough surface and chinking between courses would have required considerable quantities of plaster. Evidence found in the flooring of the passage confirms that Wall F was reconstructed, starting at its lowest level in the place of an earlier wall.



5. Map of the walls identified along the processional routes in the Area E Pilgrimage Complex. (Created by the author).

Wall G begins at the east end of Wall E, proceeding to the north parallel with Wall F. Wall G is comprised of well-fitted limestone ashlar, with some basalt ashlar employed in the lower courses, and is preserved to a height of three meters. At the south end of Square E119, Wall G is punctured by a c. 1 meter wide doorway, which has a 1.3 meter wide, undecorated basalt lintel. This doorway, which was originally c. 2.25 meter high, and served as a significant point of access to the religious structure to the west, had been carefully walled up prior to the severe earthquake. At the north end of Square E119, Wall G is bonded to the curved wall of an apse which protrudes to the east. The discovery of this apse leads the excavators to identify Wall G as the eastern wall of an ecclesiastical structure with a single exterior apse; it may have been a three-aisled basilical structure, with diaconicon and pastiphoria flanking a central apse. If this ecclesiastical structure is a martyr's chapel, a baptistery, or special ritual facility it may contain other architectural features.

The Floors and Thresholds of the Processional Passageways

The passageway portion identified here as Passage A lies between Wall A and Wall B in Square E97, and is c. 4 meters wide. Pavers of hard hematitic limestone laying on the west and east sides of the passage framed a c. 2.5 meter wide surface treatment, which covered the center of the passageway. The framing pavers corrected irregularities in the workmanship of the wall line at the northwest corner of the five-aisled pilgrimage church. Since salvagers have removed all the paving, the excavators suspect that the passageway, like the ambulatory beneath the portico to the south, was paved with marble *opus sectile*. On a 40 centimeter by 80 centimeter, hematitic paving stone just to the north of the doorway that punctures Wall A, is an inscription described subsequently in the discussion of artifacts (**Fig. 6**). A partially preserved line of pavers cuts across the north end of Square E97, in line with Wall C; it marks where a flooring transition took place, and where a threshold once controlled movement to the north.

Moving northward from Passage A into the south end of Square E98, there is a transitional



6. Kufic prayer inscription found in Passage A, Square E97. (Photo: the author, 2016).

portion of the processional, identified here as Passage B, the floor of which is framed by hematitic hard limestone pavers which continue, like Passage A, to create a central field, which is 2.5 meters wide and 2.3 meters long. The flooring in Passage B is largely missing. However, two remaining triangular pieces of red marble abutting the limestone frame suggest that a checkerboard red and white marble *opus sectile* decorated the framed space. Pilgrims could choose to proceed in four different directions. On the west, they could pass through Wall B into the ritual space excavated in Square E88. To the north, the pilgrim could ascend 50 centimeters by means of three 30-centimeter wide limestone steps, through a doorway into elevated Passage Section D. On the east side of the transitional portion of Passageway B, a limestone threshold in the floor indicates that previously, a c. 2 meter wide doorway had closed off access to the 3 meter wide Passage C which lies between Wall C and Wall D.

A carpet mosaic covers the floor of Passage C in Square E108; it is 3 meters wide, and has a 25 centimeter light-colored border made of medium size tesserae, around a 5 centimeter-wide inner frame of black, red and white. The central field is comprised of a checkerboard pattern of red limestone and black basalt tesserae (Munsell 10 YR 2/1) in c. 25 centimeter squares, set on the diagonal. The mosaic is preserved in the western 2.5 meters of Square E108, but then only continues along the base

of Wall D. It is not made of marble, and the excavator has no clear explanation for removal of the pavement. Future probes may reveal burials beneath the floor level in Passage C as it continues eastward into the southern portion of Square E118. Burials in a sacred area could explain the removal of non-marble tesserated flooring. The destruction of the mosaic could also be the result of earlier seismic activities, which had necessitated the rebuilding of Wall F.

A carpet mosaic also covers the floor of Passage D. The generally c. 2.3 meter-wide mosaic between Walls D and E is currently exposed for a distance of 7.5 meters from Square 98 and across Square E108. The western section of the floor in Square E98 currently remains unexcavated, since it is covered by fallen ashlar which support a compromised section of Wall D. An exterior band of light medium size tesserae forms the outer frame of the mosaic. The two inner frames have a combined width of c. 14 centimeters. The central field is comprised of a repeated pattern of c. 88 centimeter wide squares. Each square is divided diagonally from opposing corners with eight black lozenges, creating quadrants of right-angle triangles. Within each quadrant are six red flowers, which radiate from the center towards four small crosses on the hypotenuse. This repeated pattern thus creates many crosses (Fig. 7). This pattern was widely employed in Byzantine ecclesiastical construction in the Levant; it appears in the Pella Cathedral and

pilgrimage sites such as Mt. Nebo, Nazareth and Jerusalem². At the eastern end of Square E108, Passage D is slightly constricted by pilasters, with a c. 1.5 meter wide opening. The hard limestone threshold steps up c. 8 centimeters, and there is no evidence it had ever been closed by doors. Pilgrims stepping across the threshold faced Wall F, and turned north into Passage E.

Two carpet mosaics cover the two sections of the floor in Passage E. The first section of the passage lies in the northwestern corner of Square E118; the mosaic here is well preserved on the west side, and extends intact for c. 2 meters until it approaches Wall F. The edge of the mosaic flooring along the base of reconstructed Wall F was unrepaired at the time of the severe AD 749 earthquake. The mosaic in Square 118 consists of a c. 2 meter square field, which is surrounded by white tesserae (Munsell 2.5Y 8/1) and has two inner frames of white and dark red (Munsell 2.5 YR 3/6) tesserae outlined in black (Munsell 10 YR 2/1). The inner field is comprised of the same colors of dark red limestone, white limestone and black basalt tesserae, arranged in a regular pattern of triangles and squares, which create sixteen eight-pointed stars. On the north and south sides of the field, where the outer white framing is wider, four small designs are extant (Fig. 8). On the north side of the first section of mosaic in Passage E, as pilgrims moved northward they crossed a limestone threshold which had once supported a doorway. They then descended onto



7. Carpet mosaic in Passage D, between Walls D and E, in Square E108. Looking east towards the threshold into Passage E. (Photo: the author, 2016).



8. Looking down from Wall F to the faux opus sectile mosaic floor at the south end of Passage E in Square E 118, and the limestone and basalt steps in Square E119. (Photo: the author, 2016).

2. See Robert Houston Smith and Leslie Preston Day, *Pella of the Decapolis* Volume 2. Wooster, OH: College of Wooster

1989, pp. 74, 128-129. Smith identifies the pattern in Square E98 and 108 as Avi-Yonah's Design J-5.

a basalt step which extends across the passage, and down a second step onto the second section of mosaic flooring in Square E119.

The carpet mosaic in Square E119, in the northern extension of Passage E, was in place prior to the installation of the southern mosaic in the passage. That the northern mosaic is earlier is evidenced by the fact that it continues under the basalt steps. The northern mosaic, like that in the south, is preserved intact along the west side against Wall G, but breaks off along the eastern Wall F (Fig. 9). It has a broad, white outer frame on the west side, and inner frames of red and white outlined in black. The inner field has a black background with four rows of superimposed circles. The 34-centimeter diameter circles are comprised of concentric rings of red, black, white, black, red, black and white tesserae. White crosses punctuate the black background between the circles (Fig. 10). This mosaic narrowed at a point 2 meters north of the basalt step, where a pilaster projects into the passage from Wall F. Fallen masonry obscures the northern end of Square E119,



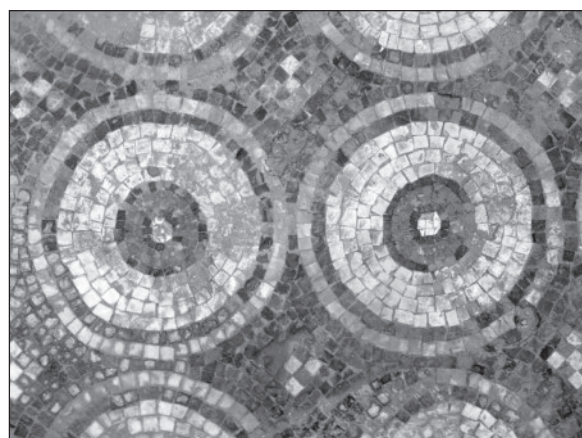
9. The mosaic flooring between Wall F and Wall G in Squares E119 and E118, looking south down Passage E. (Photo: the author, 2016).

but the architecture appears to have permitted ambulation around the apse at the end of Wall G. A series of regular scorch marks preserved on the surface of the eastern side of the northern mosaic in Passage E evidence the presence of fire, possibly in conjunction with destruction of the earlier Wall F, but are not evidence of an incident at the time of the mid-eighth century earthquake (Fig. 11).

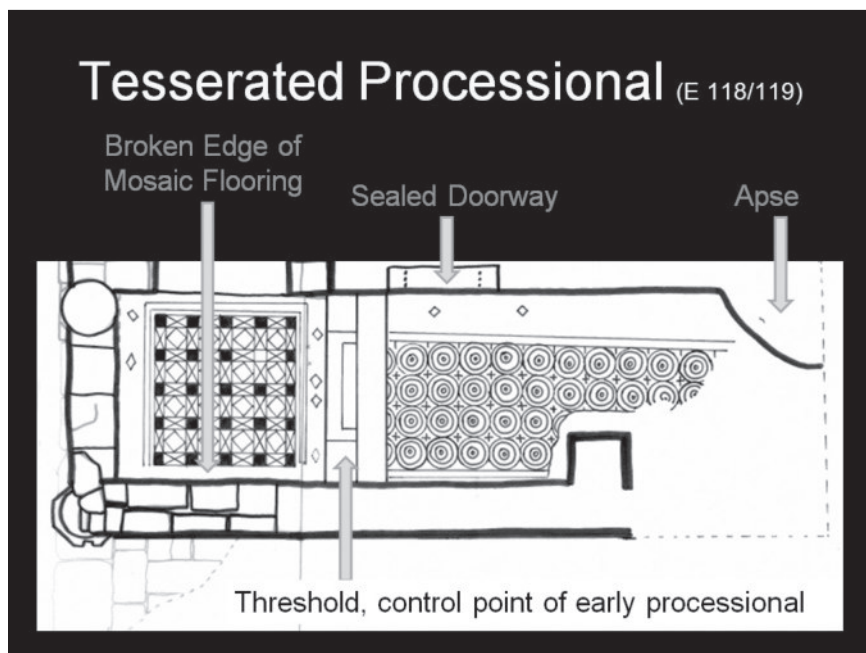
The Artifacts Found in the Passageways

Excavation revealed several largely intact objects amidst the fill in the passages. However, none of the recovered objects were found *in situ* on the pavements, hence as indicators of a venue for ritual activity, with the exception of the previously mentioned kufic prayer inscription. The objects' find spots were consistent with the eighth century destruction and subsequent salvaging of the pilgrimage site.

In Square E97 in Passageway Section A, the fill contained some body sherds from Byzantine and Umayyad forms, but none that were whole or possible to reconstruct. They also included random body sherds which had been embedded in the plaster finishing of Wall A. As mentioned above, no ritual objects were left *in situ* on the floor of the passage by the salvagers who removed the marble opus sectile. The most significant find in this passage is the two-line kufic inscription which is deeply scratched into a c. 80 centimeter by 40 centimeter hard, hematitic limestone paver in the flooring (Fig. 6). Using a well-known prayer formula, the writer calls upon "Allah" for forgiveness in Arabic. The inscription is located near Wall



10. Passage E in Square E119, detail of the polychrome concentric circles. (Photo: the author, 2016).



11. Location of Selected Features in Squares E118 and E119. (Created by the author, 2016).

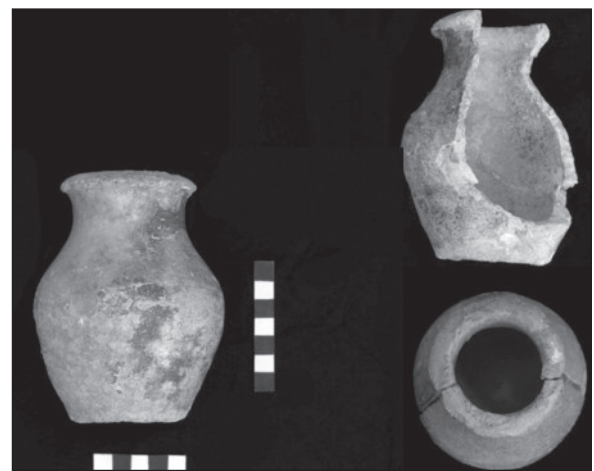
A and never endured significant heavy foot traffic. The orthography is somewhat informal, but the edges of the inscription are very sharp. This suggests that the Arabic-speaking person who made the inscription did so in the mid-eighth century, close to the time of the severe earthquake. At least five other kufic inscriptions, which are similar in orthography and content to that found in Square E97, were discovered in the Pilgrimage Complex. A full discussion of all these inscriptions should be available soon, when the inscriptions from Area E are published (Smith, Zerbini and Firas, forthcoming).

In Square E98, in Passage Section B and Section C, no intact or restorable special objects were discovered in the fill, nor were any ritual or other objects left *in situ* by the salvagers who mined the marble flooring. The previously described architectural finds of walls and doorways are the most significant results of excavation in Square E98.

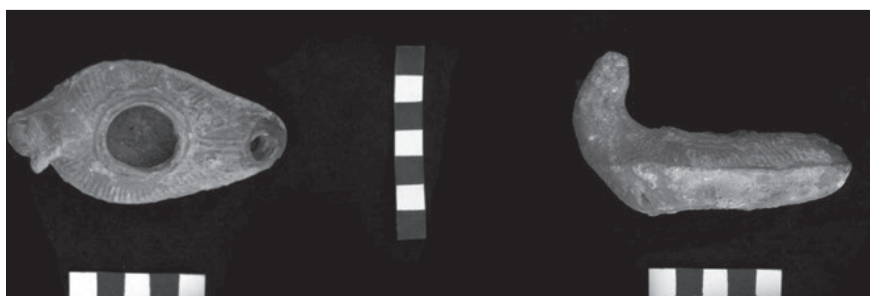
In Square E108 in Passage C, no intact or restorable objects lay *in situ* on the mosaic floor. The Late Byzantine and Umayyad body sherds found there again came from a secondary use, from the plasterwork on Wall C. In the section of Passage D in Square 108, between Walls D and E, occasional ribbed body sherds lay amidst the fill, which was mainly comprised of a tumble of ashlar. Some small ceramic objects survived with them; most significant are two small blue-

glazed jars (Fig. 12), an intact Umayyad oil lamp (Fig. 13), and a 20-centimeter tall basalt object with a shallow, circular depression in the 30-centimeter square top, which stands on a 15-centimeter square base with a low foot in each corner (Fig. 14). This basalt object appears to be an incense burner, which may have perfumed the passage.

In Square E118, Passage C, a number of small special objects were found in the fill, which was comprised of disarticulated, collapsed debris constrained within surviving architecture. The only isolated finds were a largely intact slipper lamp with Christian motifs, a piece of polished agate which was interpreted as a pos-



12. Blue glazed ceramic vessels from Passage C in Square E108.

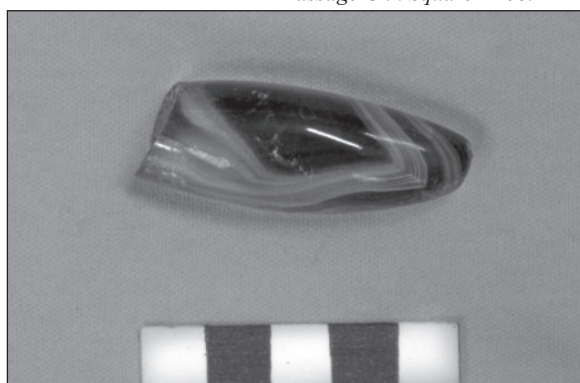


13. Umayyad era oil lamp from Passage C in Square E108.

sible burnishing tool used in the application of gold foil to icons, and some largely intact glass objects (Fig. 15). Most of these objects were found together, in the soil on the north side of the square, under a fallen monolithic limestone column (Figs. 16 and 17). The collection includes intact glass objects (Fig. 18) and a number of metal artifacts, including iron tools (Fig. 20), iron nails and large iron rings, all of which were in a bronze pan (Fig. 19), some bronze discs, a bronze two-spouted ladle (Fig. 21), a liturgical bell (Fig. 22), fragments of liturgical objects and a three-legged, one-handled bronze vessel with a short spout (Fig. 23). This collection of artifacts is considered to be a horde collected by people from Abila who were scavenging in the aftermath of the destruction of Area E, since it was hidden in a gap between some ashlar underneath the fallen column. Both the horde and the tools may have been abandoned because the salvagers were distracted by larger, more lucrative prizes, or perhaps because of resistance from those who still venerated the site, and were therefore opposed to those who were there for personal plunder.

The Significance of the Discoveries

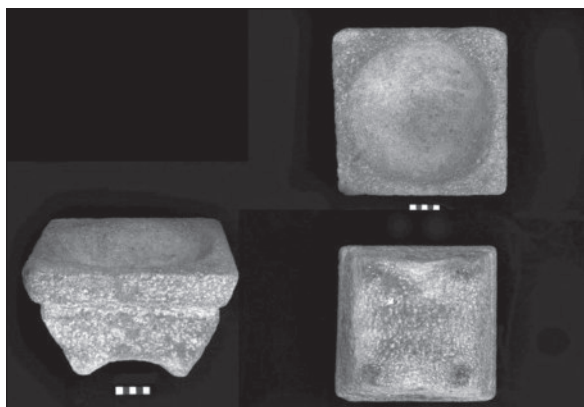
The architectural and artifactual discoveries in the Processional Walkways during the 2014



15. Agate smoothing stone, possibly used in the installation of gold foil on icons.



16. "Salvager's hoard" of metal and glass objects, Square E118.



14. Basalt "incense burner" from Passage C, Square E108.



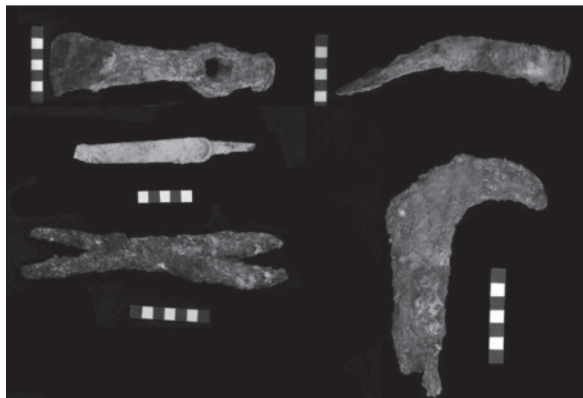
17. "Salvager's hoard" of bronze and iron objects, Square E118.



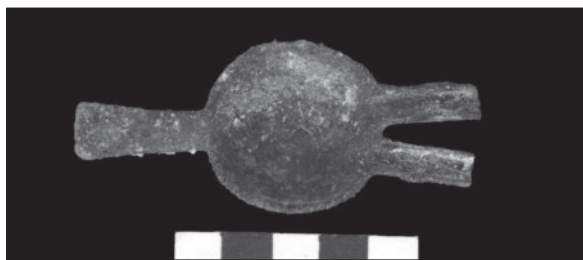
18. Selected glass vessels from the "Salvager's hoard", Square E118.



19. Bronze pan filled with iron nails and scrap metal, Square E118.

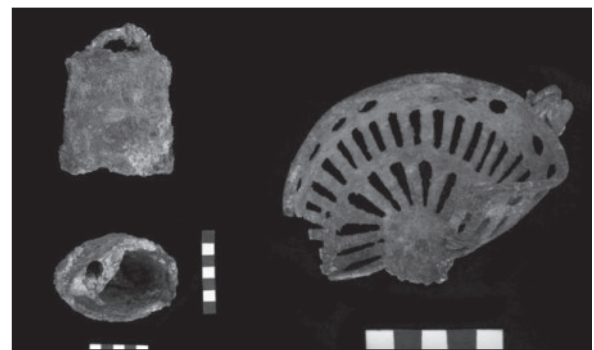


20. Metal tools from the "Salvager's hoard", Square E118. (Photo: the author, 2016).

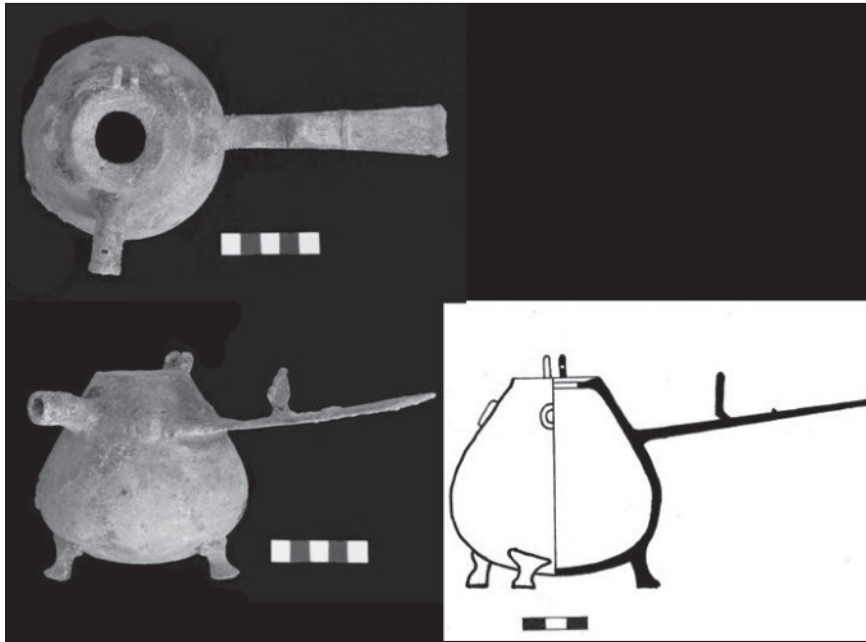


21. Bronze ladle for pouring wax or lead into amulet molds, E118 Hoard.

and 2016 excavations reveal a great deal about the ritual activities and the wealth invested in the Area E Abila Pilgrimage Complex. The plastered walls and expensive floors of tesserae and *opus sectile* were major investments, which contributed to the pilgrim experience. The mosaic and *opus sectile* paving add to the known corpus of decorated flooring from Abila, and our final publications will include a comparative study with the flooring from other ecclesiastical structures in the Levant. The mosaic pavements in the processional ways described here are consistent with other sixth to eighth century ecclesiastical mosaics found in the region, particularly the variously colored stones employed, which are common, while the hints of *faux opus sectile* mosaic patterns, exotic marble veneering and pavers bear testimony to the continuing affection for *opus sectile*. The inclusion of crosses and cross designs in the flooring affirms that it was not



22. Liturgical bell and censer lid from "Salvager's hoard", Square E118. (Photo: the author, 2016).



23. Bronze hot liquid dispenser from "Salvager's hoard", Square E118. (Photo: the author, 2016).

taboo to step on this religious motif (Habas 2015: 33-60). The sequence of wall construction and a closer scrutiny of additions to positively determine dates of construction are the subject of continuing study. The most hopeful strategy for tighter chronology is the carbon dating of

olive pits found in the lime mortars in the walls and beneath the flooring.

The Kufic inscription found in the paving of the processional way in Square E87 provides some indication of the breadth of the appeal held by the Area E Pilgrimage Complex. Pilgrims to the site included Arabic speakers and writers, who may have identified themselves as Muslims, alongside Greek speaking Christians in the mid-eighth century. The Area E Complex affirms the observation found at other regional pilgrimage sites such as Dayr 'Ayn 'Abata, that sacred sites venerated by Byzantine Christians were also significant to the early Islamic community (Politis 2010: 1-24).

The discovery that Area E was heavily salvaged, and that almost all of the marble wall veneers and flooring had been stripped away, points not only to the diminished value of the pilgrimage complex, but also to the pressing need for lime mortar needed for reconstruction in the aftermath of the AD 749 earthquake. The looter's horde found in Square E118 verifies that the Area E Complex still served liturgical purposes through the Umayyad Caliphate, and that the ruins were a rich resource to be salvaged, in the Abassid era. The presence of many blue glazed ceramic vessels affirms the need for ceramic typologists to recognize that they appeared in the late Umayyad era, and are not a unique marker from the Abassid era after AD 750.



24. Sealed doorway to the Ritual Structure on the north side of Square E119. (Photo: the author, 2016).

The processional passages walked by pilgrims in the Abila Area E Pilgrimage complex provided access to highly controlled areas of ritual significance outside the central five-aisle church building. Passageways D and E served as an ambulatory around the as yet unexcavated one-apsed ecclesiastical structure in Square E99 and E109. The excavators anticipate that the mosaic paved corridor will continue north in Passage E, before turning west to complete the circuit around the unexcavated northern focus of pilgrimages to the Area E complex. When that portion of Area E and the one-apsed northwestern ecclesiastical structure is excavated, the reason why Abila was highly venerated by pilgrims may be further clarified.

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