

PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE LOWER CHURCH AT EL-QUWEISMA, 1989

by

Robert Schick and Emsaytif Suleiman

During the winter and spring of 1989 a rescue excavation was carried out at the Byzantine and Early Islamic period lower church of el-Quweisma, first by Emsaytif Suleiman of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, and then by Robert Schick, of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman. The landowner had requested a building permit, so the excavation was undertaken in advance of the start of the building construction that has now almost totally destroyed the church.

I (Schick) wish to thank Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, then Director General of the Department of Antiquities, for his permission to continue excavating the site, after Suleiman had finished. I especially wish to thank 'Abd al-Sami' Abu Dayya, the Amman district inspector for the Department of Antiquities, for his support, and Ernesta Krackiewicz, of the Friends of Archaeology, for her help in organizing volunteers on short notice, among whom Vincent Landon and Nellie Benenati deserve special thanks.

The lower church at el-Quweisma was first investigated by Sylvester Saller and Bellarmino Bagatti in 1948-49.¹ They uncovered a mosaic floor in the church with a dedicatory inscription dated to 717-718 A.D. In 1982 Michele Piccirillo cleaned the area down to the 717-718 A.D. mosaic and lifted most of it, but he did not excavate anywhere below the mosaic, nor did he collect any pottery or objects.² The lower church is one of two churches/monasteries known in el-Quweisma. The second upper church was partially excavated by the Department of Antiquities in 1982.³

The Church

The church has an unusual design

(Fig. 1), consisting of a one-aisled hall with an apse on the east end, flanked on the south by a similarly sized aisle with a rectangular room on the east end. A chancel screen borders the apse and southeast room. On the west end of the church are three rooms. The church is oriented south of east. Its interior dimensions are ca. 14.75 m east-west (ca. 18.75 m including the west rooms) and ca. 13.0 m north-south. No traces of buildings have survived bulldozing to the east and south of the church, but there seem to be buried structures to the north. To the west must be further rooms hidden under a modern house.

The current work began with the removal of thick deposits of modern garbage and 1982 backfill down to the level of the mosaics that Piccirillo had lifted. The abandoned modern house covering the western half of the church was also demolished (Pl. I,1). The south and west walls of the house had reused the south and west walls of the church and an interior wall had incorporated part of the row of arch piers that divided the church into its south and north halves. These walls and piers were demolished along with the modern house. A Roman period altar with a short Greek inscription was found during this demolition. Some modern constructions in the southeast room were also removed. Many stone architectural elements and marble fragments, as well as Byzantine and Early Islamic pottery, were found in the modern deposits or unstratified contexts, as locus 1.

After the garbage and constructions were removed, stratified excavations proceeded in the undisturbed mosaic bedding layers down to bedrock. The large southeast room was the focus of excavation, while new architectural features and a tomb were also revealed in the rooms west of the church. Excavation re-

1. Sylvester Saller and Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*. Jerusalem, Franciscan Press, 1949, p. 251-268.

2. Michele Piccirillo, 'Le chiese di Quweismeh - Am-

man', *LA* 34 (1984) p. 329-340; *idem*, 'The Umayyad Churches of Jordan', *ADAJ* 28 (1984), p. 334-338.

3. Piccirillo, 'Chiese'.

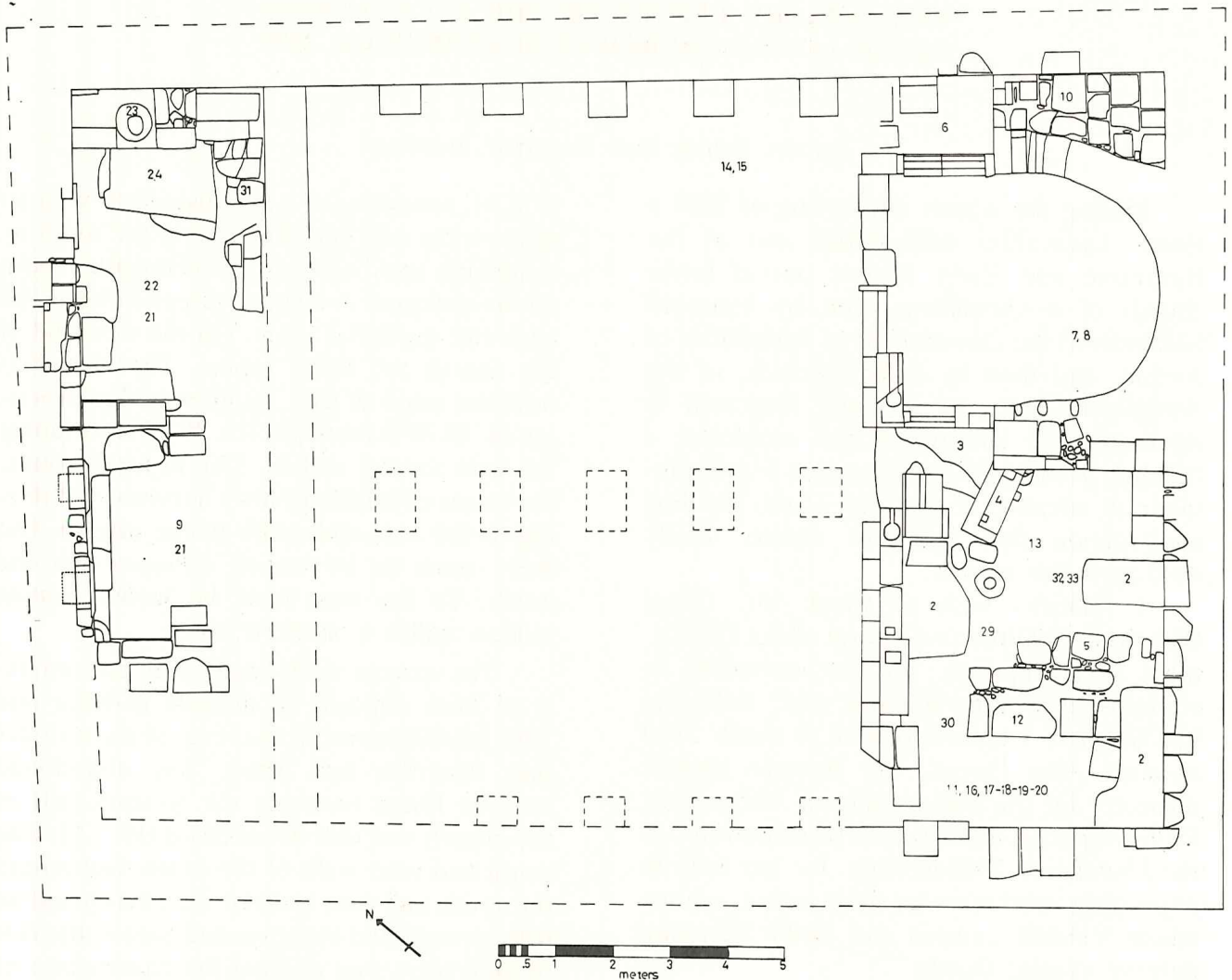


Fig. 1. Plan of the lower church at el-Quweisma.

vealed a sequence of two Byzantine and one Early Islamic period phases.

The Nave

In the first construction phase of the church, the high spots of bedrock, which slopes down from north to south, were cut away to form a level surface in the nave (Pl. I, 2). Then a fill layer of reddish brown soil (locus 15) with cobbles was deposited, upon which well dressed ashlar limestone flagstones were placed. The flagstones were covered by a plaster floor. These flagstones may have been reused from an earlier building. Several of them on the east end had a series of holes; these holes most probably were relics of their earlier use, rather than a church-phase feature. Byzantine pottery and a number of copper alloy coins were found in

the fill below some of the flagstones that were lifted. The few readable coins are clearly from the Byzantine period and when studied will serve to pinpoint the initial construction of the church within the Byzantine period.

At a later date, presumably still within the Byzantine period, a mosaic floor of large 2 x 2 cm cubes, with a preserved bedding of blue grey mortar 3 cm thick above reddish brown soil 2 cm thick, was laid on top of the plaster floor. This mosaic was totally ruined, except for a miniscule portion along the north wall. Its cubes were put loosely in the bottom bedding layer of reddish brown soil 3 cm thick for an upper mosaic floor. Above this soil was blue grey mortar with charcoal flecks ca. 7 cm thick, upon which the mosaic cubes in plaster were placed. The upper mosaic is dated by a dedicatory inscription to 717-718 A.D. This

mosaic had figures of animals that were deliberately damaged and patched. Similar deliberate destruction occurred at Umm er-Raṣāṣ after 785 A.D. It may well be that the numerous other cases of such deliberate damage and repair to images of people and animals in the churches of the area took place at the same time as at Umm er-Raṣāṣ. If so, this indicates that the lower church at el-Quweisma continued in use well into the Abbasid period.⁴ An Abbasid use of the church is also supported by the lamps from the tomb. Some Byzantine pottery was found in the bedding layers (locus 14) of these two mosaics. The small patches of extant wall plaster extended down as far as the top of the upper mosaic.

In a small area north of the north chancel screen, the flagstone pavers were not present. Here below the mosaic bedding layers were small cobbles in reddish brown soil above bedrock (locus 6) with a little Byzantine pottery.

The Apse and Northeast Room

The semicircular apse on the east end of the church was also excavated (Pl. I,2). Modern deposits extended down to just above bedrock where a layer of reddish brown soil and a white chalky layer (loci 7 and 8) on top were deposited to level off the irregular bedrock surface. Much Byzantine and some Iron Age pottery was found in these initial fill layers, upon which the apse walls and chancel screen blocks were founded. A large water cistern was in the southeast corner of the apse.

In the small room north of the apse was a slightly irregularly laid flagstone pavement (locus 10).

The Southeast Room

The large room to the south of the apse was extensively excavated. Here some surviving patches of mosaic were lifted, and their bedding layers left as balk sections, while elsewhere the room was excavated down to bedrock.

In the first construction phase of the church an east-west wall (locus 12) was constructed in the center of the room (Pl. II,1). This wall may have been the early south wall of the room. A thick layer of cobbly fill above bedrock (loci 17, 18, 19, 20, 30), containing much Iron Age and a little Byzantine pottery, was contiguous with the wall to the south. This fill was cut by a foundation trench for the construction of the later south wall of the room. On top of the fill was a thin layer of white chalky soil (locus 16) that contained some Byzantine and Iron Age pottery.

To the north of the early wall above bedrock was chalky, cobbly fill (loci 33, 32, 29, 13), containing some Iron Age and Roman-Byzantine pottery. In the northwest area a circular stone storage bin was set on bedrock (Pl. II,2). Around the base of the bin was a wispy deposit of ash. A pit may have been dug through the cobbly fill, into which the bin was set, because small cobbles were packed around the sides of the bin.

Later, dark brown soil (locus 11), with no associated pottery, and large cobbles in light grey silt (locus 5) were placed in the room, covering up the early east-west wall and the storage bin. Locus 5 contained much Byzantine and Iron Age pottery. This large cobble layer was placed in conjunction with a walkway from a doorway in the north end of the east wall to a threshold (locus 4), in the northwest corner of the room, bounded on the north by the south wall of the apse. This threshold was constructed at an odd angle, due to the presence of an arch pier just to its west, which necessitated a shift in the walkway slightly to the north into the nave of the church (Pl. II,2). An intact portion of the lower, colored geometric, Byzantine period mosaic was found between the threshold, the arch pier and the south chancel screen of the apse (Pl. III,1). This mosaic, which was lifted, was patched in one area with large plain white cubes. The mostly unexcavated bedding layers of this Byzantine mosaic (locus 3) consisted of crumbled plaster with cobbles

4. Robert Schick, *The Fate of the Christians in Palestine During the Byzantine - Umayyad Transition*,

A.D. 600-750. Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Chicago, 1987, p. 296-368.

above a layer of light brown silt with plaster chunks and cobbles.

In a later phase the locus 3 mosaic, the locus 4 threshold and the locus 5 large cobble layer were covered up by the bedding layers for a colored geometric mosaic (locus 2), presumably contemporary with the 717-718 A.D. mosaic in the nave. Much Byzantine and some Early Islamic pottery was found in its bedding layers. The row of chancel screen blocks forming the west edge of the room seems to belong to this phase. In the soil below the chancel screen in the north was placed a large broken decorated stone panel (Fig. 6), and below it a small bronze cross with part of the three chains by which it was suspended.

See Figs. 2, 3 and 4 for further stratigraphic details of the southeast room. The liturgical function of this room, enclosed by a chancel screen and therefore sanctified, remains obscure.

Fig. 2 balk in the southwest corner of the southeast room.

On top was one course of the chancel screen (1). Below was a layer of chalky cobbles (2) to the south and a layer of dark reddish brown granular soil (3) to the north. Below 3 was a layer of solid chalk pebbles and chalk powder (4), which thickened farther to the north. Below the chalk layer was a thick deposit of reddish brown granular soil (5) with a few cobbles and pebbles and much Iron Age pottery, above bedrock. To the south below layers 2 and 3 was first a layer of light brown silty soil (6) and then a layer of many loose pebbles and a few cobbles (7) in brown silty soil above bedrock. The layers were bound on the south by the south wall of the southeast room (8).

Layers 5, 6 and 7 were excavated together in four peels as loci 17, 18, 19 and 20. They are the first deposit of fill from the initial phase of the building. The handful of Byzantine sherds found along with the thousands of Iron Age sherds could have come from layers 6 and 7, which seem to be a foundation trench for the south wall 8. Layers 2, 3 and 4 are fill layers associated with the construction of the chancel screen.

Fig. 3 (Pl. II,1) balk in the southeast corner of the southeast room.

On top was the upper 717-718 A.D. mosaic (1), and its bedding layers consisting of plaster (2), followed by bluish grey mortar covering small cobbles (3), followed by reddish brown soil (4). Below was a thicker layer of light grey, compacted silt (5), with some pebbles and cobbles. These layers were excavated as locus 3. Layer 5 was above a deposit of cobbles (6). Below the cobbles was another layer of light grey silt (7), similar to 5, but less compacted and with fewer pebbles. Layers 6 and 7 were excavated as part of locus 5.

Below 7 was a layer of dark brown soil (8) with some cobbles. This layer (locus 11), with no associated pottery, covered the early east-west wall (locus 12). It continued deeper to the south, where it covered a few large blocks (9) that might be a north-south wall contiguous with 12. Below 8 was a thin layer of white chalky soil (10). This layer (Locus 16) contained Byzantine pottery. It was above a thick deposit of reddish brown soil with cobbles and pebbles (11), above bedrock. Layer 11, excavated in four peels as loci 17, 18, 19 and 20, extended underneath the east-west wall 12.

This balk section also shows the lower east-west wall (12-locus 12), the upper courses of the east wall (13) and the south wall (14) of the room.

Fig. 4 balk in the northeast area of the southeast room.

An east-west balk was drawn in the northeast area of the southeast room, where one of the lifted pieces of mosaic had been. The mosaic and its bedding layers of plaster and cobbles in mortar had been removed before the balk was drawn, leaving dark reddish brown soil (1) as the top layer. Below was a thick layer of light grey silty soil (2) with some pebbles and cobbles and chunks of mortar. These layers, excavated as locus 2, were part of the bedding for the mosaic. Below were large cobbles (3) set in a light grey silty soil (4) with chunks and powder from bluish grey mortar and plaster and some loose mosaic cubes. Layers 3 and 4 were excavated as locus 5.

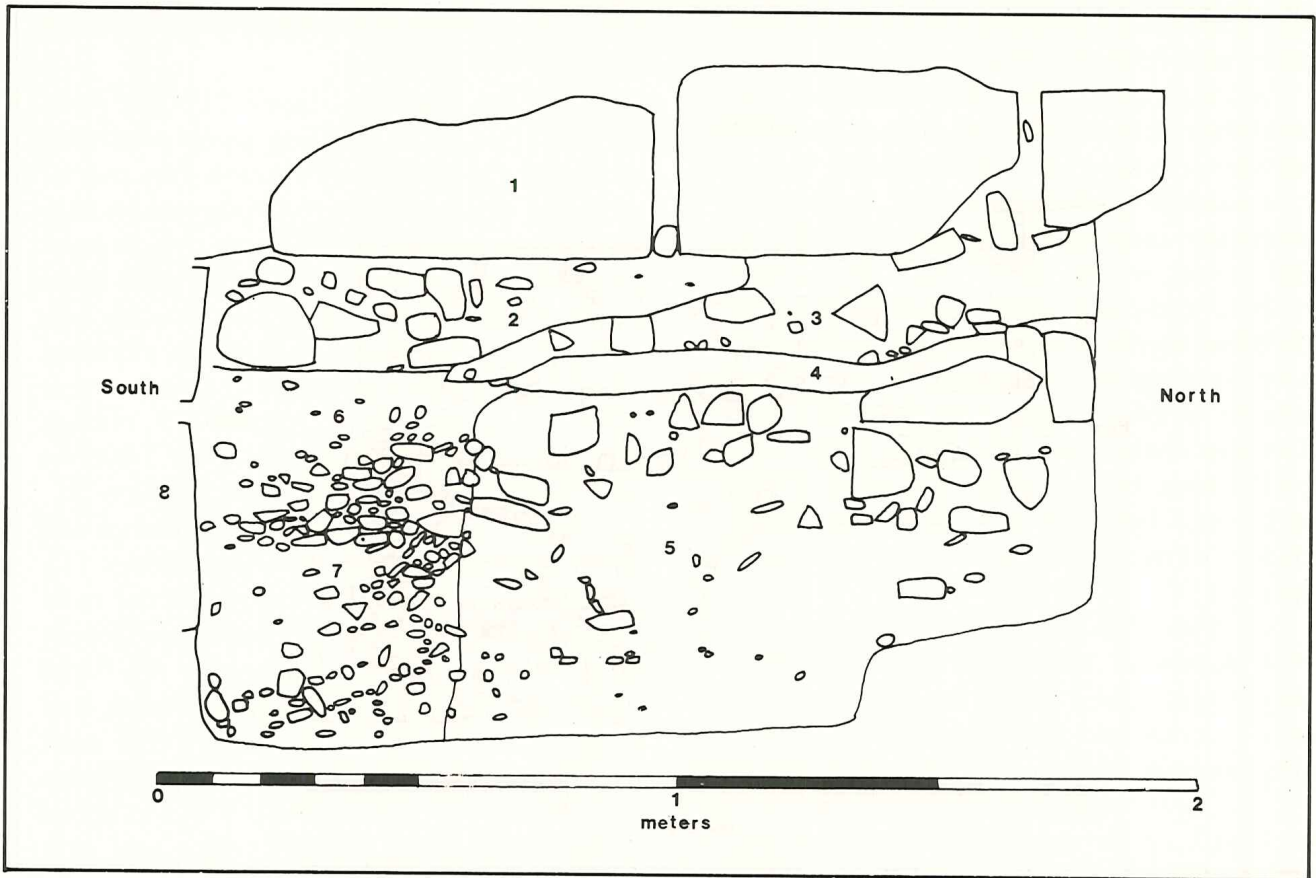


Fig. 2. Balk section in southwest area of southeast room.

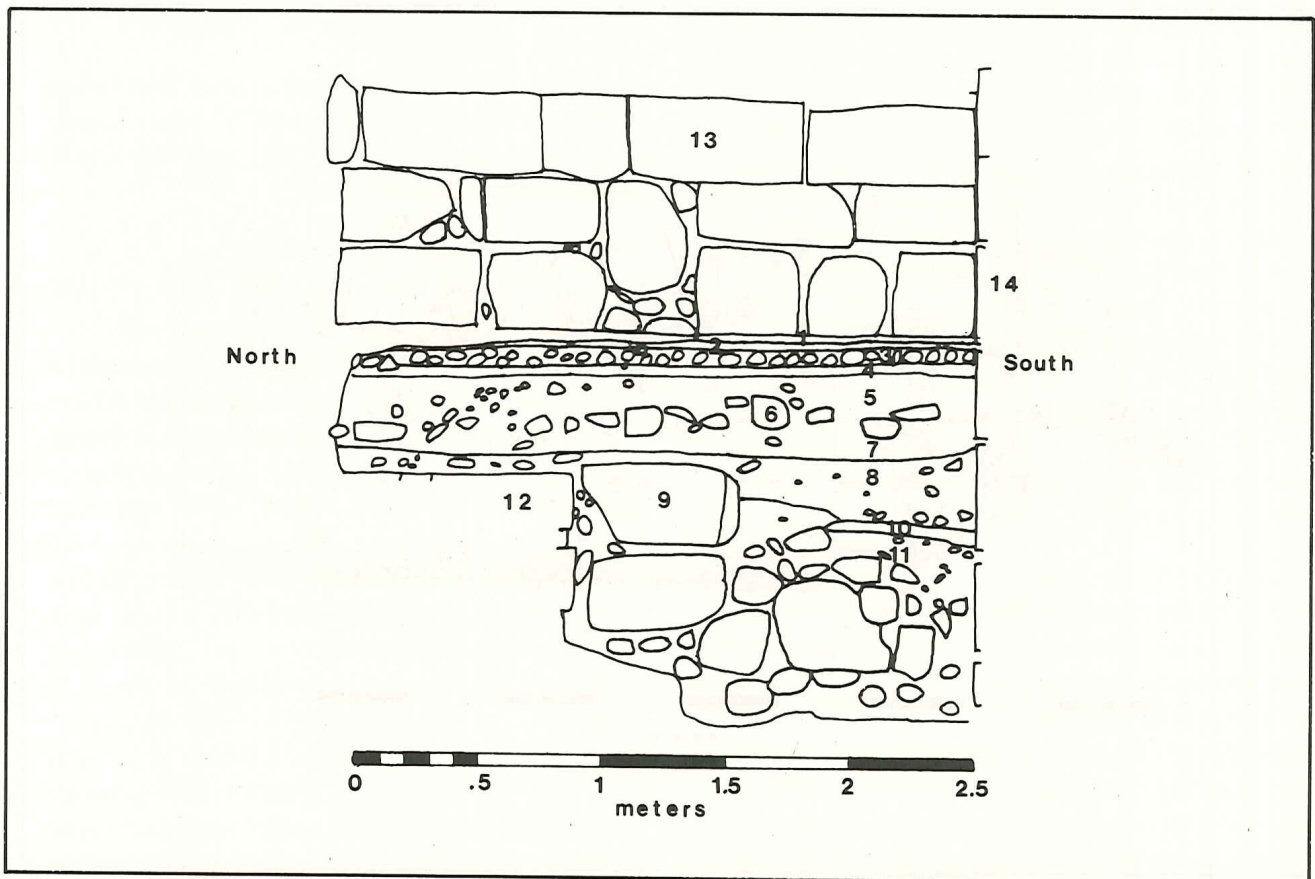


Fig. 3. Balk section in southeast area of southeast room.

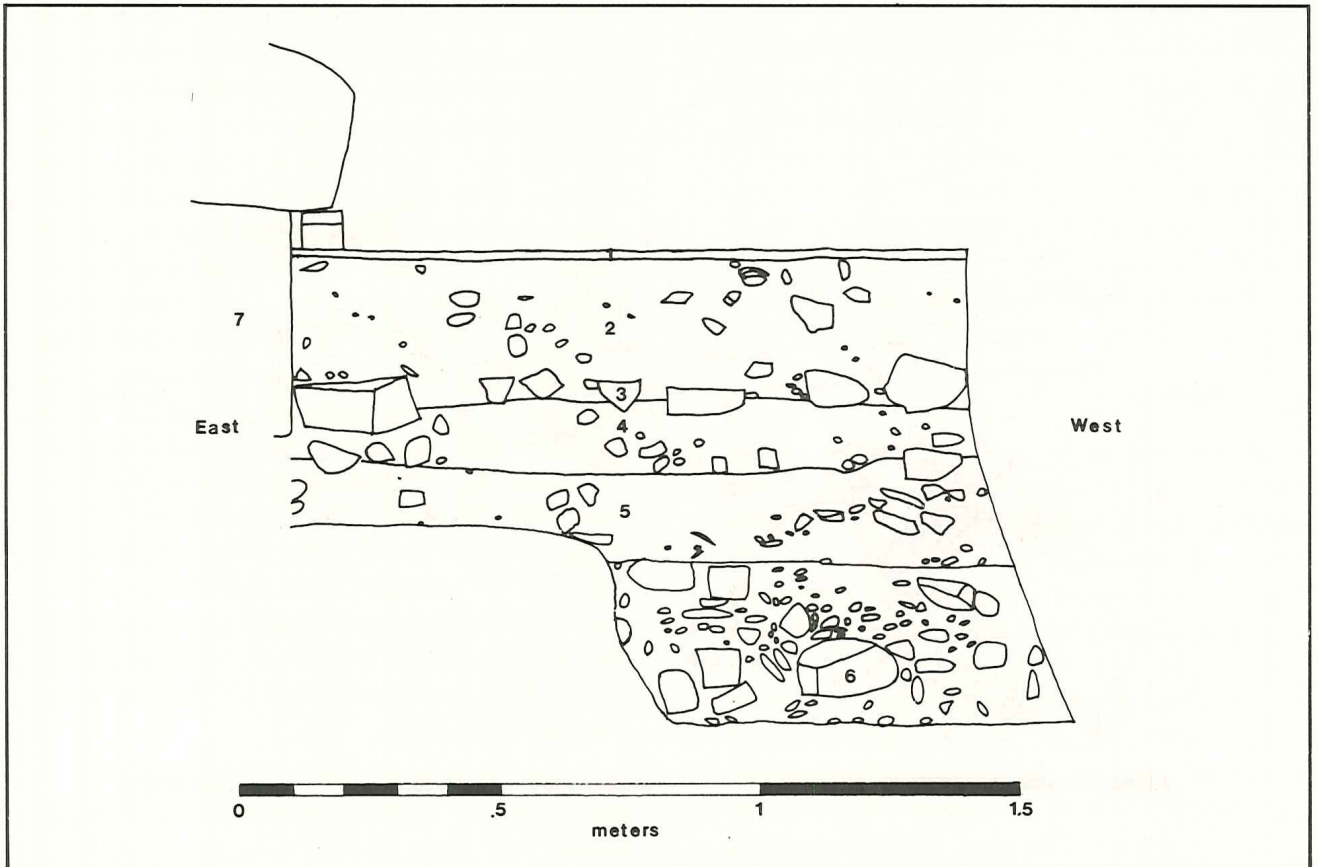


Fig. 4. Balk section in northeast area of southeast room.

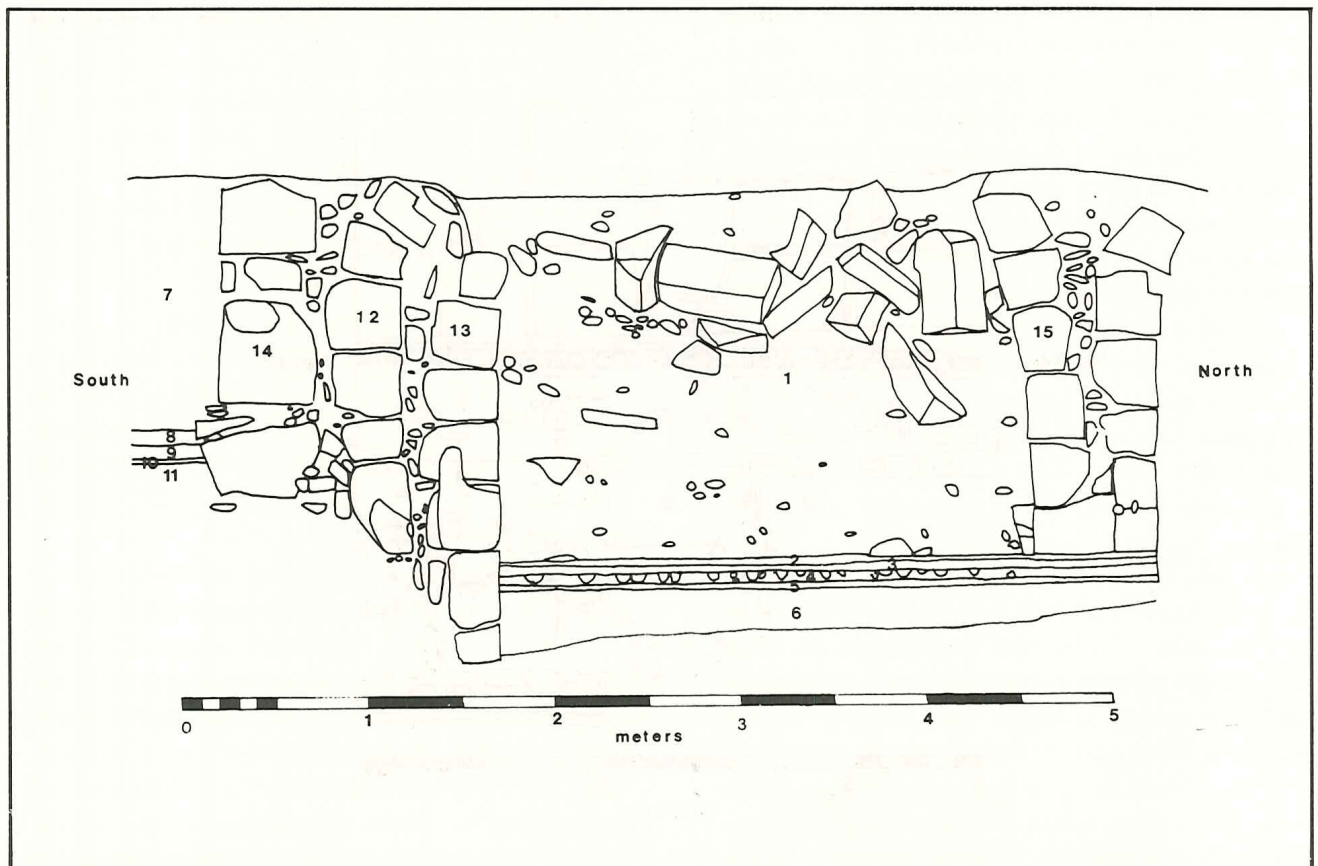


Fig. 5. Balk section in central west area.

Below was light brown silt (5) with some pebbles, cobbles and chalk. Below was solid chalky cobbles (6) in silty soil above bedrock. Layer 5 was partially excavated as locus 13 and, more carefully, as locus 32. Layer 6 was partially excavated as locus 13 and, more carefully, as locus 33.

These layers are bound on the east by the east wall of the southeast room (7).

The West Rooms

Much new work was also done in the area west of the church (Pl. III,2). The disturbed southwest corner was left largely undefined, although an intact sequence of layers was exposed at a high level, necessitating a step somewhere down to the mosaic floors of the rest of the church.

Two rooms were fully exposed; one in the northwest portion and a second room in the central portion. In this area the tumble layers (locus 21) were still intact (Pl. III,2 and Fig.5). In the tumble were some Byzantine and Early Islamic pottery, numerous large stone roof beams, a stone lintel with a cross carved on it, a few pieces of marble, including one piece shaped as a cross (Pl. IV,1), and a little glass. In both of these two rooms were mosaic floors of large plain white cubes. In the few centimeters directly above the mosaic in the central room was silty, sandy soil with chunks of wall plaster, but no traces of ash. This seems to indicate that the site was abandoned, rather than destroyed, in antiquity and that the wall plaster had begun to disintegrate and wind-blown soil to accumulate for some time before the roof and walls collapsed. These rooms were spanned by north-south arches. The south arch pier of the central room showed two phases of construction.

In the central room was a bench along the north and west walls and two cupboards in the west wall. There was no door in its west wall. In the southwest corner was a rounded plastered stone suitable for having things placed on it by people sitting on the benches. Here was only a single phase mosaic floor (locus 9) of plain white cubes up to 3 × 3 cm, with its bedding layers, which contained some Byzantine pottery.

In the northwest room was a bench

utilizing a reused column along the south wall and two doors in the west wall, leading to rooms below a modern house that were not investigated. In this room was a plain white mosaic floor (locus 22), with smaller sized cubes than the mosaic (locus 9) in the central room. This mosaic was patched in spots with larger plain white cubes. The mosaic continued below the loose sandy silty soil (locus 31), mostly unexcavated, underneath a stairway in the northeast corner (Pl. IV,2). In the north central portion of the north room was an undisturbed tomb (locus 24). In the space between the tomb, the north wall, and the arch pier and steps was a fill of large blocks covered by two layers of plaster. On top of these fill blocks was a strange circular feature (locus 23), some 0.30 m high, made of cobbles set in mortar and plastered on the inside and outside (Pl. IV,2).

Fig. 5 (Pl. V,1) balk section of west central room.

Filling the room was a thick deposit of rock tumble in loose silty soil with chunks of wall plaster towards the bottom (1-locus 21) above the mosaic floor (2-locus 9). The bedding layers for the mosaic consisted of: the mosaic cubes; bluish grey mortar (3) covering small cobbles (4) set on top of dark reddish brown soil (5); and light brown soil of variable thickness with pebbles and cobbles above bedrock (6).

The balk section also shows a small portion of the southwest room. Here was much modern garbage and tumble (7), above a sequence of layers consisting of bluish grey mortar above cobbles (8), loose light grey silt (9), and loose mosaic wasters (10), above light grey silt (11).

The central room was spanned by an arch. The south arch pier showed evidence of two phases. The first arch pier (12) was plastered on its north face, against which the second arch pier (13) was constructed later. To the south of the arch pier was a straight wall (14), which presented no evidence of supporting an arch extending to the south wall. The north arch pier (15) supported two arches, one springing to the south and the other springing to the north.

The Tomb

The vaulted stone roof of the tomb projected some 0.65 m above the mosaic floor of the room and the tomb was cut into bedrock to a variable depth around 2 meters below the level of the mosaic. A number of blocking stones were placed on top of the mosaic floor to close the opening on the west side of the tomb. The tomb may originally have been used for some other purpose, because the Early Islamic period users of the tomb filled in some of the irregularities of the sides cut into bedrock with cobbles set in mortar, to form straighter sides. They also deposited a layer of fill (locus 27) to level off the bottom. In the north part of the tomb they laid a pavement of flagstones (locus 26) on top of this fill. A number of extended burials, not yet studied, were placed on these flagstones. In the south portion of the tomb they also placed three large blocks in a line, behind which they deposited a thick layer of cobbly fill (loci 28, 34 and 35) up to the top level of these blocks to form a platform about 50 cm above the locus 26 pavement, upon which three or four bodies were placed on top of each other (locus 25). As studied in preliminary fashion by Andrea Lain the uppermost individual, the least well preserved one, may have been a male over the age of 35. The middle group of bones were from one, or more probably two, juveniles, one aged 12-13, and another aged 18 or 19. The lowest skeleton, which had been somewhat disturbed by the subsequent interments, was most likely a male aged less than 50.

The fill (27, 28, 34, 35) below the flagstones (26) and platform (25) contained much garbage, consisting of numerous pieces of pottery, mostly Late Byzantine, but including a few Early Islamic sherds, many glass pieces, including goblet bases and lamp stems, metal pieces, mostly copper alloy wick holders, pieces of mother-of-pearl, and one piece of marble, as well as large amounts of animal bones, including fish, chicken and sheep-goat. In a niche cut into the north wall (locus 24) were placed five Abbasid period pottery oil lamps (Pl. V,2), one of which had fallen onto the pavement. One of them was placed upside down, its wick was still preserved. A sixth lamp on the niche had

disintegrated into powder. A copper alloy chain with a hook for hanging lamps was inserted into the ceiling.

The Objects

A sizable number of objects was found in the course of the excavation. All of the objects, especially the pottery, need much further study, but a few preliminary comments can be made.

Stone

The handful of marble fragments, all from tumble or modern back-fill layers except for one small piece from the tomb, are only a small portion of the marble furnishings that originally would have been in the church. A cross (16.0×21.5×4.0 cm, one edge broken, white, fine grained) was the fanciest piece (Pl. IV,1). A cylindrical colonnette (28.0×9.5cm diameter, bottom broken, white, fine grained) was a typical element of the chancel screen. The other pieces of marble could all have been parts of the panels for the chancel screen or less likely from the altar or a dado on the walls. The few pieces of green chloritic schist are unusual. One piece of an oil-shale chancel screen panel was found also.

The broken limestone panel placed under the chancel screen of the southeast room (0.68 m wide × 0.60 high × 0.11-0.07 thick) was decorated with lightly cut ovals and chevrons dividing the front into four quadrants. The two lower sections, only partially preserved, were filled by rectangles, while the two upper sections were pierced by four irregularly ovoid holes around central circles. At the top was a row of circles flanking what appear to be barely perceptible traces of two birds in the center (Fig. 6).

A lintel with a cross came from the tumble in the west area. The lintels and sides of the cupboards in the west central room were decorated with crosses and a simple zig-zag pattern (Fig. 7).

The Roman period altar with a few letters in Greek and a column capital found in the apse have not yet been studied.

Metal

Most of the metal objects were thin twisted strips of copper alloy from the tomb

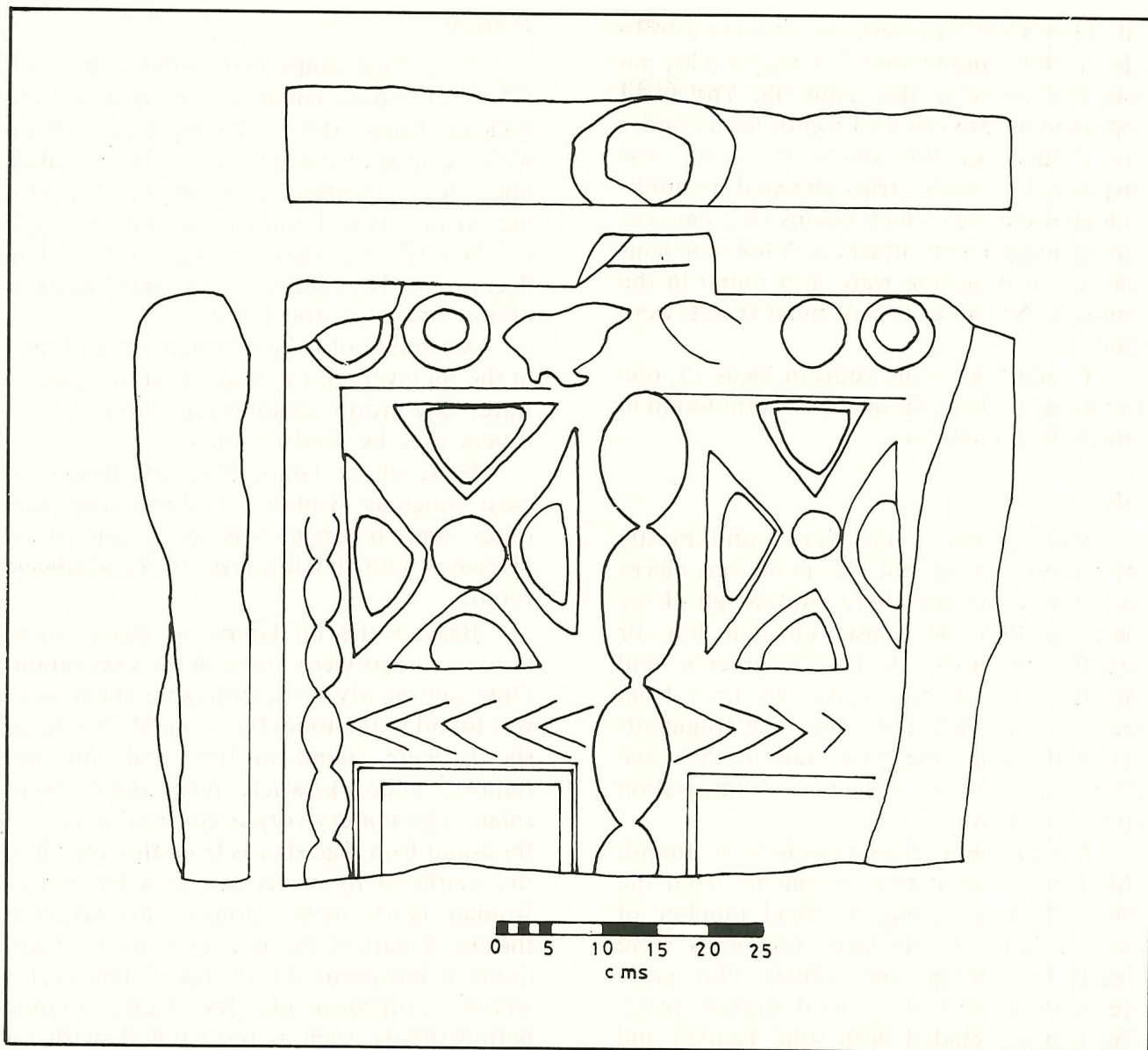


Fig. 6. Carved stone panel under the chancel of the southeast room.

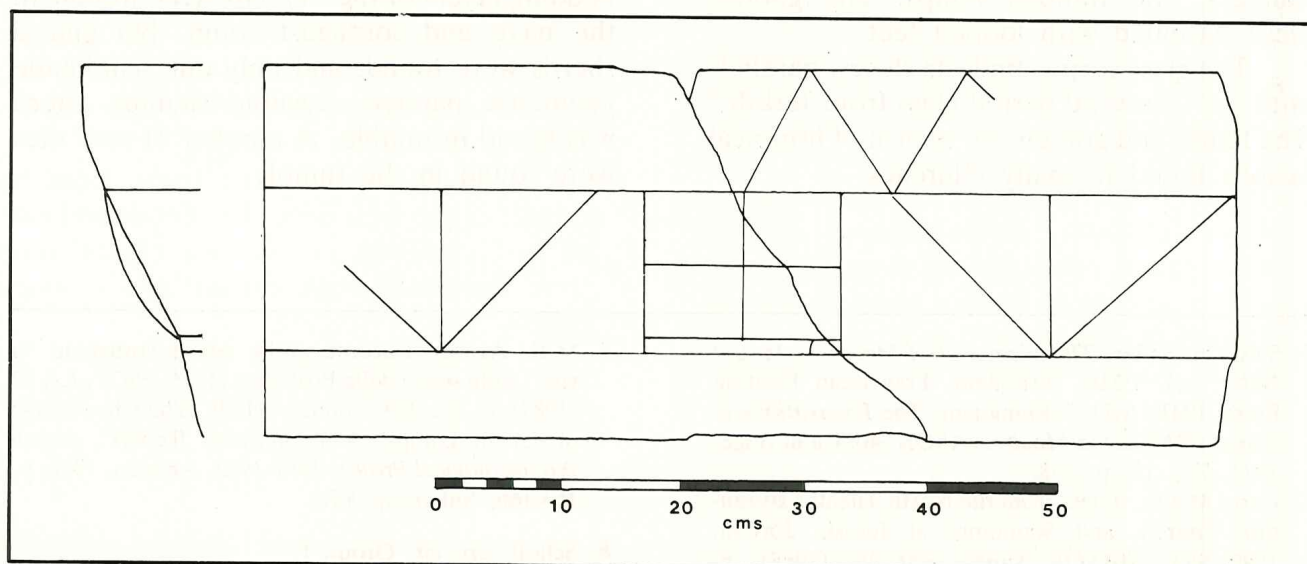


Fig. 7. Lintel of north cupboard in central west room.

fill. They were wick holders, as known from Mount Nebo and Dhiban.⁵ A copper alloy pin was also found in the tomb fill. The small copper alloy cross (6.8×4.8 cm), found under the chancel of the southeast room, was suspended by three strips attached by hooks (6.8×0.6 cm), to which chains (3.2 cm preserved length) were attached. A few iron nails and one iron needle were also found in the tomb fill. No pieces of any metal vessels were found.

In addition to the coins in locus 15, one Byzantine and one Islamic coin were found in unstratified contexts.

Glass

Many pieces of glass were found, mostly from the tomb fill, but also numerous pieces from the layers elsewhere. Almost all of the glass was thin and transparent light blue or slightly greenish. A few fragments had medium to dark blue coils; one neck from locus 31 had dark red coils. The fragments below the flagstone pavement in the nave (locus 15) had a distinctive disintegration layer on them.

No complete glass vessels were found, although the numerous fragments from the tomb fill may belong to small number of vessels. Most of the large fragments were clearly from lamps and goblets. One piece seems to be part of a round window pane. The lamps included both solid beaded and hollow plain stemmed lamps, used in polykandela, and tumbler lamps. The goblets were stemmed with looped feet.

The glass corpus finds its closest parallels with the Umayyad period glass from Jerash.⁶ The lamps and goblets are typical of liturgical vessels found in many churches.

Pottery

Five whole lamps were found in the tomb (Pl. V,2). These lamps are molded and are typically Early Abbasid having a pear shape with a channel between the nozzle and filling hole, and a decoration of vine scrolls. Two are Arndt's type I and two are Arndt's type II.⁷ One (Pl. V,2 upper left) has a wavy line decoration. They serve to date the placement of the bodies in the tomb.

A number of lamp fragments were found in the fill layers of the tomb. One is a typical Late Byzantine candlestick lamp.⁸ Two others may be Early Islamic.⁹

None of the lamps have inscriptions or clear religious symbols on them. The only other lamp fragment was the nozzle of an Herodian lamp in a low layer of the southeast room.

Besides the oil lamps no other whole pottery vessels were found in the excavation. Only one nearly reconstructable small bowl was found in the tomb fill. A number of large sherds were found in the tomb fill and tumble, while elsewhere most sherds were small. The pottery corpus consists of several thousand Iron Age sherds from the low fill in the southeast room, as well as a handful of Roman sherds, mostly from the low layers in the north part of the southeast room. Hundreds of Byzantine sherds were found everywhere. Comparatively few Early Islamic period sherds, such as red painted swirls on cream ware, were found in the tomb or the bedding layers of the 717-718 A.D. mosaic in the nave and southeast room. No glazed sherds were found, and only one handmade geometric painted Ayyubid-Mamluk sherd was found in tumble. A number of roof tiles were found in the tumble.

5. Sylvester Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, vol. 1:310. Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 1941; A.D. Tushingham, *The Excavations at Diban (Dhiban) in Moab*. *AASOR* 40, Cambridge, 1972, Fig. 13, p. 158.

6. Carol Meyer, 'Glass from the North Theater Byzantine Church, and Soundings at Jerash, Jordan, 1982-1983', *BASOR Supplement* 25 (1988), p. 175-222.

7. M.B. Arndt, 'Lucerne arabe con decorazione "a vite" dallo scavo della Probatia (1956-1967)', *LA* 37 (1987), p. 241-289; Tomasz Scholl, 'The Chronology of Jerash Lamps: A Preliminary Report', *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983*, Amman, 1986, p. 163-166, Subgroup VI:2.

8. Scholl, *op. cit.* Group I.

9. Scholl, *op. cit.* Group III.

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Other

Many animal bones were found in the tomb fill. Only a handful of animal bones were found scattered in the other layers. None were worked. No soil deposits worthy of flotation for botanical remains were excavated. A few small pieces of ostrich egg shells were found both in the tomb fill and in the locus 5 cobble layer of the southeast room.

Also found in the tomb was a whole shell of mother-of-pearl, along with a few other small pieces. A number of pieces of painted plaster were also found in the layer below the flagstones in the nave (locus 15).

R. Schick
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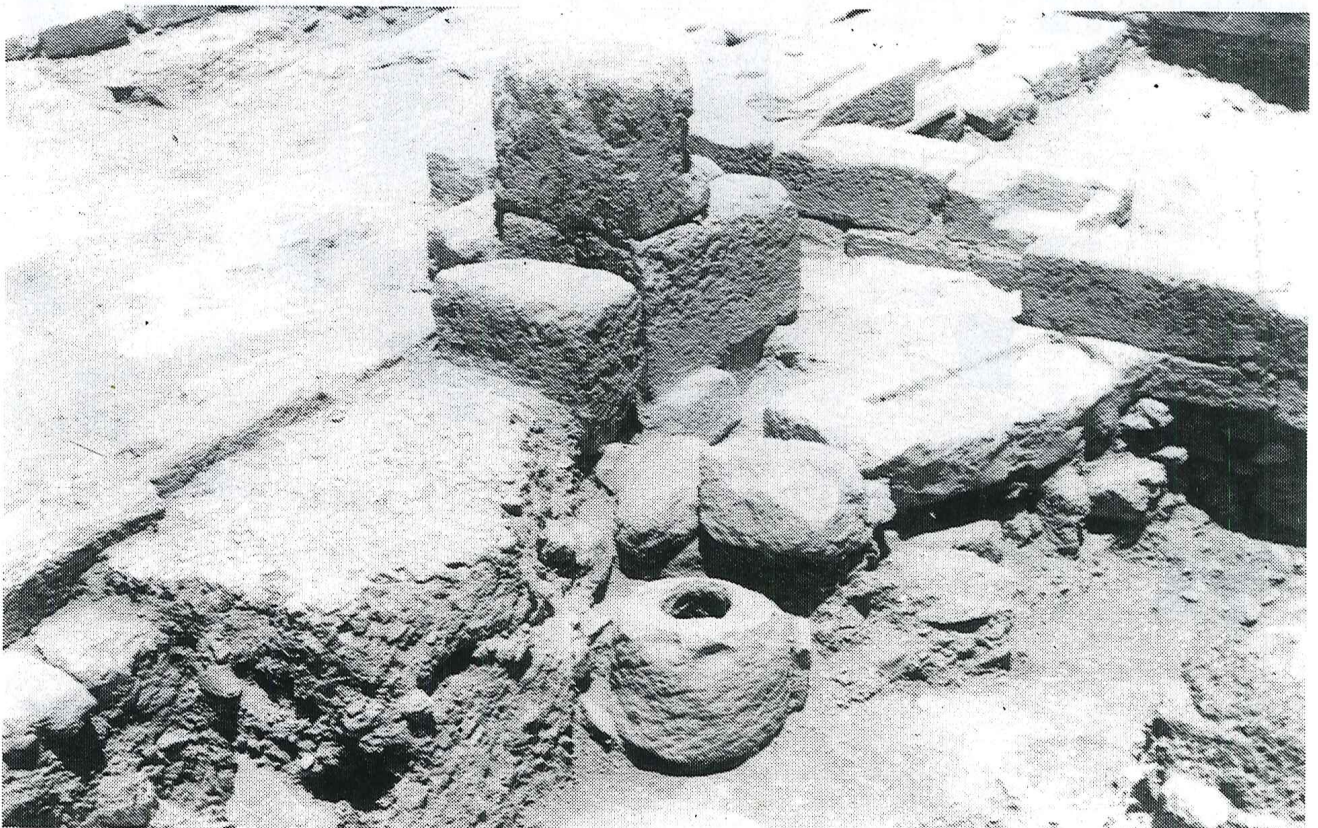
1. View to west of abandoned modern house covering the west half of the church.



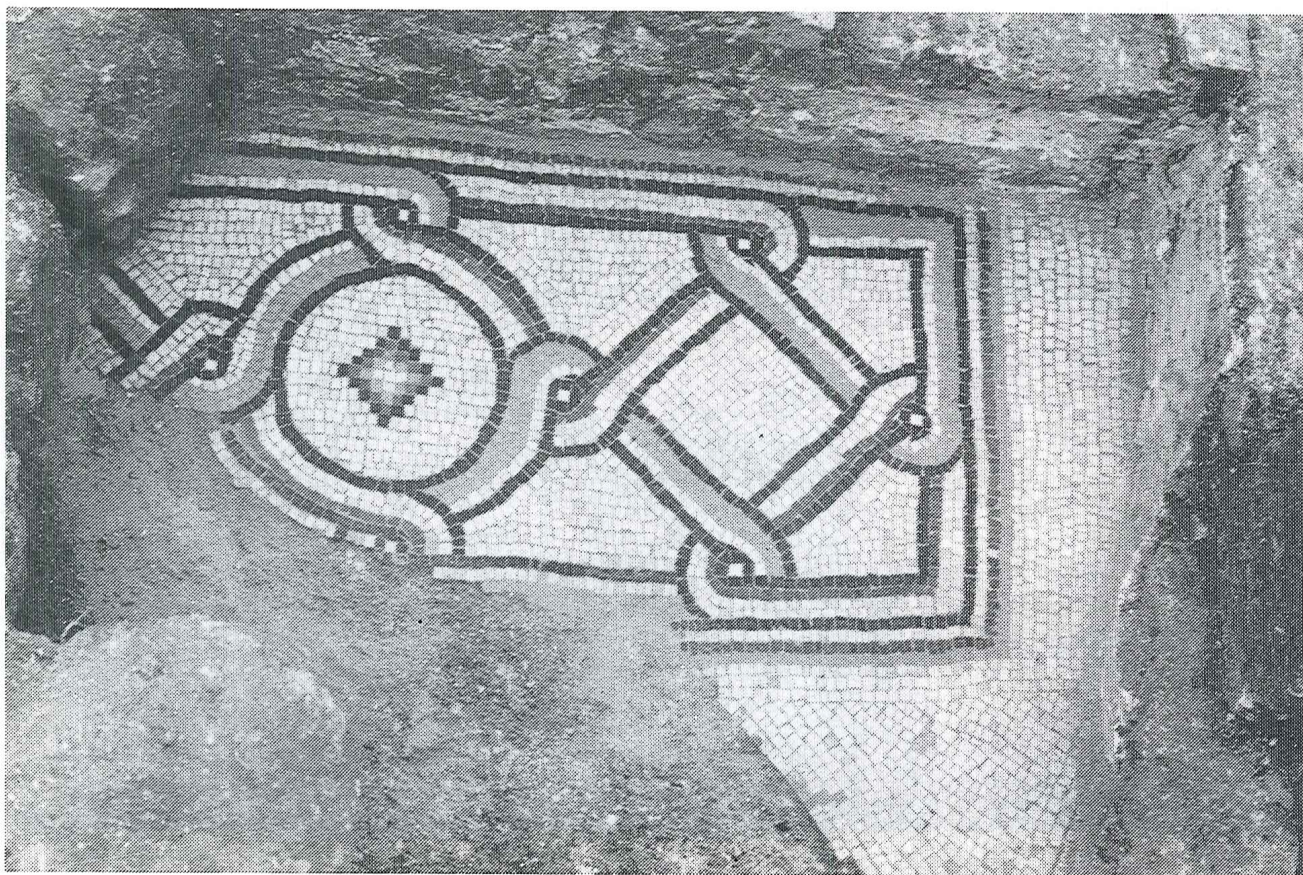
2. View to east of apse and flagstone pavement.



1. View to east of balk section in southeast corner of the southeast room.



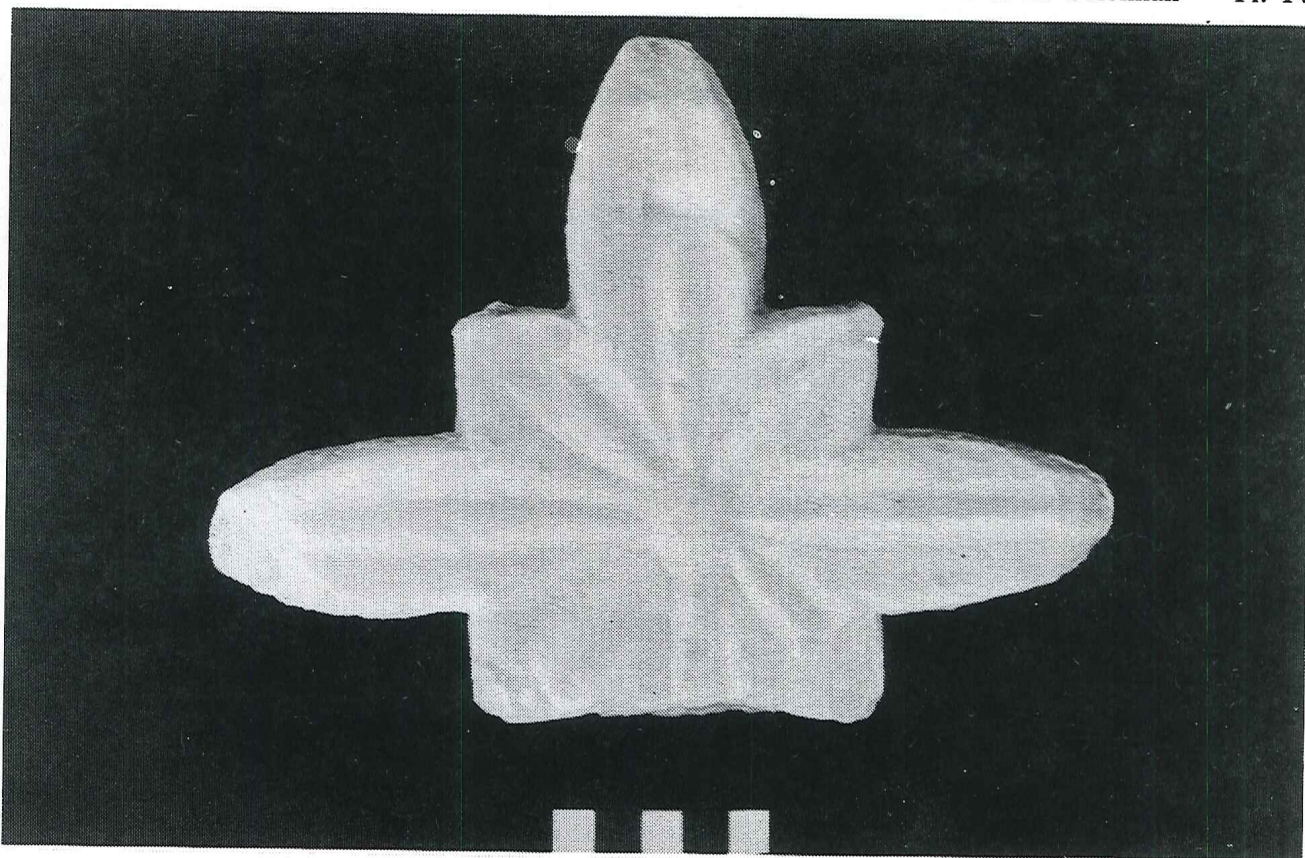
2. View to northwest of northwest portion of the southeast room.



1. View to north of lower mosaic in northwest corner of the southeast room.



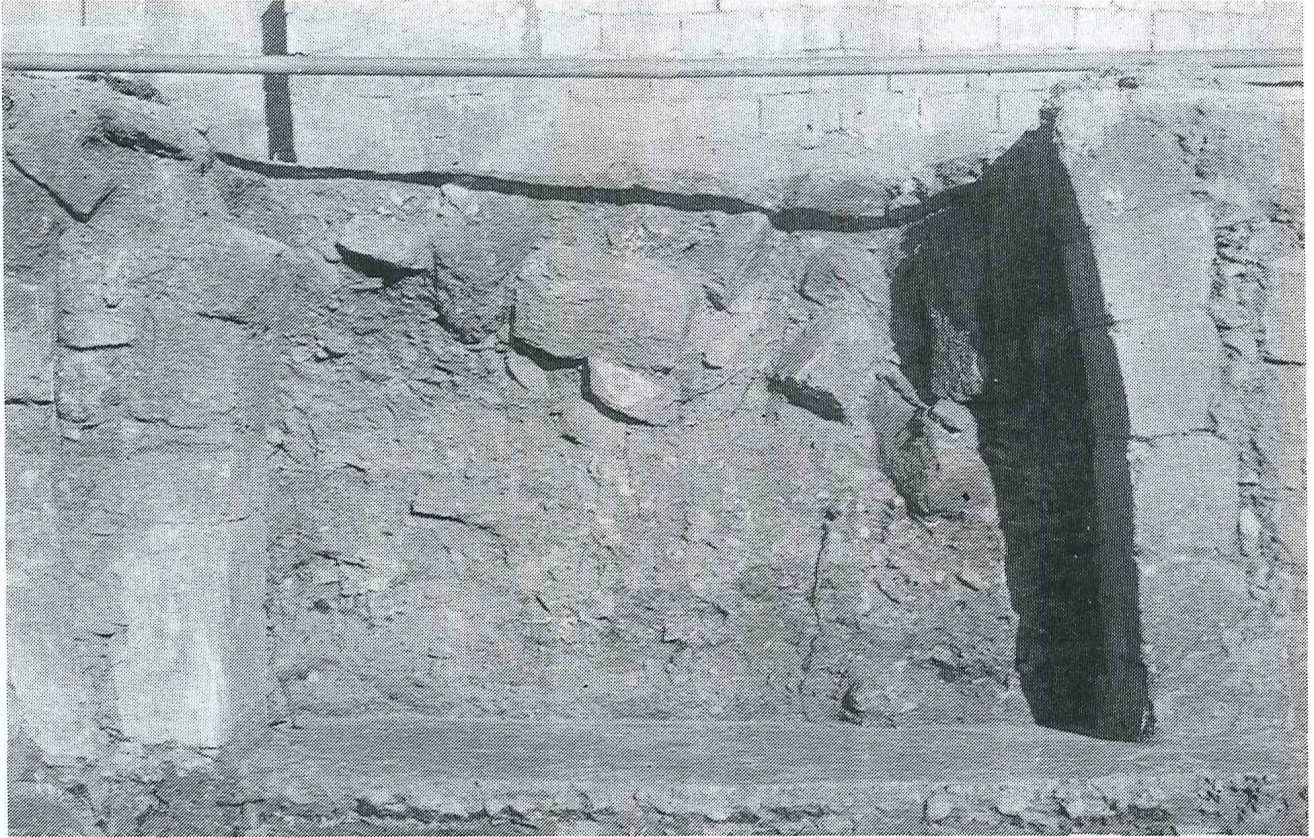
2. View to west of west central and northwest rooms.



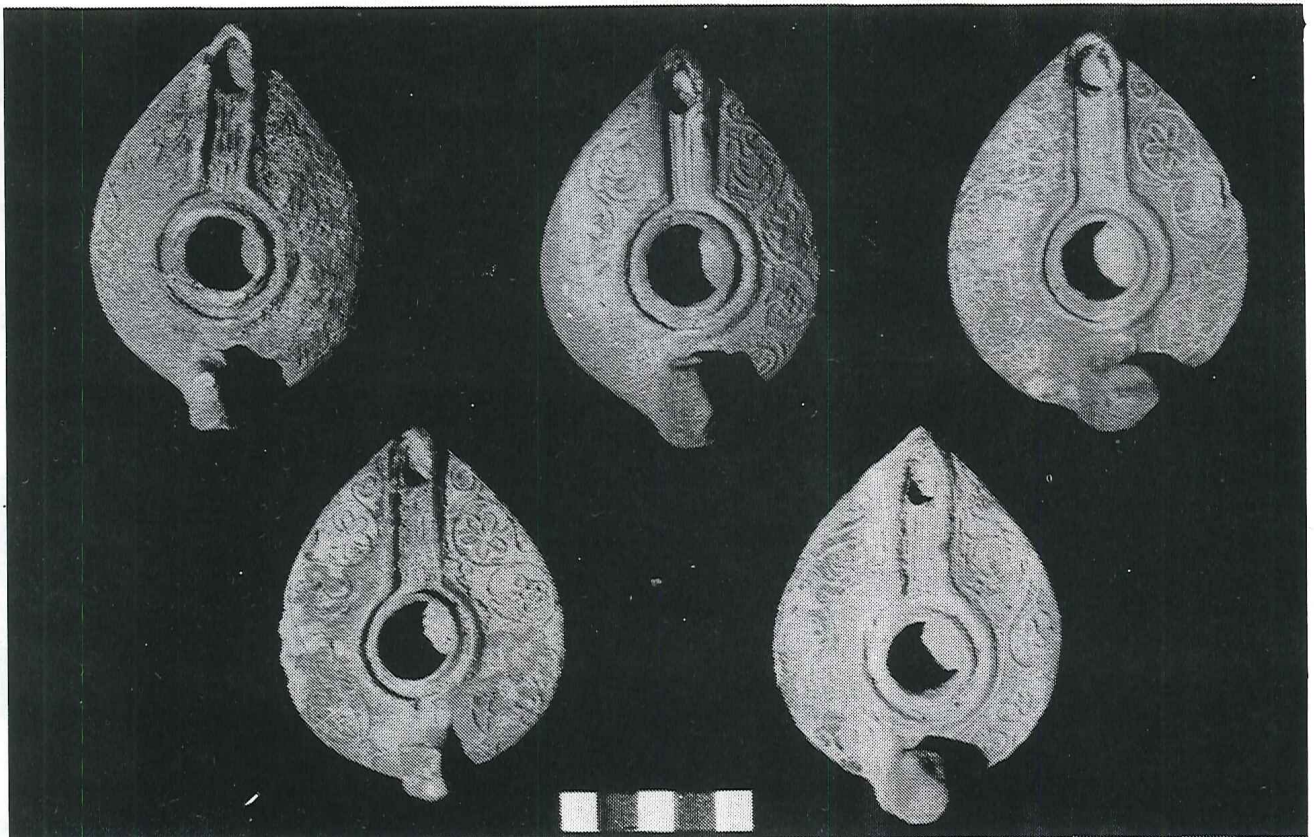
1. Marble cross.



2. View to north of northern portion of northwest room and tomb.



1. View to west of balk section in west central room.



2. Whole lamps from niche in tomb.