

## New Discoveries on Mount Nebo

by

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(Figs. 1 - 2)

By building a sanctuary on top of Mount Nebo, overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea, the first Christian communities of the region wished to perpetuate the biblical memory associated with the last moments in Moses' life. Perhaps, the place had already been identified by a preceding classical funeral monument.

A Roman pilgrim at the end of the 4th century, Etheria, reports in her memoirs that she visited a little church, the memorial or cenotaph of Moses, built on the summit of the mountain and kept by Egyptian monks. In the next century another pilgrim, Peter the Iberian, who came to the sanctuary twice, reported that he saw the memorial in a large church or Basilica.<sup>1</sup>

The literary data was confirmed by the archaeological excavations directed by the late Father Sylvester Saller of the Franciscan Biblical Institute of Jerusalem, which were carried out on the top of the mountain at the place still called today in Arabic *Siyagha*, an Aramaic term for monastery. On the ruins of a Roman mausoleum with three apses (a *cella trichora*)<sup>2</sup>, a little church had been built in the 4th

century. It was succeeded, in the next century, by a basilica with three aisles, decorated with a mosaic floor (Pl. XIII). In the 6th century a baptistery was added, propped against the southern wall, and a chapel to the Virgin Mary. On the northern wall was a large rectangular hall which Fr. Saller had recognised as being the *diacönicon* of the basilica. At that time the basilica and the lateral chapels had been adorned with a new mosaic floor.

The 1933-37 excavations stopped when they reached the floors both in the basilica and in the monastic complex that had developed on the top of Mount Nebo<sup>3</sup> at the same time.

In the sixties Fr. Virgilio Corbo of the same Institute, resumed work in the basilica to cover and restore the mosaic floors which were until then poorly protected against the inclemency of the weather and the curiosity of tourists. Excavations under the bedding of the mosaics in the baptistery, the chapel of the Virgin Mary and the southern aisle, showed that to enlarge the little church mentioned by Etheria and to add the two lateral chapels it was necessary to sacrifice some rooms of the monastery

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1. The literary sources are gathered and studied by Fr. S. Saller in the XVth chapter of *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, Part I, pp. 330-347.

2. B. Bagatti, *Edifici cristiani nella regione del Nebo* in *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, XIII

(1936) 4-13. Cfr also *Phasga* in *Dictionnaire de la Bible Supplément*, vol. VII, 1122s.

3. S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, Part I, The Text; Part II, The Plates, Jerusalem 1941. III, The Pottery, by Fr. H. Schneider, Jerusalem 1950.

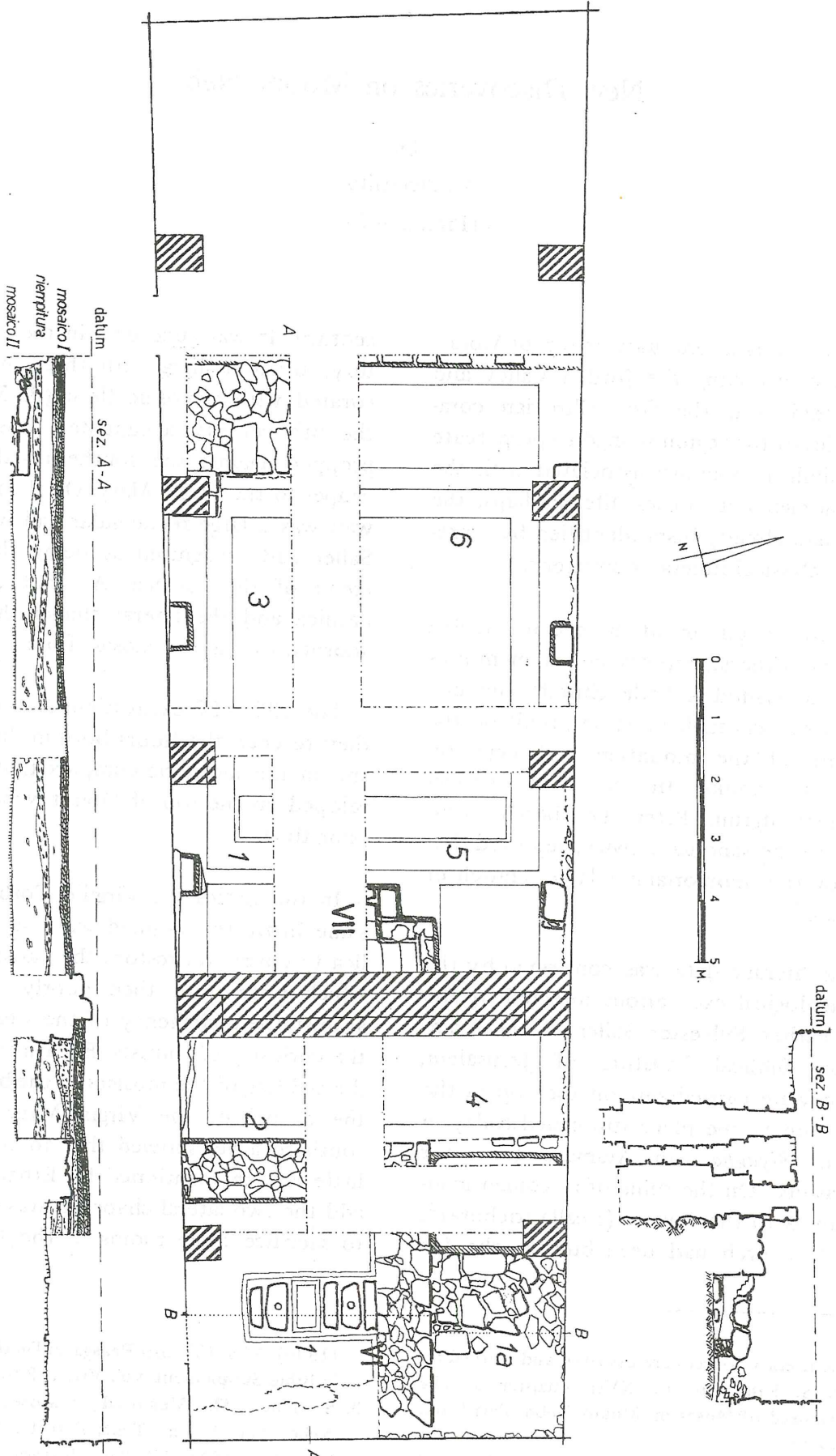


FIG. 1

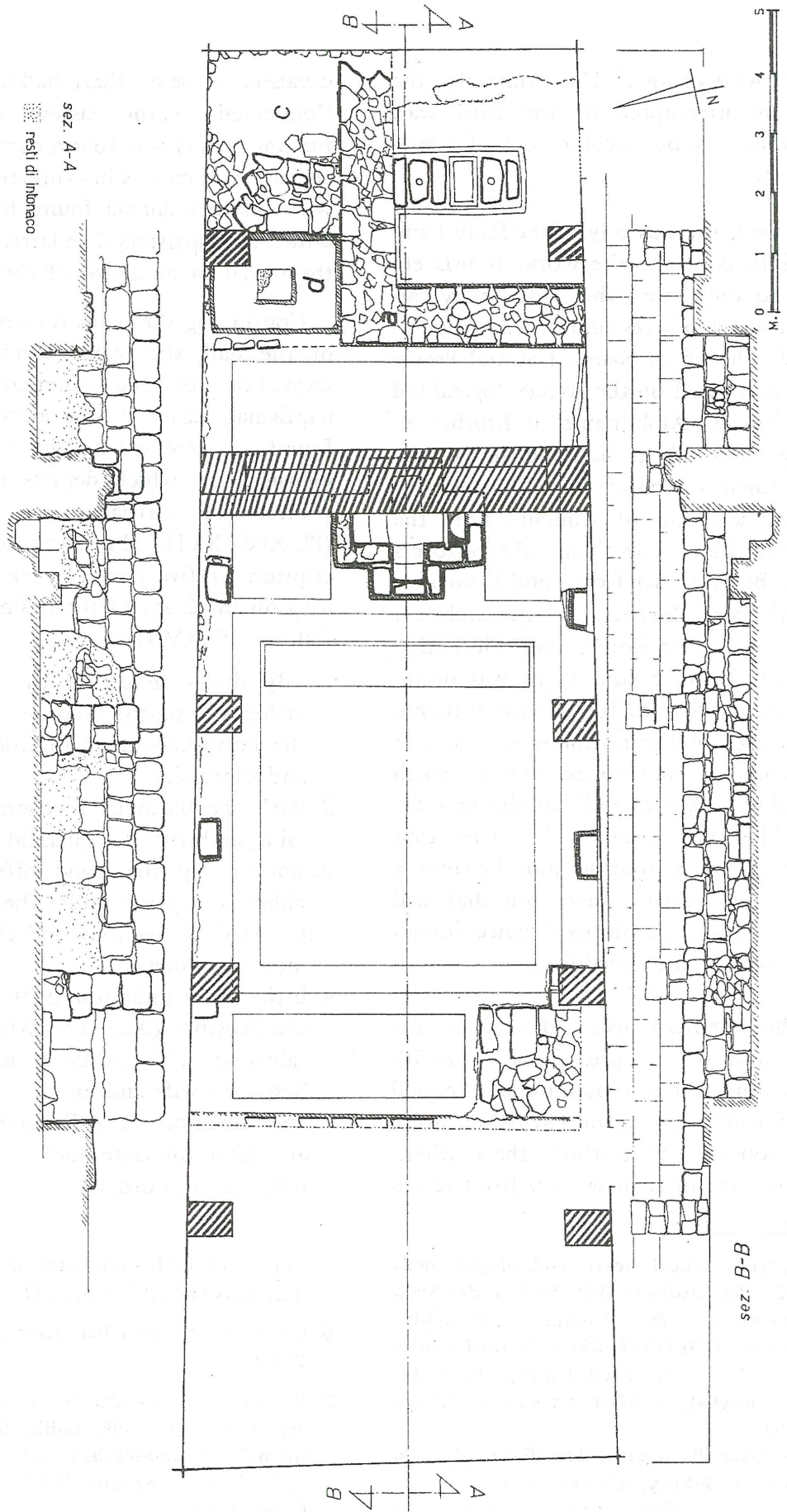


FIG. 2

and a funeral chapel.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the work was interrupted by the 1967 war, when Mount Nebo became part of a military zone.

This year, the Custody of the Holy Land decided to continue the work. It was entrusted to the writer who had already carried out in 1973 a restoration campaign in the little church of Saints Lot and Procopius. It is located on the archaeological tell known by the Arab name of Khirbet el-Mukhayyet which is believed to be the ancient town of Nebo.<sup>5</sup> The writer was assisted by a group of students from the Franciscan Biblical Institute, the restorers Raffaele Beretta from Como and Domenico Tampieri from Ravenna, by the architect Cesare Calano of Rome, and Florentino Diez from Leon, Spain. Work was begun methodically, first to remove the 6th century mosaics in the northern aisle and in the *diaconicon*, then to excavate in depth and finally to restore and lay the mosaics again. The excavation which was first thought to be a routine job, became a scientific and artistic adventure that will remain an unforgettable experience for all the members of the expedition.

In the northern aisle, adjacent to the eastern wall of the presbytery, a 4–5th century tomb came to light under a second layer of white tesserae mosaics which were already found by Fr. Corbo in the southern aisle. The greater surprise came from the ex-

cavation in the northern hall of *diaconicon*. Connected to the eastern wall, another funeral chapel was found dated to the 5th century, which was in symmetrical position with another chapel found by Fr. Corbo, under the baptistery. The latter was used for the burial of an abbot of the monastery.<sup>6</sup>

Continuing the work towards the middle of the hall, the team found the ancient baptistery of the sanctuary with the baptismal basin of masonry. They also found, in excellent condition, a beautiful mosaic floor which depicts rural life and scenes of hunting and stock-raising (Pl. XIV–XVI). The Greek dedicatory inscription of five lines is over four meters long on the front of the basin and reads as follows (Pl. XVII).

1. «By divine grace, at the time of our father and pastor Elias, beloved by God, the holy diaconicon of God was rebuilt and adorned.
2. With the basin of regeneration it contains, and with the splendid Ki.
3. borion, by the good offices of Elias abbot and priest under the consulate of the Flavii Lapadius and Orestes, in the month of August.
4. In the ninth indiction of the year 425 of the Province (Arabia = 531 A.D). for the salvation of Mousileios advocate and Sergia his wife and for
5. the salvation of Philadelphus advocate and Goti advocate and of all their kinfolk. Amen, Lord.»

4. V. Corbo, Nuovi scavi archeologici nella cappella del battistero della basilica del Nebo (Siyagha) in *Liber Annus Studi Biblici Franciscani XVII* (1967) 241-258; Scavi archeologici sotto i mosaici della basilica del monte Nebo (Siyagha), in *Liber Annus XX* (1970) 272-297.

5. Cfr S. Saller-B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo (Khirbet el-Mukhayyet)*, Jerusalem 1949 and M. Piccirillo, *Campagna archeologica a*

Khirbet el-Mukhayyet (città di Nebo) in *Liber Annus XXIII* (1973) 341-371.

6. Cfr V. Corbo in *Liber Annus XVII* (1967) 254-257.

7. For more details Cfr M. Piccirillo, *Campagna archeologica nella basilica di Mosé profeta sul monte Nebo-Siyagha* (1 luglio – 7 settembre 1976) in *Liber Annus XXVI* (1976) 281-318, Plates 49-80.

A second inscription of two lines at the entrance of the baptistery also gives the names of the artists who completed the decoration. It reads:

1. «Lord Jesus Christ, remember the clerics and monks and (all the) others who rest here (in peace).

2. Lord remember Soelos and Kaiomos and Elias the mosaicists and their whole families.»

Their work is not only intact but some of the scenes reveal a really admirable sense

of composition. Among other things, it is the first time that such scenes have been found without being enclosed in plant volutes, and it is the oldest dated mosaic with such pattern discovered in Jordan so far.

Among the fragments of plaster thrown in the filling, we have been able to gather graffiti and various letters and parts of inscriptions, always in Greek, which bear witness to veneration and use of this holy place in the 6th century.<sup>7</sup>

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