

A Byzantine Church at ed-Deir (Ma'in)

by

M. Piccirillo and M. Russan

During the summers of the years 1972–73, the Department of Antiquities excavated the Byzantine complex of ed-Deir, on the high-way Ma'in-Calliroe.

The complex is common in its plan: built on the top of an isolated hill, yet not far away from the town. Though simple and modest in its structure, it fits well for its religious aim. Quadrangular in plan, (Fig.1)¹ it consists of a small church and three chamber on its southern wall.

The small church: (PL.XVIII—and fig. 1).

It has three naves with an inscribed apse flanked by the two small sacristies. The monument is 16m. long and 15,50m. wide; Ten pilasters (5 on each side, the first two in the façade) divide the church into a rather large central nave and relatively small lateral ones. From the many fragments PL.XIX,1, we conclude that the roof was covered with tiles, common in the region at this time.

The church has two doors: the main one in the façade, the second one in the northern wall leading to the terraced fields. The presbytery occupies the eastern bay of the central nave: it is enclosed by a low wall on the north and south and by a screen on the west. On the plaster of the southern wall, there is a socket for a marble balustrade, now in the Madaba Museum.

Fragments of «Nebo stone»² posts and screen, sculptured with geometrical patterns, are still in situ, as is the case of the marble slab under the altar. The four colonnettes are in the Madaba Museum.

In the church are to be noted a cupboard on the southern wall, the column near the fifth pilaster, perhaps used for the ciborium, and the four steps leading to a platform near the entrance of the funeral chapel, perhaps the pulpit.

The mosaic floor is still well preserved as is a fragment of the plaster apse and appears to represent a carpet (Pl. XXIV,1). The mosaic is geometrical in design (Pl. XXI), except for the panel beside the altar which is decorated with volutes of vines. Also noteworthy are the tabula ansata in the nave with the dedicatory inscription (Pl. XXVIII,1) and the geometrical panel of the southern aisle near the entrance to the funeral chapel.

The three rooms: (Fig. 1)

In the southern wall of the church are three doors leading to three rooms. Through the first one (a), originally covered by a roof supported by an arch, one can enter the southern sacristy. The second room (b), still finely plastered and decorated with mosaics, was built in a second

1. The plan and the designs of the pottery were drawn by Victor Pena, O.F.M.

2. So F. Saller calls it in *Siyagha I*, p. 70, when describing the same stone. Cfr, also *Siyagha II*, pl. 61, 1-2.

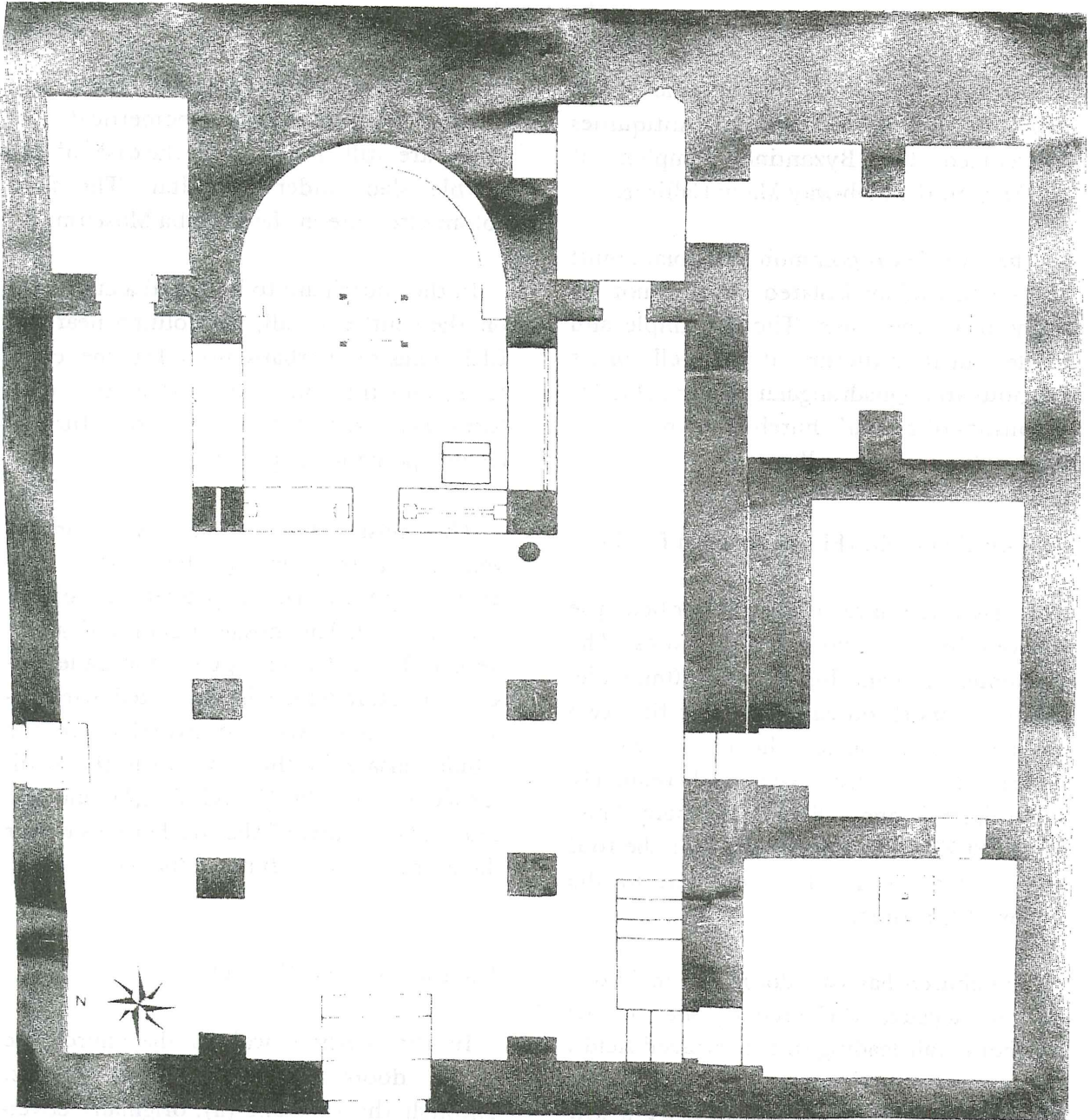


FIG. 1

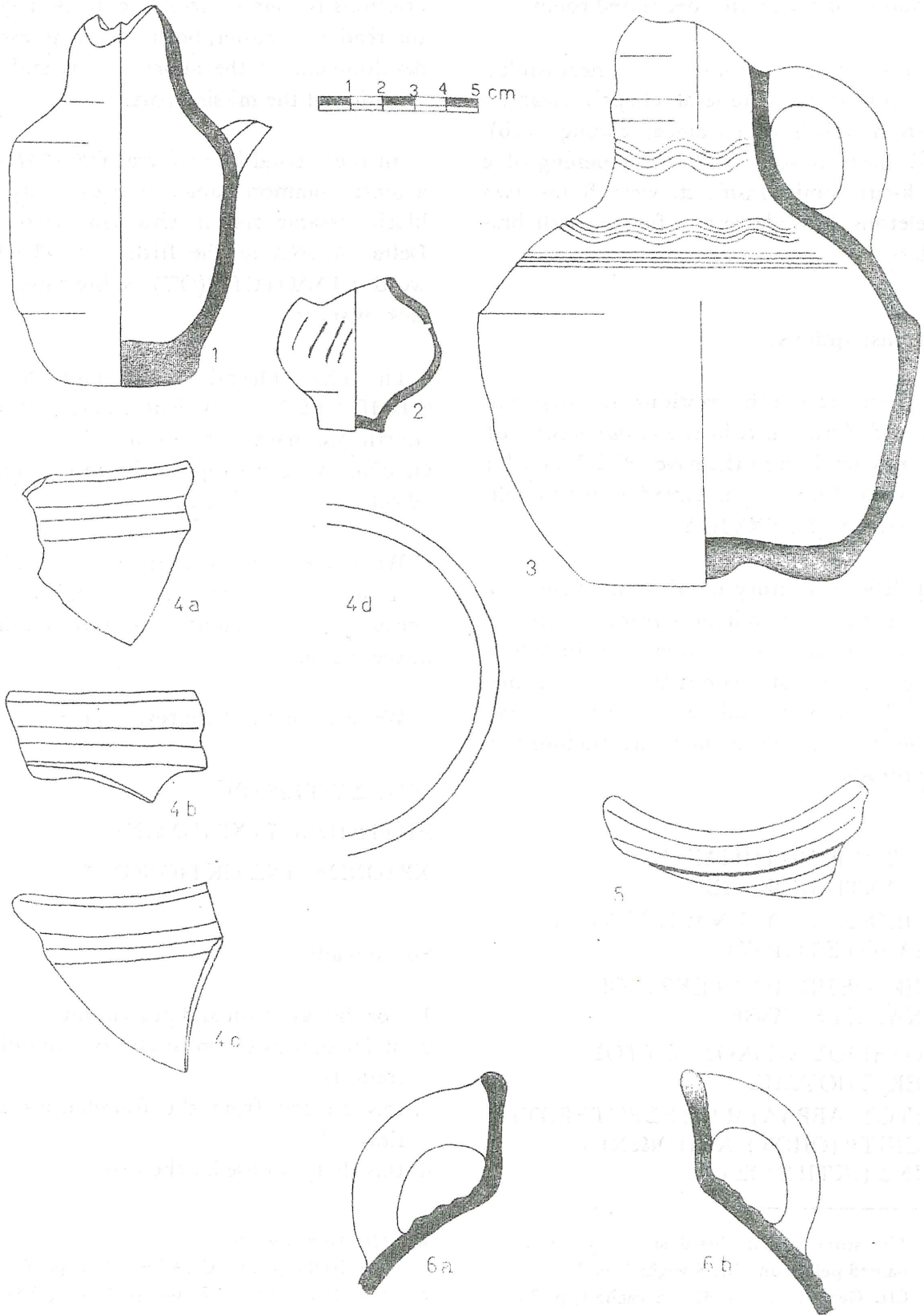


FIG. 2

stage. It is difficult to determine the exact function of such a fine decorated room.

The third room (c) meanwhile, functioned as a funeral chapel. Near its eastern wall is an entrance, leading to (b), and there is still in situ the opening of a rock-cut tomb. Inside it, were found two skeletons (a male and a female with bracelets).

The inscriptions:

There are two inscriptions: the first one (I), a dedication, is in the *tabula ansata* of the mosaic floor in the nave (Pl. XXVIII,1); the second one (II) is carved on the marble balustrade. (Pl. XXVIII,2).

I. The dedicatory inscription consists of five lines, quite well preserved, except for the lower left corner where the first two words of the fourth and fifth lines are damaged. Two crosses and two *haederae distinguentes* as two small branches enclose the inscription.

1. + ΥΠΕΡ ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ
ΑΝΤΙΑΗΜΨΕΩΣ
2. ΘΕΟ(Δ)ΩΡΟΥ ΕΝΔΟΞΩΤΑΤΟΥ
ΙΛΛΟΥΣΤΡ(ΙΟΥ)
3. ΕΚ ΘΕΜΕΛΙΩ(Ν) ΕΚΤΙΣΘΗ
ΚΑΙ ΕΤΕΛΙΩΘΗ
4. Ο [ΑΓΙΟΣ Ο] ΙΚΟΣ ΟΥΤΟΣ
ΕΚ ΣΠΟΥΔΗΣ
5. [ΤΟΥ ΑΒΡΑΑ] Μ ΠΡ(ΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΥ)
ΕΠΙΤΡ (ΟΠΟΥ) ΧΡ (ΟΝΩΝ) ς
ΙΝΔ (ΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ) +.

3. The stone which closed such a tomb was named *pellaikon*. Cfr. Siyagha I, p. 37.
4. Cfr. Gerasa, n. 344, 336. Siyagha I, p. 255. Moab 57, 59 ecc.
5. More than with *ocikos*, the adjective is used with *topos*. Cfr Gerasa, n. 285.

Since the vocabulary occurring in the inscriptions is found else-where in the region, the reading is easier, both for the necessary development of the abbreviations and the restoring of the missing parts.

In the second line we read ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟΥ a quite common name,⁴ suggested by the black tesserae still in situ, similar to the Delta of ΙΝΔ in the fifth line. The last word is ΙΛΛΟΥΣΤΡ(ΟΥ) abbreviated for lack of space.

In the third line the N of ΘΕΜΕΛΙΩΝ is evident enough. In the fourth we have part of an O and I of ΟΙΚΟΣ. We can suppose the intermediate adjective to be (ΑΓΙΟΣ)⁵

We suggest in the fifth line ΑΒΡΑΑΜ, first because of the final M, and second because this oriental name is quite common in the region.

We solve that last abbreviations :

ΠΡ (ΕΣΥ ΤΕΡΟΥ)⁷
ΕΠΙΤΡ (ΟΠΟΥ) ΧΡ (ΟΝΩΝ)⁸
ΧΡ (ΟΝΩΝ) ΙΝΔ (ΙΚΤΙΩΝΟΣ)⁹

So we read:

1. For the salvation and protection
2. of Theodorus the most glorious and illustrious
3. was erected from the foundations and finished
4. this (holy) house by the zeal

6. Cfr. Gerasa n. 334.
7. Cfr. Nebo, p. 258. QDAP 9 (1942) p. 96.
8. Cfr. Syria, nn. 367-368, p. 291. QDAP 9 (1942) p. 64.
9. Cfr. Gerasa, nn. 275-277. QDAP 9 (1942) 112.72.

5. (of Abraam) presbyter administrator.
The sixth indiction.

The two titles *most glorious and illustrious*¹⁰ in the Byzantine times are used indiscriminately. Hence it is impossible to indicate the exact nature of the civil office of Theodorus, the benefactor of the church. If our reading is correct, no similar examples for a *presbyter administrator* are known.

II. The inscription on the marble balustrade: (Pl. XXX).

The marble balustrade (1,42m by 0,87m) decorated with a cross in its centre, has the carved inscription on the upper moulded side. The stereotyped expressions enable us to read the inscription in its entirety. It is a prayer to God by the benefactor.

After KE, abbreviated (note the line on the two letters), there are four letters missing. In similar inscriptions we have the imperative of the root ΜΙΜΝΗΣΚΩ and we can integrate the last word with (ΤΟΥ ΔΟΥΛΟΥ)¹². So we read:

† Κ Ε [Μ Ν Η Σ] Θ Η Τ Ι
Τ Ω Σ Ω Ε Λ Ε Ε Ι Ι Ω Α Ν Ν Ο Υ
Τ Ο Υ Α Μ Α Ρ Τ Ω Λ Ο Υ
[Τ Ο Υ Δ Ο Υ] Λ Ο Υ C Ο Υ

To be translated: + Lord remember in your mercy John your servant the sinner + .

Pottery and other objects

We have selected some representatives:

1. Cooking pot pl. XXIX,2,1-3; Fig. 4,2.
buff ware, blackened by fire. It has an

open form with two twisted handles put horizontally under the rim. The base is round with *umbelicus*.

2. Cooking pot Fig. 4,1

As the preceding pot, reddish ware.

Parallels:

Siyagha III, p. 57, fig. 4,1.

Dhiban I, Pl. 14,9.

Dhiban II, Fig. 9,9-11; Fig. 12,35-40.

3. Jar Pl. XXIX,2 Fig. 41,3.

Fragments. Reddish ware. Without neck. Two handles.

Parallels:

Siyagha III, 19, Fig. 1,3.

Dhiban II, Fig. 12,54. 46.49.

4. Tile Fig. 4,4.

Fragment, reddish ware.

Parallel:

Siyagha III, p. 132, Fig. 5.

5. Juglet Pl. XXIX,2,9 Fig. II,1 Madaba 292.

Reddish ware. Cylindrical form. Broken neck and handle.

6. Jug Pl. XXIX,2,8 Fig. II,3 Madaba 289.

Reddish ware. Globular body, with a moulding on the neck and on the shoulder. Broken neck. Handle. Plain base with *umbelicus*. Decorated with combed lines.

Parallel:

Siyagha III, p. 93,5.

7. Juglet Pl. XXIX, 1 Fig. 2,2 Madaba 292.

Reddish ware. Globular body, decorated with shallow diagonal lines. High base.

Parallel:

Bethany Pl. 128, a-b.

8. Rim Pl. XXIX, 2, 5.7 Fig. 2,4, a.b.c.

Buff Ware.

10. Cfr. Syria, n. 305, p. 245.

11. Cfr. SEG XX (1964) nn. 378-79. V. CORBO, Ricordi dell'antico cristianesimo nel

paese di Moab in Liber Annus XIV (1964) p. 240.

12. Cfr. Gerasa, nn. 331. 336. 344.

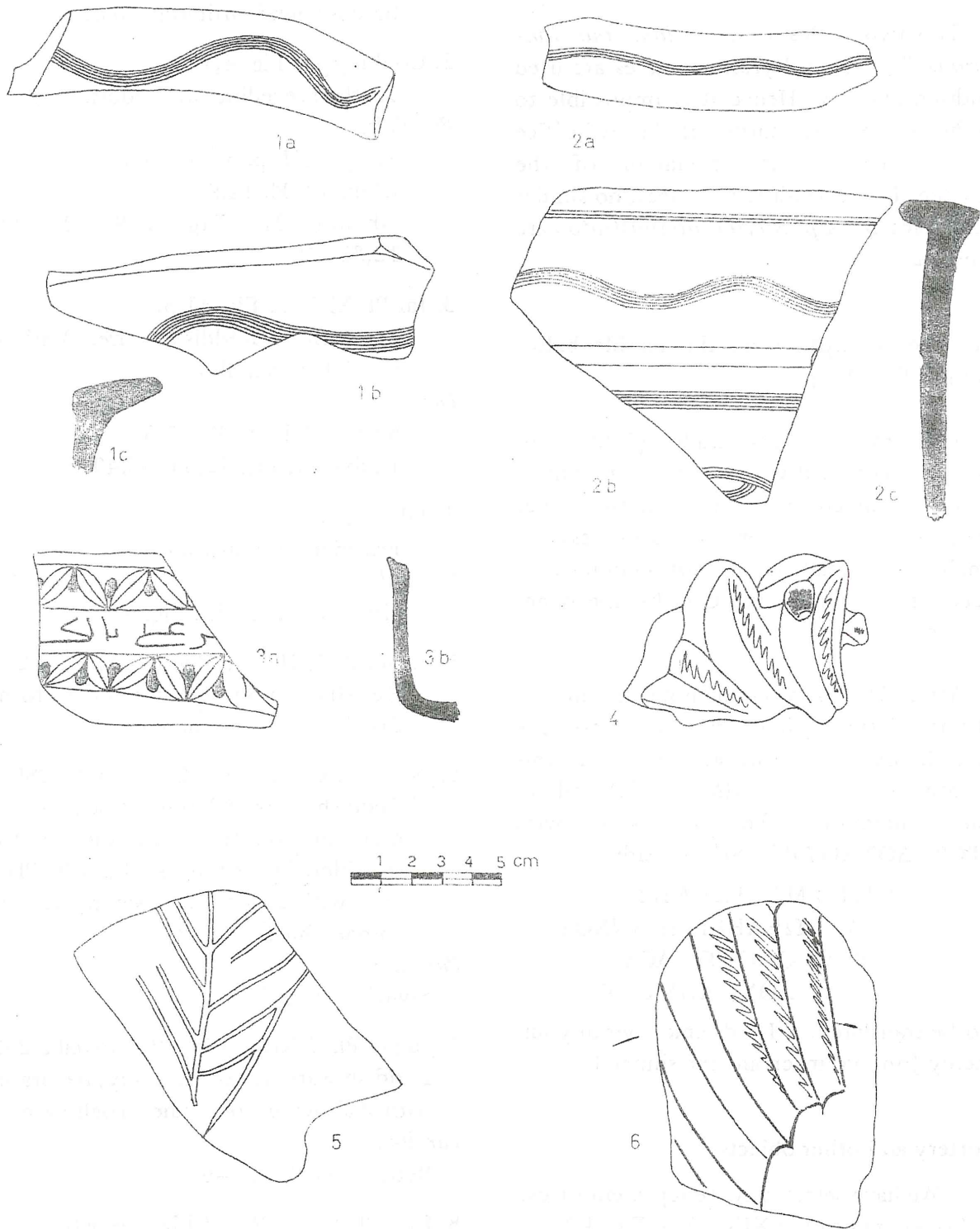


FIG. 3

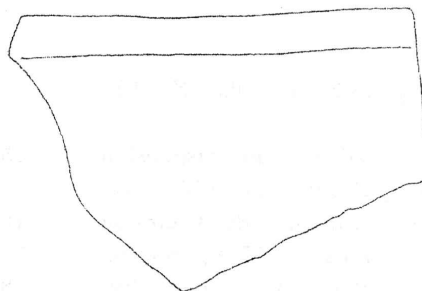
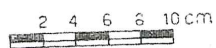
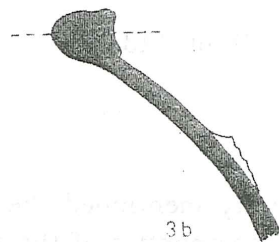
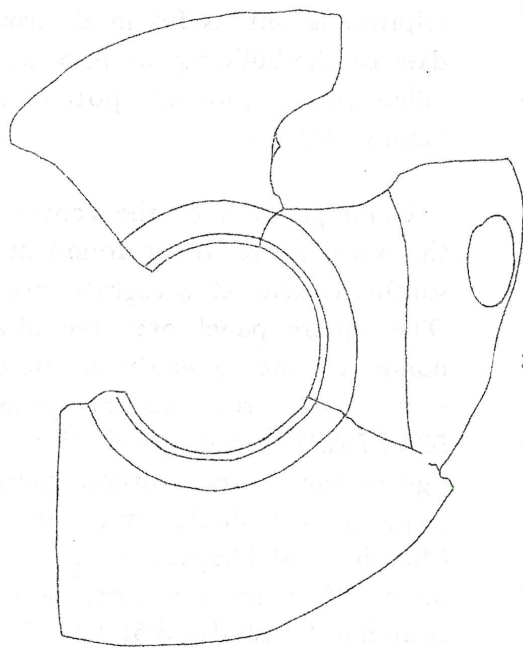
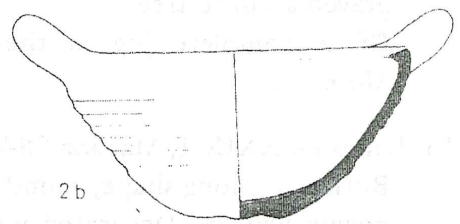
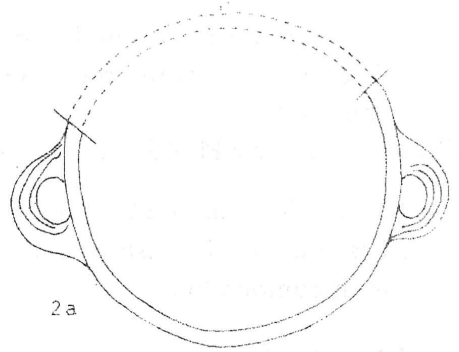
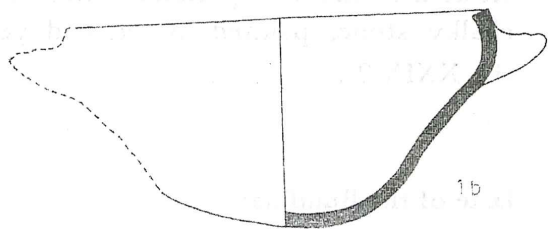
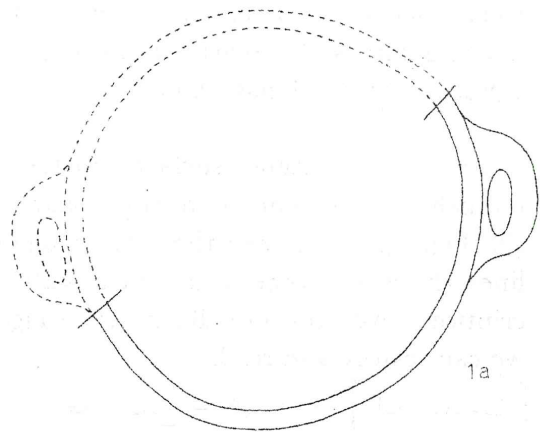


FIG. 4

9. Rims Fig. 2,6 a.b.

Reddish ware. A simple neck with a flat handle from the rim to the shoulder.

Parallel: Bethany Pl. 46, 7298.

11. Basin Fig. 3, a.b.c.; 2 a.b.c.

Fragments. Reddish ware, decorated with combed lines.

12. Fragment Fig. 3,5.

Reddish ware, decorated with an engraved stylized tree.

Cf a complete jug in the Madaba Museum.

13. Lamp Pl. XXIX,1, Madaba 284.

Buff ware, long shape, round opening, nozzle broken. Decorated with ovuli.

14. Lamp Pl. XXIX,1, Madaba 283.

Reddish ware. Long shape; round opening, burnt nozzle.

Decorated with palms and a cross on the base.

Parallel: Siyagha II, pl. 143,10.

Other objects:

We have already mentioned the marble balustrade, the colonnettes of the altar, as well as the bracelets¹³ found with the skeletons in the tomb. Also to be noted are a fragment of a stone capital, probably related to the columns near the fifth pilaster and carved on a hewn nari stone, a cosmic cross (16 cm in diameter) which has still traces of red painting in the grooves.

On the tabula ansate of the mosaic floor were pieces of a metal chain used for hanging lamps.¹⁴ Scattered nearby there were fragments of glass lamps.

From the Arabic surface pottery we publish a fragment of a cup, plain base (Pl Fig. 5,3). Between the two ornamental lines there are some letters of a Kufic inscription. As Antonio Battista¹⁵ suggests, we can restore and read:

[نائب السلطة المظ] فر على بالكر [ك المحروسة]

Related to the same period is a fragment of chalky stone, painted in red and yellow (Pl. XXIX,2).

Date of the Building:

Because the date of the dedicatory inscription is not useful in determining the date of the building, we have to study parallels to the mosaics, pottery and other helpful elements.

Good parallels to the central motif of the mosaic are to be found in the large southern nave at Siyagha's monastery;¹⁶ The square panel over the altar corresponds to the geometrical motif in the church of Procopius at Jerash dated 526-27 A.D.¹⁷; the geometrical floral design of the central southern room (b) corresponds to a similar design in St.-George Church at Mekhayyet,¹⁸ in the Siyagha's basilica,¹⁸ in the area near the synagogue-church in Jerash dated 530-31.¹⁸

13. Cfr. Dhiban II, fig. 28,5. 16. e Pl. XXV,12. 15. 35.

14. A Similar object called triple suspension bracket, has been published by H.W. CATLING, *The Kornos cave: an Early Byzantine site in Cyprus*, in *Levant II* (1975) p. 50, fig. 5,18. Cfr also D.C. Baramki, *An Early Byzantine Synagogue near Tell es-Sultan*,

Jericho, in *QDAP VI* (1938) pp. 73-77, pl. XXII.

15. Cfr. L.A. MYER, *Saracenic Heraldry*, Oxford 1933, p. 72.

16. Cfr. Siyagha II, pl. 97,1.

17. Cfr. Gerasa, pl. LXXXII.

18. Cfr. Nebo, pl. 30,2; Siyagha II, pl. 92; Gerasa, pl. LXV.

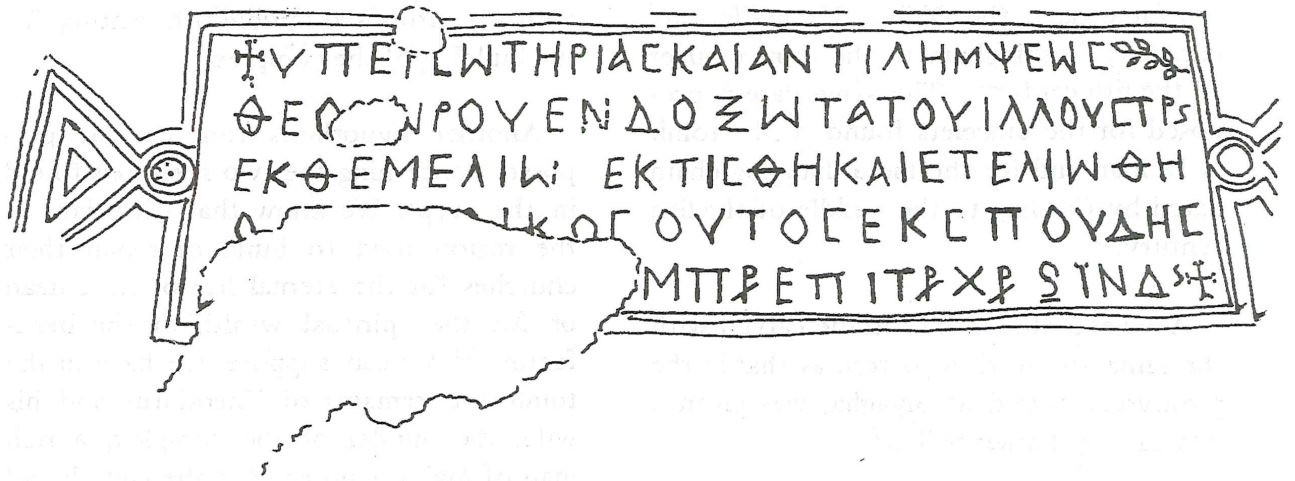


FIG. 5



FIG. 6

The pottery and other objects suggest the same date: the Dhiban II parallels are dated by Tushingam to the third quarter of the 6th century. The same date is proposed for the bracelets found in the tomb at Dhiban and for the metal hanging chain dated by Cattling to the middle of the 6th century.¹⁹

A «Nebo stone» balustrade carved with the same geometrical pattern as that in the presbytery found at Siyagha, was given a late date by Father Saller.²⁰

There is another element which with further discoveries, will be of great help for more dating. During the excavations, between the northern door and the second pilaster from the main door, a skeleton was found facing downwards with its head towards the façade. Some stones had fallen on the skeleton and broken its tibia. This element, together with the metal hanging chain and the broken lamps on the mosaic floor leads one to conclude that the church was destroyed by an earthquake. In an inscription found at Rabbat Moab and published by F. Zayadine,²¹ it is mentioned that a church was repaired «after the earthquake» during the year 597. Earthquakes took place in 588 and 599. Thus we have

here perhaps a date *antequem* which agrees with our proposed middle 6th century for the building of the complex.

Another hypothesis can also be proposed, concerning the two skeletons found in the crypt. We know that Christians in the region used to build or repair their churches for the eternal life of their dead or for the spiritual wealth of the benefactors.²² We can suppose we have in the tomb the remains of Theodorus and his wife, the builder of the complex, a rich man of Ma'in, who erected the church and the three annexed rooms for funerary purposes. Perhaps the building was destroyed by an earthquake. The innocent victim was the man assigned to the church, who was killed by a stone which fell from the roof.

We can add this new element of the history of Ma'in during the Byzantine period, to what Father de Vaux published in the 30ies²³ The funeral complex probably was built around the first half of the 6th century and destroyed by an earthquake. On the ruins a family lived during the Umayyad period.

Michele Piccirillo
and
Mahmud Rusan

19. Cfr. note 14.

20. Cfr. note 3.

21. F. Zayadine, Un séisme à Rabbat Moab (Jordanie) d'après une inscription grecque du VI^e s, in *Berytus XX* (1971) p. 139-141.

22. Cfr. Nebo, cap. IV, . 138-203.

23. R. De vaux, Une mosaïque bysantine à Ma'in (Transjordanie), *RB.* (1938) pp. 227-258; *RB* (1939) p. 78 ss.