

# THE BYZANTINE CHURCH AT DARAT AL - FUNUN

by

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## Explorers

The first to describe and document the church on the eastern stope of Jabal el-Luweibdeh in Amman was Major C. R. Conder who included it in his Survey of Eastern Palestine. Conder called it the Western Chapel, saying that it lay west of Mişdar el-Ma'dhaneh, and was built south of an adjoining cave. Furthermore, he said, "The apse, the window in the south wall, and three pillars of the aisles remain, with four [columns] which belonged to a porch 10 feet wide in the clear." Conder (1889: 56) also described the cave and said that it was probably "sacred as the tomb or cave-dwelling of some saint."

The site was visited in 1905 by M.-R. Savignac and F.-M. Abel (1905: 596-597) who noted a pedestal of red granite which they say was found by a Circassian digging for gold. On it, there is a Greek inscription, which Gatier (1986: 52) read as: "The Council and the People honour Martas, son of Diogenes, gymnasiarch, ... for life, constructor of the Heraklion, councilor and president, as proof of esteem." The mention of a "Heraklion," a sanctuary dedicated to the god Herakles, may be important in our understanding of the remains.

In 1908, Savignac and Abel returned to the site, where they recorded another dedicatory inscription in the area near the altar. This was a Greek inscription of a Christian character on a slab of white marble. In it, two important names are mentioned, that of a 'priest of St. George' who built the church and a Polieuctus who was bishop of Philadelphia, ancient Amman (Abel 1908: 570-573).

Abel's translation reads: "By the willingness of God and the intention of the humble priest of St. George for the good health and

long life of our sovereigns and thanks to his generosity, this temple was built under the Saint Bishop Polieuctus and for the good cure of Talassamachia ... ." A question, first raised by the scholar J. T. Milik (1960: 167-169), is whether the priest mentioned here belongs to this church or to another church. If he was a priest of this church, then the structure was dedicated to St. George.

B. Bagatti visited the site in 1948, accompanied by G. Lankester Harding, who was then Director of Antiquities (Bagatti 1973: 274). He reported that the structure was still intact although the owners had removed the apses. Bagatti published pictures taken that year, one of which shows some of the column drums still in place, and the area transformed into a garden with a Corinthian capital in the middle. The elements at the site which are first mentioned by Bagatti are a bas-relief with a victory, a Roman altar, a cross inscribed in a circle, and a rosette near the entrance. Bagatti says that the altar confirms the presence of a pagan cult at the site preceding the Christian one. Based on the paleography of the Christian inscription which has small letters within the larger ones, and a small circle in the letter N, Bagatti (1973: 276-277) concluded that the inscription with the name of St. George should be dated to the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century. Solely on the basis of the mention of Saint George in the inscription, A. Augustinovic (1972: 43) included the structure among shrines in Jordan dedicated to the Islamic figure, el-Khaḍr.

## The Site

The church is on Jabal el-Luweibdeh at the junction of Nimer ibn 'Adwan Street

and Mallah Street. It lies on a ridge of a steep slope overlooking two valleys, Wadi Şaqra and Mişdar el-Ma'dhaneh (Valley of the Minaret), west of Jabal el-Qal'a. The immediate area rises in two rounded platforms from the hill; these are penetrated by at least four caves and a large water cistern. Three of the caves have the remains of mosaic floors. The church itself lies on the flat platform of the lower terrace and in front of the largest cave.

### Excavations

Under the sponsorship of the Abdul Ha-meed Shoman Foundation and in cooperation with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, excavations at the site were conducted in 1993 under the direction of Pierre M. Bikai of the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR), with the assistance of May Sha'er, Lana Shnoudeh, Khlood Abdoh and Brian Fitzgerald.

### The Church

The church consists of a rectangular hall laid out in an east/west direction, with a semicircular apse to the east (Fig. 1). There is an entrance to the west which is not in the center of the western wall. West of the entrance is a narthex or porch. To the north is a cave and, to the south, a rectangular room which may have led to a second entrance into the church.

The main hall is divided into three parts by two rows of three columns standing on square bases. The columns are of a conglomerate stone and were topped with Corinthian capitals. Both the columns and the capitals were obviously reused from an earlier Roman monument. The hall of the church measures ca. 14.8 m by 12.5 m, while its central part (the nave) is about 6.8 m wide and the two side aisles are about 3 m wide. Normally in such churches the spacing between the columns is equal, but in this case it is not. The first two columns

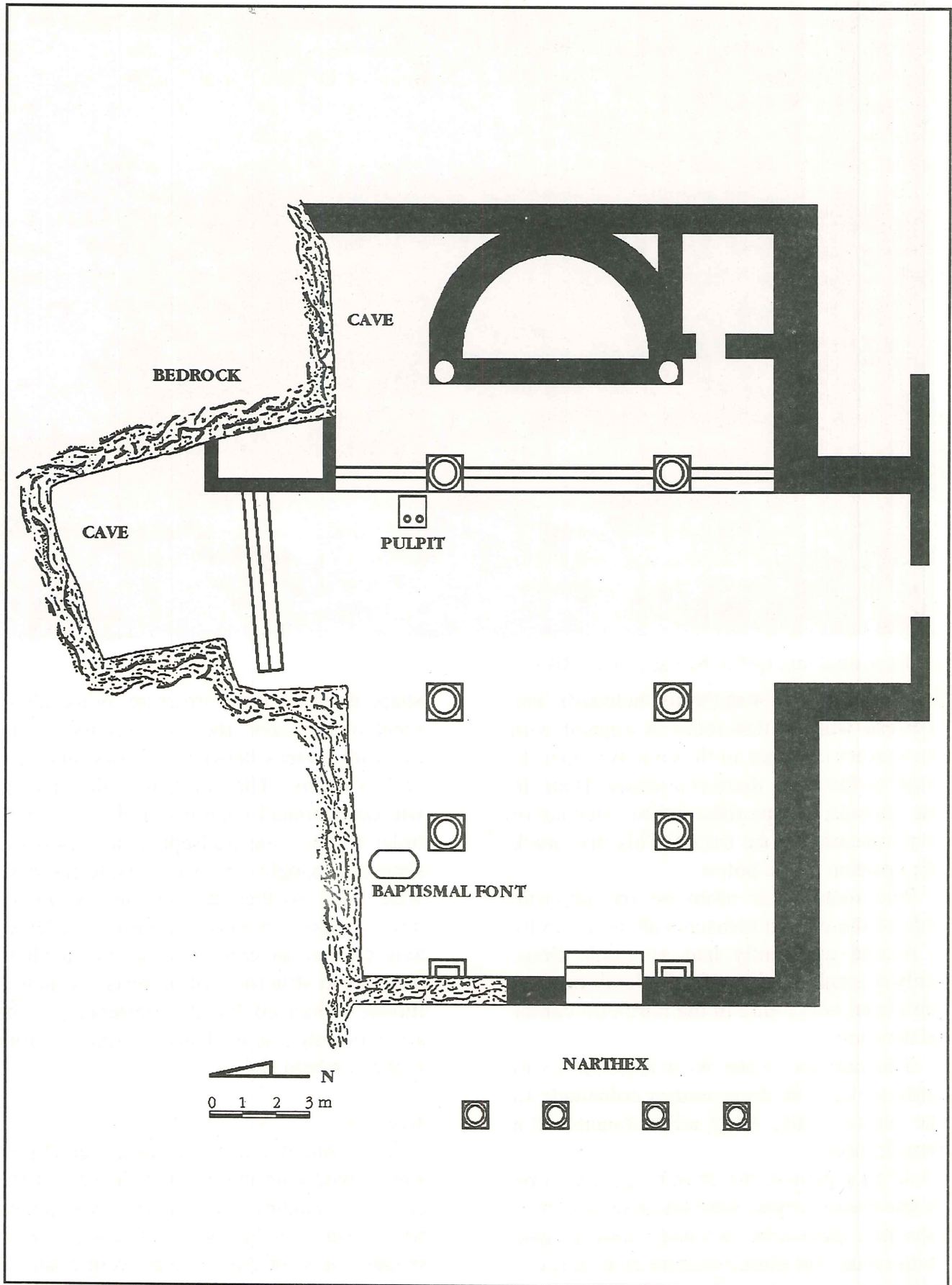
at the east (in front of the cave) are 6.8 m apart while the distance between the columns to the west is 4 m.

The eastern part of the church was separated by a chancel screen running the whole width of the church and attached to the two eastern columns. The chancel, which is about 3.4 m deep, is divided into three sections. The central part has colored marble tiles, while the side ones have the remains of mosaic floors. The semicircular apse has a diameter of about 5.8 m.

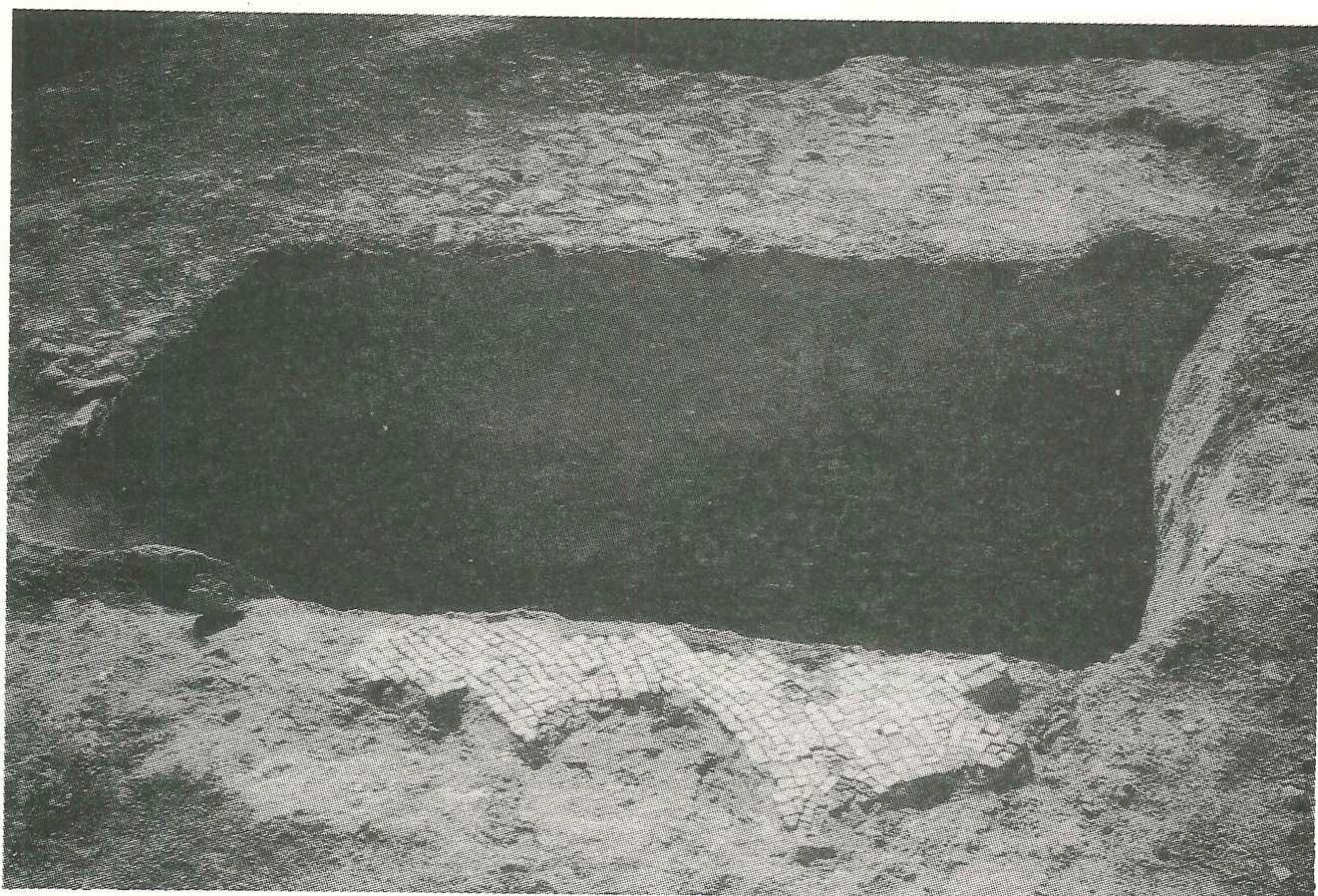
South of the apse is a room which was probably a sacristy. It measures 3 m by 3.3 m. and had a mosaic floor. North of the apse, and at about 4.3 m east of the chancel screen, there is a plastered surface which seems to be covering the wall of another cave which was left unexcavated due to the presence of a modern terrace and staircase.

In the western part of the northern aisle there is a baptismal font (Fig. 2). The location of this font is unique as fonts are normally located either in apsidal spaces or towards the ends of rooms (Ben-Pechat 1989: 170). It consists of an oval cut into the floor and has some plaster remains within. A fragment of mosaic remains just north of it. The font measures 1.5 m by 0.8 m. A similar oval font is found in a church in Kursi (Ben-Pechat 1990: 502) and it is dated to A.D. 585 by an inscription in the mosaic floor.

The cave to the north has four niches, one in its eastern wall, another in the northern one, while the remaining two are in the western wall. The northern niche of this wall is broad, shallow and taller than the others, whereas the southern niche, the largest of the four, has what may be the remains of a sarcophagus. The cave measures about 8 m east/west and 8.7 m north/south. About 2.2 m inside the cave, there are two steps going down to the main part of the cave. Within the cave, there is a room built of rectangularly cut stone blocks and measur-



1. Ground plan (by Samer Shreydeh, Qataiba al-Dasouki and Patricia M. Bikai).



2. Baptismal font (photo by Patricia M. Bikai).

ing about 2 m by 4 m (walls included). The western wall of this room is aligned with the eastern columns in the church proper. In front of the cave, there is a mosaic floor. In the mosaic, a squarish outline, devoid of any tesserae, can be traced. This may mark the position of the pulpit.

The rectangular room on the opposite side of the church measures about 3.7 m by 6 m and apparently had a mosaic floor. Only a small section of this richly-colored pavement was found in the northeast corner of the room.

The narthex to the west is about 13 m wide and 2.8 m deep, with a colonnade to the west. Again, there are remnants of a mosaic floor.

At first glance, the church appears to be of the basilica type with the standard division into nave with two aisles and an apse to the east. On closer examination, however, we see more than a basilica since a cross

shape is given to the structure by the alignment of the cave, the southern room, and the wide spaces between the first and second columns. The intercolumnar spacing was determined by the width of the cave. In order to have the transept as a uniformly-shaped rectangle, the walls inside the cave were built, so that the structure would be more or less symmetrical. This north/south axis creates an emphasis on the northern part of the structure, an emphasis which is further enhanced by the presence of the ambo or pulpit as well as the baptismal font in the northern aisle.

#### *Mosaics*

The church's nave, chancel, and apse were paved with marble, but the rest of the church, including the narthex, was paved with mosaics, only fragments of which now remain. Most of the mosaics were made of large tesserae, mainly in white, with some

being red, yellow, or blue. No shapes could be seen in the mosaic of the sacristy, while those in the chancel area and the northern aisle (in front of the cave and adjacent to the baptismal font) have the form of flowers. The mosaic south of the cave includes a Greek cross in the northwest corner (Fig. 3). In the narthex, the same flower shapes can be found on mosaics near the church entrance and in the northern part of the narthex. In the latter, we also find a border of white, blue, red, and yellow tesserae, with the pieces within this border placed diagonally.

In the southern room of the church, opposite the cave, we find the remains of what was once a colorful mosaic made with small tesserae (Fig. 4). It has a white border and then a sequence of blue, red, yellow and, again, white lines. West of this border are the remnants of acanthus scrolls of yellow,

red, blue, green and white colors against a dark greenish-blue background, within which we find a white cross-shaped flower. The edges of the acanthus leaves have been outlined, and there is an attempt at creating color gradations. Very similar scrolls are found in the Chapel of Suwayfiah. Those scrolls have within them foliate heads and figures of animals and birds (Piccirillo 1993: 264). The Chapel of Khirbet el-Kursi, near Amman, and the Church of St. Kyriakos at el-Quwaysmah also have similar borders. Such motifs are not limited to the area of Amman, but can also be found in Madaba—in the Chapel of the Martyr Theodore (A.D. 562), the Church of el-Khaḍr, and the Church of the Apostles which is dated to A.D. 578 (Piccirillo 1993: 106, 117, 129, 265, 268). The latter is the closest parallel to our mosaic as it has a dark, blackish background with white



3. Mosaic (photo by Nadim Mohssen).



4. Mosaic (photo by Patricia M. Bikai).

cross-shaped flowers. Since the date of that mosaic is known, our fragmentary border can probably also be dated to the late sixth century. This would coincide well with Bagatti's (1973: 276-77) dating of the St. George inscription to the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century. The baptismal font from Kursi, mentioned above, which is similar to the font here is also dated to the end of the sixth century. Thus, the parallels indicate that the church was in use in that period. On the basis of the present evidence, it is impossible to say when it was built.

#### Other Remains

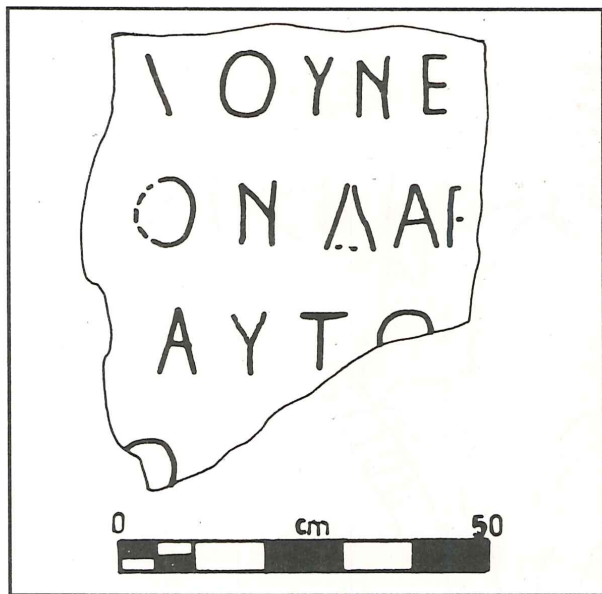
Prior to the construction of the church, the cave may have been the tomb of a revered person or another type of holy place since it was incorporated into the church. The area in front of the cave was also used before the church was built, as in the south-

eastern part of the church, remains of an earlier north/south wall cut into bedrock and having plaster on its eastern face were found. Associated with this wall is a thick plastered surface aligned with it, lying north of the apse, and apparently covering another cave which is at present unexcavated.

#### Inscriptions

The inscription mentioning Herakles is still at the site, but the St. George inscription has disappeared. During the excavations, a Greek inscription on pink limestone was found built into the modern era wall which had been built across the front of the cave (Fig. 5). Although only a few letters can be read, E. Sironen believes it may refer to Trajan, a Roman emperor who reigned A.D. 98-117.

Three inscriptions on basaltic stone were found. Two of them are Safaitic, while the



5. Greek inscription. (drawing by May Sha'er).

third is in an early Arabic script. The first Safaitic inscription was also found built into the modern wall across the cave (Fig. 6). This stone has a drawing of a camel surrounded by Safaitic writing and some symbolic marks. According to David Graf, it reads: *l'bd'l bn hsmn bn slm bn 'my bn h'b'l bn hsm hbkrt*—the she camel (was drawn) by *BD'L*, son of *HSMN*, son of *SLM*, son of *'MY*, son of *H'B'L*, son of *HSM*. Seven parallel lines in the top left corner which also appear as a ladder to the right of the camel are interpreted as representing the seven planets controlling man's destiny (Winnett and Harding 1978: 26). The camel, especially the young she-camel, which is found with many Safaitic inscriptions, played an important role in bedouin life (Winnett and Harding 1978: 22).

The other stone (Fig. 7) depicts a horse-man with a lance and an animal with long horns, possibly an oryx. The drawing is framed by a circular line. At the top left corner are seven lines intersecting the frame and at the bottom left corner are seven other parallel lines with a crossing line passing through them. According to Fawwaz al-Khraysheh, the Safaitic can be transcribed as: *lm'n bn msk h'r* and translated as the

donkey [ass?] belongs to *M'N* the son of *MSK*.

Safaitic script was used by Arab tribesmen who lived in the desert in pre-Islamic times. The script was used from the first century B.C. until at least the third century A.D., but it may have continued in use after that (Winnett 1957: 1-2).

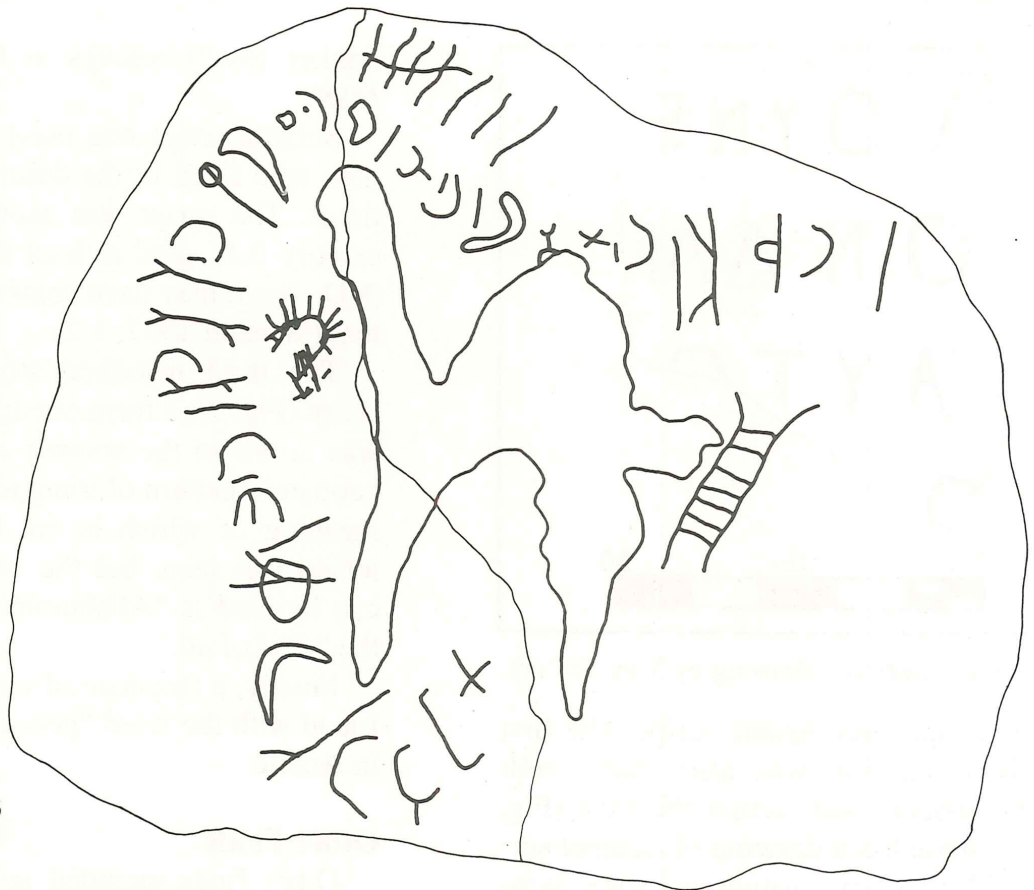
The third inscribed stone is in Kufic script (Fig. 8), a form of early Arabic which was in use in the seventh century. It has a geometric pattern of triangular hatching, the meaning of which is not known. Several letters can be seen, but the only word which can be read is "Allahumme" which means the "God of all."

Finally, a fragment of a marble altar was found with the word "peace" inscribed on it in Arabic.

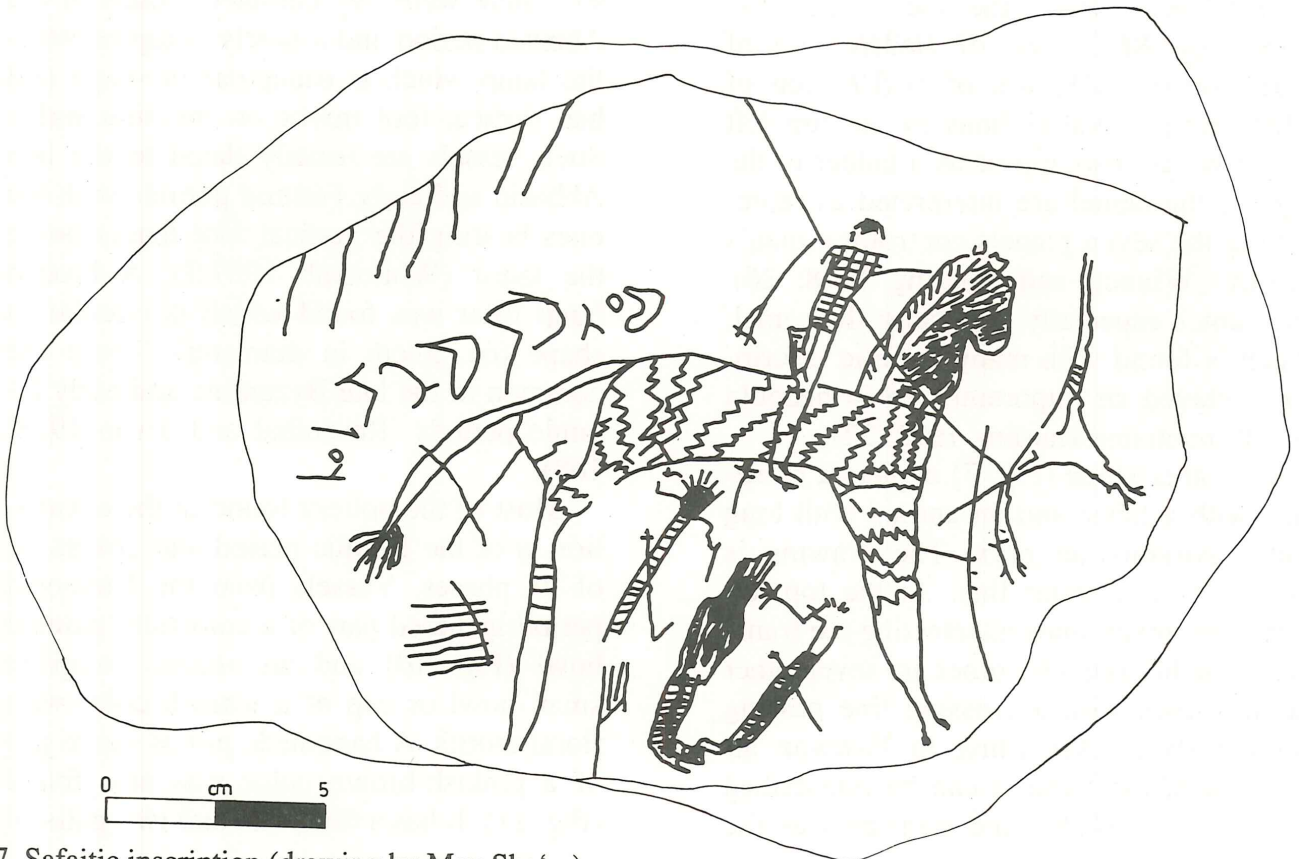
### Other Finds

Other finds included an Arab imitation of a Byzantine coin (Fig. 9). According to Shukri Saħuri, it can be dated to A.D. 647-97. There were two complete lamps of the Abbasid period and a nearly complete steatite lamp which is triangular in shape and has vertical tool marks on the side walls. Such vessels are usually dated to the late Abbasid and early Fatimid periods with the ones bearing the vertical-tool marks being the latest (Whitcomb 1987:7). A bronze lamp filler was found which is circular in shape (ca. 5 cm in diameter). These are common in the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods (Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 168).

Most of the pottery found in the excavation is of the Islamic period and covers all of its phases. Vessels from the Umayyad period included part of a colorfully painted bowl (Fig. 10) and an almost complete small bowl or cup of a whitish color with floral motifs. A handmade pithos (large jar) of a pinkish-brown color was also found (Fig. 11). It has a thick rim and two pairs of



6. Safaitic inscription (drawing by May Sha'er).



7. Safaitic inscription (drawing by May Sha'er).

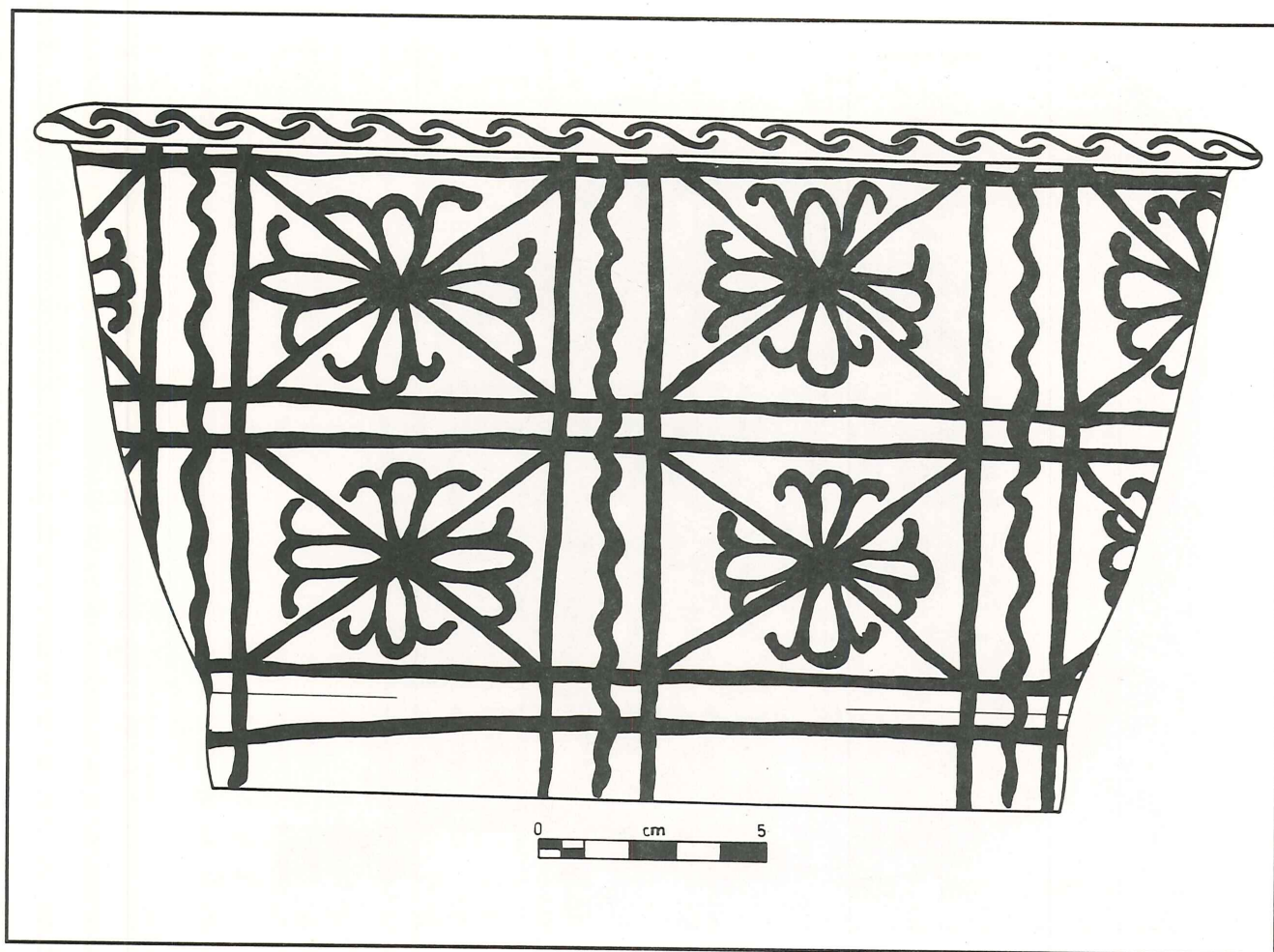




8. Kufic inscription (photo by Sarkis Labejian).



9. Arab imitation of a Byzantine coin dated to A.D. 647-97 (photo by Sarkis Labejian).



10. Umayyad period painted bowl (drawing by May Sha'er.)

handles, with its upper part bearing a combed incised decoration of wavy combing which forms squares. Another pithos has a richer decorative pattern of straight lines, wavy lines and intersecting semi-circles. Such jars date to the Abbasid era (late 10th to 11th century A.D.).

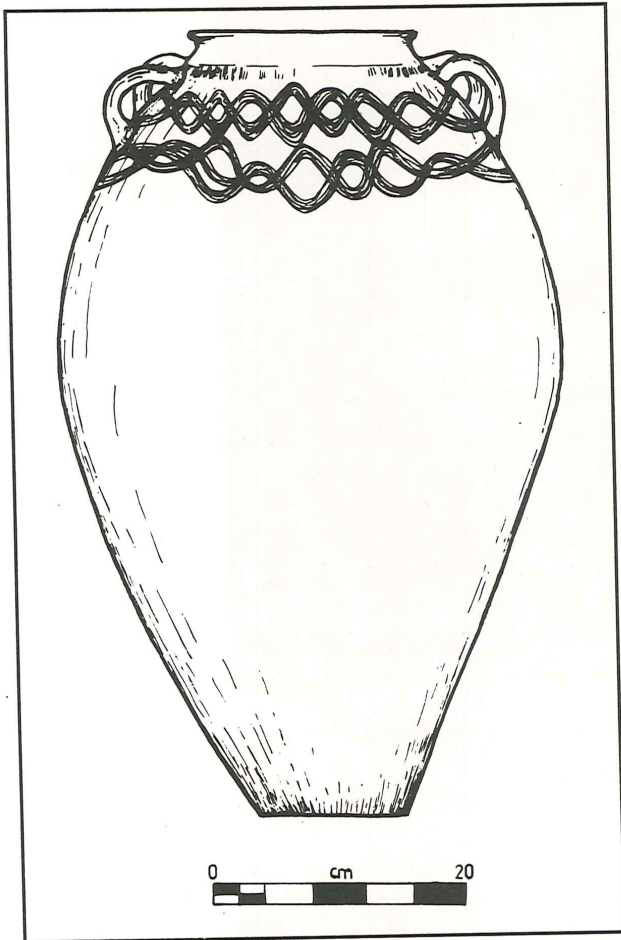
Finally, an 18th century English ink bottle of grey ware and a brown-colored glazed surface was found.

### Interpretation

The inscription mentioning the Roman god Herakles and the second inscription which perhaps refers to the Roman emperor Trajan lead to speculation as to whether an earlier monument, perhaps dedicated to Herakles, existed at or near this site. Byzantine churches were often built above Roman

temples and here there is extensive reuse of Roman architectural elements: the horned altar (Fig. 12), the capitals, the columns, and the carved stone in the western wall of the church.

The relationship between Herakles and St. George, both mentioned on inscriptions found here, is relevant to our structure. Herakles (called Hercules by the Romans), known for strength and courage during his twelve labors, was one of the heroes of classical mythology. St. George is, of course, known for slaying a dragon. Abel (1908: 570) says: "The metamorphosis of Heracles as St. George is easy since the two characters have physical strength as an attribute." We know that there was an important cult of Herakles in ancient Philadelphia/Amman. On Roman coins of the city,



11. Handmade pithos, Absid era (late 10th to 11th century A.D.) (drawing by May Sha'er.)

a chariot with a domed canopy supported by four pillars drawn by four horses, obviously the chariot of a procession connected to the cult of Herakles, was pictured (Spijkerman 1978: 250-251, pl. 55, nos. 21-22). The Roman-era cult of Herakles was an evolution of the cult of the Iron Age Ammonite god Milkom. According to Bowsher (1992: 136), "Milkom/Moloch was worshipped throughout Ammonitis, and a later identification with Hercules is perhaps reflected in the general popularity of the latter throughout the region in the Roman period."

There must have been a major monument dedicated to Herakles in ancient Amman. Where then was that monument? It is usually thought to be the large temple on Jabal el-Qal'a. A recent study of the inscription carved on that temple showed,

however, that it is not at all certain that it was dedicated to Herakles (Kanellopoulos 1994: 48-49, 81-83). On the other hand, it is difficult to see where on Jabal el-Luweibdeh a structure large enough to have been the Temple of Herakles would have been built.

What then of the inscription found in the church? It might be related to another public building dedicated to Herakles, perhaps an earlier or smaller temple which was located at or near this site.

Finally, since there is some evidence that this area may have been used in association with both Herakles and St. George, we should ask whether it continued to be a sacred area after the advent of Islam. While quantities of ceramics which are later than the church were found during the excavations, little architecture was found in association with those materials. What modifications there were, however, and the concentrations of Islamic-era materials were outside of the main building and this may indicate that the structure was still respected, if not still in use.

Augustinovic (1972), discusses the association of el-Khaḍr, the legendary being of Islam, with Mar Elias (St. Elias or Elijah) and with Mar Girios (St. George). He gives a list of churches in the area dedicated to St. George or St. Elijah where the cult of el-Khaḍr was also present. Many of these are associated with caves. The common factor which el-Khaḍr has with St. George is that they both appear as horsemen. There may have been a continuity in cult traditions through the different historical periods—one cult taking the place of another and embodying some of the features of the earlier cult. Although there is presently no evidence for the exact nature of the use of the Jabal el-Luweibdeh structure during the Islamic era, it is possible—on the basis of what happened in other places—that this Christian church, perhaps dedicated to St.



12. Horned altar (photo Suha Shoman).

George and perhaps on or near the site of a cultic place for Herakles, in turn became a memorial of el-Khadr.

### Restoration

Column drums were reset and the single Corinthian capital which was present on the site was placed on the northeast column (Fig. 13). The other capital was obtained from a private collection and was probably originally here or was from the same Roman monument as the other elements used

by the Byzantine builders. The horned altar was found on the upper level of the site and moved to its present location. Parts of the walls have also been rebuilt in areas where only their foundations survived. Fatma Marri, Na'if Zaban and Nabil Zeno assisted with the restoration of the monument and the objects.

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13. View of the church from the west (photo by Suha Shoman).

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