

THE 1998 SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

by

W. Harold Mare

The eleventh season of excavation at Abila of the Decapolis, Quwayliba (Fig.1), was conducted from June 13 to August 1, 1998, by W. Harold Mare, Director of the Abila Archaeological Project and the Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, as principal investigators, under the supervision of Dr Ghazi Bisheh then, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities. The American Staff of 34 persons¹ were accommodated in a government school at Hartha, a town close to Abila. Abila is an ancient Biblical archaeological site with an archaeological history from 3500 BC to A D 1500; it is 1.5 kilometers north-south, and 0.6 km east-west. The Abila 1998 excavation was endorsed and sponsored by the Abila Archaeological Project and Covenant Seminary. The excavation was also sponsored by Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary.

The American staff was assisted in the field by 35 workmen hired to assist in the many labor tasks. The Department of Edu-

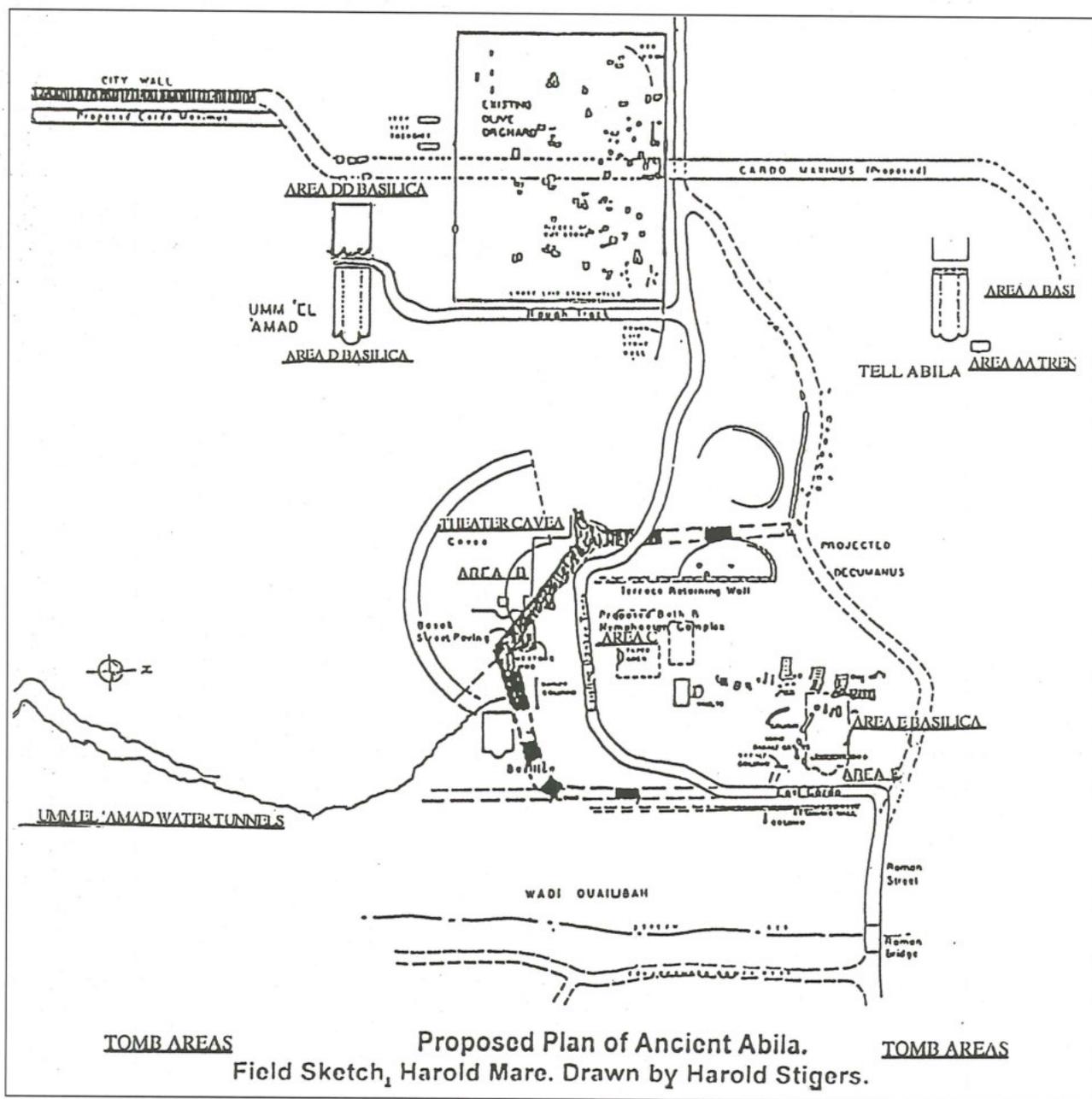
cation and Mrs. Hend Obeidat, Principal of the Girls School in Hartha, graciously allowed our American Staff to use the School, as its headquarters which was supremely adapted to the needs of our Staff.

Objectives

The objectives set forth for the 1998 Season of excavation at Abila of the Decapolis had three major components: 1) to research into the physical materials available at the site of Abila (i.e., ceramic evidence, stratigraphic profile, architectural remains, human skeletal remains, geographical, faunal and floral evidence, numismatic specimens, inscriptional evidence, soil analysis, etc.), which would be of help in understanding the cultural history of Abila and the surrounding area; 2) to perform cultural resource management by conducting salvage archaeology, thus retrieving and preserving as much as possible of the physical remains exposed or disturbed by natural causes and by

1. The American staff included: Dr W. Harold Mare, Director, Dr John R. Lee, St. Johns Fisher College, Dr Clarence Menninga, Calvin College, Dr Robert W. Smith, Florida Christian College, Dr Susan Ellis, Heritage College, Mabton, Washington, Timothy Snow, Cincinnati Bible Seminary, George Van Voorhis, Alton, Illinois, Mary Van Voorhis, Alton, Illinois, C.S. Per Almquist, Covenant Seminary, Adam Chambers, Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary, as Senior Staff members. Staff members and their positions were as follows: Director, W. Harold Mare; Area Supervisors, Susan Ellis, Area AA; George Van Voorhis, Area B; John Lee, Area C; Mary Van Voorhis, Area D; Adam Chambers, Area DD; Clarence Menninga, Area E; Robert Smith, Tomb Area. Square Supervisors included Per Almquist, Thomas Andrea, Kent Arthur, Connie Arthur, Tina Brown, Matthew Coiner, Julia Christie, Maria Deutschmann, Heather Erickson, Mark Hansen, Judith Herzog, Paul Hill, Aaron Hill, Revkah Hill, Dr Dale Jarvis, David Kraus,

Dr Ryan Landvov, Donald Moore, Shannon Scheurer, Laurie Snow, Katherine Sunder, Dean Tlustos, George Vander Welt and Harrietann Weller. The Specialists were: Ceramicists, W. Harold Mare and Susan Ellis; Registrar, Mary Van Voorhis and Elizabeth Mare Assistant, Geoarchaeologist, Clarence Menninga, Photographer, Timothy Snow. The Support Staff included Wajeeh Karasneh, Department of Antiquities representative, George Van Voorhis, Camp Manager, the Cook and his assistant. The American Staff expresses its thanks to Dr Ghazi Bisheh, then Director-General of the Department of Antiquities Mr Wajeeh Karasneh, and all the Department of Antiquities staff for their dedicated efforts given to make the Abila 1998 season a resounding success. We also thank Dr Wesley Ulrich, M.D., and Aileen Coleman, R.N., for all of their help and kindness to the excavation, including the storing of the Abila archaeological equipment at the An-Nour Hospital in al-Mafraq, Jordan.



1. Plan of ancient Abila.

unlawful digging and looting both on the site (as in the churches, bath/nymphaeum, theater *cavea*) and in the necropolis; and 3) to conduct an intensive educational program consisting of semi-weekly instructional sessions in camp on various aspects of the history and archaeology of Jordan and the surrounding regions, and a wide-ranging touring program on week-ends to the important archaeological sites in Jordan. This educational program also included provision

for regular college or graduate school archaeological courses including a practicum in the field for which three to five hours of credit could be earned.

The 1998 Abila excavation accomplished the following results in the following areas of the site.

Area R 5 (W. Harold Mare)

From May 25 to June 6, in the preliminary probe in Area R 5 just east of the

Quwayliba stream, on the lower east side of Wādi Quwayliba, Professor Mare, with the aid of Wajeeh Karasneh, the Department of Antiquities representative and several workmen, completely uncovered the sculpted basalt "conch shell" shaped structure (2.95 m wide, and 2.70 m high, not counting the missing top stones which will complete the arch) located east of the Quwayliba stream which flows north in Wādi Quwayliba from 'Ayn Quwayliba. The surface remains of this structure had been detected in our work during 1997. All of the missing stones of the arch have been recovered in the debris, which, when replaced, will make the structure ca. 3.30 m high. The "conch shell" shaped structure, which faces west, is enclosed on the north and south by two earlier Hellenistic/Roman parallel walls, 3.00 m high, with courses that extend below the foundation level of the structure. Several meters west of the structure are remains of the entrance to the complex with a basalt threshold and door sockets *in situ*. In the beginning of the excavation, it was thought the structure might have been part of a mausoleum, though it does not continue down to a tomb entrance. It was also thought the structure might have been part of a nymphaeum (since there is a large cistern on the nearby hill). The fragments of Byzantine glass lamps that were found among the debris of the structure—like many such fragments which were found in the DD Byzantine church on Umm al-'Amad, and were used in polycandelae to light religious structures—suggest to us that this installation may have been a small enclosed Byzantine religious shrine.

The season of excavation began with an instruction period, followed by major excavation in the following areas: 1) on the north tall, Tall Abila, in Area A and Area AA; 2) on the south tall, Umm al-'Amad in Areas D and DD; 3) in the saddle depression in between the two tall in Areas B, C, and E; 4) and in the tomb area, on the

east side of Abila, along the east slope Wādi Quwayliba.

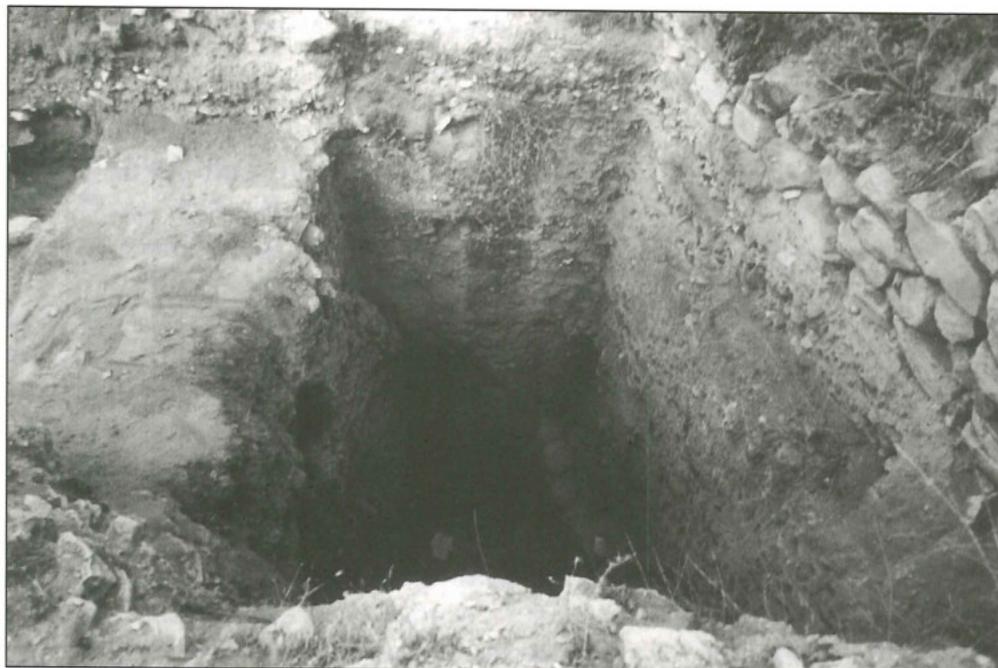
The Excavation on Tall Abila in the Area North of the Basilica and in the Deep Trenches to the Northeast of the Basilica, Area AA (Susan Ellis)

On Tall Abila in Area A, the team probed farther along the north wall of the Area A basilica but did not find the two arms and head of the life-size white marble statue of Artemis, goddess of the hunt which we found in this area in 1994.

In the nearby Area AA, just to the east of the north apse of the Area A basilica, the team continued to find remains of Early Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad walls and loci, including a Middle Bronze mud brick wall. In the deep trench of Area AA 1, an east-west Early Bronze wall was found in addition to two other stone installations located at bedrock 9.50 m below the surface of the soil (Fig. 2). Much of this Middle and Early Bronze material of squares AA 1, 5, and 15 represented domestic habitation; loom weights and part of an Asherah figurine were found. In addition, some Late Bronze and Iron Age pottery, were excavated. East of the main Bronze Age trenches in squares AA 8, 11, 25 and also in 15, the team found continued evidence of Hellenistic/Roman walls, with quantities of Hellenistic and Roman pottery. Farther to the east, the team investigated an area with two arches facing east. There was a secondary wall built against these arches at a later stage. Here, there was evidence of reuse of earlier architectural stone blocks of the Early Byzantine and Roman times, where the pottery found was basically Late Roman.

Tall Umm al-'Amad: Area D Basilica (Mary Van Voorhis)

On Umm al-'Amad, the excavation team



2. Area AA, probe excavated to bedrock,

probed in three squares (D 80A, 79A and 81) located just south of the south wall of the seventh-eighth century Area D basilica. The purpose of the excavation was to uncover any further evidence of auxiliary service structures there. However, all that was found were soil layers and random rock fall. It was concluded that there are no additional service rooms on the south side of the church beyond those service areas located to the west and south of the monumental monolithic columns at the narthex of the church. Numerous tesserae were found in the squares excavated, in addition to pottery dating to Late Roman, as well as Early and Late Byzantine.

In a further effort to conserve and restore some of the Area D basilica one of the Department of Antiquities architects, with the aid of several of the Department's workers, helped reconstruct part of the Area D church and the three apses at the east end of the church by rebuilding two stone courses of the outside walls (Fig. 3: Area D restored Church).

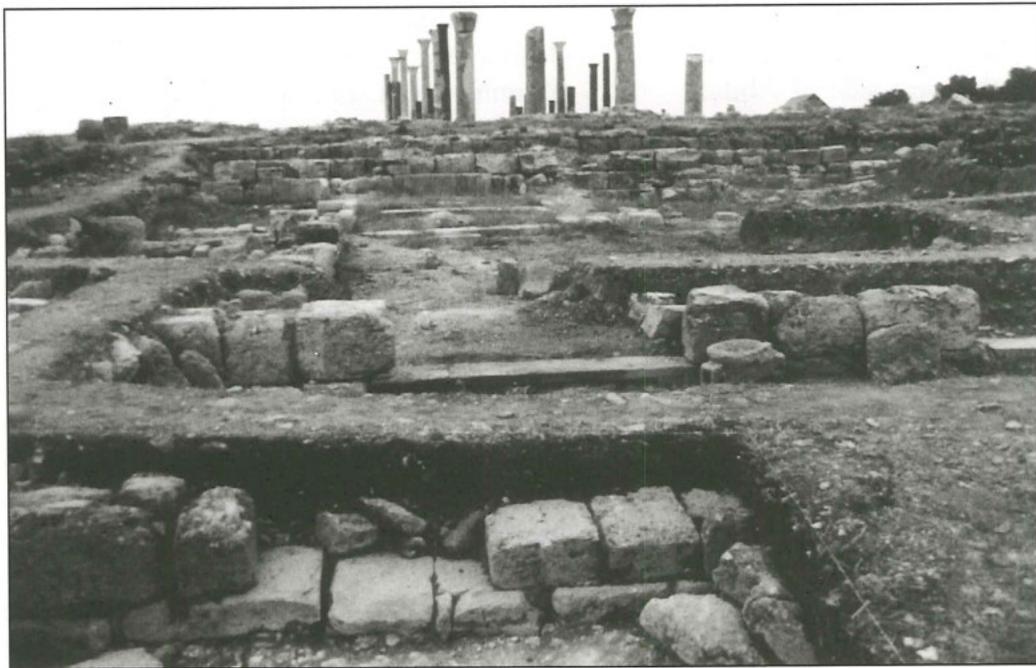
Tall Umm al-'Amad: Area DD Basilica (Adam Chambers)

In the fifth-sixth century Area DD basil-



3. Area D, restored church.

ica, (Fig. 4) located to the west of the seventh-eighth century Area D basilica, the excavation team sought to define further the north and south outer walls of the church, restore the main threshold area of the structure, and to try to find any narthex or atrium in the probe to the west of the main entrance of the church. In the probes at the north and south sides of the church, the team found that the church's south wall had been robbed out, the stones of which were in part evidently reused in the secondary rebuilding during the Umayyad period – there are numerous secondary walls enclosing rooms built within the basilica. A finely sculpted marble lintel also found in this sector was



4. Area DD church (foreground), Area D church (background).

with egg and dart, and, bead and reel decorations, reused in defining a secondary room within the church. In further excavating along the north wall of the basilica, the team again found that the wall had in part been robbed out for secondary building. In one of the excavated squares there, the team found an almost complete base of a sarcophagus (its design pointing to the Roman period) with lime mix residue at its bottom, indicating that it was used to mix lime mortar. In a probe west of the central threshold of the church, the team found no evidence of neither a narthex nor atrium.

The Saddle Depression: Area B, The Theater Cavea (George Van Voorhis)

At the civic center in the saddle depression, the team probed farther into the Area B theater *cavea*, uncovering at the central crest of the *cavea*, and ca. 2.00 m down, a large north-south and ca. 4.00 m wide arch (possibly an Umayyad structure connected with the Umayyad fortress/palace). Other walls or parts of walls running east-west and north-south were also uncovered. In a probe on the crest to the east of this central crest probe, the team discovered a water collection channel, but they were

not able to determine whether the large cavity exit found at the southeast edge of the *cavea* in 1997 continued around its back. In the orchestra and *scenae frons* area of the *cavea*, the deep probes, located to the north of the large mosaic plaza and a secondary east-west column drum wall, a well-constructed Greco/Roman wall was exposed. This wall extends ca. 4.00 m below the upper Byzantine/Islamic levels, down to bedrock, which is at a level of the Roman settling tank vaults of the nearby bath nymphaeum complex to the north. Besides Roman and some Umayyad and Abbasid pottery, the finds in this area included Roman-Byzantine lamps, and a number of coins, including a third century Late Roman Abila bronze coin (obverse, Emperor Elagabalus (AD 218-222); reverse, Abila temple, with inscription). It can be concluded that at this point of the excavation we have evidence which suggests that the Roman city was at a level that is considerably below the present surface of the soil fill accumulated in the civic center over the centuries.

In further excavating the Byzantine street which runs in front of the theater and then turns north just west of the bath/nymphaeum complex, it was found that the street con-

tinues to the foot of the south slope of Tall Abila and then seems to turn west, up the saddle depression to the west side of Abila, a road (the east-west Decumanus) which eventually runs under the vaulted arch which in turn supported the north-south road, the *Cardo Maximus*.

Area C: the Bath/Nymphaeum Complex (John R. Lee)

The ruins of the bath-nymphaeum complex lie to the north of the theater *cavea*. On the east side of the complex, the team excavated farther into the domed structure, which may well be part of the nymphaeum or another one of the structure's settling tanks. In the squares opened to the east of the domed structure, secondary column drum walls, stone floors and plastered surfaces were found, pointing to periods of habitation later than the original bath house. Excavation along the north-south retaining wall, extending north from the domed structure revealed evidence of a pool or cistern area, and a section of well-laid *opus sectile* flooring. Further excavation at these points is needed to show how these features relate to the main bath house. In the central part of

the bath house ruins (Square C 2) the team cleared away debris further exposing two columns which seem to rest on some floor of the structure.

Area E: The Cruciform Byzantine Basilica (Clarence Menninga)

In the ruins of the Area E Byzantine cruciform basilica (Fig. 5), near the Roman bridge, the excavation team further defined the outer north, south and west walls of the church. On the west wall of the church are five entrances to the church for each of the five aisles. These entrances are the main threshold for the nave, two thresholds for the south aisles, and two for the north aisles. The outside north and south thresholds are still blocked by stone and other debris, but excavation at the central and southern thresholds has continued to the floor level sections of the limestone pavement. Excavation has shown that the outside surface of the west wall of the church was revetted with marble facing. Along the south wall of the basilica, west of the side apse, the team found a secondary rebuild structure and a passageway in connection with part of a marble altar post with decorative carved de-



5. Area E, cruciform church.

signs. In the continued probe north of the north wall of the church and west of the side apse, the team found an additional threshold with flanking limestone columns in an auxiliary room complex. The limestone pavement extends north of the threshold ca. 8.00 m, and reaches to an east-west wall which was built on top of the pavement, indicating that the wall is a later construction. From the surface remains, it seems that this east-west wall extends ca 30 m west, to join at right angles with a massive north-south wall (ca. 5 m above the floor level of the church). This wall continues south and seems to be the retaining wall of the massive building (in ruins).

Area H: Tomb Excavations along the East Ledges of Wādī Quwayliba (Robert W. Smith)

In the Area H tomb area lying to the north and east of Tall Abila, along the east slope of Wādī Quwayliba, several installations and several Hellenistic-Roman-Byzantine tomb complexes and shaft graves were excavated. Among these, burial places included the following: a Late Hellenistic four loculi tomb complex (H 64) in which, among other late Hellenistic materials, a three-spouted Late Hellenistic lamp and two terracotta unguentaria were found; another tomb complex with six loculi (H 68), possibly Roman, which had been cleared of artifactual material at an earlier time; three shaft graves, including a Late Roman shaft grave (H 63) in which Late Roman sherds together with cooking pot sherds were found, another Late Roman shaft grave (H 66) which was sealed with stones over the lower part of the shaft (soil found in the grave suggests that the grave had been robbed), and a third Roman shaft grave (H 67), which had been closed with a stone, and evidently robbed in Mamluk times (two green-glazed sherds from a Mamluk bowl were found in the soil fill).

Among the installations, is a water col-

lection installation (H 62, possibly originally intended for grave use), a water reservoir (H 61; it was a plastered unit), and a possible animal water trough cut into the bedrock (H 70). Additionally, there is a large olive press, H 65, and what seems to be a smaller olive press unit (H 69) located only 15 m south of H 65. The subterranean olive press unit, H 65, (Fig. 6) has been cut out of the top ledge bedrock of the eastern bank of Wādī Quwayliba. It is a complex installation located among tomb and grave units, and next to modern olive groves. The underground unit is reached by a series of stairs cut into the bedrock, opening up into a large room, 7 m wide by 5 m deep and 2.50 m high. Along the side to the left of the stairway it contains a large circular cracker stone. A circular rolling stone is placed perpendicularly into the trough of the cracker stone. This circular stone was moved around the cracker stone by human manpower, or possibly by a donkey, in order to crush the whole olives into oily mash. The mash was then collected into woven baskets which were taken to an area in front, and to the right of, the stairs. There, it was placed between two stone slabs (one on the floor of the installation and another on top of the baskets) over which a 7 m long wooden beam, heavily weighted with two limestone blocks (the stones weighing almost 1000 kg) was lowered down to crush the olive mash in the baskets. The olive oil then flowed down through grooves and into a plastered cistern. Here the olive oil, possibly mixed with hot water (a small oven was found at the head of the installation's stairs), was cooled and any floating olives were skimmed off. It was then poured into pottery jars or into plastered cisterns. Along the edge of the installation's central chamber two cisterns were cut into the bedrock and plastered: one holding ca. 2600 liters, and the other, holding ca. 1200 liters. Olive oil stored in such cisterns would have kept at a cool, constant temperature, helpful for the



6. Area H, olive Press.

extended preservation of this useful commodity. Installation H 69, close to H 65, is a small olive press, with a collection pit which would hold only 21 liters.

At present, the Iron and Bronze Age cemetery, which must have been extensive at Abila – evidenced by the large quantities of pottery sherds of these periods has not yet been delimited. From the time we started our work at Abila in 1980, and until now, 94 tombs have been excavated (88 from 1982 through 1997, and 6 in 1998), as well as tomb complexes and graves (representing periods from Middle Bronze through the Late Byzantine). In addition, tomb mapping

was conducted and a number of installations in the tomb area were excavated, including a pottery kiln (H 36, Abila 1992) and the underground olive press complex (H 65) described above.

We look forward to do further excavating, conserving and restoring to Area E cruciform basilica in 1999 and to our twelfth season of the Abila of the Decapolis excavation in 2000.

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