

Umm Qays 1998: The Fourth Century AD Memorial Basilica of Gadara

In the western quarters of the lower city of ancient Gadara (FIG. 1), modern Umm Qays, a large Christian Basilica was erected on top of the Roman underground *mausoleum*¹ which was situated close to the Tibiriade gate.² The Byzantine structure was closely related to a sacred tomb within an apse, which was constructed in front of the older Roman complex. This crypt may be attributed to a local saint, possibly a martyr of the persecution under the reign of Diocletian. Historical sources³ mention that the Gadarene deacon Zachaios was murdered in AD 303 during the *vicennalia* of Diocletian. It is still questionable, however, if the corpse of this saint was transported to the city of Gadara or not. This important church was partly excavated during the season of 1989 under the directorship of Thomas Weber.⁴ The uncovered areas revealed traces of the ground plan including the apse, the altar zone, the colonnade, some parts of the outer walls with the western entrance, and the traces of a narthex and atrium. The proportions of the ground plan and the layout of the mosaic floor led to the conclusion that the church did not belong to the common three aisled type as previously assumed.⁵ It seems more likely that the basilica originally had five aisles, such as famous church buildings in Palestine of the Constantine period. This was assumed by the unusual width of the lateral aisles. A mosaic floor later replaced the original floor of the church and dates to the early sixth century as indicated by the style of its geometrical patterns.⁶

In order to clarify the type of the church and to yield further evidence for its early Byzantine date of construc-

tion, a final season of excavations was conducted by Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz (Germany), again under the directorship of Thomas Weber in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan at Umm Qays from April 18th until May 31st, 1998.⁷ In the course of the excavation the church was completely uncovered, additionally parts of the adjacent area were exposed.

Description of the Complex

The revealed church had the common basilical plan, but it is unique due to its five aisled design (FIG. 2). The ground plan of the church is rectangular, nearly square measuring 20.10m x 21.50m. The inner lateral aisles are slightly narrower than the outer ones. The nave with the apse measure 23.18m in length and 5.85m in width. The inner sided aisles are 3.50m wide but the outer ones have a width of 3.75m. Two rows of seven columns separate the nave from the northern and the southern aisles. The space between the columns (*intercolumniums*) is 2.40 m. Two arcades consisting of seven columns each divided the northern and the southern parts of the church into two lateral aisles. The central nave ends in its eastern side with a semi circular apse, the basement of which is still preserved in the underground crypt. The diameter of the apse is 5.45m and its depth is 3.08m. In front of the apse the church had an altar zone which was accessible by two steps. It was framed by a chancel screen of which the remaining walls were found *in situ*. This consisted of eight chancel screen posts, just three of them were found as construction material for the later alteration of the church.

¹ Complete Documentation concerning the Roman mausoleum and the crypt in Th. Weber, *Gadara - Umm Qes IV* (forthcoming).

² F. S. Meynersen in: *Gadara - Umm Qes IV* and *SHAJ VII*.

³ Eusebius von Cäsarea, *Martyrer der Frühkirche, Dokumente des Eusebius von Cäsarea*. Zusammengestellt und eingeleitet von Wilhelm Schamoni (1964), 138 ff. und An. 3, 186 ff.

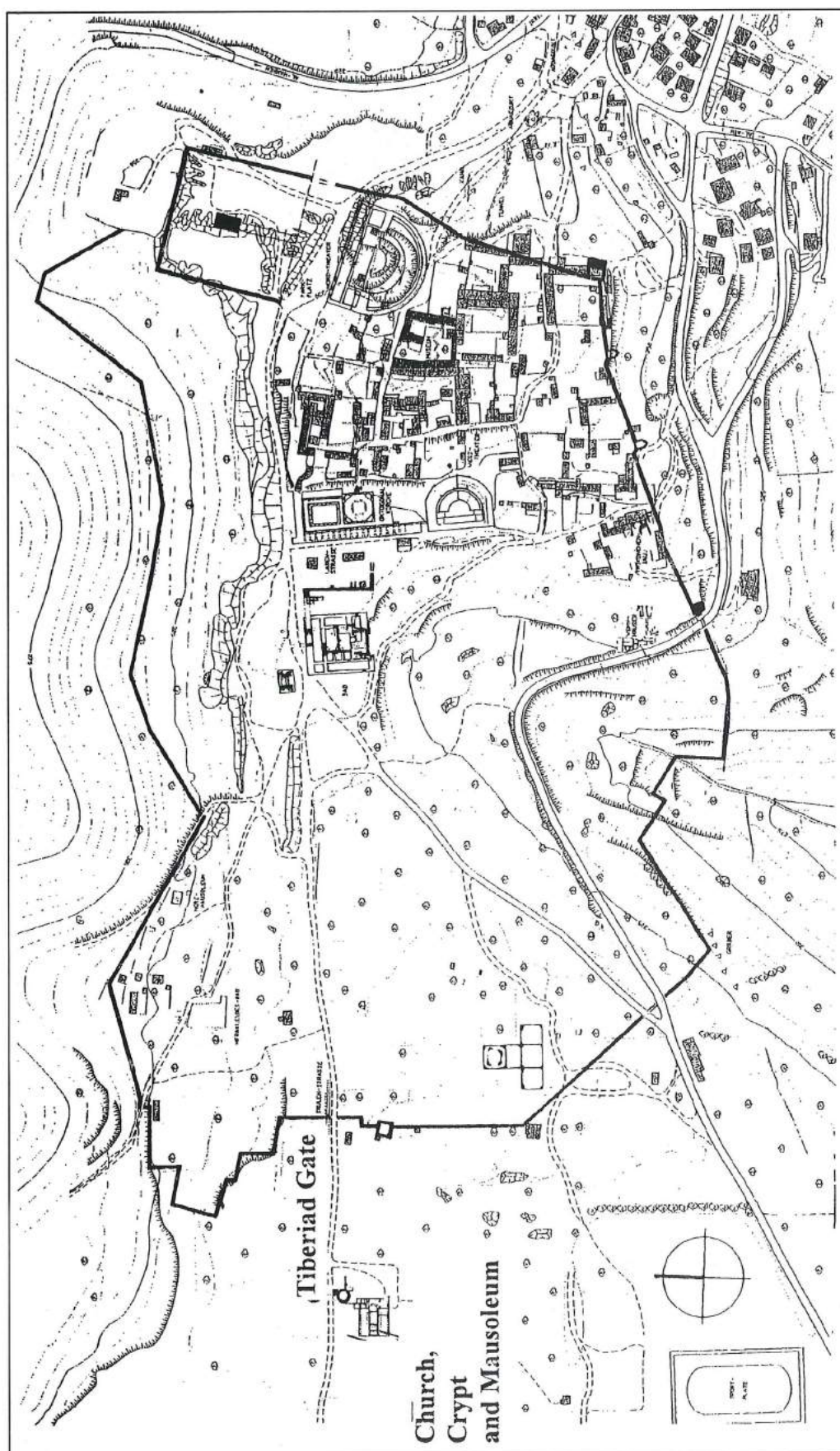
⁴ T. Weber and A. Hoffmann, *ADAJ* 34, 1990, 324 ff.; P. C. Pol, A. Hoffmann and T. Weber, *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1990, 193 ff.

⁵ For the discussion of the type of the church see T. Weber, *Gadara Decapolitana*, Untersuchungen zur Topographie, Geschichte, Archi-

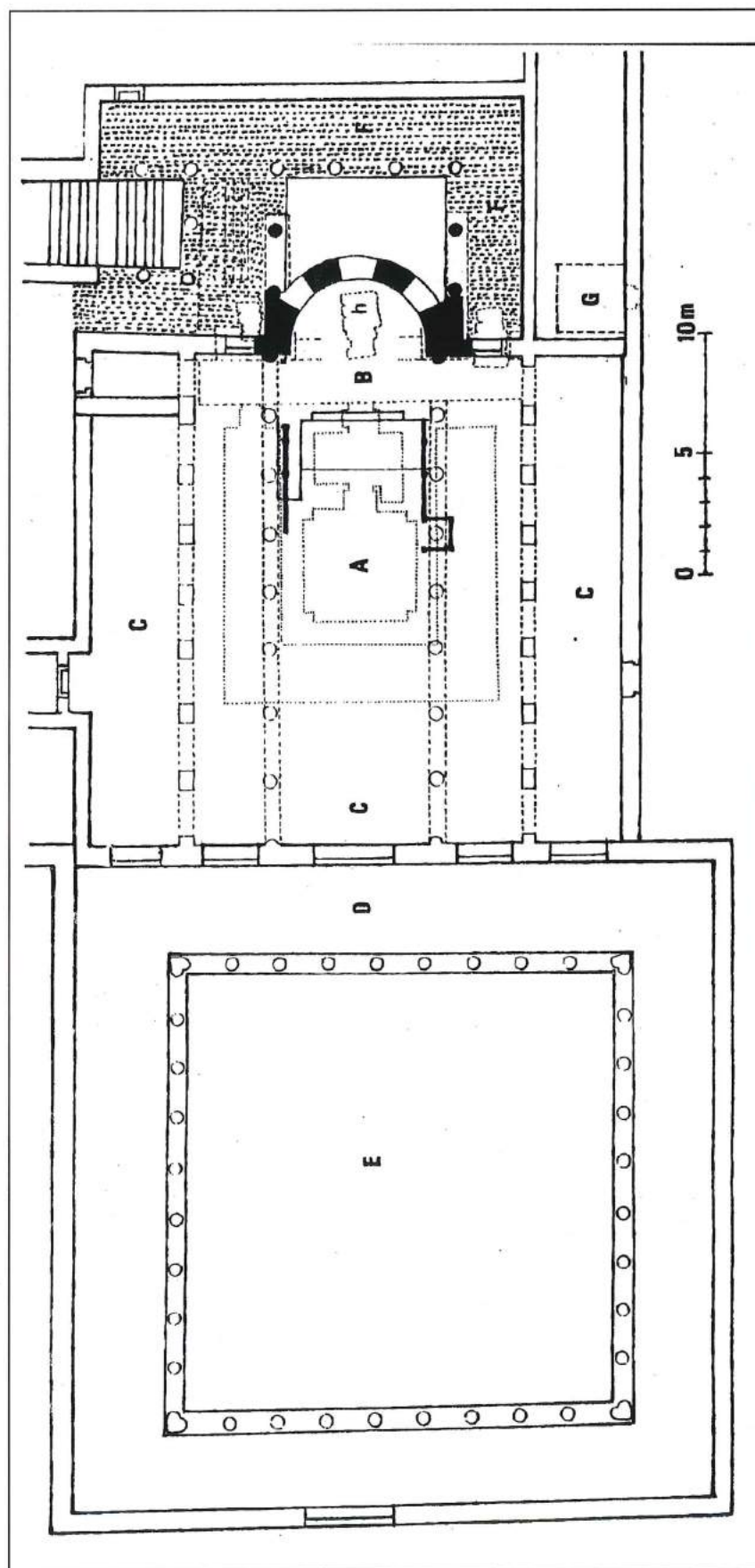
tektur und Bildenden Kunst einer "Polis Hellenis" im Ostjordanland (1995), 354 ff. (forthcoming).

⁶ *Op. cit.*: 5; T. Weber, *Gadara in Byzantinischer Zeit in Akten des XII Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie*, Bonn 22 - 28 September 1991, Teil 2, 1995, 1277.

⁷ T. Weber and U. Hübner, *ADAJ* 42, 1998. Studying this monument constitutes the topic of my doctoral dissertation, supervised by the excavator (T. Weber) in Mainz University - Germany. It will be published in: *Gadara - Umm Qes IV* (forthcoming).



1. Plan of ancient Gadara showing the location of the five aisled basilica of the early fourth century AD.



2. A: Roman mausoleum; B: crypt of the fourth century; C: five aisled basilica; D: the halls of the atrium; E: the open-air courtyard of the atrium; F: balustrade (reconstructed); G: grave room underneath the floor of the church; h: the central grave within the apse of the crypt.

To the northeastern part of the bema, there are a sign that an ambo had originally existed. It is indicated by a rectangular foundation of hewn limestone with a square post in each corner. The excavation shows that the church has a square-shaped atrium flanked by colonnades in the eastern part of the main hall. The western wall of the church extends 3m to the south and turns towards the west. Also, the north end of the wall extends towards the west. The extensions of these walls form the enclosure of a huge atrium which was larger than the basilica itself (26.47m x 26.00m). The eastern aisle of the atrium is 3.88m wide and 3m longer than the width of the main hall of the church. Its floor in front of the main entrance of the church is paved with *opus-sectile* (FIG. 3) consisting of marble and limestone slabs, mainly 20 x 20cm, and other parts are paved with rectangular slabs of basalt. The western foundation of the stylobate of the atrium was uncovered at a distance of 3.80m from the western wall. During the last two days of the season, the work took place in the southeastern corner of the complex. In the opened sounding, remains of a chapel, that was possibly used as a *Baptisterium*, was found. This was clearly shown by an apsidial structure in the western side. Furthermore, a fragment of a basin of clay was found within this room during the 1989 season of excavations. The main room of the church can be entered through five doorways from its eastern side, two in the northern wall and one in the southern wall. This is shown by the pivot sockets that are still visible in the thresholds or the pedestal stones. Two other entrances are found in the eastern wall of the church. The two doors are located on both sides of the apse. They open towards a balustrade (FIG. 2;



3. Opus-sectile tiling in front of the main entrance.

F), which once rested on two columns but today entirely vanished. This construction allowed the visitor to go around sacred space and to look down to the sacred grave through rectangular openings in the lower part of the apse.

The Mosaic Floor

The floor of the church is paved with colored mosaic of the sixth century AD, which had been badly damaged in later times. Repairs are clearly shown by larger tesserae and marble fragments. This mosaic floor is divided into three main fields, separated by two main panels. The main field covered the central nave of the basilica and overlapped both inner aisles. It is decorated with imbrication (scale pattern) with a flower in the middle of each motive. This main field is surrounded by a band of lotus flowers. The two panels which separate both lateral fields are 80cm wide, and they are decorated with a series of flora and fauna motives. Three figures of birds can still be seen in the southern panel (FIG. 4). The two outer fields of mosaic covered the outer aisles of the church. The northern one is decorated with rhomboid vignettes framed by a cable pattern which is connected to each other by symmetrical knots (FIG. 5). At the center of each vignette, a single geometrical floral and faunal motive is represented. The southern field is decorated with interlacing circles combined with a net of crosses, each consisting of small leaves. A circle with a cross is found in the middle of the grid. The only remaining part of an inscription is found in the area of the fourth intercolumnium of the north colonnade. In this area, there is an inscription enclosed in octagonal fields, a kind of *Tabula Ansata*, but



4. Figure of a bird decorating the southern panel.



5. Mosaic decoration of the northern panel.

badly damaged. One word from this inscription remains, which is read to be "*prospora*" that indicates a dedication to the basilica. This inscribed mosaic was removed in order to be exhibited at the Umm Qays Museum, and to dig underneath of it, hoping to find the earliest floor of the complex. Underneath the mosaic, slabs of limestone were found. They belong to the floor of earliest constructional phase of the church (fourth century AD, FIG. 6). In the 1998 season of excavation, we also clarified that some parts of the inner walls were originally decorated with inscribed glass mosaic (FIG. 7). More than 300 frag-



7. Glass mosaic originally decorating the inner walls.

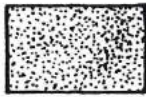
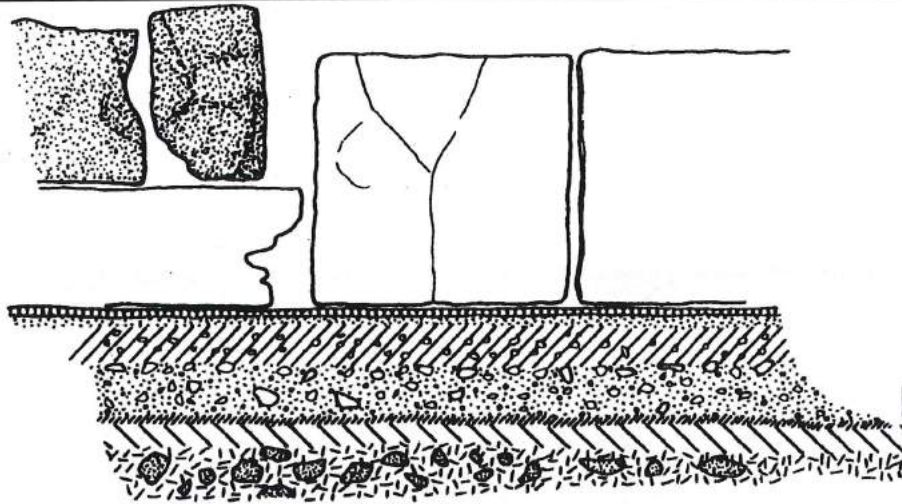
ments of them were found in a debris pit at the southern area, outside the basilica. They were studied by experts in the university of Trier in Germany, with the hope of achieving further epigraphically information about the history of the church. However, the result of investigation unfortunately brought no further information.

The Construction Material

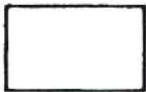
Even though most of the architectural elements of the church had been quarried away, excavated materials allow to identify them. The outer wall of the church was built of local basalt. Limestones were exclusively used in the foundation. The bases of the columns are Attic-Ionic in shape and were made of white marble, three of which are *in situ* and some others were found in secondary use. The column shafts used in the main central nave are made out of imported gray granite. A complete drum (4.20m) and other fragments were found on the floor of the church. The columns were crowned by Corinthian capitals of white marble. The atrium had colonnaded halls of basalt columns crowned by Ionic basalt capitals. This can be clearly attested by the quantity of the drums and capitals founded around the area of the basilica. The chancel screen posts were also made of marble (FIG. 8) showing carefully sculptured sides. Also,



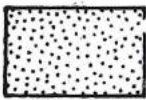
8. Marble chancel screen posts.



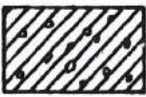
Stones of basalt: reused in the later buildings on the floor of the church.



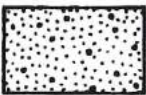
Chalky stones.



first layer of the mosaic foundation consists of mortar.



Second layer of the mosaic foundation consists of mortar mixed with small stones.



Third layer of the mosaic foundation consists of chalky stones and mortar.



The floor level of the oldest floor of the church (early 4th century AD), it was covered with laps of chalky stones.



First layer of the oldest floor foundation.



Second layer of the oldest floor foundation.



Mosaic (floor level of the 6th century AD).

6. The construction of the floors of the church: The mosaic floor level of the sixth century AD; the level of the stone slabs of the first half of the fourth century AD.

the panels of the chancel screen were made of marble. Their decoration consists of cross motives (FIG. 9). Some pieces of liturgical furniture, possibly from a lid of a reliquary made of marble were found in a late pavement (FIG. 10). It has a flat bowl in its center. The great amount of collected slabs of marble gives an impression that the walls were partially covered by *intrasia*. Traces of them were found still *in situ*, fixed on the western wall.



9. Marble piece from the chancel screen panel.



10. Marble piece, possibly from a lid.

The church was roofed with a wooden gable covered with roof tiles. A large number of tile fragments were collected during the excavations.

Conclusion

The excavation of the basilica at Umm Qays adds new important information concerning the cultural, social and religious history of Jordan in the early Christian period. Furthermore, it fills a gap in clearing aspects of the continuity of settlement of the land in the mentioned period. It shows that the area was not only a small scattered settlement, but also an important one in terms of economic aspects. This is clearly attested by the magnificence of the architectural features of the basilica, and by special production of elaborating materials for a newly built structure of the church. Examples are the ionic capitals and the sculptural material, that are dated to the fourth century AD.⁸

The work has revealed that Gadara was not only an administrative center, but a focus of pilgrims too. This was indicated, as previously shown, by studying the Roman underground mausoleum and the Byzantine crypt, and by the continuity of the rituals in the Islamic period with the worship of the Muslim saint called Abū an-Naml⁹ in the northern part of the church. In the last season of excavation, we were also able to reconstruct the arrangements of the pilgrimages through the complex of entrances and subways that allowed the visitor to go around the sacred grave within the apse of the underground crypt.

Furthermore, the excavation shows that the church was precisely planned. For instance, the architect paid his attention to the proportions of the underground complex and put the foundations of the church rightly on the solid walls of it.

As already mentioned above, the memorial basilica of Umm Qays should be regarded as one of the most interesting existing churches ever excavated in Jordan. This is because of the scarcity of its five aisled-plan,¹⁰ and the impressive and elaborate use of precious materials for the interior decoration. Also, the combination with a crypt makes it unique in the area. A remarkable feature of the Umm Qays basilica is the fact that the Roman *Mausoleum* occupies the central part of the Christian building. The pagan funeral monument was obviously the target of the Christian pilgrims cult. For this reason we could not exclude the possibility that the five-aisled Basilica was erected for the commemoration of the miracle of the Gadarene swine as reported in the New Testament episode, especially Matthew 8, 28.

The lack of inscriptions and the absence of historical

⁸ The Ionic capitals that found in the area of the basilica are similar to those found in north Syria, parallel to this type see J. Dentzer-Feydey, *Les chapiteaux ioniques de Syrie méridionale* in: *Syria* LXVII, 1990, 143 ff.

⁹ B. Mershen, in S. Kerner (ed.), *The Near East in Antiquity II*

(1991), 135 ff.

¹⁰ Only one church excavated at the site of Abila (Quwailiba) shows the same type of plan. For further information see H. Mare, *ADAJ* 38, 1994, 395 ff., *ADAJ* 40, 1996, 259 ff.; *ADAJ* 41, 1997, 306 ff.

documents do not help to identify the dedication with certainty and to determine the exact date of erection. Additionally, the stratification of the layers that covered the monument has been badly destroyed. This is caused by war actions in 1967 and bulldozing in the recent times. Nevertheless, the main phases of use might be distinguished as follows:

First Phase. The five-aisled basilica possibly dates to the early fourth century AD at the same time as the building of the underground crypt. This is clearly shown by the architectural integration of the two buildings. They share the same apse, and the extension of the south wall of the church to the east direction goes together with the south wall of the crypt showing the same technique. The history of the church buildings shows that the five-aisled type was common in Palestine and in the other parts of the Byzantine Empire during the Constantine period.¹¹ The Nativity in Bethlehem¹² and the Sepulcher church in Jerusalem¹³ in Palestine are the examples attesting this hypothesis. Other five-aisled basilicas in the region like the cathedral of Tyros¹⁴ in Lebanon and the church of Johannes¹⁵ in Damascus were built in the first half of the fourth century AD as well. In case the church was built in the early fourth century AD, it was probably renovated during the time of Justinian similar to other churches in Palestine and other provinces of the Byzantine Empire, for instance, the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

During the last season of excavation we further uncovered the oldest floor under the sixth century mosaic (FIG. 6). This was attested by revealing a part of stone pavement and the foundation of this pavement in different sounding pits. This level more likely belongs to the time when the crypt was built adjacent to the Roman hypogeum, at the same time the whole underground complex was covered by the large basilica.

Second Phase. In the early sixth century, the church witnessed new renovations in its main room when the mosaic floor was added to embellish the church interior. The geometrical motives of the mosaic like the lotus frame and the imprecation¹⁶ were common in this period in the east Mediterranean area. Additionally, the staircase leading to the underground complex was closed and altered by a new

one which is existing until today. The old staircase leading down to the sacred area was inside the main room of the church, definitely in the eastern side of the northern lateral aisles (FIG. 1).

Third Phase. After a big destruction, possibly during the Persian occupation at the first half of the seventh century or by the effect of the AD 749-50 earthquake, the church was reduced in size. To date this event is still to be studied. But the archaeological material implies a date to a period ranging from the sixth century to the Abbasid period. This means that the church was still in use during the Umayyad period and even to the Abbasid. This reduction in size is attested by secondary walls that were built on the mosaic floor of the church. A small part was reconstructed in the area of the central nave and separating the eastern part of the southern aisles by a wall to maintain the process of pilgrimage. This small church could be entered through two main doors. The main doorway lies in the middle of the northern exterior wall. The second door lies in the middle of the western wall. It seems that during the time of the second church, the southern part of the original church had been used as a courtyard.

Fourth Phase. The last phase of the church history was attested by converting the small one in a mosque. The eastern wall of the sanctuary was blocked with an additional wall, and in the middle of the south wall of the last church a small niche (*mihrāb*) was constructed with a projection on the outer wall. By this construction, a rectangular room with a niche looking towards south (*Qiblah*) resulted. A date of this mosque is implied by the great amount of collected pottery shards dating to the Ayyubid-Mamluk period. It suggests that this mosque may have served the ritual Islamic activities related to the grave of Abū an-Naml. Additionally it was located on the center of the Ayyubid-Mamluk settlement at that time. Within the inner room of the church, domestic houses were built in this period.

Acknowledgments

Studying this newly excavated church is the topic of my doctoral dissertation supervised by Dr. Thomas Weber at Mainz University-Germany. I would like to express my thanks to him and to the members of the excavations.

¹¹ J. W. Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine* (1941) 9 ff.; J. Wilkinson, *Constantinian Churches in Palestine* in: Yoram Tsafrir (ed.), *Ancient Churches Revealed* (1993), 23 ff.

¹² J. W. Crowfoot, *Early Churches in Palestine* (1941) 22 ff.; A. Ovadia, *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land* (1970) 33 ff.

¹³ A. Ovadia, *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land* (1970) 75 ff.; C. Coüasnon, O. P. *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem* (1974); J. Patrich, *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the light of Excavations and Restoration* in: Y. Tsafrir (ed.) *Ancient Churches Revealed* (1993), 101 ff. Complete Bibliography see: K. Bieberstein and H. Bloedhorn, Jerusalem: Band

2 (1994), 189 ff.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccles* X, 4, 37 ff.; C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture*, 61 ff.; J. Wilkinson, *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 32/4, 1988, 553 ff.

¹⁵ K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (1932-1940), *The Great Mosque of Damascus*; H. Stierlin, *Islam, frühe Bauwerk von Bagdad bis Córdoba* (1996) 52 ff.

¹⁶ For the type of these patterns see: V. Tzaferis, *Excavations of Kursi - Gergesa* in: *Atiqot English Series*, Vol. XVI (1983), 23 ff. The patterns which appear in the Church are found at many churches in Jordan, see M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (1993), for instance see in the same book Jerash 257 ff. and Madaba 49 ff.