

## New Archaeological Discoveries in the Basilica of the Memorial of Moses, Mount Nebo

### Introduction

The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, in the Roman province of *Arabia*, in the territory of modern Jordan, is a classical example of a monastic complex related to the shrine of a biblical figure. In this site the devotees used to worship the memory of the place in which, according to Biblical tradition, the “Prophet Moses” died after having seen the Promised Land (Sir. 45:1). The word *Ṣiyāgha*, used to call the western spur of Mount Nebo, means in Aramaic “monastery, community of monks” (Saller 1941: 115-117). This name is indeed related to the ruins of a large Byzantine monastery (almost 6640 sq.) established in the fifth century AD. and articulated in several rooms surrounding the central basilica (FIG. 1). In addition to the main coenobium, a colony of ascetic monks have dwelled in the caves of the mountain located in the surrounding valleys (Hamarneh 2014). Although most of these hermitages were beyond the boundary of the monastery, the abbot of *Ṣiyāgha* had jurisdiction over them (Hamarneh 2012: 279). The life of the monastic community continued also during the Islamic rule, most

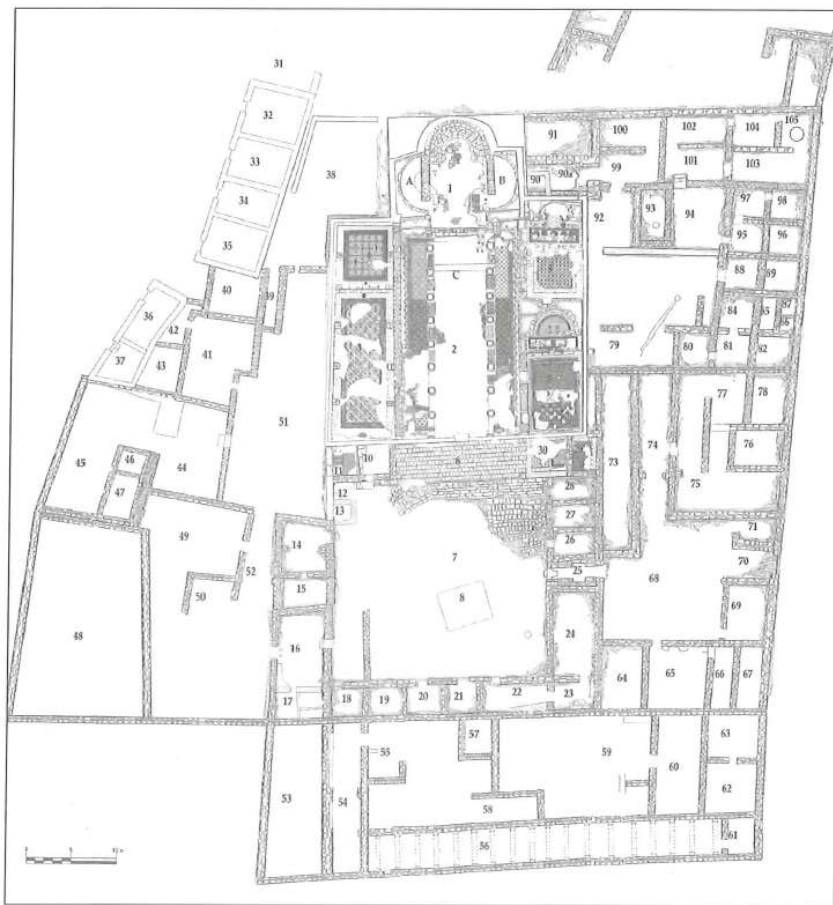
probably up to the end of the ninth century.

After having acquired the site thanks to the concern of the Emir Abdallah Ibn al-Husayn I, the Custody of the Holy Land began the first archaeological expeditions on July 14/ 1933 under the direction of Fr. Sylvester Saller (Saller 1941: 17). The excavations then continued with Fr. Virgilio Corbo (1963), Fr. Michele Piccirillo (1976) and Carmelo Pappalardo (2008)<sup>1</sup>. Since 2012, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, under the direction of Fr. Eugenio Alliata assisted by the author, have conducted some archaeological investigations in connection with the re-roofing of the ruins of the church. The geological instability of the mountain led indeed to replace the old shelter with a new one (Marino 2004: 47-64).

The aim of this article is to provide a general presentation of the excavations conducted between 2012 and 2014, with a focus on the most important discoveries and their interpretation. Due to the limited space given for this paper, the analytic study of the archaeological record will be published in a forthcoming monograph of the author (Bianchi dissertation forthcoming).

1. For the history of research, see Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 13-52.

Moreover see the article by Franco Sciorilli in this volume.



1. Plan of the monastic complex of the Memorial of Moses (after Marino 2004: 96).

### The Excavation

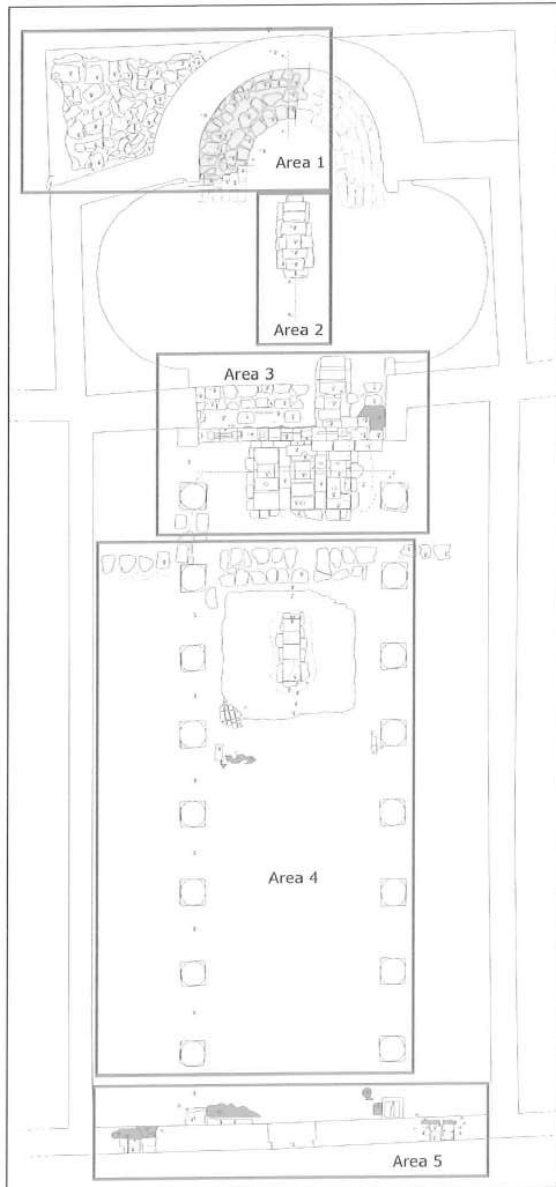
The surveys were conducted in five areas of the basilica which were never excavated by Saller, Corbo and Piccirillo (Saller 1941; Corbo 1970; Piccirillo and Alliata 1998). The fieldwork was addressed particularly to the following areas: the section under the *synthronon* in the apse; the centre of the presbytery; the entrance of the *trichora* cell; the main nave and the northern area between the columns, and finally in the area beneath the walls of the façade (FIG. 2).

Within the above mentioned sectors, important discoveries were detected under the *synthronon* (FIGS. 3, 4). In order to preserve the stability of the clergy's sitting, Corbo avoided the demolition of the structure, but he recorded one layer of black soil with Roman

pottery in the cross section (Corbo 1970: 273-281). After removing the upper rows of the northern half of the *synthronon*, a layer full of the so-called *Red-Painted Ware* dated to the late Umayyad period was identified (FIG. 5). In the same context, the recovery of many organic finds, such as pieces of coals, plant seeds, animal bones with butcher marks have provided a valuable evidence to define the diet of the monastic sanctuary. Furthermore, many fragments of fine-grained white Parian marble decorated with stylized vine scroll and lily leaves were recovered. Two of them, probably used for the balustrade of the ambo, bear some engraved Greek letters filled with a dark mixture containing traces of gold leaf<sup>2</sup>. Finally, at the bottom of the layer, a base of a column made of the local bituminous schist

2. The two marble fragments recovered in the excavation combine with other pieces found by Saller. On this topic, see Acconci 1998:

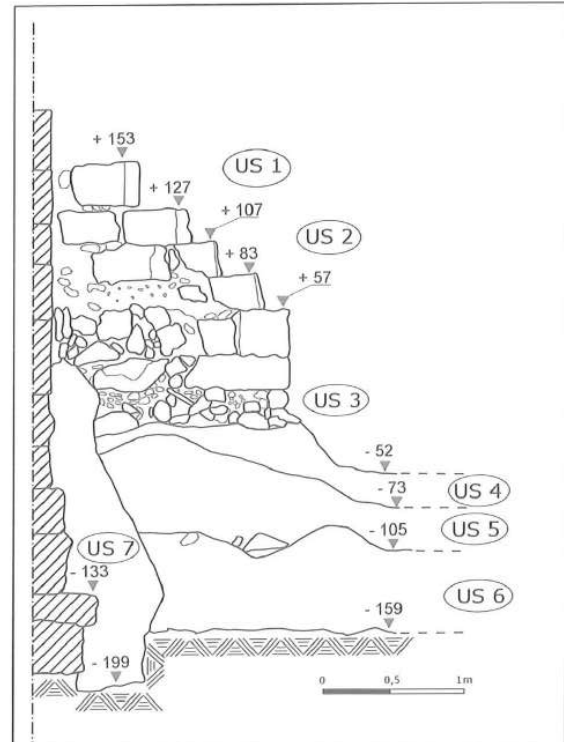
525-527, n. 150; Di Segni 1998: 435, n. 17 For the new epigraphic data, see Bianchi (forthcoming).



2. The areas of the basilica excavated from June 2012 to September 2014(drawing by the author).

(called in Arabic *ḥajar “neby mûsa”*) was found. Furthermore, few coins discovered in the layers, were analyzed by Bruno Callegher<sup>3</sup>. These numismatic records show an octagonal copper flan, dating back to the Umayyad or Abbasid period and three coins dated between 425 and 435 AD. found in the lower layer of the *synthronon* (US3) (FIG. 3).

After the complete demolition of the stairs,



3. Cross Section of the *synthronon* excavation (drawing by the author).



4. Orthophoto of the *synthronon* excavation (drawing by the author).

three underground layers were identified. The upper US4, with yellowish soil, held sherds of byzantine pottery and one coin of Valentinian II (383-392 AD). The layer US5, the same outlined by Corbo, was the richest archaeologically. Many pottery sherds dating back to the late fifth and early sixth century, colored *tessarae*, small fragments of plaster, glassy fragments and seeds were found. The oldest pottery sherds are

3. All the coins mentioned in this article were studied by Bruno Cal-

legher. On this topic, see Callegher (forthcoming).



5. Pottery sherds recovered in the upper layers of the *Synthronon* excavation (photo by the author).



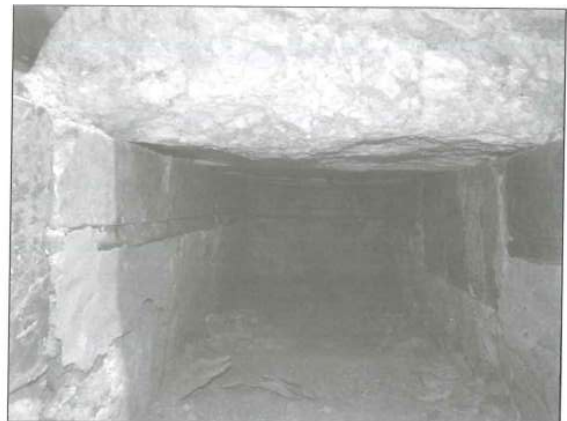
6. The tomb at the moment of the discovery, still covered by stones (photo by the author).



7. Areal view of the squared bedrock with the tomb (photo by the author).

dated back to the fourth century AD. and they came out in the lowest layer US6. Moreover, the cross section of the excavation showed the fill of the cut carried out after the rebuilding of the apse (US7) (FIG. 3). The pottery sherds found inside this layer were heterogeneous, both morphologically and chronologically, and they dated to a chronological range between the fifth and seventh century AD. These elements suggest that the rebuilding of the foundations of the apse might have took place at the end of the sixth century, while the restoration of the upper part of the of *synthronon* might be assigned to the end of the Umayyad period. Pottery from the same period was also found in the external counter, at the level of the last two *synthronon* rows.

At this point it is important to examine the excavation of the nave. The removal of the modern concrete floor allowed the identification of the preparatory layer of the oldest mosaic of the nave. This layer, which ended directly over the bedrock of the mountain, showed many production scraps of *tesserae* and four coins. Among the latter, the earliest was dated to the time of Arcadio/Honorius/Theodosius (406-408 AD) and another, more eroded, could be dated to the reign of Theodosius II (408-423 AD). Under this layer and along the central axis of the nave, five stones covered a grave place (FIG. 6). The burial was set at the centre of a squared shape portion of the bedrock, exactly on the highest



8. The inner view of tomb at the moment of the discovery (photo by the author).

peak of the spur of Şiyāgha (FIG. 7). The interior of the tomb was completely empty without any organic remains or burial goods (FIG. 8). These elements demonstrate that the burial was closed immediately after its construction. The structure was built with a lower row of local stone covered with red plaster and architectural reused fragments of alabaster marble, while on the bottom, five pinkish local stones were laid (FIG. 9). At the southwest corner of the tomb a layer with a molded fragment in alabaster and some pottery sherds dated back to first two centuries of Christian Era have been found.

During the excavation a review of the inner masonry of the western façade of the basilica was carried out. After removing the concrete floor, two red marks, painted on the masonry in the center of the north and south aisles, were found. In addition, two portions of mosaic with white *tasserae* at the floor level were recognized.

Due to a partial modern reconstruction of the western façade by Corbo, the two central sections of the wall were demolished. This allowed to identify the ancient access thresholds to the aisles; both the facilities had a water drainage channel and the recesses for the door.

**Interpretation of the Excavation**

*The Construction of the First Basilica*

The analysis of the last archaeological data and the review of the previous interpretations

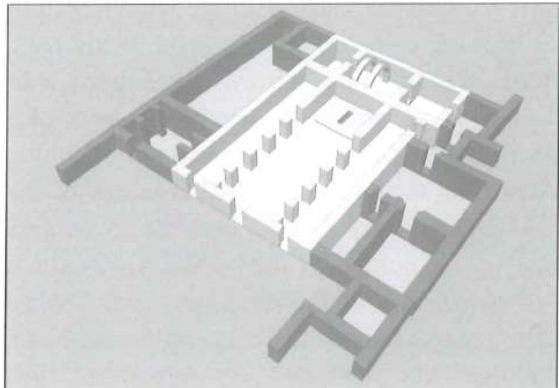
support a new hypothesis about the oldest worship building arose on Mount Nebo. The first crucial issue is related to the understanding of the space in front of the tri-conch presbytery. According to Saller’s suggestions, this cell was the oldest shrine erected on the site and the area in front of it was an open courtyard with a mosaic floor (Saller 1941: 23-44). However, the excavation conducted by Corbo and later by Piccirillo and Alliata have determined that some walls of the church were built before the *thricora* cell (Alliata and Bianchi 1998: 151-154). In addition, the shape of the area in front of the cell, surrounded by regular masonry and paved with mosaics, seemed not to characterize an outdoor courtyard.

Considering all the architectural evidence, it is thus possible to assume that the first church probably showed a rectangular basilical plane divided into three naves by two series of pillars (FIG. 10). Many parallels in Transjordan support this hypothesis (Michel 2001: 18-33).

The perimetral masonries related to this phase are located on the northern and western sides of the church, under the walls of the main nave which are visible today. The north wall is thus connected perpendicularly to the eastern wall and continues on the south side with the façade characterized by three doors. As aforementioned, the small portions of the mosaic floor found in the nave do not indicate epigraphically when they were laid. However,



9. Particular of the reused marbles of the empty tomb (photo by the author).



10. 3D reconstruction of the first architectural phase of the basilica (second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century AD) (drawing by the author).

the pottery sherds and coins recovered in the preparatory layer of this mosaic provide a *terminus post quem* between the 408 and the 423 AD which suggest that the mosaic floor, and so the first church, could be dated to the second half of the fifth century AD.

The excavation of the three rooms behind the east wall of the church allowed to recover many pottery sherds of the early Byzantine period and one coin dated back between 383 and 425 AD. This data suggest that this sector was built after the second half of the fifth century AD, most probably at the time of the first architectural phase of the basilica. The three tombs located in the central room were covered with a white mosaic floor, which is of the same type and at the level to those found by Saller and Corbo in the northern and southern rooms (Alliata - Bianchi 1998: 187, nn. 43,50,51; Saller 1941: 50; Corbo 1970: 278). It is noteworthy to mention that the quality of the mosaic of the southern room, decorated with a cross in black and white cubes, well agrees with this archaeological record (Piccirillo 1998: 268). The central room would probably be covered with an arched roof: two blocks of the arches foundations have been identified in the excavation.

Similarly, the empty tomb was probably built in this first phase because it was found sealed by the preparatory layer of the nave mosaic. In addition, looking at the topography of this burial place, it is possible to observe how the tomb is located on the higher portion of bedrock compared to the level of the nave floor. Moreover, the grave is surrounded with a shallow cut, which suggest the presence of a frontal step and two lateral walls in antiquity. According to the architectural typology of the “*sanctuaire carré*”<sup>4</sup>, it is possible to assume that square portion of the bedroom with tomb was actually under the presbytery of the oldest church provided with two lateral *pastophoria*. Another key element in support of this

hypothesis is given by the written sources. A reference in the *Life of Peter the Iberian*, wrote by John Rufus, recalls the presence of a special altar above the grave in the memory of the “Prophet Moses” (Peter the Iberian 2008: 177-179).

The origin of the alabaster marbles, reused in the tomb, remains an open question at this state of research. The three angular bases with fine moulding, thin slabs and three fragments of frame were probably part of the external or interior façade of a small building. If we assume a specific production related to the first memorial on Mount Nebo, the marbles might have adorned the oldest cenotaph built in the memory of Moses. In connection with this hypothesis, it is crucial to mention the description of the pulpit saw by Egeria, who visited Nebo around 384 AD.

«*We arrived, then, at the summit of the mountain, where there is now a church of no great size, on the very top of mount Nebo. Inside the church, in the place where the pulpit is, I saw a little raised place, containing about as much space as tombs usually contain*»<sup>5</sup>.

According to the textual source, the sentence *a church of no great size (ecclesia non grandis)* may properly suggest a modest building. Concerning to the location of the burial of the Prophet, the monks showed to Egeria a generic point inside the church, without providing more detailed information (*Itinerarium Egeriae*, XII, 3). Unfortunately, at this stage of the study, no stratigraphic evidence dates back to the time of Egeria. The oldest structures discovered in the site were indeed built not prior to 408/423 AD, with a gap of more than thirty years after Egeria’s visit. However, the topography of the squared area around the empty tomb might suggest that the *pulpitus* described by the pilgrim was located in this place.

It is worth to stress that no violation has occurred previously in the grave. Although

4. The architectural typology of the *sanctuaire carré* was widespread in the Christian East between the middle of the fifth and the

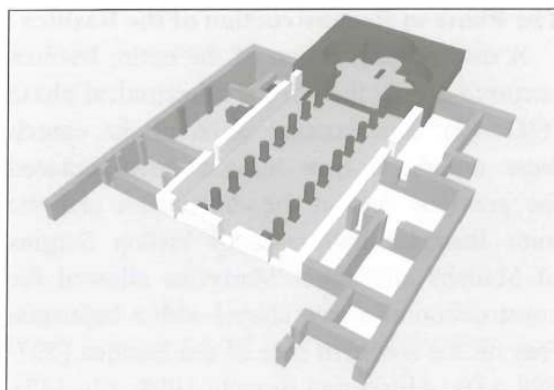
early seventh century AD. On this topic, see Weber 2012: 207-254.  
5. *Itinerarium Egeriae*, XII,1.

the absence of human bones could suggest a later removal, the shallow type of the tomb with no traces of liquid decomposition or soil, contrast with this hypothesis. This evidence may support the identification of the tomb as a cenotaph, probably built by Christian monks. Therefore, through the creation of this memory, the Christian devotees could go on a pilgrimage to a specific site related to the worship of the prophet Moses but without any tangible remains. In addition, the detailed description of John Rufus, who mentions the oral tradition related to a vision of the prophet by a local shepherd, adds a bold rhetorical exercise to support the precise identification of the worshipped tomb (Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2006: 64-65; Satran 1995: 97-105). This evidence confirms that the cenotaph on Mount Nebo was a Christian prerogative since both the Torah and the rabbinic tradition considered unknown the burial place of Moses (Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky 2006: 62-81; Tromp 1993: 115-123; Manns 1998: 65-69).

In this perspective, the monastic shrine of the memorial of Moses is part of a network of Jordanian *coenobia* associated with the worship of the biblical figure<sup>6</sup> (Hamarneh 2012: 277-279).

#### *The Phase of Partial Reconstruction with the Addition of the Tri-Conch*

During the second architectural phase the church underwent a radical transformation (FIG. 11). Firstly, a new mosaic floor in the nave replaced the previous one, probably because of the replacement of pillars with columns resting on independent foundations. The mosaic portions and the sherds of pottery recovered at the base of the columns confirm clearly this hypothesis. Furthermore, the cenotaph was completely obliterated; the three rooms behind the chancel were demolished to lengthen the three aisles at the end of which a new tri-apsidal presbytery was added. The slight divergence of



11. 3D reconstruction of the second architectural phase of the basilica (end of 5<sup>th</sup> - beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) (drawing by the author).

the tri-conch presbytery with the masonry of the three apses, which rely upon the foundations of the nave, suggest indeed a later construction. The choice to build a tri-conch presbytery is related probably with the funerary function of this architecture, as the parallels with the Egyptian churches may suggest (Grossmann 1999: 216-236; Grossman 2007: 103-136).

The pottery and coins recovered in the excavation of the presbytery date its construction to the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century AD, probably at the time of abbot Elijah and the bishop Elijah of Madaba. The mosaic floor, which seals the two graves located under the presbytery and leans on the first row of the *synthronon*, confirms this chronological range. Moreover, according to Piccirillo the iconography of this mosaic demonstrates that it was laid before the flowering of the Justinian mosaic school of Madaba. (Piccirillo 1998: 270-272; Piccirillo 2000: 139-190).

Finally, a new *diakonikon* with a baptismal font was erected on the northern side of the aisle, one-meter lower than the nave (Alliata and Bianchi 1998: 168-171). The floor was covered with an exquisite mosaic, which was funded in 530 AD by three *σχολαστικοί* (lawyers), members of important families of the imperial administration (Piccirillo 1998: 273-287).

6. A deeper analysis of this issue is part of the unpublished doctoral

dissertation of the author. See Bianchi (forthcoming).

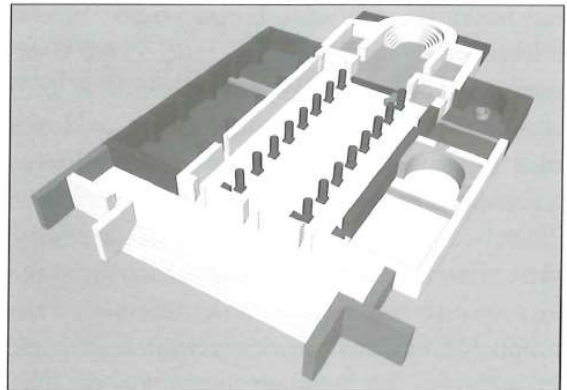
### The Phase of Reconstruction of the Basilica

A new reconstruction of the entire basilica occurred during the third architectural phase (FIG. 12). The external walls of the church were rebuilt, a new mosaic floor replaced the previous one in the *diakonikon* and the joint financial patronage of bishop Sergius of Madaba and abbot Martyrios allowed the construction of a new chapel with a baptismal font on the southern side of the basilica (597-598 AD) (Alliata and Bianchi 1998: 176-177). Chronologically, these architectural activities are dated back to late sixth century AD due to the mosaic Greek inscriptions and to the pottery sherds recovered under the preparation layer of the pavement (Piccirillo 1998: 296-300).

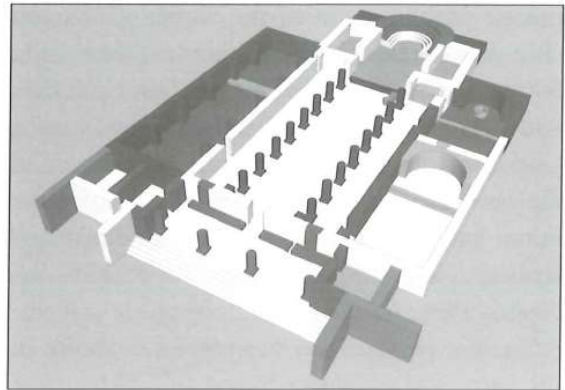
At the same time, the external wall of presbytery were rebuilt. The heterogeneity of the stone row of the apse and the archaeological records from the deep foundation cut show that a complete reconstruction occurred indeed at the end of the sixth century<sup>7</sup>. Finally, in the first decade of the seventh century, the bishop Leontius of Madaba and abbots Martyrios and Theodoros promoted the construction of a new chapel on the southern side of the church for the worship of the Virgin Mary (Theotokos) (Alliata and Bianchi 1998: 178-179; Piccirillo 300-304).

### The Umayyad Phase

During the last architectural phase, the two upper rows of *synthronon* and the masonry of the apse in the presbytery were restored (FIG. 13). The large amount of pottery and marbles with sharp fractures recovered in the excavation, as well as the disorderly arrangement of stones in the external apse buttress suggest that a brutal destruction occurred in the site. This catastrophic event is related probably to the earthquake of 749 AD. (Tsafirir 2014: 111-120) and this date might be the *terminus post quem* for the reconstruction of the apse. In fact, the morphology of this structure may have been affected by the geological instability of the



12. 3D reconstruction of the third architectural phase of the basilica (end 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) (drawing by the author).



13. 3D reconstruction of the fourth architectural phase of the basilica (half of the eighth century AD, after the earthquake in 749 AD) (drawing by the author).

northern slope. The second half of the eighth century well agrees with the chronology of the pottery recovered beneath the upper rows of *synthronon*. Most of the sherds date indeed to the late Umayyad period, few to the Abbasid era. At the same time the two lateral doors of the façade have been closed.

### Conclusion

In summary, the last excavation have provided new elements related to the architectural evolution of the basilica of the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo. A crucial discovery was the identification of the Christian shrine that can be probably identified with that of the “Prophet Moses”. This evidence allows to include the

7. For the architectural survey of the basilica masonries and their

state of conservation, see Marino 2004: 47-57.



coenobium of Mount Nebo within the network of the monasteries related to the worship of the biblical figures. Moreover, the review of the old data, and the analysis of the new archaeological record suggest new hypotheses on the oldest building erected on the mountain.

The exponential growth of the pilgrimage during the Byzantine period contributed to the richness and the fame of this monastery. The donation of the devotees, the bishops and the lay people have allowed indeed the expansions and decoration of the church for almost three centuries. The new Islamic rule does not seem to have affected the monastic privileges and the financial availability of the community. Archaeological data showed that even after a traumatic event, probably the earthquake of 749 AD, the monks were able to implement an important restoration of the basilica.

We hope that further analysis of unexcavated areas of the monastery and a deeper study of the Nebo region will allow us to get a clearer picture of the shape and functions of the sanctuary of Moses.

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