

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2016 SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

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Abila was a Decapolis city just 12 Roman miles east of Gadara (Umm Qays). The site evidences its most substantial occupation in the Late Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad and Abbasid periods. However, since the 1980s stratified remains have been excavated indicating nearly continuous habitation from the Early Bronze (EB I) to the Abbasid periods (with some reuse of the site in the later Islamic eras as well) [For an overview of the site see Mare 1997]. The excavation staff during the 2016 season consisted of ten senior staff archaeologists and 28 student volunteers from the United States, Eastern Europe, Latin America and other countries, and approximately 60 Jordanian workers hired from the local communities. The representatives of the Department of Antiquities were Mr. Emad Obeidat, Director of the Bani Kinanah office of the Department of Antiquities and Ms Ferial Issa from the Irbid office. The season of excavation was run from July 3rd through July 28th, with an initial four days preceding this as a field school for our student volunteers, and three days at the end of the excavation season for closing down our operation in Harthah, where we make our base.

The central goals for the 2016 season of the Abila Archaeological Project were: (1) to deepen the excavation in key squares in Area AA on the north *tall* in order to examine how the Byzantine, Hellenistic, Iron and Bronze Age occupational levels extended east and north on Tall Abila; (2) to continue working toward the completion of the excavation of two Byzantine churches (Areas G and E) in preparation for publication, and for better presenting the churches for tourism; (3) to excavate a presumed ‘market place’ in the area adjacent to the

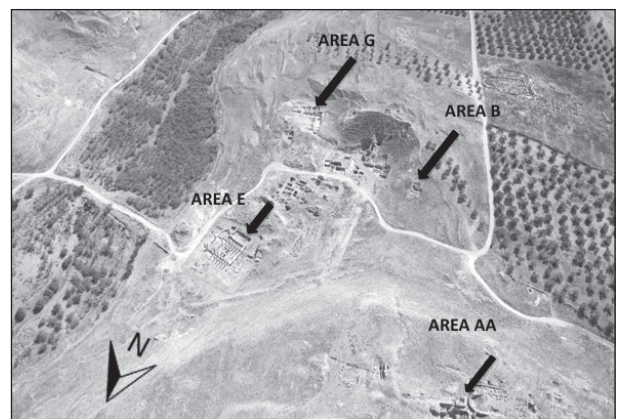
basalt road in what has been Area B, beside the ‘theater cavea’ in the center of the site (**Fig. 1**).

Area AA

Represents the History of Tall Abila from the Abbasid to the Early Bronze Periods

Goals in Area AA for the 2016 excavation season included continued excavation of the Early Bronze period, clarification of the Early Bronze/Middle Bronze transition, and understanding the relationship of the various walls in AA to determine the process of settlement. We were unable to pursue the clarification of the EB/MB transition due to our limited time in the field this season and because of our focus on the new fortified walls in the eastern squares. Excavated areas are located at latitude 32.68251 and longitude 35.86842. Under the supervision of Dr. Susan Ellis (Wayne State College), the excavation team for this area included Kevin Morrow, Roger Acevedo, Samuel Cross-Meredith, Martin Krnac, Matthew Johnson, Jessica Flinkman, Damaris Galdames and Dana Landro.

At the end of our 2014 season of excava-



1. Overview of 2016 excavation areas.

tion, Square 5 was already at the Early Bronze levels. Our hope for the 2016 season was to be able to excavate this square down to bedrock. Unfortunately, this was not possible because we uncovered several floors and stone *loci*. We are now about 75cm from our goal, as indicated in adjacent squares. Presently, we focused on excavating the two-thirds of a square south of the Early Bronze age wall in Square 5, locus 5100. The first locus this year was locus 130, which was a soft, windblown soil of a light brownish gray color. After 15cm we changed to locus 131, an arbitrary change for control. Pottery in these *loci* included red and red/black Khirbat al-Karak ware, a marker for the Early Bronze III period.

After another 15cm we came upon a grayish brown soil which contained more ash. This locus (132) can also be seen in the west balk of Square 1. After clearing about ten centimeters from the entire area we made an arbitrary change of locus number to 133 for the next locus. This locus was about 15cm further down when we came upon a heavier clay layer (134) with a locus of a few random rocks in the west-central portion of the square. These rocks were sitting on soil and did not constitute a wall. We removed them and continued to the next locus, 135, a light brownish gray soil (more ash), which then changed to a brown, windblown soil, suggesting abandonment for a time (locus 136). Each of these *loci* was between ten and 14cm deep.

The removal of locus 137 revealed a group of rocks (locus 138) sitting on a mudbrick surface (possible floor), locus 139. These rocks appeared to be random in nature, not forming a wall or structure. We removed the rocks along with locus 138, digging into locus 140 below. This revealed another rock grouping (locus 141), this time with the appearance of being a possible wall. These rocks were sitting on another surface, locus 142.

All pottery from these *loci* was Early Bronze, hand-made without a wheel. Many pieces were burnished brown or red, or pattern burnished in brown or red. The ware is varied, as is the temper. Many pieces are recognizably identical in ware, temper and decoration from our earlier excavation of Square 1. Altogether we excavated 112cm of soil in Square 5.

The Fortified Walls in Area AA

Excavation during 2014 in Square 16 uncovered a few centimeters of wall (locus 16019) just under the soil in the northeast corner of the square. Our plan for 2016 was to excavate Square 16 to the level of a probe in the western portion of the square against wall 16018 and to excavate Square 9 as the most likely area in which to reveal a continuation of wall 16019 (Fig. 2).

In 2016, we began in Square 16 by removing the north balk to see the joining of wall 16009 and the east/west wall (16008) visible in the north balk. This wall also articulated with wall 16018. After much consideration the eastern balk was also removed to fully expose wall 16009. These walls, as with all the walls in AA, appear to be aligned to true north, while our squares are oriented to magnetic north. Therefore, all walls run into balks rather than aligning with balks, and the balk must be removed in order to fully view the walls.

After clearing these two balks, excavation resumed in Square 16 with locus 22. As this locus was removed (about 12cm), we discovered a stone feature (locus 16023) in the south-central portion of the square. This was a series



2. Fortification walls bisecting Area AA.

of stones forming a basin about 65cm wide and 70cm from north to south; it was covered with flattish stones (**Fig. 3**). The stones were large, semi-flat and cobble-sized, alternating basalt with limestone. The feature continued into the south balk. We excavated the interior of locus 16023, labeling the soil as 16024. This soil was reddish loose clay, but no pottery, seeds or any other artifacts were found. The feature was approximately 17cm deep. In order to expose both this feature and wall 16019 we began removing the south balk of Square 16 (north balk of Square 11). Locus 22 contained pottery from Umayyad to Bronze Age. The *loci* near the plaster floor (locus 25) were mainly Roman and Hellenistic.

Locus 16023 led into *loci* 11032 and 11033 (soil), and 11039 (rock tumble) in the center of Square 11. These *loci* were sitting upon a plaster floor which we excavated as locus 11038 (west of 11033) and locus 11038 (east of 11033). Pottery in *loci* 11032 and 11033 was mixed from Umayyad to Bronze Age. Pottery in *loci* 11037, 11038 and 11039 was preponderantly Roman and Hellenistic.

We then shaved off the topsoil of Square 10 (10001) solely to define the top of the wall (10002) as it passed through Square 10. This let us join up with the wall as excavated in Square 9 (9002).

Because of some anomalies in the construction of the wall we decided to open Square 22. The topsoil (locus 22001) and next *loci* (22002, 22005-8) were also quickly removed as they were visible in the balks. Pottery varied from Byzantine to Iron Age. In the process, 1.3 meters of soil was removed, as measured at the north balk.

Removal of the balk both answered questions and caused more confusion. The wall, which runs through Squares 16, 9, 10 and 22, is well built, with shaped stones supported by chinking. It has a rubble core and measures 193cm in width. We have not yet reached the bottom of the wall, nor have we seen a foundation trench in either the soil or the balks. There appear to be at least three building phases. The lowest visible phase is seen in Square 16. The lowest courses (*ca* 60cm) consist of smaller, square-shaped stones with larger chinking stones. The next courses (*ca* 50cm) are of larger, well-cut squarish stones with smaller

chinking stones. These upper courses are capped by a layer of plaster which is visible in the soil balks and are probably part of the plaster surface which was laid over the entire area during the time the Byzantine water channel was in use. There is a 402×193cm area of laid stones on top of this plaster layer, which is found in Square 22. This layer is offset from the underlying wall by about 25cm.

A puzzling feature found in Square 22 is that the large wall abruptly ends, and abuts another wall of similar structure that is offset by 50cm. This second wall (locus 22009) is built on the west side in a fashion similar to the longer wall, but the construction on the east side is much more like Iron Age construction, *viz.* chunky, unformed boulders. This is topped by a single course of well-formed, squared stones.

At present, we are not able to determine the date of the construction of either of the two walls and are also unable to explain their exact function. Excavation in 2018 will focus on tracing these walls down in an attempt to ascertain their date and function, and their relation with the other excavated structures in Area AA.

Area B

This area was re-opened after a hiatus of 12 years, the last season of excavation in this area being in 2004. The excavated squares in this area are located at latitude 32.68098 and longitude 35.8689. Members of the excavation staff working in this area, under the supervision of Cheryl Eaton (PhD candidate, Aberdeen University), were Peter Helman (assistant to the area supervisor), Samuel Vila, Andrew Heldenbrand, Kelly Escarcega, Dr. Blake Hartung and Betsy Curtis.



3. Installation in Area AA.

Three squares (46, 47 and 48) were opened with the goals of further exploring a basalt pavement, including a street curb and secondary east-west cross walls that had been partially excavated in 1992, and further exposing a well-built, north-south wall running parallel to the street and abutting the cross-walls on the west. These features, along with installations on the east side of the basalt street, suggest the possible location of a market place, with shops bordering the west side of the street. Upper levels contained significant Islamic domestic occupation with pottery, a storage pit and other artifacts dating to the 8th through the 10th centuries AD (Fig. 4).

Despite the short dig season, all projected goals were reached (with the use of probes within each square), further exposing the east-west cross walls and locating the north-south wall and western end of the basalt pavement. Left by necessity for next season will be the goal of more fully exploring the suggested market place by completing the excavation of each square, removing the eastern balks of Squares 46 and 47, as well as the balk between them, and opening a square immediately east of Square 48 in order to reach the pavement abutting the basalt street there.

Square 46

Supervising Square 46 were Liz Bennett and Andrew Heldenbrand. Of the three squares opened just west of the Byzantine basalt street, Square 46 was located the farthest north, closest to the modern east-west access road which is located about 6m north. In order to provide an eastern balk in the steeply sloped terrain, the north-south sides of Square 46 were laid out a half-meter shorter than the 4m east-west sides.

Initial elevations of the square were ascertained using as a zero datum point the basalt curb immediately west of the northeast corner of the partially uncovered east-west cross wall just east of the balk between Squares 46 and 47. The elevation for the northeast corner of the cross-wall was determined to be 171cm, with the northwest and southwest corners of Square 46 at 322cm and the southeast and northeast corners at 250.5cm. Final corner elevations of the full square (July 21) were 200cm northwest, 210cm southwest, 177cm southeast and 166cm

northeast corner. For the 2m square southeast probe (46× [see further below]; July 26) they were 67.5cm northwest, 95.5cm southwest, 59.9cm southeast and 68.5cm northeast. Elevations will be updated with respect to those of the basalt street in due course; these were taken in an earlier season but were not immediately available.

Highlights

Human Remains Discovered

On July 14, human skeletal remains were uncovered (locus 007, elevation 132.5cm [see further below]). These were excavated on July 15, at the end of the first full week of excavation. Preliminary findings indicate the remains were those of a male, aged 25-35, not quite 5 feet tall. Lying in an east-west direction with the head at the west, the remains appeared to have been buried Islamic-style, on the right side with the face pointing south toward the *qibla*. Associated pottery (locus 008, pail 007) ranged in date from the Late Roman through Abbasid periods [Pottery reading by Abila Project ceramicist Dr. Susan Ellis, July 18, 2016: Abbasid 1/1 (one sherd found; one saved and registered); Umayyad 2/0; Late Byzantine 9/0 and Late Roman 1/0].

Probe 46× Opened

On July 21, with about a week of excavation remaining, a 2m square probe (46×) was opened in the southeast section of the square in effort to determine whether a surface of fitted stone pavers uncovered in adjacent Square 47 (locus 009, elevation 156cm [see further below]) continued into Square 46. However, no



4. Storage pit in Area B.

evidence of a surface was found. Instead, further excavation uncovered sequential layers of large limestone boulders (*loci* 011, 012, 013, 014 [see further below]), suggesting tumble north from the secondary, east-west cross wall largely hidden by the balk between Squares 46 and 47, and extending east of the east balk to the northwest-southeast basalt street.

North-South Wall Uncovered

On July 26, with one day left in the season, a single large limestone ashlar was discovered (locus 014, elevation 89.5cm [see further below]) beneath the sequential layers of secondary limestone cross-wall tumble described above. The position of the ashlar in the probe (46×) was in line with two large, level and aligned ashlars discovered the same day in probe 48× (locus 016, elevation 94.5 cm), which extended into the north balk there.

Interpretation

The elevation of the uncovered ashlars noted above (46×014; 48×016) suggests they extend through Square 47 below the surface of fitted stone pavers (Square 47, locus 009, elevation 156 cm) and beneath the uncovered east-west cross wall and secondary north-south wall in that square (see further below). The alignment of these ashlars suggests they belong to the well-built, north-south wall running parallel to the basalt street and abutting the cross-walls on the west. Exposure of this wall was amongst the goals of the 2016 season. Excavation of Square 46 thus ended after a final top plan and west balk plan were drawn and final photos were taken on July 27.

Square 47

Supervising Square 47 were Samuel Vila and Kelly Escarcega. The square, measuring 4m by 4m, was located just west of the Byzantine basalt street, between Square 46 immediately to the north and Square 48 immediately to the south (with a 1m balk separating each square). Initial elevations of the square corners, ascertained as described above, were 323cm northwest, 365cm southwest and 240cm for the southeast and northeast corners.

Final corner elevations of the full square (July 21) were 246.5cm northwest, 128cm

southwest, 143cm southeast and 142cm northeast. For the 2m square southeast probe (47×, July 26 [see further below]) they were 16cm northwest, 5cm southwest, 81cm southeast and 15cm northeast. As is the case with Square 46, elevations for Square 47 will be updated with respect to those of the basalt street, which were taken in an earlier season but were not immediately available.

Highlights

Secondary Build of North-South Wall Uncovered

On July 8, excavation uncovered a line of large, limestone boulders (locus 002, elevation approx. 300 cm) running along the west balk. The boulders align with the well-built north-south wall running parallel to the basalt street. They appear to be part of a secondary wall built using it as a foundation, given the use of the boulders and repurposed limestone ashlars.

East-West Cross Wall Uncovered

On July 13, excavation exposed an east-west cross wall (locus 004, elevation approx. 250 cm) running through the center of the square and extending east of the east balk to the northwest-southeast basalt street. The cross wall appears to be parallel with the east-west cross wall largely hidden by the balk between Squares 47 and 46, which extends east of the balk to the basalt street. The wall appeared to be secondary, given the use of boulders and repurposed limestone ashlars.

Tabun and Pavers Uncovered

On July 18, excavation uncovered the intact rim of a clay *tabun* (locus 008, elevation 166.5 cm), measuring about 1m in diameter and 8-10cm in height. Located immediately north of the east-west cross wall (locus 004) and below locus 003, the *tabun* (10YR/7/4 [very pale brown]) appeared to have been used only a few times, given that while it contained some ash and burn marks (along with broken pieces of *tabun*), it lacked the characteristic blackened interior [based on July 20, 2016 reading by Ellis]. Dating was difficult to determine; associated pottery ran from the Early Byzantine through Umayyad periods [Associated pottery: Umayyad 2/0, Late Byzantine 19/0, Early Byz-

antine 1/0] similar - though not identical - to that associated with the human remains uncovered in Square 46. These were located roughly 3m north (and north of the east-west cross wall), 34cm below and just west of the *tabun*. The relationship between the *tabun* and human remains is undetermined. The bottom of the *tabun* rim was resting directly on a surface of flat, fitted stone pavers (locus 009, elevation 156 cm) that with further excavation was found to cover most of the north side of the square.

Probe 47× Opened

On July 21, the decision was made to leave undisturbed for further study the surface of flat, fitted stone pavers noted above (locus 009, elevation 156 cm) and to open a probe (47×) roughly 2m square in the southeast portion of the square, south of the east-west cross wall, in an effort to reach the basalt pavement, even with the basalt street curb east of the square. Initial probe-corner elevations were 120cm northwest, 134cm southwest, 143cm southeast and 137cm northeast. Excavation during the six days remaining in the season uncovered soil and some tumble, and ended at the partial remains of a plaster floor (locus 014, elevation 5 cm) and pieces of glass tesserae in the southeast corner of the probe.

Interpretation

The plaster floor (47×, locus 014) noted above is similar to the excavated surface of a square located south of Square 48 (bounded by at the north by a similar east-west secondary cross wall and on the west by the north-south well-built wall) that was fully excavated in a previous season. The basalt pavement, even with the curb of the northwest-southeast basalt street, ends east of the surface of that square. Exposing the pavement and determining the relationship of the plaza to the basalt street was among the goals of the 2016 season. Excavation of Square 47 thus ended after a final top plan and eastern and western balk plans were drawn and final photos were taken on July 27.

Square 48

Blake Hartung supervised Square 48 and was assisted for one week by Betsy Curtis, who briefly joined the dig mid-season. The square,

measuring 4m by 4m, was located just west of the Byzantine basalt street, immediately south of Square 47 and on the most steeply sloping terrain of the three squares excavated in 2016. As a result, it contained the largest amount of debris and tumble.

Initial elevations of the square corners, initially ascertained as described above, were 381.5cm northwest, 379.5cm southwest, 194cm southeast and 252cm northeast. Final corner elevations of the full square (July 21) were 212.5cm northwest, 274cm southwest, 194cm southeast and 182cm northeast. For the 2m square southeast probe (48×, July 26 [see further below]) they were 111cm northwest, 97cm southwest, 81.5cm southeast and 84cm northeast. As is the case with Squares 46 and 47, elevations for Square 48 will be updated with respect to those of the basalt street, which were taken in an earlier season but were not immediately available.

Highlights

Secondary Building Room Uncovered (Probe 48×)

Between July 18 and 22, excavation uncovered the northeast portion of a room bounded by a north-south wall (locus 010, elevation 182 cm) and an east-west wall (locus 011, elevation 177 cm) of boulders and repurposed ashlar that met at in a corner oriented to the northeast near the center of the square. Given the short excavation season and interest in excavating inside rather than outside the building, it was decided on July 26 to open a probe (48×) focusing on the roughly 2m square southwest portion of Square 48 that composed the room corner's interior.

Plaster Floors #1 and #2 Uncovered

On July 21-22, excavation uncovered the first of two plaster floors (locus 012, elevation 144 cm) composed of limestone, ash and straw, roughly 2-3cm thick across the probe. Associated pottery ranged from the Late Byzantine through Mamluk periods (see further below). On July 26, the second plaster floor was uncovered (locus 015, elevation 98cm), with associated pottery ranging from the Late to Early Byzantine periods (see further below).

Level, Aligned Ashlar Uncovered

On July 26, two large, level ashlar aligned in a north-south direction and located near the center of the probe were uncovered (locus 016, elevation 94.5cm) below the second plaster floor noted above; these continued into the north balk.

Interpretation

The two ashlar (48×, locus 016) noted above align with a well-built, north-south wall running parallel to the street and abutting the cross walls on the west, and with a single large, limestone ashlar uncovered in Square 46 (locus 014, elevation 89.5 cm). Associated pottery ranged from the Late Roman through Abbasid periods (see further below). A large section of the wall, which runs parallel to the basalt street and abuts the cross walls on the west, is exposed in a similar square south of Square 48 that was fully excavated in a previous season. The alignment and elevation of the ashlar suggest they are part of this wall. Exposure of the wall was among the goals of the 2016 season. Excavation of Square 48 thus ended after a final top plan and western square and eastern probe balk plans were drawn and final photos taken on July 27.

Area G

The Area G church is an ecclesiastical structure comprising a three-aisled, single-apsed basilica with adjacent rooms located at the northeast end of Tall Umm al-‘Amad. Squares excavated during the 2016 season were located at latitude 32.6805 and longitude 35.8696. The area supervisor of Area G was Dr. Adam Chambers; his student volunteers were Jeff Prager (assistant to the area supervisor), Harrison Bearden, Charlie Vila, Josh Kruntorad, Alan Vongnhay, Kate Barlowe, Anne Clemenger and Abigail Danley.

The previous two seasons of excavation (2012 and 2014) have focused on uncovering a room adjoining the main church sanctuary that may have served as *diaconicon*, a room functioning as a preparatory space for rituals performed in the church. The 2014 season involved several probes intended to expand squares opened in the previous seasons to expose the south wall of the *diaconicon*. Work also con-

tinued clearing the western end of the room (35 Probe) to delineate its extent, and to establish any relationship with associated rooms near the church’s entrance.

The 2016 season focused on further uncovering the space leading ‘up church’ from the west, along with clearance of the *diaconicon*’s western end. Three 4×4m squares (41, 42 and 43) were opened west of the *diaconicon* and the narthex space leading to three entrances that opened to the central nave and two side aisles. A typical feature of Byzantine churches in this region, as at the nearby sites of Umm Qays and Jarash, is an atrium that served as a communal space outside of the more sacred precincts of the church. Although these outer spaces were less ornate, they still featured tiled floors and architectural features including colonnades, niches and occasionally fountains. While it remains unclear if these features are present at the Area G church, it is important to determine the nature of the remains of the structure’s entrance.

In order to begin work this season, several large piles of ashlar blocks and fragments - which had been created to preserve them at the site - had to be removed in order to lay out the grid for the squares. Likely due to a particularly wet rainy season, thorns and weeds were overgrown throughout the excavation area, and had to be cleared by hand and by burning them. This added a few challenges for making progress early in the season. The square supervisors in Area G were mostly students from John Brown University, and all were assets to completing the fieldwork this season. A final photo from Square 43, the central excavated square, revealed a mosaic floor surface (**Figs. 5 and 6**).

Square 41

This square was opened directly west and just beyond the end of the *diaconicon*. It was the southernmost of all the squares. Early efforts in the excavation area, which included the adjacent squares, focused on the removal of extensive amounts of rocks, overgrown vegetation and debris (G41000). In Square 41, the first soil strata (001, 002) were a complex matrix of sand to cobble-size rocks representing significant erosion from the *tall* above and to the west of the excavation area [An important oversight of this season, particularly in light of its brevity



5. Layout of squares in Area G.



6. Mosaic flooring in Area G basilica.

owing to Ramadan, was that these earlier strata, which consisted mainly of fill derived from natural erosion of the *tall*, could have been excavated with a bit more rapidity, which will be a goal for next season]. Owing to the location of the church at the side of the *tall*, the natural effects of erosion have caused the shifting of soil and material remains from higher levels, which has created several strata with a mixture of pottery dating from the Roman to the Islamic periods. Further excavation encountered a similar soil matrix in a lower stratum, with increasing amounts of silt and a small quantity of pottery

and tesserae (003). Lower strata (004, 005) became increasingly dense with broken limestone fragments and tesserae. Several large ashlar were broken and safely removed to allow for continued work. Pottery in the vicinity of the floor level was increasingly from the Islamic period (mostly Umayyad), reflecting the extensive reuse of the area for domestic purposes at this time. There were consistent numbers of tesserae recovered as excavation continued; these increased in lower soil layers (004, 006), averaging several hundred each day. This may indicate that a tessellated floor lies below - as encountered in Square 43 - but this has yet to be determined.

As the excavation season approached its final week, owing to time constraints a 2×4m probe (005) was started in an attempt to reach the floor surface in order to determine the best strategy for future excavation goals. The probe reached a new soil stratum with increasing amounts of silt/clay. The density of broken architectural debris, including column fragments, increased at this lower level to such a degree that excavation became difficult. It was at this point that excavation ceased.

Square 42

Just west of the southern end of the narthex, Square 42 was opened in order to determine the nature of the space leading up to the entrance of the church, which was expected to be an atrium, a common space in most churches at the site and in the region.

As with the adjacent squares (41, 43), the initial surface-soil matrix (G42000) consisted of typical debris that was quickly cleared. Excavation continued with the removal of two soil strata (002, 003) consisting mainly of fill from the erosion of the *tall* to the west. Its soil matrix was composed primarily of sand and limestone fragments from gravel to cobble size. The pottery at this upper level reflected a spectrum from the Roman to Islamic periods, but consisted primarily of Byzantine ceramic fragments. A daily average of about 100 tesserae was collected, recorded and discarded, as well as some small glass and bone fragments. The material remains were rather sparse in the upper layers, leaving a good amount of soil to work through in the initial two weeks of excavation. The soil

continued to be somewhat dense with fragmented limestone and small rocks, but became increasingly silty as excavation continued into another stratum (004).

At the beginning of the final week of excavation, which was limited to three days of work, a probe (005) was initiated in the northeast corner of the square in order to expedite excavation to the floor surface. A partial wall (007) was uncovered with a heavily eroded basalt column standing upright, along with another fragmentary, basalt column laying on its side. A lower soil stratum (006) was also uncovered, with higher clay composition. A column section (008) was uncovered laying horizontally which, along with the presence of column fragments in the balk, may provide some indication of an atrium space. As with Square 41, a floor surface was not reached, in part owing to the density of architectural debris, large rocks and column fragments; excavation thus had to be concluded.

Square 43

This square was opened opposite the entrance to the southern aisle of the church and what appears to be a north-south colonnade delineating the west entrance to the narthex. The surface (G43000) was cleared of debris; this included a large amount of thorns, brush, small rocks and ashlar fragments. As with the adjacent squares to the south, the initial stratigraphy consisted of a wash matrix from erosion of the *tall* above, which resulted in a wide range in pottery from the Roman to Islamic periods. This loose soil had cobble to sand sediment, with a large amount of limestone fragments of various shapes and sizes. After the removal of these upper layers (001, 002), another stratum (003) was encountered with a greater amount of limestone architectural fragments and silt. This soil matrix continued to have a greater clay component in the stratum below (004), but was less dense with small rocks and broken ashlar fragments. As with the adjacent squares, a probe (005) was made in one part of the square owing to time constraints. This was in the eastern half of the square and was intended to expedite the uncovering of a floor to be identified as an atrium. Evidence of column fragments was uncovered in soil stratum 006, along with an increasingly loamy soil matrix. A damaged tessellated floor

(007) was finally uncovered in the last week. It has a criss-cross pattern of black, red and white tesserae, with a small diamond shape at the center with a black outline and red interior. The floor was fragmented and looks to have been damaged by fallen ashlar, probably from the earthquake in AD 749 which destroyed the church. An Islamic-period coin was found at the same level as the floor.

Square 35 Probe Clearance

Another project undertaken this season involved cleanup from previous excavation seasons that uncovered the ancillary room to the south of the main sanctuary, identified as a *diaconicon*. Excavation of this room revealed extensive secondary use after the earthquake which destroyed the church, but it also revealed outer walls of fine ashlar construction, along with architectural features like marble columns and altar posts, and ornate *opus sectile* flooring. In 2014, several probes (38, 39 and 40) were excavated to extend existing squares (31, 32 and 33) in order to expose the *diaconicon*'s south wall. An *opus sectile* floor had been uncovered toward the western end of the *diaconicon*; it also appeared in other parts of the room. Another probe (35) had been opened in a previous season to determine the extent of the north-south wall that was thought to provide a western end to the *diaconicon*, but this work had been cut short by the end of the season in question. The half-excavated probe was subject to a great amount of erosion, and it was determined that its stratigraphy was compromised by several years of fill [This was confirmed later in the season after reaching the floor surface, several modern plastic bags were found at the same level]. One objective was to remove the probe's eastern and northern balks, and to remove the fill layers down to the floor surface.

Removal of the balks and clearance of the probe further uncovered a well-cut western wall of the *diaconicon*, with a continuation of the *opus sectile* flooring bordered by red and white limestone pavers that formed a decorative border. The *opus sectile*, which had not been preserved completely intact, formed a carpet pattern with a combination of red, blue and white marble pieces in the shapes of rectangles, octagons and squares. An interestingly cut basalt

stone with a step design was uncovered, but its identification has not yet been determined. The floors were drawn and then backfilled in order to protect them from further damage. The eastern balks were removed from the square extensions (39 and 40) to further expose the southern wall of the *diaconicon*, and to further open the room to delineate its features.

Preliminary Interpretations

An important objective of the season was to determine the nature of area leading up to the church's western entrance, which is believed to be an atrium. Squares 41, 42 and 43 were part of a grid laid out with the intention of uncovering this important space which has appeared in ecclesiastical complexes both at Abila and at other nearby cities with significant Byzantine communities (Jarash, Gadara and Pella). It is believed that the tessellated floor uncovered in Square 43, which accesses the narthex space just west of the entrance to the south aisle of the church, may be evidence of the atrium. Unfortunately, due to the abbreviated season, the floor was not reached in the probes of the adjacent squares. It is anticipated that the next season of excavation will reach this floor throughout the remainder of Square 43, and possibly in Squares 41 and 42. Along with the tessellated floor, evidence of another important feature common to atriums - the colonnade - was uncovered in each of the squares this season (42007, 42008). Column fragments, including parts of drums and capitals, were encountered amongst the extensive collapse and debris of the area. These elements indicate that further excavation will reveal the Area G church's atrium.

The clearance of the west end of the *diaconicon* seems to indicate that it was built at the same time as, or shortly after, the construction of the church, with ornate flooring similar to that uncovered in the main sanctuary. It was accessed via one doorway at the west end of south aisle and another from the narthex. Later, after the church's destruction by an earthquake, the larger room was subdivided by secondary walls.

Area E

In Area E, excavations were conducted as proposed in the dig design, with excavation

units on the north side of the area following the mosaic-paved processional passage first exposed in 2014, and three excavation units west of the formerly covered portico that runs north and south along the west side of the five-aisle pilgrimage church. The squares excavated this season lie at latitude 32.68201 and longitude 35.87013. Area E was supervised by Dr. Robert Smith of Mid-America Christian University, supported by the following student volunteers: James Bennett, Henry Vila, Josafat Guillen, Jacob Russell, Marissa Johns, Gabrielle Marcy, Melissa Endicott and Dr. Maxie Burch (assistant to the area supervisor).

Squares 109 and 119

The Area E excavations focused on two portions of the complex. The first was in the north where two excavation units were opened. Square 109 was excavated by Maxie Burch and Jacob Russell. They removed topsoil in locus 001 to a depth of 1.5m on the west side. Along the south side, the 60-cm wide south wall of the new church was designated as locus 002. The top of the east wall of the new church was not exposed, but in the northeast corner of the square at the location of the new church apse, several clumps of small wall mosaic - some with reflective foil behind glass - were found. Excavation was terminated for the season since it was determined that a new church lay below and that there are three meters of fill to the floor. Efforts were concentrated in Square 119 to the east. Excavation of the topsoil on the west side of the square revealed a wall running north-south that curved out in the northwest corner. The topsoil was designated locus 001. The wall was designated locus 002. This wall was determined to be the eastern wall of the church and was mainly composed of sawn, soft limestone ashlar. This wall reveals some repairs of cracks that appear to have been caused by seismic movement. Search was made for carbon samples in the mortar, which could indicate the date of the repair. Wall 002 was exposed to a depth of *ca* 3.25m. It was punctuated with a doorway (locus 011) that was *ca* 2.05m high and *ca* 90cm wide, with an undecorated basalt lintel. The threshold was a piece of hard, red hematitic limestone. The closure of the doorway with five courses of ashlar indicates a deliberate change in the

desired movement of people. Entrance was no longer needed from the west into the space at the end of the south aisle. A vertical, unbonded crack in the south wall may suggest the addition of an interior *pastophorium*. The apse was designated locus 003. The upper two courses remaining show a transition from being vertical to arching over to create a stone half dome over the apse. The bottom four courses were made of basalt. There are a total of 12 surviving courses of ashlar in the apse. These stones are tied together in a running bond.

Excavation of collapse debris east of wall 002 revealed a parallel wall (005) *ca* 2m to the east. This wall was made of recycled, large limestone ashlar that are levelled with small pieces of hard limestone and basalt. This wall is 60cm thick and forms a passage that is floored with mosaic. The locus of the floor is 007. This mosaic has a large white tesserae border on both sides of the passage. In the center is a carpet mosaic of circles within an orange border on a black background. The circles are *ca* 36cm in diameter and have concentric circles of tesserae. The colors go orange, black, white, black, orange, black, white. This carpet mosaic has white crosses in the spaces between the circles. This mosaic was in place before evident adjustments. In a second phase, an east-west wall (locus 011) *ca* 60cm thick was added and damaged the floor. The orange border was cut. The floor was repaired, employing darker orange-red tesserae. At the location of wall 011, the number of circles in the floor is reduced from four wide to two wide. On the south side of Square 119, the mosaic floor is covered by three basalt ashlar that form a step (locus 008). This step is formed directly on top of the carpet mosaic. This shows that the steps were added after the mosaic was in place. Above the basalt step was a hematitic hard limestone threshold (locus 009), with evidence that it once had a doorway that opened to the north. The locking socket is on the north side suggesting general access was from the south passageway. South of the threshold is another mosaic floor (locus 009). This is *ca* 2×2m and has a geometrical, eight-pointed star pattern that is repeated four times on each side making a total of sixteen stars. The pattern is made up of red, white and black medium-sized tesserae. On the north side

there are three small designs by the stairs. On the south side are small designs similar to those on the north side. In the second course above the floor is a large ashlar inscribed with a seven-branched, three-footed menorah (locus 010). This stone is obviously reused. This area was excavated as a part of Square 119 even though it was originally part of Square 118 from the 2014 season of excavation. The mosaic of locus 009 stands *ca* 20cm above the passageway to the west and 40cm above the mosaic to the north. It is likely that mosaic 009 was a donation that covers 007 below. The result is that people had to step up and then take two steps down. The edge of the mosaic on the east side is in poor repair and suggests that the wall 005 was a rebuilding effort. The two mosaics exposed this season in Square 119 are a continuation of the processional way that moved people from the portico of the five-aisled church to the unexcavated church in Square 109 and beyond.

Square 87

This square extends from a doorway in the north-south wall which runs along the west side of the portico. In cleaning the balk area to the north of the doorway, a two-line Kufic inscription was found that was interpreted as an appeal to Allah for forgiveness. Preliminary study of the inscription leans toward the inscription being Islamic rather than Arab Christian, and thus dates to a later use of the church structure. The north-south wall at the side of the portico is *ca* 55cm thick and is made of sawn limestone ashlar. This wall was designated locus 002. It is punctuated by a doorway which opened westward away from the portico. This doorway (locus 003) is 1.3m wide. The threshold of the doorway is made of hematitic limestone. Stepping down 8cm was space for doors to pivot inward. An east-west wall, 50cm thick and made of sawn limestone ashlar, lies alongside the north side of the square and separates it from Square 88 to the north. This wall is punctuated by a 1m wide cut that was filled in *ca* 1.25m west of the northeast corner of the room. The floor framed by the walls was once surfaced with a carpet mosaic having a design of rose buds within a black border. Flanking the sides of the doorway, sections of large white floor tesserae were exposed intact. A 1.5m strip across the eastern

side of the room preserved no mosaic floor. This area of missing flooring lined up with the cut in the north wall. The wall on the south side of the church square is less well defined and shows evidence of reconfiguration. Basalt-paving ashlar provided a foundation for limestone column bases that supported columns made of green chlorite schist marble. The missing column is probably the one with kufic inscriptions that Dr. Mare relocated into the church. The fill layer contained a well-cut capital that once was atop the monolithic green marble column. The orientation of tumbled stones in the fill and the pottery indicate that the structure in the square was destroyed by the earthquake of AD 749 and that the place was not used by squatters for secondary activities other than plunder.

Square 88

This square lies west of the *ca* 4m wide portico that runs north-south along the western end of the five-aisled basilica. A doorway in the west wall of the portico was exposed in 2014, along with the tessellated passageway paved with red and black diamonds that flank the north side of the five-aisled church. Locus 001 is the soil layer that was exposed in the doorway and continues across the square. It is a layer of collapse debris from the earthquake of AD 749. The pottery from this layer was consistently Late Byzantine/Umayyad. No reconstructable pottery was found. The sherds are primarily ribbed bag-jar fragments used in the seating of plaster on walls. The north-south wall was designated locus 002 and was made of sawn limestone ashlar. It is about 55cm thick. Wall 002 was plastered with a *ca* 1-cm thick layer of lime plaster, consisting of a first layer pressed into the joints that was covered by a thinner finish coat. Wall 002 was punctured by a doorway (locus 003) with a hematitic limestone threshold. Inside the threshold, which was made for the doors to open to the west, the floor is paved with a red and black diamond-pattern mosaic that is similar to that in the passageway to the east. This floor was covered over with basalt pavers, as was the mosaic in entrance to the room. The room has a limestone ashlar wall on the north side and a parallel wall on the south side. At a point *ca* 1.25m from the northeast corner of the room, the wall was cut and subsequently filled in. This feature aligns

with a similar cut in the wall on the south side of the room. Between the two features a line of basalt ashlar paves the floor and covers over a waterway/drain that remains to be investigated. On the south side of the square abutting the wall, a staircase ascends to the west. The floor in the northwest corner of the room is paved with large white tesserae and leads to a doorway that goes into Square 78. This room provides access to the water features that were a part of pilgrim activities related to water at the time of the earthquake in the mid-eighth century.

Square 87 was excavated by Jacob Russell and Joe. The work began at the western side of the square against the feature that is interpreted as a staircase leading up to the top of the terrace. In the center of that feature is a 1.1m wide by 1m deep vertical indentation that is covered with calcite, demonstrating the flow of mineral rich water. The base of this feature was accessed by steps. The third step appears to have been made up of a bituminous limestone carving of a saint. The placement of the stone in mortar appears to have been less than respectful. The soft stone was clearly not exposed to long-term foot traffic or sun exposure, and was located above a lower water feature. In the southwest corner of the square, the staircase carried people up to an elevated platform as part of ritual activities. In the room below, water flowed through two ritual installations. In this room three reconstructable cooking pots were found. The room was filled with a large amount of carbon and clay. The supporting roof appears to have burned and glass oil lamps in a *polycandelon* were smashed. A reconstructed glass vase with three applied handles was found. Water was directed to flow into a mudstone-faced niche that had a hole at the bottom and water flowing through a ritual basin.

Next to the main water installation, access was gained through a mudstone covering to a passageway supported by an arch and corbeling in a perpendicular passageway. More work needs to continue here. The pottery picked up from the surface of the tunnel was from the mid-eighth century. A small, intact glass 'perfume' bottle was found in the tunnel.

In the next season of excavation, the remaining unexcavated area (Square 77) in the space west of the five-aisle church needs to be exca-

vated and the soil dump needs to be removed from the atrium. This excavation should reveal the north side of the atrium and ascertain whether or not the large feature next to the terrace wall is indeed a staircase. The tunnel exposed in Square 78 also needs to be investigated. I suspect that it will attract a good deal of illicit interest. Between seasons, it seems likely that more water features will be exposed. In the processional passage at the top of the stairs from the portico, the soil dump needs to be removed and excavations should proceed westward in Square 89. This will likely expose a continuation of a mosaic passage that goes along the south side to the front of the newly exposed church on the north side of Area E. The excavation of the new northern church will be a major undertaking since it will be filled with fallen ashlars to a depth of *ca* 3m. Square 109 suggests that the church will have three aisles and an interior width of *ca* 15m.

Square 78 revealed a staircase laid on top of a mosaic floor surface that rose to a platform where significant amounts of ash and bone were uncovered. In addition, many of the structural features of this square gave evidence of use related to water, *viz.* various water channels and openings to cisterns that sat below the excavated square (Fig. 8).

In the northeast section of the area excavated this season, a large wall was encountered that joined with what appears to be an apse structure. Further excavation will be needed to determine the exact nature of this structure but, with nearly 12 courses of stone *in situ*, it will likely give us important evidence into the nature of the occupation in Area E (Fig. 9).

Additional work was done at the site to remove approximately 100 cubic meters of excavated soil, at a cost of nearly 900 JD. Work was also done with geo-electrics in Wādī Quwaylibah under the direction of Dr. Bernhard Lucke and in cooperation with Dr. Rashid (Department of Geology, Yarmouk University).

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8. Water installation in Area E.



9. Wall with apse-like protrusion.

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