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Notes on a Possible Early *Mihrab* in the Area E Church at Abila

As with most matters of significance, the nature of Christian-Muslim relations in the earliest periods is complicated. Our understanding is limited in part because of the nature of the literary sources. On the Muslim side, many of them are late and often burdened with the agendas and concerns of later generations. On the Christian side, the sources are very fragmented and likewise perspectival in nature. Recent scholarship has helped to shed light on these issues. For example, although not without its challengers, the work of Fred Donner (2012) on the “believers” movement in the Early Medieval Period has opened up many fresh insights into what Walmsley (2007: 146–8) and others have called the “plasticity” of traditions in transition during this important period. As scholars of several generations ago did with Christianity, it is common now to ask how we even ought to speak about “Islam,” especially vis-à-vis Christianity and Judaism, in the earliest decades after the conquest. In a similar

vein, Robert Hoyland’s (1998) work on the perceptions of non-Muslims of the early “Muslim” “believers,” as well as his integration of this material into discussion of the conquests (2015), also brings fresh perspectives into our understanding of the literary sources used for the reconstruction of this important period. Much work has been, and continues to be, done on the literary sources relevant to this discussion.

On the material side, significant strides have also been made over the past several decades on the archaeology of the Early Medieval Period in the Levant. Our understanding of the Early Medieval Period in Jordan is much clearer and much more precise as a result of the excellent work that has been done at many sites in Jordan and in other countries in the region. All of this has significant bearing on our understanding of the “Islamic” presence at Abila of the Decapolis in northwest Jordan in the Early Medieval Period, which is the topic of this article.

The excavation site is located in north-west Jordan approximately 20 km east of the Jordan River and 5 km south of the Yarmouk River. Abila is approximately 20 km north of the modern city of Irbid, and along with Pella, Gadara/Umm Qays, Capitolias/Bayt Rās, and to the east a bit further Umm al-Jimāl, form an important “northern constellation” of significant archaeological sites in the north of Jordan, all of which had significant occupation in the Early Medieval Period. During the first two seasons of excavation at Abila, in the early 1980s, work centered on surveys of the site. The work of those initial surveys concluded that around the two main *Talls*, occupation began at least in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC and continued into the Middle Islamic Periods, with some light occupation through the Ottoman period. The preponderance of sherds collected in the surveys of those early years, though, were dated between the 2nd and the 7th centuries AD.

After the initial surveys of the site were completed in the early 1980's, excavation focused on the apex of the north and south *Talls*, where it was clear that there was significant occupation. In time, excavation uncovered one large basilica on the North *Tall*, two basilicas on the South *Tall*, one more just east of the South *Tall*, and then one more down by the Roman bridge east of the North *Tall*. There is also what appears to be a Christian monastic complex in what we call Area B, that we are tentatively dating to the late 7th or early 8th century, but was likely was in use into the 9th century and beyond (Mare 1993; Wineland 2001; Lucke 2002; Vila 2005; 2016: 157–66).

The focus of this article is on the transition from Late Antiquity into the Early Medieval Period, specifically with regard to the material expression of religious faith of both Christians and the emergent Muslims. I will be discussing three structures at the site. The first is what I believe to be a mosque built sometime in the late 8th or early 9th

century. The second is what I believe to be a *muṣalla* that I will argue was built in the middle of the 8th century. The third is what I believe may be a prayer space in our Area E church, used by the nascent Muslims at some point prior to the mid 8th century earthquake, and as I will show, possibly quite a bit earlier. In all of these areas of the site, there is still ongoing excavation, and so many of the conclusions that I will be making are somewhat preliminary and await further investigation for more firm results. Nonetheless, the findings thus far are intriguing.

The first structure under discussion is a large rectangular building on the top of the North *Tall* at Abila (FIG. 1). Only limited excavation has been done in this area, so the following discussion is based on the initial surveys of the area, one season of excavation in 1984, and evidence of what is visible from the surface. My assumption throughout, though, will be that it is a congregational mosque and so the comparative material will be other mosque structures. The structure on Area A was built 1.5 m due east of the main Byzantine basilica on the North *Tall* and measures 34.5 m in width E/W by 19 m in length N/S enclosing a total area of approximately 650 m². The orientation of the building is 164° south-east, where the *qibla* at Abila is at roughly 160°.¹ At present we are aware of only one entrance that is visible on the north side, entering into the building to the south, but it is likely that we will find two other entrances in the middle and the west half of the north side of the building. Thus, when seen in light of the comparative material gathered by Walmsley and Damgaard (2005) in their work on the congregational mosque at Jarash and over 30 other sites, the structure at Abila is on the smaller side, not quite as square as many of

¹ Though, of course, orientation of the earliest mosques was less a matter of precise scientific orientation than of general direction (King 1982a; 1982b).



1. Aerial photo of the possible mosque in Area A. Photo credit RHB, APAAME.

the earliest mosques but very much in line proportionally with mosques dated between AD 750 and 950. In addition, Mattia Guidetti, in his discussion of the contiguity of churches and mosques, argues, “When it came time to build a congregational mosque, the site selected was often an urban area adjoining an extant main church” (Guidetti 2015: 11–27; 2017: 52). And with numbers of the examples that Guidetti mentions, it is common for mosque structures to be built on the east side of the churches when the limitations of space and geography permit.

With regard to the date of the structure under discussion, during the 1984 season

at Abila while excavating the Byzantine basilica, Duane Roller from Wilfried Laurier University opened a square that fell on top of the NW corner of this building.² After determining that the structure was clearly built with spolia from the destruction of the Byzantine church, the excavators decided that the large rectangular building must be “Umayyad.” According to their assumptions, the church was likely destroyed in either the Sassanid or Islamic invasions of the early 7th century (Roller 1984: 20), and therefore the

² For a discussion of the excavation of the building, see Wineland 2001: esp. 25–8.

building must be an “Umayyad” structure, likely a public building. Today, apart from the archaeological and literary evidence of the destruction of a few specific sites, no one believes that there was widespread destruction for either the Sassanid or the so-called “Islamic” invasions. And in fact, later excavation made it clear that the Byzantine basilica at the summit of Area A, like most of the major buildings at Abila, fell almost certainly in the earthquake of AD 749. Since then, what I am calling a congregational mosque was built with spolia that post-dates the destruction of the church, the construction of this building is likely from the “Abbasid” period, that is, sometime after the middle of the 8th century or later. Apart from more thorough excavation of this area, the only thing that remains in identifying it more conclusively as a congregational mosque is the locating of the *Mihrab*. In the near future we hope to excavate this structure and will be able to determine more conclusively if indeed it is a congregational mosque. At present, though, all indications seem to point in that direction.

Another structure at Abila that I propose may have been a place of Muslim worship is found in Area B, just to the east of our “monastic” complex near what has been called the “theater cavea.” During the 1994 and 1996 seasons of excavation a very crudely built structure was uncovered in a plaza north of the “theater cavea.” The structure measures 8.5 m N/S and 10.5 m E/W giving a total enclosed area of approximately 90 m². The north wall consists of upright column drums, and at one point, an Ionic capital resting on a base, and in parts these elements are resting on 15 cm of soil or crudely placed blocks. In the middle of this northern wall there is a threshold that is 140 cm wide, providing entrance into the structure from the north going south (FIG. 2). And, at least on the east side of the threshold, there are cut ashlar that seem to form a cap on top of the column drums at a

height of 1.25 m. The west wall was formed from the remains of a pre-existing structure, made of finely cut and fitted ashlar. In the southwestern corner, five courses of these ashlar rise *in situ* to a height of 1.8 m. The east wall was formed of very crudely laid ashlar, column drums, capitals, and bases, and seems to abruptly end running from the south to the north at about 4 m. And the south wall is constructed of finely cut and well laid ashlar that adjoin the west wall at the corner, and then run to the east 4.5 m before breaking off. The floor surface in the structure is the larger 2 cm square white tesserae and contain no design. The floor seems to have been laid in conjunction with the finely built walls on the west and south sides, while the poorly constructed walls on the north and the east are laid on top of the mosaic. The orientation of the structure is 168° south-east and so is fairly close to the *qibla* at Abila. Unfortunately, the south wall where the direction might have been marked either with standing stones, or possibly a *Mihrab*, is missing. Pottery found in the excavation of this area ranged from what the excavators identified as Late Byzantine through Umayyad, with a small amount of Abbasid pottery in the fill above the floor surface. It is thus possible that the structure was something other than a *muṣalla*, though any other identification is less likely, given what we do know about the structure. Possibly also significant is that the structure is located adjacent and to the east of a Christian monastic complex in what is called Area B³. Thus, we have here a roughly built square structure that is oriented toward the south, with the only visible entrance on the north wall, entering the building toward the south. In the absence of a *Mihrab*, obviously, it is somewhat conjectural to suppose that the building served as a mosque/*muṣalla*, but no less likely than other functions that it

³ The excavations at Area B are discussed by Wineland 2001; Mare *et al.* 1997.



2. Possible *muşalla* in Area B. Photo credit TS, Abila Excavation.

might have served.

The final area that I will discuss is, by far, the most interesting, and is found in our Area E church, located just west of the Roman bridge and on the eastern edge of the North *Tall*. Unlike most of the other churches at Abila that are tri-apsidal with all of the apses facing east, the Area E church has the north and south apses facing north and south respectively in a clover leaf or cruciform shape, forming a nave and two north and two south aisles (Menninga 2004: 40–9; Smith 2018: 1–24). To the west are the narthex and the atrium which runs up against a retaining wall along the side of the North *Tall*. Evidence on the floor of the atrium, with the indentations in the floor of large ashlar blocks that fell from a great height

as well as the lay of fallen columns, give clear indication that the structure suffered catastrophic damage in an earthquake. In a chapel in the southwest corner of the atrium, a cracked altar screen and column, along with this green glazed pot (among many similar mid-8th century vessels), likewise give testimony to the structure having been destroyed in the massive earthquake that struck the region in AD 749.

What interests us most today, though, is the pastophoria on the south side of the church. The pastophoria itself measures 8 m E/W by 4 m N/S in a rectangular shape. And most interesting is that on the south wall of the pastophoria, excavation uncovered three niches each of which measure 85 cm wide by 210 cm in height. The western and middle



3. Possible *Mihrab* in the Area E church. Photo credit TS, Abila Excavation.

niche were filled in with plaster and only the eastern most niche was left open, leaving a feature that looks suspiciously similar to a *Mihrab* (FIG. 3). Being on the south wall of the church, it is indeed oriented roughly toward the *qibla*, and so I was immensely hopeful that we might in fact have *Mihrab*, and thus a Muslim prayer space in our Area E church. And, given the fact that the church continued to function as such until it was leveled by the mid 8th century earthquake, if it is a *Mihrab*, then it seemed likely that the church was used for both Christian and Muslim worship simultaneously.

Suleiman Bashear and Mattia Guidetti discuss numbers of examples in the literary sources of this sort of phenomena (Bashear 1991: 267–82; Guidetti 2017). And there are a few excavated examples in the region of

such a thing happening. Rina Avner’s work at the Kathisma church (Avner 2010: 41–2) and the example of Shivta, discussed by Jodi Magness (2003: 185–7) and especially Gideon Avni (1994; 2014) are two. In Jordan, there are possible examples of this at Umm as-Surab (Gilento 2015: 329–60) and Sama where in both cases, the apses were walled off—though neither example contains a clear *Mihrab* (King 1983: 111–36; Gilento 2014). Other potential cases include the Numerianos and West churches at Umm al-Jimāl (DeVries 2000: 39–45), where the apses were likewise blocked off, and possibly the church of the Bishop Isaiah at Jarash.⁴ None of these examples are totally

⁴ This is the position of Cherie Lenzen (1988). Note that her results are disputed by Vincent Clark (1986).

clear, and there are scholars who dispute the dating to the modifications of the churches, and even whether they were used as places of Muslim prayer at all. Nonetheless, the literary sources do indeed talk of Muslim prayer in Christian churches.

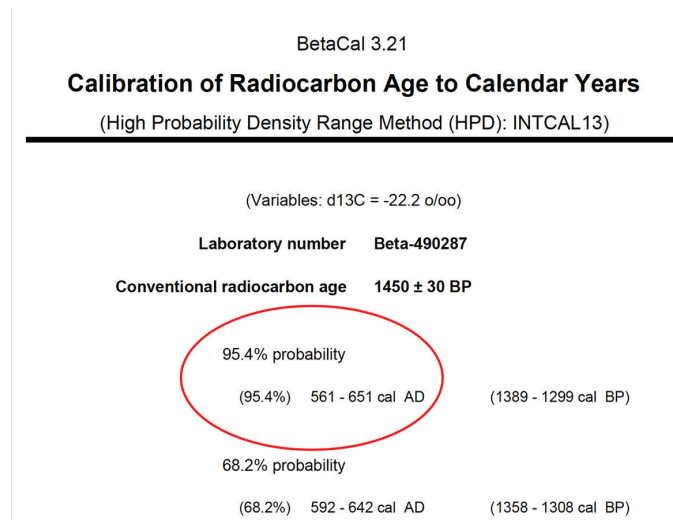
One final element in this discussion that raised some significant concerns for me was the date when the two western niches were filled in with plaster. If the two western niches were filled in prior to the rise of Islam, then obviously we would be looking at the open niche as something other than a *Mihrab*. So, during our 2014 season of excavation we were able to extract a charred olive pit from the plaster in the middle niche for testing. The C14 results were discouraging, not because they predated the rise of Islam, but rather because the date seemed too early to be plausible for the creation of a *Mihrab* in the remaining open niche (FIG. 4). The dates on the olive pit came back with a 95% probability between AD 561 and 651—that is, at the latest, only 15 years after the Battle of the Yarmouk, just a few kilometers away (Vila 2018: 1–10).

The form of the niche, it seems to me, is much too early to have been constructed

as a *Mihrab* since the pointed arch form of later *Mihrab* was not in use in the earliest periods. But, it is possible that the “Muslim” believers simply adopted this architectural feature in the church as a way of indicating the *qibla*, which just happened to be stylistically very much like what many *Mihrab* would look like in the decades to follow. But nevertheless, it is still very early for a *Mihrab* and very early for “Muslim” prayer to be taking place within a church.⁵ Be that as it may, I am inclined at present to assert with only a modicum of trepidation that we do have here a very early example of a Muslim prayer space inside the south pastophoria of our Area E church at Abila.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the nascent Muslims, the believers, prayed at Abila first in the south pastophoria of our

⁵ Although, this is where Fred Donner’s very interesting suggestions about the nature of the early Islamic polity may come into play. If Donner’s controversial suggestions are correct, the “believers” may have seen themselves in significant continuity with the local Christian population at Abila, and indeed, the Christians of Abila may not have considered them to be more than possibly a “heretical” sect of Arab Christians.



4. Results of carbon dating of olive pit from Area E. Photo credit YM, Abila Excavation.

Area E church, beginning as early as the middle of the 7th century. When that structure was destroyed in the massive earthquake of AD 749, they moved to a temporary and very crudely built *muṣalla* just east of our Area B monastic complex. Then, using spolia from the Area A church that was also destroyed in the earthquake, they constructed a more permanent, congregational mosque on the apex of the North Tall. Further excavation of this structure will hopefully make such a designation more clear.

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