

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2016 AND 2018 EXCAVATIONS REVEALING A RELIEF ICON AND RITUAL SPACES ON THE NORTHWEST SIDE OF THE ABILA AREA E PILGRIMAGE COMPLEX

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Introduction

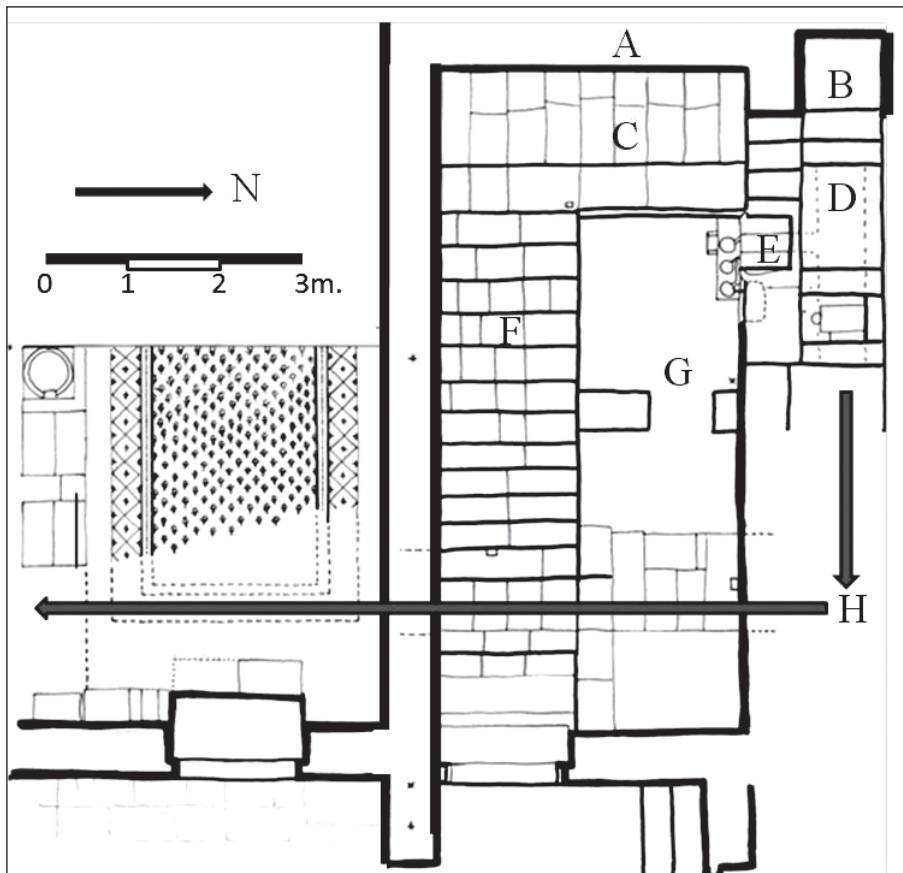
The ongoing Abila Excavation at Quwayliba¹, north of Irbid, Jordan exposed significant architectural remains and artifacts from ritual spaces during the 2016 and 2018 seasons. The spaces and objects described in this report have been located northwest of the five-aisle transept church, in a pilgrimage complex at the center of the site identified by the excavators as Area E. These discoveries illuminate the ritual activities of pilgrims during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods and the enduring traditions of the community. The ritual areas of the complex were under reconstruction from the damage caused by the early eighth century earthquakes when the great earthquake of 749 AD demolished the pilgrimage complex. That seismic upheaval capped off existing problems of persistent plague and unusual environmental events that

exacerbated, social, political and economic change that diminished Abila. The surviving resident community subsequently salvaged valuable materials they could repurpose from the pilgrimage complex. The architecture and artifacts they left in the remains of the complex, including most prominently a fragment of an extremely rare carved-stone figural relief icon from the context of the mid-eighth century iconomachy, are indicative of the creativity in attracting pilgrims and the persistence of local traditions in the face of theologically inspired opposition.

General Description of the Excavation

In 2016, work in Area E took place in three excavation units that revealed portions of the ritual spaces west of the portico and passage flanking the west end of the five-aisle pilgrimage church. These units are identified as squares E 87, E 88 and E 78 even though their dimensions were slightly modified from the regular five-meter grid with the emergence of prominent walls that made this expedient. In 2018, the expedition excavated square E 77 and returned for further work in E 87. Dr. W. Harold Mare's efforts of 2002 in removing more than two meters of jadder soil that accumulated above these squares, expedited excavation. These four squares served as the venue for some of Abila's pilgrimage specific rituals over a period of almost two centuries during which there were architectural reconfigurations. Discussion of investigation of the water supply to the complex that began in square E68 during 2018 will be covered in a subsequent report that

1. The Abila Archaeological Expedition initiated in 1980 by Dr. W. Harold Mare of Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, MO and now directed by Dr. David Vila of John Brown University, Siloam Springs, AR, conducts research at Quwayliba, the site of ancient Abila, in the Bene Kenana District under a permit granted by the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The author of this report has served as the Area E Supervisor from 2006 to the present. During the 2014, 2016 and 2018 seasons, Emmad Obeidat of the Bene Kenana District served as the lead on-site representative of the Department of Antiquities. The following report is also made possible through the heavy efforts of persons employed from surrounding communities. Area E excavation staff members in 2016 included: Dr. Maxie Burch, Michael Bennett, Melissa Endicott, Josafat Guillen, Marissa Johns, Gabrielle Marcy, Jacob Russell and Henry Vila. In 2018, the staff included Andrew Bohlender, Keegan Case, Lexie Craft, Eathan Davine, Anyelca Dubon, Marissa Johns, Jane Malkey, Daniel McCarley, and Ana Rodriguez.



1. Map of the ritual area features in excavation units E88 and E78: a) the cascade tower, b) the cascade, c) the observation platform, d) the location of the icon in its tertiary setting, e) the location of the relief's secondary setting, f) the stairway to the observation platform, g) the lower ritual room, h) the subfloor water supply channel to the atrium.

addresses the water systems of the pilgrimage complex. (Fig. 1). (Map of Excavation Units).

Excavations in 2014 adjacent to the five-aisled transept church in squares E97 and E98 exposed wide portico and a passage on the west side of the five-aisle basilica. Two openings punctuate the limestone ashlar wall that flanks the west side of this north-south running processional (Smith 2018a). The raised thresholds of these doorways suggested that secured enclosed spaces extended to the west. The excavators anticipated uncovering valued controlled spaces, but not the extent to which these spaces played a role in the pilgrimage experience in the complex. The discovery of an icon in tertiary use outside of the central ecclesiastical structure was most surprising. The following description will progress from the units E87 and E 77, which exposed an expansive shaded mosaic floor adjacent to the *atrium*/courtyard that might have accommodated the incubation of pilgrims, to the units E 88 and E 78 that exposed ritual spaces where sacralized water created the core of the Abila pilgrim's experience.

Discoveries in Squares E87 and E78 (Fig.2) (Architectural Structures in E87 and E77)

Square E87 is located west of the processional way opposite the entrance to the northernmost aisle of the five-aisle pilgrimage church. The square is bounded on the east side by a *ca.* 65cm.-wide wall constructed of sawn, local, argillaceous limestone ashlars. It stands preserved in four courses to a height of *ca.* 1.5m. A 1.3m. wide doorway punctures the wall and at the conclusion of the 2014 excavations, the sediments filling the doorway revealed that the space to the west was all one *stratum* of collapse debris consisting of major stone architectural elements surrounded by light-colored lime rich soil and few pottery sherds. The northern side of the square follows the top of a wall perpendicular to the processional way that separated the spaces accessed by the two aforementioned entrances. The east side of the square begins with a short wall stub projecting into the processional way at a point opposite the northern wall of the church. The square's northern edge continues to the west along the top of the aforementioned wall for 5m. On the

south side of the square, there is no preserved evidence of any wall. Excavation through the collapsed architectural debris in this square did not result in the discovery of any intact ceramic, metal or glass objects. The excavators found two damaged monolithic limestone columns and two limestone Corinthian capitals in the square that had formed part of an east-west colonnade along the south side of the square. The flooring and the walls of the exposed room reveal two major phases of development in the utilization of the enclosed space.

The hard hematitic limestone threshold of the doorway through the western wall of the processional way provided a transition into the ritual space in square E87. The 20-centimeter tall threshold would have kept any water in the passage from intruding into the room. The pivot points for two swinging doors pierce the sides of the threshold. These pivots, the doorjamb and 70cm by 1.4m. door well indicate that the double doors swung open into the room to the west and suggest that the builders intended to create a securable entrance. Rectangular limestone pavers that step-up 10cm. to the height of the rest of the floor in the room surround the stone-paved door well.

A ca. 3.3m.-wide carpet mosaic originally covered the center of the floor of the ritual space exposed in square E87. Falling masonry deeply indented and damaged the mosaic floor's surface in places, but the original pattern is clearly preserved. A 30cm. wide border of plain large ca. 2cm. wide off-white limestone *tesserae* surrounds a carpet mosaic. The outer edge of the carpet is set with an additional 30cm. wide band comprised of the same large plain *tesserae*. A single row of ca. 2cm. wide black *tesserae* outlines this second wide band. Inside the black borders, black single *tesserae*-outlined squares with sides of ca. 20cm. are set on the diagonal. In the off-white colored center of the squares, the mosaicist inserted a smaller black *tesserae*-outlined design. The design is a square made up of three black *tesserae* on each side that surround four red hematitic limestone *tesserae* with a single white cube in the center. This common motif like others found in the flooring of the earlier three-aisled basilica that lays below the adjacent eighth century five-aisled sanctuary form crosses and may also have

been intended to communicate belief in a triune divine being. The Abila mosaicists, here as in other parts of the pilgrimage complex, flaunted the 427AD prohibition of Emperor Theodosius II against installing crosses on floors where people might trample them beneath their feet like something of no consequence (Habas 2015). In a second ca. 10cm. wide black *tesserae* bordered band, the intervening space was filled with red *tesserae* and a single row of alternating black and white *tesserae* run down the middle of the band. Within the broad surrounding border is a 1.9m. wide field comprised primarily of ca. 1cm. wide white *tesserae*.

The central white field of the carpet mosaic is regularly set with red flower buds on black stems formed using simple geometry. The mosaicists spaced the flower buds in rows at 20cm. intervals. The mosaicists formed the units that are reminiscent of a "bouquet of flowers," with a compass set at ca. 10cm. The compass-inscribed rows of adjacent circles in the wet mortar setting bed alternated with a 10cm. offset each row thereby forming columns and diagonal lines of flowers. The overlapping circles from the alternate rows thereby cut arcs from the adjacent circles. When the top two arcs are ignored, the resultant semi-circular top of the floral units had a diameter of twenty centimeters. The bases of the units extended ten centimeters from the center of rotation and perpendicular to the base of the previously mentioned arc of 180 degrees. The overlapping of circles from the row below meanwhile cut arcs out of the base. The resultant "bouquet shapes" fit perfectly together. The mosaicists created half "bouquets along alternating rows in the central field, on the sides of the field (Fig. 3). ("Details of the E 87/77 Carpet Mosaic Construction). The western end of the mosaic continues into square E77. In the eastern side of square E87, the floor mosaic breaks off in a swath ca. 1.2m. wide that extends across the eastern side of the room from a repaired cut through in the northern wall to a break in the southern stylobate. A portion of the large white mosaic outside the carpet remains preserved in the northeast corner of the room, from the door well to the wall.

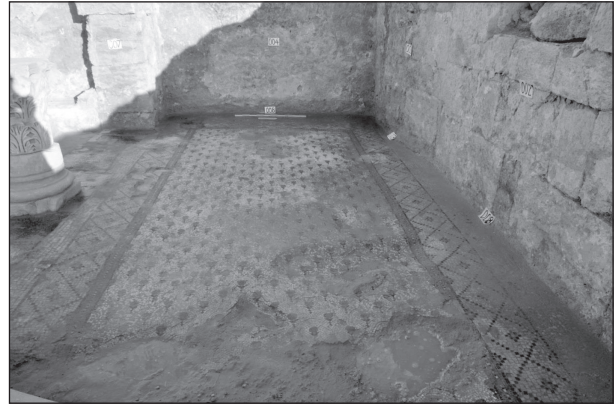
On the southern, *atrium* side of the carpet mosaic, the flooring abuts a ca. 70cm. wide



2. Architectural structures in E87 and E77.

line of large rectangular basalt and limestone ashlar set with their top surface at the same level as the mosaic flooring and *ca.* 15cm. above the hematitic limestone slabs forming the border of the opus sectile floor of the *atrium* to the south. The line of ashlar forms a step up from the *atrium* and protects the southern edge of the *tesserated* flooring. At the western end of the room, the line of stones is broken away in line with the eastern end of the preserved mosaics. In the southwest corner of E87 a plinth and a limestone column base remain in situ on the line of ashlar and demonstrates that the line of rectangular stones are the remains of a stylobate. Supporting monolithic limestone columns like one found in the collapse debris above the mosaic floor flanked the south side of the room in square E87. The preserved column base has notches cut out that suggests that the intercolumnal space may could have been closed at one time by stone chancel-type screening, or that the base was recycled from a previous location where such screening abutted a column. No fragments of either, recyclable marble or argillaceous screening fragments like those found in the South *Atrium* Chapel were recovered.

The east-west running wall north of the previously described carpet mosaic is preserved in four courses above the floor to a typical height of 1.5 meters. Elements in the wall suggest phases in the architectural development. As this plaster-finished wall was exposed in 2016, it became apparent that a *ca.* 1m. wide opening through the wall had been cut at a point *ca.* 1.5m. into the room. While the flanking portions of the wall were made of tightly fitted sawn ashlar, irregular boulders



3. Details of the E 87/77 carpet mosaic construction.

and interstitial chinking stones roughly filled this opening. No plaster filled in the gaps or obscured the modification. Interestingly this partially repaired cut through the wall lines up with the break in the eastern end of the carpet mosaic and the break of the stylobate alongside the *atrium*. The 2018 excavation of a probe below the floor in this break in the flooring revealed an anticipated water channel. The excavators anticipated possibly discovering ceramic piping that carried water to a fountain or other water feature in the *atrium* based upon the previous discovery of two fitting fragments of a spiral-fluted limestone column in the north-eastern corner of the *atrium*. The creative developers of the complex carved a vertical hole through an existing *ca.* 20cm. diameter and *ca.* 50cm. tall column to form a pipe that the excavation identifies as the vertical water shaft and possible head of a fountain. Instead of ceramic piping, the excavation discovered a limestone slab-sealed plastered-channel that was *ca.* 30cm. wide and 20cm. deep in section capable of carrying a large volume of water. Since the channel was firmly sealed, it could have still moved water that was under pressure to a fountain. Soil sediments and small pieces of charred wood choked the water channel. The cut through the wall and cut through the mosaic flooring to create the sealed water channel constituted a significant modification that was functional, but had not yet received the final finishing repairs to the mosaic floor above or plastering to the wall through which it cut, when the earthquake of 749 AD destroyed the complex. The excavator anticipates that the carbon sample taken from the channel will confirm that the channel was choked with

sediments that accumulated following the great earthquake. Further evidence of related structural modifications related to this water channel will appear in the subsequent description of the ritual antechamber in the excavation of the adjacent square E88 to the north. The destructive early eighth century seismic events in the region may have stimulated the water system modifications that were largely completed when the site was destroyed a little over two decades later in 749 AD.

In square E87, excavation exposed in the fill around collapsed architectural debris, a sherd from a ceramic *paten* with a cross impressed in the center of the concave interior. Christians of late antiquity used such liturgical vessels for the consecration and distribution of Eucharistic bread. It follows a typical Syrian model in which finely levigated red clay is employed with a shallow profile and no foot ring (Sandin 2017). (Fig. 4). (Cross-impressed Paten Base Sherd from E87). This sherd provides insight into the ceramic liturgical vessels used in the Area E complex. Architecturally, a well-preserved Corinthian style capital with two rows of acanthus leaves and volutes carved from limestone found to have fallen from the easternmost column on the stylobate will provide information for future study on capitals from Abila. Square E87 preserves the architectural remnants of the eastern end of a significant decorated covered space adjacent to the *atrium* of the five-aisled transept church.

Square E77 is located west of square E87. This unit was extended to the west to the massive terrace wall that defines the west side of Area E and which served as a means to transport ‘Ayn Quwaylibah’s water from the



4. Cross-Impressed Paten base sherd from E87.

tunnel outlet below the Area G church across the saddle between KHirbat Umm Al ‘Amad and Tall Abīl, to the pilgrimage complex. Square E77 is the location of the western end of the previously described mosaic floor found in E88. The 1.9m. wide field of red flowers on a white background surrounded by borders like those in E87 previously described continue in E77. The carpet mosaic here was generally better preserved and extended 3.3m. south from the northern east-west running wall to the stylobate along the north side of the *atrium*. The western end of the mosaic extends up to the terrace wall that runs at an angle of *ca.* 6 degrees off the orientation of the rest of the pilgrimage complex structures. The result is that there is a trapezoidal white mosaic border at the west end of the room. The patrons unfortunately left no dedicatory inscription at this eastern end where they had space. Such an omission of a dedicatory inscription appears to have been the standard practice at Abila. None of the six extant mosaic surfaces discovered in Area E has dedicatory inscriptions naming patrons.

While there are some *ca.* 5cm. rectangular holes cut into the terrace wall above the west end to the *tessera* area that could have supported construction scaffolding, there is no evidence preserved of any typical ecclesiastical architectural features like the apse carved into the terrace wall at the west end of the south *atrium* chapel. Architectural features from an earlier configuration of the space could exist below the mosaic flooring.

The stylobate found in E87 continues westward alongside the south side of the carpet mosaic in square E77. A 60cm square column base stands in situ 1.4m west of the column base in E87. When the stylobate approaches the terrace/aqueduct wall, a rectangular pilaster *ca.* 60cm square abuts the wall and forms the terminus of the bench that runs at the base of the terrace wall on the west side of the *atrium*. This masonry construction made up of sawn ashlar mortared together stands to a height of over 1.6m. This pilaster supported the western end of a line of timber lintels that stretched over the two capital surmounted columns to the processional wall in the east. These lintels that rested *ca.* 5m above the stylobate carried the southern end of the roof covering the mosaic

floor all the way to the processional wall.

The ashlar wall running along the north side of the mosaic-paved space in E77 provides evidence regarding the sequence of construction in the adjacent structures. A vertical crack of over 2.5m. in the masonry of the wall, from the level of the mosaic to the top of the preserved wall, located at a point 2m east of the terrace wall indicates that the northern wall abutted a previously constructed structure that stood against the terrace/aqueduct wall. After the masons constructed the northern wall, they then laid the southern stylobate. Mosaicists subsequently installed tessellated flooring on the slightly elevated northern portion of the *atrium* to complete the project. In a later period, remodeling efforts designed to enhance the water features of the complex required cutting through the eastern end of the northern wall and the mosaic carpet to accommodate the installation of the sub-floor water channel.

The space exposed in squares E87 and E77 west of the doorway from the processional had an undetermined early use that appears to have necessitated the installation of a strong securable entrance. Later preserved construction obscures the architecture in this space during the earlier phase of the pilgrimage complex. The clerical authorities and patrons of the ca. 4m wide by ca. 9.5m long area repurposed the space. They designed it to serve as a nicely floored shaded area from which worshippers could observe the proceedings in the *atrium* where water rituals took place and the clergy held court. This space located between the *atrium* and additional water ritual areas in squares E68 and E 78 to the north may have served as an inviting venue

for the incubation of pilgrims seeking relief from afflictions and revelation through dreams. The presence of a prayer in Kufic inscribed on a paver outside the doorway points to continuing special appreciation for the area during the last century during which pilgrims came to the complex. The unfinished remodeling of the water system is an indication of the vibrancy of the pilgrimage activity in the complex up to the mid-eighth century.

Discoveries in Squares E88 and E78 (Fig. 5) (Architectural Remains in E88 and E78)

Square E88 is located west of the formerly marble *opus sectile* paved passageway along the north side of the five-aisle pilgrimage church. The square is bounded on the east side by a ca. 65cm. wide sawn-limestone ashlar wall that stands four courses to a height of ca. 1.5m. A ca. 1.3m. wide doorway punctures the wall in the southeastern corner of the square. At the conclusion of the 2014 excavations, the sediments filling the doorway revealed that the space to the west was filled with a 1.5m deep *stratum* of disturbed collapse debris consisting of major stone architectural elements surrounded by light colored soil and few pottery sherds. A ca. 65cm thick east-west ashlar wall that separates square E87 from square E88 marks the south side of the excavation unit. A north-south masonry wall line ca. 4m to the west of the processional way in the northwest corner of the room marks its western boundary. The architectural structure centered in square E88 is an anteroom that provides separate access ways to both an upper ritual space and a lower ritual space in square E78.



5. Architectural remains in E88 and E78.

The Anteroom in E88

The entryway to the anteroom is 1.3m wide. The large opening has incorporated faux molding at the foot of the jambs. On the eastern side of the doorway, holes in the masonry, indicate that a finishing wooden decorative element affixed to the masonry surrounded the door opening in the passage wall. From the processional passage, pilgrims had to step over a 15cm tall and 25cm wide hard hematitic limestone threshold and pass through a pair of wooden doors. These doors turned on pivots in the corners of the threshold behind the doorjamb and opened to the west away from the processional route. Moving west over the threshold the pilgrims stepped into a 1.6m by 60cm door well. The floor of the door well stands 10cm higher than the exterior processional floor and would not have been subject to flooding. The bottom of the door well preserves in situ a portion of the mosaic flooring of an earlier structure in square E88. The mosaic has a 15cm wide light red colored border that surrounds a black field in which red squares outlined with lighter *tesserae* are set on the diagonal. The squares of the checkerboard have sides of *ca.* 26cm. This flooring is reminiscent of the mosaic in the southern half of square E108 in that it is a checkerboard set on the diagonal, but with two differences. In the door well, there is no evidence of a red frame around the checkerboard field and the outlining of the red squares in slightly lighter colored *tesserae* is not present. Rectangular hematitic limestone pavers frame the western side of the door well and surmount the checkerboard mosaic floor that disappears from sight beneath the pavers.

Moving west from the entrance and door well, the nearly square anteroom, which measures *ca.* 3.5m wide north to south and *ca.* 3.4m wide east to west, provides access to two ritual spaces to the west, in square E 78. The eastern wall of the anteroom is made of tightly bonded sawn limestone ashlar covered with a thin lime plaster. The southern wall of the room is built of similar sawn ashlar carefully surfaced with the same fine plasterwork. The southern wall was subject to modification with a *ca.* 1m wide cut that begins *ca.* 1.5m west of the southern jamb of the entry way. Unfinished boulders

and chinking stones without a smoothing plasterwork finish fill the wall cut. This blocked up section of the wall corresponds with the cut found in the southern wall face exposed in E 87. The wall cut also aligns with a series of reused basalt pavers and flat-sided architectural elements that bisect the floor of the antechamber north to south and run to a discontinuity in the northern wall of the antechamber. The stone flooring feature stands slightly proud of areas of flooring comprised of large white *tesserae* to both the east and west. The excavators interpret the strip of reused rectangular basalt stones transecting the anteroom between the wall cuttings in the northern and southern walls as the covering to the subfloor water line carrying



6. The Abila relief icon in-situ.



7. Detailed Image of the Abila Relief Icon.

sacralized water from square E 78 to a water feature in the *atrium*. Subsequent excavation of a probe beneath the basalt paving may reveal not only the continuation of the water conduit but also remains of the earlier phase of mosaic flooring in the anteroom.

The west side of the anteroom provided pilgrims with two potential paths. On the north end of the west side pilgrims could pass through a *ca.* 75cm wide doorless opening on the same level into a ritually significant lower space in square E78 described later in this report. On the south end of the west side of the anteroom a 1.6m wide set of stone paved stairs abuts the southern wall. It ascends *ca.* 1.2m up six steps to the west toward an upper platform in E 78 on steps with a *ca.* 20cm rise and 30cm tread made from recycled basalt and limestone ashlar. Chiseled incisions on the surfaces of the limestone steps, worn smooth by traffic, served to reduce the peril of slipping. The stairway is of sufficient width to accommodate two-way traffic. The anteroom served as a transitional area in the movement of pilgrimage traffic to and from adjacent sacred spaces. The fill in the anteroom preserved only a few body sherds and no special objects. Excavators recovered no evidence of burnt timber rafters and conclude either that post-earthquake salvagers removed and repurposed surviving elements of wooden superstructure along with the entry door or that the anteroom was not roofed at the time of the earthquake.

The Stairway and Observation Platform in E78

The excavation of square E78 revealed artifacts and architecture that highlight new details of the rituals and focus of the Area E pilgrimage complex. On the south side of the square the 1.6m. wide staircase that ascends westward from square E88 ascends a further six steps with a wider *ca.* 40cm. tread and a continued rise of *ca.* 20cm. The stairway is thus *ca.* 4.2m long and helped pilgrims ascend *ca.* 2.4m to a 1.6m wide stone-paved platform. The platform extends 3.5m. to the north. The row of eight, *ca.* 1.1m long by 40cm. wide paving stones on the western side of the platform adjacent to the tower are cracked along a line *ca.* 50cm from the tower. The compression of

these pavers by the impact and weight of fallen ashlar indicates that the materials below the surface are not bedrock or solid masonry. The elevated platform provided pilgrims a highly desired close up view of the cascading waters falling from the aqueduct outlet high above in a channel built into the tower and washing an icon in the waterway on the north side of square E78. The narrow width of the access to the cascade and possible foundation of a low barrier suggest that pilgrims did not typically move beneath the cascade from the south. The 1.6m wide platform and 1.6m-wide stairway suggests pilgrims ascended the stairway on the right side so as to move most directly to the best observation point and went back down to the processional way with their right shoulder against the tower and staircase wall. Future excavation in square E79 will add to understanding of the potential for ritual activities like lustrations in the cascade. The northwest corner of the observation platform also provided local service personnel access to components of the water system hidden below and within the tower and terrace wall to the west in square E68. The builders hid the access to the sub-floor features behind a vertical 1.5cm thick slab of metamorphosed stone that served as a “man-hole” in the wall of the northwest corner of the platform. The vaulting and 80cm. wide corbel-roofed passageway hidden below is largely located in square E68. Excavation of this unit is incomplete, and its details will be the subject of a subsequent report.

The west side of the observation platform abuts the masonry structure built along the face of the north to south terrace/aqueduct wall in E68. The excavators in 2016 considered the structure a possible “stairway” that provided ascending pilgrims from the *atrium* with an elevated overview of the ritual areas below. Following the excavation of E77 in 2018, the excavators now understand the feature in E68 as a partially collapsed *ca.* 7m tall tower that served to bring the aqueduct’s water into the complex in a dramatic fashion. It was not a means by which pilgrims accessed the pilgrimage complex. A water channel groove cut into the exposed eastern face of the terrace wall where the southern wall of the tower has fallen away preserves indications of the pre-

tower phase of the water supply system to the pilgrimage complex. Aqueduct supplied water was important to the complex before builders constructed the tower with its cascade.

The Cascade and Water Sacralization in E78

Water diverted from 'Ayn Quwaylibah by the Upper Umm Al 'Amad aqueduct splashed into the complex within a three-sided masonry chute located in the northwest corner of square E78. This cascade is a *ca.* 4m tall, 90cm wide and 85cm. deep feature in the tower wall. Water-laid mineral deposits covered its surface. The western wall, however, has a more irregular pattern of deposition that may suggest a plastered surface treatment in a deliberate attempt to accentuate the perception of a large volume of the water. The previous excavations by Dr. Mare exposed the top of this feature, but since fallen stones filled it, the excavation did not understand its potential significance. The aqueduct at the top of the terrace wall had earlier supplied water that flowed along lower channels in the terrace wall to fill the cisterns in the *atrium* and a running water feature at the southwest corner of the chancel in the five-aisled church (Smith 2018b). During later phases of development water fell down the vertical chute in east side of the tower and splashed on the horizontal stone platform at the bottom and flowed *ca.* 3.25m east until a drain swallowed it. In a region where there are long dry summers and a modest annual rainfall, such running water was remarkable and played an integral part of the miracle commemorated and the memories created in the complex (Smith 2020).

In the last major phase of the pilgrimage complex at the time of the great earthquake, the water that landed on the horizontal platform below the tower washed down over two *ca.* 15cm-tall steps and then flowed over a partially preserved bas-relief icon carved into an argillite slab. The icon bearing the image of a codex-carrying saint whose upper head was broken away was set face up in a bed of mortar. The head of the saint was set against the bottom step. Falling water washed over the icon before draining through a channel to the east. In the final configuration of the ritual space a portion of the icon sacralized water was diverted into

the ritual space just one meter to the south through a chute made of two repurposed curved roofing tiles. Most of the water fell into a masonry-covered water system below that remains to be excavated. The system the runs west to east provided water to other parts of the complex. At the time of excavation in 2016, a rectangular hole, 30cm wide and 50cm long, appears to have swallowed the "river" of water. This opening, however, is within a depression 50cm. wide and 70cm long surrounded by a bed of mortar. The excavator suggests that the large opening once housed a rectangular pierced device, which served as a grate that caught and drained the water. That object made either of metal or marble did not survive in situ and the excavator suspects that salvagers pried it up and recycled it after 749 AD.

The splashing waterfall first, provided both an auditory and visual component to the hierotropy of the pilgrimage center and second, supplied a treasured commodity when its water was sacralized by flowing over the icon. From the north side of the observation platform in E78 and the top of the tower abutting the terrace 4m above at the top of the tower in E68, pilgrims could observe the waterfall and icon. The icon-sacralized water also played a role in the Abila pilgrimage experience in the adjacent lower ritual room.

The Lower Sacred Space and Ritual Features in E78

A ritual room measuring *ca.* 1.8m wide and *ca.* 2.0m long is located north of the stairway and east of the observation platform in E78. Pilgrims accessed this space floored with large white *tesserae* by passing through a *ca.* 75cm-wide opening from the northern end of the anteroom in E88. Beneath a *stratum* of collapsed masonry, a layer of charred material covered the floor. This layer contained numerous small glass fragments and the excavators found a nearly intact glass vessel the northeastern corner of the room near the entrance. The mosaic floor does not have any decorative design and it is dented from falling masonry. The presence of glass fragments in the ashes on the floor suggests that the room had a timber roof that created a dark interior that needed illumination and that the tumult of the great earthquake caused a fire

when lit glass oil lamps smashed on the floor. The ritual focus was on the north side of the lamp-illuminated room.

In the northwest corner of the lower ritual room in E78, a 56cm-deep and 60cm-wide rectangular niche is preserved inset into the north wall to a height of *ca.* 2m. In the bottom of the niche, 20cm-wide ashlar flank each side and between them is a 20cm gap. The excavators found two crushed thin-walled cooking pots in situ within the niche atop the ashlars. In the soil that filled the pot on the eastern side, they retrieved a bronze coin with an Arabic inscription. At the bottom of the open space beneath the ledges on which the pots rested, an argillite slab inclines steeply down to the north and drained water from the niche into the hidden water system behind the back northern wall of the niche. The western wall of the niche is incised with a 2cm deep, *ca.* 4cm wide and 80cm tall vertical groove that extends up from a point 20cm above the top of the ashlars in the bottom of the niche. The eastern wall of the niche has no matching groove, but instead a chord of the stone in the eastern niche wall is



8. View of the Area E water ritual area from above.



9. View of the Area E water ritual area from the south.

cut away. The cuttings in the sides of the niche are evidence that the niche was once closed off with a *ca.* 60cm-wide and 80cm tall stone slab that was placed at an angle into the niche. One side of that slab was inserted into the groove on the west side of the niche, the slab was pivoted forward through the cutaway wall on the east side like a closing door. The feature that closed the niche matches closely with the preserved dimensions and reconstruction of the relief icon described later in this report.

The builders of the pilgrimage complex embedded a *ca.* 25cm wide and 95cm long slab of argillite in the tessellated floor of the lower ritual room beneath the at one time closed niche. Carved into this slab are three circular 2cm deep bowl-like depressions connected by narrow channels to the drain in the floor of the niche. Any water that dripped down from the water supply above or that overflowed the depressions flowed onto the floor and ran into the base of the niche through a drain in the floor that ran northward beneath the argillite floor installation. When excavators first exposed the slab, the two westernmost 12cm diameter bowl depressions were sealed over with mortar and only the eastern bowl depression was open. This modification provides evidence of changes in the use of the niche above. In an earlier configuration water dripping from above, down the closed face of the niche, fell into the then open two western depressions. In the last phase of usage of the lower room in E78, the water ritual that took place on the slab employed a new reduced water supply using only the eastern depression.

The eastern bowl-like depression in the ritual room floor has both a 1cm. deep water supply groove and a drainage groove. The water that flowed into the depression came from a *ca.* 45cm wide curved topped niche cut into the base of the north wall 15cm east of the larger rectangular niche. The bottom of this secondary niche was found closed off with a 1.4cm thick and *ca.* 25cm tall rectangular piece of hard black metamorphic stone inserted into a groove in the west side of the niche wall. Installers swung it forward to close off the front of the niche in a manner similar to which the large rectangular niche to the west had been closed. In the top at the back of the niche is a water supply channel

formed from two *ca.* 40cm-long curved roof tiles that drained sacralized water which had flowed over the icon at the base of the cascade and through the drain grate feature described above. That feature thereby drained a portion of the sacralized water into the niche below and created a reservoir of *ca.* 40 liters of water. The reservoir never overflowed since a hole in the back northeastern corner *ca.* 22cm from the base drained excess water back into the water drainage system. The interior of the closing stone of the floor-level niche is sealed with mortar along the edges and is only punctured by a *ca.* 2mm hole bored at the base which allowed a thin stream of water to run through a groove into the bowl-shaped depression and then through a second channel into the drain. A copious water supply was not needed for the ritual activities in the lower ritual room during either the first or second phases of utilization, but a continuous supply of non-stagnant water was significant for the creation of eulogia that took place there.

The lower ritual room with its water features was a special stop for pilgrims during at least the last two phases of the Area E complex. At the time of the 749 AD earthquake before the timbers of the superstructure fell and burned, the room still with its one open bowl-like depression in the floor continued to function as an installation for filling eulogia such as small glass vials of sacralized water. The cooking pots found in the niche could have been placed there by the complex staff to serve pilgrims by collecting sacralized water that dripped from above or the offerings of pilgrims. It is possible also, however that the pots served subsequent salvagers as a moving repository for valuables they had collected. Further study of the Byzantine/Umayyad transitional coin will contribute to understanding of the early Islamic currency used at Abila. Field observations include that it retains the Byzantine weight system with the letter “M” and remnants of Christian symbols on the reverse (Gousous 2014: 41, coin #121; Gousous 2004: 349). Such coins, like the pilgrimage complex, reflect the cultural overlapping of the Byzantine-Umayyad transition.

The second to last phase of the utilization of the lower ritual room is indicated by the western two depressions in the argillite slab in the floor and the wall modifications in the sides of the larger niche. The size of the opening to the niche corresponds with the relief icon fragment later situated in the stream of water that flowed in the channel above. A scenario that explains the architectural evidence is that the carved relief fragment still preserved to its full height including an upper guilloche border was installed vertically at the front of the niche. In the time before the early eighth century earthquakes, water from the artificial stream above washed down over the face of the modified icon, as it was illuminated and animated by flickering oil lamp light. Pilgrims collected the subsequently sacralized water in eulogia below the front face of the icon and surplus water then ran back into the water system through the drain in the floor to serve elsewhere in the complex. The evidence from the frame and figures on the icon that is going to be described indicate that in this niche the icon was in secondary use.

The Relief Icon that Sacralized Water in the Pilgrimage Complex

Description of the Carved Relief Fragment

The preserved Abila icon found by the 2016 expedition at the foot of the cascade feature in square E78 is a fragment of a larger carved raised-relief panel that depicts a saint (**Fig. 6**). It is carved from a 6cm. thick *ca.* 58cm tall and 50 cm wide slab of light grey (Munsell 2.5YR 7/1) argillite that may have originated from a local quarry site deep in the Yarmuk Valley. This type of sedimentary material exported from the region near Quwaylibah is composed of poorly lithified clay particles with a hardness of *ca.* 2.6 on the Mohs scale. The material does not have laminar bedding. When the stone of the icon breaks, it produces a conchoidal fracture. The argillite of the icon has a slightly greasy feel and it effectively resists water penetration. This material is the same as that into which the bowl-like depressions were carved in the floor of the lower ritual room in E78. The material is also the same as the stone used to pave the floor and sidewalls of the *frigidarium* of the Late Roman period bath complex that remains

largely intact beneath the nave of the Area E basilica. The largest preserved rectangular slabs of argillite in the *frigidarium* measure only *ca.* 4cm thick but extend up to *ca.* 1.2m long and 60cm wide. Smaller thinner slabs of this type stone also form the sides of the ritual water channel located on the south side of the chancel in the five-aisled transept basilica. It is possible that the argillite of the relief panel like that in the chancel water channel were spolia from the earlier bath complex in Area E. The homogenous stone with a hardness around that of steatite provided a superb medium that could be carved away to create both the raised-relief field of images and an ornately carved frame to the panel. This type of sculptural approach produced images that observers such as Abila pilgrims appreciated in low-light interiors since they were more visible than painted panels. In flickering lamplight, the figures became animated.

The largely intact lower left corner of the original relief carving constitutes the icon. A deeply incised 10cm-wide border flanks the left side and base of the icon. The guilloche deeply carved in the border forms a series of circular frames occupied by a regular pattern of three carved symbols. From left to right the sequence of symbols at the base of the frame is a symmetrical four-armed cross; a three-petaled symbol, later called in French a *fleur-de-lis* and a stylized four-petaled flower with a round center. The *fleur-de-lis* found on this frame is one of the earliest preserved Byzantine uses of this symbol later associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus. The design in this context could arguably be a variant symbol of the cross of Jesus like the adjacent symbols. The tetrapetalous flower could however be a symbol that also preserved an allusion to the four evangelists radiating from Jesus and possibly Mary in the center. The motifs in the frame probably correlated with the image in the center of the original composition. The frame may arguably suggest that the central focus of the carving was Jesus, possibly in conjunction with Mary.

The portion of a broad bold frame preserved in the bottom left corner indicates that the original composition of the relief carved composition was much larger than that which is preserved.

The left side of the panel outside the guilloche is chamfered creating also a 2.5 centimeter wide tenon that allowed the panel to be inserted into a vertical restraining mortise like that typically found in the sides of chancel posts. It would have held the icon in an upright position where it was expected to be viewed in its initial and possibly also secondary installations. The finished base of the stone panel does not have a similar flange. This indicates that the designers anticipated that it would be held in place by gravity in a groove or on a ledge.

The central rectangular field where the preserved image is located is set off by a plain 12 mm-wide frame. Inside the frame, the field is carved back about 6mm from the top surface and is flat and unadorned with the exception of the remaining portions of two raised figures and a *ca.* 3.5 cm diameter raised disc to the right of the neck of the figure on the left. The largely preserved person on the left stands on two exposed feet that show the individual as moving to the right but pivoting to face the viewer directly. A shallow incision on the figure's right foot that appears to be a thong crossing the top of the foot suggests the presence of sandals. The figure wears an ankle-length mantle draped over both shoulders. This old-fashioned attire found in Byzantine iconography is probably a *himation*. The figure wears the loose-fitting upper garment over a long *chiton* that may be evidenced near the ankles and around the person's neck. The right arm protrudes from the heavily draped garment and the right-hand points towards the figure's left with two fingers that largely obscure the thumb folded behind. The fingers point to a rectangular object held upright from the bottom by the left hand, which extends from the folds of cloth. The right-hand position on the figure may be conveying a more specific message, but it mainly directs the viewer's attention to the left. The rectangular object supported in the left-hand rests at the top on the subject's left shoulder. This object is commonly found in contemporary painted Byzantine artwork. The object is a codex. If the book were open, it would suggest that the figure was teaching the viewer. When it is closed, however, as appears to be the case here, the focus is upon completed revelation from God. The overwhelming majority of examples

of persons in Early Byzantine images carrying codices are depictions of Jesus Christ, the *Logos* or of the Four Evangelists, who wrote the canonical gospels. Occasionally in later religious images, other saints also carry codices containing the Christian scriptures from which they teach. Since the figure is not wearing a wool *omophorion*, symbolic of pastoral responsibilities the haloed person on the left side of the carving was not a venerated bishop.

As the viewer moves up the carved figure's body from the clothing, it becomes obvious that the person is male since the face is bearded. Bearded faces are common for adult males in Byzantine images. The beard is modest, symmetrical and slightly pointed. A flat closed mouth above the beard creates a moderately stern visage. The upper portion of the face from the bottom of the nose up is broken off with the top of the field and upper guilloche border framing to the panel. On the shoulders at both sides of the neck, the arcs of the perimeter of a 14 cm diameter halo that once extended around the head are preserved. The arcs of the halo in the field unfortunately are not preserved high enough to absolutely determine if the figure had a cruciform halo. If the arms of a cross were portrayed in the halo, then the subject could be definitively identified as Jesus Christ. The absence of an arm of the cross in the slightly better-preserved portion of the halo to the subject figure's left suggests that the figure never had a cross in the halo. Such nimbed figures without cruciform halos are typically depictions of saints in Byzantine iconography. The *ca.* 3.5cm diameter disk that stands proud of the background field above the figure's left shoulder and may once have preserved an identifying abbreviation of the saint's name as is found in many painted icons. Perhaps a very careful cleaning of the top surface of the disc will reveal the name of the saint.

A second figure on the right of the relief fragment, which has otherwise been broken away is indicated by a preserved fragment of clothing. The folds on the garment are the same as those on the left side of the more fully preserved figure. This fold of a mantle billows out behind the moving figure and exposes the side of a foot. The similar position and location of the clothing on the second figure indicates

that the second figure was of the similar size and was also moving to the right of the relief. The presence of a second figure proceeding in front of the more preserved fragment together with the absence of evidence for a cruciform halo suggests that the preserved figure on the left was a saint and not Jesus. The image on the Abila relief bears some similarities with the codex-holding "Christ Pantocrator," that adorned the gold coins of Byzantine Emperor Justinian II (685-711AD) and which came to be a standard image in the apses of post-iconoclastic period Byzantine churches. Such images of "Christ Almighty" with cruciform halos often focus on the singular figure, but in six and seventh century examples, other figures sometimes accompanied Jesus (Weitmann 1976). Early preserved examples include a painted icon from Bawit, Egypt of Jesus carrying a codex and standing with his arm around the alleged miracle-working Saint Menas of Egypt (Louvre Museum, Accession # AF 11565). More commonly, codex-carrying Evangelists associated with the production of the Canonical Gospels flank a central Jesus. A most colorful and complete *secco* painting of that scene is recently restored on the ceiling of the southern lobe of the sanctuary of the Red Monastery at Sohag, Egypt². Images like the aforementioned suggest possible reconstructions of the complete original Abila bas-relief composition.

Reconstructions and the Initial Use of the Abila Relief Carving

Based on the presumptions that the ornate frame would have continued in a uniform width all around the relief, and that the sculptor vertically centered the image, the carved panel would have once had a total vertical height of *ca.* 80 cm. If the preserved figure was matched by a second figure of the similar size, and the two figures were horizontally centered, with uniform framing continuing all around, the icon would have been *ca.* 80 cm wide not counting the 2.5cm mounting flange presumed to exist on both sides. If the original composition in the

2. An interactive view of the sanctuary and particularly the image of Jesus flanked by the Evangelists is available at <http://www.360cities.net/image/red-monastery-sohag-egypt#2.10,-83.70,90,0>
<https://www.360cities.net/image/red-monastery-sohag-egypt>

central field of the panel was more extensive and had, two sets of opposing equal-sized and evenly spaced figures depicting the four evangelists in the field, it would have been *ca.* 1.4 m wide. If those pairs of equally sized evangelists however flanked a slightly larger figure of Jesus, or of an enthroned Mary with an infant Jesus on her lap in the center, the carved panel could have attained a width of over 1.8m. The cruciform symbolism of the frame suggests that Jesus would have been the central subject in the original composition and that the long five-figure composition was more likely.

The preserved Abila icon fragment, as mentioned earlier, bears evidence on its preserved left side flange that its patrons presented it originally to viewers in a vertical position. In the *atrium* chapel of the Area E complex, about 20m south of the icon find spot, excavators found two chancel screens broken in situ that provide preserved on site examples of how church decorators made local carved stone chancel screens of a similar size stand upright. The flanges on the sides of the screens fit into vertical grooves cut into the sides of flanking chancel posts and architectural elements like columns and walls. The flange and the carving technique suggest that the Abila complex builders originally positioned the carved panel vertically in the interior of the ecclesiastical complex where diffuse natural light and oil lamps made it visible. Since the back of the icon fragment is flat and not carefully finished, it suggests that worshippers viewed the icon only from the front carved side.

The intact original image-bearing panel could have originally served as chancel screening held between posts in the south-east end of the nave where overhead piping brought water into a special water feature or could have been affixed against an interior wall. The evidence of the preserved dimensions of the flange indicate it would be similar in height to the size of the grooves in preserved chancel posts found in the adjacent five-aisle transept church. The distances between vertical chancel post sockets in the focal sacred space (*hierateion*) of the central apse of the Area E Pilgrimage Church flanking the central steps and gate are also *ca.* 2m in length. These chancel screen sections are unusually long and could accommodate the

projected length of a five-figure panel. In the studies of chancel screens of the period from the region made by Lihi Habas there are, however, no parallels for such long, ornately bordered, local stone-carved chancel screens containing bas-reliefs of human figures (Habas 2009). Two spaces between chancel posts on the south side of the chancel area could accommodate the more modest two-figure reconstruction. Since no fragments of carved screening made of argillite stone were found in the chancel area and since the material from which the icon is carved would not have been salvaged by lime makers like the marble decorations stripped from the church, an originally wall-mounted relief carving may be the better hypothesis.

The excavation of Area E exposes two architectural venues beyond the chancel beneath the dome of the transept church could have provided suitable venues for the presentation of a long original relief carving. First, there is a unique architectural feature flanked by projecting ashlar that form pilasters in the southern wall of the five-aisled pilgrimage church just west of the southern transept chapel. While a wall-mounting here could have provided space and a focal location for a large raised relief panel, there is no evidence of any attachment clamps in the wall or architectural features in the adjacent floor like the base for screening that would have restrained enthusiastic pilgrims.

Since the preserved fragment of the icon does not show any particular wear suggesting frequent handling or kissing, a second, and perhaps superior possible location of the initial presentation of the complete relief panel in the basilica is a *ca.* 7m long section of the interior of the eastern wall of the church. There the stone foundation of a stone feature with sockets for posts and grooves for screens remain in the floor *ca.* 1m west of the eastern wall of the church. It would have restricted enthusiastic worshippers' access to the wall extending from the south side of the nave to the southern semi-circular chapel. This expansive wall space in the transept provided local religious leaders a place to affix important visuals like carved, tessellated or painted images for display and veneration in a secure venue. If subsequent excavation reveals further fragments of the

relief panel, improved reconstructions of the length and the location of the new evidence may help clarify argument regarding the panel's initial location in the complex. The high-quality large-scale relief carving of sainted figures attracted devoted attention that continued even after unknown forces broke the object. Neither fear of earthquakes or iconoclasts kept the devotees at Abila from reusing the treasured image and making it an icon.

Reconstruction of the Secondary and Tertiary Use of the Abila Relief Fragment

Preserved evidence found in the remaining architecture of the Abila pilgrimage complex suggests that devotees venerated the remains of the carved relief panel as an icon in two locations in square E78. After the venerated panel was likely initially broken in one of several local earthquakes or by another cause, devotees of the complex who had resources to effect renovations to the pilgrimage complex initiated the construction of the lower ritual space in E78. The potential use of fragment of the relief may have helped to inspire their plans to enhance the aqueduct water that had long supplied the facilities in the area. The builders first installed the fragment preserving the full image of a saint vertically in the large rectangular niche of the lower ritual room in E78. There with water flowing from above and washing over its face the carving became a water-sacralizing icon. The niche was an integral part of the room and not an afterthought. The previously described dimensions of the fragment, the presence of a vertical groove able to accommodate an 80cm tall panel, the cutaway chord of the east wall of the niche and the presence of bowl-shaped depressions in the floor above a drainage system support the case for the insertion of either the preserved relief fragment or another such significant water resistant panel. It is possible that a rectangular section salvaged from the center of the original relief carving, perhaps even bearing the image of Jesus could have been employed. The problem with this alternative panel theory is that no remains of such a panel are preserved. This makes the preserved relief carving fragment the most likely candidate.

After the icon fell from its elevated location in the niche (possibly as a result of seismic activity)

or was removed and the top guilloche frame was broken off, the devotees of the pilgrimage center repositioned the subsequently smaller surviving fragment in a third location. They set it horizontally in the watercourse two steps beneath the cascade where excavators found the icon on the upper level, north side of square E78. They positioned it so that the somewhat energy-diminished water flowed over the icon and that pilgrims on the observation platform could see it beneath the surface. The flow of the water over the venerated icon subsequently transformed the perceived quality of all the water in the complex. The waters flowing over the submerged figure on the icon probably recalled an earlier era baptism or some other aspect of the experience of the persons and events connected with the miracles associated with the pilgrimage complex. In Byzantine artistic depictions of Jesus' baptism, observers can see his lower body partially revealed through the rippling waters of a pool filled by the Jordan River. The Jordan fills the pool through a waterfall set in the background or to the side.

When the icon-blessed water drained out of sight, it went on to carry its blessings to water features downstream. A small amount of the water flowed through the conduit formed of roof tiles into the previously described lower reservoir niche in the northwest corner of the ritual space and from there into a *eulogia*-creating bowl depression. The greatest part of the consecrated water fell into a larger lower channel, large enough for a small person to crawl into and move eastward. While excavations revealing further details of the water system remain to be conducted it is apparent that at least some of the water continued 2.5m. east and then turned ninety degrees and flowed south through the subfloor water channel towards the *atrium*. The construction of this final portion of the water system required that two substantial east-west walls had to be cut and that the flooring in the affected spaces in E88 and E87 removed in order to provide for the added water channel. After that installation, the perhaps impoverished, but still determined devotees of the pilgrimage complex began to rebuild the walls and restore the flooring. The excavator suggests that the subfloor channel provided water for a fountain

in the *atrium*. Clarifying the destination of the added water channel will require further excavation beneath the opus sectile floor level in the *atrium* in square E86.

Conclusion

The Christian leaders of Abila's apparent defiance of Byzantine Emperor Leo III's proclamation banning the display of human images in Christian worship in the early eighth century has parallels in the earlier history of the Abila Christian community. This is seen first, in the installation of crosses in the mosaic flooring of the three-aisled basilica in defiance of an imperial proscription of the practice and second, in sixth century Bishop Alexander of Abila refusing to denounce Origenism in the time of the reign of Emperor Justinian (Cyril of Scythopolis 1991). While some neighboring clerics opposed Emperor Justinian I unscathed, while holding to heterodox positions, Bishop Alexander of Abila suffered exile to Constantinople. The difference was that he lived at a time when Byzantine rule effectively reached into the urban centers of *Palaestina Secunda* and he was not one of the strategically tolerated miaphysite Ghassanids who had settled just to the north of Abila and helped Byzantium maintain a buffer against the Persians. The Byzantine Emperors who had alienated many of their former subjects in Palestine and Arabia over religious and economic issues prior to the Battle of the Yarmuk in 635 AD had only residual historical and cultural influence when they were no longer in control of the Levant. The clergy of Abila in the mid-eighth century were under the political jurisdiction of *Jund Al Urdunn* in *Bilad Ash SHam* which was ruled by Umayyad caliphs. The Sufyanid Umayyad Caliphs were initially pragmatic and less zealous about eradicating religious icons than their increasingly prescriptive Marwanid and later Abassid successors. During the time when the Abila relief fragment icon was on display in the Area E pilgrimage complex, Umayyad rulers like Hisham and Walid ibn Yazid were overseeing the construction of the royal retreat at Qusayr 'Amrah (قصير عمرة) with its incongruous figural frescoes on the vaulted ceilings. While zealous, iconoclastic Muslims might have publicly opposed the presence and use of icons

amongst the tolerated Christians who submitted to Islamic rule, they do not have the political will to aggressively pursue the elimination of religious images held in high esteem by the monks and laity in a still substantial Christian population. Iconodules like those who appear to have persisted at Abila, were not in peril of exile. Among the mixed population of *Jund al-Urdunn* that came to the Abila pilgrimage site with its icon were Arabic-speaking and Kufic-writing individuals. It appears possible that both Christians and Muslims continued to be drawn to holy sites like that at Abila, which they associated with biblical figures. They came because they believed the water was blessed and it affected miracles. They left evidence of their devotion in inscribed prayers on columns, walls and paving stones in the Abila pilgrimage center (Smith *et al.* forthcoming).

The stone-carved fragment the Abila Archaeological Expedition discovered at Quwayliba during the summer of 2016, preserves a rare surviving sculpted religious image of late antiquity from the Levant. The initial reason for the dearth of such stone-carved images in relief is that artists produced more realistic, two-dimensional painted images with fine details in color at a cheaper price. The second significant cause of the paucity of such images emerges from the fact some of the Christian community in the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and pious Muslims struggled over the appropriateness of such sculpted images and engaged in a war on images. The fragment of the stone-carved panel with a haloed figure, survived first, because it was protected by the veneration of local and visiting devotees and second, by the piles of ashlar that covered it as a result of the massive earthquake of 749 AD. The recovery of this icon in the context of ritual specific architecture should stimulate the quest to find how other pilgrimage sites used physical senses and architecture to generate religious experiences. It will also contribute to discussions of the responses to iconoclasm in the region, to the study of early Christo/Islamic relations, to questions pertaining to the origin and meaning of the *fleur-de-lis* in Byzantine iconography.

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