

A BYZANTINE INSCRIPTION FROM THE AREA G ECCLESIASTICAL COMPLEX OF ABILA, AT QUWAYLIBAH, JORDAN

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The Abila Expedition¹ excavating at Quwaylibah, Jordan during the summer of 2023 partially exposed a well-preserved mosaic pavement in the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex (Fig. 1). A portion of that tesserated floor preserves a Greek inscription that is of potential significance in reconstructing the history of Abila and adds to the corpus of Byzantine clerical names and inscriptions found in the region of *Palaestina-Secunda*. This report introduces the complex and focuses upon the inscription and its possible significance. It leaves discussion of the mosaic pavement's design and motifs to a later report that will come after the floor is fully exposed.

The Historical Context of the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex

The Area G Ecclesiastical Complex is a series of connected structures built by Byzantine-era residents of Abila to serve the perceived needs of the Christian community in the period of urban revival following terrible, early-sixth-century calamities that afflicted *Palaestina-Secunda*. Subsequently, following the Islamic forces' victory at the nearby Battle of

the Yarmuk in 635 AD, Abila was incorporated into *Jund Al Urdunn*. A significant Christian community with many actively used ecclesiastical structures persisted, and a variety of pilgrims still came to Abila during the rule of the Umayyad caliphs. The Area G Complex remained in ecclesiastical use through the time of the regionally devastating mid-eighth-century earthquakes. As Abila residents struggled to survive, they had no Byzantine imperial assistance to restore the broken bridges and tunnels of the Central Decapolis Water System. At the same time, political power and economic resources shifted away from the nearby Umayyad capital at Damascus with the ascendance of the Abbasid Caliphate at Baghdad in 750 AD. The impoverished population of Abila declined, and the damaged ecclesiastical complexes in the community became stock piles of architectural materials for reuse. The populace burned marble revetments from church buildings to make quicklime (CaO) for plastering cracked cisterns, and they employed fallen ashlar to erect walls of new residences sometimes within the ruins of the churches. The atrium and diaconicon of the Area G Complex were reconfigured into smaller domestic spaces occupied during the Abbasid period. The declining community eventually abandoned the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex after clay-rich soil slumped down the steep eastern slope of KHirbat Umm Al 'Amad, following a dramatic rain event during the Mamluk period (Lucke and Schmidt 2016). The atrium and subsidiary rooms on the south and the west sides of the abandoned complex were

1. Dr. W. Harold Mare of Covenant Seminary, St. Louis, MO, initiated the Abila Archaeological Expedition in 1980. Currently Dr. David Vila of John Brown University is the director of excavation. The summer 2023 archaeological season at Quwaylibah, Jordan was licensed by the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Expedition is particularly beholden to His Excellency, Dr. Fadi Bala'awi, Director-General, Zaid Gneimat of the Irbid District, Musa al-Malkawi Director of the local Bene Kenana District, and DoA Representatives: Saher Tuwaiq, Bashar al-Malkawi, Moyad Djerwan, and Areen Anakreh.



1. View of the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex from the west. Photo by Abo Yossef.

deeply buried preserving the architectural remains that had not been repurposed elsewhere.

The Physical Context

The Area G Ecclesiastical Complex (**Fig. 2**) is located above the urban center of Abila on the western side of the Wādī Quwaylibah at a highly visible, central location (UTM coordinates 32.680482° N and 35.869862° E) at an elevation of 436.05m. It was built over aqueducts that conveyed water north from ‘Ayn Quwaylibah and the Northern Decapolis Water System into the heart of the polis. The reservoir beneath

the Area G Complex, supplied by the Upper Aqueduct, distributed its waters to water features, baths in Area C, and the Area E Pilgrimage Complex. The water there helped generate a pilgrim-attracting sense of hierotopy (Smith 2020: 521-532). The Area G Complex, overlooking the central basalt road that conveyed people and produce E-W through Abila, was a spiritual asset that served both pilgrims and the local community. Located at mid-slope on a terrace cut into the side of Wādī Quwaylibah it avoided the stifling summer heat of the Area E Pilgrimage Complex near the bottom of the



2. Aerial view showing the urban context of the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex in conjunction with other excavated areas as seen from the East in 2022 (Photoby Firas Bq'ain. Image APAAME_20221106-FB-0597).

valley, in the wind shadow of the northern Tall Abīl, and the persistent winds that blew through the basilica located at Area A on the summit of Tall Abīl to the north and the basilicas on the height of KHirbat Umm Al ‘Amad to the west in Area D. The Area G Ecclesiastical complex alongside the monumental structures in Area B were likely the preferred venue for the regular activities of Abila’s ecclesiastical administrators.

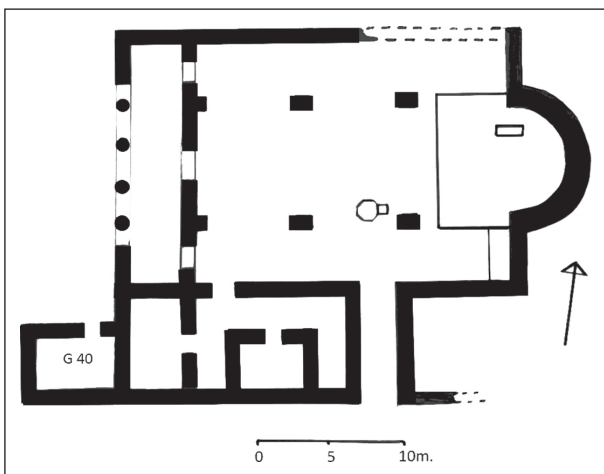
The Structural Context

The central component of the Area G Complex is a three-aisled basilica with a salient central apse (**Fig. 3**). The interior of the basilica measures *ca.* 17.5m. N-S and 23m. E-W and has an interior area of *ca.* 412m² including the apse. Its ashlar walls are made of locally quarried limestone, and its three western doorways were supported on basalt thresholds and spanned by monolithic basalt lintels quarried at nearby KHarjā. The interior walls were finished with imported Proconnessian marble revetment made from slices of columns of earlier Roman structures. The floors were paved with polychrome limestone pavers and marble *opus sectile*. Massive masonry piers supported 6.5m. wide stone arches that flanked the 7.8m. wide nave and carried a clerestory. Ceramic tiles covered the gabled roof over the nave and the shed roofs over the side aisles. The eastern end of the basilica preserves the foundations of chancel screening surrounding the elevated sanctuary. While the marble flooring, newel posts, chancel screening and the altar of the

sanctuary have long been repurposed, an embedded three-object reliquary made from a hard limestone column base and the empty grave of a locally venerated individual remained in the floor of the sanctuary to be uncovered. The southern aisle of the basilica was screened off at the eastern end so as to protect sacred objects on display. The area of restricted sacred space in the basilica covered *ca.* 73m². At the eastern end of the northern aisle, which has collapsed, a well provided access to the water of the reservoir below. The architecture of the structure symbolically connected the initiated to the mysteries of Byzantine Christianity in ways explained to catechumens and unappreciated by most modern visitors.

Auxiliary structures flank the Area G Basilica on the southern and western sides. The eastern and northern sides have no abutting structures as those sides of the basilica are on a precipice. On the south side of the basilica a *ca.* 2.5m-wide hallway provided an unusual point of access/egress through which the speakers and messages proclaimed from the ambo on the south side of the nave could be seen and heard. It is possible that a monastic residential or xenodochial complex may lie to the south through that passage. On the south side of the basilica, a doorway located near the west end of the southern aisle opened into a diaconicon / treasury complex where benefactor’s delivered gifts. Tall, thick windowless walls with no exterior doors, made it a secure space for gathering offerings and valued objects of liturgical equipment and gifts. Gifts in kind such as food were stored there temporarily before distribution to the needy or sale. Bread and wine, chosen for use in the liturgy, were brought in procession from the diaconicon into the basilica and through the nave to the sanctuary for consecration while singing believers celebrated their arrival as part of the liturgy. The southern diaconicon, like the interior of the basilica, was paved with *opus sectile*, and it had marble revetment on the northern wall.

On the west end of the basilica, a *ca.* 3m wide portico partially enclosed by end walls and four columns spaced symmetrically along a 12m opening supported a shed roof. It sloped from the western basilica wall down across the portico towards the atrium. The covered portico



3. Basic plan of Area G ecclesiastical complex locating G-40 inscription. (drawing by Robert W. Smith).



4. View of complete inscription as seen from the south wall of the Area G complex. (Photo by Robert W. Smith).

sheltered the *opus sectile* flooring, doorways, and the marble revetment on the basilica's western exterior, along with the assembling worshippers, from the summer sun and winter rains. To the west, the atrium provided a larger gathering space with perimeter stoas. The eclectic columns and entablature found in the atrium evidence the reuse of architectural elements from earlier pagan monumental construction and at least one uniquely Christian element. The atrium was impeded by the steep hillside to the north, and the presence of a monumental ecclesiastical structure in Area B remains to be completely excavated.

The entrance into the atrium from the city center to the north and other original structures on the north side of the atrium of Area G remain to be discerned. On the south side of the atrium, near the southwestern corner of the portico, a doorway accessed a room secured within the high and thick exterior walls of the complex. That room in excavation unit G 40 is where excavators found the mosaic inscription.

The Discovery of the Inscription

The ashlar-walled, rectangular room (*ca.* 3.45m wide and *ca.* 6m long) at the southwest corner of the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex atrium is the location of the newly discovered mosaic inscription. This room, with its seven preserved courses of tightly bonded, sawn limestone ashlar that needed no mortar, was an integral component of the initial ecclesiastical complex. This secure room, which had a smooth plaster finish on its interior walls, appears to have served as some sort of "ecclesiastical office" or receiving room for visitors. The excavation team largely exposed the room in Square G40 during 2018 going down to what they thought should be the floor level of the

atrium. They concluded that season suspecting that a surface of valuable flooring had been removed from the room in late antiquity, as had been the case in other parts of the complex. In 2023, to make the site more accessible to visitors, balks between squares were removed and previously excavated squares were cleared of stored ashlar. The weeds that had grown up and soil eroded from the balks since 2018 were cleared out of Square G40. In the process the excavators exposed a mosaic inscription along the eastern wall during the second to last day of the excavation season, just a few centimeters below where excavation in 2018 had ceased. The decision was made to leave the exposure of the whole floor to a subsequent season and to extend the excavation 1 meter into the southern balk for a width of 1.25m. The rapid but careful removal of this *ca.* 4m. deep single stratum of soil and intermingled fallen ashlar from the mass-wasting event from inside of the southern complex perimeter wall facilitated the recovery of the complete inscription.

The Inscription

The Area G Mosaic Inscription is a fairly standard Byzantine ecclesiastical dedicatory composition (**Fig. 4**). The inscription formed by black limestone tesserae, is set in an off-white limestone field at the eastern, narrow side of a room that is completely surfaced with a carpet mosaic. The field in which the inscription is set measures 3.43m. long from north to south and 42cm wide from west to east. The orientation of this inscription suggests that, as persons entered through the door from the atrium to the north, the focus of activity in the room was on the eastern end with the inscription and not the south side of the room opposite the door.

The three-line inscription is flanked on both



5. Detail of the “floral cross” symbol used to frame the northern end of the inscription.(Photo by Robert W. Smith).



6. The southern end of the inscription showing the terminal leaf and framing cross.(Photo by Robert W. Smith).

ends by stylized cross-shaped symbols formed with black tesserae. These “floral crosses” fit in an imaginary *ca.* 18cm square box in which the center is a *ca.* 10cm. square of five alternating black and white tesserae with split arms radiating from the corners. Inside the central square, the second row alternates between black and red tesserae creating a red diamond shape that is occupied by a single white tessera. Such tripartite squares are found on mosaics found elsewhere in ecclesiastical mosaics at Abila and may be evidence of a Trinitarian theological statement in a region where Christological doctrine was disputed. The use of crosses on floors is common on the ecclesiastical mosaic floors at Abila and in *Palaestina-Secunda* in spite of pre-inscription and post-inscription Byzantine imperial prohibitions². In this inscription, these cross symbols created a framework reminiscent

2. Habas (2015: 33–60) discusses *Palaestina-Secunda*, where Abila was situated, as a region where the Theodosius II Edict of 427 AD was widely ignored, as was the prohibition against placing crosses where they might be stepped on. This was a continuing issue since the 73rd Canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council at Trullo in 691 AD reiterated the law and threatened offenders with excommunication.

of the dove-tail- shaped handles of a traditional *tabula ansata* and similarly created a monument (Leatherby 2018 380-404). The lines under the cross-shaped symbols at both ends of the inscription are part of the framework around the carpet mosaic. The inscription appears to have been the last portion of the mosaic floor to be installed and is crammed against the plastered eastern wall of the room, necessitating an intrusion of the inscription into the framework around the main floor design.

The 105 letter *ca.* 11cm / six tesserae-tall majuscule inscription is introduced with a simple Greek cross at the left end of the top line and concludes with a leaf on a twig at the right of the bottom line (Figs. 5, 6). While initial crosses are a common Byzantine Christian convention, the use of a concluding lanceolate leaf with a clearly defined midrib is not common. The text does not indicate word divisions, and it reads:

+επιτουαγιωμνηνεπιφανιουπροεδρου
εκτισθηκδιεκομηθηεκθεμελιωντοσικριτον
ενημαπριλιωνδετους δοξαοι

Paleographically, the orthography of the inscription is typical of the sixth century AD.

It features a round-oval alphabet with almond-shaped *omicrons* and *thetas* and lunate *sigmas*. The inscription under scrutiny here follows known ligatures and abbreviation techniques. Abbreviations and numbers are indicated with the use of superpositional horizontal lines in lines one and three. The abbreviations and are standard abbreviations for the *nomina sacra*, *πατήρ* and *κύριος*. The abbreviation for *καί* with the insertion of a ligature on the leg of a *kappa* is employed in the second line. The ligature of the *mu* and *eta* in the second line is common. A small *eta* above the standard size *mu* in line three abbreviates the word *μηνί*. An abbreviation for “indiction” with a ligature on a *delta* is employed in the third line. The pronunciation of the diphthong *OI* appears to be indicated by the dots flanking the top of the *iota* in the third line.

Transcription, Translation, and Commentary Line 1

ἐπὶ τοῦ ἁγίου π(ατ)ρ(ὸ)ς ἡμῶν
ἐπιφάνιου προέδρου

“During the time of our holy father,
Epiphanius, the president”

The first line is an ἐπί prepositional phrase. The preposition ἐπί often takes its object complement in the genitive in Koine (Siebenthal 2019: 273–275 and Wallace 1996: 376). The preposition ἐπὶ has three object complements in the genitive which are in apposition to each other in the first line. The noun *πατὴρ* is the head noun, with two appositives (*Ἐπιφάνιου* and *πρόεδρου*).

Ἐπὶ τοῦ in dedicatory inscriptions is formulaic and introduces either the name of the clergyman in charge of the sacred building or that of the bishop in whose diocese the structure was located. In this case, Epiphanius has the title of π(ατ)ρ(ὸ)ς ἡμῶν (“our father”), which has at times been understood to be used for the superior of a monastery³. The adjective ἁγίω is unusual in its form. We would expect the geni-

tive ἁγίου, since it is modifying the genitive π(ατ)ρ(ὸ)ς.⁴ Further identifying Epiphanius is the title πρόεδρος. Sophocles (1900: 925; cf. Papadakis 1991: 1727–1728) offers “president” for πρόεδρος, ου, ὁ, and states that it is equivalent to ἐπίσκοπος (“bishop”).⁵ Liddell (1996: 1476) translates πρόεδρος as “presiding officer, one who sits in the first place.”⁶ While the use of “our father” is used for the superior of a monastery, the use of πρόεδρος for a superior of a monastic community is generally rejected by recent scholarship⁷. The simplest understanding would be that Epiphanius was the local bishop of Abila⁸. The name spelled “Epiphanius” appears rarely in extant inscriptions⁹. The name appears on an undated stone block in a church at Siyagha (Gatier 1986: no. 88). *Ἐπιφάνι(α)ς* is a known name from a rock inscription at Aila, Sinai in the sixth–seventh century AD (Meimaris 1986: no. 120) and from an undated mosaic inscription from *Karmiel* (Kh. Bât es Sih) (Meimaris 1986: no. 911 = Madden 2014: no.

3. In the hermitage of Procapis the term “our father” is listed (; Piccirillo 1989: 172), with the variant of “our father” in the lower Church of the monastery of Kayanos in ‘Uyūn Mūsā dated before 531 AD (Piccirillo 1989: 213). At Al KHattābiyyah church, cf. Piccirillo 1989: 313. The term “Holy Father” may be considered an honorific title employed in monastic context equal to that of “Abba” (Meimaris 1986: 239); for an extensive list of occurrences of “our father” see Meimaris 1986: 246–248.

4. For an example of ω for ου see inscriptions cataloged by Gaiter (1986: no. 46) and Bader (2009: nos. 63 and 323). For other examples of the full formula (preposition + holy + father + our + personal name + title) see Meimaris 1986: nos. 1245 and 1248; Gatier 1986: no. 78, a mosaic in the floor of the chapel of Theotokos in Siyaghah Mt. Nebo (a monastic complex that predates the fourth century but is transformed two times in the 6th century AD).

5. Meimaris (1986: 240) notes that from the fifth century onward it became customary for the superiors to be presbyters, citing Council of Constantinople IV, act 1 (563 AD).

6. Title found on an honorary inscription at Djebel Webdeh in the ruins of the Church of Saint George – Martas was the builder of the Heracleion – he is called an advisor and a πρόεδρος (Gatier 1986: no. 29). Interestingly, the term has otherwise not been found in Byzantine church mosaic pavements from Palaestina or Arabia (Madden 2014).

7. For a recent discussion of “President” and the rejection of its association with monastic leaders, see Obluski 2019: 272.

8. Previously attested Bishops of Abila are Solomon in 518 AD, Nicostratus in 536 AD, and Alexander, who was exiled as a heretic in 553 AD (Vailhé 1912: 1.120). Solomon and Nicostratus are identified with ἐπίσκοπος not πρόεδρος (Mansi, Concil. Ampl. collectio, t.VIII, col. 1074 and col. 1171).

9. The name “Epiphanius” meaning “clearly manifested” was widely used and had been the name of the Patriarch of Constantinople from 520 to 535.

225 [proposes a fifth-century date]]¹⁰.

Line 2

Ἐκτίσθη κ(αὶ) διεκόσμηθη ἐκ θεμελίων τόσι κριτόν

“[It was] created from the foundations and adorned with much green.”

The second line of the inscription begins with two aorist passive verbs, each of which has an impersonal subject. The ἐκ prepositional phrase is a complement of one or both aorist passive verbs (see the discussion below). The preposition ἐκ takes its object complement in the genitive (Siebenthal 2019: 270–271; Wallace 1996: 371–372). The aorist passive form of κτίζω followed by the prepositional phrase ἐκ θεμελίων is formulaic in dedicatory building inscriptions (Gatier 1986: nos. 53, 133, 175; Madden 2014: no. 18). Rare in such inscriptions is the additional terminology of adornment (διακοσμέω). Liddell (1996: 398) provides one reference to a 600 AD inscription in Gerasa for a building being adorned (cf. SEG 37.1541.5)¹¹. The aorist passive form of διακοσμέω also appears in a church belonging to a monastery at Zughrīt near Gerasa, dated 542 AD (Nowakowski 2017)¹². The prepositional phrase ἐκ θεμελίων perhaps modifies both verbs. If the adornment includes the foundations, perhaps this is a way of saying that everything from the ground up is included in the scope of the dedication.

The final two words of line 2 create significant difficulties for translation and for interpretation. The form τόσι is dative of the adjective τόσος, η, ον, “so much, so many” (Sophocles 1900: 1086; see his numerous citations from early Christian literature). Liddell (1996: 1807) says

the term expresses magnitude. As a dative, the final *omega* has elided with only the *iota* remaining, iotacism (i.e., τόσι for τῶσι).

The final word, κριτόν, is particularly troublesome in terms of morphology and contextual meaning. The word could be the noun κριτής, οῦ, ὅ (“judge”); but in this context such a meaning does not work. It could be the adjective κριτός, ἡ, ὄν (“separated, picked out, chosen”, or “choice, excellent,” (Liddell 1996: 997). The translation then would be something like, “it was created and adorned with so many choice (things).” With this option the intent of the expression highlights the magnitude and excellence of the adornment, with the dative τόσι expressing “material.” But, for this to be a viable option we would expect τόσι κριτόν to agree in gender, number, and case, and it does not.

The apparent lack of agreement between τόσι and κριτόν suggests a third option for κριτόν. Κριτόν might be a loanword which has not been nativized and is thus indeclinable. The form itself might be a Greek rendering of a pre-Islamic Arabic or Aramaic word. Scholars have long acknowledged that the Arab culture of the Transjordan was Hellenized. Pre-dating the Umayyad conquest by fifty years, the Petra papyri give some of the best evidence of Arabic words in Greek vocabulary (PP I)¹³. Beyond the Petra papyri, the appearance of pre-Islamic Arabic is quite marginal, with most evidence known from sites located in the eastern third of Jordan, the southern half of Jordan, and the Negev (see fig. 4 in Hoyland 2010 for a map of sites with pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions). The nearest evidence of pre-Islamic Arabic is sixty 60km to the south-east of Abila, at Umm Al Jimāl (Macdonald 2008: no. XIII)¹⁴. Because the corpus of available texts with pre-Islamic Arabic is scant, at this time there are no known contenders for a pre-Islamic Arabic word being

10. At least two different individuals with the name Ἐπιφάνιος appear in the Petra Papyri. Ἐπιφάνιος, the son of Damianos, is identified as a πρεσβύτερος (PP I: no.6 and PP V: no.55). The other Ἐπιφάνιος is the bother of Bassos and Sabinos (PP II: no.17). The name Ἐπιφάνιος also occurs with no further identification (PP V: no.64).

11. An inscription in a church at Birsama (H. Beer Shema; Kh. El-Far) says οἱ γιοι κοσμοῦνται, “saints are adorned” (Madden 2014: no.49).

12. The verb κοσμέω without δια is found at two sites. A chapel at Eleutheropolis (Beth Guvrin; Beit Jibrin) is adorned (κοσμέω) “with mosaics” (Madden 2014: no. 76). The church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives is adorned (κοσμέω; Madden 2014: no. 116).

13. Francis Gignac produced a volume demonstrating how Coptic and its dialects interfered with Greek, as evidenced by the non-literary papyri of Egypt (Gignac 1976). As of 2015 there is a single pre-Islamic Arabic text composed in Greek letters, labeled A1 (Al-Jallad and al-Manaser 2015).

14. For a thorough phonological discussion of pre-Islamic Arabic in light of other Semitic influences (e.g. Aramaic) and Greek, see Al-Jallad 2015. For an overview of the linguistic interference between Aramaic and Arabic see Retsö 2006: 178–182.

written in Greek letters corresponding to κριτόν. Likewise, Arabic lacks an obvious cognate to the Semitic *krt* “to cut”, but it does have *qt* (قطع), *qtm* (قطم), and *qtt* (قطط), all meaning “to cut.”

The root *krt* is common in other Semitic languages (e.g. Hebrew (Brown *et al.* 1980: 503–504 and Koehler and Baumgartner 1995: 2.500–501), Phoenician-Punic (Krahmalkov 2000: 243–244), and Akkadian [see *karātu*; CAD 8:215 and Tawil 2009: 174]) and in all cases means “to cut.”¹⁵ In this case, then, the lexeme in the inscription could be translated “cut things/pieces.” The final *nu* on κριτόν could be the Semitic diminutive particle (-*on*-, which would potentially be either -*ων* or -*ον* when transliterated into Greek)¹⁶. The lexical meaning with a diminutive particle could be “little cut pieces” with the dative of material, resulting in the phrase “with many little cut pieces.” This solution seems to be an awkward way to refer to mosaics considering other inscriptions that utilize specific vocabulary for the laying of mosaics.

An Aramaic dialect appearing in the region is Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA)¹⁷. Most of what is known about CPA comes from Greek inscriptions. One example of a sixth-century church mosaic with CPA is located a few kilometers south of Abila, at Al Burz (Khasawneh 1994: 21–29 and Puech 2003: no. 3). In Aramaic the adjective כְּרִיתָן *karātān* is used to describe drapes or hangings that are green in color (Targum on Esther 1:6). The adjective *karātān*

is related to the noun כְּרִיתָן *karāt* (“leek”)¹⁸. If we read κριτόν as an Aramaic loanword, then the translation is something like, “[It was] created and adorned from the foundations with much green.” If we favor this solution for κριτόν, perhaps we should read the line as an A-A’-B-B’ pattern. The B prepositional phrase serves as a complement of the A passive verb, while the B’ phrase serves as a complement to the A’ passive verb. The resulting translation would be, “[It was] created from the foundations and adorned with much green.” Reading κριτόν as an indeclinable loanword would explain the seeming lack of agreement between the dative τόσι and the form κριτόν, which looks like an accusative. A difficulty with this proposal is that Greek has a common word for “green” (χλωρός - ἁ - ὄν, e.g. Mark 6:39). It is possible that the mosaicist only knew the local Semitic vernacular for “green.”

Line 3

ἐν μηνὶ (νὶ) ἀπριλίῳ ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος)
, ἔτους . (κύριε) δόξα σοι.

“in the month of April, the 13th indiction, the year 643 [= 580 AD]. Lord, (be) glory to you.”

The third line is an ἐν prepositional phrase that is functioning temporally. The ἐν preposition takes a complement in the dative (Siebenthal 2019: 271–273; Wallace 1996: 372–375). The abbreviated ἐν μηνὶ is the most common augmentation of ἐν μηνὶ (“in the month”) used by mosaicists¹⁹. In considering the distribution of the various occurrences, ἐν μηνὶ is overwhelmingly the preferred spelling in the Era of the Province of Arabia (E.P.A.) region – 26 examples compared to 10 for the

15. For the root *krt* in northwest Semitic, see Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 538–539.

16. For -*on* as a diminutive in Hebrew and -*un* in Syriac, see Kautzsch 1910: §86g.

17. CPA shares many characteristics with Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) and the classical period of Samaritan Aramaic (SA). The modern scholarly literature uses several names for CPA, including Palestinian Syriac, Jerusalem Syriac, or Melkite Aramaic. For a brief overview of the dialect see Morgenstern 2011: 628–637. For a good discussion of the status of CPA inscriptions throughout modern Jordan, see Hoyland 2010. For כְּרִיתָן “leeks” and כְּרִיתָנון “leek” in JPA, see Sokoloff (1990: 270).

18. The same root *krt* appears in Syriac, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, and Mandaic. Sokoloff (2009: 657) says that the Syriac word is a loanword into Mishnaic Hebrew and Arabic, and he provides a citation of the derivative in a phrase translated as “leek green curtains.” The lexeme *karāšu* “leek” appears in Akkadian (CAD 8:212–214). This Akkadian lexeme can describe stones that are colored green comparable to the color of leeks. The phoneme *š* merges with *t* across the Semitic languages. Thus, the root *krš* in some Semitic languages can correspond to the root *krt* in other Semitic languages relating to a “leek.” For the phonemic merger between *š* and *t*, see Johns 1972: 5; Rendsburg 1997: 69–70; and Gzella 2013: 2.854.

19. Using the index to Meimaris’s (1992: 425–426) catalog of inscriptions.

“Pompeian” Era (P.E.) region²⁰. Even though the dating system used at Abila is P.E., perhaps this particular augmentation is a result of influence from E.P.A. mosaicists. Meimaris (1992: 160) says that the province of Arabia expanded over the centuries; Abila is on the border between the regions of P.E. and E.P.A. Even though the augmented prepositional phrase for “in the month” is favored in E.P.A., the use of Roman month names is rare for E.P.A. dates (Meimaris 1992: 157). The dative Ἀπριλίῳ (ἄπριλιος) is attested (Meimaris 1992, E.P.A. no. 240). The genitive form, ἔτους is late and very rare, having been replaced by the dative (Meimaris 1992: 92). The mosaicist follows the standard convention of rendering the numerals in Greek letters in ascending order (units, tens, hundreds).

The era employed in the Abila Area G Church inscription is the Pompeian Era of 63 BC. This era is evidenced in the sixth-century Abila Water Tunnel Inscription and second-century Abila Pilgrimage Complex inscriptions (Smith *et al.* [forthcoming]). Thus, the Abila year 640 is the equivalent of the year 580 AD/43 BH (643 Abila Era – 63 = 580 AD).

The final clause of the line is a prayer directed to the Lord (vocative).

There are several interesting linguistic details in this inscription. Abbreviations appear in each line of this inscription. Most of the abbreviations involve nominal forms, but the conjunction καὶ is also abbreviated in the second line. There is a modified form of the genitive in the first and another modified form of a dative in the second line. Finally, there is a potential Semitic loanword in the second line.

Background and Secondary Proposal for “President Epiphanius”

The term “president/προέδρος” does not appear in the titles of congregational leaders found in the texts of the New Testament describing the primitive church. Congregational leaders who directed ecclesiastical activities called “president” appear in Justin Martyr’s

mid-second-century description of Sunday gatherings of Christians. In such meetings, the Scriptures were read and the assembled persons were exhorted to make application by the “president,” who subsequently led in Eucharistic prayer and supervised the collection and distribution of offerings to the needy (*First Apology* 1.67). Justin Martyr’s description fits with the shift in polity from the collegial, congregational leadership of multiple ἐπίσκοποι in the Apostolic Church towards the increasingly adopted mono-episcopacy of the mid-second- and third-century church. Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century occasionally refers to “presidents” in his writings. In ecclesiastical contexts, these references normally refer to persons consecrated as bishops over an eparchy. The term “president” could further refer to a bishop who led in a synod /assembly of other bishops, or it could be associated with bishops who may have been assigned an expansion of their jurisdiction. When the fifth-century historian Sozomen, from Palestine, described the biblical instruction of a Eusebius of Hims Emesa who came to be consecrated as a bishop embroiled in the Arian theological controversy, he asserts Eusebius of Emesa was taught by “Eusebius Pamphilus (of Caesarea) and Patrophilus, the president of Scythopolis” (Sozomen, *Church History* III.6.2).

In the early part of the fourth century, when the the education of Eusebius took place, Scythopolis was not a regional capital. By the turn of the fifth century, when Sozomen wrote, however, the city had become the metropolis of *Palaestina-Secunda*. Perhaps Sozomen retrojected a later title of the Bishop of the Metropolitan city of Scythopolis onto Patrophilus. Such a use of the term “president” is seen in the 39th Canon of the 692 AD Council of Trullo, in which John, the “president” of Cyprus, is given metropolitan authority over a new set of congregations and their bishops when his flock flees the island in the face of Islamic advance. This raises the interesting possibility that the Epiphanius mentioned in the Abila inscription could be the metropolitan bishop of Scythopolis who was serving either in the absence of a consecrated bishop of Abila or superseding the Abila bishop. The last attested Bishop of Scythopolis is Theodore in 553 AD

20. An even greater disparity exists between E.P.A. and P.E. inscriptions with the even shorter augmented form εν μ. Thirteen inscriptions use εν μ in E.P.A. but only one inscription (from Gaza #139) uses εν μ (Meimaris 1992: 426).

(Avi-Yonah 1963: 325326). If Epiphanius was not the bishop of Abila, as is most likely, it would be possible that he could have been the president of Scythopolis, the Metropolitan See.

Conclusion and Implications

The Abila Area G Inscription identifies the construction and outfitting of the related complex at a time when Emperor Tiberius II Constantine was embroiled in the long-term conflict with the Sassanid empire in the East. Local leadership promoted the continued expansion and adornment of ecclesiastical establishments undertaken at Abila following the mid-sixth century calamities. If the venerated presiding cleric, Epiphanius, mentioned in the inscription was indeed the Bishop of Abila in 580 AD, his name extends the line of local episcopal succession. If Epiphanius was instead the Metropolitan of Scythopolis, his name would extend the succession line of that city's bishops beyond Theodore, a survivor of the same Origenist controversy that had led to the exile of Abila's bishop Alexander.

The Abila Water Tunnel Inscription found in 1984 (Fig. 7) and the name of the Bishop who ordered that critically important public works project in 568 AD was not able to be discerned by the former excavation epigrapher Bastiaan Van Elderen (1989), or now by others who have scrutinized the deteriorating text. The lacuna in the first line of the inscription is long enough for a variety of possibilities, including "Epiphanius." Only the discovery of an additional dedicatory inscription at Abila is likely to absolutely resolve, first, whether the presiding Epiphanius under whom the adornments in the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex took place was the Bishop of Abila or the Metropolitan of *Palaestina-Secunda* from Scythopolis; and, second, if Epiphanius contributed to other significant projects such as the water-system restoration and the Area E Pilgrimage Complex enlargement that had taken place twelve years prior to the construction of the Area C Ecclesiastical Complex.

An interesting possibility raised by the inscription found in the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex is that the person who was buried in the grave found in the floor of the sanctuary could have been a venerated local cleric such

as "Epiphanius." If that were the case, it is possible that during the seventh and early eighth centuries, before the earthquake of 749 AD, the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex could have been known as "Saint Epiphanius Church."

The Area G Ecclesiastical Complex inscription discovery, like the results of previous seasons of work in the complex, raises questions for further exploration. A clear answer it gives is an absolute date for when the tessellated floor of the room in the Area G Ecclesiastical Complex was installed. The inscription also clearly adds to the names of local religious leaders of the sixth century.

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7. Abila Water Tunnel Inscription. (Photo by Sufyan Al Karameh)

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