

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2018 SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

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Abila was a Decapolis city just 12 Roman miles east of Gadara (Umm Qays). The site evidences its most substantial occupation in the Late Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad periods. However, since the 1980s stratified remains have been excavated indicating nearly continuous habitation from the Early Bronze (EB I) to the Abbasid period (with some reuse of the site in the later Islamic periods as well)¹.

The central goals for the 2018 season of the Abila Archaeological Project were: (1) To deepen the excavation in key squares in Area AA on the North *tall* in order to examine how the Byzantine, Hellenistic, Iron Age, and Bronze Age habitations extended east and north on Tall Abīl; (2) to continue the excavation of two Byzantine churches (Areas G and E) in preparation for publication and for better presenting the churches for tourism; and (3) to excavate a presumed “marketplace” in the area adjacent to the basalt road in what we call Area B. The staff during our 2028 season consisted of 8 senior staff members, 24 student volunteers, and also two department representatives, four guards, and 60–70 local Jordanian workers, mostly from the village of *Ḥarthā*, where the team stays in the *Ḥarthā* Girls Secondary School at the kind invitation of the Ministry of Education office for the Banī Kinānah District.

Area AA (Fig. 1)

Area AA was supervised by Dr. Susan Ellis with the assistance of Mr. Kevin Morrow, who

was the Assistant Area Supervisor, as well as the following student volunteers, who were Square Supervisors: Lynn Khadija, Jed Scott, Abagaile Usselton, Brian Ediger, Haaroon Ahmed, Noah Maxwell, Denver Lego, and Kari Miller. Area AA represents the history of Tall Abīl from the Abbasid to the Early Bronze period². Goals in Area AA for the 2018 excavation season included continued excavation of the Early Bronze period in Square 5 and further excavation toward understanding the relationship of the various walls in AA to determine the process of settlement, especially the two massive walls that run N/S that were uncovered during our 2016 season of excavation. Excavated areas are located at latitude 32.68251 and longitude 35.86842.

The fortified wall, which bisects squares 9, 10, 11, 16, 22, and 25, was uncovered and traced down through 2.3 meters, though the bottom of the structure was not reached. Further excavation and study during our 2020 season will hopefully give evidence of the use of the structure and the possible dates of construction. At present, pottery findings seem to indicate a date of construction during the Hellenistic period or possibly Iron Age; however, more excavation is needed to determine a firmer dating.

Excavation in Area AA also pursued our understanding of the early settlement of the

1. For an overview of the site see: W. H. Mare, “Abila (of the Decapolis),” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

2. The excavation of Area AA on the north *tall* has progressed every season since 1994. A history of the excavation of this area in the early seasons can be found in John Wineland, *Ancient Abila: An Archaeological History* BAR Intl. Series 989 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2001), *ad. loc.*



1. Area AA.



2. Area AA bedrock.

site as revealed in Square 5. In this square, one plaster and one hard-packed soil floor surface were discovered, both of which were drawn, photographed, and removed. Our goal was to continue down to bedrock, which had been reached during our 2016 excavation season in an adjacent square, but we were not able to achieve that goal during this excavation season. We believe that we have approximately 70cm left until bedrock and are hopeful that this goal can be achieved during our 2018 season. Pottery from Square 5 was almost 100% Early Bronze, including some small pieces of KHirbat

Al Karak ware from the upper layers. Out of hundreds of sherds, 12 were intrusive Middle Bronze. Overall, our excavation in Area AA was successful and we were able to achieve most of our goals for this season. Seven members of the international staff worked in Area AA and an additional 14 Jordanian workers helped us in this work.

Area B

After a hiatus of 12 years, 2018 was our second season excavating in Area B, which was under the supervision of Ms. Cheryl Eaton, ABD. The Assistant Area Supervisor for this area was Dr. Blake Hartung, and student volunteers were Liz Bennett, Ethan Stafford, Nathan Wertjes, Olivia Waldron, Kat Caldwell, Rachel Jacob, Emma James, and Brooke Taylor. The excavated squares in this area are located at latitude 32.68098 and longitude 35.8689.

Excavation of Area B, which began in 1986 under the late Dr. Bastiaan van Elderen, was suspended after the 2004 season supervised by Maria Deutchmann and resumed in 2016 under the supervision of Cheryl Eaton. Although the theater cavea suggested by the semicircular shape of the northeastern slope of Umm Al 'Amad never materialized, excavation over the 10 previous dig seasons have uncovered installations representing several periods of occupation.

Seasons 1986–2004

Findings of previous dig seasons include: 1) a massive Roman facade on the northeastern slope; 2) a north-south limestone street, preliminarily dated to the Roman period, with adjacent walls and plaza extending from the hillside at the east side of the area; 3) a northwest-southeast basalt street overlying the limestone street and preliminarily dated to the Byzantine period; and 4) a large building immediately north and east of the northeastern slope of Umm Al 'Amad that was preliminarily identified as an Islamic structure of the Umayyad period but has an eastward-facing apse and other features indicative of monastic structures.

Season 2016

Excavation in 2016 opened three squares

(54, 55 and 56³) on the steeply sloping ground immediately west of the basalt street. The goal was to further explore the basalt pavement, even with the street curb and secondary east-west cross-walls (partially excavated in 1992), and further expose a well-built, north-south wall running parallel to the street and abutting the cross-walls on the west, all of which suggest a marketplace, with shops bordering the west side of the street. Probes in each square (given the brief dig season of thirteen days in the field with Jordanian workers) further exposed the east-west cross-walls and located the north-south wall and western end of the basalt pavement.

2018 Goals Fully Met

Left by necessity for the 2018 season was the goal of more fully exploring the suggested marketplace by completing the excavation of Squares 54, 55, and 56, located on the west side of the basalt street. The first two were expanded 5m east to reach the street, and a new square, 57, was opened immediately east of Square 56. This new square aligns with Squares 54 and 55, abutting the street. The goal to further explore the basalt pavement and well-built, north-south wall (described above) was fully met. Finds this season included a number of special objects that support the suggestion of a Late Byzantine/Umayyad marketplace, including a glass shard with a stamped Arabic inscription, an intact oil lamp, and an intact jug (see further, below).

Meanwhile, the basalt road was cleaned of soil, boulders, columns, and other accumulated debris to aid in interpretation and to help prepare the area for tourism. The columns, which had been removed from the street, and undamaged limestone ashlar, which were removed from the tumble in each square, were preserved and stacked on site for use in future reconstruction.

Assisting Eaton for the 2018 season were Supervising Assistant Blake Hartung and staff members (in alphabetical order): Liz Bennett,

Rachel Jacob, Emma James, Ethan Stafford, Brooke Taylor, Olivia Waldron, Nathan Wertjes, and 14 local Jordanian workers. Staff members Marissa Johns and Lexie Graft joined the Area B team to help on the two final days. Excavation of the squares occurred June 20–July 12.

Elevation Procedure

In 2016, beginning elevations of the squares were ascertained using as a zero-datum point the northeast corner of the slightly jutting basalt curb immediately east of the partially uncovered east-west cross-wall between Squares 54 and 55. The elevation for the northeast corner of the cross-wall was determined to be 171cm, with the northwest and southwest corners of Square 54 at 322cm and the southeast and northeast corners of the square at 250.5cm. Using the elevations for Square 54, the beginning elevations for Squares 55, 56, and 57 were also determined, with 45cm added to the elevation of Square 56 and the newly opened Square 57 to account for the slope of the basalt road up to Squares 55 and 54 using the zero-datum point. The accuracy of these elevations were confirmed this season using an optical level and stadia rod, and they will be reconfigured at a later date based on a base elevation for the site taken in a previous season.

Square 54

Supervising the excavation of Square 54 were Liz Bennett (returning from the previous season) and Olivia Waldron. Of the three squares opened just west of the Byzantine basalt street, Square 54 is located the farthest north, closest to the modern east-west access road, which is located about 6m north. In order to provide an eastern balk in the steeply sloped terrain, the north-south sides of Square 46 were laid out a half meter shorter than the 4m east-west sides. During the 2018 season, the square was expanded 5m east through the former eastern balk, a secondary north-south wall (with *loci* numbered for purposes of stratigraphical identification), to meet the basalt street.

Last season, the beginning elevations for the northwest and southwest corners of Square 54 were 322cm, with the southeast and northeast corners of the square at 250.5cm. Excavation of the original portion of the square ended with

3. The squares have been renumbered from season 2016 after the 2004 season records were located in early 2018 at the Mare Institute of Biblical and Archaeological Studies in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. (Squares numbered in 2016 have been renumbered as follows: 46=54; 47=55; 48=56.) Dr. W. Harold Mare was killed in a car accident in the middle of the 2004 excavation season, and the Area B 2004 season records had evidently been misfiled.

the discovery of closely fitted pavers (elevation 28cm) roughly level with the basalt curb to the east abutting the street. Ending corner elevations for this season (July 12) in the original square were 29cm northwest, 28cm southwest, 28cm southeast, and 29cm northeast; and those for the eastern extension were 26cm northwest, 28cm southwest, 21cm southeast, and 22cm northeast (**Fig 3**).

Highlights

Jug Discovered

On June 28, a largely intact jug was discovered, missing only two relatively small pieces of the neck (*locus* 019, elevation 170cm [this coincides with intact lamp discovered in Square 55; see below]; Special Object #007). Measuring 11cm from lip to base, the jug would be categorized⁴ as very short, with a thickened, everted lip, a rim-to-shoulder vertical strap handle, a ribbed 6cm-long neck, and an omphalos base. It has a minimum mouth diameter of 6cm and a maximum body diameter of 11cm. Its red-orange color is evident beneath heavy lime encrustation; thus it has characteristics of both Late Byzantine and Umayyad ware and is difficult to date⁵. Associated pottery includes potsherds dating from the Early Byzantine (7) and Late Byzantine (11) periods (**Fig 4**).

Other Items Discovered

Also discovered were (1) the carved end of a bone stylus measuring 5cm in length (*locus* 018; Special Object #003); (2) a partial (split semicircular) carved bone tool handle (*locus* 018) measuring 10.5cm in length and 3cm in diameter; and (3) a non-ornamental copper ring measuring 2.5cm in diameter (*locus* 024, Special Object #008).

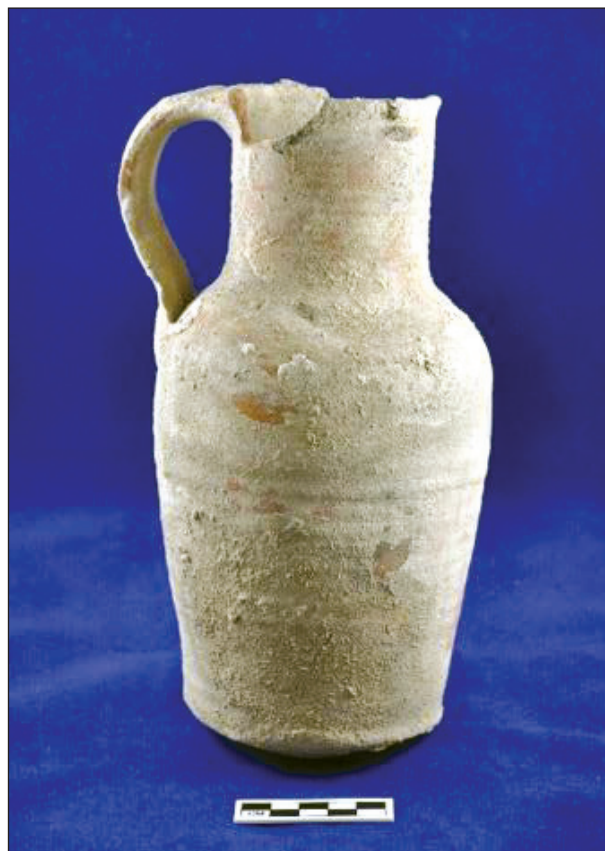
Curving Secondary Wall Uncovered

On July 28, a secondary wall constructed of boulders and pieces of limestone ashlar was

discovered (*locus* 017, elevation 170.0cm) running along what might be best described as the northwestern quadrant “border” of the original square, running east from the western balk and curving north into the northern balk, which abuts the east-west access road to the north. The relationship between the wall and basalt street would be more easily determined with excavation of the access road, which is not possible at this point in the dig for practical purposes, and with the opening of a square in the steeply slopped terrain immediately west of Square 54.



3. Square 54 from east with basalt street



4. Intact jug with omphalos base (B54019, S.O. #007).

4. Categorized based on descriptions given in Ralph E. Hendrix, Philip R. Drey, J. Bjørnar Storfjell, *Ancient Pottery of Transjordan: An Introduction Utilizing Published Whole Forms* (Berrien Springs, MI: 1996), 11–55.

5. The form, ware, and associated pottery indicate Late Byzantine, but characteristics of the two periods overlap and the jug is very similar to the artist's rendering and “very short” description of an Umayyad jug discovered at Jarash: No. 412 in Hendrix, *Ancient Pottery of Transjordan*, 264.

Square 55 (Fig. 5)

Supervising the excavation of Square 55 were Rachel Jacob and Brooke Taylor. The square, measuring 4m by 4m, is located just west of the Byzantine basalt street between Square 54, immediately to the north, and Square 56, immediately to the south (with a 1m balk separating each square). During the season, the square was expanded 5m east through the former balk, part of a secondary north-south wall that continues north into Square 54 (with *loci* numbered for purposes of stratigraphical identification) to meet the basalt street.

Beginning elevations of the square corners for the 2016 season were 323cm northwest, 365cm southwest, and 240cm for the southeast and northeast corners. Ending corner elevations of the original square (July 12, 2018) were 277cm northwest (top of north-south wall [see further below]; 16cm just east of wall), 12cm southwest (east of north-south wall), 20cm southeast and 27cm northeast; and for the eastern extension were 15cm northwest, 18cm southwest, 15cm southeast and 15cm northeast.

Excavation last season uncovered the top of a secondary north-south wall (*locus* 002, elevation 300cm) running parallel to the basalt street along the western balk and aligning with



5. Square 55 from east with basalt street.



6. Glass shard possibly from decanter with stamped Arabic inscription (B54024, S.O. #014).

the lower well-built north-south wall described above (see “Goals Fully Met”). The portion of this secondary wall that lies within the square was fully uncovered this season. Fashioned from boulders and repurposed limestone ashlar, it uses the well-built north-south wall as a foundation. Also fully uncovered was an east-west cross-wall discovered last season (*locus* 004, elevation 250cm) running through the center of the square and extending toward the northwest-southeast basalt street. The wall also appears to be secondary, given the use of boulders and repurposed limestone ashlar.

Highlights

Stamped Glass Shard Discovered

On July 5, excavation uncovered a glass shard featuring a 1.75cm long by 1.5cm wide stamp with an Arabic inscription (*locus* 024, elevation 54cm; Special Object #014) (Fig. 6). The stamp is located on the inwardly folded lip of what seems to have been a decanter with a straight, vertical rim, a partial conical v-shaped neck, and a minimum mouth diameter of 3.5cm⁶. The Arabic inscription may indicate the artifact dates from the Umayyad period. Associated pottery includes potsherds dating from the Early Byzantine (one), Late Byzantine (33), and Umayyad (nine) periods.

Kohl Applicator Discovered

On June 28, a 9.5cm bronze wand in two pieces with a 1cm flat, circular end was discovered (*locus* 020; elevation 105cm; Special Object #005). The object appears similar to applicators for *kohl* eye makeup discovered in Saudi Arabia⁷. Associated pottery includes potsherds dating from the Early Byzantine (two) and Late Byzantine (six) periods.

6. Note that the lip, rim, and neck profiles and inflections and the artifact interpretation given above are based on identifying characteristics of clay pottery in Hendrix, *Ancient Pottery of Transjordan*, 11–15, 20, 54–55.

7. Additional information concerning the Saudi Arabian artifacts mentioned above was not immediately available. Further research will be conducted to confirm identification tentatively made by an internet search that uncovered an article posted by Pitt Rivers Museum Virtual Collections, University of Oxford, “Applicators for *Kohl*,” n.p. [cited July 13, 2018]. Online: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts/index.php/temporary-body-arts/cosmetics/81-applicators-for-kohl-three-bronze-applicators-sudan-or-chad-silver-and-bronze-spoons-saudi-arabia.html>.

Coin Discovered

On July 10, a 1.5cm-diameter coin was discovered (*locus* 028; elevation 29.0; Special Object #018). Further cleaning and research may provide more information about the coin. Associated pottery includes potsherds dating from the Early Byzantine (67), Late Byzantine (114) and Umayyad (19) periods.

Intact Oil Lamp Discovered

On June 27, an intact oil lamp was discovered (*locus* 018; elevation 169.0 [this coincides with intact jug discovered in Square 54; see above]; Special Object #004). Measuring 10cm long by 6.75cm wide by 3cm high, its form and color (dark orange) indicate it dates from the Late Byzantine period⁸. Associated pottery includes potsherds dating from Early Byzantine (41), Late Byzantine (54), and Umayyad (2) periods, although it also contains those from the Abbasid (25) period.

Square 56 (Fig. 8)

Supervising the excavation of Square 56 were Blake Hartung (returning from last season to serve as Assistant Area B Supervisor) and Emma James. The square, originally measuring 4m by 4m, is located just west of the Byzantine basalt street, immediately south of Square 55 on the most steeply sloped terrain of the three squares excavated in 2016. During the 2018 dig season, the southwestern half of the square was expanded to the north by roughly 1m with the removal for safety reasons of a large, damaged ashlar and large boulders.

Beginning elevations for the 2016 season of the square corners were 426.5cm northwest, 424.5cm southwest, 239cm southeast, and 297cm northeast. Ending corner elevations (July 12, 2018) of the eastern half of the square (not including the well built north-south wall in the western half; see further below) were 48cm northwest, 48cm southwest, 43cm southeast, and 44cm northeast.

On June 26, excavation uncovered two closely fitted ashlars in the western half of the square, followed by a third on July 2, which further excavation revealed to be the top of the

well-built north-south wall (*locus* 019, elevation 108cm), originating south of the square. More of the wall was uncovered as excavation progressed throughout the remaining season and ended with the discovery of a ledge (*locus* 037, elevation 55cm) also featured in the portion of wall originating south of the square. Excavation ended July 12, after the discovery of a thin plaster floor (*locus* 034) laid over a series of pavers in the eastern portion of the square (*locus* 036, elevation 46cm at center).

The opening of two additional squares immediately south of Squares 56 and 57 in Season 2020 is expected to uncover more of the wall and provide better insight into the relationship between the two squares.

Square 57 (Fig. 9)

Supervising the excavation of Square 57 were Nathan Wertjes and Ethan Stafford. The square was opened at the beginning of the season to better understand the relationship of Square 56 to the basalt street. Beginning elevations of



7. Intact oil lamp found at level of jug in Square 54 (B55018, S.O. #004).



8. Square 56 from south with Square 57 and basalt street at right and above right, respectively.

8. Based on the interpretation of Abila ceramicist, Dr. Susan Ellis, though she noted the overlap between Late Byzantine and Umayyad form and ware.

the square corners were 381.5cm northwest, 379.5cm southwest, 194cm southeast, and 252cm northeast. Ending corner elevations of the full square (July 12, 2018) were 28cm northwest, 24cm southwest, 28cm southeast, and 24cm northeast. During the excavation season, the balk between Squares 56 and 57 was removed to reveal a poorly constructed, north-south secondary wall. Construction materials included broken ashlar, boulders, and half of a grindstone. Also uncovered was another secondary wall beginning at the southeastern edge of the square running north-south atop the basalt pavement and adjacent to the basalt street to the east. The wall, built of repurposed, broken ashlar, includes what appears to be a doorway on the northeastern edge of the square.

Excavation ended July 5 when the level of the basalt curb was reached. As with Square 56, it is believed that opening two additional squares immediately south of Squares 56 and 57 in Season 2020 will uncover more of the wall and provide better insight into the relationship between these two squares.

Interpretation

The excavation of Squares 54, 55, 56, and 57 has revealed a row of at least three adjacent installations abutting the basalt curb, with east-west cross-walls located between Squares 54, 55, and 57, though partially hidden in the balks. The layout is similar to that of Roman-, Byzantine- and Umayyad-period market areas, which have been excavated in neighboring Decapolis cities, such as Jarash and Umm Qays. This, coupled with the variety of items discovered in Squares 54 and 55—including a glass shard with a stamped Arabic



9. Square 57 from east with the basalt curb.

inscription, an intact oil lamp, an intact jug, a stylus, and a coin; a support the suggestion that shops were located along the basalt street dating at least (given the associated pottery) from the Late Byzantine/Umayyad periods. Further excavation is expected to confirm this interpretation.

Future Excavation

Continued excavation of Area B is necessary to advance the study not only of Abila and other Decapolis cities but also of other ancient city plazas and marketplaces. Moreover, further exploration of what appears to be an Umayyad-period monastic structure promises to make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between early Islamic and Christian communities. As noted last season, careful planning and continued security during the off seasons could help Area B become a jewel in Abila's crown and a valuable asset among Jordan's already rich trove of archaeological treasures and tourist destinations. Recommended goals for the next dig season (summer 2020) are:

- Two new squares (58 and 59) should be opened immediately south of Squares 56 and 57 to further expose the well-built north-south wall and the relationship of the proposed squares to the adjoining basalt pavement and street to the east.
- The previously excavated square immediately south of proposed Squares 58 and 59 should be uncovered to fully expose the north-south wall and the suggested market place on the west side of the basalt street in Area B.
- The balks between Squares 54, 55, 56, and 57 and proposed Squares 58 and 59 should be removed.

Recommendations for more far-ranging goals include:

- A system to contain erosion and tumble from the steep northeastern slope of Umm Al 'Amad should be employed within the next two seasons, possibly using wire-mesh netting similar to that used at other sites prone to rockfall.
- With the above system in place, the Umayyad-period monastic structure should be fully excavated.
- The well-preserved basalt street, unique for

its winding character, should be uncovered across the modern east-west access road and through the Area C Roman Bath complex.

Area G

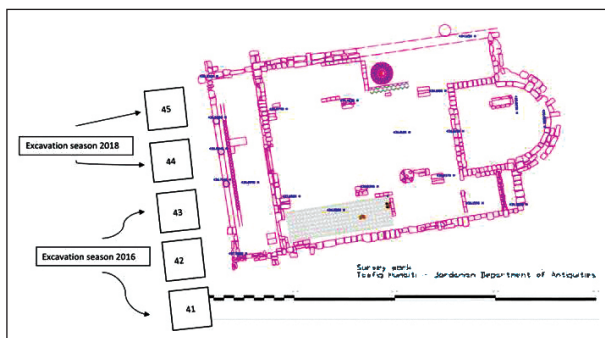
The church complex (Area G) (**Fig. 10**) located at the northeastern end of the southern *tall*, KHirbat Umm Al ‘Amad, was significant to the Christian community during the Byzantine period of Abila’s history. This area has been supervised by Dr. Adam Chambers, with the assistance of Assistant Area Supervisor Mr. Peter Hellman. Square Supervisors in this area were Josh Kruntorad, Scott Turnbull, Marcos Wilson, Maroun el-Houkayem, J.D. Cory, Selena Fincher, Vashti Smith, and Elizabeth Pace. The 2018 season of excavation at Area G focused on the expansion of work to uncover the atrium or courtyard space at the western entrance of the basilica. The previous season of excavation opened Squares 41, 42, and 43 with the intent of identifying the nature of the flooring and architectural features that comprised the narthex, or entrance space, leading up to the basilica complex from the west. In similar basilica complexes in the region, such as those at Gerasa and Gadara, access to the inner areas of the church was limited to those initiated into the church through proper rites and rituals, allowing close proximity to the altar space where Eucharist was celebrated. Those who did not belong or who were in the process of being initiated into the local fellowship of the church were expected to remain in the outer, less sacred, areas of the facility.

The focus of this season’s efforts was to open two more squares to the north of those of the previous season to better understand the nature of this entrance space that has tentatively been identified as an atrium, or courtyard. A common

pattern encountered in previous seasons of excavation, particularly with the structures immediately adjacent to the south and west of the main sanctuary, was either extensive secondary construction or building that occurred after the original church was destroyed by an earthquake (probably in AD 747), by migratory occupants who utilized the fallen building debris from the church, and nearby structures, to construct rooms and other spaces.

Square 44 (Figs. 11, 12)

An excavation unit was opened to the north of Square 43, which had been excavated in the 2016 season. Square 44 was excavated under the supervision of Selena Fincher and J.D. Cory. The initial work involved the removal of several strata of fill and debris (001, 002) that had accumulated primarily from the erosion of the *tall* that rises directly to the west of the basilica. Pottery from these fill layers generally spanned a range from Roman to the Islamic periods, reflecting the predominant occupational periods of this part of the *tall*. The destruction stratum (003) was encountered following the removal of the fill layers with large picks and careful soil extraction. The matrix of this layer was characterized by fine sediment to large stone fragments, some with clear architectural features, including parts of columns that appear to have fallen from the bases uncovered in previous excavation in adjacent areas to the east. It was hoped that the remnant of a colonnade suggested the presence of an atrium or courtyard directly east of the church, but this remains to be seen in Square 44. Due to constraints of time, only the western half of the square was excavated down to the floor (011). Instead of tessellated flooring, as was encountered in adjacent spaces, only a plaster surface remains in the excavated portion. It appears that the fallen column debris and several limestone ashlar blocks that clutter the exposed parts of the strata were remains of the destruction of the basilica. At this point, there does not appear to be any secondary reconstruction in this space, as had been the case with much of the adjoining spaces to the south of the square.



10. The church complex (Area G).

Square 45 (Figs. 13, 14)

Another excavation unit (45) was opened to the north of square 44, under the supervision of Vashti Smith and Elizabeth Pace. As with the adjacent square, the objective for this square was to further open up the space tentatively identified as an atrium or courtyard space leading to the basilica's western entrance. The first two soil layers encountered (001, 002) in the stratigraphy of the squares maintained the pattern observed in this area, which comprised a wide span of pottery washed down with the natural erosion of the *tall* above. It was composed of a soil matrix from sandy gravel mix to cobble-sized limestone fragments, with some vegetal debris. The third soil strata (004), comprising the destruction layer of the church, was encountered about 1m from the surface. The location of the excavation unit directly west of the narthex space featured a colonnade. Column fragments were discovered in Square 43 including an ornate Ionic capital with fluting

and floral-pattern decoration. Basalt drums were also uncovered, including one protruding from the northern balk with an architectural mark on the inside end in the form of a Greek letter *tau*, or "T". A large architectural fragment, possibly of a corner section of the colonnade's architrave, was also found lying on the plastered surface of the floor. It appears that this surface was missing the tessellated mosaic floor that was encountered in the narthex space directly to the east.

Squares 41, 42, and 43 Balk Removal and Clearance (Fig. 15)

An important objective of this season was to complete the removal of the remaining balks from Squares 41, 42, and 43, which were excavated in the 2016 season, to better understand the nature of the western access to the church. Along with balk removal, the western halves (2×4m) of the squares needed to be excavated to the floor. These unexcavated



11. Square 44.



13. Square 45.



12. Square 44.



14. Square 45.

sections belonged to the destruction layer of the ecclesiastical complex, the earliest occupational level encountered in Area G. These remaining unexcavated sections (43x, 42x, 41x) were exposed to weathering and accumulation of debris during the off-season, so the approach to their removal was the same strategy as for the balks. This work was completed under the supervision of Josh Kruntorad, Maroun El Houkayem, and Scott Turnbull. This project began with the removal of Square 43's eastern balk, revealing the presence of a column drum and capital that appear to belong to the colonnade in the church narthex. This balk was located in the northernmost Square 43 and continued to the south. Unlike Square 43, the eastern balks of Squares 41 and 42 were dominated by a wall that appeared to belong to the church. It was decided that this provided better access by workers and tools for the subsequent removal of the southern balk of Square 43 and to access Squares 42 and 41.

In the course of excavation that followed, the eastern and southern balks of Squares 43 and 42 were removed. In Square 43, a mosaic floor of red and blue geometric patterns was uncovered with the removal of the east balk and the previously unexcavated section in the western half. The removal of the east balk in Square 42 further exposed the rear (west) wall of the diaconicon. Further excavation revealed a lower course of the wall of fine-cut ashlar in a header-stretcher pattern consistent with those the earlier structures that were added to the main church structure. An area of mosaic flooring existed in the eastern and western parts of Square 43 that appeared to end at a threshold featuring an embedded column base. The tessellated flooring evidently continued to the south into another space (Square 42) but is preserved in only a small section south of the threshold. This flooring had almost completely disappeared in the space between the threshold and the east-west wall revealed with the removal of Square 42 south balk.

The removal of the south balk and the unexcavated western portion of Square 42 uncovered secondary walls, but the floor was not reached this season. The east-west wall encountered with removal of the Square 42 south balk had an area of tumble at its center, which

was removed to uncover a basalt threshold for an inward-swinging door. This also appears to belong to the original church complex, though the function of the space remains unclear. Excavators noted tesserae discovered at the floor level, which may indicate the presence of a mosaic floor, although this will remain unclear until further excavation of Square 41 (**Fig. 16**).

Preliminary Interpretations

The principal aim of this excavation season was to increase our understanding of the western access to the church in Area G. The squares opened this season (44 and 45) served to extend the north-south exploration of the atrium space that includes large column bases on a decorative mosaic floor. As excavation progressed, it became clearer that the destruction caused by the earthquake was quite significant, leaving gaps in the material remains, and was certainly exacerbated by the subsequent reuse of the structure, which creates a somewhat confused picture of secondary construction. In the recent excavations of Squares 44 and 45, it appears that much of the tessellated flooring was either destroyed or removed from the atrium space,



15. Squares 41, 42, and 43 balk removal and clearance.

leaving just a plaster subflooring. The presence of ornate capitals, including an ionic capital decorated with fluting and floral patterns, may provide some indication of the church's rather significant resources. In the space southwest of the main entrance, which was further uncovered with the balk removal and clearance of Squares 42 and 43, a familiar pattern of reconstruction was evidenced with the reuse of architectural material to create various domestic spaces, as did the pattern in the rooms directly south of the church's main sanctuary. The room entrance encountered in Square 41 may prove to be more connected to the original ecclesiastical structure and function, but this remains to be seen.

Recommendations for Future Excavation

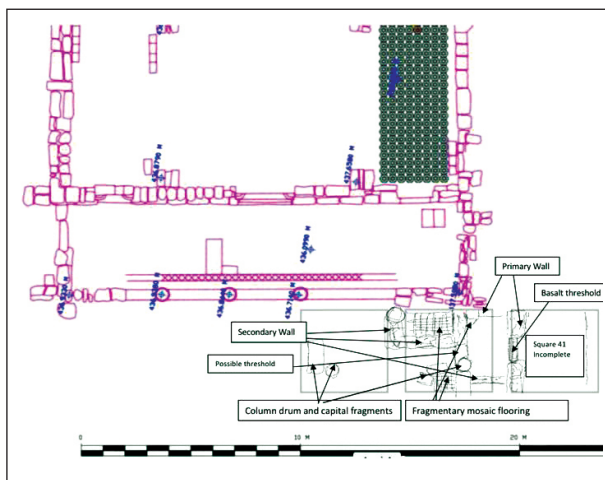
Several objectives for the 2020 excavation season should include the continued clearance of the western entrance to the church to determine the nature of its relationship to the ecclesiastical structure directly to the west. Another excavation unit should be planned (46) immediately to the north of Square 45, in order to determine if there is any pathway or structure that connects the northwest end of the narthex to the complex to the west. A main goal for the season should be to uncover the overall atrium area, as it has been excavated to this point, in order gain a better understanding of the function of this space and to consider the reconstruction of the colonnade that creates a dramatic entrance to the church. As with previous seasons, due to time constraints one square (44) was left with an unexcavated section (2×4m) in the western half that will need to be removed in the next

season's work. As part of this clearance process, work should continue to the floor of Squares 41 and 42 and remove the soil covering the mosaic floors extending throughout this area. Finally, a square should be considered in the northeast of the church, outside the north aisle, near the entrance of the water tunnel, to determine if there was direct access here from the church itself. It would be advisable to rent a bulldozer to clear the accumulated fill and construction debris that has accumulated over a number of excavation seasons.

Area E (Fig. 17)

In Area E, excavations were conducted as proposed in the dig design, with excavation units on the north side of the area following the mosaic paved processional passage exposed in 2014 and partially excavated in 2016. This area was supervised by Dr. Robert Smith, with Assistant Area Supervisor Daniel McCarley. Square Supervisors for this area were Marissa Johns, Eathan Devine, Andrew Bohlender, Keegan Case, Anyelca Dubon, Lexie Graft, Jane Mulkey, and Ana Rodriguez. The squares excavated this season lie at latitude 32.68201 and longitude 35.87013. These excavations have revealed information that points to the worship activities of pilgrims in the complex that involved the use of a significant amount of water. The excavations also exposed the frequent adjustment of the structures.

In the northeast section of the area excavated during our 2016 season, a large wall that joined with what appears to be an apse structure was encountered. Work this season focused on the west side of this wall. Our hope was to find a baptistry in this area, but excavations were inconclusive due to the extensive reuse of the area in later periods. Work in the excavation units inside this structure did not succeed in exposing all the architecture. The doorway (005) has a threshold that steps from the mosaic-covered processional passage in Square E98 down into a long stone-paved room that is *ca.* 3m wide and 7m. long (Fig. 18). The excavator was surprised that the interior of the building was not furnished with a more ornate floor. Cracks between the stones suggest that there is a water channel below. At the east end of the room, the walls evidence modifications.



16. Squares 41.



17. Area E.



18. A long stone-paved room in Square E98.

The most significant is the closure of a door to the east. The plaster surface (010) on that wall was found to contain a black painted inscription on the surface that contained at least three lines and, when interpreted, may give further understanding of the installation. At the northeast corner of the room, a narrow passage extends towards the apse to the north. At the threshold a carefully sealed ceramic pipe descends the wall. Its purpose remains to be seen. Such a pipe could have carried water from the terrace wall to serve a fountain.

In addition, the northwest corner of the atrium was cleared and exposed down to a well-preserved mosaic floor that continues from squares excavation in 2016.

Excavation in the future should focus on the area encompassed by the area west of the mosaic paved walkway and should expose the area within the apse found during the 2016 excavation season.

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