

# THE 2004 SEASON OF EXCAVATION AT ABILA OF THE DECAPOLIS

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## Introduction

The fifteenth season of excavation at Abila of the Decapolis-Quwayliba, northern Jordan was conducted from 19 June to 29 July 2004, with W. Harold Mare, Director, and the Abila Archaeological Project, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis Missouri, as principal investigator. Upon the death of Dr. Harold Mare early during the project, the leadership of the project fell to the assistant directors, Drs. David W. Chapman and Robert W. Smith. The site of Abila/Quwayliba consists of two tells adjacent to the Wādi Quwayliba linked by a saddle (total area about 1.5km north-south and 0.5km east-west) located approximately 15km north-north-east of Irbid. Over the years this site has proven itself to be rich in material from the Early Bronze Age through the Umayyad period and later.

The objectives from this season focused on three main areas (Areas AA, B, and C), though probes were initiated in other portions of the site. In Area AA the central goal was to provide greater horizontal exposure of Iron and Bronze Age strata. Roman and Byzantine road and water systems were further exposed and analyzed in Area B. The principle target in Area C was the possible bath structure. Discoveries in each area exhibited many interesting structural features and some surprising finds.

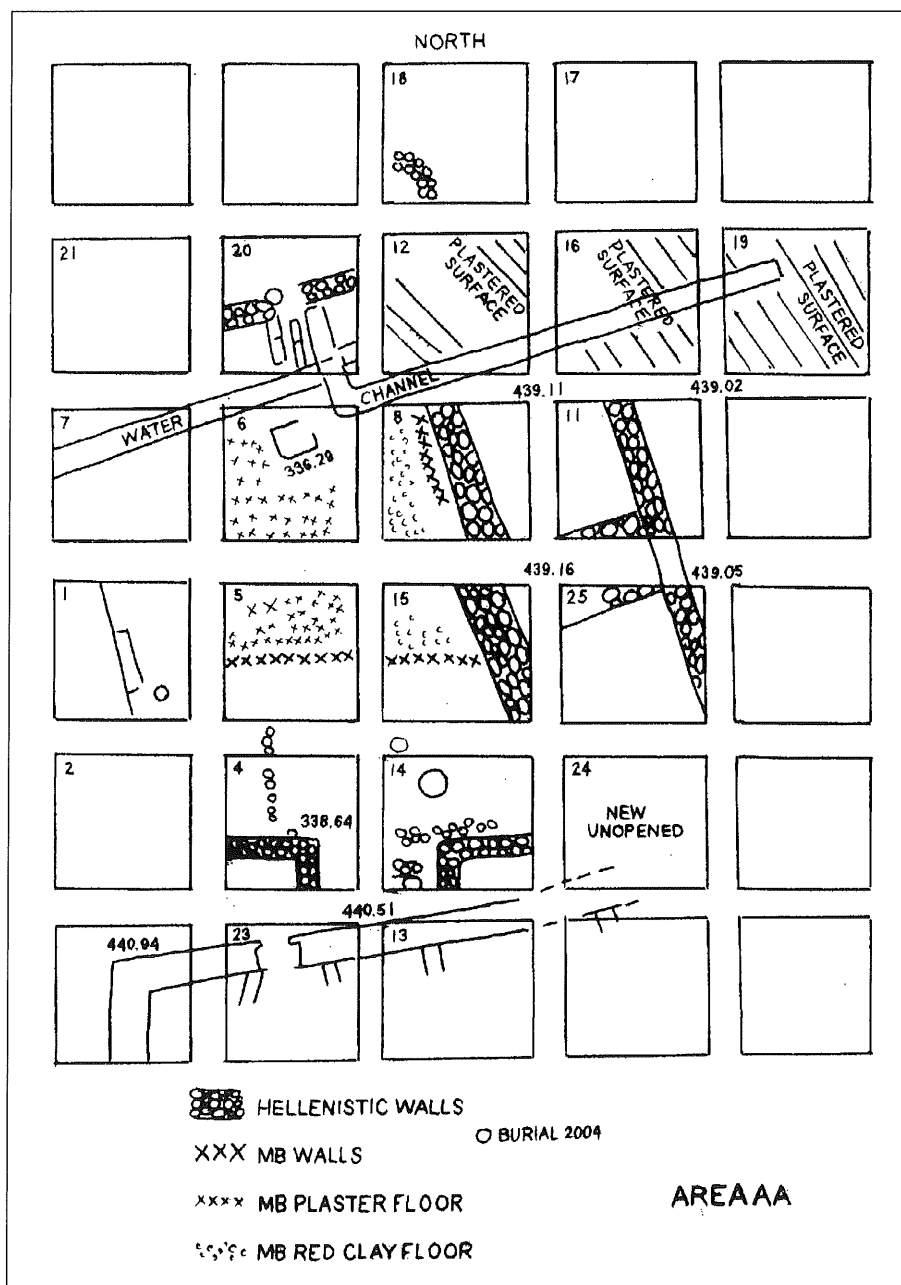
## Area AA: the North Tall/ Tall Abila (Susan Ellis)

Excavation in Area AA focused on Squares 4 and 14 with the intention of bringing the levels of these two squares down to that of adjoining squares 5 and 15 (see **Fig. 1**). We continued to find living surfaces with a great deal of pottery. In both these squares the northern balks are being excavated because of an earlier decision to

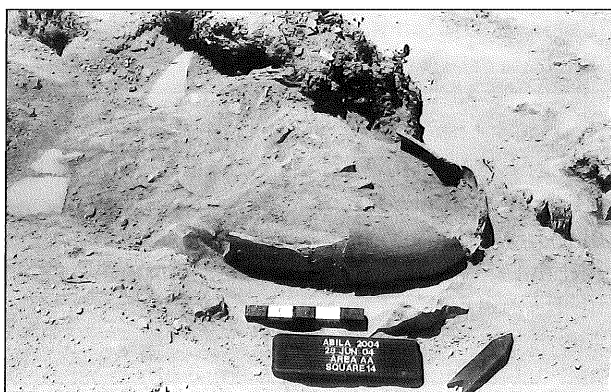
leave in a Roman/Hellenistic wall, which has cut out a major portion of the square.

Several packed surfaces were evident in Square 4 this season. Surface 4019 (elevation 436.93) was particularly noted for the amount of rock fall upon it. This surface abutted against the wall (4020). A second notable floor was Locus 4025, also abutting against wall 4020, which floor was the end of the excavation this season at 436.92. Pottery from this square was mixed Iron II and Middle Bronze, with a few errant later period sherds (possibly from wall fall or rodent burrows).

The first major discovery in Square 14, the higher of the two squares, was a jar burial in the NW corner (see **Fig. 2**). The upper elevation of this burial was 437.81 and the lower elevation was 437.35. These two elevations fall exactly within the range of a previous burial found in Square 15 (AA15025) at an elevation of 437.60. The remnants of the individual were so fragmentary that it was impossible to determine if it was a primary (the deceased buried directly after death with skin, etc. intact and the bones articulated), or a secondary burial (the deceased is left out to desiccate prior to burial, then the remains — often just disarticulated bones — are placed into the jar and then buried). The only intact bones in this burial were the majority of the cranial bones. The deceased was most likely male, as suggested by a large nuchal crest and rather prominent brow ridges. Age was probably in mid-twenties. Preliminary investigation of the skull suggests the possibility of trephination in the cranium of this man, but further investigation is needed to confirm this. Several stones had been placed around the southern exterior of the jar, which was of the Iron Age style. A second jar, an offering for the deceased, was found



1. Top plan of Area AA indicating relative locations of Squares A4 and A14.



2. Area AA: Iron Age burial containing the disarticulated skeletal remains of an adult male.

12 centimeters to the west of the burial jar. This second jar had a slightly carinated shoulder, and was Iron II in style. Offering jars were also previously found with burials in excavated Square 15.

One concern in excavating this burial was the presence of Roman terra sigillata ware just one meter to the east of the burial. At first this suggested that the dating of the burial was completely askew, but comparing these eastern loci with previous excavation (and further excavation in 2004) suggests that the eastern portion of Square 14 has long been a pottery dump, and

has had major churning because of previous inhabitants pit digging.

Further excavation of Square 14 showed continuous habitation which was particularly evident in the SW corner, where alternating levels of reddish floors and ash layers could be seen easily in the balk. Few seeds were found this season, and those that were found were olive seeds. Another east/west wall emerged (14022) below the burial. This is part of the Middle Bronze levels. Elevation at the top of this rough, poorly built wall is between 437.365-437.345. Excavation in this square ended before we could find the bottom of the wall. However, this wall extends into Square 4 where it is labeled 4020.

Because of the nature of the eastern portion of this square as a pottery dump or digging upheaval, the north eastern section has had its own loci numbers in order to compare the types of pottery found there with the pottery in the western portion of the square. These eastern loci continued to contain pottery from the Umayyad to the Middle Bronze periods. Iron and Middle Bronze Age pottery was found in the western sections of the square.

#### **Area B: Civic Center** (Maria Deutschmann and Robert Smith)

Area B is located at the center of Abila between Tall Umm al-‘Amad and Tall Abila. It has broad horizontal exposures dating to the Roman and Byzantine Periods. Earlier seasons of excavation in this area focused on three areas, the first being a basalt road which comes in from the north and curves to the east in order to avoid collision with the northeastern slope of Tall Umm al-‘Amad, which provides the southern boundary of Area B. This hill, which has been coined the theater cavea, was the second area of interest and excavation. As it has been excavated over the years, this hillside has revealed a large building structure that is still in need of some continued excavation. In part due to the presence of this large building, it is now somewhat questionable whether a theater cavea of any sort existed here. The third area of excavation is the civic center that exists to the east and north of the basalt road (see **Fig. 3**). Previous excavation revealed a tessellated floor area flanked by the remnants of limestone walls; this may indicate a marketplace/forum area. Excavation through

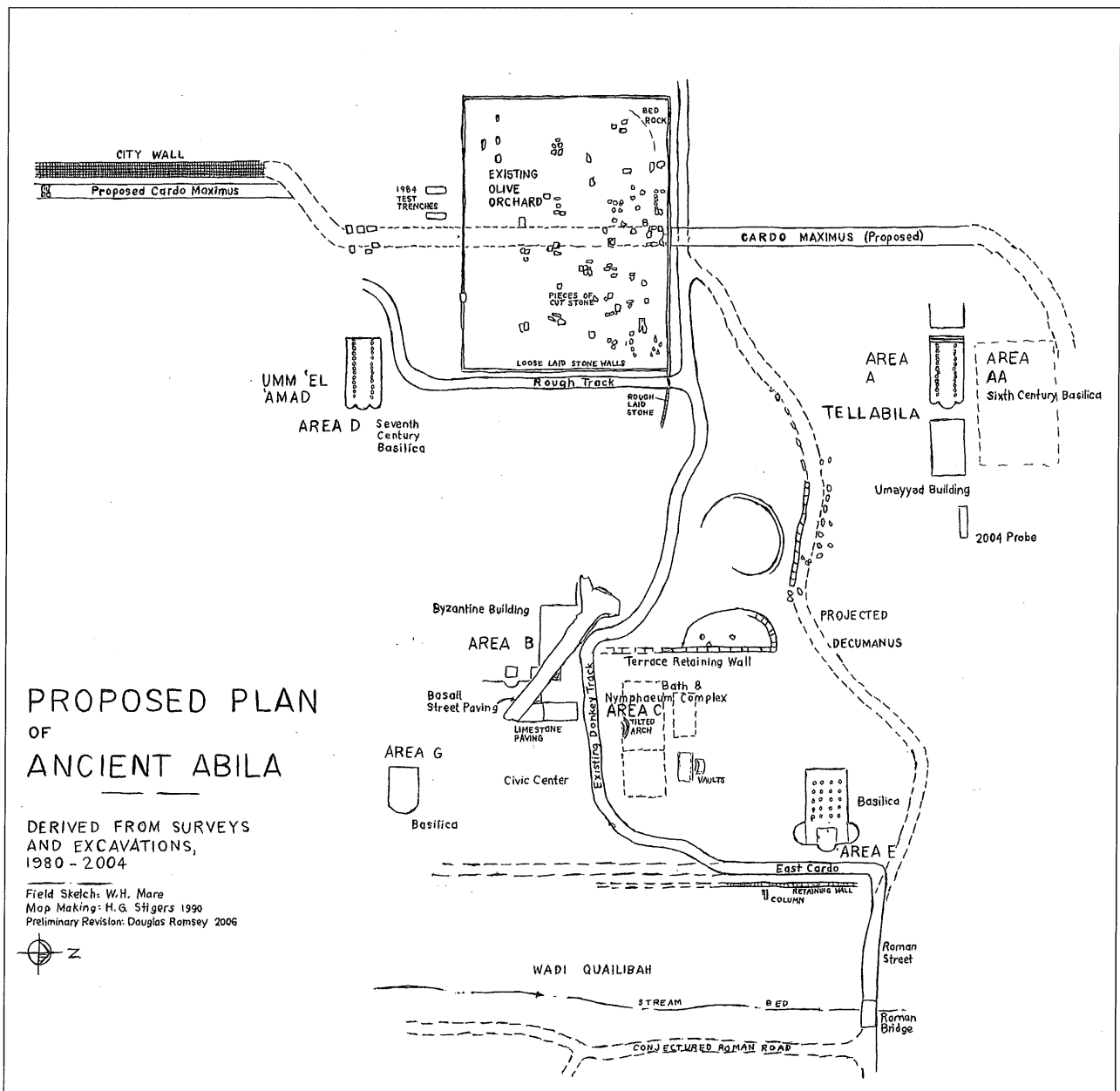
this tessellated floor took place in the 2000 season and a Roman aqueduct was revealed.

Excavations in 2004 focused on this Roman water conduit as well as a part of the area that contained a Roman limestone pavement. The study of the aqueduct is contained in the squares B43, B43x, B44, B46, and B51. The study of the commercial area and the limestone street involved squares B47, B48, B49, and B50.

While pursuing the study of the aqueduct, the excavation of the northeast quadrant of Square B43 identified a drainage trench (Locus 025). This trench, which was covered by cut stones, paralleled the east/west water conduit. The fact that the north side of this conduit was plastered indicates that this trench was a sluiceway used as an overflow drain. Pottery, bone, lamp fragments and other artifacts were found by sifting the soil found in this trench. The secondary base drain, located below the sluiceway base in the northeast quadrant, was possibly placed there to assist below-street drainage flow around a pre-existing wall intersecting the aqueduct structure. To support this further, there is a horizontal drain hole cut through the base of this wall at the north balk, which would serve to relieve water pressure by directing water flow into the secondary base drain.

With a probe in the southwest quadrant of Square B43, the expected original construction trench for the aqueduct system was located. Artifact evidence found in this undisturbed layer of construction debris indicated both Early and Late Roman; it was agreed to apply a construction period of “mid-Roman” to this significant aqueduct system. All artifacts found in the sluiceway along the north face of this aqueduct structure ranged from Late Roman to Early Byzantine, thus dating the period of abandonment for this sluiceway system; with a still later repair to the potable water conduit portion of the aqueduct structure.

The question still remained as to the exact length and directions of this conduit. On its westward course, in the west balk of square 43, we unearthed a portion of the water conduit with the potable water pipe still intact. At this point, the water conduit turned northward at a ninety-degree angle. Further investigation showed that this northward trend continued for three meters before turning westward once again in square 38.



### 3. Plan of Abila.

The sluiceway was also present in the northwest corner of this square. Architect Chelius Carter determined that the conduit in this corner lined up diagonally with the water channel found beneath the basalt street to the southwest. These basalt pavers were pulled up in the 1988 season (B5 and B7) and revealed a below-street water channel. It is most likely that a water source will be found at the end of this water channel.

On the eastward course of the water conduit (in square 44) an obvious debris/dark soil fill trench was found around the water conduit and some later limestone steps were cut through.

Someone, at some point in time, had performed a massive undertaking to repair the aqueduct system. A probe (designated Square 51) was also opened further east to determine if, at this juncture, the aqueduct made a ninety-degree turn north to Area C. However, in this square the water system clearly continued eastward and the decision was made that further excavation eastward from that point should be halted and that a probe should be put in during a future season; at a place parallel to the location of the water cistern in Area C.

The other goal for Area B in 2004 was to fur-

ther expose a Roman era limestone paver street west of the Civic Center. A portion of this pavement had already been exposed, to the south of and .7 meters into Square 47, due to the prior excavation of the area. This prior investigation had assumed that a basic limestone street continued to the north. However, in this season, excavation further into Squares 47 and 48 to the north determined that thoughts of a simple paved street had been too simplistic (see **Fig. 4**). In the south of Square 47 was a row of raised limestone blocks, put into place at the time of construction, that had been the base of a large door frame. The pavers showed no wheel markings at all. Furthermore, there was an intentional, decisive split in the level of the limestone pavers — the pavers in the east of the square (locus 47010) continued at the same level while the pavers in the west were placed approximately 25cm lower (locus 47011). Due to the narrowness of both levels of pavement (approximately 3 meters), they were most likely for pedestrian use.



4. Area B: Basalt road (foreground) with limestone causeway showing split in level of limestone pavers into squares B47 and B48 (balk removed).

Based on the further excavation done to the north in Square B48, it is possible that locus 47010 was a walkway leading into a marketplace. On the east of this walkway these pavers are flanked by an exterior limestone wall standing 1.3 meters in height with a doorway cut into it. This doorway is constructed of secondary carved basalt pieces (deemed secondary in nature because the cornice overhangs the wall; another indication is a large rosette carved into the frame). The floor of this door frame is composed of a basalt rock carved with channels that would have allowed large doors to open and close. This doorway has limestone steps (of the same type as the pavers) leading down east toward the top of a tessellated forum area. Perhaps this was an exit and entry into this market area.

Along the west balk of square B47 and in the balk of square B48 (as indicated by a test probe) a covered water/sewage channel existed. The inside of this channel is plastered. This channel runs in a south/southwest direction. Future removal of the balks should be done in order to ascertain the nature of this water/sewage channel. Further to the west of squares 47 and 48, squares B49 and B50 were opened up. Although no limestone pavers were found, these squares, as well as squares 47 and 48 in the layers above the pavers, indicate many levels of habitation with numerous floor levels, ash lenses, and a variety of bone, glass and pottery dating from Roman to Umayyad times. It is definite that this section of the city was a well-trafficked and occupied part of the city.

#### Area C: North of the Civic Center (Jack Lee and Chelius Carter)

In Area C, excavation of the bath complex was continued, and a number of balks and some tertiary structures (including a small ceramic *tābūn*) were removed to allow for greater exposure of the monumental building. At the entrance of the domed chamber a large kiln made of recycled circular bricks and square ceramic tiles was exposed at a level above the newly discovered hypocaust.

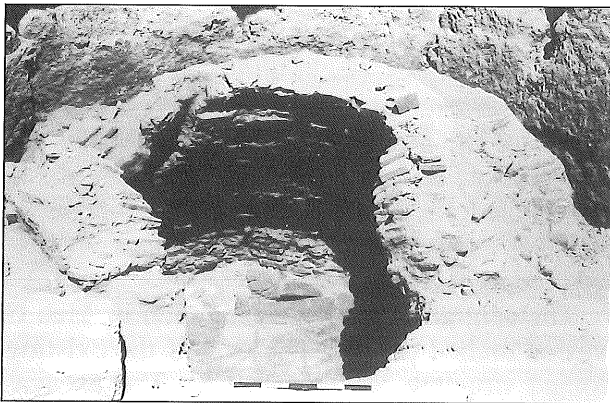
The central target of investigation in Area C was an arched portal at the east of the existing domed structure (designated C8). The excavators determined to redefine the original parameters of squares C10 and C15, immediately in

front of the primary structure to the east, and to expand these squares both west and north, along the east façade of the structure (the expansion being labeled as C10X and C15X, respectively).

Additionally, two attempts were made to further investigate safely the inside of the domed structure (C8) and connecting passages. After much labor was expended in removal of debris from the crevasse southwest of the dome (C30), it was found only to lead back into the domed structure, not into the targeted south passage-way beyond the rubble fill. Due to the immense amount of debris still remaining in one square (C11), coupled with disappointing results from C30, work in these squares was abandoned for the season.

Among the most interesting finds from this season included an ancient kiln (see Fig. 5), which was discovered in the excavations in C10. Much to our dismay, this rather intriguing kiln construction was built in the middle of the arched portal we were seeking to expose, preventing any further excavation there, for now. At the end of the season, the kiln area was filled with sand for preservation purposes.

A small area east of the ancient kiln discovered in C10 was found to be clear of debris, allowing a probe to go down deep. Finally, after several years of seeking confirmation for the Area C “bath” designation, the ever-so-elusive *hypocaust* floor system was found with a grid of *pillotti* intact and *in situ*. While it was fully expected that we would eventually find this system, what was not expected was where it was found, since it was located in an area heretofore considered as “outside” the building envelope. In any case, the existence of a bath in Area C is



5. Area C: Excavation in progress of the early Islamic era kiln located under the domed arch of the bathhouse.

now certain.

For dating purposes, a quantity of soot (residue from the downdraft flow of heated gases emanating from the fire box below the finished floor) was retrieved in C10 for future Carbon-14 analysis. Additional probing was done in the north balk of the probe in the debris level, which encased the sub-floor area. Several shards of pottery were found here, all Late Byzantine, possibly identifying the period of abandonment as Late Byzantine.

In clearing out C10 of later settlement rubble walls and intervening balks, there was exposed in the south balk, a “flat arch” of finely crafted *voussoir-cut* stones, indicating a doorway. This portion of wall incorporating this opening appeared to be contemporary with the east façade of the monumental structure in Area “C”. The doorway was thought odd until the discovery of the *hypocaust* floor in the same square. It is now proposed that the domed room comprises the interior center of a much larger and more formal bath structure.

The original finished floor height in the C10 probe is difficult to determine, as none of the *pillotti* are uniform in height, due to their being disturbed in the post-abandonment mining of floor pavers. There is what appears to be a limestone paver in the north balk of the C10, possibly *in situ*. If this is in its original position (to be verified in future excavation) then, its finished floor height is .06 meters below the finished floor height in C8, which is approximately correct for a transition threshold expected to be between the domed room and an adjacent *hypocaust* floored room.

## Probes

In order to investigate the connections between various portions of the site, a variety of investigative probes were employed at different locations. Two squares were opened near the intersection of Areas A and AA. Also a trench probe was employed on the eastward portion of Area AA. Furthermore, some structural features were examined below the church in the northern part of Area G. Finally a trench probe was launched in Area R.

### 1. Area A Northern Squares

Under the direction of Susan Ellis two squares

(A58 and A59) were opened along the north side of the Area A church; in order to clarify more of the water collection system. The rubble base below the Byzantine church was penetrated and pottery was discovered from Byzantine to Iron II. Looking at this area, in conjunction with two previously excavated squares, we can see that an extensive water collection system was in existence at the time the church was in use. At this point in the excavation, it appears that this area, including the “Umayyad” Building, Byzantine Church, and water collection area were all public spaces. Excavation reveals that these structures are built on top of earlier habitation, much of which is major construction, if not monumental architecture.

## 2. Area AA Eastern Probe

As part of Susan Ellis’ work in Area AA, a series of test probes were put in on the sloping area east of the double arches on the eastern side of AA (see **Fig. 3**). The probes were numbered AA52-57. Each began as a 1 meter (N/S) by 4 meter (E/W) trench. Two of these, Squares 56 and 57 were opened into full squares. Most trenches came down on various pavement layers, with the middle trenches exhibiting more carefully laid pavers in comparison to the worked rubble stones to the west. The trench furthest to the east ran into a north/south wall abutted by an east/west wall. Each of the trenches/squares consistently exhibited Byzantine, Umayyad and (less frequently) Roman pottery sherds.



6. *The Civic Center (Area B) from the south. In the foreground is a large residence, the basalt street, and the limestone paved street. In the background is a five-aisle church (Area E) and further excavation squares past the domed structure (Area C).*

These probe trenches indicated that, during the time that the arch on the eastern side of AA was an active gateway, there was also a paved surface with well-cut limestone blocks. After abandonment, some of the area was destroyed, and in other areas rubble was deposited upon this paved surface. Further excavation is needed to determine the relationship of this paved surface to other features discovered this year, and the relationship of this pavement to lower features. It seems likely that there should have been a walkway from the lower areas up to the arch and the monumental architecture on AA (church and building).

## 3. Area G Excavation

In Area G on the north side of the single apsed martyr’s church is the terminus to one of Abila’s water channels from ‘Ayn Quwayliba. In the year 2000 a collapse of the subterranean vaults at the terminus of the water channel was noted. This summer one square was opened (G7), to begin exposing this structure as a part of the water delivery infrastructure of Abila. This water system appears to provide water at a juncture in the main basalt road through the site.

## 4. Area R Trench Probe

In Area R, on the east side of the Wādī Quwayliba (almost due east of Area G), investigations were made to study the possibility of this as the location of the theater of Abila. These investigations proved inconclusive. The line of stones on the surface suspected to be part of the *skene* proved to be early Islamic structures in which an ornate Byzantine capital was found.

## In Memoriam

Dr. W. Harold Mare, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary and Director of the Abila Archaeological Project 1980-2004, who founded our work and led it through twenty-five successful years. He is survived by his five children and many grandchildren.

## Acknowledgments

This excavation was undertaken under the gracious supervision of Dr. Fawwaz Khraysheh, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and

assisted by Mr. Wajeeh Karasneh, Irbid District Inspector of the Department of Antiquities. Our capable and helpful Department Representatives were Mousa Melkawe and Abd Al-Raouf. The 2004 Abila Staff used the facilities of the Secondary Girls School in Ḥarthā, through the kind arrangement of the Department of Antiquities and the Ministry of Education. Our Abila Staff of 22 much appreciated the kindness and diligence of our more than 30 local workers and the many others who opened their homes and hearts to our crew. A significant thanks is due to the doctors and nurses of Annoor Hospital in al-Mafraq, Jordan, who looked after Drs. Mare

and Chapman and who helped arrange matters for Dr. Mare's family.

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