

EXCAVATIONS AND RESTORATIONS AT DAYR 'AYN 'ABĀṬA 1994

by
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EXCAVATIONS

Introduction and Objectives

The fifth season of excavation at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa in the Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi was conducted from January to June 1994. It was planned as renewed season of archaeological work in conjunction with the restoration project on the site. Previously excavated areas were completed and several new areas were opened in an effort to identify the full extent of the monastic complex and the nearby cairn tombs.

The main objectives for the 1994 season were to reveal the limits of the living quarters inside the monastery north of Area K (designated as Area M), exhume the communal burial chamber (Area K.II 29) discovered in 1992 and expand excavations in the cave (Area F.III) at the north aisle of the basilica (Fig.1). Rescue work was also deemed necessary amongst the Middle Bronze Age II cairn tombs (Area J).

Area M

Area M was the new excavation area in the northern part of the monastery. It is bordered on the south by Area K and on the west by Area B. Five separate trenches (M. I-V) were opened which exposed the north and east enclosure walls of the monastic complex (Fig.2), the sixth century AD rubbish dump beyond them and parts of the living quarters including the presumed pilgrim's hostel. The complete extent of the water channel above the site on the east was also made.

Area M.I contains the plastered water channel which continues to the south in Area K (Fig.3). The course of the channel which follows the contour of the mountain

bedrock is about 70 cm wide and up to 60 cm deep.

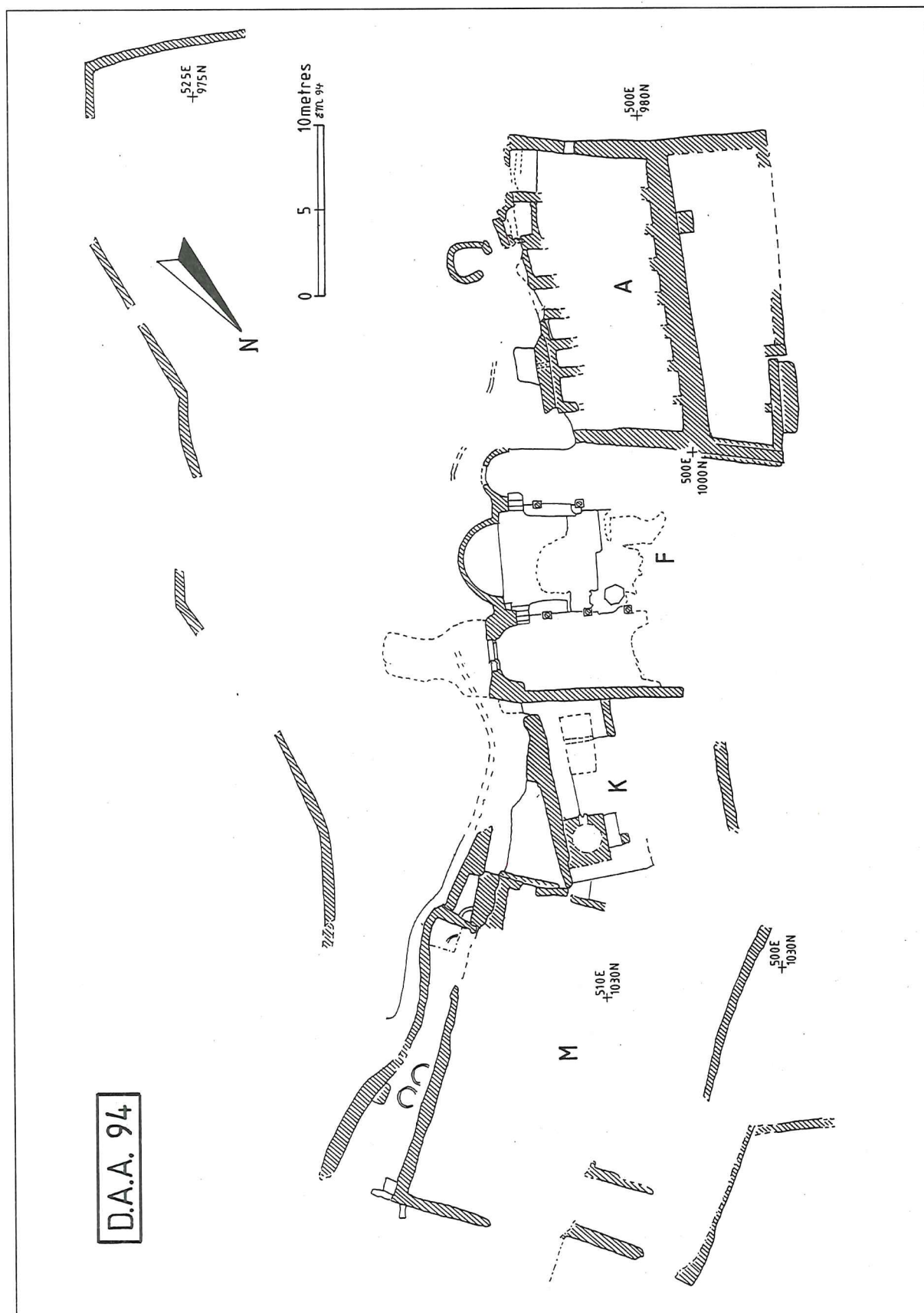
Area M.II comprises the deposits sloping outside the north, east and west walls of the monastery. Of particular interest is M.II 5 which constituted an extensive rubbish dump whose ashy deposits were filled with pottery, glass, metal, animal bones, and other material typical of the sixth century AD. Around 25 cubic metres (a third to a half of the total area) was excavated and sieved through a 5 x 5 mm mesh. The M.II 5 deposit was probably used in conjunction with other dumps (in Areas B.I and M.V 8.1 and 8.2) throughout the entire occupation of the monastery, or intensively for a shorter period. The presence of these dumps indicate that the major entrance into the monastic complex would not have been through the north wall. The eastern side of M.II had two well-preserved *tābūn*-type ovens with associated Abbasid pottery (Fig.4).

Area M.III borders the north-east corner of Area K.I. It was a small, open-spaced area which was probably never roofed and contained two *tābūn*-type ovens.

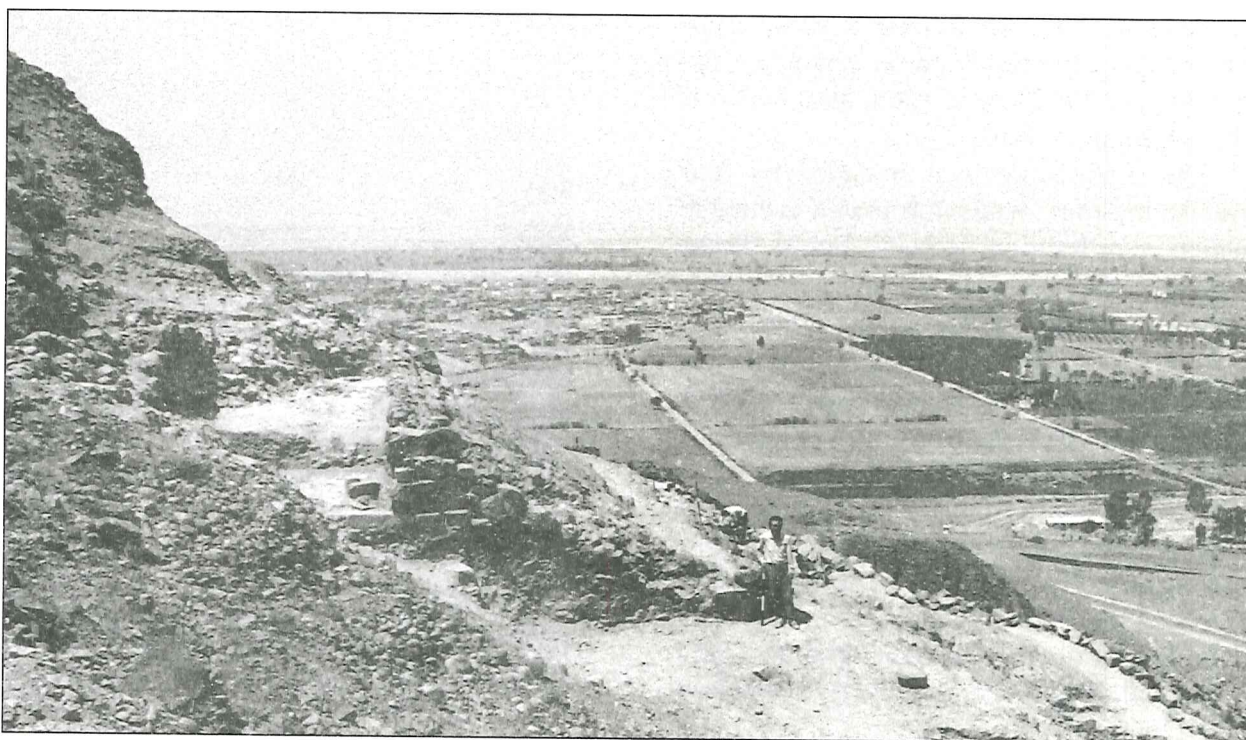
Excavation in Area M.IV was incomplete and only revealed a portion of a room near the north-west corner of a building which may be associated as the pilgrim's hostel. In this vicinity a sandstone block was found which had an engraved Greek inscription naming the builder as Ioannis Prokopios. Inside the north-eastern corner of the monastery walls a room, designated as Area M.V, was excavated with a large plastered bin, a bench and a possible arch pier.

Area K.II

Excavations in Area K.II were divided into a western section which was dug down



1. General plan of excavated areas in monastic complex (by W.E. Moth).



2. Area M, north wall of monastic complex (photo J.Rossiter).



3. Area M.I, the plastered water channel from the south (photo J.Rossiter).



4. Area M.II 6.5 Abbasid period *ṭābūn*- type ovens and pedestalled plate Reg. no. 160 (photo J. Rossiter).

to bedrock, an eastern section which contained the communal burial chamber discovered in 1992 and a room just north of the large stone oven.

The first section was bounded by four rubble masonry walls forming a rectangle which were built on bedrock (Fig.5). These seemed to be part of a retaining wall system which was employed to create level areas on the site. Consecutive layers of deposits were removed, some of which consisted of loosely packed boulders in an apparent effort to fill space. Although there was no clear indication of any real occupational floor surface, some layers contained reconstructable pottery vessels. At the bottom of this trench four cist grave burials were found cut into the bedrock (Fig.6). They contained three juveniles (Fig.7), a newborn and a fetus.

Excavation of the eastern side of K.II was one of the main priorities of the season (Fig.8). It was hoped to completely exhumed all the skeletons which were communally buried there. Over forty were systematically removed, but the fact that the bodies were placed one on top of the other made it extremely difficult to lift them individually. Therefore, all the skeletons in the burial chamber could not be removed by the time the physical anthropologist had to leave. Preliminary analysis of the bones indicate that most of the individuals were male (presumably monks) and that at least one of those was an African and an other a female. The burial chamber itself turned out to be a disused water reservoir with a connecting settling tank. Immediately north of this were three more cist burials which also were not excavated.

At the northern limit of Area K.II was a small room adjacent to the large stone oven uncovered in 1992 and apparently of a contemporary period. A complete Early Abbasid moulded jug (Fig.9) with a Kufic inscription around its shoulder was found here. A



5. Area K from south-west (photo K.D. Politis).



6. Three Byzantine graves cut into bedrock in Area K.II (photo I. Ruben).



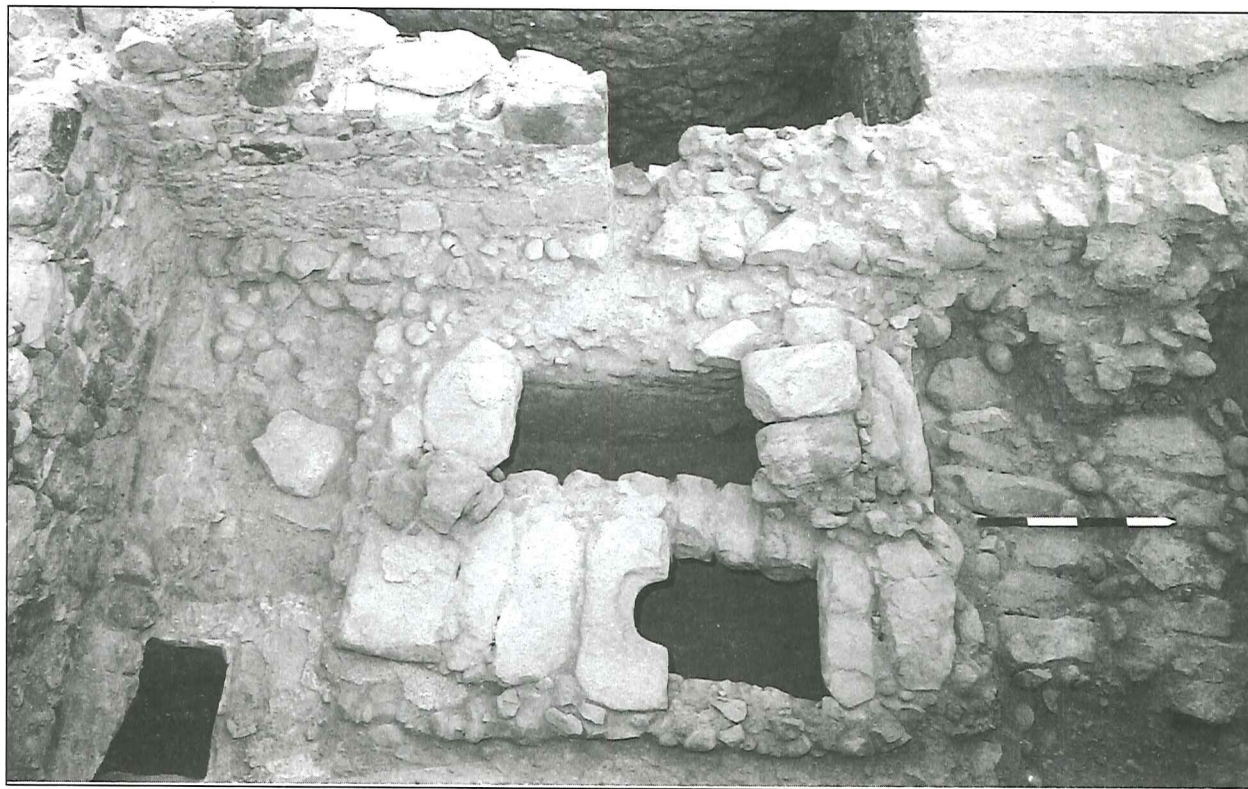
7. Child burial with iron anklets, Area K.II (photo I. Ruben).

preliminary translation names the potter as Abū 'Isa al-Munatimi, or al-Wathiqi (Fig. 10).

Area F

The natural cave in Area F.III, which was and still is the focal point of the entire site, was excavated to a depth of over three metres (Fig.11). Below the Byzantine-Abbasid mosaic floor, steps and marble paving slabs, lay a series of habitations and burials.

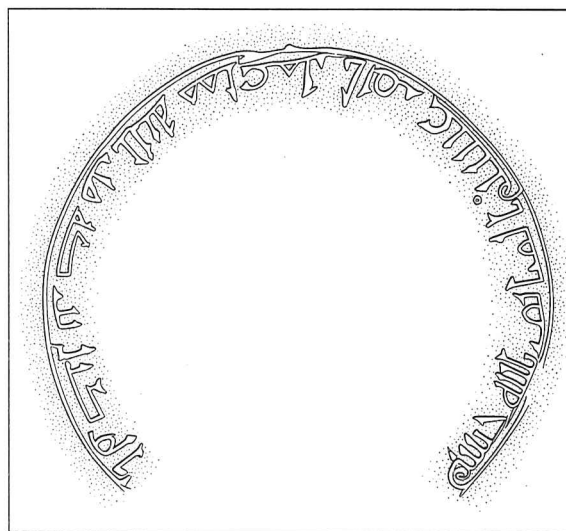
The first period represented below the floor was Early Roman (ca. first century BC first century AD) and may have contained a burial but was badly disturbed by the later building activities. Immediately below this were more disarticulated human bones, pottery sherds and beads belonging to the Middle Bronze Age II period (ca.1700-1550 BC). Further down Early Bronze Age I and II (ca. 3000-2800 BC) pottery, again, mixed with human bones were found. The last



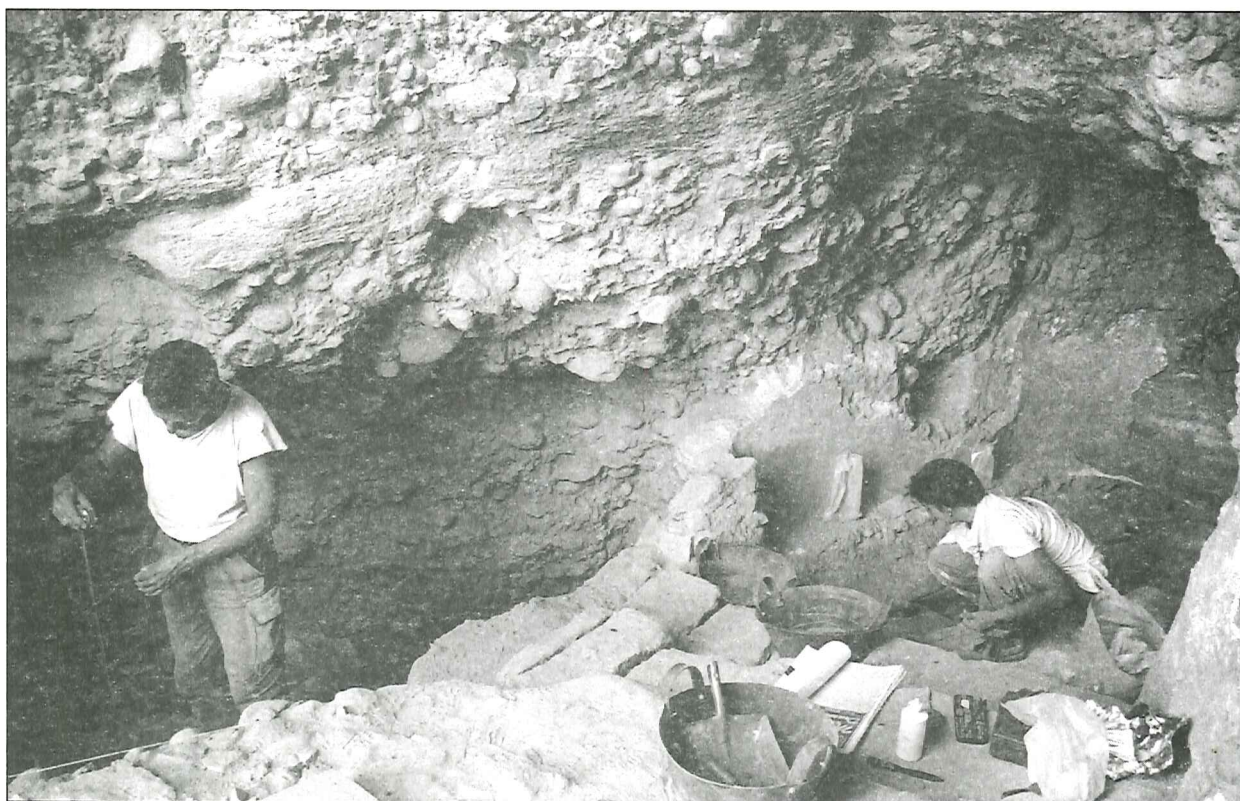
8. Area K.II, disused reservoir, reused as communal burial chamber (photo J. Rossiter).



9 . Abbasid period moulded jug with Kufic inscription around shoulder, ca.early ninth century AD reg. no. K.II 47.2-148 (photo J. Rossiter).



10. Kufic inscription on moulded Abbasid period jug, ca. early ninth century AD reg. no. K.II 47.2 148 (drawing by J. Farrant).



11. Area F. III, the cave. Excavation below the Abbasid-Byzantine floor (photo J. Rossiter).

identifiable layer of human occupation contained flints and worked bone tools which date to the ceramic Neolithic period (ca. 5000 BC). The discovery of freshwater mollusc at this level contributes to the theory that a spring once existed in the cave.

After the removal of the mosaic pavement in the nave of the basilica (Area F.II) for conservation (see following report on restorations), excavations below the floor revealed four layers of lime mortar and plaster mixed with ash and cobbles. One layer even had the footprints of one of the builders preserved in it! Below this was a layer of red sandy silt followed by a series of wooden beams (some still preserved *in situ*) and rows of stones. The tops of arches were finally revealed, on which the entire basilica was built. Plaster on the structures at this level may indicate some kind of an earlier building but excavations were discontinued due to time restrictions and the reality that the entire basilica was being undermined.

Area J

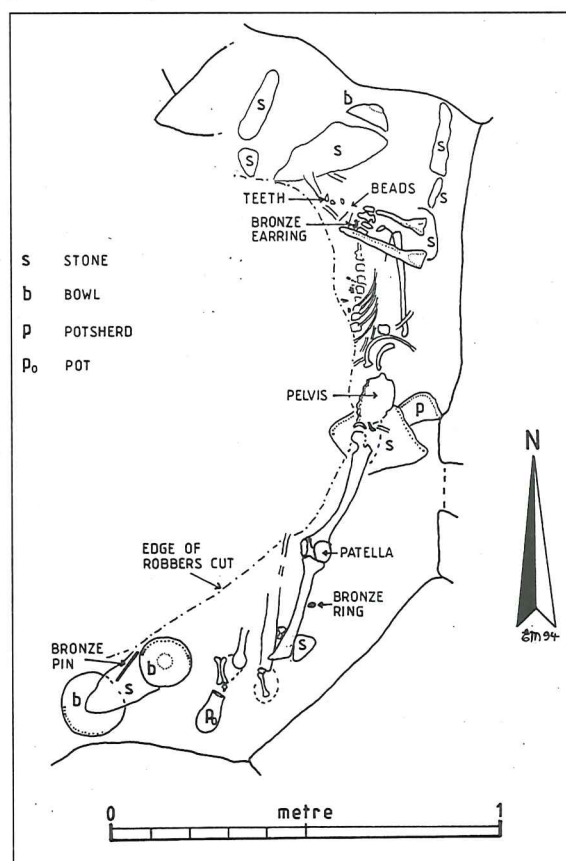
The topographical survey, surface collections and rescue excavations in Area J which were conducted in the 1990, 1992 and 1993 seasons, continued in 1994. Twelve more structures were identified bringing the total to 38 (J.XXXVIII was the last one designated). All except J.XIV, J.XVI and J.XXII were Middle Bronze Age II cairn tombs. During 1994 three cairn tombs were excavated, J.IV, J.V and J.XV.

The circular cairn tomb 2.5 m in diameter, identified and designated as J.IV in 1990 was completely excavated in 1994. Unfortunately, it had suffered even more disturbance since it was discovered. The only remaining area which was left *in situ* was up against the east end of the chamber where approximately half an adult had survived (Fig.12). The body seems to have been placed on a mat or fabric as was evident

from the fibrous material on the lower side on most of the bones. Excavation revealed that most of the grave goods had probably been removed by the recent tomb robbers.

Two carinated bowls, a juglet and a copper alloy pin were found near the feet of the skeleton, and another bowl and juglet next to the head (Fig.13). Other finds included two copper alloy earrings, two rings and two bead necklaces. Many beads of shell and stone (Fig.14) along with pottery sherds were also retrieved from within and outside the tomb which represent a thorough disturbance by the tomb robbers. In spite of this, there is some potential for reconstructing some vessels, such as a large storage jar with a perforated base whose fragments had been found in all levels.

Another roughly circular cairn tomb approximately 5m in diameter which was re-



12. Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb J. IV: remnants of contents after excavation (drawing by W.E. Moth).

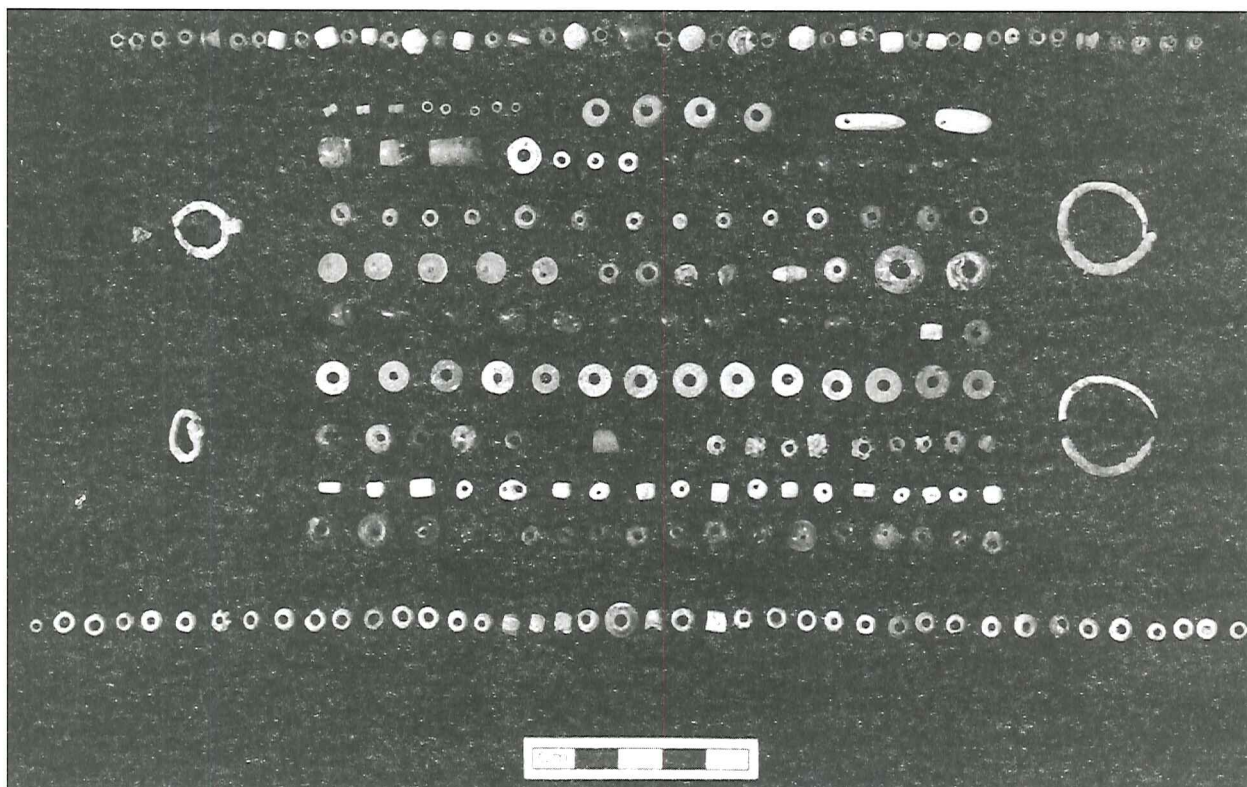
corded as J.V in 1990 and revisited in 1993, was devastated by tomb-robbers during those years. The spoil was totally sieved in 1994, but only yielded fragmentary human bone and beads, primarily of shell similar to those from J.XI which could hardly be retrieved without a sieve (Fig.15). No pottery was found.

The largest cairn tomb in Area J was designated as J.XV in 1990 and attracted

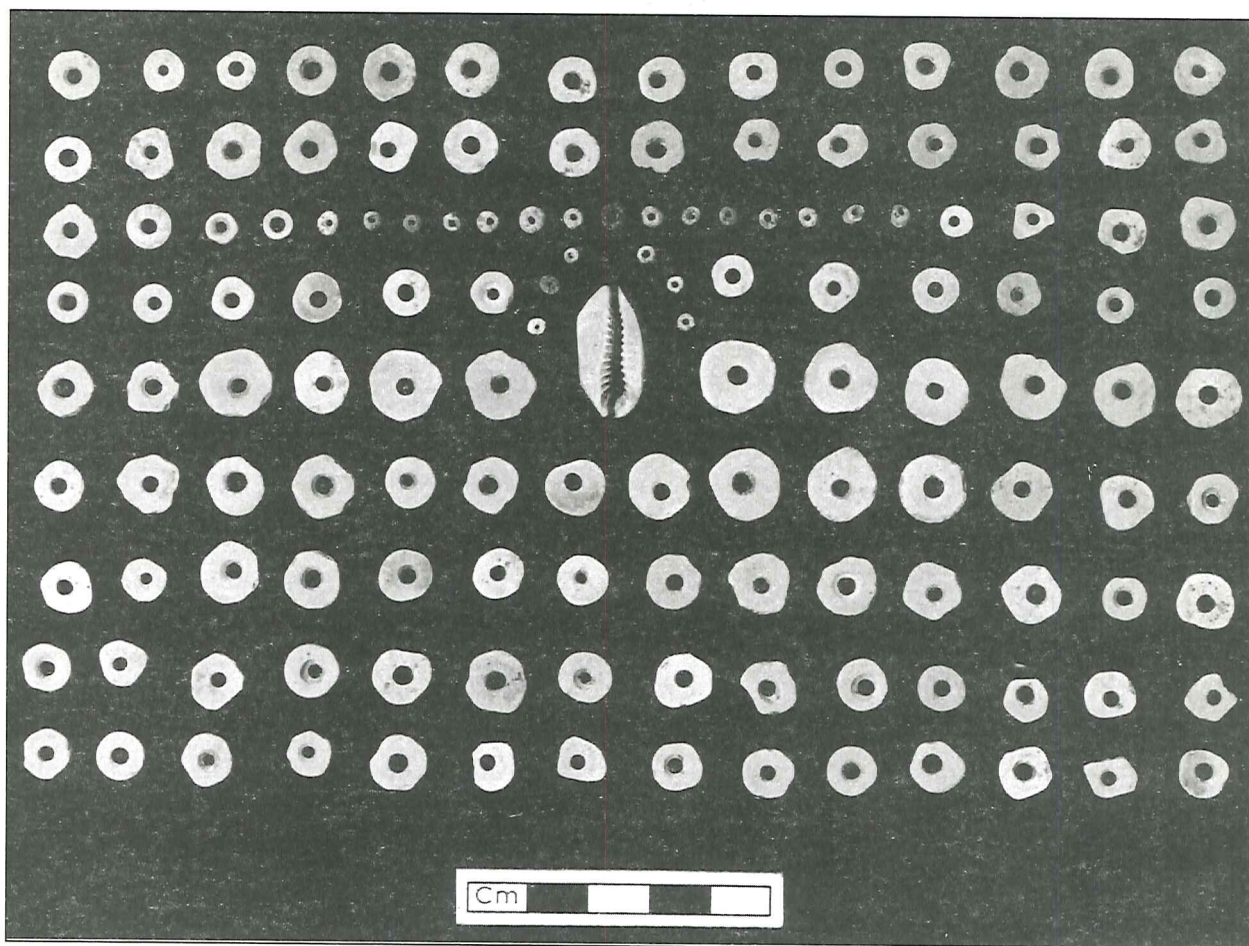
attention not only for its size but also for its prominent location (Fig.16). The structure had three burial areas built on a 5 x 16 m platform (Fig.17). Although they had been badly disturbed in antiquity, it was evident that all the areas contained more than one internment. Only one, in the centre, was definitely a cairn structure. A large number of shell and stone beads as well as an Egyptian steatite scarab seal dating to ca. 1700-1550



13. Pottery vessels collected at Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb J.IV (photo J. Rossiter)



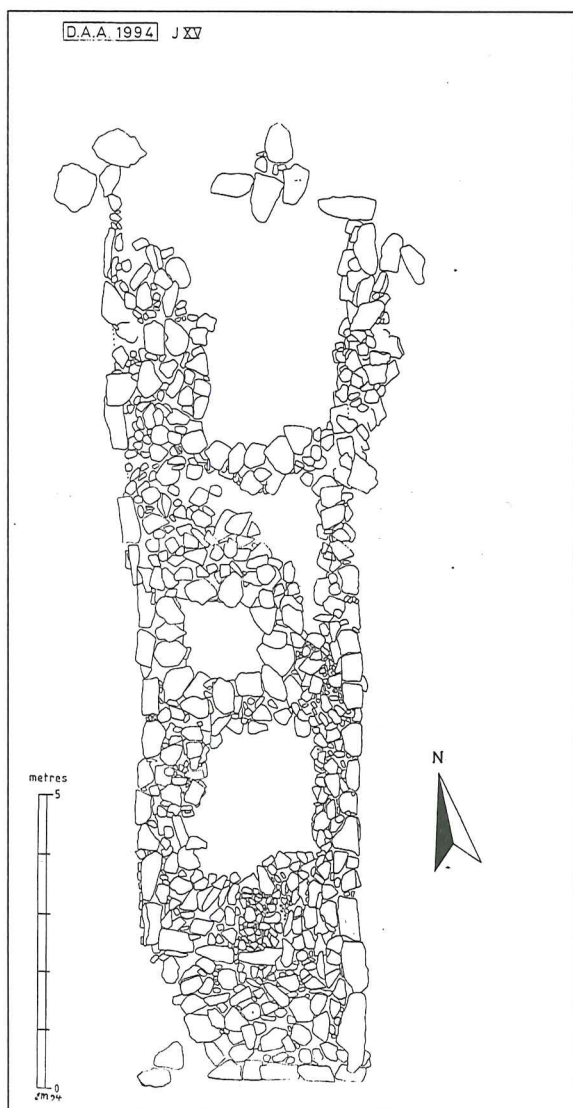
14. Beads, earrings and finger rings from Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb J.IV (photo J. Rossiter).



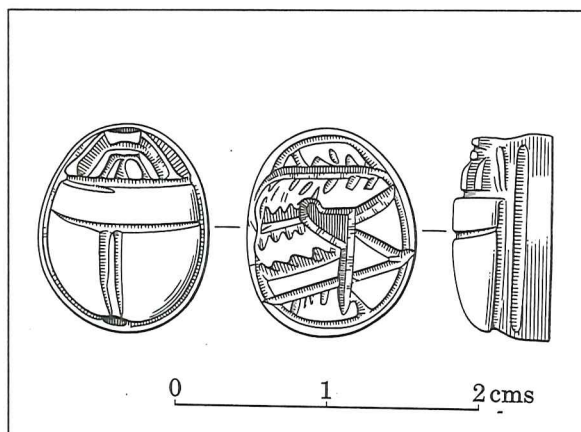
15. Beads from Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb J.V.



16. Middle Bronze Age cairn tomb structure J.XV from south-east (photo J. Rossiter).



17. Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb structure J. XV (after W. E. Moth).



18. Egyptian steatite scarab seal ca. 1700-1550 BC from Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb structure J.XV 17.2 reg. no. 167 (drawing by J. Farrant).

BC (Fig.18) were retrieved from sieving through a 2 x 2 mm and 1 x 1 mm mesh (Figs. 19, 20). Only one hand-made pottery vessel could be reconstructed from sherds found on the surface outside of the south-western wall of the platform. The finds correspond well within a Middle Bronze Age II date.

During 1994 surface collections were made in Areas J.I, J.II, J.VII, J.VIII, J.XVII, J.XXX and J.XXXI. The survey of the area was also extended to include the newly identified cairn structures (Fig. 21).

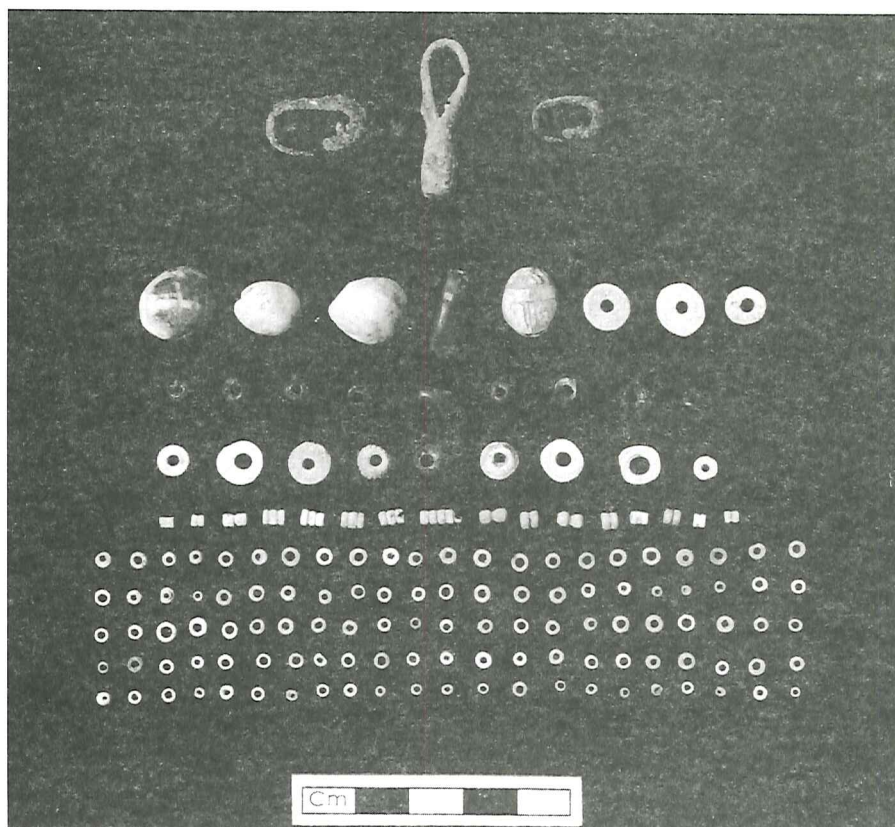
Area E.VII T.1

Near the new road cut up to the main monastery buildings was a roughly circular grave covered by large stone slabs and paved with roundish stones. The south-western end of the tomb had already eroded exposing the legs of a human skeleton, and since more road works were being planned, its excavation was made a priority. Once again though, ancient tomb robbers had disturbed most of the burial leaving only a few fragments of Early Bronze Age I pottery with which to date the grave and some beads. Two skulls were also identified indicating that a least two individuals were interred there.

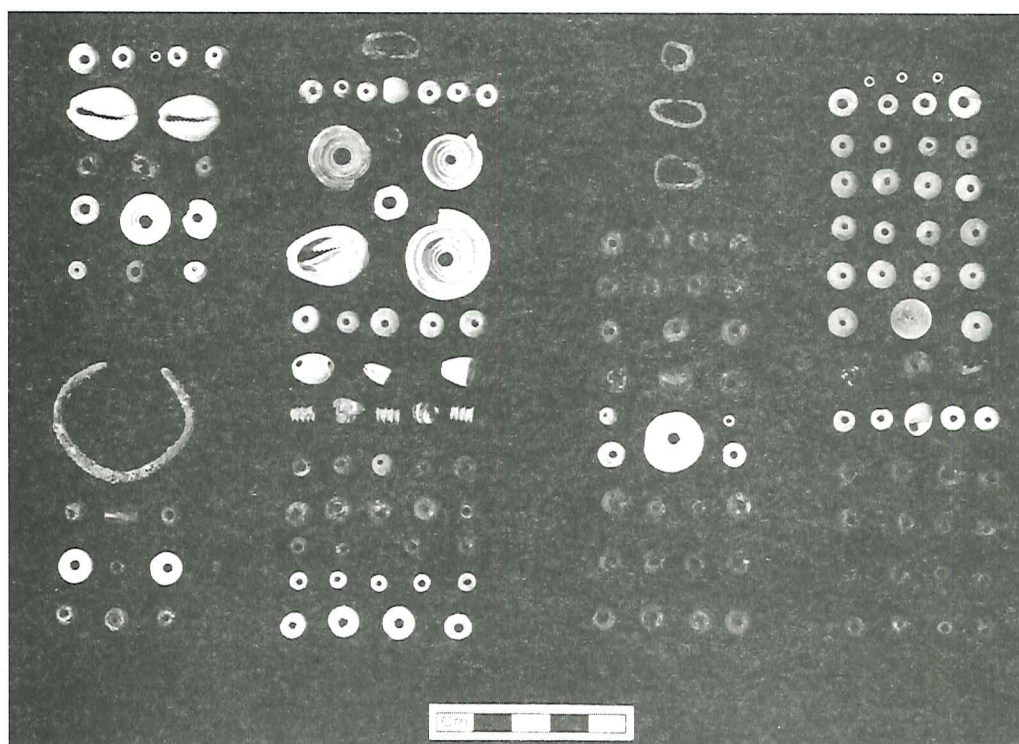
Summary and Conclusions

New excavations in Area M revealed the north and east boundary walls of the monastic complex. Thick rubbish deposits outside the northern wall turned out to belong to the sixth century AD, whereas a number of *tābūn* type ovens on the eastern limits of the site were related to the last phase of occupation, the Early Abbasid period, roughly the late eighth to early ninth centuries AD. A Greek inscription inside the boundary walls of Area M probably identifies the builder of the pilgrim's hostel of the monastery.

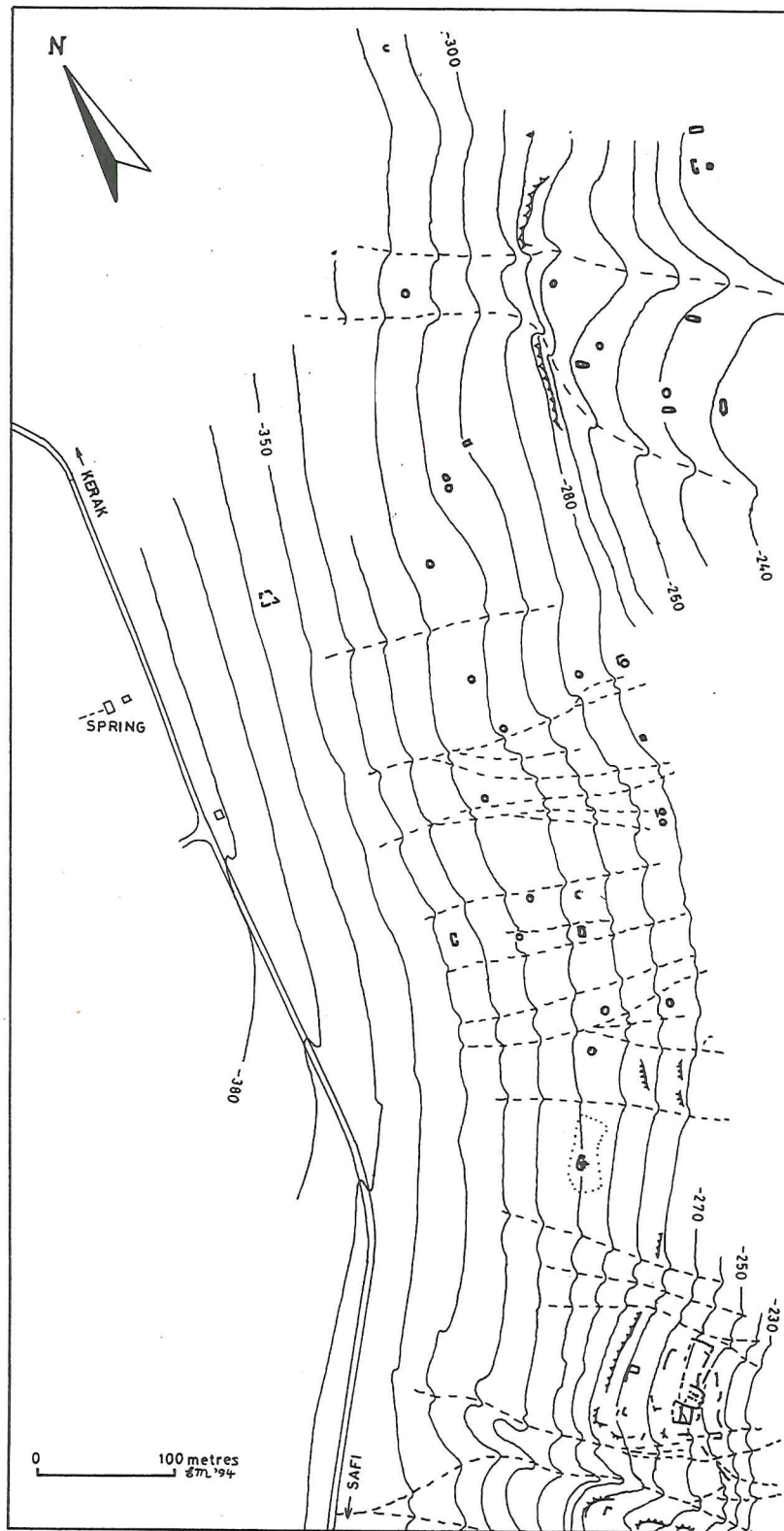
Excavations in Area K were virtually completed with only several more skeletons



19. Three earrings, an Egyptian scarab seal and beads from Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb structure J.XV (photo J. Rossiter).



20. A bracelet, four earrings and beads from Middle Bronze Age II cairn tomb structure J.XV (photo J. Rossiter).



21. Extent of Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa area surveyed in 1994 (by W.E. Moth).

left to exhume. The benches and *tābūn* - type ovens associated with the final occupation in the Early Abbasid period were dismantled to reveal Byzantine burials and retaining walls built on the bedrock. Another room was excavated north of the large stone oven which helped date the structure also to the Abbasid period.

Excavations in the cave, Area F.III, reached a new depth of over three metres. Consecutive layers of remains from the Bronze Age to the Neolithic period indicate a long continuity of occupation in the cave and allude to a tradition of its use as a refuge.

The removal of the May 691 AD mosaic pavement in Area F.II allowed the excavation below the floor which revealed both an earlier mosaic pavement and an ambo associated with the April 606 AD constructions. The paving techniques and underlying architecture were also understood.

Rescue work amongst the cairn tombs of Area J included the identification of twelve new Middle Bronze Age II tombs and the excavation of three of them.

An Early Bronze Age I tomb was also excavated near the newly cut road leading up to the main monastic complex.

RESTORATIONS

Introduction and Objectives

The priorities of the initial restoration project begun in 1993 were the consolidation of all the ancient walls, conservation of the mosaic floors and making the site more accessible to visitors. These were continued in 1994 on a larger scale. The work took place during the entire period of the excavations and continued until the end of the year.

The mosaic floor in Area F.I which was damaged after the 1990 season was completely repaired with original mosaic cubes. Since the new mortar dries faster than the old one when wet, the restored sections are clearly visible as distinct from the ancient

paving but the difference is virtually invisible to the ordinary visitor. The western end of the northern wall of the church was dismantled and a small section of mosaic paving was also lifted and relaid. This was an important section because it revealed the original April 606 AD northern doorway to the church.

One of the biggest tasks undertaken during 1994 was the complete removal of the May 691 AD mosaic pavement in the lower part of Area F.II, the nave of the church. The lifting was justified since it lay at the edge of the site and was eroding. The foundation had deteriorated causing severe subsidence of the floor level. After an initial consolidation the pavement was divided into 22 sections and lifted individually.

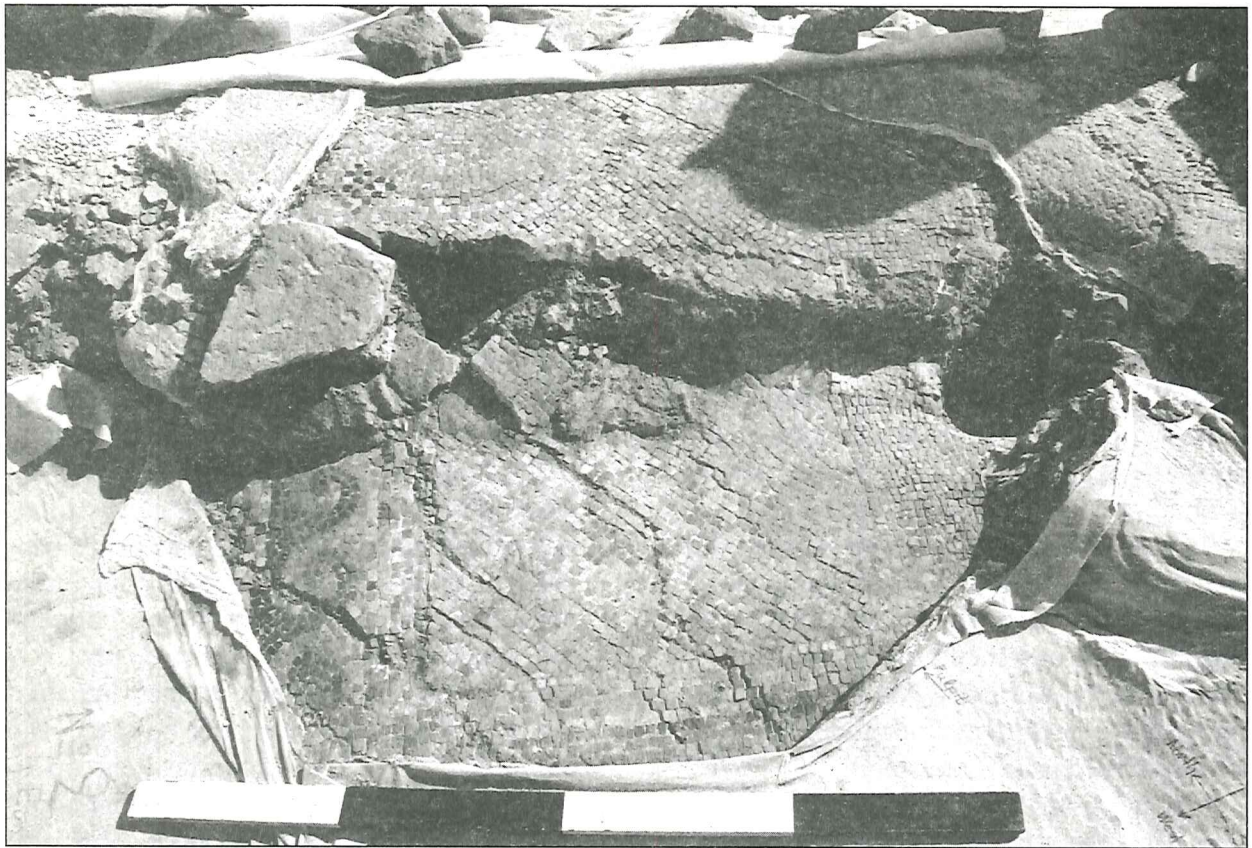
Each of these was then cleaned, repaired and stored until the floor can be reset. The ambo base which the mosaic went up to was also removed revealing an earlier ambo and an associated mosaic floor (Fig. 22) presumably contemporary with the April 606 AD pavement in F.I and F.III.

The northern sections of the plain mosaic pavement in the cave were also removed, but the reasons for this were to expose more of an area to excavate below the floor level. The remaining mosaic floor was consolidated and repaired.

Conservation of the mosaic pavement in the chancel in the upper portion of Area F.II also continued, but many of the cubes were crumbling and will need consolidating.

The walls in Areas A, F and K continued to be consolidated with a mixture of lime mortar. Several local workmen were trained to do this job.

A new stairway was constructed from the end of the road made in 1993. First, part of the mountain bedrock was cut with a jackhammer and then 94 steps each 15 cm high were built from locally quarried stone and grey cement. The railings were made of local tree branches. Although this work was



22. Mosaic floor discovered below ambo during removal of May 691 AD mosaic in nave of basilica, F. II (photo J. Rossiter).

not completed it has greatly facilitated access to the site. A circular route is planned.

Finally, two signs were constructed from local stone but await inscription in Arabic and English.

After July a contractor employed by the Ministry of Tourism built walls of metal gabion boxes and cement water channels to protect the road from erosion.

The Staff

The excavation team consisted of Khalil Hamdan, Department of Antiquities representative; W.Eddie Moth, surveyor and Areas E.VII T.1 and F.III supervisor; Isabelle Ruben, Areas K.II and F.II supervisor; Robert Schick, Area M supervisor; Sarah Collins, Area J supervisor; Kathy Gruspier, human osteologist; Mark Beech, archaeozoologist; Chantelle Hoppe, archaeologist and archaeobotanist; Jim Rossiter, photographer; Jim

Farrant, illustrator; Yiannis Meimaris, epigraphist; Stefania Chlouverakis, mosaic conservator; Theodoros Loukeris, mosaic conservator's assistant; Theoni Dimitropoulou, mosaic conservator; Maria Mertzani, archaeological conservator; Jad Al-Younis, executive assistant; and was joined by Chris Entwistle who assisted in post-excavation work. Most of the 35 locally hired workmen from Ghawr eş-Şafi had participated in previous seasons of work on the site. The project was directed by the author.

Acknowledgements

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Nucci, Cecilia Gasdia and Paulo Ballarin performing gratis in aide of the project. Additional support came from the Palestine Exploration Fund in London, the Royal Jordanian Airlines and Jacob Suchard/Pavledes -Kraft-General Foods S.A. Thanks are also due to Biotrek S.A. for mosaic conservation equipment and supplies, the Jordan Valley Authority for the use of two housing units in their Mazra'a-Sekine complex and surveying equipment, to Aramex International Couriers for providing transportation within Jordan, the Arab Potash Company for water supply and road maintenance, Mr. Gunter Breest for subsidising the guarding of the site and to Frosti's Ice

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