

2004 Excavation Report

Northeast Church [area supervised by Mark Schuler]

In 2004, systematic excavation completed exposure of the final phase of the *domus* of the Northeast Church and began work on the northern rooms and the atrium. This report will address in turn work done in:

- A. The tombs in the chancel (L533 and L537)
- B. The nave
- C. The north aisle
- D. The North Lateral Chamber
- E. The atrium

Figure 1 is a detailed listing of loci, walls and floors. **Plate 1** is a photo of the excavated *domus*.

Tombs in the chancel

The exposed sarcophagus in the south section of the chancel was opened in 2003. According to last year's report, "it contained the bones of a single small woman of 60 plus years." Subsequent anthropological analysis sharpens the initial notice. That anthropological report follows this excavation report.

Also, in 2003, the cist tomb was excavated to the level of the burial. In 2004, exhumation of the skeletal remains from the limestone box was finished. The tomb contained the disturbed remains of three individuals that had been interred sequentially over time. With each inhumation previous skeletal remains were pushed aside and some bones were inverted (**Figure 2**). Skulls were crushed (**Plate 2**). The pattern is similar to so-called "family tombs" at Beth Yerakh, Rekhovot-in-the-Negev, Khirbet Karkur, `Avdat, and Nesanna.¹ Field analysis of the skeletal remains suggests that the most recent burial was a young individual, since the squamosal suture between the temporal and parietal bones of the skull was not fully fused.² Using the field measurements of the subpubic angle and the siatic notch, the most recent burial seems to belong to a male.³ The siatic notch of any earlier burial may be indicative of a female. A full anthropological report will be part of a subsequent volume in this series.

Only fragmentary pottery sherds and a few loose mosaic tesserae were recovered from the earth that had washed in around the bones. Several fragments of green Byzantine glass await formal identification. Numerous rodent bones were intermingled, especially at the head and foot of the box.

The dimensions of the limestone box holding the burials in the cist tomb are similar to the box from the exposed sarcophagus.⁴ The chamber of the cist tomb is constructed of four courses of ashlar.⁵ The interior opening of the chamber is 0.97 m (width, north-south), 2.17 m (length, east-west), 1.42 m deep.⁶

¹ In discussing the multiple burial phenomenon, Haim Goldfus writes: "In many churches – evidently private foundations, whether of a single family or several families – the tombs were used as a family burial receptacle. The 'family' could have consisted of members of consecutive generations or of several members of the same generation, as we have observed in churches of the Negev region such as Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Nessana, and `Avdat." In monasteries, "This 'family' was not necessarily based on blood ties but rather on ecclesiastical kinship or monastic brotherhood." Haim Goldfus, "Tombs and Burials in Churches and Monasteries of Byzantine Palestine" (Unpublished PhD dissertation at Princeton University, 1997), 240.

² William M. Bass, *Human Osteology: A Laboratory and Field Manual*. (Columbia, MO: Missouri Archaeological Society, 1995), 12, 39.

³ Bass 209, 213.

⁴ External dimensions of the sarcophagus box in the cist tomb are 0.60 m wide, 2.02 m long, 0.53 m deep. Sidewall thickness is 11 cm; end thickness is 13 cm. Internal depth is 34 cm at west (head) and 38 cm at east (foot). The curve of the west end of the sarcophagus begins 30cm from the top. The width of the box of the exposed sarcophagus varies from 61.5 cm at the west end to 64 cm at the east end. Its length is 2 m

Notably, the box in the cist tomb sits somewhat askew from level. Further excavation between the north side of the sarcophagus box and the north basalt wall of the cist tomb (L543) showed that the sarcophagus box is perched on irregular stones 27 to 33 cm above the smooth limestone floor of the chamber of the cist tomb. Recovered from the accessible fill at the bottom of the cist tomb chamber were several nails and nail fragments (**Plate 3**). These are identical to those recovered at other Byzantine burial sites in the Hefer Valley and at Rammun and likely belonged to a wooden coffin.⁷ The space between the bottom of the sarcophagus box and the floor of the cist tomb (27-33 cm) is comparable to the depth of Byzantine lead coffins.⁸ From the edge of the area under the sarcophagus box, one vertebra was also retrieved as were a few Roman and Byzantine sherds. In a subsequent season, the sarcophagus box will be removed to allow careful examination of the lower burial.

Portions of the visible floor (F516) and the plaster layer of the first floor (L550) were removed in a 1.5 x 2.5 m section north of the cist tomb chamber. A vertical line of plaster of indeterminate function runs parallel to the long axis of the tomb about 1.5 m to the north between the first column base and the east wall (W520). The north wall of the cist tomb is held in place by assorted stones in a dense mortar. A conical socket for a post is evident 1.2 m north of the cist tomb opening and 1.5 m west of the synthronon under the plaster base (L550) of the first floor (F517). Also of note is a Byzantine ionic capital covered with intact plaster that serves as the foundation stone for the north corner of the apse wall. Only Roman/Byzantine pottery fragments were recovered under the sealed base of F517.

Although excavation of the tomb is not complete, it seems that the chamber of the cist tomb pre-dated the church and held a burial in a wooden coffin. It was likely part of some earlier Christian structure or facility upon which the Northeast church was built and from which the Northeast church may have reused architectural materials. Subsequently, a (reused?) box of a sarcophagus was crudely inserted into the chamber and set on stones that held it above the revered burial below. Into this box, three individuals were sequentially interred. While they might be individuals of note in the community (saints? religious?), more likely they were benefactors who received such burial in proximity to a saint on the basis of their support. A rolled lead pipe to floor level allowed ongoing veneration (**Figure 3**). The practice of stacking burials

on center. The walls range between 10 and 12 cm thick. The interior is rounded at the west end, beginning 33 cm from the west. The interior depth slopes from 35 to 38 cm west to east.

⁵ The bottom course is 37cm high. The blocks from west to east are 38 cm, 34 cm, 56 cm, 38 cm, 49 cm. The second course is 35 cm high. The blocks from west to east are 28 cm, 55 cm, 50 cm, 49 cm, 34 cm. The third course is 40 cm high. The blocks from west to east are 40 cm, 68 cm, 37 cm, 71 cm. The top course is 21 cm high. The blocks from west to east are 58 cm, 74 cm, 26 cm, 57 cm.

⁶A comparative chart shows similarity to other burial chambers on the site:

	Width	Length	Depth
NEC	0.97	2.17	1.42
NWC south	1.03	2.09	1.2
Gate north	1.03	2.13	1.21
Gate south	0.99	2.03	1.35

⁷ Levi Rahmani, "A Lead Coffin from the Hefer Valley," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974): 124. H. Taha, "A Byzantine Tomb at the Village of Rammun," *Liber Annuus* 48 (1998): 342, plate 5.

⁸ A lead coffin from Caesarea is 31 cm in depth (Levi Rahmani, "A Christian Lead Coffin from Caesarea," *Israel Exploration Journal* 38.4 [1988]: 246). The coffin from the Hefer valley is 36 cm deep (Rahmani, "Lead Coffin" 124-127). Another collection of coffins have reported depths of 34 cm, 41 cm, 39 cm and 19 cm (Levi Rahmani, "Five Lead Coffins from Israel," *Israel Exploration Journal* 42.1-2 [1992]: 81-102).

has a parallel in the tomb of Azonaine in the church of St. Theodore at `Avdat,⁹ but the construction of the latter is finer.

The Nave

The nave of the church was excavated to the level of a fragmentary mosaic floor (F544, **Figure 4**). In several locals, it was clear that the original floor was overlaid by 3-4 cm of plaster and a second mosaic floor. A section of that mosaic is a carpet of imbricated scales (Avi-Yonah pattern J3)¹⁰ similar to those in the south aisle of the Northwest church and likely laid at the same time (late six century). Toward the western end of the nave, larger white tesserae might suggest a possible third layer, although there is a significant gap in continuity between the layers in the central part of the nave and those near the west wall. On the other hand, the white tesserae may be part of a carpet extending from the north aisle into the nave from the area of the north doorway (now blocked) and the cistern. The western doorway to the nave was blocked during the final phase of the church (see comments on the atrium below).

Due to the exceptionally poor condition of the floor (F544), significant efforts were devoted to stabilizing the edges of the remaining segments. Cleaning and mapping of patterns will await future seasons.

Two stone fragments of chancel screen panels were recovered from the destruction fill. Vine and cluster themes provide the background for the panel. The corner of the flaired arm of a cross may be visible on one of the fragments. Two coins were recovered at floor level. One was next to the north stylobate and the westerly column base. The second coin lay near the south stylobate and the second column from the west wall. Neither location was sealed. See the numismatic report elsewhere in this volume for details.

The North Aisle

The 2004 season witnessed the removal of destruction fill (L542) from the north aisle of the *domus*. Recovered from the destruction fill were several equally-sized corbels. Along with others teetering from their position, the corbels had been reused to build the north wall (W521). The rectangular face, which had held the stone roof beans in the corbels' original use, shows patches of plaster that were part of the wall covering. Identical corbels were used to create a bench along the north wall from the base of the chancel screen to the ridge of stones in floor (F538) that separated the mosaic of the aisle from the mosaic of the north entrance next to the cistern. The bench was plastered to the wall. This bench of corbels sits atop the original mosaic of the floor, suggesting that the corbels forming the bench and the corbels reused in the wall were installed as part of a major repair to the church. This major repair, likely after the earthquake of 551 CE,¹¹ may explain the unusual systyle intercolumnation in the north aisle. It does not balance the araeostyle intercolumnation in the south aisle because it is a repair, not the original.

At the west end of the north aisle is a cistern. It is 2.95 m wide and estimated to be some 4 m deep. The head for the cistern is a segment of an aqueduct pipe in secondary use. As the cistern extends under the walls in the northwest corner (W521 and W511) and required an unusual configuration of the northerly entrance from the west (**Figure 1**, see discussion of the North Entrance Room), the cistern was constructed before the church and may have predated it. A plain white mosaic floor surrounds the cistern and may have extended into the nave. A column base from the repair of the north part of the church sits on the plaster base of the floor.

⁹ Avraham Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1981), fig. 33.

¹⁰ M. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaic Pavements in Palestine," Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine 2 (1933): 141.

¹¹ Kenneth Russell, "The Earthquake Chronology of Palestine and Northwest Arabia from the 2nd through the mid-8th Century A.D.," in Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 260 (Fall 1985): 44-46.

In the northeast corner of the aisle next to the base of the chancel screen, a section of the mosaic floor is preserved (**Plate 4**). Toward the east end next to the bench is a repair done with larger tesserae in no discernable pattern, probably from the same incident that required structural repair to the church. The poverty of the community in the sixth century is reflected in the repairs which neither preserved the symmetry of the church nor the pattern of the mosaic.

The original mosaic floor was decorated with several patterns. Running parallel to the stylobate is a three-strand guilloche (Avi-Yonah pattern B2)¹². The guilloche matches the pattern discovered in the south aisle last year and is separated from the stylobate by roughly the same dimension as the guilloche from the south aisle is offset from the south wall. The gap was likely filled by the same banding of white and black stripes (four white, two black, and four white).

The bulk of the still visible pattern consists of 20 cm squares framed by a single row of black tesserae. On each of the four corners is an 8 cm framed square. The field of the small squares is a solid color (red, brown, yellow, black, pink). The field of the large square is filled by diagonal lines in five or six colors constructed of 2x2 blocks of tesserae. Minor variations to the diagonal patterns can be seen. The rectangles between the corners are white.¹³ The pattern was likely replicated down the aisle to the west.

Next to the base of the chancel screen in the center of the aisle are four 20 cm squares. The squares are framed mostly in red tesserae and are separated by 8 cm rectangles and squares. The central 8 cm square is framed in black and has a red field. Black framing continues to the west. The 20 cm squares have white field. In the middle of each field is an equal-armed cross (5 x 5 tesserae, **Plate 5**).

Crosses in mosaic floors are important due to the prohibition against their use after 427 CE by the Theodosian code.¹⁴ However, crosses continue to appear on Mosaic floors into the sixth century.¹⁵ Ernst Kitzinger, in discussing the plain red crosses in the floor of the Martyrion of St. Babylas at Antioch, proposes,

In early Christian times crosses placed more or less conspicuously on or near entrances served primarily an apotropaic function. They denied access to the powers of evil . . . Two kinds of buildings were in need of particular attention – the house and the tomb. Since the Martyrion of St. Babylas was both a tomb and a church our mosaic crosses fit into this picture very well.¹⁶

The Northeast church likewise is a tomb and a church. The appearance of crosses, while suggesting an earlier foundation than the late sixth century, is also in continuity with the apotropaic practice of other

¹² Avi-Yonah 139.

¹³ General parallels can be found at Mt. Nebo and Jerash. Michele Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman: ACOR, 1993), figs.188, 521.

¹⁴ *Nimini locere signum salvatoris Christi vel in silice vel in marmore aut sculpere aut pingere. Codex Theodosianus* 1.8.0.

¹⁵ The prohibition was reaffirmed in the Code of Justinian and was even included in the canons of the Council of Trullo in 692 CE. J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collection* (Paris: H. Welter, 1901-1906) vol. 11, col. 975, no. 73.

¹⁶ Ernst Kitzinger, "The Threshold of the Holy Shrine: Observations on the Floor Mosaics at Antioch and Bethlehem", in *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, P. Granfield and J. A. Jungman, eds., vol. 2 (Aschendorff, Muenster, Westfalen, 1970), 640.

churches in the lower Galilee. “The placement of crosses near entrances to the church and sanctuary continues in the mosaics of this region.”¹⁷ Evil must be kept at bay.

The North Lateral Chamber

Typically, the *domus* of a Byzantine church has three entrances from the west. In the Northeast church, the expected northerly entrance from the west does not exist due to the location of the cistern. Instead, a wide entrance (1.47 m) to a long (6.9 m) lateral chamber (exedra, exorcisterium?) provides access to the north aisle through a doorway (0.98 m) in the north wall of the *domus* just east of the head of the cistern. After entering this chamber from the atrium, individuals would turn right and then left into the north aisle. In a later phase, this north doorway was blocked. The fourth-century cathedral and the fifth-century church of St. Theodore at Jerash have lateral chambers next to the aisles.

Structurally, the north lateral chamber and the room beyond it to the east are part of the original building and not annexes. The remaining exterior stones of the western wall (W511) span the joint of what would be the northwest exterior corner of the *domus*. The southwest interior corner of the lateral chamber has a plaster fixture that seems to have fed water into the cistern (drainage from the roof?). The wide (1.2 m) north wall (W540) of the lateral chamber was the north wall of the entire structure. A doorway (0.81 m) in the east wall (W539) of the lateral chamber that closes from the east provides access to an unexcavated area. The doorway shows no sign of intentional blockage. The floor (F549) of the lateral chamber is hard plaster and packed earth.

Next to the north wall (W521) of the *domus* and just east of the north entrance is a small staircase climbing in an easterly direction. Although a balk blocks full view, the remains of the staircase may terminate at a column base squared off with ashlar 1.8 m from W539 (**Plate 6**). The stairs would provide access to a small storage gallery¹⁸ over the north aisle made possible by the extra width of the church on the north side. The positioning of two more small column shafts in the east section of the chamber point to later domestic use of the space -- a hypothesis reinforced by the high incidence of sherds from cooking pots and storage jars along with many animal bones, often showing cuts and breaks. Documentation of the bone finds will be published in a future volume.

Long after the destruction of the church, the remains of W540 served as the base for W541 which ran in a westerly direction over the northwest corner of the lateral chamber. It likely tied in with W513 which follows the line of the atrium stylobate and floats half a meter above the remains of the atrium. These walls may have made an animal pen of the remaining ruins of the Northeast church. A Turkish pipe was recovered from this level in the destruction fill.

The Atrium

With a 2.5m trench, the western wall (W511) of the church was exposed along its entire length (18.5 m) to the level of the atrium floor (F545, **Plate 7**). The floor consists of flagstone pieces uniformly 60 cm wide and of varying lengths. It is roughly 60% intact, the southern half being the best preserved. At the north end of the exposed floor is a cover for a reliquary in secondary use as a flagstone. It has an inscribed concavity and hole nearly identical in dimension to the receptacle on the exposed sarcophagus. The dimension of the stone would fit the reliquary loculus in the center of the chancel in the north aisle, the cover of which is missing.

Along the western end of the trench, 10 to 20 cm of the stylobate of the atrium were exposed. The bases of four columns are partly visible. A systyle intercolumnation would align with three of the extant four bases and would properly place a column base at the north end of the stylobate. However, the north corner of the stylobate is just 1 m from the presumed north wall of the atrium (W553), not allowing enough space for a

¹⁷Karen Britt, “Mosaics in the Byzantine Churches of Palestine: Innovation or Replication,” unpublished PhD dissertation at Indiana University, August 2003, 249. Britt cites examples from Kursi, Tabgha, Nazareth, and elsewhere.

¹⁸Barbara Schellewald, “Zur Typologie, Entwicklung und Funktion von Oberräumen in Syrien, Armenien und Byzanz,” *Jahrbuch fuer Antike und Christentum* 27/28 (1984/1985): 216.

north portico. The southern terminus of the stylobate has not yet been exposed and seems to be the base for W552 running to the south. Although further excavation may prove otherwise, it seems as if the stylobate does not align in a usable way with the church. It is presumed that the stylobate originally belonged to an earlier complex.

Floating above the column bases but following the lines of the stylobate is W513. It comes from a later period. However, ashlar (laid in a U shape between the southerly two column bases) and W552 (running to the south) both rest on the stylobate. Further excavation will clarify the interrelationships of these walls.

The flagstone floor is interrupted by three lacunae next to the exterior west wall of the *domus* (W511). In each lacuna, remnants of an earlier mosaic floor (F546) are visible (Avi-Yonah pattern B9).¹⁹ In several spots, the plaster base of this floor (F546) curves up the side of W511, suggesting that the wall was plastered on its westerly face. The lacunae mark the location of benches installed at the same time as the flagstone floor, as evidenced by a surviving section of the bench near the entrance of the north lateral chamber (compare the benches in the atrium of the Northwest church). As two lacunae are balanced on either side of the blocked western entrance to the nave, that blockage occurred sometime after the laying of the flagstone floor.

At both ends of the exposed floor of the atrium (F545), thresholds are installed that are contemporaneous with the flagstone floor (F545). Both are architecturally problematic. The smaller gate to the north (0.95 m) is part of W553 that abuts the northwest corner of the church and extends the line of W541 to the west. Noted above is the problematic relationship of this wall to the stylobate of the atrium. The larger gate (1.6 m) to the south aligns with the southern wall of the *domus* (W510). However, it awkwardly abuts one of the column bases sitting on the atrium stylobate – a clear secondary construction. To the south of the threshold is a street that may align with one of the *cardines* of the city.

At floor level toward the north end of the trench, part of a grain mill was recovered (**Plate 8**). It is the bell-shaped bottom part (*meta*).²⁰ The hour-shaped upper stone (*catillus*) is missing (although one was recovered from the atrium of the Northwest church). The mill attests to later domestic use of the north lateral chamber and the atrium

Phasing

With evidence gathered during the 2004 season, the probable phasing of the church is coming into sharper focus. The chamber of the cist tomb, the stylobate of the atrium, and perhaps the cistern predate the church. The tomb with the burial in a coffin and perhaps other components may have been of an earlier Christian complex.²¹ At the death of a revered woman in the fifth or early sixth century, the church was built with her exposed sarcophagus in the chancel of the south aisle and in respectful proximity to the revered coffin in the center of the chancel. After significant damage to the church caused by the earthquake of 551 CE, major reconstruction seems to have taken place. The work is of low quality indicating the harsh conditions of the time. The north wall of the *domus* was rebuilt, mosaics were repaired, and benches were installed in both aisles and in the atrium on top of the original mosaics. Repair of earthquake damage might explain the unusual intercolumnation in the north aisle. A synthronon was installed in the chancel along with a flagstone floor, and several loculi for reliquaries. Likely, relics from the exposed sarcophagus were

¹⁹ Avi-Yonah 138.

²⁰ L. A. Moritz, *Grain Mills and Flour in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), pp. 74-90. For a relief demonstrating the usage of this animal-driven mill, see Paola Ciancio Rossetto, *Il Sepolcro del Fornaio Marco Virgilio Eurisace a Porta Maggiore*. I Monumenti Romani, V (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani, 1973).

²¹ A possible parallel would be the hypogeum and 4th century crypt at Gadara over which Christians built a small church in the 4th century and then a basilica in the sixth century. T. Weber, "Gadara 1998 The Excavation of the Five-Aisled Basilica at Umm Qays: A Preliminary Report," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 42 (1998): 449.

extracted at this time (to pay for the reconstruction?) and the remaining bones were gathered. A new mosaic floor was laid in the nave on top of the earlier one. The flagstone floor was laid in the atrium, benches were installed, the north and south gates were added. After the reconstruction, burials in the cist tomb resumed (a family whose benefactions to the reconstruction allowed such placement?). During a final phase, access to the church was severely restricted. Doors in the north and south walls were sealed, as was the main westerly entrance. Burials stopped. Reliquaries were removed. A crude wall was built around the exposed sarcophagus. A bench was installed inside the southwest entrance, and the north room was converted to domestic use (guard?). The church became a mausoleum and was little used or abandoned by the earthquake of 749 CE.