

## Three-Year Summary of Work on the Northeast Church at Hippos

At the midpoint of the Hippos Excavation Project, three years of work have been completed on the Northeast Church. The first season (2002) exposed portions of the interior of the chancel (apse through the south aisle) and the external southwest corner in order to identify the basic dimensions of the church. The second season (2003) exposed the rest of the chancel and the south aisle. In the third season (2004), the rest of the domus of the church was exposed, as was a 2.5 m section of the atrium across the western dimension of the church and a north lateral chamber next to the north wall.

The Northeast Church is a square, mono-apsidal structure with a northern series of rooms and an atrium to the west. No work has been done yet to the east and south. The church is poorly constructed of re-used materials. Only fragments of mosaic floor remain. Basalt column bases, shafts, and ionic capitals rest on stylobates. A synthronon of soft limestone was added in a later phase, as were benches against the north and south walls. Walls were plastered and painted with bands of red and yellow.

The chancel spans the width of the domus and holds the notable finds of this unremarkable church—two tombs: a sarcophagus in the southeast corner and a tomb just north of the central axis. The sarcophagus is partially exposed above a later flagstone floor. It is faced with marble slabs, two of which were adorned with crossed. A hole bored through the monolithic lid allowed ongoing veneration. The bones inside the sarcophagus were carefully arranged under the hole. The long bones were arranged in table shape around the crushed skull and post-cranial bones. Anthropological analysis concluded that the remains belong to a woman. She was more than 55 years of age and had a severe case of osteoporosis.

A second tomb abuts the central axis of the chancel to the north. Its covering stones held to floor level a rolled lead pipe that descended below to the limestone box of a sarcophagus, crudely covered with six stones. The chamber of the cist tomb is constructed of finely hewn basalt ashlar. It was plastered and apparently decorated with at least one human figure. The exceptionally fine construction of the chamber and its relationship to surrounding structures suggest that the chamber predated the church and may be responsible for its location. The number and disarray of bones point to multiple, sequential burials. Three different individuals were identified, the most recent being a young male. Further excavation revealed that the limestone box sits askew on stones about 30 cm above a flat limestone floor of the chamber. Nails recovered from below the sarcophagus box suggest it sits on top of the remains of a coffin. Thus the sarcophagus box and three inhumations are secondary to an earlier burial.

In the nave and aisles only fragments of mosaic floor remain. In the nave, two layers of mosaic rest one upon another, with an upper carpet of imbricated scales. Guilloche patterns are visible in both aisles as are crosses next to the base of the chancel screen, likely having apotropaic significance.

Benches were installed next to the north and south walls in a secondary phase of the church. Their installation seems to have been part of a major repair to the church after an earthquake, at which time the column bases of the north aisle were re-set to a narrower intercolumnation and two additional columns were added.

A segment of an aqueduct pipe serves as a wellhead for a cistern at the west end of the north aisle. Five doorways provided entrée to the church: two in the north wall, one in the south wall, and two in the west wall. A basalt cross adorned the western façade of the church.

A north lateral chamber provided access to the north aisle through a door in the north wall of the domus next to the wellhead of a cistern. A staircase in the room led to a gallery or tower. The space was later converted to domestic use.

An atrium spans the western side of the church. There are thresholds for gates at either end of the excavated section, with a street running to the south. A stylobate with column bases to the west seems to predate the church and was crudely incorporated into its design. Lacunae in the flagstone floor next to the west wall of the church indicate the placement of benches. Benches and the flagstone sit atop a mosaic floor that is contemporaneous with the building of the church.

At this point in the excavation, at least three phases can be identified:

1. The church was built to house the remains of a revered woman in proximity to an earlier burial chamber.
2. After severe damage caused an earthquake, structural reconstruction and other modifications took place. Some time after the reconstruction, burials in the central tomb resumed.
3. During a final phase, access to the church was severely restricted. The church became a mausoleum and was little used or abandoned by the earthquake of 749 CE.