

# 2005 Excavation Report

## Northeast Church Complex

[area supervised by Prof. Mark Schuler]

In 2005, excavation focused on areas surrounding the *domus* of the Northeast Church complex and on conservation of the nave mosaic. This report will address in turn work done in:

- A. The northern chambers
- B. The south vaulted chamber
- C. Chambers west of the portico
- D. The cisterns of the Northeast Church complex
- E. Conservation work

**Figure 1** is a detailed listing of loci, walls and floors. **Figure 2** is a top plan of the complex.

### The northern chambers

Excavation of the northern chambers in 2005 revealed an increasingly complex matrix of rooms. To the east of the north lateral chamber are two additional rooms and to the north are at least two other rooms.

In 2005, the balk in the north lateral chamber was removed. As a consequence, the stairs next to W521 were revealed (**Figure 3**). The stairs and the column that form their corner sit atop the hard dirt floor of the chamber. They seem to be a later addition to the chamber, perhaps providing access to a storage platform at the east end of the chamber held aloft by the other columns.

The opposite (north) wall of the chamber also displays a later alteration. What was thought to be an exceptionally wide wall is in fact two walls: an northerly wall (W540) of typical Byzantine width (0.72-0.75 m) and an inner wall (W555) of poorer quality and narrower dimension (0.44-0.47m). 2.8 m east of W541 at floor level is a rectangular opening to a cistern (0.45 m x 1.2 m) framed by ashlar (Cistern B). The opening abuts and runs parallel with W540. W555 apparently framed the opening to provide access to the cistern (**Figure 4**). Attached to W555 east of the cistern opening was a basin constructed of stones and plastered to funnel water into the cistern. The water presumably came from the roof. The staircase, column shafts and W555 are later additions to the chamber.

To the east of the north lateral chamber is a square medial chamber (approx. 2.95 m). The doorway (0.81 m) to this chamber through W539 closed from inside the chamber. Passageways from this chamber to the north (1.35 m wide) and to the east (1.15 m wide) lack door jambs. The medial chamber thus functions to separate these inner rooms from the more public space of the north lateral chamber and to provide free movement between them. W539 proceeds to the north of W540 on the west side of the north passageway. A parallel wall (W583) was discovered to the east of the same passageway. At least two additional rooms are to the north of the side chambers excavated in 2005.

During a later phase, presumably after the passageways had been blocked, a bench was installed in the southeast corner of the room next to the east wall (W560). The bench was 0.67 x 1.50 x 0.46 m high (**Figure 5**). A small Corinthian capital was used as part of the fill of the bench. Below the bench and in the northeast corner of the medial chamber, small fragments of an earlier mosaic floor were detected. An intact oil lamp was also recovered from beneath the bench, sitting on a mosaic fragment.

In the southwest corner of the room, a segment of the main aqueduct pipe of the city was positioned on top of stones and earth and filled with ceramic and earth. It may have functioned as a crude chair or storage platform (**Figure 6**).

The western doorways to the north lateral chamber and to the medial chamber were never intentionally blocked as were so many of the other doorways in the church complex. As suggested in the 2004 report, these two rooms continued to be used after liturgical practice ceased in the Northeast Church (guard?). The use of two pieces of aqueduct pipe, one in the north medial chamber and one as a cistern head in the *domus* of the church (Cistern A), point to some kind of subsequent usage of the space after the earthquake of 748

C.E. Large quantities of chopped animal bones and numerous shards of domestic cooking pots reinforce this hypothesis. Modifications to the north lateral chamber, noted above, likely came from this same period.

W540 continues to the east and forms an exterior corner with W575. W575 runs parallel to and abuts W520 to the exterior wall of the apse (as does W512 to W509 on the south side of the apse). These walls create a third side chamber east of the medial chamber and of similar size to it (3.15 m east to west by 3.43 m north to south). In addition to the passageway in W560, there is an exterior doorway (1.10m) in W575 that could be closed from inside the chamber. A third doorway provides direct access to the chancel and suggests that the room functioned as a preparatory space for clergy. We identify it as a *skeuophylakion*, while recognizing the tentative nature of using this label.<sup>1</sup>

The doorway to the chancel through W521 displays two phases. An original doorway (1.13m) with jambs provided a door that could be closed and locked from inside the *skeuophylakion*. Later that doorway was narrowed into a passageway (0.81m) without door jambs and with a higher threshold to accommodate the laying of the second floor (F516) in the chancel. In a third phase the passageway was intentionally blocked, as was the east door and the west passageway, thus sealing off the *skeuophylakion*.

The fortuitous sealing off of the *skeuophylakion* in antiquity preserved the mosaic floor of the room. The edges of the mosaic tiles are about 1.7 cm with an average of 38 cubes per decimeter. The carpet is suited to the contours of the room. It consists of an outer area paved with mostly white tesserae, a seven-tesserae border, and a simple geometric pattern (Ovadiah Type A<sup>2</sup>) filled with a geometric motif.

The outer area is interrupted with a medial line of single black tesserae. About every 40 cm the line expands to a Avi-Yonah type E diamond (7 by 7) bordered in black. In the center of the diamond is a white Avi-Yonah type D crosslet surrounded by pink tesserae with a single black tessera in the center.<sup>3</sup> The medial line and diamonds are interrupted in front of the exterior doorway in W575.

Next to W521 and east of the passageway to the chancel are two flared crosses some 35 cm in height (**Plate 1; Figure 7**). The width of the arms of each cross is two tesserae, flaring at the end to four tesserae. The upper and left rows and the flairs are red; the lower and right rows are black. Between the two large crosses is a black crosswise arrangement (5 by 5) with an Avi-Yonah F3 pattern of three peach tesserae and three red tesserae in each corner.<sup>4</sup> See the 2004 report for a discussion of the apotropaic function of crosses next to doorways.

Between the outer area and the main geometric pattern is a border of seven tesserae. From outside to inside, single rows of tesserae are black, red, peach, white, peach, red, and black.

The central Ovadiah Type A geometric pattern of the carpet is filled with the same geometric motif that appears between the two large crosses: a black crosswise arrangement (5 by 5) with an Avi-Yonah F3 pattern of three peach tesserae and three red tesserae in each corner (**Figure 8**). The geometric pattern replicates itself six times in each direction, filling the floor of the room (**Figure 9**).

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastical sources from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries specifically name such side rooms as the *diaconicon* and the *skeuophylakion*. The term *pastophoria* is used in a collective sense. See G. Descoedres, *Die Pastophorien im syro-byzantinischen Osten: eine Untersuchung zu architektur- und liturgiegeschichtlichen Problemen* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1983) XVI.

<sup>2</sup>Ruth Ovadiah, *Mosaic Pavements in Israel* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1987), 166.

<sup>3</sup>M. Avi-Yonah, "Mosaic Pavements in Palestine," *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine* 2 (1933), 138.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

In the northeast corner of the room against W540 is a bench that is 0.62 x 1.32 x 0.55 m high. The mosaic floor is broken in front of the bench, making it unclear whether the bench sat on top of the floor (**Figure 10**). Also recovered from the fill in the room were a number of marble fragments that might have been parts of liturgical furnishings.

## The south vaulted chamber

Earlier work on the southeast exterior corner of the church (see 2002 report) suggested that W512 proceeded to the south. A blocked doorway just to the west of the chancel screen base in W510 also suggested that part of the Northeast Church complex continued to the south. Work in 2005 revealed a large barrel-vaulted room (6.23 m east to west and 5.63 m from north to south, **Plate 2, Figure 11**). Two pilasters for the ribbing of the barrel vaults are still in evidence next to the south (W554) and the north (W510) walls. A Roman-era pilaster base was inverted and reused as part of the westerly pilaster on the south side. The bases for the ribs are the typical 2.2-2.4 m apart. Some of the collapsed ribbing was recovered resting on about 25 cm of fine fill.

Three high benches or platforms were discovered next to the south, west and north walls of the vaulted chamber. The north bench fills the space between the pilasters (0.47 x 1.71 x 41 m high). A south bench (0.64 x 1.90 x 0.41 m high) fills the corresponding space. A third bench fills the corner from the westerly pilaster on the south wall to the corner and from the corner to the north for 3 m (west section is 0.63 x 3.0 x 0.34 high; south section is 0.62 x 0.94 x 0.36 m high). Lack of plaster between the stones of the bench and the pilasters may indicate that the benches were part of the original construction of the room. In the southwest corner of the room, a column base (0.69 m diameter, 0.20 m high) sits inverted and may have functioned as a pedestal. The presence of these benches would suggest that the room functioned as a *diaconicon*. Analysis of pottery shards was inconclusive.

On the south wall (W554) above the bench is a rectangular niche in the wall (**Figure 12**). The niche is 2.44 m west of W512 and 0.86 m above the floor. It is 0.43 m wide by 0.51 m tall by 0.46 m deep. Partially intact plaster in the bottom of the niche would reduce the height to 0.36 m. Nothing survives of the contents of the niche.

The floor of the chamber is covered in hard plaster on top of a pebble base. In several locations the plaster is still visible curving up from the floor onto the walls, benches, and pilasters, especially on W512. Likewise some plaster still clings to the joints between the benches and the walls. In its final phase, plaster covered walls, benches, pilasters, and the floor.

In the northeast corner of the *diaconicon* is a well-preserved cistern head (**Figure 13**). The head is a finely worked square stone (0.66 x 0.66 x 0.49 m high). The opening is 0.36 by 0.38 m and space is provided for a 0.46 x 0.48 m lid, now lost. The front of the cistern (Cistern D) head faces the center of the room with one back corner 0.65 m from W510 and the back other corner 0.37 m from W512. The head sits on a platform about 0.25 m above the floor. Several stones are plastered to the southeast side of the head creating a catch basin that feeds the cistern. The cistern seems to be about three meters deep.

On the cistern platform in the northeast corner of the room, a small horde of gold jewelry was discovered hidden under a fragment of a ceramic jar (**Plate 3**). The horde included three belt elements and a magical amulet.<sup>5</sup>

The belt elements (**Plate 4**) consist of two nearly identical pieces 1.43 x 2.23 cm. They are made of two pieces of metal 0.07 cm thick with edges bent over and pressed together making a total thickness of 0.45 cm. On the obverse is an outer decorative border of quarter moons, arrows, triangles, and scrolling with an entwined pattern in the center. The reverse has a lightly punched pattern. One of the two pieces has a

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<sup>5</sup> This report is indebted to Adam Lajtar of the University of Warsaw and Jeffrey Spier of the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth for their assistance in identifying the finds and in supplying supporting bibliography.

protruding nodule on the obverse that is part of a 0.47 cm small pin through the tab (creating a catch?). The third belt element is 1.48 x 1.61 cm. It is made of one piece of metal 0.10 cm thick with bent edges yielding a total thickness 0.29 cm. Its obverse is of similar pattern to the other two pieces. On the reverse are two eye hooks.

The belt elements are quite similar to a set of eleven pieces purchased in Constantinople but said to come from Syria and currently in the Dumbarton Oaks collection.<sup>6</sup> A gold buckle (probably from Italy) with a similar entwined pattern is in Berlin.<sup>7</sup> Similar belt elements have been discovered in widely scattered locations: Langobard Italy, along the Danube, Antioch and Cairo. The belt elements from Antioch were discovered with a silver candlestick with early seventh-century control stamps.<sup>8</sup> A dating to the late sixth or early seventh century seems plausible.

The amulet is fitted into a gold Byzantine setting (**Plate 5**). The complete piece has a horizontal dimension of 2.23 cm and a vertical dimension of 2.37 cm. Its thickness is 0.22 cm. The hanging ring at the top of the amulet has a 0.92 cm outside diameter. The ring has a smooth inner ridge; both outer ridges are nodules .09cm thick with 23 nodules around the ring. The amulet stone is held in a gold fitting hammered around the stone. The outer ridge consists of similar nodules – 64 around the ring. The setting is from the sixth or early seventh centuries.

The amulet itself is a well attested type.<sup>9</sup> The amulet is likely made of haematite (an iron oxide), a material used for similar magical amulets. On the obverse is a long-legged bird, likely a crane (phoenix?), with rays (seven?) around the head. The bird stands on a crocodile. Above it is a winged scarab. On either side in descending order are a bird, a scorpion (the tail of which is partially hidden by the setting), and a stylized snake. The working of the animals is somewhat primitive and the identification is partially based on clearer parallels. The reverse reads, in Greek over two lines, *pepte*, meaning "digest." Its primary purpose is stomachic, although an effective amuletic design might be appealed to for broader purposes. Below the Greek lettering is the Chnoubis symbol, a stylized coiled snake with a lion's head likely referred to by Galen.<sup>10</sup> Of such amulets, Campbell Bonner writes, "There is reason to think that all came from Syria, through the subjects are Egyptian."<sup>11</sup> As to dating, Jeff Spier writes: "Most of these amulets are second-third century in date, although I feel that this variety is slightly later, probably fourth century (as Michel also suggests) or even later, but not as late as the sixth century. Old magical amulets were occasionally reused in later times."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> M.C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2 (Washington: Trustees of Harvard University, 1965), no. 42.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Spier, Private correspondence 18 July 2005

<sup>8</sup> M. C. Ross, "A Small Byzantine Treasure Found at Antioch-on-the-Orontes," *Archaeology* 5 (1952): 30-32.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell Bonner lists seventy one medical amulets. Many are stomachic (77-107) with numbers 102-105 being the closest parallels. Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950). See also Simone Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (London, 2001), no. 401.

<sup>10</sup> Galen, *De simpl.* 10, 19 (XII, 207 ed. Kühn).

<sup>11</sup> Bonner 60.

<sup>12</sup> Private correspondence 18 July 2005.

To find such an amulet in an ecclesiastical context is noteworthy. While early Christian writers inveighed against the practice of magic,<sup>13</sup> James Russell's survey of the archaeological evidence from the early Byzantine period led him to conclude, "Underlying this devotion to the new faith, however, there clearly remained a deeply engrained attachment to practices inherited from some timeless past involving various forms of magic."<sup>14</sup> Chrysostom may condemn amulets,<sup>15</sup> but Alexander of Tralles, a practicing physician of the sixth century, condones the therapeutic use of amulets.<sup>16</sup> Whoever hid this horde in the *diaconicon* of the Northeast Church complex likely believed in the power of the amulet as much as in the power of the church to provide a safe hiding place.

The discovery of a healing charm in the *diaconicon* indirectly raises the question of the function of the room in which the horde was hidden. The room is oversized in comparison to the small size of the church. It is wrapped around the corner of the church that houses the tomb of the revered woman. Its only entrance is immediately adjacent to the tomb. The cistern in its northeast corner is in direct proximity to the tomb, prominently placed in the room, and at the same time is an unprecedented feature of a *diaconicon*. Might the room have served some sort of cultic function in the veneration of the sacred woman? Might the waters of the cistern have been drawn for healing purposes?<sup>17</sup> Might one who treasured an amulet also seek the solace of sacred waters?<sup>18</sup> Complete excavation of the cistern may shed greater light on the possibilities.

## Chambers west of the portico

Work in 2005 intended to further expose the atrium of the Northeast Church complex, the *cardo* to the south, and the walls and framing components surround the column bases at the south end of the stylobate. A five meter section of the street was uncovered to the south of the threshold (**Figure 14**). The initial courses of basalt pavers south of the threshold are irregular, either suggesting that the street was repaired or more likely intimating the later insertion of the threshold into a pre-existing pavement. Subsequently the courses average 0.40 to 0.50 m in width.

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<sup>13</sup> For the views of the ante-Nicene fathers on magic: Francis C. R. Thee, *Julius Africanus and the Early Christian View of Magic* (Tübingen, 1984), 316-448; for Origen, Chrysostom, and Augustine: N. Brox, "Magie und Aberglauben an den Anfängen des Christentums," *Thierer theologische Zeitschrift* 83 (1974): 157-180.

<sup>14</sup> James Russell, "Archaeological Context of Magic" in *Byzantine Magic*, edited by Henry Macguire (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 37.

<sup>15</sup> *In epistulam 1 ad Corinthios*, PG 61, col. 38; *In epistulam ad Timotheum*, PG 62, col. 552.

<sup>16</sup> *Alexander von Tralles*, edited by Theodore Puschmann, volume 2 (Vienna, 1879): 375, 475.

<sup>17</sup> "In late antiquity Christians in search of miraculous healing began to visit the shrines of saints, usually their tombs or another place where their relics were preserved. Examples are Abu Mina in Egypt, dedicated to the martyr St. Menas and functioning by the late fourth century; Sts. Abbakyrus and John at Menouthis in Egypt, which flourished between the fifth and seventh centuries; the shrine of St. Thekla in Anatolian Seleukeia (Meriamlik), which is attested between the fourth and sixth centuries; the pilgrimage complex of Qal'at Sem'an near Antioch, at the column of St. Symeon the Stylite the Elder, which was particularly active in the late fifth and sixth centuries; and the shrine of his later homonym, Symeon the Stylite the Younger, at the Wondrous Mountain (6th-7th century). These shrines are known through their extensive archaeological remains, through accounts of the posthumous miracles performed by the saints, and through pilgrimage artifacts or "souvenirs," such as ampullae, designed as containers for holy oil or water, and clay tokens made from the dust of a holy site." Alice-Mary Talbot, "Pilgrimage to Healing Shrines: The Evidence of Miracle Accounts," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 56 (2002): 154. Includes a bibliography of sources.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander of Tralles advocated the use of any means in the interests of the sick. *Alexander* 319, 475.

On the east side of the street, a corner of a building has been identified (W585). The northwest corner is 1.95 m south of the southwest corner of the church. It protrudes 4-5cm further west than does the west wall of the church (W511). At least three courses of ashlar are visible above the street level.

3.95 m south of the threshold, the paving of the street changes. A 1.0 m wide section of paving has a rounded channel cut in it that flows from east to west. The channel is 11 cm wide and 5 cm deep. It flows from under the unidentified building to W552 and proceeds under that wall for 24 cm. The channel empties into a cistern (Cistern C). The oval opening of the cistern is 0.44 m east to west and 0.57 m north to south. There is no surviving head for the cistern. The cistern was later sealed and covered by W552.

To the west of the street and on the line of the stylobate of the atrium runs W552. A doorway in the wall provides access to a westerly room that was partially excavated (**Figure 15**). The doorway closed and locked from inside the room. The room is 2.5 m wide (north to south) and is bounded on the south by W569 and to the north by W562. The top surviving course of W562 is constructed with pavers from a plaza, one of which displays the mason marks *alpha* and *eta*. Perhaps these pavers were removed from the atrium for the construction of this later room. Three floors were in evidence in this southerly room: F568 is of mud and plaster mix and at a level implying that the wooden door may no longer have been in use; F571 is a floor of larger stones contemporaneous with the threshold and W569; F573 underlays W562 and may be a remnant of the floor of the atrium.

To the north is a second similarly-sized room bounded to the north by W574. The doorway for this room is inside the threshold to the portico and is constructed between the first two column bases on the stylobate. The threshold is placed on top of the stylobate enabling a door to be locked from inside the room. A number of nails were recovered from the fill. Significantly, this room did not have evidence of any stone floor as in the southerly room outside the main gate. Nor were remaining pavers of the atrium found. Hard packed earth provided the floor.

Further excavation for five meters to the north of these rooms and 2.5 m west of the stylobate revealed neither additional rooms nor any pavers of the atrium. Excavation at the end of the season halted at a hard level that may have been the base for the atrium.

The chambers west of the street and the portico are reminiscent of later chambers built around portions of the atrium at such sites as the north church at Shivta.<sup>19</sup> These chambers come from a later phase in the history of the Northeast Church complex and point to a time when the atrium was no longer in use. Likewise, the large cistern (Cistern C) was no longer in use, as the draining system to it was covered (W585) and the head was replaced by a wall (W552). The stone floor (F572) may be a remnant of the paving around the cistern.

## The cisterns of the Northeast Church complex

Four cisterns have been identified as part of the Northeast Church complex. During 2005, three of the four were surveyed.

Cistern A is located in the northwest corner of the *domus*. The head for this cistern is a piece of the aqueduct pipe of the city and suggests ongoing usage of Cistern A after the earthquake of 748 C.E. The cistern is roughly bell-shaped (**Figure 16**). It is fed by a basin that channels water through W521 and then into the cistern (**Figure 16b**). At least two layers of plaster were visible in the throat area of the cistern. The top layer of plaster was pinkish in color. Based on the profile, we estimate the volume of the cistern to be fifteen cubit meters.

Cistern B is located on the north side of the north lateral chamber. As noted above, the cistern is fed by a basin to its south and east. The basin is plastered in to W555, which framed the cistern opening. Cistern B is also roughly bell-shaped (**Figure 17**). But as is indicated by both the floor profile and the cross section,

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<sup>19</sup> Shlomo Margalit, "The North Church of Shivta: The Discovery of the First Church," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 119 (1987): 107.

the cistern is irregularly carved. In one place it shows a square corner. Elsewhere stone nodules protrude, especially from the ceiling (**Plate 6**). One possibility is that the cistern made partial use of a pre-existing fissure in the rock (lava tube?). Plaster recovered from the cistern is grayish in color. We estimate the volume of Cistern B to be just under thirteen cubic meters.

Cistern C is located 4.25 m south of the entrance to the atrium and on the west side of the street. It is on a line with the stylobate of the atrium. As noted above, Cistern C was fed by a channel that crosses the street from east to west. The cistern has an oval horizontal profile (2.2 x 4.7 m) and is bell-shaped (**Figure 18**). It is approximately three meters deeper than the other cisterns (**Plate 7**) and has an estimated volume of almost twenty nine cubic meters. Recovered plaster is grayish in color.

Cistern D is located in the northeast corner of the south vaulted chamber. It awaits survey and excavation in 2006.

Assuming Cistern D is of comparable size to Cisterns A and B, the average size of the cisterns in the Northeast Church complex is about 17 cubic meters. By comparison, the average size of the cisterns at Shivta is 46 cubic meters, at Sepphoris the average is 47 cubic meters and, and the cisterns of Hurvat Zikhirin averages 46 cubic meters.<sup>20</sup> Although its cisterns are smaller than other sites on average, the Northeast Church complex has water sources independent of the water system of the city.

## Conservation work

Conservation work in 2005 was conducted under the direction of Eva Parandowska. The following tasks were completed:

1. A broken column base on the south stylobate of the nave was cleaned and glued back together.
2. A cracked column drum from the atrium was lowered, cleaned, and glued back together.
3. Plaster around the doorway from the chancel to the *skeuophylakion* was repaired and sealed.
4. Broken plaster floor from the south vaulted chamber was repaired in several locations: near the entrance and near W512. A shortage of supplies prevented repair to the entire floor.
5. Plaster around the base of the cistern head in the south vaulted chamber was repaired.
6. Significant effort was devoted to stabilizing the edges of mosaic fragments still intact in the nave. Part of this repair was required because of the use of defective materials in 2004.
7. Sample sections of the remaining mosaic floor were cleaned revealing Avi-Yonah pattern B8 in red bordered by a guilloche (**Plate 8**), Avi-Yonah pattern J3 (**Plate 9**),<sup>21</sup> and a sauvestika (a counter-clockwise swastika) in black (**Plate 10**). A border of crosslets (**Plate 11**) is in evidence on the east and south sides of the nave. Further cleaning and documentation await the 2006 season.

## Conclusion

Work in 2005 indicates a significantly more complex history to the Northeast Church and its place as part of a larger complex. Future excavation along with more detailed analysis of ceramic, glass and bone fragments may help to clarify the history of this small but fascinating structure.

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<sup>20</sup> Tsvika Tsuk, "The Water Supply System of Shivta in the Byzantine Period," in *Cura Aquarum in Israel*, Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the History of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering in the Mediterranean Region Israel 7-12 May 2001 (Siegburg 2002), 73.

<sup>21</sup> Avi-Yonah, 138, 141.