

AREA A

BASTIAAN VAN ELDEREN

Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

During the 1968 and 1971 seasons six Squares were excavated in Area A, all but one (A.6) to bedrock.¹ Approximately three-fourths of a Byzantine church was uncovered—the apse, north aisle, south aisle, and nave, though its western end, with narthex and main entrance, was not located.

Also identified were traces of Islamic occupation—including water channels to feed cisterns below the church, a quarry north of the church, and northeast of the church a large cave containing evidence of Roman occupation.

The major objective of the 1973 season was to complete the excavation of the church—to expose the narthex and western wall containing the main entrance. A second objective was to finish excavating Square 6 to bedrock, and to integrate Areas A and D. The first objective was not fully accomplished because an extensive Islamic installation was encountered in the higher accumulation of debris along the western edge of the acropolis. Regarding the second objective, Square 6 was excavated to bedrock and Areas A and D were integrated.

Square 7—This square (6 x 8 m.) lay west of Square 5 and south of the east-west axis. Some exposed traces of architecture suggested that the ground surface of the acropolis, rising sharply along the western edge, contained the ruins of perimeter structures. This was conclusively demonstrated by the excavation of the new Square. (See Figure 2.)

The removal of the ground surface debris exposed two major north-south walls (A.7:2 and A.7:3) running roughly parallel. Wall A.7:2 (6.5 m. long and .80 m. wide) ran along and at a slight angle to the west balk so that its southern end was

¹ Bastiaan Van Elderen, "Heshbon 1968: Area A," *AUSS*, 7 (1969): 142-165; Dorothea Harvey, "Heshbon 1971: Area A," *AUSS*, 11 (1973): 17-34.

partially hidden in the balk. The east face of this wall was completely exposed to its founding level—five courses preserved in the northern part and eight courses in the southern part. About half of this wall was removed to expose features underneath.

Wall A.7:3 (6.25 m. long and .75 m. wide) lay across the middle of the Square. The northern half of this wall, where it curved towards Wall A.7:2, was removed to expose features underneath. A bath complex, built against the east face of the southern half (see below), was uncovered.

The sector between Walls A.7:2 and A.7:3, possibly a hallway or alley between two buildings, contained a number of beaten earth surfaces, all containing Ayyūbid/Mamlūk sherds. There were no doorways or windows opening into this passageway, except one doorway between the walls at the south end, near the south balk, which was used with only one of the surfaces. The removal of Wall A.7:2 revealed walls with plastered surfaces running to the west of it and perpendicular to it suggesting a complex of rooms.

Islamic Bath—The major architectural feature in Square 7 was an Islamic bath installation of the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk period in the southeast quarter of the Square. (See Fig. 3.) Evidence of this began appearing as soon as the ground surface debris was removed. The first parts to be exposed were two hemispherical tanks plastered inside (occupying a space of about 2 x 3 m.). The larger tank, for hot water, had been plastered at least five times. Both tanks drained into a stone basin (.99 x .54 m. and .22 m. deep) in the next room to the south (Pl. III:B). The basin had a drain on its south side which had been broken out. This room (2.50 x 2.20 m.) had a floor of large, smooth stone tiles, and walls with partially preserved plaster. Since the south wall lay outside of Square 7, a 4 x 2 m. extension was excavated to the south—Square 8.

This excavation of Square 8 revealed the south wall (A.8:2) of the bathing room with a doorway in the east end leading to an

entrance hallway (2.25 x .85 m.) running east-west, with the same type of tile floor (A.8:7), partially destroyed. In the west end of the south wall of the hallway (A.8:5) was an entrance (A.8:6) which was .55 m. wide and plastered on the inside edges (suggesting a passageway rather than a door). Sizable portions of the plaster on the walls in the hallway and bathing room were preserved. In the west end of the hallway was a small plastered bench (A.8:9). The cleaning of Wall A.8:2 revealed a flue or chimney (A.8:10) which connected with the heating system below the entire bath complex (Pl. III:A).

In excavating the space north of the wall against which the water tanks were built, an opening with a three-course brick arch was found (Pl. II:A). This oval-shaped firebox (A.8:24) heated the water in the larger tank. It also heated the bathing room by means of a hypocaust-like heating chamber leading from the firebox and widening out under almost the whole floor of the room (Pl. II:B). In this the hot air circulated between small stone pillars that supported the basalt slabs on which the tile floor was laid. This hot-air chamber was filled with dirt and debris—with ash layers on the bottom.

North of the furnace was a room which appeared to be the “furnace room,” of the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk period, like the rest of the installation. In it were found various layers of ash mixed with patches of *huwwar*. (See Fig. 3.)

Partly under and west of the furnace room was found an earlier room bounded by the north-south Wall A.7:46, and the east-west Walls A.7:57 and 7:47, the wide wall upon which the north side of the bath installation rested. (The west wall, lying apparently beyond the limits of Square 7, remained unexcavated.) Evidence from the foundation trenches of these three walls indicated a late Roman date.

To the east of this room appeared the fragment of a mosaic floor (A.7:58) which consisted of three rows of white tesserae laid along the walls and a field of white tesserae laid diagonally

(later it was discovered that this section of diagonally-laid tesserae was the surround of the design in the mosaic floor of a room extending eastward). This will be dealt with after further discussion of the westward-extending room.

An interesting phenomenon on the east side of north-south Wall A.7:46 was a narrow channel (A.7:65) built against and along its east face. It ran from Wall A.7:47 (from the hearth stone or threshold [A.7:39] of the firebox) and up to Wall A.7:60, clearly suggesting that the channel, associated with a Late Roman wall, was part of an installation antedating the mosaic floor (A.7:58).

These Late Roman walls gave rise to speculation about the nature of this architecture, especially the east-west Wall A.7:47. An impressive piece of construction, 1.50 m. wide, with well cut and tightly fitted stone blocks, it continued eastward into the balk between Squares 5 and 7, and part of its south face lay under the Islamic bath installation. This major wall was re-used in the Byzantine period: Mosaics A.7:58 and A.7:76 were laid up to it on the north and south face respectively. Although the alignment is not perfectly true, it seems possible that this major Wall A.7:47 was used as a continuation of the north wall of the Byzantine basilica at its western end. This wall was partly re-used later in the building of the bath installation, the then remaining top course serving as the threshold for the arched entryway of the firebox, and across it was built Wall A.7:3, which served as the west wall of the bath installation. North of this wide wall a hard-packed black earth surface (A.7:69), identified as Late Roman also, extended to Wall A.7:57 west of Wall A.7:46. Two unexcavated surfaces below this black floor (Surface A.7:78 and *huwwar* Layer A.7:80), cut through by the foundation trenches of Walls A.7:46, 47, and 57, were examined by a probe trench and yielded Early Roman, Hellenistic, and Iron II (Persian period) sherds.

No conclusive evidence of re-use of this western room in the

Byzantine period was found, although Byzantine sherds appeared mixed with Islamic sherds, and a small segment of mosaic was found in the southeast corner. A partly damaged wall (Wall A.7:70) to be associated with the Umayyad Surface A.7:68 was found in the west portion of the room. This sector became part of the "Furnace Room" for the Islamic bath installation after Wall A.7:3 had been cut through it to form the west wall.

As Mosaic A.7:58 was being exposed, east of Wall A.7:46 dividing it from the western room, it was noted that the center portion had been destroyed by a *ṭabun* (A.7:73), which was completely uncovered by the removal of the balk between Squares 5 and 7. This also revealed that the white tesserae of this mosaic formed the surround of a colored geometric design of the mosaic uncovered in the west edge of Square 5 (Pl. I:B). The Byzantine date for the use of this floor is indicated by the sherds found on it; and the similarity, in design and workmanship, to other more precisely dated mosaics in the Madeba region suggests a mid-sixth century date. This room, whose west, north, and south walls were identified, had apparently lost its east wall in subsequent construction. It was apparently an anteroom outside the basilica proper along its north wall, a type common in Byzantine churches.

The large *ṭabun* (A.7:73), whose construction had destroyed the central portion of the Mosaic A.7:58, had a long diameter of 2.00 m. for its outer rim. The upper layers of the destruction debris in the *ṭabun* contained Ayyūbid/Mamlūk sherds but inside this oven only Umayyad evidence was found, suggesting that it was built into the Byzantine floor in the seventh or eighth century.

In the southwest corner of Square 7, significant Byzantine evidence was found below the Islamic levels in the "passageway" between Walls A.7:2 and A.7:3, described above. A striking feature of the south face of Wall A.7:47, near the west balk, was a corner with the cross-wall only .08-10 m. long. This wall stub

appeared to be a door jamb. The removal of wall fragments and a beaten earth surface, all Umayyad, exposed a fragment of a Byzantine mosaic floor (A.7:76). The tesserae, laid diagonally, and slightly larger than those of Mosaic A.7:58, were white except for a few scattered colored ones used for repair work. This floor, laid up to the south face of Wall A.7:47, had a border of three rows of tesserae running parallel to the wall then around the above-mentioned door jamb and into the doorway. The corresponding southern door jamb was located by a similar border design. This mosaic floor continued into the south and west balks and under Wall A.7:3, the west wall of the bath installation. Hence the size and function of this room were not known. However, the doorway or passage identified was aligned with the north aisle of the basilica. Although the west edge of the doorway still lies in the balk, the continuation of the mosaic into the doorway (no threshold was found) suggested the presence of another room, perhaps the narthex of the church. Mosaic floors with white tesserae, found in both early and late Byzantine structures, frequently serve a utilitarian rather than a decorative function in rooms and spaces outside the main parts of the church.

Square 6.—In Square 6, opened in 1971, was found an Ayyūbid/Mamlūk structure, possibly a house, built over the ruined Byzantine church. Evidences of the church included a column base (A.6:38) with a fragment of mosaic (A.6:37) attached on its west side, and a mosaic fragment (A.6:35) laid up to one of two paving stones (A.6:36) in the west balk.²

Between the 1971 and 1973 seasons, portions of the balks, especially the west balk of Square 6, had eroded extensively. Large stones, dislodged from the balk, partially destroyed its face. The 1973 objectives in Square 6 were to delineate the Byzantine and earlier occupation, and to continue the excavation to bedrock.

² D. Harvey, "Heshbon 1971: Area A," pp. 18-21.

North and east of Walls A.6:5 and A.6:6, the north and east walls of the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk house, was a crudely constructed kind of platform, consisting of column bases and column fragments. These large architectural members were removed along with Walls A.6:2, 5, and 6, in order to reach the layers underneath.

The removal of a gray-brown dirt layer (A.6:46) along the west balk exposed more mosaic (A.6:47) similar to A.6:35, which ran up to the east and north sides of the same two paving stones A.6:36; also other fragments of this floor south of Column Base A.6:38 and in the center of the Square. About ten centimeters below this mosaic near the west balk, a second mosaic (A.6:48) was found. This lower flooring was laid up to the paving stones (A.6:36) with a three-row border that also continued to the north, indicating the western edge of the mosaic.

The construction of the mosaics at *Tell Heshbân* is similar to that in other Byzantine mosaics: a foundation of small stones, a filler around the stones (brown clay), and over this foundation a cement underlayer in which the tesserae were set. Both foundations of these mosaics were fairly extensive in the Square. The absence of any mosaic fragments between the two mosaic foundation layers indicated that before the upper mosaic (A.6:47) was laid the lower one (A.6:48) was almost completely destroyed or removed. Three portions of this lower mosaic were preserved: one (described above) near the west balk, another near the northeast corner of Column Base A.6:38, and a third in the center of the Square.

Column Base A.6:38 was apparently raised to a level .18 m. higher than the other column bases found *in situ* in the basilica, but still in proper alignment with and spacing from the other column bases. This raising was done after the two building phases of the Byzantine church represented by the two mosaic floors (since both mosaic foundations are broken from the column base). Possibly this occurred when the base was replaced after dislocation caused by the destruction of the Byzantine church.

Accordingly, it seems that tesserae of Mosaic A.6:37 attached to the column base must be considered part of the fragments of the lower mosaic (A.6:48).

As described above, the border of the lower mosaic identifies its western edge along the west balk. This suggests the existence of a wall along the western edge of the mosaic, preserved in A.6:36 (identified as "paving stones" in 1971) and in Wall A.6:69, a north-south wall along the west balk of which the west half is in the balk.³ This may have been the western wall of the nave of the first phase of the Byzantine church, which was at least partially removed in the second phase (an enlargement?) represented by the upper mosaic (A.6:47).

The lower mosaic (A.6:48) was attached to the western wall by three rows of tesserae running parallel to the wall. Between this and the field of the mosaic was a .35 m. surround of white tesserae laid diagonally. The field was surrounded by a border of colored tesserae with an entwining rope design. This border continued south beyond the westward extension of the line of the south row of column bases. This strongly suggested that this row of columns did not extend farther west, at least in the first phase of the church. If it had, there would be intercolumnar mosaic panels, not a border crossing the row. Excavation to the west could possibly reveal changes made in the second construction phase, but the 1973 evidence pointed to the existence of a west wall near the west balk.

In the southeast corner of the Square, between Column Base A.6:38 and the east balk, an Ayyūbid/Mamlūk surface was identified together with a narrow wall (A.6:40) along the east balk. Below this surface and wall was found the stone foundation layer (A.6:58) for the upper mosaic (A.6:47). The stone foundation layer (A.6:61) of the lower mosaic (A.6:48) was also identified in this sector. Directly below this, along the east side of and

³ Although the foundation stones (A.6:61) of Mosaic A.6:48 did not run directly to this wall, the filler and cement underlayer did, indicating rather conclusively that the Mosaic A.6:48 also did.

below the Column Base A.6:38, there was found the un-robbled part of a well-built Early Roman north-south wall (A.6:65) running through the entire Square. This wall, laid in header-stretcher construction upon bedrock (the uneven surface was leveled by a layer of black plaster), had been shaved down when the first phase of the church was constructed. Further robbing apparently occurred when the second phase was constructed since the stone foundation layer (A.6:61) for the lower mosaic extended over the wall at its higher levels near the column base, but not in the sector in the middle of the Square where the surface of the wall had been lowered by robbing thus disturbing the stone foundation layer of the mosaic.

The stylobate wall supporting the south row of column bases was identified in Square 4 and dated to the Roman period in the 1971 season.⁴ This wall was uncovered in Square 6 (A.6:68) where it was built up to but not bonded into the Early Roman north-south Wall A.6:65. Its Roman date was further confirmed, but its relationship to Wall A.6:65 indicates that it was later than that wall.

The function of Wall A.6:65 could not be ascertained at this time. Its size and construction were impressive and similar to the major east-west wall (A.7:47) in Square 7. If these two were part of the same building complex, they would have formed a corner in Square 5. Very little evidence of this could be found, although more investigation was thought necessary. The removal of the Byzantine layers from the Square, especially in the northern half, revealed the extensive Roman occupation. In addition to the well-built wall (A.6:65) described above, there was a layer of large stones (A.6:71), apparently a cobble floor or platform, in the western half of the Square. Along its eastern edge was a retaining wall (A.6:72); on the western side it butted against Wall A.6:69. This space between this platform and Wall A.6:65,

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 26.

slightly less than a meter, was filled in the same period by a small wall (A.6:77).

The middle portion of Surface A.6:71 was removed from the platform, revealing a substantial fill (A.6:80) of large stones and dirt containing Late Roman sherds, placed on the bedrock. This suggested a similar date for Surface A.6:71; and for Wall A.6:69, which predated this surface or platform and was laid on bedrock, an Early Roman date (or possibly earlier).

Since an Early Roman surface (A.6:76) covered the foundation trench of the major wall (A.6:65), it was later than that wall; but the same surface was cut by the foundation trench of Wall A.6:68; therefore the latter, the stylobate wall, was later than the major Wall A.6:65.

Directly above the bedrock (in Surface A.6:85 and Soil Layer A.6:88) were found Hellenistic sherds also mixed with some from the 7th-6th century B.C.; but no architectural features earlier than the Early Roman period.

Squares 3 and 4.—Removing the upper part of the balk between Squares 3 and 4 made possible the integration of some loci in Squares 3 and 4 identified in 1968: A.3:7 = A.4:13; A.3:11 = A.4:14; A.3:65 = A.4:51. The exact function of this last locus—eight cut stones laid in two rows—could not be determined. This could have been part of the structure for the screen separating the nave from the presbytery, which would have been the portion of the first bay between the easternmost columns and the ends of the apse walls. Further, traces of border design were found in the mosaic fragment (A.4:8) discovered in 1968; likewise in the mosaic fragment laid against the screen foundation, between the easternmost column base (A.4:45) and the south end of the apse wall (A.3:5).

The south balk of Square 4, portions of which had eroded away since 1968, was removed in order to integrate A.4 and D. 6. Below the top soil an Ayyūbid/Mamlūk wall (A.4:47) was uncovered, which equaled A.3:24 and D.6:68. This wall formed part of a

room with Walls D.6:2 and 3. Below the soil layers under this wall were found various parts of a mosaic floor, traces of which were attached to the south exterior wall (D.6:55) of the basilica. White tesserae were laid in at least 14 rows parallel to the south wall, then in a field laid diagonally. Apparently scattered in this field were red, blue, and yellow diamond-shaped designs (one example of which was found intact). A similar field and design were found in Mosaic A.6:47 between the Column Base A.6:38 and the south balk. However, the level of Mosaic A.4:52 (891.30-.35 m.) corresponds with the level of Mosaic A.4:48 (891.32-.39 m.), rather than with that of Mosaic A.4:47 (891.46 m.). However, integration of mosaic surfaces by levels must allow at least a margin of variation of .10 to .15 m., especially if the portions are some distances apart.

Mosaic Stone Foundation Layer A.4:23 was laid directly up to Column Base A.4:45, thereby showing a surface connecting the column base and the south exterior wall of the church. Traces of mosaic were found attached to this column base in the same way and at the same level as the mosaic attached to Column Base A.6:38.

Further removal of the south balk of Square 4 involved probing the foundation trenches of the Stylobate Wall A.4:12 and of the south exterior wall of the church. This work confirmed and refined the conclusions reached in 1971 regarding A.4:12. Two foundation trenches were found—an upper one for the upper course of the wall which contained Byzantine sherds and a lower one which contained Early Roman sherds. This confirmed the suggestion of the 1971 Report that the Byzantine builders had re-used the lower courses of the Roman Wall A.4:12 and added an upper course to complete the stylobate wall.

Near the bottom of the south exterior wall of the church a solid Early Roman layer was identified which had been cut through by the Foundation Trench A.4:62 containing Late Roman sherds. This suggested a Late Roman date for at least the lower courses

of the south wall. On the south side of this wall in Area D, Byzantine material was found to the bottom of the wall. Possibly, the entire south side of the wall was cleared and exposed by the Byzantine builders.

With the removal of the south balk in Square 4, a similar operation was carried on in Square 3 with corresponding results. The east-west wall (A.4:47) in Square 4 which formed part of an Ayyūbid/Mamlūk room with Walls D.6:2 and 3 continued in Square 3 (A.3:24) and formed a corner with Wall D.6:3. The removal of this wall (A.3:24) revealed two soil layers underneath from the same period. Below these layers was found a layer .16 m. deep of tesserae, dirt, and cement fragments dating from the Late Byzantine period. Fragments of the mosaic floor (A.3:20) in this part (the south aisle) of the church were found. A segment of mosaic was found attached to the column base and, although the tesserae were missing between the base and the south exterior wall, the preservation of the stone foundation layer (and in some places the cement underlayer) of the mosaic clearly demonstrated that these fragments in Square 3 were to be correlated with the fragments in the south aisle in Square 4.

The east wall of the south aisle was positively identified through the traces of mosaic attached to it. In the mosaic along the south exterior wall was a basin formed of white tesserae, seven centimeters deep. Similar basins have been found in mosaic floors in other churches, such as in Swafiyeh and Madeba.

During the 1968 and 1971 seasons the south sacristy along the apse was identified. Access to this room was by a doorway from the south aisle. During the latter part of the second phase of the church construction this doorway was blocked by a secondary wall built across it. Another unusual feature of this room was that its north-south dimension was larger than the width of the south aisle. Usually the south exterior wall of the church would be continued as the south wall of the sacristy. This room had a mosaic floor; and the portions of the border and surrounding field,

and the walls to which the mosaic ran, indicate the actual size of the room, although the entire sector on the southeast exterior of the church was built over in the early Islamic period.

A segment of mosaic (A.3:20W) consisting of three rows of white tesserae was found lying between the easternmost column base and the west end of the south wall of the apse. This was attached to the column base and joined three rows of white tesserae lying along the east side of the column base. This mosaic segment was laid up to an east-west row of stones which possibly functioned as the base for the screen on the south side of the presbytery. The construction of this mosaic was the same as elsewhere. The cement underlayer (A.3:68) was found in places above the foundation layer of small stones (A.3:69).

Excavation below the level of the mosaic floor exposed the stylobate wall (A.3:67) which continued to the west end of the south wall of the apse. Its continuation beyond the easternmost column base (A.4:45) confirmed the conclusion that it was originally a Roman wall re-used in the construction of the church. Although the foundation trench of this wall was considerably disturbed by rodents, it was evident that the lower two courses were dated to the Roman period. This wall was built on bedrock.

Summary

The 1973 season was very fruitful in contributing new light on the Islamic, Byzantine, and Roman occupations of Area A and in identifying a Hellenistic occupation.

The two previous seasons had established the Islamic occupation of the acropolis. In the center of the Area water channels were found which fed into various cisterns cut into the bedrock. Along the southern side of the acropolis various Ayyūbid/Mamlūk structures were identified in Area D. In 1973 architectural remains of the same period were found along the western side of the acropolis, principally the bath installation uncovered in Squares 7 and 8. Exposed architectural features as well as walls partially excavated indicated that sizable portions of these Ayyūbid/

Mamlūk structures lay to the west of the excavated Squares.

In addition, a definite Ummayyad installation was identified—the large *ṭabun* set down through the mosaic floor in Square 7.

The major Byzantine feature in Area A was the large Christian basilica, identified in 1968 when the apse and portions of the nave and side aisles were excavated together with some fragments of mosaic floors. In 1971 more of the apse and side aisles were uncovered. The 1973 excavations further clarified the existence of at least two phases of the Byzantine church when a mosaic floor was found superimposed on an earlier one in Square 6. There was some evidence that in the later phase the western end of the basilica was modified or enlarged by the removal of the western wall of the nave. The western exterior wall of the basilica in the second phase seemed to lie beyond the 1973 excavations in Square 7, as indicated by the mosaic floor found in the southwest corner of that Square. In addition, in this second phase there was at least one room outside the basilica proper on the north side. This room had a mosaic floor with geometric intertwining designs.

Antedating the Byzantine church was a major architectural feature on the western half of the acropolis, indicated by massive well-built Roman walls (in Squares 6 and 7), re-used in Square 7 by the Byzantine builders and in some cases again by the Islamic builders. The extent and identity of this Roman building awaits further excavation; the architecture clearly suggests some type of major public building.

Traces of Hellenistic and Iron Age occupation, found directly above the bedrock, were not adequate to identify any occupation features. Possibly the Roman builders cleared the acropolis in order to build the major structures on bedrock.

Questions remain to be answered in Area A: How extensive were the Islamic buildings on the western side of the acropolis? How large was the Byzantine church and what were its related structures? What were the prior Roman structures on the acropolis? Where there earlier occupation layers on the acropolis?