

THE EXCAVATION OF THE NORTH CHURCH AT HESBÂN, JORDAN: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

JOHN I. LAWLOR

Baptist Bible College and School of Theology
Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania

The existence of a Byzantine church north of Tell Hesbân was confirmed by a sounding done in 1976 as part of the Andrews University Expedition. As a follow-up to that, Baptist Bible College of Pennsylvania sponsored a four-week expedition¹ to the site for the purpose of expanding the excavation of the church. The probe of 1976 had established the existence of three strata at the site: an Ayyūbid/Mamlūk cemetery, an Umayyad complex, and the Byzantine church. While the church was the primary focus of attention, the extent of the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk cemetery and the nature of the Umayyad complex were secondary matters for investigation.

Ayyūbid/Mamlūk

The cemetery stratum proved to be more extensive than it was initially thought. Numerous cist burials were located in the region of the eastern half of the church, with a concentration of them in the extreme eastern sector which included the apse, chancel, north and south side chambers. With one or two exceptions, where the burials were situated immediately on top of the mosaic floor of the Byzantine church, the interments were .50-1.50 m. above the Byzantine stratum. The ceramic evidence found in the context of the burials suggested that they were to be dated to the Ayyūbid/Mamlūk Period (A.D. 1200-1450).

¹The dates of the excavation were June 17-July 14, 1978. A staff of seventeen professors and students were assisted by twenty workmen. The core staff consisted of John I. Lawlor, Director; Lawrence T. Geraty, Senior Advisor; Larry G. Herr, Stratigrapher; and Bert DeVries, Architect.

Umayyad

The Umayyad complex was comprised of a series of one and two-course walls set directly on top of the mosaic floor of the church (see Pl. I:A). The main wall, approximately 21 m. in length and oriented east-west, stretched from the west wall of the church to one meter inside (west) of the apse wall. A shorter, two-course, north-south wall in the chancel butted against the south face of the main axis wall. In the nave shorter wall stubs were found running between the north face of the east-west axis wall and the south face of column bases four and six.²

The purpose of this complex has not yet been conclusively ascertained. One possibility is a domestic arrangement. A major problem, however, with that suggestion is the absence of domestic occupational debris. No evidences of everyday living were found. A second possibility is that the walls represented a remodeling of the Byzantine church into an Umayyad mosque.

Square C, located in the southeast corner of the church yielded clear evidence of four Umayyad surfaces: the Umayyad reuse of the Byzantine mosaic floor and three plaster surfaces, Loci 29/31, 25/26 and 21 (bottom-to-top sequence). That the three most recent Umayyad phases were found only in the south-east corner of the church structure may suggest that the original Umayyad phase represented some sort of a public building, while the latter three represented domestic occupation. Perhaps the two were used simultaneously. Closer examination of the available ceramic evidence may provide some clues to a workable solution to this problem.

Byzantine

The 1976 sounding uncovered a well-defined east wall, apse and synthronon.³ A small, badly damaged fragment of mosaic was found in the chord of the apse. However, the fact that the bedding for the mosaic sealed against the west face of the plastered

²Eight column bases on the north stylobate wall were numbered consecutively from one to eight, moving east to west.

³John I. Lawlor, "Area G.14," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 196-197, Figs. 19, 20.

synthronon suggested the possibility of an earlier/lower mosaic in the apse.

The exposure of the Byzantine church during the 1978 season demonstrated that both the architectural elements and the mosaic floors of the church were, indeed, well-preserved. The plan of the church was that of a typical basilica: inscribed apse, north and south side chambers, north and south stylobate walls forming side aisles and central nave, and a narthex at the west end. Two levels of mosaic were exposed in the apse/chancel and a fairly complete mosaic was exposed in the nave. All three mosaics bore Greek inscriptions.

Apse/chancel. The inscribed apse which was preserved 3.12 m. above bedrock, contained fragments of three tiers of what probably was at one time a five-tiered synthronon. The five-tiered synthronon in the church at Siyagha provides a fine example of this particular architectural feature.⁴ The apse was 3 m. deep (from the chord to the west face of the apse wall), and approximately 6 m. wide at the chord. The west face of the lowest course of the synthronon was plastered; three different layers of plaster were distinguishable.

The chancel which was elevated two steps (.52 m.) above the nave was nearly square; it extended westward from the chord of the apse 7.5 m., the equivalent of three bays, and was approximately 7.75 m. wide, the width of the nave.

The chancel contained evidence of an altar installation immediately west of the apse chord (see Pl. I:B). Six altar post sockets, three on each of the north and south sides of a well-preserved reliquarium, were identified. One of the marble altar posts was discovered in Square C, the area of the south side chamber. The altar post was .93 m. long and decorated at its top with the lotus plant motif. Similar altar posts have been found both at the newly excavated church at Ma'in,⁵ as well as at Siyagha.⁶

⁴S. J. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo: Part I: The Text*; Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, No. 1 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1941), p. 48. Ibid., *Part II: The Plates*, Pl. 39:1.

⁵M. Piccirillo and M. Roussan, "A Byzantine Church at ed-Deir (Ma'in)," *ADAJ* 21 (1976): 176, Pl. XXII:1.

⁶These were shown to the author by Michèle Piccirillo while visiting the work at Siyagha in July, 1978.

The reliquarium contained a miniature marble sarcophagus (see Pl. II:A). The base of it was .246 x .173 m. and was divided into two compartments; one was .092 x .111 m., the other was .082 x .111 m. Each corner of the .079 m. high gabled lid featured a "horn," and both sloping sides of the lid were decorated with raised crosses. The smaller of the two compartments contained a silver reliquary, oval-shaped, .11 x .067 x .055 m. (see Pl. II:B). Its lid, decorated around its rim with a twisted rope pattern, also bore the image of a well-proportioned Byzantine cross. The contents of the reliquary were an ashy material, perhaps cremation remains, and a human knee-cap from a right leg. The practice of depositing relics of saints under the altar was common during the fifth and sixth centuries, although the discovery of them *in situ* is unusual.

Nave and side aisles. North and south stylobate walls, on an east-west orientation, supported a total of 16 column bases—eight on each wall. Further similarity between the Hēsban and Siyagha churches was found to exist on this point.⁷ The entire length of the north stylobate wall was exposed; all eight column bases were *in situ* (see Pl. I:A), and the easternmost base had .75 m. of its column still standing. Only the three easternmost bases on the south stylobate wall were exposed, but all three still supported fragments of their columns. The average distance between each column base was 2 m. The width of the nave was 8 m.; its length was 15.25 m. The north side aisle was 5 m. wide, while the width of the south aisle was 5.5 m.; both aisles were 22 m. long. The width of the side aisles in relationship to the width of the nave was greater than in many fourth-to-sixth-century churches.⁸

The exposed portions of the west wall revealed two entrances: the main one at the west end of the nave, the other at the west end of the north side aisle. A third one was projected at the west end of the south side aisle, although that particular region was not excavated.

Side chambers. Two side chambers of approximately equal size were located on the north and south sides of the apse. Each opened

⁷Saller, 1: 59-64.

⁸The ratio in the Siyagha church was that the combined width of the side aisles equalled the width of the nave.

upon its respective side aisle through what were probably arched entrances. Both side chambers gave evidence of having had mosaic floors at the time the church was in use. Byzantine soil layers in Square C, the square in which the south side chamber was located, yielded numerous ivory carvings, many of which gave evidence of having been inlaid at one time. The corpus included five bishop heads with mitres averaging .06 m. high and .03-.04 m. wide; four carvings of what appeared to be miniature columns varying in length from .09-.13 m. and .015 m. wide; and one piece .17 x .035 m., showing a sea creature swallowing a fish. Its design was similar to that of the sea creatures leaping around Thalassa, the goddess of the sea, pictured in the center of the mosaic floor of the Apostle's Church in Madeba.

Narthex. A 4 m.-wide narthex was located outside the west end of the basilica. Three column bases, .8 m. square, were *in situ* in a north-south line 3.5 m. west of the west wall of the basilica. Two of the column bases were located south of the east-west axis line, and one north. A plaster-lined water chancel lay between the two southernmost column bases, and sloped in a northeasterly direction, running under the main western entrance to the church. This would seem to indicate that a cistern was situated under the west end of the nave; this, however, was not confirmed.

Mosaics. Two levels of mosaics were preserved in the apse/chancel. The upper mosaic was composed of two main panels about four meters long, divided by a single-line Greek inscription stretching north-south across the chancel directly west of the altar. The eastern panel had interlocking clover-leaf patterns at both ends, with a simple flower bud design characterizing the mosaic of the altar area. The western panel featured large trees⁹ at both ends, with a large, well-executed urn in the center of the panel (see Pl. I: B). All this was bordered by a pattern of continuing and interlocking swastika-like designs. The lower mosaic was exposed in a 1.5 x 2.5 m. probe in the apse. It was located approximately .10 m. below the upper mosaic and featured a seven-line Greek inscription in a circle surrounded by a twisted rope-like pattern. Gazelle-like animals

⁹Saller, 1: 230-232, Fig. 28.

faced the inscription on the north and south, and gently bent trees hovered over both (see Pl. III:A).

The nave mosaic featured a double border. The outer border was a series of interlocking circles approximately .25 m. in diameter; a similar pattern was discovered in the mosaic in Room B of the church in Ma'in.¹⁰ The inner border was composed of a series of large (ca. .6 m. in diameter) medallions in which birds of various kinds were featured. In all but two of those medallions which were uncovered, the birds had been defaced with either a plaster or mosaic patch replacing them. This was thought to be the result of iconoclastic efforts. Another large urn was part of the nave mosaic, along with various geometric patterns and designs. At the east end of the nave, directly in front of the chancel steps, a four-line Greek inscription was uncovered.

Inscriptions. Three inscriptions were uncovered; two were located in the apse/chancel, the other at the east end of the nave. The first inscription is a seven-line Greek inscription located in the apse on the lower mosaic (see Pl. III:A). It reads:

ΤΙΕΡ
ΣΩΤΗΡΙ
ΑΣΦΙΛΑ
ΔΕΛΦΟΤ
ΚΑΙΗΛΙΟΥ
ΤΙΟΤΑ
ΜΗΝ

In translation, the inscription would read: "For the salvation of Philadelphos and Elios his son, Amen."

The second inscription was located at the east end of the nave, directly in front of (east of) the chancel steps. It is four lines in length; the first line is complete, the last three lines are broken in places. It reads:

† ΤΙΕΡΣΩΤΗΡΙΑΣΤΟΤΕΤΑΠΡΕΣ'
ΠΑΠΩ...ΠΡΟ...ΚΕΝΕΤΣΕΒΙΑ
† ΙΧΘΥΣ...Σ/Ω[?]....ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛ
ΦΟΤΜΑΙ...Τ/Π[?]Α...ΟΤΟΙΚΟΤΑΤΤΟΤ

While parts of it are missing, the majority of those parts can be reconstructed, based on comparative material from Mukhayyat,¹¹ as

¹⁰Piccirillo and Roussan, p. 181, Pl. XXVII:1.

¹¹M. Piccirillo, "New Discoveries on Mount Nebo," *ADAJ* 21 (1976): 59, Pl. XV.

well as the context of the inscription. A probable translation of the four lines would be: "For the salvation of the blessed presbyter Papio . . . Eusebia. Christ (*Ichthus*) remember (?) Philadelphos and all his house."

Some observations are in order. First, the letter style of these first two mosaics is the same except for the "alphas." These two inscriptions were probably contemporary. Second, while the first inscription made no use of abbreviations, the second one did. The "slanted sigma" indicated that "ΕΤΑ" and "ΠΙΡΕΣ" were both abbreviated terms; the former an abbreviation for ευλογητος ("blessed"), the latter an abbreviation for πρεσβυτερος ("elder/presbyter"). Third, the use of ΙΧΘΥΣ in the inscription raises some questions. In light of its customary use at an earlier period (first and second century), what was the significance of its use in a probable mid-sixth century context? Does its use have any bearing on the date of the church?

A third inscription was found on the upper apse/chancel mosaic. It is nearly 4 m. in length, stretching across the chancel in front of (west of) the altar (see Pl. I:B). A .95-m. portion of it was broken out in the northern half and a .2-.25-m. portion of it was broken out at the south end. As excavated, it reads:

ΕΠΙ...ΩΘΗΤΟΑΓ*ΘΤΕΙΑΣΤ*ΣΠΙΟΤΔΗΩΑΝΝΟΤΔΙΑΚΤΙΕΡΕΩΤΗ*ΤΩ...ΠΙΟΦΟΡ*

Once again, comparative materials,¹² as well as context, suggest a possible reconstruction of the major segment that was lost. A probable reconstruction/translation would be: "At the time the holy altar was renewed and finished by the zeal of John the deacon for the salvation" The existence of the upper mosaic approximately .10 m. above an earlier one clearly indicates that the apse/chancel sector of the church had gone through a remodeling phase.

One further observation regarding this third inscription was that the style of lettering is noticeably different from that of the first two mosaics. The letters of this single line inscription are all the

¹²S. J. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo (Khirbetel-Mekhayyat)* (Jerusalem: The Franciscan Press, 1949), p. 173. Saller, *Memorial of Moses*, 1: 254; 2: Pls. 109, 116.

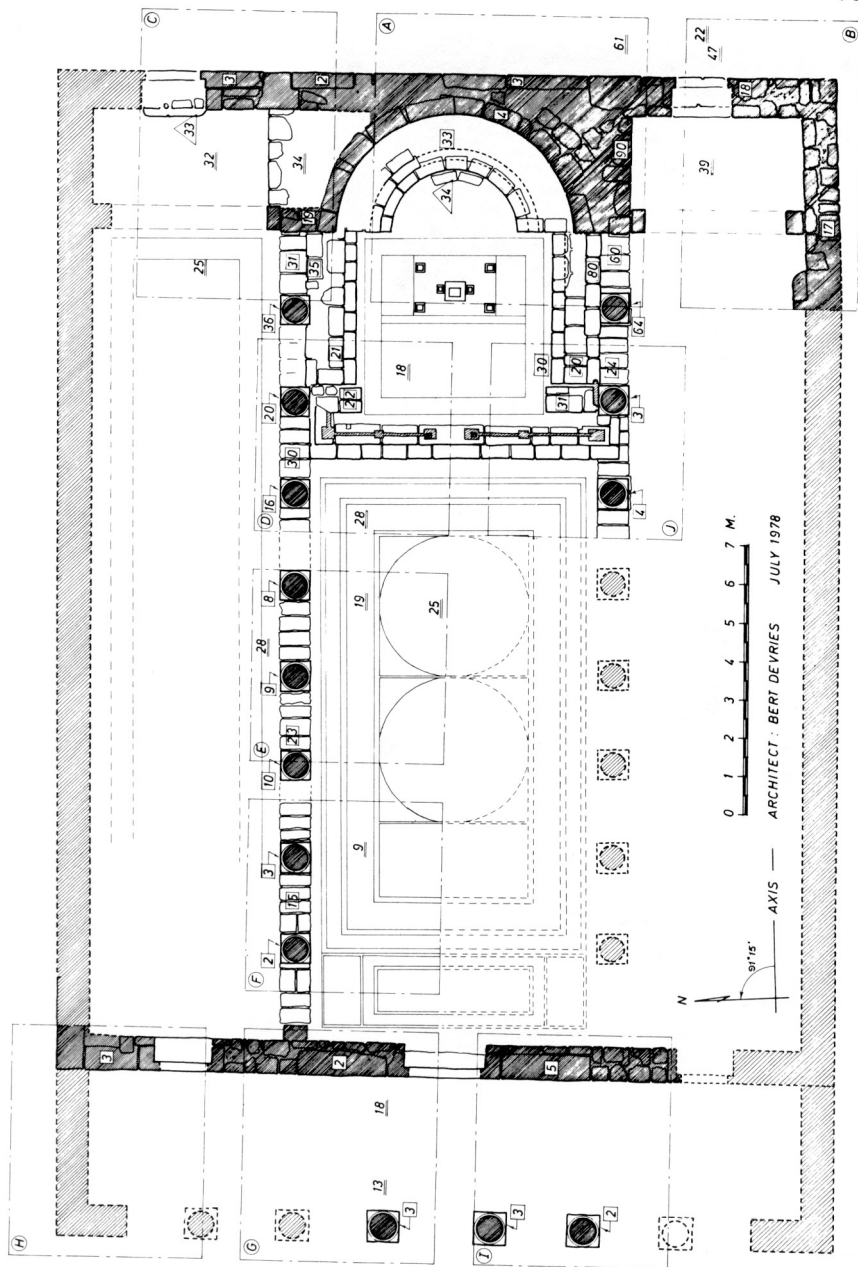
same height and were executed with much more style. This is particularly noticeable in the letters Ω, Θ, and Υ. The style of letters in this inscription was very similar to the two inscriptions in the Theotokos chapel at Siyagha.¹³ No datelines appear in any of the inscriptions.

Conclusion

Since none of the inscriptions contains a dateline and the ceramic evidence has not been closely analyzed, a firm date has not been assigned to the church. However, architectural similarities to the church at Siyagha and the fact that the same names which appear in the Siyagha inscriptions were found at Ḥesbân may suggest that the Ḥesbân church was constructed about the same time as the church at Siyagha. A tentative date, therefore, for the church would be mid-sixth century, perhaps about A.D. 550. Further and closer investigation of the available evidence should shed more light on the matter.

Some discussion was held concerning the feasibility of preservation and reconstruction. Tentative plans were made to preserve and protect the mosaics as well as the architecture from vandalism and the weather. As usual, the problems involved were time, personnel, and finances. If the Department of Antiquities follows through with the preservation, another season of excavation and clearing might be warranted.

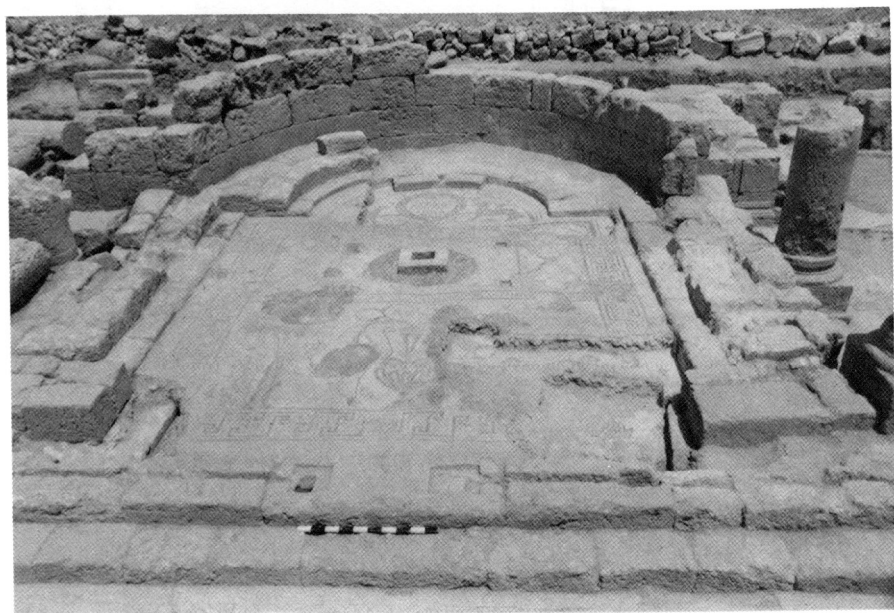
¹³Saller, *Memorial of Moses*, 1: 254; 2: Pls. 109, nos. 1, 2; 110, no. 1; 116, nos. 1, 2, 3.



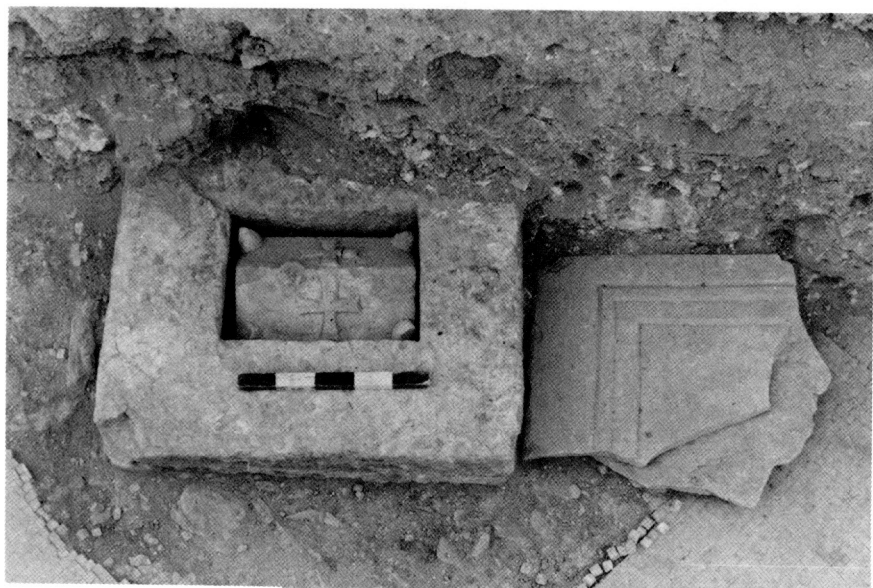
A PLAN OF THE HESBĀN NORTH CHURCH



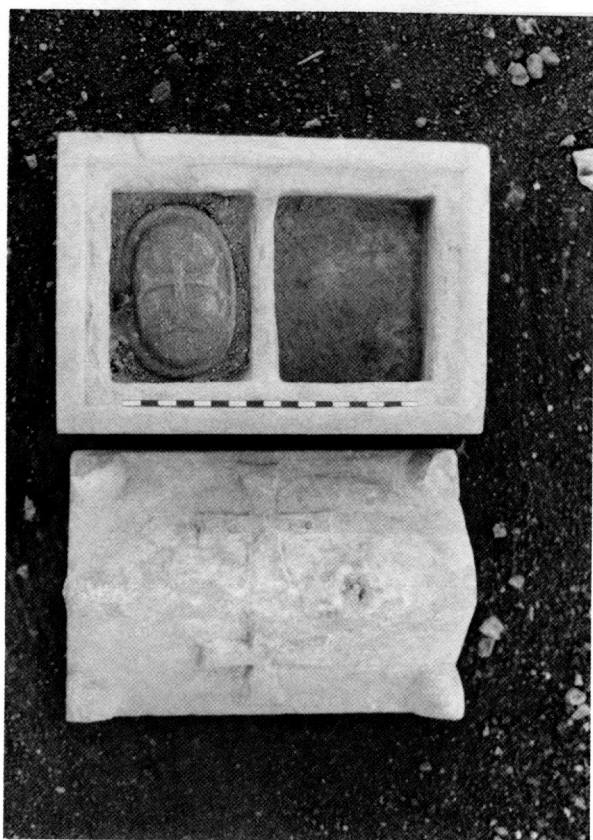
A. Umayyad complex sitting directly on nave mosaic. Note column bases of Byzantine church *in situ* to the right.



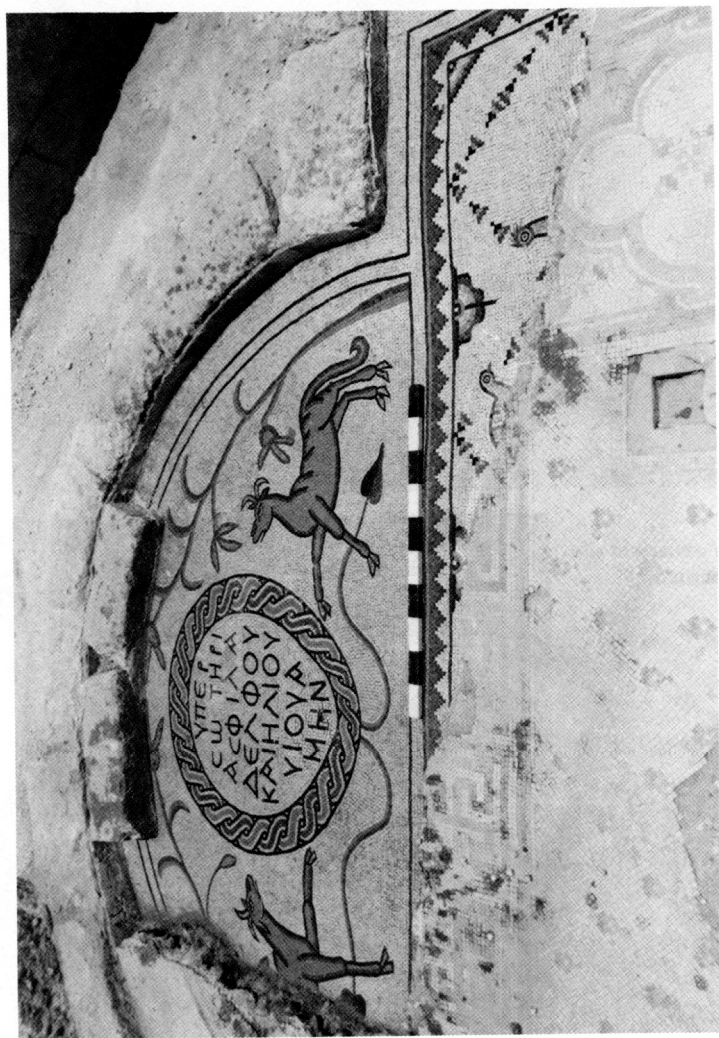
B. The apse/chancel of the Byzantine church. Note two levels of mosaic flooring and fragment of column still standing.



A. The marble ossuary *in situ*
in the reliquarium.



B. Marble ossuary showing
silver reliquary in left com-
partment.



A. Lower apse mosaic showing gazelle-like animals and Greek inscription.