

LINTEL INSCRIPTION: TALL HISBAN, FIELD M, SQUARE 5, 2001

KEITH MATTINGLY
Andrews University

THEODORE W. BURGH¹
University of North Carolina
Wilmington, North Carolina

The 2001 season (Figure 1) produced a unique find from the northern slope of Tall Hisban in the form of a “door lintel” (Figure 2)² with four lines of neatly chiseled Byzantine Greek letters. No chiseled inscription of this length has previously been found at Tall Hisban. Siegfried Horn led five archaeological expeditions to Tall Hisban between 1968 and 1974. Øystein LaBianca led five expeditions back to Tall Hisban as a part of the Madaba Plains Project beginning in 1997.³ In 2001, Field M Supervisor Theodore Burgh and Assistant Field Supervisor Keith Mattingly opened two new squares, 4 and 5, north of squares 2 and 3, which had been opened by Lael Caesar and his team in the 1999 season. The focus of this article is to review Greek inscriptions discovered at Hisban, to offer a translation of the “lintel” discovered in 2001 and to provide preliminary discussion regarding its possible relation to the chronological phases of life at Tall Hisban.

During the Byzantine early Christian period, Tall Hisban (or Tell Hesban, Heshbon) was known as Esbus or Esbous.⁴ During the first quarter of the fourth century C.E., Esbous had gained sufficient ecclesiastical stature to have become a seat of a bishopric.⁵ In 649 C.E., Pope Martin I corresponded with

¹The authors would like to thank their student research assistants: Alex Carpenter, Isaac Oliver, and Christie Goulart Ribeiro. The authors also thank Robert Bates for creating specialty fonts, and Paul Ray who so willingly gave help whenever he was asked.

²For the purposes of this article, the inscribed rock is referred to as a “door lintel.” It may have been used, however, in some other fashion, such as in a foundation or in the side of a wall.

³Expeditions in 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001, and 2004: Øystein LaBianca and Paul Ray, “Preliminary Report of the 1997 Excavations and Restoration Work at Tall Hisban,” *AUSS* 36 (1998): 245-257; Øystein LaBianca and Paul Ray, “Madaba Plains Project 1997: Excavations and Restoration Work at Tall Hisban and Vicinity,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* (1999): 115-126; Øystein LaBianca, Paul Ray, and Bethany Walker, “Madaba Plains Project: Tall Hisban, 1998,” *AUSS* 38 (2000): 9-21; Bethany Walker and Øystein LaBianca, “The Islamic *Qusūr* of Tall Hisban: Preliminary Report on the 1998 and 2001 Seasons,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* (2003): 443-471.

⁴The site has also been referred to as “Exebon” (Egeria, *Egeria's Travels*, trans. J. Wilkinson [London: SPCK, 1971], 108).

⁵John Irving Lawlor, “The Esbous North Church in Its Stratigraphic and Historical Contexts” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1990), 5. Lawlor, 250, notes that the records of the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.) register the attendance of “Gennadius, the bishop of Esbous,” and that Bishop “Zosus of Esbountos” attended

Theodore Bishop of Esbous regarding questions of the bishop's orthodoxy. The bishopric of Esbous, along with Madaba, Philadelphia, and Gerasa, is mentioned as belonging to the province of Arabia.⁶ The above, along with evidence provided by mosaics from two eighth-century-C.E. Christian churches in the Madaba region that refer to Esbous, indicate its recognition as an ecclesiastical town of some consequence in the province of Arabia during the late sixth to mid-eighth century.⁷ Esbous, like every major site in Jordan, had numerous churches as evidenced by excavations at the Acropolis Church site, located at the acropolis, and the North Church site, located on the north side of the tall, and by traces of mosaics found in the vicinity of the tall.⁸

Archaeological evidence of Greek inscriptions at Hisban includes a Hellenistic ostrakon, with approximately thirty-five Greek letters written on a sherd that appears to be the product of someone's doodling or scribbling.⁹ Other artifacts include two Late Hellenistic Rhodian jar handles impressed with finely executed and well-preserved date-stamps,¹⁰ and a plaster fragment discovered in the Acropolis Church with the letters ΔΝΙΗΛ, assumed to be the name ΔΑΝΙΗΛ, dated by Bjørnar Storfjell to 530-540 B.C.E.¹¹

the Council of Ephesus (431 C.E.). Michelle Piccirillo notes that "Esbous, modern Hesban, was one of the first Christian bishoprics in the area of Jordan (*The Mosaics of Jordan*, ed. Patricia Bikai and Thomas Dailey [Amman, Jordan: American Center of Oriental Research, 1992], 250).

⁶Pamela Watson, "The Byzantine Period," in *The Archaeology of Jordan*, ed. Burton MacDonald, Russell Adams, and Piotr Bienkowski (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 494.

⁷The first church is located near the village of Macin, and the second is the eighth-century-C.E. basilica of Saint Stephan at Umm er-Rasas (Lawlor, 9-13).

⁸Bastiaan van Elderen, "Byzantine Christianity at Hesban: Its Churches and Mosaics," in *Hesban After 25 Years*, ed. David Merling and Lawrence Geraty (Berrien Springs: Institute of Archaeology, 1994), 146.

⁹Bastiaan van Elderen, "A Greek Ostrakon From Heshbon," in *Heshbon 1973: The Third Campaign at Tell Hesban, A Preliminary Report*, ed. Roger Boraas and Siegfried Horn, Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 8 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1975), 21-22.

¹⁰Dewey Beegle, "Area B," in *Heshbon 1968: The First Campaign at Tell Hesban, A Preliminary Report*, ed. Roger Boraas and Siegfried Horn, Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 2 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1969), 123, see esp. Plate 24B; James Cox, "A Rhodian Potter's Date-Stamp," in *Heshbon 1974: The Fourth Campaign at Tell Hesban, A Preliminary Report*, ed. Roger Boraas and Lawrence Geraty, Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 9 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1976), 149-155, see esp. Plate 15B.

¹¹J. Bjørnar Storfjell, *The Stratigraphy of Tell Hesban: Jordan in the Byzantine Period* (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1983), 87, 112; see also idem, "Byzantine Hesban: The Site in Its Archaeological and Historical Context," in *Hesban After 25 Years*,

Excavations just to the north of the Esbous acropolis, in the remnants of a Byzantine church (the North Church), yielded three mosaic Greek inscriptions, two in the apse/chancel and one at the east end of the nave.¹² Two of the inscriptions were written in similar orthography, one with seven lines and thirty-eight letters, the other with four lines, three of which were broken, with a total of seventy-four extant letters. The style of lettering in the four-meter-long third inscription, with fifty extant letters, differed noticeably from that of the other inscriptions. The letters of this line were all the same height and were executed with much more style, particularly as seen in the letters “ω,” “θ,” and “γ.” Though dating the churches has proved to be problematic, partially because none of the inscriptions contained easily dateable material, the foundation of the North Church has been dated by Lawlor to the second half of the sixth century.¹³

The first inscription in the North Church is a seven-line Greek inscription located in the apse on the lower mosaic. It reads:

ΥΠΕΡ
 ΚΩΤΗΡΙ
 ΑΣΦΙΛΑ
 ΔΕΛΦΟΥ
 ΚΑΙ ΗΛΙΟΥ
 ΥΙΟΥ
 ΜΗΝ

The translation reads: “For the salvation of Philadelphos and Elios his son, Amen.” The second inscription with four lines was located at the east end of the nave, which reads:

ΥΠΕΡΚΩΤΗΡΙΑΚΤΟΥΕΥΛ' ΠΡΕΣ
 ΠΑΠΙΩ ... ΠΡΟ ... Κ... ΕΝΕΥΣΕΒΙΑ
 ΙΣΘΥΣ ... Ω ... ΦΙΛΑΔΕΛ
 ΦΟΥΜΑΙ ... ΠΑ ... ΟΥΟΙΚΟΥΑΥΤΟΥ

The translation reads: “For the salvation of the blessed presbyter Papiro and for an offering and in piety Jesus Christ . . . Philadelphoumai and all his household.” The third inscription, found in the upper apse/chancel mosaic,

ed. David Merling and Lawrence T. Geraty (Berrien Springs: Institute of Archaeology, 1994), 109-119; van Elderen, “Byzantine Christianity at Hesban,” 146. For a picture of the site, see Plate 24A in *Heshbon 1968: The First Campaign at Tell Hesban, A Preliminary Report*, ed. Roger Boraas and Siegfried Horn, Andrews University Monographs: Studies in Religion 9 (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1969).

¹²John Lawlor, “The 1978 Excavation of the Hesban North Church,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities* 24 (1980): 95-105; see also idem, “The Historical/Archaeological Significance of the Hesban North Church,” in *Hesban After 25 Years*, ed. David Merling and Lawrence T. Geraty (Berrien Springs: Institute of Archaeology, 1994), 126-129. For Lawlor’s most detailed treatment of these inscriptions, see “The Esbous North Church,” 118-132, 143-148.

¹³Lawlor, “The Esbous North Church,” 311.

was nearly 4 m long with one 95 cm and one 25 cm section missing. It reads:

ΕΤΙ [ΤΟΥΑΝΕΝΕΛΩΗΚΑΙ
ΕΤΕΛΕΙ] ΩΘΗΤΟΑΓ^ϞΘ^ϞΝCΙΑCT^ϞCΠΟΥΔΗ
ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥΔΙΑΚΥΠΕΡCΩΤΗ^Ϟ [ΤΩΚΑ] ΠΤΟΦΟΡ^Ϟ

The translation was based on proposed reconstructions and reads, "At the time of the renewing and refinishing of the holy altar, by the zeal of John the deacon; for the salvation of those who gave."¹⁴

Two lintel inscriptions have been discovered at Hisban. Major C. R. Conder saw the first lintel inscription found in Tall Hisban in 1889. Describing Hisban as "a comparatively large and important town,"¹⁵ he noted that heaps of fallen masonry littered the slopes of the tall. Among the tumble of masonry covering the northeast slope of the citadel hill, he found a five-foot-long lintel stone "inscribed" with the letters Ε...ΕΧΒΑΙ. He was uncertain as to the inscription date because the "square shape of the letters is not that usually found in the Byzantine Greek texts of the fourth to ninth centuries."¹⁶ As to its meaning, Conder suggested that the ΕΧΒΑΙ is possibly the word "Esban" or "Hesban," taking the "ι" as the first line of the letter "Ν."

Excavations during the 2001 dig season yielded the second lintel inscription (Figure 2) in the central east portion of Square M5 under the sixth locus in an area filled by larger rocks and soil, which seems to be a rubble or drop layer.¹⁷ Conder describes the location of the first lintel on the northeast slope of Tall Hisban. The second lintel was buried on the east side of the north slope, perhaps not far from the position of the first one.

It is not clear where the second lintel was originally used. The position in which it was found is below the Acropolis Church and above the North Church. It could have been thrown from the top of the tall, as happened with much of the earlier Iron Age material on the west side of the tall, in order to clear and prepare the top of the acropolis for newer architecture. In this case, it could have been used in the Acropolis Church. Another possibility includes that of secondary usage. If this is the case, then the lintel could have been used originally in either the Acropolis Church or the North Church. One possibility for secondary usage of the lintel is in Square M4, located immediately above and to the south of Square M5, where a portion of a double-vaulted room, also found during the 2001 season, may have incorporated the lintel into one of its walls. Although further excavation will reveal more data, it appears that the wall

¹⁴Ibid., 126-132.

¹⁵C. R. Conder, *The Adwān Country. The Survey of Eastern Palestine: Memoirs of the Topography, Orthography, Hydrography, Archaeology, Etc.* (London: Committee of the Palestine Exportation Fund, 1889), 104.

¹⁶Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁷The surrounding debris was comprised of field rocks without any intentional shaping present. The "lintel" top was somewhere between 70 and 90 cm below the surface.

of the room runs northwest from Square 4 into Square 5. A disturbance may have caused the collapse of the structure, causing the remains to shift and slide north to the foot of the tall. Evaluations of this area suggest some type of activity that caused the walls to slide westward. At any rate, the lintel was found in an upright position about 2 m from this wall.

The lintel (Figure 3) is made out of hard limestone with a four-line inscription in Byzantine Greek, a language consistent with the Byzantine occupation of Tall Hisban (324-630 C.E.).¹⁸ The length of the lintel is 101 cm along its bottom edge and 94 cm along its top edge, 34 cm high, 19 cm wide at the top and 30 cm wide at the bottom (Figure 4). The right end of the lintel is missing. Based upon assumed missing letters, this section would probably add 15 and 20 cm to the lintel's overall length.

The lintel's four lines contain relatively uniform and neatly spaced letters between 5 and 6 cm high (Figure 3). The style of the letters generally follow what Welles referred to as the "Oval Alphabet,"¹⁹ unlike the neat, square letters that Condor discovered on the first lintel, but very much like the apse mosaic of the North Church.²⁰ The fourth line has a generic bird, the same height as the letters and about 13 cm long. The letters on lines 2 and 3 are quite clear, while approximately 13 cm sections are heavily damaged in lines 1 (center) and 4 (center left). The letters on line 1 extend to the top of the lintel, which has been disintegrated, making the top of the letters unclear. The letters on lines 2 and 3 are generally quite clear, with one exception in the middle of line 2. The letters on line 4 do not extend to the bottom of the lintel and are generally quite clear.

Evidently, inscribers on the East Bank of the Jordan did not pay close attention to orthography.²¹ In this inscription, one notes that twice the letters "O" and the "Y" are combined into one letter, "Ϟ," and twice they are rendered as two letters, with "Y" rendered with a "V." The letter "Σ" is rendered with a "C" and the letter "Ω" with a "U." Each of these characteristics have parallels in other Byzantine fifth- and sixth-century-C.E. inscriptions.²²

The inscription:

¹⁸Watson, 461. Watson, *ibid.*, uses the dates "from the fourth to the mid-seventh centuries A.D." in reference to the Byzantine period.

¹⁹C. B. Welles describes the alphabet of the Byzantine period as either "The Square Alphabet," "The Round Alphabet," or "The Oval Alphabet" ("The Inscriptions," in *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis*, ed. Carl H. Kraeling [New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938], 366-367).

²⁰Lawlor, "The Historical/Archaeological Significance of the Hesban North Church," 128.

²¹As explained by Archimandrite InnoKentios, Priest of the Church of Saint George, Madaba, Jordan (private interview, June 2001).

²²Welles, 366-367.

Ε Π Ι Τ Θ Θ Ε Ο [C Ε Β Γ] Ε Ω [P] Γ Ι Θ Π Ρ [Ε C]
 Γ Ο Υ Μ Ε Ν Θ Τ [O] V C Ω Τ Η Ρ Ι Ω [Δ]
 Μ Α Τ Ο Ε Α Ν Ε Ν Ε Ω Θ Η Η Ε Κ Κ [Λ]
 ☞ [Μ Η Ν Ι] C Ε Π Τ Ε Μ Β Ρ Ι Ω Π Ρ Ο Τ Η Ι Ν

ε π ι τ ο υ θ ε ο [σ ε β γ] ε ω [ρ] γ ι ο υ π ρ [ε σ]
 γ ο υ μ ε ν ο υ τ [ο] υ σ ω τ η ρ ι ω [δ]
 μ α τ ο ε α ν ε ν ε ω θ η η ε κ κ [λ]
 ☞ [μ η ν ι] σ ε π τ ε μ β ρ ι ω π ρ ο τ η ι ν

Suggested reconstruction:

επι του θεοσεβ(εστατου) γεο[ρ]γιου πρε[σβ](υτερου και)
 ηγουμενου του σωτηριω [δ](απανη και)
 (κα)ματοε ανενεωθη η εκκ(λησια)
 ☞ [μηνι] σεπτεμβριω προτη ιν(δικτου)

Translation:

At the time of the most pious (or God-fearing) George, presbyter (and)
 abbot of (the) Savior, (who) provided the c(osts and)
 labor (for the) restoration of the church

☞ (in the) month of September (of the) first indiction

or

At the time of the most pious (or God-fearing) George, presbyter (and)
 abbot, thanks to the salvatory c(osts and)
 labor this church was renovated

☞ in the month of September, first indiction

Commentary

Line One—επι του θεοσεβ(εστατου) γεο[ρ]γιου
 πρε[σβ](υτερου και)

επι του. A common introduction for inscriptions, επι του is translated as “in the days of.”²³ This phrase is also used in the Phase A Chancel Inscription of the North Church at Esbous and translated by Lawlor as “at the time of.”²⁴

θεοσεβεστατου. At first we followed the suggestion of Charles Barber, Stefanos Alexopoulos, and David Jenkins, who wondered if the word “θεοσ” might be an abbreviation for Theodosius, Theodose, Theorore, or Theodora. The

²³Translated by Leah Di Segni as “in the days of.” Sources include inscriptions on two medallions; a four-line inscription in a *tabula ansata* at the entrance to the Memorial of Moses at Siyagha; and a five-line inscription in the pavement of a funerary chapel, located at Siyagha (“The Greek Inscriptions,” in *Mt Nebo: New Archaeological Excavations, 1967-1997*, ed. Michelle Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata [Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1998], 432-433, 428, 437). See also Piccirillo’s translation of an inscription at Jabr (*The Mosaics of Jordan*, 314).

²⁴Lawlor, “The Esbous North Church,” 132.

letter “β” might belong to the word βασιλεο[ς], thereby making it the beginning of an introduction to an emperor, such as Theodosius I (379-395 C.E.) or Theodosius II (408-450 C.E.).²⁵ Thus our initial translation was “during the [? Year] of the reign of the Emperor Theodosius.” However, because this translation did not fit with extant letters, we sought other solutions. Sophia Kalopissi, Professor of Byzantine Archaeology at the University of Athens, noted after her examination of the lintel that θεοσεβ is an abbreviation for θεοσεβεστατος, a superlative for “one who worships God,” or “one who is described as God-fearing, very devout, or most pious.”²⁶ Based upon her observation, we were able to reconstruct the damaged area of the inscription where letters were difficult to see, particularly the C and E.²⁷

γεοργιου. The word is translated “George.” Once the name “George” became clear, two difficult-to-read letters became equally clear. The initial “Γ” appears in the inscription as a straight line with no top horizontal line, damaged at the top edge of the line. The “ρ” also became clear. While the name “George” is not yet attested at Hisban, it is a well-known name in the Byzantine world.²⁸

πρεσβυτερου. The initial “Π” and “ρ” are relatively easy to read. The next two letters make sense based upon the word πρεσβυτερου. We are unclear as to whether the term is complete or abbreviated. Abbreviations could include πρε, πρεβ, πρεσβ.²⁹ Yiannis Meimaris lists 102 inscriptions, in which the term “presbyter” appears in complete or abbreviated form.³⁰ Clearly, the first four letters are extant on the inscription. Given the assumed letters necessary to make lines 2, 3, and 4 complete, it would appear that the most likely option is that the complete word is used here in line one. πρεσβυτερου is also used in the

²⁵Names of other possible individuals include Bishop Theodose of Esbous; Archbishop Theodore (635-639 C.E.); a priest, Theodore; or a benefactor named either Theodose or Theodore. Each of these names are attested for by Piccirillo in *Mosaics of Jordan*, 124, 151, 203, 252, 288, 304-307, 311, 313.

²⁶Personal communication with Sofia Kalopissi (email, April 4, 2004). See also M. Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions*, *QDAPS* 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 69.

²⁷A four-line inscription in a *tabula ansata* to the right of the entrance to the Memorial of Moses on the western spur (Siyagha) has been reconstructed with this same abbreviation. A three-line inscription in the *tabula ansata* set in the mosaic pavement of the lower layer in the Chapel of Priest John in the village of Nebo contains the complete abbreviation (Di Segni, 428).

²⁸Yiannis Meimaris lists thirty-two occurrences of references to George the Martyr (*Sacred Names, Saints, Martyrs and Church Officials in the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Pertaining to the Christian Church of Palestine* [Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, 1986], 66, 68, 118, 124-128, 187).

²⁹Avi-Yonah, 96-97.

³⁰Meimaris, 187-201.

nave mosaic of the Esbous North Church. For smooth expression of line two, we have also assumed that a *καὶ ἡ* follows *πρεσβυτερου*.

Line Two—*γουμενου του σωτηριω δ[απανη και κα]*

[*η*]γουμενου. We have assumed an *η* at the end of line one, which is to be attached to *γουμενου*. The term *ηγουμενου* can be translated as “one who governs, father superior, or abbot.”³¹ Meimaris notes that the term *ηγουμενος* comes from the verb *ηφεομαι*, meaning “to precede” and was given to the leader or the superior presbyter of a Christian community. He lists thirty sources, in which the term is so used.³²

τ[ο]υ. The inscription of this word poses two problems.³³ First, the middle letter is difficult to read in the original. Second, the form does not agree with the dative of the next noun. If the middle letter is indeed an “O,” then one possibility is that the form is an abbreviation for *τουτω*.³⁴ If this is the case, then the form would agree with the next noun.

σωτηριω. Two options present themselves for translating this word. On one hand, *σωτηριω* might indicate that George was a presbyter and abbot in behalf of the Savior.³⁵ On the other, the word *σωτηριω* could refer not only to “salvation,” but also to “maintenance, preservation, keeping safe (custody),”³⁶ or to “acting in a way conducive to well being.”³⁷ With this understanding, *σωτηριω* could be used in an adjectival sense, describing the costs and labor put into constructing the church building. The Phase A Chancel Inscription of the North Church at Hisban contains the phrase, “for the salvation of those who gave.”³⁸

δ[απανη]. The second line concludes with most of a Δ. Part of the letter’s right line is faint and part of it is missing. The rest of the word is reconstructed, based upon similar usage in other Byzantine dedicatory inscriptions, where it has

³¹Suggested by InnoKentios (private interview, June 2001). H. G. Liddel, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones note that the word *ηγούμενος* refers to “an official title, president, Roman governor, subordinate officials, or an abbot” (*A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with rev. supp. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996]). The *Patristic Greek Lexicon* defines the word as “the office of a monastic superior, abbacy, bishop, monastic superior” (ed. G. W. H. Lampe [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968]).

³²Meimaris, 239.

³³Kalopissi stated that this word “makes no sense to me” (email, April 11, 2004).

³⁴Avi-Yonah, 105

³⁵Suggested by InnoKentios (private interview, June 2001).

³⁶See Liddel, Scott, and Jones, s.v. *σωτηριω*.

³⁷See Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, s.v. *σωτηριω*.

³⁸Lawlor, “The Esbous North Church in Its Strateigraphic and Historical Contexts” (unpublished version), 69.

been translated as “cost,” “having to do with money,” “at the expense of,” or “the one who pays.”³⁹


Line Three—(κα)ματοε ανενεωθη η εκκλ(ησια)

(κα)ματοε. Probably to render a smooth sentence, the second line probably concluded with και, with κα to be added to the letters at the beginning of line three in order to make the word καματος.⁴⁰ It is difficult to understand why the letter “ε” concludes this word, which neither makes sense as a concluding letter to the word καματος, nor as the first letter of the next word ανενεωθη. One suggestion is that the letter is supposed to be a “C” (sigma) and that the middle horizontal line is the result of later damage to the lintel. The interpretation of later damage makes sense because the letter is shaped differently than all the other epsilons on the inscription. The word καματος conveys the meaning of “labor” or “that which is the product of toil.”⁴¹

ανενεωθη. ΑΝΕΝΕΩΘΗ is translated “restored” or “renovated.”⁴² The word is also suggested for the reconstruction of the Phase A Chancel Inscription of the North Church and translated by Lawlor as “renewing.”⁴³

η εκκλ[ησια]. A reconstruction that seems quite obvious. The word means “church.”

Line Four— μηνη σεπτεμβριω προτη ιν(δικτου)

 Sylvester J. Saller and Bellarmino Bagatti note that “most of the birds represented in mosaics do not seem to have a special meaning, but only the general one of glorifying God. . . . The representation of birds in the mosaics of Palestine are so numerous that one need not expect new subjects” each time one is used.⁴⁴ It has also been noted that the symbol of a partridge is found all over Jordan as the sign of a good life.⁴⁵

μηνη. Though much of these four letters has been destroyed, a sufficient remnant of their lines makes their reconstruction clear. The term is attested in

³⁹Four experts identified the word: Kalopissi, Stefanos Alexopoulos, and David Jenkins (Notre Dame University); Elly Economou (Andrews University); and InnoKentios. Liddel, Scott, and Jones define δαπαναω as “to spend upon a thing, defray all expenses.”

⁴⁰As attested by Kalopissi, Alexopoulos, Jenkins, Economou, and InnoKentios.

⁴¹καματος is translated as “labor” (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon*); “the product of toil” (Liddel, Scott, and Jones); and “carried in his own arms” (InnoKentios).

⁴²As attested by Kalopissi, Alexopoulos, Jenkins, Economou, and InnoKentios.

⁴³Lawlor, “The Esbous North Church,” 132.

⁴⁴Sylvester J. Saller and Bellarmino Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo With a Brief Survey of Other Ancient Christian Monuments in Transjordan* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1949), 108.

⁴⁵Suggested by InnoKentios (private interview, June 2001).

other inscriptions and is translated as “month” or as “moon.”⁴⁶

σεπτεμβριω. This term denotes the Roman calendar name of the month used by the Greeks, “September.”⁴⁷ The expression μηνι σεπτεμβριω appears in a mosaic inscription found in the Chapel of the Martyr Theodore, dated 562 C.E.⁴⁸

πρωτη. This word is translated as “first.”

ιν[δικτου]. An “indiction” is a period of fifteen years. Indictions were initiated with Emperor Diocletian, who imposed a fifteen-year cycle of property taxes. Constantine and others maintained the concept. The word “indiction” comes from the Latin word “indictio,” which literally means “institution, proclamation, appeal, announcement.” An “indiction” was an edict of the Roman emperors used to determine land tax throughout the Roman Empire. Gradually the word came to denote not only an imperial proclamation, but also a fifteen-year cycle and the first day of this cycle. Though originally an indiction was used exclusively for fiscal and tax purposes, it slowly began to be used for determining the various dates of civil life. The first day of the indiction was September 23 because that was the day on which Caesar Augustus was born, but under Constantine the Great (306-337 C.E.) it was changed to the first of September.⁴⁹

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea (325 C.E.) adopted the first of September as the beginning of the New Church Year, a practice continued to the present in the orthodox church. The Roman Church, during the reign of Pope Pelagious II (579-590 C.E.), adopted the indiction for establishing the dates of documents, a practice followed until 1097 C.E. The first indiction in 313 C.E. was followed by the second in 314 C.E., the third in 315 C.E., and so on until the fifteenth indiction in 327 C.E. Then the cycle began again. This complete cycle continued for a total of eighty-six repetitions until the practice was stopped in 1602.⁵⁰

The lintel inscription is dated in the month of September of the first indiction of a fifteen-year cycle. It is suggested that the lintel date can be chosen from one of the eighty-six first indiction dates.

Observations

Several issues complicate determining just what the lintel tells us. It was found with little context as it was not located among large building material. Rather

⁴⁶Μηνι is translated as “month” by Di Segni, 430, 443, 447; and Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, 110.

⁴⁷W. Arndt and F. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 754.

⁴⁸Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan*, 109, 117.

⁴⁹American Numismatic Association, *Newsletter* 48, September 6, 2002 (<www.money.org/yn/ynnewsletter_200248.html>); cf. *Medical Dictionary Search Engine* (www.skypoint.com/~waltzmn/MSDating.html), s.v. “Indiction” and “Dating Systems and Dates of Manuscripts.”

⁵⁰Ibid.

it was located in the midst of rubble that could have easily been thrown from the top of the acropolis. The letters in line one are difficult to read and the right end of the lintel is missing. In addition, there is no record of a presbyter or abbot at Hisban by the name of George.

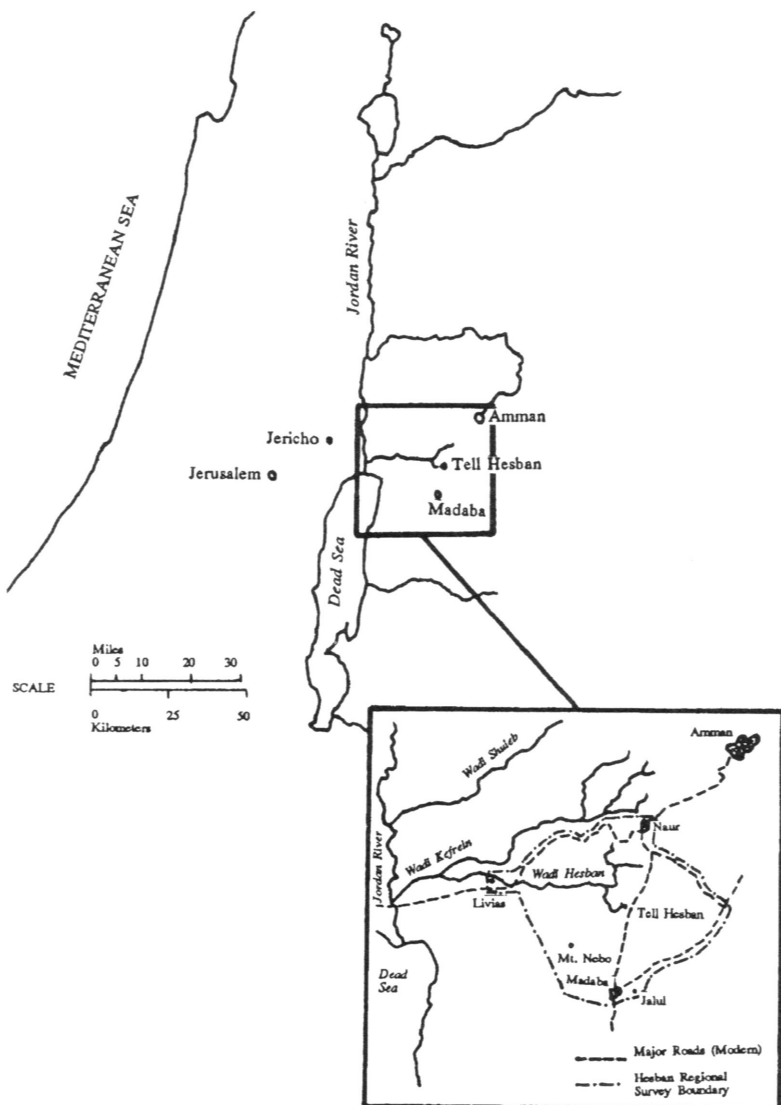
What is obvious is that a church was built. While the lintel could have been used secondarily at a later time, it could also indicate the existence of a third church at Esbous. The church renovation was probably funded by George, a man described as God-fearing (pious) and as a presbyter, perhaps a supervising presbyter.

Several clues assist in dating the inscription. The word "presbyter" belonged to the standard vocabulary of ecclesiastical hierarchy during the fourth to seventh centuries.⁵¹ During the same period, abbreviations were used for the purpose of conserving space and effort. The inscription font style is similar to that of the mosaic inscriptions of the North Church, e.g., both used ω for Ω and "C" for "Σ." Yet the fonts are also different in that the mosaic font did not have a "V" for "Υ" nor a "δ" for "ΟΥ." However, the similarities are sufficient to select a fifth- or sixth-century-C.E. date, especially noting the usage of similar words on the lintel and mosaic inscriptions, $\epsilon\pi\iota$ του, $\pi\rho\epsilon\sigma\beta\upsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\upsilon$, $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho\iota\omega$, and $\alpha\nu\epsilon\nu\epsilon\omega\theta\eta$.

A more precise date for the lintel can be suggested by examining all the first indiction dates of the fifth and sixth centuries, of which there are 13: 508, 523, 538, 553, 568, 583, 598, 613, 628, 643, 658, 673 and 688 C.E. Further precision can be suggested either by using Storfjell's dates for the Acropolis Church or Lawlor's dates for the North Church. The corresponding first indiction date for Storfjell is 538 C.E., and for the Lawlor the dates are 658, 673 or 688 C.E.

Further research is necessary to discover how the name "George" is to be connected with Tall Hisban. Hopefully, further digging in and analysis of Field M may provide a better understanding of the immediate surrounding area in which the lintel was found.

⁵¹Lawlor, "The Esbous North Church," 144.



Map 1. Regional map of the Madaba Plains Project—Tall Hisban.



Figure 1. Standing, left to right: three local workers, Melissa Sahlin (Square Worker), Theodore Burgh (Field Supervisor), Adeib Abushmais (Department of Antiquities Representative), Øystein LaBianca (Director). Kneeling, left to right: local worker, Keith Mattingly (Administrative Director and Assistant Field Supervisor), Aren LaBianca (Associate Square Supervisor), Lauralea Banks (Square Supervisor).



Figure 2. Front view of lintel inscription.

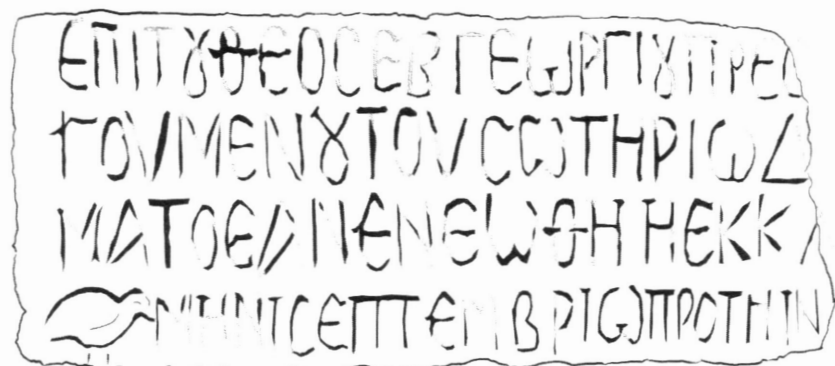


Figure 3. Artist's reconstruction of lintel script.

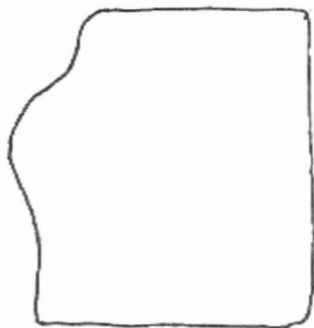


Figure 4. Approximate end view of lintel.