

Northeast Church (area supervised by Dr. Mark Schuler)

Approximately fifty meters to the east of the Northwest Church is the collapse of a building. Surface indications of an eastward apse and several column drums protruding from the debris have led previous surveyors to identify the site as a small church. In 2002 a limited survey excavation attempted to ascertain the dimensions of this Northeast Church. The following discussion summarizes excavations (Fig. NEC1) in the apse (L504), the exterior to the southeast corner (L503), the exterior to the southwest corner (L505), the eastern end of the south aisle (L506) and a burial at the eastern end of the south aisle (L507, L508).

The apse

The apse wall (W502, L501, L504) is intact to seven courses above the *synthronon* (1.57 m) with some declination of the north side (Fig. NEC2). It is approximately 4.5 m wide and 3 m deep. Basalt stones with a rectangular, stipple face comprise the lower courses. Destruction fill suggest that upper courses were of limestone. The dome was surfaced on its interior with plaster. Pigmented plaster fragments (red, yellow, and orange) suggest a fresco covered the dome.

A *synthronon* (L518, depth of 1 meter, height of 30 cm) surrounds the apse. At the center of the apse, the *synthronon* protrudes to 1.54 m (Fig. NEC3) and may have had additional height. The *synthronon* and transitions between the floor (F516) and the apse wall (W502) were covered with plaster.

The current floor is *opus sectile* in local stone with a few marble fragments in secondary use (Fig. NEC3). The south end of the chancel north of the row of columns displays a pattern. 20x20 cm stones are set in a row. Each stone is rotated 45 degrees so that its corner is at the top and the stones contact each other at the corners, resulting in a row of diamonds. Subsequent rows of 20x20 cm stones align with the bottom points of the previous row. Gaps between the stones are filled with smaller square stones that have not been rotated. Triangular stones fill the remaining gaps. The resultant pattern is cruciform (on an angle).

Northern sections of the apse west of W502 remain to be excavated to floor level. Architectural fragments of cornices, pilasters, doorjambs, and a partial altar screen post were recovered from the fill.

The southeast corner

Shallow trenches exterior to the southeast corner (L503) revealed two factors of note. The apse wall is exterior to the building—as is true of only a minority of Byzantine churches excavated in Israel. Of greater possible significance is a second wall (W512) that runs parallel and directly next to the wall of the east end of the south aisle (W509), effectively doubling its thickness (2.3 m). W512 seems to continue to the south (Fig. NEC 2). Its exact function is to be determined.

The southwest corner

The exterior southwest corner (L505) was identified and cleared to a depth of 1 m from the surface. 1 m of the south wall (W510) was revealed to the east and 4.5 m of the west wall (W511) was uncovered to the north. An entrance to the southern aisle begins 2.6 m from the southwest corner, suggesting that the church has three entrances from the west. Architectural fragments (lintel stone, doorjambs, and pilasters) were in the fill.

2.5 m to the west of W511 is another wall (W513) running parallel. Its function and relationship are to be determined.

The eastern end of the south aisle

Four meters of the eastern end of the south aisle (L506) were cleared to floor level (Figs. NEC3 and NEC4). The interior southeast corner is 3.95 m from the southern corner of the apse. The aisle is set off from the nave by a run of four columns (52 cm in diameter), separated by 2.5 to 2.75 m on center. A single drum protrudes from the surface in each case. The aisle is about 13 m east to west and 2.75 m from column to south wall. The floor is of similar *opus sectile* style in local stone with some marble pieces in secondary use. The construction quality is poor. All of the floor is east of and level with the top of the channel for the chancel screen, which seemingly transects nave and aisle on the same north-to-south line (only partially excavated).

Two short, perpendicular walls are constructed on top of this floor. One wall (W515) runs from the first column to the east wall. The other (W514) runs from the same column to the south wall, skewing somewhat to the west over the top of the channel for the altar screen. W515 has a small doorway toward its east end. The design of what remains plus doorjambs recovered from the fill above suggests that the door was not used for regular access. These secondary walls and the room itself seem to serve a protective purpose for what is inside.

The burial

Inside the room created by W514 and W515 is a rectangular surface (Fig. NEC4). It is 16.5 cm above the floor and 57 cm from the south wall (W510). The surface is a single basalt stone that had been plastered. It is 76 cm wide (N to S) and 227 cm long (E to W). The sides of the raised surface are marble slabs 3 cm thick. On the north side is an incised cross. The lower member of the cross is not visible. W514 is skewed to the west because of the size of this stone.

On the top of the plastered stone is a small basin and hole. Its center is 36 cm from the south edge and 53 cm from the west. The shallow basin is 9 cm in diameter with a 1 cm rim and a 1 cm hole. There are some indications in the damaged plaster top that the plaster extended the shallow basin 3 cm around. The hole was probed with a wire to the depth of 9 cm.

A 58x48 cm section of the floor (F516) next to the cross was opened (L507). After a plaster subsurface, the fill was dirt and stones to a depth of 22 cm. At that level there was hard plaster. Thirty-six single tesera were recovered (red, white, and black). Also found was one 2x6 block of teserae (4 black and 2 red). Although the area of excavation is quite small, the plaster layer is identified as an earlier floor (F517). It is at approximately the same level as the floor for the south aisle, the elevation of which is surmised from the elevation of the channel for the chancel screen.

A small hole (20x30 cm) was opened in this floor for another 14 cm (L508), to the bottom of the marble piece with the incised cross. The marble piece is 62 cm wide and 52 cm high. It is incised with a Byzantine cross of a style that would come to be called "Teutonic" in the Middle Ages. The cross is 23x17 cm. Below the left arm is a capital Greek alpha (5 cm high and 4 cm wide). Below the right arm is a lower case omega (3 cm high and 6 cm wide). The cross is 7.5 cm from the top of the marble piece. Only the top three arms of the cross are visible from F516. The cross and the alpha and omega would be visible from F517.

Excavation continued in the small hole to a depth of 77 cm from the top of the raised surface. A smooth and finely worked vertical surface of limestone or marble (chipped white) was revealed behind and below the marble inscription. Although only a small section is exposed, it seems that an intact sarcophagus is buried in the south aisle of the church to the east of the chancel screen.

The above evidence indicates at least two stages in the history of the church. During stage one, the earlier floor (F517) and the sarcophagus were put in place. During stage two, the top floor (F516) and the walls around the sarcophagus (W514 and W515) were added. A key question is the sequence between the earlier floor and the sarcophagus. The earlier floor may have been cut to insert the sarcophagus. In breaking through F517, there was a difference in plaster hardness

to about 15 cm from the sarcophagus along a parallel line (a repair after a cut?). However, that difference could be a construction technique. Although the fill below F517 was contaminated due to the close quarters of the probe, the fill revealed only a few teserae (7).

The second stage (F516, W514, W515) shows much poorer construction (*opus sectile* in local stone, half the inscription is hidden, W514 is skewed from the line of the chancel screen channel, misalignment covered over by plaster). The expected marble top for the sarcophagus is missing. Perhaps there was an attempt to repair or hide the sarcophagus after damage or desecration was done (Sasanians in 614 CE?). Seemingly, those who did the second stage of construction were very poor and no longer knew the significance of the alpha and omega on the inscription.¹

If future excavation proves the above proposal, this burial in the Northeast Church at Hippos is significant. Most Byzantine churches and monasteries with burials are “located outside, or on the fringes of the inhabited area of the city . . . close to or in the midst of cemeteries.”² The Northeast Church is in the city center. The burial is even more unusual, if Haim Goldfus’ research is confirmed:

Proportionally, the total number of tombs – especially inside the space of the prayer hall, in the Galilee and the Northern Coasts sites, as well as in the site of other regions – is by far lower than in most sites of the Negev region.³

There is one possible parallel for the burial. At the basilical church at Dor, built in the first half of the fourth century, is the tomb of two venerated bodies in the south aisle at the eastern end. Interestingly, the second of five slabs covering the tomb has a hole that enables an earthenware pipe (70 mm thick) to carry oil into the grave. C. Dauphin calls the tomb a tomb-reliquary.⁴

Summary of the survey

On the assumption of symmetrical construction, the survey of the Northeast Church in 2002 reveals a square church (interior dimensions of the apse and two aisles are 12.5 x 13 m) with a single exterior apse. The aisles are separated from the nave by a row of four columns. There were three entrances from the west. An altar screen crossed the nave and two aisles just to the west of the first column. A sarcophagus of a venerated person or persons is buried at the east end of the south aisle. The church may have been built to house the burial (a *marturion*?). At a second stage of construction/repair, an *opus sectile* floor of local stone was laid behind the line of the chancel screen and protective walls were erected around the tomb.

Ceramics and small finds

Ceramics and glass recovered from the destruction layers are from a narrow band of time (5th to 8th CE), are very consistent, with prevailing types from 6th to 8th CE (Byzantine and Umayyad). Of note is a fragment from a Late Roman C 10 plate impressed with a cross and the left profile of a woman (Plate NEC1).

¹ Some inscriptions in the Negev show such ignorance. The alpha and omega are reversed below the arms of the cross. Segal Segal, *Architectural Decoration in Byzantine Shivta, Negev Desert, Israel* (BAR International Series 420, 1988), 154.

² Haim Goldfus, “Tombs and Burials in Churches and Monasteries of Byzantine Palestine (324-628 A.D.),” unpublished doctoral dissertation at Princeton University (January 1997), 238.

³ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴ C. Dauphin, “Sur la route du Pèlerinage en Terre Sainte: La Basilique de Dor,” *Archaeologia* 180-181 (juillet-août 1983), 74.