

## A Byzantine Tombstone from Tel Bet Yerah/Khirbat al-Karak (Israel)

Jacob Ashkenazi, Mordechai Aviam, Raphael Greenberg and Oren Tal

*Abstract:* A tombstone of the Byzantine period (fifth-sixth centuries CE) was discovered during recent conservation work in the bathhouse of the Early Islamic palace of al-Şinnabra at Tel Bet Yerah/Khirbat al-Karak in the Jordan Valley. The stone appears to identify a functionary, possibly of the adjacent church excavated by Delougaz and Haines in 1952-53. We discuss the status of the church and possible significance of the reuse of the stone in the bathhouse floor.

*Keywords:* Tel Bet Yerah; Khirbat al-Karak; Israel; Byzantine period; Sea of Galilee; Church; Greek inscription

During recent conservation work in the bathhouse of the Early Islamic palace of al-Şinnabra (Da'adli 2017a), in the northern part of Tel Bet Yerah/Khirbat al-Karak (Israel), a marble slab bearing a Greek inscription was discovered, face-up, at the edge of the pavement of the central hall. It was almost entirely covered by a broad, plastered bench that flanked the main entrance of the structure (Da'adli 2017b, 159-169 passim, and esp. p. 160, fig. 8.44) (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The fortified palace of al-Şinnabra was established by the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya, a short distance south of the Byzantine church of Khirbat al-Karak (Delougaz and Haines 1960), and remained in use until the mid-eighth century CE. Several marble slabs that are likely to have originated in the earlier church can be seen beneath the bench and a recent re-inspection revealed that clay pipe- and tile-fragments, as well as gilded glass mosaic tesserae, of the type employed in the bathhouse itself, were incorporated in its plaster coat. Since a post-reform Umayyad coin was embedded in the foundation trench of the shared wall between the fortified enclosure and the bathhouse (Bijovsky 2017: 184, No. 15), the construction of the bathhouse can be no earlier than the beginning of the eighth century, several decades after Mu'awiya's initial construction of al-Şinnabra palace.

The inscription is carved in three lines on a rectangular slab, clearly cut from a larger stone and currently measuring 47.50 × 23.50 cm. Additional cut slabs can be seen nearby (Da'adli 2017, 160, fig. 8.44). The letters of the inscription are legible and their

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<sup>1</sup> Conservation work, conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) in collaboration with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and Tel Aviv University, was directed by I. Mizrahi. The existence of the inscribed slab was first pointed out to R. Greenberg and T. Da'adli by Mizrahi in February 2018. It was fully exposed at the request of the authors in January 2019. The other members of the IAA conservation team included O. Eyal, N. Adadi and A. Shapira. We are grateful to them all and to the two anonymous readers whose comments improved the contents of this paper.

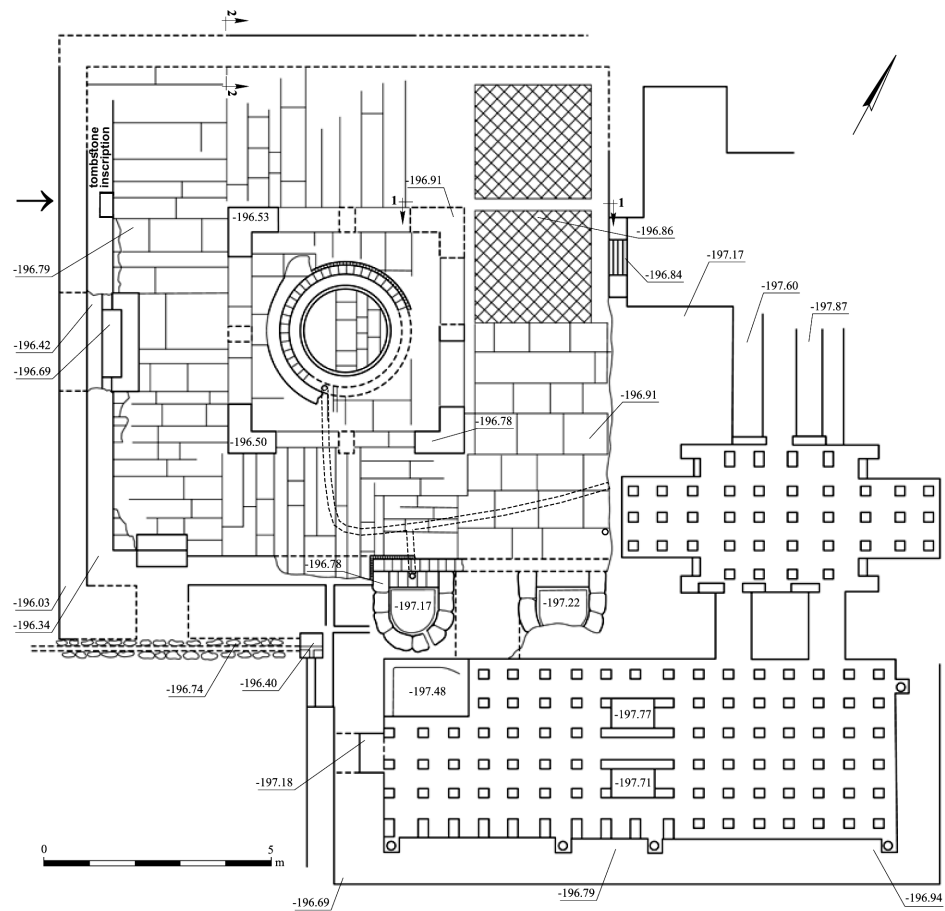


Fig. 1. Plan of the Early Islamic bathhouse (modified after Da'adli 2017, plan 8.10).

paleography is typically fifth-sixth centuries CE (with fair equivalents at other sites in Byzantine Palestine); they are 3 cm high on average (fig. 2). The inscription reads:

†ΤΟΠΙΟC[  
ΔΡΟΥΠΡ[  
ΒΥΤΕΡΟ[

† τόπος [Ἰαν]  
δρου π[ρεσ]  
βύτερο[υ †]

† *Tomb of Andron? the Priest*

The marble slab with its inscription originally covered a tomb, perhaps one of those found in the nearby church nave and northern aisle (or domus, per the excavators) (fig.

3). Such finds are known from Byzantine churches in the Negev, but are rare in the Galilee. It is likely that the complete burial inscription, originally comprised of the cross (or two crosses and the beginning and at the end), the indication of the burial (τόπος), the name of the deceased and his ecclesiastical rank.

The reconstruction of the text is tentative. The initial cross clearly attests to its Christian (clerical) orientation and the word τόπος followed by name and title, indicates an epitaph. The term τόπος denotes the physical resting place (i.e. a burial) and moreover a resting place of one of the site's Christian community elders/leaders. While the restoration of the second and the third lines is straightforward,<sup>2</sup> the reconstruction of the private name in the first line is more challenging. The name, Ἄνδρον, is obviously not the only possibility for a name whose suffix is -δρον in its genitive form (e.g. Φαίδρου, Ἀντάνδρου, Εὐάνδρου, Κασσάνδρου, Λιάνδρου, Νικάνδρου, etc.).



**Fig. 2.** The inscription (photo on left, by M. Aviam; drawing on right, by I. Ben-Ezra, Tel Aviv University, Institute of Archaeology).

<sup>2</sup> That is the appearance of the ecclesiastical rank, *πρεσβύτερος*, in many inscription in churches in Byzantine Palestine, especially on mosaic floors, in the site itself (Kraeling 1960, 54, inscription 4, and below) and in relative proximity to it, e.g. at Kursi, cf. SEG 30-1697, 33-1270; at Hippos, cf. SEG 46-1944; at Scythopolis cf. SEG 8-38 and many other sites in the Holy Land and beyond; see also in this respect Meimaris (1986, 184-201).

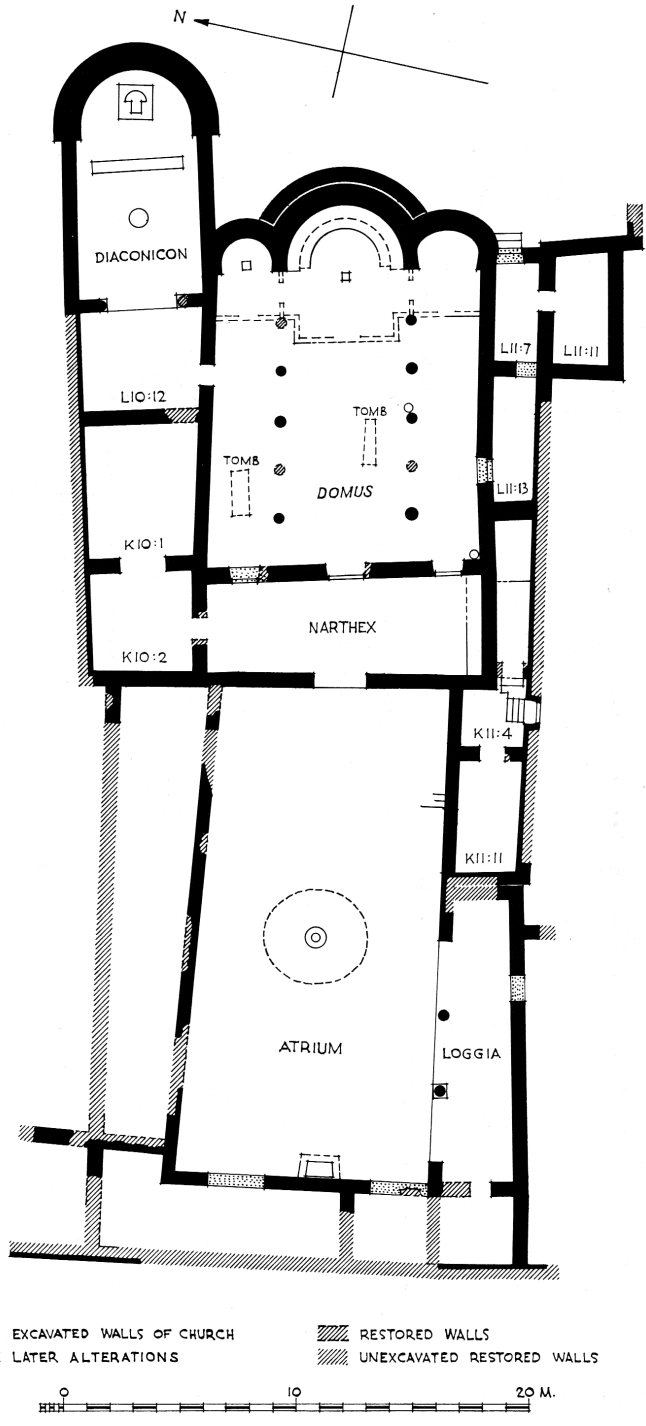


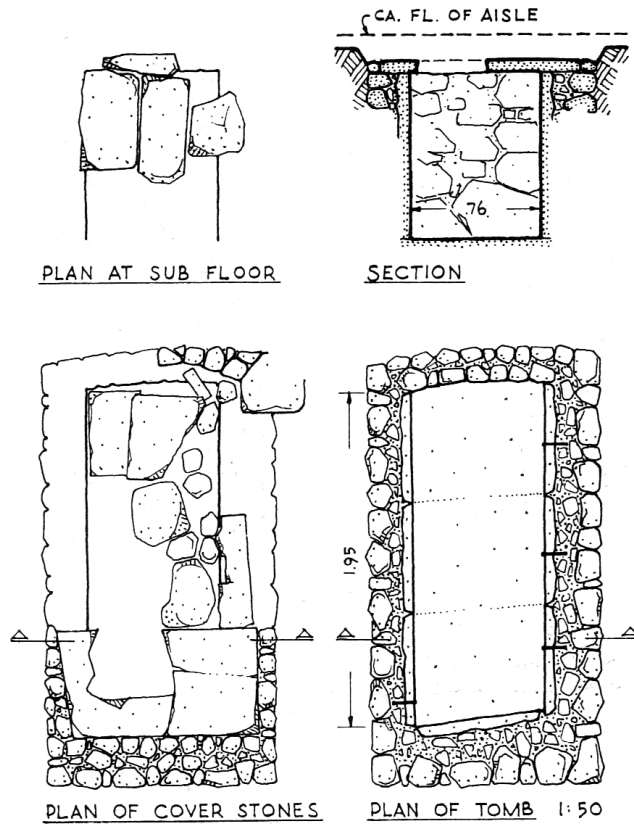
Fig. 3. Plan of the Byzantine church (after Delougaz and Haines 1960, pl. 16).



**Fig. 4.** A fragment of a marble chancel screen from the Early Islamic bathhouse (photo by M. Aviam).



**Fig. 5.** A marble chancel post in the Early Islamic bathhouse (photo by M. Aviam).



**Fig. 6.** Plan of the tombs in the domus of the Byzantine church (after Delougaz and Haines 1960, pl. 21, 3).

Still, our reconstruction of the name as [Ἄν]δρου suggests a symmetrical layout for the inscription, in which each of the three lines have had eight letters and signs — crosses included. If symmetry was disregarded by the stone cutter, the name Ἀλέξανδρος would have been more likely, being more common in the prosopography of the Byzantine southern Levant.

Our burial inscription joins two other inscriptions from the mosaic floor of the church at Khirbat al-Karak among the four published by Kraeling (1960):

The first is located at the front of the diaconicon in the southern apse (Kraeling 1960, 53-54, Inscription 1) and reads:

† [— — — Θ]εοδώρῳ μάγιστρ(ιανῶ) καὶ Θεοφίλῃ καὶ Βασίλ[ω]  
 ἐπισ[ . . . ἐγέ]νετο ἡ ψίφωσις τοῦ μεσαύλου καὶ τοῦ διακονικοῦ  
 ἐπὶ τ[ῶν-] πρε(σβυτέρων) Ἡλίου καὶ Βασίλου, ἰνδικτίονος ζ', ἔτους φρα'.

† [— — —] *Theodoros the magistrianus and Theophila and Basil the... the mosaic of the court (atrium?) and the diaconicon was made in the days of the [most pious] priests Elias and Basil, in the 7th indiction, year 591.*<sup>3</sup>

Another inscription lies in the west-central part of the atrium of the church (Kraeling 1960, 54-55, Inscription 3) and reads:

[Κ(ύρι)ε φύ]λαξον  
[τοὺς π]ρ(εσβυτέρου)ς Ἀμήν

*Lord, save the priests, Amen*

The first inscription is dated to 528 CE, and two priests are mentioned in the third line: Elias and Basil (Kraeling 1960, 53-54). In the second inscription, if Kraeling's reading is acceptable, at least one priest is mentioned again (as the reconstructed plural abbreviation π]ρ(εσβυτέρου)ς is uncommon). According to the inscription in the chapel identified by the excavators as a diaconicon (see below), it was paved simultaneously with the atrium (μέσσωλον);<sup>4</sup> therefore it is plausible that the two πρεσβύτεροι, Elias and Basil, were the priests referred to in the atrium inscription. Andron(?)/Alexander(?) of the inscribed tombstone would thus have been yet another priest who served in this church. But what kind of a church was it?

In the first line of the inscription from the chapel, Kraeling (1960, 53-54, Inscription 1) followed by Avi-Yonah (1960, 347), read Theodoros the μάγιστρ(ο)ς, but it seems that the reading of Di Segni μάγιστρ(ιανός) is more plausible for the region and period.<sup>5</sup> Theodoros is followed by two individuals, Θεοφίλας and Βασσίλος. Avi-Yonah suggested identifying the second person as a bishop, following his reading of the damaged word at the beginning of the second line (1960, 347). Di Segni thought that the lack of any epithet preceding the name rules out such a possibility. She suggested the possibility that Basilius was a lay person holding a civil office such as a steward (ἐπιστάτης) or an overseer (ἐπίτροπος) and that Theophilas, as she determined, is a feminine name and hence was his wife (Di Segni, 1997, 373).

As no remains of a settlement from the Byzantine period were identified during the many seasons of excavations at Tel Bet Yerah/Khirbat al-Karak, it seems that the church was an isolated structure, which may have served a nearby rural community (cf. Greenberg, Tal and Da'adli 2017, 216). As far as we know, the nearest Byzantine-period settlement to the north is Ḥamath Tiberias and to the south-east is Tel Dover. Therefore, the possibilities to define the function of this church are: a church on a private property, a martyrium or a monastery.

The excavators identified the northern chapel as a diaconicon, probably because of the inscription in front of the apse (Haines 1960, 17-18). For unknown reasons they refrained from identifying the basin in the apse as a baptistery, though to us it seems clear that this unit of the complex served as a baptistery chapel.

<sup>3</sup> This is the reading of Di Segni (1997, 370). We use this translation for the more reasoned completions.

<sup>4</sup> For the term in Byzantine sources as indication of the inner court of the church, see Di Segni 1997, 371.

<sup>5</sup> See Di-Segni, 1997, 372-373. Magistrianos was a Greek term for an agent in rebus. For the office, see Ashkenazi and Aviam 2017, 311-315.

Considering the appearance of lay officials and private individuals in the inscriptions, alongside clergy (but probably not a bishop), we suggest that it was a family church built on private property. Moreover, the existence of a baptistery may indicate that the church also served as a martyrium that attracted visitors and travelers either on a pilgrimage along the Jordan River or around the Sea of Galilee. It may be added that while the layout of the church and the context of the inscriptions suggest that this was a private church, its location on a pilgrim route and the inclusion of a baptistery, may indicate that it was intended to attract pilgrims as well.

The discovery of the inscription sheds light on another phenomenon; the time-lag in the presumed reuse of materials from the church in the Early Islamic complex. According to Delougaz (1960, 57-59), the church — where only a very few marble fragments (such as those in the reliquary box in the main apse) remain — went out of use in the first half of the seventh century CE, shortly before the construction of Mu'awiya's palace. The bathhouse, however, belongs to a later stage in the palace, fifty years or more after the abandonment of the church. Therefore, whether or not the church coexisted with Mu'awiya's palace, it was only c. 700 CE that parts of it were incorporated prominently in the royal bathhouse, lining the frigidarium floor and pools. Eventually, most of the slabs disappeared from the site along with the entire palace superstructure, surviving only beneath the bench added to the bathhouse in a second stage. In addition to the floor slabs, there is a large decorated fragment of a marble chancel screen in the south-west corner of the frigidarium (fig. 4), and a marble chancel post embedded in the eastern wall (fig. 5). It is likely that the inscribed tombstone was taken from its original location in the church, where it would have covered one of the two tombs cut into the mosaic floor (fig. 6). The one- or two-generation gap between the abandonment of the church and the dismantling of its marble furnishings may therefore represent the span of time during which Christian practice was abandoned and its memory — as well as that of the local Byzantine functionaries — gradually faded away.

Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee (Ashkenazi & Aviam)  
Tel Aviv University (Greenberg & Tal)

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