

BYZANTINE CHURCHES IN NABLUS (*NEAPOLIS*), PALESTINE

Las iglesias de época bizantina en Nablus (Neapolis), Palestina

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ABSTRACT: Our aim is to research and catalogue archaeological and historical information on all the churches in Nablus from the Byzantine period, built from the beginning the fourth century AD to 638 AD –16 AH– and discovered from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. We also aimed to provide a description of each building in terms of usage and form. We have extracted information from Byzantine literary and historical sources and Samaritan religious sources, as well as from reports on archaeological excavations, for analysing and drawing conclusions. In our study, we discuss the reuse of former Samaritan, Christian or Islamic sites, for reconstruction or conversion of the buildings to adapt them for use by the religion of the conquerors, whether it be Samaritan, Christian or Islamic. The churches have never been the subject of a comprehensive archaeological study due to the biblical focus of archaeological projects in Palestine. We examine each church individually looking at the cross-over or integration of architectural periods and models. Our review leads to the discovery that all the churches built in Nablus during the Byzantine period were of four architecturally distinct types, these being the Latin cross, octagonal central-plan, basilica-plan and rectangular plan. We also found that Christian churches were allowed to remain in use during Islamic rule.

Key words: Palestine Jordan; Byzantine period; religious architecture; Christian basilica; architectural types.

RESUMEN: Nuestro objetivo ha sido investigar y catalogar información arqueológica e histórica sobre todas las iglesias de Nablus de la época bizantina, construidas desde inicios del s. IV d. C. hasta el 638 d. C. –16 AH– y descubiertas en los ss. XIX y XX. Además proporcionamos una descripción de cada edificio en términos de uso y forma. Hemos extraído los datos de fuentes bizantinas históricas y literarias y de las samaritanas religiosas, así como de los informes de las excavaciones arqueológicas, para analizarlos y sacar conclusiones. En nuestro estudio nos centramos en la reutilización de antiguos edificios samaritanos, cristianos o islámicos para la reconstrucción o la conversión de estos edificios de cara a su adaptación a la nueva religión en tiempos de conquista. Las iglesias nunca han sido objeto de un amplio estudio arqueológico debido al enfoque bíblico de los proyectos arqueológicos en Palestina. Examinamos individualmente cada una de las iglesias en lo que respecta a la transición o integración de fases y modelos arquitectónicos. Nuestra investigación permite observar que todas las iglesias construidas en Nablus durante el período bizantino fueron de cuatro tipos arquitectónicamente distintos: la de planta de cruz latina, la central octogonal, la basilical y la rectangular. También observamos que las iglesias cristianas pudieron permanecer en uso durante la época islámica.

Palabras clave: Jordania palestina; periodo bizantino; arquitectura religiosa; basílica cristiana; tipos arquitectónicos.

1. Methodology

Our objective was to catalogue all the Christian churches in Nablus –*Neapolis*– that were constructed during the Byzantine period, from the beginning of the fourth to the seventh centuries AD. We were concerned with identifying their architectural type according to the typology demonstrated in their construction. We used the contemporary literature and historical Byzantine and Samaritan sources to extract information. In addition, we made use of reports on archaeological excavations produced from the nineteenth century to the present. We also used information from our own field work and visits to all the churches. Due to the fact that these Byzantine churches in Nablus have never been the subject of a comprehensive study, our research has been able to shed new light on them.

2. Background

Although Christianity began during the early Roman period, it was not readily established in the Samaritan stronghold of Nablus. Consequently, the inhabitants sharing multiple religious beliefs –the pagan Romans, the Samaritans and the Christians– lived side by side in Nablus for centuries. No deaths by martyrdom are recorded as taking place in the city (Bagatti, 2002: 61). The multi-religious character of the city is alluded to by Saint Epiphanius, who refers to the existence of at least two non-Christian sects (Bagatti, 2002: 63).

According to Saint Epiphanius' text, the local inhabitants still made sacrifices to the Roman goddess Kore in addition to Samaritan rites.

During the fourth century, Nablus was part of the Palestina Prima province (Abel, 1967: 200) (Fig. 1). It flourished during the Byzantine period and became an episcopal seat in the fourth century (Picirillo, 1993: 297). Germanus, the bishop from

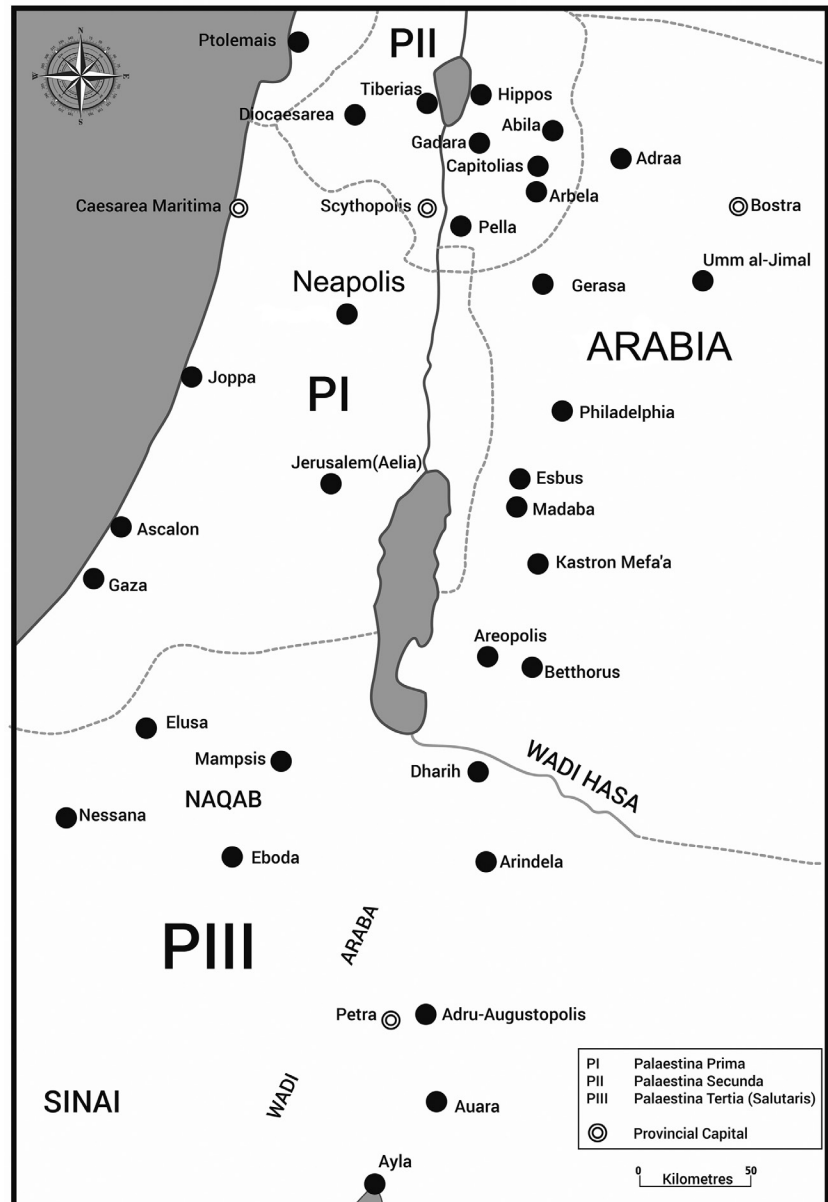


FIG. 1. *Map of Palestine Jordan during the Byzantine period (drawing by A. Al Hadi Jawabreh).*

Nablus who attended the Synod of Ankara in 314 AD and the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, was praised by the Samaritan poet Marqah for allowing the Samaritan population to practise circumcision, despite it being forbidden by Roman law. Other bishops referred to in ancient sources were Terebinthus, who was in office during Samaritan times, and Ammonas, who was slain in the 529 AD Samaritan revolt (Bagatti, 2002: 62). The text by Amianus Marcellinus, who refers to Nablus as a great city, is the only source of information on the city from the fourth century (Amianus Marcellinus, xiv: 8 and 12). Towards the middle of this century, Nablus, considered *civitas gloriosa et valde nobilis*, was a centre off-trade for essential goods, such as flour, oil and textiles (Dauphin, 1979: 32).

Previous studies and excavations have paved the way and given us a point of reference for our study: to date, the remains of more than 350 churches have been discovered in the Holy Land. The first monograph on this topic, pertaining also to churches on the other side of the River Jordan, was published over 70 years ago by Crowfoot (1941). The next effort at a synthesis was published 30 years later by Bagatti (1971). The essential information up to the early 1980s was collected by Ovadiah (1970), with three supplements published together with De Silva (Ovadiah and De Silva, 1981; 1982; 1984). Finds of more recent years were published by Bottini, Di Segni, and Alliata (1990) and by Tsafirir (1993), including a map. Of particular interest are the studies on the Negev churches by Rosenthal (1982), Negev (1974, 1989), Margalit (1987) and the study by Aviam (1990) on the churches of Western Galilee. Several final reports on the excavations of the churches of Zion, Nahariya, Tabgha (Heptapegon), Beth-Yerah, Kursi, Mamshit (Mampsis), Abdah, Nessana, Negev, and several churches in Jerusalem and its vicinity, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, enable us to evaluate information on these churches more thoroughly and to base our conclusions on firmer ground. The comprehensive study of the Judean Desert monasteries (Hirschfeld, 1992) provided valuable information on the monastic churches. The most up-to date map and bibliographical references

are to be found in Tsafirir, Di Segni, and Green (1994). The epigraphical material was collected, indexed, and analyzed by Meimaris (1986) and studied more critically by Magen (1993: 219-220), pertaining to churches with dated inscriptions. A comprehensive study of the baptismal installations was undertaken by Ben Pechat (1989). It was during the reign of Zeno –424-491 AD– that the Church of Mary Theotokos –Mother of God– was built above the Samaritan Temple (Naveh and Magen, 1997: 10). The building of the church provoked riots and confrontations between the Samaritans and the Byzantine authorities from the time of Zeno suppressing the Samaritan revolt –484 AD– (Magen, 1993: 1355). Subsequently, Nablus experienced a number of historical changes in a short period of time with different outcomes that brought about the Sassanid invasion of Palestine in 614 AD, leading to significant damage to the city and the flight of the inhabitants from a number of cities in search of safety (Kalbonah, 1992: 32); this resulted in the Byzantine contra attack against Ciro –589-628– in 628 AD, lasting until their defeat by the Arabs in 636 AD and their rule during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties that would last until their overthrow in the Crusades in 1099 AD (Kalbonah, 1992: 32). The short period of Christian control, between 1099 and 1187 AD, meant the construction of a number of churches in Nablus, as well as the renowned Queen Melisende Palace –1152-1161 AD– (Burgoyne 1987: 3). The re-conquest by Saladin and the severe earthquake of 1202 brought about the destruction of many buildings in the city. Not long after, toward 1260, the city was invaded by the Mongols, and later, toward 1280, the city was invaded by contingents of marauders belonging to nomad tribes (Burgoyne, 1987: 3). Dominion of the Mamluks –c. 1260-1516– was in general a prosperous period for the city and the whole of Palestine. Some buildings from the period survive (Burgoyne, 1987: 3). The Ottomans –1516-1918– converted Nablus into a district capital –*sonyok*–, under the control of the governor of the Damascus province.

In 484 AD, during the reign of the emperor Zeno –476-491 AD–, the Church of Mary Theotokos, a

large octagonal church was built on the summit of Mount Gerizim (Bagatti, 2002: 71). The church was built on the most sacred site of the Samaritans and, as a result, there were periods of conflict in the area between the two faiths. The city of Nablus saw bloody battles between the Christians and Samaritans. The first revolt occurred in 482 AD, when the Samaritans took control of Nablus and marched to Caesarea. It was then that Zeno commissioned the building of the church on Mount Gerizim, and the Samaritans were forbidden to visit their sacred mountain. There was a further rebellion from 491-518 AD under the emperor Anastasius I and Mount Gerizim was re-occupied, and then re-conquered by Procopius, the governor of Edessa. In 529 AD, the Samaritans staged another rebellion in which Bishop Ammonas was slain, but they were decisively defeated by Justinian (Malalae, 1831; Alder and Seligsohn, 1902-1903; Avi-Yonah, 1954; Bagatti, 2002: 62-630). The building was in use during the eighth century and was restored during the ninth century, but fell into disuse in the middle of the tenth century, becoming a ruin (Petrozzi, 1981: 176). The city of Nablus was shown on the Madaba map, drawn up in the sixth century AD. Unfortunately, the large scale detail of the city became badly damaged, but some elements are still visible, including parts of the wall and towers around the city. The colonnaded avenue, *Decumanus Maximus*, ran from east to west beginning at the eastern gate towers. It seems to have been crossed by a shorter street, *Cardo*, running from north to south. The large church shown in the south-eastern part of the city might have been the cathedral of Nablus (Abel, 1923: 120-132; Donner, 1992: 47-48). The Roman walls are also mentioned by Pilger Arculf in 670 AD. Although Eusebius situated Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal near Jericho (Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, 64: 9-17), Mount Gerizim is shown in close proximity to Nablus on the Madaba map (Donner, 1992: 48). During the first half of the seventh century, the city was conquered by the Arab Muslims, but continued to flourish during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The Church of Mary Theotokos on Mount Gerizim figures in

the mosaic of 785 AD in Saint Stephen's Church in Um er-Rasas. This is located 30 km to the south-east of Madaba and is identified with the Roman garrison, *Kastron Mafiaa* and the prosperous city of the Byzantine and Umayyad periods (Piccirillo, 1993). Nablus of mediaeval times –during the Crusader, Ayyubid-Maluk and Ottoman periods– occupied the site of Flavia Nablus. At the end of the tenth century AD, the city is mentioned by the Arab geographer, Al-Muqaddasi, whose death is recorded in 985 AD. In his work, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, he describes the city of Nablus as a 'Little Damascus', with clean, paved streets and stone houses. In 1099 AD the city came under Crusader rule. It was the second most important city of the Latin Kingdom, after Jerusalem. A palace, a castle and a series of churches were built in the city. Nablus was administrated by Melisende, the daughter of the second king of Jerusalem, Baldwin of Bourge, and her son Baldwin III. After the death of Melisende in 1161 AD, a viscount took administrative control of the district of Nablus until the arrival of the Ayyubids in 1187 AD. After the Crusader defeat in the battle of Hittin in 1187 AD, Saladin took possession of the city.

Burchard of Mount Sion described the city as being without adequate defence in 1283 AD. However, Al Demashqi describes the city as prospering in 1300 AD. He described Nablus as a palace among gardens saying: "God had graced it with the sacred olive, and that olive oil was exported to Egypt, Syria, the Hejaz and the Bedouins in the desert" (Petrozzi, 1981: 192). The city continued to flourish during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. In more recent times, in 1927, the old town was extensively damaged by a series of earthquakes, a substantial part being destroyed (Burgoyne, 1987: 4). Expansion of the city, beyond the wall, took place at the end of the eighteenth century. The Old City consists of seven quarters, representing a typical example of traditional urban architecture in Palestine. In 2005, the Old City of Nablus figured in the Palestinian list of cultural sites with potential world heritage status (Taha, 2005: 18-22).

3. The churches

We look in turn at the following churches from the Byzantine period in Nablus in relation to architectural style, chronology (324-638) and usage: 1) the Christian basilica under the Great Mosque; 2) the Al-Nsr –Victory– Mosque; 3) the church at Tell Sofer; 4) the Church of Mary Theotokos; 5) the monastery at Bir Al Hamam; 6) the Jacob's Well Church. Almost all of these are located in areas A or B, under Palestinian control, according to the 1995 Oslo II Accord between the Palestine Liberation Organization –PLO– and Israel; the exception is the Church of Mary Theotokos on Mount Gerizim which is located in area C and under Israeli administrative and military control.

3.1. Christian basilica under the Great Mosque

The Christian basilica is found on the eastern side of the old city of present-day Nablus (Fig. 2). In 1996, three red granite column shafts were found in the northern part of the mosque, which now stands on the site. They are approximately 5,5 m in height and have a circumference of 1,85 m –diameter of 0,79 m–. Their Corinthian capitals are approximately 1,05 m in height and have a circumference of 2,5 m –diameter 0,79 m–.

The bases have not survived, but the capitals and columns have been relocated to a roundabout in the street, King Faysal, by the Nablus Department of Archaeology. Similar columns have been described by researchers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Guérin and Wilson, in 1874 and 1880

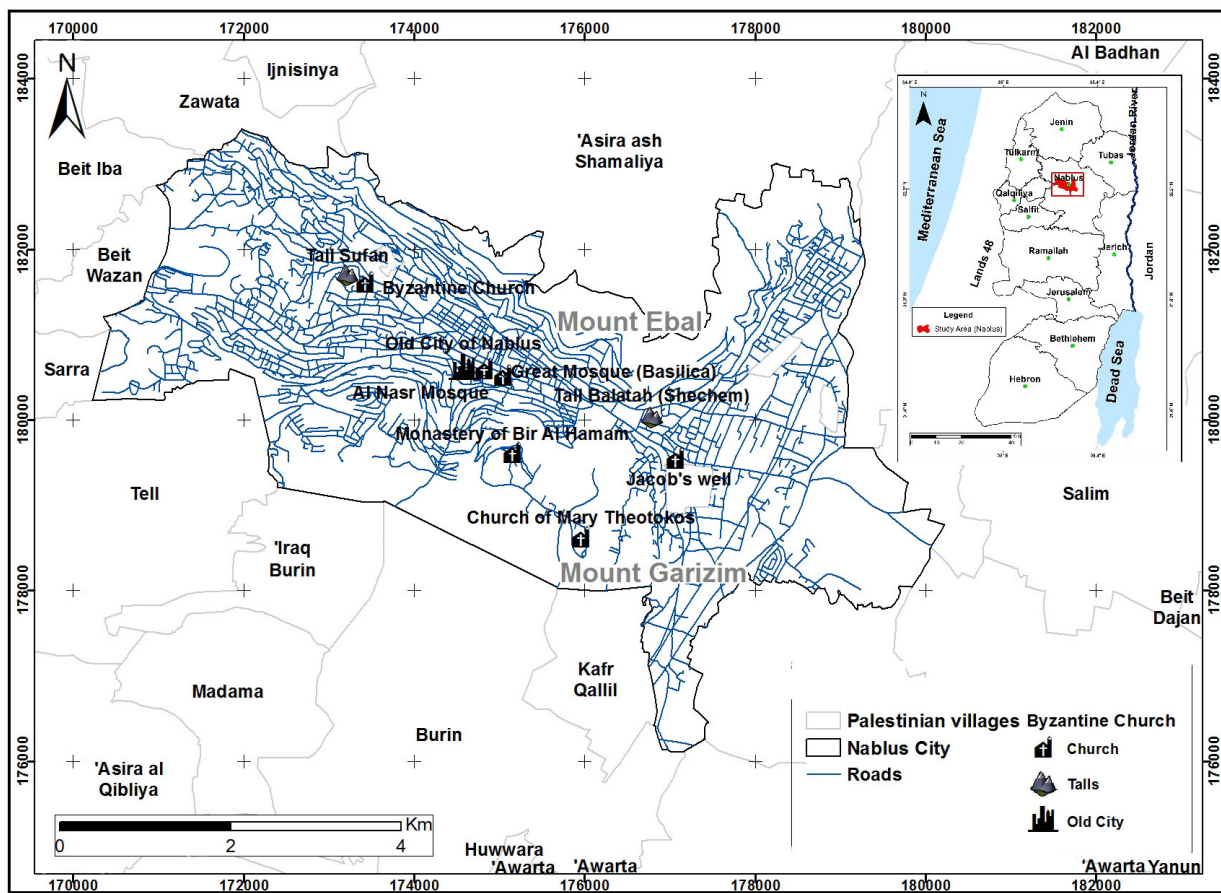


FIG. 2. The location of the Churches in the city of Neapolis (drawing by M. Burqan).



FIG. 3. *Church in Neapolis appears in Um Al Rasas (Pichirillo, 1993, fig. xxxvii).*

respectively, spoke of red granite columns found in the northern part of the Great Mosque and of the use of similar columns in its construction, as well as in that of the Al-Hanabela and Al-Nsr mosques (Guérin, 1874: 400; Wilson, 1880).

In addition, Corinthian capitals of Roman origin and fragments of red granite columns were re-used in religious buildings: the columns were found in the Great Mosque on the floor of the interior courtyard and date to the Byzantine period (Petrozzi, 1973: 248, Al-Nemer, 1975: vol. iv, 184). We discount the idea of determining their exact origin at the present time, due to a lack of detailed archaeological information. However, on looking at the Madaba map, we are able to deduce that a Byzantine basilica dating at least as far back as the sixth century existed on the same site as the Great Mosque, giving weight to our working hypothesis that there was a basilica on the same site as the Great Mosque and this being the case the columns and capitals may have belonged to it (Fig. 4, no. 2). Red granite columns with Corinthian capitals were common in the second and third centuries and would have been incorporated into important buildings, given that were expensive to produce and to transport. We are unable to date the columns as they lack points of reference due to their being outside the periods of the operation

of the quarries and being larger than those from the various construction phases of the city. Only petrological analysis would be able to show the origin of the types of marble used for the capitals, cornices and minor architectural decoration. Little difficulty is found in determining the source of the red granite as it appears to come from the Aswan quarries in Egypt, along with other examples at nearby sites.

3.2. *Al-Nsr –Victory– Mosque*

The Al-Nsr or Victory Mosque is also located in the old city of Nablus (Fig. 2). Information has now been put forward on the existence of a Roman temple beneath the mosque and therefore we adhere to the basic supposition of Abel and Al-Bešawi¹, who in 1923 and 1999 respectively suggested that the mosque was Roman in origin. Al-Bešawi identifies the dome that appears in the Madaba mosaic as the temple dome –Ŷame Al-Nsr– (Fig. 4, no. 3). As there is no definitive information on the existence of a Roman temple under the Al-Nsr mosque, we need to bear in mind the hypothetical nature of the suggestion. Although Al-Bešawi alluded to the dome of the mosque as being that of the temple, it might have been that of a *nymphaeum*, an honorary arch or other such structure.

The historical information given by the present name of the mosque, Ŷame Al-Nsr –The Victory Mosque–, and the typological analysis of its formal characteristics, indicates the former existence of a twelfth century church. The floor plan of the mosque has a church layout (Fig. 5). The remaining archaeological materials found are an indeterminate assortment of reused column fragments and stones from old buildings –some Roman, others Byzantine, in origin– from different periods ranging from Roman times to the Middle Ages.

¹ Al-Beshawi, M. A.: *Markaz Al-Balda Al-Qadema Fi Madinat Nablús ‘Sa at Al-Nasr’, Derasa Atharya WaMemo-rya*. Architecture Master’s thesis presented in 1999 in the University of de Jerusalem.

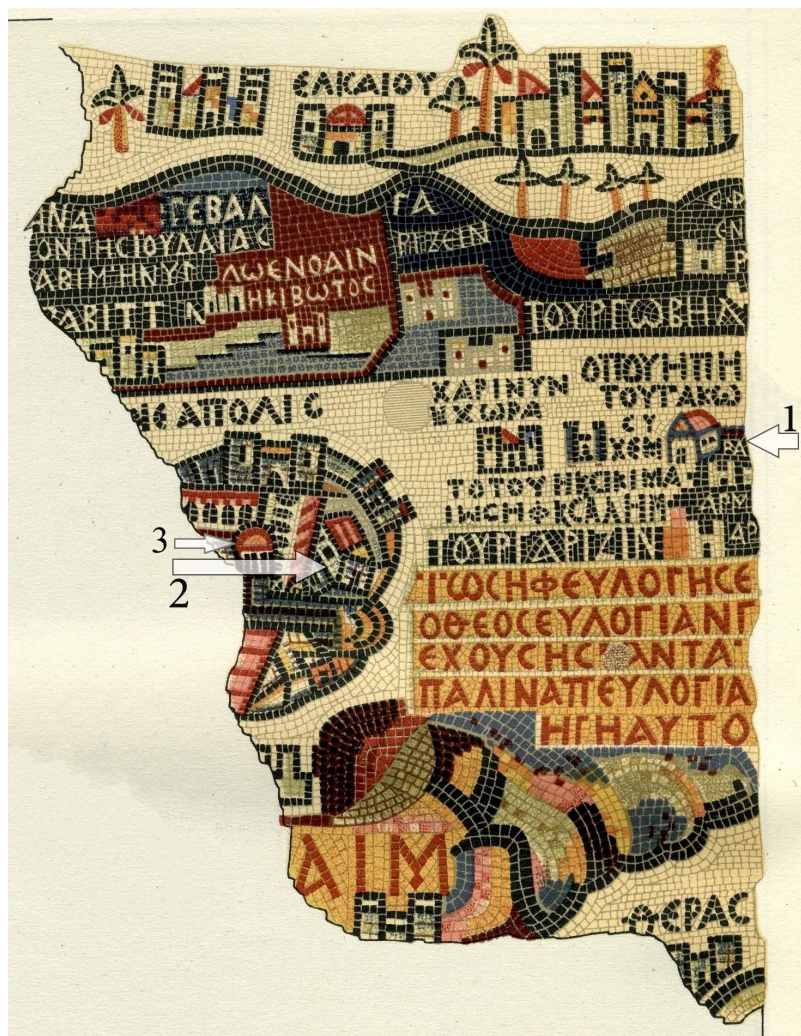


FIG. 4. *The Madaba Map showing part of Neapolis and the Christian Basilica that can be seen today beneath the Great Mosque in the old town of Nablus (1); Jacob's Well (2) and Roman temple (3) (Avi-Yonah, 1954, fig. 1).*

3.3. Church at Tell Sofer

The church structure discovered near Tell Sofer is located about one and a half kilometres to the west of the city centre of Nablus. During the 2014 summer, the Nablus Department of Antiquities discovered a mosaic floor in a damaged condition, belonging to the church. However, the church structure itself was damaged by an excavator during the twentieth century when a road was being built between Nablus and the city of Tulkarem

(Fig. 2). Further archaeological excavations will need to be carried out to examine the church, which dates to the Byzantine period, to obtain more information on the mosaic floor and the structure itself.

3.4. Church of Mary Theotokos

The octagonal Church of Mary Theotokos –Mother of God– is found on the highest peak of the Samaritan sacred mountain, Mount Gerizim (Fig. 2). It occupies a central position within a large Byzantine site enclosed by a fortifying wall with towers. The site was visited by a number of travellers during the nineteenth century: Mills (1864: 18) identified the building as a Samaritan Temple. During the 1930s, archaeological excavations at the church were conducted by the German scholar, M. Schneider (Schneider, 1951: 210-234). A recent survey, along with archaeological excavations, conducted by Yitzhak Magen towards the end of 1990 resulted in new findings (Magen, 1990: 83-89).

3.4.1. Site history

The erection of the church on Mount Gerizim has been recorded in both Christian and Samaritan sources. The most complete historical report on events leading to the construction of the church and its surrounding fortifications is that by Procopius of Caesarea –buildings v and vii–. He writes that early in the history of the church, the Samaritans were allowed to climb Mount Gerizim and pray there freely, undisturbed by Byzantine authorities. In his

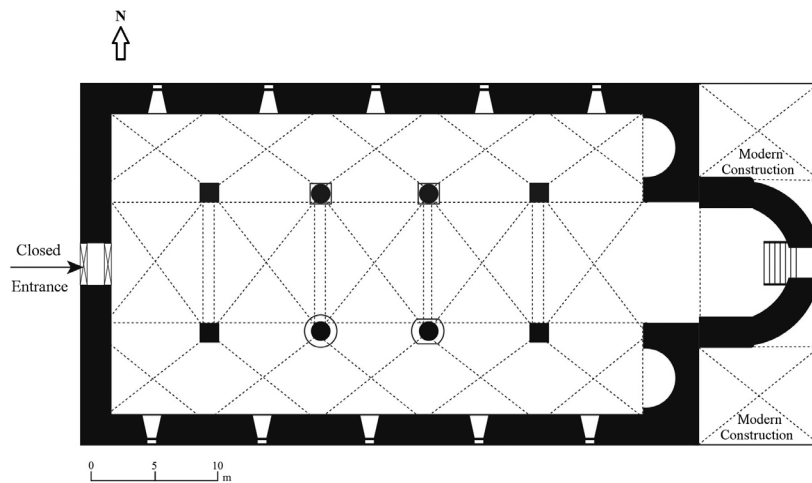


FIG. 5. Floor plan of the Al Nsr mosque.

description, Procopius recalls the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4: 20-21) and describes the conflict between Samaritans and Christians that arose after Zeno's decision to build a church to Mary Theodokos on the mountain. Notwithstanding, in 484 AD, Zeno fortified the site with a wall and allocated ten soldiers to guard it. During the reign of Anastasius I, the Samaritans climbed Mount Gerizim, killed the soldiers, and most probably damaged the church. Later, during Justinian's reign an additional outer wall was built as a further defensive measure. In the account of the Byzantine writer I. Malalae (1831: 382-383), the Samaritans in Palestine staged a rebellion during the reign of Zeno, who had converted their synagogue on Mount Gerizim into a place of prayer devoted to Mary Theodokos. A similar reference from the same source is found in the *Chronicon Paschale* (Paschale, 1989). In the Samaritan chronicles, we find a similar story (Alder and Seligsohn, 1902-1903: no. 4876):

In the twelfth year of Netanel's term as High priest, Zeno, King of the Edom –Byzantium– came to the holy city of Shechem –Tell Balatah– and oppressed the children of Israel... and went to the synagogue built by Babah Rabah on the chosen site of Mount Gerizim and inquired as to the ownership of the place... and took the mountain within its full boundaries and the water pool and erected a large building and a tomb for himself.

The Samaritan revolts, taking place in the fifth and sixth centuries, began with the erection of the church in 484. It was built with a central hall, representative of commemorative –*martyria*– churches. The use of the Samaritan sacred site indicates that the Christians now regarded Mount Gerizim as their *locus sanctus*. It also signifies the submission of the Samaritans, and the conversion of some to Christianity. However, the Samaritans regarded the act as a desecration of their Holy of Holies. The con-

tinual Samaritan attempts to damage the church compelled Justinian to protect it with a surrounding outer wall. Learning from the experience of earlier rebellions, he also fortified the city of Nablus (Avi-Yonah, 1954: 9 and 127-132).

3.4.2. Site description

The site, measuring 100 x 83 m, is divided into two areas –north and south–. A rectangular building that contained a large pool, Bir Al-Rasas –lead well– is found in the northern irregularly shaped fortified area. The octagonal church stands in a central location in the southern area, a rectangular space of 71 x 56 m enclosed by a fortified wall (Fig. 6).

3.4.3. The southern area

In the southern area, four towers with dimensions of 8.6 x 8 m are found at each corner, and another tower is found on the southern wall. On the northern wall there is an elaborately built gatehouse displaying four building phases. The two later phases are probably from the Islamic period. The dimensions of the gatehouse are 9.6 x 8.6 m. It has massive walls, with the exterior walls built of finely hewn stones. The 3 m wide entrance would have held a substantial

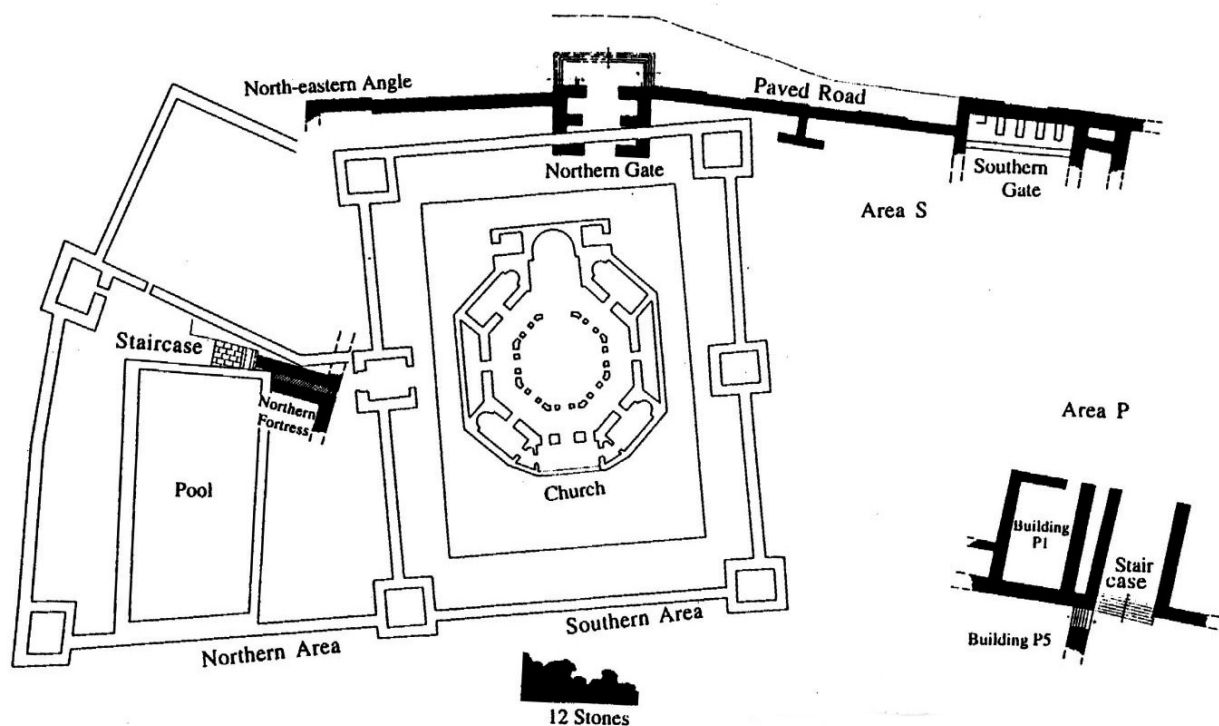


FIG. 6. Plan of the Church of Mary Theotokos (Magen, 1990, fig. 10).

wooden gate. The base of the gateway is composed of well-fitted flagstones. In addition to the gateway leading directly to the surrounding enclosure, there is another wide gateway leading to the staircase that would have led up to a tower in the wall guarding the gateway. The walls of the second phase were built above the remains of the hewn stone construction, probably during the Islamic period, the gateway was made narrower and a wide staircase was built next to it (Magen, 1993: 85).

The walls of the fortified area are built of large dressed stones with borders and a protruding central boss, with parts of the wall surviving to a height of 4 m; originally the wall would have been up to 7 m high. Within the area there are various rooms, some of which were built at later date (Magen, 1993: 85).

3.4.4. The peristyle

The church is surrounded by a peristyle measuring 53 x 39 m composed of rectangular 100 x 60 cm

piers built of finely hewn stones resembling those of the church and gateway. Piers were found in the north and west wings of the church and the gateway. It is assumed they originally surrounded the entire building. The area around the peristyle was not completely excavated. Along the northern wall it is possible to discern rooms adjoining the outer wall, but the layout of the area outside the peristyle is unclear. The area between the pillars and the church was entirely paved with flagstones neatly fitted to the edges. Hence, it appears that the peristyle, the paving, the church and the gatehouse were built as a unified whole. To the west of the church, there is a large cistern into which water from the paved area drains (Magen, 1993: 85).

3.4.5. The church

The church layout is octagonal (the outer dimensions are 37.4 x 30 m). It comprises double walls which create rooms and chapels. In the east

an extension encloses an apse. The entrance to the church is in the west, where the open room serves as a *narthex*, probably paved with marble slabs, with doorways into the church, the central one being the largest. The narthex provides access to a chapel on either side and there are another two larger chapels either side of the apse. Triangular rooms join the *narthex* to these chapels which have doorways into the main hall. The south-eastern chapel walls were lined with marble slabs as indicated by the recessed imprints on the chapel walls and the numerous marble fragments found in the church. In the chapel apse there is a hexagonal stone fixture, which too small for a baptistery and may have been a reliquary. On both the north and south sides, between the north and south chapels, there is a long narrow trapezoidal room, giving access to the main hall and perhaps serving as treasuries or similar. Small square rooms on either side of the large raised apse have outside entrances. It is unclear how the floors of the church and apses were paved. Perhaps in the earliest building phase, they were paved with marble slabs and mosaic; some mosaic *tesserae* and fragments of marble paving slabs were found during the excavations. In the centre of the church there is an octagonal base for piers and columns that would have supported the central dome. Only a few red limestone column fragments survive (Magen, 1993: 86-87).

3.4.6. The northern enclosure

The northern wall of the enclosure is built of dressed stones with borders and a central protruding boss, similar to the southern enclosure wall. A wall from the north-western corner tower to the east has a larger tower mid-way along, opposite the southern enclosure gate tower, to which it seems to have been connected by a paved path. We think this towered gateway into the northern enclosure formed the main entrance to the entire church complex. This is not surprising, as the main road to Mount Gerizim comes from the north toward Shechem-Neapolis. From the mid-point tower the wall continues to the east, creating an irregular corner. In the northern enclosure there is a large structure, probably a pool for water.

Plaster fragments can still be seen on the walls and water collects at the bottom in winter. At first sight the pool does not appear to be an organic part of the Byzantine construction. The building and stone-dressing techniques are different from those of the rest of the enclosure so perhaps it dates to a phase earlier than the Byzantine enclosure and the church (Magen, 1993: 87).

3.4.7. Finds

During Schneider's excavations in 1930s, inscriptions and an altar slab were uncovered (Schneider, 1951: 211-234). Of interest among the finds of these recent excavations were six dedicatory inscriptions carved on stone slabs deciphered by Segni (Magen, 1990: 193-227). Two had been installed in later floor pavements and the other four were found in the debris. At least five of the six inscriptions were identified as inscriptions in honour of Samaritans who had donated to the sanctuary previously located in close proximity. Only a few inscriptions from Mount Gerizim belong to the Christian building. The most significant, found by Schneider in the 1930s, is that which mentions an important relic deposited there: "A stone from the Golgotha". The archaeological finds from the excavations of Yitzhak Magen were relatively minor. There were a small number of coins, some late pottery objects, marble, mosaic and early ceramic fragments. Architectural elements included columns, Corinthian capitals, and cross-ornamented capitals (Magen, 1993: 88).

3.4.8. Excavations recorded in historical sources

Procopius' writings speaks of two phases in the history of the church and the surrounding walled area (Procopius of Caesarea, Buildings v and vii). He suggests that in the first phase during the reign of Zeno (474-491), the church and possibly the surrounding wall were built and that in the second phase during the reign of Justinian (527-565), an additional outer defensive wall was built. Until the present research, it was assumed that the church was constructed by Zeno while the walls and towers

around it were built by Justinian. The discovery of the gate and peristyle and the fact that they were built as an integral part of the church and the fortifications, imply that both the church and the enclosure were built at the same time by Zeno. It should be noted that a gateway of such dimensions is of no value without a fortified wall to defend it. The question of what Justinian built arises. We assume he added the northern enclosure, which seems to be of a different type of construction. It adjoins the southern one and technically, at least, appears to be from a later period. It was built at the most vulnerable section of the site adjacent to the gate and the main road from Nablus in the north. This supposition not only corresponds to the archaeological data but also clarifies Procopius' words. It is difficult to conjecture that an isolated church would be built on a mountaintop without proper means of defence and no remains of an earlier fortification were found. No evidence exists of a synagogue standing on the site, although this is mentioned by Malalas and the Chronicon Paschale. It is possible that the intention of these sources was to indicate that the church was built to replace a synagogue on Mt. Gerizim, but not necessarily on the same site.

The erection of the church on Mount Gerizim and the conflict between the Samaritans and the Christians raises the question of the location of the Samaritan temple during the Hellenistic period and the site of the Holy of Holies of the Samaritan community. Subsequent to his excavations at Tell Al-Ras, Bull and Wright (1965: 234-237) reported the finding of remains of a Samaritan temple, built to the same plan as the Jerusalem Temple in the time of Sanballat, governor of Samaria (Temple B), beneath the Roman temple. He assumed it was the one he had found on the northern peak of the mountain (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* XIII, 254-256). A reappraisal of Bull's finds and the discovery of a Hellenistic town on Mount Gerizim where the church site is centrally located, illustrated the need for a renewed search for the Samaritan holy place and temple in the area of the church. In a stest-pit made in the centre of the church, remains of a Hellenistic structure were revealed. This evidence

refutes Schneider's conclusion that no Hellenistic remnants were found in the church. It is of interest that the three Samaritan holy sites, the 'Twelve Stones', 'Hill of Eternity', and the place of the 'Offering of Isaac' surround the church. We believe a Samaritan shrine was located in the area and its existence was forgotten as a result of the church's construction and Christian desecration. If some of the inscriptions discovered in the area of the church can be dated before the fifth century, it would suggest Samaritan rites were practised at the spot from the Hellenistic age until Christian occupation of the site.

3.5. Byzantine monastery at Bir Al Hamam

3.5.1. General description

The site of the Monastery was discovered in 2001 during bulldozing work conducted by the owner of the land (Munib Al-Masri) for construction of a Palace. This was followed by extensive salvage excavation carried out jointly by the Department of Archaeology at An-Najah National University, Nablus, and the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage at Ramallah². The Monastery, overlooking Nablus is located on the upper north-western slope of Mount Gerizim, approximately one kilometre to the west of the Church of Mary Theothokos (Fig. 2). Bir Al Hamam, at 750 m above sea level, provides wide vistas to the north and east. The name of the site, Bir Al Hamam, can be translated as "Pigeon Well", with the function of providing water still represented by two cisterns on the site. One cistern was found in the monastery and the other is located just west of the complex. The site was not specifically referred in the Survey of Western Palestine, in which the whole area of Mount Gerizim was referred to as El-Warshat lands (stone quarries), nor was it included in the Israeli Survey of 1968 (Gophna and Porath, 1972). In fact, the exact site was never accurately recorded

² Almost all the data for this site was collected from the fieldwork carried out by the author.

in former surveys. The Bir Al-Hamam site refers in general to a terraced area, known locally as ras Kikis (Jaros and Deckert, 1977: 2). The limited amount of architectural fragments discovered so far reveal a Crusader building that had probably been misidentified as a small fort or castle. The building may go as far back as Baldwin I (Petrozzi, 1981: 181). Bull apparently agreed with the identification of the site as a Crusader building (Bull and Wright, 1965: 234-237) as indicated in Petrozzi's acknowledgement (1981). In his survey of churches from the Crusader period.

Pringle mentions a number of sites in the Nablus area, including a castle ascribed to Baldwin I in ras

Kikis, slightly to the west of Tell er-Ras (Pringle, 1993: 95). Bir el-Hamam was first recorded in Palestinian Surveys in 1999 (Ashhab, 2002) and by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities in 2001 (Taha, 2014: 26). The near square complex measures 28 m east-west and 24 m north-south –672 m²–. There is an exterior wall at the perimeter of the complex and access is given through the 1 m wide main entrance in the north-eastern area (Fig. 7). The entire area is enclosed by a 104 m long wall, built with large, roughly dressed fieldstones. The internal building walls are built with roughly cut stones and partly dressed ashlar. One to three courses of these walls survive.

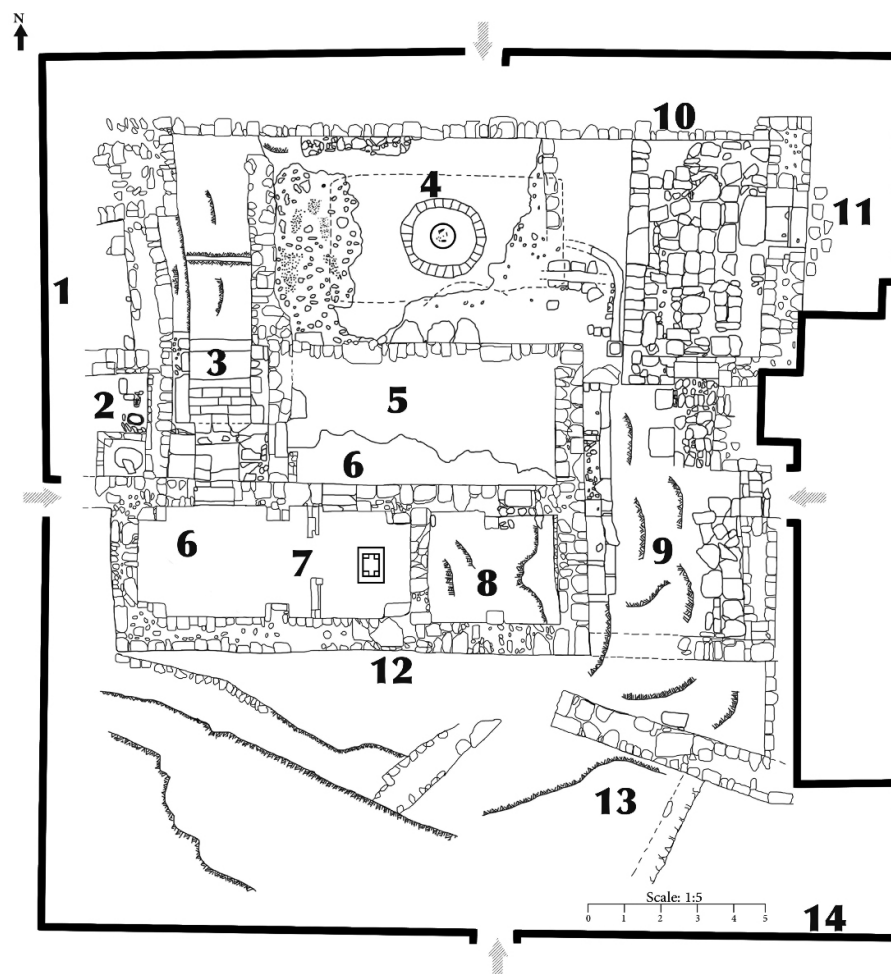


FIG. 7. *Bir Al Hamam Monastery site plan: 1) Western area; 2) oven; 3) staircase; 4) cistern; 5) refectory; 6) mosaic floor; 7) chapel; 8) storeroom; 9) stables; 10) courtyard; 11) main entrance; 12) wall; 13) water reservoir; 14) new building (the Palace).*

3.5.2. Courtyard and Main Entrance

The rectangular courtyard (Fig. 7) measures 5.3 x 3.6 m –19.08 m²–. It was paved with large and medium stone slabs and small stones were placed at the joins. The sizes of the stone slabs range from 0.5 m to 0.8 m. The courtyard is accessed through three doorways, with the main entrance to the complex on the eastern side. This is 1.9 m wide and there is a drop of about 0.2 m to the courtyard level, with evidence of a door socket on the inside. The width of the threshold step is 0.5 m. It consists of a neatly cut ashlar stone, and at each end there is evidence of two circular holes for doorposts. Two courses of the door jambs survive

to a height of 0.75 m. Another opening is found opposite the main entrance leading to the internal courtyard. It is 2.4 m wide with a 0.55 m wide step. Only one course of this survives. The third doorway is 1.22 m wide and is located on the southern wall and leads to the stable area. A stone basin was found in the south-eastern corner, probably a baptismal font and apparently not in situ. It measures 0.7 x 0.58 m and is 0.37 m deep. The basin is 0.06 m thick and has a circular hole in the lower part.

3.5.3. Chapel Staircase

The staircase is located to the west of the cistern and refectory (Fig. 7). It rises in a north-south direction to the upper level of the small chapel complex. The staircase passageway is 1.95 m wide and is lined with 0.5 m wide bench seats. Two courses of the passageway walls survive. The staircase consists of 8 steps built with cut stone slabs, the steps ranging from 0.10 m to 0.12 m in height, and 0.3 m to 0.95 m in width.

3.5.4. Chapel

The chapel is located in the southern corner of the monastery (Fig. 7). The shape of the chapel follows a rectangular plan. Two main phases in the history of the chapel can be identified. The first phase can be seen in the construction of the outer stone walls of the chapel and the mosaic floor. The interior of the chapel measures 8.5 x 3.4 m. The walls survive to an average height of 80 cm and are about 1 m thick; they were coated with plaster that remains in some sections. The chapel is divided into two areas. The eastern area is in the form of a square and creates the sanctuary area. It is of note that the apse area is rectangular in shape rather than the usual semi-circular design. The western area of the chapel is accessed by the northern staircase leading to a 118 cm wide doorway, with a rise of 30 cm above the upper staircase landing level. Two courses of the doorway sidewalls survive

and there are sockets in the doorway threshold for closing the door. Another doorway, 100 cm wide and 77 cm deep, on the northern wall of the chapel connects the eastern area of the chapel with the sanctuary of the neighbouring northern room. It was partially blocked off in the second phase of the building. The floor of the chapel was paved with a polychrome mosaic of red, white, dark yellow, black, brown, dark grey, light grey, and dark rose (Fig. 7). The vine-leaf design was decorated with blue and green glass *tesserae*. The sizes of the glass *tesserae* range from 8 to 10 mm. The mosaic floor of the chapel survives almost in its entirety. Moreover, it is bordered on all sides with parallel lines enclosing a variety of motifs. The design of the outer border consists of a symmetrically undulating ivy stem with an ivy leaf between each undulation. The ivy leaves are replaced by three bunches of grapes and two vine leaves in front of the northern doorway. The design of the inner border consists of a line of running scrolls. In addition, the edge of the main mosaic consists of small rhombic patterns near the main northern doorway and the inscription in the eastern part of the mosaic pavement. The main area of the mosaic floor consists of geometric patterns of interwoven bands that form alternate rows of circular forms with smaller circles in their centre and octagonal forms with small rhomboid forms in their centre. The Greek inscription of three lines, located at the eastern end of the chapel, appears within a *tabula ansata* measuring 135 x 27 cm.

The second phase is represented by the erection of six pillars on the mosaic floor. Four of them were located at the corners of the chapel and two at midpoint on the north and south walls. The mosaic floor was reused, and the stone iconostasis or chancel screen was erected over it in the eastern part of the chapel, forming a square bema that contains the altar. The decorated screen separated the bema from the western nave, and was found almost complete. It consists of two sections, each with a post and a panel. They are both marble and the decoration is almost symmetrical. The panels are decorated with a circular relief with a cross in the centre. The posts are decorated with three rosettes within a border

that is divided into three metopes. The uppermost part of each post is surrounded by a Corinthian capital. A stone table is positioned on the mosaic floor on the eastern side of the bema. The table top measures 0.87 x 1.2 m and is 0.14 m thick. It is not clear if it was found *in situ*.

3.5.5. Refectory

The refectory is located immediately north of the chapel (Fig. 7). The floor has a drop of 0,2 m on the chapel floor level and measures 8.2 x 3.5 m (28.07 m²). Access is gained to the refectory by the staircase to the western doorway measuring 1 m wide and 0.77 m deep. There is another door connecting the refectory to the bema of the chapel. A third door is located at the eastern extremity of the southern wall and leads to the storeroom. The Refectory floor was paved with a polychrome mosaic of which an 8 m long by 1.5 m wide strip survives. The central mosaic paving was surrounded by a geometric border, 50 cm in width, consisting of parallel lines on either side of a repeated block triangle pattern and a Greek meander pattern formed by straight lines at right angles. A floral design consisting of several rows of small flowers is represented on the mosaic. Two incomplete Greek inscriptions were found within *tabula ansata* on the mosaic floor. One is 33 cm long; it consists of three lines that survive to a width of 24 cm. The second inscription is 36 cm long and consists of three lines that survive to a width of 64 cm. The floor of the room is raised 110 cm above the level of the cistern courtyard. At a later stage, the door leading to the storeroom was blocked off.

3.5.6. Storeroom

The storeroom is located immediately east of the chapel (Fig. 7). The rectangular room measures 4 x 3.5 m –14 m²–, and it is accessed from the refectory. Four stone courses of the walls survive to a height of approximately 1 m.

3.5.7. Cistern

The rectangular cistern occupies the central part of the courtyard (Fig. 7). It is 4.24 m high x 7.7 m long and 3.95 m wide. The lower part of the cistern is hewn into a layer of limestone rock, while the upper part was built with stone and roofed with a half-barrel vault. However, the top of the cistern has been demolished, and the circular stone that formed the opening to the cistern was not found *in situ*. The cistern was plastered with two thick coats of greyish mortar of which most remains. The first coat applied is a thick rough mortar consisting of a mixture of lime, ash, small pebbles and crushed pottery. The second coat of fine white plaster consists of lime, pulverised pottery and ash. The total capacity of the cistern would be approximately 105 m³. It was apparently fed with water from drainage from the chapel complex roof. The rainwater reached the cistern along an underground channel below the courtyard flagstones. It appears that the tunnel found in the south-eastern corner of the courtyard connected to the cistern. The cistern courtyard measures 64 m² and is entered from the main entrance in the eastern wall. The stairs up to the monastery chapel and refectory are accessed from this courtyard that appears to have been paved with a white mosaic floor; only a small part survives. A small section of the mosaic floor has been restored in the south-western corner of the courtyard and occupies a space 1 x 0.5 m. large white *tesserae*, 15-20 mm in size, have been used for the mosaic paving.

3.5.8. Stable

The stable is near-rectangular (Fig. 7) and measures 8.7 x 4.8 m. There is a full row of stalls along the western wall with five troughs. The troughs are rectangular, with the interior width being 55 cm and the exterior 80 cm. Four of the troughs are built with large stones, and the interior bases are paved with medium and small stones. The fifth trough is square-shaped and hewn into the rock. There is another shorter row parallel to the other

along the eastern wall, with two troughs; four courses survive. There is an independent entrance on the east and a second 122 cm wide doorway on the north. The threshold of the second doorway is 60 cm thick, 20 cm higher the courtyard level and 26 cm higher than the ground level of the stables. Hard beaten soil, flagstones measuring 30 x 30 cm and small stones were used for the stable ground. Two animal skeletons were found on the ground in the stable area.

3.5.9. Western Area

The characteristics of this area suggest a probable food service area for the inhabitants of the monastery, as indicated by the discovery of a kitchen area with an oven for cooking and other facilities for food preparation (Fig. 7). A concentration of Ayyubid –1171-1258 AD– coins and some pottery were found in the area, showing intensive use of this part of the monastery in the last phase of its occupation.



FIG. 8. Chancel Screen and the Altar and the complete Greek inscription in the chapel.

3.5.10. Water Reservoir

There is a partly exposed stone water tank in the south eastern area of the monastery complex (Fig. 7). A significant part of the tank was demolished during construction work. The lower part is hewn into the rock, while the upper part was built with fieldstones. The internal walls are coated with a layer of grey plaster.

3.5.11. Mosaics and inscriptions

The mosaics at the monastery are relatively well preserved in the apse and the north side of the church. In general, their design is simple. The *tesserae* range from 8 to 10 mm in size. Three inscriptions were found, all of them forming part of the mosaic floors. One of them was found in the apse of the small chapel and two of them in the refectory. They were all written in red tesserae on a white background within *tabula ansata* surrounded by a border; they all consist of three lines. The entire Greek inscription survives without deterioration

of the one located in the apse of the chapel (Fig. 8). It reads in translation: “For the blessing and salvation of Hesychios and Megalos and Prokopias, The Christ-loving brothers” (Fig. 9A). The Greek inscription is partially damaged and cannot be restored on the one located in the refectory adjoining the chapel. It reads in translation: “For the rest and salvation –or for the blessing and salvation–, Of the Christ-loving and... –or Of the builders and...”. I have provided two suggestions for the first two lines. They are only suggestions and



FIG. 9. Greek inscription in the chapel and refectory: A) first inscription; B) second inscription; C) third inscription.

the amount missing would depend on the allowable space on the left of the surviving inscription. I am not able to provide any suggestion for the third line (Fig. 9B). Once again the Greek inscription is partially damaged and cannot be restored on the one located in the refectory adjoining the chapel. It reads in translation: “For the rest of --- inos, in Christ”. The same applies to this inscription in that the author is unable to determine how much of the inscription is missing on the left. The name of the deceased, a name ending in -inos, is mentioned in the second line and the name of Christ is mentioned in the third line (Fig. 9c) (Taha, 2007).

3.6. The Church of Jacob’s Well

3.6.1. Location and history

It is located 1500 m east of Nablus and 500 m from the Canaanite City of Shechem –Tell Balatah– (Fig. 2). The well itself is enclosed in a twentieth century Greek Orthodox Church within the grounds of a monastery found in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. The area of the church is 1000 m² (Justinos, 25/03/20170; Avi Yonah, 1954; fig. 4). In the fourth century AD it was a basilica, as it appears on the Madaba map, and during the Crusade Wars in Palestine the church plan was changed to cruciform (Justinos, 25/03/20170) (Fig. 4) (Avi-Yonah, 1954: 46). There is a reference to the location of Jacob’s Well at the foot of Mount Gerizim (John 4: 20). It can be found close to where the Jerusalem-Samaria road branches north to Tell Al Fara’h. There

seem to be two biblical references to the well, one of the well standing in the land that Jacob bought from Hamor (Genesis, 33: 19) and the other, found in John (4: 13-14), refers to the place where Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman and asks for water from the well.

The Jacob's Well site in Nablus has been a destination for pilgrims since 333 AD when it was first considered as the place of the meeting with the Samaritan woman³; until the first church was built there at the end of the fourth century the well may have been used for baptisms by Christians (Pringle, 1993: 258). A Latin-cross cruciform plan church was built enclosing the well before 384 AD; this is referred to in the writings of Saint Jerome. It is believed that the Samaritan revolts of 484 or 529 caused the destruction of the church (Pringle, 1993: 258).

Following this Justinian built another Byzantine church that is known to have still existed in the 720s and may have survived to the ninth century (Pringle, 1993: 258). There are remains of mosaic flooring in the south-eastern and north-eastern areas of the church dating to this period. The well inside the church formed the central feature of the crypt below the high altar.

The Crusaders constructed a new church on the Byzantine foundations in the twelfth century and today the Greek Orthodox Church administers the site where they began construction on their church in the early twentieth century. This present church has its foundations 6 m below ground (Pringle, 1993: 258).

Pilgrims visiting the site have attested during various periods in their writing to the fact that different churches have been found enclosing the well

³ *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, 587-588.

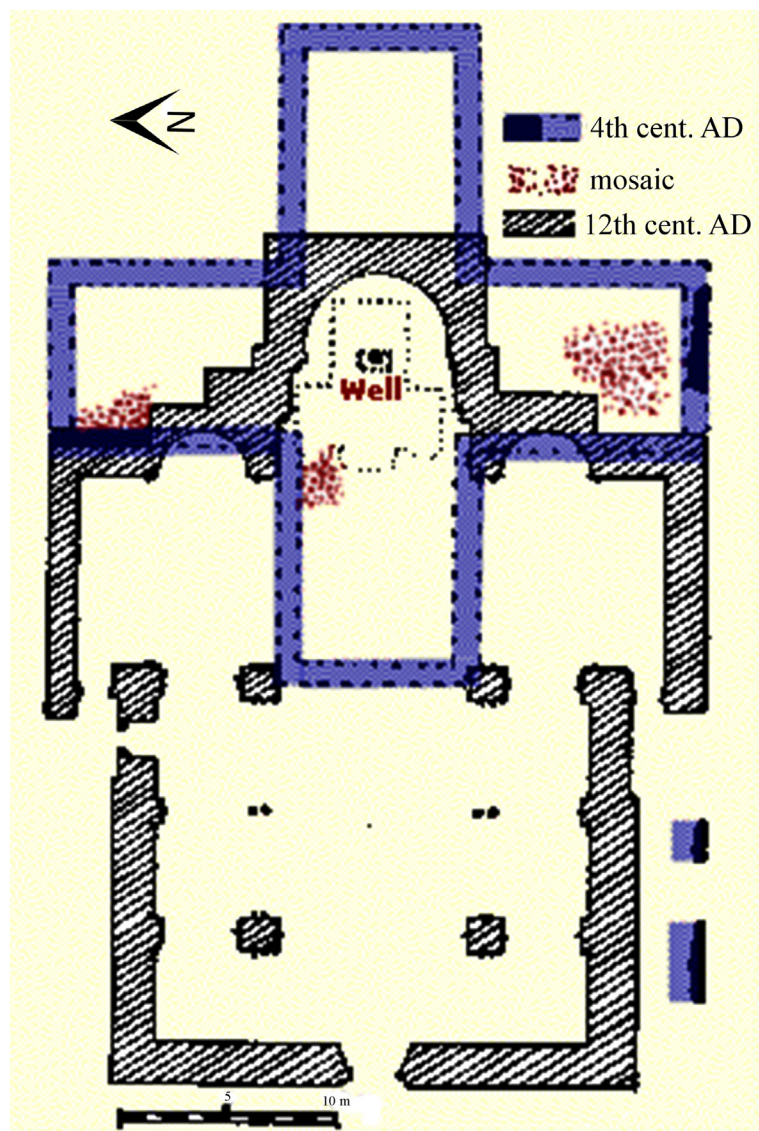


FIG. 10. *The Church of Jacob's Well* (Bagatti, 2002).

(Bromiley, 1982: 955; Hastings and Driver, 2004: 535-537). However, Bagatti's map shown in Fig. 10 does not accurately represent the history of the church. The ancient church changed from the basilica plan to cruciform during reconstruction (Fig. 11). According to Saint Jerome's account there was a church on the site at the end of the fourth century, and it appears on the Madaba Map (Fig. 4); in Arculf's account of his pilgrimage in 670 AD he confirms that the church he found at the site was built in the shape of a cruciform plan.

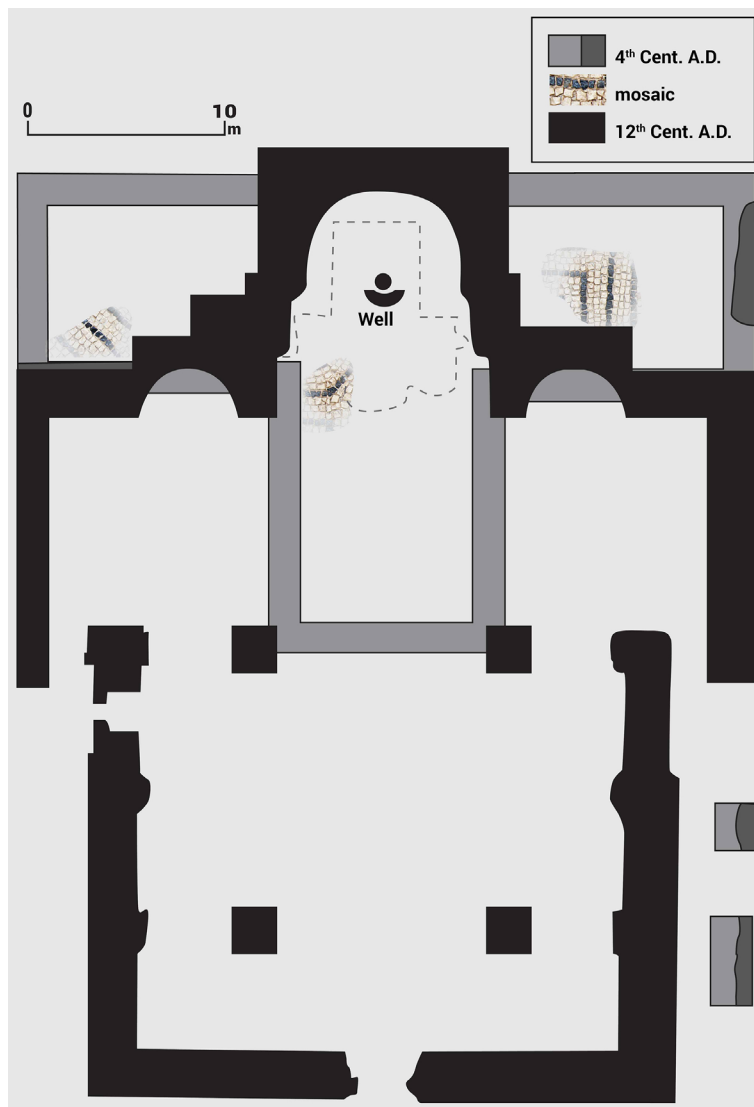


FIG. 11. *The Church of Jacob's Well (adapted by the author).*

3.6.2. Description of well

A certain Major Anderson visited the site in 1866 and wrote a detailed description of the well itself. He stated that the upper opening of the 1,2 m deep neck was only wide enough for a person to pass through and that below the neck the well opened out to a cylindrical space with a 2,3 m diameter. The well, made of stone, had been sunk into soil deposits until a limestone base was reached and the horizontal strata had made it easy to construct; it

appeared to have been completely lined with rough stone. In 1935, measuring the depth of the well produced the figure of 41 m (Bromiley, 1982: 955).

4. Conclusions

Archaeological research on the Byzantine era in Nablus is still in its early stages due to the fact that the archaeological campaigns of the nineteenth and twentieth century in Palestine focused on biblical sites and did not investigate the Byzantine and Islamic periods. The Byzantine period was seen as a transition between the Roman and Arab Islamic periods and for various reasons was considered part of the Roman Era. All the churches built in Nablus during the Byzantine period were of architecturally distinct types in style and floor plan. We will mention each of four types we identified in Nablus chronologically from the earliest built to the latest, as follows:

— *Type 1*: Latin cross plan with the four arms of the cross pointing toward the four cardinal points of the compass, used for Jacob's Well Church. As far back as the time of St Jerome (404 AD), we find mention of a church located over the historic well that is found in the centre of the crypt.

Until 330 AD, there was a baptistery on the site. The Byzantine church in the form of a Latin cross was built there in 340-390 AD. The cruciform plan – a Byzantine innovation first introduced by Constantine in his Church of Apostles in Constantinople, where he was interred – is quite rare-. Jacob's Well Church, the Church of Mary's Tomb in Jerusalem, and presumably the church built by the Empress Eudoxia in Gaza belong to this group. The Church of Prophets, Apostles, and Martyrs in Gerasa is in the form of a cross within in a rectangular space. A

transept basilica also has a cruciform central space such as in the phase of the Church of the Nativity in the time of Justinian, when the octagon of Constantine was replaced by a trefoil sanctuary comprising a north-south transept terminating in two apses with a third apse to the east. The trefoil sanctuary was also recognized on the outside. Another transept basilica is found in the Church of Loaves and Fishes at Tabgah, on the Sea of Galilee (cf. Ovadiah, 1970).

— *Type 2*: Octagonal central-plan church, used for the church of Mary Theotokos on Mount Gerizim. It was built partly by Zeno in 484 and partly by Justinian in 529 AD. A similar octagonal central-plan is found in Gadara “Um Qeis” in the north of Jordan (Homes-Frederico and Hennesy, 1989: 600).

— *Type 3*: Basilica plan church, used for the basilica below the Great Mosque in the Old City of Nablus which appears on the Madaba Map, dated to the time of Justinian I in the sixth century. Similar basilica plans are found at Pella (Jordan) (Homes-Frederico and Hennesy, 1989: 435) and Gerasa (Zayadine, 1986: 308) and in the churches of the Nativity in Bethlehem and of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Avi-Yonan *et al.*, 1993: 305).

— *Type 4*: Chapel with rectangular plan, used for the building which was discovered in 2001 at the Bir Al Hamam site on the western peak of Mount Gerizim, dating to the late sixth and early seventh century. Similar basilica plan chapels are found in the church of St John the Baptist in Jerusalem; the Church of Deir Dosi (Saint Theodosius’ Monastery) near Bethlehem and in the Church of Burj Al Ahmar near Jerusalem (Avi-Yonah *et al.*, 1993: 305, 307).

In summary, the Church of Mary Theotokos was built over the Samaritan Temple, the Great Mosque over the Christian basilica and the crusader church over the Mosque Al Nsr, while the Church of Jacob’s well was built over the Crypt commemorating the dialogue between Jesus and the Samar-

itan woman. Finally, the small chapel in Bir Al Hamam was constructed, according to the inscription in the *tabula ansata*, with donations from two people, in the honor of Jesus Christ. As we have almost no information on the church at Tell Sufan, it is hoped that archaeological excavations in the future will shed light on it. The churches continued to function and were used by the Christian community during the early Islamic period. The Christians were free to practise religious ceremonies and prayer rites side by side with the Muslim and Samaritan communities without conflict.

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