

## A BILINGUAL GREEK-GEORGIAN INSCRIPTION FROM MOUNT ZION, JERUSALEM, AND THE LOCATION OF THE “MONASTERY OF THE IBERIANS”

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A salvage excavation on the southern part of Mount Zion uncovered building remains dating from the Byzantine period. A bilingual Greek-Georgian mosaic inscription was discovered in one of the rooms of the building complex. Based on this finding, and in light of the early written sources, the author proposes to identify the building with the Monastery of the Iberians.

*Keywords: Monastery, Georgians, Mount Sion, Peter the Iberian, Byzantine Jerusalem, inscription, epigraphy*

### INTRODUCTION

A salvage excavation carried out in 2020–2021 on the southern part of Mount Zion, uncovered archaeological remains dating from the Iron Age to the Ottoman period (map ref. 23180/63088; Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> In this article, the architectural phases of a Byzantine-period building complex are described briefly, followed by the presentation of a bilingual mosaic

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<sup>2</sup> The excavation was carried out at the site of the former Shulchan David Hall prior to the construction of a new building. The excavation, on behalf of the IAA, was directed by Michael Chernin (Permit Nos. A-8781, A-8925), with the assistance of Nissan Nehama (administration), Marion Sindel (supervisor of the area where the inscription was discovered), Shai Halevi (surveying and photogrammetry), Or Zakaim (plan), Shulamit Terem (pottery reading), Kfir Arbiv (metal detection), Ghaleb Abu-Diab (mosaic conservation). Thanks to Yehiel Zelinger (scientific consultation) and Yevgeny Kagan (Jerusalem Old City district archaeologist) for their advice and support in the publication. We would like to especially thank M. Korol, I. Tsaritsin, A. Kogan, I. Shmuelian, Y. Silverman, D. Ostrovsky, M. Rudnitsky, A. Zanemonets and D. Dector, a group of tour guides who discovered the inscription while working as laborers during the COVID19 pandemic. We would like to express our deep gratitude to Prof. Leah Di Segni of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who translated the Greek text, and to Dr. Yana Tchekhanovets of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, who translated the Georgian text, both contributing valuable comments.

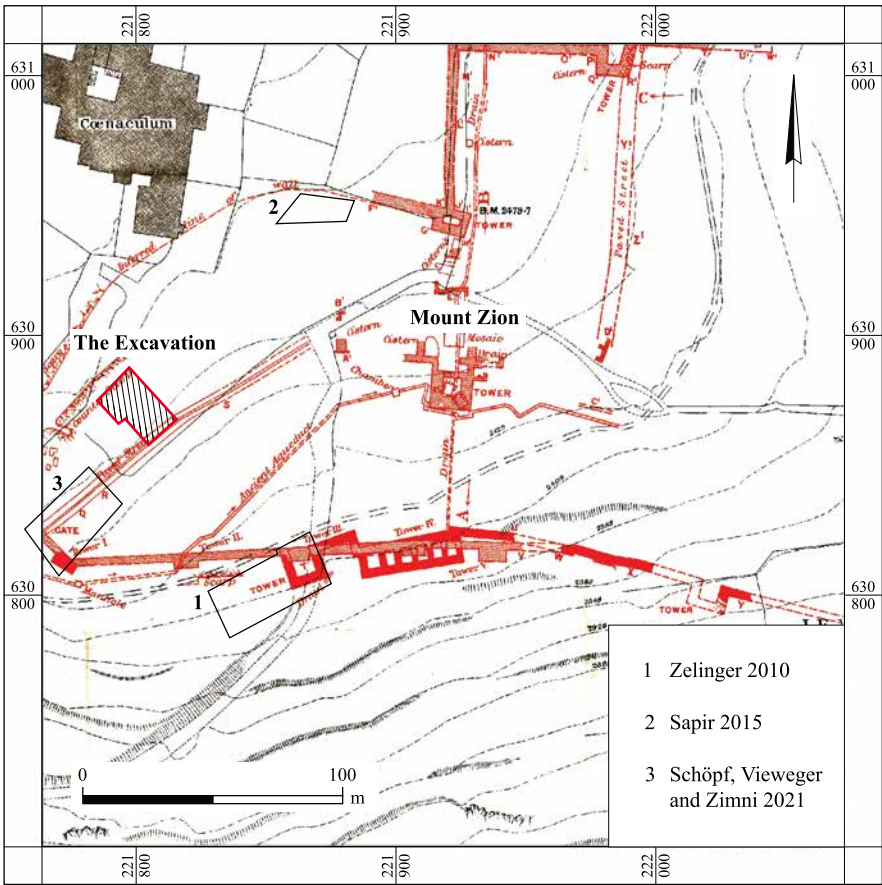


Fig. 1. Location map of the excavation and other nearby excavations on Mount Zion (after Bliss and Dickie 1898).

inscription discovered in the building, and by a discussion on the implications of this find in the light of the early written sources.<sup>3</sup>

Recent excavations in the immediate vicinity of the Shulchan David Hall were directed by Zelinger (2010; Fig. 1:1) and Sapir (2015; Fig. 1:2), both on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The German Protestant Institute of Archaeology expedition conducted excavations in the Protestant cemetery adjacent to the Zion Gate (Fig. 1:3; Schöpf, Vieweger and Zimni 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The full excavation report is being processed and will be published separately.

## THE BYZANTINE-PERIOD BUILDING REMAINS

A short segment of a street (L442; width c. 5.4 m) was exposed at the southern edge of the excavation (Plan 1). The stone paving was not extant, but a rock-hewn drainage channel, roofed with stone slabs (L156; depth c. 1.4 m) ran along the middle of the street (Plan 1). This street, designated here ‘central street,’ was the continuation of the main southwest–northeast Roman-period street that led from the southwestern gate in the Roman–Byzantine city wall, uncovered c. 50 m to the southwest in the adjacent Protestant cemetery plot excavations (Schöp, Vieweger and Zimni 2021). The street was first discovered and documented in the excavations carried out by Bliss and Dickie in 1894–1897 (Bliss and Dickie 1898:50–53). An adjoining street, designated ‘side street’ (L143; width c. 4 m), also with an underlying drainage channel roofed with stone slabs (L106; depth c. 0.4 m), was discovered running north of the central street and curving to the northeast. The central street and part of the side street probably functioned in the Late Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad periods.

Two underground, rock-hewn stepped cisterns (L183, L160), exposed west of the side street, were probably originally Early Roman-period *miqva’ot* (ritual baths), whose entrances were walled up in the Byzantine period, converting them into cisterns. At some point, the smaller Cistern 183 was completely walled up, while the larger Cistern 160 probably continued in use until the Byzantine-period building complex was abandoned in the eighth century CE.<sup>4</sup>

The Byzantine building complex was erected north of the central street. Most of the building remains dated to the Byzantine period, as the earlier buildings were probably destroyed during the construction activities. Three main construction phases were identified: Phase 1, dating to the fifth–sixth centuries; Phase 2, dating to the sixth–seventh centuries; and Phase 3, dating to the seventh and first half of the eighth century—the Umayyad period.

*Phase 1 (Fifth–Sixth Centuries)*

In Phase 1, the southern wing of the building was built in the area between the central and side streets. The walls were built on earlier rock-cut foundations. A few rooms were exposed, the building extending beyond the excavation limits to the north and east. The partly exposed eastern room comprised two well-preserved walls (W466, W477), coated on the interior with grayish plaster and incised with a herringbone pattern, and an adjoining plastered stone bench. Part of a mosaic floor with a bilingual inscription was discovered in this room.

*Phase 2 (Sixth–Seventh Centuries)*

In Phase 2, a large northern wing was added to the Byzantine building complex, covering most of the side street. The upper part of the building was built on two rock terraces cut

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<sup>4</sup> All the dates mentioned in this article are CE.



Plan 1. The Byzantine-period building remains.

into the slope, and the lower part was built on an artificial platform, supported by a two-meter-high retaining wall (W102/W359). The ceramic and numismatic material in the fill behind the wall dated to the sixth century. The building was poorly preserved, but it was possible to establish its general layout. It comprised a few partly rock-hewn and partly built rooms on either side of a corridor (L289). The corridor had rock-cut steps that may have led to an upper floor. A thick layer (10–15 cm) of broken tiles uncovered in one room (L391) indicated that this part of the complex was roofed with tiles.

Stone pillars were secondarily constructed inside Cistern 160 to support the ceiling, part of which had collapsed, leaving a layer of debris containing sixth-century pottery on the cistern floor. A roughly built wall now separated off the disused part of the cistern.

Renovations carried out in the southern wing of the building complex included a repair to the mosaic inscription (see below), and the laying of a white mosaic floor (L154) south of W150, under which pottery dating to the sixth–seventh centuries was found.

### *Phase 3 (Seventh–First Half of the Eighth Century)*

The final building phase included the construction of a few carelessly built walls and the walling-up of doorways (W208, W223) in the southern wing. Several Umayyad coins minted in the first half of the eighth century—post-dating the monetary reforms of Caliph Abd al-Malik (685–705)—and an ostrakon with a Kufic Arabic inscription, came from this phase, dating it to the Umayyad period.

Thick layers of stone rubble found throughout the excavated areas indicate that the building was destroyed as the result of a natural cataclysm, possibly in the earthquake of 749. The room containing the mosaic inscription was overlain by a layer of stone rubble, above which many pieces of a colored ornamental mosaic floor, together with dozens of broken Fine Byzantine Ware bowls, were found. These remains probably came from an upper story with mosaic floors, the many table vessels indicating that it may have served as a refectory.

The building complex was not rebuilt, and a circa two-meter-thick layer of soil accumulated over the building debris. Remains of agricultural terraces dating from the Mamluk period were found in the southern part of the excavation area.

### THE BILINGUAL MOSAIC INSCRIPTION (Fig. 2)

The partially preserved mosaic inscription was set in a rectangular *tabula ansata* frame (47 × 82 cm) between two small ears (c. 20 cm high, 25 cm wide). The frame and the dividing lines between the four lines of the inscription were made of red tesserae on a white background, and the letters (c. 7 cm high) were executed in black tesserae. The tesserae used for the inscription and its background were much smaller (c. 0.8 × 0.8 cm) than the tesserae of the frame and the outer part of the mosaic floor (c. 1.7 × 1.7 cm). The coarser execution of the right ear of the *tabula ansata* clearly differed from the more refined execution of the left one, probably testifying to a secondary repair of the inscription.



Fig. 2. The Greek-Georgian mosaic inscription.

The inscription consists of four lines of text, of which only the first line is completely preserved. The first two lines are in Greek, and the last, very damaged two, are in Georgian. Only the first three letters are preserved in Line 3, and only part of the first letter in Line 4. The Greek inscription, read by Leah Di Segni, reads as follows:

- 1 (image of cross) Χ(ριστ)ὲ βοήθη ἄ[μ-]
- 2 βα Μελλ[ίττα]?

*Translation:* Christ, help Abba Mell[itas?].

Di Segni dates the inscription not later than the fifth century, based on the execution of the letter M. The title *amba* is a common spelling for *abba*, a title of respect for monks and priests. Based on the first syllable of the personal name (Μελ) in Line 2, it is possible to reconstruct it as Mellitas, as this name was common in Palestine in this period.

The reading of the Georgian fragmentary inscription, proposed by Yana Tchekhanovets, is as follows:

- 3 ქ(რისტ)ე შ(ეიწყალე)
- 4 მ? [...]

*Transcription:*

- 3 q(rist)e S(eiwyal)e [...]
- 4 m? [...]

*Translation:* “Christ, have mercy... M (?) ...”

The Georgian text is written in *asomtavruli* script, using ligatures, similar to the mosaic inscriptions of the Bir el-Quṭṭ monastery located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (Tarchnišvili 1955), archaeologically dated to the sixth century (Tchekhanovets 2018:147–149). The Georgian abbreviated formula seems to repeat the Greek text in Line 1, making it possible to interpret the first letter of Line 4 as the beginning of the same name in Line 2, perhaps Mellitas.

The mosaic was set in a bed of light gray mortar on a thin layer of compacted earth on bedrock. Several Byzantine *minimae* retrieved from this layer provide a *terminus post quem*, dating the mosaic no earlier than the fifth century. However, a Fine Byzantine Ware bowl fragment, dating from the sixth century, was also found in the layer below the mosaic floor; its presence may possibly be attributed to the repair of the mosaic floor, evident in the right ear of the frame.

#### DISCUSSION: WRITTEN SOURCES AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS

The bilingual Greek-Georgian inscription is, to date, the first monument exhibiting early Georgian epigraphy discovered within the city limits of Byzantine-period Jerusalem. A few Georgian *asomtavruli* inscriptions were previously discovered in excavations of Byzantine-period monuments located in the vicinity of the city, namely at Bir el-Quṭṭ (Corbo 1955) and Umm Leisun (Seligman 2015), testifying to the presence of Georgian monks in the Jerusalem area (for a summary, see Tchekhanovets 2018). The discovery of the Mount Zion mosaic inscription raises the issue of identifying an associated monastic institution. The Byzantine written sources record the existence of a Georgian (Iberian) monastery on Mount Zion in the first half of the fifth century, founded by the Georgian aristocrat and clergyman, Peter the Iberian (c. 411–491), the only Georgian monastery inside the city mentioned in contemporary written sources.<sup>5</sup> The main source for the biography of Peter the Iberian, and for the history of the monastery he founded in Jerusalem, are two versions of the Life of Peter the Iberian. The first source, preserved in the Syriac original, is traditionally attributed to John Rufus, Bishop of Mayumas in the late fifth century, the disciple of Peter the Iberian (Horn and Phenix 2008); the second version was compiled in Syriac by Zacharias the Rhetor (c. 465–after 536), but it was only preserved in a twelfth-century Georgian translation (Marr 1896).

The work of John Rufus contains the most important topographical indications for the location of this monastery (Horn and Phenix 2008:93–95):

At that time, the blessed Peter also chose for himself a place up toward the (Church of the) Holy Zion, in what is called the Tower of David. He built therein a monastery that still (stands) to this day, called ‘that of the Iberians.’ It is located on the left, as one is coming to Holy Zion

<sup>5</sup> Historical and archaeological evidence of this monastery was summarized by Yana Tchekhanovets (2017).

from the second gate of the same tower. There he dwelt in quiet together with John, the companion of his quiet (life).

According to this record, the monastery founded by Peter the Iberian was located near the Tower of David, i.e., in the northern part of the present-day Armenian Quarter in the Old City. This does not accord with other information from the work of the same Rufus, from which it is understood that the monastery of Peter the Iberian was not far from the Church of Holy Zion, i.e., in the vicinity of Mount Zion. According to Rufus, Empress Eudocia arrived at Jerusalem in 443, desiring a meeting with Peter, and set out to meet him at “Holy Zion” (Horn and Phenix 2008:100–101):

She persisted, saying that if he did not wish to come to her, she by all means would come to him, being prepared to make [her] journey from where she stayed to the Holy [Church of] Zion.

Later, in Rufus’ account of Peter’s relationship with the Jerusalem Patriarch Juvenal (Bishop of Jerusalem 421–451, Patriarch 451–458), he reports (Horn and Phenix 2008: 104–105):

When he [Peter] was still dwelling in the Holy City, Juvenal, who at that time was his bishop, many times attempted to ordain him and could not, since God was protecting him. [Juvenal tried] so hard [that] when a liturgy was being celebrated in the [Church of the] Holy Zion, Juvenal dared to send select [men] to take him by force from his cell, which was nearby.

Tsafrir (2012) provided a convincing solution to this topographical problem, suggesting that when John Rufus used the term “Tower of David,” he was not referring to the current Citadel of Jerusalem, but to the southwestern part of the city (Tsafrir 2012:257), an urban area surrounded by a separate wall, the so-called “Wall of Zion”, often mentioned in fourth-century written sources.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This wall is usually associated with the fortifications of the Tenth Legion camp. According to Tsafrir, the southern wall of the former Roman camp corresponded approximately to the line of the modern southern wall of the Old City, erected in the Ottoman period (Tsafrir 1999:134). Based on this consideration, Tsafrir proposed to locate the “second gate of the Tower of David”, mentioned by John Rufus at the southern gate of the Wall of Zion (Tsafrir 2012:253). This conclusion leads to locating the monastery of Peter the Iberian between the Ottoman southern city wall and the area of the Tomb of King David, i.e., in the northern part of Mount Zion. While agreeing with Tsafrir’s theory about the identity of the “Tower of David” of John Rufus with the “Wall of Zion”, we must note the problematic nature of his conclusion about the location of the southern part of this same wall. No traces of fortifications predating the eleventh-century Fatimid period were found in the numerous archaeological excavations carried out in recent decades along the southern city wall of Jerusalem. Moreover, in a written source referring to the second half of the eighth century, namely the testimony of the Byzantine monk Epiphanius, there is unequivocal evidence that Mount Zion was within the “Wall of Zion.” When he visited the church of Holy Zion and continued his journey to the southeast, towards the Church of St. Peter (located on the southeastern slope of Mount Zion), he reports: “Outside the city, to the right, near the wall there is a church where Peter came out and wept bitterly” (Vasil’evskij 1886:12; Wilkinson 1977:117). From this source, it follows that it does not refer to the wall erected in the fifth century—the wall of Eudocia (which had enclosed also Mount Zion)—but to another separate fortification, since the church of St. Peter and the Pool of Siloam, also located within the wall of Eudocia, are described as being outside the wall mentioned by Epiphanius.



Recent excavations in the Protestant cemetery uncovered material evidence of the use of the southwestern city gate in the Late Roman period (Schöp, Vieweger and Zimni 2021), thus lending archaeological support to the existence of Late Roman-period fortifications around Mount Zion, predating the fifth-century wall constructed by Empress Eudocia. The concept of the location of Mount Zion within the walls of the Roman camp (“Wall of Zion”) was also proposed in a recently published study of Roman-period Jerusalem (Weksler-Bdolah 2020:31–32).

Based on the understanding that Mount Zion was within the “Wall of Zion”, I propose to identify the “second gate of the same tower [of David]”, mentioned by John Rufus, with the city gate exposed in the Protestant cemetery excavations. The central street leading from this gate to the northeast, toward the Church of Holy Zion, passed by the Byzantine-period building in which the mosaic inscription was discovered (Phase 1). The location of this building complex north of the central street is also consistent with Rufus’ report that the Monastery of Peter the Iberian was located on the left, “as one is coming to Holy Zion from the second gate of the same tower” (Horn and Phenix 2008:95).

The Monastery of the Iberians is mentioned in *De Aedificiis*, the work of the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea, dedicated to the construction activities of Emperor Justinian I (527–565), probably written around 555–560. Listing Justinian’s various building projects in Jerusalem, Procopius writes that “These, then, were the monasteries restored in Jerusalem: ... the Monastery of the Iberians in Jerusalem” (Dewing 1940:356–359).

According to Procopius, Justinian did not build this monastery, but only restored (ἀνεεώσατο) it. It can be assumed that the restoration work carried out by Justinian, not only in the Monastery of the Iberians but also in other Jerusalem monasteries, was associated with a natural cataclysm that damaged them. It is possible that this was the earthquake on July 9, 551, which, according to the Byzantine historian, Theophanes, struck all the Middle Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire, including Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia and Syria (Russell 1985:44–45).

In light of this understanding, it seems that evidence of the damage caused by the earthquake of 551 may also have been found in Cistern 160, where the stone pillars were secondarily constructed to support the remains of the cistern whose ceiling had partially collapsed in the sixth century, and a wall was built to partition off the collapsed part, enabling the cistern to continue in use until the eighth century.

The Phase 2 building activities, including the repair of the mosaic inscription, the laying of the white mosaic floor in the adjacent room (L154), and the construction of the northern wing of the Byzantine building complex, should thus probably all be attributed to the building activities in the reign of Justinian.

The excavation revealed that the Byzantine complex continued to exist with minor changes in Phase 3, until the end of the Umayyad period. The excavation unearthed archaeological evidence of two more destruction levels that occurred between the end of the sixth and the mid-eighth centuries. The first is represented by a dense layer of ash (10–20 cm thick), found mainly in the northwestern part of the complex. The final destruction of

the building complex, whereby the entire building complex was found covered with a mass of building stones and broken tiles, is probably related to the earthquake of 749 (Russel 1985:47–49).

The building complex was abandoned and not rebuilt, aligning with the absence of the Iberian Monastery in the list of monasteries in Jerusalem compiled by the Frankish emperor Charlemagne (McCormick 2011:11).

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The bilingual Greek-Georgian inscription bears the title “*amba*,” a common spelling for *abba* and a title of respect for monks and priests. This indicates the likelihood of a Georgian monastery on Mount Zion in this place. Based on this inscription, the early written records and the corresponding archaeological remains, I propose to identify the Byzantine-period building complex with the Monastery of the Iberians, founded by Peter the Iberian in the fifth century. The archaeological findings in the site confirm the main historical milestones of this monastery known from written sources: its construction in the fifth century, its restoration in the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565), and the cessation of its existence by the beginning of the ninth century.

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