'Atiqot 62, 2010

A Christian Inscription at Shelomi

Hagit Tahan and Danny Syon

In September 2001, following construction work, a salvage excavation was conducted in the southern industrial zone of Shelomi (map ref. NIG 2133/7762; OIG 1633/2762; Fig. 1).[1] The area is located in the western reaches of the ruined village of el-Bassa, at the foot of the hill on which the Muslim cemetery of the village is situated. El-Bassa itself sits above the site of Talmudic Beẓet (Frankel et al. 2001:17, Sites 81, 82; 153). Past excavations and surveys yielded Christian remains at several sites in the vicinity, notably a monastic farm complex (Dauphin 1993; Dauphin and Kingsley 2003). The Christian identity of this area in the western Galilee during the Byzantine period has been discussed most recently in Frankel et al. 2001:114–116, and is beyond doubt.

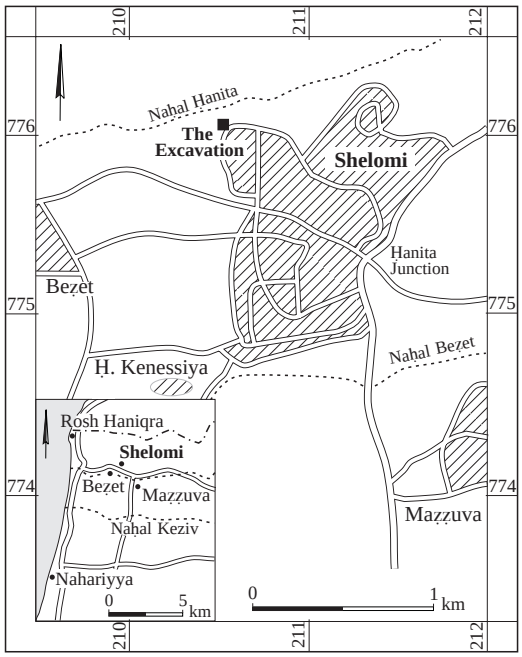


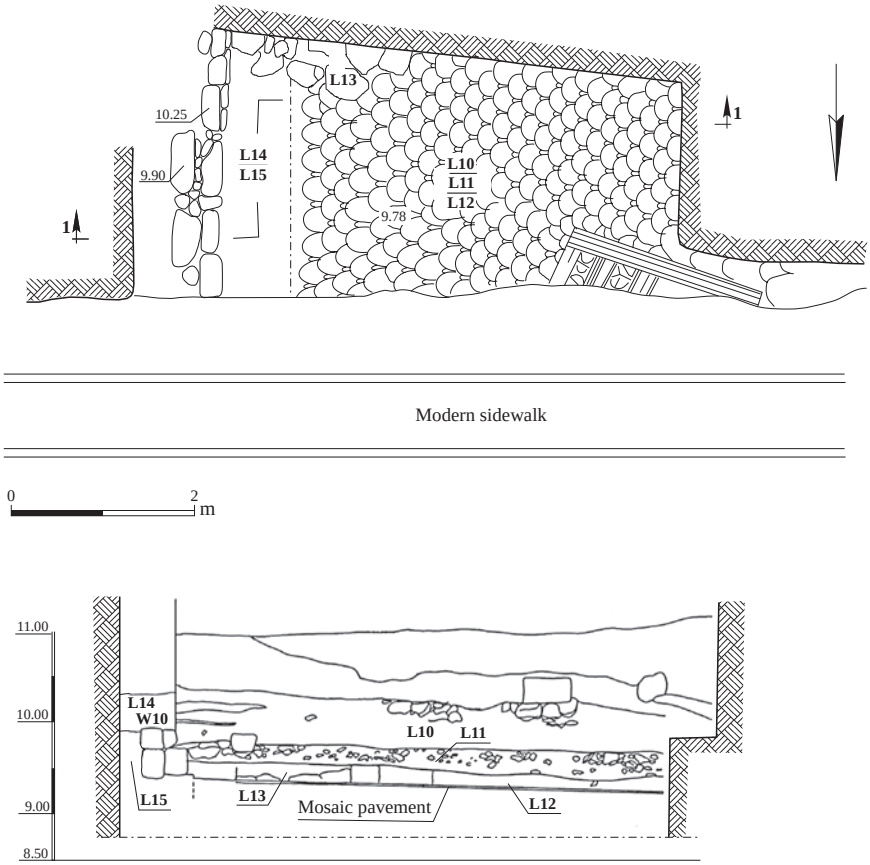
Fig. 1. Location map.

The Excavation

The excavation trench measured 2.5 × 5.0 m and two strata could be defined in it (Plan 1). Only the lower stratum contained architectural remains.

Stratum 2.— Architectural remains in Stratum 2 (Loci 12 and 13) include a mosaic pavement that joins a wall (W10) constructed of chalk (*nari*) ashlars in the east (the join is not marked on Plan 1, but is visible in Fig. 2, in the southeastern corner of the room). Two courses of the wall survived above a foundation that was not excavated. The pavement and wall were covered with debris and collapsed stones, partly ashlars and partly smaller stones that were part of the original structure.

The mosaic pavement is constructed of large tesserae, measuring 2 × 2 cm. Apart from a plain band (75 cm wide) next to the wall, the pavement is arranged in a white scale-pattern with red and yellow tesserae marking the apex of each scale. Approximately 4 m west of the wall, a Greek inscription in a rectangular frame of a double black line was set into the pavement (Fig. 2; see below). The inscription faces east–southeast, and its edge is not parallel to the extant part of the wall. Its position in relation to the other edges of the building could not be determined. The inscription and the pavement were damaged twice by roadworks prior to the excavation (Figs. 3, 4).[2]



Plan 1. Plan and section of the excavation.

Fig. 2. The mosaic pavement, general view to south. Note the inscription at right foreground and W10 at far left center.

Fig. 3. The inscription following the first damage by roadworks.

Fig. 4. The inscription following the second damage by roadworks (before excavation).

Stratum 1 (Loci 10 and 11).— An accumulation of light brown soil, with few stones and potsherds. Locus 11 represents the debris associated with the abandonment of the building, and L10—a later stage of accumulations.

The Inscription[3]

The inscription apparently contained no more than the recorded six lines, assuming that the date formula is at the end, as is the most common arrangement. It should be noted that not all the lines have the same density of letters.

The inscription is very fragmentary. However, based on the assumption that it follows the usual formulae, the following reconstruction is suggested. The use of common abbreviations to fit the right number of letters in each line and the smaller density of letters in lines 3 and 4 were taken into consideration. The inscription is probably a dedicatory inscription of a church or a monastic establishment.

+ΕΤΕΛΙΩΘΗΗΨΗΦ]ΟCIC
ΤΥΑΓΙΥΤΟΠΥΕ]ΠΙΤΥΕΥΛ
ΚΑΙΘΕΟΦΙΛ]ΜΑΡΥΘΑ
ΠΡΕCBsΥΠΕΡ]CΟΤΗ
ΡΙΑCΑΥΤΥΕΓΕΝ]ΗΤΟΗΜ
----------ЧІА

+ἐτελιώθη ἡ ψήφ] <ω>σις
τοῦ ἁγίου τόπου ἐ]πὶ τοῦ ἐυλ(αβεστάτου)
καὶ θεοφιλ(εστάτου) Μαρουθα
πρεσβ(υτέρου) ὑπερ] σ<ω>τη-
ρίας αὐτοῦ ἐγέν]<ε>το μηνὶ
----- ἔτους Γ[χ]ϥ ἰ(νδικτιῶνος) Α͵

Translation

The mosaic of *the holy place* was *completed* in the time of the most pious and *God beloved* Maroutha *the priest*, for *his* salvation; made in the month of [---], year [6]9[3], indiction 1.

Commentary

Formulae.— The words appearing in italics in the translation are only one of several possibilities for a reconstruction using standard formulae, so no parallels are given for them. There remains the title 'most pious' (*ἐυλαβεστάτου*), which appears, e.g., in two fifth-century CE church inscriptions at nearby 'Evron, in the territory of 'Akko-Ptolemais (Tzaferis 1987:39*, No. 1; 42*, No. 5) and in an

inscription dated to 477 CE at Ḥorbat Karkara, in the territory of Tyre (Avi-Yonah 1966).

Abbreviations.— Only three abbreviations are extant: (a) *ἐυλαβεστάτου* is abbreviated with a bar above the *lambda;* (b) the letter M with a small H above is the common abbreviation of the word *μηνὶ*, e.g., at the sixth-century CE church at Suḥmata (Avi-Yonah 1934:96); (c) the single letter I as an abbreviation for *ἰνδικτιῶνος* is quite rare, normally it is abbreviated as ΙΝΔς. A similar abbreviation is found at Ashqelon, in two church inscriptions dated to 493 and 498 CE (Tzaferis 1971:242, 244). Two other abbreviations are assumed: one is for *θεοφιλεστάτου*, possibly with the same bar above the *lambda*; the other, a small s for *πρεσβυτέρου*.

Misspellings.— Twice (ll.1, 4) *omicron* is used instead of *omega*, a rather common phonetic misspelling in sixth-century inscriptions.

Name.— The name Maroutha is a Semitic name attested in two inscriptions from Caesarea. At least one of the Caesarea inscriptions is Jewish, though Maroutha is not a common Jewish name (Roth-Gerson 1987:112). This inscription is dated to the fifth century CE. The other inscription has not been fully published (Avi-Yonah and Negev 1963).

Date.— The general style of the inscription, and especially the drop-shaped *omicron* and *theta*, suggests a date after c. 540 CE (Di Segni 1997:888). The location of the inscription at Shelomi cannot leave any doubt that it was in the territory of the diocese of Tyre. Thus, the date must be according to the era of Tyre, beginning in 126/5 BCE. The single letter surviving of the date being a *qoppa*, i.e., 90, it is quite clear that a 'hundreds' letter preceded the 'tens'. Given that a number of churches were identified as having been built or renovated after the Arab conquest (e.g., Syon 2003; Tzaferis 2003), the natural choice would be ϫϥ (= 690 = 564/5 CE), or even ΨϥΨϥ (= 790 = 664/5 CE), however none of these dates coincides with the first year of the indiction cycle.[4]

The only way to reconcile the date with the indiction cycle is to add a 'units' letter as well. Since the indiction cycle began on September 1, and the Tyrian year on November 18, the only possible dates are 692 or 693, i.e., 566–568 CE. Thus the inscription should be dated between September 1, 567 and August 30, 568 CE. In the reconstruction 693 was chosen simply because it is statistically the more probable, given that eight months of the relevant indiction year fell in this year.

This solution necessitates the assumption that the date was written in a mixed order: ϫϫϥ or ϫϫϥ and not in an ascending order, i.e., 'units', 'tens', 'hundreds', as was the usual dating formula for Tyre in this period. Examples for inconsistent numbering do exist, e.g., at Ḥorbat Ḥesheq, where the date reads ΠΒΦ (Di Segni 1997:322, No.76).

The little pottery found (see Fig. 5:2–10, below) is also consistent with a date in the sixth–seventh centuries CE, and the coin of Justin II dated 573/4 CE (see below) further corroborates the proposed date.

THE FINDS

The finds collected from both strata were mixed and not conducive for a precise stratigraphy. Except for a single jar from the late Hellenistic–Early Roman periods (Fig. 5:1), indicative of earlier habitation at the site, the vessels date to the Byzantine (Fig. 5:2–10) and Umayyad (Fig. 5:11–15) periods. A single Byzantine coin was found east of W10:

Reg. No. 112, L15, IAA 102613.
Justin II, Cyzicus, 573/4 CE.
Obv.: DN IVSTI-NVS PPAV Justin and Sophia on thrones, a cross between their heads.
Rev.: **M** Above: cross, below: B, to l.: A/N/N/O, to r.: ϥ/III
Æ follis, ↑, 12.94 g, 30 mm.
DOC 1:236, No.122c.

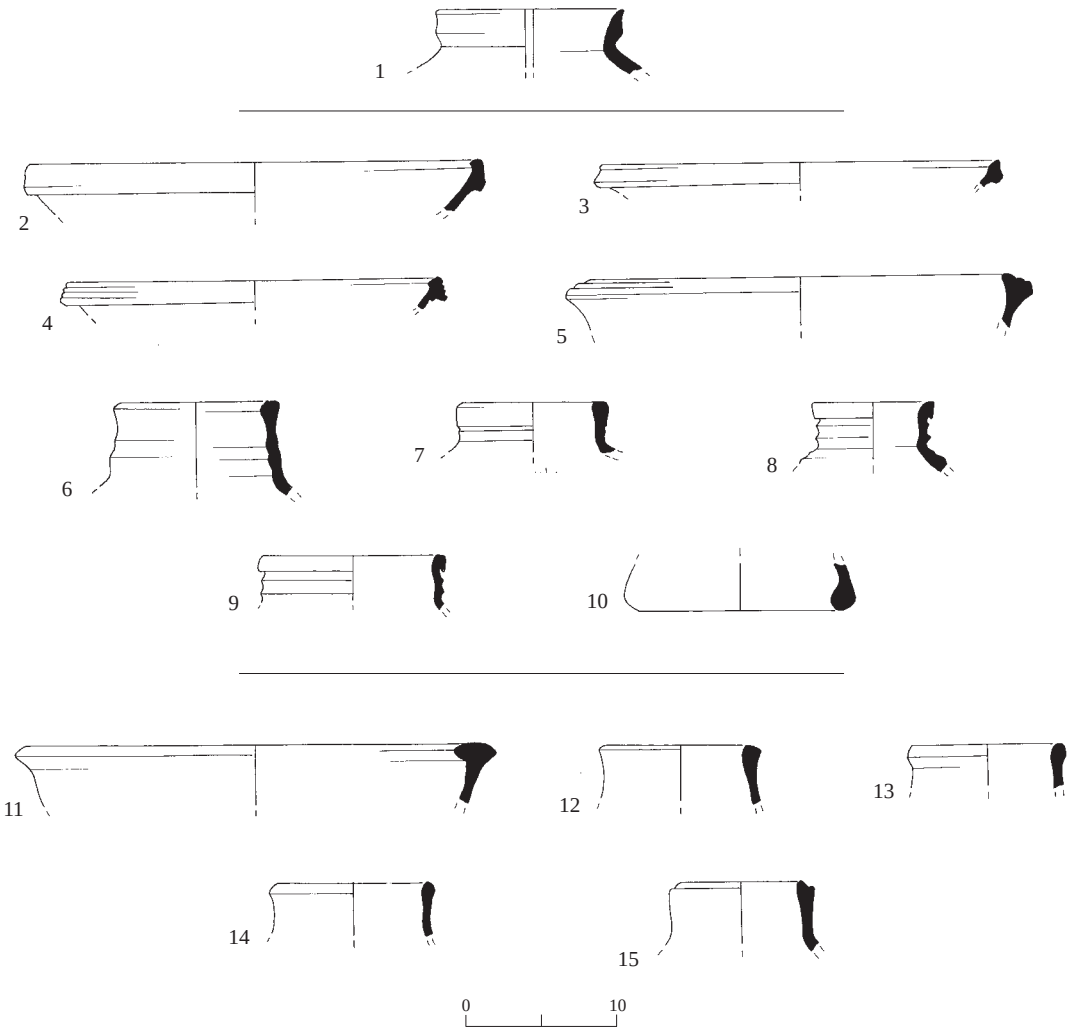


Fig. 5. Pottery from the Late Hellenistic–Early Roman (1), Byzantine (2–10) and Early Islamic (11–15) periods.

No.	Type	Locus	Basket	Description	Selected parallels
1	Jar	15	111/4	Orange clay	Loffreda 1974:63, Fig. 16:2 (end of Hellenistic–beginning of Roman period)
2	Bowl	10	100/2	Orange clay; red burnish inside, brown slip on the outside of the rim	Hayes 1972:387–389, Fig. 85:c (6th c.)
3	Bowl	11	104/6	Orange clay, traces of red slip outside	Hayes 1972:329–336, Fig. 69:40 (within the 6th c.)
4	Bowl	11	104/4	Reddish clay	Hayes 1972:329–338, Fig. 68:13 (6th c.)
5	Bowl	11	104/5	Orange–light brown clay	Hayes 1972:372–373, Fig. 80: Form I1 (late 4th–c. third quarter of 5th c.)
6	Jar	10	100/3	Gray clay	Avshalom-Gorni 1998:65, Fig. 5:9 (6th–7th c.)
7	Jar	11	104/1	Gray clay	Aviam and Getzov 1998:68, Fig. 9:13 (late 5th–6th c.)
8	Jar	15	111/3	Orange clay	Byzantine ridged-neck jar; no exact parallel (5th–6th c.)

◂ **Fig. 5** (cont.)

No.	Type	Locus	Basket	Description	Selected parallels
9	Jar	15	111/2	Light orange clay	As No. 8
10	Jar lid	11	104/8	Yellowish clay	Aviam and Getzov 1998:68, Fig. 9:17, 18 (Byzantine period)
11	Bowl	10	100/1	Light gray clay	Loffreda 1974:123, Fig. 41:26
12	Jar	11	104/10	Dark gray clay	Cf. Amir 2004:157, Fig. 9.3:15 "Byzantine–Umayyad"
13	Jar	13	108/1	Gray clay	Tzaferis 1983:4, 15–16, 33, Fig. 7:1–8 (7th–late 8th c.)
14	Jar	10	100/5	Gray clay	As No. 13
15	Jar	11	104/2	Gray clay	As No. 12

NOTES

[1] The excavation (permit No. A-3495) was directed by Hagit Tahan on behalf of the IAA. Assistance was provided by Yosef Yaacobi (administration). The coin was identified without cleaning.

[2] Thanks to the vigilance of the late Eli Bar-On of Nahariyya, a photograph (Fig. 3) was taken of the inscription immediately following the initial damage, about a year before the excavation took place. By the time the excavation started, further damage had occurred, and this photograph provides the only evidence to its previous state.

[3] I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable help of Leah Di Segni, who put me on the right track reading the inscription (D.S.).

[4] The indiction cycle was a fifteen-year cycle introduced by the Roman administration for taxation purposes, probably in 312 CE. It eventually became a rigid part of all dating formulae in official documents of the Byzantine period and was often used also in unofficial documents, such as tombstone inscriptions.

REFERENCES

Amir R. 2004. The Pottery. In Y. Hirschfeld *Excavations at Tiberias, 1989–1994* (IAA Reports 22). Jerusalem. Pp. 153–167.

Aviam M. and Getzov N. 1998. A Byzantine Smithy at Ḥorvat ʻOvesh, Upper Galilee. *ʻAtiqot* 34:63–83 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. 6*–7*).

Avi-Yonah M. 1934. The Byzantine Church at Suhmata. *QDAP* 3:92–105.

Avi-Yonah M. 1966. An Addendum to the Episcopal List of Tyre. *IEJ* 16:209–210.

Avi-Yonah M. and Negev A. 1963. Notes and News: Caesarea. *IEJ* 13:146–148.

Avshalom-Gorni D. 1998. *Storage Jars from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods in Western Galilee—Chronological, Typological and Regional Aspects.* M.A. thesis. Bar Ilan University. Ramat Gan (Hebrew).

Dauphin C. 1993. A Byzantine Ecclesiastical Farm at Shelomi. In Y. Tsafrir ed. *Ancient Churches Revealed.* Jerusalem. Pp. 43–48.

Dauphin C. and Kingsley S. 2003. Ceramic Evidence for the Rise and Fall of a Late Antique Ecclesiastical Estate at Shelomi in *Phoenicia Maritima*. In G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni and L.D. Chrupcała eds. *One Land—Many Cultures: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Stanislao Loffreda OFM* (SBF Collectio maior 41). Jerusalem. Pp. 61–74.

Di Segni L. 1997. *Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods.* Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University. Jerusalem.

DOC 1: A.R. Bellinger. *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection* 1: *Anastasius I to Maurice 491–602*. Washington, D.C. 1966.

Frankel R., Getzov N., Aviam M. and Degani A. 2001. *Settlement Dynamics and Regional Diversity in Ancient Upper Galilee: Archaeological Survey of Upper Galilee* (IAA Reports 14). Jerusalem.

Hayes J.W. 1972. *Late Roman Pottery.* London.

Loffreda S. 1974. *Cafarnao* II: *la ceramica*. Jerusalem.

Roth-Gerson L. 1987. *Greek Inscriptions from Synagogues in Eretz-Israel.* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Syon D. 2003. A Church from the Early Islamic Period at Khirbet el-Shubeika. In G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni and L.D. Chrupcała eds. *One Land—Many Cultures: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Stanislao Loffreda OFM* (SBF Collectio maior 41). Jerusalem. Pp. 75–82.

Tzaferis V. 1971. Byzantine Churches and Inscriptions in Israel. *Eretz Israel* 10:241–244 (Hebrew; English summary, p. xviii).

Tzaferis V. 1983. The Excavations at Kursi-Gergesa. (*'Atiqot* [*ES*] 16). Jerusalem.

Tzaferis V. 1987. The Greek Inscriptions from the Early Christian Church at 'Evron. *Eretz Israel* 19:36*–53*.

Tzaferis V. 2003. The Greek Inscriptions from the Church at Khirbet el-Shubeika. In G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni and L.D. Chrupcała eds. *One Land—Many Cultures: Archaeological Studies in Honour of Stanislao Loffreda OFM* (SBF Collectio maior 41). Jerusalem. Pp. 83–86.