Wall Paintings in the Synagogue of Rehov: An Account of Their Discovery

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In memory of Dodo Shenhav

The large-scale excavations carried out in Beth Shean during the last decades have revealed large portions of the Roman-Byzantine city of Nysa-Scythopolis and showed that during the Roman Period, the city was inhabited by a chiefly pagan population, which converted to Christianity during the Byzantine Period. Evidence of Jews and Samaritans living in the town was also found, but these populations were small minorities. Most Jews mentioned in rabbinic literature in connection with Beth Shean lived outside the city, in agricultural settlements surrounding the Gentile town, where the present-day kibbutzim of Maoz Hayim, En Hanaziv, Tirat Zvi, and Beth Alpha are situated.[1]

A long mosaic inscription from the synagogue of one of these settlements – the

synagogue of Rehov,[2] located in the fields of Kibbutz En Hanaziv – informs us of the concerns of the inhabitants of a Jewish settlement in the vicinity of a Gentile city for the observance of religious agricultural laws (fig. 1).[3] Dealing with the laws pertaining to the Sabbatical year and with the laws of tithing in the northern part of the country in general, and in the Beth Shean area in particular, this inscription contains the earliest extant version of a rabbinic text, thus differing from most synagogue inscriptions which are dedicatory in nature. Of particular interest is the first paragraph containing a detailed description of the topography of Beth Shean and its surroundings, as well as the last paragraph with a list of hitherto unknown towns in the Sebaste (Samaria) region. Beside this mosaic inscription, the excavations have yielded additional inscriptions, several of which also relate to the life and concerns of the local Jewish community. In contrast to most synagogue inscriptions, of mosaic or stone, these texts were written on plaster on the walls and pillars of the prayer hall. Wall plaster has rarely been preserved in Palestinian synagogues apart from a few small fragments. Thus the discovery of some eight hundred plaster fragments among the debris on the floor of the Rehov synagogue, many bearing remains of painted inscriptions or polychrome decoration, adds a new dimension to our knowledge of the interior decoration of ancient synagogues. The processing of such a large number of fragments (preservation, restoration, drawing, and photography) required a great deal of time and resources, and owing to a lack of funds after the excavations the decipherment of the inscriptions could not be completed. As a result, only brief mentions of the contents of these inscriptions have been heretofore published by the author.[4] Recently, however, a grant was obtained that allowed us to proceed with the restoration of the plaster fragments in the Israel Museum's laboratories, and the epigrapher Haggai Misgav was entrusted with their decipherment. The results of his work on one of the inscriptions are presented in this issue.[5] The remaining inscriptions will appear in the final publication of the excavations of the synagogue of Rehov.

The Synagogue

The first clue as to the existence of an ancient synagogue at this site showed up in the late 1960s, when members of Kibbutz En Hanaziv were preparing for the cultivation of a plot of land on which the Arab village of Farwana had stood until 1948. In the course of their work, they unearthed fragments of a chancel screen carved with a seven-branched menorah, as well as a clay coin-box containing twenty-eight gold coins dating from the reigns of Heraclius (613–616 CE) through Justinian II (686/687 CE) – very likely the synagogue hoard.[6] Following these discoveries, the field was declared an antiquities site, and five seasons of excavations were conducted by the author on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums (now the Israel Antiquities Authority). The excavations revealed a basilica-type synagogue building (fig. 2), aligned along on a north-south axis, with the back wall facing Jerusalem. Three main building phases were distinguished, ranging between the fifth and the seventh century CE. In the last phase, the synagogue had an almost square prayer hall divided into a central nave and two side aisles by two rows of square pillars, five per row. At the southern end of the prayer hall was a raised bema, stretching the full width of the nave. The chancel screen decorated with a menorah that was discovered before the excavations stood, apparently, on a low wall located in front of the bema, as evidenced by an additional fragment of the

Opposite page:
Fig. 1
Halakhic inscription on the mosaic floor of the Rehov synagogue.

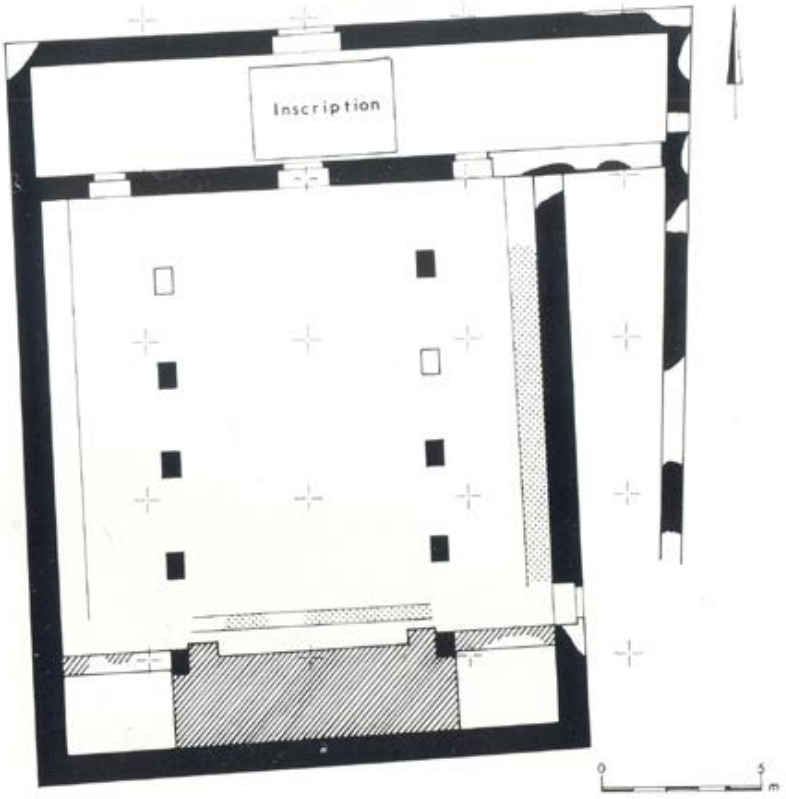

Fig. 2
Plan of the Rehov synagogue

screen found in situ. The narthex, or entrance hall, was added during the last phase to the north of the prayer hall. Access to the narthex from the north was on the central axis. From the narthex, three doorways led to the prayer hall. A fourth entrance was located in the southern part of the eastern wall. The floor of the narthex was divided into mosaic panels, some of which were decorated with a simple black geometric design (a diaper pattern of rhomboids) against a white background, while two bore inscriptions. One of these is the long halakhic inscription in Hebrew mentioned above, which was located between the outer entrance to the narthex and the central doorway leading to the prayer hall, so that all who entered the synagogue could read it and would have to tread on it. The other inscription, which occupied a small panel at the eastern end of the narthex, contained a four-line dedicatory text in Aramaic with, apparently, a reference to the rebuilding of the Temple.

The Mosaic Floors

Several phases can be discerned in the mosaic floors of the prayer hall, including small repairs and major repaving. Since much of the site had been damaged by plowing, often below the level of the floor, and by a Late Ottoman cemetery, none of the mosaic phases was preserved in its entirety. In addition, shortly before the destruction of the synagogue, apparently in the late seventh century CE (see below), work was begun on replacing the entire mosaic of the nave. The mosaicist had started to lay the southern border (a double guilloche with eyelets and an undulating ribbon, both displaying a high quality of craftsmanship) when the building collapsed. Piles of as yet unused tesserae arranged according to color, as well as a pile of waste resulting from the cutting of the tesserae, were found in the southern part of the nave. Work on the central carpet had not yet begun, and there is no way to know what the artisans intended to represent: a wholly geometric composition, additional inscriptions, or, as in several other synagogues, panels representing a Torah shrine, zodiac, and biblical scene. The reason for the replacement of the entire mosaic of the nave is also unknown. Had the former mosaic pavement been damaged? Or did it have a figurative decoration that the community decided to replace with an aniconic one, in accordance with the seventh-century tendency toward aniconic as opposed to figurative decoration? In this context, it should be borne in mind that while all the mosaics preserved in the synagogue feature geometric motifs, they are all located in the aisles, areas which often display only geometric motifs.

The End of the Synagogue

It is difficult to ascertain the circumstances under which the synagogue went out of use. The ceramic and glass evidence points to a seventh century CE date for its abandonment. The numismatic evidence and, in particular, the latest coins of the two synagogue hoards allow us to date the synagogue's destruction more precisely to the end of the 680s CE. Indeed, in both hoards (the gold hoard discovered before the excavations and a "money-pouch" hoard containing fourteen Arab-Byzantine copper coins, found beneath the rubble of a collapsed wall separating the western aisle from a small chamber to the west of the bema), the latest coins date to the 680s, including a gold coin of Justinian II, dated 686/687 CE. The destruction of the synagogue was obviously violent and abrupt. As mentioned above, it occurred while the mosaicist was replacing the floor of the nave. Bronze chandeliers with glass oil-lamps were found fallen on the floor of the prayer hall, below the spots where they originally dangled from the ceiling. Walls and pillars of the prayer hall had collapsed eastward, the pillars in a parallel alignment with their stones like toppled dominoes. The evidence for sudden destruction and the pattern of the collapse suggest that the synagogue was destroyed in an earthquake.[7] However, no major earthquake is documented around that date for the region.[8] The earthquake of 659/660 CE, which was strongly felt in the Jordan Valley, is too early, and the massive earthquake that struck the Holy Land and flattened the neighboring city of Beisan (Beth Shean) on January 18, 749 CE occurred more than sixty years after the dates of the last coins recovered in the synagogue. Either another cause for the destruction of the synagogue needs to be considered or the building, somewhat weakened by the repairs, was affected by a rather weak tremor that went unrecorded.

Fig. 3
Western side of the bema with plaster still adhering to it

The Discovery of the Plaster Fragments

The walls of the synagogue, 80 cm thick, were built of large fieldstones and rubble. Most were preserved to a height of one or two courses, four to five in the southern wall. A few patches of white plaster still adhered to the lower courses. The bema, made of basalt ashlars, was apparently preserved to its original height, ca. 90 cm above floor level. Large areas of white plaster (unpainted or discolored?) still lined the sides of the bema and its upper part (fig. 3). The pillars separating the central nave from the aisles were square, built of rectangular basalt ashlars laid as headers and stretchers. They had all collapsed, but a few white patches still adhered to some of the stones (fig. 4). Except for these few patches still in situ, all the recovered plaster comes from the debris that covered the synagogue floor. Some of the plaster fragments were found in the debris, ca. 20 cm thick, covering the aisles and in a fill beneath the mosaic inscription of the narthex, but the bulk was recovered

Fig. 4
Lower course of a pillar with two layers of plaster

in an elongated mound, ca. 50 cm high, located in the central nave, which had been spared by the tractors of the kibbutz. This mound contained the collapsed pillars of the western row.

Much of the plaster recovered was in a very fragmentary state, having been crushed by the collapse of the walls, roof, and pillars, but a few fragments were better preserved, especially those that had come from the pillars. Many of the plaster fragments bore the remains of paint, mainly inscriptions written in Hebrew letters in red paint, but a few also displayed decorative elements. The majority of the fragments had fallen on the floor, face down. Until we turned them over, it was impossible to know if they were painted or not. Moreover, it appeared that a second layer of plaster had been applied on top of the first layer (figs. 4, 5). Apart from small remnants of inscriptions, mainly in black paint and charcoal, very little is known of the upper layer. The paint of the lower layer, by contrast, was generally well preserved, even though its entire surface had been hammered to ensure that the upper layer of plaster would adhere better, thus destroying part of the paint. It should be stressed that it is thanks to this second layer of plaster that the paint on the lower layer was so well preserved. Furthermore, since the upper layer of the plaster was clearly wet when it was applied, its back absorbed the paint from the lower layer. As a result, in some cases we have both the original inscriptions or decorations on the lower layer and their "mirror images" on the back of the upper layer. In other cases, only the mirror images were preserved, the original inscriptions having disintegrated when the synagogue collapsed.

Fig. 5
Fragment of an inscription within a wreath, with the upper layer of plaster still covering the lower layer

Painstaking work in the field enabled the recovery of numerous fragments of plaster. Before removal, each fragment was carefully cleaned using dentist tools and rubber bulb blowers (figs. 6 and 7), strengthened with Paraloid as needed, drawn, and photographed, and the exact point of impact was recorded. Pieces of gauze were spread over the uncovered fragments of plaster until their removal, to protect them from sun and dew. At the end of the third excavation season, members of the Israel Museum Restoration Laboratories (fig. 8) came to the site to remove the larger fragments.[9] They glued pieces of canvas to the backs of the fragments, in order to transport them to the laboratory. There they removed the canvas and gave the fragments new backings. Soon after the excavations, the author began to reassemble the inscriptions and decorative motifs from the hundreds of fragments recovered, with the technical help of the Israel Museum Restoration Laboratories. However, as mentioned above, work had to be discontinued, owing to a lack of funds. Haggai Misgav has now completed the task and deciphered the inscriptions.

The Decoration of the Walls and Pillars

The plaster recovered in the synagogue of Rehov allows us to reconstitute part of the synagogue's wall decoration.

Several fragments of plaster recovered in the aisles suggest that the inner faces

Figs. 6, 7
Volunteers carefully clean fragments of inscribed plaster

Fig. 8
Members of the Israel Museum Restoration Laboratories prepare a plaster inscription for transport to Jerusalem

of the side walls of the prayer hall were decorated with vertical red stripes against a white background. A number of fragments of plaster found near the eastern entrance to the prayer hall feature red quatrefoils within a green grid (fig. 9). This most likely represents a stylized coffered ceiling design, which decorated either the lintel above the door or the ceiling nearby. Small fragments of plaster with remains of finely executed polychrome designs were collected beneath the *statumen* (foundation layer) of the narthex mosaic. The original locations of these fragments are unknown, and they are too fragmentary to enable an identification of the motifs depicted.

The bulk of the plaster was recovered in a small area of the central nave where the fills had not been disturbed by tractors. This area contained the plaster that originally coated the pillars along the sides of the nave, mainly those of the western row. The reconstruction of these plaster fragments shows that the pillars were densely covered with Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions written in red paint. Large wreaths, ca. 90 cm in diameter, seem to have occupied the entire width of the sides of the pillars facing the nave, at least on some of the pillars. These wreaths were placed ca. 1.50 m above the floor, a convenient height for the members of the congregation to read their contents. One of the preserved wreaths contains a long dedicatory inscription, ca. 16 lines, enclosed in a *tabula ansata* (40 × 30 cm) with a vine trellis filling the empty spaces between the *tabula* and the wreath. The inscription lists the names of donors with some of their professions or nicknames. Another wreath contains a text almost identical to the halakhic inscription written on the mosaic floor of the narthex, but ending with an address to all the inhabitants of the locality instead of the list of the exempted towns in the Sebaste region. The plaster inscription was clearly an earlier version of the narthex mosaic text and seems to have been, originally, a letter received by the community in answer to its questions about the observance of the agricultural laws in the vicinity of the Gentile town of Beth Shean. This is indicated by the first word of the inscription (*Shalom*), the emphasis on Beth Shean, the location of the synagogue, and the

Fig. 9
Plaster fragments featuring red quatrefoils within a green grid

blessings at the end. Owing to its importance, the text was recopied, without the ending and with the addition of the paragraph on Sebaste, on a more durable surface, the mosaic floor of the narthex. Other inscriptions written on plaster include a list of fast days (see article by Misgav in this issue), a list of the twenty-four priestly courses, as well as other texts which were, apparently, connected with the life of the community.

One wreath, of which only the mirror image was preserved (on the back of the upper layer) is of particular interest. It was found near the bema. Although the paint is very faint, it is possible to distinguish, within the wreath, the drawing of a structure consisting of four spirally fluted columns surmounted by Ionic capitals with wide steps leading to it. A gabled roof covers the central part of the structure, which encloses four small *tabulae ansatae* containing brief inscriptions in Hebrew

Fig. 10
Fragment of plaster featuring a menorah. Note the hammering marks on the surface

script; these could not be deciphered due to their very faint and fragmentary state. On either side of the central part of the structure are, apparently, partly open curtains. To the left of the structure is a large seven-branched menorah (fig. 10). This drawing seems to represent a Torah shrine, a motif that occurs on the mosaic floors of other synagogues; alternatively, it might be a symbolic depiction of the Temple façade.

The Interior Decoration of the Synagogue

The wealth of painted plaster from the Rehov synagogue completes the picture presented by the mosaic floors concerning the synagogue's interior decoration. L.I. Levine[10] has correctly noted that all the preserved mosaic floors of the Rehov synagogue are non-figurative, and all the inscriptions are in Hebrew and Aramaic – none is in Greek. He therefore deduced that this synagogue was conservatively oriented, in sharp contrast to the nearby Beth Alpha synagogue. This may be true for the last phase of the synagogue, which dates to the seventh century CE, a time when other synagogues were built or remodeled with mainly aniconic decoration. However, since the inscriptions painted on the lower layer of plaster belong to an earlier phase (this was clearly shown by the successive copies of the halakhic inscription), they could, hypothetically, have surrounded a nave decorated with figurative mosaics as in Beth Alpha or Beth Shean. If so, there may even have been a relationship between the drawings and inscriptions appearing on the pillars of the prayer hall and the motifs represented on the mosaic floor of the nave.[11] Examination of the mosaic pavements in the naves of a number of synagogues dating to the fifth and sixth centuries CE reveals that the Torah shrine and menorahs are usually represented in the panel nearest the bema (and, indeed, at Rehov, the plaster fragment featuring a wreath with these motifs was found near the bema); the zodiac appears in the central panel (possibly corresponding

to the inscriptions from Rehov recording calendar-like texts – specifically, the list of fasts and the roster of the twenty-four priestly courses); and a biblical scene or a dedicatory inscription appears next to the entrance (perhaps corresponding to the long donor list from Rehov, as well as other inscriptions or designs that have not been preserved).

Conclusion

Some evidence from other synagogues suggests that the case of Rehov was not unique. A mosaic floor inscription in the courtyard of Susiya's synagogue mentions "Rabbi Isai the priest (רבי איסי הכהן) who made this mosaic and plastered the walls with lime (טח את כתליו בסיד)."[12] The inscription does not specify whether or not the mosaic and the plaster were decorated. Unfortunately, the plaster has not been preserved, but the mosaic carpet to which the inscription belongs is decorated with geometric motifs. Many publications of synagogues mention the discovery of small fragments of painted plaster,[13] mostly red, sometimes with geometric or stylized plant motifs: for example, simple flowers in red at Beth Alpha, and volutes, eggs, and darts at Hammat Tiberias. At En Gedi, two boats with sails were drawn on one of the pillars.[14] Some of the plaster fragments from synagogues even bear Aramaic inscriptions in Hebrew script, for example, *amen amen sela shalom* at En Nashut,[15] and a fragment reading "himself" (גביה) at En Gedi, apparently part of a dedicatory inscription with names of donors.[16] The discovery of a fragment of plaster with remains of an inscription in the synagogue of En Gedi is particularly noteworthy, since the mosaic floor of the last phase is aniconic (except for birds, which seem to have been accepted motifs even in aniconic decoration). The floor contains, as at Rehov, an inscription dealing with issues of local concern, namely, a list of offences for which members of the local community would be held responsible.[17] The texts written on the mosaic floors of the En Gedi synagogue (the lists of biblical personalities, months of the year, and zodiac signs) could also have been written, previously, on the plaster of the synagogue, as at Rehov. There is only one passage in rabbinic literature which may refer to wall paintings in synagogues, though the possibility that it refers to other public buildings cannot be excluded: In Talmud Yerushalmi *Avodah Zarah* 3:3, a sage grudgingly accepts wall decoration, without specifying what type of drawing was intended: "In the days of Rabbi Yohanan, they began to make drawings on the walls (מציירים על הכתלים) and he did not prevent them." However, this sage, identified as R. Yohanan ben Nappaha (a native of Sepphoris and founder of the academy of Tiberias, known for his lenient rulings) lived in the third century CE, before the time most of the known synagogues were built. Yet despite the lack of literary evidence and the scanty remains of painted plaster from synagogues, we may assume that the inner faces of the walls of most synagogues were coated with plaster, at least when the walls were made of undressed or roughly smoothed stones. Patristic literature provides us with glowing descriptions of the beautiful mosaics and paintings that adorned the walls of contemporaneous churches, and archaeological evidence has confirmed the existence of figurative murals in churches dating to the Byzantine Period.[18] It is highly doubtful, however, that the wall paintings of synagogues may be compared to those of the contemporaneous churches. The fragments of plaster from Rehov are also very different from the wall paintings of the Diaspora synagogue of Dura Europos. The discoveries in the Rehov synagogue and the limited evidence from other synagogues would

rather suggest that the walls and columns of synagogues chiefly served to inform the local congregation of matters of primary concern to them, whether connected with the daily life of the community or with the service in the synagogue, both often being connected.[19]

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* Photos: © Israel Antiquities Authority, by Z. Radovan (fig. 1); by F. Vitto (figs. 3–8, 10); © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by V. Naikhin (fig. 9). Synagogue plan: © Israel Antiquities Authority, by M. Feist.

[1] See Vitto 1982b.

[2] The synagogue has been called the synagogue of Rehov because of its location, ca. 800 m northwest of Tel Rehov (where recent excavations directed by A. Mazar have revealed a major Bronze Age and Iron Age city [Mazar 2008], thus confirming the identification of the tell with the Rehov of the Egyptian texts), as well as the mention in Eusebius's early fourth-century CE *Onomasticon* (142.19) of a place called *Roob* (*Rooba* in Jerome), four Roman miles from Beth Shean. Z. Ilan, however, disagreed with this identification (Ilan 1977; Ilan 1991, 189), claiming that the Roob of Eusebius must be near a *wely* known as es-Sheikh er-Rihab located further south, at the foot of Tel Rehov.

[3] On the excavations, see Vitto 1974; Vitto 1975; Vitto 1980; Vitto 1981a; Vitto 1981b; Vitto 1981c; Vitto 1993. On the inscription, see Vitto 1974; Sussman 1974; Sussman 1975; Sussman 1976; Sussman 1981; Israeli 1978.

[4] Vitto 1976; Vitto 1981c; Vitto 1982a; Vitto 1993; Vitto 1995; Vitto 2005.

[5] The author wishes to thank the Jeselsohn Epigraphic Center for Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University, which enabled the completion of the technical work on the plaster fragments. Many thanks also to David Mevorah, Israel Museum Senior Curator of Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Periods, for his help in all the stages; to the Restoration Laboratories of the Israel Museum, in particular to David Bigelajzen and Andrei Vainer, for their work on completing the cleaning of the plaster fragments and their restoration; to Julia Rodman, for drawing all the plaster fragments; to Vladimir Naikhin, for photographing them; to Hani Davis and Nancy Benovitz, for editing the English of this article; and to Haggai Misgav, for completing the reconstruction of the inscriptions started by the author, making the necessary corrections, and spending long hours in the storerooms of the Israel Museum to decipher the inscriptions.

[6] Paltiel 1969; Bahat 1973; Bijovsky 2012.

[7] Karcz and Kafri 1978, 240, 245.

[8] Russel 1985; Guidoboni 1989; Amiran, Arieh, and Turcotte 1994, 266.

[9] Shenhav 1978. The author gratefully acknowledges Dodo Joseph Shenhav, former Head of the Israel Museum Restoration Laboratories, and the members of his team, in particular, David Bigelajzen, for their help both prior to the third season of excavation, when most of the plaster fragments were recovered, by providing us with the material necessary for their excavation as well as useful advice as to how to proceed, and, in the field, where they prepared the larger fragments for transportation to the Israel Museum.

[10] Levine 2005, 219.

[11] This possibility has already been suggested by the author, see Vitto 1987; Vitto 1995.

[12] Gutman, Yeivin, and Netzer 1981, 128, pl. II.

[13] See Vitto 1995, 292–93; Hachlili 1988, 224.

[14] Barag 2006, 19*.

[15] Maoz 1993, 414; Maoz 2010, 32.

[16] Barag 2006, 19*.

[17] Levine 1981.

[18] For written sources on wall decoration in Palestinian churches, see Vitto 1995, 286–88. The sixth-century CE *ekphrasis* of Choricius of Gaza describes the wall decoration of the Church of St. Sergius in Gaza (Choricius, *Laudatio Marciani* II.53). According to Choricius's description, the mosaic of the apse represented the Virgin and Child, St. Stephen, and St. Sergius; the mosaics of the side walls depicted 24 scenes of the life of Jesus, from his birth to the Passion. Grabar 1968, 101, however, believes that Choricius's description of the walls, written as a piece of rhetoric, "enriched their iconography in the direction of drama and narrative." For archaeological evidence of the Palestinian churches, see Vitto 1995, 288–90. Remains of wall paintings representing saints, the Transfiguration, or biblical figures have been found in several churches, e.g., Rehovot-in-the-Negev and Shivta.

[19] We know from literary sources that imperial promulgations and other texts, which informed congregations about important matters, were affixed to the interior walls of churches, see Vitto 1995, 299 and nn. 126 and 127, for examples.

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