

## A NEW Umayyad Church at Khilda – Amman

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During the course of the work conducted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan<sup>1</sup> at Khilda in the western suburbs of Amman (UTM Grid ref. 22681-156261),<sup>2</sup> in the winter of 1994-95 a church with a unique ground plan<sup>3</sup> was uncovered.

The structure (Photo 1-2) consists of two – apsed (north and south) halls of similar size – internal measurements ca 12 m (E/W) by 8.5 m (N/S) – with mosaic pavement (Photo 3-4; Fig. 1: Plan). Each hall has a semi-circular apse at the east end and a corresponding entrance in the western wall. The halls are separated by a row of pillars. A vaulted flagstone paved courtyard (atrium) measuring 6 m (E/W) by 8.5 m (N/S) preceded the church proper on its western side. It was accessed by a doorway with two steps leading up to a platform fashioned by leveling the surface of the bed-rock. Whether the church or the atrium were accessed from the southern side we will never know, due to the bulldozing that took place when the adjacent modern house was constructed. Some parts of the walls of the church are preserved up to 2.5 m above the floor level.

The completion of the mosaic pavement of the church was commemorated by a dedicatory inscription of five lines in a tabula ansata dated to the year 750 of the Pompeian era (A.D. 687). The collapse and abandon-

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1. In addition to the authors, the following people participated in the excavations and documentation of the site: Lubna Hashem, Fadwa Shamailah, Jihad Shoubaki, Qutaibah Dassouqi, Tawfeeq Hnaiti, Robert Schick and Alex Najjar.

2. The site, which is known also as Kh. Othman, was recorded in 1988 during the Archaeological Survey of Greater Amman (ASGA, site 176). It was dated to the Late Bronze Age, the early Roman, late Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad and Ayyubid-Mamluk periods (Abu Dayyah et al.1991).

3. The southern wall of the church had been bulldozed prior to excavation. The possibility that the church consisted of a central nave and two side aisles is excluded through indirect evidence; *a.* The two halls are equal in size, which is not usual for three-aisled churches; *b.* The altar, the baptismal font and the dedicatory inscription are placed in the north hall, which means that this hall was of the same importance as the south one; *c.* A stone basin was placed at the south side of the entrance to the south hall. Usually these basins are placed in the corner of the church to collect the water used to clean the floor of the church; *d.* Two-apsed halls are evidenced from other sites. The closest parallel to the Khilda church is the church of Hufa al Wastiyah (Ruba Abu Dalu, 1994:11).



ment of the church according to the pottery sherds excavated in the north apse took place in the mid-eighth century. A destruction horizon at the north apse was excavated. The fallen stones were separated from the mosaic floor by a thick layer (20-30 cm) of a yellowish clay. This layer may represent either the soil deposits on the roof of the building (a few fragments of roof tiles were found and can be attributed to the earlier church), which was filtered down through the collapse, or the mortar and plaster decomposed and carried by rain, then deposited on the mosaic floor.

It is reasonable to assume that the collapse of the church walls and vaults well evidenced during the excavations can be associated with an earthquake of the late VIII Century (Russell 1985:49; Tsafirir and Foerster 1992:235). However it is important to say that there are some indications (argument from silence) that the abandonment of the church occurred prior to the final collapse. No in situ artifacts were uncovered in the north chancel.

Five centuries later (during the Mamluk period) the whole area was resettled and the remains of the church have undergone some major modifications. A retaining wall was built between the pillars from the east to the west. This wall was constructed on 5-10 cm of soil accumulated above the mosaic floor during the abandonment of the church. The eastern segment of the wall does not have a northern face indicating that it was built to retain the collapse debris of the church. It runs from east to west for about 4 m and at its western end makes a corner with another retaining wall, which runs north-south. This north-south wall does not have an eastern face and was also built to retain the collapse debris. Except for the space bound by these two retaining walls, the northern church wall, and the north apse, the whole area of the church was completely cleaned from the collapse deposit and the space behind both retaining walls from the south and west was subdivided into a smaller rooms by means of partition walls constructed directly on the mosaic floor. The original wall of the church from the north was completely refaced when a new wall was built against it. The bench along the northern wall of the church was used as foundation to build the new wall. One room was constructed in the north hall. The original doorway of the church was utilized. Another room adjacent to the first one from the west was built in the atrium. The door to this later room was from the south. The south hall (to the south of the retaining wall) was used to build more rooms. At least three small rooms were built in the south apse and south nave. The atrium was also used to build vaulted small rooms.

As mentioned above, the walls of the new rooms were built directly on the top of the mosaic pavement. In one instance the mosaic pavement was covered with a thin layer of plaster as was the case at the entrance of the

north nave. Later on, the mosaic pavement was almost completely removed and only those parts of it that were under the walls or covered by a thin layer of plaster were preserved. The mosaic panels in the north apse and hall were preserved because this area was never reused after the destruction of the church. In the south apse the mosaic floor was completely removed. In the south hall a medallion was preserved because it was covered by a wall, while the mosaic pavement at the western part of it and in the atrium were kept because it was not figurative.

The architectural analysis indicates that this church was built on top of an earlier church. The evidence came from the south apse and the chancel step. The mosaic pavement of the south apse was completely removed in the antiquity and only one row of tesserae is still preserved. We noticed that the south chancel step is of different alignment and about 20 cm lower than the chancel step in the north apse and that is why we decided to probe the subfloor of the upper mosaic. Twenty centimeters below the (later) floor level another mosaic floor and an apse wall appeared. The alignment of this earlier apse was different from the upper apse. The motifs of the lower floor mosaic were also different from the upper ones. In the south hall, where the mosaic floor was removed in antiquity, we decided to excavate three probes. One of them (2.5 × 1 m) was set against the chancel step from the west. The lower mosaic floor was not preserved but the bedding was visible in the sections. Small quantities of tesserae were found and some pottery sherds, which may prove helpful for dating, were recovered from the fills under the floor level.

## **The mosaics**

### *1. The mosaic panels of the later church*

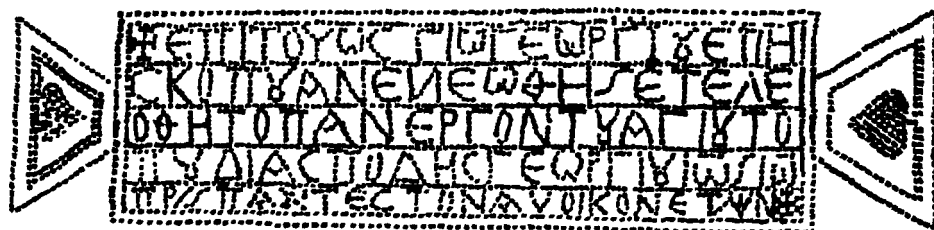
The apse and the nave of the north hall of the church were decorated by mosaic panels, some of which were damaged by iconoclasts. The north apse (Photo 5-6) has an altar of an unusual form. It consists of two parallel short walls of blocks plastered from all sides. This type of altars is a transitional between altars supported by colonettes with square bases fixed into the floor and completely built apses.

Colonettes were also used in the transitional type but they were shorter and fixed to the top of the constructed part of the altar. Two square holes in each side of the lower part of the altar were found. The space between the two sides of the altar base was most probably used to keep the reliquary.

The altar is encircled by two vine shoots issuing from an amphora on a high pedestal. A gazelle is facing the amphora at each side. The heads and the legs of the two animals were disfigured. The northwest corner of the chancel contains the circular in shape baptismal font with a hole from one side near the bottom. The neck of a pottery vessel was used to line the hole. The north chancel was separated from the hall by a 20cm high chancel step with grooves and square holes. The square holes were used to fix the short square pillars which were placed at equal distances. Decorated marble slabs were attached to each column from both sides. Few fragments of these slabs were found in the north chancel.

The floor of the north hall was decorated with four mosaic panels (Photo 3-4). The first one includes a tabula ansata with a five-line Greek dedicatory inscription (Photo 9) in front of the chancel step and separated from it by a 15 cm wide frame. It reads:<sup>4</sup>

✠ Ἐπὶ τοῦ ὡσιωτάτου (καὶ ἀγιωτάτου) Γεωργίου ἐπη-  
σκόπου ἀνενεώθη (καὶ) ἐτελε-  
όθη τὸ πᾶν ἔργον τοῦ ἁγίου τό-  
που διὰ σπουδῆς Γεωργίου Ἰωάννου (καὶ) Ἰωάννου  
πρεσβυτέρου (καὶ) πάντες τῶν αὐτῶν οἰκὼν ἔτου ΨΝ ✠



✠ *At the time of the most pious and most holy Bishop George, was renovated and terminated the whole work of the holy place by care of George (son) of John, and of the priest John and of all (the members of) their families, in the year 750.* ✠

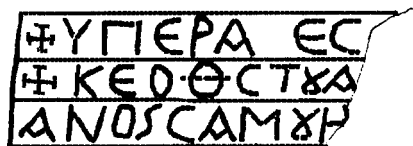
4. We would like to express our gratitude to all those who helped us with the reconstruction and translation of the inscriptions. Many names have to be mentioned: Father Michele Piccirillo, Robert Schick, Konstantinos Politis, Yanni Meimaris, Basemah Hamarneh, Lea Di Segni.

The second panel was also enclosed in a rectangular frame. At the upper part of this panel two peacocks facing an amphora were depicted. The heads and the legs of both birds were disfigured. The lower part of the panel contains a personification of the Earth (Photo 7). A crowned woman in full length holds a bunch of flowers in each hand. The inscription was added on both sides of the head: Η ΓΙ (The Earth).

The third rectangular panel contains a composition where a lion and a zebu are depicted on either side of a palm tree. The symbolic meaning of the scene is suggested by Psalm 65:25, Isaiah: "And the lion will eat [straw] like the ox". This composition which has been interpreted in the case of the mosaic of the Paradise at Madaba museum and the mosaic of the Amman Citadel as a scene of friendship among animals, (Piccirillo 1992:128; Zayadine et al. 1987:304) may have been used here as a symbolic representation of the biblical Paradise.

The fourth panel consists of three different parts. At the upper part two gazelles were depicted facing a tree. Both animals were defaced. The middle part includes a three-line Greek inscription (Photo 10). For the name of the Saint, see below. It reads:

✠ Ὑπὲρ ἀ(φ)έσε[ε]ος τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν Ἰω(άννου) πρ(εσβυτέρου) ✠  
 ✠ Κ(ύριε) ὁ Θ(εὸς) τοῦ ἁγίου Ο(υ)αρου ἐλέ[ει]σον Στεφ-  
 ἄνο(υ) (καὶ) Σαμουή[λ]ου [...] Ἀμήν ✠



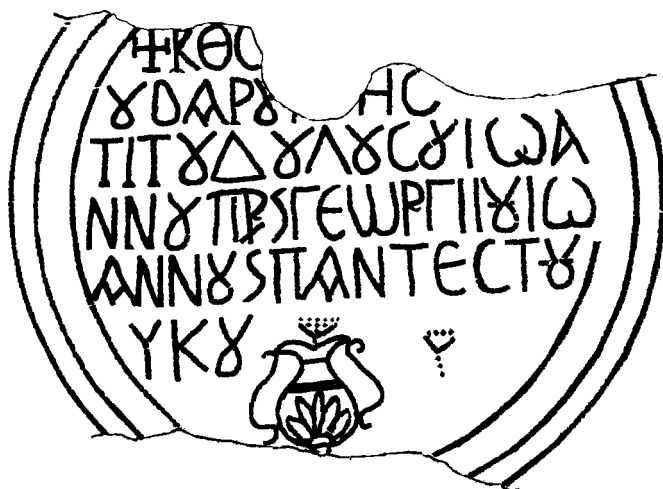
✠ *For the pardon of the sins of John the priest* ✠  
 ✠ *O Lord God of saint Varus have mercy of Stephan*  
*and of Samuel [...]. Amen* ✠

The lower part of the panel from its both ends has two pairs of birds facing a tree. The central part of this panel was badly damaged.

The southern apse and hall of the later church were also paved and decorated by mosaic panels, but unfortunately because of the reuse of the area in the later periods, the mosaic floor was almost completely removed. In the south apse (of which only a small segment is preserved), one row of white tesserae at the base of the stone of the apse can be seen, but the bed-

ding of the mosaic floor can be seen in the whole area of the apse. No traces of the altar or the mosaic floor – except for that one row which was mentioned above – is preserved. So nothing can be said about the chancel and its decoration. The mosaic panels of the south hall are not in better condition. Only those small segments of the mosaic panels that were covered by walls are preserved. Fortunately a medallion that contains an amphora and a Greek inscription in six lines was partially preserved (Photo 11). If the integration of the missing letters is correct, we have the name of Saint to whom the church was dedicated, the Martyr Varus. He was put to death in Egypt during the persecution of Diocletian. His body was transferred to Sire, a village of Palestine near Mount Tabor, by a lady named Cleopatra (Meimaris 1986, p. 136; Bagatti 1971, pp. 281-285). The name of the Saint appears as ἁγίου Οὐαρου in a marble inscription found at Khirbet Sweikeh, near Ramallah (SEG VIII, 1937, nos. 7, 8). It reads:

✠ Κύριε ὁ Θεὸς [τοῦ ἁγίου-]  
 ου Ο(υ)αρου [μνησ[θη-]  
 τι τοῦ δούλου σου Ἰωά-  
 ννου πρεσβυτέρου) (καὶ) Γεωργίου Ἰω-  
 άννου (καὶ) πάντες τοῦ  
 ὕκου



✠ O Lord God of Saint Varus remember your servant John the priest and George son of John and all (the members) of his house.

A small portion of the mosaic floor was preserved at the entrance of the south hall. The whole floor of the atrium was most probably also paved with plain mosaic. In its northern part the mosaic floor was completely removed except for a small segment that was under the threshold of a door to one of the Mamluk rooms. In this area not only the mosaic floor, but also the bedding was dug out down to the bedrock which was leveled and used as floor for one of the Mamluk rooms. All these activities took place during the Mamluk period. The pottery sherds (that is a mixture of handmade, hand painted and glazed ware) and one complete lamp from a beaten earth floor of the room have confirmed the date (Photo 19). An additional evidence was obtained from a silver coin dated to 1260/61 (Ahmad Ajaj: personal communications). The southern part of the atrium was spared. Most probably that happened because this part of the atrium was paved with non-figurative, plain tesserae.

## *2. The mosaic panels of the earlier church*

Only the apse, the chancel and the chancel step of the earlier church was excavated (Photo 5). The apse of this church is about 20 cm lower than the apse of the later church and its diameter is 10 cm smaller. The chancel contains the four bases of the altar. These bases are of a small rectangular narrow slabs of stone fixed in the mosaic floor of the chancel. Each slab has a square hole where the base of the colonnette of the altar was fixed. The whole western part of the chancel is covered by badly preserved mosaic floor with geometric decorations (Photo 13). The central part of it was decorated by two birds facing an amphora from both sides (Photo 14). The panel at the north side is 1.20 m wide, but only a small (30 cm) part of its length can be seen because it goes under the mosaic floor of the north hall of the later church. The other panel at the south side is also 1.20 m wide. It extends to the south for one meter, then it is cut by the bulldozer trench. Both panels are framed and decorated with geometric designs.

A probe trench through the damaged parts of the mosaic floor of the north chancel (of the later Church) will reveal if there is yet another apse paved with mosaic which was associated with the earlier Church. Thus far a probe trench was excavated in the floor of the southern hall of the later Church. Only few tesserae were found in the probe trench, but taking into consideration that two floor beddings were identified and the



upper one can be attributed to the mosaic floor of the later church, we think that the lower one could be attributed to the mosaic floor of the earlier church.

### *Conclusions*

1. Two churches, built one above the other were excavated in the area. This fact cannot be interpreted as repaving of the same church and changing the size of the apse because the apse walls and chancel steps have not only different alignments but different levels and the altars are of different types. Moreover some architectural elements of the earlier church such as a small marble column of an altar (Photo 16), a oil shale chancel post (Photo 17), a stone fastigium decorated with a cross (Photo 12), and stone lintel decorated with floral motifs and crosses (Photo 15), were reused in the construction of the later church. Fragments of columns were reused in the walls of the Mamluk houses and since the architectural analysis revealed that the roof of later church was supported by pillars and vaults rather than columns it seems most likely that those columns were part of the earlier church. However a further investigations are necessary. Among the marble fragments, of special interest is a mensa marble fragment (Photo 18) decorated with a relief in which the praying Daniel can be identified (Dresken 1991: Taf. 78, 146; Buschhausen 1971: Taf. 70, A60; 72; A61; Piccirillo 1994).

The mosaists prepared the floors and then paved them using the same techniques described by several authors (Atiyat, 1994:182; Piccirillo 1993:19).

2. The later church was dated by a dedicatory inscription to the Umayyad period 687 A.D. The earlier one is not dated yet, and why and when it was abandoned is difficult to establish because of the limited area of the excavations, but that happened in a date not later than 687 A.D. The closing date of the later church is also difficult to determine exclusively on the basis of typological studies. The diagnostically Umayyad red-on-cream ware which was revealed from the floor of the church was still in use at least during the second half of the eighth century (Whitecomb 1988:66).

3. Beside being valuable as a dating evidence, the dedicatory inscription of the later church adds a new name (George) to the list of bishops of Philadelphia: Cyrion, Eulogius, Theodosius, Thomas, Polyeucte and John (Northedge et al.1992:42,43).

4. The analysis of the damages according to the “thoroughness and carefulness of the damage and the nature of repairs” (Schick 1987:314), reveals two distinct types: a) when the damage was done carelessly and not repaired and b) when the damage was done carefully and often not thoroughly and crude repairs were conducted. The first type could be attributed to the later occupants of the site (the Mamluks) who were offended by the images so they destroyed them and saw no need to do the repairs because the place was no more used as a church. The second type of damage and repairs, most probably was carried out by the Christians themselves, “more specifically Milkites who damaged and repaired the floors in their own churches to counter criticism of their non-Christian neighbors in the early Abbasid period” (Schick 1987:367).

5. The construction of new churches in the Umayyad period was confirmed by a long list of churches built during this period (Schick, 1987: 260). The list includes the upper floor of the church of the Virgin in Madaba, A.D. 676 (Di Segni 1992: 251-257), the church of Quwaysmah / Philadelphia A.D. 717-18 (Schick 1991:334), the Acropolis church of Ma'in A.D. 719-20 (Piccirillo 1992:35), Saint Lot church at 'Ayn Abata A.D. 691 (Politis 1993:506), the church of St. Stephen at Um al-Rasas A.D. 756 (Piccirillo 1992:46), the church of Khilda/Philadelphia A.D. 687, and the chapel at 'Ayn al-Kanisah/Mount Nebo A.D. 762.

These churches, in addition to providing us with valuable historical and artistical evidence demonstrate the prevailing tone and mood of tolerance in the early Islamic period and call into a serious question the widely accepted assumption that Islamic rule caused a widespread destruction and Islamic authorities prohibited the construction of new churches as well as the renovation of existing ones (Schick 1987:372). Moreover there are some indications demonstrating improvement in the position of the non-Orthodox Christians such as Nestorians and Jacobites (Schick 1987:293).

### **The Pottery (Fig. 2-3)**

Abbreviations used: Dia - diameter; Dec - decoration; ext - exterior; int - interior. All the sherds are wheelmade with the exception of No. 12,20.

1 - 13,5,6. Rim, Bowl; Color: pinkish gray 5 YR 6/2; Dec: dark reddish brown 5YR 3/3 floral decoration on white 10 YR 8/2 slip on the ext and the upper part of the int; Dia: 20 cm.

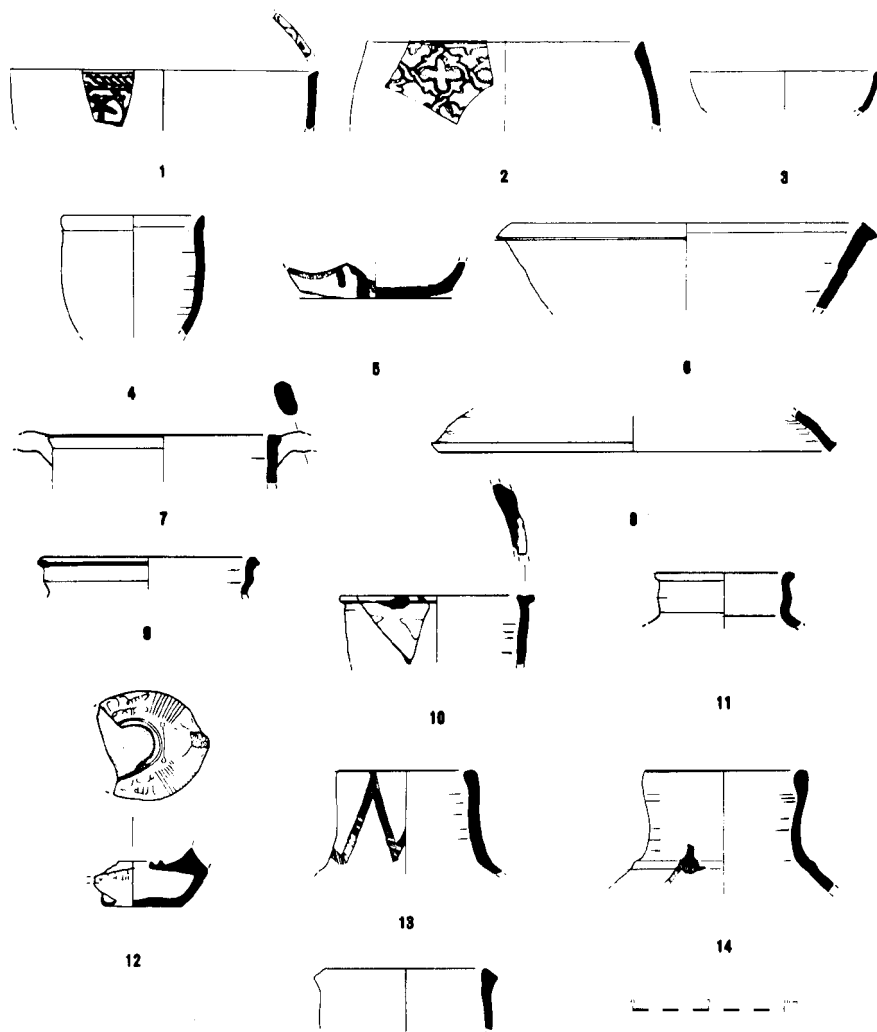
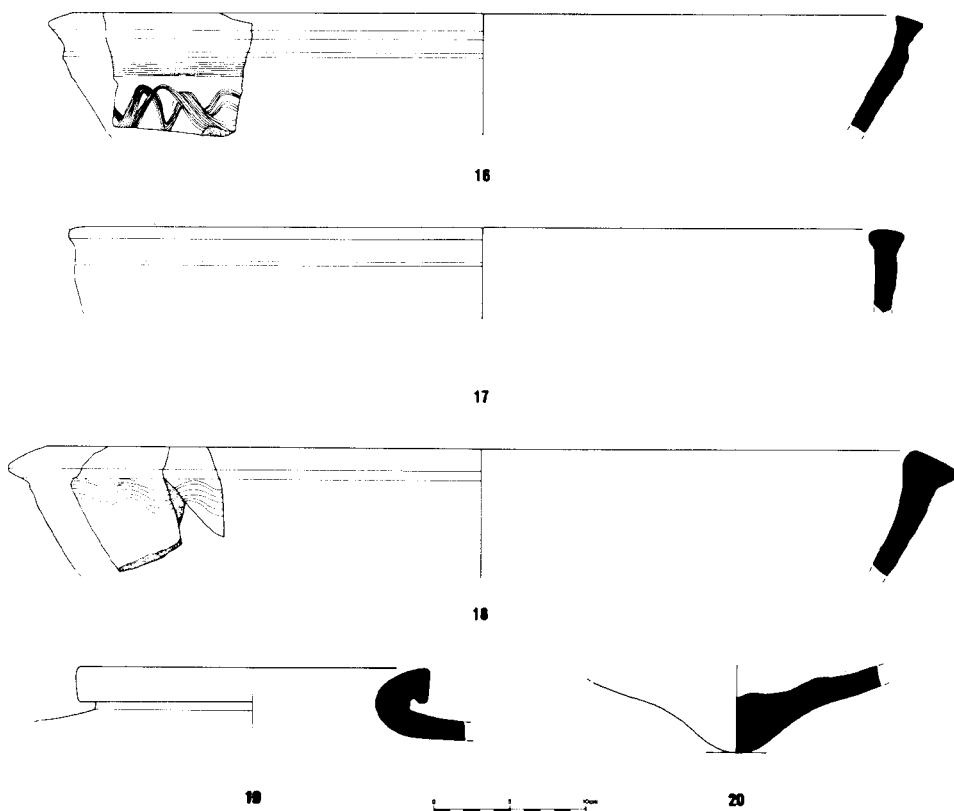


Fig. 2 Ceramics from the destruction phase (Bowls, Cooking pot, Jars).

- 2 - 9,3,3. Rim, Bowl; Color: light reddish brown 2.5 YR 6/4; Dec: ext: reddish brown 2.5 YR 4/4 and red 2.5 YR 4/8 floral decoration on white 10 YR 8/2 slip, ent: white 10 YR 8/2 slip;
- 3 - 9,4,5. Rim, Bowl; Color : light reddish brown 2.5 YR 6/4
- 4 - 13,5,6. Rim, Bowl; Color: pink 5 YR 8/4, white 10 YR 8/1 slip on the ext; Dia : 9cm.
- 5 - 12/13,7,17. Base, Bowl; Color :pink 5 YR 7/3, white 10 YR 8/2 slip on the ext; Dec: dark red 2.5 YR 2.5/4; Dia : 9.5 cm.



*Fig. 3 Ceramics from the destruction phase. (Basin and storage jars).*

- 6 - 12/13,8,19. Rim, Bowl ;Color : light red 2.5 YR 6/6 throughout; Dia :23 cm.
- 7 - 9,4,5. Rim/handle, Cooking pot; Color: pinkish gray 7.5 YR 7/2 with black patches.
- 8 - 9,4,5. Lid; Color: reddish brow 2.5 YR 5/4 with black patches.
- 9 - 9,3,6. Rim, Cooking pot; Color : pink 5 YR 7/4 with reddish gray 5 YR 5/2 patches.
- 10 -9,4,5. Rim, Cooking pot ? ; Color : pink 5 YR 7/4; Dec: reddish brown 5 YR 5/3 on white 10 YR 8/2 slipped ext.
- 11 -9,4,5. Rim, Cooking pot; Color: reddish yellow 5 YR 6/6 with dark reddish gray 5 YR 4/2 patches.
- 12 -9,5. Lamp; Moulded; Color: white 2.5 YR 8/2; Inscribed.
- 13 -13,5,13. Rim, Jar ; Color : pink 5 YR 7/4; Dec: reddish brown 5 YR 5/3 on the ext; Dia: 8.2 cm.
- 14 -13,5,16. Rim, Jar; Color : pink 5 YR 8/4, white 10 YR 8/2 slipped ext; Dec: dark reddish brown 5 YR 3/2 on the ext; Dia: 10.4 cm.

- 15 -9,4,8. Rim, Jar; Color :light gray 10 YR 7/1 with dark reddish gray 5 YR 4/2 patches
- 16 -9,5,9. Rim, Basin; Color: pinkish gray 7.5 YR 6/2, light gray 2.5 Y 7/2 slip on the ext.
- 17 -9,4,7. Rim Basin; Color: pink 5 YR 7/4, light gray 2.5 YR 7/2 slip on the ext and int.
- 18 -9,1,1. Rim, Basin; Color: light red 2.5 YR 6/6 throughout.
- 19 -12/13,7,17. Rim, Pithos; Color: light reddish brown 2.5 YR 6/4; Core: gray 2.5 YR N6, 98%; Dia: 20 cm.
- 20 -12/13,8,19. Base, Pithos; Handmade; Color: pink 5 YR 7/4 throughout, white 10 YR 8/1 slip on the ext.

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