

**CHRISTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE
HOLY LAND
NEW DISCOVERIES**

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF VIRGILIO C. CORBO, OFM



Editorial Board

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FRANCISCAN PRINTING PRESS
JERUSALEM
1990

THE BYZANTINE CHURCHES OF HERODION

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The first remains from the Byzantine period discovered at Herodium¹ were uncovered by Father Corbo's expedition (1962-67)² on the summit of the mountain palace-fortress. Among these remains was a chapel, ca. 7.8 x 3.4 m in size, with a rounded inscribed apse (1.3 m in radius) in its eastern wall.

During the extensive excavations at Lower Herodium (1972-87), directed by the author³, three Byzantine churches were uncovered in different parts of the site (Fig. 1). It seems that the extensive ruins of Greater Herodium attracted the Byzantine community which settled here at some time in the

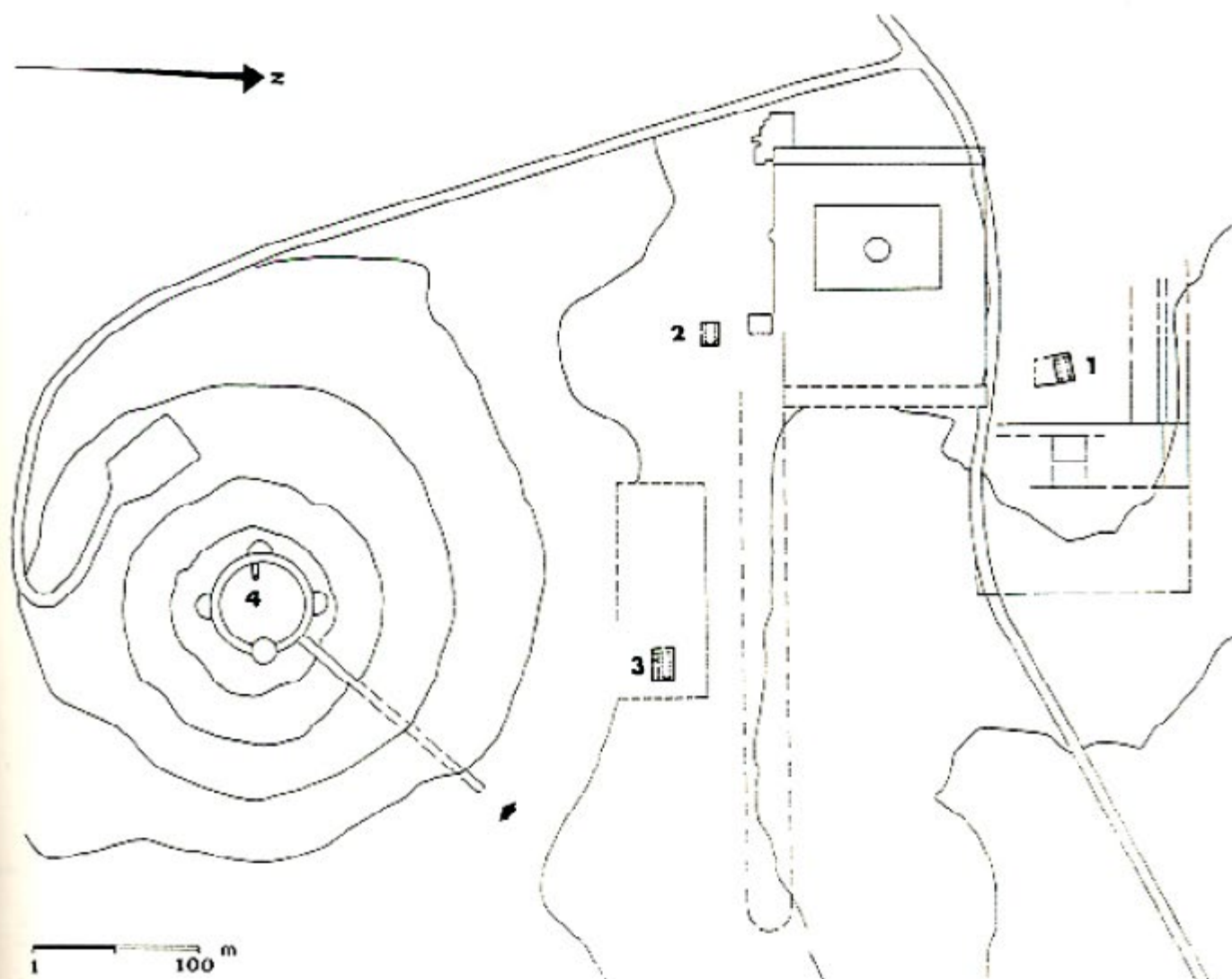


Fig. 1 Herodium: general plan.

5th century C.E. Many of the Lower Herodium's structures were now first cleared and then rebuilt, mostly by subdivision into small dwellings or other units. In other cases, the ancient masonry was either reused in the construction of new structures, built over or beside the ruins, or burned to produce lime, as indicated by several limekilns discovered at the site.

We shall refer to the churches in terms of their relative locations: the Northern Church, Central Church and Eastern Church. The first of these to be uncovered was the Northern Church (1972, 1978); it was followed by the Eastern Church (1979, 1980) and finally the Central Church (1981-83). The three churches are similar in size — small to medium — and share certain features: they are all of the basilica type, the hall divided into a nave and aisles and paved with mosaic floors; flanking the apses of all three churches are rooms (one on each side); each church had a baptismal font and each probably

had upper galleries above the aisles, paved with white mosaic floors.

Northern Church

The Northern Church was built in the middle of the widespread (mostly still unexcavated) northern section of Lower Herodium⁴. The church hall was 10.4 m long and 8.5 m wide (Fig. 2-5). This is the only church at Herodium whose apse was not round but rectangular. The nave was separated from the aisles by square-sectioned pillars. The upper galleries were supported by arches resting on these pillars, as evidenced by the fallen arch stones found in the debris.

A built bench ran around three of the walls — an uncommon feature in Byzantine churches. The hall was paved with a decorated mosaic floor, consisting of one carpet in each of the nave and aisles and small carpets between the pillars, all laid in simple



Fig. 2 Northern Church: general view, looking east.

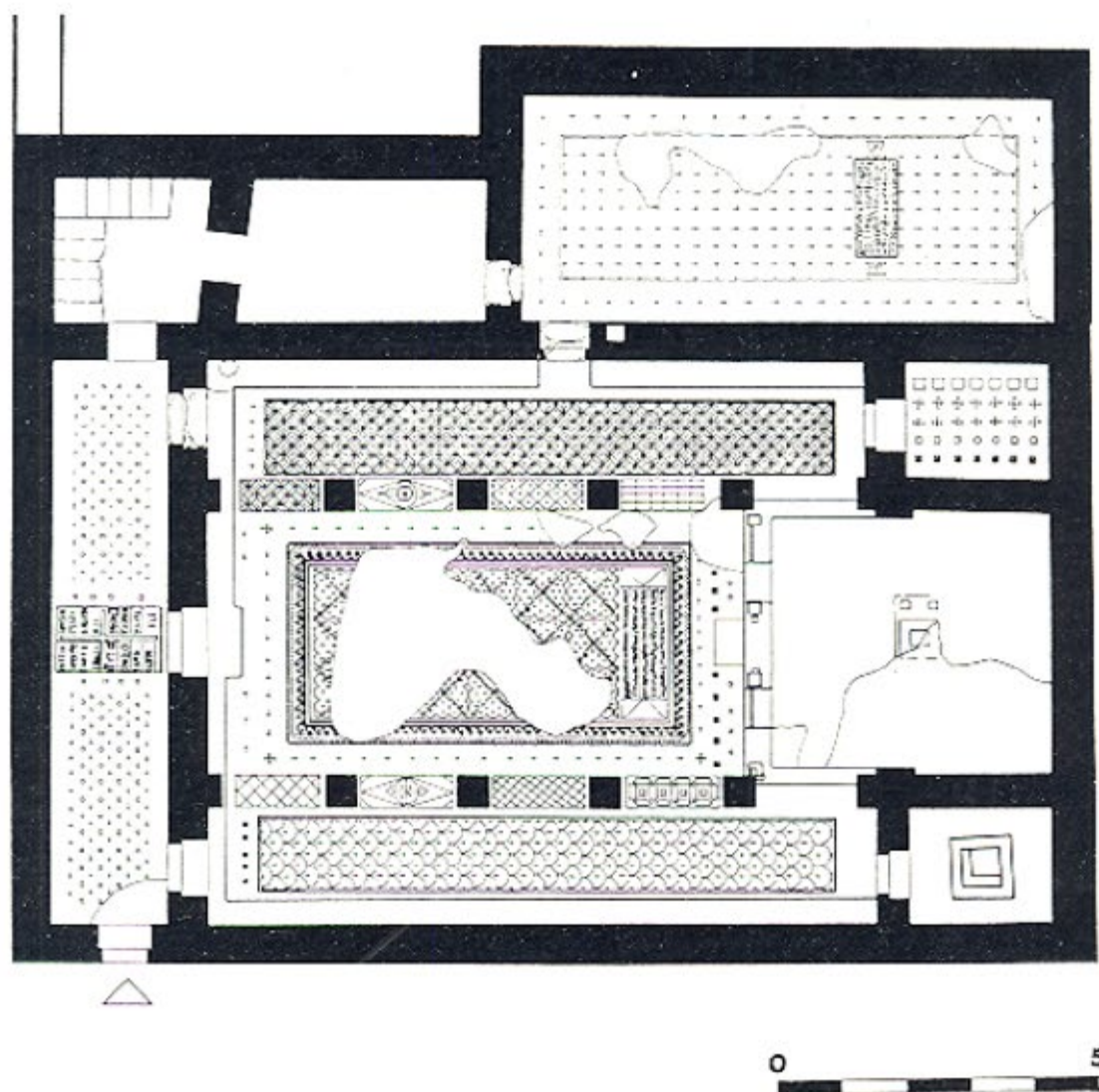


Fig. 3 Plan of the Northern Church.

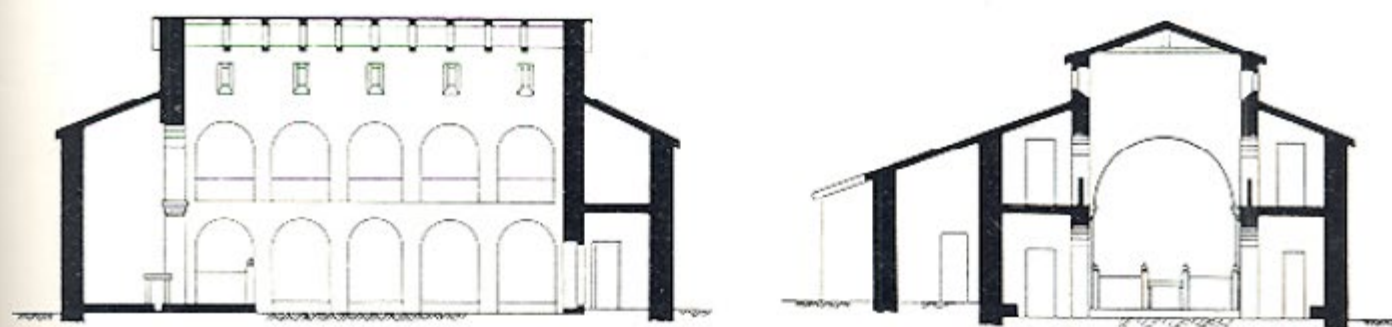


Fig. 4 Northern Church: reconstruction.



Fig. 5 Northern Church: prayer hall and apse.

geometric patterns (Fig. 6). The carpet in the nave contained an inscription (Fig. 7) of five lines within a *tabula ansata* (in connection with this and all other inscriptions, see Leah Di Segni's article in this volume). Traces of a mosaic floor were also found on the *bema* (*presbyterium*), as well as evidence of an altar and a reliquary once set beneath the altar. The *bema* was originally surrounded by a chancel screen, and evidence was found in front of the *bema* of a pulpit (*ambo*), which was cancelled while the church was still in use. A small plastered baptismal font was found in the centre of the small room to the south of the apse.

Three doors led into the church from the narthex (Fig. 8). The entrance to the narthex itself was in the south, in its narrow side. The narthex, too, was paved with a mosaic floor, in whose centre (opposite the middle entrance to the hall) was an inscription consisting of eight lines within a rectangle, fashioned

in the shape of a door divided by a cross into four panels.

Three additional rooms were found adjoining the church on its north, all paved with mosaic floors. The western, smallest room served as a staircase. The central room had no special features, whereas the eastern, largest one (7.5 x 3.5 m in size), which may have been used as a chapel, contained an inscription consisting of five lines within a *tabula ansata*.

Remains of a courtyard, providing access to the church, were uncovered to the south of the building.

Eastern Church

The Eastern Church was built over the eastern edge of a substantial Herodian building to the north of the mountain (probably the main wing of the palace of Lower Herodium⁵). The hall was 12.3 m

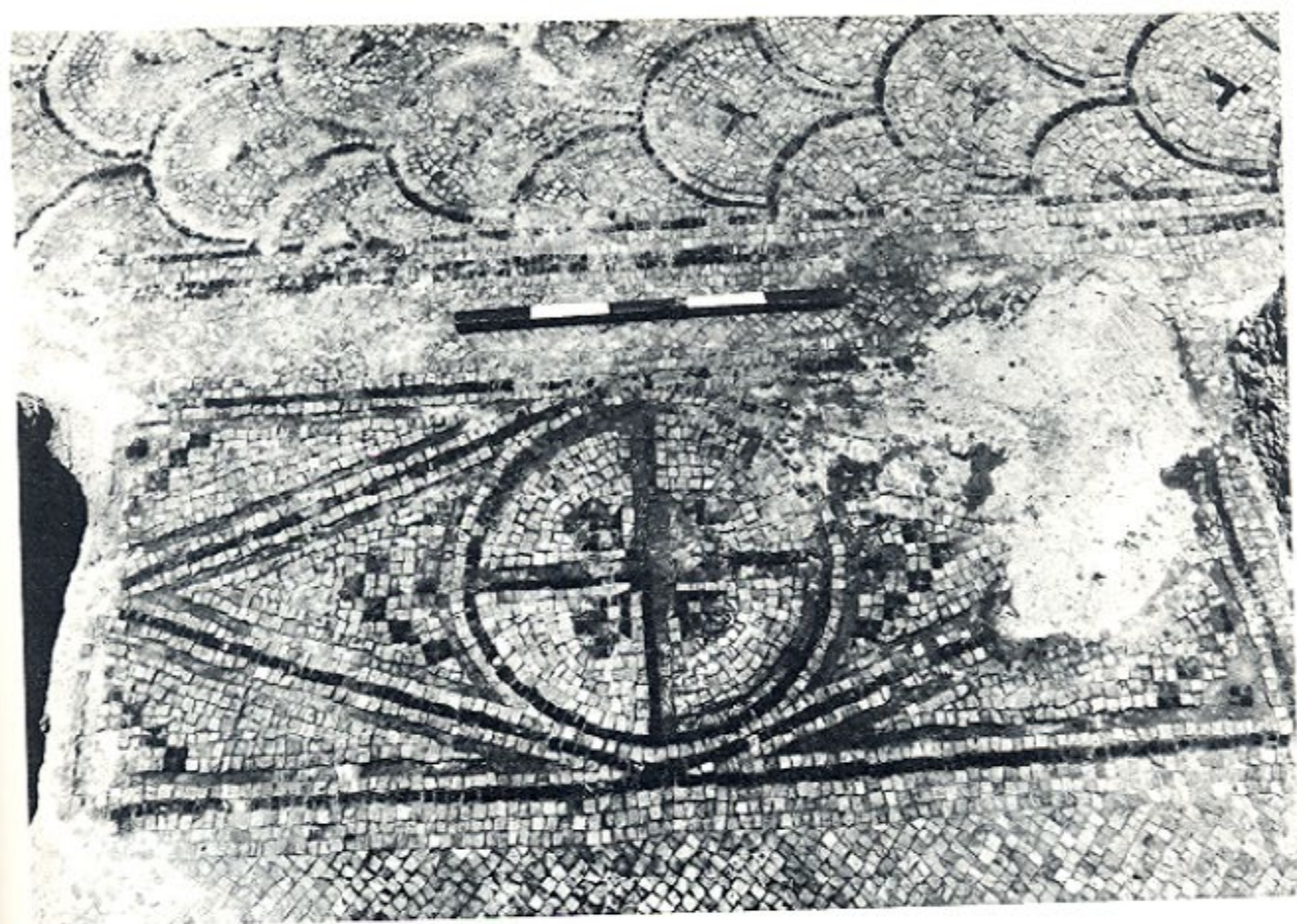


Fig. 6 Northern Church: detail of mosaic.



Fig. 7 Inscription in the nave.



Fig. 8 Northern Church: narthex.

long and 8.3 m wide (Fig. 9). Of the apse (1.7 m in radius), the *bema* in the chord of the apse and the two small rooms flanking it, only the foundations are now extant. The aisles were separated from the nave by monolithic columns; none of the capitals have survived.

The church hall was paved with a decorated mosaic (of which only a small part has been preserved), with one carpet in each of the nave and aisles as well as small carpets between the columns. All the carpets but the central one were laid in geometric patterns. The central carpet was decorated

with a vine trellis, forming three rows of medallions enclosing representations of birds and animals. Only one of the medallions has been fully preserved, with a representation of a lion. The partially preserved medallions contain remains of a peacock, an eagle and another bird (Fig. 10).

Three doors led into the church from a narrow narthex, paved with a coarsely laid white mosaic floor. Two rooms were uncovered in the south of the church, both entered through the church hall. The smaller one, on the west (4.5 x 2.9 m in size), was paved with a fully preserved mosaic floor,

consisting of a carpet laid in a geometrical pattern into which eight leaves were woven (Fig. 11). The room contained a plastered baptismal font, built into a niche in the eastern wall; beneath the floor was a (looted) tomb. The eastern, larger room (7.8 x 2.9 m in size), possibly used as a chapel, contained a partially preserved inscription of four lines in a *tabula ansata*, just beside the entrance.

Central Church

The Central Church was uncovered in the centre of Lower Herodium, adjoining the south of the monumental Herodian building beside the large pool (and garden) complex, in front of a long artificial terrace (remains of Herod's funeral ground?). Unlike the other two churches, clear evidence was found here of an earlier Byzantine phase, under the western half of the church. This

may have been either a chapel above a small barrel-vaulted tomb, or a burial room proper.

Beautifully carved, heavy ashlar were incorporated in the walls of the church and the two contemporaneous rooms adjoining it on the north (Fig. 12). These well carved stones (some of which were decorated) must have been looted from a nearby Herodian structure, perhaps the facade of Herod's burial monument.

The church hall was 11.4 m long and 10.2 m wide; part of it (in the southwestern corner) was cut into the bedrock. The well built apse was 2.0 m in radius. Two rows of monolithic columns separated the aisles from the nave. Nave and aisles were paved with mosaic floors — simple geometrically decorated carpets in the aisles and an intricate, well designed carpet in the nave (Fig. 13-15).

The remains of a mosaic carpet, also laid in geometric patterns, were uncovered on the well preserved *bema*. The latter was originally surround-

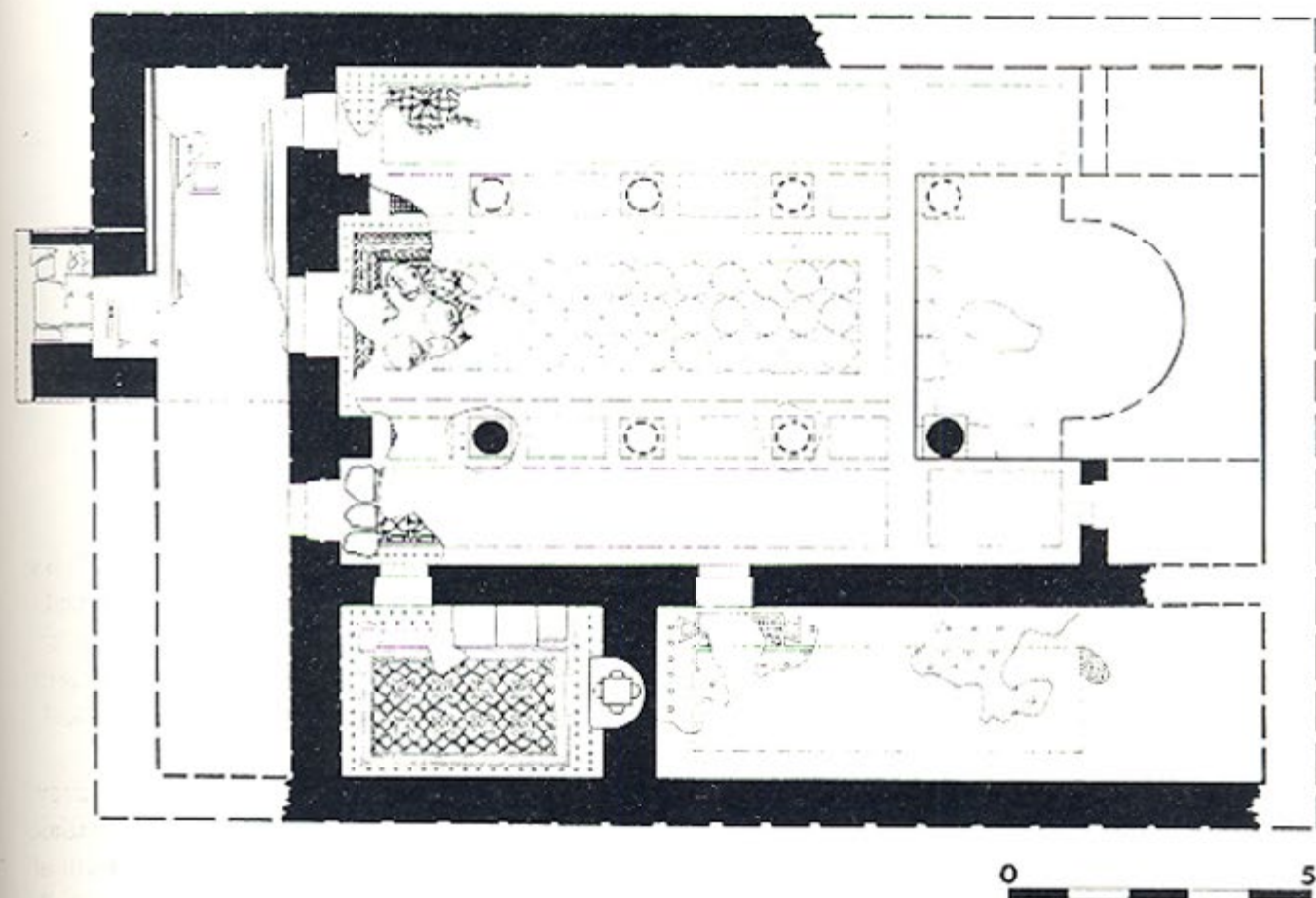


Fig. 9 Eastern Church: plan.



Fig. 10 Eastern Church: mosaic in the nave, looking north.

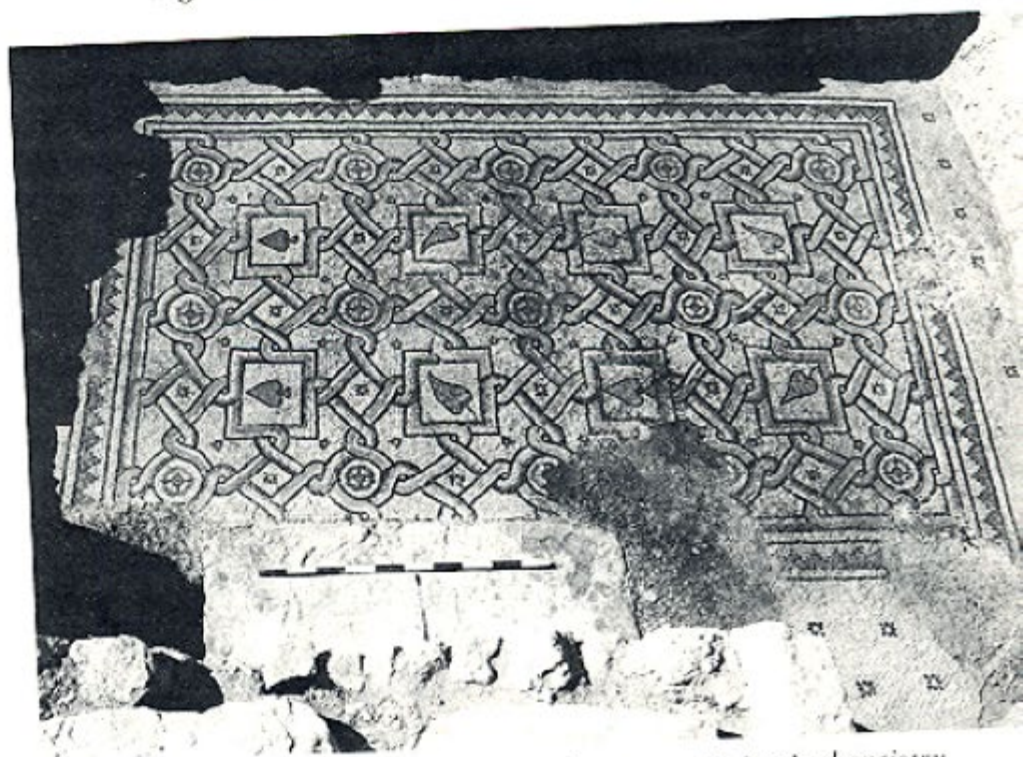


Fig. 11 Eastern Church: mosaic pavement in the baptistry.



Fig. 12 Central Church: general view, looking north-west.



Fig. 13 Central Church: general view, looking east.

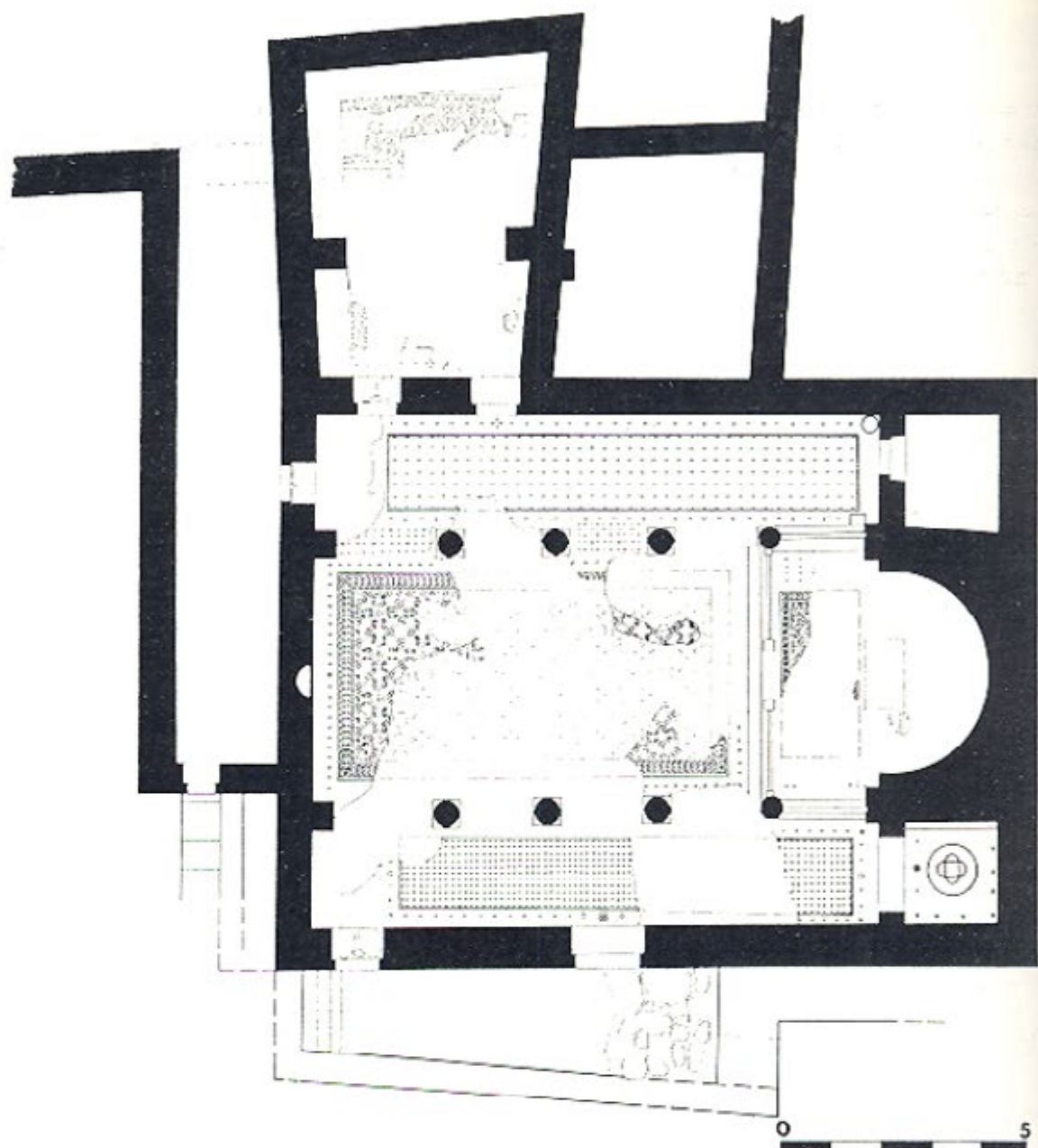


Fig. 14 Central Church: plan.

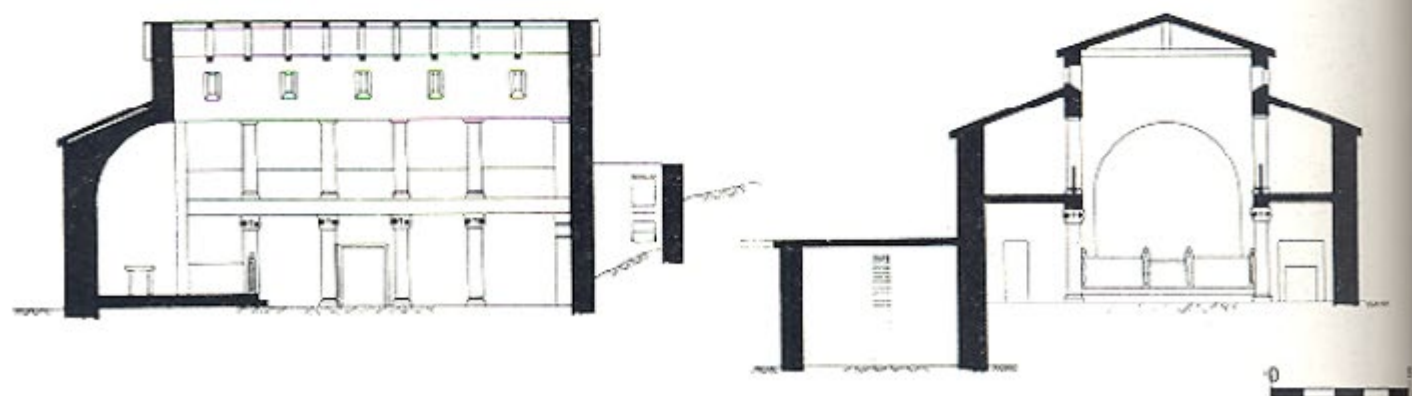


Fig. 15 Central Church: reconstruction.

ed by a chancel screen; visible in its centre was evidence of the altar. The walls of the apse preserved traces of the frescoes that once decorated it (including vine motifs).

The main entrance to the church was through the southern wall — an unusual feature, probably motivated by the topographical obstacles in the

west. The only door from the west led into the northern aisle through a corridor (or narrow court) built on the uneven, sloping rock. To the south, a trapezoid-shaped room (ca. 6.4 x 4.4 m in size) communicated with the church hall. Along two of its walls ran built benches with elevated sides on which those seated could rest their heads.

Summary

The Byzantine remains at Herodium have proved to be much more extensive than known or assumed prior to the excavations. So far we have detected signs of Byzantine activity in practically all areas excavated at Lower Herodium. The main concentrations of Byzantine structures were uncovered around the above-mentioned monumental Herodian building, to the east and west of the pool complex and inside the substructures of the "large palace" (north of the mountain), where the eastern church was situated. East and west of the pool complex, Byzantine activity was concentrated inside two huge Herodian galleries (each about 110 m long and 10 m wide), as well as near and below the eastern gallery (named the "earth-dam" by the excavators)⁷.

The three churches are of the same order of magnitude (small to medium size), characteristic of rural churches. An important but so far unsolved question is the nature and type of the settlement located here during the Byzantine period. Was it a regular settlement, such as a village or a small town? Was it a monastery or a coenobium; or perhaps a logistic base serving the various monasteries in the desert to the east?⁸

The dating of the churches — on the basis of the mosaics, inscriptions and architectural criteria — seems quite certain. The Northern Church is probably the earliest, from the middle to the second half of the 5th century. The Eastern Church was probably built at the end of the 5th century or the beginning of the 6th. The Central Church was perhaps the last to be built (though an element of doubt remains). Only further excavation can provide the full answer to the question of the nature of Herodium in the Byzantine period and the function of the churches in this constellation. *



Fig. 16 Central Church: baptismal font.



Fig. 17 Central Church: decorated capital.

NOTES

- 1 A more detailed report of the three churches was recently published in Hebrew: E. Netzer, R. Birger and A. Feller, "The Churches of Herodium," *Qadmoniot* 20 (1987) 32-44; an English translation of that paper will soon be published by the Israel Exploration Society in their forthcoming *Churches Revealed*.
- 2 See V. C. Corbo, *Herodium, I: Gli edifici della reggia-fortezza* (SBF Collectio Maior, 20), Jerusalem 1989, 77-85.
- 3 See E. Netzer, *Greater Herodium* (Qedem 13), Jerusalem 1981; idem, *Herodium, an Archaeological Guide*, Jerusalem 1987.
- 4 See *Greater Herodium* (n. 3 supra), 45-51.
- 5 See *ibid.*, 30-35.
- 6 See *ibid.*, 35-45.
- 7 The Byzantine remains between the church and the monumental building consisted of a few phases.
- 8 In a recent publication, J. Zias ("Was Byzantine Herodium

a Leprosarium?" *BA* 59 [1986] 182-186) has suggested identifying Herodium with the Empress Eudocia's Leprosarium at "Phordisia," mentioned by the 14th-century church historian Nicephorus Callistus. According to this source, this hospital accommodated 400 patients suffering from the "holy sickness," which Zias believes to be leprosy (Hansen's disease). However, in view of the very late date of the source and the uncertainty of the identification of Phordisia with Herodium, we find it difficult to accept this hypothesis.

* **Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank E. Lass, D. Stacey, Rivka Birger and Rachel Bar-Natan, who helped in the field work; Rivka Birger and Ayala Feller who collaborated in the preparation of this report; Leah Di Segni who studied the inscriptions; Aina Zabidov-Cohen, who prepared the final drawings following the survey and the drawings done by the author; and Zeev Radovan, who took the photographs.