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The Churches of Herodium

Ehud Netzer, Rivka Birger-Calderon and Ayala Feller

Herodium, located about 5 km southeast of Bethlehem, is an example of one of the opulent sites built by King Herod, the great builder, and it bears his name. Here he constructed a huge complex comprising a palace, a fortress, a district capital, and the king's burial monument. An unusual round fortified palace was erected at the top of an artificial and modified hill, while the larger part of the complex was located at the base of the latter — in Lower Herodium.

Excavations conducted on the mound by V. Corbo of the Franciscan Biblical School in 1962–1967, exposed, in addition to the Herodian remains, a few ruins from the Byzantine era, including a chapel. The latter was built into the Herodian ruins (its southern and western walls are from Herodian times). The chapel is 7.8 m long and 3.4 m wide. At its eastern extremity is an apse, 2.6 m in diameter, recessed into the eastern wall. However, no traces were found of a mosaic floor or other characteristic features of Byzantine churches. This chapel apparently served a group of monks who chose to make their abode at the top of the round hill.

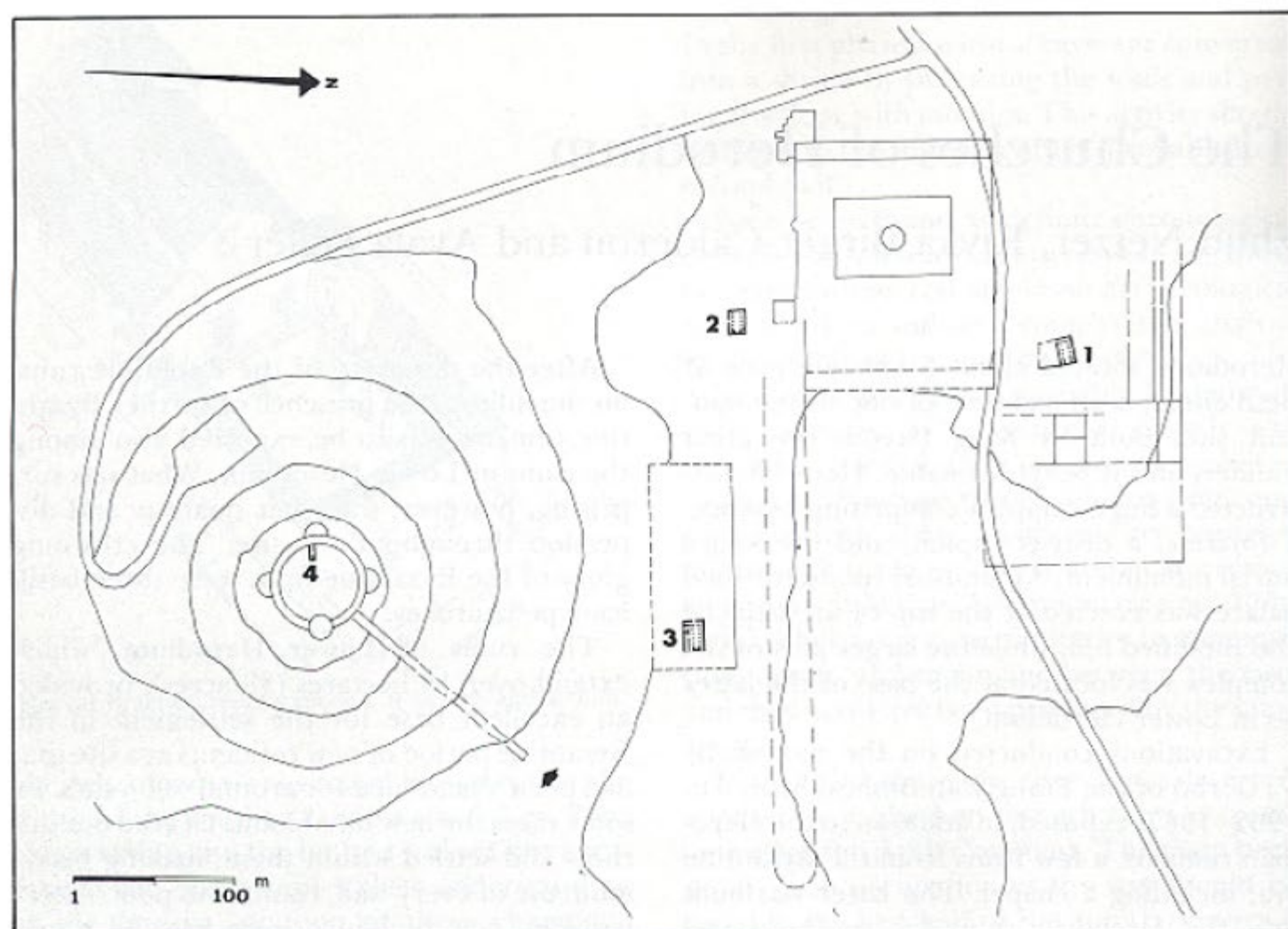
¹ The churches were discovered in 1973–1983 during excavations directed by Ehud Netzer on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in cooperation with the archaeology officer of Judea and Samaria and the Israel Exploration Society. Rivka Birger, Rachel Bar-Nathan, Egon Lass, and David Stacey were members of the excavation staff. Surveying was carried out by Ehud Netzer, and photographs were taken by Zev Radovan. We would like to thank Leah Di Segni, who deciphered and studied the inscriptions, and Anat Cohen, who drew the plans. See also E. Netzer, "The Byzantine Churches of Herodium," *CAHIL*, pp. 165–176; L. Di Segni, "The Greek Inscriptions in the Northern and Eastern Churches at Herodium," *ibid.*, pp. 17–190.

After the discovery of the Byzantine ruins on the hilltop, the presence of further Byzantine remains was to be expected also among the ruins of Lower Herodium. What was surprising, however, was their quantity and dispersion throughout the site. The crowning glory of the Byzantine finds were three basilica-type churches.¹

The ruins of Lower Herodium, which extend over 15 hectares (38 acres), provided an excellent base for the settlement in the Byzantine period of new residents at a site that had been abandoned for around 400 years. In some cases the new inhabitants cleared out the ruins and settled within them, making maximum use of every wall, room, and pool. Alternatively, new buildings were erected, some atop and others alongside the ruins, usually exploiting stones taken from them.

The three churches uncovered in Lower Herodium, in the order of their discovery, are:

1. The northern church (excavated in 1973, 1978), located north of the Bethlehem–Tekoa road, atop ruins from the Herodian era.
2. The eastern church (excavated in 1979–1980), located north of the mount upon the ruins of a large structure which almost certainly functioned as a wing of the central palace of Lower Herodium. Some of the structure's original walls served the church building as foundations.
3. The central church (excavated in 1981–1983), adjoining the south of the "monumental building" near the large pool at the heart of Lower Herodium. This church was erected on top of ruins from the Herodian period; its builders reused stones from an elaborate



Herodium: location of churches — 1) The northern church; 2) The central church; 3) The eastern church; 4) The chapel built above the fortified palace on the mount

monument whose location has not yet been ascertained, and could possibly have served as Herod's tomb. Unlike the other two churches, this building was preceded by a structure (perhaps a chapel or burial chamber), also from the Byzantine period.

The three churches have several features in common: all were built on a similar scale (moderate size); all have a basilican design and are graced with mosaic floors; all have two small *pastophoria* rooms, on either side of the apse, and all include a baptistery — in two cases in a room located south of the *bema* (*presbyterium*), and in the third, in a chapel-like room adjacent to the south end of the main hall.

The Northern Church

The inner dimensions of the church's hall

were 8.5 m in width and 10.4 m in length. The nave, together with the *bema*, was 13.1 m long. The *bema* is rectangular; in place of the regular round apse there is a rectangular room open toward the main hall. On either side of the rectangular *bema* there is a small room. The hall itself is surrounded on three sides (north, south, and west) by a built-in bench, a rare phenomenon in churches from the Byzantine era. Square pillars, four on each side, separated the lateral aisles from the nave. The pillars did not have decorated bases, and apparently lacked capitals. The columns supported stone arcades, evidence of which was found among the building's ruins.

The hall of the church, like its other rooms, had a mosaic floor, most of which has been preserved (see Pl. XVIa). The mosaics were carpetlike; there was one along the nave,



Herodium: general view of the northern church, from the southwest

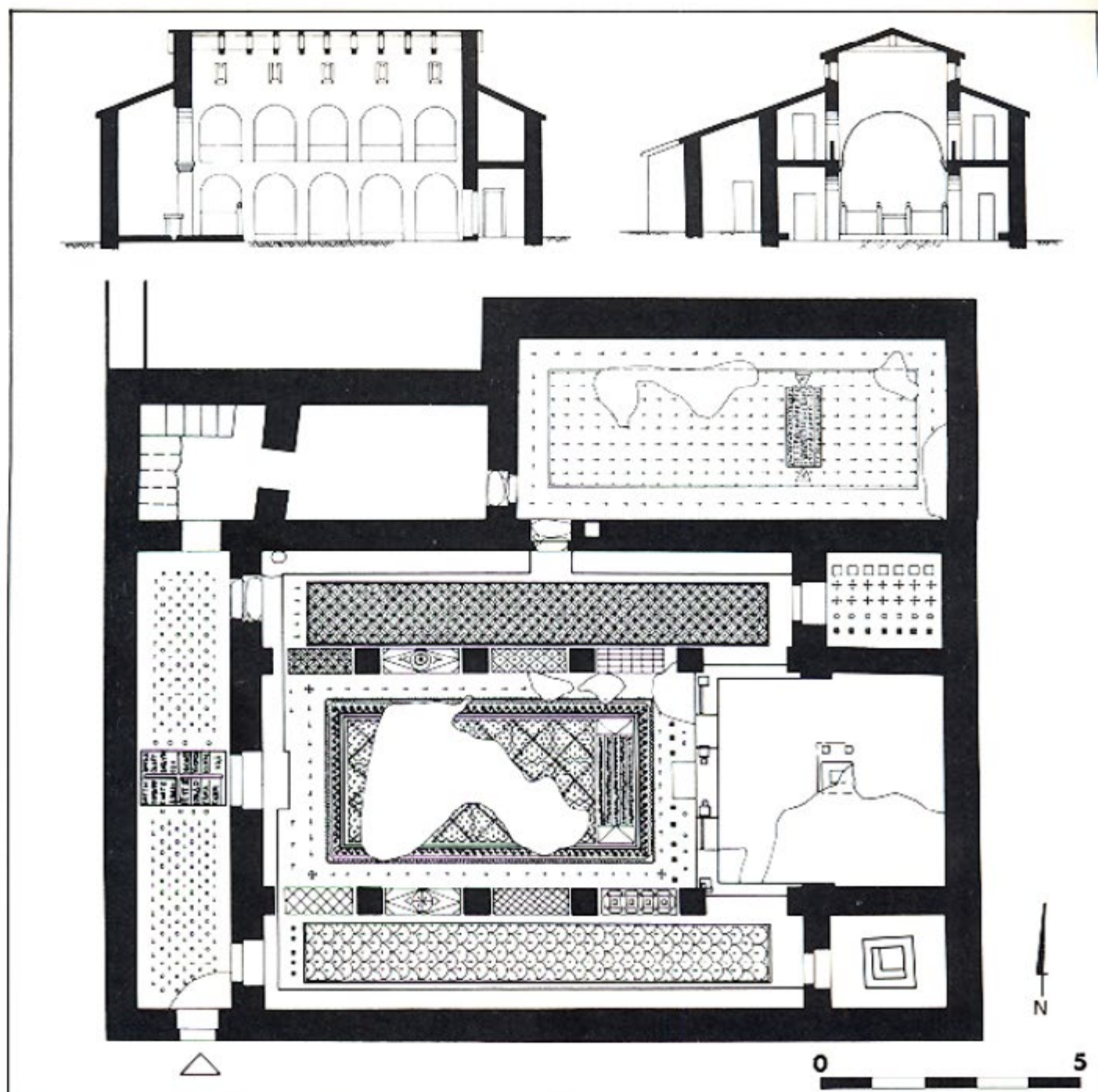
others along the aisles (one for each aisle), and small mosaic panels in the intercolumniations. The designs comprised simple geometric shapes, each carpet having a different decoration. At the eastern extremity of the large carpet, a five-line Greek dedication inscription was set in a *tabula ansata*. It reads:

O Lord the Son(?) Christ and holy Michael, receive the offering of Thy servants, the children of Ioulesas, the brothers Saphrica and Anael and their households, and of Salaeos and his children, and of Abraam and his children, and of Zana and Nonna and Nonna's daughter Zana.

The *bema*, too, had a mosaic floor (indicated by the negative impressions of the tesserae in the mortar bed). In its center, evidence of the

altar table was found — impressions of two of the altar's four pillars — and below there was a rectangular niche, in which a reliquary had probably been laid. The *bema* was surrounded by a chancel screen, of which no traces remain. There are signs that an *ambo* had originally existed at its northern edge, but it had been removed already during the church's existence.

The small room (1.9 × 2.2 m) south of the *bema* had a basin in its center (approximately 60 × 60 cm), which was built of and coated with mortar and partially sunken into the white mosaic floor. This was most likely a baptismal font, and the room itself was a baptistery. The chamber, similar in size, north of the *bema* also had a mosaic floor, decorated with rows of flowers and other patterns. Its function is not clear; it may have served as a



Herodium: plan and elevation of the northern church

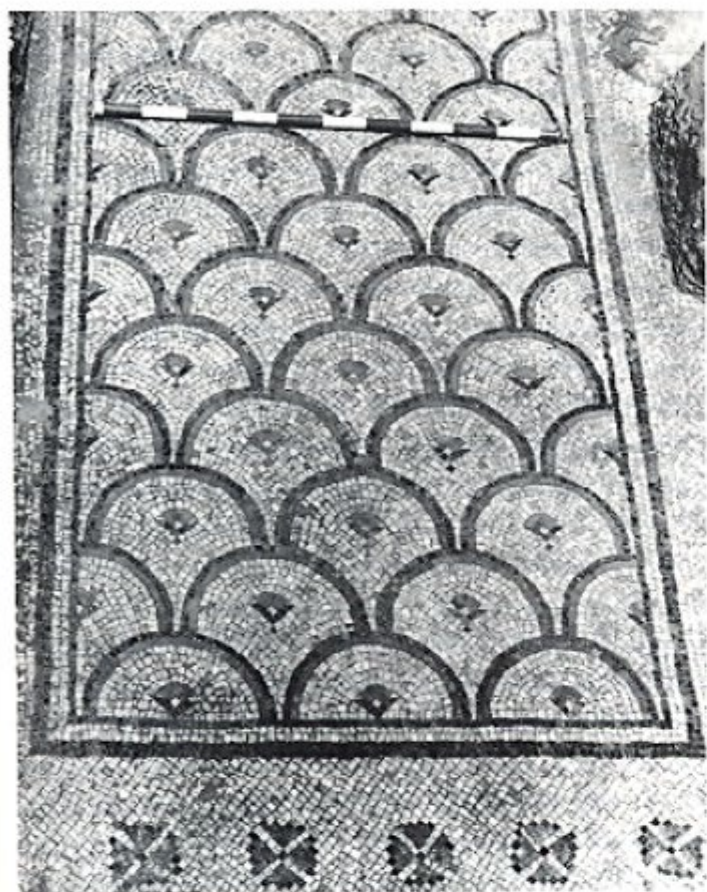
prothesis, namely a room for the preparation of the bread and wine for the Eucharist.

The church hall was entered from the west, via the narthex, through three entrances. The central entrance led into the nave, each of the lateral ones led into one of the aisles. The narthex was narrow (1.8 m wide), about as long as the width of the main hall, and was entered from the south (from a courtyard that has not yet been excavated), not from the west as is usual. It was entirely covered with mosaics comprising alternating rows of

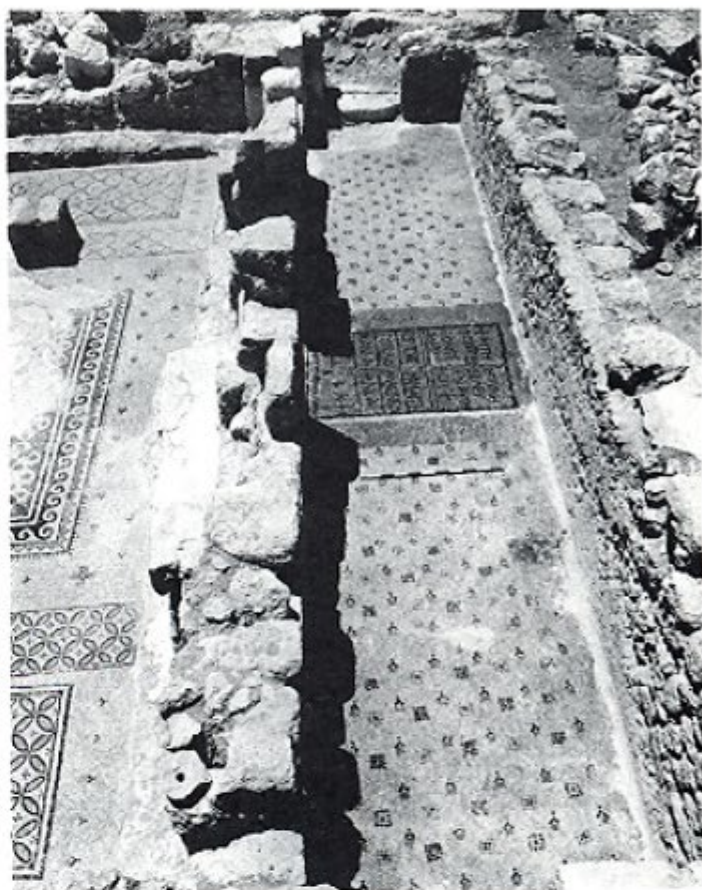
flowers and squares. In its center, opposite the central entrance, a dedication inscription in Greek was uncovered (see Pl. XVIc):

This is the gate to the Lord, the righteous shall enter into it. O Lord the Son, Christ remember Thy servant Anael and Saprica.

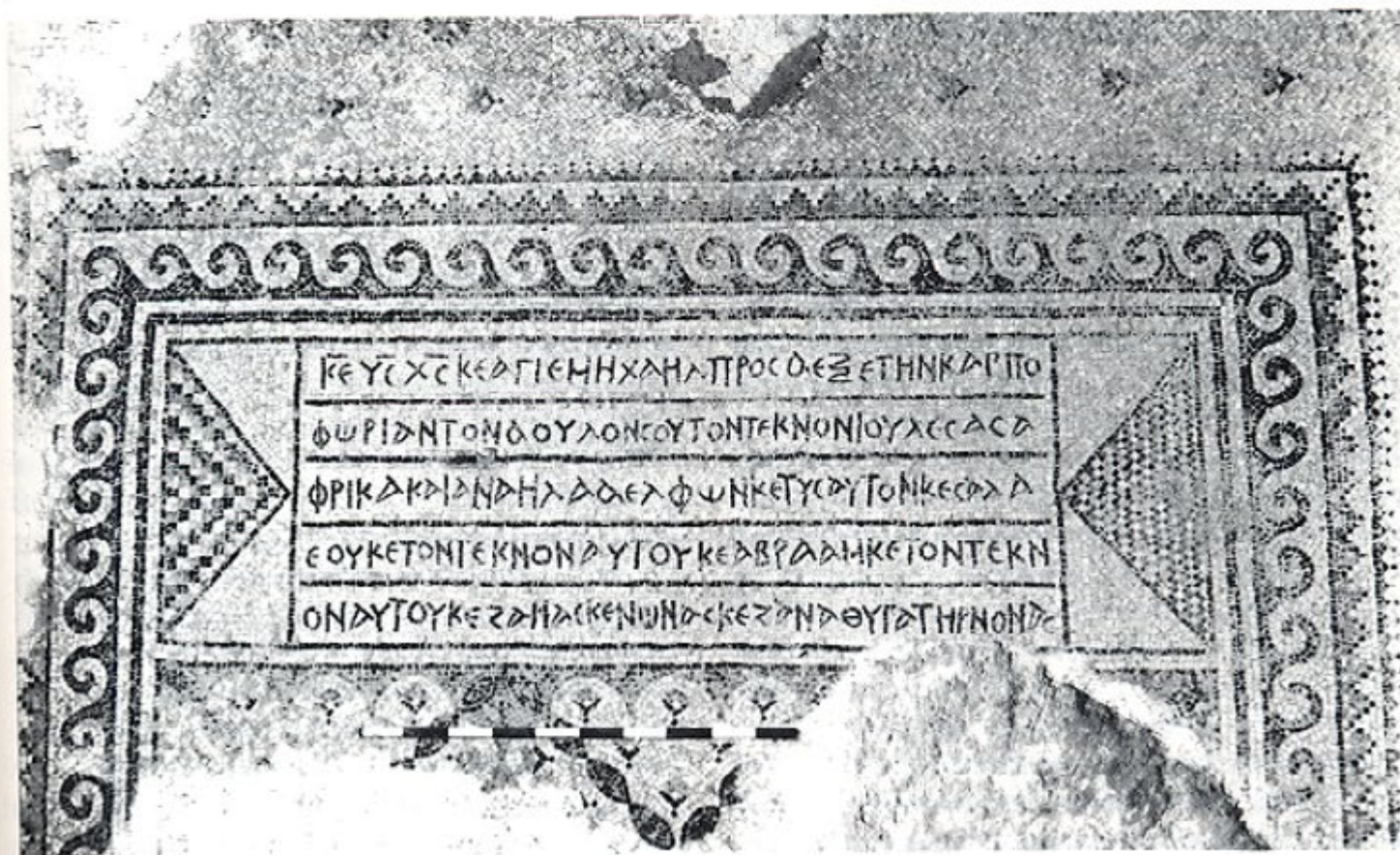
The first part is taken from Psalms 117:20 (MT. 118:20), which was commonly inscribed at church entrances. Note that the Saprica mentioned in this inscription is probably not



Herodium: mosaic in southern aisle of the northern church, looking east



Herodium: narthex of the northern church, looking south



Herodium: inscription in hall of the northern church



Herodium: inscription in eastern room north of the northern church's nave, looking east

Saphrica of the first inscription — Anael's sister — but perhaps his wife. The inscription, orientated westward, is laid out in an unconventional manner. It has the appearance of a gate incorporating a cross which in effect divides it into four panels, the upper two of which bear the first part of the inscription, while the lower two contain its second part.

Three rooms lay alongside the main church hall and the narthex on the north. The eastern one was the largest (3.5 × 7.6 m). It had a mosaic floor consisting of rows of flowers, and in its center a Greek dedication inscription (also five lines) was laid down in a *tabula ansata*. It reads:

Saint Michael, receive the offering of your servant Anael and his household, Saphrica and Mamas. Amen.

In this inscription, the names of Anael and his wife, Saphrica, are joined by that of their son, Mamas; this text, therefore, may be later than that in the narthex. Possibly this room, which was entered directly from the main hall, served as a chapel. Most of its eastern wall is destroyed, so that the existence of an apse there cannot be ascertained.

The westernmost and smallest of the three rooms had a staircase leading to the upper story. This room was entered from the narthex. In any event, the existence of an upper story is clearly evidenced both above the lateral aisles (which were colonnaded galleries) and above the narthex. Its remains — debris comprising tesserae and the mortar on

which they were laid — indicate that it was also paved with a course, white mosaic. The third room, situated between the westernmost chamber and the "chapel," could be entered from the stairwell. The last two rooms were paved with white tesserae interspersed with a few red and black stones, with no pattern.

The mosaic patterns unearthed in the first church are typical of mosaic floors of the Byzantine period. The design in the nave resembles that in the Eshtemo'a and Susiya synagogues, in the first church in Bethany (fourth-fifth century), in the Church of Hosen (555 C.E.), in the Church of Peter and Paul in Gerasa (after 533 C.E.), and elsewhere.

The three inscriptions discovered in the northern church are of considerable interest. All of them bear the names of the same family of donors. The first two include the same form of address: κ(ύρι)ε υ(ι)ος χ(ριστό)ς, "O Lord, the Son, Christ." Most uncommon is the appearance of υ(ι)ος, "the Son," and not the common abridged version, Ι(ησοῦ)ς = "Jesus." It is possible that this is merely a textual error, but that seems unlikely, as it appears in both inscriptions. The notation "the Son" does not correspond to the usual Orthodox Christian formula. Leah Di Segni, who read and published the inscriptions, raised the possibility that it expressed the belief of non-Orthodox Christians, followers of a Gnostic Judeo-Christian sect. These sects, which proliferated in the second and third centuries C.E., had mostly disappeared by the fourth century, but groups of them apparently lingered on in the East, at least until the sixth century C.E. A further indication of possible Gnostic inspiration was the choice of the archangel Michael as patron of the church. The cult of angels was especially widespread among the Gnostic sects, with particular stress on the role of Michael, who was identified in certain cases with Jesus himself. On the other hand, the earlier Orthodox Church Fathers did not view the angel cult favorably, and it was only at the start of the sixth century that the intensification of the cult among the population, and the disappear-

ance of Gnostic sects, brought about official Church approval of this phenomenon.

The names in the inscriptions are on the whole local or Semitic. Ioulesas is derived from the Roman Julius, but has a local suffix. The name Saphrica, or Saprira, is found chiefly in Egypt and Syria, while Anael-Hanael and Abraam are biblical. Zana was a rare, feminine form of the name Zanos that appears in southern Palestine. The name Nona was particularly common in Palestine, but also in Syria and Egypt. Mamas and Salaeos (Salah) are Semitic connotations that were common in the area.

The donors all belonged to one family. Saphrica and Anael were brother and sister. The other Saprira was Anael's wife (the duplicity of the name may indicate a familial relation). From an epigraphic point of view, the church inscriptions belong to the end of the fifth century or the first half of the sixth century C.E. The fact that the inscription in the room north of the main hall includes the name of the child Mamas may indicate that that chamber, or at least its floor, was an addition to the already built church.

The Eastern Church

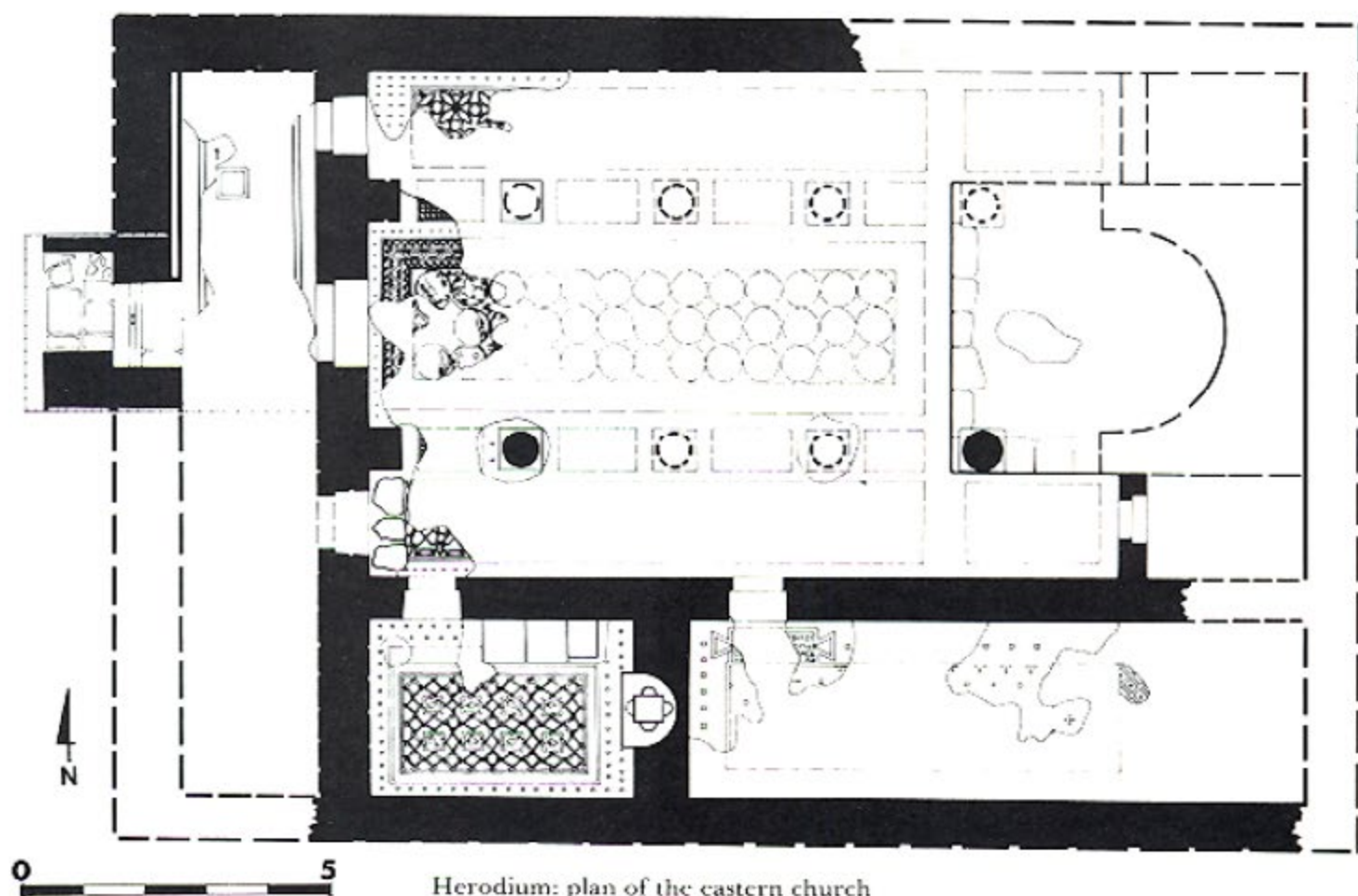
The inner dimensions of the main hall were 12.3 m in length and 8.3 m in width. The nave, together with the apse at the end of the *bema*, was approximately 14 m long. As in the northern church, here too there were small rooms on either side of the *bema*, but in this case only part of one, that south of the apse, has survived. Rows of columns — which almost certainly were originally monoliths — separated the aisles from the nave. The columns were stood on roughly worked pedestals. No remnants of their capitals have been uncovered in the excavations.

The main hall (like the other rooms of the church) was decorated with mosaics, which have mostly been destroyed; parts, however, have been preserved, particularly in the west. Here too, mosaic carpets decorated the nave and each of the lateral aisles, and small panels paved the intercolumniations. The most beautiful of these mosaics is that of the nave, which



Herodium: view of southern aisle of the northern church, looking east

has three rows of medallions formed by vine-scrolls with bunches of grapes, leaves, and tendrils. The medallions were filled with animals and birds. In the first row on the west, a peacock faces the central medallion, in which a section of an acanthus leaf has been preserved. The peacock itself has been destroyed, perhaps by iconoclasts, and restored in the shape of a leaf. In the second row, from the left, a lion has been preserved almost in its entirety (see Pl. XVIId), and beside it, in this row's central medallion, the top half of an eagle's head. In the third row, only the bottom part of a bird's legs has been preserved. The remaining mosaics in the main hall were decorated with rich geometrical patterns. An unusual phenomenon observed here were signs of red, yellow and green paint on the underfloor beneath the mosaics, in the shape



Herodium: plan of the eastern church

of the medallions and the figures within them. These markings helped the mosaicists lay the tesserae.

The *bema* in this church is mostly destroyed, and the remains of the apse foundations at its edge could hardly be discerned. The main hall was entered through three entrances from a narrow narthex, as in the northern church. The latter, which was as long as the church's width, and 2.5 m wide, was excavated only in part. A crude mosaic was discovered in the narthex, with a simple black frame and flowers.

Two rooms were unearthed south of the main hall. Both were entered from the southern aisle of the main hall. The western one (2.9 × 4.5 m) served as a baptistery. Its small baptismal font was built inside a niche in the center of the eastern wall; it is plastered and cruciform. The floor of the room was decorated with a mosaic of unusual geometrical design — eight squares with leaves and circles



Herodium: two southern rooms of the eastern church, looking east

enclosing rosettes. Under the floor, in the north, a plundered tomb was unearthed, covered by stone slabs.

The second room — probably a chapel — is larger than the first (about 2.9 m wide and at least 7.8 m long), but destroyed on its eastern side. Its pavement had a black mosaic frame, with patterns of flowers and squares both within and without (here too evidence of colored outlines on the mosaic bed were discovered). Opposite the entrance door a four-line Greek inscription was laid in a *tabula ansata*. Only a small part of it has survived:

... for the salvation of those (the benefactors) ... Amen.

The last line may possibly have contained the name of the church. In any case, the letters are quite different from those in the northern church, apparently indicating a later date in the second half of the sixth century (or even the beginning of the seventh century) C.E.

There are indications (rough mosaic stones that fell from above) that the eastern church, like the northern one, also had a gallery above the lateral aisles and the narthex. The stairwell, however, has not yet been discovered.

Mosaics of populated vinescrolls, such as that unearthed in the eastern church at Herodium, were widespread in Palestine in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. both in churches and synagogues.

The Central Church

Whereas the northern and eastern churches were apparently built as independent structures, the central church was incorporated into a block of buildings which also included the remains of the Herodian "monumental structure," cleared of its ruins and divided into a number of rooms.

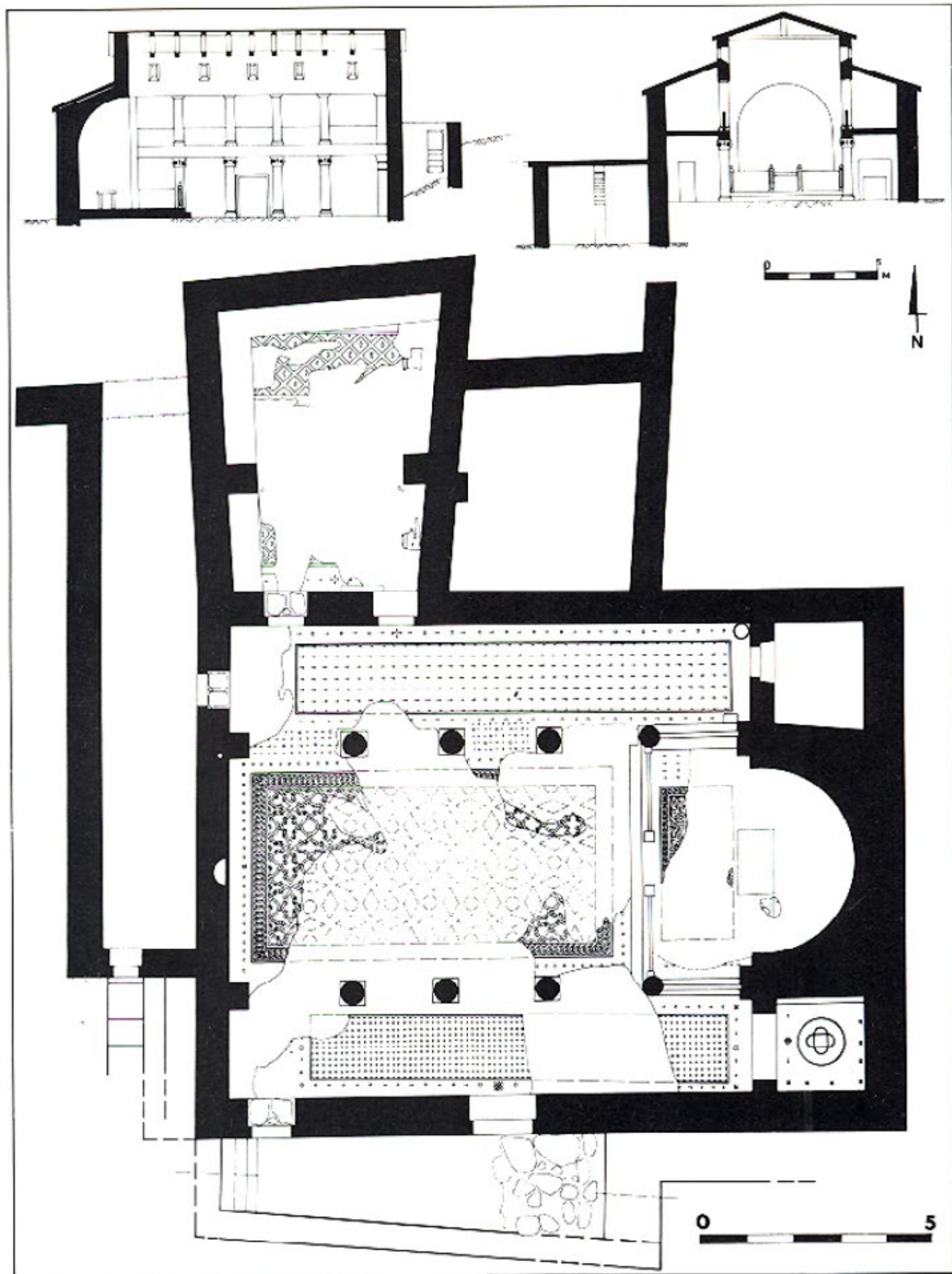
The inner dimensions of the main hall were 11.4 m in length and 10.2 m in width. The nave, together with the apse at the edge of the *bema*, was 13.8 m long. Here too the apse was flanked by two small rooms. Between each of the lateral aisles and the nave was a row of four columns, probably monoliths; they stood



Herodium: general view of the central church against the background of the mount



Herodium: general view of the central church, looking west



Herodium: plan of the central church

on crudely-worked bases. The excavations unearthed some of the capitals, each different from the others.

The church's main hall was originally covered in mosaics, with a central "carpet" for the nave and an additional "panel" in each aisle; they have been largely preserved. The decoration of the nave's mosaic comprised a complex geometric design, combining lozenges and circles, while in the aisles the patterns were ornamental. Unlike the other two churches, here there were no separate "panels" in the intercolumniations, but instead rows of background pattern (flowers and squares), similar to but more dense than that surrounding the "carpets" of the nave and aisles.

The complex pattern of the nave's mosaic is unusual (see Pl. XVib). It resembles that of the second church in Bethany (postdating 427 C.E.) but also the mosaics of Khirbet al-Mefjer of the Early Arab period. The patterns in the aisles are representative of common Byzantine designs, such as those in the church of Horvat Berachot.

The *bema* of the central church was also paved with a geometric mosaic, of which only a small part has been preserved. Remains of frescoes with geometrical patterns — and perhaps also vinescrolls — were discerned on the walls of the apse and in the debris. Apparently the entire church was ornamented in a similar manner. Likewise, decorated fragments of plaster were found. The center of the *bema* bears traces of the altar legs. The former was surrounded by a chancel screen, the posts of which, on either side of the entrance to the *bema*, were apparently made of marble, whereas its panels (at least the lateral ones) were built and coated with plaster. In the western wall of the nave, opposite the apse, a small niche was hewn from the natural rock approximately 80 cm above the floor level.

As in the northern church, here too the baptistery was situated in the southern side room (ca. 2 × 2 m) of the apse. In its center stood the baptismal font, hewn out of a single stone, shaped like the drum of a column, 1.1 m



Herodium: baptismal font in the central church

in diameter and 85 cm high. The font was quatrefoil and had a square recess at the bottom. A small cross was engraved in the wall of the font. The mosaic floor of the baptistery, around the font, had a combination of flowers and geometrical shapes, and a cruciform decoration at the front of the font. The baptistery had no door, but opened onto the southern aisle along almost its entire width. North of the apse was another small room (partly destroyed), the floor of which was also mosaic, apparently white.

The main entrance to the church hall was from the south (not the west), and there was no narthex. In front of the entrance was a paved area, rather like a front porch, which apparently had no roof. Unlike the other two churches, which were built under better topographic conditions, the southwest corner of this church was hewn out of natural rock. Thus access from the west was difficult. The location of the main entrance at the south was

possibly related to the fact that a large cistern was situated nearby. The latter was apparently built in Herod's time and is still used today.

Another entrance to the main hall was discovered in the west, opposite the northern aisle. This entrance was no doubt of secondary importance, and was later blocked. The area to the west was partly bounded by a corridor, the floor of which was never leveled, but followed the natural contour of the bedrock that sloped from south to north. Possibly there was a second story over this corridor, which led into the galleries (at least the northern one) above the lateral aisles. The topographic layout here was such that it was possible to enter the galleries even without a stairwell. Evidence of a second story above the lateral aisles and perhaps above the corridor on the west as well is provided by the abundant debris of mosaic stones with the plaster on which they were laid.

Only one other room (discounting the two small chambers on either side of the apse) was directly connected to the main hall. This room adjoined the northern aisle near the northwestern corner of the hall. It was trapezoidal in shape and offered access to the main hall via two entrances — one of which was eventually blocked. The room was originally paved with mosaics with geometric designs, which underwent many repairs and modifications. In the course of time, benches were built along two of the walls (on top of the original mosaic floor). These benches incorporated built-in supports for the head or upper part of the body.

As already pointed out, most of the central church was built of stones taken from the nearby Herodian monument. Many had a central boss, and some were even decorated. The two pairs of rooms at the northern end of the church (alongside the room with the benches) were also built of the same material, but they had separate entrances. (No other stones of this type were found anywhere else on the excavation site.)

An earlier building apparently overlapped the western third of the main hall of the church. An opening in the southern wall that

was later blocked (the threshold of which is 1.3 m above the church floor) belonged to this building, and an underground trapezoidal cell, discovered underneath the nave, must also have been part of it. There is no doubt that the ceiling of this cell was dismantled, and that the cell itself went out of use once the church was built. It may have served as a tomb earlier in the Byzantine period.

Conclusion

The three churches of Lower Herodium are situated close to one another. Although the presence of a number of churches in one settlement was not an unusual phenomenon, this concentration raises questions. Are we dealing here with a small town, a large village, or was the site in whole or part a monastery, similar to those in the nearby Judean Desert? Furthermore what was the connection between the three churches we excavated and the monastery that was identified on the ruins of the palace of the hill fortress? Was the place in fact inhabited by a Gnostic sect?²

The three churches excavated in Herodium have the character of village churches, similar in size and shape to other such edifices in Judea from the Byzantine period. Nonetheless, they do have a number of distinctive features. The northern church has no apse. Instead there is a rectangular room opening onto the main hall along its entire length. This is a somewhat unusual phenomenon in Palestine, although it is occasionally found in chapels, such as those in Mata^c or Gibeon. In Syria, on the other hand, this layout is quite common. Butler, the surveyor of the Syrian

² The anthropologist J. Zias recently proposed identifying Byzantine Herodium with the "Prodisia" hospital, which, according to Nicephorus Calistus (a late source from the fourteenth century), was built by Empress Eudocia in the mid-fifth century C.E. This source indicates that the hospital was designed to care for 400 sufferers from the "holy disease," that is, leprosy. Zias bases his identification on the phonetic similarity between the Byzantine word "Prodisia" and the Arabic name for Herodium, Jebel Fureidis. The late date of the Calistus source and the lack of proof that "Prodisia" was in fact Herodium render this hypothesis unlikely.

churches, suggests that its profusion resulted from the fact that apseless churches were easier to build.

One of the interesting features of Herodium is the presence of a baptismal font in each of the churches. Usually, when there were a number of churches in one locality, there was a single baptismal font which served all. Another point of interest in this context is the unusual location of two of the baptismal fonts (those in the northern and central churches) in a room flanking the apse, to the south. This phenomenon is known from Kursi, where in 585 C.E. a baptismal font was installed in the room south of the apse. The location in the eastern church, in a chapel south of the main hall, was more conventional. Such a placement is found in the monastery church on Mt. Nebo, where the baptismal font is also extremely similar to that discovered in the central church at Herodium. Similar fonts, fashioned from a monolithic stone, were discovered in Teko'a, near Herodium, and in Emmaus.

Another extraordinary feature at Herodium are the benches in the northern church along three walls of the main hall. This rare design is known mainly from eastern Transjordan [at Gerasa, there were benches around the entire main hall in the Mortuary Church, and a bench along the northern wall in the "Synagogue" Church; and at Khirbet Mukhayat (Nebo), there was a bench along the western wall of the Church of Amos and Clovis]. In any case, we still do not know whether wooden benches were used in churches during this period.

All three churches in Lower Herodium had rooms north or south of the main halls. Their function was connected with the liturgy of the church, and they were usually built at the same time as the rest of the edifice, or shortly thereafter. They occasionally were used as chapels, and in one case as a baptistery. Such rooms may well have served for the collection of offerings (*diaconicon*) and for preparing the Eucharist.

Only two of the three churches of Lower Herodium (the northern and eastern ones)

had a narthex. Apparently its absence in the central church was due to topographic constraints, and not liturgical considerations. The main entrance to two of the churches (the northern and central ones) was in the south, and in the eastern one in the west, as was common.

The great similarity in design of the main halls of the three Herodium churches relates also to their mosaics. The composition of all three employs the same scheme: a central carpet with a main motif and an ornate frame in the nave, carpets with simple frames in the lateral aisles, and (in two churches) small panels in the intercolumniations. Rows of flowers and decorative patterns against a white background surrounded the main carpets. There is also a general resemblance between the mosaics in the rooms adjoining the main halls.

In spite of similarities in general appearance and composition, however, there are clear differences in technique and in the choice of decorative patterns. In the northern church, in the main hall and the narthex, the range of colors is small — four colors and tones — and the tesserae are mainly uniform in size, which gives the mosaics, and in particular the geometric designs, a two-dimensional character. In the eastern church, on the other hand, there is a richer use of color — about twelve colors and shades — and the size of the tesserae varies according to the pattern. As a result, there is greater variety in the mosaics of this church, and a greater play of light and shade. The central church has about nine colors and tones, and here too there are differences in the size of the tesserae in the nave and the lateral aisles, but to a lesser degree than in the eastern church.

This variety may indicate different workshops or periods. The vinescrolls in the eastern church should be assigned to the sixth century C.E., perhaps even to its second half. The mosaics of the northern church, which are notably simpler, apparently predate the eastern church, and may possibly belong to the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth century C.E. We are inclined to



Herodium: mosaic pavement of the central church's nave

date the mosaics of the central church to a later stage than the other two churches.

It would seem, thus far, that the best criteria for dating the churches are the mosaic floors and the inscriptions incorporated into them. According to these criteria and to general considerations (such as a comparison of the design of the churches), the churches were apparently built between the end of the fifth century and the middle, or even the end, of the sixth century C.E. Although we cannot ascertain this, it would seem that they were constructed in the following order: first the northern church in the second half of the fifth century, or perhaps in the beginning of the sixth; then the eastern church, in the second



Herodium: mosaic pavement of the northern church's nave

half of the sixth century. As to the central church, we cannot be sure whether it was the second or the last to be built, but the latter possibility seems more likely.

All of the churches display signs of renovation, some pertaining to regular maintenance, such as additional layers of plaster or floor repairs, and some to changes and additions, such as the blocking of the entrances. It would appear, therefore, that the churches were in use for a relatively long time, probably including the Early Arab period.