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## The Northeast Insula and Late Antique Christianity at Hippos Palaistines

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## Hippos of the Decapolis and its Region 18 years of Research



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## Hippos of the Decapolis and its Region 18 Years of Research



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## Hippos of the Decapolis and its Region 18 Years of Research

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**English front page:** Mount Sussita, with the Ein-Gev stream flowing below it and the Sea of Galilee to its west.  
Looking south (photo by M. Eisenberg)

**Hebrew front page:** Mount Sussita plateau and the Sea of Galilee to the west (photo by M. Eisenberg)

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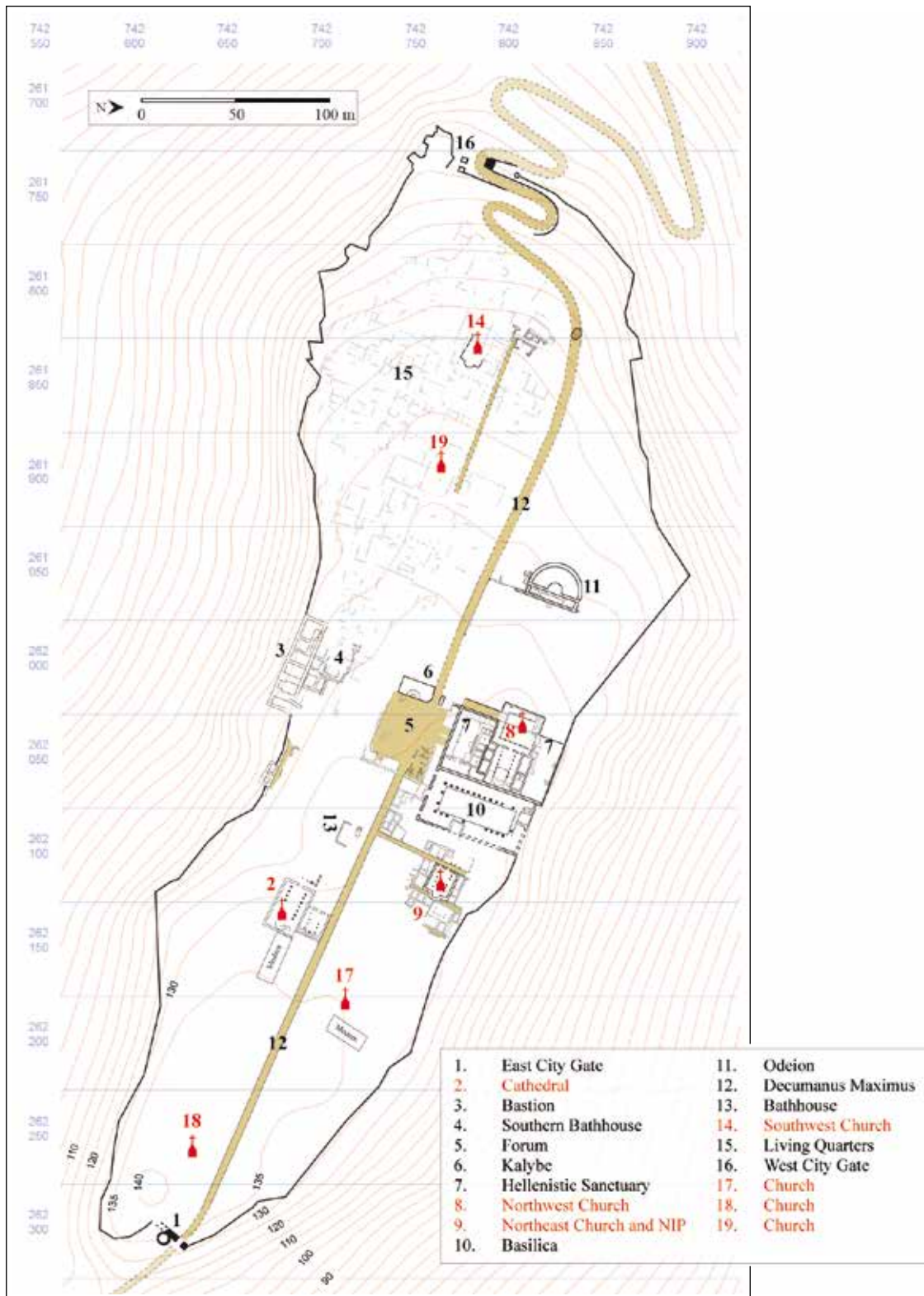


Fig. 1: A plan of Hippos and its churches  
(drawn by A. Regev Gisis, based on Survey of Israel, contour map).



# The Northeast Insula and Late Antique Christianity at Hippos Palaistinēs

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## Introduction

Although smaller than most *poleis* in the Decapolis, Hippos Palaistinēs<sup>1</sup> displays a similar concentration of churches within its urban confines during the Late Antique period. Of the known churches, four are clustered in the city center and two are in the domestic quarter, with a possible seventh church in the southeastern quadrant (Fig. 1). To date, most of the significant publications have focused on the material remains of the site (Segal et al. 2014). Little has been surmised about the practice of Christianity at Hippos Palaistinēs other than a suggestion that “Hippos may have been within the sphere of the Monophysite influence” (Młynarczyk 2011).

Through analysis of common basilical church plans and artifact distribution within such sites (Mulholland 2014) along with minor literary references, this article will contend that the mixed community at Hippos Palaistinēs shifted more fully into the sphere of Chalcedonian Christianity in the 6th century. A discussion of the material remains of a small church in the Northeast Insula along with those of other churches at the site will set the stage for the argument.

## The Northeast Insula

The Northeast Insula is a 50x60 m area to the east of the former Roman basilica and north of the Decumanus Maximus (Fig. 2). The insula is bisected by three small cardines, the eastern one providing a boundary for the excavation area. Some evidence does survive of earlier structures, such as the corner of two stylobates in the southwestern corner of the insula. After the city was given its grid matrix in the Roman period (Segal 2014a: 64–85), a peristyle house was constructed at the northern end of the insula between two cardines in the 3rd or 4th century CE. The house was of some prominence, decorated with frescos and inscriptions. It was entered through a porch or garden with a fountain and looked out over the northern cliff of the mountain (Fig. 3). It is likely that another house was situated between the two cardines to the west.

A major earthquake in 363 CE destroyed the Roman basilica (Segal 2014b: 164–181; Wechsler and Marco 2017) and heavily damaged the structures of the insula to the east. In the 6th century, a small mono-apsidal church was constructed in the northern part of the insula.

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1 The name for the site is drawn from a reference to its 4th century bishop, Πέτρος ἐπίσκοπος Ἴππου Παλαιστίνης, in Epiphanius (Haer. 73, 26).



Fig. 2: Northeast Insula (photogrammetric model by E. Gershtein, The Photogrammetry Lab, The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, Hippos Excavations Project, courtesy of the Hippos Excavations).

This “Northeast Church” used the western cardo as its portico and its protruding apse blocked the central cardo. The domus of the church has a nave with two aisles. The chancel is bar-shaped and includes the eastern end of both aisles. The church is noteworthy for its two burials in the chancel – a masonry tomb of two phases below the floor just north of the central axis, containing the remains of 12 individuals and a partially exposed sarcophagus faced in marble in the chancel at the eastern end of the southern aisle. The sarcophagus held the incomplete remains of a small woman more than 55 years of age. Both burial chambers are from the original phase of the church. The chancel also had loculi for relics in the center of the chancel and at the head of the northern aisle.

The church has side chambers along the northern length of the church and an oversized and arched diakonikon to the south of the chancel. The northern chambers provide access to a two-story building to the north with a cooking facility in its southwestern room. From this northern building and from the northern chambers of the church one can cross the small cardo, blocked by the apse of the church, via a doorway from a room north of the apse, and enter the southern portico of the peristyle court of the abovementioned house. In the Late Antique period, the house was reconstructed with spaces subdivided by window walls. These interconnected buildings, along with smaller structures near the southwestern corner of the church, suggest that the church was part of a larger compound, likely some sort of urban





monastic community. The tomb of the woman was central to that compound. The diakonikon and its cistern may have supported a healing cult taking its hope from the sanctity of the woman. This memorial church, attended by an urban religious community and possibly supporting a healing cult, is but one example of a broad range of Christian practice in the urban core of Hippo Palaistinēs.

## The Other Churches

South of the Northeast Insula across the Decumanus are stairs that lead to the atrium of the largest church on the site (20x40 m). It bears the designation “Cathedral” in part due to its size and lavishness, but most significantly because of a tri-apsidal baptistery built between the northern wall of the church and the Decumanus (Fig. 4; Eisenberg 2017: Fig. 5). The “Cathedral” is mono-apsidal with a protruding apse and a synthronon. The chancel is Π-shaped and contained within the nave. Granite shafts,

marble Corinthian capitals, Attic marble bases, and a multi-colored opus sectile floor attest to the prominence of the structure. A fragmentary inscription in the floor of the baptistery dates the floor to 591 CE (Epstein 1993). The domus is from the 5th century and the baptistery was added later, in the 6th century (Ovadia 1970).

North of the “Cathedral” across the Decumanus is another church that was partially exposed, reburied and never fully published (Fig. 1). This “East Church” was a mono-apsidal structure with a protruding apse. Its chancel is also Π-shaped. To the north of the apse in the eastern wall is a niche that was later blocked. At the head of the southern aisle a small apse was added in a second phase. This apse was set off by a chancel screen and may have been used for the rite of prothesis (Bagatti 2001).

West of the Northeast Insula and the Roman basilica, a third church (17x36 m) with an atrium sits on top of the ruins of the main temple compound of the city. This “Northwest Church” is a basilica with two aisles and a nave. In its

first phase from the late 5th century or early 6th century, the church has a single inscribed apse with a synthronon and a Π-shaped chancel (Fig. 5; Eisenberg 2017: Fig. 5). The apse is flanked by rectangular sacristies at the heads of the side aisles. Later in the 6th century the church underwent major embellishment (Fig. 6). The chancel was expanded to include both aisles in a T-shape. An apse was inserted into the northern aisle near the eastern end with a chancel screen and

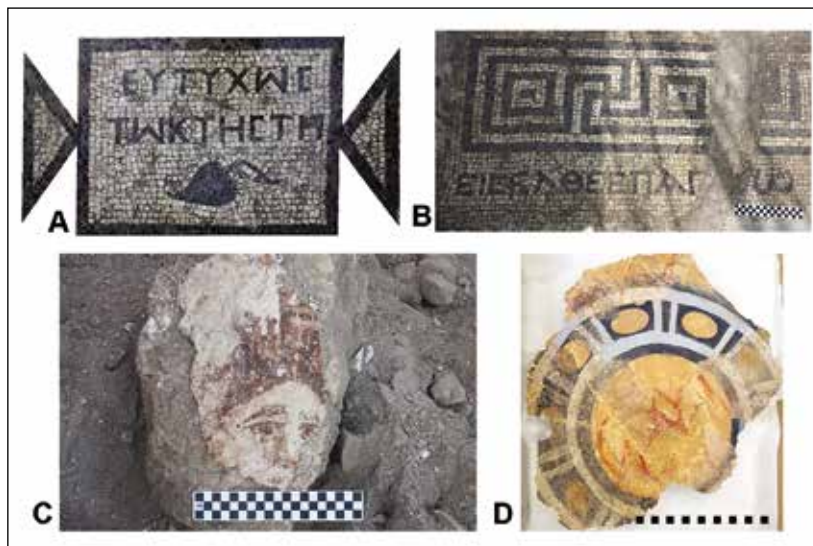


Fig. 3: Inscriptions and Frescos: A. Near the east threshold to the porch/garden; B. Entrance hall inscription; C. Fresco of Tyche from the porch/garden; D. Restored wall plaster from the room east of the peristyle court (A-C: photos by M. Schuler, D: conservation and photo by A. Iermolin).

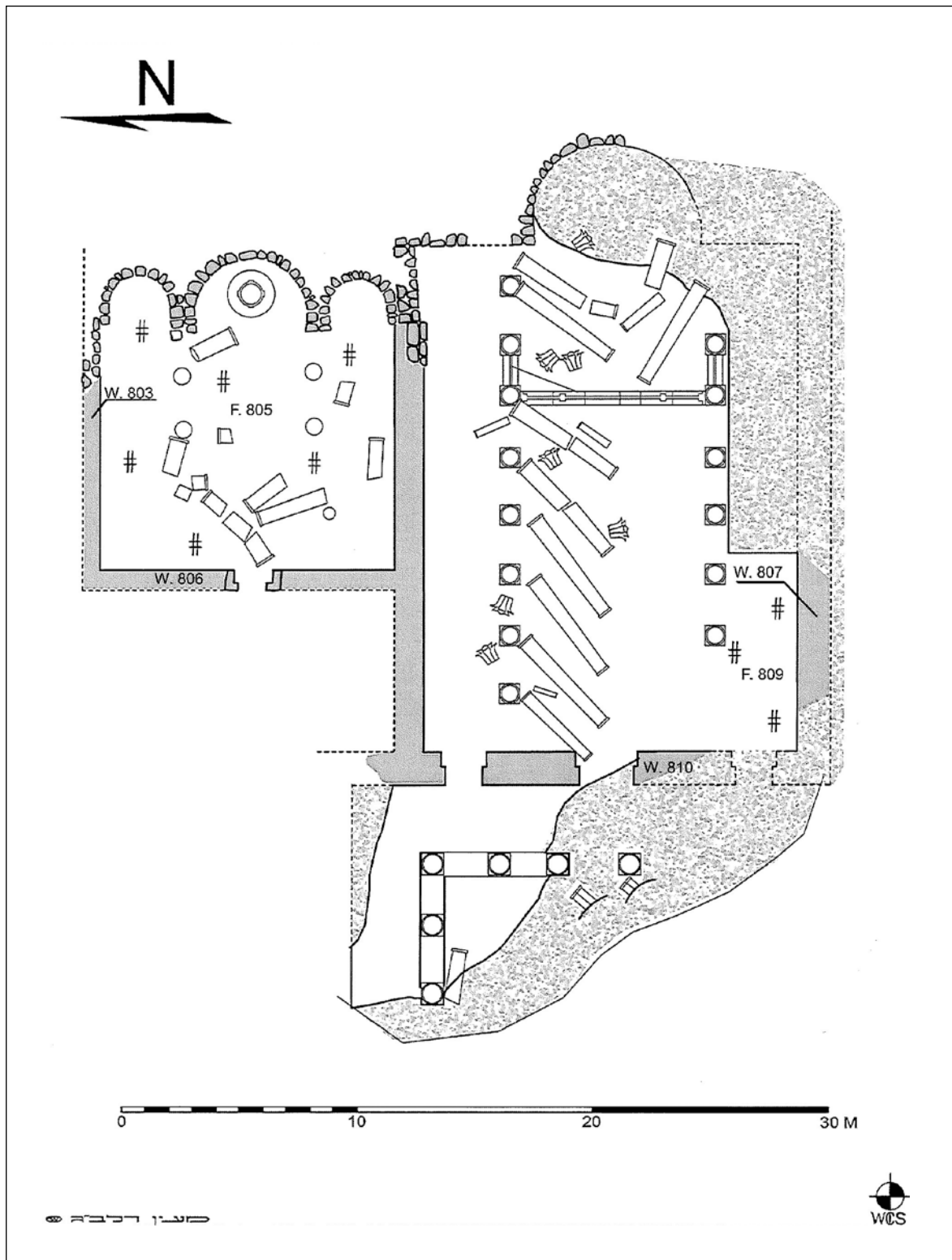


Fig. 4: Plan of the Cathedral (M. Ralbag, Fig. 14. In: Segal, A., Młynarczyk, J., Burdajewicz, M., Schuler, M., and Eisenberg, M. (2003) *Hippos-Sussita – Fourth Season of Excavations*, Haifa).



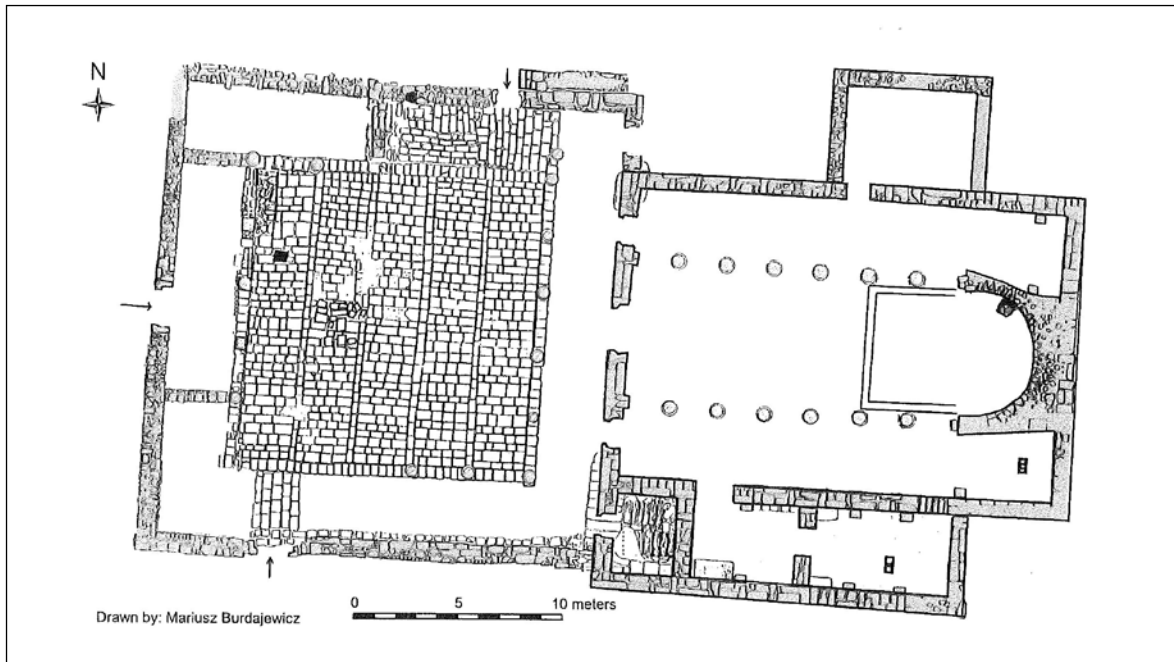


Fig. 5: Plan of the Northwest Church, phase 1 (drawn by M. Burdajewicz, Fig. 262. In: Segal, A., Eisenberg, M., Młynarczyk, J., Burdajewicz, M., and Schuler, M. (2014). *Hippos-Sussita of the Decapolis: The First Twelve Seasons of Excavations 2000–2011*, Vol. I, Haifa).

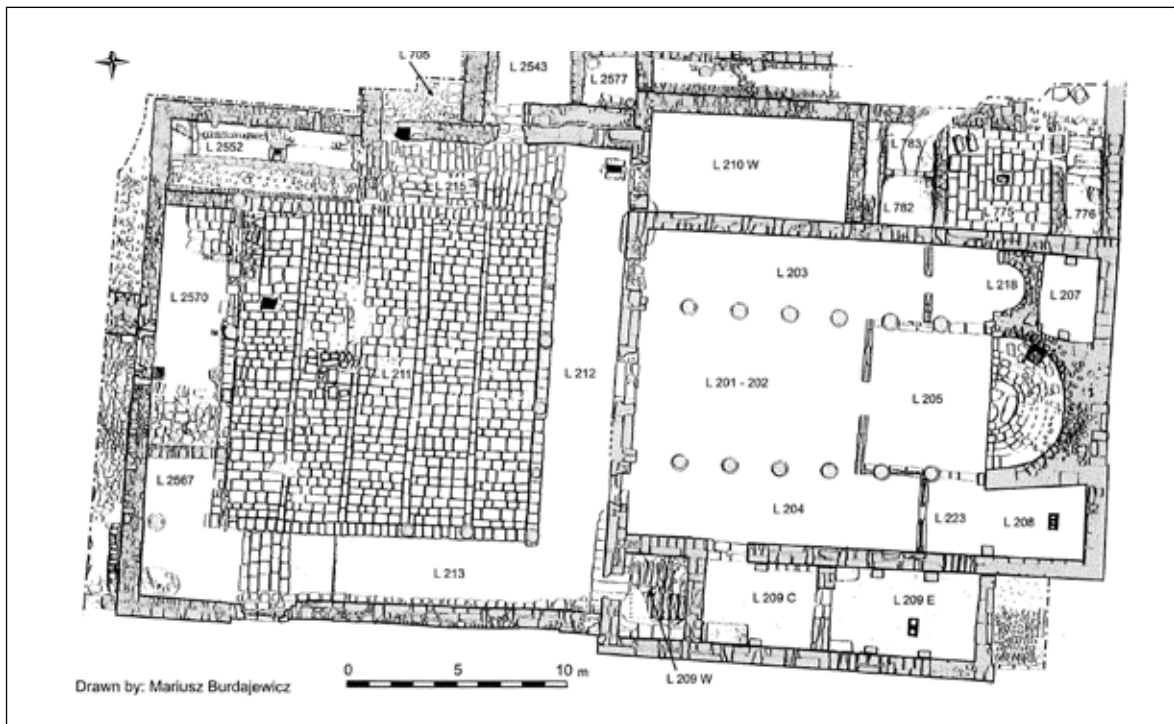


Fig. 6: Plan of the Northwest Church, phase 2 (drawn by M. Burdajewicz, Fig. 277. In: Segal, A., Eisenberg, M., Młynarczyk, J., Burdajewicz, M., and Schuler, M. (2014). *Hippos-Sussita of the Decapolis: The First Twelve Seasons of Excavations 2000–2011*, Vol. I, Haifa).

a reliquary, possibly for the rite of prothesis. The eastern end of the southern aisle became a martyrion chapel with a large reliquary of pink limestone inserted into the floor and a marble altar table set above it. The floors were repaved in mosaic of similar style to those of the church at Kursi (Młynarczyk and Burdajewicz 2004). Notably, this church was still in use until the earthquake of 749 CE ended any significant occupation of the site. South of the southern aisle and accessible from it is a diakonikon. Sealed by the earthquake, finds there yielded more than 100 pottery items.

In the southwestern quadrant of the city, there are remains of at least two churches. One, unexcavated, is west of the Kalybe (an open temple for the cult of the emperors). We detected the atrium with a cistern in this church, and surface debris suggests that the chancel is tri-apsidal.

Further to the west is the “Southwest Church”. It is a mono-apsidal structure with a protruding apse (Figs. 1, 7). The chancel is Π-shaped with screens to the west (Segal and Eisenberg 2005). At the eastern end of the northern aisle is a doorway with a lintel stone still intact. Under the plaster at the eastern end of the northern wall is a blocked doorway. The southern wall also has two doorways. Within the chancel, a reliquary identical to that added onto the martyrion chapel in the southern aisle of the Northwest Church was inserted into the floor and marks the location of the altar. The geometric mosaic floor of the final phase is dated to the mid-6th century. The church itself was destroyed by fire well before the Umayyad period and was abandoned (Segal and Eisenberg 2005), as were domestic spaces excavated nearby.

The five excavated churches of Hippos display significant architectural diversity and a degree of evolution in their phases. These factors assist us in understanding Late Antique Christianity at Hippos Palaistinēs in terms of theology and both liturgical and paraliturgical activity.

## Architecture, Artifacts, and Christianity

Mulholland has reassessed 47 basilical churches, primarily from Israel and Jordan, to identify their historical and literary context.<sup>2</sup> Using like-for-like analysis, he classifies sites according to their plans (monoapsidal, inscribed, or triapsidal) and the configuration of their sanctuaries (Π-shaped or T-shaped). From the data, he posits three major types. One has a protruding monoapsidal plan with one or more entrances flanking the apse and a Π-shaped sanctuary that he labels “Constantinopolitan”. This type often has multiple entrances on both sides. A second type, the “Syrian”, has an inscribed monoapsidal plan with a Π-shaped sanctuary and rooms on either side of the apse. This type often has a parallel chapel or diakonikon accessible from the southern aisle. A third type, the “Roman”, is triapsidal or monoapsidal with a T- or bar-shaped sanctuary, side altars and evidence of multiple relics or reliquaries<sup>3</sup> (Mulholland 2014).

Application of this classification system to the churches at Hippos Palaistinēs would identify the Southwest Church as Constantinopolitan. The “Cathedral” and the first phase of the East Church seem also to correspond to this type. The first phase of the Northwest Church is Syrian. The Northeast Church is Roman, especially since

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2 Mulholland’s theoretical reconstruction is not without criticism. See Fiema 2016.

3 The Council of Carthage in 401 made relics beneath altars compulsory in the west. Such positioning of relics became compulsory in the east in 787 at the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicea.



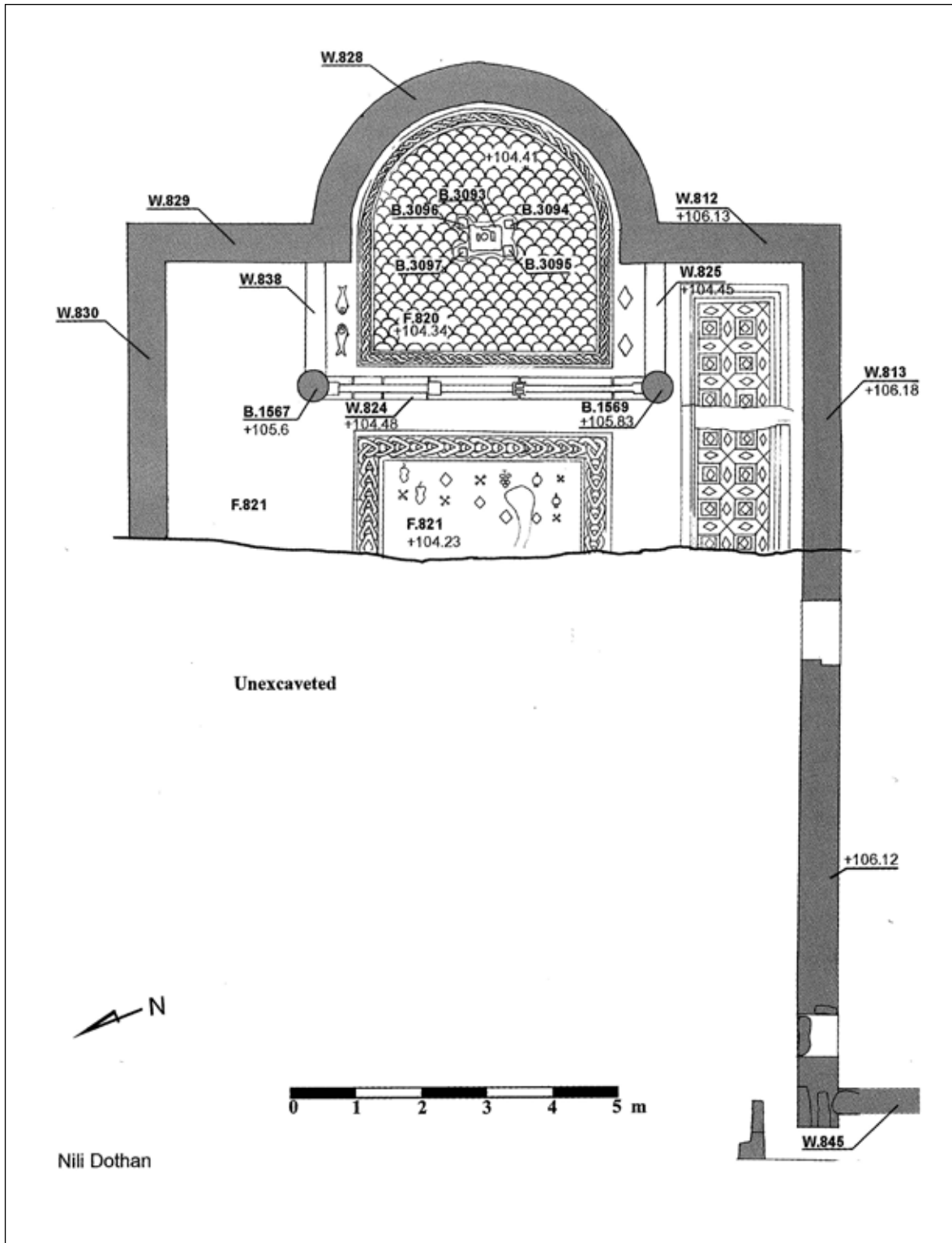


Fig. 7: Plan of the Southwest Church (N. Dothan, Fig. 4. In: Segal, A., Młynarczyk, J., Burdajewicz, M., Schuler, M., and Eisenberg, M. (2005) *Hippos-Sussita – Sixth Season of Excavations*, Haifa).

burials in the chancel are more characteristic of western and northern Africa. If the unexcavated church in the domestic quarter is triapsidal, it too would likely be Roman. Such a range of church types would suggest a diversity of theological perspectives in the city, as was the case in Palestine in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.

However, numerous changes occurred in the 6th century. The East Church added an apse with an altar to the southern aisle in a second phase. The “Cathedral” added a triapsidal baptistery. A three-line inscription was added to the mosaic in the chancel in the Southwest Church in a second phase. It records an offering by a priest named Simonios (Lajtar 2007). A reliquary was later inserted in that same floor (Bordman 2005), possibly the gift to which the inscription refers. Most significantly, the Northwest Church added an apse and altar to the northern aisle and a martyrion chapel to the southern aisle forming a T-shaped chancel during the 6th century in its second major phase (Młynarczyk 2011). The classification of the Northwest Church changes from Syrian to Roman. In fact, modifications at all four of these churches shift them toward a more Roman type. Assuming that the Northeast Church, the most Roman of the types, comes from this same period, some sort of theological/liturgical change must have come over Hippos Palaistinēs.

Mulholland finds similar modifications toward a Roman type within his catalogue in the 6th century. He states, “These modifications appear to coincide with the switch in religious favor from the Monophysite Antiochene or Syria Church to the Chalcedonian Roman Church during the 6th century that accompanied the accession of emperor Justin I and his nephew Justinian I” (2014). A second factor in church modification may have been the introduction of the Great Entrance rite to the liturgy in the second half

of the 6th century, about the time of Justin II, which elevated the role of the rite of prothesis (Taft 2004).

Two bishops from Hippos Palaistinēs were signatories to synods of Jerusalem in the first half of the 6th century: Bishop Colon in 518 CE and Bishop Theodorus in 536 (Gams 1857). The synod of 518 was held under Patriarch John III. John was a Monophysite; however, after becoming patriarch of Jerusalem in 516, he became Orthodox and condemned the opponents of the Council of Chalcedon. The synod of 518 reiterated pro-Chalcedonian decrees. Present at the synod were 33 bishops along with Sabbas, a renowned Chalcedonian. The synod of 536 was called by John’s successor Peter. At the synod, Peter proclaimed his embrace of the Council of Chalcedon. Actions of the synod, which included 44 bishops, reaffirmed anti-Monophysite decisions (McClintock 1891; Fortescue 1910). The participation of two bishops from Hippos Palaistinēs in synods intentionally taking pro-Chalcedonian positions corresponds to a move toward more Roman liturgical practice, as we now know is reflected archaeologically – in 6th century modifications to churches in the city. Hippos Palaistinēs became more formally aligned with the Chalcedonian theology.

A theory that the 6th century bishops of Hippos Palaistinēs fostered a flowering of Chalcedonian belief and western liturgical practice in the city is supported by an inscriptional connection between the “Cathedral” and the Northwest Church, which underwent the most significant conversion from a Syrian to a Roman type. The floor of the southern aisle of the Northwest Church was carpeted with mosaic in the later 6th century. Inscriptions noting financial contributions of two individuals appear in the floor, Petros and He(lio)dora, the latter of whom was specifically credited with support for the laying of the floor. In the southern portico



of the atrium is another inscription that marks an offering “for the eternal rest of Anton(i)a, a deaconess” (Młynarczyk 2011). Młynarczyk, citing an unpublished paper by Lajtar, suggests that two of these individuals can be connected to those commemorated in the baptistery of the “Cathedral” at Hippos. In the inscription, one Prokopios makes a dedication for the eternal rest of two persons: A man named Petros and another individual, whose damaged name in the genitive Lajtar reads as “[Anto]n(i)as”. Młynarczyk posits a family consisting of Petros and Anton(i)a and their son who became a priest at the “Cathedral”, Prokopios. He(lio)dora would be Anton(i)a’s sister-in-law or mother (Młynarczyk 2011). A wealthy and influential family seems to have contributed to this Romanizing shift in the 6th century.

Although the city declined significantly in the 7th and 8th centuries, Orthodox practice continued. The variety of vessel forms sealed in the diakonikon of the Northwest Church by the 749 earthquake are indicative of the practices and usage of the diakonikon in the Ordo Romanus I promulgated in the late 7th century (Thurston 1911).

## Conclusion

The church compound in the Northeast Insula, decidedly Roman in plan and practice, contrasts with the Syrian and Constantinopolitan plans of the other excavated churches. However, these churches show modifications in the 6th century toward more Roman forms and practices. The Northeast Church, constructed in the 6th century, may reflect this trend. Since the trend correlates with the participation by bishops from Hippos Palaistinēs at synods in Jerusalem that took decidedly pro-Chalcedonian positions, it is reasonable to surmise that Hippos Palaistinēs shifted more fully into the sphere of Chalcedonian Christianity in the 6th century.



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## תקצירים

# המבן הצפון-מזרחי והנצרות בסוף העת העתיקה בהיפוס-סוסיתא

מארק שולר

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בתחום העירוני של היפוס-סוסיתא נחשף ריכוז של כנסיות מסוף העת העתיקה. ארבע כנסיות מצויות במרכז העיר ושתיים ברובע המגורים. ייתכן שכנסייה נוספת, שביעית במספר, נמצאת בחלק הדרומי-מזרחי של העיר. על סמך התכניות של הכנסיות הבזיליקליות, הממצאים ומעט אזכורים במקורות הכתובים, הטענה במאמר זה היא, שהקהילה המעורבת של היפוס-סוסיתא עברה שינוי תיאולוגי במאה ה' לספירה, המשתקף באדריכלות של הכנסיות. מתחם הכנסייה במבן (אינסולה) הצפון-מזרחי הוא בסגנון רומי בתוכנית ובביצוע, בשונה מהכנסיות האחרות שנחפרו, האופייניות בתוכניתן ובסגנוןן לכנסיות של סוריה ושל קונסטנטינופוליס. על כל פנים, בכל הכנסיות ניכרות התאמות שנעשו במאה ה' ברוח הכנסיות של רומא. הכנסייה הצפונית-מזרחית, שנבנתה במאה ה', עשויה להעיד על מגמה זו. היות שהמגמה הניכרת באדריכלות תואמת את השתתפות בישופי העיר בכינוסים כנסייתיים בירושלים שנקטו עמדה כלקדוניאנית מובהקת, סביר להניח שסוסיתא עברה במאה ה' אל חיק הנצרות הכלקדוניאנית.