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## οἰκοί to Monastery: an Interpretative Possibility for the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos

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BETWEEN SEA AND DESERT:  
ON KINGS, NOMADS, CITIES AND MONKS

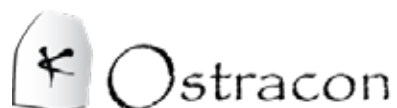
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Editors

Orit Peleg-Barkat, Jacob Ashkenazi,

Uzi Leibner, Mordechai Aviam, Rina Talgam

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Οἶκοι τοῦ Μοναστηρίου: Ἐνὶ Ἐπιγραφῆσι  
Εἰς τὴν Ἀντιόχεια τῆς Ἰσχυρίας

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Mark Schuler

INTRODUCTION

Monasticism in late antique Palaestina is well-known. Its dominant theme being ἀναχώρησις or withdrawal, Judean wilderness monasticism has received, understandably, significant scholarly attention (Chitty 1966; Hirschfeld 1992; Patrich 1995).

Literary sources point to urban monasticism in Palaestina in late Antiquity being present not only in Jerusalem, the center of religious life, but also in other urban centers. Around 370 CE, Innocentius, a former member of Constantine’s court, erected a monastery on the Mount of Olives (Chitty 1966:48–49). Melania the Elder created a community for women on the Mount of Olives, as did Rufinaus of Aquileia for males in 375–376 (Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 44). Egeria, whose writing is set in the 380s, mentions *monazontes* and *parthene* among the participants in the liturgical celebrations in Jerusalem (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 24,1; 24,12; 25,2). The arrivals of Paula and Eustochium in 386 imparted an international attraction to monasticism in Palaestina’s holy places (Jerome, *Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae* 46, 10). Peter the Iberian became a monk in Jerusalem in 430 and later founded a monastery in Bethlehem in 445 (Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* 26–34). Melania the younger also founded monasteries on the Mount of Olives in 432 and 436, first for women and then later for men (Gerontius, *Vita Melaniae Junioris*). A major figure of urban monasticism is Passarion who built a monastery on Mount Zion around 400. He is described as the “archimandrite of the monks” by Cyril of Scythopolis, a Decapolis city so steeped in monastic influence that Sabas visited it twice (*Lives* 162.20 and 165.1).

Also, the presence of inscriptional references to monks in urban churches points to the continuing presence of urban monasteries in the fifth and sixth

centuries CE. For example, on the floor of a small chapel located next to a basilical church on the Mount of Olives, is an inscription naming three persons who are called μονάζοντες (Bliss and Dickie 1898; SEG 8 177). In Madaba, “a monk named John undertook the paving with mosaics of a chapel on the north wall of the church of the Apostles” (Piccirillo 2015; IGLSyr 21,2 144). In addition, the *Supplementum epigraphicum graecum* (SEG) catalog has at least ten additional inscriptions from urban contexts in and around Palaestina mentioning the term μοναχός.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, archaeological evidence for urban monasticism is relatively meager. As one would expect, due to its religious importance, Jerusalem has the highest concentration of urban monasteries, especially near the Holy Sepulchre, north of the Damascus Gate, and on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. More appropriate *comparanda* for this study come from other urban sites. At Scythopolis, churches and monasteries are close to one another along the northern city wall. At Tiberias, a monastery at the peak of Mt. Berenike is within the city walls (Hirschfeld 2006). In Sepphoris’ civic center are the remains of a small church surrounded by rooms. Identified as an “urban pilgrim monastery” (Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014:561), only the foundations of the rooms’ walls were found.

Other factors contribute to the paucity of work on urban monasticism in Palaestina. First, the very definition of “urban” is a factor. For example, Rubin (1990:49–50), in his study of the Negev, concludes that monasticism in the Negev was, to a large extent, an urban phenomenon. From the

1 At Antioch of Syria: IGLSyr 3,1 814 and 185. At Emessa: IGLSyr 5 2207, 2208, and 2211. At Kissufim: SEG 30 1688 and 1689. At Bostra: IGLSyr 13,1 9040. At Philadelphia: IGLSyr 22,2 43 and SEG 38 1661.

perspective of the desert monasteries, those in Rehovot-in-the-Negev, 'Avdat, Nessana, and Shivta are more urban. However, when such Negev sites are compared to the Roman cities of Palaestina, the Decapolis, or the special case of Jerusalem, the Negev sites are quite different in terms of the extent of the urban surroundings. For the sake of this paper, the comparanda will be Roman sites.

Second, archaeologists tend to excavate churches in urban areas without carefully examining or even excavating surrounding or related structures (Michel 2001: xi). Monastic complexes may stay hidden while the prayer hall is exposed. Third, unlike rural areas where the monasteries were isolated in self-contained facilities, an urban monastery might not display all the functions of a rural monastery, relying instead on resources from the community within which it is located. Similarly, monastic boundaries may not be demarked by a substantial wall, as was necessary for rural areas.

To enable a closer scrutiny of urban monasticism, Goldfus has proposed criteria “by which one can, intelligibly, characterize urban monasticism and monastic complexes” (Goldfus 2003:73). “The first guideline defining an urban monastery would be its location in relation to the city” (Goldfus 2003:73). A second guideline identifies the particular function of the monastery within the urban context. Asking whether the monastery served men or women or an ethnic group, whether it was a “desert in the city” or served pilgrims or treated the ill, such questions might help “to comprehend the shape and infrastructure of an unknown monastery” (Goldfus 2003:74). Third, Goldfus suggests paying attention to the “size, dimension, and spatial plan” (Goldfus 2003:74) of the monastery, noting in particular that an urban monastery would not need all the facilities to be self-sustaining, as would a rural monastery. Later in the article, Goldfus writes, “the existence of tombs in these specific churches, as well as in other churches of Byzantine Palaestina, might be used also as a preliminary indicator for identifying monastic complexes” (2003:78). Burials could then be a fourth indicator.

This paper examines a single case at Antiochia Hippos. It employs the four indicators from Goldfus. However, while Goldfus proposed these components as a framework for a broader study of urban monasticism, this paper will use them in an attempt to identify a site as an urban monastic complex. We argue that a

compound of interrelated structures in the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos fits the guidelines and so may be an example of the varied practice of urban monasticism in late antique Palaestina.

#### THE STRUCTURES IN THE NORTHEAST INSULAE AT ANTIOCHIA HIPPOS

Excavations carried out by Epstein, Avi-Yonah, Shulman, and Anati between 1950 and 1955 (Epstein 1993:635), and by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa from 2000 to the present (Eisenberg 2017) have identified at least seven churches in Antiochia Hippos (Fig. 1). Two were uncovered in the 1950s: a so-called cathedral and a second structure to the north across the Decumanus Maximus. A third sat on top of the ruins of the main Roman temple and was likely still in minor use at the time of the 749 CE earthquake. A fourth was a small funerary chapel set into the ruins of the *Odeon*. A fifth church was partially excavated in the western part of the domestic quarter. A sixth was in the southeastern part of the domestic quarter and remains unexcavated. A seventh was part of the Northeast Insulae and is the focus of this study.

The Northeast Insulae sit north of the Decumanus Maximus and east of a large Roman basilica (Fig. 2). Bisecting cardines (Cardo 2N, Cardo 3N, and Cardo 4N) subdivide the area into three zones. At the north end of the eastern zone is a Roman-era peristyle house called the House of Tyche where a fresco of the goddess discovered. The Northeast Church is the most prominent feature of the central zone. We hypothesize that these structures are part of an urban monastic complex. Since we have no literary or inscriptional evidence to support the hypothesis, we shall examine the complex in view of the four guidelines posited by Goldfus, though taking them up in a different order.

The first indicator: “defining an urban monastery would be its location in relation to the city” (Goldfus 2003:73). Since the compound is on top of Sussita mountain and inside its defensive walls, it is located within the city limits and thus is an urban compound. However, in contrast to nearby monastic sites at Tiberius and Scythopolis, this compound, in the Northeast Insulae, is in the urban core, less than 100 m from the forum. In what may have been a neighborhood of wealthy homes, a small church (12.5×13 m), of similar footprint to a neighboring

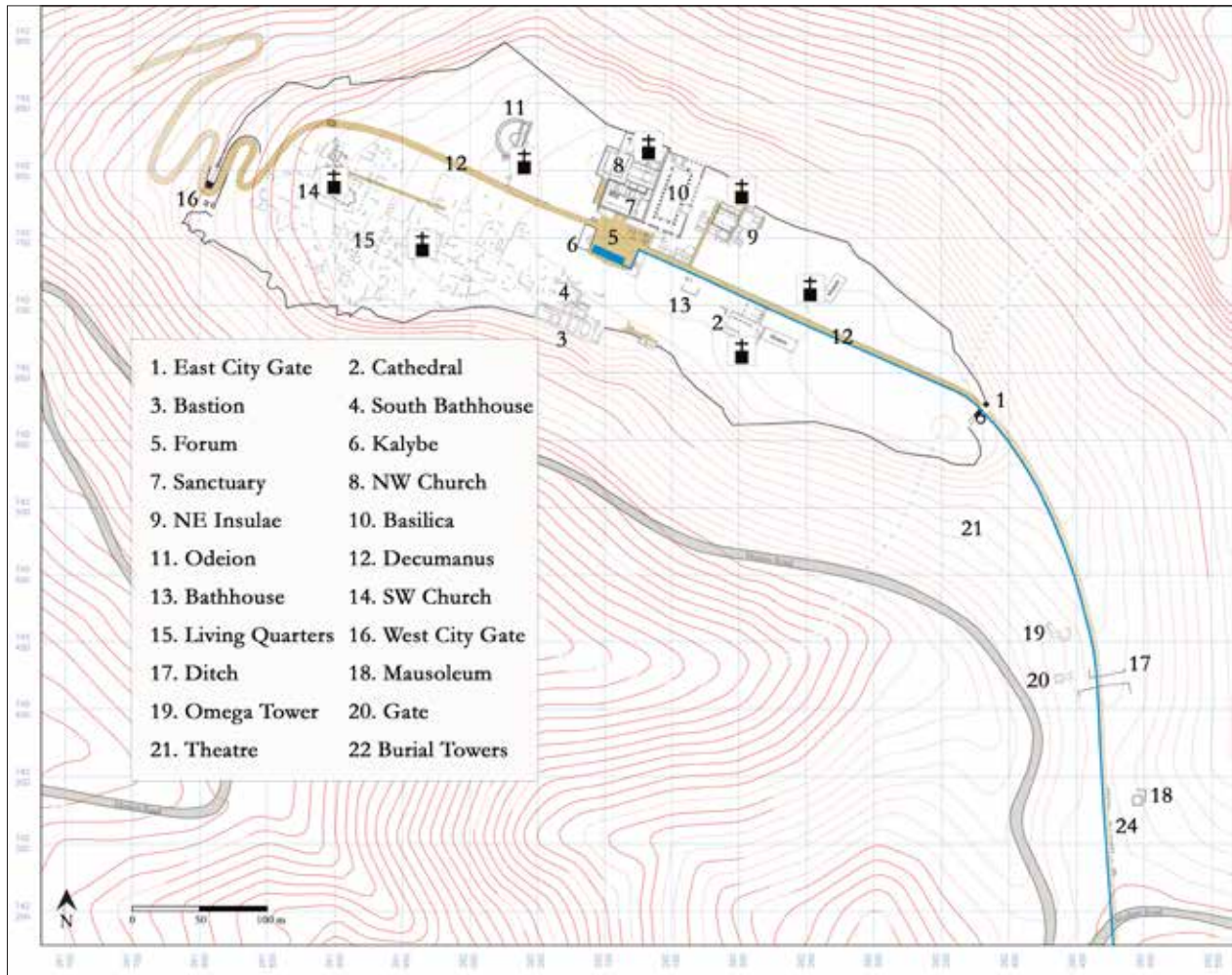


Fig. 1. Churches of Hippos (courtesy of the Hippos Excavations Project, revised by M. Schuler).

house, is positioned within the earlier Roman street grid, interrupting the eastern street (Cardo 3N) with its apse and using the western cardo (Cardo 2N) as its via sacra and portico. It incorporated walls of an earlier building and set some of its walls over foundations of other buildings. The *domus* of the church has an irregular configuration of entrances (Fig. 3). The entrances to the south aisle and the nave are from the west, but the entrance to the north aisle is done from a lateral chamber to the north. This configuration was caused by the presence of a cistern capped by basalt pavers. We posit that this unusual configuration results from the reuse of a part of an earlier peristyle court. The Northeast Church replaced an urban peristyle house.

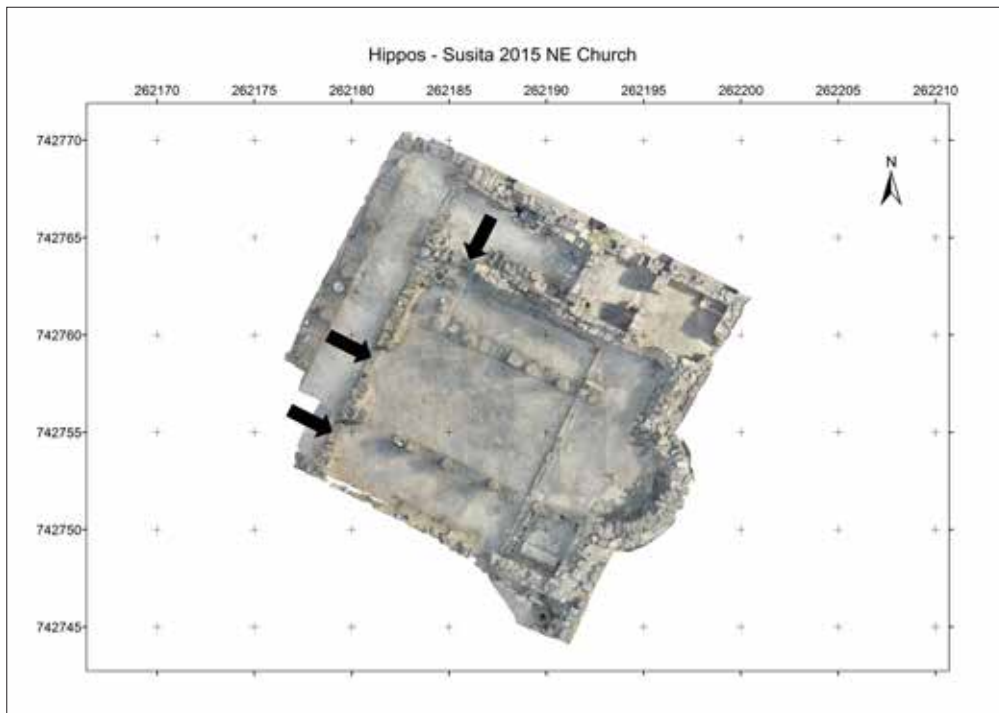
Paul Magdalino has argued that “many, if not most, urban and suburban churches and monasteries

were converted lay *oïkoi*” (Magdalino 1984:94). A monastery “in more ways than one was the *alter ego* of the secular *oïkos*. Far from being a negation of the extended household ... the religious foundation was the household’s ultimate fulfillment ... The foundation and endowment of a family monastery was a sound economic investment, capable of bringing materials as well as spiritual benefits to the founder and those of his [or her] descendants who inherited proprietary rights to the establishment” (Magdalino 1984:102). Interestingly, Cyril of Scythopolis uses the word *oïkos* to describe both the monastery of Procopius at Scythopolis and the monastery of St. Stephen in Jerusalem (*Lives* 180.6–8 and 151.12, 19).

Thus, the compound in the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos is in the heart of the ancient city and repurposes earlier urban structures. Consistent with



*Fig. 2. Aerial photo of the Northeast Insulae Project in 2015 (courtesy of the Hippos Excavations Project).*



*Fig. 3. Photogrammetry of the Northeast Church (photogrammetric model: E. Gershtein, The Photogrammetry Lab, The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, Hippos Excavations Project (courtesy of the Hippos Excavations)).*

the first indicator proposed by Goldfus, its remains will be examined in view of his second indicator.

Goldfus calls for attention to the “size, dimension, and spatial plan” (Goldfus 2003:74) of the monastery. And as a second indicator, this small church is part of a larger interconnected compound (Fig. 4).

To the south of the *domus* is a structure with a foyer, two small rooms, a larger room with a *tabun*, and a paved courtyard. Although the entrance to this building is outside the southern gate of the compound, the walls are structurally connected to the church. We posit that this edifice provided support to the compound.

To the west of the *domus*, across the portico, is a structure with two rooms separated by a window wall. The southern space was used for storage. Interestingly, the doorway to the southern room is outside the gate of the compound. The doorway to the northern room is inside the compound. A staircase leads to the roof or a second story.

To the north of the church is a large structure two stories high that spans the distance between the two small cardines (Cardo 2N and Cardo 3N). Its second floor is accessible from the north lateral chamber of the church via a staircase. Its first floor is accessible through a passageway from the north medial chamber of the church. From the *skeuophylakion*, a doorway to the Cardo 3N gives access to two eastern entrances to the northern building.

The same route provides access to the House of Tyche to the east of the church. The apse of the church did indeed intrude into the western wall of the peristyle house, but this intrusion retained the southern jamb of a large doorway opening from the peristyle’s south portico to the west street. That door was subsequently narrowed like the narrowing of doors in the *skeuophylakion*. The retention of the doorway and its subsequent modification suggest incorporation of at least part of the House of Tyche into the larger complex (Segal et al. 2008:45).

The House of Tyche, a three-sided peristyle house named for the fresco found in its ruins near the fountain, underwent major modifications by the late antique period (Fig. 5). The earthquake of 363 that destroyed the Roman basilica to the immediate west likely caused heavy damage to the house.

Subsequently, and certainly by the late fifth century CE, the northern courtyard/garden was closed by a double doorway whose exterior faced the peristyle. The peristyle court was intact. However, a staircase

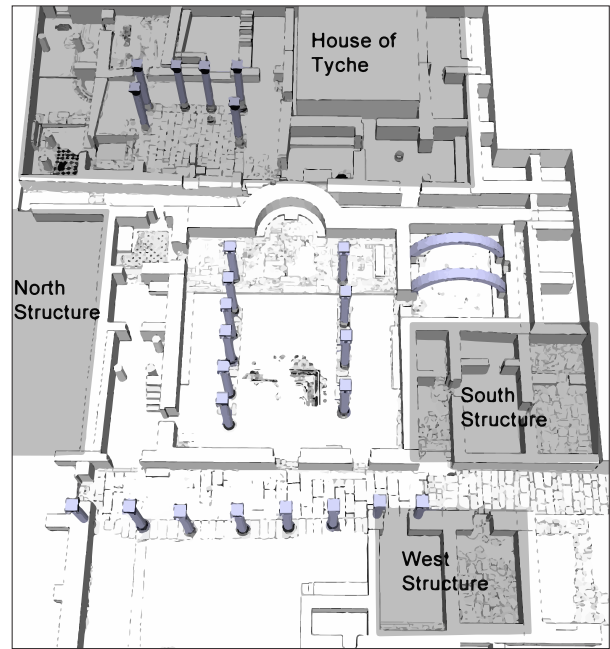


Fig. 4. North section of a 3D model of the project (drawing: J. Druckhammer).

was installed on top of basalt paving next to the western wall leading up to the top of the southern portico of the peristyle court.

All the eastern rooms of the house were modified. In the northeast corner was an entrance foyer, identified as such by an inscription reading, ΕΙΣΕΛΘΕΕΠΙΓΑΘ (‘‘enter for good’’). The northerly door to the foyer from the courtyard/garden was sealed, and the space was converted to some light industrial usage with ceramic pipes running across the mosaic floor and draining into the cistern under the peristyle court.

The next room to the south is tentatively identified as a triclinium, based on the shape, position in the house and decorative plaster recovered from the ruins. In the late antique period, the room was subdivided by a window wall. A bench/shelf was installed next to the northern wall.

The southern half of the house was completely rebuilt. In the southeast corner are a single room and a paved courtyard. Neither spaces have any access to the house, and the courtyard continues to the south integrating the first course of the original southern wall of the house as part of its crude paving.

The southern half of the house was rebuilt, with a large central room (8×5 m) with window walls both to the east and to the west. The central room has a shelf





Fig. 5. Top plan of the House of Tyche (drawing composite: A. Heiliger, T. Mankin and M. Schuler).

spanning the south wall and north-to-south double arch supporting the roof. The space to the east of the easterly window wall was accessible by a doorway and was likely used for storage. The space to the west of the westerly window wall provokes interest.

In the southwest corner of the peristyle house is a storage room with an external doorway to *Cardo 3N*. The room, 6.7×3.7 m., is subdivided into two sections by a crude stylobate with a pilaster to the east and a column to the west next to the westerly wall. The room has an exterior door facing the street and may be entered from spaces to the north and east. Opposite the doorway to *Cardo 3N* is a small cistern. In the southern section of the room, a crudely made bench about 40 cm high runs the width of the room next to the southern wall. On the hard-packed floor of this part of the room was a heavy deposit of late antique common-ware sherds including fragments of the shoulder of a Late Roman amphora (form LRA1) with Greek writing (*dipinti*) indicating the contents were fish paste (Segal et al. 2009:80–83). The doorway to *Cardo 3N* is the only access from the city to the complex of buildings being discussed, other than the main gate to the west portico of the church. Thus,

if the spaces in the former House of Tyche served a monastic complex, *Cardo 3N* and this doorway might have been how the monastic community received resources from the larger urban environment. If so, the space in the southwest corner of the house may have been used for food preparation.

To the north of the storage room is a small room. The room, 4.2×3.5 m, abuts the apse of the church. Doors allow exiting the room to the north or the south. Next to the west wall of the room is a small, 87 cm wide and 180 cm long, platform, whose surface is 45 cm above the room's floor. The dimensions would suggest it served as a sleeping space.

Together, the spaces to the east and south of the peristyle court in the former House of Tyche likely played some sort of support role for the posited monastic complex.

Five distinct components make up this complex: The Northeast church; a small complex to the south sharing the southern wall of the *domus* and the west wall of the *diakonikon*; a two-room structure to the west; a building two stories high to the north; and a group of rooms east and south of the peristyle court of the House of Tyche to the east.

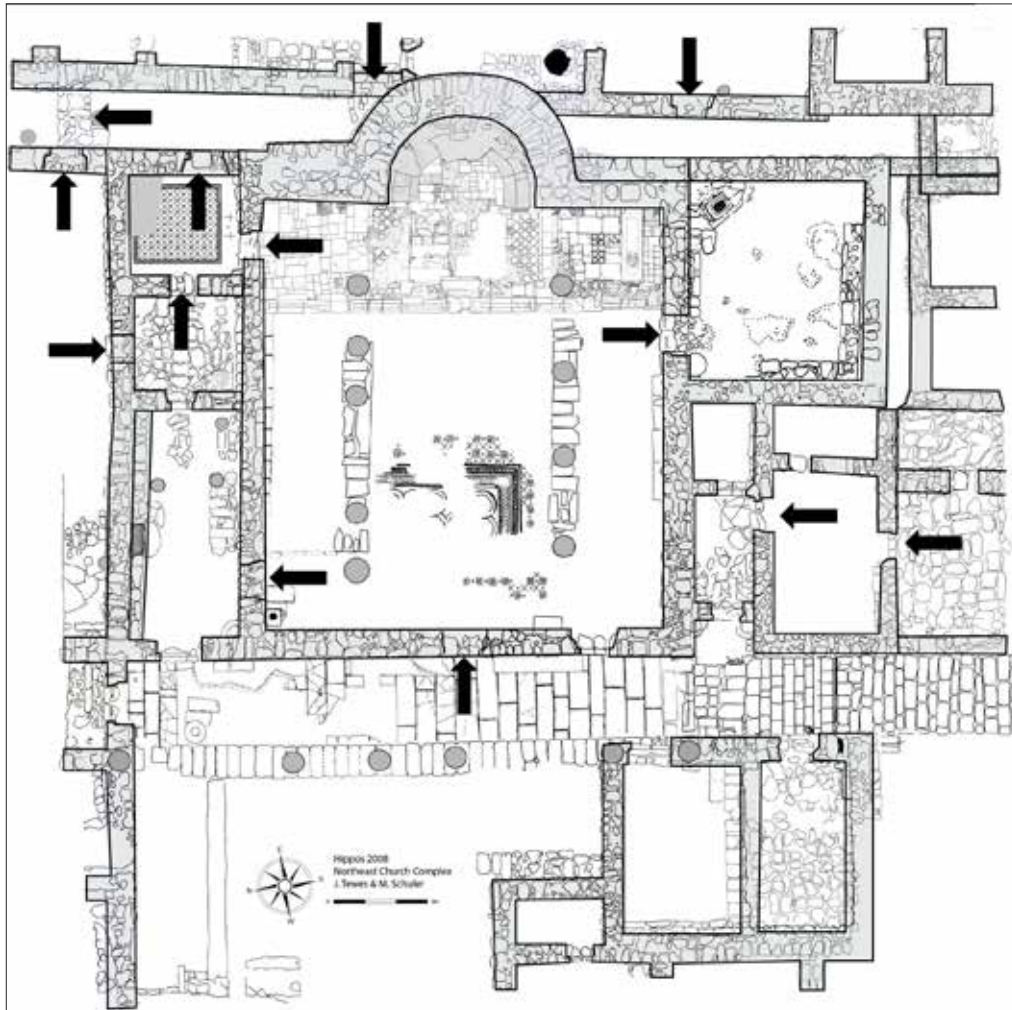


Fig. 6. Top plan of the Northeast Church (drawing composite: A. Heiliger, D. Tewes and M. Schuler).

The interconnection of these five units is demonstrated by the passageways among them. That interconnection is further confirmed by the intentional decommissioning of all the interrelated buildings of the complex, seemingly at the same time. Prior to the earthquake of 749 CE, liturgical rites ceased in the Northeast Church. Burials stopped (Fig. 6). Reliquaries were removed. All doors to the *domus* were intentionally sealed, except the entrance to the south aisle that gave access to the tomb of the elderly woman. Only the west entrances to the north lateral and medial chambers of the church remained open and suggest later use of the two rooms as a domestic space.

The southern structure had its doorways closed. The northerly building was sealed off at the north medial chamber, and *Cardo 3N* was blocked south of the two easterly entrances of the northerly building.

Similarly, in the House of Tyche, the principal doorway from the south portico of the peristyle court to *Cardo 3N* and the west doorway from the southwest room were blocked. Such comprehensive and systematic blockages affirm the hypothesis that the structures were an interrelated complex in the late antique period. What remained accessible after the decommissioning became a mausoleum and was little used or abandoned by the earthquake of 749 CE.

We have argued that the four structures surrounding the Northeast Church and together with it were an interconnected complex in the late antique period. However, a complex involving a church in an urban context is not conclusively a monastery, unless further indicators to that end are present.

The third indicator, following Goldfus, is the presence of burials in the church. At the south end

of the chancel, a single limestone slab covers a sarcophagus underneath. The sides of the slab are marble with crosses and with an alpha and omega. A basin for holy oil covers a hole bored into the lid. The sarcophagus contained the bones of a single, small, elderly woman gathered under the anointing hole, with long bones placed in a frame around fragments of the skull, pelvis and other smaller bones (Fig. 7). The example resembles that of a chapel in a monastery at Scythopolis which reserves a tomb for “Lady Mary who founded this church” (Fitzgerald 1939:27). The burial in the Northeast Church has the additional distinctions of demarcating the tomb within the chancel, providing for ongoing veneration and according a degree of anonymity appropriate for a foundress/abbess. We should expect a considerable number of monasteries for women in urban contexts, as the environment is safer than the desert and as pious and wealthy Christian widows often took up monastic life.

To the north of the central axis of the chancel is a second burial, a masonry tomb constructed of four courses of basalt ashlar (Fig. 8). Between the second and third covering stones, a lead pipe extends down into the tomb. At about 75 cm below the level of the stone floor is the limestone box of a sarcophagus, covered by flat stones. The sarcophagus was perched on irregular stones 27 to 33 cm above the smooth limestone floor of the chamber of the masonry tomb. Recovered from the accessible fill at the bottom of the masonry tomb were twenty-six fragments of iron nails and a lead corner bracket (7×6 cm). These pieces are similar to those recovered at other Byzantine burial sites in the Hefer Valley and Rammun and likely belonged to a wooden coffin (Rahmani 1974:124 and Taha 1998:342, plate 5). Discoloration of the remaining soil (2.5 YR 5/1) indicated the outline of a decayed wooden box.

Human remains were uncovered in two main areas of the tomb: the interior of the sarcophagus held the remains of at least nine individuals, while the second area under the sarcophagus yielded three individuals. The pattern is similar to the so-called “family tombs” at Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Khirbet Karkur, `Avdat, and Nesanna. In discussing the multiple-burial phenomenon, Haim Goldfus writes:

In many churches – evidently private foundations, whether of a single family or several families – the tombs were used as a family burial receptacle. The ‘family’ could have consisted of members of

consecutive generations or of several members of the same generation, as we have observed in churches of the Negev region such as Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Nessana, and `Avdat. . . [In monasteries,] this ‘family’ was not necessarily based on blood ties but rather on ecclesiastical kinship or monastic brotherhood (1997:240).

All the individuals found in the masonry tomb were adults, except for one infant aged 0–1 years represented only by teeth and pelvis fragments. As for the genders, at least three were men and three women. All the skeletons were disarticulated, with some individuals represented by only a few pieces.

The partial skeletal remains suggest that relics were extracted from the masonry tomb. Relics were important to the Christians at Hippos, for even after the Northeast Church was abandoned, the veneration of relics continued in the Northwest Church until the destruction of the city in 749 CE (Segal et al. 2003:26). If such extraction occurred, it points to the perceived holiness of those here buried. The mix of ages and genders might also suggest an idea of celibacy in urban monastic contexts different from that of the monks of the desert (Goldfus 2003: 79).

These two burial locations, both in the chancel, and both venerating those there interred are a significant indicator for identifying the complex in the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos as an urban monastic complex (Goldfus 2003:78).

If the complex is monastic in some form, an identifiable function for the complex would further the case. It is the fourth indicator for our consideration.

Certainly, the veneration of the elderly woman was part of the function of this complex, even after it was decommissioned. A well-paved street gave access to the gate of the compound. The only unblocked door after the decommissioning allowed continuing access to her tomb. A crude wall was built around the exposed sarcophagus of the woman, and a bench was installed inside the remaining southwest entrance. However, the cult of the elderly woman may have involved more than a memorial.

Next to the chancel and the tomb of the elderly woman is an arched *diakonikon* (6.23×5.63 m), oversized compared to the church (Fig. 9). Its only entrance is adjacent to the tomb of the elderly woman. Three high benches line the south, west and north walls. In the northeast corner of the *diakonikon* is a cistern head. This cistern is in direct proximity to the tomb, prominently placed in the room, and is an



Fig. 7. Tomb of the revered woman (photo: M. Schuler).

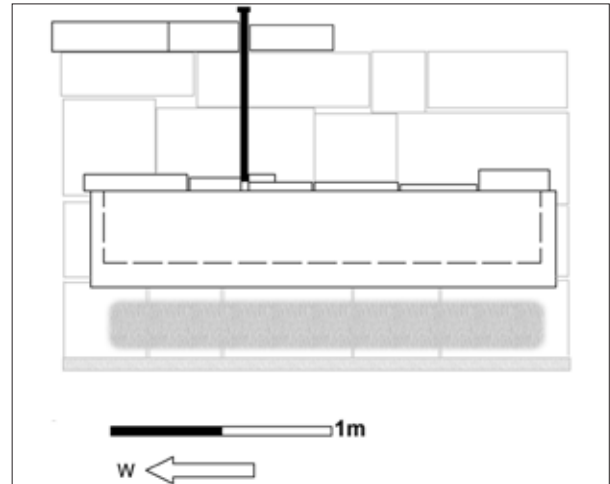


Fig. 8. Schematic of Masonry Tomb (drawing: M. Schuler).



Fig. 9. Diakonikon (photo: M. Schuler).

unprecedented feature of a *diakonikon*. Behind it, a small hoard of gold jewelry was found, including a magical amulet for somatic diseases (Segal et al. 2005:89–71).

We suggest that the room was the locus of a healing cult that grew from the veneration of the elderly woman. Christians in late antiquity searched for healing at the shrines of saints, usually their tombs,

or another place where their relics were preserved. Examples from comparable times periods include the tomb of the martyr St. Menas in Egypt in the fifth century; Sts. Abbakyros and John also in Egypt in the fifth and seventh centuries; the shrine of St. Thekla in Anatolia, attested between the fourth and sixth centuries; and the pilgrimage site at the column of St. Simon the Stylite the Elder, active in the late fifth and

sixth centuries. “These shrines are known through their extensive archaeological remains, through accounts of the posthumous miracles performed by the saints, and through pilgrimage artifacts or ‘souvenirs,’ such as *ampullae*, designed as containers for holy oil or water, and clay tokens made from the dust of a holy site” (Talbot 2002:154).

Although no such remains were found in this side room, the presence of the cistern suggests a healing function. The discovery of the healing amulet nearby, although pagan, supports this hypothesis, for Alexander of Tralles advocated the use of any means in the interests of the sick (*Twelve Books on Medicine*: 319, 475).

Binns posits a similar monastic healing site at neighboring Scythopolis, by drawing on references in Cyril to the monastery of Euthemane that Cyril calls the “well of eight,” to the Piacenza Pilgrim describing Scythopolis as a place where St. John the Baptist performed many miracles, and to a Russian abbot, Daniel, who visited Scythopolis in the twelfth century and was shown a miraculous pool (1994:146–147). The monastery compound at Antiochia Hippos served a similar function, although centered on a local saint. A major bubonic plague in 540–541 CE may have contributed to the development of such sites.

## CONCLUSIONS

A compound comprising four interconnected buildings surrounding the Northeast Church at Antiochia Hippos may have been an urban monastery (Fig. 10). The compound is in the urban core of the city. In its interconnectivity and in its decommissioning, the compound was treated as a unit. Its prominent burials in the chancel including a revered tomb of an elderly woman strongly suggest a monastic community. The compound also provided a significant function to the late antique workings of Antiochia Hippos, as the tomb of the elderly woman became and to a degree continued to be a site of healing. While the lack of specific literary or inscriptional evidence requires that the identification of this monastic compound be at best tentative, the material remains from the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos ought to be part of any study of urban monasticism and monasteries in Palaestina.

The case of the Northeast Insulae at Antiochia Hippos demonstrates the possibility of using key indicators to identify monastic compounds in ancient cities with concentrations of churches. Such identification has the potential to reveal more about urban monastic practice in late antique Palaestina as a complement to the practice in the desert.



Fig. 10. Northeast Insula Project 2016 (courtesy of the Hippos Excavations Project).

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