

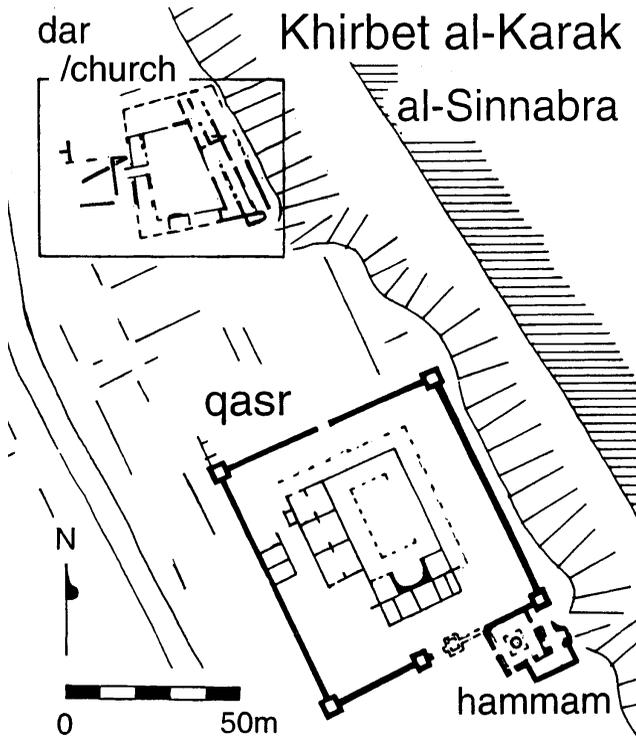
SINNABRA (OR KHIRBAT AL-KARAK) DONALD WHITCOMB

In 1952 two young professors from the OI decided to begin a new excavation in the young state of Israel; this was to be at Khirbat al-Karak, a pleasant place high on a bluff above the Sea of Galilee. Around this site, the river Jordan begins its long, historic flow southwards. They were primarily interested in a newly discovered Bronze Age settlement, but in order to keep their new director, Carl H. Kraeling, interested, they shifted the focus to a nearby early Byzantine church. This excavation and that on the main site were carefully recorded (fig. 1) with attention paid to the stratigraphic remains in the church and especially above that building, where its ruins were replaced a stables complex of the Umayyad Caliphs.

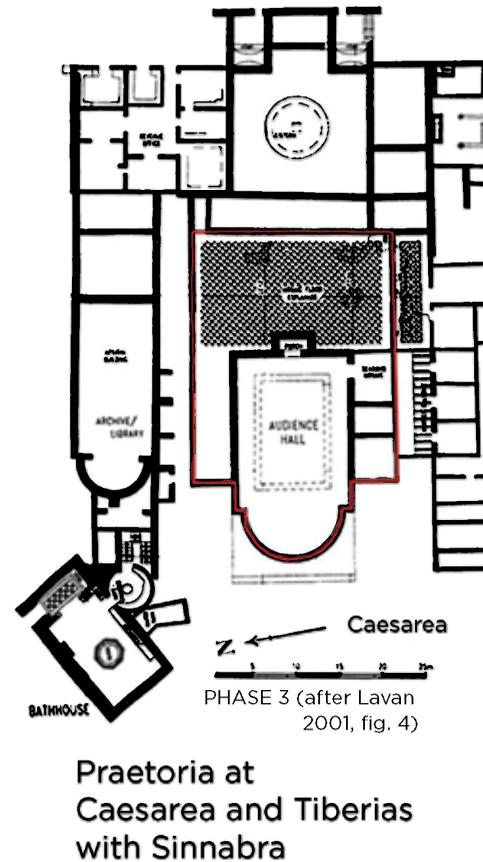


ABOVE: Figure 1. The Islamic building, Delougaz and Haines 1960, pl. 51A.

Helene Kantor and Pihas Delougaz did not realize that the eighth-century Caliphs, Mu'awiya, Abd al-Malik, and others, stabled their horses just north of the winter palace that was called Sinnabra. Some fifty years later, there was a paper by Ronny Reich stating that the main site could not be a synagogue inside a Roman fort, as had been assumed. Then, what was it, I pondered; I realized that this building must have been a *qasr* (pl. *qasur*), a palace of the early Islamic period. My short paper in 2002 has become rather famous for the identification of the palace called Sinnabra with the site of Khirbet al-Karak (fig. 2). This historical connection is due to the discussion of as-Sinnabra by L. A. Mayer, whose geographical notes leave little doubt as to the name.



ABOVE: Figure 2. Plan of the Khirbat al-Karak complex (after Whitcomb 2002).



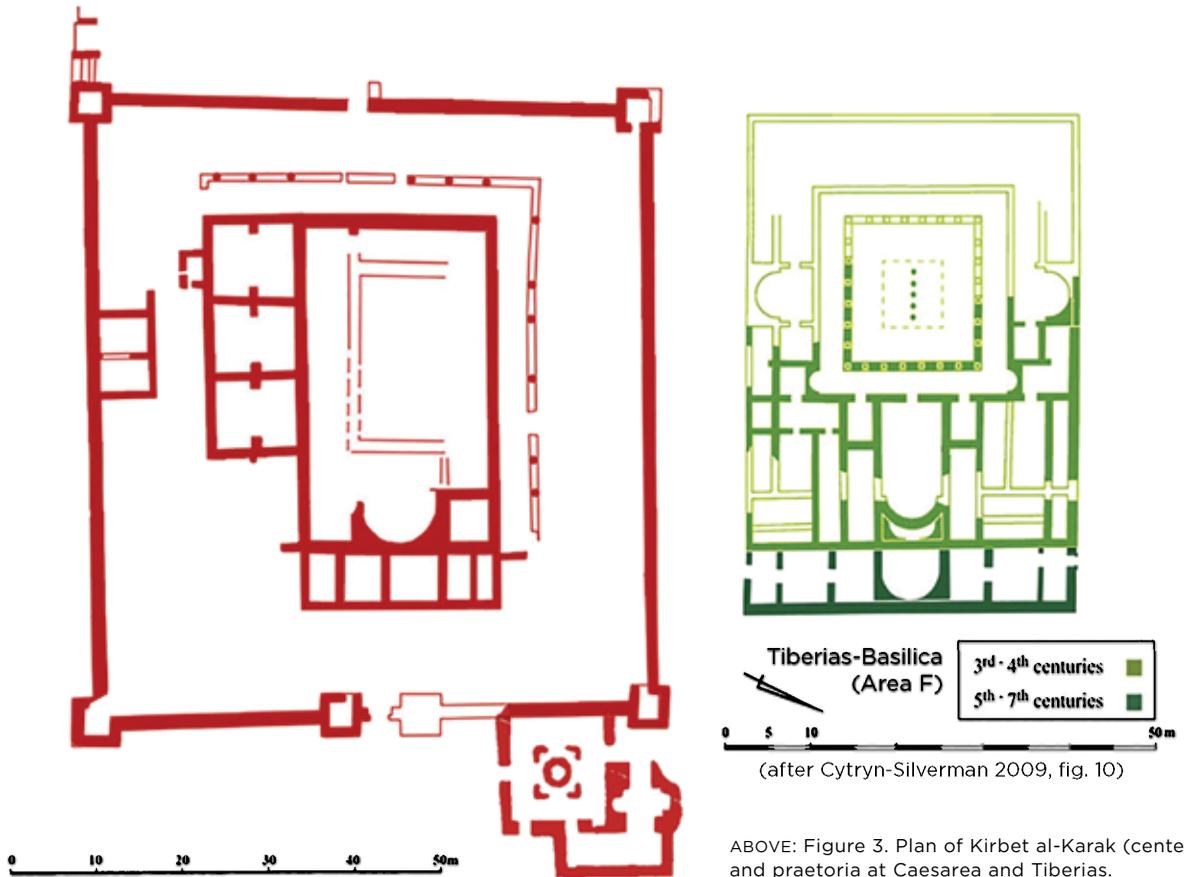
Praetoria at Caesarea and Tiberias with Sinnabra

The building has recently been described in a monograph by Raphael Greenberg and Tawfiq Da'adli (2017) as a “fortified basilica,” which still does not assist in understanding its function. Rather one may turn to other basilical structures, among which is the praetorium at Caesarea is perhaps the most interesting. Caesarea was the Byzantine administrative center conquered by Mu'awiya, who would have seen its audience hall, rooms, and bath hall. Likewise, there was the praetorium at Tiberias, about 10 km away, which had a new set of rooms and apse added in the early Islamic period (fig. 3). Each of these buildings was adorned with fine mosaics, similar to those found at Sinnabra.

The functional equivalent of the praesidium, the administrative palace complex, was the *dar al-imara*, found in most early Islamic cities. One of the spatial constants in early Islamic cities was

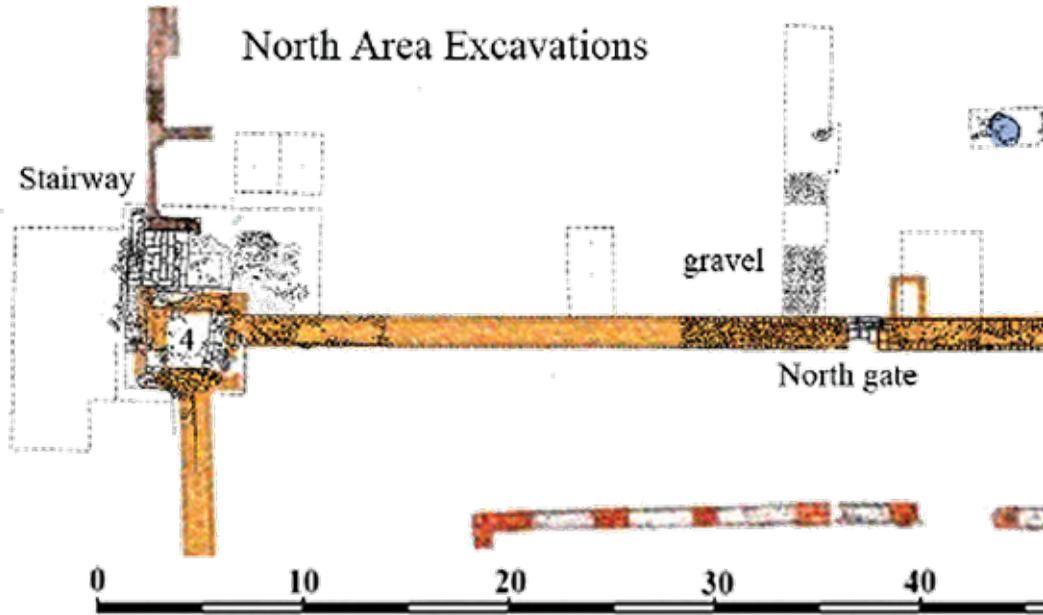
that the *dar al-imara* was located immediately behind, that is on the *qibla* side, of the congregational mosque. In the case of Sinnabra, the mosque should be located just north of the “fortified basilica.” This was the hypothetical basis for organizing a new excavation at Khirbet al-Karak, informally characterized as the search for Mu’awiya’s mosque.

This hypothesis interested Tawfiq Da’adli, who is now a professor at The Hebrew University. He had done some excavations within the basilica building and found coins beneath the floors proving early Islamic ex post facto dating for the building (2017). The instigator for new research is Prof. Rafi Greenberg, known to many at the OI from his residence here a few years ago. He has been involved



at Bet Yerah, as the site is known at his Tel Aviv University, for over twenty years of research and excavations. His interest is the exceptionally important Bronze Age site and, beyond this archaeology, the preservation and enhancement of the site. He has worked hard to make the site a national park featuring all the periods represented, including the Byzantine and early Islamic.

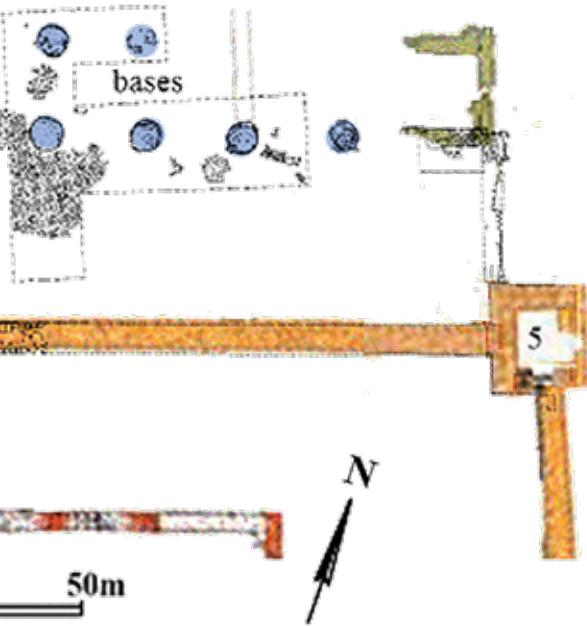
While we had talked about new excavations for many years, it was Tawfiq’s initiative in applying for and receiving a grant from the van Berchem foundation which began the process. The OI contributed a similar amount through the generosity of Gil Stein and Chris Woods. We had two research assistants in the field, Veronica Morriss from the OI, and Alon Arad from Tel Aviv University. A team of Palestinian archaeology workmen completed the excavations. We began on February 4



ABOVE: Figure 4. Veronica photographing on the stairs.

with a clean up on the site. Happily there had been a drought and only dried brush needed to be removed; we all remembered the visit two years earlier when the dense brush was head high and meant nothing could be seen.

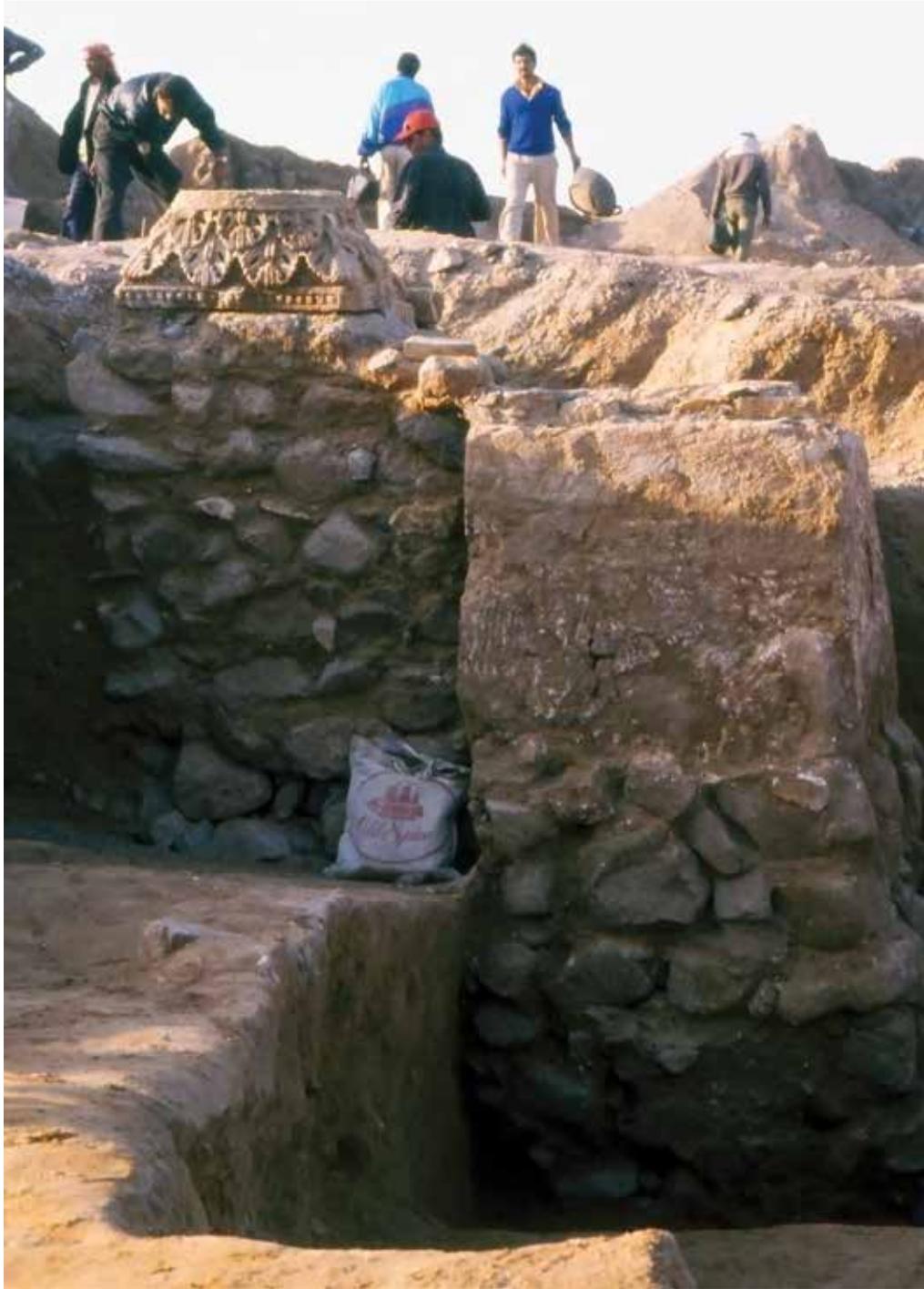
We began clearing a set of stairs that Delougaz had found some seventy years ago (fig. 4). These were attached to the exterior of the corner tower, a broad and shallow stairway descending from the west and ending with a compacted gravel surface. The stairway is curiously similar to the long staircase that we found at Mafjar, no doubt giving us two examples of Umayyad



LEFT: Figure 5. Plan of the north wall and new discoveries.
 RIGHT: Figure 6. Column bases in mosque at Tiberias.

architecture, but still another unexplained feature at both sites. The compacted gravel surface continued across the open area outside of the north wall of the site, and we started to lose a few days due to light rains.

After two weeks of digging, we moved farther to the eastern end of the north wall (fig. 5). We started clearing some cement-like masses that proved to have a common size, shape, and height. Further, they line up in rows at common distances; they immediately recall the “mushrooms” or column-bases in the mosque at Tiberias (fig. 6; as excavated by Katia Cytryn-Silverman in recent years; 2009). Not only was there a local parallel but I realized these column foundations were very similar to those that I had found in the mosque at Aqaba (fig. 7). Those foundations of the Umayyad mosque had been carefully prepared, sometimes twice, as the architects seem to have changed their plans. There is some indication of gravel surfaces laid over these bases; did the Abbasids later cancel out the Umayyad mosque? Needless to say, we had time only for final plans and photographs. Once again, an archaeological truth was proven, that the most interesting discoveries are made at the last minute.





ABOVE: Figure 7. Column bases in excavations at Aqaba.



ABOVE: Figure 8. Hypostyle building discovered this season.



The Sinnabra project has explored an aspect of the famous site of Khirbet al-Karak, a beautiful corner of the Sea of Galilee (fig. 8). It seems that the OI keeps being drawn back to its complex antiquities. We began by exploring its role during the early Islamic period and, while we cannot claim to have found its very early mosque, the hypostyle hall that once may have stood there has its fascination and begs for someone to return.

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