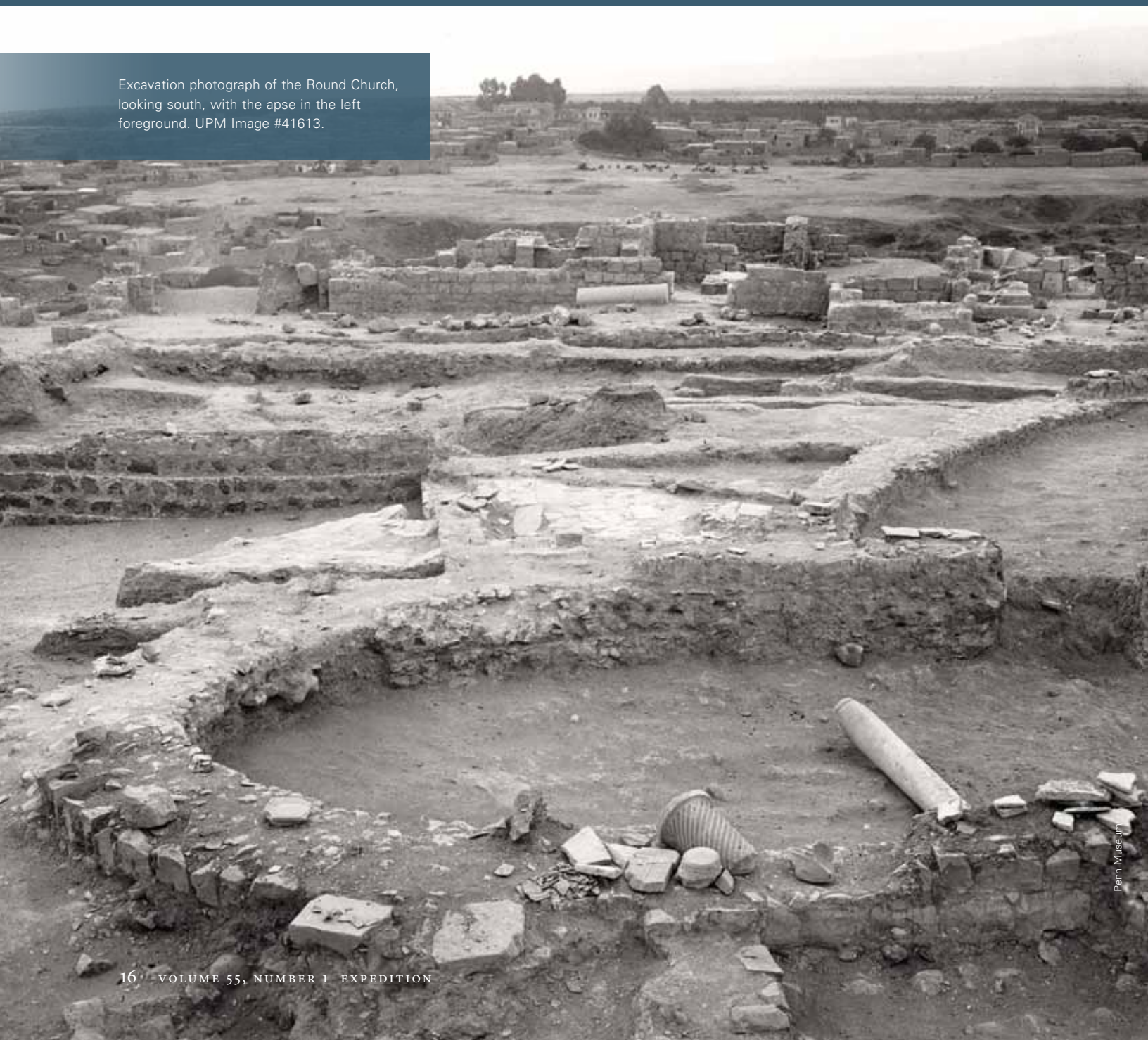


The Round Church at Beth Shean

BY DAIRA NOCERA

Excavation photograph of the Round Church, looking south, with the apse in the left foreground. UPM Image #41613.

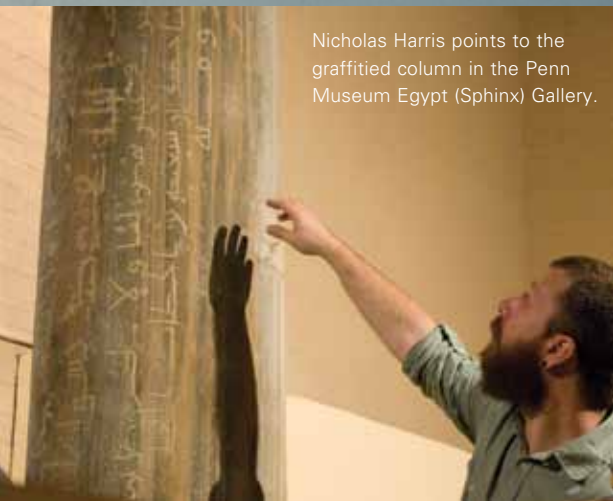


A visitor to the Penn Museum may fail to notice two orphaned Corinthian columns tucked away in the Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery. These come from the curious Round Church, built on the tell of Beth Shean in the 5th century. Both received graffiti after they had fallen, testifying to the continued heterogeneous population of the settlement. The right column's inscription is in Arabic, the left is in Hebrew (see page 18). The church itself is unique in Byzantine architecture, posing problems of both reconstruction and date. Sadly, with the deep excavations on the tell, virtually no trace is left of the church on site, although many of its architectural components are now in the Museum.



Column and capital from the Round Church, with Arabic graffiti on shaft. UPM Image #30102.

EXCAVATED FROM 1921 TO 1933 by Rowe and Fitzgerald, a building of unique architectural design extended over the ruins of the Roman temple of Zeus Akraios. The centrally planned structure consisted of an enormous rotunda (approximately 38.8 m in diameter), enveloped by an ambulatory or cloister with a projecting apse and sanctuary on the eastern side and narthex to the west. The entrance was to the west through a trapezoidal narthex or portico. While the building has the salient features identifying it as a church, its design is unique. The modest thickness of the walls, 1.0 m for the outer circle and only 64 cm for the inner, suggests that the building was hypaethral (unroofed). The discovery of a water channel running inside the inner wall seems to confirm this interpretation. Indeed, if we compare the proportions of this church with other early Christian rotundas, the distinctions are clearly apparent. For example, Santa Costanza in Rome is half the diameter of the Beth Shean rotunda, but with walls three times as thick. The walls in the Round Church were



Nicholas Harris points to the graffitied column in the Penn Museum Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery.

BETH SHEAN COLUMNS IN LOWER EGYPT

By Nicholas Harris

The marble columns, majestic in their own right, contain a further curiosity: they are criss-crossed with Arabic and Hebrew graffiti. Column I carries two examples of Hebrew graffiti. One reads: "In the name of the Lord, we will d[o and will prosper]." Below this paraphrase of Gen. 39:23, commonly appearing at the beginning of Hebrew books and contracts, we read the name "David S<...>," presumably the name of the inscriber. This inscription appears near the top of the column and avoids the Arabic graffiti, set in neat lines down the middle of the column. Thus, this Hebrew graffito must have been inscribed after the Arabic lines, dating it to the 9th century or later.

Column I has four distinct Arabic inscriptions. One particularly valuable inscription reads: "[This is] the writing of Ahmad ibn Sa'id ibn al-Khattab al-Bajali, in the spring of the year 190 [= January–March, 806]." The remainder of the graffiti, judging from their script, also date from the 9th or 10th century. Beth Shean throughout the 'Abbasid period was a popular point for traffic of various kinds to ford the River Jordan, on the route from Syria to Egypt. But the graffiti have another connotation. Column IV carries two Arabic inscriptions; one reads, alluding to Q. 48:2, "O God, forgive Ahmad ibn Jami' his sins, what came before and what will follow. Amen." Ahmad's contrition and the toppled column, however, are linked. The sight of an ancient ruin frequently provided an *'ibra* in Arabic, a Qur'anic term (e.g. Q. 12:111) meaning a moral or contemplative lesson from history. The medieval traveler could not help but be struck by the grandeur of past civilizations, yet also could not help but notice that God had eventually erased them and sundered their monuments.

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simply too thin to support a roofing system of any substance. Most likely, only the ambulatory was roofed. The inner circle formed the stylobate (foundation) for a colonnade, from which the remains of nine column shafts were excavated. Six Corinthian capitals came from the same excavation and must have surmounted the columns. Eleven additional capitals, smaller and with different decoration, and a pilaster capital were found in the surrounding area.

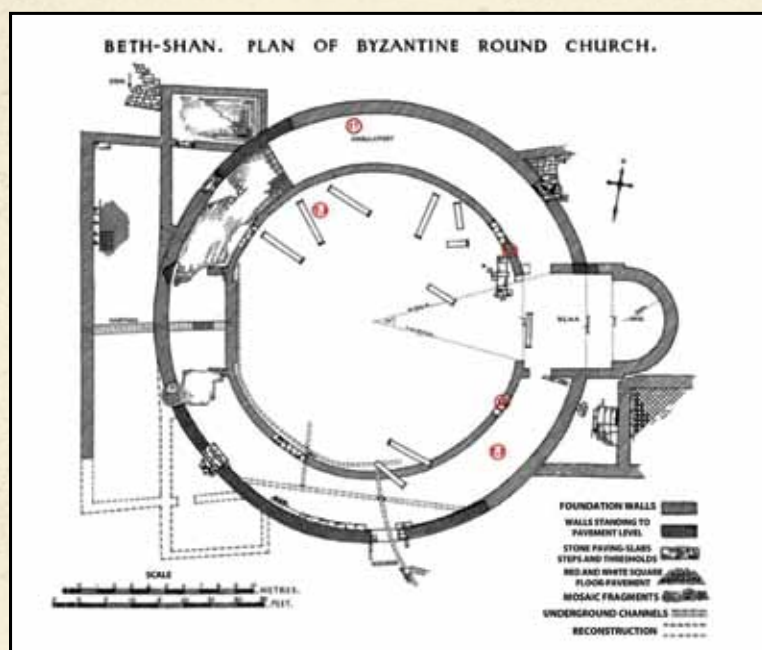
The excavators initially dated the church to 431–38 CE, based solely on the stylistic analysis of the six Corinthian capitals, which they compared to capitals from the church of St.

Stephen in Jerusalem. However, a closer analysis of these Beth Shean capitals allows for their identification as *spolia* (reused elements) from Roman buildings of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. While the Corinthian capitals cannot assist in dating the church, an examination of the smaller capitals encourages a date in the last quarter of the 5th century or the beginning of 6th century.

The seventeen capitals may be grouped into seven types, based on their most important characteristics. Those from the ambulatory colonnade (including the two in the Egypt [Sphinx] Gallery), Type I, are comparable to Late Roman



Above left, the Round Church during excavation, looking south. A Type I capital is circled in red. UPM Image #41614. Above right, Round Church during excavation, looking west. A pilaster capital is circled in red. UPM Image #41591.



Left, plan of the Round Church, showing approximate findspots of capitals. After G. M. Fitzgerald, 1931. Right and below, capitals (Type I) from the Round Church. After G. M. Fitzgerald, 1931.



examples. The closest common traits may be found in 3rd century Corinthian capitals from Caesarea and Tiberias. These bear close similarities in the treatment of the acanthus leaves, the number of rows of leaves, the geometrical pattern formed by the connection of the tips, the quality of the carving, and the execution of ribbon-like helices and volutes. Thus the Type I capitals may be identified as reused Roman works, and therefore cannot be used as a basis for dating the church. The characteristics of Type I capitals are closer to Roman than to 5th century examples.



Small capitals (Type V) from the Round Church. Each pair represents a different stylistic treatment of the tips of leaves touching each other.



Photograph and drawing of capital (Type IV) from the Round Church, with acanthus leaves.

Six other capitals have been grouped as Type V. They can be described as a simplified version of the Lederblätter type and can be dated to the end of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century CE, based on examples excavated elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The defining aspect of this group is the pattern resulting from the tips of the leaves touching each other. The resulting shapes are a teardrop, a diamond, and a spearhead, which allows us to group the six pieces into three pairs. Considering their modest size, these capitals may have been part of some feature on the ground level, such as a ciborium or canopy for the altar, similar to that from the church of St. Demetrius in Thessalonike, built around the middle of the 5th century.

The best evidence for the dating of the church may be found in the only capital belonging to Type IV. This example finds good comparisons in a church at Khirbat al-Karak, dated to the last quarter of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century, and in a fragment from the cemetery church in Horvat Karkur Illit. The capital from the church in Khirbat al-Karak was found in the narthex, which has been assigned to the second construction phase. The dating of this church is based on the relative chronology of its three building phases and is supported by some epigraphic evidence and its architectural design. The second comparison shows a similar treatment of the acanthus leaves, which are very characteristic for this type. The fragment may belong to the second building phase at Horvat Karkur Illit, dated to the reign of emperor Justinian. In light of these comparisons, the most likely date for the construction of the Round Church at Beth Shean is the last quarter of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century CE.

The stylistic analysis of the capitals allow for two significant conclusions. First, Roman spolia were used in this building, a common practice across the Mediterranean in Late Antiquity. Second, the evidence for dating provided by the stylistic analysis of the last capital is certainly more methodologically sound than that proposed by the excavators. However, the comparanda have been positioned chronologically only tentatively within their own archaeological contexts. Thus, these new conclusions on the dating of the church have to be considered tentative as well. Moving the dating of the Round Church to the last quarter of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century would fit much better with the overall analysis of Beth Shean in this period. In fact, Tsafirir and Foerster, in their 1997 article on urbanism at Beth Shean, date the Round Church to the second half of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century solely on the grounds of the evidence for the urban development of the city. Our study of the capitals seems to confirm their intuition. 🏠



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For Further Reading

Fitzgerald, G. M., *Beth-Shan Excavations 1921–1923: The Arab and Byzantine Levels*. Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1931.

Tsafirir, Y., and G. Foerster. "Urbanism at Scythopolis-Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 51 (1997): 85–146.