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A Decorated Portable Reliquarium from Shave Zion

The modern settlement of Shave Zion is located south of Nahariyya, on the southern bank of Bet Ha'Emeq stream. In the mouth of the stream, on its northern bank is a large ancient site named Khirbet Malaha spread on a low hill and the flat fields east of it. According to the surveys the site contains pottery sherds dating to the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. On the southern slope of the hill were excavated the remains of a large church dated to the Byzantine period (Aviam 2001). On the southern bank of the stream another large church was excavated dates to the Byzantine period (Prausnitz 1967). This church is suggested to be part of a monastery (Ashkenazi and Aviam forthcoming).

East of this church, on a low sandy hill, between the houses of the modern settlement, are remains of a mosaic floor. This mosaic fragment is known since the 1930s, when a house was built next to it. In the summer of 2010 when the new residence of the house wished to re-expose the mosaic the Institute for Galilean Archaeology conducted excavation at the site on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa.

The ancient remains comprise a mosaic floor c. 3 × 3 m, pottery sherds from the Byzantine and Hellenistic periods and a stone reliquarium. The foundation of the floor included red soil into which stones (10-25 cm) were incorporated. On it was the layer of plaster cement and on top of it was a third layer of plaster into which the tesserae were inlaid. The mosaic includes stones in three colors: white, bluish-gray and red. Most of the tesserae are made of lime but in some places on the fringes there are orange clay tesserae. The floor design is framed by a one stone wide line of bluish-gray colored stones. In a distance of eight cm from the frame is a guilloche, 20 cm wide. Eight cm from it is another frame which creates a series of medallions. In the center of each medallion is a circle divided into four quarters – two white and two red. On the other side of the exterior frame in the white space which probably abutted the walls, are geometric patterns in red and bluish-gray. The density of the mosaic floor is 56 tesserae to 10 cm². Three ancient repaired patches can be seen in the floor. They are



Fig. 1. The short side of the reliquarium.

made of larger tesserae in an attempt to imitate the original design. In these patches the density of the stones is 36 tesserae to 10 cm².

Although no walls were discovered, the orientation of the design is to the east and together with the discovery of the reliquarium and Byzantine period pottery we assume that these are the remains of a small ecclesiastical structure probably a monastery.

South of the mosaic floor next to a modern wall were revealed three fragments of a soft limestone decorated reliquarium¹ (Figs. 1-3). After restoring, one of the short sides was fully preserved (13 cm wide, 11 cm high; Fig. 1), part of one of the long sides (14 cm), the bottom corner of the other long side and part of the base (Figs. 2, 3). Its estimated fully length is 21 cm. The three sides of the reliquarium present decoration, which was carved with a sharp knife on its smoothed face, and according to some remains they were all painted red. On the long side is a rectangular frame made of simple lines with curved lines in the corners. In its center is a large (5.5 cm high, 5.5 cm estimated width) deeply carved cross with widening arms. The short side depicts five elements within a square frame. At the bottom are two standing facing birds looking up towards a deeply carved cross (3 cm high, 2.5 cm wide) of the same design as the one on the long side. On each

¹ The reliquarium was cleaned, restored and photographed by J. Dray.

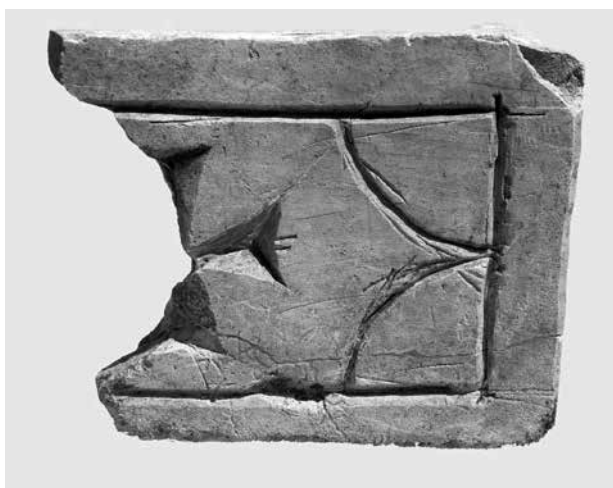


Fig. 2. The long side of the reliquarium..



Fig. 3. A reconstruction of the long side.

side of the cross is a branch, or perhaps a tree, carved diagonally to the corner. Between the birds, below the cross is a hole (1 cm) drilled through the wall.

The motifs depicted on the reliquarium are very common in sacred Byzantine art. A similar scene of two facing birds on both sides of a cross is portrayed above the entrance to one of the rock-cut tombs in Shefar'am (Maayan-Fanar 2009: 20, Fig. 17). On a silver reliquarium from the Toronto museum is a depiction of a cross, with an angel on each side of it, and next to the angels a tree and next to it a bird and a lamb (Noga-Banai and Safran 2011: Fig. 1). In our opinion

this is a portable reliquarium. It was probably used by pouring oil from it during a religious ceremony, probably into small containers given to the participants. A small reliquarium decorated with a cross on its short side was discovered at the church of Khirbet el-Beiyudat (Hizmi 1990: 256, Fig. 17). At the same church another reliquarium was discovered. Its exterior sides are not worked which proves that it was permanently placed under the altar (Hizmi 1990: Figs. 8, 9). On the floor of the church at Horvath Hesheq a small reliquarium (27 × 17 cm, 12 cm high) was discovered. On one of the short sides it is decorated with a cross, and in the center of the other short side is a punctured hole with a bronze tube inserted into it (Aviam 1990: 360, Fig. 12). At the same church two other stone reliquaria were discovered in the floor of the central apse and in the floor of the southern apse (Aviam 1990: 360). The conclusion from these two sites is that the reliquaria that were permanently placed were not worked decorated on the outside, while the portable reliquaria were finely worked, decorated and probably had spouts to pour the sacred liquid.

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