At the last ARAM Decapolis conference (September 1992), W. Harold Mare, the founding director of the American excavations at Abila, argued that Abila was a “thriving Greco-Roman city of the Decapolis.”1 Since that conference we now have many more seasons of excavations to report, and thus this occasion appears to be an appropriate time to assess the currently extant archaeological evidence for Roman occupation at Abila/Qweilbah in northern Jordan.

If you were to visit the Abila site today, you would observe several prominent architectural features on its twin tells and in the saddle between.2 Most notably, remains of five Byzantine churches now have been excavated (see Figure 1).3 There are also clear outlines of at least two other prominent structures occupied during the Umayyad era, and possibly both dating to the Byzantine period. In another large excavation area (Area AA) the careful visitor might observe walls from the Hellenistic, Iron, and Bronze ages. Certainly the importance of Abila/Qweilbah as a city can be proven for many eras of occupational history. However, excavated Roman period architecture at Abila still pales in comparison to Byzantine evidence from the site. Nevertheless, many arenas of evidence still support the notion that Roman Abila was a thriving polis that grew even more in importance in the Late Roman era.

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1 See Mare (1992). Dr. Mare’s article presented the following evidence for his thesis: “ancient literary evidence pointing to Abila as a city of the Decapolis; the extensive road system; the large complex of public buildings; cultural richness and diversity; effective use of the city’s abundant natural resources; the multilevel social structure; and the economic, industrial and artistic richness of the city” (ibid., p. 57). While Mare’s thesis can certainly be sustained, that particular article does tend to blend evidence from several other occupational periods (especially Byzantine) in with the Roman materials.

2 Abila/Qweilbah consists of two tells (Tell Abil to the north, and Umm el-Amad to the south) with a saddle in between. Based on excavated strata, the northern tell has an occupational history dating back at least to Early Bronze (EB I). Both tells were surmounted by Byzantine churches. Just east of these tells runs an ancient wadi, fed by the spring Ayn Qweilbah. Across the wadi and east of Tell Abil lies a bridge connecting the city on the west with the eastern banks of the wadi. On this eastern side, above the wadi, there are hundreds of rock-cut tombs dotting an extended stretch of the escarpment down to the wadi.

3 For an introduction and comparison of these churches see Chapman & Smith (forthcoming).
LITERARY EVIDENCE FOR ROMAN ABILA

Before we focus on the excavations themselves, it is worth taking a moment to recall some of the familiar literary testimony to Abila as a Decapolis city.4 Studies in this literary evidence are complicated by the existence of multiple cities named Abila in antiquity. Thus the second-century geographer Claudius Ptolemy mentions at least two Abila’s among the cities of Coele-Syria and the Decapolis.5 However, in this passage it is evident, based on the relative geographical coordinates, that the second of these Abila’s is the one to be identified with the archaeological site of Qweilbah now under excavation.6 In Ptolemy’s list, the second Abila is mentioned in the midst of other Decapolis cities such as Hippos, Capitolias, and Gadara (all of which are fairly proximate to our excavation site); and it is natural to assume that Ptolemy counted this second Abila among the Decapolis cities. As further evidence for “Decapolis” Abila, an inscription found in Palmyra from the time of Hadrian was dedicated by “Agathangelos of Abila of the Decapolis.”7

Other literary evidence also testifies to Abila as a Graeco-Roman city. Though he does not employ the title “Decapolis,” Eusebius mentions (at the time of the transition from the Roman era to the Byzantine period) “Abela” as a city (polis) 12 miles east of Gadara.8 Prior to the Roman period, in the Hellenistic era Polybius testifies to an Abila that, along with Gadara, was captured by Antiochus the Great.9

Nonetheless, Abila is missing in the Decapolis list provided by Pliny the Elder.10 And the mention in Pliny’s Natural History of a city named Abila, which he discusses shortly after the cities listed in his Decapolis list, has been debated as to whether it refers to Abila/Qweilbah, or to some other Abila.11 Of course, Pliny also remarks concerning his Decapolis list that “not all writers keep to

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4 This evidence is analysed in Wineland (2001), 47-68. Also see Mare (1992), 57-58. For texts see Spijkerman (1978), 23-31.
6 The site of Qweilbah is identified with Decapolis Abila based on its geographical location (in addition to Ptolemy’s Geography also see Eusebius, Onomasticon 33-34), on the etymology of the modern Arabic name, and on inscriptions found on site that mention the name of Abila.
7 See text and translation in Wineland (2001), 60-62; esp. p. 61 on the issue of the proper translation of “Agathangelos.”
9 Polybius, Histories xiv as cited in Josephus, Antiquitates, xii.136. Text and translation in Marcus (1943), 68-69. For (unlikely) textual variations, see text in Niese (1892), 95.
10 Pliny (Natural History, v.16.74) lists: Damascus, Philadelphia, Raphana, Scythopolis-Nysa, Gadara, Hippos, Dion, Pella, Galasa (sic, often thought to be Gerasa), and Canatha. Text and translation in Rackham (1942), 276-279.
11 Pliny, Natural History, v.16.74.
the same towns in the list.” 12 Still, one must wonder why Abila is omitted in Pliny’s enumeration of Decapolis cities. Some scholars have postulated that Abila appears in his list under another name. 13 Others suggest the later mention of Abila among the tetrarchies refers to Abila/Qweilbah and testifies to its importance. 14 We might, however, wonder if Abila/Qweilbah was intentionally omitted from Pliny’s list; and this could imply that this Abila’s significance was in some sense dwarfed in the early Roman period by other cities in the region.

NUMISMATIC, CERAMIC, AND INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCE FOR ROMAN ABILA

Coins minted at Decapolis Abila testify to its importance in Roman times. Spijkerman lists coins from the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century to that of Elagabalus in the third. 15 The coins, along with other inscriptions, tend to follow the Pompeian dating system – another evidence of the significance of Roman presence in Abila. 16 These coins refer to Abila as “Seleucia Abila” in Coele-Syria, and identify the city as an autonomous holy city of asylum. This might very well imply the use of a temple precinct as a place of refuge in Roman times. Nevertheless, in light of the second and third century dating of coins currently known to have been minted at Abila, it must be admitted that comparable coins were minted in earlier periods at most other Decapolis cities. 17 Also, most coins found during excavations at the site of Abila have come from other cities and not from Abila itself, although this may be due to a variety of factors. 18 Certainly, coins found at the Abila excavation site from a variety of locales do testify to use of Roman-era coinage at Abila throughout Early and Late Roman times. Yet, it currently appears that Abila itself did not

12 Pliny, Natural History, v.16.74: in quo non omnes eadem observant.
13 However, the identification of Abila with Raphana, which one can recently find on Google Earth, is not very likely.
14 Mare identified the mention of Abila here in Pliny with Qweilbah; see Mare (1992), 57. Wineland disagrees, suggesting that it must refer in context to an Abila near Damascus; see Wineland (2001), 57. A similar issue of identification occurs with various references to Abila in Josephus; see Wineland (2001), 57-59.
15 Spijkerman (1978), 48-57. A similar opinion can be found in Meshorer (1985), 78.
16 Wineland (2001), 105.
17 According to Wineland (2001, p. 81) and following Spijkerman, first-century B.C. coins are known from Gadara, whereas the following Decapolis cities evidence first-century A.D. coins: Canata, Gerasa, Hippos, Philadelphia, Pella, and Scythopolis. Only Capopolis is thought (like Abila) to have begun minting coins in the second century A.D.
18 Wineland (2001, 90) suggests that looting of the Abila site may help explain the fact that few Abila coins minted onsite have been found at Abila. Wineland actually reports an instance of a local villager possessing an Abila-minted coin, which had been looted from the Abila site.
mint its own coins until after most other Decapolis cities had begun to strike their city coinage.19

As to ceramics, both early and late Roman pottery has been found around the site. Whole forms are especially testified by the tomb finds. Moreover, it is a common experience for excavators at the site to discover Roman-era sherds in their squares. For example, rarely does the excavation day go by that there is not at least some scrap on the pottery-reading table of *terra sigilata* (whether imported or imitation ware). The presence of Roman-period ceramics is especially evident atop Tell Abil (the northern tell) and in the saddle below, though Roman era pottery has been found throughout the whole site.

Various inscriptions have been dated by paleography to derive from Roman Abila. Two Tyche inscriptions will be mentioned further below. Most importantly, one inscription found onsite mentions Abila alongside the cities of Emmatha and Capitolias. The square alphabet employed in this inscription has been dated to the second century A.D.20

TOMB REMAINS AND ROMAN ABILA

Some of the most impressive evidence for Roman Abila comes from the tomb finds. The French excavations of the 1980’s (which built on probes done earlier in the century) made known to the world beautiful painted tombs from Abila.21 The fresco work carefully decorating these eighteen Late Roman era tombs has been much admired. Further investigation of tombs up through 2000 has confirmed the presence of death and burial in Roman Abila, often in substantial tombs with multiple loculi and impressive decoration (See figures 2 and 3).22 Such Roman tombs often contain rich assortments of pottery, glass, jewelry and other small finds.23

There are certainly multiple examples of Early Roman era tombs at Abila, including some that were discovered largely intact. However, it should be acknowledged that the most ornate Roman era tombs date from the Late Roman period (rather than the Early Roman period). This may suggest a growing sense of wealth and importance in Late Roman Abila.

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19 The author certainly recognizes that this picture may change as further coins are discovered.
20 See discussion in Wineland (2001), 75-76. Wineland also mentions a few other fragmentary inscriptions thought to have come from the Roman era (see pp. 72-76).
21 See reports in the works by Alix Barbet & Claude Vibert-Guigue.
22 See e.g., Mare (1997b), 308-309; this reports the Late Roman tomb H60 discovered by Robert W. Smith. The H60 tomb contained an admirable collection of fresco artwork (including lifelike portrait medallions) and of embossed figures (such as lions and sphinxes) carved into the tomb walls.
23 For a convenient listing of tomb finds, see Wineland (2000), 105.
Past publications on Abila have occasionally associated (or postulated) Roman structures with the Qweilbah site. At times these postulations, though often reasonable, had not yet been actually verified by complete excavation of the stratigraphy of the excavation structures. Some examples include the so-called theatre cavea, the bridge, the bath/nympheum complex, and the temple.

From long before the American expedition it had been suggested that there was a theatre cavea in the extensive curved area seemingly cut into the north face of Umm el-Amad (above the saddle between the twin tells). Almost any visitor to the site might come to a similar opinion given the unique shape of that face of the tell. However, it must be admitted that none of the probes into the steep face of this so-called cavea has been able to confirm the presence of such a theatre. These probes did expose a Byzantine/Umayyad structure built into the base of the tell, with clear evidence of collapse from the tell above. However, the theatre itself remains to be found. The current excavation team has recognized at least four options here: 1) no theatre existed at Abila (although this seems unlikely for a city of its size); 2) remains of the theatre do lie in the so-called cavea, but at a level deeper than yet exposed; 3) all (or at least most) remains of the theatre had been robbed out in antiquity, and thus the theatre may have originally stood in the cavea, even if direct archaeological evidence is wanting; 4) the theatre in fact was someplace else, possibly looking at the city from across the wadi. In any case, the existence of a theatre at Roman Abila must remain an open question until further work has been done.

To this day, remains of an ancient bridge continue to be employed by small truck traffic crossing the wadi near the excavated Area E church. This has long been labeled in our excavation preliminary reports as a “Roman bridge.” In fact, until 2006, no substantial work had been done to analyze this ancient structure, or to prove that it dated back to Roman era occupation. In 2006, working in cooperation with Bernhard Lucke to take soil samples adjacent to the bridge, two deep probes were begun on the north and south sides of the present structure. This proved to everyone’s amazement that the bridge was much wider and much higher than originally thought. Subsequently, the Department of Antiquities also initiated an excavation of the bridge in 2007, and this work has partially exposed the structure to a depth of roughly five meters. Certainly the structural features of the bridge could be Roman in origin. During this past

24 Schumacher (1888), 30.
25 A brief discussion of one such probe can be found in Mare (1997b), 305-306.
26 One might compare such a suggestion with the significant depth of the theatre excavated at nearby Bayt Ras (Capitolias).
27 A few test probes have been made across the wadi at some possible theatre sites (especially in the 2004 season), though without any verifiable results. See e.g., Chapman et al. (2006), 67.
season (2008), another deep trench was dug in order to examine soil layers and to gather pottery. This deep trench has uncovered a preponderance of Late Roman and Byzantine sherds in several meters of washed sediment found toward the bottom of the bridge’s foundations. On the basis of these findings, we are currently postulating that this immense bridge was built across the wadi in the Late Roman period. Thus, during the Late Roman and Byzantine eras, the traveler at Abila would have been struck by this impressive structure that allowed traffic to conveniently pass over the wadi.

On the eastern slopes of Tell Abil stands a series of monumental structures. Excavators with the American team had suggested that the southernmost of these structures could very well have been a Roman era bath and nymphaeum complex. Certainly, in antiquity ample water flowed to this vicinity from extensive water channels, though these were most clearly in use in the Byzantine period. Various vaulted rooms also suggested the “bath” identification. However, the existence of a bath was not actually verified until the 2004 excavations, when Jack Lee and his team unearthed remains of a hypocaust system in a probe in one square. While this was cause for much rejoicing, subsequent analysis of the only coin found amongst the small portion of the exposed hypocaust flooring shows the coin itself to have originated in the Byzantine period. Further excavation would be required amidst the monumental rubble in order to learn if the structure itself dates from an even earlier (i.e., Roman era) period.

One complex matter in the study of Roman Abila concerns the existence of Roman and Hellenistic temples at the site. Starkly stated, heretofore in our excavations no definitive structural evidence exists for a temple building from the Roman period. This can be contrasted with the occasional optimism found in various publications to the effect that a Roman temple originally stood atop Tell Abil in a locale that now is buried under the Area A church. In fact, an extensive probe in the nave apse of that church indicated several meters of Byzantine fill before it came down on Bronze Age strata (without stratified Roman remains). Various probes around the church have yielded foundation walls for the Byzantine church, but no walls that can be certainly attributed to a Roman Temple.

Nonetheless, while the excavated remains have not yet provided us conclusive structural evidence of such a temple, there is sufficient inferential evidence to continue to suggest that such a temple most likely existed in that prominent location. Roman era sherds have been found in various probes around

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28 From the deep trench probe this summer there is some further evidence below this bridge for a smaller original bridge structure from an earlier period. Presumably this was in use prior to the construction of the larger bridge. The larger bridge would have allowed pedestrian and cart traffic to not descend so deeply into the wadi channel in order to cross the wadi.


the Byzantine church. A series of capitals from various styles of columns were originally found buried in a row just outside the Byzantine structure; and the current excavator, John Wineland, has suggested that study of these may lead to the conclusion that at least some of them were Roman-era capitals. Most substantially, a broken, but nearly complete, life-sized statue of Artemis was found in fill on the north side of the Area A church (figure 4).\footnote{This has been reported in Mare (1996), 261. Later Mare suggested two options for this statue: that it was from the Hellenistic period, or that it was a later Roman copy based on an earlier Greek model (Mare thinks the former to be “better”), See Mare (1997a), 277-281.}

Finally, in this last excavation season (2008), we uncovered definitive evidence of a Roman era paved surface about a meter and a half below the current level of a Byzantine mosaic atrium to the west of the Area A church (see figure 5).\footnote{Of the approximately 60 sherds found beneath this finely-laid pavement, all but one came up as Early or Late Roman. The square in question was laid immediately north of the Byzantine mosaic atrium surface (in order not to penetrate the mosaic itself).}

Clearly, excavations atop Tell Abil do indicate that monumental Roman building remains lie below the Byzantine strata; and it continues to be reasonable to postulate that a temple once stood proud atop this hill. Nonetheless, further excavation should provide more conclusive stratified evidence.

Beyond the question of a temple atop Tell Abil, one would naturally expect the populace of a Roman city to have engaged in the worship of multiple deities. Numismatic evidence from Roman era Abila does indeed portray Herakles, Athena, and Tyche on the reverse of many ancient Abila coins.\footnote{For the numismatic evidence, see Spijkerman (1978), 48-57 (esp. the summary on p. 49).}

Tyche is found particularly often, though it is difficult to infer the shape of any temple to Tyche from these coins, since they variously portray her sitting in distyle, tetrastyle, and even hexastyle temples. Furthermore, a dedicatory offering to Tyche was inscribed in a column discovered to have been reused in the Area E church.\footnote{See Mare (1996), 263-264; and especially note Van Elderen (1995), 95-96. Van Elderen, who considers the inscription to be late second century, translates the text to read “To good Tyche: For the safety of the rulers, …………….. Dischasedeinionus, having achieved his ambition, from his own expenses erected this column. He lived 26 [years].”}

Such reuse of architectural elements appears common on the site, and it is reasonable to assume that the Byzantine period witnessed the destruction of pagan temples (and the reuse of their construction materials).

Some previous presentations on Abila had suggested that an extensive basalt street (found in the saddle between the main tells) was a Roman road (perhaps a \textit{decumanus}) leading through town. However, subsequent probes under the surface have evidenced sufficient Byzantine pottery to indicate that the road in its current form is Byzantine.\footnote{See Van Elderen (1989), 18-20. Also see Wineland (2001), 72. Based on paleographic analysis this text is dated to the second century A.D.}

Yet, in one portion of the saddle (in Area B) a...
limestone pavement lies under the basalt street, suggesting an earlier thoroughfare (see figure 6). Excavations in 2004 demonstrated that this limestone pavement, which splits into two smaller paved sections with different levels, must have been used largely for pedestrian traffic.37

Immediately adjacent to the east of this limestone pavement stands a wall with a threshold leading into a large mosaic-lined plaza area. Probes beneath the mosaic plaza have suggested that the plaza was in use in the Roman era. Deep beneath this plaza sits a Roman period water channel that led down from the west toward the vicinity of the previously mentioned bath/nympheum area.38

Apart from monumental architecture, some remains of Roman era buildings have been found northeast of the Byzantine church atop Tell Abil (in an area we have called “AA”). These appear to be walls either from smaller public structures (such as shops) or from large domestic habitation. Further horizontal exposure of this area could help to identify the various purposes to which these walls were put.

Upon review of the extant architectural evidence, we can still suggest that a thriving city existed on this site in the Roman period. However, there remain unanswered questions – such as the location of the theatre, the date of the bath, and the exact parameters of the temples that must certainly have dotted the Abila cityscape. This serves as a reminder of the continued need to excavate this fine site; and the need to test our theories against actual stratified remains.

CONCLUSION

Certainly, much evidence exists for Roman era habitation of Abila. The tomb finds, combined with literary and numismatic evidence, testify to the occupation of the site. Even the currently excavated architectural elements, though they have not yet verified every suggestion of previous generations, do indicate important civic features (such as plazas, water channels, and pedestrian thoroughfares).

However, as I have re-examined the evidence for Decapolis Abila during the early and late Roman periods, I am left to wonder why Abila is (in all probability) omitted from Pliny’s first-century list of Decapolis cities. Also I note that the extensive Late Roman tomb finds can be contrasted with the less impressive Early Roman tomb discoveries. Finally, as far as we can tell, numismatic evidence suggests that the city first minted coins in the second century. Now, one must be careful to note that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

37 Chapman et al. (2006), 64-65.
38 Chapman et al. (2006), 63-64.
Our numismatic record is likely incomplete, and excavations continue to unearth new finds. Yet, perhaps one could suggest that in the first century Abila was still struggling as a polis to achieve the status of some of its more famous neighbours. By the second century, Late Roman Abila had indeed ascended to some prominence, and this process was to continue into the Byzantine period, when Abila served as the cathedra of a bishopric. Certainly Abila was a thriving Graeco-Roman city, though its greater eminence may have been established a bit later than some other Decapolis cities. Such a hypothesis will need to be continually tested through further excavation of the site. Nonetheless, perhaps such a postulation can provide us with a way forward in the analysis of the various strands of evidence for Roman Abila.

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ROMAN REMAINS AT DECAPOLIS ABILA


Fig. 1. Top plan of Abila excavation site, showing location of five Byzantine churches. Note also bridge designation toward bottom of drawing.
Fig. 2. Tomb H60 – note fresco medallions above both the loculus and the niche.

Fig. 3. Tomb H60 lions and sphinxes.
Fig. 4. Portions of the Artemis statue found atop Tell Abil.
Fig. 5. Pavement found beneath the level of the Byzantine atrium in Area A. Sherds found below the pavement (in which the excavator is standing) were Early and Late Roman. Note the Byzantine church in background and the mosaic atrium of the church precinct in the top right of the picture.
Fig. 6. Areas B (foreground) and C – basalt pavement in use during Byzantine era, but limestone pedestrian way appears to be Roman. Note deep excavations below Roman period plaza in center of picture.