

THE BYZANTINE CHURCH OF THE NUTRITION IN NAZARETH REDISCOVERED

KEN DARK

Although Nazareth has usually been seen by scholars as a relatively minor Byzantine pilgrimage centre, it contained perhaps the most important 'lost' Byzantine church in the Holy Land, the Church of the Nutrition – according to De Locis Sanctis built over the house where it was believed that Jesus Christ had been a child. This article, part of a series of final interim reports of the PEF-funded 'Nazareth Archaeological Project', presents evidence that this church has been discovered at the present Sisters of Nazareth convent in central Nazareth. The scale of the church and its surrounding structures suggests that Nazareth was a much larger, and more important, centre for Byzantine-period pilgrimage than previously supposed. The church was used in the Crusader period, after a phase of desertion, prior to destruction by fire, probably in the 13th century.

Keywords: Nazareth, Church of the Nutrition, Byzantine, Crusader, Holy Land pilgrimage

I. INTRODUCTION

This article has two purposes: presenting archaeological evidence for the Byzantine Church of the Nutrition, and forming part of the final interim report on the work of the 'Nazareth Archaeological Project' at the Sisters of Nazareth convent in central Nazareth.¹ Full publication of that work as a research monograph will follow after further analysis of the extremely rich data is completed. Thus only a provisional summary of a much more extensive study is presented in this paper. The monograph will include full archaeological documentation for all the material discussed, and will explore many other aspects of the site's interpretation which space does not permit here.

The Church of the Nutrition is perhaps the most important 'lost' Byzantine pilgrimage church in the Holy Land, and was believed to have been built on the place of the upbringing, or 'Nutrition' (in the sense of 'nurturing'), of Jesus Christ. It will be argued here that the church was located on the site currently occupied by the Sisters of Nazareth convent (hereafter 'the convent'), a Roman Catholic house established by nuns from France in the centre of the present city, close to the famous Church of the Annunciation. Some readers of this journal may find such a view surprising, being aware that the convent was first suggested as the site of the Church in the 19th century, on indisputably weak grounds (as discussed by Bagatti 1937). Subsequently, any association between the Church of the Nutrition and the convent site has been viewed with, to put it mildly, scepticism by most scholars, and later publications attempting to support the claim, such as the paper by Livio (1980), have only fuelled such a perspective. However, while previous scepticism on this issue has been largely justified, as we shall see, there is convincing evidence that the Church of the Nutrition did stand on the site of the present convent. Furthermore, most of the archaeological information from the site has previously been either inaccurately reported or ignored.

Address correspondence to: Ken Dark, Research Centre for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire RG6 6AH, UK, k.r.dark@reading.ac.uk

2. A BYZANTINE CHURCH AT THE SISTERS OF NAZARETH CONVENT

Pre-modern structures were first discovered at the convent site in 1884, and investigated by nuns, pupils of the convent school, workmen and other clergy from then until the Second World War. More systematic work was undertaken from the late 1930s by Henri Senès, a Jesuit who had been an architect before becoming a priest, although his work was neither up to the highest archaeological standards of his time nor was it published (Dark 2007, forthcoming b).

This produced an array of structures that are covered by a purpose-built cellar (hereafter ‘the cellar’) occupying much of the courtyard of the cloister and extending under the north range into the garden. The portable artefacts are kept in a small museum (hereafter ‘the museum’) in the north range of the convent and many records, almost all unpublished, stored elsewhere in the present building. However, no examination of the site using modern archaeological methods had taken place until the Nazareth Archaeological Project began work at the site in 2006. Our study (Dark 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010, forthcoming a, forthcoming b), completed in 2010, involved collating, copying and re-analysing all extant records of previous investigations of the site, photographing and cataloguing all of the extant finds and re-surveying all archaeological features in the cellar. A Total Station survey of the whole cellar for the project was prepared by Mitchell Pollington (Fig. 1).

The main evidence for a Byzantine phase in the cellar consists of an artificial cave (‘the Large Cave’) with an apsidal north end (Fig. 2) and of a series of smaller spaces to its east, only accessible from the cave. The apsidal end of the Large Cave is lit by a rock-cut ‘light well’ (Fig. 3) and separated from the area to its south by two rock-cut steps.

The apsidal end of the cave was constructed by digging back from the north side of a Roman-period *kokhim* tomb (Tomb 2), leaving only slight traces of the northern part of that feature (Dark forthcoming b). However, the western, and perhaps southern, burials of Tomb 2 were preserved *in situ* at the south end of the cave. That this was deliberate preservation is suggested by the decoration of the *loculi* openings to the west with polychrome mosaic – some *tesserae* apparently cut into curved shapes to fit their curvilinear apertures. A niche cut into the rock-face above the *loculi* resembles the prayer niches at Byzantine sites such as Mar Saba, more closely than features, including niches, found at Second Temple-period *kokhim* tombs (Patrich 1993, 1995a, especially Fig. 28; 2003).

In fact, the whole of the Large Cave seems to have been elaborately decorated with polychrome wall mosaics. Schumacher (1889, 70) reports mortar on the cave walls and notes that the soil inside it contained ‘piles of good thick mortar-cover’, presumably fallen from those walls. There were also ‘heaps of mosaic glass . . . representing every possible colour . . . some being nicely gold-plated’ (72) and, according to Sœur Marie de Nazareth (1956, 252), reporting information in the convent diary, a pile of mosaic cubes of green, gold, blue, red and pink was found near the southwest end of the apse. This pile of *tesserae* was on top of a layer of compact soil, probably the Crusader-period mortar floor discussed below. An unpublished plan made during ‘clearance’, today kept in the convent, shows a slab labelled the ‘mosaics of an altar’ also lying on the southwest side of the apsidally-ended cave. This had green, yellow, red, pink and gold-in-glass *tesserae* outlining an equal-armed cross with circles between the arms – almost certainly a fragment of a wall- or floor-mosaic rather than an altar. The same plan indicates mosaic *tesserae* opposite the ‘altar’ on the southwest edge of the cave. These references are corroborated by the finds kept in the museum. There are many polychrome *tesserae* found in the cave and more are known by the Sisters once to have existed, but to have been given away, lost, stolen or even thrown away.

Thus, there is no doubt that the Large Cave was extensively decorated with polychrome wall mosaics, although its floor seems to have been the flattened bare rock, which is white-coloured when newly exposed. Apart from the fragment bearing a cross, which along with

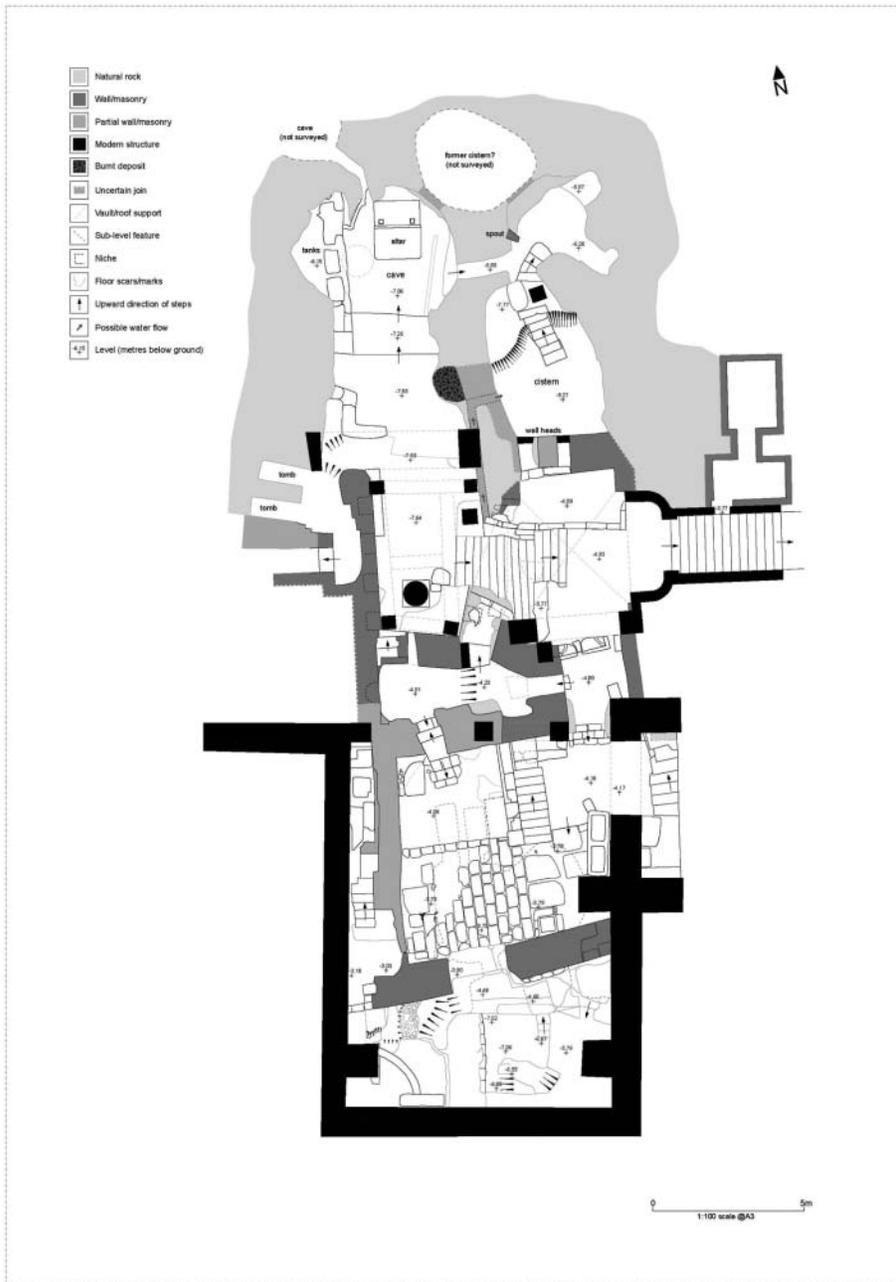


Fig. 1. Plan of the overall state of the archaeological features in the cellar at the Sisters of Nazareth convent in 2009, prior to the restoration of the floor in Structure 1 (based on a Total Station survey made for the Nazareth Archaeological Project by Mitchell Pollington 2008-9). Modern walls are in black. Tomb 1 is shown only in dotted outline as it underlies the undisturbed natural rock below Structure 1, but Tomb 2 is marked by the two *loculi* are labelled 'tomb' on the top left of the image.



Fig. 2. The apsidal north end of the Large Cave, from the south-east. The scale is 1m high in 10cm divisions.

the surviving mosaic *tesserae* serves to demonstrate the Byzantine date of this decoration, the only clue to what these mosaics depicted is the presence of flesh-coloured pink *tesserae*, strongly implying that figures were part of the programme of images displayed in the cave.

The cave was also furnished with imported marble sculpture. Byzantine column capitals and the upright from a Byzantine marble screen (probably part of a chancel screen) are preserved in the museum. The plan with the mosaic-decorated slab also indicates that columns were found with the 'altar' and shows two other column shafts lying near the southeast end of the apsidal-ended cave. The most detailed earlier description of the site yet published, by de Nazareth (1956), mentions the discovery of another column fragment in the cave in 1885 (252).

Schumacher (1889, 71–72) reports a small statuette and a fragment of a small marble 'ionic' capital (from an altar or liturgical table?), both covered with gold leaf, from the Large Cave, although one or both could be Crusader in date. If Byzantine, this would be especially interesting as gilded marble is paralleled only in Israel in Byzantine contexts at the cave-church at Khirbet Kana (probably believed to be the Biblical Cana in the Byzantine period) on the northern side of the Bet Netofa valley, immediately north of Sepphoris (Edwards 2001, 2002; Richardson 2004, 104–105; 2006, 139). Another small column, with a Corinthian capital (Schumacher 1889, 71–72) even more strongly resembles a component from a Byzantine altar or table. Thus, it seems likely that the cave contained one or more altars and a marble screen.



Fig. 3. The 'light well'. The earlier rock-cut aperture is encased in later Crusader-period ashlar.

It is hard to imagine any other interpretation that would account for all this evidence as well as the suggestion that the Large Cave was a Byzantine cave-church of the type attested elsewhere in the Holy Land, as – to give one example – at Khirbet ed-Deir (Hirschfeld 1993, 1999), suggested to date from the late 5th to 6th centuries. There, the monastic cave-church was built on three levels on the steep slope of a c. 100 m long x c. 20–30 m wide canyon with sheer 12 m high cliffs and the mouth of a large natural cave was largely blocked by a well-built wall. In the cave there was a chancel with a marble screen, the floor was entirely paved with mosaic and the walls were coated with a thick layer of whitish plaster. Khirbet ed-Deir has a rock-cut cistern underneath the entrance area and various 'water installations' in the floor that may have had a liturgical function.

Water installations are also found at the Sisters of Nazareth site. On the west side of the area east of the steps in the Large Cave there are a series of rock-cut basins, which before being destroyed in the 19th century, extended in masonry southwards. The extant basins are cut, at about waist-height, into the top of a narrow rock shelf in the cave wall. The north of each basin has a hole close to its sloping base allowing liquid to flow northwards. These basins were fed by a pipe or conduit high to the south, and this liquid was then passed from one basin to another before draining along a near-vertical rock-cut channel, and then another sloping to the north in the cave floor, into a cistern behind the apse. The original form of this cistern is unreconstructable as it was blasted with explosives during the 19th century, but its existence and location are beyond doubt and its existence

indicates that it was water that was being channelled through these basins. Immediately to the south of the more vertical channel, there is a green glass spout set in mortar into the side of the northernmost basin, so that water could be dispensed from it in the apse area.

If this was a Byzantine cave-church, it seems probable that the context for such a dispensation in its apse was liturgical. The form of the basins may assist with the interpretation here, as they would have served to extract sediment from the, possibly chalk-laden, water draining through this system. The collection of 'white-water', almost certainly chalky water, by later Christian pilgrims in Nazareth is referred to by the Russian Abbot Daniel in the 12th century (Pringle 1988, 118) and one could easily imagine that the lay recipients of the water would queue to the south to receive it from a priest or attendant dispensing it into a drinking vessel from this spout, before returning to the body of the cave-church. Perhaps this is, then, a rare opportunity to reconstruct archaeologically a lost liturgical practice from Byzantine Nazareth.

There are also four other rock-cut rooms adjacent to the east of the apsidal cave, briefly referred to above. The first of these to the north is a curvilinear cistern, no longer visible. The second room, adjacent to the south, is a rock-cut rectilinear space and has three, undated and roughly hewn, but shallow, niches in its walls. The niches may be recent features as they do not appear on the earliest plans of the site, but the room is depicted on those plans. It contains a stone overflow channel, of indeterminate date, high in its northwest side, apparently to carry excess water from the cistern to the north, but it does not have the appearance of a cistern. A similar rock-cut room at the monastery of Enclistra on Cyprus is interpreted as a cell (Mango and Hawkins 1966, pl. D) but the room at the Sisters of Nazareth need be no more than a space for collecting water, given the adjacent cisterns.

This room opens through a rock-cut doorway in its west wall into the apsidally-ended cave, and through another rock-cut doorway into a very deep curvilinear cistern, entered by steps, with a layer of waterproof lime-plaster over the wall, confirming its use as a cistern. A Crusader-period masonry wall covering the whole of its southern side has an opening at its top resembling a reversed letter D, but this obscures an earlier rock-cut opening in the same location, with holes in the south and west of the wall faces. These might suggest a winding mechanism, raising water into a rectilinear space to its south. If so, the function of this space may be similar to that of the room north of the cistern.

According to the convent archive, a Byzantine acanthus-decorated cornice was found in the room immediately south of the cistern and west of the present stairs. A Byzantine date for the room is confirmed by the fact that it is the only entrance to the Large Cave, through a very large, arguably 'monumentalised', rock-cut round-headed doorway in the east side of the room (Fig. 4). A series of four rock-cut steps lead into the Large Cave from its original floor-level, which was much lower than that of today, while on either side of this doorway there was a vertical rock-cut channel. The channel on the south fed into a cistern largely obscured beneath Crusader-period masonry and that on the north, via a stone conduit standing immediately on the rock (Fig. 5), into the large cistern to the north of the room. These vertical channels can be seen at their uppermost surviving part to be cut by the Crusader barrel-vault high above them. The stone-built conduit is sealed beneath a mortar floor of which a small part survives in the northwest corner, adjacent to the stairs into the Large Cave. This floor may be associated with certainly Crusader-period features and indicates the Crusader-period floor level in this part of the site.

This mortar floor overlays a stratified sequence comprising a burning layer, a silty alluvial layer and then a make-up layer for the floor. These deposits, which all postdate both the chancel and entranceway steps in the Large Cave and the rooms to its east, have largely been dug away by earlier investigators, but were preserved for us to record in a block of



Fig. 4. The rock-cut arch opening into the Large Cave, showing by the scale a water channel cut into its face, from the east. The niched wall can be seen in the background; the cross-vault above the entranceway in the upper part of the foreground. The scale is 1m high in 10cm divisions.

unexcavated soil on the south side, where it borders the largest cistern. The lower part of this block comprises rubble, closely resembling deposits derived from the roof-collapse of caves. This rubble directly overlaid the Byzantine-period floor of the Large Cave and probably represents the collapse of the roof of the cave after a period of disuse. The silty alluvial deposit overlaid this rubble. This is probably identical to the alluvial silt noted by earlier scholars below a Crusader-period niched wall on the southeast side of the Large Cave, immediately west ('in front') of the monumentalised arched doorway. Both deposits lay below a continuation of the same Crusader-period floor visible adjacent to the steps from the Large Cave to the cross-vaulted room, showing conclusively that the cave-church passed out of use before being refurbished and re-used in the Crusader period, and helping to differentiate between Byzantine and Crusader features.

Consequently, the water-management system evidenced in the area of the doorway may be assigned to the Byzantine period. The monumentalisation of this area may explain the architectural sculpture, as it could have served as a Byzantine-period vestibule, or narthex, for the Large Cave and the area to its south, to which we shall return shortly. The architectural sculpture found here is unlikely to have fitted the rock-cut arch, so may perhaps relate to a doorway leading from an upper level, in this case an entrance monumentalised with columns supporting an acanthus-decorated cornice. Water could have been drawn from the cistern on the north in this vestibule area without entering the cave-church, and it is



Fig. 5. The stone conduit below the later mortar floor on north-west side of the stairs into the Large Cave, from the south. The scale is in 10cm divisions.

possible that this was made available to people (whether ecclesiastical or lay-folk) at times other than during church services, perhaps even on an everyday basis as a water-source in a settlement not otherwise well-supplied with water.

The area south of the Large Cave was also incorporated into this phase of use. Earlier features south of the Large Cave were encapsulated in vaulted rooms. White floor *tesserae* and polychrome wall-mosaic *tesserae*, including fine glass mosaic cubes, found inside the rock-cut walls of Structure 1 (Fig. 6), an Early Roman-period domestic building predating the earliest burial at the site (Dark 2007, forthcoming b), suggest that it was provided with a plain white tessellated floor and polychrome wall-mosaics in the Byzantine period. The structure had originally had a smaller room to its north (termed the ‘Chambre Obscure’ by the site’s 19th-century investigators), and this was vaulted and furnished with a niche at its west end, as had been provided for the retained portion of Tomb 2, suggesting that it was used as a place of prayer. Both niches face to the west. Many polychrome wall-mosaic *tesserae* found around the entrance to Tomb 1, a better preserved Early Roman-period *kokhim* tomb, imply decoration of this area, once more recalling the treatment of Tomb 2.

It is possible that it was in this phase that the cave immediately east of the forecourt of Tomb 1 (Fig. 7) was modified to form a small rectilinear room. The back (north end) of the cave is wholly comprised of a well-built stone wall, so similar to the massive Crusader-period mortared stone wall running east-west at the break of the slope above and immediately north of it to suggest that it was the deep foundation for that wall. That is, the back



Fig. 6 Structure 1, view from the south-east. The scale is 1m high in 10cm divisions.

of the cave was truncated by the insertion of this foundation and could have extended further back into the hillside.

Why the cave was modified in this way is an enigma, but it could be associated with the re-use of the adjacent tomb as a focus for Christian veneration. An approximately dome-shaped space was constructed by digging from within Tomb 1 to its east. This dug away one or two *loculi* to form a room enterable only from within Tomb 1, itself enterable only through the original entrance from its forecourt. A vertical shaft in its ceiling gives light onto the south end of the room, and immediately beneath this is a stone-built table, resembling a Christian altar (Fig. 8).

When first seen, through the hole in its ceiling, the chain of a liturgical vessel and small lamps were lying on the built table, and two iron spurs, probably best interpreted as Crusader-period votives, hung on its walls (de Nazareth 1956, 262). These artefacts offer strong support for the interpretation that the stone table is a Christian altar, and indicate that the room was in use in the Crusader period. However, they afford no evidence for its construction date: it could be Crusader or earlier. Given the evidence for Byzantine ecclesiastical activity on the north of the site, then it seems possible that the room, one might reasonably term it a chapel, was built in the Byzantine period. This would be consistent with the Byzantine use of Tomb 2 as the basis of the cave-church, and the presence of Byzantine mosaic immediately outside the tomb.



Fig. 7. The cave east of Tomb 1, from the south-west. The massive Crusader-period wall running east-west across the south of the site ('M4') can be seen left of the scale. The scale is 10cm divisions.

It is credible that Byzantine church-builders could have recognised Tomb 1 as an earlier Jewish burial place, even if only by analogy with the tomb of Christ described in the New Testament. However, the treatment of a Second Temple Jewish tomb in this way is unusual, perhaps even unique, and suggests a site-specific explanation. If this chapel was inaccessible except from within the tomb, movement from the ground surface above to the north can never have been easy. One possibility, therefore, might be that the remodelled cave was a cell for an attendant priest so that they may celebrate Communion at the altar in the chapel. An analogy could then be found with the numerous Byzantine hermits' cells cut into the Galilean hills (Aviam 2004, 201). A Byzantine date might allow greater space once to have existed at its rear before the construction of the Crusader-period wall.

Whether or not the chapel and modified cave east of Tomb 1 were constructed in the Byzantine period rather than later, it is clear that the crypt of the Byzantine church was designed to preserve and incorporate, as places of Christian veneration, both Structure 1 and Tombs 1 and 2. Tomb 2 and Structure 1 were provided with what can be interpreted as prayer niches and all three were decorated with mosaic. Given that the nearby Church of the Annunciation shows that this was in the centre of Byzantine Nazareth, then the association meriting such veneration is likely to have been with the Gospels' account of the upbringing of Jesus Christ (Matthew 2:23, 4:13; Luke 1:26, 2:42:39, 51; 4:16–30).

However, the cave-church was far from being the only Byzantine ecclesiastical structure at the site. Over the cave-church and cisterns there was a substantial surface-level building.



Fig. 8. An anonymous photograph of the chapel next to Tomb 1 in 1945, from inside Tomb 1 to its west. The altar can be seen on the right of the photograph. Reproduced from the anonymous pamphlet guidebook *Les Fouilles De Nazareth*.

Three apses built of massive blocks of ashlar (1 m × 30 cm × 60 cm) were recorded in both 1900 and 1913 on the east of this building during the construction of the convent church. The architect of the existing convent church produced detailed measured plans of these, and the apses – with the structure of a vaulted room to its west under the south end of the present convent church – survived long enough to be depicted in two drawings based on lost photographs, both unpublished, showing plain round-headed arches and ashlar walls. An accompanying written account with one of these mentions mosaic on the base of the inside of the wall.

Fragments of floor mosaic found within the area of these walls (shown on a plan at 1.99 deep, immediately northeast of the *loculi* in the Large Cave) seem to confirm this. Many mosaic *tesserae* were found under each pillar of the cloister, and a sarcophagus – mistaken for a washing trough – found close to the modern belfry was filled with *tesserae*. This suggests that the structure had mosaic decoration across much of its extent, and a fragment of Byzantine polychrome floor mosaic in the museum may be from the surface-level structure rather than the cave-church.

The same structure may also be the origin of some of the architectural fragments and columns in the convent museum, courtyard and garden. There are granite column shafts, white marble cornice fragments and white marble ‘Corinthian’ column-capitals. A Greek inscription, also in white marble, reading ‘. . .risto. . .’, perhaps even ‘Christo’ (Fiona Haarer,

personal communication 2008) in the museum may also belong to the structure. Desmarais (1966) notes what was said to be part of a broken altar stone found in the foundations of the east wall of the present convent church. A '3–4 m' high granite column from the site might give an impression of the height of the aisles of this church, although its context is uncertain (de Nazareth 1956, 246).

Combined, these records suggest a large and richly decorated Byzantine church. This stood over the cave-church in a way reminiscent of the construction of the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation on the venerated caves there (Bagatti 1969, 94, pl. XI). Cave-churches beneath Byzantine pilgrimage churches are widely attested, as at Tabgha (Wilkinson 1999, 41) and Mar Saba (Patrich 1993, 239–241; 1995a, 1995b) in Israel and Meriamlik in Anatolia (Krautheimer 1986, 109). Interestingly, the northernmost of the three apses seems to have been by far the largest, suggesting a four-apsed chancel, as at Amathontos, Peyia and Shivta. The southernmost apse was that of a small chapel, containing a limestone sarcophagus. The sarcophagus may be that preserved in the front courtyard of the convent immediately east of the cellar. To judge from the recorded 'straight joint' between its north wall and the south wall of the main church, this chapel was a later addition to the main structure, perhaps related to an important burial (a saints' tomb?) represented by the sarcophagus.

Another apsed structure was found immediately north of the apsidally-ended cave. This is a basilica shown on a plan and section, with annotated measurements, drawn in 1912 by the then-Superior of the convent, Mère Giraud, and today in the convent archive. According to the plan, the building had an eastern apse and was 8m wide and 17m long. This structure was found approximately where today one can see a terraced higher area of the convent garden, immediately in front of (i.e. south of) the 19th-century 'pigeon-loft' forming the northwest corner of the present convent garden. It may even be that the location of this structure in some way determined the size and position of this raised area, which is c. 18 m long. A broad, deep, irregular channel entered this basilica from the north through three openings in its side. This channel led uphill to the 'Synagogue Church' (Pringle 1988, n. 172, 145–147) on higher ground to the north. An ashlar-walled structure and a deep 'negative feature' in this zone were confirmed by an excavation in 1941.

One possibility is that this smaller basilican structure was earlier than the main church, which would then have been built as a larger-scale replacement for it. If this building was contemporary with the main church to its south, it might have been another subsidiary chapel, a holy well or even a baptistery. The existence of a smaller, single-apsed, basilica north of a major church is well attested at several Early Byzantine sites, as at Stobi. However, the complex offering the greatest similarity to the structures at the Sisters of Nazareth is the famous Early Byzantine church of Aya Trias on Cyprus. This was a four-apsed basilica with a smaller single-apsed basilica to its north and subsidiary buildings to its south. One can, therefore, produce a well-dated Early Byzantine parallel for the whole complex reconstructed here, and on that basis the most parsimonious explanation is to consider the basilican building as subsidiary to the larger church rather than predating it.

This highlights the matter of dating the church. The church as we see it in plan may be 6th century in date, given the probable date of the Byzantine architectural fragments preserved at the convent, its scale and plan, but such a date necessarily only applies to the final plan of the structure. It might be expected, but is currently impossible to prove, that the known plan conceals earlier phases of structural re-design – although these might possibly be recognisable with further study of the available records. However, 4th-century coins were found in the Large Cave, and it seems possible that the cave-church was established first, and the surface-level church added as a later embellishment. The earliest dated cave-church in Israel is said to be that mentioned in the Life of St Chariton, dated to the 4th century (Hirschfeld 1993, 257).

The surface-level building was very large compared to the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation. The latter has been estimated to have been c. 15 m wide and c. 18 m long, with walls 70–90 cm thick (Ovadia 1970, 144, 147). Assuming that it was symmetrical around the axis of its largest apse (A3), and excluding the small southern chapel, then the reconstructed surface-level church at the convent was c. 28.4 m wide and presumably (assuming that it was approximately rectilinear) 56.8 m long, with walls 1.0 m thick. Even the extant walls show a structure over 24 m wide. That is, it was certainly larger than the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation and, so one must assume, the largest church (and probably the largest building) in Byzantine Nazareth. This, rather than that on the Church of the Annunciation site, may well have been the principal church of Byzantine Nazareth.

Although an impressive building both above and below ground, the surface-level church and cave-church were only part of a broader array of Byzantine-period evidence, judging by the unpublished records in the convent archives. This includes mosaic floors, architectural sculpture and (in this case mostly undated) masonry walls across a broad zone to their south and, perhaps, west. These fragmentary traces of structures might represent a Byzantine monastery or convent serving the church, like that found – again, south of the principal church – at the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation (Bagatti 1969, 93–95, pl. XI).

The *wadi* that ran through the centre of Byzantine Nazareth (Bagatti 1969, 236–237; Dark forthcoming b) may have separated this larger church from the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation, but one cannot exclude the possibility of a bridge across linking the two areas, as in later centuries (Eugenio *et al.* 1997, 10–11). Byzantine building skills in the 6th century were, of course, easily capable of constructing such a bridge. Thus, one should be willing to consider the possibility that the buildings on, and south of, the convent site formed part of a ‘family of churches’ (Hubert 1996), including the Church of the Annunciation, dominating the centre of Byzantine Nazareth. This would have monumentalised the centre of Nazareth far beyond the assumptions of recent scholarship and, in turn, suggests that Nazareth was a major pilgrimage site by the 6th century at the latest. When this expansion occurred is less clear from archaeology, although Jerome seems to have considered Nazareth a small village (*Onom.* 141.3), so it may not have been until after his time.

Such a realisation is contrary to the usually held assumption that Nazareth was relatively unimportant in 6th-century Christian pilgrimage. Indeed, Byzantine *eulogia* from Nazareth, most famously that from Monza (Pringle 1988, 141) inscribed ‘Eulogia of the rock of the water of the Mother of God’, show water gushing forth from a well as the symbol of the pilgrimage centre. As there is no well at the Church of the Annunciation site, another location must be indicated by these – one in which water played a major role. The convent site seems the most plausible candidate given that St Mary’s Well was outside the Byzantine settlement.

3. EVIDENCE FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE CHURCH AT THE SISTERS OF NAZARETH CONVENT

If the church at the convent was so important a pilgrimage site, it is reasonable to expect that it should appear in descriptions of Nazareth by pre-Crusader pilgrims. Indeed, it may do so. In 384, the Western pilgrim Egeria (Wilkinson 1999, 96) recounts that in Nazareth there was ‘a big and very splendid cave in which she [the Virgin Mary] lived. An altar has been placed there, and within the actual cave is the place from which she drew water.’ This does not sound similar to the small cave at the Byzantine-period Church of the Annunciation and that site lacks a well (Dark 2007, 23, n. 42). But it could be the cave-church and adjacent water-related features at the convent. No other known Byzantine church in Nazareth has a well and a large cave-church.

Although there is a strong case that the Large Cave is that seen (and presumably worshipped in) by Egeria, a later text has been of most interest to previous scholars. The late 7th-century Insular Latin text *De Locis Sanctis* (Meehan 1958) contains what purports to be a description of the Holy Land based on the eyewitness testimony of a Frankish pilgrim, Arculf. The text, by Adomnán abbot of the island monastery of Iona in Scotland – an author best known today as the biographer of its founder St Columba – draws on many textual sources (O’Loughlin 2007; see also O’Loughlin 1994; Woods 2002; Aist 2008) but also contains what appears to be genuine eyewitness testimony concerning pilgrimage sites operating at the end of the 7th century. Among the parts of the text that contain detail found in no earlier texts, and so plausibly based on the memory of an eyewitness, is the description of Nazareth.

De Locis Sanctis describes two large churches in the centre of Nazareth. One is the Church of the Annunciation. The other was near it, set above a vaulted crypt with two tombs (*tumuli* in Adomnán’s Insular Latin) either side of a ‘house’. Within the same church there was a well, from which pure water was raised by means of a pulley. The Sisters of Nazareth site has all the features mentioned in *De Locis Sanctis* as characterising this second church (the Church of the Nutrition); in summary: it is a big church near the Byzantine Church of the Annunciation, with two tombs, a ‘house’, and a well, below it. Meehan (1958) was certainly wrong to dismiss the Sisters of Nazareth site as the Byzantine Church of the Nutrition on the grounds that the ‘only spring in the village is St Mary’s Well’ (27), because there was another spring at the convent site. Indeed, Egeria mentions a well, probably the same well, as separate from St Mary’s Well, which she identifies as outside the village.

Those scholars who have dismissed an identification of the convent site with the Church of the Nutrition have suggested two alternative candidates for identification as that building. St Joseph’s, in the north of the Church of the Annunciation compound (Pringle 1988, 147–150) and the Orthodox church of St Gabriel (the present Orthodox Church of the Annunciation) near St Mary’s Well (139–144). Neither of these identifications bears serious archaeological scrutiny. As Pringle, the leading expert on Crusader churches in Israel, has noted, the presence of a mosaic-floored Byzantine winepress (but no Byzantine-period church) under St Joseph’s ‘seems to rule out any possibility that the church seen by Arculf could have stood here’ (149). The Church of St Gabriel is a medieval and later building, and there is no reason to suppose that the water supply was already channelled to its site in the Byzantine period – the canalisation bringing water to the church appears to be 12th century (Alexandre 2006). Moreover, the original St Mary’s well is within a small cave at the base of the hill known as Jabal es-Sikh about 17 m north of the present church (Mansûr al-Kass 1913). So the Church of St Gabriel is almost certainly not on the site of the Church of the Nutrition, because it was not in the centre of Byzantine Nazareth but outside it and was not built above the well.

Thus, we have two options: either the surface-level building at the convent is the ‘lost’ Church of the Nutrition, or it escaped mention by pilgrims. The suggestion that there was a large church complex in the centre of Nazareth that pilgrims omitted to mention over a period of more than 500 years seems incredible, so parsimony again suggests that the church at the Sisters of Nazareth is the Church of the Nutrition.

To identify the complex as the Church of the Nutrition might be thought a controversial claim, because *De Locis Sanctis* states that the focus of veneration there was the house where Jesus Christ was brought up. However, although, as Structure 1 is best interpreted as a 1st-century domestic building (Dark 2007, forthcoming b), it is archaeologically possible that it really was the house where Jesus Christ grew up, all that this archaeological evidence conclusively shows is that it was *believed* to be that structure by the founders of the church in the 4th century or later. As such, it is hardly surprising that it was elaborately adorned and treated with such reverence.

4. CRUSADER ACTIVITY

The cave-church shows use during the Crusader period. The wall-mosaics were patched with coloured glazed Crusader-period pottery cut into *tesserae*. A substantial new wall (Fig. 9) with a series of niches (for icons or statues?) and some form of water outlet, or water feature, was built immediately opposite the entranceway, which was itself encased with ashlar walling. Other ashlar walling blocked the area to the northwest of the cave. An ashlar doorway (Fig. 10), leading into a blocked ashlar-lined passageway going to the south was added at an upper level in the southwest of the room northeast of the aspidally-ended cave, the remainder of which was barrel-vaulted. As mentioned above, a massive wall encased the south of the large cistern, with a masonry wellhead facing into the entranceway south of this. A fine cross-vault was built above the entranceway (Fig. 11) and a barrel-vault inserted over the earlier rock-cut entrance to the Large Cave. The walls of the entranceway and passage from it to the south were encased in ashlar and given built doorways, as was the 'Chambre Obscure', which was extended in ashlar to the east, with a narrow slit in the north wall looking directly at the east end of the Large Cave. This feature seems most likely to be a liturgical window or 'squint' of the type widely attested in medieval Western Europe.

The 'Chambre Obscure' was barrel-vaulted and, to its south, Structure 1 was barrel-vaulted and remodelled. A paved raised platform (Fig. 12), with a window looking onto the



Fig. 9. The upper part of the niched Crusader-period wall at the south end of the Large Cave, from the east.



Fig. 10. The high level doorway in the southwest of the northernmost accessible rock-cut room northeast of the cave-church.



Fig. 11. An anonymous photograph of the Crusader-period cross-vault in the entranceway in the twentieth century. Reproduced from the anonymous pamphlet guidebook *Les Fouilles De Nazareth*.

altar of the small chapel next to Tomb 1 was constructed at the south end and a massive east–west wall immediately south of this. The walls on the west and north of the structure were probably rebuilt at this point, and a high stone-framed doorway with a ‘Gothic’ arch added to the south end of the refurbished east wall, so that the newly-paved area was afforded a grand entrance from the southeast with the window (probably another ‘squint’ as it allowed a vertical view of the altar in the chapel) just outside it.

A stone-built dividing wall was put into Structure 1, separating it into southern and northern rooms, or according to one of the unpublished records – carefully drawn in pencil with the appearance of a measured scale plan – a wall enclosing the northwest corner of the structure in a reverse L-shape. The earlier rock-cut stairway west of Structure 1 was covered by an ashlar-built stairway, and two new, well-built, stairways – resembling those of 12th-century date at Mount Tabor – were added leading to a stone platform connecting the top of these stairs, fragments of which were found lying on the floor just northeast of Structure 1. The stairways and liturgical windows are similar to those at pilgrimage sites, where a series of stairs allowed the circulation of pilgrims, and this may be what is evidenced here. Similarly, the refurbishment of the cave-church suggests its liturgical use, and the niched wall may well be most readily interpreted in such a context.

The surface-level church was also refurbished, as distinctively Crusader architectural sculpture and newly-built walls show. These new constructions included two ashlar-lined tunnels leading south from the church, one with a previously unknown well, still in its



Fig. 12 The south of Structure 1 from the Crusader-period stairway on its northeast, with the scale standing on the Crusader-period paving and the massive Crusader-period east-west wall ('M4') to its south. The scale is 1m high in 10cm divisions.

Crusader-period wellhead. A very fine white marble bowl, its exterior depicting in high relief what appear to be grapes, found west of the belfry, may be a font from the surface-level church. A broken statuette of the Virgin Mary from the Large Cave is likely to belong to this phase.

Such Crusader-period rebuilding was almost certainly associated with the veneration of at least some of the earlier features on the site. The chapel on the eastern side of Tomb 1 was used, if not built, in this phase and the 'squint' looked vertically onto its altar. A doorway in the western part of the Crusader wall immediately north of Tomb 1 leads onto a white mortar floor on a rectilinear rubble-built platform infilling approximately half of the forecourt of Tomb 1, to overlook the entrance to the tomb from the northwest. These features strongly suggest the use of the site by (Western?) Christian pilgrims, who were probably prohibited from directly participating in the liturgical life of the cave-church and chapel next to Tomb 1.

This veneration of Tomb 1 could, perhaps, be the origin of the story told to the nuns that the site had contained a great church containing the tomb of 'the Just' (de Nazareth 1956, 247). The two most likely candidates for 'the Just' are James the Just 'brother of the Lord', and St Joseph, who is called 'the Just' in Matthew 1:19. As it was believed that James the Just was buried in Jerusalem it seems most likely that, if this is the saint's tomb to which local people referred (and that must be uncertain), then it was considered in the medieval

period to be the tomb of St Joseph. No wonder, then, that such care was lavished on it, for Abbot Daniel tells us that the Tomb of St Joseph was constructed by the Lord (Pringle 1988, 118). One need not, of course, suppose that this really is St Joseph's tomb, in order to recognise that the medieval belief that this was a tomb constructed for St Joseph by Jesus Christ would have afforded it exceptional sanctity. In fact, Tomb 1 is probably too late in date (Dark 2007, forthcoming b) to be the genuine tomb of Joseph.

Thus, the church was probably once more a place of pilgrimage in the Crusader period. But the stratified sequence in the Large Cave shows that the Byzantine and Crusader-period use of the cave-church was discontinuous, and probably separated by a long phase of disuse in which the Large Cave partly collapsed. Tony Grey's, as yet unpublished, study of stratified pottery from the convent (undertaken for this project) indicates no material that has to be later than the late 8th century nor before the 12th century. A 12th-century start for the Crusader phase would fit well with the use of diagonal tooling on Crusader ashlar in the cellar and the style of the Crusader sculpture.

A charcoal-rich burning deposit recorded by us overlying the Crusader mortar floor in the large *in situ* block of soil, referred to earlier, supports 19th- and early 20th-century descriptions of a burning layer extending across the whole of the Large Cave. Earlier investigators found ash mixed with mosaic under all the pillars of the nineteenth-century cloister, suggesting a widespread fire destroying the surface-level church. Further ash was found in Structure 1 and to the south of Tomb 1. The largest cistern contained burnt embroidered cloth and a hoard of heavily oxidised and illegible bronze Crusader-period coins was discovered in 1900 in the soil over the squint looking into the chapel adjacent to Tomb 1, apparently under an ash deposit. Another hoard, perhaps of similar date, was found under the bell-tower, so possibly inside the surface-built church. The prospect of such destruction might be the reason why the chapel and Tomb 1 were apparently hastily abandoned and sealed by crudely-built blocking walls.

This burning deposit brought the Crusader activity to a close, perhaps in the course of the attack by Sultan Baybars in 1263. The latest artefact predating the destruction in the Large Cave is a complete 'slipper lamp' of a type which Avissar and Stern (2005, 126–128) date to the 1200s or perhaps 'even earlier' (Avissar and Stern 2005, 126–128; Schumacher 1889, 72, Fig. 7) and much 13th-century pottery (generously identified for us by Edna Stern in 2008) comes from the site in general. Thereafter, the site was used for domestic activity and lay waste before its purchase by the Sisters of Nazareth in 1881. In the 17th century an attempt to construct a mosque just to the east of the present convent (de Nazareth 1956, 251), on the site of its present school, was quickly abandoned after a series of collapses, and the mosque relocated to the present site of the El-Abayad mosque. Although an unfinished minaret of the abandoned building (the only part constructed prior to its abandonment) can be seen incorporated into the convent school structure on the land east of the convent, there is no evidence that a functioning Muslim religious building ever stood on the site of either the convent or its school, nor that one was ever planned to stand on the land that is today the convent.

5. CONCLUSION

The Byzantine evidence from the site may, minimally, be interpreted as a major, although previously unknown, pilgrimage church – with a well-preserved cave-church beneath it. This surface-level building was probably the largest church in Byzantine Nazareth. Byzantine Nazareth itself was a much larger pilgrimage centre than usually supposed and the church of the Sisters of Nazareth and the Church of the Annunciation may have formed a group of churches at its core.

It is probably the cave-church visited by Egeria in the late 4th century and surface-level and cave-churches are best identified as together comprising the Church of the Nutrition mentioned in *De Locis Sanctis*. The latter was believed by the Byzantines to contain the house in which Jesus Christ was brought up, and this was, perhaps, the principal purpose for the establishment of the church. At least in the Crusader period, it was probably also believed to contain the grave of an important saint, possibly that of St Joseph. The church was disused at some point after the 7th century, but refurbished in the 12th century. Both the rebuilt surface-level church and the associated cave-church may have been an important pilgrimage focus in the Crusader period, when the same features were venerated. The Crusader church was destroyed by fire, probably in the 13th century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Work at the Sisters of Nazareth convent was only possible through the kind permission and help of the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Sisters of Nazareth. The convent was an exemplary host for an archaeological project, and I would especially like to thank Sisters Stefania Cantore (the convent superior), Margherita Giaccone (the convent superior when our work there began) and Claude Cherier (the oldest of the Sisters, who could recall earlier work). The assistance provided by Eliya Ribak before the survey was invaluable, as was that provided on site by Mitchell Pollington, Ifan Edwards, Helen Robertson, Mike Burns, Alice Larter, Maria Calderon, Mark Laynesmith, Nicola Mellor, Bernard Mulholland and Simon and Jemma Underdown. Thanks are also due to Petra Dark, James Crossley, Tony Grey, Martin Henig, Birgitta Hoffman, Alan Millard, Joseph Patrich, Tessa Rajak, Edna Stern, Sacha Stern, Joan Taylor and John Wilkinson, for their advice and help. I must also thank the organisations funding the project, especially the Palestine Exploration Fund and Late Antiquity Research Group, and Felicity Cobbing, Sam Moorhead and Jonathan Tubb at the Palestine Exploration Fund for their advice and help.

NOTE

¹ For another part of the final interim report on the work of the Nazareth Archaeological Project at the Sisters of Nazareth convent, see Dark (forthcoming a). The final interim report on the work of the project in

the countryside north of Nazareth, probably comprising the majority of Roman-period and Byzantine Nazareth's farmland, was published in this journal in 2008 (Dark 2008b).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aist, R., 2008. 'Book Review: Thomas O' Loughlin, *Adomnan and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the locations of the Biblical Drama*', *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26, 137–140.
- Alexandre, Y., 2006. 'Excavations at Mary's Well, Nazareth': <http://www.israntique.org.il/eng/zafon/marys_well.html> [accessed 30 May 2006].
- Aviam, M., 2004. *Jews, Pagans and Christians in the Galilee: 25 Years of Archaeological Excavations and Surveys: Hellenistic to Byzantine Periods*, Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.
- Avisar, M. and Stern, E. J., 2005. *Pottery of the Crusader, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Periods in Israel* (IAA Report 26), Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority.
- Bagatti, B., 1937. 'Gli scavi presso le Dame di Nazaret', *Studi francescani* 34, 253–266.
- Bagatti, B., (with E. Alliata, transl. E. Hoade), 1969. *Excavations in Nazareth: From the Beginning until the Twelfth Century* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 17/1), Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press.
- Bagatti, B., (with E. Alliata, transl. R. Bonanno), 2002. *Excavations in Nazareth: From the 12th Century until Today* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 17/2), Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press.
- Hubert, J., (ed.), 1996. *Les églises doubles et les familles d'églises* (Antiquité Tardive 4), Paris: Brepols.
- Dark, K. R., 2007. *Archaeological Recording at the Sisters of Nazareth Convent in Nazareth, 2006*, London: Late Antiquity Research Group.
- Dark, K. R., 2008a. *Nazareth Archaeological Project: A Preliminary Report on the Fourth Season in 2007*, London: Late Antiquity Research Group.
- Dark, K. R., 2008b. 'The Roman-period and Byzantine landscape between Sepphoris and Nazareth', *PEQ* 140, 87–107.
- Dark, K. R., 2009. *Nazareth Archaeological Project: A Preliminary Report on the Fifth Season in 2008*, London: Late Antiquity Research Group.
- Dark, K. R., 2010. *Nazareth Archaeological Project: A Preliminary Report on the Fifth Season in 2009*, London: Late Antiquity Research Group.

- Dark, K. R., 2012. Forthcoming, *Nazareth Archaeological Project: A Preliminary Report on the Fifth Season in 2010*, London: Late Antiquity Research Group.
- Dark, K. R., 2012. In press, 'Early Roman-Period Nazareth and the Sisters of Nazareth Convent', *Antiquaries Journal* 92.
- Desmarais, R., 1966. *Un Lieu De Culte 'Au Saint De Nazareth' A Nazareth*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Ottawa.
- Edwards, D., 2001. 'Cana, Khirbet', in A. Negev and S. Gibson (eds.), *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (revised edn.), New York: Continuum, 109–110.
- Edwards, D., 2002. 'Khirbet Qana: from Jewish village to Christian pilgrim site', in J. H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, vol. 3 (*Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplementary Series 49), Ann Arbor, MI: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 101–132.
- Eugenio, A. P. et al. (ed. and trans. M. P. Silas), 1997. *Nazareth* (2nd edn.), Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press.
- Hirschfeld, Y., 1993. 'The cave-church at Khirbet ed-Deir', in Y. Tsafir (ed.), *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 244–258.
- Hirschfeld, Y., 1999. *The Early Byzantine Monastery at Khirbet ed-Deir in the Judean Desert: The Excavations in 1981–1987* (Qedem 38), Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University.
- Hubert, J., (ed.), 1996. *Les églises doubles et les "familles d'églises"* (= *Antiquité Tardive* 4).
- Krauthheimer, R. (with S. Curčić), 1986. *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (4th edn.), Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Livio, J.-B., 1980. 'Les Fouilles Chez Les Religieuses De Nazareth', *Le Monde de la Bible* 16, 26–34.
- Mango, C. and Hawkins, E. J. W. 1966. 'The hermitage of St. Neophytos and its wall paintings', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20, 119–206.
- Mansûr al-Kass, A., 1913. 'The Virgin's fountain', *PEFQSt* 45, 149–153.
- Mechan, D., 1958. *Adamnan's De Locis Sanctis (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 3)*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Nazareth, M. de, 1956. 'La Maison De Saint Joseph À Nazareth', *Cahiers de Joséphologie* 4, 243–272.
- Netzer, E. and Weiss, Z., 1995. 'New evidence for late Roman and Byzantine sepphoris', in J. M. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Recent Archaeological Research* (JRA Supplementary Series 49), Ann Arbor, MI: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 162–176.
- O'Loughlin, T., 1994. 'The library of Iona in the late seventh century: the evidence of Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu* 45, 33–52.
- O'Loughlin, T., 2007. *Adomnán and the Holy Places: The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama*, London and New York: T & T Clark.
- Ovadia, A., 1970. *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land*, Bonn: Hannstein.
- Patrich, J., 1993. 'Chapels and hermitages of St. Sabas' monastery', in Y. Tsafir (ed.), *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 233–243.
- Patrich, J., 1995a. *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Patrich, J., 1995b. *Archaeological Survey of Israel: Map of Mar-Saba (315)*, Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority.
- Patrich, J., 2003. 'Monastic landscapes', in W. Bowden, L. Lavan and C. Machado (eds.), *Recent Research on the Late Antique Countryside* (Late Antique Archaeology 2), Leiden and Boston: Brill, 413–447.
- Pringle, D., 1988. *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus*, Vol. 2: L–Z (excluding Tyre), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, P., 2004. *Building Jewish in the Roman East* (*Journal for the Study of Judaism* Suppl. 92), Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Richardson, P., 2006. 'Khirbet Qana (and Other villages) as a Context for Jesus' in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archaeology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 120–144.
- Schumacher, G., 1889. 'Recent discoveries in the Galilee', *PEFQSt* 21, 68–78.
- Strange, J. F., Longstaff, T. R. W. and Groh, D. E., 2006. *Excavations at Sepphoris: Vol. 1: University of South Florida Probes in the Citadel and Villa* (Brill Reference Library of Judaism 22), Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Wilkinson, J., 1999. *Egeria's Travels* (3rd edn.), Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
- Woods, D., 2002. 'Arcluf's Luggage: the sources for Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Ériu* 52, 25–52.

Copyright of Palestine Exploration Quarterly is the property of Maney Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.