

A New Armenian Inscription from a Byzantine Monastery on Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem*

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ABSTRACT: The remains of a large fifth–eighth-century monastery and pilgrim hostel, excavated on the eastern slope of Mt. Scopus, include agricultural facilities, stables, halls, a sophisticated water system, a large bathhouse and a church complex. The latter consists of church and a probable baptistery, both faced by an entry hall that covered an underground water cistern. Near the mouth of a cistern, an Armenian mosaic inscription was discovered. It is composed of the name Grigor (i.e., Gregory), two mostly destroyed letters, and what is apparently the *nomen sacrum* ‘Christ’. The cross at the beginning and the *nomen sacrum* at the end are in red; the other letters are black. On the basis of the coins, we date the inscription to the sixth century. It constitutes a significant addition to the information about Armenian presence on the ridge of Mt. Scopus and the Mount of Olives and to the corpus of early Armenian mosaic inscriptions from Jerusalem.

IN 1999, during the construction of the new road from Jerusalem to Ma‘aleh Adumim, the remains of a monastery and pilgrim hostel were discovered on the eastern slope of Mt. Scopus (map ref. 17450 13280). The site, termed by the authors as the ‘Monastery of Theodorus and Cyriacus’ on the basis of a mosaic dedicatory inscription found in the western wing of the complex (Di Segni 2003), was excavated in late 1999 and early 2000 by David Amit, Jon Seligman and Irina Zilberbod on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Amit, Seligman and Zilberbod 2003).

The complex covers an area of *c.* 4.5 dunams (fig. 1). In the middle of the northern unit (B), the monastery’s church was built. The western part — the only part that survived — contains a decorated mosaic floor. North of the church and parallel to it, part of a hall survived, with a colourful mosaic floor; it apparently served as the baptistery or prothesis chapel. West of the church and baptistery was an entrance hall (9.0×15.5 m.), facing both their façades and divided longitudinally by a row of square piers. The western half of the hall was apparently roofed

* D. Amit, J. Seligman and I. Zilberbod are responsible for the archaeological description of the site. M.E. Stone is responsible for the publication of and commentary on the inscription.

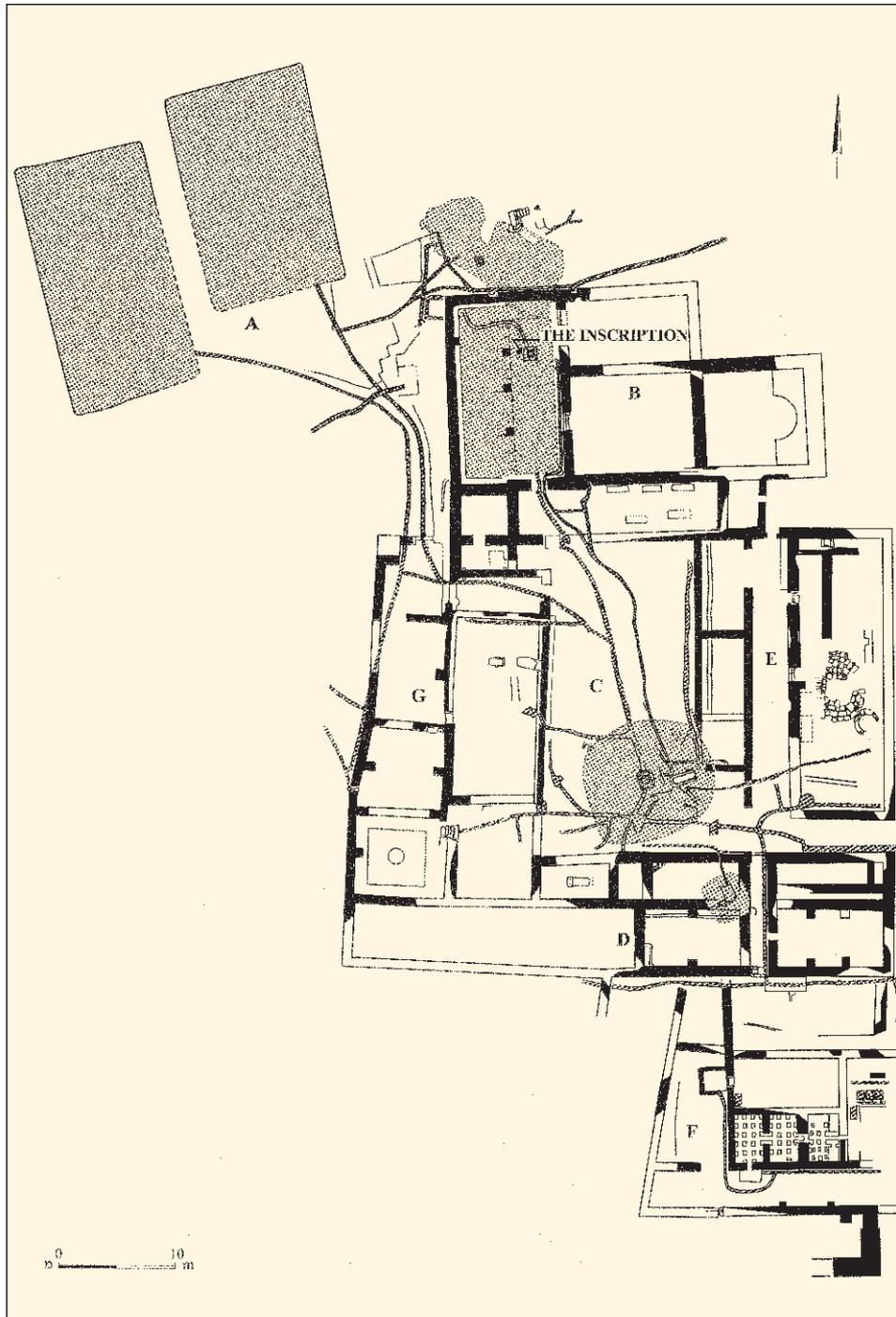


Fig. 1. General plan of the monastery

and benches were built along its walls. The floor, made of a coarse white mosaic, served as the ceiling of a large rectangular water cistern with a system of arches, hewn below most of the hall's area.

In the centre of the complex was a large courtyard (C), surrounded by halls, storerooms and various rooms. Baths (F) were uncovered in the southern part of the complex. These were built at the latest stage of the monastery's existence, after the Islamic conquest, and maintained the form of Roman baths.

Excavation of the reception hall (G, room 27) at the southern end of the wing west of the central courtyard uncovered a Greek inscription, enclosed within a medallion decorated with a floral pattern. The inscription mentions 'Theodorus and Cyriakus', who held religious offices in the monastery (Di Segni 2003). It is now displayed in the recently opened archaeological park next to the Keneset.

It has recently emerged that this was not the only inscription at the site. On a study excursion led by Prof. Shimon Gibson. Ms. Mareike Grosser, one of his assistants, observed a short inscription that had been overlooked by the excavators a decade ago.¹

This Armenian inscription is set into the white mosaic floor of the entrance hall, west of the church (B). It is set against the edge of the mouth of the water cistern (Cistern II). The mouth of the cistern is capped by a square stone with a round aperture at its centre. It is located close to the entrance of the room identified as a baptistery. The inscription was parallel to the western edge of the square stone.

The findings of the excavation make it clear that the monastery was founded in the fifth century CE. Functional and architectural analyses clearly show that this northern wing, in which the inscription under discussion was discovered, belongs to the earliest stage of development of this complex.

On the assumption that the mosaic floor belongs to the earliest stage of the building, the inscription should be dated, on archaeological grounds, to the fifth century. This would make it the oldest dated Armenian mosaic inscription uncovered to date in Jerusalem.

THE ARMENIAN INSCRIPTION

The inscription (fig. 2) reads as follows:

† ԳՐԻԳՈՐ Ե – Ն(?) ՔՄ

† Grigor E – N(?) Ch[ris]t

¹ Prof. Gibson kindly sent a photograph of the inscription to Dr. David Amit, who invited Prof. Michael Stone to decipher it.



Fig. 2. Armenian inscription

The overall length including the cross is 86 cm.; the length of the written area is 66.5 cm.; and the height of the first character 10.5 cm.

The following observations may be made:

1. The inscription is composed of two elements, one in red tesserae and the other in black. The background is white and undecorated. The cross at the beginning and what I (MES) take to be a *nomen sacrum* at the end are in red, while the intervening text is black.
2. The tesserae resemble those of the white mosaic floor in which the inscription is set. The inscription is damaged, and there were at least two further letters of which the bottoms survive, following 'Grigor', the Armenian form of Gregory. The *nomen sacrum* is well preserved.
3. The writing is in round Armenian uncial script (*erkat'agir*). It is characterised by ligatured letters, showing the antiquity of this phenomenon. Ligatures were previously observed in the inscription 'Abel' on a sarcophagus or tomb cover from the site of the Eustathius mosaic (Musrara), which is dated to the sixth century at the latest. This pushes the date of the use of ligatures back by several decades (Stone 1997: 267).
4. Ligatured with the Ω ('or') of Grigor there is apparently an Ե ('e'), as may be ascertained by a close examination of the surviving bottom line of the letter. Next, a single letter is quite lost, except for a short horizontal line. Only the bottom of the next letter has survived; it is tentatively to be identified as an Ն ('n'). No reading can be proposed for these three letters.
5. The *nomen sacrum*: The second of the two red signs at the end of the inscription is an U ('s'). It is in a conventional, uncial form, and the apparent serifs turn out, upon closer examination, to be imperfections in the tesserae. The only letter that raises difficulties is the second last letter. There are only two uncial Armenian letters with closed heads and a straight vertical: Գ ('g'), *gim*, and Կ ('k'), *k'ē*. The letter under discussion is not *gim*, of which two clear specimens occur in the preceding word. Notable here is a horizontal cross-bar, which extends to the right beyond the head and turns sharply down. Although two tesserae are missing, this down stroke continued further down than the

vertical of the main upright. In addition, the form of the lower lefthand corner of the head also seems to reflect the continuation of the cross-bar. Read thus, the letter may be identified as $k\bar{\epsilon}$ with two oddities. First, the loop at the top is reversed, extending to the left of the vertical instead of to the right. Second, the down stroke at the end of the cross-bar is unusually long.²

6. Crosses preceding names are common in graffiti in the Holy Land and may indicate, as they still do, the clerical status of the named person. Many examples may be observed in the Sinai graffiti (Stone 1982: *passim*). The use of ϠU ('Christ') with a graffiti may be observed in Sinai H Arm 28, which reads $\text{ϠU } \text{ԲԱԲԳԵՆ}$ ('Christ, Babgen').³

Despite all the above, our reading of these two signs remains tentative.

This is another example of an Armenian inscription in a room outside a monastery church in which there is a Greek inscription. It thus resembles the situation of the Eustathius mosaic, as well as that reflected by contemporary textual witnesses (Stone 1997: 265–266; 2002: 218–219).

In a previous study, I (MES) pointed out that several inscriptions and mosaics bear witness to Armenian presence on the Mount of Olives. The new inscription is found further along the ridge formed by the Mount of Olives and Mt. Scopus and should perhaps be viewed in this context. Moreover, another factor bears on the location of this mosaic, the position of this monastery on the route between Jerusalem and the Judaeian Desert monasteries. The role of the Armenians in the early monastic movement is well known.

Consequently, the new inscription, despite its brevity and poor content, bears a double significance. First, it is a contribution to Armenian palaeography, joining the small corpus of inscriptions from the fifth century CE or shortly after. Second, it casts further light on the role of the Armenians in the religious establishments in Jerusalem and in the monastic movement, which is now attested directly from the late fifth to the seventh centuries CE.

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² One might read this sign as a ligature of $\text{Ϡ} + \text{Ω}$, the latter being shortened. That, however, yields no sense, nor does it explain the rubrication.

³ This is known in Jerusalem Greek inscriptions, but we have no other Armenian graffiti of earlier or comparable date. A reexamination of Sinai H Arm 65 in the published photograph seems to show ϠU inscribed very faintly above the name.

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