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Huqoq – 2023

Jodi Magness, Dennis Mizzi, Matthew Grey, Jocelyn Burney,
Martin Wells, Karen Britt and Ra'anana Boustan

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Preliminary Report

From 29 May to 4 July 2023, the eleventh season of excavations was conducted at Horbat Huqoq (henceforth Huqoq) in eastern Galilee (License No. G-1/2023; map ref. 24500–50/75430–65; Magness 2012 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=1959&mag_id=119); Magness et al. 2013 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=3331&mag_id=120); 2014 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=12648); 2016a (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25057&mag_id=124); 2016b (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25060&mag_id=124); 2017 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25304&mag_id=125); 2018 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25419); 2019 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25653&mag_id=127); 2020 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25880&mag_id=128); 2023 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26377&mag_id=135)). The excavation was undertaken and underwritten by the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill, Austin College (Texas), Brigham Young University (Utah), and the University of Toronto (Canada). Additional funding was provided by the Kenan Charitable Trust; the College of Arts and Sciences and the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill; and private donors. The excavation was directed by J. Magness, with D. Mizzi (assistant director and finalizing of plans); M. Golan (administration); M. Grey and J. Burney (area supervision); J. Haberman (field photography); M. Robinson-Mohr (registration); D. Schindler (ceramics); C. Swan (glass); K. Britt and R. Boustan (mosaics); M. Wells (architecture); S. O'Connell (painted plaster); R. Mohr (drawing); V. Pirsky (drafting); C. De Brer (site conservation); M. Lavie (small finds conservation); and Griffin Higher Photography (aerial photography). The volunteers consisted of undergraduate and graduate students from the U.S.A., Canada, Germany and Slovakia.

Excavations this season continued in Area 3000 (Fig. 1), where there are five main occupation phases: (1) a synagogue and an adjacent courtyard to the east dated to the Late Roman period (late fourth–early fifth centuries CE; Fig. 2); (2) a late Medieval (Mamluk; fourteenth–fifteenth centuries CE) public building that we now identify as a synagogue (Mizzi and Magness 2022) and a massive vaulted structure built on top of the Late Roman courtyard (Fig. 3); (3) installations and a few scattered walls built after the late Medieval synagogue and vaulted structure had gone out of use and were pitted and robbed out (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries CE); (4) an open area with numerous *ṭabuns*, associated with layers of ash and a few partition walls (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries CE); and (5) houses belonging to the modern village of Yaquq from the late Ottoman–Modern periods (nineteenth century CE up to 1948).

The Late Roman Period (Fig. 2)

The Nave and East Aisle of the Synagogue Building

The removal of the foundation course of the north wall of the late Medieval building's 'pi-shaped structure' (Magness et al. 2020 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25880&mag_id=128)), revealed the south half of a mosaic panel at the southern end of the Late Roman synagogue's nave, immediately inside the entrance in the middle of the south wall; the doorway is not preserved, as the south wall was later robbed out down to its foundations. The northern half of this panel was exposed in 2017 (Magness et al. 2018 (https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=25419)).

The removal of the remaining baulks in the southern part of the east aisle revealed additional patches of the Samson panel, segments of which were first exposed in 2012 and 2013. Where the mosaic itself did not survive, the bedding continued uninterrupted. Immediately on top of the mosaic was a thin, compact layer of degraded plaster that apparently had fallen off the synagogue's wall. On top of this layer, or directly on the mosaic in places where the degraded plaster layer did not exist, was a layer of ash and charcoal. The burning had discolored sections of the mosaic. Since no evidence of widespread burning was found on the mosaics in other parts of the synagogue, this burnt material probably originated in a localized fire. Five rust stains on the mosaic indicate that large iron nails or bolts had fallen onto the floor. The sequence of events

can be reconstructed as follows. Evidently, the plaster had peeled off the walls after the building ceased to be maintained. Later, the burning event occurred but was not cleaned up, indicating that the synagogue was still standing but not in use. During the subsequent occupation phase, the plaster and ash layers were cut by the foundation trench for the late Medieval east stylobate, confirming that the two deposits predate the construction of the late Medieval synagogue.

The Mosaics

During the 2023 season, efforts were concentrated on fully uncovering, conserving and documenting the mosaics located at the southern ends of the nave and the east aisle, segments of which were uncovered in 2012, 2013 and 2017.

Mosaic in a Heraldic Composition. At the southern end of the nave, the excavation exposed a horizontal row of five panels in a heraldic composition—a symmetrical arrangement comprising a central element bounded on both sides by identical elements—adjacent to the ‘Tower of Babel’ panel located to its north, which was excavated in 2017. The panels are oriented toward a viewer standing at the southern end of the synagogue nave, looking toward the northern end of the hall. The mosaic consists of a completely preserved central panel bearing an inscription within and below a wreath. It is flanked on both sides by a panel depicting an eagle perched on top of a nude statue, the left-hand panel completely preserved and the right-hand panel partially preserved. Adjoining these two panels are the two exterior panels, of which only the left-hand, western one was preserved, depicting a lion gripping the head of a bull; its right-hand counterpart at the east end of the row is not preserved, as the mosaics on this side of the nave were cut by the foundation trench of the late Medieval east stylobate. In keeping with the principles of heraldic composition present in this mosaic, it is reasonable to assume that the outer right-hand (easternmost) panel was a pendant to the outer left-hand panel at the west end of the row and, thus, it most probably contained a lion gripping the head of a bull. The horizontal row of panels is framed on the west and south sides by an elaborate outer border composed of rectangular panels, depicting animal chases (Fig. 4) and other animal scenes alternating with squares of perspectival meander motif.

The center panel contains the only completely preserved inscription uncovered in the synagogue, which consists of two distinct units. The first is located within the wreath and is in Hebrew, while the second is inscribed below the wreath and is in Aramaic. The Hebrew inscription consists of a series of short sentences that center on what must have been a common proverbial statement to the effect that “toil” or “labor” (יגע) necessarily yields results or benefits (akin to the modern English maxim, ‘hard work pays off’). Below the wreath, the second unit of the inscription consists primarily of personal names (the forenames followed by their patronymics). The inscription identifies these named figures as artisans (Aramaic: אומניה).

Samson Panel. Newly uncovered mosaic fragments at the southern end of the east aisle clarify that three episodes from the Samson narrative were depicted, not two, as previously thought: Samson and the foxes (Judges 15:4–5); Samson smiting the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:15–16; Fig. 5); and Samson carrying the gate of Gaza (Judges 16:3). Furthermore, it has now become clear that the episodes are arranged as a continuous narrative within a single large panel, rather than in individually framed panels. The panel is oriented west toward a viewer standing in the nave. The sequence of events in the narrative is defined by the repeated appearance of Samson, whose image is preserved in two of the three episodes represented (Samson carrying the gate of Gaza; Samson smiting the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass).

The Foundations of the East Wall of the Synagogue

Limited excavation along the outside of the east wall of the synagogue revealed five architectural elements, including worked blocks and unfinished column bases or capitals, arranged in a north–south row at the level of the base of the wall. At the southern end, a small sounding exposed bedrock below the wall’s foundations. Along the wall’s east side, a narrow cut in bedrock was filled with packed earth and fieldstones that created a leveling surface for the ashlar foundations. One of the five architectural elements laid parallel to the wall—a column base—sat on this earth fill, indicating that these elements do not predate the Late Roman synagogue but are contemporaneous with its construction. We propose that these architectural elements served as a base for scaffolding or another ad hoc structure related to the synagogue’s construction.

It is apparent that there is no foundation trench along the east wall of the synagogue, and the narrow cut hewn into bedrock at the very bottom of the wall's foundations was the only preparation for its construction. Therefore, the level of the bedrock represents the original working surface, as indicated also by the five architectural elements, which may be related to the synagogue's construction. The Late Roman builders buried the foundations by depositing an earth fill sealed by a layer of stone chips, raising the level of the surface in the process. Further confirmation that the original working surface was at the level of bedrock and not higher up comes from the courtyard area immediately to the east. Here, the paving stones of the courtyard were laid on a thick layer of packed cobbles that goes down roughly to the same elevation as the bedrock outcrop exposed along the synagogue's east wall (see below), indicating that there was no prior deposit that was interrupted by the building of that wall and that the entire area had to be raised up.

The Courtyard and Cistern Southeast of the Synagogue

The courtyard in this part of the site was paved with large limestones packed tightly together in neat, north–south rows with no mortar between them. At its south end, the courtyard incorporated a natural outcrop of bedrock that was carved to imitate paving stones. Where the bedrock did not extend high enough to be incorporated into the pavement, it was cut back and the gap was filled with paving stones; those stones were robbed out at some point prior to the late Medieval period.

The cistern, with the courtyard extending to its north and south, is hewn out of bedrock (Fig. 6) and was fed by a rock-cut water channel running from the southwest. On top of it was a monolithic limestone block (0.6–0.7 m high) carved into an octagonal profile when viewed from above. Each of the block's eight sides is carved with a framed panel design. The block was carefully placed on top of the cistern's opening and was plastered on the outside to create a seamless transition from the sloping bedrock base.

The Eastern Courtyard of the Synagogue

The excavation of the southern half of the eastern courtyard unearthed the eastward continuation of the courtyard's south wall, all the way to its southeast corner, and the southern segment of the courtyard's east wall. The courtyard extended c. 20.35 m

eastward from the east wall of the synagogue building, and its south wall had a wide entrance (c. 3.8 m). The courtyard's estimated length from north to south is 22.4 m. It apparently was surrounded by a peristyle with porticos along all four sides, though only the porticos on the west, south and east are attested (all c. 3.2 m wide), since the northern half of the courtyard remains unexcavated. It appears there was a bench (c. 0.2 m high) along the inner face of the east portico. Three soundings in the courtyard's interior revealed that the massive paving stones were laid on a foundation of thick, mortared cobblestones (Fig. 7). A sounding in the south portico, where the flagstone pavement had been robbed out but the plaster bedding was intact, yielded Late Roman (third–fifth century CE) pottery.

The western edge of the courtyard, including the colonnaded portico, was completely removed during the late Medieval period to create an elevated porch and monumental staircase, elements that had subsequently collapsed or were damaged. In the 2022 excavation season, a cluster of 106 Late Roman coins, including two gold coins, was found in the rubble, and an additional 762 coins from the same period were found here in the 2023 season. These contexts were unsealed and contained material dating to as late as the nineteenth century. Presumably, the coins originally were deposited under the courtyard's western portico, in front of the eastern entrance of the synagogue from the Late Roman period, and became mixed with the later remains after the collapse of the late Medieval construction.

A plaster surface along the exterior of the courtyard's east wall seems to be a street running outside of and parallel to the courtyard. A large monolithic stone column lying horizontally within the baulk to the east may have originally stood along this street. The excavation season ended before we could determine whether this street dates to the Late Roman period or was added in the late Medieval period.

The Late Medieval (Mamluk) Period

The Vaulted Structure (Figs. 3, 8)

In the late Medieval period, a massive, vaulted structure (5.54–5.60 × 16.97 m), the function of which is unknown, was erected over the eastern part of the courtyard, including its south portico, its south stylobate and part of its interior pavement; its walls were erected directly atop the courtyard flooring, and it repurposed each of the latter

features as foundations. It reused the courtyard's original south wall as additional support for the vaulted ceiling and the courtyard's original east wall as its own. Wide openings (3.50–3.54 m wide) were installed in the structure's south and north walls, the latter flanked by columns supporting an arch. Another smaller opening, installed in the structure's western wall, led from the vaulted structure in the direction of the synagogue building. The original pavement of the Late Roman courtyard was still in use in the north part of the vaulted structure, whereas it seems that the paving stones of the southern and eastern porticos were robbed out some time before the late Medieval vaulted structure was built, with a thick layer of plaster laid down in their stead by the late Medieval builders. The Late Roman-period courtyard's south stylobate ran down the center of the vaulted structure, its pedestals and those of the southern end of the eastern stylobate cut down to the level of the stylobate blocks.

At some point, the vaulted structure appears to have been damaged, particularly at its northwest corner. Subsequently, it was repaired or renovated by the rebuilding of the northern part of the structure's west wall and the construction of buttressing along the northern face of the structure's north wall to support the weight of the vaulted ceiling.

The Cistern and Courtyard Southeast of the Synagogue

In the late Medieval period, the opening of the cistern to the southeast of the synagogue was raised to accommodate the rise of the surrounding ground level. The cistern opening was much simpler in style than its Late Roman predecessor, consisting of rings of fieldstones set on top of one another with packed earth in between. The area around the cistern lay between the late Medieval vaulted structure and the synagogue, making it an important thoroughfare for visitors walking between the two buildings. To the south of the cistern, stones from the Late Roman courtyard pavement had been robbed out and this area was filled in with stone rubble and earth overlaid by a packed earth surface with patches of cobblestones.

A semi-circular installation of two rows of large fieldstones—perhaps a bench or platform—abutted the exterior face of the southern part of the vaulted structure's west wall. To the north of the cistern, the Late Roman-period courtyard pavement also remained in use in the late Medieval period, along the northern part of the vaulted structure's western wall. Opposite the opening in the west wall of the vaulted structure was a

repurposed paving stone that formed part of the first step of the late Medieval monumental staircase; it had a circular drain cut into it, which allowed water to run off the pavement, through the drain, into a water channel, and southward into the cistern. At its southern end, the channel cut through the opening of the Late Roman cistern. To the east of the cistern, a pedestal from the Late Roman courtyard's peristyle was placed against the west wall of the vaulted structure, flanking the right side of the opening. The pedestal sat directly on the courtyard pavement and was hollowed out to serve as a water basin.

Monumental Staircase Ascending from the Eastern Courtyard to the Synagogue

To the east of the late Medieval synagogue's east wall, a row of reused pavement stones oriented north–south was set on top of the Late Roman courtyard pavement. These stones appear to be the first step in a monumental staircase that spanned most of the eastern side of the building, providing access between it and the vaulted structure and courtyard to the east. The profile of the complete staircase, which had four steps leading to a platform at the top, is preserved outside the building's northeast corner. A shorter staircase was built at the southern end to fit in the limited space between the cistern and the building.

Remains to the Northeast of the Synagogue

A rock-hewn cistern (6.5–7.0 m depth down to a silt layer at its bottom; not shown in Fig. 3) was discovered to the northeast of the synagogue. The cistern has an irregular, oval-shape interior with a narrow, cylindrical opening, unlike two bell-shaped cisterns originally hewn in the Late Roman period, one to the southeast of the synagogue (see above) and another to the south ([Magness et al. 2023 \(https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26377&mag_id=135\)](https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26377&mag_id=135)). A limestone block cut into a rounded cube shape, with a cylindrical hole drilled through the center, is set over the opening, providing access to the cistern below. The top of this block has a raised lip surrounding it, which was drilled with holes to hold a grate or cover. This monolithic block sits on three courses of limestones, forming a narrow shaft that descends into the cistern. A surface of large, flat cobblestones surrounded the opening. After the cistern went out of use, the opening was plugged with fieldstones and the area was covered

with collapsed stones. The cistern's interior is covered with a thick coat of white plaster embedded with pottery sherds. A second cylindrical opening, blocked with stones, can be seen from inside the cistern, 2.5–3.0 m to the north of the other opening.

To the south of the cistern, just outside the northeast corner of the synagogue, the southern half of a room with benches along three of its walls was exposed, which also dates to the late Medieval period. The benches are composed of rectangular stone blocks covered with white plaster. They are set in an earth fill that cuts through a massive Late Roman pavement that apparently is a continuation of the eastern courtyard (see above). When the benches were installed, a large, roughly square limestone block was embedded into the same fill c. 0.3 m north of the east–west section of benches. When the benches went out of use, they were buried in leveling fills for a new floor above them. This floor paved a room or outdoor space that abutted the east wall of the late Medieval synagogue.

The Late Ottoman to Modern Periods

Remains above the Eastern Courtyard and Vaulted Structure

At some point, the ceiling of the vaulted structure collapsed, and its interior fell into disuse. Subsequently, the collapsed structure and the area to its north were covered with fill, above which there were walls, surfaces and installations dating to the late Ottoman period—likely for working and food preparation activities, as well as the partial remains of two houses belonging to the modern village of Yaquq. Three phases involving architectural modifications and the raising of floors were distinguished in both houses. The southern of the two houses was the eastward continuation of a previously excavated building that repurposed the late Medieval vaulted structure. Vivid evidence of the modern village's abandonment and destruction in 1948 was found in the northern of the two houses, illustrated by the burning and collapse of its roof and the high concentration of charred wood, ash and yellow fill that covered the floors. At some point, apparently during the bulldozing of the village in 1968, the walls collapsed inward and covered the remains of the burnt ceiling. A large number of artifacts that were in use at the time of the house's abandonment was found in the destruction level: a large metal barrel, smaller metal canisters, a smashed iron gasoline can, an iron basin on a tripod, two copper bells, a pair of large tweezers, a shovel, an adze, a chisel, nails, a scale

weight, a door lock, door hinges, two horseshoes, a decorated horse stirrup, a thimble, the soles of shoes, glass bottles—including one complete bottle with an “Akko” stamp on the bottom and one with an inscription indicating that it contained boot polish, an intact spouted jug identified as an ‘Akko amphora’, the glazed lid of a teapot, a decorated glazed *finjan* (coffee pot), two grinding stones, pieces of textile and an intact stoneware rum jug of British manufacture stamped in 1940 that had been placed into a metal cannister and that had the acronym “SRD” (“Supply Reserve Depot”; among soldiers it was commonly said to stand for “Sure to Run Dry”) painted on its side—indicating that the rum was provided by the British army.

Another modern house was excavated farther to the north, to the east of the northeast corner of the late Medieval synagogue. It had a white plaster floor and an arched roof supported by pilasters. Farther north, the cistern in this area (see above) was covered by a thick fill and sealed by the white plaster floor of another modern house.

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1. Area 3000 at the end of the 2023 season, aerial view looking north. (Images//G1-2023-1.jpg)

2. Schematic plan of the Late Roman synagogue and eastern courtyard. (Images//G1-2023-2s.jpg)

3. Schematic plan of the late Medieval synagogue, the vaulted structure and eastern courtyard. (Images//G1-2023-3s.jpg)

4. The 'animal chase' border of the mosaic. (Images//G1-2023-4.jpg)

5. Mosaic depicting a dead Philistine soldier. (Images//G1-2023-5.jpg)

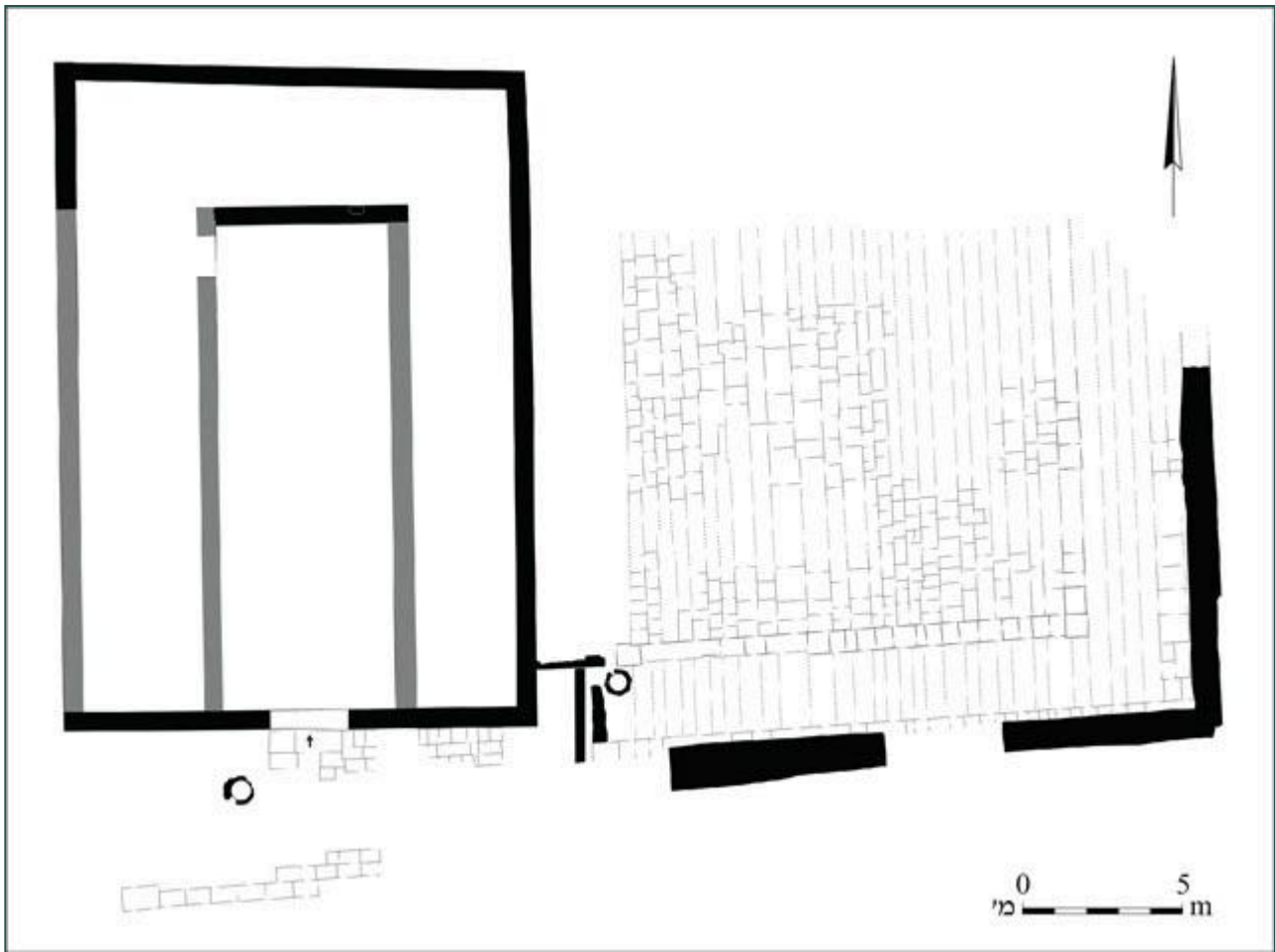
6. Late Roman-period cistern, looking north. (Images//G1-2023-6.jpg)

7. Soundings under the paving stones in the eastern courtyard, looking south. (Images//G1-2023-7.jpg)

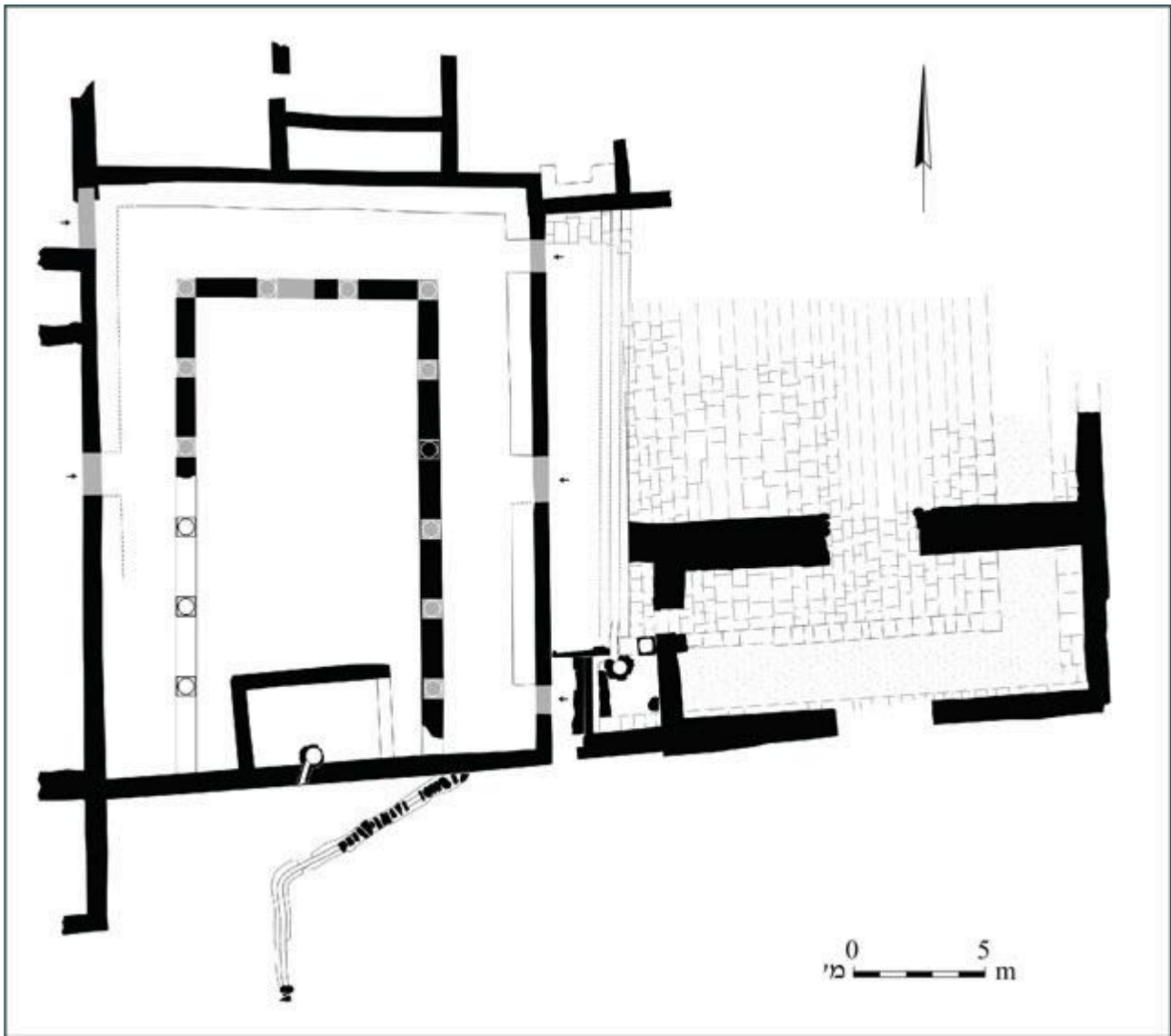
8. The late Medieval vaulted structure, looking northwest. (Images//G1-2023-8.jpg)



1. Area 3000 at the end of the 2023 season, aerial view looking north.
(Images//G1-2023-1.jpg)



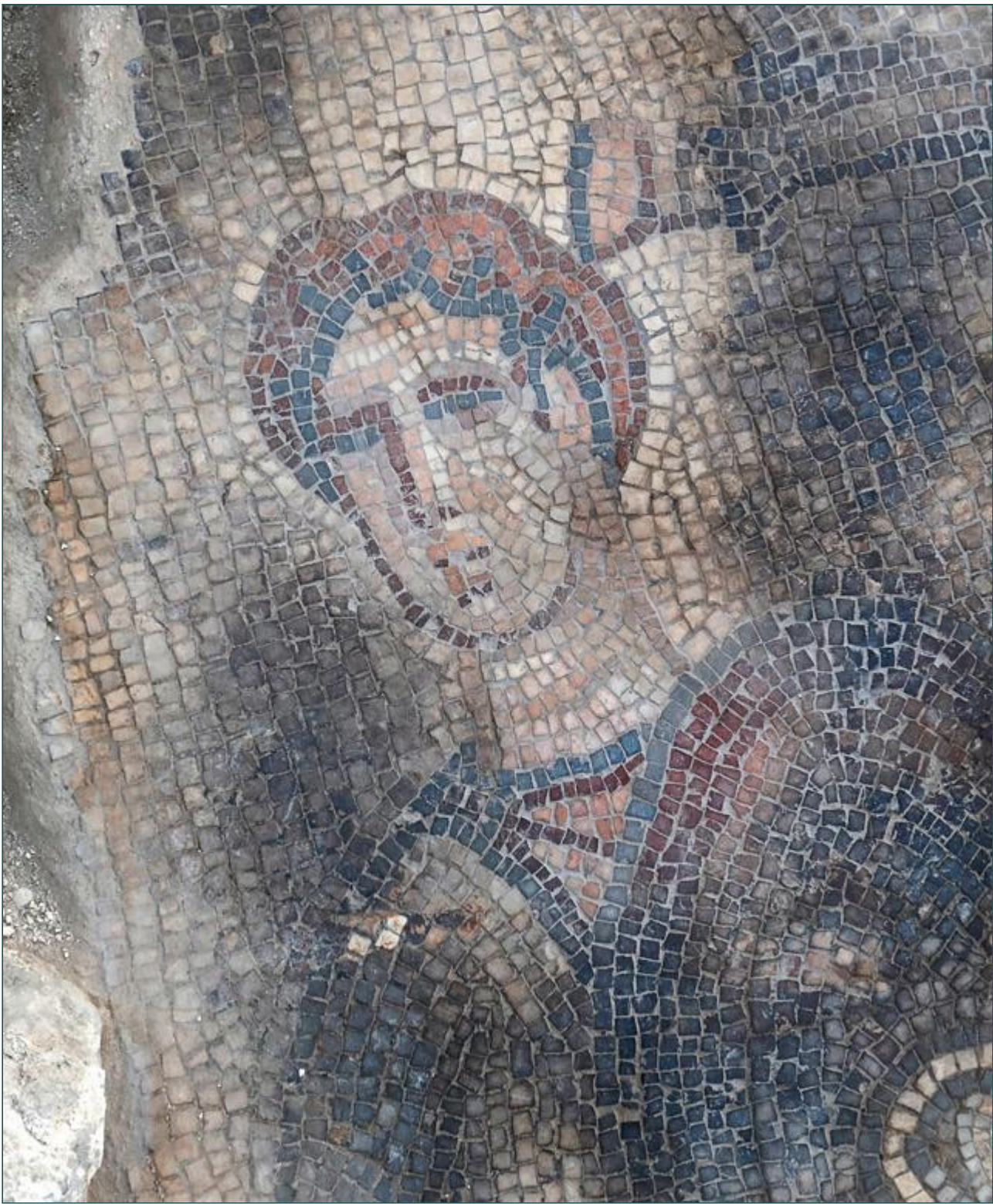
2. Schematic plan of the Late Roman synagogue and eastern courtyard.
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3. Schematic plan of the late Medieval synagogue, the vaulted structure and eastern courtyard.
(Images//G1-2023-3s.jpg)



4. The 'animal chase' border of the mosaic.
(Images//G1-2023-4.jpg)



5. Mosaic depicting a dead Philistine soldier.
(Images//G1-2023-5.jpg)



6. Late Roman-period cistern, looking north.
(Images//G1-2023-6.jpg)



7. Soundings under the paving stones in the eastern courtyard, looking south.
(Images//G1-2023-7.jpg)



8. The late Medieval vaulted structure, looking northwest.
(Images//G1-2023-8.jpg)