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TWO ADDITIONAL INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MARTYRION OF THEODOROS
IN HIPPOS OF THE DECAPOLIS

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TWO ADDITIONAL INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MARTYRION OF THEODOROS IN HIPPOS OF THE DECAPOLIS*

The Martyrion of Theodoros (the ‘Burnt Church’ aka the Southwest Church) is one of seven Byzantine churches known from Hippos of the Decapolis, a Graeco-Roman city east of the Sea of Galilee on the edge of the Golan Heights.¹ The church is relatively small, with inner dimensions of 15 × 10 m (W-E and N-S). The construction of the church dates to the second half of the 5th – early 6th century. The mosaic floor is from the first half of the 6th century, whereas the blocking and reordering of the church’s spaces belong to the third quarter of the 6th century. The roof of the church burned and collapsed during the late Byzantine period, most probably not later than the early 7th century. It created a thick layer of ash that covered the entire inner space of the building and preserved the mosaic floor well. The church’s destruction might be connected to the Persian invasion of the Land of Israel in 614 AD.

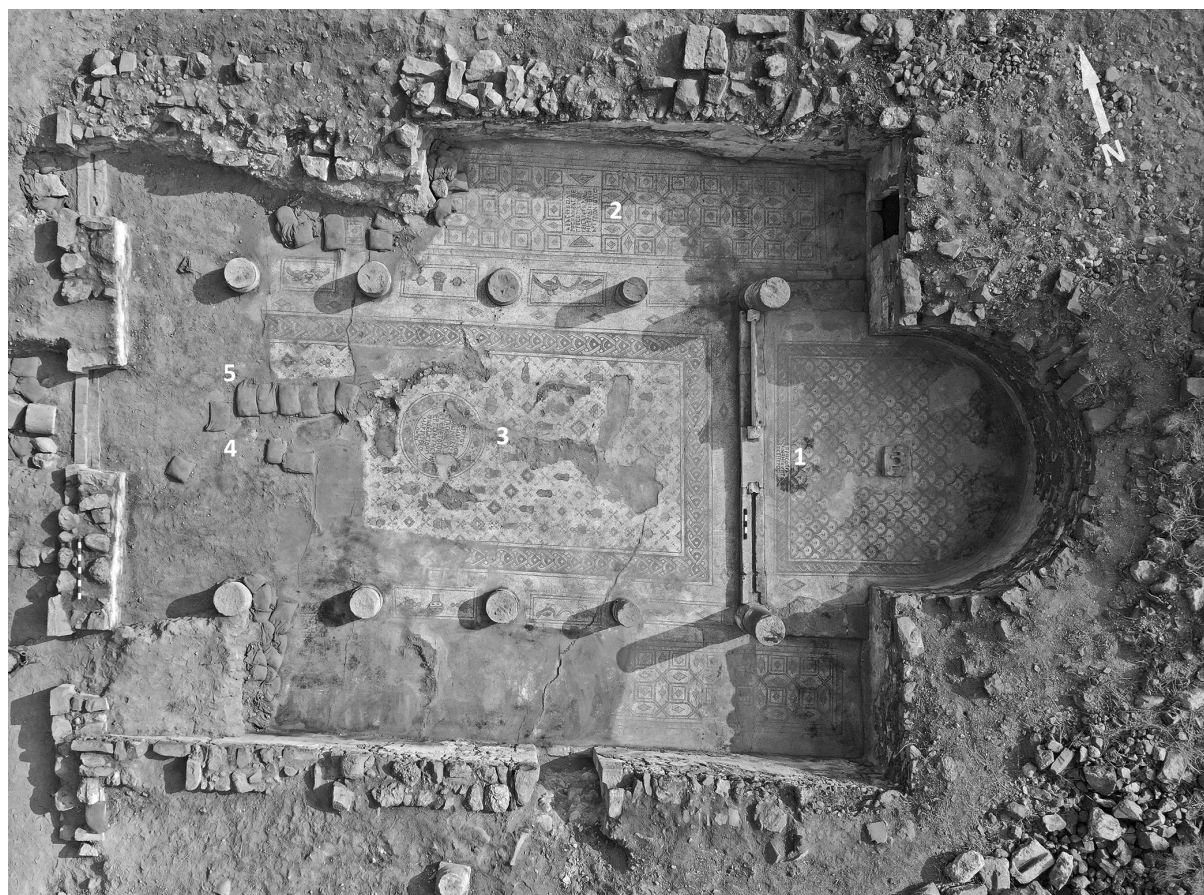


Fig. 1

* We would like to thank Thomas Ford (Cologne) for proofreading the English text and for further advice.

¹ Excavations at Hippos are directed by Michael Eisenberg and Arleta Kowalewska on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, Israel. The 2020 excavations were conducted under the Israel Antiquities Authority license G-22/2020 and Israel Nature and Parks Authority permit number A004–20 (Hippos-Sussita is a national park). Due to the Covid-19 crisis, only conservation work was conducted at the church in 2020, carried out by Yana Qedem (Vitkalov). After the season’s works, the mosaic floor was once again covered up to protect it.

Three inscriptions in Greek were previously found on the mosaic floor and are fully published (Fig 1: nos. 1–3).² The 2020 conservation efforts, focusing on circa 2.5 m of the westernmost parts of the nave and northern aisle mosaic carpet, revealed two additional inscriptions (Fig 1: nos. 5/4). Both are contained within *tabulae ansatae*, placed side by side at the western edge inside the geometric frame of the nave (Fig. 2). The inscriptions are aligned with and adjacent to the geometric frame of the mosaic. They face west, towards the congregation entering via the main portal. The larger inscription is described below under no. 4, and the smaller one under no. 5.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

² The church was excavated in 2005, 2007, and 2019. For details and further references see G. Staab and M. Eisenberg, *Building Inscriptions from the Martyrion of Theodoros at the 'Burnt Church' in Hippos above the Sea of Galilee*, ZPE 214, 2020, 203–214.

Inscription 4 (Fig. 3)

The inscription is situated 0.1 m south of no. 5. The lower frame of the tabula ansata is part of the western inner frame of the mosaic. The inscription consists of six lines. Its maximal dimensions within the tabula ansata are 0.95 × 0.53 m. The average height of the letters is 7 cm. All letters are laid in black tesserae on a white background. The inscription is almost fully preserved.

Προσφορὰ τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου Σιμεονίου χρυσολοχῶ ΚΟΣΤΟΥΤΟΣ· φυλάξ(ε)ι αὐτῶν κ(α)ὶ ἰ
^{vvvv} τὰ τέκνα αὐτοῦ ἢ καὶ τὴν ἐλευθερ(ί)α(ν) σου.

“Offering of the priest Symeonios, goldsmith, custodian (?). He (sc. the Lord God) will protect him and his children and your freedom (?)”

l. 2 Σιμεονίου: The name is usually encountered with an ypsilon and an omega Συμεώνιος. A priest of this name (Σιμεώνιος) appears on a mosaic panel at Apameia on the Orontes in 530 AD (SEG 56, 1860), and a deacon Symeonios is known from a dedication of a mosaic pavement in the basilica of Photios, north of Apameia, 483 AD (SEG 37, 1415).

An ἀργυροπράτης Symeonios, to be distinguished from an ἀργυροπράχης of the same name at Alexandria (P.Oxy 144; PLRE III 2 p. 1212), dedicated a copper cross at Tarsos together with a Μέγας.³

A saint named in the form “Symeonios” is mentioned on a silver or golden leaf from Syria, dated to the 6th/7th century, probably once fixed on a reliquary.⁴ In this case, it has been suggested that the man in question was Symeon Stylites the Younger (died 592 AD) and the extension -ιος was used as a diminutive, to distinguish him from his more famous predecessor, Symeon Stylites the Elder.⁵ If this naming of the younger saint was common at a certain time, he might have been the namesake of the priest Simeonios from Hippos (with iotacistic spelling: iota for ypsilon). Nevertheless, it is possible that contemporaries associated the older Symeon with this extended form of the name as well, considering what Theodoros of Patrai says in his eulogy of St. Theodosius. He explicitly introduces Symeon Stylites the Elder under the name-form Συμεώνιος (p. 9, 9–12 ed. H. Usener): Συμεώνιον δὲ λέγω τὸν μέγαν ἐκεῖνον καὶ πρεσβύτην (“By Symeonios I mean that great and old one.”). In spite of this determination, he continues the tale with the short form Συμεών.

The Simeonios of the present inscription – a priest, goldsmith, and perhaps custodian – is, in our opinion, to be differentiated from the priest with the similar-sounding name “Simonios” who appears as the donor of the chancel mosaic in this church (inscr. 1, at the entrance to the bema). In any case, variants of the name ultimately all derive from the Hebrew name *smwn*.⁶

l. 2f. χρυσολοχῶ: If not simply the contracted form of χρυσολόου, the genitive χρυσολοχῶ could be derived from the later simplified variant of the occupational title shortened to χρυσολόος. Ameling gives some examples of this phenomenon in his commentary on a Christian funerary inscription (CIIP IV 1 [2018] 3307) for a χρυσολόος Αἰωνίς from H. Luzit (Deir Dubban, between Jerusalem and Ashkelon), inter alia referring to a Christian inscription from Nea Anchialos in Thessaly, in which the profession of goldsmith is practised by a man also known by the name Συμεώνιος.⁷

The remarkable connection between the function of a priest and the occupation of a goldsmith is also documented in a fragment at Korykos (MAMA III 336 = BCH VII 235 no. 10, Εὐγενίου πρεσβυτέρου χρυσολόου). A διάκονος Isidoros of the same occupation is mentioned on an epitaph at Rhodos⁸; cf.

³ Cf. SEG 51, 1864, according to D. Feissel; the name on a Byzantine weight SEG 55, 1900 no. 63.

⁴ Cf. P. Nowakowski, Cult of Saints, E01679: <http://csa.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E01679>.

⁵ J. Lassus, Une image de saint Syméon le Jeune sur un fragment de reliquaire syrien du Musée du Louvre, *Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot* 51, 1960, 129–150.

⁶ Cf. Staab/Eisenberg 2020 [cf. n. 2], 204 n. 10.

⁷ Cf. SEG 40, 492: †Κοιμητή[ριον] ἢ διαφέροντα ν ἢ Συμεονίου χρυσολοχῶ ἢ καὶ τῆς τούτου γαμε||τῆς Ὀλυμπίας † (We thank D. Koßmann for this information).

⁸ G. Pugliese Carratelli, *Supplemento Epigrafico Rodio*, *ASAtene* 30–32 (1952–1954) p. 301 no. 86.

also χρυσοχόοι as donors of mosaics at Gerasa in 611 AD (Kraeling 486 no. 335; cf. no. 353 χρυσοχλοῦ, misspelled) and at Attaleia (Pamphylia; S. Şahin, *EA* 25, 1995, 25 n. 1). If we assume a fondness in early churches for ostentatious decoration, which is hardly archaeologically verifiable nowadays, the profession of goldsmith might have had some significance in the ecclesiastical sphere. In Beth She'arim an inscription from a Jewish context mentions a deceased father of two persons, one of them a Rabbi Παρηγόριος, “from the guild of goldsmiths” (ἀπὸ χρυσοχῶν).⁹

1. 3 ΚΟΣΤΟΥΤΟΣ: Most probably this is a poor rendering of the genitive singular of the Latin word *custos*. To our knowledge, the transliteration of *custos* to κούστως is testified by only one inscription, on a sundial dedicated by a soldier of the 8th legion (IGLS XVI 1 no. 283 [Sī, Hauran]), whose function as *custos* remains unspecified and can only be speculatively connected to the cultic-religious realm.¹⁰ Waddington read Κόστωδι in an inscription from Bostra (Inscription de la Syrie no. 1926; cf. IGLS XIII 1 no. 9415), which he understood as a personal name with reference to Latin *Custodi*. More frequently, Greek κουστωδία occurs for Latin *custodia* in early Christian texts (cf. Lampe s.v. κουστωδία). In the present case, neither the o-sounds (ο instead of ου and ου for ω/ο) nor the dental (τ instead of δ) are transliterated as expected. Probably the Latin genitive *custod-is* led to the Greek form κόστουτ-ος, according to the third declension. Thus, the priest and goldsmith Symeonios is additionally recognized in his function as a “custos” (gr. φύλαξ), whatever this exactly meant in practice. In the early church there is no office documented under this designation. It may be recalled that the German term “Küster” (‘sexton’) derives from the Latin *custos* (> *custor*). If this interpretation of the letters ΚΟΣΤΟΥΤΟΣ is right, Symeonios might have been responsible for the protection and the use of liturgical objects, a task that would have suited his expertise as a goldsmith very well.

Less likely, the form is a nominative for Latin *custos*, as in one Byzantine text of the 15th century.¹¹ In this case, κοστούτος would be the subject of the following φυλάξει, a verb adopted from psalm 120 (see below), and so a designation of God. In the same psalm, God is described as the one “who is guarding Israel” (v. 4 ὁ φυλάσσων τὸν Ἰσραηλ). Inspired by the role given to God in this psalm, the writer of our inscription would then have artfully replaced the usual subject Κύριος. However, this assumption seems improbable since God is never called *custos* (or φύλαξ) in a general sense without any specification. According to the Thesaurus linguae Latinae s.v. *custos*, there are only few instances in Latin where the word is applied to God, all in a specific or metaphorical context: Arnobius *nat.* I 604 *Christum animarum vestrarum custodem*; Lactantius *inst.* I 20, 41 *quasi custodi finium deo*, VI 12, 35 *thesauros tuos custodi deo credere* (after Vulg. gen. 28, 15 (*custos* [διαφυλάσσω] *tuus*); Augustine *serm.* ed. Mai 5, 1 *innocentiae custos*; Cassiod. *de inst.* 33 p. 84,19 ed. Mynors (in a prayer) *custos hominum*.

1. 3f. φυλάξ(ε): The background for using this word must be psalm 120: v. 5 Κύριος φυλάξει σε (...) // v. 7 Κύριος φυλάξει σε ἀπὸ παντὸς κακοῦ, φυλάξει τὴν ψυχὴν σου. / v. 8 Κύριος φυλάξει τὴν εἴσοδόν σου καὶ τὴν ἔξοδόν σου ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν καὶ ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος. The last verse (“May the Lord guard your entrance and your exit”) is frequently cited or referred to as blessing formula in Christian inscriptions, particularly those like ours, that are related to doorways.¹² However, the subject Κύριος (the Lord God) is missing in the present inscription. That προσφορά (offering [sc. of the mosaic]) can be understood as the subject is highly unlikely, because there are no parallels for a transformation of this biblical expression into a material con-

⁹ M. Schwabe, B. Lifshitz, Beth She'arim. Volume II: The Greek Inscriptions, Jerusalem 1974, 40f. no. 61 (Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society 5, 1937, 86–90): Μημόριον Λεολντίου πατρὸς τοῦ ῥίββι Παρηγορίου καὶ Ἰουλιανοῦ παλλατινίου, ἀπὸ χρυσοχῶν (= <https://library.brown.edu/iip/viewinscr/beth0061>).

¹⁰ Cf. A. Sartre-Fauriat, M. Sartre, IGLS XVI 1 p. 323. For the transliteration of Latin *armorum custos* to ἀρμῶρων κούστωρ and similar spellings in papyri in a military context, cf. F. Mitthof, Ein spätantikes Wirtschaftsbuch aus Diospolis parva (P. Erl. Diosp.), München–Leipzig 2002, 75 (we owe this observation to Charikleia Armoni).

¹¹ Cf. Lexikon der byzantinischen Gräzität s.v. κουστώδος, with reference to E. Gerland, Neue Quellen zur Geschichte des lateinischen Erzbistums Patras, Leipzig 1903 (Index 288–291), 224 no. 22,4.

¹² For an inscriptional quotation of the entire passage of the psalm (Ps. 120, 5,7–9), cf. MAMA VIII 256 (Savatra).

ception. Rather, readers were expected implicitly to think of the subject (Κύριος) behind φυλάξει, relying on their familiarity with the biblical passage.

l. 4 αὐτῶν (read αὐτόν): The confusion of the vowel quantity is hardly surprising in the light of similar mistakes on other mosaic inscriptions from Hippos.

l. 6 τὴν ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΑ σου: The meaning of the word-combination τὴν (read τήν) ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΑ σου, which at any rate functions as an object of φυλάξει, is uncertain.

In respect to invocations of the pattern φύλαξον τὸν δοῦλόν σου / τὴν δούλην σου¹³ (“protect your servant”), one may suppose an audacious reformulation by replacing δούλην with its antonym ἐλευθέραν. In this case, it would be emphasized not that man is dependent on God, but that he is set free by God from all earthly restriction and imperfection. However, such an interpretation of the term δοῦλος is not attested in any Christian inscription. In any case, it would remain uncertain who is meant by ἐλευθέραν σου. The choice of the female form corresponds with the fact that mention of the donor’s wife is generally expected in this position, after the priest Simeonios has prayed for himself and his children. Perhaps the personal name of the spouse led to the wording in which the article and the possessive personal pronoun have been added, according to the invocation formula mentioned above. In other words, the term δούλη was replaced by the personal name Ἐλευθέρα, so that the phrase had no theological meaning, but would have been a sophisticated wordplay by the initiator of the inscription. This speculation is very questionable, as the name Ἐλευθέρα was not at all popular: the edited inscriptions in CIIP provide the male name Ἐλευθέριος only twice.¹⁴ However, the appearance of the female name at Hammat Gader, for the wife of a *Praefectianus* Boethos,¹⁵ does not make its appearance in Hippos entirely improbable.

Some theological reflection on the author’s part would need to be assumed if he chose the noun ἐλευθερ(ί)α(ν) (“freedom”) at the end of the inscription regarding verses 7 and 8 of psalm 120 (see above). The prayer to God to safeguard the soul of man and preserve him from evil on all his paths would have been substituted for a request to protect his freedom. This interpretation is all the more likely as already the church father John Chrysostomos had concluded from verse 7 of psalm 120 that only God “will be able to redeem and remove all evil from man and make him free” (δυνήσεται καὶ ἀπαλλάξαι πάντων [sc. κακῶν], καὶ ἐλεύθερον ἀποκαταστήσαι, *Expositio in psalmos*, Migne PG 55, 346/7).¹⁶ In our mosaic inscription the formula (ὁ κύριος) φυλάξει would have been finished with the concise object ἐλευθερ(ί)α(ν), which thus provided a kind of theological conclusion of the traditional psalm verses whose extensive citation was not possible in the space available.

Inscription 5 (Fig. 4)

The inscription is situated 0.1 m north of no. 4, inside the north-western corner of the geometrical frame of the mosaic. It consists of four lines, with the following maximal dimensions within the tabula ansata: 0.74 × 0.42 m. The average height of the letters is 7 cm. All letters are laid in black tesserae on a white background. The upper right part of the frame is extended 5 cm up and a single letter ny appears in the extension just above the upper row. About a third of the inscription is damaged.

Observing the course of the top frame line, the upper left corner seems to have slipped downwards by about four tesserae as a result of damage. What looks like an ypsilon is part of the first line at whose end a ny is added above the row.

¹³ Cf. e.g. SEG 37, 1504 (Deir Mukallik, 5./6. Jh. n. Chr.) Κ(ύρι)ε, φύλαξον | τὴν δούλην | σου.

¹⁴ Cf. CIIP I 2 no. 1069a (lead seal) and IV 1 no. 3007 Ἐλευθέρι(ο)ς (Choziba, eunuch in a painted wall inscription); LGPN I–IVb contain four testimonies, all of imperial times.

¹⁵ Cf. L. Di Segni, *The Greek Inscriptions of Hammat Gader*, in: Y. Hirschfeld (ed.), *The Roman Baths of Hammat Gader*, Israel Exploration Society 1997: Final Report (IIP-303; pp. 185–266), no. 17; for the same era see also PLRE II 389 s.n., one of empress Pulcheria’s attendants.

¹⁶ For freedom as Christian achievement through baptism cf. Lampe s.v. C. 3.



Fig. 4

- 1 Υ[ca. 6 I.]ΠΣΚΑΙΑΝ΄
- 2 [ca. 6 I.]ΣΒΑΙΛΙΟΥ
- 3 ΑΔΓ Μ[.]ΙΜΕΓΑΚΑ
- 4 ΙΕ[. . .]ΒΙΟΥ

The text can be completed only speculatively, for example in the following way:

- 1 Ύ[πὲρ μνήμ]ης καὶ ἀν΄-
- 2 [απαύσεως] πρε]σβ(υτέρου) Αἰλίου
- 3 ἀδ(ελφοῦ) μ(ου) [κα]ὶ Μεγά(λου) κα-
- 4 ἰ Ε[ύσε]βίου

“For the [remembrance (*aut* peace, [εἰρήν]ης) and rest] of the priest Elias, [my brother, and] of Megas and of Eusebios.”

1. 1f. Ύ[πὲρ μνήμ]ης καὶ ἀν΄[απαύσεως]: For the combination of the widespread formula ὑπὲρ ἀναπαύσεως, here combined with a preceding μνήμης (*vel* [μνί]μης) only, compare to mosaic at neighbouring Tabgha (SEG 8, 5): † Ύπὲρ μνήμης [κ(αὶ)] ἰ ἀναπαύσεω[ς]. However, other supplements, such as [εἰρή]νης (regarding the space perhaps in iotacistic spelling [ἰρί]νις) or [εὐχ]ῆς (“prayer request”), cannot be completely ruled out.¹⁷

1. 2 Αἰλίου: Probably not the Latin *nomen gentile* “Aelius”. Read Ἡλίου, genitive of Ἡλίας.¹⁸

1. 3 ἀδ(ελφοῦ) μ(ου): At the beginning of the line, one can discern the rest of the middle part of an alpha, which is combined with the horizontal base of a delta crossed at the right side by the typical abbreviation stroke. This ligature is not at present found elsewhere. It can be proposed to be an abbreviation of ἀδελφός.

¹⁷ Cf. SEG 44, 1335 (North Syria) Ύπὲρ μνήμης καὶ ἀναπαύσεως Ἐθερίας τῶν Μαρα καὶ ὑπὲρ εὐχῆς Καλλιοπίου καὶ Πατρικίου ἀδελφῶν αὐτῆς καὶ ἰ πάντων τῶν διαφερόντων αὐτοῖς ἐψηφώθη ὁ ἄγιος τόπος οὗτος; IGLS XIII 2 no. 9918 (Qarfa, 589/590 AD); from the Mount of Olives SEG 8, 175 [† Ύπὲρ] ἰ εὐχῆς κ(αὶ) ἀναπαύσεως ἰ [Θεο]δοσίας τῆς ἐνδοξοτάτ(ης) κουβικουλαρίας, and SEG 8, 176 † Ύπὲρ εὐχῆς κ(αὶ) ἀναπαύσεως Καλιστράτου ὑποδιακ(όνου).

¹⁸ For parallels of the name cf. e.g. Madden no. 237 p. 163 (Scythopolis: Tell Iztabba, Monastery of Lady Mary) = <https://library.brown.edu/iip/viewinscr/bshe0024/> and /bshe0025; CIIP I 2 (Jerusalem) no. 1021; no. 1165,3b; no. 2495 et al.

This word is also abbreviated in a Christian inscription from Syria, PAES III A no. 804 (Taff): ἄδ^ε(λφός); another case from Laodicea Combusta is unclear (MAMA I 30 [Calder: “The transcription ... cannot be regarded as certain.”]): ἄδ(ελφός).

If the expansion of the single letter *my* to *μ(ου)* is correct, the mosaic is secondarily related to inscription 4, where Simeonios stands out as the main donor. He would then have set the mosaic inscription in remembrance of his deceased brother Elias, who like Simeonios himself had been a priest (πρεσβύτερος). Simeonios perhaps then took over this function only after his brother’s death.

The degree of relationship with the other two persons remains unknown. If the reading of the names is correct, it need not mean that there is any connection between the Μέγας of inscription 5 and the bishop Μέγας mentioned in the central inscription of the church.¹⁹ However, in both cases it seems evident that the writers had difficulty in forming the genitive of Μέγας. The widespread use of the name Εὐσέβιος also should not arouse any speculation on a connection to other individuals of Hippos who bore this name.²⁰

Conclusion

The five inscriptions on the mosaic floor of the Martyrion of Theodoros, two newly exposed and three previously known, give us a plethora of details. They tell us about the donors who financed the laying of the mosaic carpet and even sponsored parts of the roofing (intercolumnar beam construction?).²¹ According to our readings eight individuals – donors, their family members, and church administrators – are named: a priest Simonios (no. 1), Abbas Theodoros (no. 2), Abbas Petros (no. 3), two different men named Megas, one of them a bishop (no. 3, and no. 5), Simeonios – priest, goldsmith, and custodian in one person (no. 4), his (probably elder) brother Elias, also a priest (no. 5), and Eusebios (no. 5).

The inscriptions, together with the rest of the mosaic designs,²² illuminate the nature of the local community of the westernmost neighbourhood at Hippos. The poor knowledge of Greek evident from the inscriptions agrees with the unassuming depictions visible on the simple-quality mosaic. Yet even this ordinary Christian community, which lived around the church in modest dwellings,²³ strived to embellish their place of worship with symbolism of Jesus’ miracles and enter the world of the “epigraphic habit”.

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¹⁹ Cf. Staab/Eisenberg 2020 [cf. n. 2], 208–213 no. 3.

²⁰ Cf. M. Eisenberg, G. Staab, Eusebios’ Aedicula Tombstone from Hippos, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 2020, DOI: 10.1080/00310328.2020.1789341.

²¹ Cf. Staab/Eisenberg 2020 [cf. n. 2], 205–208 no. 2; C. Saliou, *Épigraphie et vocabulaire architectural: à propos d’une inscription d’Hippos récemment publiée*, in: HUORT, 07/10/2020, <https://huort.hypotheses.org/372>.

²² The mosaic is full of simply rendered depictions of various fruits, baskets with fruits and loaves of bread (?), fishes, wine goblets, and birds, accompanied by colourful geometric designs.

²³ The neighborhood was excavated to a limited degree north of the church in the years 2011–2012, revealing partly paved streets that surrounded clusters of rooms and yards built with reused and unworked stones in poor quality. No objects were found that could attest to any financial means of the community. The houses were seemingly abandoned around the same time the church was destroyed, before the Umayyad rule settled.