SESSION 1E
Religion in Late Antiquity

CHAIR: *Kim Bowes*, University of Pennsylvania

Byllis and its Bishop in the Sixth Century C.E.

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Sitting on top of a hill in south-central Albania, Byllis was an independent episcopal see in the fifth century C.E. and one of the most important cities of Epirus Nova in the sixth century. Five churches were built in the city during this period, either on the ruins of disused public monuments or on leveled private houses. This new Christian cityscape included a cathedral, as well as an episcopal complex that gradually expanded into the urban fabric and that has been the main focus of recent fieldwork in Byllis.

The expansion of the complex led to the privatization of an east-west street, south of the cathedral, that became the complex's main thoroughfare and the pivot of its development. After a massive reduction of the defended perimeter of the city under Justinian, the episcopal complex dominated the northern half of the remaining intra-muros city, while to the south, the former civic center was built over, or quarried for, spolia. In addition to the cathedral and to the bishop's palace, the complex comprised an enclosed area dedicated to habitat and economic activities that included wine production and storage, large-scale cooking, and animal rearing. While the scale of the complex is impressive, evidence of decline in the late sixth century and abandon in the early seventh indicate that this community at the bishop's service could not maintain itself in Byllis under the pressure of migrations and insecurity.

This paper reports the results of recent fieldwork in the episcopal complex of Byllis.

The Lord and the Ring: A New Interpretation of a Corinthian Finger Ring with an Inscribed Cruciform Invocative Monogram

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At some point in Dark Age Corinth, a man was buried with a bronze finger ring, an object traditionally dated to the seventh century C.E. and bearing on its bezel a unique inscribed cruciform monogram. In this paper, I propose a new reading of the monogram and a revised chronology based on sigillographic comparanda. The social dimensions of the ring's use are then analyzed through (1) comparison with contemporaneous jewelry, (2) an appraisal of the relationship between the monogram and lead seal inscriptions, and (3) a contextualization of the ring within the complete mortuary assemblage.

New photographs of the ring make clear that its inscription is an invocative monogram....appealing for divine assistance....of a distinctive type well-known from a substantial body of late seventh- to eleventh-century Byzantine lead seals. The relatively early form of the monogram and accompanying symbols, as well as the presence in the same multiple burial tomb of a Corinth-type belt buckle of the late seventh to eighth century, suggest an eighth-century date of manufacture. Although apotropaic symbols or texts are not unusual for finger rings, the adoption of this type of cruciform invocative monogram, borrowed directly from lead seals, is unprecedented in ring iconography. I argue that the reproduction of a lead seal obverse is a symbolic appropriation of the status of individuals who possessed such seals, persons of relatively high rank ranging from spatharioi and wealthy merchants to Constantinopolitan bishops. The deceased at Corinth is unlikely to have held such a status and may have sought, through his choice of ring decoration, a symbol not only protective but also one that conveyed a desired social position. Such an interpretation accords well with the entire funerary assemblage of this tomb in which the ring's owner was one of the middle interments. While the tomb's structure and location conform to local custom, the persons laid within it were clearly not Greek. The presence of numerous weapons and other objects, unknown to Greek mortuary practice but common to those of a variety of migratory groups in southeastern Europe, suggests a migratory origin for the deceased. The ring's owner is therefore best understood as a semiacculturated non-Greek who adopted a monogram of apotropaic value that expressed the owner's wish to be associated with the Greek elite.

The Round Church at Beth-Shan: Architectural Features and Date

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The Round Church in Beth-Shan (northern Palestine) was excavated by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology from 1921 to 1933 by A. Rowe and G.M. Fitzgerald. Among the first features to be brought to light was a section of a curved wall that was later interpreted as the foundation of the church. Six Corinthian capitals were recovered in the church, and 11 additional capitals, smaller and with different decoration, were found in the debris of the surrounding areas.

The remains suggest a unique architectural arrangement of the church: a large rotunda containing an ambulatory with a projecting apse in the eastern side. The building was likely an hypaethral building whose inner wall was supported by columns topped by the Corinthian capitals. Six of the other, smaller capitals, may have been installed in pairs to create a hexagonal ciborium such as that found at the fifth-century church of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki.

The excavators based their initial dating of the church (C.E. 431–438) solely on the criteria of the stylistic analysis of the six Corinthian capitals, which were thought to bear strong similarities to two capitals from the church of St. Stephen in Jerusalem. In this paper, I analyze the decoration of the capitals and the architectural features to place the dating of the church in the last quarter of the fifth to early sixth century C.E. I argue that the Corinthian capitals found in the Round Church in Beth Shan are spolia from Roman buildings dating to the third and fourth century C.E. and therefore do not provide accurate evidence for dating. A more accurate dating for the church can instead be based on comparison of the two capitals found in the debris around the church, which suggest, a date in the last quarter of the fifth century C.E.