THE UMAYYAD MOSQUE OF TIBERIAS

Tiberias, capital of the Jund al-Urdunn (the military district of the Jordan) in the early Islamic period, grew out of an earlier Roman–Byzantine settlement. Yet despite its historical importance and the many salvage excavations conducted in this city, little is known of its urban layout between the seventh and eleventh centuries.

Among the areas excavated, the ancient city center stands out. It was first uncovered in 1952, with excavations continuing sporadically until March 2008. Over the years, these expeditions uncovered the main north–south city artery (cardo), a large bathhouse, a broad pillared building built over what has been identified as an unfinished Roman temple (Hadrianeum), and a basilical building to the east, lying between the cardo and the Sea of Galilee.

While reassessing the archaeology of early Islamic Tiberias, the author noted the profound affinity between the pillared building—identified since the 1950s as a Byzantine covered market—and the eighth-century Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. They were similar not only in the planning concept, but also in proportions, building technique, and decoration. In addition, the pillared building’s very location in the center of the then recently conquered town seems fitting for a central Friday mosque.

This article presents the major archaeological finds connected to the Umayyad period (661–750) in Tiberias, as well as the main arguments that seem to support the identification of the pillared building as an Umayyad Friday Mosque.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The surrender of the Roman–Byzantine town of Tiberias to the Muslim army in 635 opened a new page in the history of this settlement on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. The terms of surrender guaranteed a smooth and peaceful change of government, the Arab conquerors taking possession only of those houses and places of worship (kanāʾis) in Tiberias that had been abandoned, and profiting from the taxation of goods. According to the sources, the commander Shurahbil ibn Hasana, to whom the city surrendered, also allotted the location where a mosque for the faithful was to be erected.

Tabariyya, as it is called in Arabic, was chosen as the capital of Jund al-Urdunn, ultimately to the detriment of Baysan (Scythopolis), which had been the capital of Palaestina Secunda. From a modest town, listed as a bishopric but mainly renowned as the heart of Jewish life and of Talmudic studies, Tabariyya turned into an administrative center under the authority of the governor of Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria). When the Umayyads moved the caliphate’s capital to Damascus, Tabariyya’s importance certainly grew. The routes connecting Fustat and Jerusalem with Damascus converged in the area south of the Sea of Galilee, at a pass near al-Sinnabra, before continuing through a new ascent (ʿAqabat Fiq), which was leveled by order of the caliph Ṭabariyya (r. 685–705) in 692.5 To the north and south of Tiberias the Umayyad caliphs built winter palaces on their lands at al-Sinnabra and Khirbat al-Minya.

By the tenth century, Tabariyya was definitely a flourishing town. In 985, the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasi (d. ca. 1000) described it as one farsakh (around six kilometers!) long, stretching between the mountains and the sea. He wrote:

Tabariyya is the capital of Jordan and a city of Wādī (the Valley of) Kanāʾ. It is situated between the mountain and the lake, cramped, with suffocating heat in summer, and unhealthy. Its length is about a farsakh, but it has virtually no breadth. Its marketplace extends...
from one gate to the other, with its cemetery on the hill. There are eight hot baths here needing no fuel, along with numerous basins of hot water. The mosque is large and fine, and stands in the marketplace; its floor is laid in pebbles, and the building rests on pillars of joined stone.

It is said of the people of Tiberias that for two months they dance, for two more months they glut; for two months they flail about, and for two more months they go naked; for two months they pipe, and for two more months they wallow. The explanation of this is that they dance from the number of fleas, then glut themselves with the lotus fruit; they slap about the hornets with fly-swatters, to drive them from their meat and fruits; then they go naked from the intense heat; they suck the sugarcane; and then they must wade through their muddy streets.

When Nasir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 1075) visited Tiberias in 1047, he mentioned that it was encircled by walls except on its seaward (eastern) side, and that it had a central mosque, as well as another one on the western side of the city. His description is as follows:

The city has a strong wall that, beginning at the borders of the lake, goes all round the town; but on the water side there is no wall. There are numerous buildings erected in the very water, for the bed of the lake in this part is rock; and they have built pleasure-houses that are supported on columns of marble, rising up out of the water. The lake is full of fish.

The Friday Mosque is in the midst of the town. At the gate of the mosque is a spring, over which they have built a hot bath; and the water of this spring is so hot that, until it has been mixed with cold water, you cannot bear to have it poured on you. They say this hot bath was built by Solomon, the son of David—peace be upon them both—and I myself did visit it.

There is, too, on the western side of the town of Tiberias, a mosque known as the Jasmine Mosque (Masjid al-Yāsmīn). It is a fine building, and in the middle part rises a great platform (dukkān), where they have their prayer-niches (mahārib). All around those they have set jasmine-shrubs, from which the mosque derives its name. In the colonnade, on the eastern side, is the tomb of Joshua (son of Nun), and underneath the great platform aforesaid are the tombs of the seventy prophets—peace be upon them—whom the children of Israel slew. In the town of Tiberias they make prayer-mats of reeds, which sell in the place itself for five Maghribi dinars apiece. On the west of the city rises a mountain, upon which has been built in hewn stone a castle [probably referring to the church on Mount Berenice]; and there is here an inscription in Hebrew characters, stating that, at the time it was cut, the Pleiades stood at the head of the zodiacal sign of the Ram. The tomb of Abu Hurayra (the Prophet’s Companion) lies outside the city, towards the south; but no one can go and visit it, for the people who live here are of the Shi’a sect, and as soon as anyone comes to make the visitation, the boys begin a tumult, and raise a disturbance about him that ends in stone-throwing, wherefrom injuries are received.

In 1992, Timothy P. Harrison published what has remained so far the only conceptual study on early Islamic Tiberias. Based on archaeological studies of other Islamic cities such as Fustat, Istakhr, Susa, and 'Aqaba, Harrison explored the possibility that Umayyad Tiberias was provided with a misr (fortified city) at the northeastern tip of the Roman–Byzantine walled city, in the area later occupied by the Ottoman city and today’s modern Tiberias. Harrison used part of the archaeological data available at the time of his research, which showed that Tiberias had expanded considerably, both to the north and to the south, into areas previously not developed. On Mandatory maps he identified a square area, each side circa 400 meters, within the Ottoman city, which he ascribed to Umayyad activity, concluding that “sometime during the Early Islamic period the town underwent a settlement shift,” that, he posited, should probably be identified with the establishment of the Umayyad provincial capital.

The possibility that an Umayyad misr was built in Tiberias alongside the pre-Islamic settlement, as was the case in many other early Islamic towns, should not be ruled out completely. Nevertheless, the reappraisal of some old archaeological evidence, together with new publications, allows us to assume that not only did the "old" town continue to prosper and expand, but its center retained its role as the heart of the capital’s activity.

This is verified by the results of Gideon Foerster’s excavations of 1973 and 1974 (licenses G-22/1973 and G-37/1974, fig. 2), which were published by David Stacey. Stacey focused on five of the seven archaeo-