

is perhaps best known through his *The Catholic Student's Aids to the Study of the Bible*, in five volumes, which is a mine of information; and *The Layman's New Testament* which has had a large sale and evidently supplies a demand.

Father Pope had been declining in health for some time and had had to give up most of his active work. The writer saw a letter from him only three weeks before his death. It consisted of two or three lines written in a very shaky hand when he was almost blind and very ill. He knew that very soon God would call him to Himself, and prepared for it. Certainly he could look back on a long life spent in the service of God. We pray that he may speedily enter into the reward of his labours. His death is a serious loss to us, but we have the consolation of possessing the works he has left us. May he rest in peace.

## PALESTINE LETTER

WAR is not conducive to the peaceful study of the past. Nevertheless, conditions in Palestine have been such that since 1939 archaeological research has never been completely suspended. That fact is an indication of the calm with which one viewed the future. No sooner was the war over than it only remained to take up the work again on its pre-war scale.

This continuity of work has made it possible to complete the excavation of the Palace of the Thousand and One Nights in the Jordan Valley, three miles north of Jericho. We wish to say something about this winter residence of the Umayyid Caliph Hisham (724-43, A.D.), whose architects knew how to combine the magnificent with the comfortable. On entering the great doorway one is at once struck by the abundance and variety of the decoration. Lintels and doorposts, arches, windows, balustrades, ceilings, pillars, capitals: nothing has escaped the chisel of the sculptor or the plaster covering in which the artists have not scrupled to shape human heads in high relief. The effect must have been a most vivid and varied decoration before the bright colours faded.

It seems that the Caliph Hisham never enjoyed the amenities of this beautiful palace—still less his successors. It has the appearance of having been newly built and decorated; and there is in fact evidence that the building collapsed as the result of an earthquake, which must have been that of 746 A.D., hence only a short time after its completion. The mosaic pavements are in such a remarkably good state of preservation that one would say that they had only just now been finished.

This building, methodically excavated by Mr. Baramki of the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem, has a special interest from the point

of view of the history of art in Palestine. It shows the continuity between the (Moslem) work of the eighth century and that of the Christian Byzantine period of the two or three preceding centuries; a continuity nevertheless, which is not without a certain deterioration from and lack of understanding of the earlier art. In any case the discovery at El Mefjer—as the place is called—marks an era in the architectural evolution of the Near East.

Passing from the deep trough of the Jordan Valley to the countryside of Idumaea, covered with its fragrant brushwood, one reaches the village of es-Semwa (the Biblical Eshtemoh), four miles south of Yatta. About ten years ago, excavations, of which the traces are yet visible, were made here on the site of an ancient building. The results of this work which was carried out by representatives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem were not published until 1941. Certain evidences, already noted by us, showed that it was the site of an ancient synagogue. Laying bare the foundations, the excavators revealed the general ground-plan of the building with its niches turned towards the Holy City and its porch of two columns. Destroyed probably during the war in the reign of Hadrian the synagogue was rebuilt on a more modest scale. From this rural sanctuary numerous sculptures have been brought to light, representing the Seven-branched Candlestick, the horn Trumpet, the cooking-pan of the Day of Atonement, and also shells and jars.

It is clear from the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius that several Jewish villages existed in this area during the Byzantine period. Were there any conversions among these survivors of Israel or among the Idumaeans who were still pagan? There appear to be some grounds for thinking so. An important place of baptism has recently been unearthed by the French School of Biblical Studies and Archaeology of Jerusalem, some distance to the west of Hebron on the track coming from Gaza. The place, which was discovered by Dr. Kopp, comprises a chapel in the middle of which is a tank five feet, ten inches wide and four feet, four inches in depth. Four steps lead down into the tank on the east side, and water was supplied by a channel from a nearby spring. The name, Ma'moudiyeh, which it still bears, shows that it was nothing else than a baptistery, and moreover (as is clear from the excavations carried out by Père de Vaux in April 1946), a famous baptistery served by a number of monks who lived in a building opposite the chapel. The Greek inscription carved on the lintel of the monastery door appears to ascribe the foundation to a superior called Demetrios. A tradition grew up in the Middle Ages and lasted to the end of the fifteenth century, to the effect that St. John the Baptist himself lived in this desert and administered baptism here. During the Byzantine period the region was controlled by a military guard-house which had a heavy door in the form of a mill-stone.

From Hebron, going up once more towards Jerusalem, we come to Bethlehem where the Basilica of the Nativity is in process of being cleaned. In December 1944 all the walls of the Grotto were laid bare. This constituted a great event and it was possible to examine at leisure the marble surfacing fixed to the rock by means of a mortar made of brick dust. One noticed the rough way in which the entrances to the Grotto underneath the Octagon of Constantine had been handled by the architect of Justinian (527-65). A far more satisfying experience was to see the twelfth century mosaic in the little apse of the altar of the Nativity, after its coating of soot had been removed. It is a picture, in the traditional Byzantine style, of the Birth of Our Lord. A Latin inscription reads: Pax hominibus bo(nae voluntatis).

In June 1946 the Department of Antiquities took up the work again after an interval and entrusted to Mr. Johns the task of cleaning the mosaics and paintings of the Basilica. Today it is much easier to make out the figures of Biblical, Palestinian and Norman sacred tradition, painted on the pillars, as also the details of their dress and the accompanying inscriptions.

In 1942 during reconstruction work on the Mosque of El Aksa in Jerusalem which is built on the site of the palace of Solomon, there were found among the timbers, carved wooden beams—some of the Umayyid period, others of Byzantine style, very like the soffits of the Basilica of Bethlehem. The latter probably come from the well-known church of St. Mary the New, of Justinian, which once stood on the high ground to the west of the Temple area. On another beam made up of miscellaneous pieces, one can read the name of Peter, the saintly archbishop and patriarch of Jerusalem (524-52) and a reference to the erection of a sanctuary to St. Thomas the Apostle.

In virtue of a decision taken by the Advisory Board of the Department of Antiquities, the Director, Mr. R. W. Hamilton, started in October 1946 the work of restoring the façade of the Church of the Tomb of the Virgin, which was called in the Middle Ages, Our Lady of Josaphat. Already the unsightly stone bench, which concealed the base of the pillars and the foot of the façade, has disappeared exposing to view the mouldings of the pedestals and a well preserved strip of the mediaeval paving of the parvis. Underneath the parvis a vast cistern has been found, whose covering rests on arches. The cistern is mentioned in some of the itineraries of the Middle Ages.

As this letter is already long enough we shall leave till next time the remainder of our information, notably that concerning the caravanserai of Qiriath el Enab, the first campaign at Tell el Far'a in Samaria and also the very thorough excavation just completed at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee.

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*Jerusalem, 26th October 1946.*