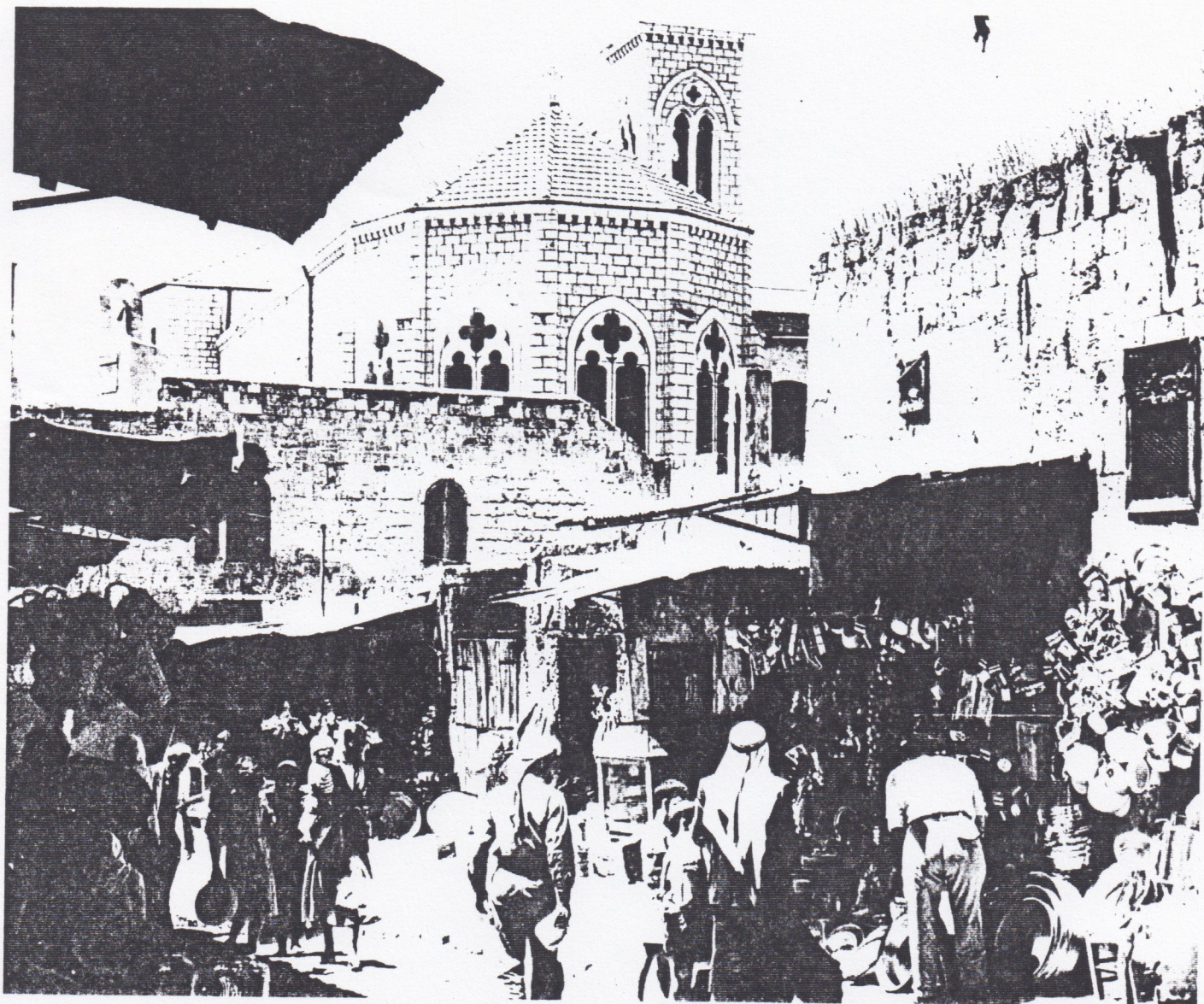


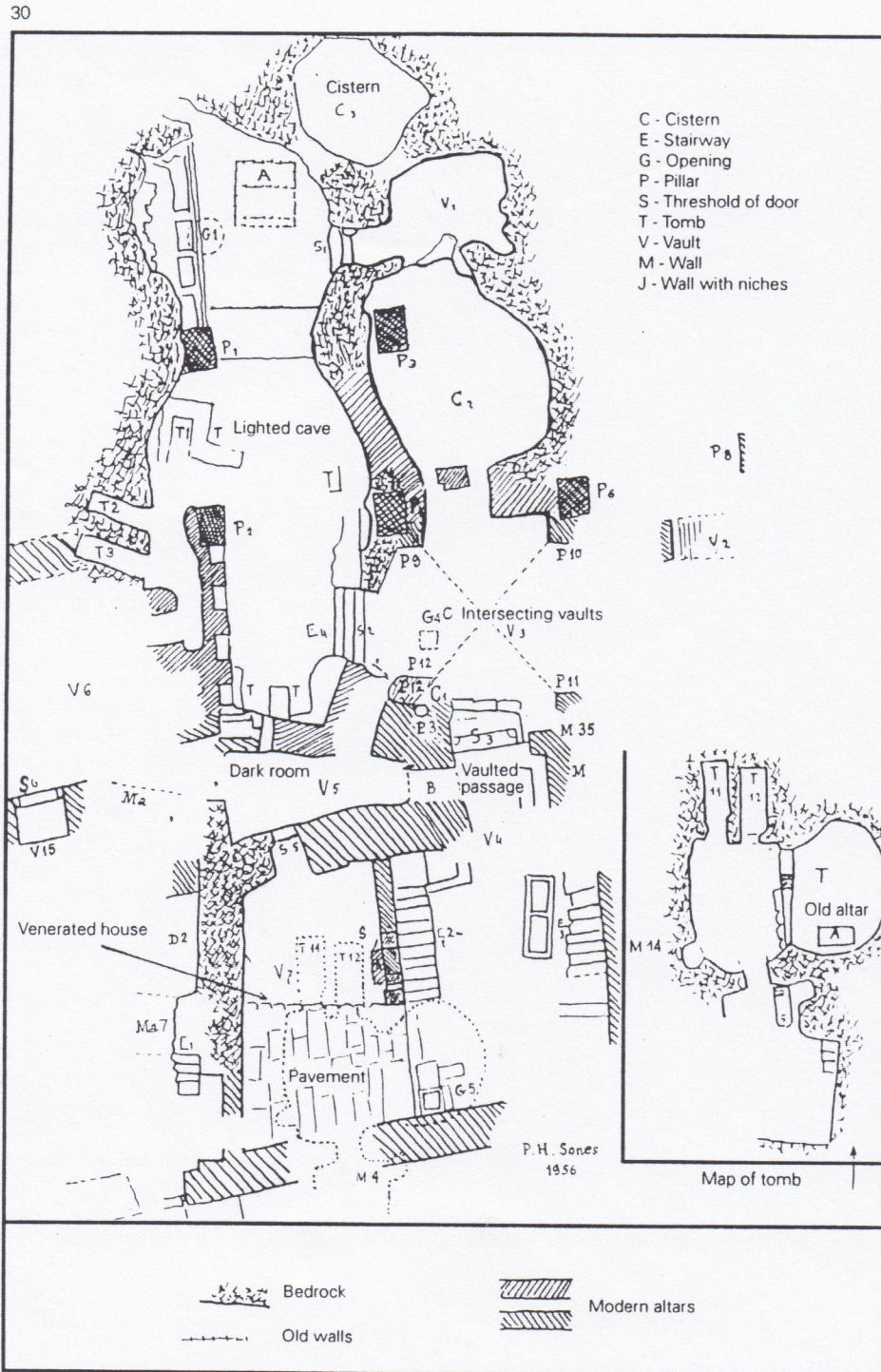
# The Excavations at the Sisters Of Nazareth



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For a long time, an embarrassing silence covered up the archaeological excavations conducted under the premises of the Sisters of Nazareth. These Byzantine constructions marked a holy place, apparently the church of the Nativity or the house of Saint Joseph, which the Franciscans situated elsewhere. In preparing this issue on Nazareth, Rev. Jean-Bernard Livio, s.j., Chairman of the Department of Adult Christian Education in Geneva, decided to analyze and present the discoveries himself.

30. Map of the excavations made by Fr. Senès under the convent of the Sisters of Nazareth.



- C - Cistern
- E - Stairway
- G - Opening
- P - Pillar
- S - Threshold of door
- T - Tomb
- V - Vault
- M - Wall
- J - Wall with niches

When, on 26 January 1855, the "Sisters of Nazareth" arrived in Nazareth, they were the first nuns to return and settle in Palestine. They founded first a dispensary, then several schools and an orphanage. In buying the stately Catafago mansion in the center of town, they never suspected they would find themselves involved in an enigma of Palestinian archaeology which a century of excavations and controversies has not been able to solve.

In 1881 they bought ten small buildings adjacent to their property (where their church is located today). As work proceeded on the construction of the convent, they discovered a certain number of sculptured stones and a large granite column. In what served as their vegetable garden, they found other granite columns. These discoveries, along with the banal incident that followed, led to a first series of excavations.

EARLY EXCAVATIONS

On 18 October 1884, when a workman who had been cleaning the cistern (C 1 on the plan • 30 •) on the northern side of the premises tried to come up, he got wedged in the opening. The cistern, it should be noted, was shaped like a bottle and had a long narrow neck 5 m. deep. When his colleagues came to the rescue, they dislodged a stone which fell into an empty space. Intrigued by the empty space, the workman pointed his lamp in its direction, discovering, to his great surprise, a large underground room with a beautiful vaulted ceiling • 31 •. On examining the vault (V 3), he noticed an air — or light — shaft (G 4) which had been blocked up. After quickly unblocking the shaft, the sisters and pupils began clearing away about 20 cm. of thick mud which covered the entire floor. The chamber was approximately 2.30 m. high.

They reached some sort of doorway. Then, as they continued to clear away the debris, they entered a cave 16 m. long, 4 to

31. Byzantine vault (V3 on the map 30) in the underground chamber first discovered which gave access to the "lighted cave." (Ph. Sisters of Nazareth)

32. The "lighted cave." Daylight enters through an opening in the cupola on the left. Placed there by the Sisters, the statue of St. Joseph has since been removed. (Ph. D. Brihat)

7 m. wide depending on the area, and almost 8 m. high. The cave had like a cupola through which entered daylight, hence the term "lighted cave" • 32 •. As they cleared the area, they discovered under the cupola three small basins dug out of the rock and a section of marble column (5 march 1885). In the mud, they found pieces of sculptured marble, sections of columns, Byzantine coins, fragments of terra cotta lamps, even a complete lamp. They also found a large number of colored tesserae (green, pink, blue and red) from beautiful ornamental mosaics.

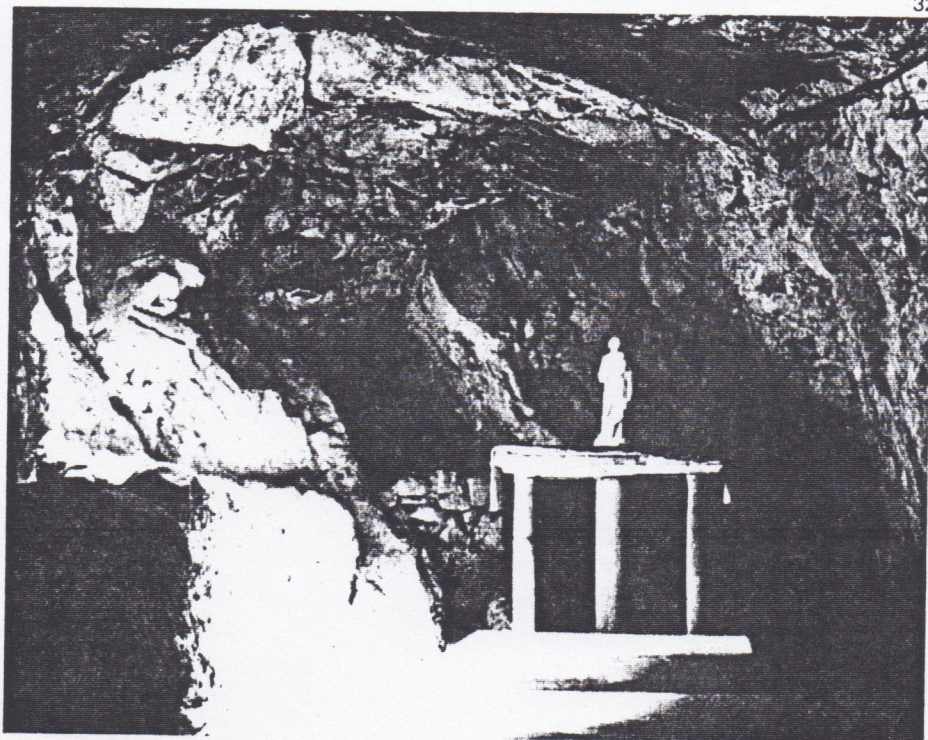
The then-superior of the community, Mother Giraud, began to remember all the comments made since their arrival by the inhabitants of Nazareth, viz., that the Sisters had bought the property under which was "the tomb of the Saint." Until that day, she had not paid much attention to these comments, thinking them no more than sales talk to justify the raising of prices every time there was a new transaction. But that very year 1885, a French pilgrim, Father Fulgence, O.S.B., put the Superior in touch with Victor Guérin, an eminent archaeologist and distinguished historian of Palestine. Mr. Guérin sent the Sisters the text of Arculf — which, incidentally, he interpreted in his own way, translating "tumulus" by "tomb," thereby misdirecting on-site research for many years thereafter — and suggested that they check to see if they had not discovered the church visited by the Gallic bishop during his trip to the Holy Land around 670 and mentioned in his text. It might be the occasion to learn more about this mysterious "saint" whose memory was clearly linked to the property the Sisters had bought and kept alive by the Moslems of Nazareth.

#### I. FIRST PERIOD OF EXCAVATIONS : 1884-1914

For five years the Sisters continued to explore the subsoil of their property,



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33. Cistern C2 during the excavations. The arch in the foreground is vault V3. On the back wall is the double niche for drawing water from the cistern (C3) which is now blocked up. The coping-stone on the right has rope marks. Discovered in the

village, the stone now rests in front of the opening on the right, which must have been its original place. (Ph. Sisters of Nazareth)

mostly on the haphazard suggestions of pilgrims passing through Nazareth and whenever they could find time between their many activities. They found a second cave (C 2) to the northeast of the first • 33 •. It was filled — to about 40 cm. from its rock ceiling — with alluvial clay containing carbonized materials and debris of all sorts, particularly numerous pieces of precious fabric, embroidery and spun gold. They also exhumed more terra-cotta lamps and glass vases for perfumes or ointments which, for a while, they mistook for tear vases because, listening to the neighbors, they thought themselves in a “ tomb. ”

After clearing the chamber and reaching the back of the cave, they noticed that the rock had been covered with water-proof lime and that the southern wall contained a drain for the run-off. In the northern wall, there was a door-like opening which led to a small vaulted chamber (V 1). In its northwest corner, where began one of the arches supporting the vault, there was a stone gargoyle which served as the overflow of a cistern (C 3) located further north and higher up. This cistern, no longer accessible, was also vaulted. All these vaults were constructed like the one first discovered and can be dated from the end of the 4th or the 5th century. Upon visiting the cave on 11 april 1887, Brother Liévin, O.F.M., noticed that, in the southeast pillar supporting the intersecting vaults (hidden today by two modern arches), two stones had been replaced in Crusader times.

In the lighted cave, they discovered four basins inside detachable blocks placed in a drainage area, then a little farther, behind a niched wall, the bases of two catacomb tombs (T 2 and T 3). The basins were arranged as steps, which reached the three others already mentioned, and emptied one into the other. Apparently, those who installed the basins did not realize that there were tombs just beneath the thin layer of drainage soil. Nearby, in another

tomb (T 1), this one grave-like, they found a male skeleton buried in a sitting position and wearing a ring from which the stone had been removed. Had they discovered the “ Saint ” ?

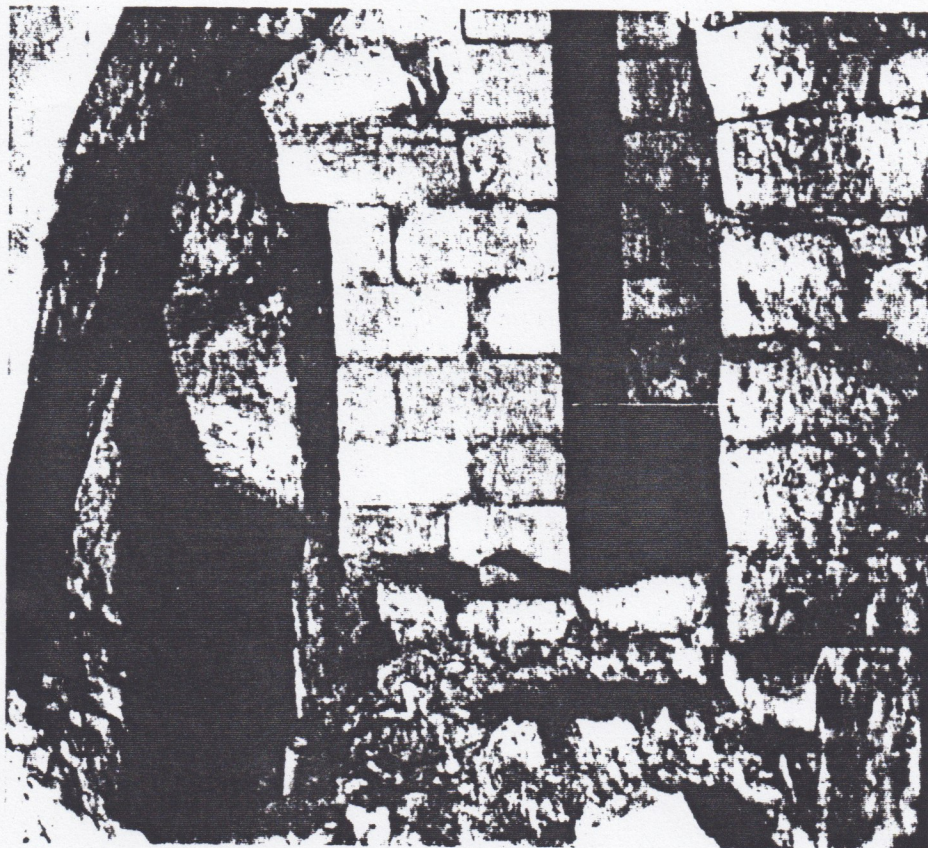
In this same large lighted cave, they discovered other catacomb tombs in the southern wall. In the eastern wall just across from the niched wall, they found the last step of an old stairway which provided access to the cave, and under the step, a ditch of crushed stone which fed the cistern north of the intersecting vaults. When Victor Guérin visited the cave on 13 april 1888, he helped the Sisters discover the foundations of the old church by finding the beginnings of the arches which supported the floor of the church above.

The following month, Fr. van Kasteren, a Dutch Jesuit on visit there, noticed that the intersection of the vaults (V 3) resembled the one called “ caneros ” near the Jordan which Arculf mentions in his narrative and which Du Cange translates as “ vaults shaped like the claws of a crab. ”

#### “ THE VIRGIN’ CHAMBER ”

In 1889 the Sisters continued the excavations, again starting at the intersecting vaults but this time proceeding southerly. At the end of the lighted cave, they came upon a narrow vaulted chamber (V 5) which had a tiny window that opened into another chamber. They noticed its large barrel vault. But before they could reach

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34. After going down a ladder placed in the shaft, two Sisters discovered a cave with an altar. The chains of either a lamp or a censer were lying on the floor. This was the "tomb of the Saint." (Ph. Sisters of Nazareth)

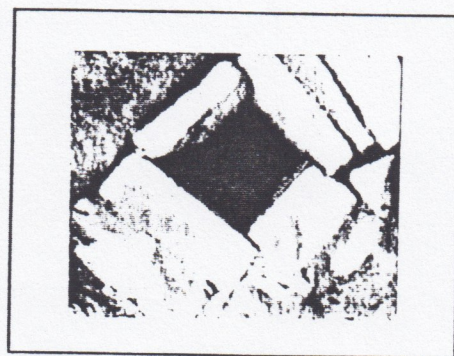
it, it collapsed under the torrential rains of 1891, partially obstructing the area and obliging them to re-approach it from the east, beginning again at the intersecting vaults.

The work of clearing the debris intensified when the Sisters decided to build a church on the eastern side of their property, to rebuild the enclosing wall along the side street, and to add, near the property of the Franciscans, a large vaulted room needed as a classroom. About that same time (summer 1900), Fr. Séjourné, Dominican prior in Jerusalem and editor of *La Revue Biblique*, wrote to the superior of the Sisters of Nazareth, suggesting that she proceed prudently in clearing the

debris and that she supervise the workmen very closely because, to the right of the stairway — that had just been discovered south of the intersecting vaults — he would find the chamber which "belonged to the Virgin." At the same time, he sent her the text of a Russian monk, Daniel, to support his hypothesis. As a matter of fact, the Sisters did find a chamber — which, for a long time, they called "the Virgin's chamber" — west of the stairway (E 2) and under the vault which had collapsed during the torrential rains of 1891. This chamber was enshrined under a beautiful vault and opened through two arches which had been built — or consolidate — by the Crusaders. To the east of the stairway, they found yet another stairway (E 3)

35. Opening of a square shaft (G5) found in the pavement at the foot of the south wall (M4). From this opening rose the smell of incense. (Ph. Sisters of Nazareth)

— this one circular — the top of which once connected with the first stairway at a landing whose stone pieces were lying on the ground below. The style of these stairways recalled that of the Benedictine



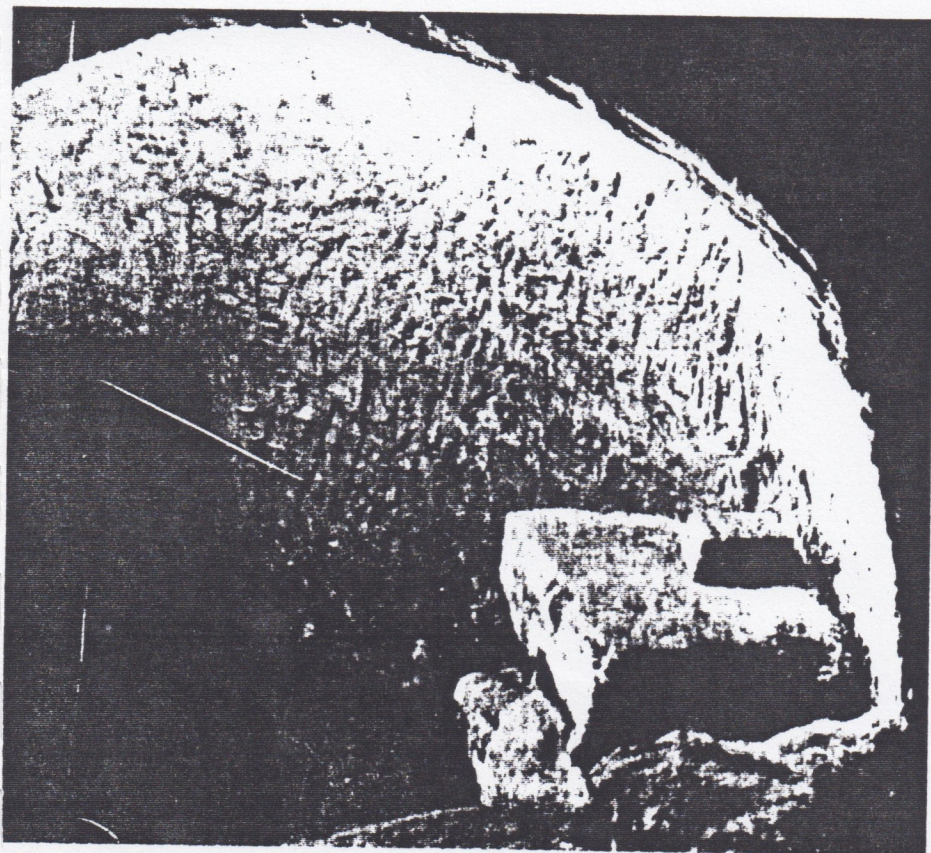
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monks of Cluny or, closer still, of the Crusader building on Mount Tabor.

#### "THE TOMB OF THE SAINT"

South of this last chamber was the wall (M 4) on which rested the collapsed arch. At the foot of the wall, they found a thick stone block — 72 cm. deep at its base — bevelled on three sides and cut Crusader-style. It was lying flat on the pavement, its full thickness exposed. On loosening it, they discovered a second stone which, quite obviously, was blocking an opening. After removing it with some difficulty, they noticed a square shaft (G 5) • 35 •. Those present that day recorded in the community day book that a fragrant odor, like that of lingering incense, rose from the opening for several days. With a ladder, the Sisters reached bottom where they found a round chamber hollowed out of the rock measuring 2.70 m. in diameter and having almost a cupola-like ceiling. Against the wall of this chamber, they noticed a sort of altar made of two stone

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blocks clumsily superimposed • 34 • Resting on the altar were a molded stone, a small chain, a communion spoon, and small terra-cotta lamps. Suspended on the wall, as in ex-voto, were the spurs of knights. Everything suggested that the room had been a chapel set up in a sacred place to honor some saint. Had they found the mysterious " tomb of the Saint " ?

To the west of this room, there were two openings in the wall that had been blocked with loose stones. Behind the stones, there was a Jewish burial chamber which had two tombs or loculi (T 11 and T 12). From this burial chamber in the south wall, and above two unworn steps, they could see the original entrance to the tomb which had also been walled up with loose stones. After removing the latter, they discovered a classical rolling stone, typical of Jewish tombs • 37 •. It was in a closed position. Unable to budge it from the inside, they dug from the outside to beyond the above-mentioned wall on which rested the collapsed vault and to a depth of 7 meters from the surface. As they dug, they found a large quantity of beautifully colored mosaic tesserae. But when they reached the level of the rolling stone, there was no sign of the tomb. Fr. Séjourné thought that the text of the Russian monk Daniel pertained to this tomb, the " tomb of Saint Joseph. " In fact, Daniel linked all gospel-related memories to the site of the present church of the Annunciation.

#### " THE VENERATED HOUSE "

The Sisters also excavated the area west of the opening (G 5) through which they descended to the " tomb. " They cleared away the remains of an ancient two-room house built against the rock, whose western and northern walls were the rock itself but whose eastern and southern walls were made of rough masonry • 36 •. The room on the south side had a stone pavement. The entire structure was located under two vaults which were demolished in 1929

when the Sisters decided to build a protective concrete ceiling over the excavations. The overall construction of the house suggests crude workmanship and the ancient methods used during the period when people still lived in caves, specifically, during the 1st century of our era. Under the pavement, there is still a brick Roman-style drain which served either to bring water to the domestic cistern or to eliminate waste water. Unfortunately, the construction of the stairway against the east wall of the house — which must have taken place during a time when the faithful wanted to preserve the house in the crypt of a church built above it — destroyed most of this drain, making it practically impossible for us today to determine whether it ever connected with the cistern which was discovered later under the area separating the chamber with the ancient house from the intersecting vaults.

#### II. SECOND PERIOD OF EXCAVATIONS : 1940-1963

The first World War suddenly halted the momentum stimulated by so many discoveries, leaving a huge question mark over the conclusions to be drawn from this first period of excavations. The Sisters did not resume their investigations until 1940. In the mean time, archaeology took a giant step forward. The new generation of archaeologists pays much more attention to the countless small objects — particularly ceramics — which are found in an excavation. Unfortunately, the Sisters kept almost nothing during this long period. Whatever had any value was given to the Franciscan Fathers for their museum or loaned to passing pilgrims for examination. For example, in 1931, they entrusted a certain number of coins to a group of Roman seminarians who claimed they could clean them by " frying them in oil " and who promised to return them duly labelled with a subsequent group of pilgrims.

Accordingly, it was not until 1940 that systematic investigations were resumed, thanks to Henri Senès, s.j., who taught at the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Jerusalem. Having been an architect, he was able to bring that competence to bear on his archeological knowledge. Needless to belabor the difficulties that awaited him.

#### THE WORK OF FR. H. SENES

He soon realized that he faced three problems. First, since he was working underground, he could not excavate much more without jeopardizing the Sisters' constructions above. In order to date accurately the discoveries made at the end of the last century and at the beginning of this one, he had to content himself with modest probes that no more than checked stratification. Second, he had to establish the chronology of the discoveries and draw up plans of all that had been found — something which had not yet been done — basing himself on the accounts reported by the Sisters in their " Convent Diary " and on sketches left by passing specialists. Last but not least, he had to refute the sometimes impassioned arguments of those who, for reasons more religious than scientific, were bent on minimizing the importance of the discoveries made by the Sisters.

In fact, at the very time when the Sisters began talking about their discovery of the sizable ruins of a church, its crypt and its annexes, and therefore about the obvious vestiges of a Christian Byzantine, and possibly Crusader, presence, the Orthodox were trying to impose what they claimed to be very old traditions concerning two of their properties — the Virgin's Well and the adjoining church of Saint Gabriel — and the Franciscans were inventing a " house or workshop of Saint Joseph " on the property next to the church of the Annunciation and to their own friary. For their part, the Sisters of Nazareth had embellished their discoveries with expla-

36. West of opening G5 were found the remains of the "Venerated House" dating from the 1st century. Seen here are the western rock mass (D2) and the entrance to the house (S5).

nations which were surely very spiritual but lacked archeological support!

Fr. Senès, who dedicated his life to clarifying the matter, left an impressive number of plans, sketches, annotations and written lectures about his research. Unfortunately, he died before writing a concluding synthesis. For almost 23 years, he constantly returned to the premises to excavate, sketch and verify. Though always self-critical, he was convinced that what had been discovered beneath the property of the Sisters of Nazareth was indeed the church which Arculf found next to the church of the Annunciation. During this period, the Sisters hesitated more and more about allowing the discoveries made on their property to become a source of tension between the Christian communities of Nazareth. For that reason, they avoided all publicity over their excavations. After the death of Fr. Senès, they



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deliberately entered a long period of silence in this regard. When in 1969 *Bible et Terre Sainte* published an issue on Naza-

reth, there was practically nothing on the subject.

If today I take up the question once again in the conclusion of this article, it is first because the situation regarding the holy places of Nazareth has considerably improved, in that re-affirmations of respective positions no longer run the risk of opposing the local communities. It is also because, over the last fifteen years, I have often had the occasion to reside with the Sisters of Nazareth and to verify personally and extensively the arguments upheld by Fr. Senès. Tests conducted recently during the excavations which preceded the installation of an elevator on the western side of the "tomb" have confirmed what I thought about Fr. Senès' position. I therefore wish to recall it here, as I examine Arculf's own text, the only document from before the 8th century to give a somewhat detailed description of the churches of Nazareth.

#### THE NARRATIVE OF ARCULF (670)

1. Civitas Nazareth, ut Arculfus, qui in ea hospitatus est, narrat, et ipsa ut Capernaum murorum ambitum non habet supra montem posita, grandia tamen lapidea habet aedificia ibidemque duae pergrandes habentur constructae ecclesiae, una in medio civitatis loco super duos fundata cancos, ubi quondam illa fuerat domus aedificata, Dominus in qua noster nutritus est salvator.

2. Haec itaque eadem ecclesia duobus, ut superius dictum est, tumulis et interpositis arcibus subfula habet inferius inter eosdem tumulos lucidissimum fontem conlocatum, quem totus civium frequentat populus de illo exhauriens aquam, et de latice eodem sursum in ecclesiam supraaedificatam aqua in vasculis per trocleas subrigitur.

3. Altera vero ecclesia in eo fabricata habetur loco, ubi illa fuerat domus constructa, in qua Gabriel archangelus ad beatam ingressus ibidem eadem hora solam est locutus inventam. Hanc de Nazareth experientiam a sancto didicimus Arculfo, qui in illa duabus hospitatus est noctibus et totidem diebus.

The town of Nazareth, according to Arculf who received hospitality there, has no surrounding walls like Capernaum. Set on a hill, it nevertheless has tall stone buildings. Two very large churches have been built there. The first, in the center of town, is constructed over *two vaults (crab claws)* on the spot where once stood the house in which the Lord our Savior was brought up. This church, built *on two mounds* and, as already mentioned, on two interconnected vaults, has beneath it — between the two mounds — a very clear *fountain* from which the entire population draws its water. The water is hoisted to the church above in small vessels by a system of *pulleys*. The other church was built on the site where once stood the house in which the Archangel Gabriel visited Blessed Mary whom he found alone and to whom he spoke. We gathered this information about Nazareth from Saint Arculf who received hospitality there two nights and just as many days.

(From D. Baldi, *Enchiridion Locorum Sanctorum*)

#### III. INTERPRETATION OF THE ARCULF TEXT

In the Latin translation made by St. Jerome (+ 419) of the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius, it is said about Nazareth: "There is a church on the site where the angel came to announce the important news to Blessed Mary, and there is another on the site where the Lord was brought up" (*nutritus*, which later gave the church its name: church of the Nutrition).

Jerome personally visited Nazareth for the first time in 386. He must have seen the two churches. Since none of the other witnesses of the first centuries have given us more ample information, the narrative of the Gallic bishop who came to Nazareth about 670 must be read very carefully. Arculf gave an oral account of his journey to Abbot Adamnan who transcribed it. It is the oldest extant document on the subject.

But it is also the document on which the defenders of the other localizations of the "ecclesia nutritionis" base themselves, the principal rival sites being the church of St. Gabriel (K. Kopp) and the church of St. Joseph (Frs Viaud, Bagatti and Baldi, O.F.M.).

### THE VAULTS AND THE "TUMULI"

At the Sisters of Nazareth, at the foot of the long, modern, pink-stone stairway leading to the caves, there are two intersecting semi-circular Byzantine vaults supported by four massive pillars. In two of the pillars, it is obvious where old worn stones have been replaced by cut stones (of the Crusader Period). The two vaults are within the angle formed by two rock walls that have been cut vertically and rise higher than their keystones. When facing north from under the intersecting vaults, one sees, between two pillars, a rocky mound (tumulus) which is practically hidden by masonry dating from the same period as the vaults. Then, from the same spot but facing west, one sees, between two pillars, another rocky mound. It may therefore be said that the vaults are located between the two sides of the angle formed by these walls, i.e., between the two tumuli.

### THE FOUNTAIN

To the north, there is a breach in the rock wall, a sort of double niche, partly hollowed out of the rock, partly constructed even before the intersecting vaults. From there, it was possible to draw water from a cistern completely hewn out of the rock • 33 •. Less than 15 m. away, on the same level and under the same layer of clay that had accumulated in the cistern after the destruction of the church, the Sisters found an ancient sarcophagus that had been divided into two compartments and re-used as a wash-tub and drinking-trough. This would seem to prove that the

cistern contained enough water to satisfy the domestic needs of the people and their animals. However, the cistern does not seem large enough to satisfy, for the entire dry season, the needs of a large village, unless it served only as a reservoir which was connected to a source and constantly fed from it. But precisely, even today, the Sisters' property is located over a rivulet which flows down the Nebi Sain, the hill overlooking Nazareth on the northwest. Also, 200 m. away, at a place called Mensa Christi, approx. 30 m. higher than the cistern, there is a spring which directly supplied the cistern with water through channels whose vestiges have also been found. This helps us understand why Arculf used *fons*, a term that suggests running water.

A close examination of the double watering niche, which today is partly obstructed by modern masonry, reveals the presence on the right of an eyelet or hole cut through a salient angle in the stone and undoubtedly used to attach a rope for drawing water. It also reveals a similar hole on the left, now partially hidden by one of the pillars of the intersecting vaults. There is therefore a double installation for drawing water. The one on the right had a coping-stone, now disappeared, but whose small supporting wall is still there. Recently, a coping-stone used as a windowsill has been found in a neighboring house of modern construction. It could very well be the missing stone. Close scrutiny of the quality of the work involved in the two masonry constructions suggests that the double watering installation is much older than the intersecting vaults.

This fountain has a very original arrangement. Water could be drawn from the room beneath the intersecting vaults (there are traces on the coping-stone) as well as from above the arch, thanks to a hole 50 cm. in diameter which had been pierced through the arch. The sides of the hole bore further traces of rope marks. The size of its opening obviously necessitated small containers. But precisely, the

text of Arculf speaks of *vasculos* operated by pulleys. On the other (south) side of the intersecting vaults, there is a small bottle-shaped cistern which held water until the excavations of 1884 and whose narrow watering-shaft cuts through the intersecting vault. When this cistern was full during rainy seasons, it overflowed through a duct into the other cistern. The stone conduit, still visible on both sides of the modern stairway descending to the lighted cave, seems to suggest older workmanship than the vaults. There were therefore two different places for drawing the same water: one above the intersecting vaults for small quantities, the other beneath the vaults for larger quantities.

### TENTATIVE CHRONOLOGY

An analysis of the build-up which obstructed the fountain has furnished additional information about the chronology of events. At the very bottom, on the solid rock of the fountain/cistern, people dropped very delicate and finely crafted objects: glass vases, lamps probably used to inspect the bottom, small terra cotta containers for drawing water, all of which recall the period of pilgrimages when various objects fell either by accident or through carelessness. Then followed the destruction of a rich upper structure, probably by fire, if the layer of ashes is any indication. The remains were thrown into the cistern, *inter alia*, pieces of gold cloth and embroidery, possibly from church vestments. Rain water then deposited sediment. The inhabitants must have continued to draw water as best they could until such a time as the sediment completely blocked the cistern and its access channels. Various earthquakes, especially the one of 1754, displaced the bed of the underground river which today still runs beneath the Sisters' building, but at a deeper level. As for the potsherds found in the lower strata of the sediment and beneath it, they have been dated from the 5th to the 11th centuries by Yeivin and Ben-Dor of



37. A large round stone closed  
the original entrance to the  
" tomb of the Saint. " (Ph. D. Brihat)

the Israeli Department of Antiquities during one of their visits to Nazareth.

Consequently, if we take literally the testimony of Saint Willibald and his companions who, after travelling throughout the Holy Land from 724 to 726, mention in the account of their pilgrimage that " the Christians [of Nazareth] had to repeatedly repurchase the church from the pagan Saracens each time the latter decided to destroy it, " we can infer that the church in question is that of the Annunciation and that it alone remained after the other had been destroyed. The history of Nazareth at this time is clear : under

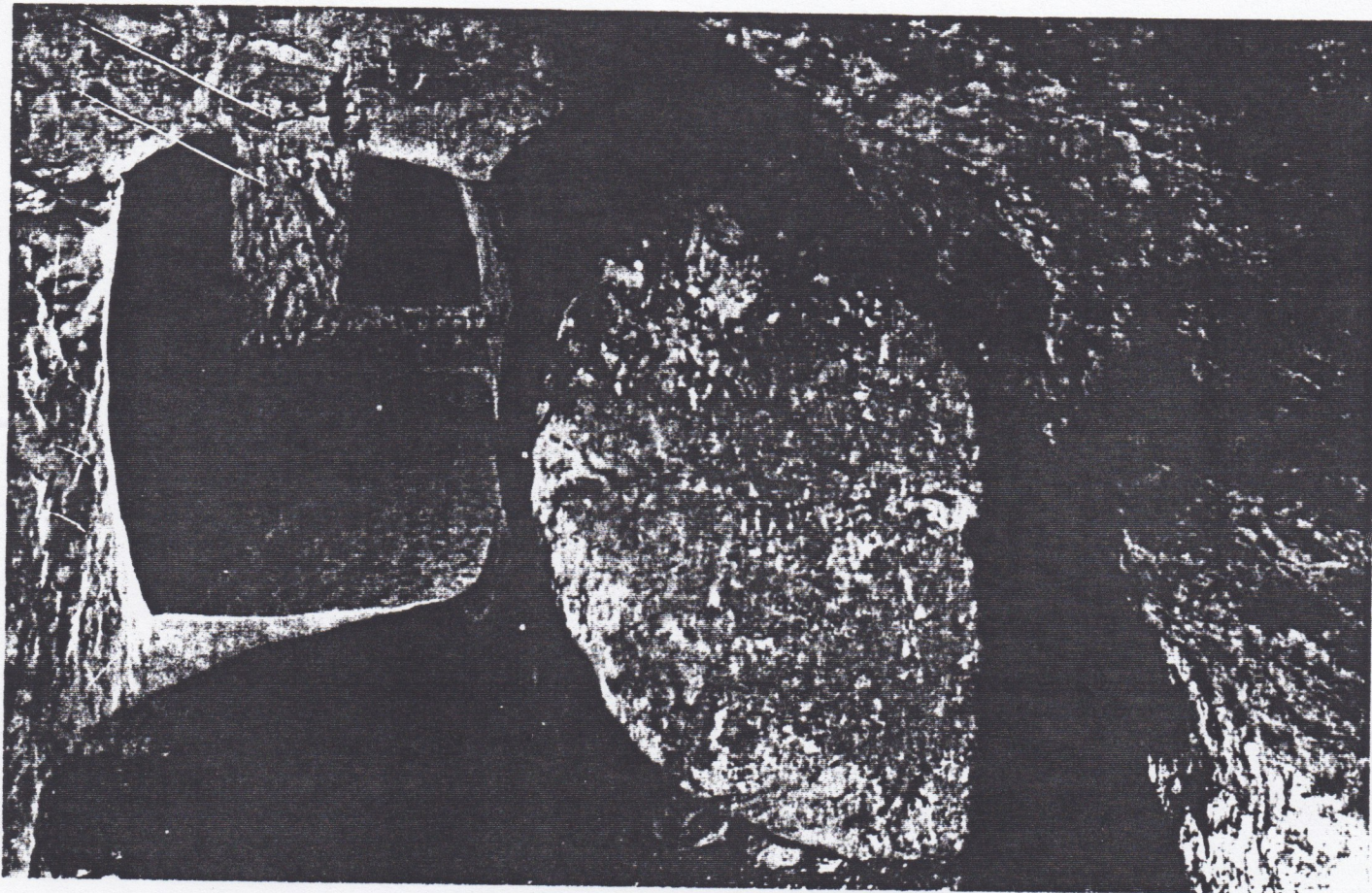
Saracen occupation, Christians did not have the right to rebuild their churches.

Moreover, once destroyed, Christian holy places were often covered over with mosques. This seems to have been what happened at the Sisters of Nazareth who found on the northeast side of their property, against their present church, the characteristic beginning of a minaret stairway which was later destroyed when the mosque was moved farther north to within the present souks.

An oral tradition recounts to this day that the mosque had originally been built over

the cistern " with stones from the great church, " but that it had been three times destroyed for reasons so mysterious that the Moslem inhabitants concluded that " the Saint in the caves will have nothing to do with us. " It is their explanation of why the mosque was built on the site it now occupies. Also, it is interesting to link this oral tradition with the one mentioned earlier in connection with the purchase of adjacent property by the Sisters. At the time, a neighbor had said to the Mother Superior who was buying some of her land : " Be careful, my land is holy ground. This is where the Saint is buried. " Then, bending down, the woman touched the

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ground with her fingers and kissed them. Oral traditions, needless to say, are important in this country.

#### WHERE IS THE CHURCH OF THE NUTRITION ?

What conclusions can be drawn ? There is obviously a striking connection between the discoveries made at the Sisters of Nazareth and the text of Arculf. None of the characteristic details of the Gallic bishop's narrative are sufficient to determine the location of the church, but when taken together they can only apply here. True, there is another well in Nazareth, the well, but the archeological remains discovered near the church of Saint Gabriel do not go further back than the Crusader Period. True, there is elsewhere a church of Saint Joseph, but Fr. Viaud, who has extensively excavated its subsoil, has only been able to prove a Crusader presence through building materials intended for the construction of a church whose walls never rose higher than 2 meters. Besides, he is the first to identify the "house" with the "workshop" of St. Joseph. None of the witnesses to visit Nazareth before the 17th century place the church of the Nutrition on that spot. Finally and most importantly, there is no trace of a fons lucidissimus beneath the Franciscan church, and it takes all of Fr. Baldi's ingenuity to try to pass off an ancient basin for a cistern-fountain.

Consequently, since available archaeological and historical evidence seems to suggest that Arculf's text refers to the property of the Sisters of Nazareth, the other discoveries made there must be put in perspective. We can only conjecture the following.

#### IV. HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

At the end of the 2nd century B.C., tombs dotted the western hill of the basin in

which the tiny village of Nazareth was nestled. A century later, many of them were apparently converted into cisterns, others into caves for a troglodyte population. The village mentioned in the gospel must have covered the center of the present city : from about the property of the Franciscans to that of the Anglicans on the west ; toward the church of the synagogue and the mosque in the souks on the north ; toward the bus station on the east ; and finally to Paul VI Road on the south.

The question arises : did the first Christian community establish meeting places on the very locations where the members of Jesus' family remembered having lived ? That would seem to be the meaning of the early Christian graffiti found under the church of the Annunciation.

Moreover, the people who built the small house against the rock — whose walls and pavement are still standing — most likely did not know about the tomb under the property of the Sisters of Nazareth. It is not known when it was decided to enlarge the small domestic cistern and convert it to a tomb. Though it is difficult to be precise, everything seems to point to the period after the return of Christians to Nazareth during the second half of the 4th century. At that time, they must have built the two churches mentioned by Arculf. Who ? Possibly Count Joseph of Tiberias, a converted Jew who was encouraged by Constantine to erect holy places. Regardless, it remains a fact that the Byzantine builders considerably complicated their own task by constructing a very large religious edifice over the remains of this modest house, itself built over such a complicated maze of cisterns. To do that, they had to think it important to preserve in a crypt and enchase like a jewel these ancient vestiges. Would this not be proof that the vestiges represented "holy places" ? Pilgrims lingered there. One of them recounted what the local people had

told him, viz., that the house he visited was the one "in which the Lord, our Savior, had been brought up."

Did pilgrimages gather such great numbers of people that it became necessary to open new caves on the north side to accommodate visitors who wanted to pray there ? Were important pilgrims who died during their journey even buried there ? Regardless, it seems clear that the lighted cave was still a meeting place at the time of the Arab invasion. In the 8th century, the church must have been destroyed and, as we saw, replaced by a mosque. It is not impossible that the tradition of the "holy place" survived first on the hatred of the occupier, then on the determination of Christians not to lose its memory.

In any case, when the Crusaders arrived in the country, they found traces of liturgical devotions in the ruins of the Byzantine church. Did the Crusaders rebuild a church ? If they did, it is not mentioned by the chroniclers who spoke only of one building where all gospel memories were commemorated, viz., the church of the Annunciation. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, they did suspend the spurs of knights as ex-votos on the walls of the domestic cistern which had been converted to a "tomb." After the defeat of Hattin, the Crusaders were driven from Nazareth.

The Franciscans were the first to return in the 17th century but were not allowed to build churches. On what is now the Sisters' property, a minaret was again added to the mosque which, because of three mysterious destructions, was moved farther north at the end of the 17th century. When Father Quaresmio wrote his chronicle about 1620, the only places left in Nazareth were the site of the Annunciation with its Franciscan friary and, "at a stone's throw to the north," the ruins of what had been the foundations of a Crusader church which was never built. Two centuries later, the Sisters of Nazareth arrived in Galilee. ■