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For Professor Avraham Negev, with deep appreciation

New excavations in the East Church at Halutza (Elusa): preliminary report

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Halutza (ancient Elusa) was probably founded in the 3rd-2nd c. B.C. as a Nabataean caravanserai on the spice road from Petra to Gaza (fig. 1).¹ That it was the only settlement in the Negev with the designation of *polis* is shown by an inscription found in the theatre and by the Nessana papyri.² It grew in importance in the late Roman and Byzantine periods. Christianity at the site is documented from the mid-4th c.³ Saint Jerome narrates a dramatic story of the conversion of the populace by St. Hilarion (c.300-370), who was said to have provided the plan of the first church.⁴ Whether or not a bishopric was established here immediately after this conversion is uncertain, but Theodolus and Aretas, bishops of Halutza, attended the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), respectively.⁵ Despite the obvious importance of Halutza for the history of Christianity in the Negev, the site has received little archaeological attention, due largely to the almost complete blanketing of the site with more than 1.5 m of sand, as well as to reports of extensive stone robbing in the late 19th-early 20th c. and perhaps earlier.⁶ In 1973 A. Negev began survey and trial excavations at the site, and in 1980 he excavated the eastern third and cut several sections in the W part of the nave, narthex and atrium of a church on the SE fringe of the town.⁷ He named it the East Church; due to its great size (it is the second largest known in the Negev, after a church at Beer-Sheva recently exposed by P. Fabian) and the presence of a stepped 'chair' in the central apse (the so-called bishop's chair) he also suggested that it served as the cathedral.



Fig. 1. Location of Halutza (Elusa).

- 1 For a summary of evidence for early Halutza, see Negev in *NEAEHL* 1, 379.
- 2 Negev 1981, 73-76; *PNessana* nos. 228, 313 = C. J. Kraemer, *Non-literary papyri* (Princeton 1958).
- 3 On early Christian sources cf., for example, Mayerson 1983 and 1963, 166-69.
- 4 *Vit. Hilar.* 25 (*PL* 23, col. 41).
- 5 For a detailed list of the *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* where the bishops of Halutza are mentioned, see Y. Tsafir, L. Di Segni and J. Green (edd.), *TIR Iudaea-Palaestina* (Jerusalem 1994) 119.
- 6 Lombardi 1972, 339-40, nn.4 and 7.
- 7 Negev 1974b; 1976; 1989; *NEAEHL* 1, 379-83.