

THE ANTIQUITIES OF RIHAB OF THE BENE HASAN

by

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As part of its plan to develop for tourism some of Jordan's less famous sites, the Department of Antiquities has encouraged its archaeological investigation of Rihab of the Bene Hasan. This is a village on the Jerash-Mafraq road, rising on the east side of a fertile plain, which from its height of 900 m, overlooks the Jordan-Syrian border: 26 km. west of Jerash and 40 km south of Bostra.

The village was visited in August 1900 by Schumacher², who noted among the ruins of the Roman, Byzantine and Arab periods two fragments of Greek inscriptions thereafter published by Rohrer.³ Steurnagel⁴, republished Schumacher's notes and confirmed the historical identification of Rihab proposed by Guthe⁵, as the capital of the Aramean state of Beth Rehob (2 Sam.10,6ss:1 Sam.14,47, LXX).

Albright passed through Rihab in August 1931 and singled out ceramic fragments of the Late Bronze or First Iron Age⁶.

Alt carefully reviewed the ruins in September 1932 and, in one of the small stone houses which the Bene Hasan were constructing, he was the first to see a mosaic pavement and to identify the plan of a three-nave church. Moreover, he copied the inscriptions of two other fragments of funerary stele.⁷

Glueck questioned the historical identification accepted by German scholars, having failed to find amongst the ruins any ceramic fragment older than the Roman period.⁸

To the dedicated vigilance and indefatigability of the late Lankester Harding of the Department of Antiquities of Transjordan, we owe the registration of the new discoveries made in the thirties and forties, and which opened a new chapter in the history of the village.

Avi-Yonah, publishing the six inscriptions of pavement mosaics photographed and placed at his disposal by Harding, was able to identify the four churches accompanied by their respective dates of construction, and to read, together with the names of the benefactors two new names, Polieuctos and Theodore, to be added to the list of archbishops and metropolitans of Bostra of which Rihab formed a part⁹.

The discovery made it possible for Alt to fix with more exactitude the south-western confines of the diocese of Bostra in the VI-VII century.

In 1958, the discovery of a new church dedicated to St. Mena and built during the time of Archbishop Theodore in the year 634 was published by Lux and Mittmann.

During his field investigation conducted between 1963 and 1967 in northern Transjordan, Mittmann visited Rihab and along with ceramics of Late Bronze and Iron Ages, he discovered and read the inscriptions of four other funerary steles and a fragment of dedicatory inscription on an architrave of an edifice not otherwise identifiable¹².

A sixth church dedicated to St. Paul was excavated by the Department of Antiquities in 1970 but, until now, has remained unpublished.

Two other churches were brought to light during the summer of 1979.

Churches Previously Noted:

1. St. Sofia; finished in February 499 of the 8th indiction 604 A.D. at the time of Archbishop Polieuctos.¹⁴
2. St. Basil; finished in 489 of the 12th ind. = 594 A.D. at the time of Archbishop Polieuctos¹⁵.
3. St. Stephan; finished in May 515 of the 8th ind. = 620 A.D. at the time of Archbishop Polieuctos¹⁶.
4. St. Isaia the Prophet; finished in the month of Distro of the 8th ind. of the year..... at the time of Bishop Theodore¹⁷.
5. St. Mena; finished in March 529 of the 8th ind. = 634/35 A.D. at the time of Bishop Theodore¹⁸.

New Churches:

6. St. Paul; finished in June 490 of the 13th ind.=596 A.D. at the time of Archbishop Polieuctos. (Pl. XCVI, 1).

This is of the three-nave type with a single step raised bema. The central carpet has a composition of octagons flanked by intertwined rings and squares, and is enclosed by a broad border consisting of a motif (which is repeated 6 times) of two vine shoots issuing from amphorae. In one of the octagons, whose figuration was destroyed during the iconoclastic crisis, there remains the name of a person called: Summa of John.¹⁹

The four-line dedicatory inscription runs the length of the step:

“At the time of the most holy and most blessed Polieuctos, Archbishop, and of Bassus, the most illustrious *Paramonarius*, this temple of St. Paul²⁰ was finished and covered with mosaics, thanks to the offerings of John and Elia, sons of Martyrius, in the month of June of the thirteenth indiction of the year 490 of the Province” (596 A.D.).

7. St. Peter; finished in the month of Loos of the year 518 of the 11th indic. = 624 A.D. at the time of Archbishop Polieuctos (Pl. XCIV, 1).

This church has the usual chancel with raised bema, closed by socketed foundations of the screen which extended the entire width of the building.

The carpet of the central nave is enclosed by a double-return swastika meander and is decorated with a composition of rings and ellipses alternating with squares, once decorated with the benefactors' images of which nothing more remains than traces of the names (Pl. XCV and Pl. XCVI,2).

The dedicatory inscription runs the length of the step: (Pl. XCIV, 2) “At the time of the most holy and most blessed Polieuctos,²¹ Archbishop and Metropolitan, this temple of the apostle Peter²² was finished and covered with mosaics as a result of the zeal and work of Georgio of Martirus, the most illustrious lector,²³ in the month of Loos, at the time of the 11th indic. of the year 518 of the Province” (624 A.D.).

8. St. Mary; constructed on the 9th of the month of Panemos of the year 428, the 11th indic. = 534 A.D. (Pl. XCVII,1), and restored in the year 476, the 1st indic. = 582 A.D.

The church is found at the entrance of the village near the townhall, as one approaches from Jerash. It has an elongated (21 x 14 m.) triple-nave construction with the walls still standing to the height of a meter. A border of circles and squares encloses the central carpet which is decorated with six series of octagons in a composition of interlaced squares and rings.

The iconoclastic intervention spared a few secondary elements of the figurative decoration which centre upon the themes of the crafts or the months: within the second series of octagons, the scythes, hammers, saw, hoes, and axes ordinarily associated with such themes are visible (Pl. XCVII,1,2).

A cistern was found inside the western wall, which perhaps, once served as the façade.

We have two inscriptions: the dedicatory inscription in front of the chancel screen; the second located between the third and fourth pillar of the southern aisle.

- A. The Dedicatory inscription: (Pl. XCVIII,1).

“This temple of St. Mary was finished and covered with mosaics at the time of Martirius and Elia and Olefus²⁵, the blessed sons of Olefus, for their own repose and that of their parents in the year 424, the 9th of the month of Panemos of the 11th indic. Now, however, these mosaics have been restored at the time of Elia of Bassus, the most pious presbyter and *Paramonarius*, in the year 476 of the time of the indic.”²⁶

- B. Inscription between the pillars (Pl. XCVIII,2):

“Lord give repose to John of Azizeus²⁷. Lord God of St. Mary and of all the saints²⁸ have pity on all the world and aid the benefactors and John of Anaelus the most illustrious deacon. In the month of Xanticus of the first indic.”²⁹

Conclusion:

We leave the problem of the historico-geographical identification of Rihab unsolved. We do not have sufficient elements to confirm or deny the Guthe hypothesis, who, basing himself on homonymy, associated the village with the capital of the Aramean state of Beth Rehob. No document whatsoever exists for the identification of the site in the Roman-Byzantine epoch.

From an historical point of view, the inscriptions discovered in the village up to now have contributed to the addition of two more names to the episcopal list of archbishops and metropolitans of Bostra and to the clarification of their chronological placement (Polieuctos 594, 596, 624) and Theodore (634) besides specifying the territorial limits of the diocese which extended to within a few kilometres of Jerash.

The datings of the churches cover a long period of history stretching from 534 (St. Mary) to 634 (St. Mena); but of particular historical interest are the last four. Two (St. Stephan in 620 and St. Peter in 624) were built during the period of the Persian occupation of the region (614-627)³⁰. This is first-hand evidence of the normalization of relations between the Persian forces of occupation and the local population - after an initial period of conflict and persecution.

Two others (St. Mena and St. Isaia in 634) were terminated on the very eve of the conquest of Damascus by Muslim troops.³¹ The two churches demonstrate that the struggle in progress between the Byzantine Empire and the Arab tribes of the Arab Peninsula was not felt in the village in its dramatic character; the military upheaval was as surprising to them as it is for us distant spectators of an undertaking considered impossible.

The discoveries have brought to life, if only partially, a small town (whose name is yet unknown), which was relatively well-off and economically prosperous during the VI-VII centuries A.D. on the road, which like today, must have united Jerash to Bostra.

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(Trans. Antonio Parisio)

NOTES:

1. My thanks go to Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities for the trust he has shown me and to those who have collaborated in various ways in the realization of this work: Hussein Qandil, Dr. Ghazi and Muflih Muhammad el-Frabiyan of the same Department; the Rev. Franciscan Fathers Jouseph Farrayeh, Filippo Manzo, Hanna Jalluf and Antonio Parisio of Terra Sancta College, Amman; Rev. Fathers Lino Cignelli and Adolfo Pinto of the Franciscan Biblical Institute; Hanan Kurdi, Salem Da'ja and Boghos Darakjan of the Registration and Research Centre of Amman. For more complete information c.f. my article in *Liber Annus* 1980.
For the location of Rihab see "The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan-Archaeological Map - Amman Sheet 1, Scale 1:250,000, 192-252.
2. G. Schumacher, "Unsere Arbeiten im OstJordanlande", *MuNDPV* 1900, 73-76.
3. C. Rohrer, "Bemerkungen zu den gefundenen Inschriften", *MuNDPV*, 1901, p.19, nn.8-9.
4. C. Steuernagel, *Der Adschlun*, *ZDPV* 48 (1925) 354-357.
5. H. Guthe, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, 1914³; p. 108; *Bibelatlas*, Leipzig 1911, Sheet 2 and 4.
6. W.F. Albright, "Explorations in Transjordan", *BASOR*, 49 (1933) 29: "At the northern end we finally picked up a few earlier sherds (Late Bronze or Early Iron) but nothing characteristic".
7. A. Alt, "Das Institut in Jahre 1932", *PJB* 1933, 24-25.
8. N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*, IV, Part I: *Text*, New Haven 1951, 81 (*AASOR* XXV-XXVIII): "Numerous Roman Byzantine and Mediaeval Arabic sherds were found there, but nothing earlier. From this point of view alone, it would be impossible to identify this site with the Bet-Rehob of II Sam. 10,6 as Steuernagel does, aside from all other considerations".
9. M. Avi-Yonah, "Greek Christian Inscriptions from Rihab", *QDAP* XIII (1947) 68-72, Pls. XXVII,4, XXVIII.
10. A. Alt, "Das Territorium von Bostra", *ZDPV* 68(1951) 235-245.
11. U. Lux, "Der Mosaikfussboden der Menas-Kirche in Rihab", *ZDPV* 83(1967)34-41; S. Mittmann, "Die Mosaikinschrift der Menas-Kirche in Rihab", *ibi*, 42-45, Taf. 13-17.
12. S. Mittmann, *Beitrage zur Siedlungs und Territorialgeschichte des Nordlichen Ostjordanlandes*, Wiesbaden 1970, 120-21, 187-190, Taf. XXI, 42, XXIV, 47: "Das ein wenig nach Westen einbeigende Nordende dieses Hangabschnittes ist, wie auch die ubrige Oberflache des Siedlungsgelandes, ubersat mit byzantinischer (4-7 Jh.n. Chr.) und fruromischer Keramik, dazu nicht weniger dicht mit eisenzeitlichen (12-9 Jh. v. Chr.) Scherben; und sogar spatubronzezeitliche (I-II) Stucke treten in diesem Bereich, wenn auch in geringerer Zahl, zutage" (p. 120).
13. A photo in "The Archaeological Heritage of Jordan", Part I, 1973, p. 43, Pl. XI,b.
14. Avi-Yonah, *QDAP* XIII (1947)69. From the mention of three monks in the first inscription, Avi-Yonah

- deduced the existence of a monastery in the vicinity. It is, however, doubtful whether the *monk and paramonarius* refer to all three benefactors or solely to Cosma, the last of the series.
15. According to Avi-Yonah, *ibi*, the martyr to whom the church was dedicated and whose relics were still supposed to be in the reliquary shrine beneath the altar at the moment of rediscovery, is St. Basil of Ancyra, martyred during the persecution of Julian the Apostate. It is more probable, given the relative nearness of Rihab to Scythopolis Beit Shean, that we are dealing with the St. Basil who was martyred at Scythopolis and who was venerated during an annual feast in the church which was dedicated to him. (A. Row, *The Topography and History of Beth-Shan*, Philadelphia 1930, p. 52, fn. 106; F. Halkin, "Inscriptions Grecques relatives a l'Hagio-graphie", *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXIX (1951) 75.
 16. The cult of the protomartyr had extended both east and west of the Jordan and Syria (H. Vincent-F.M. Abel, *Jerusalem Nouvelle*, IV, 1926, pp. 766-804; B. Bagatti, "Nuove testimonianze della lapidazione di S. Stefano", *Antoniano* 49 (1974) 527-532; F. Halkin, *Anal. Boll.*, LXIX (1951) 71-72.
 17. Avi-Yonah, *ibi*, suggests that the 8th indic. was of the year 574/75 and places Theodore before Polieuctos in the list of bishops of Bostra. The inscription of the church of St. Mena (c.f. n. 5) constructed in the 8th indic. the year 534/35 at the time of Bishop Theodore, obliges us to shift the date of the church of St. Isaia to the same year, as Mittmann justly noted, and, consequently, to inverse the order of the archbishops in the list.
 18. I believe that Mittmann's translation and interpretation and comment (*ZDPV* 1967,45) ought to be looked at once again. It is not a question of a sacred edifice (the *martyrion of Procopius*) but simply of a person, i.e. of *Procopius (son) of Martyrius*, a proper name which occurs frequently in other inscriptions of Rihab.
 19. If our reading is correct, we have here the name of the person with the fluttering mantle fringe who is represented once in the octagon (Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, plate 23,2 or 25,1). A *Summus dux Palaestinae* in 531 A.D. is mentioned in the life of St. Sabas written by Cyril of Scythopolis (E. Schwartz, *Kyrrillos*, Vita S. Sabae, LXVII,10).
 20. A church dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul was found in the vicinity of Jerash (C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa City of the Decapolis*, 1938, p. 484, no. 327). Various churches and monasteries bore the name of the apostle in Damascus and surroundings, in a region tightly linked to the life of the same (J. Nasrallah, *Souvenirs de St. Paul*, Harissa 1944).
 21. From a historical point of view the inscription adds another four years to the long episcopate of Polieuctos.
 22. The term *apostile* without further addition highlights the place of Peter in the veneration of the Christians (B. Bagatti, "S. Pietro nei monumenti di Palestina", in *Studia Orientalia Christiana* (Collectanea n.5) Cairo 1960, 454-466).
 23. The *lectorship* of George fills a gap in the ecclesiastical orders known from the inscriptions from the transjordan area until now.
 24. A church was dedicated to the Virgin in Madaba (P.M. Séjourné; "Medeba, coup d'oeil historique, topographique et archeologique," *R.B.* 1892,636-637, and a small edicula was located on the first terrace of the cathedral complex in Jerash (Kraeling, *Gerasa*, 473, no. 288).
 25. The name *Olefus* was found in two inscriptions of Hauran (Brunnow-Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, III, 314 and 334).
 26. From the dedicatory inscription of the sanctuary of St. Job at Bostra, we know that at the time of Justinian, Jordan was a bishopric, and in 539, the bishop was John (R. Devrèese, *Le Patriarcat d'Antioche*, 1945, pp. 227). From an inscription found in Jaber (Mittman, *Beitrag*, 190-194), we know that in 531, Agapius was bishop, and that he might have been bishop at the time the church of St. Mary was constructed. About 570, we have Simeon and Dositeus. From 594 to 624 Polieuctos.
 27. *Azizos* is a relatively common name amongst the population of the semitic tribes, as is *Anaelos* of lines 5-6 (*AAES*, III,A, nos. 62, 616).
 28. For the use of *agioi* as a substantive see Kraeling, *Gerasa*, p. 482, no. 314.
 29. Given the identity of the inscription, we are forced to presume that the mosaicist wanted to complete the dating of the dedicatory inscription where the month is missing. The work was probably brought to completion in the month of Xanticus in the Year 582.
 30. For a general perspective of the Persian invasion see A.A. Vasiliev, *Historie de l'Empire Byzantin*, 1932, pp. 257-262.
 31. Vasiliev, *Histoire*, 264-282 and Ph.K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, London 1943, 147-159. Bostra was taken by Khalid ibn el-Walid, in the year 634.