

Forty Years of Archaeological Work at Mount Nebo-Siyagha in Late Roman-Byzantine Jordan

It is unfortunate that literary sources referring to Jordan in the Late Roman-Byzantine epoch are limited to generic geographic descriptions and to a few historical allusions in authors such as Eusebius, Jerome, Stephen the Byzantine, Hierokles and George the Cypriot¹. Apart from the succinct and generic list of cities and villages that can be gleaned from the above-mentioned authors and from a few other works, e.g. the *Notitia Dignitatum* and the *Tabula Peutingeriana*², we can add the names of some bishops of the most important cities who participated from time to time in ecclesiastical councils and thus signed the promulgated documents³.

In the light of such texts, we are able therefore to sketch only the broadest outline of the political, religious and administrative organization of this frontier region of the Roman-Byzantine Empire⁴.

Politically and administratively the Transjordanian territory, which for the most part had been unified by Trajan into the *Provincia Arabia*, was in the 4th century AD subdivided into four parts:

- 1) The *Provincia Arabia*, with Bostra as its capital, which extended as far as the Wadi Mojib and included the mountain region of Ajlun, Ammonitide and northern Moab.
- 2) The southern region (Moab and Idumea) which included Petra and was part of Palestine III or Salutaris.
- 3) The southern part of the Jordan Valley and the region which faces it, which were united to Palestine I, with Cesarea as its metropolis.
- 4) The northern region of the Jordan Valley which was united to Palestine II, whose capital was at Beit Shean-Nysa Scythopolis.

¹ Cf. Brünnow-Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, vol. III, pp. 249–360 'Überblick über die Geschichte der Provinz Arabia'.

² *Notitia Dignitatum*, ed. O. Seeck, Berolini 1876. K. Miller, *Itineraria Romana. Römische Reisewege an der Hand der Tabula Peutingeriana*, Stuttgart 1916. E. Weber, *Tabula Peutingeriana*, Codex Vindobonensis, 324, Graz 1976.

³ Mansi, *Conciliorum Collectio*, Florentiae-Venetis 1759–1798. Cf. Devreesse, *Le Patriarcat d'Antioche depuis la paix de l'Eglise jusqu'à la conquête Arabe*, Paris 1945, pp. 124–141.

⁴ F. M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine*, II, pp. 168–191. For the political and administrative development in the area in the year 295, 358 and 399 AD, cf. F. M. Abel, *Histoire de la Palestine*, II, pp. 243–245, 294–296, 318–321.

As regards religion, we find from the 4th century on, an already well-organized church with an autonomous hierarchy in the entire transjordanian area⁵.

In the Palestine III or Salutaris region, we find bishops in Petra, Aila, Zoara and Augustopolis.

In Moab there are two bishoprics, viz. Areopolis-Rabbat Moab and Charach Moab, while in Ammonitide, we find bishops at Madeba, Esbus, Philadelphia-Amman and Gerasa.

In the area dependent upon Palestine II, there are bishops at Abila, Gadara, Capitolias and Pella. While in the area dependent upon Palestine I, there are bishops at Livias, Gadora and Amathus and Bacatha.

Therefore the bishoprics in the area number 19, under metropolitan bishops who resided at Bosra, Cesarea or Jerusalem, at Beit Shean Nysa Scythopolis and Petra⁶.

Of the Christianity of that period, however, we can trace the history and beginnings only with considerable difficulty and with large lacunae.

The evangelists write that Jesus himself, carrying on the mission of John the Baptist, preached 'across the Jordan' and that many in this region believed in him (Matt. 4, 25; 19, 1–2; John 10, 40–42). The historian Egesippus informs us that the first Christian community of Jerusalem found refuge in the territory of Pella of the Decapolis during the anti-Roman Jewish revolt of 66–70 AD⁷. Another text tells us that some Christians originating from the region of Madaba and Ziza were put to death in Amman during the Diocletian persecution⁸, while with reference to the same period, Epiphanius mentions several Christian sects located in the villages of Transjordan⁹.

⁵ Devreesse, *Patriarcat*, pp. 208–224. *Idem*, "Les Anciens Evêchés de Palestine", *Mémorial Lagrange*, Paris 1940, 217–227. N. Edelby, 'La Transjordanie chrétienne des origines aux Croisades' in *Proche-Orient Chrétien*, 1955, pp. 97–117.

⁶ Even if we discount a note by the historian Sozomen to the effect that in *Provincia Arabia* some villages were likewise furnished with bishops (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 19; PG LXVII, 1476).

⁷ 'When the people of the church in Jerusalem were instructed by an oracular revelation delivered to worthy men there to move away from the city and to live in a city of Peraea called Pella, the believers in Christ migrated from Jerusalem to that place' (Eusebii *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 5, 3–4(75); PG XX, 222).

⁸ J. T. Milik, 'Notes d'Epigraphie et de Topographie Jordaniennes' in *Liber Annuus* X (1960), 161–184.

⁹ 'This Nazoraean heresy is found in the vicinity of Beraea in Coele-Syria, in the

In the first half of the 4th century Eusebius, in a messianic commentary on Psalm 59, 10, 'Mine is Gilead and mine Manasse . . . Moab is my wash-basin, on Idumea I will rest my sandals . . .', gets carried away in his enthusiasm and writes: 'The fulfilment of this can be verified by those who cross into the Arab region, when they see the Moabites and the Ammonites (converted in great numbers) to the point of filling the church of God (and they can verify it) who go into Idumea, because they see there the multitude of the church of God'¹⁰. In the light of the contemporary literary sources we may even accept as probable the assertion of the bishop of Caesarea who says that towards the first half of the 4th century Christianity was fairly widespread in the cities of Transjordan, making ever deeper inroads in the succeeding years.

The historical contribution of archaeological research

If we ask what sort of contribution archaeological research makes to our knowledge of the history of Jordan in the Late Roman-Byzantine period, we note first of all with satisfaction and appreciation the impressive quantity of new data placed by archaeology at the disposal of scholars, from the preliminary explorations of the 19th century up to contemporary systematic excavations¹¹. Monuments, mosaics and inscriptions which have been studied in almost every corner of the region compensate in a determinative manner for the paucity of literary data left to us by antiquity.

From an examination of these data we can draw some historical and cultural conclusions of primary importance.

The first evidence that we gain is of a socio-political character. The overwhelming majority of the dated inscriptions, which come moreover from religious edifices and in particular from mosaic floors, date from the 6th century¹². We know that Justinian, in his military and civil reform of the empire, well realised the strategic importance of this southern province. Hence he decided to entrust it to a functionary equivalent in rank to a duke who should interest himself in maintaining order and peace, and in particular defending the

borders of the empire¹³. From archaeological evidence we are led to conclude that the interests and reform of Justinian had positive repercussions on the security of the region, which then achieved a period of economic well-being as well as a cultural and artistic re-awakening such as can be paralleled only by the Nabatean and Roman epochs¹⁴.

In the religious sphere the construction of churches or their restoration and embellishment all over the region is a proof of the above-mentioned spread of Christianity, not only in the cities but likewise among the rural populace in and around the villages.

The names of the persons which are to be found in the inscriptions, e.g. bishops, clergymen, functionaries and simple benefactors, are in the great majority of cases not Greek but of local origin¹⁵. Thus names are the best evidence for an autonomous Christian church in the region even though Greek was used as a foreign liturgical language. The names of bishops, priests, deacons, deaconesses and other cult officials, throw new light on the hierarchical religious organization of such a community. With these names we are able to complete for the 6th century the lists of bishops known from the literary sources¹⁶. Likewise, the inscriptions enlighten us on the faith of this local Christianity, its saints, its devotional practices, its belief in the after-life, and so on¹⁷.

We have only to remember the historical value of the Madaba Map 'which is the only extant cartographical representation of ancient Palestine', and the mosaic floor discovered at Ma'in which depicts some bishop-seats in Jordan¹⁸.

Of particular interest is the care and artistic taste with which the local people decorated their churches. For this the highest expression is to be found in the mosaic floors discovered everywhere in the region. In this same context, the art of mosaics within the late Roman-Byzantine period, we can make mention of a school operating in Jordan which we customarily call the 'school of Madaba'¹⁹. It is important to

¹³ Devreesse, *Patriarcat*, p. 216, fn. 2.

¹⁴ Abel, *Histoire de la Palestine*, II, pp. 355–388. A. Grabar, *L'Age d'or de Justinien*, Paris 1966.

¹⁵ Canova, *Iscrizioni . . . protocristiane . . . di Moab*, p. LXXXI–XC. Edlby, 'La Transjordanie Chrétienne', pp. 102–109. M. Noth, 'Prosopographie des Bistums Medaba in spätbyzantinischer Zeit', in ZDPV 84 (1968), 143–158.

¹⁶ For Gerasa, cf. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, p. 66, fn. 222; for Bostra, M. Avi-Yonah, 'Greek Christian Inscriptions from Rihab', in QDAP XIII (1947), p. 71 and fn. 1; A. Alt, 'Das Territorium von Bostra', in ZDPV 68 (1951), pp. 235–245; for Madaba, cf. M. Piccirillo, 'Campagna archeologica nella basilica di Mosé Profeta sul monte Nebo-Siyagha', in *Liber Annuus* XXVI (1976), p. 306. Mittmann, *Beiträge*, pp. 190–194. Saller, 'The works of Bishop John of Madaba in the light of recent discoveries', in *Liber Annuus*, XIX (1969), pp. 145–167. Useful is the work of Y. Meimaris, *Saints, Martyrs, and church officials* in the Greek Inscriptions pertaining to the Christian Church of Palestine, Jerusalem 1976 (Hebrew University).

¹⁷ Devreesse, *Patriarcat*, pp. 219–224. Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, 193–199 'The Sanctity and Cult of Lot'. F. Halkin, 'Inscription Grecques relatives à l'hagiographie' in *Analecta Bollandiana* LXVII (1949), 87–108; LXIX (1951), 67–76.

¹⁸ M. Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Mosaic Map*, Jerusalem 1954. H. Donner-H. Cüppers, *Die Mosaikkarte von Madaba*, I, Tafel Band, Wiesbaden 1977. Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, p. 80, fn. 3. R. De Vaux, 'Une Mosaïque byzantine à Ma'in (Transjordanie)', in *Revue Biblique*, 1938, pp. 227–258.

¹⁹ Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, pp. 80–137, 'Iconographic, Technical Researches'. Grabar, *L'Age d'or de Justinien*, 112f.

Decapolis in the vicinity of Pella, and in Basanitis . . .' (Epiphanius *Adversus Haereses*, XXIX, 7, 7–8 (123); PG XLI, 402). Cf. B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision*, Jerusalem 1971, pp. 24–26.

¹⁰ Eusebius *Commentaria in Psalmos*, 59, 10; PG XXIII, 567–570.

¹¹ Cf. S. Saller-B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo* (Khirbet el-Mekhayyat) With a Brief Survey of Other Ancient Christian Monuments in Trans-Jordan, Jerusalem 1949, pp. 221–235. R. Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani del Paese di Moab*, Roma 1954. Department of Antiquities, *The Archaeological Heritage of Jordan*, Amman 1973, pp. 3–5, 41–43. S. Mittmann, *Beiträge zur Siedlungs- und Territorialgeschichte des Nördlichen Ostjordanlandes*, Wiesbaden 1970. A. Augustinovic-B. Bagatti, 'Escursioni nei dintorni di 'Ajlun', in *Liber Annuus* II (1951), pp. 227–314. M. Piccirillo, *Chiese e Mosaici della Giozдания Settentrionale*, Jerusalem 1981.

¹² Although we have to mention the so-called 'Church of Julianus' at Umm el-Jimal dated by the American explorers to 345 AD (AAES II, A, 173) on the basis of a tomb lintel found in the building (AAES III, A, 151f), and the church dedicated to the Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs in Jerash, dated to 464–65 on the evidence of an inscription written 'on two lintel(?) blocks . . . seen only by Wetzstein' (C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis*, New Haven 1938, p. 476). The first mosaic floors in Jerash are dated to the period 526–534 AD in the Churches of St John the Baptist, St George and SS Cosmas and Damianus (Kraeling, *Gerasa*, pp. 479, 481, 482). Contemporary with these is the work of Soelos, Kaiomos and Elias in the diaconicon of the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo.

1. Mount Nebo-Siyagha seen from the East.



note that thanks to the inscriptions found on mosaic floors we know the names of several artist-artisans of the Madaba school, as for example Soelos, Kaiomos and Elias, whose signature we find in the baptistry at Mount Nebo and who ended their artistic task in 531, being thus contemporaries of the great masters of Ravenna and Constantinople²⁰.

The singular importance of the memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo

Basing ourselves on literary sources, we can thus trace the broad outline of the spread and organization of the Christian community in the cities of Transjordan during the 4th and first half of the 5th century, while archaeological data expose to us the zenith of the artistic and cultural development of a community which, by the 6th century, is identified with the political and religious life of the region. However, so far neither the literary sources nor archaeological data have been able to fill all the gaps in an uninterrupted historical reconstruction of the Christian presence in Jordan from its beginnings to its flowering in the pre-Islamic epoch.

The systematic study of the basilica and monastery built by the Christians of the region on Mount Nebo in memory of Moses, prophet and man of God, constitutes a first effort at tracing, with the help of archaeological evidence, the evolution throughout the centuries of a monument from its primitive nucleus, through its highest development in the first years of the 7th century to its decline and dereliction in the succeeding centuries.

The monument in itself, on account of the treasures which it houses, remains a necessary point of reference for the study of the late Roman-Byzantine civilization in Jordan.

Exploration and identification of the site (FIG. 1)

The exploration of Siyagha is a relatively recent undertaking. Only in 1864 do we have a first description of the ruins in a travel report written by the Duke of Luynes. Subsequently, other explorers took an interest in this site overlooking the Jordan Valley, suggesting various biblical identifications²¹.

Merrill, a member of the American Palestine Exploration Society and an expert in extra-biblical literature, had noted that the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum in three biblical passages had substituted for the word *Nebo* the paraphrase, 'place of Moses' burial'. A precisely identical substitution occurs in Numb. 32, 3 at the hand of the Targum Onkelos. As a result of diligent research among the beduins of the area it became known that the mountain was also called Jebal Nebo or Jebal Mousa in homonymy to Wadi and 'Ayoun Mousa located on the western slope of the mountain. Thus the idea developed that Khirbet Siyagha, on the eastern peak of the isolated mountain, was somehow linked with the last events of the life of Moses (as narrated in Deut. 34, 1-4).

The discovery in Arezzo (Italy) of the Egeria memoirs, published by Gamurrini in 1884²², and the subsequent dis-

²¹ S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, 1, Jerusalem 1941, pp. 1-22 'The Site and its Surroundings—The Exploration of the Site'.

²² I. F. Gamurrini, *S. Silviae Aquitanae Peregrinatio ad Loca Sacra*, Romae 1884. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, London 1971. Saller, *Memorial*, 333-340.

²⁰ Piccirillo, 'Campagna', *Liber Annuus* xxvi (1976), p. 314, fn. 94.

covery of the biography of Peter the Iberian in 1895²³ were decisive in orienting scholars in this direction. The Roman pilgrim and the bishop Peter, relate in great detail their visits to the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo in Arabia. The pilgrim, after having crossed the Jordan river on her way from Jerusalem, had stayed at Livia (tell er-Rameh) and then taken the road to Esbus. At the sixth mile she took a deviation to the springs of Moses and from there climbed to the summit of Mount Nebo²⁴. The bishop took the road which came from Madaba²⁵. Monks living there showed both pilgrims the memorial tomb of Moses in a church.

Between the Byzantine pilgrims and the modern explorers we find only two possible references, one in the Crusader pilgrim, Thitmar and the other in the notes of a Portuguese Franciscan monk who visited the region in 1564²⁶.

In 1933 the archaeologists of the Franciscan Biblical Institute in Jerusalem began the archaeological exploration of the site.

The first excavation campaigns 1933–7²⁷

In the first series of three excavation campaigns (July 13 to September 22, 1933; July 15 to October 22, 1935; July 3 to October 16, 1937) the Franciscan archaeologists were under the direction of Fr Sylvester Saller (1895–1976) who was aided during the second and third campaign by Fr Bellarmino Bagatti. These excavations brought to light one of the most extensive Byzantine monastic complexes in the Middle East. The vast monastery had developed around a sanctuary constructed on the highest point of the eastern summit of Siyagha. It was on this sanctuary in particular that the Franciscan archaeologists focused their attention in a research which continues to this day so as to gain a more comprehensive view of its history.

The external wall of the apsidal area, the three apses in the interior of the presbytery and various architectural elements scattered among the ruins of the monastery or re-used in walls

²³ R. Raabe, *Petrus der Iberer*, Leipzig 1895. Saller, *Memorial*, 341–347. J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades*, Jerusalem 1977, pp. 57–58.

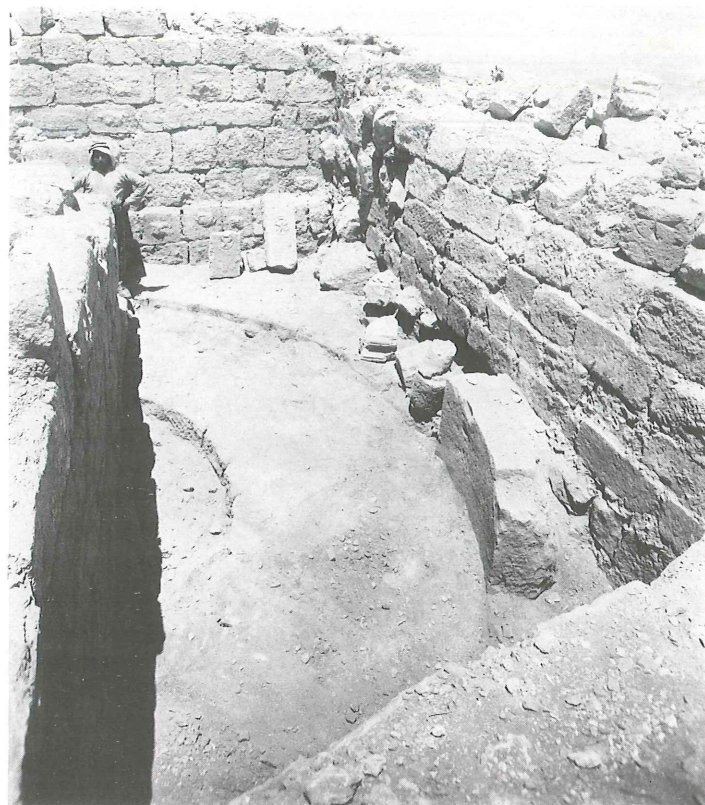
²⁴ 'Then, impelled by God, I conceived the desire to go once more into Arabia, to Mount Nebo . . . After crossing the river we came to the city of Livias . . . As we travelled along, the local presbyter from Livias . . . asked us, "Would you like to see the water that flows from the rock . . . ? You can if you have the energy to turn off the road at about the sixth milestone" . . . We turned off the road at once, the presbyter led the way, and we followed him . . . Then we set off for the mountain . . . So we set out and came to the foot of Mount Nebo; it was very high, but mostly possible to ascend on the donkeys, though there were some steeper part we had to dismount, and it was hard going. On reaching the mountain-top we came to a church, not a very big one, right on the summit of Mount Nebo, and inside, in the position of the pulpit, I saw a slightly raised place about the size of a normal tomb. I asked about it, and the holy men replied, "Holy Moses was buried here . . ."' (Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, pp. 103–108).

²⁵ 'On the following day we set off towards Medeba. When we were half way there we reached the holy Mountain of Moses called Abarim or Pisgah, which is where the Lord said to him, "Go up and die". A venerable and very lofty church is there, built in the name of the Prophet, and it is surrounded by a number of monasteries'. (Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, p. 57.

²⁶ T. Tobler, *Magistri Thetmari Iter ad Terram Sanctam Anno 1217*, 1851, p. 30. A. Baiao, *Itinerario de Terra Sancta e suas particularidades* composto por Fr Panataleo de Aveiro, VII edicao, Coimbra 1927, p. 392f.

²⁷ S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, Part I, The Text; Part II, The Plates, Jerusalem 1941; Part III, The Pottery, by H. Schneider, Jerusalem 1950.

2. The southern apse during the excavation (1933).



of later epochs, are crucial for a definition of the nature of the building at its beginnings (FIGS 2–3).

Fr Saller identified it with the 'little church' visited by Egeria at the end of the 4th century or beginning of the 5th century in the shape of the funeral mausoleums of the classical period (the *cella trichora*). On the evidence of the wall-foundation found under the mosaic floor of the central nave of the basilica at the height of the second row of columns in front of the presbytery, he located the facade of this early church. Later, in the 5th century, the facade was destroyed and the body of the basilica was added in which Peter the Iberian saw the Memorial of Moses. At yet a further stage of development the sanctuary was destroyed by some as yet unknown cause. When it was reconstructed in the course of the 6th century, with chapels on the southern and northern sides, the ruined *cella trichora* served as a foundation for the presbytery of the basilica.

A typological analysis and a patient, as well as laborious, juxtaposition of the anomalous architectural elements led Fr Bagatti to pre-date more accurately the *cella trichora* to the 2nd to 3rd century AD. The original nucleus of the sanctuary must have been a monumental funeral-edifice, some examples of which it is still possible to see in the district surrounding Amman²⁸. The presence of Late Roman sherds and a few

²⁸ B. Bagatti, 'Edifici Cristiani nella regione del Nebo', in *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* XIII (1936), pp. 4–13. See also 'Phasga (ou Mont Nebo)' in *Dict. Bibl. Soupl.* VIII, p. 1122ff.

3. The presbytery during the work of restoration.



bronze objects foreign (FIG. 4) to monastic life are probably further evidence for this hypothesis²⁹.

Apart from these areas of conjecture, the excavations thoroughly clarified the last period of the sanctuary as well as of the monastery³⁰. The inscriptions of the mosaic floors which still remained in the presbytery and in the side chapels (FIGS 5–6) constituted a source of primary importance for the history of the Madaba bishopric and of the Madaba School of Mosaics³¹ (FIGS 5/6). Likewise, the pottery found in the monastery proved particularly useful for the knowledge of Byzantine pottery in Jordan³².

Near the pulpit, on the eastern end of the southern aisle, a platform was found which was identified as being part of the memorial of Moses seen by the pilgrims³³.

Restoration works 1963–73⁴

New data on the history of the sanctuary were added during the 60's when the Superiors of the Custody of the Holy Land

decided to cover the ruins of the basilica in order to begin the restoration of the mosaic floors. Once Fr Virgilio Corbo, who was charged with the project, had removed the mosaics of the presbytery (FIG. 7, Area I), southern aisle (Area II), baptistry (Area III) and Theotokos chapel (Area IV), he was able to excavate and examine the area down to bedrock. Of this the most important result was that he could now trace the continuation of the foundation wall which Fr Saller had exposed in the central nave and which ended in the southern aisle with a room decorated with a big mosaic cross (Area II). Beneath the ground level of the baptistry two other mosaic floors were brought to light, the lower being connected with a tomb. The funeral chapel, as an inscription indicated, was built at the time of the abbot Alexius, a priest whose name was already mentioned in an inscription of the presbytery. This coincidence confirmed Fr Saller's conclusion that the presbytery mosaic had been the oldest mosaic inside the basilica (late 4th century AD).

Excavations beneath the mosaic in the Theotokos chapel (Area IV) revealed three different rooms of the monastery destroyed in the construction of the chapel.

New contributions 1976–83⁵

After the 1967 Arab–Israeli conflict Mount Nebo was declared a military area. This forced a suspension of the work

²⁹ A bronze figurine (Saller, *Memorial*, p. 311, no. 229, pl. 139, 1) and a lamp (*ibi*, p. 309, no. 177; pl. 138, 1), with some marble fragments (*ibidem*, p. 294, no. 75).

³⁰ Saller, *Memorial*, pp. 108–208 'The Monasteries'.

³¹ *Ibi*, pp. 209–277 'The Mosaics' and 'The Inscriptions'.

³² Saller, *Memorial*, III, *The Pottery*, by H. Schneider, Jerusalem 1950.

³³ Saller, *Memorial*, I, pp. 67–69 and V. Corbo, 'Nuovi Scavi archeologici nella cappella del Batiistero della Basilica del Nebo (Siyagha) in *Liber Annuus*, xvii (1967), p. 283.

³⁴ See Corbo, 'Nuovi Scavi', *Liber Annuus*, xvii (1967), 241–258 and *Idem*, 'Scavi archeologici sotto i mosaici della Basilica del Monte Nebo (Siyagha)', in *Liber Annuus* xx (1970), 273–298.

³⁵ Cf. M. Piccirillo, 'Campagna Archeologica nella Basilica di Mosé Profeta sul Monte Nebo-Siyagha', in *Liber Annuus*, xxvi (1976), 281–318; pls 49–80.

4. A bronze figurine found at Siyagha.



5. The basilica at the end of the excavation (1933).



and we were able to resume only in 1976. The removal of the mosaics in the northern aisle then brought to light a second mosaic room (Area v) corresponding to the room with the cross in the opposite aisle (Area II). Beneath it we were able to

excavate a tomb built between the wall of the *cella trichora* and the rock of the mountain.

Beneath the mosaic floor of the northern hall (Area VI) we unearthed a funeral chapel at its eastern end, connected by a door with the room previously excavated in the northern aisle (Area v), and a roughly mosaiced once-arched room on the western side (Area VIII), linked to the atrium of the basilica (Area IX). Three quarters of the northern hall (FIG. 8) were occupied by the ancient diaconicon of the sanctuary (FIG. 9), which served also as the baptistry (Area VII). From the five-line dedicatory inscription in front of the basin we learnt that at the time of Elias, bishop of Madaba, under the Roman consuls Lampadius and Orestes, in the month of August of the year 425 of the Province (Arabia) i.e. 531 AD, by the good offices of Elias, abbot of the monastery, the holy diaconicon of God was rebuilt and adorned with the basin of regeneration that it contains and with the splendid kiborion. Another two-line inscription west of the central mosaic body which is decorated with scenes of hunting and stock-raising, gives the names of the three mosaicists who worked at the beautifying of the diaconicon: Soelos, Kaiomus and Elias.

A new attempt at a synthesis of the history of the sacred place³⁶

At the conclusion of this archaeological research in the basilica we can now attempt an historical synthesis of the history of the monument. The main historical-archaeological problems are related to the dating of the *cella trichora* and to the setting of the three-nave basilica.

A. The dating of the *cella trichora*

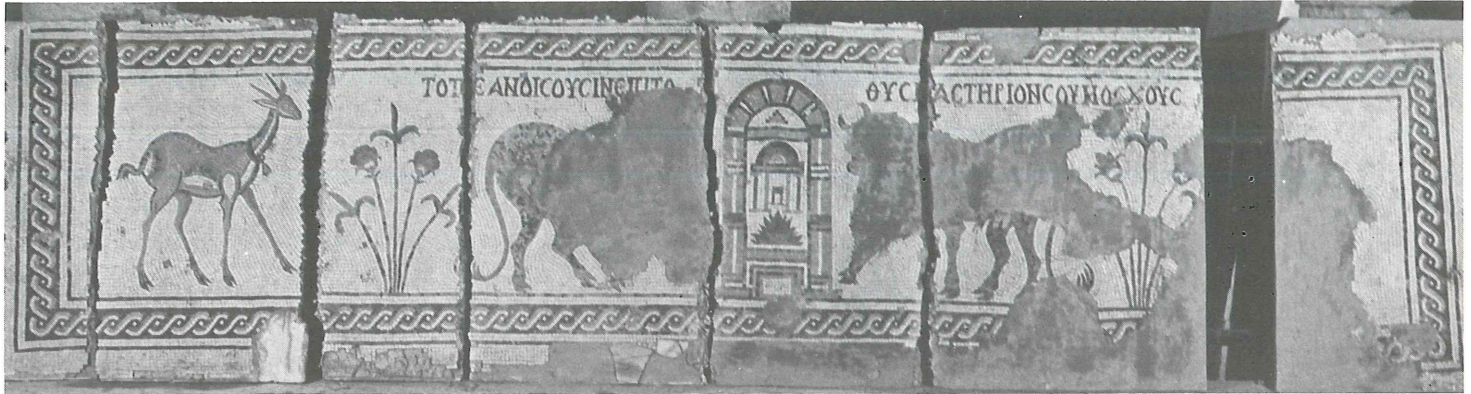
From the name of the abbot Alexios found in the mosaic inscription in the presbytery and on the third-level mosaic floor in the baptistry chapel on the southern wall of the basilica (Area I and Area III), dated to the end of the 4th century AD³⁷, we can accept Fr Saller's dating of the mosaic floor of the presbytery to the same period.

Two thresholds still *in situ* connect the mosaic-floor rooms found in front of the chancel (Area II and v) with the two funeral chapels on the southern and northern sides (Area III and IV). This means that the whole setting in front of the *cella trichora*, in which we can recognize the atrium of the first church, is contemporary with it. Furthermore six tombs were found beneath those mosaics, tombs which were built on the bedrock, four in the atrium, two in the area of the presbytery, of which one is in the middle of it, while the second one cuts across a wall at the entrance of the earlier three-apsed building, in which we can see the foundation-setting of the main entrance to the original building (Mausoleum). This means that the area of the *cella trichora*, which seems to have been

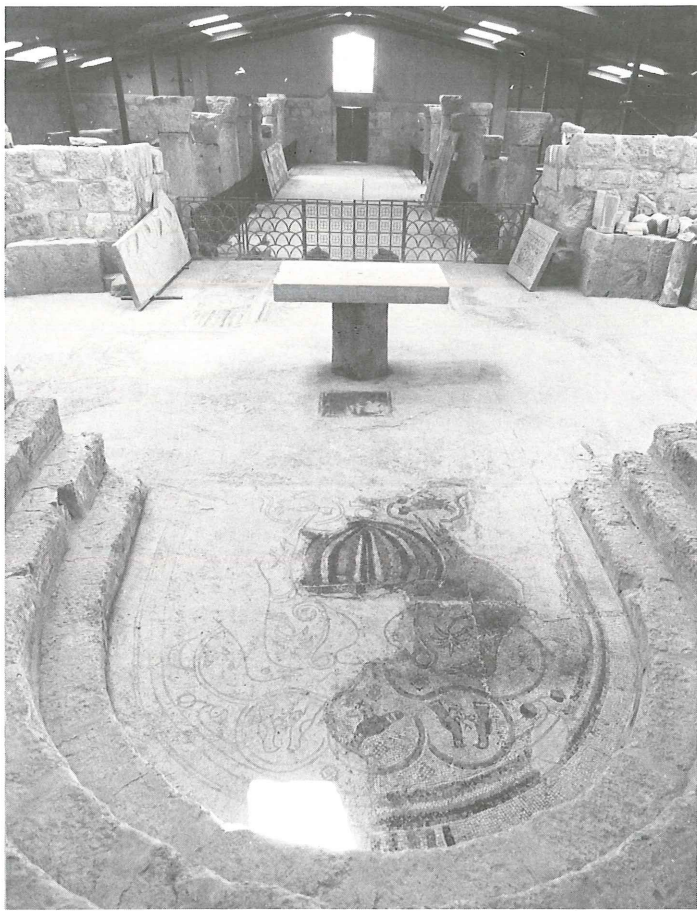
³⁶ A first attempt was made by the author in *Revue Biblique* 1977, pp. 248–249.

³⁷ On the evidence of a bronze coin found beneath the inscription (see Corbo, 'Nuovi Scavi', *Liber Annuus*, xvii (1967), p. 258.

6. Mosaics from the Theotokos Chapel (beginning of the 7th century).



7. The interior of the basilica seen from the central apse.



8. The northern hall of the 6th century basilica.



changed by monks into a church only when the mosaic floor was laid, was used for funeral purposes. From lack of other evidence we can accept Fr Bagatti's hypothesis, based on stylistic reasons, that the first building is to be defined as a classical mausoleum of the 2nd to 3rd century AD. Only later, in the 4th century, did the monks, aided by the Christians of

9. The old diaconicon of the basilica (August 531).



the region³⁸, change the ruined mausoleum which until then has been used for funeral purposes, into a church.

B. The setting of the three-nave basilica

The second problem is constituted by the relation between the basilica and the new diaconicon found under the mosaic floor of the northern hall. If we note that the steps leading to the diaconicon were sealed by the northern wall of the basilica, which itself rests on the southern plastered wall of the diaconicon, we are obliged to say, against the view of Fr Saller, that before 531 (the date of the restoration of the diaconicon given by the dedicatory inscription), no 'fifth century basilica' existed at Siyagha. The archaeological evidence is for the 4th century church with atrium and two side funeral-chapels at the end of an open courtyard on the highest spot of the mountain. Later the diaconicon-baptistry on the northern terrace was added one metre lower than the courtyard level. Only after 531, possibly years after, during which the diaconicon was in use, was the three-nave basilica built

³⁸ 'The people living in that region hurried to bring there all the materials for a building, and a church was erected in the name of the great prophet and lawgiver (i.e. Moses)' writes John Rufus in *The Life of Peter the Iberian* (cf. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, p. 57).

there, preceded by the destruction of the atrium and facade of the 4th century church. The destruction of the two side chapels, of the diaconicon and of some rooms of the monastery with the filling-up of the area occupied by them in order to raise the floor to the same level as that of the basilica, gave space for the building of the elongated hall on the northern side and of the new baptistry chapel on the southern side whose mosaic floor was finished in 597 AD. On its western wall was later added the Theotokos chapel whose mosaic floor was completed at the beginning of the 7th century.

C. Attempt to summarize the new data

To sum up in a chronological synthesis the various phases of the history of the monument at Siyagha, we reach the following order of events:

PHASE I

On the highest spot of the mountain, towards the 2nd to 3rd century AD, a three-apsed monument, the *cella trichora* (possibly a mausoleum) was built, which was used for funeral purposes, if not originally, at least at a later time, perhaps after its violent destruction.

PHASE II

Christian monks re-adapted the *cella trichora* into a church with adjoining synthronon in the central apse, while re-using the two lateral apses as sacristies. A coloured mosaic was laid in the church at the time of the abbot Alexios covering the tombs of the preceding epoch. To this reconstruction are to be connected the atrium on the west, with its white large mosaic cubes, and the two funeral chapels on either side. It was in this church that the monks showed the 'Memorial of Moses' to Egeria. It is likewise probable that Peter the Iberian visited this same monument which he called a 'great church'—no exaggeration if he was comparing it to the poor monks' cells in the midst of which the edifice stood. It should be stressed that it is from the memoirs of the two pilgrims that we know that the church was dedicated to the memory of Moses, the prophet and man of God, by the Christians of the area.

A roofless courtyard, flanked to the south and north by a few monastic structures, was also part of the primitive sanctuary.

PHASE IIA

On the northern slope of the mountain was added later on a diaconicon-baptistry. In August 531 there took place the restoration and beautification of the diaconicon, the mosaic floor of which was laid by Soelos, Kaiomos and Elias. On the southern slope, the funeral chapel was changed into a new room probably of a sacred nature and itself decorated with a new mosaic floor of floral and geometric designs.

PHASE III

From the middle of the 6th century to the first years of the 7th, the sanctuary underwent complete reconstruction. The

10. The baptistry chapel on the southern wall.



atrium of the 4th century church was destroyed and the new three-nave basilica was built with its atrium extending toward the west.

Subsequently the rooms and chapels to the north and south were dismantled and their floor raised to the floor level of the basilica. A lengthy and spacious diaconicon was erected to the north, while to the south a baptistry chapel (FIGS 10–12) and a Theotokos chapel were the last features added to the basilica (FIG. 13).

Conclusion

Thanks to the archaeological evidence and to the witness of the pilgrims, we have in the sanctuary of Mount Nebo-Siyagha, a continuous sequence of monumental and artistic activity from the 2nd–3rd century to the 7th century, with

evidence even of the iconoclastic period which did not spare the Memorial of Moses.

We are editing a volume, the fourth in the series dedicated to the sanctuary, which will encompass all of the discoveries which have come to light from 1967 to 1978 beneath the surface mosaics. Of particular historical-archaeological importance will be the publication, entrusted to Fr Bagatti, of the pottery sherds found in the sealed levels.

At the same time, thanks to the generous and friendly collaboration of the Officials of the Department of Antiquities, we are working on a new project, a volume dedicated to the mosaics of Jordan, thus completing a comprehensive view of the pertinent discoveries of Siyagha and el-Moukhayyet on Mount Nebo. This will be a corpus volume intended to be a synthesis of the archaeological work begun

11-12. The two inscriptions from the mosaic floor of the baptistry dated to 597 AD.



13. The Greek inscription in the Theotokos Chapel (beginning of the 7th century AD).



over forty years ago by the Franciscan Biblical Institute and other scientific institutions in co-operation with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.

This corpus volume will give scholars the possibility of

embracing in a unified vision the social and artistic achievements of the people of Jordan during a golden period of their history which, thanks to the work of archaeologists, has now been brought back to light.