Raouf Abu Jaber

Changes and Challenges in Arab Life: Transjordan During the Three Centuries Before Islam, 380-638 AD

The south-east of Bilād ash-Shām, i.e. Transjordan and Palestine, was probably the area that was most affected by the rise of Islam at the start of the 7th century. The effect, direct and deep as it was, must have been an upheaval at all levels for people living in the area. Islamic doctrine was being enthusiastically discussed and applied, new habits were being introduced and the whole political set-up was being reconstructed. In little more than a decade, the old established, relaxed order of the ageing Roman Empire, with its different branches and entities, was completely replaced by the aggressive drive of a new force. This new power was suddenly in full control of vast areas of land and large numbers of people of different races. Between the Hejra in 622 AD and the battle of Yarmuk in 636 AD, which was quickly followed by the fall of Jerusalem in 638 AD, the destiny of the Middle East was in turmoil.

People living in Transjordan and Palestine were confronted by a drastic change, in some ways comparable to that which happened a thousand years earlier when Alexander the Great conquered the area in 333 BC. However, this time there was one important difference: the population in the countryside, mainly Arabs and Arameans, were more closely related to the invading groups. A large proportion of the settled population were Arab tribes who had started moving into the lands of the Edomites, Nabateans, Moabites and Ammonites in waves during the preceding millennium. Earlier, the Thamudis, Lihianites and Safa'aieen had preceded them. Their gods were many, but those with the largest following were Hubal, Allat, Duchara and Wud (Hitti: 1970: 72).

Before the spread of Christianity, some people had adopted Judaism, such as the two tribes of al-Medinah who were prosperous when the Prophet Muhammad arrived as a religious refugee from Mecca in 622 AD. These Banū Quraydah and Banū an-Naḍīr were Arabs, but their ancestors had at some earlier stage adopted the Jewish faith. Their religious affiliation was a cause of the strife that followed and led to their complete disappearance less than a hundred years later (Hitti 1970: 4, 117). It should be noted that Hitti does not mention a third tribe, the Banū Qaynaqā', who were raided by the Prophet Muhammad in 624 AD after they elected to remain hostile. All seven hundred men and their families were spared, but were deported to Debab for the sake of security (Al-Tabari 1990: 481).

The pluralism that had characterised the northern Hijaz, Palestine and Transjordan for many centuries was undermined by the speed with which the new religion was adopted. Islam became predominant and could not accept anything less than the total obliteration of relics of idols and local gods. It tolerated Christians, who rarely fought against Muslim armies, but the Islamic attitude towards Jews was different; the antagonism probably stemmed from that first conflict in Medina and was subsequently maintained.

Sixteen years after the Hejra, Caliph Omar still remembered the unfriendly Jewish attitude towards Islam in its early days. In his well-known edict to the Christians of Jerusalem in 638 AD, he insisted that the population of Jerusalem should not allow Jews to continue living in the Holy City. Christians were most probably happy to comply with this request, as relations between the two communities had been tense since the rise of Christianity six hundred years earlier. The Crucifixion was both well-remembered and blamed on Jews in general. Furthermore, Jewish support for Roman persecu-

tion of Christians during the first three centuries of Christian life in the Holy Land and other parts of the Roman Empire must have intensified the antagonism between them.

At this stage, it may be useful to describe settlement in Transjordan in the centuries immediately preceding the Macedonian conquest of 333 BC. Discussing the matter in detail, historian Israel Eph'al[1] (Eph'al 1982: 198) reached a revealing conclusion about the inhabitants of the area between the 6th and 4th centuries BC, i.e. the time of initial Nabataean settlement. He wrote that "it is more reasonable to suppose that in southern Trans-Jordan two ethnic groups, the earlier inhabitants of Edom and Moab and the Arabs — each with its own culture, existed side by side, intermingling in the course of generations in an extended process. These same people were well described by Glueck when he wrote "Theirs was a record of remarkable accomplishment, extending from commerce to agriculture and from engineering to architecture and art" [2]. (Glueck 1965: 4).

The migration of Arab tribes from the Arabian peninsula into Bilād ash-Shām, Iraq and Asia Minor must have been taking place for hundreds of years. Written Arabic sources are generally post-Islamic, but researchers have been able to establish an excellent chronicle based on Arab *Jāhilyya* poetry, especially the famous poems known as *al-Mu'allaqāt*. In a carefully researched paper by leading historian Professor Abdul Aziz al-Douri, entitled "Arabs and Land in Bilād ash-Shām during the early Islamic Period", the conclusion was reached that the Arab presence in Bilād ash-Shām dates back to the early 1st millennium BC. Thereafter it increased continuously, especially from the 3rd century AD onwards, until the rise of Islam. Unsurprisingly, Arab tribes settled first in southern areas of Bilād ash-Shām: Ghassān around Damascus and in the Jaulan, Gudhā'a in the Balqā' and southern Transjordan, Lakham and Judhām in southern Jordan and Palestine, and Kalb in the *bādiya* of the south-east. This suggests that the tribes spread from the south to the north or north-east, into the areas adjoining the *bādiya*. All of these tribes were originally from Yemen, and their widespread dispersal gives some indication of the extent of Arab tribal penetration into Syria before Islam.

Christianity spread amongst these tribes at an early stage, with al-Dhaja'meh and Salih — two branches of the more extensive federation known as Gudhā'a — converting to Christianity before the end of the 4th century. The well-known historian of this period, Professor Salih Hamarneh, has, on the basis of information provided by al-Masu'di, confirmed that a certain prince of Mādabā, Daoud Ibn al-Haboura (known also as al-Lathaq), converted to Christianity towards the end of the 2nd century, some 200 years before the arrival of the Ghassanids in the area[3]. The Salih were the predominant tribe at that time, after their recognition as allies of Rome. By the 4th century, the city and district of Petra was known as Palestina Tertia and had more than forty bishoprics, demonstrating that by this time Christianity was already the predominant religion in the area.

When the Ghassanids succeeded in becoming the predominant tribal federation in the *Limes* area just before the end of the 5th century, the Romans realised the importance of having them as an ally despite the fact that they were followers of the Monophysite branch of Christianity. The Ghassanid phylarch Arethas visited Constantinople in the mid 6th century and succeeded in persuading the Emperor Justinian to install Jacob Baradeus as bishop in Edessa, after which its followers became known as Jacobites (Hitti 1970: 79).

Prior to the 5th century, life in rural areas seems to have been both orderly and prosperous. Procopius describes how Abochorabus, or Abu Karb bin Jabalah, was appointed phylarch of the Saracen Arabs in Palestine by Justinian in around 542 AD, adding that he was an able administrator who kept the *Limes* free from bedouin attacks, whilst maintaining relations with the neighboring Maddeni, whose chief was Caisus ('Ali 1953: 245). This confederation of tribes mentioned by Procopius was a prominent part of the Arab presence in Iraq and Bilād ash-Shām referred to by the poet Omar bin Kalthoum (died *ca.* 600 AD) in his famous *Mu'allaqāt* (al-Zawzani 1979 :198, 222):

[1] Eph'al quoting Glueck refers to articles in AASOR 14 1934, p. 83 and AASOR 15 1935, P. 139.

[2] In the book Deities & Dolphins by Nelson Glueck, the chapter "They Began as Bedouins" is an interesting summary of the capability and accomplishments of the inhabitants of Transjordan between 200 BC and 200 AD.

[3] Proceedings of the International Conference on Bilād ash-Shām, Amman 20 - 25 April 1974, Pp. 549-562.

وقد علم القبائل من معد اذا قبب بابطحها بنينا
بانا المانعون لما اردنا وانا النازلون بحيث شئنا

The Tribes of Ma'ad are well aware
When domes in the countryside are raised
That as masters our wishes prevail,
And our domain is where we wish to stay [4]

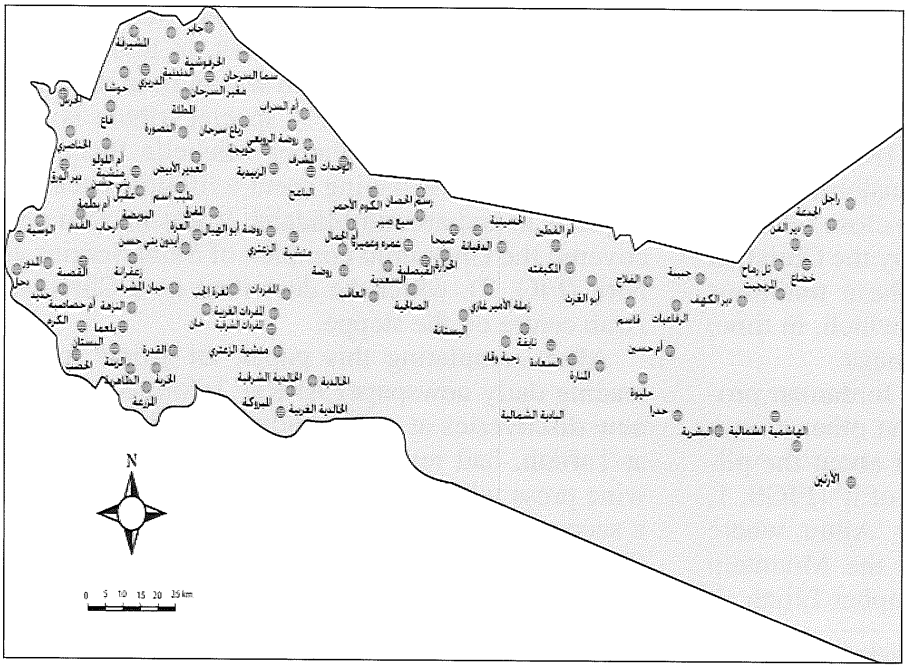
Abochorabus was probably the same dignitary who was defeated by Romanos, Governor of Palestine in 470 AD after attacking the borderlands. Presumably, the valour and performance of the tribes induced the Romans to make the Ghassanids phylarchs in Palestine, which duty they performed until 636 AD.

These different historical data give food for thought. As a researcher and historian, I have often wondered where farmers managed to grow the crops needed to feed the inhabitants of these extensive areas. In the 1940s Transjordan was an exporter of cereals, mainly wheat; the countryside, especially between 'Ammān and aṭ-Ṭafīlah — including Karak and its plains — produced large quantities thereof. At one time, most was bought by Allied forces via a British contractor, Steel Brothers Company. Every plot of land was cultivated; the photo below taken by the famous photographer Bonfils in *ca* 1870 gives a good idea of how the fields around Karak looked then. Intensive agriculture was possible when people were willing to invest the hard labour required (Abu Jaber 2009 :188).

Life in early Christian times must have been reasonably prosperous to judge by the ruins we see in the countryside. The Christians of Transjordan and southern Palestine were already actively building churches well before the Ghassanids rose to preeminence. A list (FIG. 2) of Christian sites in the area gives the reader a good impression of the upheaval that, in less than two centuries, turned the area into a staunchly Christian stronghold opposed to both paganism and Judaism. The list is summarised in a book by Pierre-Louis Gatier entitled "Inscriptions de la Jordanie" that was published by the Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient in 1986.

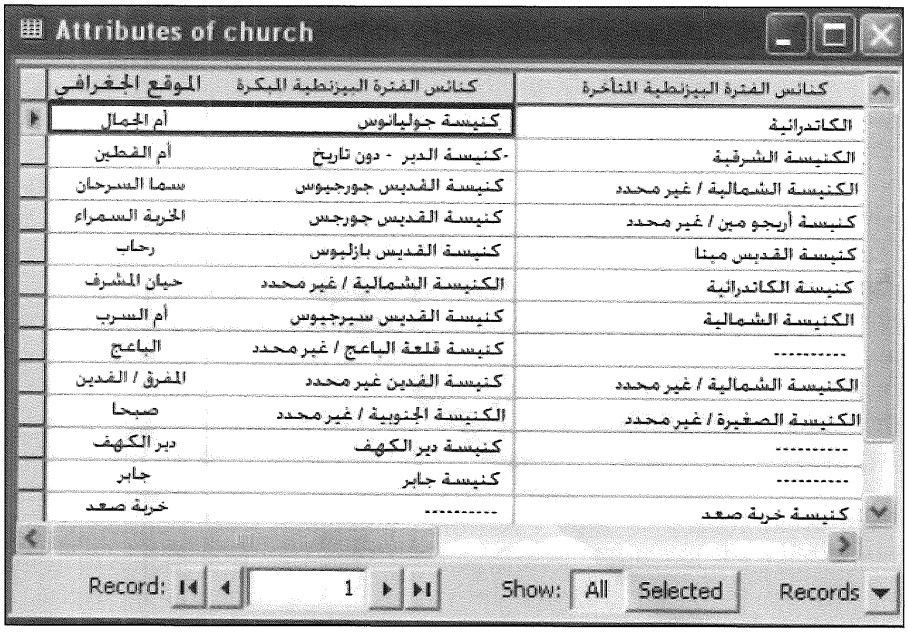
Fig. 5 is from an original in the collection of the Harvard Semitic Museum. It is numbered 966 and bears the caption "Vue General du Kerak". The photographer, Bonfils, was a Frenchman who joined French forces in Lebanon in 1860 and later started his work in Bilād ash-Shām, paying especial attention to Jerusalem.

Mention of all these sites and the people who lived there brings to mind the work of 19th century travellers, who were amazed at the quantity of ruins they encountered — *khirab*, as people in the Jordanian countryside called them until recently. H. B. Tristram of the British Association was probably speaking for all of them when he wrote:



1. Map showing distribution of churches and thereby settlement density in northern Jordan (Dr Bazazo and Dr Wahib).

[4] Translation by the author.



2. Left list shows early churches built 324-491 AD; right list shows late churches built 491-636 AD.

"What is the date of these cities, all like each other? They are unquestionably far older than the early Saracenic as we may see by the ruined Khāns. The most uniform and remarkable feature about all these towns is the vast number of wells, all now dry, and of huge cisterns or underground store-houses, some for water and others with a bell shaped neck and small mouth for storing corn.

"Such water works as the tank at Zīzyā easily explain to us the enormous population of which the ruined cities give evidence. Everywhere is some artificial means of retaining the occasional supplies of rainwater. So long as these precious structures remained in order cultivation was continuous and famines unknown". (Tristram 1873: 181, 182, 186).

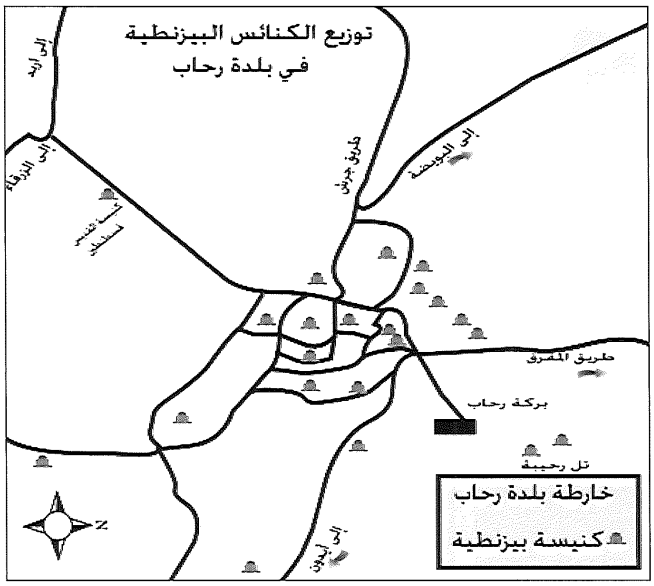
A very important aspect of Transjordan's history in early Christian times was its close relationship with the traditions established by the Christian faith during its early existence. These traditions established stories about holy sites which, in time, became centres for Christian pilgrimage.

In a well-referenced study, two Jordanian professors, one an archaeologist and the other a marketing specialist, produced a report about the pilgrimage route and published a map of it[5] (FIGS. 1, 4 and 6). It starts in the north near 'Ajlūn, where Tall Mār Ilyās and the Church of the Mountain Lady remind us of the story of Prophet Elijah. It then goes south to Bethany-Beyond-The-Jordan, where Jesus was baptised and where there are three churches and a chapel, along with a caravanserai, stable and pool in the neighbouring Wādī al-Kharrār. Next, pilgrims arrived at Mādabā, site of many churches and Christian sites such as Siyāgha, Mount Nebo and 'Uyūn Mūsā. The last stop was Makāwir, where Herod committed his crime of ordering the beheading of John the Baptist.

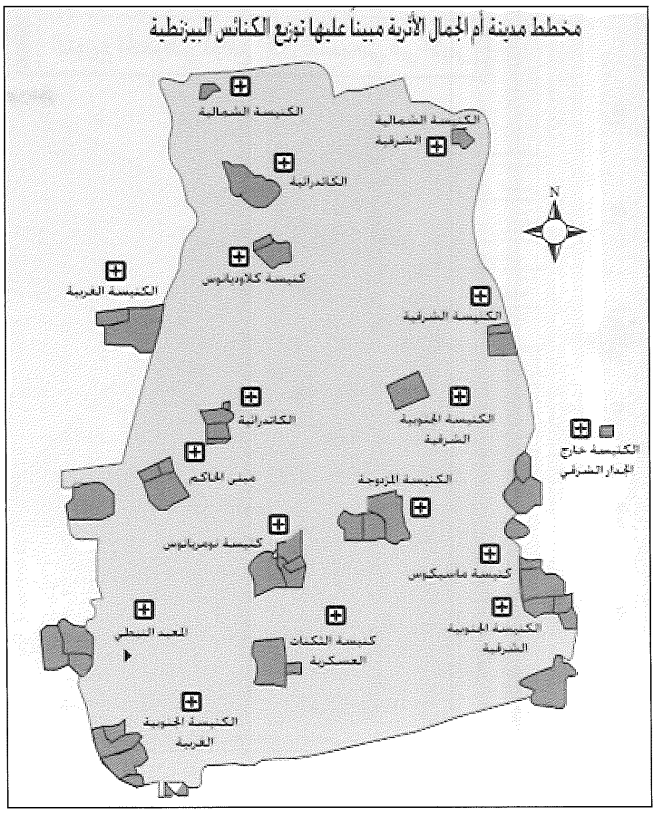
Pilgrims probably made a diversion to visit Riḥāb, between Tall Mār Ilyās and Bethany. The purpose would have been to visit no less than 24 churches, the oldest of which was built in the early 5th century (see FIG. 3). A special tribute is due here to our colleague Father Michelle Piccirillo, who died in 2009, having spent a lifetime excavating sites in and around Mādabā. It was he who discovered the Ghassanid complex of Saint Sergius at Nitil (FIG. 7), which he described as a Christian Arab centre on the steppe.

After completing this paper, an article in the leading daily newspaper Al-Rai' informed me that new discoveries at ar-Rashādiyya, 26 km south of aṭ-Ṭafīlah, had revealed "the existence of a large wine press with water-works and canals as well as a second church after the one discovered in 2002 (FIG. 8). The whole site was served by a well-built road similar to that of Trajan and preliminary

[5] Archaeologist Dr Mohammed Wahib, who worked for a number of years at Bethany, and Dr Ibrahim Bazazo, a specialist in tourist management and marketing. Their joint paper was presented to the second conference on Religious Tourism, held at the Orthodox Society in Amman, October 2009.



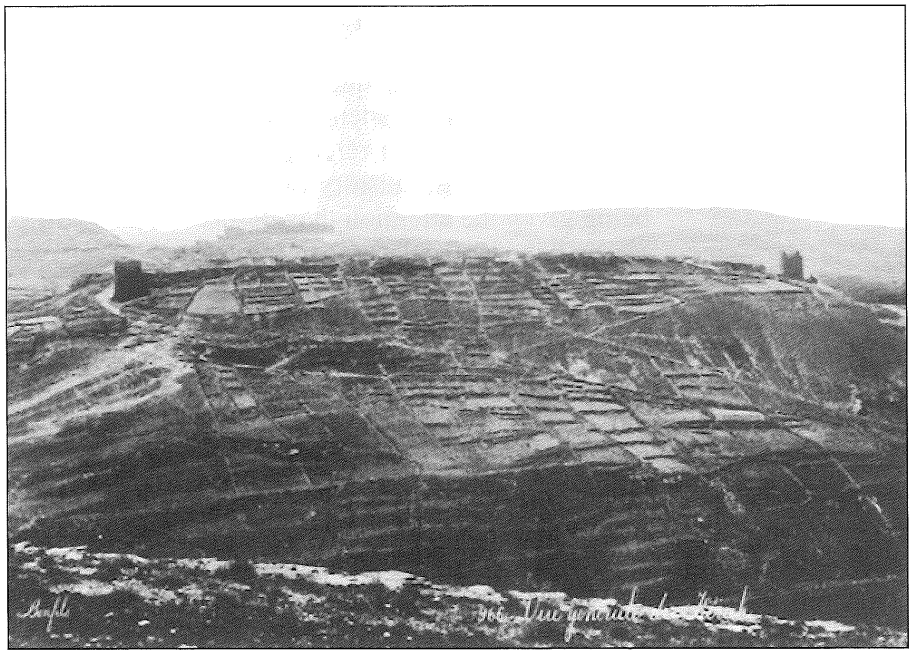
3. Distribution of churches in Riḥāb.



4. Distribution of churches in Umm al-Jimāl (Dr Bazazo and Dr Wahib).

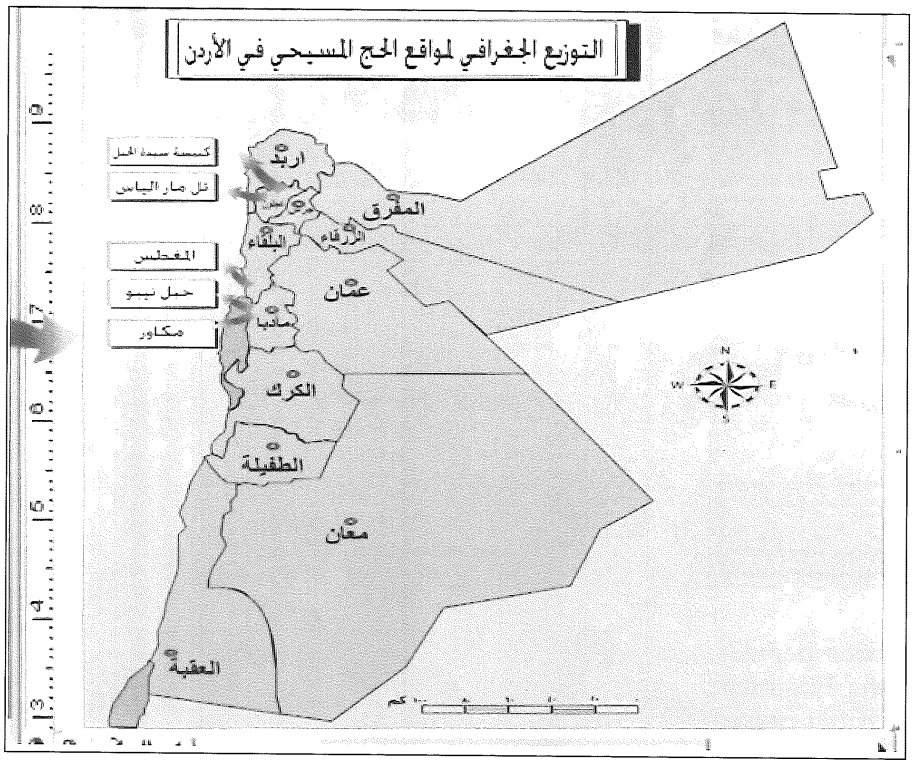
excavations have shown that it has been populated continuously since the times of the Edomites. Some activists have been calling for better preservation measures at this important site, but like in so many other archaeological sites in Jordan, such noble wishes are not realised due to the shortage of funds"[6].

I have been pondering these matters for years and in 2010 the same old question presents itself. It is known from archaeological and historical studies that Bilād ash-Shām was well populated before the 7th century. Places such as al-Qasṭal, Nitil, Zīzyā, Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Umm al-Quṣayr, Umm al-Walīd, to say nothing of Mādabā and Dhībān, were all rel-



5. View of al-Karak by Bonfils (1870); the intensive terracing demonstrates that the area must have been intensively occupied in earlier times.

[6] Al-Rai' daily newspaper Article published 20 May 2010.



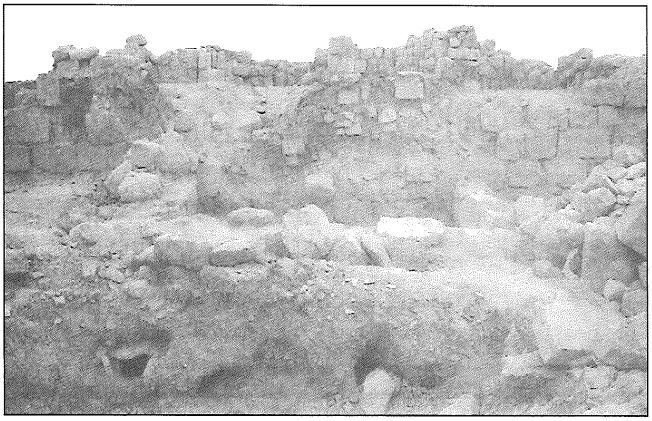
6. Map showing Christian pilgrimage sites in Jordan.

7. Church of Saint Sergius at Nitil: the mosaic floor.

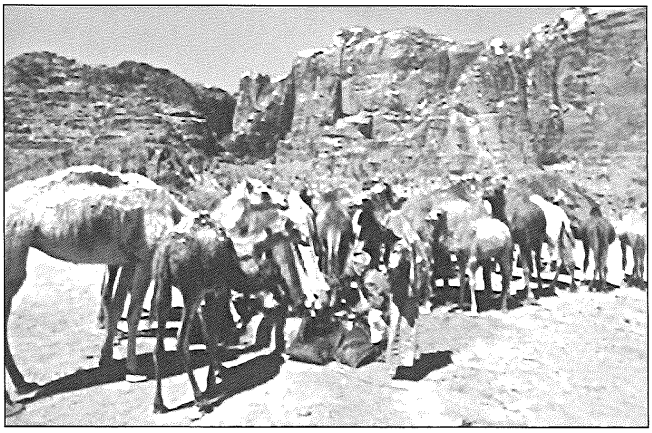
atively densely populated with outstanding public buildings and many churches. Why, therefore, is it that their archaeology and history is not being studied and written about in the same detail as that of other historical eras? The four early 20th century photographs which I have included below depict a way of life that had existed in the Transjordanian countryside since the 4th century (FIGS. 9, 10, 11 and 12).

Another important question also comes to mind. Why is the greatest attention being paid to Roman sites, while the sites I refer to here — which are an integral part of the history of the region — are not being given the attention they deserve? This is especially so in view of the now pressing need for salvage, as many sites are threatened by population growth, land development and environmental change. Bilād ash-Shām has had a glorious past. Indeed, its population could have numbered more than 10 million during the period under consideration here. It therefore deserves much more care and attention from archaeologists and historians alike, which I sincerely hope my article will help to encourage.

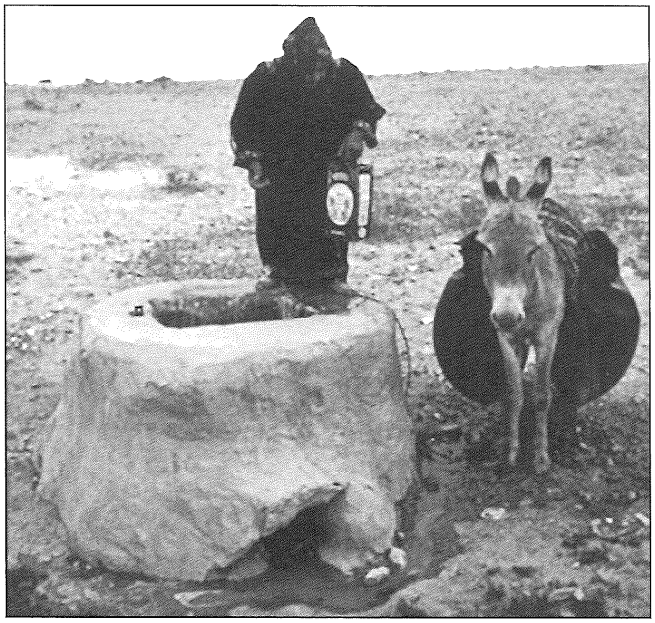
It is from such a background that I have, in recent years, been calling for more archaeological studies that will shed further light on the life of Arab cities and encampments during these 300 years. The excavations that have taken place at 'Aqaba, Pe-



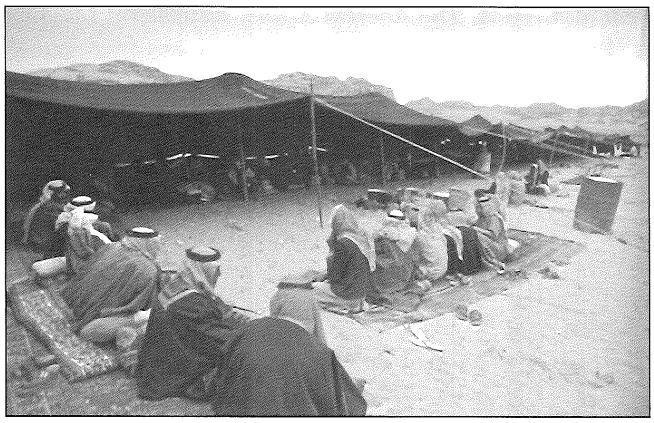
8. Archaeological remains at ar-Rashādyyia.



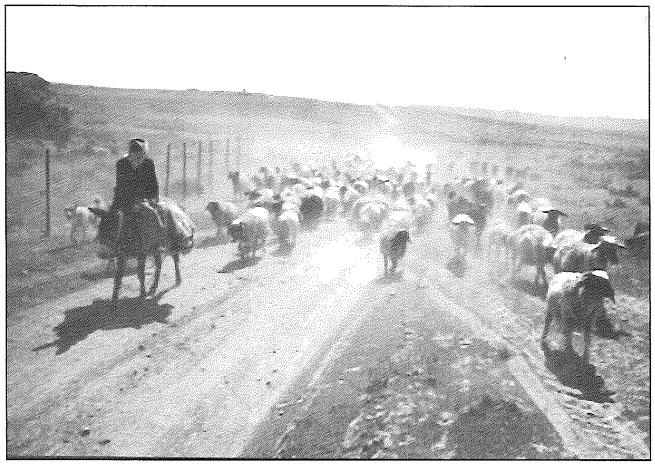
9. Watering camels in the desert (Picture from Jordan's Pictorial History, Ministry of Culture and Youth Mont Liban Press, Beirut 1980).



10. Woman drawing water from a well, using skins transported on a donkey (Picture from Jordan's Pictorial History, Ministry of Culture and Youth Mont Liban Press, Beirut 1980).



11. Tribal meeting in Wādī Rum (Picture from Jordan's Pictorial History, Ministry of Culture and Youth Mont Liban Press, Beirut 1980).



12. Flock of sheep in the area south of 'Ammān (Picture from Jordan's Pictorial History, Ministry of Culture and Youth Mont Liban Press, Beirut 1980).

tra, Nitil and Riḥāb are hugely important, but more has to be done to bring this hitherto uncovered and mysterious field of knowledge to light. My sincere hope is that by drawing attention to such matters, articles such as this will encourage the efforts of those interested in opening up new fields of archaeology, which will in time yield information that will be useful, as well as interesting, to our studies.

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