

Christianity in Southern Jordan in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods

This article is a brief summary of the archaeological evidence for Christianity in Southern Jordan in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods. The geographical area covered is modern-day Jordan south of Wādī al-Mūjib, the eastern half of the Byzantine province of Palaestina Tertia and the southern part of the Early Islamic *jund* of Dimashq. That is my area of responsibility for my ongoing project in collaboration with Anne Michel and Michele Piccirillo to produce a corpus of the Byzantine churches in Jordan.

The History of Investigation

The study of Christianity in southern Jordan suffers from the limited interest for the ancient historians that this marginal area had within the Byzantine empire as a whole. As a consequence, the area is mostly invisible historically throughout the period, with only a limited number of literary or historical references in Greek or Arabic sources that record events, people, or places. This problem is particularly acute for the period after the Islamic conquest. Thus the bulk of what can be known derives from archaeological evidence. Some previous scholars have examined general aspects of the area in the Byzantine period, notably Gutwein in his study of Byzantine Third Palestine (1981), the dissertation by Fiema (1991), and the studies by Schick (1992a; 1992b; 1994; 1995). Alliate and Ratti (1984) and Piccirillo (1993) provide some general information about Christianity in southern Jordan.

The earliest studies of Christianity in southern Jordan consisted of the analysis of literary sources, such as the acts of the various church councils that record the names of the bishops who participated. Le Quien (1740) gathered all of this information together; now largely replaced by the new editions of the church council acts by Schwartz (1982-1984) and Schieffer (1982-1984) and the listings of bishops by Fedalto (1988).

The investigation of the physical remains of Christianity began with the 19th century explorers. Among the numerous explorers who crossed the region prior to the First

World War, Rudolf Brünnow and Alfred von Domaszewski's reports from the 1890s (1904-1909) are of particular value for Petra as well as other sites such as Udhrūḥ (JADIS 2097.002) (Brünnow and von Domaszewski 1904-1909, 1: 461; Killick 1983a: 234, 241).

After the First World War, Nelson Glueck started his extensive surveys in 1933, in which he occasionally noted evidence for Christianity at the many sites he visited, such as otherwise uninvestigated church ruins at Buṣayra (JADIS 2001.013) (Glueck 1933-1934: 78); Dayr ar-Riyāshī (JADIS 2009.002) (Glueck 1933-1934: 59-60); Khirbat al-Bayḍa (JADIS 2002.003) (Glueck 1933-1934: 79-80); and Khirbat ad-Dayr (JADIS 2002.012) (Glueck 1934-1935: 99).

But the most significant study of the evidence for Christianity was produced by Reginita Canova (1954), the wife of the director of the Italian hospital in al-Karak who collected hundreds of tombstones from the neighboring villages, notably 68 from Maḥayy (JADIS - 2304.005) (1954: 341-401). She also described church ruins at a number of sites, such as at Majra (JADIS - 2104.106) (1954: 409-415), al-Muraygha (JADIS 2206.049) (1954: 263), and Umm Ḥamāt (JADIS - 2204.039) (1954: 322-324). Many of the tombstones she found are dated, and provide the bulk of the evidence for a number of otherwise little investigated sites.

Sylvester Saller and Bellarmino Bagatti (1949) prepared a list with bibliographic references of the known Christian sites in southern Jordan.

Within the last couple of decades a number of survey teams have surface-sherded Byzantine and Early Islamic sites and recorded evidence for Christianity. Burton MacDonald surveyed Wādī al-Ḥasā, and noted the hermitage of Ḥammām 'Afrā (JADIS - 2104.015) (1980; 1988: 242, 244, 282, 284). He later surveyed the 'Arabah Valley, where he noted a hermitage in the lower Wādī al-Ḥasā (1980: 361-362; 1992: 104).

Udo Worschech surveyed in the north Karak plateau (1985a; 1985b), noting such sites as Khirbat Qabu (Dayr

al-Mahrūq) (JADIS - 2107.055) (1985b: 161-163 - #75), also noted by Miller (1991: 55 - Site 72).

Maxwell Miller surveyed the Karak plateau, revisiting Canova's sites (1991) and noting additional churches as at ad-Dann wa-al-Baradān (JADIS - 2208.015) (1991: 44), Maḥayy (JADIS - 2304.005) (1954: 341-401) (1991: 166), Qaṣr ar-Ruṣayfa (JADIS - 2106.008) (1991: 85 - Site 192), and Sdayr (JADIS - 2105.052) (1991: 147 - Site 394).

S. Thomas Parker also surveyed the Roman frontier (1986) and the area around al-Lajjūn (1987) and Geoffrey King surveyed in the 'Arabah Valley (King *et al.* 1987).

The Department of Antiquities of Jordan cleared much of the lower church at al-Ḥumayma (JADIS 1892.008) in 1962-1963, but nothing was ever published. The Department also cleared the church at ar-Rabba (JADIS 2207.002) in 1964, but very little was published (Zayadine 1971a; 1971b). The surveys and excavations in Petra over the past century revealed some limited amount of information about Christians, such as the Urn tomb, which was converted into a church in 446 (McKenzie 1990: 146-147; Sartre 1993: 81-84); the partially excavated building in the al-Kātūta area, which may not be a church (Khairy 1986a; 1986b); the ad-Dayr tomb and the nearby "hermitage", which were part of a cluster of Christian hermitages (Brünnow and von Domaszewski 1904: 329-330; Dalman 1908: 261-262; Sartre 1993: 109-111); and the occasional stone-carved crosses and other Christian symbols that Manfred Lindner has found (e.g. 1970 and most recently 1997).

The quantity of work devoted to the archaeology of Byzantine Christianity has jumped dramatically since the mid-1980s. The first published excavation of a church was conducted in 1985 at the early sixth century church in the Roman legionary fortress of al-Lajjūn (JADIS 2307.002) (Schick 1987).

The next site to be excavated was Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta (JADIS 1905.002), the site of Lot's Cave, where the Byzantine through Early Islamic monastery has been under excavation since 1988 (Politis 1989; 1990; 1992; 1993; 1995).

The excavations of the Early Islamic site of Ayla/Aqaba since 1986 have found a few scattered Christian architectural elements originally from the Byzantine settlement (Whitcomb 1994: 14-15; Zayadine 1994).

Further projects began in the 1990s. At al-Ḥumayma (1892.008) five churches have been investigated since the 1991 season (Schick 1997); with extensive excavations of the C101 lower church, in use up to the early seventh century and the B100 and F103 churches, both built over by Early Islamic domestic houses, and smaller-scale probes of the C119 and B126 churches.

At Udhrūḥ (JADIS 2097.002), the principia inside the legionary fortress, excavated in 1991, may have been

converted into a church (Killick 1983b: 121, 123-125).

The main church at Petra has been under excavation since 1992 (Fiema *et al.* 1995; Schick *et al.* 1993).

The church at Nakhal (JADIS 2205.001) was excavated in 1993, but remains unpublished (Schick *et al.* 1994). Excavations at Khirbat adh-Dhariḥ (JADIS 2103.134) since 1993 have revealed that the Nabataean temple was converted into a church (Muheisen and Villeneuve 1998).

The busiest year for excavations of Byzantine churches was 1994. The church at Khirbat as-Samrā'/ Shiḥān (JADIS 2208.016) was partially excavated in 1994 (Qusus and Schick 1994; 1995).

The church at Gharandal (JADIS 2101.001) was first excavated by Jihad Darwish in 1994 and since 1997 by Alan Walmsley (1997).

The "Petra Ridge Church" has been under excavation since 1994 (Bikai 1996).

A long term project at Faynān (JADIS 1900.001) began in 1994 that so far has involved excavation of the south Byzantine cemetery (Findlater 1998) and survey (Freeman and McEwan 1998).

The excavations in the Roman-Byzantine city of 'Aqaba since 1994 have uncovered a probable church established in the pre-Constantinian period and ending in the late fourth century (Parker 1996; Mussell 1998; see Shertl 1936).

Since 1994, Politis has recovered some 300 Christian Greek tombstones from the robbed-out Byzantine cemetery of an-Naq'/Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi.

Excavations in the Lisan Peninsula since 1995 have exposed the Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bizaṅṭī (JADIS 1907.007) and Qaṣr at-Ṭūba monastic sites (Holmgren and Kaliff 1996; 1997; also Politis 1995b).

A project at the monastic site of Jabal Hārūn (JADIS 1896.003) started in 1998 (see Peterman and Schick 1996).

On the other hand, where there are numerous known surveyed but unexcavated church sites, as noted earlier, some other major sites remain virtually complete archaeological blanks; al-Karak, Ma'ān, and at-Ṭāfila are the most striking such cases, where there obviously would have been churches in the Byzantine period. The antiquities there, as well as those at a number of smaller sites, have been all but obliterated by modern occupation, although there are any number of preserved stray architectural elements, such as lintels with crosses marked on them at various sites that could well have originally been part of now completely destroyed church buildings. Many other sites have been damaged, although less severely. Although population growth and economic development in Jordan continues to result in damage or destruction of some archaeological sites, such as the major damage to the Byzantine cemeteries at Faynān since the

1980s and at Ghawr aş-Şāfi since 1993, many sites remain largely untouched. The site of Faynān has perhaps the greatest potential for rewarding excavation.

General Observations

It is noteworthy that few places have more than one church. Faynān and al-Ḥumayma have five, Petra has four, Udruh seems to have two. No place has the dozen or more churches as is the case to the north, as at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Umm al-Jimāl, Jarash, or Mādabā. It is odd just how few churches are yet known in Petra.

The clearly identifiable churches are all basilicas, except for ad-Dann wa-al-Baradān. The lower church at al-Ḥumayma and the churches at Nakhāl and Petra have three apses on the east end.

Mosaics are not a frequent decorative motif, contrary to northern Jordan. Mosaics have been uncovered at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa, Gharandal, Petra, Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bizanti, and Khirbat as-Samrā'/ Shihān, while stray cubes are visible on the surface of a few other sites. There were no mosaics at al-Ḥumayma, and the absence of any accidental discoveries of mosaics during modern building construction at such places as al-Karak, in contrast to the situation at Mādabā, indicates that few if any mosaics are to be found there.

Numerous crosses carved on stones are known, such as the lintel at the uninvestigated site of Khirbat Nuṣrāniya (JADIS 2101.011). Of particular interest are the crosses carved on paving stones that mark burials in the C101 lower church at al-Ḥumayma.

Numerous Greek Christian inscriptions are known, mostly from Canova's collection of tombstones, including 197 from al-Karak; that number is nearly doubled by the tombstones from an-Naq'/ Ghawr aş-Şāfi. Only a few of the dated ones go back to the fifth century or early sixth century, while the bulk date to the second half of the sixth century, with sustained numbers up through the early seventh century, but with only a greatly reduced number thereafter.

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