

Early Byzantine Monasticism in Southern Jordan

Eastern Palaestina Tertia

The eastern sector of the late Roman-Byzantine province of *Palaestina Tertia* was located in the southern part of modern Jordan, from Wādī al-Mūjib (Arnon) in the north, to al-‘Aqaba (*Aila*) in the south. The province was created to defend the south-eastern frontier of the Empire and to protect the fringes of the *oikoumene* (the inhabited world) from *Saracen* (nomadic-bedouin) and Sassanian attack (Graf 1978: 1-26; Mayerson 1994: 271-283). With the strategic transfer of the Tenth Legion to *Aila*, it also guarded the Empire from advancing Muslim armies in the seventh century.

As in the western sector of *Palaestina Tertia*, close communications between urban centres were maintained through a network of *castra* and *castella* (forts and police stations) along the *via nova Traiana*, at the southern end of the Dead Sea and along Wādī ‘Arabah which also served as intermediate havens as well as military camps. The early fourth century AD *Notitia Dignitatum* lists a number of these military installations in the area which may now be identified with more certainty. Many of these were originally built during the preceding Nabataean and Roman periods.

Cavalry units which were reportedly stationed at *Zoara*, were strategically situated above the mouth of Wādī al-Ḥasa (?*Zared*) in the fortress of Umm aṭ-Ṭawābīn (King *et al.* 1987: 449, 620; MacDonald 1992: 83-87, 104, 249) overlooking the city of *Zoara* (Khirbat ash-Shaykh ‘Isā) to protect that sizable community and its important communications route. It may have been closely interconnected with the fort at Umm Ubtulah further east along Wādī al-Ḥasa (MacDonald 1984: 183-189). These would have undoubtedly communicated with other forts to the north, in Bilaydah (at the mouth of the Wādī al-Karak), Khirbat ‘Ayn Sikina, Wādī ‘Isāl (Jacobs 1983: 262-272) and Rujm an-Numayra (Glueck 1935: 7), and others to the south at Fayfa (*Praesidium*), Rujm Umrūq, Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭilāḥ (*Toloana*), Faynān (*Phaino*) and Gharandal (*Arindela*) (King *et al.* 1989: 199-215; MacDonald 1992:

249-265; Mayerson 1994: 277) and probably other sites yet to be identified.

Although archaeological work in Wādī ‘Arabah is still at a pioneering stage, other Roman-Byzantine sites (Khirbat Ḥassiyā, Bi’r Madhkūr, Khirbat aṭ-Ṭayyibah and Qā‘ as-Sa‘īdiyīn) may have been military installations protecting the southern routes to the key Tenth Legionary fort at *Aila*. However, it is possible that these forts communicated in an east-west direction, connecting with the *via nova Traiana* and avoiding the arid Wādī ‘Arabah with its marauding *Saracens*, as well as north-south.

The *via nova Triana* was the lifeline of the eastern frontier in *Palaestina Tertia*, and the protection provided by the *castra* and *castella* placed along it were vital. They linked the southern port of *Aila* with the deep *Arnon* gorge in the north through a series of interconnected, fortified sites now identified al-Ḥumayma (*Auara*), Ṣadaqa (*Zodocatha*), Khirbat al-Khāldī (*Praesidio*), Udhrūḥ and al-Lajjūn (Mayerson 1994: 277-8). Together they formed the basis for the “*Limes Palaestinae*”, protecting the *oikoumene*.

The Spread of Asceticism

The most vulnerable members of the late Roman-Byzantine *oikoumene* were the newly established Christian ascetics who chose to live in isolated hills, cliffs and deserts. Although spiritually independent, they were physically defenceless and exposed to *Saracen* attack. There are literary accounts of them being robbed and massacred. The best known account of such an incident was at Mount Sinai and is commemorated annually on the 14th of January (Mayerson 1994: 237-8).

Some of these monastic settlements had Biblical associations which also attracted pilgrims. These were associated with urban centres which provided them with financial and human resources which protected them from *Saracen* threats and guaranteed their communications with the wider *oikoumene*.

As Jerusalem was the focal point of Christian pilgrimage, the adjacent Judean Desert naturally became the cen-

tre of monasticism in the Holy Land. The Holy City was simply too crowded for ascetic monks who found solitude in the desert. During the sixth century AD the Byzantine Emperor Justinian supported the construction of new churches and monastic complexes throughout the Empire and consequently the once isolated communities of the Judean Desert flourished. A detailed study of the area has identified many of these sites (Hirschfeld 1992).

More recent archaeological surveys and excavations in southern Jordan have now brought to light a number of monasteries and hermitages which strongly suggest a vibrant Christian ascetic community in this area from the fourth to seventh centuries AD. The most direct route east from the Judean Desert is across the Dead Sea via the Lisān Peninsula. It was not surprising therefore to discover a network of hermitages located across this spectacular landscape.

The Laura Monastery on the Lisān

Approximately mid-way from the western side of the Lisān Peninsula to the mouth of Wādī al-Karak lies the site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī (referred to as el-Qeryeh by Abel 1929: 247-248) built on a marl promontory and surrounded by eroded gullies. Recent excavations there revealed a monastery which probably served as the base for ascetic monks and pilgrims crossing al-Lisān from the Judean Desert. It is comprised of a small single-aisled church measuring about 10 x 5 metres and a number of domestic rooms (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 321-332). Although some of these rooms have walls preserved to over three-metres high, at least one third of the church area has been destroyed by modern bulldozer activity. The surviving mosaic floor pavement in the church is white and adorned with just one interlined chain cross in the centre of the chancel. Glass tesserae in the destruction debris is probable evidence for mosaics on the walls or dome.

Pottery dating from as early as the fourth century indicates the foundation date of the Dayr al-Qaṭṭār monastery. Later Byzantine ceramic types are evidence for a continuity of occupation at least into the seventh century. An Abbasid gold coin and a small piece of rectangular cloth inscribed in Arabic (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 332) date the final period of occupation. Of particular interest are some Early Bronze Age I (ca. 3,000 BC) vessels found near the bottom of a "crypt" (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 329). These may have been brought to the site as representing ancient holy relics in order to sanctify the church and may indicate that the early Byzantine Christians were conscious of previous occupations in the area as having an Old Testament significance.

Only 200 metres east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār are three niches cut into the soft marl sediments which apparently served as hermits' cells (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 332-33). Crosses and graffiti were etched onto the walls of

these cells. One had the name *Elias* inscribed in Greek on the wall, presumably the name of the ascetic which inhabited it. It is possible that this *Elias* was the Jordanian-born monk and founder of two monasteries near Jericho who in 495, according to Cyril of Scythopolis, became Patriarch of Jerusalem (Hirschfeld 1992: 241-242).

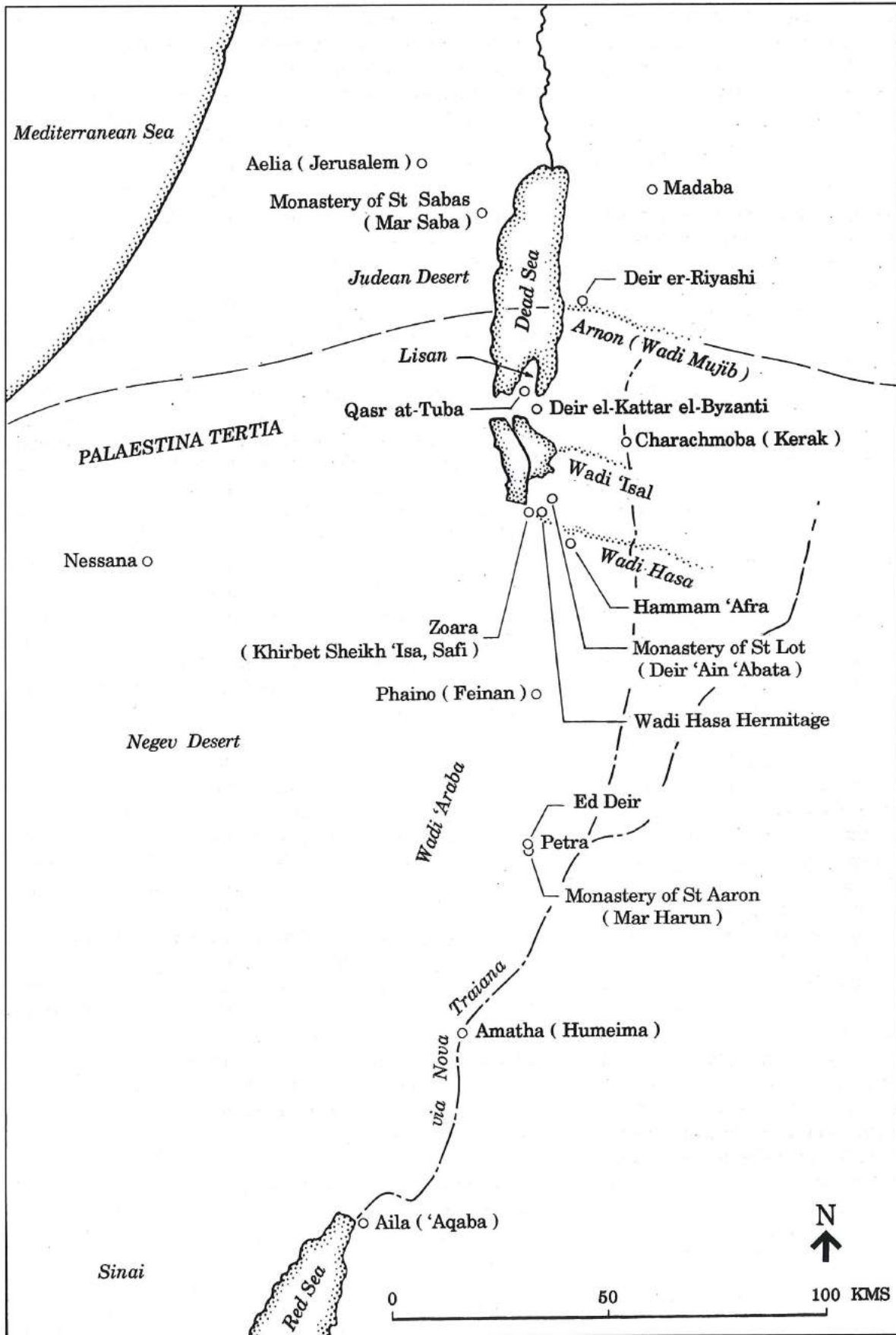
About 3 kilometres north-west of the Dayr al-Qaṭṭār lies a larger hermitage known as Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba which is carved out of a marl promontory and built partially of natural gypsum slabs and of adobe bricks (Abel 1929: 248-252). The structure consisted of four rooms connected by open narrow corridors which would increase wind draughts (a beneficial feature in this sweltering environment) and a paved courtyard on the south side. Again crosses and graffiti were etched on the walls along with one Greek inscription mentioning the names of four hermits, *Agapios*, *Konstantinos*, *Makarios* and *Ioannis* (Politis 1995: 556-559). A water cistern which was revealed during recent excavations at the site (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 335) indicates that this hermitage was more than an ephemeral ascetic cell. Considering the short distance from the eastern shore of the Judean Desert, it may have played a primary role in the pilgrimage route eastwards across the Lisān Peninsula. It is anticipated that the fragments of inscribed papyri found during these excavations will help to resolve the nature of ascetic activities on al-Lisān. Nearby caves recently reported may also be related to the Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba hermitage (personal communication, Volker Wrede, 1998).

The Hermitage at Dayr ar-Riyāshī

Perched high on top of a spur extending from Wādī al-Haydān into Wādī al-Mūjib lies the hermitage of Dayr ar-Riyāshī. Because of its inaccessible location few have been able to visit the site (Burkhardt 1822: 371; Glueck 1934: 59-60 and 100), and indeed that was probably the intention of those who built it. Grooves on steep eastern side of the spur were probably made by supplies being drawn up by rope in baskets (a practice still evidenced in ascetics' cells today). Although it has never been excavated, stone walls, an apse and surviving sections of insitu mosaic pavements embody the remnants of a small church. Adjacent to this are a cistern and a series of small cells. Two stones with engraved crosses and Byzantine pottery scattered on the ground confirm the Christian nature of the site.

The Coenobium Monastery of St Lot

The monastic complex at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa in Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi consists of an 18 x 17 metre triple-apsed basilical church flanked by a large seven-metre deep arched reservoir on the south and a refectory and hostel to the north. Several hermits cells are found above and to the south of the monastery. It is the most extensively excavated and



1. Early Byzantine Monastic Sites in Eastern Palaestina Tertia.

studied coenobitic monastery in eastern *Palaestina Tertia* (Politis 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995 and 1997).

Accurately located and depicted on the Mādabā mosaic floor map as the Sanctuary of *Agios* (=saint in Greek) *Lot*, its construction is dated by a Greek mosaic floor inscription to April 606 with a renovation date of *Xanthikos* (roughly May) 691. Pottery and other objects from the excavations indicate a fourth century AD origin of the site as a Christian place of pilgrimage. Nabataean and Roman period pottery suggest an earlier veneration of the site. The presence of Early and Middle Bronze Age finds may even allude to a belief that the site was sacred by its later inhabitants if they too had discovered such ancient relics. There is similar evidence for this ritual at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī on al-Lisān. The final period of occupation was in the late eighth to early ninth century as evidenced by Abbasid period pottery, glass and inscriptions.

The mosaic inscriptions in Greek name several church officials including the Bishop *Iakovos*, the Abbot *Sozomenos*, the Presbyter and County Bishop *Christoforos*, the Presbyter and Oeconomos *Zenonos*, the Governor *Ioannis* son of *Ravivos*, *Georgios* the sacristan, the builder *Ioannis Prokopios* and *Ioannis Savinaou*, probably the mosaicist. Pilgrim's graffiti in Greek on the wall plaster and stone blocks include *Nestacia Zenobia*, *Ulpus*, *Sozomenos* and *Pavlos*.

A communal tomb in a disused cistern, reinterred skeletons in the cave and several single stone-lined burials account for the monks and pilgrims who lived and died at the site. At least one was of African origin which corroborates the Coptic coins and pottery found at the monastery.

Furthermore, the unusually large basilical church and reservoir, the hostel complex and an exceptionally wide range of foods including fruits, meats and fish from the Red Sea attest to the monastery being a major pilgrim destination in eastern *Palaestina Tertia* during the sixth-seventh centuries. It was visited by St Stephen from the monastery of St Sabas in the Judean Desert during the late eighth century (Garitte 1959: 365) and by the Russian Abbot Daniel in 1106-7 (Wilson 1888: 47).

The Cave Church at Ḥammām 'Afra

Near the hot springs of Ḥammām 'Afra, three kilometres south of the wadis 'Afra and al-Ḥasa, is located a cliff-side cave church. It is comprised of three caves cut into the sandstone escarpment aligned east-west and decorated with wall paintings of crosses with fish and birds and Greek inscriptions including one naming an Abbot *Ioannis* and a hermit *Theodoros* (MacDonald 1980: 351-364).

The east end of Cave 1 has three niches carved into the bedrock flanked by two pilasters and two columns resembling a basilical church plan. Similar cave churches have been found in the Judean Desert (Hirschfeld 1992: 117-129). Although the front part of all three caves has

eroded away, there are remnants of what might have been a passageway which probably would have connected them.

Immediately east of the cave church is a rock-cut room with an entrance and window. To the south of this structure are the remains of steps cut into the bedrock leading up above the wadi. Although this has not been investigated it would not be surprising to find other caves and single chambers used as hermits' cells associated with the cave church at Ḥammām 'Afra.

The Cliff-Side Memorial at Wādī al-Ḥasā

On the northern cliff-side escarpment of the mouth of Wādī al-Ḥasa is another rock-cut cave with two inter-connecting chambers. The northern one contains a large (unfortunately robbed-out) stone-built cist tomb. The adjacent southern chamber has a one metre-wide apse on the eastern side flanked by two half metre wide niches covered with partially painted plaster. When this was first reported, a Greek inscription etched on the plaster covering the cave wall characterised the site as a "Holy Place" (Frank 1934: 207-208; Alt 1935: 72-73). Although later scholars hypothesised that this was the Biblical site of the Sanctuary of Agios Lot depicted on the Mādabā mosaic map (Donner 1983: 1-3), the more recent discovery and excavations at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta have disproved this notion.

Stone walls and a 2.2 x 3.5 metre reservoir immediately outside the cave indicate more substantial structures once existed at the site. It is possible that a hermit/caretaker may have lived there. Early Byzantine pottery sherds and remnants of an ancient path leading up to the cave suggest that the site had frequent visitors. Taking the "Holy Place" inscription and the impressive burial chamber into account, it seems that the site was intended as a memorial to a holy man who attracted a significant number of pilgrims.

Monastery of St Aaron and Hermitages at Petra

The Byzantine city of Petra continued to flourish as it had done during the Nabataean and Roman periods, becoming a centre of Christianity in eastern *Palaestina Tertia*. It was the See of the Metropolitan until the early seventh century. The al-Kātūta and Urn Tomb were both reused as churches. Recent excavations have uncovered two large basilical churches: the "Petra" church (Fiema forthcoming) and the "Ridge" church (Pa. Bikai 1996: 481-486). A cache of carbonised papyrus rolls from the mid sixth century AD were discovered in a room adjacent to the "Petra" church which names one as the Church of the Virgin Mary and the other as the Church of the Saint High-Priest Aaron (Pi. Bikai 1996: 487).

The latter church probably refers to the Monastery of St Aaron on top of Jabal Harūn, just south of Petra. This monastic complex lies immediately below a mosque rebuilt

over a church dedicated to the traditional burial place of Moses' brother, Aaron (Peterman and Schick 1996: 473). The remains, which are currently under excavation, consist of a multi-roomed courtyard complex around a water cistern. Over a dozen 5 x 4 m to 5 x 2 m cells can be distinguished as well as a 16 x 7 m church. The monastery is listed by Eusebius in the Byzantine period, mentioned as a place of frequent pilgrimage during Lent in the mid-8th century by St Stephen the Sabaite and visited by Crusader and Medieval travellers (Peterman and Schick 1996: 477).

There is also evidence for monastic activities at the main site of Petra. In the largest rock-cut Nabataean monument, the ad-Dayr, there is testimony of four Greek Orthodox monks residing there until 1884 (Piccirillo 1992: 20; Canova 1954: 17-19). A rock-cut cave on the way to Seyl Batha bears crosses at its entrance indicating it was once occupied by a hermit (Linder 1997: 504, pl. 52).

Other Hermitages and Monasteries

Immediately west of Khirbat Faynān (ancient Phaino) are two churches. Further west is a cluster of rooms enclosed by a wall which may be a monastic complex (Frank 1934: 223; Khouri 1988: 123). In Wādī Dufali and Wādī al-Malik near al-Karak (Byzantine *Charachmoab*), hermitages have also been reported (Canova 1954: 3-4, 17-24, 220-222, 217). An adobe-built church which was recently discovered during excavations in Byzantine Aila (al-'Aqaba) may have been part of an early monastic complex similar to those found in the Egypt (Parker 1996: 247).

Considering the eastern spread of asceticism from the Judean Desert, there is every reason to believe that the discovery of monasteries and hermitages from new surveys and excavations in southern Jordan will continue well into the next millennium.

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