

Ancient Arabs, Jews and Greeks on the Shores of the Dead Sea

Abstract/Introduction

For over three thousand years the interactions of the Semitic and Hellenic peoples have formed the bedrock of Levantine society. Recent archaeological discoveries including funerary inscriptions, documentary papyri, religious and cult objects, ceramic forms, architectural styles and even the style of dress illustrate this historical reality. Often, these finds have specific cultural identities. The evidence from ancient settlements on the shores of the Dead Sea has revealed a coexistence of wealthy multi-ethnic communities. Their economies were based on the trade of the unique resources of the area such as salt, sulphur and bitumen, as well as large-scale agriculture of balsam, indigo, dates and sugar cane.

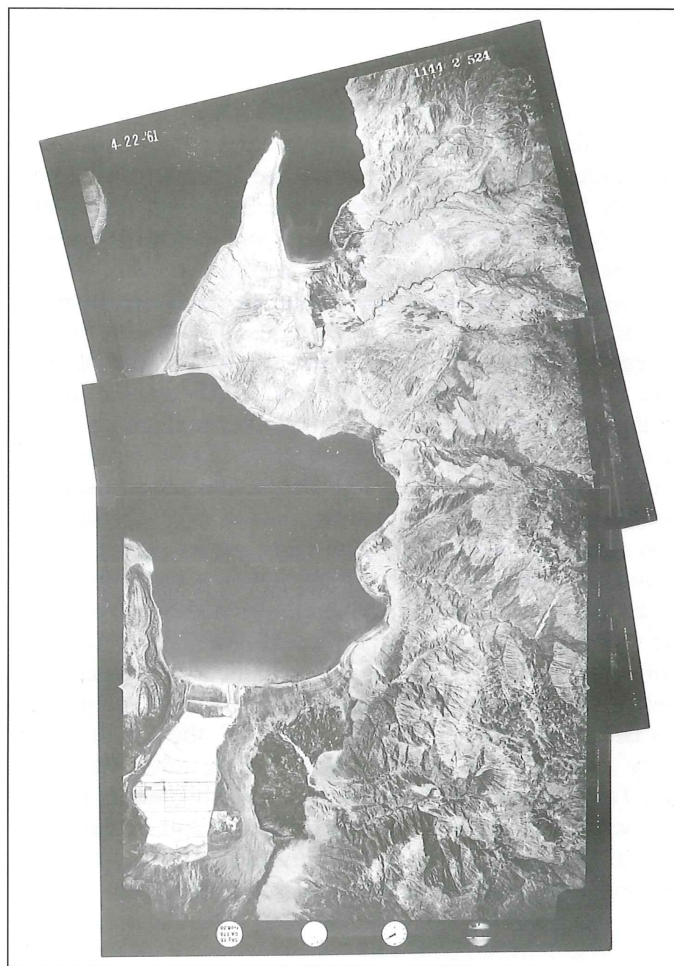
Dead Sea Geography

This paper focuses on one small, but uniquely historic region of the ancient Near East: the sites located along the shores of the Dead Sea, particularly those on the eastern side.

The Dead Sea littoral has changed drastically during the last 11,000 years (FIG. 1). Originally it consisted of a body of fresh water extending from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Wādī ‘Arabah in the south. The limits can be clearly delineated by remnants of lacustrine sediments, which geomorphologists characterise as Lake Lisan deposits (Macumber 2001: 5). These are the oldest Dead Sea shores along which evidence has been found for some of the earliest human occupation.

There were several names for the Dead Sea in antiquity. It is referred to as the ‘Salt Sea’ in the Old Testament (Numbers 34: 3, 12; Deuteronomy 3:17; Joshua 3:16, 18:19). Ancient Greeks, such as Strabo, identified it on the basis of another of its invaluable resources, bitumen, and named it ‘Asphaltites Thalassa’ (Piccirillo and Alliata 1999: 56). The name ‘Dead Sea’ was first used by the Greek travel-writer Pausanius in the second century AD (V.7.5). In Arabic literature and historical sources it is known as Baḥr Lūt, or the Sea of Lut (Le Strange 1890:

64-66), in reference to the protagonist in the epic tale of Sodom and Gomorrah recounted in both the Old Testament (Genesis 14, 18, 19) and the Holy Qur’ān (21: 27, 26: 166, 27: 55, 29: 27-28, 11: 70-78 and 81-82).



1. Aerial view in 1961 of the south-east end of the Dead Sea showing the shoreline which has since dropped substantially, and the main agricultural villages of al-Mazra'a/Ḥaditha (north) and aṣ-Ṣāfi (south) (photo: Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre, Amman).

Origins of the Dead Sea Communities

Although prehistoric occupation in the Dead Sea region is attested to as early as 500,000 years ago (Macumber 2001: 5), true settlements are not evident until about 5,000 years ago. It is during this period, known as the 'proto-urban' Early Bronze Age that the first nucleated villages and towns can be found. Several such settlements have been excavated at the south-east end of the Dead Sea which may relate to the 'cities of the valley' described in the Old Testament (Genesis 13: 12, 14) and recounted in cuneiform tablets found at Ebla in northern Syria (Politis 2001: 34-37). These accounts are significant because they have some geomorphologic and archaeological corroboration as well as a religious affiliation. Furthermore, they are directly associated to the Dead Sea area and the original identity of its inhabitants.

The Early and Middle Bronze Ages (roughly 3,200-1,500 BC) are the periods in which most scholars of Near Eastern archaeology set these biblical episodes and the patriarchs related to the foundation of Judaism that was eventually inherited by the Christian and Islamic faiths. Although important archaeological sites such as Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl, Bāb adh-Dhrā', Numayra, Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta, aṣ-Ṣāfi, Khanāzīr and Fayfā are now being studied, they can neither seriously substantiate the biblical stories nor identify their ethnicities. They have, however, been able to verify the existence of organised and interrelated communities on the Dead Sea shores during this early period that apparently suffered some kind of catastrophe (Rast and Schaub 1974: 9-19). The Iron Age (1,200-400 BC) is a significant period in determining ethnicity as during this time the Old Testament was written. In this respect, some of the contemporary accounts may be credited as 'historical'. The earlier stories such as those mentioned above, were now recorded in order to remember a shared past, thus creating a common national history. During the Iron Age the Dead Sea purportedly served as an international border and its shores served as a battlefield between the biblical Israelite, Ammonite and Moabite people (supposed ancestors of Jews and Arabs respectively). But what is the archaeological evidence to substantiate these cultural or ethnic distinctions? Although this period has been characterised as 'proto-historic', there is little literary evidence for determining ethnicity other than the Old Testament itself. The problem with this text is that it was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, by and exclusively for a single group, the Israelites, and consequently reflects national and possibly political bias. Furthermore, it was written as a recollection at a later date. One clear example is the slanderous claim that the ancestry of Ammonites and Moabites (the sworn enemies of the Israelites) originated from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Politis 1996: 17-18). One of the problems in understanding the history of the Dead Sea region dur-

ing the Iron Age is that there are fewer material remains than from the earlier Bronze Ages (Benedettucci 1998: 110). Mt Nebo/Pisgah (Numbers 21: 20; 23:14; Deuteronomy 3: 17, 27; 4: 49; 34: 1; Joshua 12: 3; 13: 20) and a number of *tall* sites in its valley below, reveal Iron Age occupations at the northern end of the Dead Sea. Some of these, such as tall Nimrin/Bethnimrah (Numbers 32: 36), Rāma/Bethharam (Joshua 13: 27) and Jericho (Numbers 22: 1; Joshua 6:1-27), have long been associated with Moses and Joshua in one of the most important episodes of Jewish national history that led directly to the very foundation of their first state (Deuteronomy 31: 14-30; Joshua 6: 12-27). At the southern end of the Dead Sea, there is even less evidence representing this period. One recent discovery is Tulaylāt Qaṣr Mūsā al-Ḥamid, which, if we are to believe in biblical identifications, may be associated to the Moabite town of Zoar (Politis 1999a: 543-544). What is certain from this site is that a community based on relatively large-scale organised agriculture could flourish on the arid and seemingly inhospitable shores of the Dead Sea at this early date.

Ancestral Definitions and Claims

Addressing the issue of ancient cultures and the ethnic groups and territory associated with them is a delicate task. This is particularly true in the ancient Near East where the most influential societies interacted to form the basis of what is called 'western civilisation'. It is further complicated by the fact that remnants of these cultures have survived into modern times, often seeking to identify with the past in order to justify their present and future existence. It is particularly dubious to employ the nation-state model that was an unfamiliar concept in the ancient world. This retrospective examination, which can sometimes be imaginary, may alter the reality of a claimed ancestry. It is therefore the responsibility of conscientious archaeologists to uncover and present their finds as objectively and impartially as possible. One of the main aims of this *exposé* is to identify the principle ancient cultural players in the Dead Sea region through their artefacts. The two groups concerned here are the Semites (Arabs and Jews) and Greeks (including 'eastern Romans'). The interaction between, and eventual union of these groups formed the bedrock of Levantine society (Bowersock 1999: 72-73, 80).

Defining cultures or ethnic associations can be precarious, especially concerning the Near East where there is a constant dialogue between the past and the present. Interpretations can often be subjective, if not personal. The criteria for distinguishing such divisions must therefore be carefully assigned. Language is perhaps the most distinctive element when identifying a culture. It leads to a written and, consequently, a shared history of a people. A common belief system tends to develop into an organ-

ised religion. This encompasses issues ranging from codes of behaviour to burial practices. There are also other factors such as crafts, art and architectural forms that may identify cultures, though at times they may be shared with other groups. These similarities require archaeologists to be particularly careful when diagnosing associated artefacts and their interpretation. During the 19th and earlier 20th centuries distinguishing an ethnic group on the basis of 'race' was academically acceptable as evidenced by the inclusion of physical anthropology within the study of archaeology (Jones 1998: 40-44). During the latter half of the 20th century however, this notion was largely discredited mainly due to the new study of genetics that gave accurate scientific evidence of consanguinity within most cultural groups. Whilst the varying degrees of racial homogeneity are still being debated, it seems probable that environmental determinism, rather than physical inheritance, is responsible for the specific characteristics of a particular cultural or ethnic group.

Semitic Identities

Any attempt to define and distinguish between ancient Arabic and Jewish people results in defining the minor traits of two Semitic communities rather than describing entirely different peoples or cultures. Firstly, both the origin of their languages and their *lingua franca* are akin. Their respective written alphabets and spoken words were therefore mutually comprehensible. For centuries both groups communicated continuously in Aramaic, the most widely spread of all the Semitic dialects. By the time of Jesus Christ, Greek had become the *lingua franca* of the eastern Roman Empire which was also adopted by both Semitic groups and was frequently used instead of their own language (Millar 1987: 146). The fact that they shared the same ancestral homeland (the Levant in general, and Dead Sea region specifically) largely explains their similar genetic (if not racial) inheritance. To the Arab, however, their collective name implies a basic identity with the land of Arabia whereas the Jews claim a divine right to the land. The roots of their religious beliefs are similarly related. Christianity and Islam inherited much of their principles directly from Judaism via the Old Testament, a book that they too greatly revere. Jews and Arabs (whether pagan Nabataeans or Muslims) were originally iconoclastic. During the last two millennia the Jews and Arabs (Muslim and Christian alike) venerated the same prophets and abided by many of the same moral codes of behaviour; for example male circumcision and the prohibition of pork consumption. Their similar prompt burial practices can be attributed to the usually warm climate of their shared homeland. Intermarriage was not unusual being acceptable at the highest level, as evidenced by King Herod the Great whose father was a

Hellenised Jew and mother a Nabataean Arab. By the virtue of their intertwined societies most of their material culture is similar, if not indistinguishable (Wenning 2003). This fact is problematical and is being constantly debated by archaeologists. The question of the identity of the ethnic group that was buried at Khirbat Qumrān is a good example. It has been recently demonstrated that the 'Qumran-type graves' were not exclusively Jewish as had been widely believed, but were also used for Nabataean Arab burials in the region (Politis 2003a; Wenning 2003).

Hellenic Influence

Although the first known contacts between the Semitic peoples and the 'Greek World' occurred as early as 1,500 BC when Mycenaean, Minoan and Cypriot traders and artisans reached the Levant, this initial influence was minimal and not apparently enduring. Perhaps the most important cultural exchange at an early date was the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet by the Greeks to transcribe their language. It has also been argued that there were some minor artistic exchanges, such as pottery, architectural styles and wall paintings (Politis 1988: 2; Novak and Pfalzner 2002: 226-231). By the Archaic period in the late Iron Age (ca. 800-700 BC) there is ample evidence of exported Greek Geometric pottery indicating trade as well as Greek mercenaries present in the Levant (Kokkinos 1998: 46-47). It was not until the conquest of the Near East in the fourth century BC by Alexander the Great that the spread of Greek, or more correctly Hellenistic, culture fundamentally influenced the future of the area. This not only laid the foundation for the dominant 'classical' and 'western' civilisation that followed, but also the transformation of the very nature of Semitic societies (Rajak 1990: 262-263). Alexander himself personally encouraged the fusion that resulted in Hellenic and Semitic cultures in the Near East, when he took a local bride and never returned to his Macedonian homeland in Greece. His generals and soldiers followed his colonist policy of intermarriage and settlement that resulted in the establishment of deep Hellenic roots in the lands they conquered. Although Hellenistic culture was promoted, it did so whilst assimilating the indigenous peoples and because Greek colonialism was not based on race, members of other ethnic groups were able to join the new Hellenistic culture. In this transformation of the Near East, the Greek language served as the primary vehicle for the diffusion of Hellenistic culture. All the key institutions that characterised Hellenism (dramatic literature, *gymnasia* education, *boule* politics, science, architecture, the *agora* market place and the pagan religious Pantheon and cults) required the use of the Greek language. If one aspired to be a part of this new community, speaking Greek was the only essential prerequisite. It is not surprising therefore, that the histories of the Jewish people by Fla-

vius Josephus and in Maccabees 1 and 2 were not only written in Greek, but employed a 'Hellenised' dramatic style (Rajak 1990: 268, 276).

Hellenisation of the Near East was so widespread and influential that it prevailed throughout the Roman period when it was officially promoted (Rajak 1990: 264). This Graeco-Roman cultural alliance was so successful that much, and often all, memories and identities of the subjugated peoples were erased (Millar 1987: 147). It may be argued that by the time of the first centuries AD, Hellenism absorbed many Semitic societies. This is possibly why we have relatively few surviving Aramaic literary works as compared with Greek in the Semitic homeland during the 'classical' period.

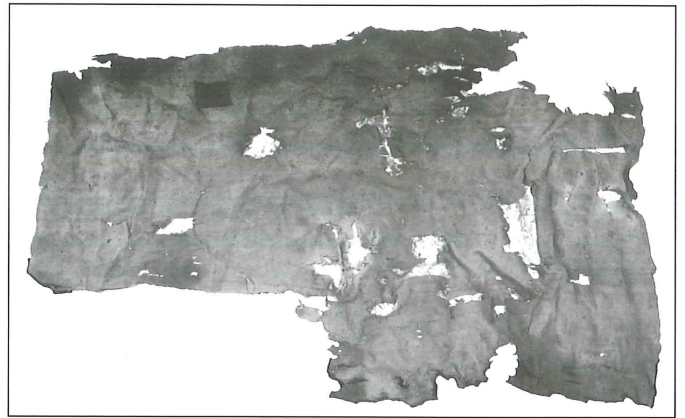
The coming of Islam saw resurgence in Hellenism epitomised by the veneration of Alexander the Great himself in the Holy Qur'ān (XVIII, vv. 83-89; XXX, vv. 1-6). In fact, it has been argued that Hellenism flourished in the early Islamic world (Shahid 1992: 49-60).

'Classical', Christian and Islamic Societies

The archaeological record reveals the astonishing degree of influence that Hellenistic culture had on indigenous Semitic societies, often manifest in items of every day use found at Dead Sea sites.

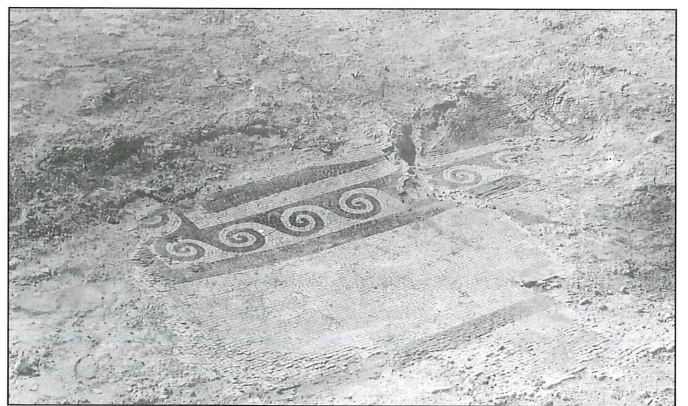
During the Iron Age, for example, cooking pot forms did not apparently include lids and therefore there is complete lack of pottery that could be interpreted as being lids. This has obvious culinary implications; food was stewed as water was boiled away. Archaeological finds have revealed that various gruel and porridge-type meals of cereals and pulses were prepared in this way. Along with the numerous changes brought by Hellenism came the invention of the casserole type of cooking pot sealed with a lid. Cooking in pots covered with lids is more energy/heat efficient and would have reduced both fuel consumption and water evaporation both of which are scarce resources in the Dead Sea area environment. The characteristic shape, brittle ware and ribbed decoration of these cooking pots survived well into the eighth century AD, verifying the success of this food preparation method. Daily dress in the Dead Sea region apparently used Graeco-Roman fashions, as seen from the tunic and mantle garments (FIG. 2) uncovered at Mas'ada, the Cave of Letters and Khirbat Kazūn (Granger-Taylor 2000: 151). Average Nabataean Arabs, Jews and Greeks would have been indistinguishable in sartorial appearance.

The art of mosaic paving originated in Hellenistic Macedonia during the fifth century BC. This became one of the most popular methods of decorating private and public buildings throughout the Near East. The baths at Machaerus are adorned with an early example of such mosaic pavements depicting a very typical Hellenistic stylised wave boarder (FIG. 3). The depictions of vin-

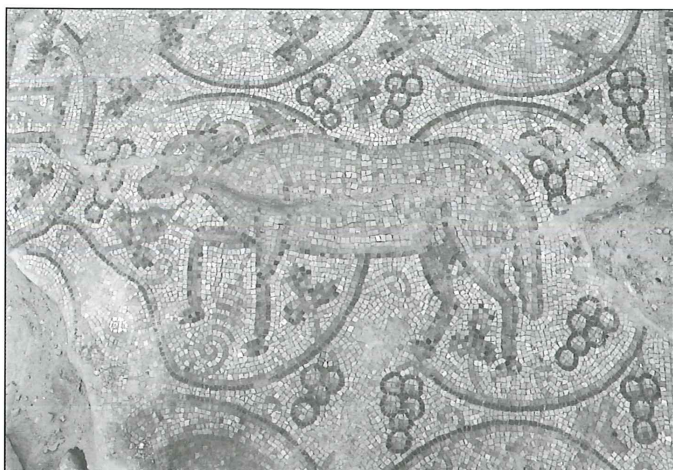


2. Mantle garment from Khirbat Kazūn, registration no. KQ Tex. 41 M2a (photo: T. Springett).

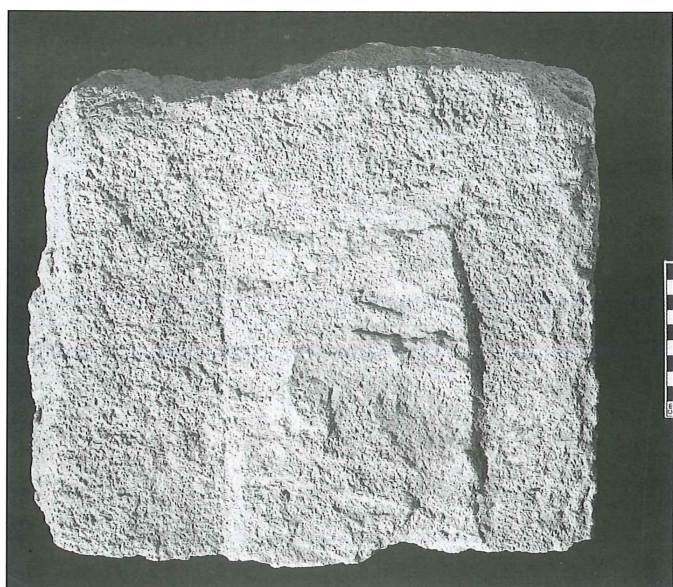
iculture on many mosaic pavements in churches similar to one at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta (FIG. 4), wall paintings and architectural elements allude to the continuity of a Dionysian cult beyond Hellenistic pagan traditions in the Dead Sea region. This was particularly prevalent amongst the Nabataean Arabs who transformed aniconic representations of their chief god Dushara such as ones found at Khirbat Kazūn (FIG. 5), into anthropomorphic figures of Dionysus himself. The discovery of wine presses, grape pips and specialised pottery filter jugs from many Dead Sea sites of this period prove that wine consumption continued to be as widespread as it was in Graeco-Roman times. Greek and Roman historians such as Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Flavius Josephus all writing in Greek, refer to the good relations that existed between the Jewish and Nabataean Arab communities. Some of those by the Dead Sea flourished by trading in balsam (Hirschfeld 2003) and date palm cultivation (Freeman-Grenville 2003: 31; Bowersock 1996: 94). Judging from the alternative names given to the Dead Sea, there is no doubt the other rich natural resources of the area such as bitumen, salt and sulphur were also ex-



3. Hellenistic wave design on mosaic pavement in the baths of Machaerus (photo: M. Piccirillo).



4. Grape vines depicted on mosaic pavement in the chancel of the basilica of Agios Lot, Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta (photo: T. Springett).



5. Aniconic representation of Dushara on sandstone block, Khirbat Kazūn registration no. KQ 7 (photo: T. Springett).

plotted. There is significant evidence from a Greek papyri found at Nahal Hever on the western shore of the Dead Sea that some Nabataeans were allied with Jews during the final Bar Kokhba Revolt of 135 AD (Graf 2003). But perhaps the best affirmation for the co-existence of Jews and Nabataean Arabs can be found in the Babatha archive of 132-135 AD which documented the legal exchanges between a Jewish widow and Nabataean officials who confirmed her inherited land rights in Mahoza, Zoara (Bowersock 1996: 75, 77-78). Not only does this judgement demonstrate that Jews were welcome to take refuge in Nabataea but importantly that they could own land there (Bowersock) 1988: 185-186). Recent excavations have identified these sites at the modern villages of Haditha and al-Mazra'a (Politis 2003b: 110) (see FIG. 1).

During the cooler seasons of the year, the mild Dead Sea climate made the area ideal for winter residences. Jericho and 'Ayn Gadi to the west were favourite retreats and the abundant thermal springs found along the shores were famous for their therapeutic qualities according to Flavius Josephus. The ailing King Herod the Great built a villa for his frequent visits to Kalliroe for this reason. Excavations at the 'Ayn az-Zāra oasis on the east coast of the Dead Sea have revealed a building complex incorporating several hot springs (Clamer 1997: 45-48). A port served as access to the site that was linked by a steep road up to the fortress of Machaerus which is comparable to Mas'ada on the west coast of the Dead Sea. This originally Jewish stronghold bordered the Nabataean Arab Kingdom and was eventually overtaken by King Herod the Great on behalf of the Roman Empire and he erected a palace on the site. It was here that John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod's son Antipas, spending his final, fateful days as a victim of Salome and her malicious mother Herodias (Mark 6:14-29; cf Kokkinos 1998: 266-268).

John 'the forerunner of Christ', later known as 'the baptist', was one of the most important and colourful characters to inhabit the Dead Sea region. Although he has been linked to the zealous Jewish Essene sect, he was certainly intensely involved in the foundation of Christianity. He wandered along the shores of the Dead Sea prophesising the coming of a saviour and immersing his converts in the Jordan River as repentance for their sins (John 1: 28). He eventually met his redeemer, Jesus Christ, another radical Jewish prophet, who was undoubtedly the most famous and influential character ever to frequent the shores of the Dead Sea. As these two personalities travelled the area preaching to ordinary folk they used the Greek language along with local Aramaic. About two thousand years ago, Greek was as widely spoken as Aramaic both in the urban and rural areas by the common, usually uneducated people. But it was Greek that was chosen to transcribe the narratives of the New Testament, indicating that this language was a unifying factor and consequently dominant over the various Aramaic dialects. This foreshadowed the future status of Greek as the official language of Christianity as mandated by the Byzantine state. Aside from Machaerus (mentioned above) there are two other important sites that are associated with the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. The first are the sites of Aenon and Sapsaphas in the Wādi al-Kharrār on the east side of the lower Jordan River called Bethany in Peraea where St. John was supposed to have baptised Jesus Christ (Mark 1: 9-11; John 1: 28, 10:40). Excavations revealed the remnants of a large basilica church built on great vaults that were dedicated to St John together with a number of Christian monastic and pilgrims' dwellings dating to the fourth-sixth centuries AD (Piccirillo and Alliata 1999: 55; Piccirillo 1995). It is

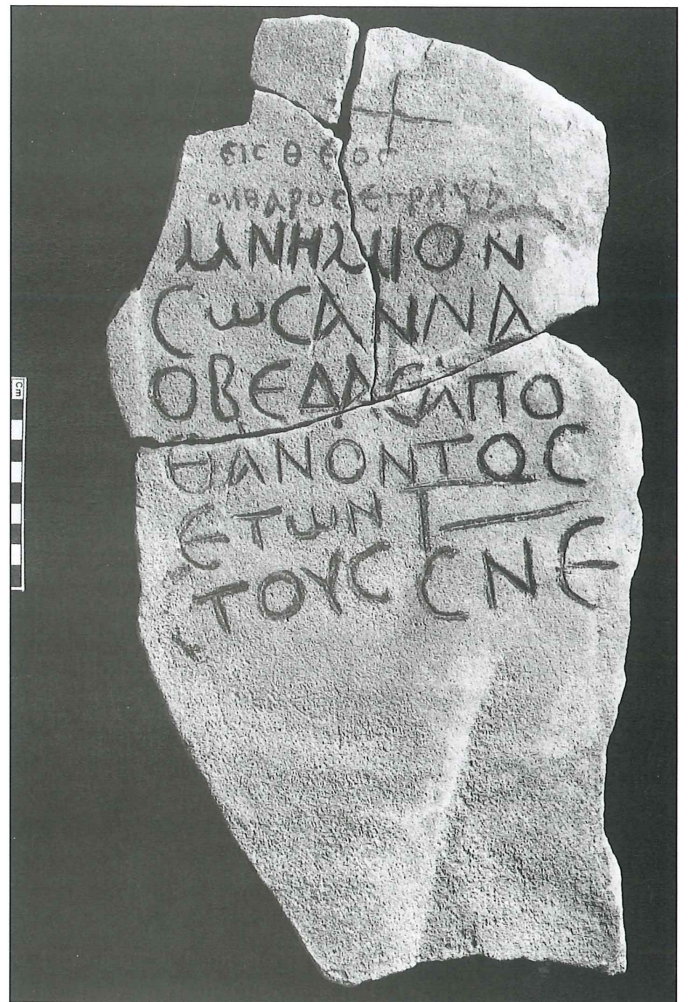
interesting to note that Herodian-period pottery and ‘shaved’ stone vessel fragments have been discovered during the excavations indicating an actual presence at the site during the time that John the Baptist and Jesus Christ purportedly roamed the area. However these material finds have no specific religious or ethnic identity and allude only to the pre-‘Christian’ occupation. The second site is Khirbat Qumrān of Dead Sea scroll fame, which has been compared to a quasi-religious tertiary school with oral instruction similar to Plato’s where young males lived and studied together (Phillip Alexander, public lecture, University College London, 19 October 1998). It may be best described as a didactic centre of the pious Jewish Essenes to which John the Baptist may have been affiliated. The fact that such a Judaic religious school should model it’s system on a Hellenistic prototype is indicative of the extent of Greek influence on key indigenous Semitic institutions (Rajak 1990: 264). Another vivid linguistic example is the Greek origins of the word for a Jewish religious congregation: ‘synagogue’; the Christian equivalent is ‘ecclesia’, or church. Both derive from the classical Greek concept of an assembly. The impact of Hellenism on Christianity is unequivocal and manifold. Much of this is due to the fact that Christianity became the official state religion of the eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire that inherited most of the Graeco-Roman institutions. The dominance of the Greek language was ensured and enshrined, when it became both the official language of state affairs and of the Christian Church. This was further endorsed by it’s use as the universal language of scholarship, literature and commerce (Gutas 1999: 17).

Recent excavations and surveys at the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea highlight the spread of ‘Greek’ culture via Christianity (Politis 2001a: 585-589). Of particular note are the fourth to seventh century AD dedicatory and funerary inscriptions found at the Monastery of Agios Lot and the City of Zoara (Politis 2001c: 19). Virtually all of these are inscribed in Greek and most are dated according to the Macedonian calendar (an obvious Hellenistic vestige). Also, a large number of these Christian inscriptions bear Nabataean Arabic names in Hellenised forms, including:

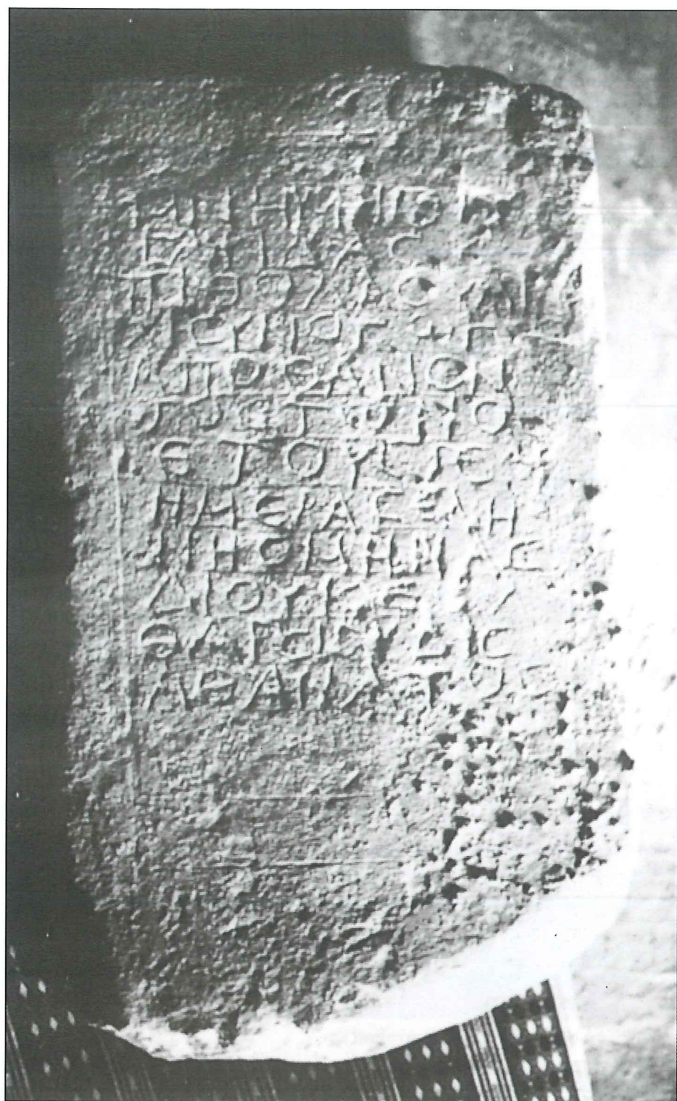
ΟΥΑΡΔΟΥΣ, ΟΒΟΔΑΣ (FIG. 6), ΑΒΔΑΛΓΗΣ, ΣΙΛΘΑ, ΑΡΕΘΑΣ, ΑΛΕΣΟΣ, ΑΛΦΑΛΑΣ, ΣΑΒΑΣ, ΡΑΒΙΒΗΛΟΣ, ΔΟΥΣΑΡΙΟΣ, ΝΕΤΙΡΟΣ, ΑΒΔΟΜΑΝΗΣ, ΑΖΙΖΙΟΣ, ΑΜΕΡΟΣ, ΑΣΕΜΟΣ, ΘΕΜΑΛΛΑΣ, ΚΑΙΑΜΟΣ, ΜΑΛΕΧΑΘΗ, ΜΟΣΑΛΕΜΑΣ, ΝΕΣΑΡΙΟΣ, ΣΑΔΑΛΛΑΣ, ΣΕΛΑΜΑΝΟΣ, ΑΒΑΒΗ, ΑΒΑΒΙΟΣ, ΑΒΒΙΒΑΣ, ΑΒΔΟΥΣ and ΑΒΟΥΒΑΘΗ.

There were also a few Jewish tombstones inscribed in Aramaic, and notably one in Greek naming a certain ΣΑΡΙΔΑΣ ΠΙΘΑΛΛΑΟΥ as an ΑΡΧΙΣΥΝΑΓΟΓΟΣ. (FIG.

7) This is quite surprising not only because it is a tombstone inscribed in Greek belonging to a Jew, but even more so as he was the head of a synagogue. Ordinary Jews may have lost their ability to communicate or write in Hebrew, particularly in a largely Hellenised and Christian Arabian province, but still one would have expected Rabbinical officials to have retained their knowledge of Hebrew. These Hellenistic influences of the Byzantine Christian period survived even into the first Islamic Caliphate of the Umayyad. The mosaic pavement in the nave (FIG. 8) of the basilica of Agios Lot at Dayr ‘Ayn ‘Abāta dated to 691 AD is one of a dozen churches so far discovered east of the Dead Sea that were either renovated or built during the early Islamic period. That fact that Greek was still being chosen to inscribe mosaics without official imposition proves the familiarity that most people had with the language. Perhaps rather more significant are the papyri found southwest of the Dead Sea at Nessana in the Negev desert, which clearly illustrates the persistence of



6. Christian tombstone inscribed in Greek with Nabataean Arabic name, ΣΩΣΑΝΝΑ ΟΒΕΔΑΣ in a Hellenised form, Zoara/Ghawr aş-Şāfi, registration no. Z 266 (photo: T. Springett).



7. Jewish tombstone inscribed in Greek naming ΣΑΡΙΑΔΑΣ ΠΙΘ-
ΑΛΛΑΟΥ as an ΑΡΧΙΣΥΝΑΓΩΓΟΣ, Zoara/Ghawr aş-Şāfi, registra-
tion no. Z 89(photo: K. D. Politis).

the Greek language even at an official level. These papyri were part of a group of Umayyad court documents among which was one dated to 685 AD which was sent from the administration of the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik himself and written in Greek (Bowersock 1999: 77-78). When the Abbasid dynasty established their power-base in the east by the founding of Baghdad, they realised how much they needed to learn from Hellenism. Therefore by the early ninth century the famous Christian Arab scholar Ḥunayn ibn-Ishāq began a colossal programme of translating almost all of the great Greek classics in philosophy, literature, science and medicine. This was first supported by the enlightened Caliph al-Ma'mūn and then by successive caliphs as well as by Abbasid society in general (Bow-

ersock 1999: 81). Such Graeco-Arabic translation existed informally during the Umayyad period, but in the east where the early Abbasid Caliphate was based, there was a lack of Greek-speakers (Gutas 1999: 53-60, 192) so a deliberate translation movement commenced (epitomised by the *Bayt al-Hikma*) that was to shape the entire future of the Semitic polity (Gutas 1999: 53-60; Shahid 1992: 51-52). This new eastern base had dramatic repercussions in the Dead Sea region which became a cultural backwater of the Levant. This is quite apparent from the poor archaeological record of the area for about two hundred years. There are historical references though, that describe thriving market towns on the Dead Sea shores producing indigo and dates (Schick 1997: 75, 79) indicating the endurance of the communities. One of the best testimonies for the continued survival of indigenous Semitic peoples in the Dead Sea region can be found in the Ayyubid-Mamluke period (12th-15th century AD) settlements. These consisted largely of medium-sized towns whose economies were based on the large-scale cultivation and production of sugar. Recent investigations have revealed a network of sugar factories in the region based at the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea in the main market town of Zagar (Politis 1998: 629-630; Jones *et al.* 2002) (FIG. 9). Furthermore, it is apparent that this was a key industry for the entire medieval Arab world whose science (based on ancient Greek works) and technology was more advanced than those in the contemporary European 'west'. By applying such knowledge, those involved in the sugar trade gained considerable wealth which not only enriched the Dead Sea region but also contributed to the development of Semitic culture in general. The success of this process led to its westwards diffusion, as evidenced by the construction of similar sugar factories on the islands of Cyprus and Rhodes, and eventually into Europe where such applied skill indirectly led to the industrial revolution.

Defining a 'Dead Sea Culture'

Attempting to describe the cultural landscape of the Dead Sea region during the last five thousand years is perhaps an over-ambitious endeavour. And yet there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there remains a reasonable amount of Semitic continuity though occasionally coloured by varying degrees of western, Greek influence. These interactions have sometimes resulted in unions of societies producing a hybrid culture. Language, which is often the only surviving ethnic indicator, has proven to be a persistent clue, helping to define a 'Dead Sea culture'. However, no single ethnic group can comprehensively characterise the history of the region. These former Dead Sea communities may therefore be best described as being a 'mosaic of cultures' (Jones 1998: 21) where once Arabs, Jews and Greeks were intertwined.



8. Mosaic pavement dated to 691 in the nave of the basilica of Agios Lot, Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa (photo: T. Springett).



9. Aerial view in 1992 of Tawāḥin as-Sukkar (sugar factory) and Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Īsa (ancient Zughar), Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi (photo: courtesy Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre, Amman).

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