# ANCHORITE CELLS AND DWELLING COMPLEXES ON AL-LISAN PENINSULA: PRELIMINARY FIELD RESULTS OF THE SWEDISH DEAD SEA EXPEDITION, 2009 AND 2011

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**Introduction**

This preliminary report is based on the results of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition (SDSE) on the al-Lisan peninsula in January 2009 and August 2011. The work included documentation of three hermitages (cells / dwelling complexes of anchoritic monks) registered during our earlier survey and complementary documentation of inscriptions (see Holmgren and Kaliff 1997, 2005). A further objective was the inspection of the part-excavated church / monastic centre (*coenobium*) of Dayr al-Qaṭṭar al-Bīzanṭī (JADIS no. 1907.007). Seasonal heavy rains, illicit excavations and tectonic movements are currently threatening the structures and exposed inscriptions. Furthermore, SDSE registered previously unknown graves in the immediate vicinity of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al- Bīzanṭī. In 2008, we discovered some new looting pits on the plateau to the west of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār using Google Earth satellite imagery. During the field-survey, these turned out to be graves dated to the monastic period.

The fieldwork was professionally facilitated through the much appreciated help and effort of our representative Jamileh Abdel Latif Saleh Eshtewi from the Department of Antiquities office at Safi. We are grateful for all advice and assistance from the inspector at the same department, Jihad Darwish. We would also like to thank Mohammad Alzahran, curator of the museum at Safi, for useful assistance with a number of issues, not least for managing the finds from this and previous years which are now stored at the Lot's Cave museum at aṣ-Ṣāfī. Many thanks also go to Eyas Abusror in Amman, for helping us with important practical issues. The C-14 samples referred to in the text have been analysed for our project by Prof. Göran Possnert at The Ångström Laboratory, Tandem Laboratory, Uppsala University, Sweden.

The church and monastic centre at Dayr al-Qaṭṭar, along with nearby several cells and dwelling complexes, represent a monastic society organized in a pattern similar to the well-documented desert monasteries in Egypt and the Judean desert. The Judean desert and its fringes became the most important monastic 'center' in Palestine. This was the desert closest to Jerusalem, whose holy places were less than a day's walking distance away. Individuals of deep religious piety, as well as high intellect, were drawn here from all over the Christian world. A flourishing cosmopolitan society was therefore established in the desert as well as in the Holy City itself. Despite the proximity of settled lands, the desert monks adhered faithfully to the way of life they had chosen. The wild vistas of the desert were thought to provide a direct link with the divine (Patrich 1995: 6-7). Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and the hermit dwellings on the Lisan peninsula are located close to this core of monastic activities, in suitably wild and desert-like surroundings. No literary references to the *coenobium* known today as Dayr al-Qaṭṭār have been found, nor are there any references to any of the *laurae* in the vicinity. This is probably because the site has not yet been identified with any historical known monastery. In sum, the al-Lisān sites form a relatively large monastic complex. The various sites comprise a *coenobium* and a richly decorated and well-built church with at least one chapel, as well as other buildings. This monastic community is most probably mentioned in the written sources, but has not been properly identified. Besides the archaeological work remaining to be done on the al-Lisān remains, the task of identifying them is of great importance for our project.

**Dayr al-Qaṭṭar and the Hermitages on al-Lisān: *Coenobium* and *Laura***

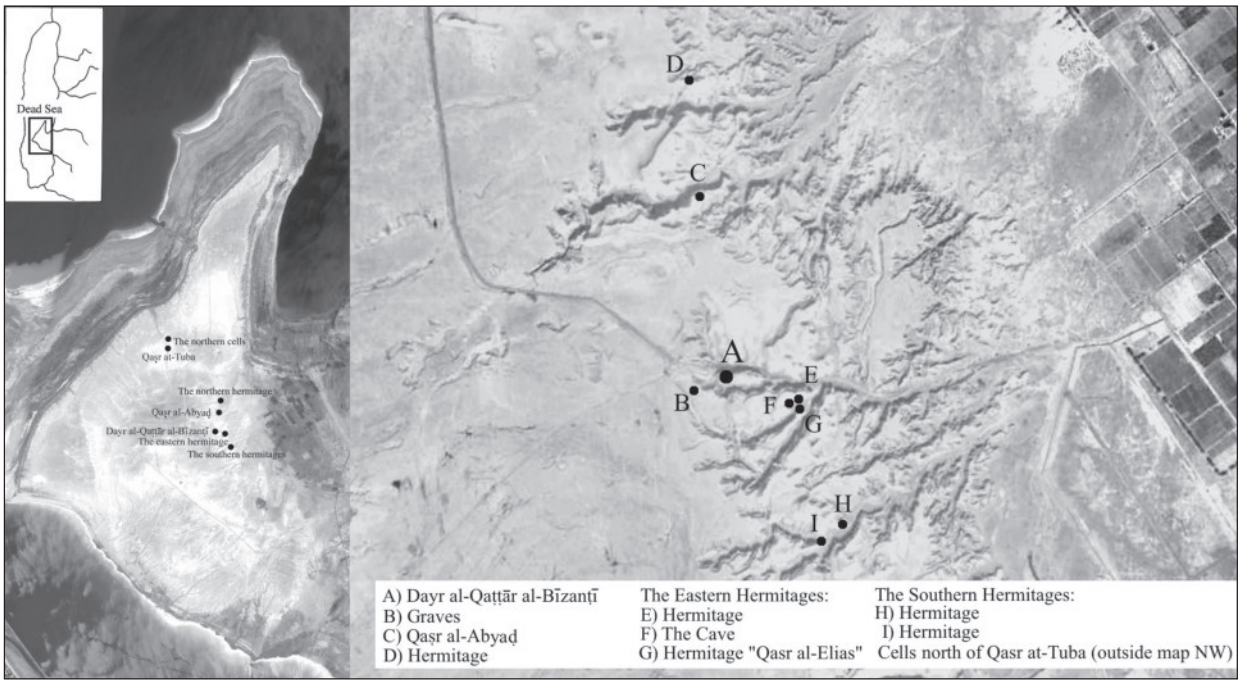
In spite of its much smaller scale, an Egyptian pattern can be seen in the monastic activities on the Lisan peninsula (see below) (**Fig. 1**). The anchorite cells are dispersed over a large area, being located in small rift valleys eroded into the Lisan marl up to 3 km from the center (Dayr al-Qaṭṭār). Some locations seem to form separate small *laurae*, like the area around Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba, although these clusters of cell and dwelling complexes were probably organized as a single community. The survey documentation of January 2009, together with our earlier surveys, covered a large area in the eastern and south-western parts of al-Lisān. The terrain, with its steep rift valleys and loose dust, is very hard to access. Erosion is a constant threat to the hermit cells because of the soft marl they are cut into. Rain, wind and earthquakes have damaged many sites and looting activities have also disturbed several units. This especially concerns those closest to the habitation and agricultural areas to the east. In this area, modern graffiti – cut into the soft, vulnerable marl of some cells – is especially regrettable because of the damage caused to invaluable inscriptions preserved from the Byzantine period.

The Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is an independent archaeological project, initiated in 1994 by the authors of this report, who are also co-field directors. The project was earlier associated with the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, but is now linked to the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Uppsala University. As well as the documentation of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bīzanṭī, a further goal of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is to study the monastic society of the al-Lisān area from a long-term perspective (approx. 4th-12th century AD). Of particular interest is the date of and processes behind the establishment of the earliest anchorite dwellings, the development of the *laura* (or different *laurae*) on al-Lisān and the possible development and change of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār from a dwelling complex into the core of a *laura*, and eventually into a *coenobium*.

**Hermitages and Graves Documented in 2009**

*Graves*

About 200m east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bīzanṭī, recent illicit excavations have revealed about 20 previously unknown graves. One-third of these human-sized rectangular pits show clear evidence of human remains. Although the re-




*1. Satellite image of the al-Lisan peninsula, with the major sites discussed in this paper marked respectively (National Imagery and Mapping Agency CNES / SPOT Image 2009).*

mains of a broken skull and two jawbones are present, most of the scattered bones seem to originate from other parts of the body. Two of the looting pits contained skeletal remains from several individuals; one burial deposit contained more than eight femoral heads, suggesting not only reburial of bodies, but perhaps also some kind of arrangement of the bones. It is likely that some sort of advanced equipment was used to discover the tombs. This would explain why some of the pits were empty of bones, i.e. where a rectangular space of loose soil misleadingly indicated the presence of a tomb. The loose soil might very well be the original burial place for skeletal remains subsequently buried in adjacent collective graves. A more thorough analysis of this site is necessary in order to better comprehend the function and content of the tombs discussed. However, it seems without doubt that these specific tombs are associated with the site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār.

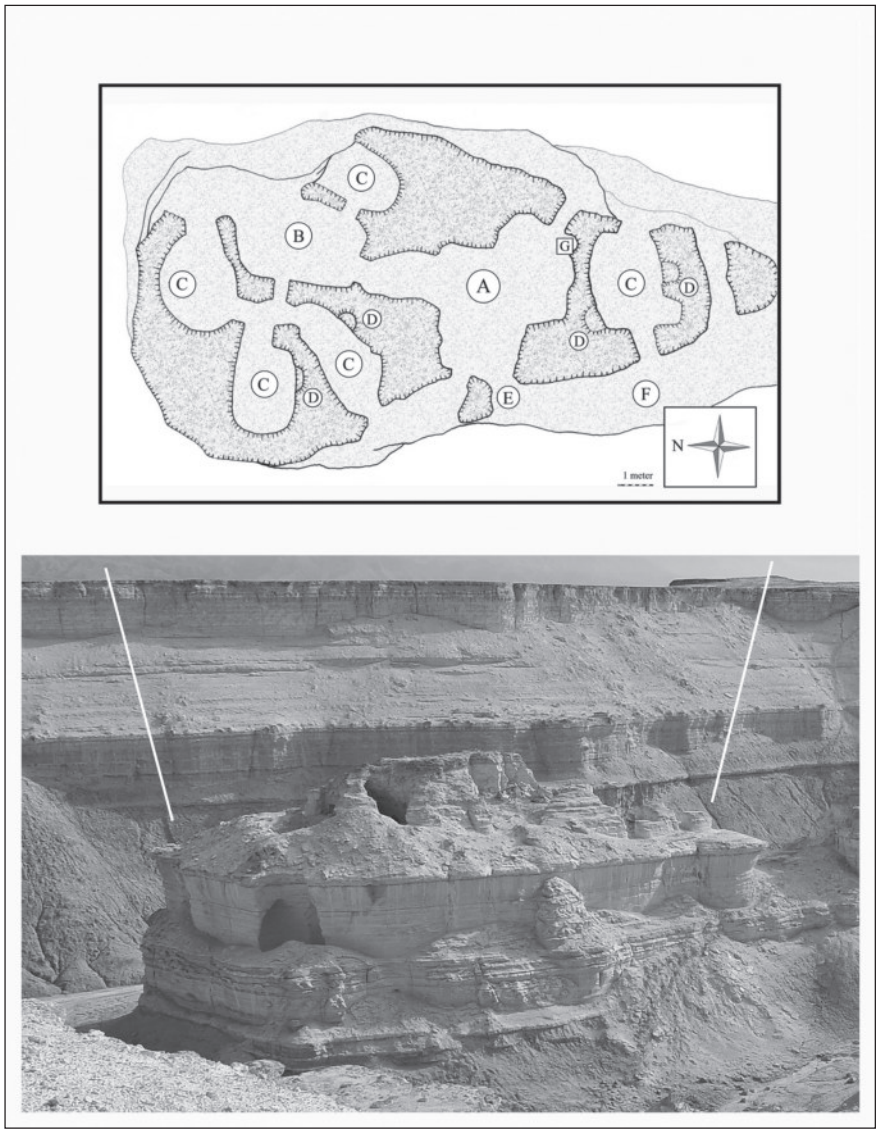
Two C-14 samples were taken from molars, but only one could be dated owing to the poor condition of the bone material. The sample yielded a most likely date of 540-600 AD (Ua-42728: 1 sigma, 68.2%), which is only slightly younger than the date from the previously studied crypt under the floor level of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. A C-14 sample from another molar derived from the crypt beneath Dayr al-Qaṭṭār yielded a date of 410 - 540 AD (Ua-38855: 1 sigma, 68.2%). The contents of the crypt can also be understood as bone material collected from elsewhere in the area - most probably from burial sites in or adjacent to the hermit dwellings nearby. However, the site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār could also be interpreted as having originally been a larger hermit dwelling, with the cell-like crypt being one of many rooms similar to 'Qaṣr Ilyās' and Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba, as discussed below. Further excavation in Dayr al-Qaṭṭār's substructures may confirm this.

*Eastern Hermitages*

The eastern hermitages are the closest dwelling complex to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. The site is located in a small *wadi* approximately 300m east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār – hence the name (Holmgren and Kaliff 2005). These cells, cut into the slopes of the nearby ridges, could form a small *laura* on their own. More probably, these hermitages should be interpreted as two adjacent dwelling complexes, one very large (referred to here as 'Qaṣr Ilyās') on two levels with several chambers and passages that have collapsed in recent years, and a smaller one consisting of at least two rooms, now partly collapsed. A more precise dating of these structures in relation to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār will be very important for gaining an understanding of the development of the monastic community. For a preliminary dating, see *Inscriptions and graffiti* below.

On a central ridge in the middle of the *wadi*, the larger of the above-mentioned hermitages, *viz*. 'Qaṣr Ilyās', was briefly documented in 2009. The structure is generously proportioned with a central space surrounded by several satellite cells. It is cut into the sediment in the typical al-Lisan manner; the greater part of the structure is still standing, although a large part of the superstructure has collapsed into the interior. In general, the site is in poor condition owing to natural erosion and geological activities affecting the soft laminated marl. The hermitage also shows evidence of recent illicit excavations. The southernmost part of this site was excavated and documented by SDSE in 1997. To avoid further damage, only the accessible parts of the site were documented in 2009. Beneath the debris of eroded material, but also scattered on the ground surface, quantities of building material and other items are visible. The passage between the different chambers has lancet-shaped sections with pointed vaults. This architectural feature and the high, central position of the site very much resemble the sites of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba and Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 333-336, 2005).

The estimated layout of 'Qaṣr Ilyās' was sketched in plan form. In terms of rooms A - C (**Fig. 2**), the structure was studied by analysing the walls above the loose marl and harder collapsed crust (*ca.* 1-1.5m deep). A larger central space constitutes the central core of the entire complex (A-B). Space A probably represents a chapel, accessed through an entrance (E) and further connected to the top of the ridge (F). Several satellite cells (C) are moreover connected to the central core, sometimes containing arched niches (D). The main entrance to the complex was most likely in its southern part, where ladders or now buried steps once gave access to the site. From the photograph below the sketch in **Fig. 2**, one




*2. A preliminary sketch of 'Qaṣr Ilyās', showing its distinctive layout (illustration SDSE).*

can see how the previously documented cell – containing the inscription *ELIAS* (hence our name for the site) – is situated on a lower level in the site's north-western corner. Whether this separate cell is connected to the rooms of the upper level has yet to be verified.

Traces of two large illicit excavations were found in two different rooms of the complex. The adjacent Greek inscriptions were not damaged, but the pits had partly disturbed the floor level of the hermitage. The latter was documented and the sides of the pits were cleaned in order to document the profile of the marl layers. No strata are visible in this hermitage, although a clear layer of bird excrement and collapsed roof or ceiling material (consisting of reed) can be seen about 10cm above the floor level. This suggests that the hermitage may have been abandoned before the start of the various collapse episodes. Each pit was backfilled to protect potential features and inscriptions. The layout of 'Qaṣr Ilyās' has many similarities with the sites of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba and Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ, both documented by SDSE (see archaeological reports in *ADAJ* 41 and 49). A small survey was carried out around the site, during which scattered archaeological material and samples were collected. Frequent finds included pottery, bricks, strips of palm leaf and pieces of rope, as well as nut-shells, smaller bones and textile fragments.

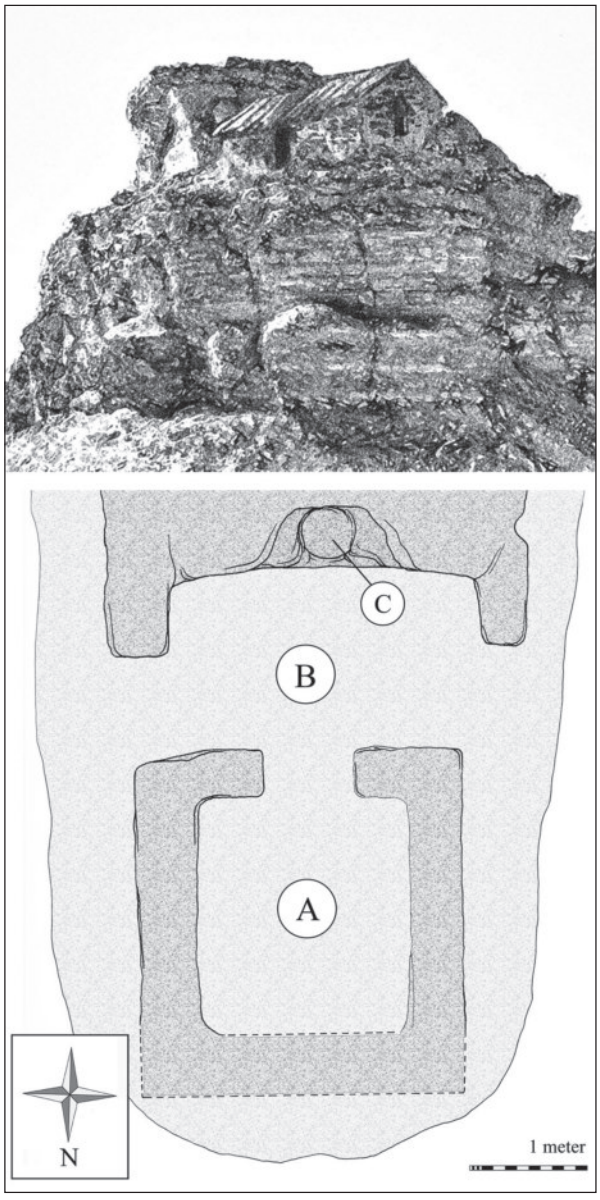
*Southern Hermitages*

In a separate *wadi* south-east of the 'eastern hermitage', two additional dwellings were

mapped. On entering a narrow part of the inner valley, a hill top facing the valley entrance has evidence for a smaller hermitage. The feature consists of one room, possibly with other minor features buried under fallen debris just north of and immediately outside the entrance. The structure consists of one semi-circular room approximately 3x2m with a maximum height of 190cm. Two opposing small niches flank the entrance; lower parts of the interior walls, up to 60cm above the floor level, are smooth and carefully cut into the marl. However, above that level the interior surface is uneven and very rough – almost as if some centimetres were deliberately removed from upper parts of the cell walls. Faint lines on the western wall, near the entrance, suggest the occurrence of inscriptions, which may have been deliberately removed from the rest of the interior.

About 100m further south, there is yet another hermit dwelling in the *wadi*. On a prominent hill top, the architectural plan of a two-space dwelling can be discerned. A relatively large room measures *ca.* 1.70x2m (room A) with a south-facing doorway. This room / small freestanding building is connected to another installation to the south. The latter consists of a niche-like feature with an elevated and round hollowed installation (C; possibly a *piscina* / *thalassidion*). This area, *viz*. the space between the room and the southern niche, is marked B on the sketch. The original height is impossible to determine, but the standing marl-walls are preserved up to a height of 0.5-1m. Fallen bricks and other building material, such as blocks made out of the Lisan 'crust', can be found in the valley bottom all around the dwelling. A preliminary reconstruction sketch of the entire complex and its appearance as seen from the valley bottom is at **Fig. 3**, complementing the plan.

Originally, the complex could not have been easily accessed owing to the narrow setting of the hilltop. Only narrow paths on both sides of the hermitage could have accessed the entrances on either side of space B. A ladder or similar might also have originally given access to the complex itself. It is too early to interpret the function of the site, but the unusual combination of a room built next to an installation of this type might suggest a place of worship such as a small chapel.




*3. One of the southern hermitages (marked I in **Fig. 1**). The illustration shows the plan of the hermitage (below) and a tentative reconstruction (above) (illustration SDSE).*

*Cells North of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba:* **(Figs. 3-4)**

In the northern extension of the *wadi*, where Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba is situated, a number of cells are visible – primarily on the eastern side of the valley. Many of these cells are very small indeed, especially in terms of their height. The inner height of some cells does not exceed 1.5m, although they are man-sized (or more) in length and width. A few spaces could be interpreted as tombs, although no skeletal remains were found inside or in their general vicinity. During the period of the early hermitages, there are lit-

*4. Hermit cells north of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba (photo SDSE).*

erary sources that describe the limited dimensions of hermit cells as deliberate. This would have been in accordance with rules put forward by Euthymius and other founders. Sometimes this caused complaints, with monks changing monastery because of too-small cells. Patrich refers to a detailed contemporary description of Theogonius' cell, near the Theodosius monastery, by Paul of Elusa: "But very small was the cell and it is so low that when you come in, if you do not take care, you will knock your head against the ceiling" (Patrich 1995: 126).

On the second level of cells facing the valley, one of the larger dwellings (?) has a cruciform-shaped plan with smaller cells or spaces attached to a main corridor. On either side of the entrance are two semi-circular spaces, each around 1 m in diameter. Further along the narrow corridor is a perpendicular north-south crossing section that constitutes the center of the entire complex. This section has semi-circular spaces about 2m in diameter at either end. The crossing section is about 8 meters in total length. Following the east-west corridor to its far end, there are two similar cells, one on either side.

The cells in this area are half-filled with al-Lisan marl; they seem to have been deliberately filled and were subsequently part-emptied, perhaps by illicit explorers. Alternatively, perhaps the half-filled spaces were originally made as cells, which were subsequently used as tombs and then excavated in ancient times so that relics could be gathered into communal ossuaries at a site of importance, most likely in crypts beneath Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bīzanṭī.

*Hermitage North of Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ*

Another hermitage was also discovered and preliminarily mapped in 2009. Situated north of the previously documented hermitage of Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ, a similar construction was carved out of the marl. This newly discovered hermitage was, like its southern counterpart, located on the eastern edge of the white hilltops overlooking the flat landscape around the southern part of the Dead Sea. The hermitage is almost completely buried by the collapsed superstructure, but enough of the rooms can be seen to permit an estimation of its size and architectural plan. The site resembles Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ, in that it has a larger chapel-like structure oriented north-south which measures nearly 7m. A shelf-like feature is visible in the western part of this 'chapel' and, at the far north end, a circular room *ca.* 2m in diameter extends to the west. A small elevated compartment is attached to the latter room, facing north. At this point it is hard to determine the function of the hermitage, but it is interesting to see how the size and architectural plan are almost identical to that of Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ. The great quantity of inscriptions preserved at the latter may be matched at this newly discovered site. A third hermitage, similar but somewhat smaller, has also been sighted along this ridge but has unfortunately been lost for the time being owing to the complicated, winding valley systems.

Remarks

A good parallel for the al-Lisān hermitages can be found in the cells of the Gerasimus monastery (Dayr Hayla), which is located about 3.5km away. Here, the caves are cut into the soft marl

in much the same fashion as those at al-Lisān. A characteristic feature, also seen at al-Lisān, is a tunnel-like corridor running across the hill into which the dwelling complex is cut. As at the Lisān sites, the hermitages of Gerasimus vary in size and complexity. The most elaborate dwelling complex (Cave 3) may have been the residence of a more prominent monk. Here we find two living rooms and also two cooking stoves. This site and its features very much resemble those of Qaṣr at-Ṭūba. Other similarities include the rock-cut prayer niches, as well as engraved crosses and Greek inscriptions, which include singular names such as *Ioannes* (Patrich 1995: 128-130, see especially figs. 56-57).

In the larger dwelling complexes at al-Lisān, such as Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba and Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ (but excluding Dayr al-Qaṭṭār itself), prayer chapels have been identified. The larger hall of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba, with its documented liturgical installations, shows clear evidence for such a function. This is also evident in the larger room of Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ. Palaeographic material and the artefacts and installations found, especially at the well-documented Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba, suggest a combination of a hermit dwelling and a place of worship (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997, 2005). The same interpretation probably also applies to the dwelling complex of 'Qaṣr Ilyās' in the eastern hermitage. At these, as well as at some of the smaller sites, there are also prayer niches. This combination of monks' cells and a prayer chapel is not unusual in early monasticism, with examples from Mar Saba and the Euthymius monastery (Hirschfeld 1993; Patrich 1995). There are several parallels documented at the great *laura* of Mar Saba, where remains of chapels or prayer niches were found in many dwelling complexes. These installations always constituted an integral part of the dwelling complex, with the chapels comprising a separate space next to the dwelling room. This is also the case at the al-Lisān cells and dwelling complexes. In the case of Mar Saba, it was assumed that each cell or complex included such a place of worship (Patrich 1995: 90-95). The hermit cell has also been discussed as a miniature church, where hermits celebrated the Eucharist in solitude. This was experienced as a corporate solitude in which the whole church participated. The saying of Evagrios of Pontus can be quoted in this respect: "The monk lives separate from all and united to all" (Lozano 1987: 145).

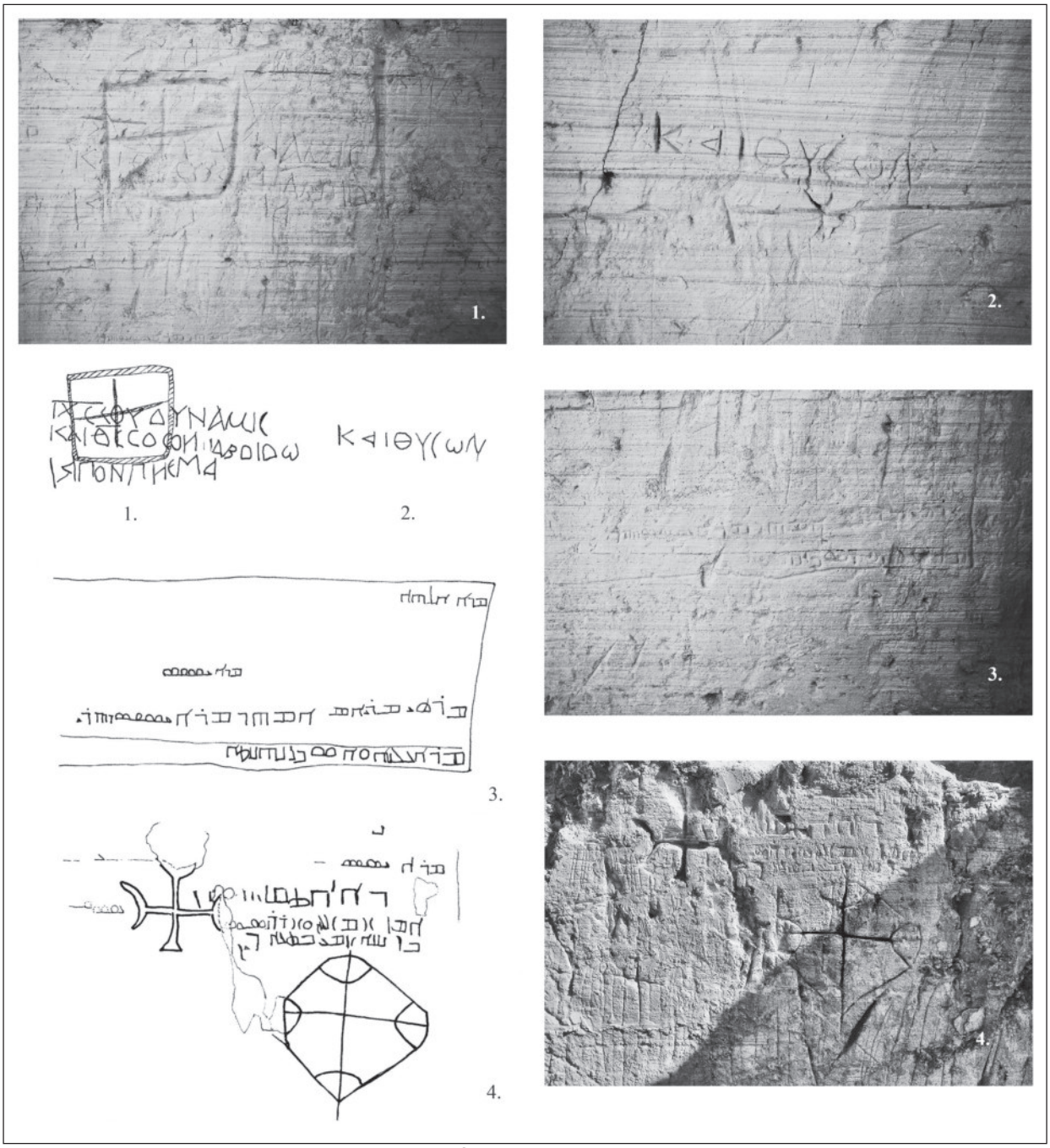
It is evident that several dwelling complexes were built according to a common plan, with certain variations depending on the location and size of the complex. There are also parallels with the great *laura* of Mar Saba, where the architecture and quality of the dwelling complexes, with water systems that collected rain water into cisterns, show that they were built by expert masons according a plan that was drawn up in advance (Patrich 1995: 106).

**Inscriptions and Graffiti**

The marl walls of the cells and dwelling complexes were plastered inside with lime mixed with straw. Many inscriptions on the walls of the chapels and dwelling rooms were covered with plaster in a later phase. This plaster has often fallen off the walls owing to erosion, thereby once again exposing inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic, together with different crosses and more enigmatic signs. Samples of organic material in the plaster have been C-14 dated in five different cases. The plaster provides a *terminus ante quem* for the inscriptions, but need not be contemporary as the inscriptions might be older. The dates obtained were relatively consistent, being between 380-540 AD (1 sigma, 68.2%).

In addition to the marl walls at Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ and Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba, as well as at eastern hermitages such as 'Qaṣr Ilyās', various inscriptions were documented. A more thorough analysis is underway, dealing with all the various inscriptions and graffiti present in the cells and hermitages described in this report. This material will be examined in the context of the various rooms and their functional interpretation, after the necessary cleaning and excavation (e.g. see plan of Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ in Holmgren and Kaliff 1997). However, a more in-depth analysis of the inscriptions documented at Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ has already been presented in an excellent work by Émile Puech (Puech 2011: 91-93). These inscriptions mainly concern the Greek, Aramaic and Christian - Palestinian graffiti in (**Fig. 5**:**1-4**). This material is briefly presented here with English translations, along with parts of the detailed interpretations made by Émile Puech.

Inscription 1 depicts a rectangular panel, including a cross with three lines in Greek. Line 1: "Jesus Christ (is) your strength." Line 2: "And,




*5. Inscriptions 1-4 from Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ (illustration Émile Puech; photo SDSE).*

O God, save Abo / Aba, see!" Line 3: "And O Holy Spirit!"

The shorter Inscription 2 can be read as: "and sacrifice / offering a sacrifice / famous by a sacrifice".

Inscription 3 is interpreted as Christo - Palestinian Aramaic enclosed in a rectangular box. Its poor preservation means that only the last two of the original six – perhaps seven – lines can be read. The suggested reading for Line 1 is: "Lord God", with the beginning of Line 2 being: "Our Lord Jesus". The last two lines are fully preserved. Line 5: "Lady Mariam, mother of the Lord Jesus, protect!" Line 6: "Lord, allow us to enter because we have committed sin!"

Inscription 4, to the right of a smaller Greek cross and above a larger Greek cross within an angled square, presumably consists of three dif-

ferent entries with four preserved and readable lines.
Line 1: "… ? …"
Line 2: "Lord Jesus [ ]"
Line 3: "[L]ord, we beseech and be favourable!"
Line 4: "Really, listen to [me / us], and protect [us], O Jesu[s!]"
Line 5: "Really, look! Listen in the wilderness!"
Parts of the larger dwelling complex in the eastern hermitage of 'Qaṣr Ilyās' were already visible during earlier fieldwork, but the full extent of the site was only revealed after erosion of the site from 2002 onwards. The documentation of wall inscriptions from three cells located on the lower level, which were previously interpreted as separate cells, has already been presented in the preliminary report covering the results from 1995 and 1996 (Kaliff and Holmgren 1997). Parts of these inscribed walls have unfortunately been damaged by modern graffiti during recent years. During SDSE's 2009 season, additional inscriptions and graffiti could be seen on exposed walls protruding from the collapse at 'Qaṣr Ilyās'. Present is an inscription of the Greek letters *XP*, a common abbreviation of the name of Christ. Furthermore, an indistinct presence of the word φως (Gr. "light") can be traced. The word 'light' is sometimes connected to the monogram of Christ. Another commonly associated word is ειρηνη (Gr. "peace"), together with the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. These four different inscriptions could all be interpreted as references to Jesus Christ and, as such, might represent traces of an early Christian presence. Other traces of Christian inscriptions / graffiti include a distinct cross in connection with a proper noun written in the dative, meaning "this place belongs to Fafeos". Perhaps the most elaborate graffiti is a depiction of a possible *navicula Petri*, a ship representing the Christian church.

Two different radiocarbon samples from the straw / plaster mixture that once covered the Greek letters XP (i.e. part of the plaster preserved on the wall below the inscription), have yielded consistent dates: 420-540 AD (Ua-38854: 1 sigma, 68.2%) and 430 - 540 AD (Ua-42725). Another similar date, of 380-530 AD (Ua-42727), comes from sooty plaster in the adjacent room to the north. Yet another, this time of 410-540 AD (Ua-42726), comes from one of the chambers in the southern part of the hermitage.

The relatively poor material finds from the hermitages, cells and chapels are representative both of the ascetic life of the monks and of the handicrafts carried out during the course of their daily work in the cells. The finds from the hermitages are generally similar (notwithstanding the papyrus find from Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba) and include fragments of pottery, strips of palm leaf, tufts of camel hair, fragments of rope, nut shells, smaller bones and textile fragments. Fragments of linen cloth and tufts of camel hair are both common finds. Camel hair was probably used by the hermits for clothing, a custom relating to John the Baptist who was in turn presented as the Prophet Elias *redivivus* by Jesus (Mt 17:12-13). Both John the Baptist and Elias were regarded as prototypes for the hermit life.

**Early Christian Monasticism: A Brief Background**

To better understand the reasons for the development of the various religious installations on al-Lisān, we need to consider both earlier and contemporary phenomena. In Palestine, the earliest phase of Christian monasticism has been dated to the early fourth century AD. The monastic movement spread and flourished during the Byzantine period (324-642 AD) and often continued into the Islamic and Crusader periods. One example is the Gerasimus monastery (Dayr Hajla), located between Jericho and Jordan. This monastic community was founded in 455 AD and was only abandoned after the Crusader period, notwithstanding the fact that the number of monks was reduced during certain periods. This site was rebuilt in more modern times and exists to this day (Murphy-O'Connor 1998).

Many monasteries were established in or around large cities, at holy places and at sites of pilgrimage, while others were in desert areas. The remains of monasteries have therefore been found in diverse areas. The first known monks in the region were Hilarion of Thavata who lived in the Gaza region, Epiphanius who settled near Eleutheropolis, *ca.* 50km south-west of Jerusalem, and Chariton who became the founder of monasticism in the Judean Desert. Chariton founded three *laurae* in the first half of the

fourth century: Pharan, Douka and Souka. The more organized monastic communities, characterized by a monastic center or *coenobium*, were established along the Jordan in *ca.* 455 AD when Gerasimus founded a *laura* surrounding a *coenobium* (Patrich 1995; Bar 2005).

The process by which the different early monasteries came into being was similar. The first monks installed themselves in a cave or hut in isolated solitude. Over the course of time, other monks joined them and different communities were formed. A hermitage is generally referred to as a 'cell' (κελλίον) in contemporary written sources. With donations from wealthy admirers or a legacy bequeathed to the founder, dwelling cells, a prayer house and water reservoirs were constructed. This was the case with the foundation of the Mar Saba monastery. Similar is the story of the establishment of the three *laurae* of Chariton, the *laura* of Euthymius, the *coenobium* of Theodosius and others (Patrich 1995: 61, 126). The founder, who was the leader of the group, determined whether it would be built as a monastery or, in the case of anchorites, as a *laura* (λαύρα, [Gr. "alley" or "lane", presumably referring to the narrow path that communicated between the monastic cells]), or even as a communal monastery or *coenobium* (κοινόβιον [Gr. "common life"]). Certain variations also existed between monasteries of the same type. A *laura* could also be changed later and rebuilt into a *coenobium*, as shown by the monastery of Euthymius (Khan el-Ahmar), one of the major monasteries of the Judean desert along with Sabas, Theodosius and Chariton. The *laura* with its church was completed in 428 AD and, after the death of Euthymius in 473, a *coenobium* was built at the site of the church, enclosing the founder's tomb (Hirschfeld 1993: 339-371). The Gerasimus monastery is an example of a different monastic type, built *ca.* 455 as a *laura* surrounding a *coenobium*. This shows that the two types of monastic community could be combined. Nevertheless, the specific features of each type are clear enough. In a *laura* the hermits lived during the week in dispersed cells situated some distance from each other. On Saturdays and Sundays they assembled in the church, located at the core of the *laura*, for communal prayer and a meal. In a *coenobium* the monks met daily in the church and dining room. In both types, the daily schedule was divided between prayer and manual labor. Also, recluses who lived alone in their cells could be found in the vicinity of a *coenobium* (Patrich 1995: 3-4). Although data on the size of the monastic population in Palestine is hard to come by, the monastic movement attracted many people from the early Byzantine period onwards. Patrich (1995) cites Cyril of Scythopolis, who in 516 AD counted the entire monastic population of Jerusalem and the Judean desert as 10,000 in total. Hirschfeld estimates that there were never more than 3,000 monks in the Judean desert (Hirschfeld 1992: 78-79), even after the expansion that resulted from the settlements of Sabas and his disciples, which greatly increased the number of monasteries. Earlier, the number of monks was much lower, with a reasonable estimate being *ca.* 1,000-1,500. According to Patrich (1995: 8-9), the number of monasteries in the Judean desert and on its margins was quite sparse until *ca.* 480, i.e. just six *laurae* and eight *coenobia*.

The monastic settlements of Lower Egypt are closest in structure to the *laurae* of Palestine and are therefore considered particularly valuable for comparative study. There is more written evidence from this area and its monastic communities were much larger. Here, there were two distinct types of monastic community: coenobite schools (*scholae coenobiorum*) and communities of anchorites (*congregations anachoretarum*). The *coenobium* was typically a novitiate stage before a life of seclusion, although some monks continued to live out their lives in the *coenobium*. The cells of the anchorites were often quite distant from each other and as such prevented the monk from seeing or hearing his neighbor. At Kellia (*ca.* 50 miles south-east of Alexandria) the cells of the settlement extended over a wide area, some of them as far as 5-6km from the church in the *laura* core. Archaeological remains indicate that the settlement eventually extended over an area *ca.* 22km long, including about 1,500 dwelling complexes with a few churches. By the end of the fourth century, before the settlement expanded, Kellia already had 600 monks. In another community of Lower Egypt, Scetis, a total of 3,500 monks lived in its four *laurae* during the mid sixth century. These numbers are unparalleled in the Palestinian *laurae*, which generally numbered only several dozen

monks. Even the great *laura* of Mar Saba was small in comparison with the anchorite colonies of Egypt (Hirschfeld 1992: 78-79; Patrich 1995: 11, 122 and references therein) (**Fig. 6**).

The education of monks was similar in the different monasteries of the Byzantine era. Novices lived in the *coenobium* cutting wood, carrying water, cooking and performing many other duties until they displayed their spiritual preparedness to practice a hermit's life. Also, monks in training were kept in the community until they had grown a beard and looked less youthful, lest they become a temptation to older monks in the *laura*. Monks who became 'perfect in God's eyes' were allowed to live in cells away from the *coenobium*. These anchoritic monks lived in seclusion for five days, eating only bread, dates and water. Part of their mission was to become free of any passion of the soul: anger, cowardice, lethargy etc. The anchorites – or cell dwellers – lived alone in their cells during the week but met in the church on Saturdays and Sundays. There were also recluses, however, who refrained from coming to the church and lived alone for years – up to several decades – in their cells. The labor of the monk in his cell included basket weaving, fashioning mats from palm fronds and calligraphy. In some communities, the monks also wove linen fabric, depending on the raw material available in the area. During the harvest season, monks also went into surrounding villages to work for wages given in kind. Such was daily life, more or less, in Egyptian communities such as Kellia and Scetis. This has parallels in the monasteries of the Judean Desert and Jordan Valley, even if the monasteries of Palestine were not centers for handicraft or agriculture in the manner of the Egyptian and some Syrian examples. Income from the sale of baskets woven by the monks,

*6. Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba on al-Lisān; a larger hermitage documented by SDSE in 1996 (illustration SDSE).*

along with other products, was only marginal at best. The charity of admirers was of vital importance, with donations being given in the form of various products or silver / gold coin. The economic existence of the Palestinian monasteries in the desert was therefore based on donations or bequests by admirers or pilgrims (Hirschfeld 1992: 102-111; Patrich 1995: 15, 194).

Pachomius (290-346 AD) is regarded the founder of coenobite Christian monasticism in Egypt, although monastic communities living an organized communal life of one sort or another existed even before his activities. He founded his first monastery in 323 at Tabennesi and, at the time of his death, no less than nine monasteries and two nunneries along the Nile were united within his community. According to Palladius, during his time in the area (389-399 AD) the Pachomian federation included many monasteries and numbered 7,000 monks. Even during Pachomius' lifetime it numbered 3,000 monks. The movement founded by Pachomius had a great impact and the rules and practice of his Egyptian monasteries spread far and wide. In the Pachomian monastic community, or *koinoia* (κοινωνία), the organizational and economic administration was in the hands of the *oikonomos* (οίκονόμος) or 'leader' of the main monastery. Each single monastery had also an *oikonomos*, who was assisted by a deputy (*secundus*). There were also groups of monks of special status, *viz*. *maiores* (πατέρες). These took an active role in the Sunday liturgy and included older, more experienced monks and / or those who excelled in virtue. The monks in each monastery were divided into houses. Each week a different house provided – in rotation – necessary services such as cooking, serving food, cleaning, hospitality, caring for the sick, church services and so on (Chitty 1966: 22-28; Rousseau 1985: 112-13; Patrich 1995: 19).

A wall surrounded a Pachomian *coenobium* and its structure resembled that of a military camp (Chitty 1966: 22). In the wall, there was a gatehouse and next to it a guest room. Additional buildings included an assembly hall for prayer, a dining hall, a kitchen, a bakery and a hospital, as well as a storehouse for food and tools. Work played an important part in the life of the monk and in the economy of the monastery. This was the difference between Pachomian and Antonian monasticism, in which the monks performed only light work in their cells. In Pachomian monasteries there were also various workshops. Palladius mentions many types of craftsmen, including tailors, metalworkers, carpenters, swineherds, camel drivers, gardeners, bakers, basket weavers and book copyists. According to Pachomian rules, the monks were not to practice excessive mortification or fasting; labor was more important, although there was a degree of freedom of choice in these matters. This differed from contemporary monastic life in Syria that displayed extreme forms of mortification. Besides longer periods of fasting, compared to Egypt, there was a tendency towards corporal suffering and self-destruction of the body. Such suffering could be expressed through winding chains around the body, exposing the body to wild beasts and the ravages of weather, vertical binding of the body or confinement to a narrow vertical space in order to force an erect posture that prevented normal sleep. Examples also include the choice of an extremely limited and isolated living space, e.g. on top of a tall column (Patrich 1995: 20-22 and references therein).

The Basilian rules are of special interest to Palestinian monasticism, since its leaders were often natives of Asia Minor, where Basilian monasticism prevailed. The church father Basil was born in Cappadocia in 329 / 30 and is known as one of the 'Three Cappadocian Fathers', along with Gregory of Nazianzus and his brother Gregory of Nyssa. They were all three influential theologians, loyal to the decisions of the Council of Nicaea and opposed to what was condemned as Arian heresy. Basil regarded monasticism, expressed through communal coenobitism, as the only proper way of life for a Christian. The *coenobium* was supposed to be a community of modest size, housing around 30-40 monks. The organization was simple. The brotherhood was headed by the *proestos*, who was to be as a father to the others, obeyed by everyone. A deputy aided him in administration. The elder and more experienced monks enjoyed special status in the community. Everyday life was a combination of prayer and work. Recommended labors included weaving, shoemaking, construction, carpentry, tin-smithing and agriculture. The educated and capable were permitted to devote themselves to the study and reading of scriptures. Basil

preached a moderate form of asceticism and moderation in fasting. Excessive asceticism was perceived as false pursuit of glory. Basil's teaching greatly influenced the monastic movement in Palestine, especially coenobitism (Patrich 1995: 28-31).

**Discussion**

There are examples of anchorite settlements – *laurae* – that sprang up around *coenobiae*. One example of particular interest to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and its surrounding hermitages is the anchorite *laura* known as 'The Cells of Choziba', which developed at a distance of about 1km from the Choziba *coenobium* (Monastery of St. George) in the Judean desert. At the same time there are other examples, such as the *coenobium* of Theoctistus, where no such settlement developed outside the *coenobium*. The anchorites in Choziba maintained a laurite way of life in their cells, while the *coenobium* served them as a *laura* core. As at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, some monastic cells are located much closer to the *coenobium*, while the main cluster is some distance away. As at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, burials have been identified just outside the *coenobium* (Patrich 1990, 1995: 124-125).

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār may have been constructed as a *coenobium* from the very beginning, in parallel with the Gerasimus monastery. However, it is more likely that it was only converted into a *coenobium* some time after the first hermits settled in the area. If so, the site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār would already have been functioning as a *laura* core during the earliest phase of the al-Lisan *laura*. The presence of cells at the very site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, apparently covered by the later buildings and surrounding walls of the *coenobium*, might also indicate that this location was the earliest anchorite settlement in the area – a place which attracted more and more hermits to gather in the vicinity and eventually establish a *laura*. Eventually, the core of the *laura* was changed into a *coenobium*. From at least the early 6th century onwards, possibly even earlier, Dayr al-Qaṭṭār had all features of a *coenobium*, even if the dating and interpretation of the different features and buildings remain uncertain owing to limited excavation at the site and in the surrounding cells to date. On the basis of a preliminary examination of pottery and finds, the earliest phases at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār could date back to the 4th century (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997, 2005). A comparison can be made with the monastery of Gerasimus, which consisted of several buildings, *viz*. the church, the monks' cells, a kitchen, a refectory and storerooms. Surrounding the *coenobium* were 70 hermitages that made up the *laura* part of the community. The hermitages were either small cells or rooms cut into the soft lake deposit of Wādī an-Nakhīl, as mentioned above (Hirschfeld 1992). The interpretation of the crypt at Dayr al-Qaṭṭar (documented during the 1996 excavation) is in line with the interpretation of the site as an earlier cell or dwelling complex for one or more hermits, which was later converted into a *coenobium*. Possibly the cell and / or tomb of the founding father was then incorporated into the church and later used as a burial crypt or ossuary (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997). In an early phase, the site might have been the core of a *laura* consisting of the various cells discovered during our survey of the surrounding area. This would be in line with developments at other contemporary sites. At Mar Saba, for instance, the *coenobium* (and present-day monastery) mark the core of the *laura*, while the cells of the great *laura* extend along a 2km section of the Kidron valley. In this example, as at St Euthymius, the *coenobium* includes the tomb as well as the cell of the founding father, which is also a common pattern. A more detailed analysis of this possible development from *laura* core to *coenobium* at Dayr al Qaṭṭār requires further excavation. A more detailed investigation, including excavation, of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār will be crucial for interpretation of the monastic complex of al-Lisān as a whole. Thorough documentation and restoration of the site is of great importance to the project, not least because of the constant threat of increasing erosion and looting activities which are damaging the structures.

The historical identification of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and the monastic community on al-Lisān is still enigmatic. We have previously suggested that Dayr al-Qaṭṭār might be identified with a bishopric mentioned in the 4th century named Sodoma. In the councillor list of the Council of Nicea in 325, Bishop Severus of Sodoma is recorded amongst the bishops of the province of Arabia. In the list of fathers gathered at the

Council of Chalcedon in 451 and at the Synod of Jerusalem in 518, the bishop of Sodoma is lacking but instead a bishop of Zoara turns up (Abel 1938: 198-201). The reading of Sodoma was challenged as early as the 1930s; it was suggested that Sodoma was a misspelling of Soadon. It has also been previously proposed that Sodoma refers to a general area around Zoara, rather than to the seat of a bishop. However, at the time when the existence of a bishop of Sodoma was questioned, the church at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār was not on the map. The problem concerning Bishop Severus of Sodoma might tentatively be solved by the identification of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as a bishop's church. If this is the case, we would also have an identification of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār at least during its earliest phases. Nevertheless, this does not solve the problem of the historical identification of the monastic community. On the basis of archaeological evidence for its size and continuity, the *laura* of al-Lisan and its *coenobium* (Dayr al-Qaṭṭār) ought to be mentioned in more than one written source.

The identification of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as Sodoma has received further support from the Finnish historian Joonas Sipilää (2005), who asserted that: "The argument is quite convincing, including the suggestive geology of the area and the Roman road passing south of it. The site does not appear to be dictated by economic considerations. Rather, it had a strict religious function in line with the tradition to mark out biblical events. The placing of the bishop seat of Sodoma on the Lisan Peninsula and, consequently, in to the province of Arabia solves the problem of Severus".

As a place of worship connected to Old Testament history, Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bīzanṭī has a possible

parallel at Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭah, near Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfī, which has been identified as the basilica of Lot's Cave according to Byzantine tradition (Politis 1992, 1993). It has previously been argued that the hermit communities on al-Lisān, including Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, were likewise built in connection with Old Testament traditions concerning Sodom and Gomorrah (c.f. Abel 1929: 248). An early date for the earliest church at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār is supported by Late Roman pottery found during the 1997 excavation, although further and more thorough analyses are required before this can be confirmed. Apart from the archaeological finds, an early date is also indicated by the Roman road passing near the site, which was mentioned by Alois Musil in his travel account of the late 19th century (Musil 1907: 164).

There is evidence pointing to Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as the location of the earliest and most important hermit site in the Lisān area. The earliest phase of the hermit community at al-Lisān can be dated to the early 4th century AD. The crypt of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 329) is likely to be an early hermit cell, which was later incorporated into the church of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and was used as an ossuary. This crypt might originally have been the cell of one of the

*7. Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al- Bīzanṭī in 2009, with the main site still under investigation by SDSE. The exact date of the substructure of the church is still uncertain. However, radiocarbon dating of the adjacent chapel's mosaic bedding yielded a date of 670-770 AD (Ua-38853: 1 sigma, 68.2%), while the wooden superstructure of the latest phase of the main building dates to 1,000 AD (photo SDSE).*

early anchorites settling in this area, who was later revered as a holy person. The tomb and / or cell of the founding father was often preserved and sometimes marked with a special building, or he was buried in the cave in which he had spent his life (Patrich 1997: 44). The shape of the crypt, which bears a clear resemblance to hermit cells in the vicinity, suggests that this might also be the case here (**Fig. 7**).

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār remained a monastery into the Early Islamic period – possibly up to the time of the Crusades – a phenomenon recognizable at several Byzantine sites (e.g. Kaegi 1992: 88). A C-14 date from wooden structures in the top layer, probably part of the most recent roof construction, came in at around 1,000 AD. This indicates that the latest church and associated monastic activities may have continued through the 11th and possibly into the 12th century. There is also a possibility that Dayr al-Qaṭṭār was turned into a Muslim shrine during its latest phase, or was used as a profane functional stronghold on the ancient road passing nearby. One such example, resembling Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, is the sanctuary of Saint Aaron (Jabal Hārūn), where a Christian place of worship was subsequently converted into a Muslim shrine (Fiema and Frösén 2008). The function of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and the surrounding hermitages during the Islamic period still remains uncertain. A more comprehensive answer to this question requires further investigation at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār itself.

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