

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS  
AT 'AYOUN MOUSA-MOUNT NEBO  
1984-1987

by  
Michele Piccirillo

In the spring of 1984 I was shown by Ḥajj Aḥmad Abu Shaker Abu Ghanam, a resident of the village of Fayṣaliya on the road from Madaba to Mount Nebo, a small section of a mosaic floor in the courtyard of his farmhouse among the vineyards of 'Ayoun Mousa, in the valley north of Mount Nebo. With the permission and the generous cooperation of Dr. Adnan Hadi-di, then Director of the Department of Antiquities, in the summer of the same year we started a rescue excavation, the results of which will be dealt with later in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, while working in the field, we did not know that we were celebrating a double centennial with our excavations. I was reminded of that by a commemorative stamp sent to me by a Spanish friend. The stamp was issued by the Spanish Ministry of Post and Telecommunications to commemorate the sixteenth centennial of the journey of the nun Egeria to the Middle East. On the stamp, with a map of the region and the picture of the pilgrim travelling on a donkey, were figured the two milestones of the *Via Nova Traiana* in Wadi el-Mujib with the number VI written on one of them, a direct reference to her pilgrimage to the Memorial of Moses. According to modern scholars, Egeria came on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Palestine, Egypt, Sinai, Arabia

and Mesopotamia, through Constantinople and Syria, in the years 381-384, a date accepted by the Spanish stamp for the celebration.<sup>2</sup>

After the stamp, I received another letter from Arezzo, Italy, with an invitation to participate in an international symposium to commemorate the first centennial of the discovery and publication of the manuscript of Egeria's travels.<sup>3</sup> The Latin manuscript, unique and, unfortunately incomplete, was discovered in Arezzo by Francesco Gamurrini in 1884 and published in 1887.<sup>4</sup> It was the precise account of the pilgrim of the fourth century that helped modern scholars to identify the ruins of Siyagha with the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, excavated by Frs. Saller and Bagatti of the Franciscan Archaeological Institute in 1933-1937.<sup>5</sup>

Although Egeria's travels have always been in our thoughts since then at Mount Nebo, the Spanish stamp and the academic celebration at Arezzo have given an impetus to continue our research in the valley visited by the pilgrim on her way to the Memorial of Moses.

In chapters X-XII of her memoirs is the complete account of Egeria's pilgrimage to the sanctuary:<sup>6</sup>

"Then impelled by God, I conceived the desire to go once more into Arabia, to Mount Nebo. It is the

---

1. The results were published by the author ("Una chiesa nell'wadi 'Ayoun Mousa ai piedi del Monte Nebo", *LA* (1984), p. 307-328, tavv. 21-32).  
2. P. Devos, "La date du voyage d'Egérie", *Analecta Bollandiana* 85 (1967), p. 165-194. P. Maraval, *Egérie. Journal de voyage*. Paris, 1982, p. 27-39.  
3. Convegno internazionale sulla Peregrinatio Egeriae. Nel centenario della pubblicazione de Codex Aretinus 405 (già Aretinus VI,3). Arezzo, 23-25 ottobre 1987. The author participated with a paper on "Il pellegrinaggio di Egeria al Monte Nebo in Arabia".  
4. G.F. Gamurrini, *S. Hilarii Tractatus de myster-*

*iis et Hymni et S. Silviae Aquitanae Peregrinatio ad loca sancta quae inedita ex codice Arretino deprompsit I.F.G. Accedit Petri Diaconi Liber de locis sanctis*, Roma 1887 (Biblioteca dell'Accademia storico-giuridica, 4). A photographic reproduction of the manuscript was presented to the participants at the international colloquium by the City of Arezzo (Biblioteca della Città di Arezzo, Ms. 405 (già Codex Arretinus VI,3), Arezzo 1987).

5. S. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo*, I. Jerusalem, 1941, p. 333-340.

6. The translation from the Latin text is taken from J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land*. Jerusalem, 1981.

mountain which God told Moses to climb, in the words "Ascend this mountain Araboth, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab over against Jericho; and view the land of Canaan... and die on the mountain which you ascend." And Jesus our God, who never fails those who hope in him, saw fit to grant my desire.

"With us came some holy men from Jerusalem, a presbyter and deacons, and several brothers (monks)...

"Now we had to hurry to carry out our intention of reaching Mount Nebo. As we travelled along, the local presbyter from Livias (we had asked him to leave his home and accompany us because he knew the area so well) asked us, "Would you like to see the water that flows from the rock, which Moses gave to the children of Israel when they were thirsty? You can if you have the energy to turn off the road at about the sixth milestone." At this we were eager to go. We turned off the road at once, the presbyter led the way, and we followed him. It is a place with a tiny church under a mountain — not Nebo, but another one not very far from Nebo but further in. A great many monks lived there, truly holy men of the kind known here as ascetics.

"The holy monks were good enough to receive us very hospitably, and welcomed us indoors. Going in with them we joined them in prayer, and they then very kindly gave us the "blessings" which it is normal for them to give to those whom they

entertain. Between the church and the cells was a plentiful spring which flowed from the rock, beautifully clear and with an excellent taste, and we asked the holy monks who lived there about this water which tasted so remarkably good. "This", they told us, "is the water which holy Moses gave the children of Israel in this desert." As usual we had there a prayer, a reading from the Books of Moses, and one psalm.

"Then we set off for the mountain..."

Before the discovery of the manuscript the first account of a visit by a modern scholar to 'Ayoun Mousa was written in 1864 by the Duke de Luynes.<sup>7</sup> All the explorers who visited the springs after him left a poetical description of the valley and its springs.<sup>8</sup> As an example, we can read the description by H. Tristram in *The Land of Moab*, written in 1873 (published 1877, p. 335-337):

"To describe Ayun Moussa is not easy. One is easily tempted to exaggerate, for in this thirsty land a perennial spring gives an air of fair enchantment to the scene, from its startling contrast with the arid bluffs around. These springs are supposed to derive their name from the tradition of their having been the resting-place of Moses on his way to Pisgah. There are two fountains, or rather two groups of springs, bursting from the foot of a tall line of cliffs. The first group run for a short distance over a shelf of rock, shaded by some fine old fig-trees, under which we sat for our mid-day meal, which was flavoured with watercress gathered on the spot.

7. M. Le Duc de Luynes, *Voyage à la Mer Morte, à Pétra et sur la rive gauche du Jourdain*, I. Paris, 1874, p. 153. A beautiful photograph of the springs is in the *Atlas*, Pl. 34.

8. See the description by C.R. Conder, *Heth and Moab. Explorations in Syria in 1881 and 1882*. London, 1885, p. 131: "It is a most picturesque spot. The northern spring, rising in a shallow valley, pours its stream over a cliff some thirty feet high, down which hang long trailing creepers beside the water. The hollow below the fall is

full of maidenhair fern, and a large wild fig grows up against the cliff. There are two cascades again lower down, and the rushing brook disappears in a narrow gorge, between tall canes and various shrubs. The contrast of this vegetation with the great blocks of limestone in the valley, the tawny hill above, glaring against the blue sky, without a tree or a blade of grass, is very effective."

Cf. also A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, I, *Moab*. Wien 1907, p. 342-346.

A few yards further on, several smaller springs issue from fissures in the cliff, soon unite their streams on a broad, wide shelf of rock, and then form a pretty cascade, about 25 feet high, the effect of which in winter, over the horseshoe-shaped ledge, must be very fine.

“The real beauty of the fall is best seen on descending; when the overhanging platform is found to be the roof of a cave with a chord of 60 yards, its front partially built up with stalagmite below and stalactite above, and water dropping in all directions. But who can do justice to the beauty of its adornings? The roof is one mass of pendent fronds of maidenhair fern — the sides are tapestried with them, the floor is carpeted with them. Happy maidenhair! Here, at least, safe from extermination at the hands of collecting maniacs!

“Fig-trees cast their massive shade over the mouth of the cave, and overhang the lower falls very little further down, and about 50 feet in height. Hence the water hurries rapidly down the wady, dotted with fine terebinths and patches of cultivation. Climbing up again to the springs, we walk along a path under the line of cliffs: till we come to a series of caves in its face, which have been walled up with masonry, leaving only low square-headed doorways, originally tombs, but now occasionally used as folds by goatsherds.

“Near these, the second of the twin springs of Moses bursts from a deep horizontal tunnel in the rock, about 15 inches in diameter. The

volume of water is greater than that of the other spring, and both fountains and stream, clear as crystal, have every stone and pebble of their gravelly bed covered with the glossy black shells of *Neritina* and *Melanopsis*. This stream joins the other, after the cascades, by a series of smaller leaps. We could here look down its course till it enters the Seisaban; and had a peep of a bit of the Jordan valley, set in a frame of mountain and rock, with green hill-sides in all the lower part.”

The water of ‘Ayoun Mousa was a real temptation for the travellers who preferred to rest near the spring rather than explore the neighbourhood. In 1931 the Jordanian government opened a road to the valley to pump part of the water of the spring to Madaba. Therefore, Nelson Glueck, Fr. Saller and Fr. Bagatti, could reach the valley more easily and continue exploring westwards. In 1934 Glueck surveyed the fortress of el-Meshhad near the spring, collecting Iron Age and Nabataean sherds together with a number of clay figurines. Fr. Saller and Fr. Bagatti could identify several Byzantine ruins along the path which leads to the Roman road on the Mushaqqar ridge,<sup>10</sup> a road with its milestones already known from the survey of Fr.-Germer-Durand in 1884.<sup>11</sup> A general sketch of the region was provided by the two Franciscan scholars in the first volume of the Memorial of Moses excavation report.<sup>12</sup> A more detailed map was drawn by the members of the Hesban Expedition who surveyed the Roman road in 1973.<sup>13</sup> As on the mountain, the early human presence in the valley is witnessed by dolmens, circles, tombs of different epochs and flints.<sup>14</sup> In the Iron Age the fortress of

9. N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine, I* (AASOR, XIV), 1933-34, p. 24-27.

10. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses*, I, p. 335, fn. 2.

11. J. Germer-Durand, “Voie de Hesban au Jourdain”, *RB* 4 (1895), p. 398-400; 5 (1896), p. 613-615.

12. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses*, I, Fig. 2.

13. S.D. Waterhouse and Ibach, “The Topographical Survey, Heshbon 1973”, *AUSS* 13

(1975), p. 217-233, Fig. 10. Cf. M. Piccirillo, “The Jerusalem-Esbous Road and its Sanctuaries in Transjordan”, *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* III. Ed. by A. Hadidi, p. 165-172, Fig. 1. Amman: Department of Antiquities, 1987.

14. C.R. Conder, *The Survey of Eastern Palestine*. London, 1889, p. 99 f., 254-274. E. Stockton, “Stone Age Culture in the Nebo Region, Jordan”, *LA* 17 (1967), p. 122-128.

el-Meshhad near the spring was built. The fortress of el-Meḥaṭṭa near the sixth milestone, in the Roman-Byzantine period defended the Esbous-Livias road taken by the pilgrims to reach the Memorial of Moses.<sup>15</sup> Along this road it is still possible to see the third, fourth, fifth and sixth milestones. The standing milestone at the sixth mile is dated to the time of the Tetrarchy (288 A.D. at the time of Diocletianus and Maximinus). A second one is dated to the time of Julius Verus Maximinus (236 A.D.).<sup>16</sup> Buildings of the Byzantine period have been located near the springs of 'Ayoun Mousa, near the spring of 'Ain Jammaleh, along the path which unites the springs to el-Meḥaṭṭa and among the vineyards. (Pl. XXXIV, 1,2).

It is not difficult for the reader to follow Egeria on her road to the sanctuary.<sup>17</sup> After going down to Jericho from Jerusalem, her starting point, and crossing the Jordan River, the pilgrim stopped at Livias. Accompanied by a priest of the city "who knew the places well", she took the road which goes from Livias to Esbous on the high plateau. At the sixth milestone, a detour from the main road led her to the Springs of Moses, from which it was possible to climb the peak of Mount Nebo to visit the sanctuary of Moses. Egeria then returned to Jerusalem by the same road.

Since the summer of 1984, when we started, work has continued in 1986 and 1987, with the excavations of the two churches of the monastery of Kayanos among the vineyards, and of the church of the Deacon Thomas along the path.<sup>18</sup>

### The Church of Kayanos

The excavations in the courtyard of

the farmhouse of Ḥajj Aḥmad Abu Shaker revealed the church of a small monastery with two mosaic floors. The church was excavated in the summer of 1984 and 1986 in two stages. The upper church, like the lower one, has a slightly raised, square presbytery decorated with a geometric motif of octagons enclosed by a swastika meander (Pl. XXXV,1). The two side aisles, decorated with a geometric grid, are larger than the normal proportions in such buildings of the Byzantine epoch. The northern grid is interrupted by the portrait of a horseman; only the lower part of the figure is left. The horseman had a spear in his hand, the point of which is visible (Pl. XXXVI,1). The central nave was decorated with two panels enclosed in a guilloche (Pl. XXXV,2). Figuratively, the most interesting motifs are the portraits of three benefactors in the western panel (Pl. XXXVI,2). Fidus is portrayed as a young man dressed in a short tunic, perhaps a deacon whose name we read in an inscription of the church; John is portrayed as a vine harvester in the middle; and an anonymous camel-driver, partly destroyed, is portrayed on the right side. The camel driver is depicted half nude, partly dressed with a loin-cloth, and with a mantle on his shoulders. He carries a bow on his shoulders, and holds a whip in his right hand, while a big sword hangs on his side. The figure, which is seen several times in the Safaitic and Thamudic graffiti of the desert, depicts an Arab Christian soldier, one of the Ghassanids unified by the Byzantine government under al-Ḥarīth, elected filarchus, patrician and king of the Arabs.<sup>19</sup> The figure in the mosaic fits very well the description of the Arabs, Saracens and Ishmaelites, given by the Latin historian

15. For a sketch map of the fortress, see *AUSS* 13 (1975), fig. 11.  
 16. "Imp(eratori) Caesari G(aio) Iulio Uero Maximino P(io) F(elici) Aug(usto) n(ostro) et G(aio) Iul(io) Uero Maximo nob(ilissimo) Caes(ari) filio Aug(usti) n(ostri) apo Esbountos m(ilia) S mil(ia) p(assuum) VI" (cf. Th. Thomsen, "Die römischen Meilensteine der Provinzen Syria Arabia und Palaestina", *ZDPV* 40 (1917), p. 1-103, Map 1.

17. Cf. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses*, I, p. 333-340; Piccirillo, "Il Pellegrinaggio di Egeria al Monte Nebo in Arabia", in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sulla Peregrinatio Egeriae*, (forthcoming).

18. Preliminary reports have been published in *LA* 34 (1984), p. 307-318; 36 (1986), p. 350.

19. Cf. S.T. Parker, *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan*, BAR International Series 1987, p. 727.



Fig. 1. Greek inscription from the upper church of Kayanos.

Ammianus Marcellinus and by Saint Jerome in the *Vita Malchi Monaci*.<sup>20</sup> We may be able to see in the camel driver and in the horsemen of the northern aisle two soldiers connected to the fortress of el-Mehatta. Unfortunately, we do not know if the fortress was still in use in the second half of the sixth Century, when the church was repaved with mosaics. The central inscription which may have named the Bishop of Madaba in whose time the work was done is destroyed. However, several inscriptions which mention people who took care of beautifying the church remain: the priest Theodore, whose name we read near the door; faithful ladies and gentlemen like Salamanos, Paulos, Maximos and their sons (Fig. 1);<sup>21</sup> Matrona (Fig. 2), Sabina and Anastasia; and the names of deacons Fidus, Thomas and Elipdus, together with the monk Casiseos, written in the intercolumnar spaces.<sup>22</sup>

In the last inscription, for the first time in the inscriptions of the region, the word *monazon*, a word synonymous with the more normal *monaxos*-monk, appears. In the rich vocabulary used by Egeria to indicate the monks and nuns she met in her journey, like *monachi*, *ascites*, *fratres*, *apotactitae viri et feminae*, we also find *monazontes* and *parthenae*, as in our inscription.<sup>23</sup> Another detail can be noted from the reading of the inscriptions: except for Salamonas and Casiseos, all the names of the benefactors are of Greek-Latin origin.

#### The Lower Church

The lower church has a more regular plan than the upper one, although we could not determine all of the details. It was built on two tombs which we found filled with bones. Only the bed of the

20. "Saraceni... omnes pari sorte sunt bellatores, seminudi coloratis sagulis pube tenus amicti, equorum adiumento pernicium graciliumque camelorum per diversa reptantes, in tranquillibus vel turbidis rebus..." (Ammiani Marcellini *rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, XIV, 4,3). "Et ecce subito equorum camelorumque sesores Ismaelitae irruunt, crinitis vitatisque capitibus, ac seminudo corpore, pallia et latas caligas trahentes: pendebant ex humero pharetrae; laxos arsus vibrantes, hastilia longa

portabant" (Hieronymi *Vita Malchi Monaci*, PL 23, 58).

21. For two inscriptions see Piccirillo, *LA* 34 (1984), p. 310 f.

22. See M. Piccirillo and E. Alliata, "La chiesa del monastero di Kaianos alle Ayoun Mousa sul Monte Nebo", *Omaggio U. Fasola*, Pont. 1st. Arch. Crist., Roma 1987 (forthcoming).

23. "Et descendunt omnes monazontes et parthenae" (Egeria, *Itinerarium*, XXIV, 5).



Fig. 2. Greek inscription from the upper church of Kayanos.

upper mosaic, about 15 cm in thickness, separated the two superimposed floors, which more or less repeat the same decorative programme. The area of the presbytery was decorated with a grid filled with flowers enclosed in a border of interlooped circles. The center of the panel was occupied by a Greek inscription surmounted by a blank rectangular panel, possibly the base of the altar or the opening of the underlying tomb (Pl. XXXVII,1). The Greek inscription in front of it has a funerary character (Fig. 3): "In memory of Kayanos and for the repose of our father Rabeos, and of John for the salvation of Casiseos...".<sup>24</sup> The same text is repeated in the Aramaic Christo-Palestinian inscription added between the north wall of the presbytery and the mosaic panel (Pl. XXXVII,2; Fig. 4). It was greatly damaged by the insertion of a pilaster of the upper church. It was translated and studied by Emile Puech of the Ecole Biblique: "The

reader will remember the good works of our Lord Gayyan the priest (or the son of) Casiseos, and the heirs who have made (or restored) the parts of (or the furnishings....)".<sup>25</sup> Both texts refer to a community of monks. In the first one we possibly have the name of an abbot of the monastery at the Memorial of Moses, *Rabeos*, which is recorded in the form *Robebos* in a funerary chapel east of the monastery excavated in 1986.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the title "our father", is normally used for the superior of a monastery.<sup>27</sup> If so, we can conclude that the abbot of the monastery on the mountain was also the superior of the monks living in the valleys around. As at Saint Catherine in Sinai, the irrigated fields of 'Ayoun Mousa and of 'Ain el-Jemmaleh to the north, and el-Keniseh and el-Jedideh to the south, could have been the gardens of the Memorial of Moses.

The mosaic in the nave was decorated with two square panels enclosed in a frame

24. See Piccirillo, *LA* 34 (1984), p. 313.

25. See E. Puech, "L'inscription Christo-Palestinienne d' 'Ayoun Mousa (Mont Nebo)", *LA* 34 (1984), p. 319-328.

26. For first news of the discovery, see Piccirillo,

*LA* 36 (1986), p. 349, tav. 67, foto 3.

27. Cf. Y. Meimaris, *Sacred Names, Saints... and Church Officials in the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Pertaining to the Christian Church of Palestine*, Athens 1986, p. 239-248.

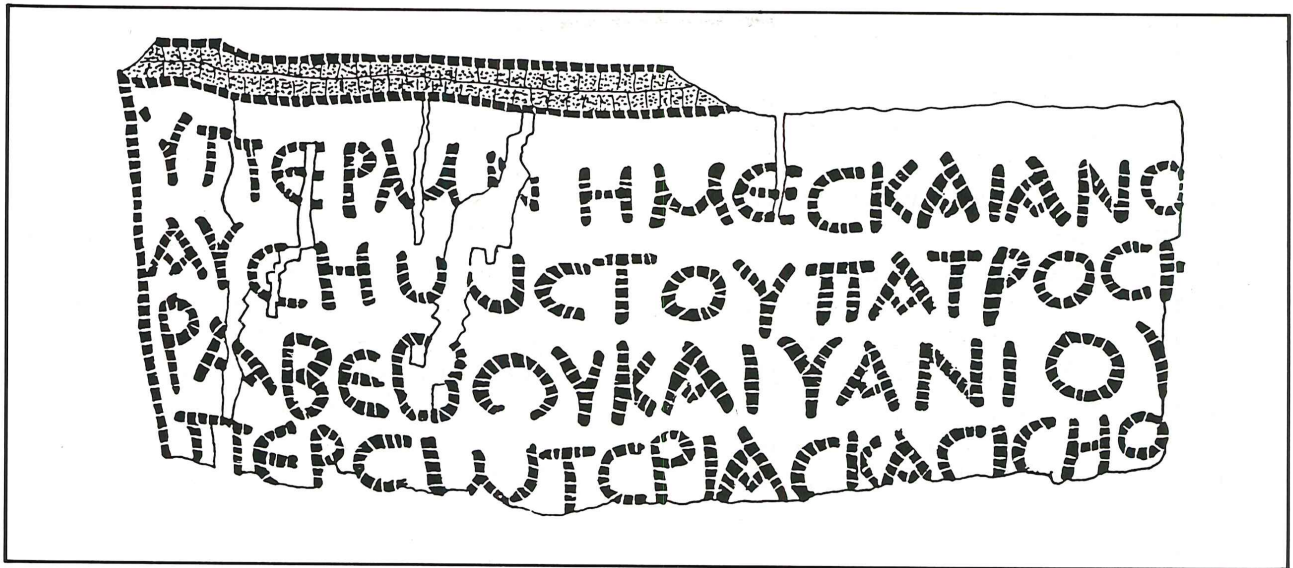


Fig. 3. Greek inscription from the lower church of Kayanos.

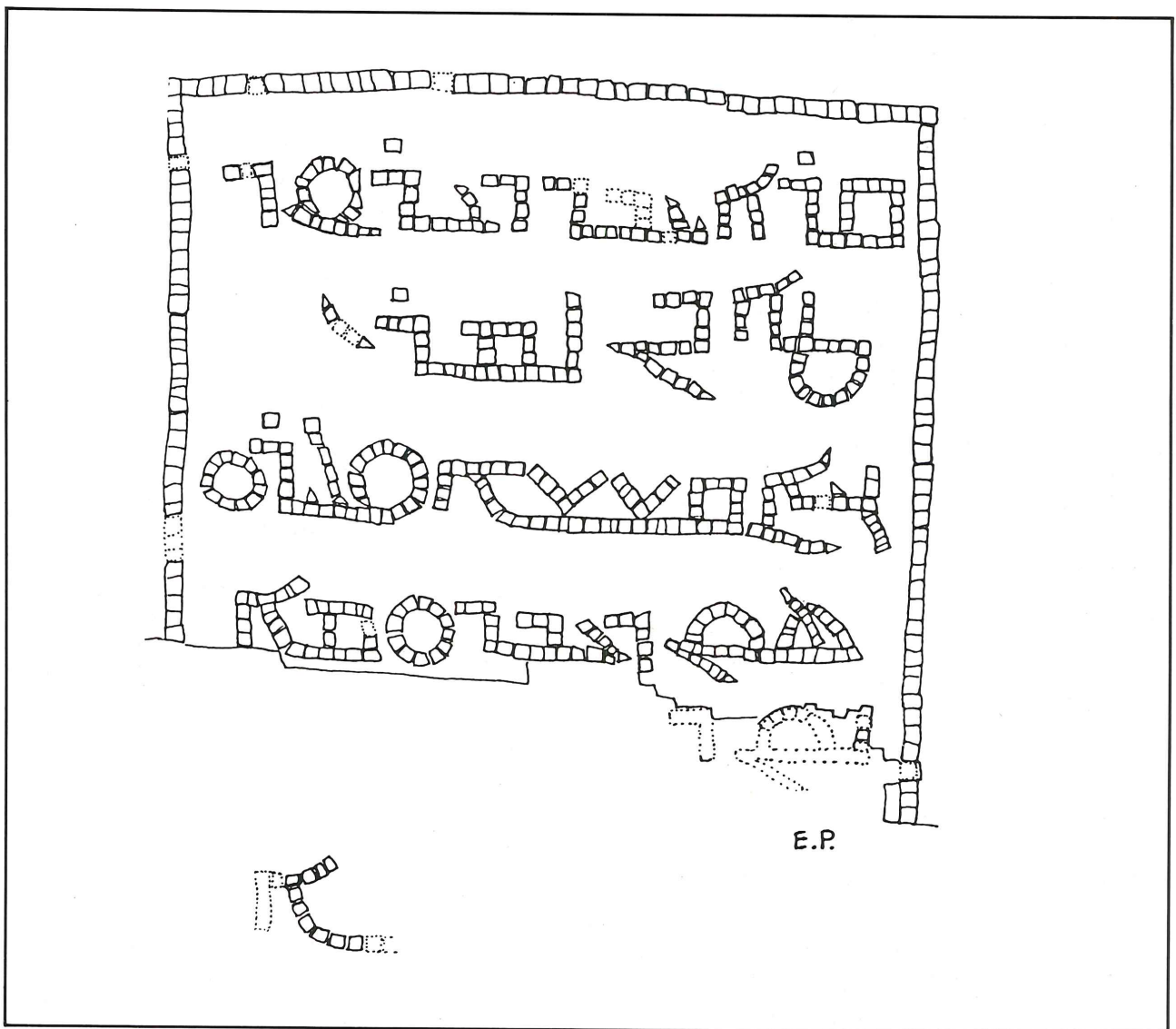


Fig. 4. Aramaic Christo-Palestinian inscription from the lower church of Kayanos.

of acanthus scrolls with animals (Pl. XXXVIII,1). On the black background a fawn, a sheep, a zebu and a dog running after a gazelle can be recognized. The scrolls of the western side were decorated with the text of a Greek inscription with the names of members of the clergy and benefactors. In the central medallion of the interlooped circles in the eastern panel of the carpet, is the name of the bishop of Madaba (Pl. XXXVIII,1; Fig. 5): "This most holy church was mosaiced at the time of Bishop Kyrus". We have already found the name of the Bishop Kyrus in the inscription of the lower baptistry chapel in the atrium of the cathedral of Madaba to be dated to the first decades of the sixth century before Bishop Elias, in office in 531, a good *terminus ante quem* for the lower church of Kayanos.<sup>28</sup> The four vine scrolls of the western panel were decorated with two vintage scenes: the vine harvester and the man carrying the grapes on the back of a donkey, and two pastoral scenes: the dog in pursuit of a gazelle or of a fox, and a shepherd with a he-goat (Pl. XXXVIII,2). A lamb near a tree and an inscription decorated the area near the main door; both the inscription and scene were destroyed overnight by an unknown modern iconoclast before we could take a picture of them. In the inscription which was partly destroyed in antiquity, is the name of Fidus son of Amrilios and the name of the benefactor Milichos. In the two medallions of the western side of the frame we read: "O Lord, accept the offering of Obedos, most pious archdeacon and of Salamanos. The mosaicists did the work. By care of Salamonos deacon and econom the church was mosaiced by the offering of Papionos the most pious deacon".

In contrast to the names in the mosaic of the upper church, the names of the benefactors here are of Semitic origin. This

can be explained by the assumption of Graeco-Roman names by the wealthy people of the village in a later period.

Historically and artistically, this mosaic is one of the earliest works of the Madaba school of mosaicists.<sup>29</sup> The mosaic is poorly executed. The figures of the animals do not stand out from the black background of the frame. Moreover, the drawing of the figures in the hunting, vintage and pastoral scenes is not accurate, and so the figures are reduced to mere gestures. Technically, this work is characterized by the lack of nuances in the faces obtainable by the use of tessera fragments that became a technical feature of the mosaics in the region later.

Historically we can conclude that the small monastic complex of Kayanos was built at the time of Bishop Kyrus at the beginning of the sixth century in memory of the abbot Rabbebos and other deceased people buried in the two tombs on which the church was built. The church was destroyed and rebuilt on a new plan in the second half of the same century. From the sherds collected in the courtyard we can conclude that the church was abandoned at the beginning of the seventh century. There are no traces of Late Byzantine or Umayyad sherds.

### The Church of the Deacon Thomas

The second church which we explored in the summers of 1986 and 1987 is located along the path which connects the springs with the Roman road.<sup>30</sup> The church is part of a small monastery built on the slope of the mountain. It is a square building composed of the church on the northern side, and of two or three rooms on the southern side.

The church, well built with hard square stones, is a three-aisled church with the square presbytery higher than the main

28. Cf. LA 34 (1984), p. 314; LA 31 (1981), p. 314f.

29. Piccirillo, "The Continuity of the Artistic Tradition of the Mosaics in Jordan from the 5th to the 8th Century A.D. The Recent Archaeological Evidence", in A. Effenberger (Ed.), *Die Kunst in den östlichen Grenzgebieten des byzantin-*

*ischen Reiches in der Zeit zwischen Justinian und dem Arabereinfalle*, Kolloquium vom 18. bis 19. Februar 1988, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (forthcoming).

30. For preliminary reports, see LA 36 (1986), p. 351; LA 37 (1987), p. 401.



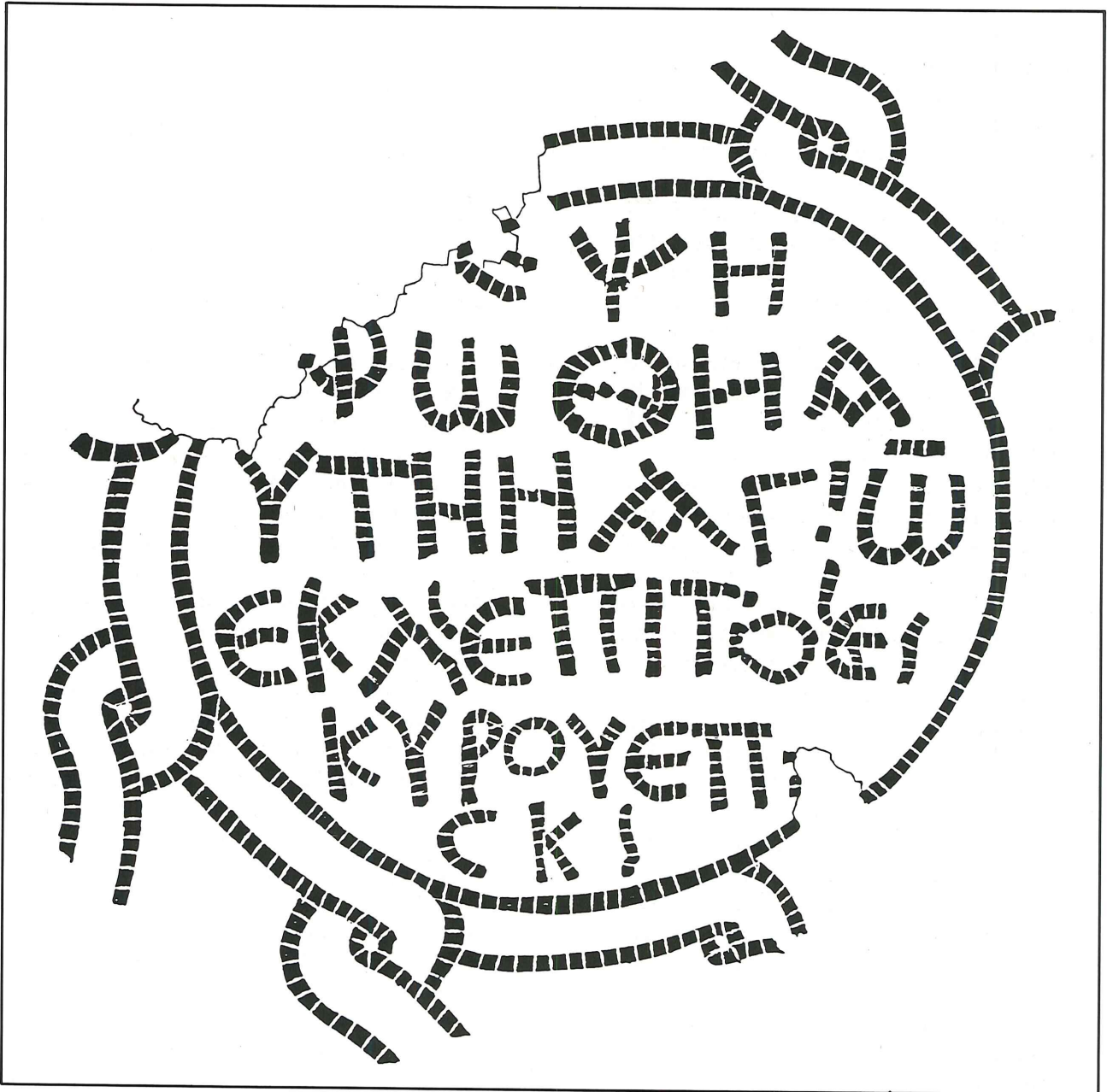


Fig. 5. Greek inscription from the lower church of Kayanos with the name of Bishop Kyrus.

nave and two sacristies on both sides (Pl. XXXIX). It had two entrances: a door in the western facade, and another one in the south wall. Although the ruins have been pillaged by the bedouins to build their farm houses in the valley, the walls and the pilasters are still preserved for more than a meter in height. A lintel and a keystone of the triumphal arch were decorated with carved crosses. The presbytery area was closed by a chancel screen in Nebi Mousa stone (oil shale) decorated with crosses. Later additions to the church were the

fixed altar and the reliquary in the presbytery, and a second chancel screen in the south aisle in front of the south sacristy (Pl. XLI,2). The walls were covered with a thick layer of chalky plaster, which over the centuries of exposure to rain has formed a hard incrustation on the mosaic pavement which was labourious to remove.

The mosaic, well preserved and quite intact except for some repairs near the main door, is one of the best examples of the Madaba school of mosaicists operating in the middle of the sixth century. In the

square panel of the presbytery, among four trees loaded with fruit, were a lion facing a zebu, and a lamb at the centre, which was later covered by the reliquary and the altar (Pl. XL,1).

The main nave was decorated with a carpet enclosed in a frame of acanthus scrolls, rich in colour. Florets and fruits were added to the leaf of the acanthus. On the black background of the scrolls, a series of birds of different species and fruits are depicted. A cage among partridges indicates a chase scene. Foliate masks decorate the corners: two bearded masks on the east side and two young men with plump cheeks on the west side.<sup>31</sup>

On the white background of the central carpet two vine shoots, coming out of a jar on the western side, form eight rows of three scrolls each, decorated with scenes of hunting, vintage and pastoral life. Two panthers are depicted on both sides of the jar, a motif common in the first mosaic floors of the region.<sup>32</sup> It follows a hunting scene with Stephanos, dressed in a short tunic with *orbicula*, who confronts a lion with a spear, while on the left, a gazelle runs away. On the two upper rows a shepherd in a posture of resting is shown leaning on his staff, among his flock of sheep, goats and a dog. Hunting and vintage scenes are intermingled in the other four registers. The harvester cutting the grapes, the young man carrying grapes on the back of a donkey, the running hare and the fox eating grapes from a basket, are parts of the vintage scenes.

To the big-game hunting scenes belong a hunter, dressed in trousers and boots with a sword hanging at his side, who is shooting arrows at a lion; a hound who snares a deer by the leg; and a hunter who defends himself against a bear with a sword

and a shield decorated with a cross.<sup>33</sup> (Pl. XL,2). In the last row, which continues on an open space before the acanthus frame, a young man is harvesting pomegranates from a tree.

The side aisles and the intercolumnar spaces of the church are decorated with geometric motifs, except for one which is decorated with a fish. The flower grid of the south aisle is interrupted in front of the south door by a medallion decorated with an eagle and an inscription below it. The inscription records the name of the Deacon Thomas in whose honour we have named the church and the monastery. The eagle, a motif found in several mosaics of the region in the same position,<sup>34</sup> has two Greek letters added to the sides of its head: A and ω. The two letters, normally used to indicate Christ at the sides of a cross, give a christological meaning to the eagle as a symbol of life and resurrection.<sup>35</sup> (Pl. XLI,1).

Compared to the richness of inscriptions in the two mosaic floors of the church of Kayanos and of the other churches excavated in the region, the church of the Deacon Thomas is peculiar for the paucity of written texts. We have only the name Stephanos in the main nave, the name of the Deacon Thomas, and the name of the benefactor Amrilios carved on a chancel screen. Our dating is therefore based on the comparison of the stylistic motifs with other mosaics in the area.

The decorative program of the pavement of the church is the same as that of the Theotokos chapel in the village, dated to the end of the fifth century at the time of Bishop Fidus, with the vine shoots coming out from the cantharus to form the scrolls. The scenes, however, are very close to those in the mosaic of the church of Saints

31. As in the Apostles church in Madaba (U. Lux, "Die Apostel-Kirche in Madaba", *ZDPV* 84 (1968), p. 106-129; Taf. 14-34) and in the el-Khadir church (U. Lux, "Eine altchristliche-Kirche in Madaba", *ZDPV* 83 (1967), Taf. 26-40).

32. This motif can be seen twice in the mosaic of the Theotokos chapel, newly discovered at Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, Mount Nebo (*LA* 36 (1986), p.

349 f., Pl. 68).

33. As in the el-Khadir church at Madaba (*ZDPV* 83 (1967), Taf. 30 C).

34. As in the church of Saint George at Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, Mount Nebo (S. Saller and B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*. Jerusalem, 1949, pl. 28,2).

35. The motif is found on Coptic stele in Egypt (*DACL*, III, 2, p. 2832-2835).

Lot and Procopius in the village of Nebo, dated to the time of Bishop John in the middle of the sixth century. A comparison of the two works shows that the mosaic in the valley, although moving within the same figurative context, is less harmonious in its naturalistic details. It shows some stylistic details which unite it with the mosaics of the first decades of the sixth century. At the same time, however, this work is much freer in the drawing of the figures. In some scenes, such as the one with the two goats, the scene with the hound that snares a deer and that with the fox eating grapes, reaches an outstanding quality of drawing and colour. In my opinion, these scenes are superior to the same details in the church of Saints Lot and Procopius. It is a transitional work between the group of mosaics of the beginning of the sixth century and the masterworks of the middle of the same century.

In the excavation we have collected some late Byzantine coins and Byzantine and Umayyad pottery sherds. Therefore we can conclude that the church was built and mosaiced in the first half of the sixth century, and was abandoned in the seventh century.

Near the springs of Moses Egeria saw a small church and cells inhabited by monks. Neither the church of Kayanos nor the church of the Deacon Thomas can have any historical relation with the church that she visited. Egeria specifies that the small church was located in front of Mount Nebo, *on the side*, north of the springs. The cells were *on the other side*. The water

ran between the church and the cells.<sup>36</sup> The rooms cut in the rock near the springs which were seen and described by the explorers could have been part of the cells seen by her. This is the only possible historical evidence left till this day of what Egeria saw in the valley at the foot of Mount Nebo, other than the spring itself, the milestone and the fortress on the Roman road from Livias to Esbous.

The inscriptions of the lower and upper church of Kayanos testify to the continued presence during the sixth century of the monks met by the pilgrim in the valley in the fourth century. To the monastic presence we are indebted for the buildings and the mosaics we have unearthed.

On the occasion of the double celebration of the sixteenth centennial of the journey of Egeria of Mount Nebo, and of the first centennial of the discovery and publication of her manuscript, our excavations in the valley of 'Ayoun Mousa have only given the opportunity to focus some topographical details of the text, and to clarify a historical period of the human presence near the springs of Moses, whose water "beautifully clear and with an excellent taste", as stated by Egeria in the fourth century, is still flowing from the rock, giving life and prosperity to a deserted region.

Michele Piccirillo  
Franciscan Archaeological  
Institute

---

36. Cf. Saller, *The Memorial of Moses*, I, p. 336.

