

Davide Bianchi
Universität Wien
davide.bianchi@univie.ac.at

Davide Bianchi

A Cave to Live and to Pray In: The Topography of Monastic Hermitages in the Valleys of Nebo

Introduction

Interest in Christian hermitages has assumed considerable importance in recent decades due to a broader understanding of monasticism in Late Antiquity (Brooks Hadstrom 2018). The analysis of archeological evidence, together with the topographical survey of the landscape, allows for the reconstruction of the settlement dynamics of early Christian hermits. Moreover, the study of the material culture provides new information on the practical aspects of monasticism and its interaction with the territory. Recent research has also indicated that the distinction between the hermitic and coenobitic monasticism, by which these two forms could be antithetical, is nowadays less strict (Rapp 2016: 95–9). Indeed, archaeological evidence testifies that hermitages and *coenobia* could share the same environment and landscape, as in the case, for example, of the Nebo region (Bianchi 2018; 2021: 19–22).

The aim of this paper is to focus on the architectonic typology of the hermitages in the Nebo region. The peculiar features of these monastic structures, consisting of both rooms carved out of the natural rock and rooms built in masonry, will be analysed.

The Archaeological Evidence

Mt Nebo is located in Jordan, *ca.* 7 km northwest of Mādabā, and it reaches an altitude of 800 m on the Balqa' plateau. The archaeological ruins of the village of Nebo and the Memorial of Moses stand on the top of the two western peaks of the mountain, respectively Khirbat al-Mukhayyaṭ and Ṣiyagha (Saller 1941a: 1–5). At the foot of Mt Nebo there is the *wādī* of 'Uyun Musa with a spring, which flows for some kilometres into a lush valley (FIG. 1).

Literary sources, in particular the travelogues of Egeria, who visited the place at the end of the 4th c. AD, and the text by



1. The *wādī* of ‘Uyūn Mūsā with Mt Nebo in the background (photo by the author).



2. The rock caves in ‘Uyūn Mūsā (photo by the author).



3. The rock caves in 'Uyūn Mūsā (photo by the author).

the anonymous pilgrim of Piacenza (6th c. AD) attest a hermitic presence in the Nebo Region (Piccirillo 1998: 193–4). The oldest nucleus seems to be that of 'Uyūn Mūsā. Egeria effectively mentions that these monks were called 'ascetics',¹ thus specifying their particular way of life (Judge 1977: 80). Further on in the text, the pilgrim recalls that the monks lived in monastic cells named *monasteria*.² It is worth mentioning that the semantic origin of the Latin word

monasterium, deriving from the Greek verb μονάζω (to live alone), refers to structures for a single monk (Talbot 1987: 231; Liddell and Scott 1996: 1143).

The territorial surveys carried out by Saller in 1933–1935 in the 'Uyūn Mūsā valley have reported the presence of numerous caves, which were identified as possible hermitages inhabited by ascetics (Saller 1941a: 187–93). These cavities, located on the northern slopes of Mt Nebo, rise half-way up and are mostly square or rectangular in shape. They consist of a single room that is not very deep and from 1.5–2 m high. Some structures have two communicating rooms and the internal walls show signs of human activity (FIGS. 2–3). In some caves, pottery sherds dated to the Byzantine period (mostly 5th c. AD) and small pieces

¹ 'Very many truly holy monks, whom they call here ascetics, live there' (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 10.9). For the translation, see McGowan and Bradshaw 2018: 124.

² 'So, there in the middle between the church and the monastic cells flows from a rock abundant water, very beautiful and clear, with excellent taste' (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 11.2). For the translation, see McGowan and Bradshaw 2018: 124.



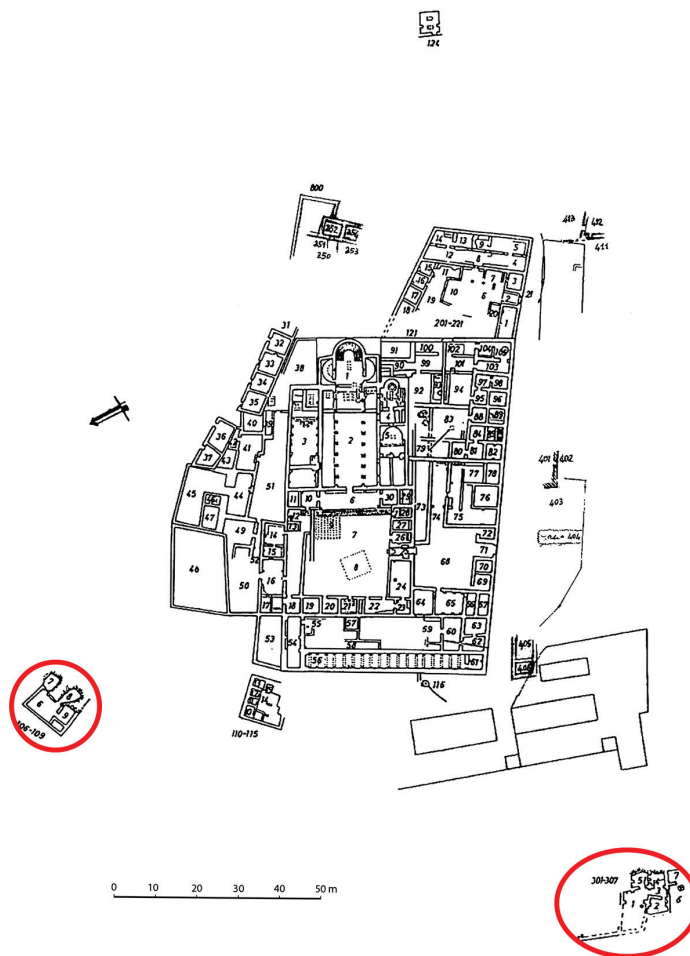
(Saller 1941a: 189–90). The ceiling in many cases today shows a thick blackened layer of smoke attributable to fireplaces. This practice, forbidden to hermits, suggests a later occupation of these rooms by Bedouins or local shepherds.

One photo in the book *Arabia Petraea* by the Czech theologian and orientalist Alois Musil, provides an interesting documentation of the status of these cave-hermitages in the second half of the 19th century (FIG.

4. The cave-hermitages in ‘Uyūn Mūsā with facade masonry in the time of A. Musil (after Musil 1907: 345 fig. 163).

5. Ruins of the facade masonry of the cave-hermitages in ‘Uyūn Mūsā in 2018 (photo by the author).





6. Map of the monastery of Şıyyagha showing rock hermitage nos. 106–109 and the hermitage of Procapis (edited by the author).

4; Musil 1907: 345 fig. 163). The scholar, describing the landscape of ‘Uyūn Mūsā, refers to several natural and artificial caves that served as chapels for monks, which in his time were inhabited by some people of the Ṛanamât-Belḳâwıjje Arabic tribe (Musil 1907: 345–6). The pictures show that one of the caves had an artificial external wall created to close frontally the rock cavity, perhaps in order to make the inhabited rooms safer. Musil suggests that in the Nebo valleys this peculiar architectonic type of hermitage was widespread (Musil 1907:

346). These walls were also documented during the archaeological campaign of Saller, although in an evident state of decay, and in recent times as well (FIG. 5; Saller 1941b: pl. 13).

Although this type finds interesting parallels in the Judaeen Desert, in particular in some hermitages of the Great Laura of Mar Saba (Patrich 1993: 233–43), a similar configuration characterises the so-called ‘cave-hermitages group nos. 106–109³ on

³ For convenience, reference is made to the numbering of the rooms in Saller 1941b: pl. 161.

the north-western slope of Mt Nebo, near the *coenobium* dedicated to Moses (FIG. 6). This cave complex may have preserved the original form of the first hermitages in the Nebo valleys.

The area in front of the caves no. 107–108 has been cut to create a large flat area on which two rooms were built. Cave no. 107 is about 3.95 m long and 2.90–3.75 m high. The entrance to the cave was walled up, except for an opening originally used as a door, which was later closed. Internally, the cavity was purportedly lined with masonry and its walls were plastered (Saller 1941a: 188–9). The latter architectural structure suggests that this cave, originally used as a shelter for a hermit, was subsequently transformed into a cistern.

Cave no. 108 was found closed with five

stones and its interior is very irregular. The entrance is about 90 cm wide and 110 cm high. Its walls have preserved no traces of plaster or masonry. During the excavation, an important layer of black soil partially filled the interior; after removing that, some human bones, a shell, a ring, and a few clay sherds were discovered (Saller 1941a: 189–90). These elements characterise the cave as a burial place.

Room no. 106, located in front of the entrances to caves no. 107 and no. 108, was built using part of the natural rocky slope of the mountain and partly with stone masonry. The internal wall surface was plastered and the floor was paved with plain white *tesserae* (FIG. 7). The two stone benches found against the eastern wall suggest that the room was a portion of the



7. Mosaic floor of room no. 106 and entrances to caves nos. 107 and 108 (© SBF Jerusalem).

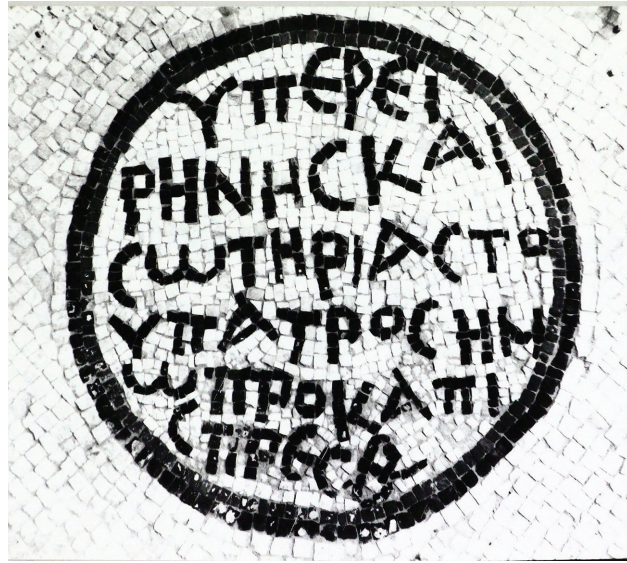


8. The hermitage of Procapis (photo by the author).

monk's dwelling. In the southern wall, an opening allowed entrance to room no. 109. The eastern and northern walls of the latter room were created by cutting into the rocky slope of the mountain, while the western and southern ones were built of masonry. The floor is also made from native rock. Pottery sherds and coins found in room no. 109 point to an occupation during the early Byzantine period (5th c. AD; Saller 1941a: 191). It, therefore, seems reasonable to assume that this group of caves and rooms could not have been for, and inhabited by, coenobitic monks, but by hermits.

The survey by Piccirillo and Alliata identified another hermitage located on the south-western slope of Mt Nebo dated,

according to the types of pottery found during the excavation, to no later than the 6th c. AD (Piccirillo and Alliata 1990). This structure, consisting of four rooms, is partially rupestrian with additions in masonry, and it includes a paved courtyard obtained by cutting the tophaceous rock of the mountain for about 1 m to the north and east (FIG. 8). Remains of a collapsed mosaic floor suggest the presence of a second storey floor that fell completely into the room below. From the northern side of the courtyard, a small corridor with a mosaic floor connects the entrance of the hermitage. Two rooms to the east and one to the west of the corridor are all internally characterised by rocky benches, probably used as seats by



9. Hermitage of Procapis, mosaic floor with Greek epitaph (© SBF Jerusalem).



10. Ruins of masonry located in front of the rock cavity at 'Agri Specula' (photo by the author).

monks (Piccirillo 1998: 200). On the other side of the corridor, there is the northern room, which is the centre of the complex. This room has a two-stepped bench, a small cistern dug entirely out of the bedrock and a mosaic floor with a Greek epitaph recalling the monk and hegumen Procapis (FIG. 9):

Υπὲρ εἰρήνης καὶ ἰ σωτηρίας
τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Προκαπίου
πρεσβ(υτέρου)⁴

A noteworthy element of this inscription is the designation ‘our father’, which according to L. Di Segni (1998: 438) was usually used in the epigraphic contexts to refer to hegumens. In this sense, the scholar supposes that this epitaph refers to a monk who held the *coenobium* of Şiyyagha. Although the inscription would suggest the presence of a tomb, no burial place has so far been identified. However, it should be noted that the entire hermitage has not been investigated archeologically.

A survey carried out by the author in summer 2018 allows for the identification of another possible group of hermitages on the summit opposite Şiyyagha, known from the biblical text and from Egeria with the toponym ‘*Agri Specula*’ (Numbers 23.14; *Itinerarium Egeriae* 12.10). In this case too, the top of the rocky mountain has some natural caves that show signs of human activity. In front of the rocky cavity, courses of a regular masonry 2.5–3 m long and linked to the rock were found (FIG. 10). These walls seem to be pertinent to three rooms built in connection with the caves. Two of the rooms seem to be interconnected, as shown by the finding of a threshold. The proximity to Şiyyagha, as well as the same architectural configuration, suggests that these structures could be of the same

type of the hermitage as the nos. 106–109 group. It is also important to remember the presence of a huge cistern not far from these structures that could have been the water reserve for the survival of the monks.

Discussion

The archaeological evidence of the Nebo Region shows that these hermitages had several rooms. Although one of them could have been for the dwelling of the monk and the other for prayer, the presence of two rooms could also suggest that these spaces were shared, perhaps by two or more monks, as seems to be reflected in the literary sources. Regarding the two hermitage-cave of the group nos. 106–109, Saller had already postulated that one room may have been inhabited by a master in the ascetic life, while the other by one of his disciples (Saller 1941a: 191–2). The custom of two monks living together occurs in some episodes of the *Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus (ca. AD 550–619) as, for instance, in chapter 93. The text mentions Abba George’s visit to a hermitage located near the village called Bethabara, about six miles from the Jordan River, at the time of the Emperor Tiberius II (AD 574–582). The anchorite Abba Sisinius, who declined a bishopric, and his disciple, lived in the same place and were later buried together (John Moschus 93, trans. Wortley 2008:75–6).

Hagiographic narratives also allude to the same practice, as in the *Life of Symeon the Holy Fool* by Leontius of Neapolis in the 7th c. AD. Symeon and John, who was to be his companion, met and became friends while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The text emphasises that the two monks decided to devote themselves entirely to the monastic life, sharing the same living space in the desert (*Symeon the Holy Fool* 137; trans. Rydén 1963: 137, 16–9; Cesaretti and Hamarneh 2016: 120–1). Cyril of Scythopolis recalls another example in the *Life of Euthymius* (9–10; trans. Schwartz

⁴ ‘For the peace and preservation of our father Procapis the priest’ (SEG 40 1990: no. 1537). See also Di Segni 1998: 438–9 no. 35.

1939: 21). Euthymius, together with Theodotus, reached a natural cave in a gully of Wādī el-Muqallik (Dayr Muqallik), which after being blessed by their prayers, was transformed into the church of the *coenobium* at the beginning of the 5th c. AD (Kühnel 1984; Goldfus *et al.* 1995: 249–56). Later in the text, Euthymius and his pupil Domitian settled in a small cave at Mishor Adummim, which became the central point of the Euthymius monastery and the common burial place for the two monks (*Life of Euthymius* 14; trans. Schwartz 1939: 23–4; Hirschfeld 1993: 340–4).

In the last decades, several hermitage caves in the territories beyond the Jordan River have been identified, but the majority of the cells are carved into the mountain, often developing one or more natural cavities (Waheeb *et al.* 2011; Hamarneh 2014: 362). On the other hand, the groups built on the top of Şıyyagha consist of natural rock cavities to which one or two rooms were added externally. Although simple in shape, the interior often has benches carved from the rock, while some masonry rooms have a mosaic floor. The hermitages could also have several rooms, in some cases communicating, and in that of Procapis, an upper storey was built. The latter seems to suggest that the structure was used by a monk of a high status, maybe a hegumenos, and destined for long-term occupation. Monks may have preferred this type, including both the rock cave and the masonry, because of the proximity to the *coenobium*.

It is worth saying that the monks' secluded spaces contributed to modelling the sacred geography of the Nebo region. This pattern differs from the rock hermitages in the Lisan peninsula or in the valley of the Dead Sea, which refer more to the *Laurae* model or to temporary shelters for the ascetics (Politis 2001). The cave-hermitages of the 'Uyūn Mūsā, although in a worse state of conservation, could have

shared the same typology as those on the top of Şıyyagha, in particular, the one that has two communicating rooms (Piccirillo 1998: 217).

Conclusion

In light of these considerations, the continuation of the research on the Nebo hermitages is desirable in order to lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the hermitic phenomenon of this region. Moreover, the importance of this task is necessary due to recent construction activities in the valleys of 'Uyūn Mūsā, which are undermining the integrity of the archaeological sites and, unfortunately, compromising the original landscape of this territory.

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