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Christian Communities in Jordan during the First Arab Domination through Epigraphic Sources

Introduction

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

This is a writing to *'Umar* from the Christians of such and such a city. When You [Muslims] marched against us [Christians]: we asked of you protection for ourselves, our posterity, our possessions, and our co-religionists; and we made this stipulation with you, that we will not erect in our city or the suburbs any new monastery, church, cell, or hermitage; that we will not repair any of such buildings that may fall into ruins, or renew those that may be situated in the Muslim quarters of the town; that we will not refuse the Muslims entry into our churches either by night or by day; that we will open the gates wide to passengers and travellers; that we will receive any Muslim traveller into our houses and give him food and lodging for three nights; that we will not harbor any spy in our churches or houses, or conceal any enemy of the Muslims. [At least six of these laws were taken over from earlier Christian laws against infidels.]

That we will not teach our children the Qu'ran [some nationalist Arabs feared the infidels would ridicule the Qu'ran; others did not want infidels even to learn the language]; that we will not make a show of the Christian religion nor invite any one to embrace it; that we will not prevent any of our kinsmen from embracing Islam, if they so desire. That we will honor the Muslims and rise up in our assemblies when they wish to take their seats; that we will not imitate them in our dress,

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either in the cap, turban, sandals, or parting of the hair; that we will not make use of their expressions of speech, nor adopt their surnames [infidels must not use greetings and special phrases employed only by Muslims]; that we will not ride on saddles, or gird on swords, or take to ourselves arms or wear them, or engrave Arabic inscriptions on our rings; that we will not sell wine [forbidden to Muslims]; that we will shave the front of our heads; that we will keep to our own style of dress, wherever we may be; that we will wear girdles round our waists [infidels wore leather or cord girdles; Muslims, cloth and silk].

That we will not display the cross upon our churches or display our crosses or our sacred books in the streets of the Muslims, or in their market-places; that we will strike the clappers in our churches lightly [wooden rattles or bells summoned the people to church or synagogue]; that we will not recite our services in a loud voice when a Muslim is present; that we will not carry Palm branches [on Palm Sunday] or our images in procession in the streets; that at the burial of our dead we will not chant loudly or carry lighted candles in the streets of the Muslims or their market places; that we will not take any slaves that have already been in the possession of Muslims, nor spy into their houses; and that we will not strike any Muslim.

All this we promise to observe, on behalf of ourselves and our co-religionists, and receive protection from you in exchange; and if we violate any of the conditions of this agreement, then we forfeit your protection and you are at liberty to treat us as enemies and rebels (ʻUmar Pact).[1]

According to the so-called ʻUmar pact, compromises had to be maintained for a peaceful life by both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. But, in actuality, life was very different and varied from country to country and according to the caliph who took power. Especially during the first Arab age, that had its center in Damascus and was led by the Umayyad dynasty of Prince Moʻawia of Syria, the new Arab communities needed local Christian bureaucrats for the administration of the state, and could not oppose them with a too rigid attitude (Shahid 2002: 380). Father M. Piccirillo's numerous excavations, publications, and reflections on this period inspired me to focus my doctoral work on the topic in the form of a thesis entitled "Christian Communities during the Muslim Domination through Epigraphic Testimonies In: Israel, Palestinian territories, and Jordan," a portion of which is presented here. The aim of my research is to study Christian communities in Israel, Palestinian territories, and Jordan in the period between the 7th century and their disappearance, using data that come mainly from epigraphic sources.

Christianity did not disappear abruptly at the time of the Arab invasions. This is demonstrated by both the episcopal lists, which can be reconstructed through literary and epigraphic sources (from many archaeological excavations), and the descriptions of contemporary travelers. Concerning the epigraphic sources, Jordan represents a very special case: it is an area that has many attestations that allow us to reconstruct, at least partially, how

[1] The Pact probably originated *ca.* 637 by ʻUmar I after the conquest of Christian Syria and Palestine. There are many variations of the text and scholars deny that the text as it stands today could come from the pen of ʻUmar I. It is generally assumed that its present form dates to around the 9th century (Marcus 1938: 13–5).

Christians lived together with the first Arab communities. The inscriptions present significant evidence about the organization of the dioceses and about the tolerance shown by the Umayyad and the early-Abbasid dynasty, which does not cause any definitive crisis in the religious structure of the Christian communities.

Historical Events and Territorial Divisions

The territory of the current Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan extends mainly to the east of the homonymous river, where the Nabataean state (with Petra as its capital) developed around the 2nd century BC. It was articulated following the routes between the Arabian Peninsula and the rest of the region, including the city of Bosra, which became the second capital of the Nabataean kingdom (Piccirillo 1991: 7).

The state of the Nabataeans was absorbed in the Roman Empire in the year AD 106 under Emperor Trajan (Piccirillo 2002: 29).[2] This was a period of prosperity for the urban centers, largely populated by people of Hellenistic culture. The territories were structured according to a new administrative division: the new province was called Arabia, whose jurisdiction spread from the borders of Syria to the Red Sea, including numerous cities of the Decapolis.

The Diocletian administrative reform in the province of Arabia led to important territorial changes. The province extended its borders to the north, while the southern part was reduced in favor of Palestine.[3] Subsequently, the reforms implemented by Emperor Diocletian eventually led to its dismemberment (Bianchi 2007: 15; Piccirillo 2002: 43–8). In the year 358, Palestine (Bradbury 2005) was divided in two along the *limes*, with Palestine to the north and Palestine Salutaris to the south. In this way, the former territory of the province of Arabia was detached from Palestine and became an autonomous area with Petra as its capital city (Hamarneh 2003: 32).

Finally, in the year 400, as attested in the *Codex Theodosianus* (7.4.304; 16.8.29), there was a final change in the eastern provinces. The Three Palestines were then created: Palestine Prima,[4] with a capital at Cesarea (Bianchi 2007: 15); Palestine Secunda,[5] with a capital at Scythopolis (Bianchi 2007: 15); and Palestine Tertia,[6] which had Petra as its administrative center (Fig. 1; Avi-Yonah 1966: 121).

The 7th Century: Two Political and Military Misfortunes Led to the End of the Byzantine Rule and to the Arrival of the Arabs

The 7th century was a period of great disorder for the four Roman provinces, due to the Persian (614–628) and Arab (629) invasions (Piccirillo 2002: 219). The first occupation began in 614 with the Persian king Cosroe II (590–628; Ognibene 2002: 21) who conquered Syria, Arabia, and Palestine, arriving in Jerusalem (Sebeos 24.68), where he killed the population and

[2] Trajan took advantage of the death of the Nabataean king, Rabbel II, to take possession of the kingdom and thus oust Rabbel's son Obodas.

[3] Palestine incorporated the Nabataean cities of the Negev: Shivta, Elusa, Phaino, Ayla, and Petra, while the southern region of Moab remained in the province of Arabia. These changes were made to strengthen the border of the *limes Arabicus* placed along the desert, whose limit was marked by *castra*. The military authority of each province was entrusted to a *dux* and was separated from the civil-administrative authority assigned to a *praeses*.

[4] Palestine Prima included Judea, Idumea, Samaria, and Perea.

[5] Palestine Secunda incorporated Galilee, the Golan Heights, and the cities of the Decapolis, previously assigned to the Palestinian region.

[6] Established from the former territory of the Province of Arabia. The border with Arabia was located at the Wādī Zared. This border, on the north side of Palestine Tertia, was subject to further changes in the early 6th century moving up to Wādī Mūjib/Arnon; the change led to the detachment of the cities of Charach Mouba and Rabbat Mouba from the jurisdiction of Arabia.

1. Plan of the Three Palestines and Arabia (Piccirillo 2002).

then plundered the city,[7] as testified by Strategios, monk of Saint Saba (Piccirillo 2002: 219).[8] In 628, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius reported an important victory over enemy troops and ratified the peace with the defeated Sassanids (Ognibene 2002: 23).

The Muslim invasion began with a defeat in Mu'ta, in the eastern part of Palestine Tertia, on 8 September 629. After the battle, Emperor Heraclius, experiencing great financial difficulty, decided to stop the economic aid to the Arab tribes who lived on the southern borders (Theophanes 336).[9] This led to the beginning of friendly relations between the federated Arab tribes and the Muslim invaders in 630, called the year "of the embassies" (*sanat al-wufud*), during the conquest expedition to the oasis of Tabuk (Schick 1992: 110–1). Through the Islamic conquests and the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad, Ayla Aila, the port of Palestine, was opened, and a peace treaty was signed with the Christian community of the city (Piccirillo 2002: 195–201).

A year after the Prophet Muhammad's death on 8 June 632, the Caliph elected by the Muslim community, Abu Bakr, sent a new expedition (Piccirillo 2002: 195–201). The first clash with part of the Byzantine troops took place in the Wādī Arabah, where Sergio, the *dux* of Palestine Prima who moved from Caesarea, was defeated. Emperor Heraclius, informed of the facts, sent the rest of the army, led by his brother Teodoro (Piccirillo 2002: 220–1). On 13 July 634, the battle took place in *'Ajnadayn*, an area between Beit Gibrin and Lidda, where the imperial army suffered its first defeat. The surviving Byzantine army came back to Beisan in the Jordan Valley, to cross the river back to the Golan. The second clash took place in the Jordan Valley, near the city of Ṭabaqat Fiḥl (Pella), where the Byzantines withdrew on 23 January 635 (Piccirillo 2002: 195–201). The decisive conflict was fought on 20 August 636 along the bank of the Yarmuk River. In 638, Jerusalem surrendered too. The pacts were negotiated between the Patriarch Sophronius and Caliph 'Omar (Schick 1998: 75–6).

The First Phase of Arab Domination: The Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties

The first dynasty of the Umayyads (661–750) settled in Damascus, showing a strong

[7] Sebeos says that after the initial surrender of the city, a revolt broke out between Jews and Christians. Then the Persians laid Jerusalem under siege for 20 days, conquered it, and plundered it for three consecutive days.

[8] Strategios tells of the arrival of the Persians, the destruction of most Christian buildings, and provides a list of the dead. The corpses were collected in streets, churches, and other buildings of the city by a courageous group of buriers led by a notary, Tommaso, and his wife.

[9] Theophanes stated that the reason for the support guaranteed by the Arab border tribes to Muslims led to the defeat against the Arabs. A historian from the early 9th century says that Muslims were able to travel to Mefaa, north of Wādī Mūjib, in January 629 without meeting Byzantine garrisons or federated Arabs in the area.

interest in the Jordanian and Palestinian territory.[10] The administrative structure was based on the ʻUmar Pact (Perrin 2000: 43), partly testified by bilingual papyri (in Greek and Arabic) found in some churches in Nessana, in the Negev (Palestine Tertia), dating between the 674 and 690 (Di Nucci 2006: 31).[11]

The Arab administration assured the citizens' respect for churches and freedom of worship. Furthermore, Christians and Jews could not live in neighborhoods separated from the Arabs and had to pay a special tax (*jiziah)*. Then, the state owned only imperial goods and the lands of those killed in war and of emigrants; private property remained private. Those who disagreed with these principles could freely leave with their goods. Thus, the abandonment of churches in the Umayyad period, sometimes recorded by archaeological investigations, had little to do with religious relations between Muslims and Christians, but rather was the result of socioeconomic factors (Piccirillo 1984b: 333–41).[12]

To gain more control over the conquered regions, the Arabs created new military provinces. The territory was divided into *Ajnad* (singular: *Jund*), military districts (Shahid 1994a: 1–11) equivalent to the Themes used to divide the diocese of the East from the 628 to the 636 (Shahid 1994b: 352–76).[13] The Byzantine diocese of the East, made of eleven provinces, changed its name to Bilad al-Sham, made up of four *Ajnads* (*Jund* Filastin, *Jund* al-Urdunn, *Jund* Dimashq, *and Jund* Hims); which were then divided into smaller districts (*kura* Qura). The territories of the provinces of Arabia (Palestine Prima, Secunda and Tertia) were part of two *Ajnad*s: *Jund* Filastin (formed by Palestine Prima and Tertia) and *Jund* al-Urdunn (composed of Palestine Secunda, the southern part of Phenicia Maritima, and the northern portion of the Arabia province; Fig. 2). The Ghassanids, the most important of the former foederate tribes, played a prominent role in this military system (Zayadine 2000: 37; Shahid 2002: 380).

Muʻawiya, the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, introduced the inheritance succession, which did not belong to the Arab tribal tradition nor to the Muslims in the election of the caliph. He also reorganized the army and introduced an administrative system based on Byzantine models, setting up an advisory board comprised of notables belonging to the former federated Arab tribes (Shahid 2002: 380).

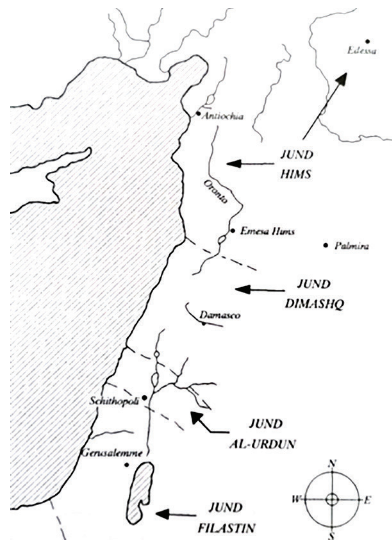
The balance created between the Arab tribes from the south and those from northern Arabia deprived the Umayyad dynasty of its main support against factions that for religious, social, political, and economic reasons, did not accept their exclusion. Among these, there were the "non-Arabs" converted to Islam (*mawali*), the Christians and the Persians, who had hoped to benefit from the same social and economic rights as the Arab Muslims, but who, in fact, were

[10] From the texts of the early Islamic tradition, it appears that the Umayyad dynasty, before the foundation of the new administrative capital of Ramla in the Palestinian plain began, wanted to make Jerusalem (which had taken the name of al-Quds) a religious political center, if not an alternative, certainly on the same level as Mecca, in the hands of the antagonist Abū Zubayr.

[11] The papyri mainly deal with taxation and liturgical rituals.

[12] In fact, the Arab population arises with the increasingly frequent use of the Arabic name accompanied in some cases by that of the tribe to which it belongs. The harassment to which the inhabitants were subjected is also documented, as are some compulsory job services imposed by the new authorities, which constituted one of the causes of the progressive abandonment of the territory.

[13] The diocese of the East was divided, before the Persian conquest, into 11 provinces. With the Byzantine reconquest, the territory was divided into military circumscriptions, and the themes were: theme of Emesa, theme of Damascus, theme of Jordan, theme of Palestine.



2. Plan of the division of the Three Palestines and Arabia into the Arab provinces (Hamarneh 2003).

affiliated as *clientes* to an Arab tribe, and remained as citizens of lower level, often not even exempted from paying the tax imposed on non-Muslims (Bianchi 2007: 22).

Caliph ʻUmar II (717–720) decided to transform the *pro capite* tax into a land tax imposed on all owners of any religion. Then, in order to demonstrate again the Muslim supremacy over the Christian populations, he changed the ancient contribution with a capitation tax imposed only on non-Muslims. The non-Arabs (*mawali*) at first were not considered equal to the Arabs; but the constant struggles between the Arab tribes and their authority led to the disappearance of the difference in social hierarchy. The Arab dominant class disappeared and was replaced by a mixed aristocracy, based on the delegated authorities of the prince.

These divisions within the state were exploited by the descendants of an uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, namely al-Abbas, his great-grandson. Abu al-Abbas, proclaimed himself a caliph in 749, and the Abbasid dynasty began. The Abbasid dynasty (750–809) moved the capital to Baghdad, Mesopotamia, leading to a change in trade routes to the Persian Gulf. The Jordanian area therefore lost importance. The region was abandoned, and with the exception of few urban centers, it remained in the hands of Bedouin tribes (Piccirillo 2002: 253).

Development of Christianity in Jordan

In Jordan, Christianity developed from Palestine through the Jewish province of Perea (Piccirillo 2002: 57). In Arabia, the attestation of a diocese in the 3rd century in Bosra is connected to the names of the bishops Berillo, Ippolito, and Massimo (Piccirillo 2002: 67). In the 4th century, the church was divided in a more articulated way, and within it, a hierarchy was created: bishops, who referred to the bishop of the metropolitan city of the province, who in turn referred to one of the most important episcopal seats: the Patriarchate of Antioch (the Patriarchate of Jerusalem will be added later; Piccirillo 2002: 67–8). From this moment, most of the information regarding the dioceses comes from the acts of the ecclesiastical councils and from the mosaic inscriptions inside Christian places of worship.

In the 4th–6th centuries, information on the development of the dioceses is mainly provided by the acts of the general and local councils.[14] In the Council of Nicaea (325), there was an increase in the episcopal seats, which reached a total of 18 in Palestine, while for Arabia five bishops are mentioned, coming from Bosra, Philadelphia-ʻAmmān, Esbous, Suwaida, and Batanee (Hamarneh 2003: 33). Between the Council of Ephesus (431) and that of Chalcedon (451), the number is doubled, due to the dynamism of Juvenal of Jerusalem (Piccirillo 1989b: 461). In fact, first at the so-called Second Council of Ephesus (449) and then at the

[14] In Palestine and Arabia, the Episcopal See will follow the same administrative division of the empire.

Council of Chalcedon, Juvenal managed to obtain the title of Patriarch, the jurisdiction of the Three Palestinas (Hamarneh 2003: 32), and made Jerusalem a patriarchate (Piccirillo 1989b: 461). Furthermore, with the Council of Chalcedon, 23 bishops were appointed for the Palestinian territory and the diocese of Gerasa was added in Arabia.

In the era of Justinian, there were 28 suffragan seats for Palestine Prima; 13 for Palestine Secunda; nine for Palestine Tertia with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and the three metropolitan offices of Petra, Beisan, and Cesarea Palestinae. To these must be added the four bishops of ʿAmmān, Esbus, Gerasa, and Mādābā, dependent on Bosra and consequently on the Patriarchate of Antioch (Abel 1936: 199–202; Bagatti 1982: 26; Fedalto 1983a: I 5–41; Fedalto 1983b: II 261–83). Regarding the further development of each diocesan seats between the 5th century and their disappearance, the importance of mosaic inscriptions in ecclesiastical buildings should be noted where bishops are often mentioned as promoters of the works (or simply remembered as head of the diocese) carried out in cities or villages (Hamarneh 2003: 34).[15]

The period between the 5th and first half of the 7th century is considered to be one of great prosperity, due to the generosity of the central government of the empire, especially towards the great sanctuaries of the Holy Land. In the rest of the Palestinian territories and the province of Arabia, public works were carried out by civil and military officials of the provincial administration, landowners, artisans and traders, officers and soldiers of the army, monks, and the general population (Hamarneh 2008: 62), who were joined by Christian Arab groups, especially the *Banu Ghassan* (Piccirillo 2002: 191–217). In fact, they settled in the abandoned Roman fortified structures, transforming them into large rural agglomerations. Their Christianization is testified by Sozomeno in *Historia Ecclesiastica* during the reign of the emperor Arcadio, but it could have been started in the 4th century, as can be deduced by the mention of Arab bishops in the councils of Seleucia and Antioch.

Christian Communities in Palestine and Arabia from the Second Half of the 7th Century until Their Disappearance

The mosaic floors of the churches dated between the 7th and 9th centuries must be interpreted in continuity with the Byzantine period. The inscriptions mostly come from the province of Arabia, but there are also some from Palestine Tertia. The texts are precious documents, which attest to the continuity of life and peaceful coexistence between the Islamic and Christian communities (Piccirillo 2002: 227). The churches show that political change was not experienced with the drama reported by contemporary literary sources, and that it did not change the everyday way of life of the Christian communities, apart from the payment of taxes *jizyah* and *kharaj* to the Arabs.

The few remaining literary sources describe the Arab period as "a world subject to great misery, sadness, privations and constant difficulties" (Pirone 1991) for Christians. For monastic communities, however, a completely different condition is described. An example is the "Life of Saint Stephen Sabaita" (Pirone 1991), in which the daily life "in the territories governed by the Arabs" is documented.[16] From this work, it is clear that the political change was experienced by the monks of Saint Saba only in a marginal way, and they

[15] They saw reflected in the mosaic floors the great prestige achieved by the important local families who were the great engine of development in the cities and in the countryside, especially in the 6th century (the most prosperous period).

[16] The period of the life of St. Stephen took place between 725 and 794. The original was written in Greek by his disciple Leontius of Damascus around 807 in the graduation of St. Saba.

continued their life as they always had. Despite the difficulties, Leontius (Pirone 1991) sufficiently documents that the lives of Christians continued their normal course. Pilgrimages to holy places continued from the surrounding regions and even from Europe. This peaceful coexistence is also attested through the memories of public and private debates, held at the court of the Caliph, in which theological questions were discussed between the two communities (Piccirillo 2002: 226).

In the same line of continuity with literary sources, regarding the presence of Christian communities in Jordan, the mosaic floors with inscriptions dating from the 7th and 8th centuries must be interpreted, which also give us other information from the Umayyad and Abbasid period. It seems that the communities were able to support church reconstruction and construction projects from the beginning. In many cases they have integrated the episcopal lists, of which otherwise we would not have further references. These testimonies reveal the type of patron, fruition, and chronology of the monument, highlighted by the various interventions that have occurred over the time (Hamarneh 1996: 66).

In these inscriptions, the primary role of the bishop is evident (Tables 1–2; Piccirillo 1980: 328–32) as promoter or witness of the works carried out in the diocese (the city) and the villages.[17] The bishop often gave jobs to the members of the lower hierarchy of the clergy, such as the corepiscopes (Politis 1992: 281–90), the periodeuti (Saliou 2000: 390–411), the presbyters (Piccirillo 1980: 317–50), the deacons (Piccirillo 1987: 177–239), archdeacons (Negev 1981: 61–2), treasurers (Piccirillo 1984a: 329–40), readers (Gatier 1998: 388–9), and members of monastic communities (Piccirillo 1994: 521–38).

In addition to the high ecclesiastical commission, more donations also appear from whole cities and villages, as in the mosaic of the Church of the Virgin in Mādābā (Piccirillo 1982: 373–408; Di Segni 1992: 251–7), or in the first phase of the flooring of the Church of St. Stephen in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1987: 177–239; Piccirillo and Alliata 1994: 241–71). Lay donors, who contribute to the creation of secondary floor, are also mentioned with invocations for help (Piccirillo1987a: 177–239) and commemorations of the deceased, useful for understanding the social structure of the population. There are also cases in which anonymity formulas are used, probably by the choice of the donor (Hamarneh 1996: 55–75).

Furthermore, there are various testimonies of reconstructive work and decoration, of which a significant example comes from the complex of St. Stephen in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, where an inscription dating to 756 was found. This inscription certifies the commission of a second mosaic in the presbytery area, when the presbytery was modified and raised from the original level in the year 718, as confirmed by the inscription in the mosaic below (Piccirillo 1987a: 177–239; Piccirillo and Alliata 1994: 241–71).

In the 8th century, evidence of Christian communities is apparent in progressive building constructions, like Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Mādābā, and Jerusalem. In other places, however, the signs of frequentation come from the phenomenon of iconophobia. This crisis has been noted in human and animal figures that have been targeted and deemed to be without theological value, as in the case of iconoclasm. It seems that the manifestation

[17] The names are useful as a safe guide for defining the diocesan territory, understanding where the jurisdiction of the dioceses extended and chronologically following the history of architectural development in cities and villages. An example of the fundamental role of the bishop comes from the inscriptions present in the ecclesiastical buildings of the villages of Khirbet al-Samra and Riḥāb.

Table 1. Episcopal list of the Province of Arabia (Patriarchate of Antioch).

Diocese	Name of the Bishop	Dating
Mādābā	Sergio II	718
	Job	756–762
	Theophane	767
Philadelphia	John	649
	George	687
Bosra	Teodoro	633–638
	George	691
	Stephen	8th century

Table 2. Episcopal list of the Province of Palaestina Tertia (Patriarchate of Jerusalem).

Diocese	Name of the Bishop	Dating
Zoar'ā	Chrestos	691
Areopolis	Stephen	687
Elusa	George	639

of the aversion of the Semitic populations towards animated images of any kind can be identified as the root of the phenomenon. References to this crisis in literary sources are scarce. The only one that could be read as an intervention against iconophobia is the discussion that took place during the Council of Nicea in 787. The priest John of Jerusalem (Ognibene 2002: 133–4) accused Caliph Yazid II of the destruction of the mosaics: "the holy icons and all other things of the same kind were destroyed in every province of his empire" (Piccirillo 2002: 248). Apart from this episode, neither Arab nor contemporary Christian sources make any reference to the iconophobic phenomenon.

The iconophobic crisis affected not only the mosaics of the Umayyad period, but also those of the previous era which were still in use in the 8th century (Piccirillo 2002: 243–8). After the mosaics were damaged, there were immediate restorations with the same polychrome tesserae, or some tesserae of different sizes, or simply lime plaster mixed with sherds. In most cases, the original image was replaced by dis-figurative geometric-floral motifs (Ognibene 2002: 145). Together, the restorative work and the inscriptions testify that the mosaics were used by the Christian community even after the iconophobic crisis and suggest that the dis-figurative interventions and restorations were performed by Christian workers

(Ognibene 2002: 145). Nevertheless, the authorship of the iconophobic order and the duration of the phenomenon are still under discussion. The iconophobia seems to be of Muslim origin, in connection to a similar current present within Islam. However, it has yet to be determined whether the caliphs ever intervened with an order in a Christian church (Piccirillo 2002: 245).

One hypothesis sees this phenomenon as an act prompted by the Christian authorities because of the 'Umar Pact, which decreed that the churches had to host the prayers of Muslims. Perhaps an additional condition was also placed, namely that the figural representations in the building had to be removed or covered.[18] This hypothesis suggests that the iconophobic intervention was likely initiated by Christians to protect ecclesiastical buildings and accommodate the Islamic community. To prove this hypothesis, however, it is necessary to rely only on data from archaeological research, as clearly stated by Piccirillo (1996: 173–93).

Why Christian communities ultimately left the territory is still unclear. Climate change and epidemics have been proposed as causes, but none of them is entirely likely. Most hypotheses relate to the Bedouinization process. After the Arab invasion, the tribes continued to enter the territories of Palestine and Arabia, causing damage to agriculture and sedentary life in the region, especially in the provinces of Arabia and Palestine Tertia (Piccirillo 2002: 253). Many lands were abandoned or left by farmers and cultivated by new arrivals, who were novice farmers and caused much damage, not knowing the proper cultivation techniques. The consequent abandonment of the countryside led to desertification, erosion of fertile soil, and loss of many areas suitable for agriculture. This explains the presence, noted by archaeologists, of oil mills and wine presses in areas that were then deserted, such as the cities of the Negev, Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, and Mt. Nebo (Piccirillo 2002: 253).

Examples from the Dioceses of the Provinces of Arabia and Palestine Tertia

Diocese of Bosra

The first evidence comes from the diocese of Bosra and can be dated during the clashes between Muslims and the Byzantines (630–636). We are informed that between 634 and 638, the inhabitants of the villages of Riḥāb paved mosaics the churches of St. Menas ("By grace of Jesus Christ God and our savior was built and mosaic and finished the temple of St. Mena in the time of Theodore the most holy and honored by metropolitan God . . ."; Fig. 3), St. Isaiah ("In the time of the most holy Theodore our metropolitan and archbishop this temple of the holy prophet Isaiah was mosaic. . ."), and Khirbat as-Samrā ("Under the most holy and most blessed Archbishop Theodore the mosaic of the holy place of the martyr John was made. . ."; Fig. 4). These texts mention the archbishop and metropolitan, Theodore, who is not mentioned in the list of bishops of the diocese of Bosra.

Given that the city of Bosra, the metropolitan seat of the province of Arabia in whose territory are located the two villages of Riḥāb (Piccirillo 1981a: 76–7) and Khirbat as-Samrā (Gatier 1998: 384–9; Piccirillo 1993: 306), was conquered in 634/35, and factoring in the necessary time for the implementation of these works, it must be deduced that the population of the two villages continued their daily lives as if they were not affected by the events at the eve of the military disaster of 636.

From the floor of the central nave of the Church of St. Constantine in the village

[18] Several ecclesiastical buildings were used by Muslims for prayer, such as the Basilica of St. John in Damascus, the Church of Homs, the Church of St. Sergius in Rasafa, the Church on the Tomb the Mary of Gethsemane, and the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, despite protests by Christians.

of Riḥāb comes an inscription (Fig. 5) in a frame, in which the commissioning benefactor, named Constantine, wanted to entrust the memory of himself to Christ the Lord. Instead of a figure, two numbers "TM" (= 340) have been written on the white background of framed sector of the mosaic. Leah Di Segni, comparing this case with others in Palestinian and Jordanian territory, in which the *era ab origine mundi* is used, reads this as dating to AD 832 (Di Segni 2006: 578–92). In this way, this can be read as a restoration of a Christian church dating back to the 9th century (in addition, the material found during the excavations date to the 9th–10th centuries as well).

Diocese of Philadelphia-ʿAmmān

Three of the inscriptions from the diocese of Philadelphia-ʿAmmān are of great interest for this topic. They are texts referring to the second phase of the Khilda cult building, dedicated to St. Varus ("O Lord God of Saint Varus. . ."), and dating to the 687 (Fig. 6). St. Varus was actually one of the few saints remembered in these Jordanian inscriptions that date to the Arab period. The restoration was carried out by Bishop George of Philadelphia-ʿAmmān, and thanks to George's son, John, the presbyter (also named John), and their families ("At the time of the most holy and most holy Bishop George, the entire work of the place was restored and completed. Saint with the care of George, John, and the presbyter John and all the members of their families, in the year 750"; Fig. 7; Najjar-Sa'id 1994: 547–60).

From the lower church of the village of Al-Quweisma, however, comes a mosaic inscription which recalls the integral restoration of the church by the presbyter and treasurer Tzobeo in the year 780 (Piccirillo 1984a: 332–3), which according to the Pompeian era of Philadelphia-ʿAmmān, corresponds to AD 717/18, the era of ʿUmar II ("By God's providence and by the zeal and care of

3. Inscription in the church of St. Menas in Riḥāb (Piccirillo 1981b).

4. Dedication epigraph in mosaics found in John the Baptist in Khirbat as-Samrā (Piccirillo 1993).

Tzobeo the most precious priest and treasurer was restored from the foundations the whole building of this most holy church and was paved in mosaic for his salvation, and that of Macedonio, Abbiba and John his brothers, at the time of the first indiction of the year 780"; Fig. 8). In the presbytery of the same church, it is possible to see a mosaic inscription in Aramaic-Palestinian (Fig. 9) and part of a second text with

5. St. Constantine a Riḥāb. The disfigured mosaic panel with the two letters TM added during the restoration (Di Segni 2006).

6. Inscription in which the martyr Varus is remembered in the church of Khilda-ʿAmmān (Najjar and Sa'id 1994).

an invocation in Greek ("Oh Lord [help] the village"; Fig. 10). The inscription in Aramaic-Palestinian must be mentioned because, even if it is of Semitic origin, in this text the name *Ḥabbiba* refers to someone who is very likely the same person mentioned in the dedicatory inscription of Tzobeo: there is then epigraphic evidence that demonstrates the contemporaneity of the two Greek inscriptions with this one of Semitic origin. The dating of 717–718 for the Christ-Palestinian inscription is very remarkable, because these types of texts are rarely dated or datable. It also underlines that this church was part of a monastery and that Tzobeo, Macedonio, *Ḥabbiba,* John, Stephen, and Raytou were monks from this holy place, as expressed by the sentence αὐτοῦ ἀδελφῶν. This can also be read in the "Life of St. Stephen Sabaitha" and Abbot Cosma (egumene of the Al-Quweisma monastery) who visited their monastery.

The dedicatory inscription in this church also comes from a special place. In fact, it is located in the lateral nave, facing a wall that shows no sign of any entrance. It will certainly be a topic to be explored.

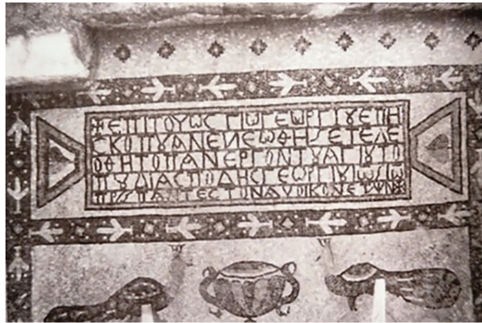
Diocese of Mādābā

From the diocese of Mādābā come 70 cases, the largest number of mosaic texts in Jordanian territory. At the turn of the 8th century, some cities stand out for their progressive building development: Umm ar-Rasās, Maʿīn, ʿAyn al-Kanisah (near Nebo), and Mādābā.

Maʿīn–Belemounta was founded in the 719/720 on an acropolis within the diocese of Mādābā. The church shows the use of iconographic decoration with vignettes of 11 locations on the Jordan River (Fig. 11). Belemounta is one of the toponyms of the western area of the Jordan. The same toponymal was also found in the southern part of the coeval church of St. Stephen in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1989a: 232–4).

In the dedicatory, incomplete inscription, two biblical passages are mentioned: Psalm 117.20 ("This is the door of the Lord, the righteous will enter through it. . .") and Psalm 86.2 (". . . Love the Lord, the gates of Zion more than all the tents of Jacob"; Figs. 12a–b).

Regarding Umm ar-Raṣāṣ–Kastron Mayfaʿah, it is necessary to recall that in 718 the church dedicated to St. Stephen was

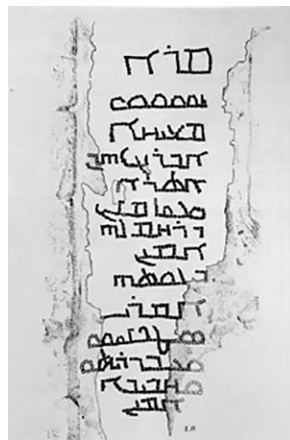


7. Dedicatory inscription of the Church of St. Varus in Khilda-ʿAmmān (Najjar and Sa'id 1994).

8. Inscription in mosaics in lower church of Al-Quweisma (Piccirillo 1993).

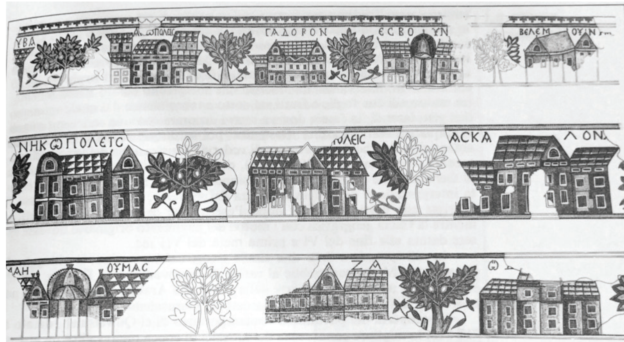
built on the northern edge of the town by the bishop Sergius II ("At the time of the most holy Bishop Sergius, the mosaic of the saint was completed and illustrious protodiacon and protomartyr Stephen. . ."; Fig. 13). The mosaic floor of the new foundation cites numerous toponyms east and west of the Jordan River, together with a selected sample of Nile Delta locations, using the usual repertoire of iconographic themes. Particularly interesting is the presence of representations that refer to ecclesiastical and lay evergreens from other villages in the *chore* of Mādābā, offering an important map of the flourishing places within the diocese (Piccirillo and Alliata 1994: 241–69).

The inscriptions refer to the complex social structure of Kastron Mayfaʿah. The main one recalls the figures of a deacon, archon, and bursar. Among the petitioners, the people who love Christ are mentioned: seven of the most eminent members seem to be listed in a long strip under the inscription. In addition, there is a later restoration dating precisely to 756, initiated by the bishop Job

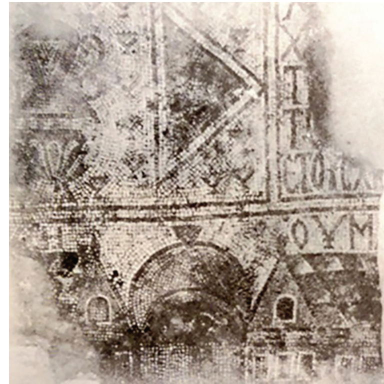


9. Aramaic-Palestinian inscription in mosaics in lower church of Al-Quweisma (Piccirillo 1993).

10. Greek invocation in the lower church of Al-Quweisma (Piccirillo 1984).



11. The geographical plan in the church of Maʿīn (Piccirillo 1993).



12a. Dedicatory inscription in the church of Maʿīn (Piccirillo 1984).

12b. Dedicatory inscription in the church of Maʿīn (Piccirillo 1984).

(“By grace of Christ the mosaic of the holy bema was embellished, [precisely] this at the time of our most pious father Job the bishop. . . in month of March, 9th indiction of the year 650”; Fig. 14). Only about 60 inscriptions come from this site, including the topographical vignettes datable to the full 8th century (Piccirillo and Alliata 1994: 241–69).

In the monastery of ʻAyn al-Kanisah, dedicated to the Theotokos in the valley of ʻAyn al-Kanisah at Mt. Nebo, the restoration of the mosaic floor dates to 762, almost coeval with the second phase of St. Stephen, both promoted by bishop Job of Mādābā (“By the providence of God this venerable monastery of the Saint Theotokos was rebuilt at the time of Job, bishop of the Medabesi and George the recluse. For the salvation of those who offered. Fifteenth indiction of the year 6270”; Fig. 15). The reference to the recluse seems important, being a form of asceticism and monasticism not widespread in the Jordanian area. From this text we have a remarkable enrichment of the monastic vocabulary in the region. Furthermore, dating confirms the vitality of the monastic presence in the valleys and on the top of Mt. Nebo (Piccirillo 1995a: 409–20).

At the Basilica of the Virgin in Mādābā (Piccirillo 1982: 373–408), the later restoration of the internal part of the building is remembered in a dedicatory inscription, dated to the year 767. The restoration took place thanks to the bishop Theophanes and the help of the entire city of Mādābā (“At the time of our most pious

13. Dedication epigraph (1st phase: 718) from the mosaics of St. Stephen in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1993).

father Bishop Theophanes, this beautiful mosaic work was made of the glorious and venerable house of the holy and immaculate Queen Mary Mother of God. . . It was finished by the grace of God in February of the year 6074, fifth indiction"; Fig. 16). This intervention, which chronologically bears the last date attested in mosaic inscriptions from the Mādābā region, opens a controversial issue on the ecclesiastical organization in the region during the 8th century, and above all, on the abandonment of the religious buildings which, as attested by ceramic finds, occurred during the 9th century (Di Segni 1992: 251–7).

14. Dedication epigraph (756) from the mosaics of the presbyterium of St. Stephen (Piccirillo 1993).

Diocese of Zoar'ā

The end our excursus leads to the diocese of Zoar'ā, and specifically Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa, where the bishop Jacob built the first part of the building dedicated to Lot in 606. It was then restored in 691 by the chorepiscopus Crestos (Politis 1992: 281–90), with the help of lay donors, as he says in the text: "At the time of the beloved priest and chorepiscopus from God Crestos, the treasurer of Zeno and John Rabebos and Diocetus. The basilica of the holy place was paved in mosaic in the year 586" (AD 691; Fig. 17). This information attests to the presence of a chorepiscopus still at the end of the 7th century; therefore these itinerant officials still existed, maybe to help the bishop in the more distant communities.

15. Dedication epigraph of the second phase of the mosaics from the Theotokos in 'Ayn al-Kanisah of the Virgin in Mādābā (Piccirillo 1993).

Critical Issues

The importance of the mosaics found in Jordanian churches, the chronological continuity (from the 6th to the 8th century) attested in their inscriptions, the refinement of the decorations, and the careful restoration work are striking. These mosaics help

16. Dedication epigraph (767) from the mosaics of the church of the Virgin in Mādābā (Piccirillo 1993).

to reconstruct devotional, cultural, and social paths in a region not sufficiently documented by written sources. They gave way to partial reconstructions of Jordanian episcopal lists, as well as to new information on the Christian communities and private donors, who helped in the construction of the church, and to deeper knowledge about the wealth of the monastic communities during the Arab period.

Moving forward in my study on inscriptions, several points of reflection appeared clearly. One of these concerns the importance of local commissioning on the creation of mosaic floors, as it was the great engine of development for the city and the countryside. Also important is the value of the clergy and ecclesiastical hierarchies, which appear as donors integrated into the local communities, while the bishop appears to be mentioned as the promoter of the work.

Dauphin (1978), in this sense, thinks of an extremely restricted contribution of the bishop, limited to the diocesan centers and not to the adjacent territory, and proposes that the work was done by other members of the minor clergy. The scholar's statement seems unconvincing for Hamarneh (1998), who believes that some inscriptions found in small villages distant from the diocesan center (*i.e.*, Umm ar-Rasās or Khirbat as-Samrā) bear dedications from bishops. Hamarneh bases her reconstruction on the epigraphic findings that allowed for the creation of episcopal lists and which suggested the constant presence of the bishop, both in the main city of a certain diocese and in the surrounding area. But only the case of Umm ar-Rasās points out how the entire population of the rural village got involved in its decoration, with a greater number of lay people than clergymen. Probably the bishop is only remembered in the inscriptions as a pastor of his own diocese, but this does not show his active intervention in a particular city. Of great importance may be the presence in the 7th century of a chorepiscopo in the diocese of Zoar'ā, and in the 8th century of a periodeuta in the diocese of Gaza, moving among communities to replace the bishop. Furthermore, in order to find a solution to the problem, a new study could compare the epigraphic attestations for their chronology, their original site, and the ecclesiastical or

17. Dedication epigraph of mosaics in St. Lot in Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa (Piccirillo 1993).

secular hierarchical components that are appointed. In addition, it should not be forgotten that in the 8th century some of the most important cities began to depopulate, with people moving further inland to rural areas, where in fact communities will have a longer life span.

A real mystery, on the other hand, is the city of Jarash, which presents only epigraphic records dating back to the first half of the 7th century (611). Strangely, no attestation can be dated to the transition period from the Byzantine age to the Arab age, but not even to a later period. With great certainty, however, we can say that a Christian community was still present in the city, because ceramic elements were found in the excavations of ecclesiastical buildings dating back to the 7th–8th century. Among these, a terracotta lamp with Arabic inscription dated to 125 of the Egira (AD 737), which came out of the workshop of the potter David, son of Mustafa. A cross on the bottom is also added, and testifies how the humble object was intended for the use of Christians.

Even the phenomenon of iconophobia still leaves several questions. There are systematic—partial or total—destructions aimed at making the images of living beings present on mosaics and liturgical furnishings unreadable. The attention that characterizes this phenomenon, which can be seen in the full rearrangement of the floors, makes it possible to identify the material executors of these interventions in the Christians themselves. The issue relating to the instigators of these destructive operations remains widely discussed to date, since the iconophobic phenomenon is not only registered in the churches, but is also found in the synagogues of the region.

It should be noted that the floors installed in the Umayyad period (such as the mosaic of the lower church of Al-Quweisma dated 719/720, the one of the church on the acropolis of Maʿīn with the same chronology, as well as the first level of the floor mosaic of the Church of St. Stephen of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ dating to 718) show the memory of figural representations used in the original decorative program. Subsequent interventions, such as the new 756 floor located in the presbyterial area of the Church of St. Stephen of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, placed above the previous one (which was presumably figured), show geometric decoration indicating that the iconophobic intervention should be placed chronologically around or before that date.

Finally, a question that Piccirillo asked himself was: "when and why did the dissolution of this world take place with the abandon of Jordanian cities, villages and countryside?" (Piccirillo 2002). The causes of this are still to be understood.

In conclusion, we can say that, in addition to literary sources, Byzantine-Arab inscriptions can help us in answering many open-ended questions about the borders of the dioceses and increase episcopal lists that still partial and poor of this period. They also help us to appreciate the wealth of the Christian villages, still active despite the presence of the Arabs, and above all, to understand why there was a mass abandonment of the region at some point. According to the archaeological findings and the few existing sources, it is possible that peaceful coexistence was attested until the 9th–10th century, when Muslims seemingly decided to end the policy of religious tolerance.

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