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Rural Properties in Byzantine and Islamic Arabia and *Palaestina Tertia*: Church, State, and Landowning Élite

The socio-economic assets of marginal lands in the Byzantine East were much dependent on the development of rural landscape in the provinces of *Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* in the 5th–8th/9th centuries. The considerable number of village-based communities, revealed by long-running surveys and excavations, attest to a profound secular and ecclesiastic impact on landscape exploitation (Hamarneh 2003: 34–43; Walmsley 2005: 511–3).

Most scholars agree that the mid-5th century witnessed an interplay of social and spatial norms that placed special emphasis on the larger function of frontier zones (Fiema 2002: 131). In this context, local populations settled in marginal areas, on the edge of the desert, and provided agricultural labor and military protection (Fiema 2002: 132). The pattern also reflected administrative readjustments and the gradual decrease of the influence exerted by municipal governments, which reshaped the function

of Late Antique cities. Church institutions gained instead more relevance, as illustrated by the establishment of diocesan centres in the 4th–5th centuries (FIG. 1). The bishop's authority in urban administration was formally recognised by laws, promulgated in AD 409 for the West and repeated in AD 505 for the East (Sarady 2006: 184–5). Subsequently, Emperor Justinian, through *Novella* 131, recognised these obligations; hence the Church became a driving force in the social fabric by promoting building projects, not only of edifices connected directly with its duties, such as churches and charitable institutions, but also of civic structures such as defensive walls, baths, public inns, and prisons (Gatier 1985: 299–300; Feissel 1989: 821–3; Hamarneh 2013: 416–7).

The ecclesiastical hegemony apparently limited the agency of local elites, who instead were obliged to direct their interests toward rural settlements, especially in



1. Plan of the Three Palestines and Arabia (by M. Ben Jeddou).

the 6th century. The attention towards the countryside revitalised the economy, created a new social order, and led to the development of a provincial aristocracy consisting primarily of landowners. Greek dedicatory inscriptions hint at the involvement of private donors in the building of rural churches and paving them with mosaics, attesting to the full spatial integration of Christian monuments into the fabric of villages.

Archaeological excavations bear witness to the growth of large agricultural settle-

ments, mainly represented by villages that rose on, and incorporated, abandoned Roman *castra*. Most of these settlements illustrate an important building policy that may reflect a growing interest of the Church in these villages, and particularly in the land it possessed (among others Umm ar-Raṣāṣ/ Mefa'a in the bishopric of Mādabā, serves as a fine example; FIG. 2). Thriving rural settlements were associated with extensive stretches of centuriated fields spreading beyond the village limits, with hamlets and industrial installations, notably wine and



2. Aerial photo of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (courtesy of APAAME_20170920_MND-0179).

olive presses (Hamarneh 2013: 63).

The epigraphic evidence indicates that the main euergetic activities in villages were conducted by the religious authorities, at local or diocesan levels. They performed structuring efforts that sharply modified the topography of settlements both internally and externally. Provincial or municipal authorities rarely acted in their official capacity, but rather as private sponsors, just as the provincial aristocracy or more humble village dwellers. Additionally, inscriptions on rare occasions single out the occupation of lay donors, and it is hardly

ever connected to agriculture; laymen are identified as soldiers,¹ mosaicists, merchants, or controllers of weights (Hamarneh 2003: 230–8). This *ex silentio* implies that most donating communities were well structured within the agrarian context and performed tasks strictly connected to the exploitation of land. The agricultural labour was reflected instead in the rich decorative repertoire of the mosaic pavements, owing the fact that local sponsors may have had a responsibility

¹ The papyri of Nessana refer to several soldiers involved in buying land in the town (*P. Ness.* 3.14–30).

in choosing decorations that expressed their toil and daily realities.

Within the briefly sketched framework, the reconstruction of land property in quantitative and qualitative terms remains uncertain; though a definition of a hierarchic order of small and medium sized landowners can be evinced in *Novella* 138 of Justin II of AD 566 (Lemerle 1979: 26; Decker 2009: 66–7). More effective reconstructions of forms of transactions related to agricultural land ownership can be glimpsed from the corpus of Nessana and the Petra Papyri. Economic stratification is also suggested in texts concerned with rural church sponsorship and may allow for the reconstruction of specific patterns according to the order in which the names are listed.²

Significant contribution to broaden our understanding of the landscape of the village and the place of men within that landscape is provided by inscriptions mentioning specific tasks of administration. The first case is that of the involvement of an *epitropos* (a term designating a procurator or an administrator) in the construction of the Church of ad-Dayr in Ma'in (the biblical Ba'al Maon/Belemona [Piccirillo 1989: 245]; FIG. 3). The church inscription, dated to the 6th century, does not mention Church officials. Instead it lists Theodore, the most glorious *illustris*, and the efforts of the *epitropos* (administrator) in building the holy house from its foundations (Gatier 1986: 193–4; Di Segni 1995: 314–6; FIG. 4).³ One may notice that the main donor, to

whom all honours are attributed, acts in his private capacity, together with an administrator, who probably managed Theodore's private estate on the outskirts of the town. This interpretation can be supported by an episode mentioned by Cyril of Scythopolis in the *Life of Sabas*. Following dissension amongst his opponents in the Great Laura, Sabas was forced to leave for Nicopolis (Amwas), where he dwelled in seclusion under a carob tree. The *epitropos* of the site came to see him and constructed a cell on the spot that soon developed into a *coenobium* (*Vita Sabae* 35 in Schwartz 1939: 120–1; Baldelli *et al.* 2012: 262–3). The episode may indicate that the tree grew on an extensive private estate that required an administrator (*epitropos*). The term is also mentioned by Sozomenos in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. He relates that Calemerus, the *epitropos* of an estate in Kaphar-Zechariah near Eleutheropolis, was well disposed towards the owner, but hard, discontented, and unjust towards his neighbouring peasants. However, these defects were apparently accepted and did not prevent Calemerus from receiving instructions to find the tomb of Prophet Zacharias in a garden nearby (Sozomenus 17; Walford 1855: 423–4). The term is also listed in various contexts in the Petra Papyri (e.g., *P. Petra* 6a ca. AD 573 (?); *P. Petra* 98 [Kaimio and Lehtinen 2018: 203]; *P. Petra* 74 ca. AD 559 [Arjava and Vesterinen 2007: 95]).

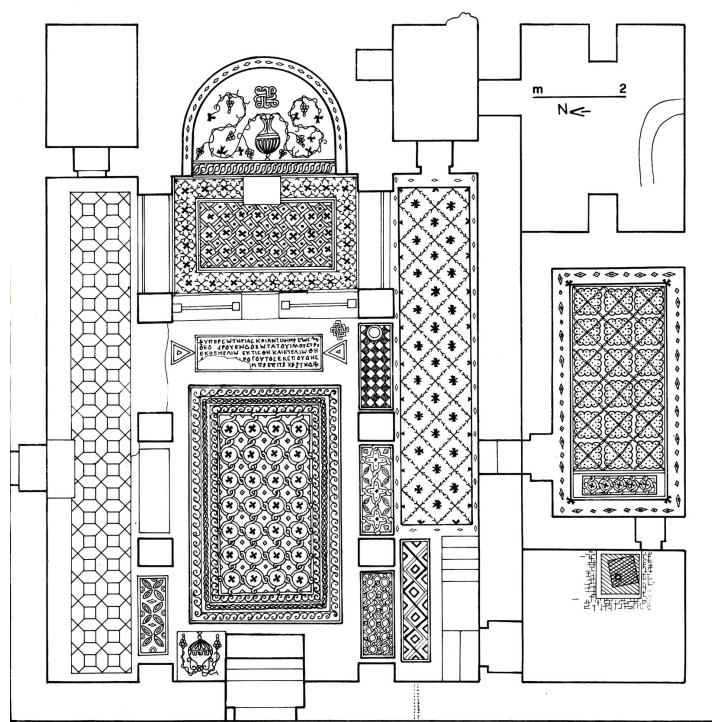
Large villages, that cannot be considered as one unique domain, may have consisted of several stretches of privately owned land, which required specific agents/trustees or administrators representing the landlords. A system that reflected in church inscriptions with reference to the *pistikos* attested both individually or collectively.⁴ According to

² The inscriptions found in *Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* do not mention the extension of the area laid in mosaics offered by each donor. One may speculate that the name order together with texts inserted in independent small spaces may reflect not only the prominence of the social standing but also point to the quantity of economic investment. Insights to such practice are provided by the Greek inscriptions of the church discovered in 'Uqerbat near Hama in Syria (Jaghnoon 2019: 8–15).

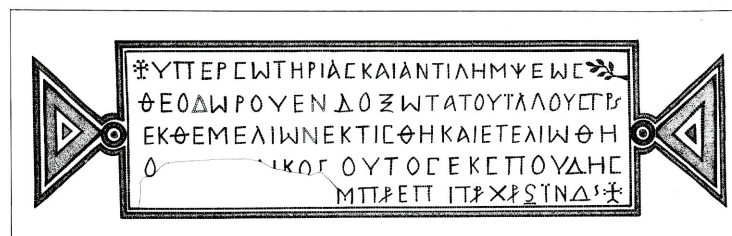
³ The text: 'For the preservation and succor of Theodore/the most glorious illustrious/This holy

house was built from the foundations by the effort of (name lost) the clarissimus epitropos in the sixth indiction' (after Gatier 1986: 193–4).

⁴ Piccirillo translates *pistikos* as an adjective meaning faithful.



3. Ad-Dayr church of Ma'in (after Piccirillo 1989).



1. † Ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας καὶ ἀντιλήψεως
2. Θεοδώρου ἐνδοξωτάτου ἱλουστρ(ίου)
3. ἐκ θεμελίω[ν] ἐκτίσθη καὶ ἐτελιώθη
4. ὁ ἅ[γιος] οἶκος οὗτος ἐκ σπουδῆς
5. [...λα]μπρ(οτάτου) ἐπιτρ(όπου) χρ(όνων) ϛ̅ ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) †

4. The inscription of ad-Dayr church of Ma'in (after Piccirillo 1989).

Di Segni and Feissel, it may refer to trustees or administrators who managed property or revenues for third parties (Di Segni 1995: 316; Feissel 2006: 261).

The inscription in the Church of Bishop Sergius at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ/Kastron Mefa'a (dated to AD 587) lists five persons among the donors defined as *pistikoi*

- 1 Κύριε ὁ Θεὸς βοήθησον τοὺς καμόντας
- 2 τὸ ψήφειν τοῦτον ᾧν ὁ Κύριος γινώσκει
- 3 τὰ ὀνόματα. Ἐν τοῖς χρόνοις Σοελου
- 4 Κασσισεου Ἀβδαλλου Ὁβεδου Ἡλίου πιστικοί.



5. The inscription of Bishop Sergius Church of Umm ar-Raşāş (after Piccirillo 1994).

or administrators (Fig. 5), rather than faithful as suggested instead by Piccirillo (1994: 259). However, it may also refer to a function of trusted agent as mentioned in the *Spiritual Meadow* of John Moschus (*Pratum* 79, p. 87 iii: 2936)⁵. This plurality of significant values given to a *pistikos* allows us a glimpse of its compatibility with a rural environment in which administration of property and commerce were entwined.

The term *pistikos* is used, according to the integration of the partially conserved mosaic inscription, in the dedicatory text of the church of the Reliquary at Umm ar-Raşāş dated to 586 (Piccirillo 2006: 384–5). Another *pistikos* is listed by name in the 8th century pavement of St Stephen’s Church in the same village (Piccirillo 1994: 247). The complexity of the agrarian economy of Kastron Mefa‘a (Umm ar-Raşāş), the extension of the fenced fields, terraces, and dams, visible in the aerial photographs, suggest extensive fractioned properties, either single or collective, part of which required professional administrators, hinted to by the donorship of at least six *pistikoi* in the aforementioned churches in the second

half of the 6th century.⁶

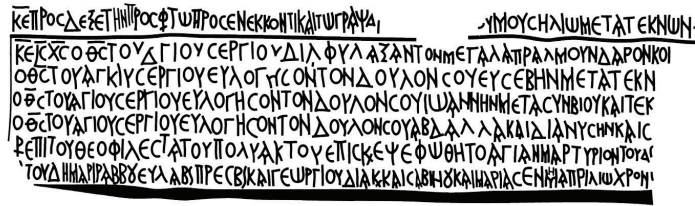
A church built on private property,⁷ or with private funds, could be also the case of that of ar-Rashidiya (near Ṭafilah) in AD 573/74 (Mahamid 2003: 7–16). The dedicatory inscription does not refer to members of the local or diocesan clergy, it mentions only Megale, *Christ-Loving* as founder and a mosaicist from *Aelia* (Jerusalem; FIG. 6).⁸ The prominence of the dedicatory inscription, set in a medallion in the main nave, suggests that the status of the woman was that of a wealthy local aristocrat who exercised her authority as patron and almsgiver by building the church on privately owned land or with her own wealth. In addition, there are no siblings or relatives associated with the woman in the text (Di Segni 2006: 587–9). This allowed

⁵ According to different interpretation it may designate a village magistrate who held a collegial office for a fixed term as in inscriptions from the Hauran (Di Segni 1995: 316).

⁶ Julian the *pistikos* is mentioned in the inscription of Beth Ther in *Judaea* dated to the late 6th or 7th century (Avi Yonah 1932: 142; Di Segni 1995: 315).

⁷ The church rises on the eastern limits of a small settlement. It consists of a three naves basilica (15.5 x 25 m), built not far from a wine press (Mahamid 2003: 12).

⁸ ‘Entering hither thou will see the virgin mother of Christ, the ineffable Logos, dispensation of God, and if thou believe, thou shall be saved. With God’s help this mosaic was finished in the month Peritius of the year 468, indiction 7, for the salvation of Christ-loving Megale. Work done by Andrew of Jerusalem, mosaic layer’ (after Di Segni 2006).



8. Dedicatory inscription of St. Sergius Church of al-Umayri East (after Fisher 2015).

tion of St Sergius on the *megaloprepestatos* (*magnificentissimus*)⁹ Almoundaros the *komes*, and plea for the blessings of the saint for themselves and their own household (Bevan *et al.* 2015: 333; FIG. 8).

In some cases, wealthy donors contributed to the building of different churches in the same village; such were the brothers Stephanos and Elias, sons of Comitissa, mentioned twice in the 6th century Church of Saints Lot and Procopius and in that of St George at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Piccirillo 1989: 180, 187). The two brothers were probably wealthier, at least in terms of landholdings and the yield of those holdings than the others anonymous villagers, who they however flank in their prayer to the saint to accept the offering and the toil of the community. Humbler donations may represent small communities of free farmers, as suggested by the inscription of the Church of St Theodore at Suf, in which it is specified that the villagers themselves paid the workers and provided the artisans (Gatier and Villeneuve 1993: 4; Feissel 2006: 265).¹⁰

Whilst church inscriptions mirror the official aspect of the local political powers,

shared social status, and the display of wealth, papyri and hagiographic sources allow a view from a different perspective. They mirror the impact of a booming rural economy based on patterns of dependency, such as villagers leasing land from urban residents or from monasteries, who acted as landowners in the village. Peasants supplied the landlords with agricultural produce in order to obtain direct payments or short-term financing (Bagnall 2005: 556). Monasteries acted as land owners, and in that capacity received donations of land and peasants. According to Theodorus of Petra, the *coenobium* of Theodosius received two estates from the *Comes Orientis* and owned a pig farm and a village that supplied the *coenobium* with victuals (*Vita Theodosii* 80 and 85 [Usener 1850]; Di Segni 2005: 30.). Cyril of Schytopolis in the Life of St Sabas mentions several landowners of Mādabā who provided wheat and pulses to the *coenobium* and the *laura* (*Vita Sabae* 45–6 [Baldelli *et al.* 2012: 280–2]). He also refers to an incident that happened to a Saracen camel rider transporting wheat from *Machaberos* – Mekawer that was purchased by the *oikonomos* of the monastery (*Vita Sabae* 81 [Baldelli *et al.* 2012: 339–40]). In life of Gerasimus, the Saracen driver of a camel caravan is forced to abandon the camels after crossing the Jordan with their load of wheat (*Vita Gesasimi* 8 [Di Segni 1991: 71–2]). In the Life of St George of Choziba, the agent of the monastery arrives

⁹ The junior/intermediate title evidences the complexity of the system of the Jafnid phylarchate and the procedure of imperial recognition via honorific titles (Bavan *et al.* 2015: 334–5).

¹⁰ The donation of village communities may have included not only material means (as money or kind), but also labour.

from *Arabia* to ask the abbot for 60 *solidi* to buy wheat (*Vita sancti Georgii Chozibitae* 25 [Di Segni 1991: 99]).

The relationship between a collective and rural society also could be glimpsed in the inscriptions of the *martyrium* churches of Ya'amun and Khallit Isa-Bayt Idis (Melhem and al-Husan 2001: 33–50; Feissel 2006: 272–3 n. 869), dated respectively to AD 499/500 and AD 507. The inscriptions mention the *gerontes*/elders, which could be either a title conferring dignity to the monks of a monastery or a council of elders, who represented leading sponsors in the village community. It is however unclear whether the *sunkomentes* (co-villagers) mentioned in the inscriptions were tenants of the monastery or simply village dwellers.

The picture captured by the Petra Papyri gives an idea of the possessions of some of the urban citizens, mainly wealthy landowners, in terms of legal procedures and juridical terminology. Koenen (1996: 184) estimated that the total size of the property divided in *P.Petra* 17 as 85 acres (34.4 ha), which summed to other properties mentioned in the same document adds up to 134 acres (54.23 ha).¹¹ This was comprised of vineyards, grain fields, houses, threshing floors with granaries, etc., though it did not represent, according to Koenen, the total land holdings of the family (Koenen *et al.* 2013: 88–90). He conceded that there may well have been other properties not mentioned in the document.

The corpus of Petra Papyri discusses issues related to property rights, tax obligation, several types of negotiated contracts, and methods of settling disputes relating to private agricultural property (Frösén

et al. 2002: 101–4). From the texts which refer mainly to family affairs, one may suggest that the upper classes of 6th century Petra were not much different from their contemporaries in other cities of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*.

Rural property detailed in the Petra Papyri covered a variety of private domains in villages that included farmhouses, hamlets, gardens, vineyards, orchards, and agricultural installations such as cisterns, threshing floors, stables, and water channels. Agricultural produce was mostly wine, wheat in lesser proportion, few olive groves, and fruit, while farming methods made intensive use of terraced fenced plots irrigated by complex dam systems.¹² Fields were leased out or farmed out, and there are cases of emphyteutic lease (Koenen 1996: 184; Gagos and Frösén 1998: 480). Most of the lands had fixed boundaries and were under Petra's communal tax authority rather than the imperial *fiscus*. The tax amount was determined by the total area of land registered in the city, included property in nearby villages of *Palaestina Tertia*, and was assessed through the local *collegium* of tax-collectors.¹³ Large villages presumably entrusted an *archon* with the task of representing them for tax payments on their behalf. The term *archon* designated both economic and civil functions within the community, and is mentioned in the inscription of *Kastron Zizion* (*Zizia*) dated to AD 580 (Gatier 1986: 182; Di Segni 1995: 321), in some late 7th century papyri from *Nessana* (Kraemer 1958: n. 58, 1), and in the dedicatory inscription of St Stephen's Church in *Kastron Mefa'a* (*Umm ar-Raṣāṣ*)

¹¹ The land in the Petra Papyri was measured in *iugera*, Frösén argues that the size of the units of measurement likely varied depending on the productivity of the land or the type of crops cultivated (Frösén *et al.* 2002: 101–4). According to the classification of White, an estate of 80–500 *iugera* (21–131.5 ha) was considered to be a medium-sized property (White 1970: 387–88; Kouki 2012: 125–6).

¹² Much similar land use system can be identified in the aerial photographs of several large agricultural sites in *Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* as for example *Umm ar-Raṣāṣ*, *Udruh*, *al-Ḥumaymā*, *Khirbat Khau*, etc.

¹³ It was estimated that in the late 4th century *Asia Minor*, 100 *iugera* of grain fields were taxed as 15 *iugera* of vineyards (Thonemann 2007: 465; Koenen *et al.* 2013: 90).

dated to AD 718 or to AD 756, in which the *archon* additionally holds the minor office of deacon (Piccirillo 1994: 244–5).

Monasteries situated near or in Petra collected rent, labour, and services from peasants and took charge of charitable institutions. *P.Petra* 6a dated to AD 573, mentions a donation *propter mortem* divided in two parts, one given to the Holy House of the Saint High Priest Aaron (Fig. 9). The receiving party is represented by Kerykos, the presbyter and abbot of the Monastery (appointed as administrator), the other half of the propriety was left to the *xenodochion* of the Saint and Triumphant Martyr Kerykos situated in Petra (Frösén 2018: 122). A similar context is described in the draft of a will in *P.Petra* 86v that deals with bequests in favour of pious institutions of movable and immovable properties, with revenues and tenants given to a *xenodochion* to provide assistance to needy travellers, a *xeneon*, the monastery of Aaron, as well as

to other institutions (Arjava and Lehtinen 2018: 93–9).

Besides donations, land was also acquired through direct contracts between clergy members and private owners. In *P.Petra* 25, a presbyter representing the Church or Monastery of the Saint and Martyr Theodore of *Ammatha*, bought from a Deacon in AD 558/59, an *epoikion* (hamlet/farm) and a piece of well-irrigated, cultivable land, and *georgia* which may point to agricultural works connected to it, in the village of Augustopolis.¹⁴ Particular attention

¹⁴ The reference to agricultural labour (*γεωργία*) appears also in *P.Petra* 30 and *P.Petra* 48. It may also stand for a private long-term (emphyteutic) lease as in *P.Petra* 86r (Koenen *et al.* 2013: 4, 7–10). Similar cases are documented in Egypt as P. KRU 113 which mentions the donation of tools and irrigation equipment to the monastery of Apa Phoibammon (Dayr al-Baharī; Crum and Steindorff 1971: 344–6). *Georgos* may also stand for peasant, farm labourer, or landless peasant, see Banaji 2001: 91–4, 108, 253; Decker 2009: 66.



9. Aerial view of the monastery of Aaron near Petra (courtesy APAAME_20171001_REB-0642).

should be lent to the definition of a type of property described in the document by the term *patrimonium*, probably because such property was subject, in this specific case, to the imperial treasury instead of the fiscal system of Petra.

Landed property and agricultural exploitation after the Arab conquest seem to have been equally intense within the framework of a new administrative system in *Jund al-Urdun* and *Jund Dimashq* (FIG.

10). The significant number of churches and monasteries renovated was due to the fact that in these areas the Umayyad administration did not hinder building projects. The intent was to maintain control over Christian rural areas and not to reduce their own tax revenues (Hamarnéh 2020). Muslim communities and military elite preferred cities and the newly established military towns/*misr* (Walmesley 2007: 344–5; Pini 2019: 207–13), while Christians



10. Map of the *Jund* (by M. Ben Jeddou).

continued to dwell in smaller towns and in the countryside.

Apparently, this could be the case illustrated by the inscription of the lower church of al-Quweismeh dated to AD 717/718, in which the Lord's benediction is invoked for the *ktema* a term that may well stand for an estate, a property or a domain inhabited by tenants. In the Greek papyri from Egypt, the noun means grainfields and vineyards, a similar meaning is accorded also in the Petra Papyri (Koenen *et al.* 2013: 13).

The functionality of the Byzantine agricultural system encouraged the Umayyads to establish private domains that operated on the same principle. The most common pattern featured large estates with residential areas, fields, water irrigation, and storage facilities. The land in these estates was cultivated by free labourers, either newly converted Muslims or Christians (*mawali*). The Arab sources elaborate on the interest of members of the Umayyad upper class in large scale agricultural investment in the Balqa and on the edges of the Badija (Hamarnah 2004: 65–6; Walmsley 2007: 335). Although the information in the sources are reported in retrospect, they allow us to imagine a central system managed by figures of different social standing linked to Umayyad court. This system, however, was also implemented to settle large numbers of Muslims into regions that remained predominantly Christian (Whitcomb 2016: 13; Hamarnah 2017: 118–9).

In this political context, the Church paid particular attention to the office of the *chorepiscopus* (bishop of the *chora*), which designated the itinerant bishop who was responsible for villages. Although the office seems attested in the inscriptions of *Palaestina* in the 5th–6th centuries, it appears specifically mentioned to the east of the Jordan only from the 7th century in the dedicatory inscriptions of village churches. Kassiseus, the *chorepiscopus* of

the Monastery of Saint Gellon, is named in the church of Khirbat Daria (Gerasa/Pella), dated to the 7th century. The inscription of the church of Khirbat ad-Duwayr (Pella) dated to AD 593/602 refers to Bishop Paul and *chorepiscopus* Roman, while that of the Church of St Lot at Zoara, which is dated to AD 691, records the name of *chorepiscopus* Chrestos (Hamarnah 2003: 225–6). The country bishop was probably responsible for the spiritual care of villages/hamlets which lacked a church (or were not able to build one due to restrictions), and according to a far-fetched but possible hypothesis, cared for those who provided labour on Umayyad estates. A similar interpretation may also be put forward for the term *periodeutes*, a title given to a cleric of any rank of a country community to serve as link between the bishop and the people. A *periodeutes* is named in the church mosaic inscription of St John the Baptist at Rihāb, dated to AD 619/20 (Hamarnah 2003: 226).

The Church was a central feature of country life to which it provided rational organisation (for example acting as the landlord of agricultural land, vineyards, orchards, and pastures), besides redirecting part of its income to euergetism and sponsorship activities. It interacted with local landowners, creating ultimately a fairly well-structured society with mutual interests and concerns. The village and the land it exploited, either through private estates, tenants, or small landowners were not only the basis of the fiscal system of the area in the 6th–7th centuries. It was also the expression of the prestige and economic power of local and provincial aristocracy. In historical terms it also seems that reliance on local resources did actually replace international trade, thus reflecting the decrease in importance of the area in the minds of central government, especially after the Arab conquest. The involvement of the Umayyads and Abbasids gradually led to the rise of a new type of land ownership

in the countryside, ultimately creating a new, although chronologically limited, equilibrium.

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