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The Christian Community of Rihāb during the First Phase of Islamic Domination through Epigraphic Sources

During his studies in the Jordanian territory, Father Piccirillo made some important reflections on a document, the so-called Pact of 'Umar¹ (Casson and Hettich 1950; Perrin 2000: 43; Di Nucci 2006: 31), that records pacts between Muslims and Christians that were cornerstones for a peaceful coexistence of the communities. It is now well known that the historical reality with respect to the situation portrayed in the Pact of 'Umar was very different and varied from country to country, also according to the caliph who took power. Especially during the early Muslim age, the new arrivals needed local Christian officials for the administration of the state, and a rigid attitude with them would have been useless (Shahid 2002: 380).

¹ The Pact was probably originated in about 637 by 'Umar I after the conquest of Christian Syria and Palestine. The text is partly handed down by some bilingual papyri (674-690), in Greek and Arabic, found in some churches of Nisānā (Nessana), in An Naqab (Negev).

My doctoral thesis² was inspired by these considerations. The objective was the study of Christian communities in the timespan between the 7th and 9th-10th centuries, mainly using data from epigraphic sources. Jordan represents a particular case, and a very interesting epigraphical one. It is, in fact, an area with findings that allow us to reconstruct, at least partially, the strong interconnections between Christians and the first Muslim communities. The inscriptions mention significant information about the organization of the dioceses and an attitude of generalized tolerance demonstrated by the Umayyad dynasty, and at first also by the Abbasid dynasty, which did not cause any definitive crisis in the religious structure of the Christian communities.

² The doctorate in Christian epigraphy (Virgili 2021), to be published, was supervised by Prof. Danilo Mazzoleni and co-supervised by Prof. Philippe Pergola, professors of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology in Rome.

Diocese of Bosra: Rihāb

The 7th century was a period of great upheavals for the province of Arabia, due to the Persian (614–628) and Muslim (from 629) invasions. The latter began with a defeat at Mu'tah by the Muslim Arabs near Al Karak in eastern Palaestina Tertia on September 8, 629. After several clashes, the decisive conflict was fought on August 20, 636, along the bank of the Yarmuk River. The first dynasty was that of the Umayyads (661–750), who settled in Damascus, demonstrating a strong interest in the Jordanian and Palestinian territory.

In this phase, important Christian inscriptions document a continuity of life and a peaceful coexistence between the Islamic and Christian communities. The churches in the Jordanian area demonstrate that the political change was not experienced with the drama reported by contemporary literary sources, and that therefore it did not change the everyday life of the communities. But the inscriptions also testify to much more. They demonstrate that the Christian population was able to support reconstruction projects and new constructions of ecclesiastical buildings, as happened in the Byzantine age. The first epigraphic attestations that can be dated during the clashes between the Muslims and the Byzantines (630–636) come from the diocese of Bosra. The texts were found in Rihāb (Piccirillo 1980: 317–350; Piccirillo 1981a: 63–90; Michel 2001: 216–217) and KHirbat As Samrā (Gatier 1998: 384–392; Michel 2001: 197–206). The present essay focuses on the village of Rihāb, which stands on the eastern edge of a fertile plain that overlooks the border region between Jordan and Syria from a height of 900 m, 26km east of Jarash and 40 km south of Bosra, on the road from Jarash to Al Mafraq.

Church of St. Menas—Dedicatory Inscription of Procopius and His Family

The church was found in 1958 by an archaeological mission of the German Evangelical Institute (Piccirillo 2002: 217) at the northern end of the village. Only the foundations have been preserved (Piccirillo 2002: 217) of a small basilica with three naves ending with an apse placed between the extensions of the two lateral naves (FIG. 1) (Piccirillo 2002: 217). The mosaic decoration was composed only of geometric motifs with rectangular divisions, common throughout the Middle Eastern area (Piccirillo 1980: 330). The presbytery was decorated with an intertwining of cloverleaf motifs and, in front of the altar, with a rectangular panel closed in a toothed line, with a composition of intertwined octagons (Piccirillo 1981a: 76–77). The central nave was closed by a toothed meander with a double swastika and double return. The carpet was decorated with lobed squares with flowers (Piccirillo 1980: 330).

The dedication inscription³ (FIG. 2) (Lux 1967: 34–41; Piccirillo 1981a: 63–90; Michel 2001: 216–217; Piccirillo 2002: 223–224) occupied the northern side (northeastern area) of the central nave, near the presbytery area, while the lateral naves were simply decorated with

³ “Χάριτι Ἰησοῦ [Χ]ριστοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν ἐκτίσθη κ(αὶ) / ἐψηφόθη καὶ ἐτελιώθη ὁ ναὸς τοῦ ἁγίου Μηνᾶ, ἐπὶ Θεοδόρου τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου καὶ θεοτιμῆτου μητροπολίτου, ἐκ προσφορᾶς Προκοπίου Μαρτυρίου καὶ Κομητίσσης συμβίου καὶ τέκνων αὐτῶν, ὑπὲρ ἀφέσεως ἁμαρτιῶν καὶ ἀναπαύσε/ος γ[ον]έων.[Ἐ]γράφη ἐν μηνὶ Μαρτίῳ χρόνον ὀγδόης ἰν(δικτιῶνος) τοῦ [ἔτους] ΦΚΘ.”

“By the grace of Jesus Christ, our God and Savior, the temple of St. Mena was built and mosaiced and finished at the time of Theodore the Most Holy and honored by the metropolitan God with the offering of Martyrius by Procopius (son) and Comitissa consort and (of the) their children for the remission of sins and for the rest (of) their parents. It was written in the month of March, the eighth indiction of the year 529.”

geometric and floral motifs (Piccirillo 1980: 330). The church was dedicated to St. Menas, a popular martyr in Egypt (Leclercq 1933: 324–397): the Greek version of the passion is the oldest and has three different translations in several manuscripts⁴. It is interesting how the cult, thanks to the itineraries and the ampoules (found in all parts of the Mediterranean) (Michon 1899: 296–297) coming from the sanctuary of St. Mena in Egypt, spread throughout the *Orbis Christianus Antiquus*. St. Menas, in fact, was one of the best-known saints in late antiquity (Michon 1899: 296–297). In Jerusalem he was venerated in a place of worship, probably a martyrium, founded in the mid-5th century by the Abbess Bassa, an acquaintance of the Empress Eudocia.

The village of Riḥāb, with its “universalism” of devotions, worships Menas, martyr of Egypt, among other various saints to whom the thirteen churches present are dedicated. This is probably because the locals traveled and visited the most important shrines in the Middle East. This devotional variety is also strengthened by the location of the village, near the *Via Nova Traiana*, the artery that crossed the Transjordan country from north to south, touching the most important urban centers and the most significant trade route with

the surrounding populations (Piccirillo 1997: 24–25).

Within the epigraphic texts of Riḥāb, dogmatic stereotyped formulas are documented, in which, however, feelings of a strong orthodox faith can be identified. For example, in this inscription we have references to Jesus defined as “Jesus Christ our God and Savior” (Piccirillo 1980: 330–332). The text specifies that the church was built “in the time of Theodore the most holy and honored by the metropolitan God” (Piccirillo 2005b: 385–387). Since the 6th century, all the villages and towns of the province of Arabia depended on the archbishop of Bosra, metropolitan of the province of Arabia (Fiaccadori 1992: 97–103). The archbishop was an intermediary figure between the bishops of the region and the patriarch of Antioch, on whom the whole province depended.

In Jordanian texts the bishop is often mentioned, with a primary role in the construction of the building (Hamarneh 2013: 415–430). Doubt exists, however, as to whether the bishop was directly involved in the work or was only the promoter. Surely in a period such as this, of transition from Byzantine to Muslim domination, the archbishop could not move freely in the territory; therefore, in all likelihood the members of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy took charge of the work and especially, as we read in the inscription, a local *evergete* with his family. When the work was completed, the archbishop probably inaugurated the new place of worship.

Also interesting is the reinterpretation by Father Piccirillo of what Mittmann (Mittmann 1967: 44–45) said about the fourth line (“*Von der Stiftung des martyrion des Prokopios*”). Actually, the text does not speak of a sacred building, *i.e.*, the martyrdom of Procopius, as Mittmann thought, but

⁴ The first translation was published in the *Analecta Bollandiana* in 1884 (Van Hoof 1884: 258–270) and the second by Theophilus Joannon (Theophilus 1884: 258–270), while the third is the hymn of Romano the Melode by Krumbacher in 1909 (Krumbacher 1909: 31–43). The various passions have small variations on where the relics are placed. The passion edited by Krumbacher tells of some Christian faithful who first collect the remains of the martyr and then spread the relics in other unspecified countries. The remaining two agree in reporting that some faithful collect the remains of the saint who, after placing them neatly in a sarcophagus, are brought back to Egypt to satisfy Menas’s last wish.

more simply of a person, *i.e.*, of Procopius, son of Martyrius. Furthermore, the father Martyrius is mentioned in other inscriptions present in the churches of the village. It could be assumed that Procopius is related to Elias and John, remembered as donors in the church of St. Paul (Piccirillo 1981b: 65–66), dated to 595. But it is even more probable that he is related to George, another donor who took care of the construction of the church of St. Peter (Piccirillo 1981b: 66–67) during the Persian invasion, in 623. Finally, the Martyrius himself, in the first person as a donor, is documented in the church of St. Mary (Piccirillo 1981b: 67–68) dated in a first phase to 533 and restored in 582–583. The name occurs frequently in the dedication inscriptions of Rihāb of the Byzantine age (Piccirillo 1980: 341–344).

Probably an important family, such as that of Martyrius in the village of Rihāb, took care of the well-being of the population, but also of the construction of ecclesiastical buildings from the second half of the 6th century to the first half of the 7th century. Among the patrons stands a family group: Procopius, his wife Comitissa and their children, the latter of whom participated financially in the construction of the church for “the remission of sins and the rest of their parents” (Piccirillo 1980: 330–332). The latter is a prayer that often occurs in the inscriptions of Rihāb, and they remembered their deceased family members, for their salvation.

The dating is specified in the last line where it says: “It was written in the month of March, the eighth indiction of the year 529.” In the text, the era of the province of Arabia or Bosra is used, starting from AD 105/106, the date of the Roman conquest of the region by the emperor Trajan, who made it the Roman province of Arabia. A contrast between

the dating elements present should be highlighted: only the last four months of the year 529 of the era of the province of Arabia have the eighth indiction; March, in reality, would require the seventh. Given the explicit declaration of the year and month, it will be appropriate to consider it, as Fiaccadori says, an oversight by the mosaicist on the indiction and to consider not the octave but the seventh, so that it would correspond perfectly to the month of March 634 (Fiaccadori 1992: 97–103). The building was thus completed on the immediate eve of the taking of Bosra, between 634/35 and of the decisive battle between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic troops, which resulted in the total defeat of the Emperor of Byzantium in the battle of the Yarmuk of 636⁵ (Piccirillo 2002: 195–201).

The location of the dedication inscription seems to be unique, given that in all the churches of the village the main epigraph is placed in front of the presbytery area, in the center of the nave. This could also suggest a phase of change in the artistic as well as political world with the arrival of Muslims. Subsequently there would be variations in the traditional positioning of the dedicating texts within the churches in the former province of Arabia (Piccirillo 1979: 251–255).

Church of the Prophet Isaiah—Dedication Inscription of Sammasaios, George, and John

The church was located on the northern slope of the hill on which the village stood, near the church of St. Basil

⁵ Bosra was taken by Khalid Ibn Al Walid in 634. The construction of new ecclesiastical structures shows that the ongoing struggle between the Arab tribes coming from the Hijaz and the Byzantine Empire was not lived in the village with fear towards the new rulers; on the contrary, the military reverse did not change daily life much, except for the payment of *jizyah* and *kharaj*.

(Piccirillo 1980: 324–327). Between 1936 and 1942, Lankaster Harding, of the Transjordan Department of Antiquities, identified four churches, including the one dedicated to the Prophet Isaiah (Piccirillo 2002: 216–218). The building was discovered during the construction of a private house and never fully excavated (Piccirillo 1980: 328–330).

Of the dedication inscription⁶ (FIG. 3) remains only a reproduction, published by Father Piccirillo in 1980–1981 (Piccirillo 1980: 328–330; Piccirillo 1981a: 74–75; Lux 1967: 34–41; Michel 2001: 216–217; Piccirillo 2005b: 385–387). Contemporary texts, which came to light in Jordan, have already made clear that Christians of the province of Arabia and in Palaestina Tertia had a special veneration for the characters of the Old Testament⁷; the prophet Isaiah is attested in Riḥāb (Piccirillo 1979: 253) and is also remembered in the village of Siloam in Jerusalem⁸ (Bagatti 1971: 219–220).

⁶ “Ἐπὶ τοῦ ἁγιο(τάτου) Θεοδώρου ἡμῶν μητρ[οπολίτ(ου)] (καὶ) ἀρχιεπισκ(όπου)] ἐψηφ(ώθη) οὗτος / ὁ ναὸς τοῦ ἁγίου προφήτου Ἡσαίου ἐκ κα[μμάτων καὶ σπο]υδῆς / Σαμμασαίου θεοφ(ύλεστ(άτου) πρ(εσβυτέρου) (καὶ) Γεωργίου αὐτ[οῦ] (υἱοῦ?) καὶ Ἰωάννου / Μακαρ(ίου) ὑπὲρ μνείας (καὶ) ἀναπαύσε(ω)ς τῶ[ν] γονέων καὶ διαφερόντ[ων] ἐν μηνί / Δύστρω χρ(όνοις) ὀγδόης ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) τοῦ [ΦΚΘ] ἔτους τῆ]ς ἐπαρχίας.”

“At the time of the most holy Theodore our metropolitan and archbishop this temple of the holy prophet Isaiah was built in mosaic for the labors and zeal of Sammasaio the priest beloved by God, of his son George (?) and of John of Macarius for the memory and repose of their parents in the month of Distro, the eighth indiction of the (year 529) of the province.” Transcript by Piccirillo; the dating had not yet been included in the articles and therefore the year was added in the lost part of the text.

⁷ For example, the Monastery of Lot in Zuwarah (Zoara) (Palaestina Tertia), Church of Elias (Mādabā), and Basilica of Moses (Mount Nebo).

⁸ A plan of the two small rock churches of Siloam with their inscription.

Compared to the previous inscription⁹, the initial form is simpler and less devotional, immediately recalling that the construction from scratch was carried out “at the time of our most holy Theodore, metropolitan and archbishop.” The name of Theodore is a fundamental testimony to be able to date the epigraph, given the loss of the year, to the same period as the church of St. Menas (Mittmann 1967: 45; Piccirillo 1980: 330). Avi-Yonah proposed the eighth indiction of the year 574/5, placing Theodore before Polyeuctos in Bosra’s episcopal list (Avi-Yonah 1947: 70). The inscription of the church of St. Menas, built in the eighth indiction, in the year 634 at the time of archbishop Theodore, forces the movement of the date of the church of the Prophet Isaiah to the same year, as Mittmann points out (Mittmann 1967: 45), and to consequently invert the order in the list of archbishops and metropolitans. For the integration of the second line, Father Piccirillo thought of completing the lacuna with ἐκ καμάτων, drawing inspiration from the inscriptions in the village, such as in that of St. Peter¹⁰ (Piccirillo 1980: 335), where the order of the words is reversed.

The Christian community is part of the autochthonous population, where traditional Semitic names survive alongside imported Greek names, such as George and John, of which the most significant example is that of Sammasaio. He was a representative of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose name comes from the root *šmš*¹¹ (Wüthnow 1930: 104). As with the church of St. Mena¹², family groups with local presbyters took

⁹ *Cfr. supra*: inscription in the church of St. Mena.

¹⁰ Use of the term in the inscription of the church of St. Peter, dated to 624.

¹¹ It comes from the root of the Semitic sun deity Shamash.

¹² *Cfr. supra*: inscription in the church of St. Menas.

care of the erection of the churches “in suffrage and remembrance of their parents and relatives.”

Only “in the month of Distro, the eighth indiction of the year...of the province” remains of the dating. Thanks to the name of archbishop Theodore, it was possible to complete the text with the year 529, which as mentioned¹³ would correspond to the month of February 634 of the Christian era (Fiaccadori 1992: 97–103). The month of Distro is equivalent to the moon of February, in fact in this case the Macedonian calendar is used, as was common in the territories of the Decapolis and in Syria.

Syriac Church—Inscription with the Mention of Metropolitan Archbishop Theodore

The scholars who excavated the site have assumed that the mosaic medallion in which the text was found (al-Husan 2001 [Arabic]: 5–14; al-Husan 2002 [Arabic]: 71–94), incomplete on the right side (FIG. 4) mentions the archbishop and metropolitan of Bosra, Theodore (already mentioned in the churches of St. Mena¹⁴) and the Prophet Isaiah¹⁵. This hypothesis has led to dating of the restoration of the church in a period that goes from 634 to 640¹⁶ (Gatier 1998: 384–392). An attempt has been made to restrict the

chronological span to the year 636–637, due to the discovery of another inscription, located at the main entrance of the church, in the Syriac language (al-Husan 2002: 71–94). The inscription also presents elements that can be connected not only to the presence of a church for a Syriac community but also to their strong documented Orthodox faith, as often appears in every church in Rihāb.

Furthermore, the floor has the typical decorative characteristics of the first Islamic phase, with purely geometric shapes, but the first typically Islamic ceramics were also discovered. The church does not present any iconographic destruction: few figures were present, and the building was possibly abandoned in a period prior to the iconophobic crisis (Piccirillo 1996: 173–193; Vasiliev 1956: 23–47) that struck the area, especially in Jordan.

Church of St. Sergius—Enrollment of Presbyter Elijah and Deacon Thomas

During the excavations carried out between 1991 and 1999, Abd al-Qadir al-Husan (al-Husan 2001 [Arabic]: 5–14; al-Husan 2002 [Arabic]: 71–94) brought to light, in the hilly area of Tall Ruhybah, south of the village of Rihāb, a large ecclesiastical complex consisting of the church of St. Sergius and the chapel dedicated to the martyr Philemon. The church of St. Sergius (FIG. 5) was 18 m long and 11 m wide, with a single nave surrounded by twelve other rooms, all decorated with human and animal figures in mosaics (subsequently destroyed by the iconophobic phenomenon). The floor of the nave has a geometric floral motif with the inscription (FIGS. 6 and 7) probably located in the center and enclosed within tabula ansata. At the bottom of the dedica-

¹³ *Cfr. supra*: inscription in the church of St. Menas.

¹⁴ *Cfr. supra*: inscription in the church of St. Menas.

¹⁵ *Cfr. supra*: inscription in the church of the Prophet Isaiah.

¹⁶ The archbishop and metropolitan Theodore of Bosra is remembered in five other churches found in a nearby village, KHirbat As Samrā: in the church of St. Peter by the deacon Asterius; in the church of St. George, by the deacon Casisseus; in church no. 81, fragmented, but the name of the metropolitan archbishop Theodore has been hypothesized; in the church of the Hegumen with also a dedication to the martyr Theodore/Theodosius; and in the church of St. John, where the same saint is remembered.

tion¹⁷ there are two boxes with as many epigraphs in which the names of some patrons belonging to the local community are mentioned.

With the two partial photographs of the inscription, it is possible to enrich the episcopal list of the diocese of Bosra. After Polyeuctos and Theodore, we have the testimony of the metropolitan archbishop George who, in all likelihood, must be the successor of Theodore (remembered up to 640 in the texts of KHirbat As Samrā). However, there is a discrepancy with the literary sources, which attest that, in 649, Pope Martin entrusted the churches of Arabia and Palestine to the custody of Bishop John of Philadelphia (Fiacadori 1992: 101).

In another letter, the pontiff would appear to testify that the only two prelates still in office in the province were John and Theodore of Esbous (Fiacadori 1992: 101). Therefore, it is not clear why the figure of the metropolitan archbishop George of the diocese of Bosra is still mentioned in the inscriptions. Furthermore, the term metropolitan makes it clear who had the primary role. It can be hypothesized, not having other documents on the matter, that Archbishop George was a Monophysite, because with respect to other inscriptions, such as, for example, that of the chapel of Philemon,¹⁸ which was contemporary with

the church of St. Sergius, there is no mention of any person from the Trinity or its nature. Furthermore, Archbishop George is not remembered as the first name but as the third, as if the mention of him did not have much importance. A continuity of life of the Christian community within the village is confirmed in the second half of the 7th century, in the middle of the Umayyad phase. The Umayyad dynasty held power in the region from 661 until 750.

In the text it is explicit that “this sacred place was covered in mosaic” which already gives the idea that it is a restoration. It is documented that the sacred place is dedicated to a military saint much revered in the East, Sergius, a Syrian martyr and Roman army officer executed in 297 for his faith. Local ecclesiastical offices are attested such as the treasurer and presbyter Stephan, but also the presbyter and paramonary Elijah and Thomas (probably with the role of deacon), whose names are of Greek origin. Finally, the text specifies the use of the era of the province of Arabia or Bosra with the year 555, on the first of February during the fourth indiction. This allows us to date the text to 1 February 555, which would correspond to 1 February 661 of our era (Feissel and Gatier 2005: 544).

In the past, the date of the construction of the church of St. Sergius had been identified by Piccirillo (after al-Husan) with the year 580 of the era of the province of Arabia, in the month of March, which would correspond to the month of March of 686 of the Christian era (Piccirillo 2005a: 459). In another publication (Piccirillo 2002: 229), the same scholar dates the inscription to the year 691 of the Christian era, which would correspond to 585 of the era of the province of Arabia. The correspondence with the indiction would remain

¹⁷ “Ἐπιφώθη ὁ ναὸς οὗτος τοῦ ἁγίου Σεργίου ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκονομίας Στεφάνου πρεσβυτέρου, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου Γεωργίου μητροπολίτου / καὶ ἀρχιεπισκόπου, παραμ[ον]ῆ Ἡλίου πρεσβυτέρου καὶ Ἰουμάς κ(αὶ) Ἡλίου αὐτοῦ ἁγίου τόπου, ἔτους φνε’ (οἱ φνε’) τῆς ἐπαρχίας μηνὸς Φεβρουαρίου προτῆ χρόνον τετάρτης [iv]δ(ικτιῶνος).”

“This sacred place of St. Sergius was mosaiced in the time of the treasurer Stephen the presbyter and in the time of the most holy metropolitan George and the presbyter Elijah and the deacon Thomas, in the year 555 (or 580) of the Province, the first of the month of February, in the fourth indiction.”

¹⁸ *Cfr. infra*: inscription in the chapel of St. Philemon.

both for the year 555 and 585. But some data would lead us to assume the dating of February 1, 661, as more plausible: while this interpretation the month of March was erroneously read (Piccirillo 2005a: 459), it is February that is clearly mentioned in the text; furthermore, the nearby chapel of St. Philemon was dedicated in 663, a year closer to 661.

Church of St. Philemon-Peter's Inscription

During the excavations carried out between 1991 and 1999, Abd al-Qadir al-Husan (al-Husan 2002: 71–94) brought to light a large ecclesiastical complex consisting of the church of St. Sergius and the chapel dedicated to the martyr Philemon in the hilly area of Tall Ruhybah, south of the village of Rihāb. The chapel of St. Philemon (see FIG. 5) can be dated to the period of the Persian occupation of the province. However, this church was later remodeled, and nothing remains of the old church except the apse, the mosaic floor, and an adjoining western hall, which has a single hall system, 20m long and 10m wide. Knowing that the apse of this church is rectangular in shape, the semicircular apse was subsequently obliterated, as can be seen from its effects on the mosaics.

Abd al-Qadir al-Husan found an inscription¹⁹ (FIG. 8) (al-Husan 2001 [Arabic]: 5–14; al-Husan 2002 [Arabic]: 71–94; Feissel and Gatier 2005: n. 544) dating back to the full Umayyad period.

¹⁹ “+ Χάριτι Χ(ριστο)ῦ ἀνε[νεώθη]η ἡ ψίφωσις τοῦ ἁγ(ίου) μάρ/τυρος Φηλίμον[ος ἐπὶ] Στεφάνου διακ(όνου) κ(αὶ) ἰγου(μένου) / ἐκ σπουδ(ῆς) (καὶ) καμάτο[υ] Θεωδ(όρου) Γολεου (καὶ) τ(ῶν) αὐτοῦ τέκν(ων) / ἐν μη(νὶ) Μαρ(τίῳ) ἰνδ(ικτιῶνι) ς' τοῦ ἔτους φνζ' † Πέτρος ὁ γράψας.”

“+ By the grace of Christ, the mosaic pavement of the holy martyr Philemon (?) was restored. [Under] the deacon and abbot (hegumen) Stephen, thanks to the zeal and toil of Theodore, son of Goleos (?), and of his children. In the month of March, sixth indiction, year 557. Peter wrote.”

The text begins, as is common in Byzantine inscriptions, by invoking Christ and once again showing a strong orthodox faith. It is documented that “the mosaic flooring of the place of the holy martyr Philemon has been restored”; therefore, it refers to a floor intervention and reminds us to whom this small chapel is dedicated, namely to Philemon, an Egyptian martyr from Antinopolis.

It is interesting to note that the epigraph does not refer to the archbishop of Bosra. It should also be underlined that it is stated that the building was restored “under the deacon and abbot Stephan” and not under an archbishop. From this we can deduce two things: the chapel probably had to be part of a monastery, as confirmed by the remains of the rooms around the complex, in which the restoration took place only for the floor of the chapel, and also the fact that it is not the name of the archbishop at the head of the community but rather that of the abbot. Another plausible hypothesis can be linked to the fact that the church of St. Sergius and the chapel of St. Philemon are part of the same ecclesiastical complex. This factor could justify the lack of the name of the bishop in the dedication inscription of the chapel of St. Philemon, given that he is mentioned in the church of St. Sergius.

Finally, it is attested that the chapel was restored in the month of March, during the sixth indiction of the year 557 of the province, which would correspond to 663 of the Christian era, two years after the intervention in the church of St. Sergius. In the last part of the text the following is mentioned: “Πέτρος ὁ γράψας”. The client Peter probably wanted to highlight that it was he who wrote the text and took care of the work inside the cult building.

*Church of St. Costantine Nicephorus—
Inscription Dated to 832*

During the campaign between 1991 and 1999, Abd al-Qadir al-Husan filled another gap. Digging inside an isolated monastery among the olive trees south of the village, coming from Mafraq, on the left, along the road to Jarash, he brought to light a church dedicated to St. Costantine Nicephorus, founded in 623, at the time of bishop Polyeuctos and during the Persian invasion. The church has three apses (FIG. 9) and is distinguished by the bema projecting into the central nave (Piccirillo 1998: 29–31). The rich figurative decoration (Michel 2001: 221–222) in the squares of the carpet and the spiral band of the central nave was canceled during the iconophobic crisis, leaving the geometric motifs of the mosaic program in evidence, as increasingly used from the end of the 6th century onwards.

Along the entire length of the step, the dedicatory inscription written in red tesserae develops on three lines: “By the grace of God Jesus Christ this prayer hall of the holy and victorious Costantine was erected from the foundations and finished, at the time of the holy Polyeuctos archbishop and metropolitan, with the providence and effort of Kaium (son) of Procopius the count, for the salvation and long life, his and his sons beloved by God, and benefactors; edited by John and German piissimi paramonarii in the month of February, on the 28th day, at the time of the eleventh indiction of the year 517 of the Province” (Piccirillo 1998: 29–31).

Two letters have been inscribed in a box instead of a figure on a white background²⁰ (FIG. 10). The two inscribed letters are overlined. The horizontal line usually highlights an abbreviated

²⁰ “340” (AD 832). Usage was from the origin of the Byzantine world 6340.

nomen sacrum or numbers. For Leah Di Segni, the first meaning would not make sense and therefore it would be necessary to opt for numbers (Di Segni 2006: 578–579). As you can see, only two letters are remembered, which would correspond to 340. Interpreted this way it has no meaning. Like isopsephon (Perdrizet 1904: 350–360; Skeat 1978: 45–54), the figure is not unknown; as a date it would not correspond to any known era; moreover, as previously mentioned, the two letters are subsequent to the damage caused by the iconophobic phenomenon, datable from the 8th century.

Di Segni hypothesized a case of abbreviated dating since, in other inscriptions from the same period, they present the dating without some numbers, therefore abbreviated (the era from the creation of the world is always used) (Di Segni 1992: 251–257; 1994: 531–533). Therefore, adding in front the thousands, which characterize this era, we would obtain a date corresponding to (6)340 of the Byzantine era in use in Transjordan around the 8th century, both on epigraphic and literary texts. The dating would be 832 of the Christian era, which fits perfectly with the iconophobic interventions and in a period in which there was also the first phase of the iconoclastic struggle²¹ (Patrich 1994: 351–352).

Final Considerations

The churches of Rihāb, like other villages and towns in Jordan, demonstrate that the political and artistic change during the first years of Islamic rule was not as dramatic as reported

²¹ The iconoclastic controversy has two phases: the first dated between 724 and 787, ended with the Second Council of Nicaea; the second in the 9th century, ended with the Council of Constantinople in 843.

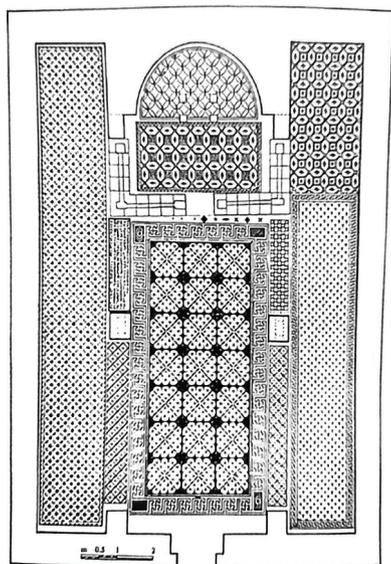
by contemporary literary sources and therefore did not affect the everyday life of the Christian communities, apart from the payment of *jizyah* and *kharaj* to the new Muslim rulers.

The texts document much information including the names of some villagers, especially families and members of the clergy, including the archbishop and metropolitan Theodore, unknown before the discovery of the aforementioned inscriptions in the villages of Riḥāb and KHirbat As Samrā, who took care of financing or constructing ecclesiastical buildings. In the stereotypical formulas, the full Orthodox faith of the population is captured, except perhaps in the case of the two churches dedicated to St. Sergius and St. Philemon. A sort of universalism is also documented through the various martyr figures to whom places of worship are dedicated.

The dates of the churches cover a long period, at intervals, ranging from 634/635 to 832: a period in which great

transformations are attested by way of artistic decoration inside the churches (arrival of Muslims, Orthodox vs. Monophysite, and the phenomenon of iconophobia and the abandonment of Riḥāb).

This quick examination allows us to probe the complexity relating to the genesis and contexts underlying the appearance of Byzantine-Arab inscriptions, which can help us answer the many questions still open and related to the first period of Muslim rule in Jordan: in particular, they document essential information regarding the boundaries of dioceses, the effective historicity of episcopal lists, and the role of the bishop in the restoration and construction of religious buildings from scratch. These texts provide a mirror on the unexpected richness and vitality of the Christian villages still active during the Muslim domination and offer important starting points for addressing the question of why the region was suddenly abandoned between the 9th and 10th centuries.



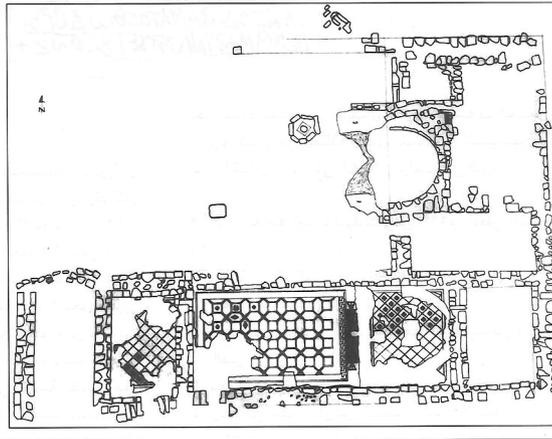
1. Plan of the church of St. Mena, Riḥāb (after Michel 2001: 215).
2. Dedicatory inscription of the church of St. Mena, 634/635 (after Piccirillo 1979: 254).

†ΕΠΙΤΟΥΑΓΙΩΘΕΟΔΩΡΘΗΜΩΝΜΗΤΡ ΕΥΗΦΘΤΟΣ
 ΟΝΑΟΣΤΟΥΑΓΙΣΠΡΟΦΗΤΟΥΗΣΑΪΟΥΕΚΚΑ ΥΔΗΣ
 ΣΑΜΜΑΣΑΙΟΥΘΕΟΦΠΡΣΓΕΩΡΓΙΣΑΥΤ ΠΩΑΝΝΟΥ
 ΜΑΚΑΡΥΠΕΡΜΝΕΙΑΣΑΝΑΠΑΥΣΕΟΣΤΩ ΩΝΕΝΜΗΝΙ
 ΔΥΣΤΡΩΧΡΟΓΔΟΗΣΙΝΔΤΟΥ ΣΕΠΑΡΧΙΑΣ

3. Dedicatory inscription, lost, from the Church of the Prophet Isaiah, 634/635 (after Piccirillo 1981a: 328).



4. Dedicatory inscription inside the Syriac Church (after al-Husan 2002: 85).



5. Plan of the complex consisting of the church of St. Sergius and the chapel of St Philemon, Riḥāb (after al-Husan 2002: 92).



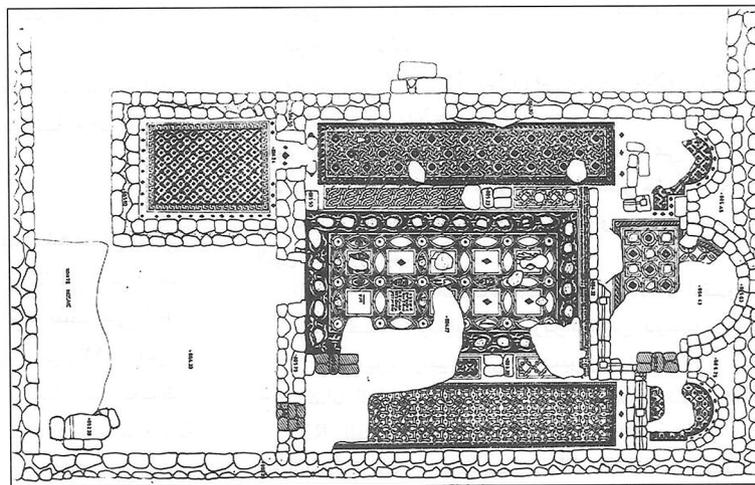
6. Left side of the dedication inscription of the church of St. Sergius, 661 (after al-Husan 2001: 13).



7. Right side of the dedication inscription of the church of St. Sergius, 661 (after al-Husan 2002: 83).



8. Dedicatory inscription of the chapel of St. Philemon, 663 (after al-Husan 2002: 84)



9. Plan of the Church of St. Constantine Nicephorus, Rihāb (after al-Husan 2002: 88).



10. St. Costantine in Riḥāb. The disfigured mosaic panel with the two letters TM added during the restoration (after Di Segni 2006: pls. 53, fig. 2).

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