

CHRISTIANITY IN PETRA DURING THE FOURTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURIES AD

Mohammad Najjar

Introduction

Petra was one of the most important urban centers in southern Jordan during the Roman and Byzantine periods. By the beginning of the early Islamic period, however, the city had largely lost its political and economic significance, and settlement gradually shifted eastward toward the area of modern Wādī Mūsā, where 'Ayn Mūsā is located. This paper examines the development of Christianity in Petra from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD, placing it within its broader political, historical, and religious contexts, and tracing the interaction between pagan traditions, imperial policy, and ecclesiastical developments.

Petra in the Roman and Byzantine Administrative Context

During the second and third centuries AD, three Arab client kingdoms dominated the Levant: the Nabataean Kingdom, the Kingdom of Edessa, and the Kingdom of Palmyra. Prior to their annexation by Rome, these kingdoms used Aramaic as both language and script. Following their annexation in AD106, 248 and 273 respectively, they ceased to exist as independent political entities and were integrated into the Roman imperial system.

Their populations became Roman provincials within the *Imperium Romanum*. The annexation of vast and highly significant units from the Arab political structures in the Levant during the second and third centuries was one of the most serious political shifts in the empire. It was during this period that the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD212 was passed, granting

citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire and abolishing discrimination between Romans and the inhabitants of territories under Roman rule.

The new citizens (*cives*) were citizens of Rome and later to Byzantium, and their history thus became part of Roman and Byzantine provincial history. These were the Arabs of such client-states as Petra and Palmyra, who continued to live within the limes after the annexation of the first by Trajan and the second by Aurelian and who lived mainly in the eastern provinces of the Diocese of the Orient.

Prior to the annexation, the region had been exposed to Hellenistic cultural influence long before Roman rule through contacts with the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms. Built around the time of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires by the Nabatean Arabs, the architecture of Petra as well as other cities in the region often reflected the work of Greek architects (Fig. 1). In fact, the name of the ancient city itself is the word for "stone" in Greek. The most recognizable structure in the ancient city of Petra, the tomb called the "KHaznah" in Arabic, or "Treasury" in English, shows the indelible influence of classic Greek architecture, art and religion. Its stunning Corinthian-styled columns create a dramatic entrance to the tombs.

As a result, Greek culture (Fig. 2), and language were widely adopted, and many Arabs assumed Hellenized or Greek names that masked their Arab origins. Although Greek became dominant in inscriptions, native languages continued to be used. Nabataean remained in use into the fourth century.

The earliest dated Arabic inscription is that of Namara (AD328), written in Nabataean script derived from Aramaic, while the earliest example of the fully developed Arabic script dates to approximately AD512 at Zabad.

Petra belonged to the Roman province of Arabia until AD295–297. Under Emperor Diocletian's administrative reforms, Petra later became the capital of the newly established province of Palestina Tertia, which included territories south of Arnon on both sides of Wādī 'Arabah besides Sinai. Its significance has risen up because of the main trade route had been shifted to west Arabia as a result of the Persian Wars of the fourth and the sixth centuries, when presumably the Mesopotamian route became dangerous (Shahid 1984: 16).

The Emergence and Spread of Christianity in the Roman East

Christianity emerged in Judaea during the reign of the Herodians in the first century and spread rapidly throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Christianity was initially regarded by Roman officials as a local movement or a Jewish sect rather than a political threat. Roman religious policy generally tolerated diverse cults as long as they did not conflict with the Imperial Cult, whose primary concern was civic order and state stability. While persecution of Christians was not systematic, notable episodes occurred, including Nero's persecution following the Great Fire of Rome (AD64), and the empire-wide policy under Emperor Decius (AD249–251), which required citizens to perform sacrifices to demonstrate loyalty. Christian refusal to comply led to persecution and martyrdom.



1. Isis-Venus-Al 'Uzzā.

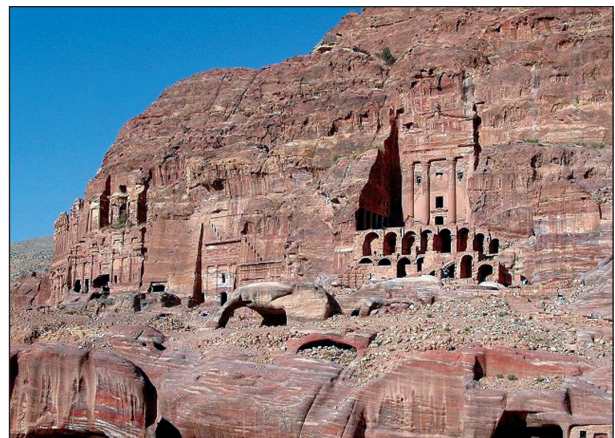
Diocletian Persecution and Petra as a Place of Exile

The most severe persecution occurred during the reign of Diocletian (AD284–305), who strongly promoted the Imperial Cult. Persecutions were carried out by the prefect Maximus who was later sent to 'Ammān to oppress more Christians. Christianity was viewed as antisocial and atheistic, as it rejected the existence of Roman deities altogether. Despite the Nabataean tradition of religious syncretism, Christians in Petra resisted Diocletian's edicts.

Prefect Maximus, later governor of Arabia, actively prosecuted Christians in Petra and 'Ammān. Petra –particularly the copper mines of Phaeno (Faynan)– became a place of exile and forced labor for Christians from Petra and the wider region including Palestine, Egypt, Central Anatolia (Eusebius 1861: 39). In AD303, the so-called Great Persecution began, involving the destruction of churches, confiscation of scriptures, and execution or condemnation of those who refused to honor the Imperial Cult.

From Toleration to Triumph: Christianity in the Fourth Century

The persecution ended with the accession of Constantine (AD306–337), who issued an Edict of Toleration restoring the legal status of Christianity. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Missionary figures played a crucial role in the Christianization of the region. Saint Hilarion (AD291–371), renowned for his ascetic life and miraculous powers, was instrumental in converting the inhabitants of



2. The Royal tombs.

Elusa (Arabic KHalasah), a major Nabataean city in southern Palestine. Elusa had previously been a center of pagan worship devoted to Venus (Al 'Uzzā), whose cult was shared by both settled Arabs and nomadic Saracens. According to Jerome, Hilarion's activities led to mass conversion and the establishment of the first church in the city (Shahid 1984: 299). The conversion of the Saracens in and around Elusa reflects a phenomenon that has been noticed elsewhere in the process of Christianization among the Arabs, namely, that it was carried through by the anchorites and the eremites, the holy men of this early Christian period. Petra was the seat of a bishop since AD343. Bishops Arius and Asterius attended the Council of Sardica and shifted to the anti-Arian positions. For this reason, Asterius was sent into exile by the Arian Emperor Constantius. Petra was the seat of a bishop within the patriarchate of Antioch until AD451, after which it was transferred to the patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Persistence of Paganism and Monastic Activity

Despite official Christianization, pagan practices persisted in Petra well into the late fourth century. Bishop Epiphanius (Epiphanius, quoted by Shahid 1985: 552) describes an annual ritual celebrated on the night of January 5–6 in honor of a virgin goddess associated with the sun, a practice closely resembling Christian nativity symbolism. Similar celebrations were observed in Elusa and Alexandria. Obviously, the people of Petra continued to celebrate the feast of Venus until late in the fourth century. The Arabs of Petra, till late in the fourth century, celebrated their pagan liturgy, centering round the worship of Aphrodite/Venus–Al 'Uzzā; they chant “the praises of the virgin in the Arabic dialect or language (Epiphanius, quoted by Shahid 1985: 552), calling her 'Kore' (Fig. 3). Petra continued to do so at least until the end of the fourth century when Epiphanius recorded these celebrations of Aphrodite/Venus/Al 'Uzzā few years after the death of Hilarion in AD371. And maybe even later (Bani al-Harith bin Yasker of Azd tribe) had an idol which was called Dushara in the 7th century (Ibn al-Kalbi 1995: 37).

Efforts to suppress paganism included the

destruction of the pagan temples by traveling groups of monks. Around AD423, Bar Sauma, (famous for never sitting or lying down) with his companions (40 monks) reached Petra during the night. The inhabitants refused to open the doors for them. Bar Sauma threatened to attack the town and burn it down. That night, and after four years of continuous drought, it started to rain so heavily that the city walls were washed away by the flood. Following this event, not only the inhabitants of the town, but also the priests of Al 'Uzzā and Dushara converted to Christianity. The next mention of Christianity in the 5th century was the inscription in the Urn Tomb referring to the conversion of part of it into a church in the time of bishop Jason and his deacon Julian (AD446). Nevertheless, traditional social practices, such as slavery, continued, and tensions between pagans and monks occasionally erupted into violence, as in the massacre at Rhaithu (Ammianus, quoted by Shahid 1984: 297).

Ecclesiastical Structures and Christological Controversies

Petra has only four churches. As rightly stated by Robert Schick the small number of churches in Petra is very shocking (Schick 1991: 583).

By the fifth century, churches had been constructed throughout Petra. The Ridge Church (Fig. 4) likely dates to the late fourth



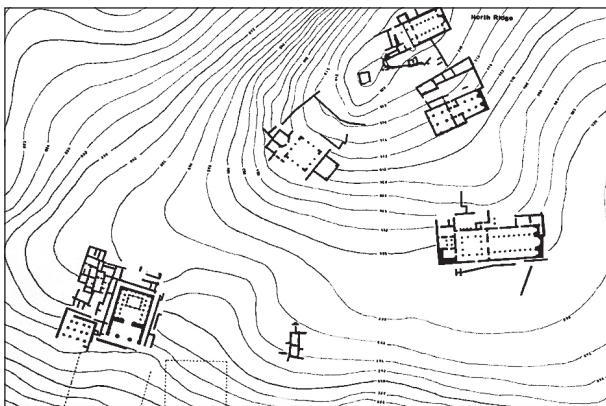
3. Kore, the virgin daughter of Zeus.

century, while a major monastic complex (Fig. 5) was established at Jabal Hārūn (Mount Aaron). In AD446, the Urn Tomb (Fig. 6) was converted into a church dedicated to Christ the Savior (Sartre 1993: 82) during the episcopate of Bishop Jason (Fig. 7). Petra became entangled in major Christological controversies. Following the Council of Ephesus (AD431), Archbishop Nestorius was exiled to Petra, most probably to Faynān, which fell within the diocese of Petra. Later theological disputes, including Monophysitism, continued to affect the region, as rival emperors supported opposing doctrines and exiled dissenting bishops to Petra and its hinterland.

Churches, Papyri and Urban Life in Sixth-Century Petra

A large basilica with a baptistery was constructed north of the colonnaded street in the late fifth century (Fig. 8). Its mosaic pavements depict human, animal, and bird figures framed within vine-bordered roundels (Fig. 9). The church was destroyed by an earthquake in AD551, although occupation continued into the seventh century. The discovery of 140 Greek papyri in Petra's main church in 1993 provides invaluable insight into the city's administrative, economic, and religious life during the sixth century. These documents, dated between AD513 and 594, record donations, property transactions, and ecclesiastical offices. One of them mentions Obodianos, a Nabataean landowner bequeathed all his belongings to be divided equally between the "Holy House (Monastery) of our Lord the Saint High Priest Aaron" and the "most Holy Hospital of the Saint and Gloriously Triumphant Martyr

Kyrikos" in Zadakatha (today's Sadaqah/Petra). Since one of the executors of this will was the archdeacon of "the Church of our blessed and All-Holy Lady, the Glorious God-bearing and ever-Virgin Mary, associated with episcopal churches and the the papyri were found in a room annexed to Petra church, it is reasonable to assume that Petra church was the metropolitan seat of Palestina Tertia (Piccirillo 1992: 334), the Cathedral which was dedicated the Virgin. The dedication of the main church



4. Ridge churches.



5. Aaron tomb.



7. The Urn tomb.



7. The Urn tomb.

to the Virgin Mary (Theotokos) reflects Petra's affiliation to Orthodoxy.

Decline and Transformation in the Seventh Century

The last bishop of Petra was Athenogenes. By the early seventh century, Petra had ceased to function as a metropolitan ecclesiastical center, with authority transferred to Rabbath Moab (modern Ar Rabbah). After severe fire damage, the city's great church fell into disuse. Petra is notably absent from the peace treaty concluded with the Prophet Muhammad in AD630, indicating its diminished political and religious role by that time.

Conclusion

The history of Christianity in Petra from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD reflects broader transformations in the Roman and Byzantine Near East. Petra served not only as a regional administrative and ecclesiastical center but also as a place of exile, theological

conflict, and cultural interaction. Archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and papyri collectively demonstrate the city's complex religious landscape and its gradual decline on the eve of the Islamic period.

The Christianization of Petra was a gradual process between the fourth and the sixth centuries AD, evidenced by churches, inscriptions, and episcopal activity. Claims that Petra converted suddenly due to actions of a single ascetic figure such as Barsauma, belong to later Hagiographical traditions rather than historical or archaeological evidence. The conversion of Christians communities in the Levant after the early Islamic conquest is a gradual and complex process, involving demographic shifts, changing political control, and continuous use or abandonment of church sites over several generations- not a singular dramatic change.

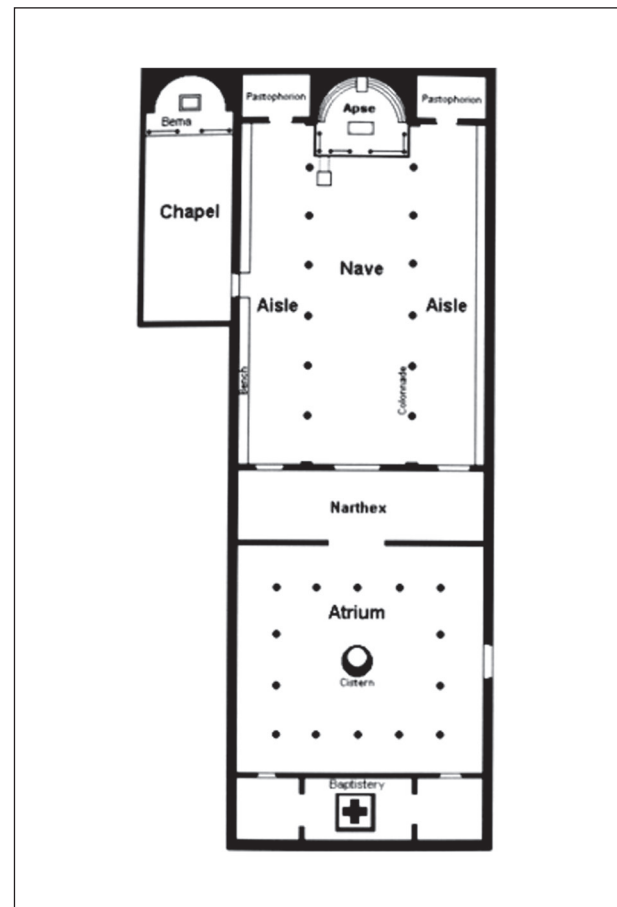
Dr. Mohammad Najjar
m.najjar@joscapes.com



8. The Basilica (Petra church).



9. Petra church.



10. Petra church.

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