

3. THE SHRINES OF BIBLICAL FIGURES BEYOND THE RIVER JORDAN

Monastic shrines linked to the Old Testament figures which arose beyond the River Jordan testify the Christian devotion to these characters²⁸⁰ (Fig. 116). Amongst the Biblical episodes, the Exodus occupies an important place as it was the journey made by the Jewish people who, in their flight from Egypt, journeyed through these territories until they reached the plains of the land of Moab from where they could contemplate the Promised Land²⁸¹.

After reflecting in the first two chapters on the new archaeological data of the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo, the main subject of this book, it is now important to focus on the other monastic shrines that were located in the region beyond the River Jordan. The analysis of the individual monastic foundations, through textual sources and monumental evidence, allows several architectonic and devotional analogies to be highlighted; these have to be interpreted with a holistic approach in order to be able to understand their topographical structure and their chronological development, as useful aspects for comparison with the monastery on Mount Nebo.

Particular attention is paid to the network of roads taken by pilgrims to visit these monasteries and how they are part of a larger system of interconnected places of worship.

3.1 ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MONASTIC SHRINES IN JORDAN

The presence of monastic settlements in the territories of Jordan is shown by numerous literary and epigraphic sources from the 4th cent. A.D.²⁸², in connection with the wider monastic phenomenon, widespread first in Egypt and then throughout the Holy Land with its epicentre in the regions of the Judean Desert²⁸³.

A first specification concerns the dual typology of the Jordanian monasteries: on the one hand, small and medium complexes are attested in rural settings, while on the other, large monastic complexes existed near the holy sites²⁸⁴. Unlike the rural monasteries, the organization of which was connected both to an initial conversion of the local communities and to the subsequent territorial administration of ecclesiastical possessions, the large shrines with monasteries depended closely on the geographical place in which they were located²⁸⁵. For this reason they were characterized by an architectonic typology due to the topographical particularities of the site and the specific functions of devotion and accommodation to which they were destined. The main element that differentiated the monastic shrines from other monasteries is represented precisely by the frequentation of the faithful and the strong association which was created between monks and pilgrims²⁸⁶.

²⁸⁰ For an extensive discussion of the topic, in particular for the history of studies with numerous epigraphic references, see MacDonald 2000.

²⁸¹ Deut. 34, 1–12. For further information on the possible itineraries of the Exodus, see MacDonald 2000, 63–100 and specifically for Mount Sinai Kaswalder 2010, 44–51.

²⁸² For more on the topic, see Piccirillo 1992 and Hamarneh 2012.

²⁸³ The subject of monasticism in Palestine has been extensively studied. For a historical and chronological framing, see at least Patrich 1995; Bitton-Ashkelony – Kofsky 2006a, 264–265; Marazzi 2015, 9–25.

²⁸⁴ Most of the monastic testimonies are located in a rural context, mainly made up of monastic chapels standing in villages. For more on the subject, see Hamarneh 2003, 195–209 and for an update Hamarneh 2012.

²⁸⁵ The phenomenon in the Palestinian region is well studied; see in this regard Taxel 2008 and Ashkenazi 2014.

²⁸⁶ Whiting 2016, 108.

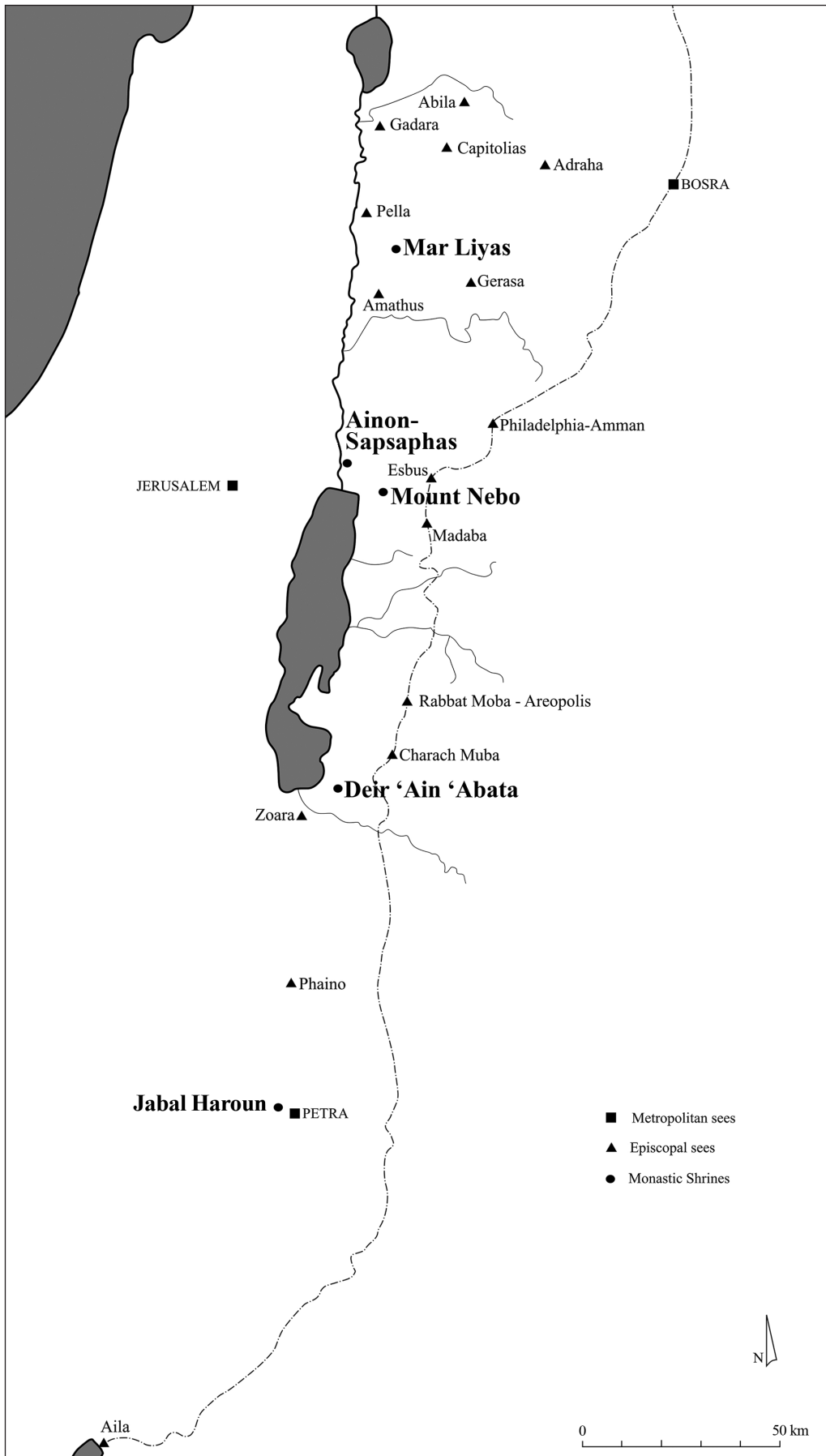


Fig. 116 Map showing the monastic shrines beyond the River Jordan.

A correct approach to the origin of the Biblical memorials in Jordanian monastic complexes places attention on the subject of the so-called *inventiones*, i.e. those discoveries of tombs or relics connected with the figures from the Old and New Testaments. The fundamental background is to be sought in the fact that the holy places were given great value by the Emperor Constantine, following the promulgation of the edict of religious tolerance in A.D. 313. In the first decades of the 4th cent. A.D., intense building, often with direct imperial involvement, occurred in a number of important places connected with the life of Christ²⁸⁷. Among the earliest examples, we can mention the two Constantinian basilicas of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in which the topographical element legitimized the worship and represented that guarantee of faith and tradition for the Christian devotee²⁸⁸.

In addition to the evangelical places, Christian religious veneration concerned some sites linked to Old Testament episodes. In particular, from its origins, the monastic movement privileged those important charismatic figures who, through their lives and teachings, were a model of reference for the first communities of monks. As early as the 4th cent. A.D., Anthony the Great and Jerome identified in the life of the prophet Elijah, above all during his period of solitary retreat, those important qualities to which monks should aspire for the quest of ascetic virtues²⁸⁹. These positive elements distinguished the hermitic manifestations at the dawn of monasticism²⁹⁰ and numerous Biblical figures²⁹¹ were quoted in hagiographic literature to exemplify the fundamental monastic virtues: hospitality, peace and humility²⁹². In the territories on the other side of the River Jordan, the first monks settled in the places that recalled the work and the life of those Biblical figures who had lived there or passed through: Moses on Mount Nebo, his brother Aaron on the top of Mount Hor near Petra, the prophet Elijah near Thisbe and his ascension close to the Jordan, and lastly the patriarch Lot in the valley of Zoara.

Specific references to the Biblical memories are already seen from the 4th cent. A.D. both from the travelogues of the first Christian pilgrims to the provinces of *Arabia* and *Palaestina* and from the transient epigraphic and monumental evidence. In particular, the descriptions of the shrines given in the *Itinerarium Egeriae* reflect a panorama of building still being formed, where often the pilgrim recognized only simple buildings or natural elements such as grottoes or heights²⁹³. The social component which accompanies the topography of these sites was made up of hermits willing to welcome and guide pilgrims. We can therefore consider that in this first phase the sites under examination still lacked an elaborate architecture for the life of the monks and worship, with perhaps the exception of Mount Nebo on the top of which Egeria recalls the presence of an *ecclesia non grandis* but without a stable religious community²⁹⁴.

At a later stage, from the end of the 5th cent. A.D., but above all from the start of the 6th cent. A.D., the evolution of these complexes was intertwined with the establishment of devotional practices, increasingly widespread in the urban and rural *martirya* which became very popular thanks to the political stability promoted by the Emperors Anastasius I (491–518), Justin (518–527) and Justinian (527–565)²⁹⁵. This veneration was linked precisely to the miraculous *inventiones* of remains or memories of saints, martyrs and figures from the Old and New

²⁸⁷ On the subject, see Ousterhout 1990, 108–124 and Ousterhout 2008, 47–58.

²⁸⁸ For an updated study of the Constantinian complexes see Ciliberto 2012 with bibliography.

²⁸⁹ Krueger 2010, 199. For the numerous monastic settlements dedicated to the prophet Elijah, see Janin 1975, 143–146.

²⁹⁰ In general, for the first phases of the monastic movement, see Mango 2008, 158–182; for the Palestinian region, see Perrone 2012, 6–46.

²⁹¹ As well as Elijah mentioned above, Abraham, Moses, David and Daniel are recalled.

²⁹² The main episodes are recalled in the passages in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* where these virtues are recalled in connection with the main Biblical figures mentioned above. For an updated bibliography, see Krueger 2010, 199.

²⁹³ In particular at the sites of Bethany, Nebo and Sinai, the pilgrim explicitly recalls ecclesiastical buildings.

²⁹⁴ It. Eg. 12, 1.

²⁹⁵ For a development of the subject, see Hamarneh 2014, 124–126.

Testaments²⁹⁶. The narrative pattern which recurs in the hagiographic texts often involved a main character, whether ecclesiastical or lay, who through a dream or a vision came into contact with the saint, who reveals to him the place of his burial. This was followed by the interest of a religious authority, often episcopal, which ordered the search for the relics or the tomb and the edification of a place of worship²⁹⁷.

As L. DI SEGNI rightly points out, this practice was widespread in Palestine, in many eastern provinces and even in Italy and Gaul²⁹⁸ and the sources, in particular Eusebius of Caesarea and the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux recall the tombs of many Biblical figures²⁹⁹. However, if in almost all the regions of the Byzantine Empire, the *inventiones* were mainly linked to local figures such as martyrs, in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* the miraculous “finds” also concerned figures from the Old and New Testaments and were often located near earlier pagan tombs, some dated even to the Iron Age³⁰⁰. As will be seen in detail, these patterns reflect the origin of some memorials in Jordan. In particular, for the case of Mount Nebo and the shrine of Elijah-John the Baptist at Wadi al-Kharrar, the site was identified thanks to a dream, while the edification of the monastic complex dedicated to the patriarch Lot (venerated in a natural cavity, the oldest finds of which date back to the Bronze Age) and of the monastery dated to St Aaron (which stands on a previous Nabatean shrine) is linked to the cultural continuity of the place³⁰¹.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the existence of an initial nucleus of hermits in a specific Biblical place could encourage the arrival of new monks and the edification of a monastery supported by a charismatic “holy man” who thus became its founder as well as, after his death, often the reason of veneration³⁰². One example is the complex of Mount Nebo, where in addition to the memory of the Biblical prophet, Peter the Iberian mentioned an Egyptian monk of great moral rigour and wisdom³⁰³. This element must therefore be taken into consideration for a correct understanding of the monastic complexes: the reasons for pilgrimage could be both the veneration of the Biblical figures as well as of holy monks, and opportune architectural solutions depended on these circumstances to mark out the individual funerary structures. Moreover, the devotion of the faithful was not limited to monasteries alone: many churches in Jordan were dedicated to saints, local martyrs and in rare cases also to Biblical figures near a town or a village where the population was particularly active in the preservation of the tradition of worship both on a local and international basis³⁰⁴. This practice reflected the jurisdictional autonomy of these churches which were not integrated into the diocesan administrative system until the middle of the 6th cent. A.D.³⁰⁵.

Returning to the development and to the particular structure of the monasteries under examination, from the second half of the 6th cent. A.D., the church represented the real heart of the

²⁹⁶ On this issue, see in particular Di Segni 2006–2007, 381–401; Chavarría 2011, 32–34.

²⁹⁷ Chavarría 2011, 32–34.

²⁹⁸ Di Segni 2006–2007, 381 and the extensive bibliography in notes 1 and 2.

²⁹⁹ In the *Onomasticon* the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, the tomb of David and his father Jesse in Bethlehem, that of Lazarus in Bethany, of Joshua near Thamnatsare, of Habakkuk in Gabatha, of Rachel and Ephrata near Bethlehem, of Amos in Thecoa, of Habakkuk in Kela, and of Miriam, the sister of Moses in Kadesh Barnea. For the references, see Di Segni 2006–2007, 386 note 22.

³⁰⁰ Di Segni 2006–2007, 386.

³⁰¹ Fiema 2012.

³⁰² On the figure of the holy monk in the late ancient period, the work of Brown 1971 is fundamental. See also the interesting reinterpretation by Ashkenazi 2014.

³⁰³ Joh. Rufus, *V. Petri* Ib. 83–85.

³⁰⁴ In addition to the shrines that arose near the monastic complexes, a church was dedicated to the prophet Elijah in the city of Madaba; one was dedicated to the patriarch Lot in association with the martyr Procopius in the site of Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, while a church was dedicated to the prophet Isaiah in the territory of Rihab. In this regard, see Piccirillo 1981, 74–75 and Piccirillo 1989a, 67–70, 182–188. For an extensive study of the devotional geography in this area, see Hamarneh 2014, 119–136.

³⁰⁵ Dragon 1979, 44–47; Hamarneh 2014, 124.

monastic complexes, appearing as the barycentre of the religious and lay component of the structure. In this chronological horizon, the archaeological investigations have highlighted restorations and enlargements in all five memorials in Jordan. As well as an artistic and decorative embellishment of the ecclesiastical buildings, often related to the productions of the refined schools of mosaics of the region, new architectonic elements and liturgical furnishings became necessary for the specific devotional practices of the site. Following the model of the contemporary urban and rural churches, in which special reliquaries were placed in the presbytery³⁰⁶, architectonic structures were built in the monasteries under examination to celebrate the figure to whom the church was dedicated³⁰⁷. These elements could be cenotaphs (in the complexes of Nebo and Jabal Haroun) or could constitute the monumentalization of natural elements such as grottoes and rivers specifically quoted in the Biblical tradition (Lot's grotto or the water of baptism of John the Baptist). In addition, the assiduous devotional attendance necessitated a special organization of the various monastic spaces, in order to offer pilgrims assistance and to meet their physical and spiritual needs. The religious welcome had to satisfy the four basic needs of the faithful: food, water, shelter and practices of worship³⁰⁸. The monasteries therefore took on opportune areas and architectonic structures to meet these growing demands. The union of these two elements not only represented the guarantee for the success of these shrines³⁰⁹, but ensured them a long and lasting presence in the territory.

Unfortunately, as often occurs, it is difficult to reconstruct the exact function of the areas which developed around the building of worship from the limited archaeological remains. However, some elements, such as ovens, drains and terraces inform us of the activities of the monks and allow us to state that the monasteries under examination were independent regarding water, food and perhaps also produce. It is also possible that some of these shrines, in particular that of Moses on Mount Nebo and of Aaron on Jabal Haroun fulfilled a function of shelter and healthcare for the ill³¹⁰.

The numerous building activities carried out in the five Biblical memorial sites, which we know, thanks to the epigraphic references in the mosaic pavements, also continued in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., are a reflection of the high level of economic security that had been attained. During their existence, these monastic complexes were defined as important centres in their local areas, not only for the function of the monks as mediators between man and the divine, but also for their social role in relation to the central power, the local communities and the other aristocratic and ecclesiastical elites in the province.

³⁰⁶ An in-depth analysis appears in Duval 1994, 185–188, resumed by Michel 2001, 74–80.

³⁰⁷ For Nebo, see the study by Michel 1998b.

³⁰⁸ Michel 2001, 74–80.

³⁰⁹ Limor 2006, 332–333; Voltaggio 2015, 321–322.

³¹⁰ On the subject of healthcare in the monasteries in Late Antiquity, see the extensive discussion in Crislip 2005.

3.2 THE PILGRIMAGE ROUTES BEYOND THE RIVER JORDAN

The five Jordanian monasteries under examination arose in a territory which, from the 4th cent. A.D. in union with Palestine, represents the religious centre and the focus of pilgrimage for the entire Christian world. The ecclesiastical authorities, the religious and the pilgrims required an adequate system of roads that would allow them to reach the places of devotion easily. The articulated system of Roman roads, built in the previous centuries for the military and administrative requirements of the empire, answered this need³¹¹.

The focal point of departure and arrival of the religious itineraries in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* was the Holy City of Jerusalem, which had already enjoyed this status since the time of Emperor Constantine (Figs. 117–118). Eusebius himself recalls in *Vita Costantini* that at the end of the Synod of Tyre in A.D. 335, the emperor invited all the bishops to the inauguration of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and that they reached the city using the itineraries of the *cursus publicus*³¹².

The discovery of numerous milestones bearing Latin and Greek inscriptions has enabled the reconstruction of the road system of the region³¹³, but for a more exact comprehension of monastic geography in Jordan, with the routes taken by pilgrims visiting the holy places, attention has to be given to certain travelogues. The most famous travelogue is the *Itinerarium Egeriae*, written at the end of the 4th cent. A.D. The *Life of Peter the Iberian* by John Rufus (5th cent. A.D.) dwells more specifically on the holy places and on their origin. The archdeacon Theodosius, who wrote in the early 6th cent., recalls in his *De Situ Terrae Sanctae* interesting details about the roads and the distances of the shrines. Of somewhat later date, the itineraries of the Anonymous Pilgrim of Piacenza (second half of the 6th cent.) and of the pilgrim Arculf (second half of the 7th cent.) may also be mentioned.

Thanks to the Umayyad religious policy, which was very clement towards the Christians of the region, and the maintenance of the Byzantine road system by order of the Muslim caliphs, the faithful could continue to reach the places of devotion in the first Islamic period³¹⁴ (Fig. 119). Although the altered political and economic situation considerably reduced the flow of pilgrims, many oriental monks and abbots from the Christian West continued to visit and stay at the monastic complexes until the middle of the medieval period. Indeed, we have accounts from the writings of the Epiphanius the Monk (8th cent.), the English Bishop Willibald (late 8th cent.) and lastly the Russian Abbot Daniel who visited the Holy Land in the 12th cent. Information on the mobility of Palestinian monks can also be ascertained from hagiographic sources. The *Spiritual Meadow*, a monastic treatise by John Moschus written between the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th cent. A.D. and the *Life of St Stephen the Sabaite*, written by Leontius of Damascus in Arabic at the end of the 8th cent. A.D., record the peregrinations of certain monks.

From these accounts we learn that the pilgrims did not follow a specific itinerary explicitly for the monasteries in Transjordan, but usually visited them after having been to the main places of evangelical devotion³¹⁵. It should not be forgotten that during the Byzantine period the most important sites for Christians were those linked to the birth, preaching and death of Christ, privileging visits to the cities of Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the territories of Galilee³¹⁶.

The visit was thus structured in the different provinces. In particular, in *Palaestina Secunda* to the north, after having journeyed to the places in Galilee and crossed the River Jordan, the

³¹¹ For more on accessibility in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*, see Roll 1995 and Roll 1999.

³¹² Eus. v. C. 4, 43.

³¹³ For the epigraphic studies on the milestones, see Graf 1997.

³¹⁴ Worthy of note are the milestones with inscriptions in Arabic dating back to the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik (A.D. 685–705), see Sharon 1966, 367–372 and Roll 1999, 112.

³¹⁵ For a detailed study of the itineraries of the pilgrimages Maraval 1985 is fundamental.

³¹⁶ MacDonald 2010, 25.

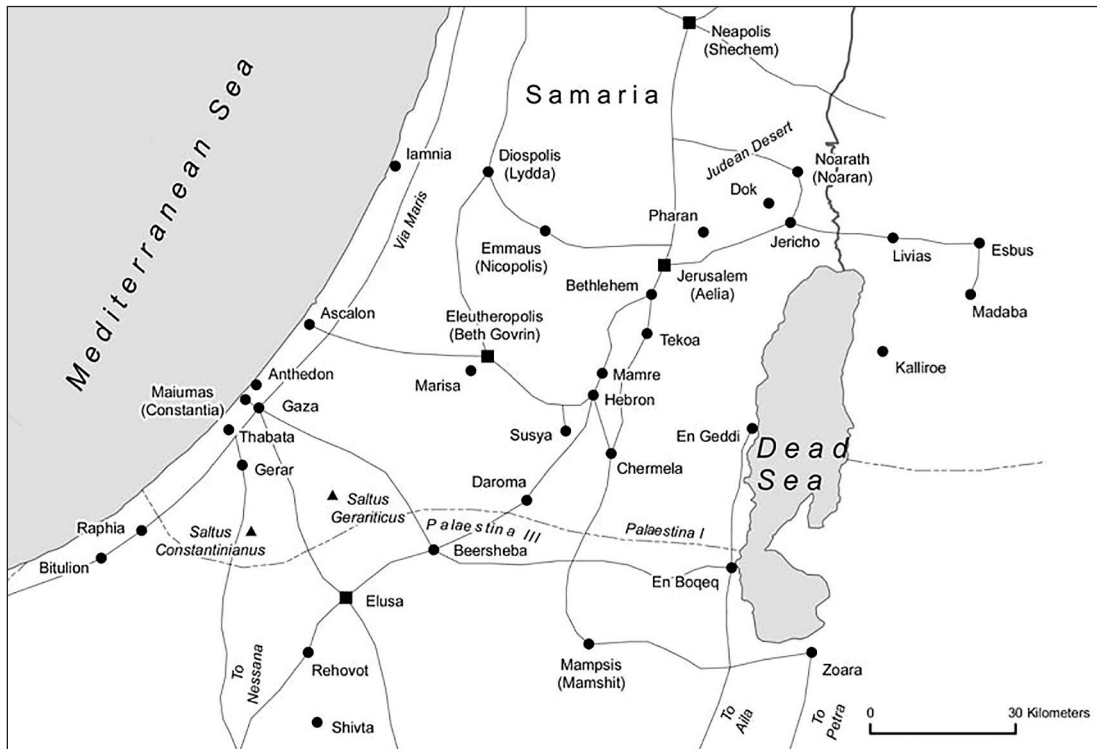


Fig. 117 Roads in Roman and Byzantine times in the provinces of *Palaestina Prima*, *Tertia* and *Arabia* (after Sivan 2008, XVIII, table 2).



Fig. 118 Roads in Roman and Byzantine times in the provinces of *Palaestina Tertia* and in the Sinai (after Sivan 2008, XX, table 4).

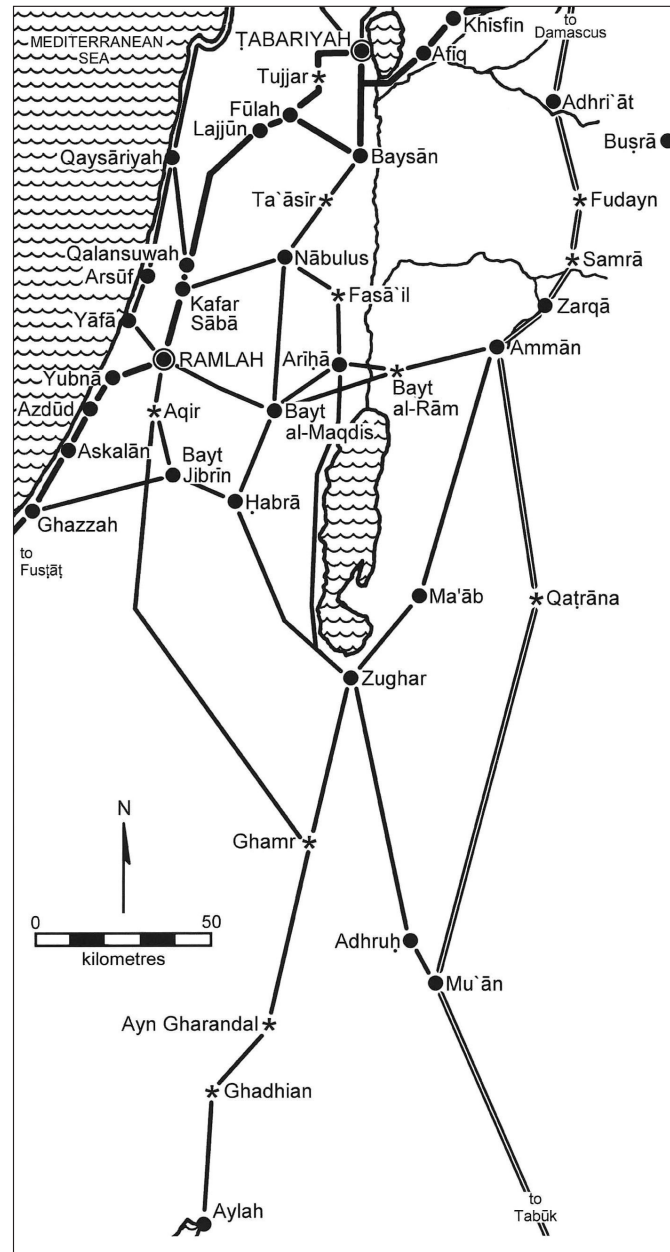


Fig. 119 Roads in the *Jund* of the Islamic period (after Walmsley 2009, 108).

pilgrims could reach the site of Mar Liyas near the village of Thisbe³¹⁷. A compulsory stopping place after having left Jerusalem was the descent to the site of the Baptism and, after crossing the river, the devotees went first to the complex of Sapsaphas then, continuing on the road that linked Jerusalem to Esbus, they could reach a fork which led to the summit of Mount Nebo in the province of *Arabia*³¹⁸ (Fig. 117). The shrine of Lot near Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata and that of Jabal Haroun, both in the southern province of *Palaestina Tertia*, were visited by those monks and devotees who, taking the *Via Nova Traiana* towards Ayla-Aqaba went to the Egyptian monastery of Mount Sinai, the real reason for transit in this region³¹⁹ (Fig. 118).

³¹⁷ On the dynamics of the pilgrimage to the monasteries of Galilee, see Ashkenazi – Aviam 2013.

³¹⁸ Piccirillo 1987.

³¹⁹ Maraval 1995, 295–297; Roll 1999, 109; Hamarneh 2003, 29–32.

3.3 ANALYSIS OF THE MONASTIC COMPLEXES

3.3.1 The prophet Elijah: shrine of Mar Liyas in the ancient Tishbe

Biblical memories and literary sources

The memorial to the prophet Elijah is today located in the archaeological site of Tall Mar Elyas some 80 km north-west of Amman and 9 km from the city of 'Ajlun³²⁰. The Biblical text specifies the place of origin of the prophet with the city of Tishbe in the mountainous region of Gilead, east of the Jordan³²¹. The primitive Christian tradition indicates the hill near the site of Listib/al-Istib (about 13 km north of the river Jabbok). The toponym, which through a metathesis and an assimilation of the Arabic article with the name, can easily be traced back to the original Tishbe³²². Christian pilgrimage practices should already have been known at the end of the 4th cent. A.D. as is clear from the words of Egeria, who, coming from the city of Salem, reached the site of Elijah and saw there a cave where tradition recalled the prophet's stay:

«Thus, going for a while through the valley of the Jordan, along the bank of that river, as our route was there for a while, we suddenly saw the city of our holy prophet Elijah, that is, Tishbe, from which he had the name of Elijah the Tishbite. There down to this day is the cave in which that holy man sat, and there is the grave of holy Jephtha, whose name we read in the book of Judges»³²³

Worthy of note is the subsequent step because it would indicate the presence of a hermit, perhaps close to the city of Tishbe. Egeria recalls a hermitage inhabited by a monk in a broad valley which was shown to her as the bed of the Corra River, corresponding to the Biblical stream Cherith and near which the prophet Elijah settled for a short period of time³²⁴:

«Thus, also giving thanks to God there according to custom, we continued our route. Then going on that route, we saw a most pleasant valley coming to us on the left. The valley was immense, sending a great stream into the Jordan. And there in that valley we saw the cell of a certain brother now, that is, a monk. Then, as I am very curious, I began to ask what was this valley where a holy monk had now made a cell; for I did not think this was without a reason. Then the holy ones who were making the journey with us, that is, knowing the place, said to us, "This is the valley of Corra, where holy Elijah the Tishbite lived in the time of King Ahab, when there was a famine and at God's bidding a raven used to bring him food and he used to drink water from that stream. For this stream that you see flowing from that valley into the Jordan, this is Corra.»³²⁵

³²⁰ See in detail MacDonald 2010, 81.

³²¹ The main passage in which the origin of the prophet Elijah is attested is in 1 Kings, 17.1, but the epithet "Tishbite" recurs five other times in the Bible (1 Kings, 21.7; 21.28; 2 Kings, 1.3; 1.8; 9.36). This term also reoccurs in later tradition as seen in the version of the LXX, in Josephus Flavius and in Eusebius of Caesarea. For an extensive study of the subject, see Augustinović – Bagatti 1952, 248–249; MacDonald 2010, 71.

³²² In this regard, see Augustinović – Bagatti 1952, 252; MacDonald 2000, 204.

³²³ It. Eg. 16, 1. "Ac sic ergo euntes aliquandiu per vallem Iordanis super ripam fluminis ipsius, quia ibi nobis iter erat aliquandiu, ad subito vidimus civitatem sancti prophetae Heliae, id est Thesbe, unde ille habuit nomen Helias Thesbites. Inibi est ergo usque in hodie spelunca, in qua sedit ipse sanctus, et ibi est memoria sancti Gethae, cuius nomen in libris Iudicum legimus" trans. by A. McGowan 2018, 131.

³²⁴ 1 Kings, 17. 2–6.

³²⁵ It. Eg. 16, 2–3. "Ac sic ergo et ibi gratias Deo agentes iuxta consuetudinem, perexivimus iter nostrum. Item euntes in eo itinere vidimus vallem de sinistro nobis venientem amenissimam, quae vallis erat ingens, mittens torrentem in Iordanem infinitum. Et ibi in ipsa valle vidimus monasterium cuiusdam, fratris nunc, id est monachi. Tunc ego, ut sum satis curiosa, requirere cepi, quae esset haec vallis ubi sanctus, monachus nunc, monasterium sibi fecisset; non enim putabam hoc sine causa esse. Tunc dixerunt nobis sancti, qui nobiscum iter faciebant, id est loci notores: "Haec est vallis Corra, ubi sedit sanctus Helias Thesbites temporibus Achab regis, qua famis fuit, et iusso Dei corvus ei escam portabat, et de eo torrentem aquam bibebat. Nam hic torrens, quem vides de ipsa valle percurrentem in Iordanem, hic est Corra" trans. by A. McGowan 2018, 131–132.

Unfortunately, Egeria's description contains fairly general geographical references that have suggested to scholars various identifications of the stream Cherith and the route followed by the pilgrim³²⁶. Subsequent Byzantine tradition, in particular the Anonymous Pilgrim of Piacenza and the monk John Moschus, is inclined to the Wadi Kharrar, while the medieval tradition favours the Wadi Fasail, as Burchardus recalls in the text of the *Peregrinatores Medii Aevi quatuor*³²⁷.

Lastly, the evidence from Jewish sources is also interesting. A. AUGUSTINOVIĆ and B. BAGATTI direct attention to a text written by the rabbi ESTHORI HAPARHI (1280–1355) and which appeared in his *Sefer Kaftor Vaferech* (ספר כפתור ופרח)³²⁸. The Jewish scholar recalls that north of the city of El-Istib (אל אסת'יב) there flowed the Wadi el-Yabi (ואד אליבאיס) and the real name of the valley was Wadi Elyas (ואד אלייס)³²⁹.

The archaeological data

The site of Mar Liyas in the mountainous region of 'Ajlun, already the focus of several sporadic surveys³³⁰, was the object of archaeological excavations in 1999 by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. The complex is made up of two churches, a series of tombs associated with the building of worship, a baptistery and some rooms placed south of the main church which could be associated with a small monastery which developed on the rocky slope of the hill (Fig. 120).

At a lower level (922 m.a.s.l.) there is the small church with a three-apse presbytery dug out directly in the rocky slope³³¹ (Fig. 121). Along the southern side there opened a room in which a series of tombs were identified. From this level, it was possible to reach a large oval courtyard on an upper terrace that very probably was the place where the pilgrims and the faithful assembled before entering the basilica (Fig. 122). A cistern has been identified in the centre of the courtyard³³².

The top of the hill, at 946 m.a.s.l., is occupied by a basilica which develops for a length of 40 m in an east-west direction and for a width of 26.50 m in a north-south direction³³³. The church had a portico with columns in front of the narthex, which was characterized at the northern end by a small exedra and by three accesses³³⁴. The hall was divided into three naves and ended with the presbytery raised by a step and ending with an inscribed apse. The *bema* had at its sides two lateral *pastophoria* placed at a lower level³³⁵. Two series of columns divided the hall into three naves, which then become five in the last phase as shown by the discovery of two further rows of bases of columns in the centre of the lateral naves³³⁶. The capitals in Corinthian style are plundered material from a previous building and are decorated with deeply engraved acanthus leaves. From the architectonic point of view, the two apses placed opposite one another, at the centre of the lateral walls of the building, are characterized as unique in the panorama of Byzantine buildings in Jordan.

³²⁶ The exact identification of the Corra River remains debated. Precisely in reference to the vicinity suggested by Egeria, many scholars are inclined towards Wadi el-Yabis, although the monk John Moschus says that the Corra is on the left of Sapsas, probably referring to Wadi al-Kharrar. In this regard see, Wilkinson 2002, 293; MacDonald 2010, 74.

³²⁷ It. Plac. 165; Jo. Mos. prat. 1, 5; *Peregrinatores Medii Aevi quatuor* 57–58.

³²⁸ Augustinović – Bagatti 1952, 251–252; see also Clermont-Ganneau 1880–1897, II, 139.

³²⁹ Augustinović – Bagatti 1952, 251–252.

³³⁰ In particular, the region of 'Ajlun was the object of systematic explorations by G. SCHUMACHER published in *Steuernagel* 1925.

³³¹ The excavations of the small church were carried out in 2003. See Piccirillo 2007, 99 and MacDonald 2010, 75.

³³² Piccirillo 2007, 99 and MacDonald 2010, 75.

³³³ For the measurements of the basilica, reference was made to the data from the studies of M. PICCIRILLO who made an attentive survey of the complex. See in this regard Piccirillo 2007, 99 and Piccirillo 2011, 106.

³³⁴ Piccirillo 2007, 99.

³³⁵ Piccirillo 2007, 99.

³³⁶ Piccirillo 2011, 107.



Fig. 120 Mar Liyas. Aerial photo of the monastic complex (© APAAME).



Fig. 121 Mar Liyas. Small church with a three-apse presbytery.

The entire sacred building contained elegant mosaic pavements. In the central nave they are placed in two panels side by side. The mosaic to the east, towards the presbytery, displayed a network of rhombuses, while the one to the west was decorated with a plant subject. The whole, unfortunately almost totally lost due to the subsequent military occupations of the church, was surrounded by a band of mosaic with a decorative motif of swastikas³³⁷ (Fig. 123). The northern nave was paved with five mosaic panels, the central one of which, made up of a geometric pattern framed by a series of three-pointed corollas, faced the lateral apse³³⁸ (Fig. 124). The southern nave was decorated with two mosaic panels of different dimensions; in the one facing the western door, bearing a motif with stylized flowers, there is a Greek inscription in seven lines with letters in white tesserae on a red background (Fig. 125). The text, unfortunately damaged and therefore incomplete, has the name of the presbyter Sabaa, an invocation to Christ with a prayer to Elijah and above all the date of execution of the mosaic of A.D. 622/623, the period linked to the Persian occupation of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*³³⁹.

Against the northern wall of the church were two communicating rooms: the one to the west contained the baptistery; the other an apse chapel which ended at the rear in correspondence with the protruding apse of the church³⁴⁰. The two rooms were covered in mosaics: in particular in the baptistery, the north panel is decorated with stylized flowers, while to the south there is a geometric motif with a series of circles knotted and joined to one another³⁴¹. The mosaic

³³⁷ Piccirillo 2007, 99.

³³⁸ Piccirillo 2007, 99.

³³⁹ The mosaic inscription reads: “[Made by] Sabaa the priest... Lord God have mercy on him and his spouse... St Elijah... in the year 686” L. DI SEGNI draws attention to the important element of the dating. Although it is believed that the calculation must be made taking A.D. 63 as a base, given the foundation of the city of Pella and starting year of the chronological system used in all the territory subject to this polis, a recent study by A. STEIN, as well as the inscription found in Khirbet al-Tantur are inclined towards A.D. 64. In this regard, see Piccirillo 2011, 108–109, fig. 9.

³⁴⁰ Piccirillo 2007, 99.

³⁴¹ Piccirillo 2007, 99.



Fig. 122 Mar Liyas. Aerial photo of the monastic church (© APAAME).



Fig. 123 Mar Liyas. Basilica, central nave, eastern mosaic.

inscription in four lines near the western side of the baptismal font is noteworthy as it mentions a donor³⁴².

A group of rooms adjacent to the southern side of the basilica, and a wine-producing facility decorated with a mosaic of white tesserae were built on the slope of the mountain³⁴³. These rooms functioned as a small monastic complex as shown by the mosaic inscription in the centre of a square room of the complex (Fig. 126). The text in ten lines is surrounded by a round medallion decorated with a two-strand cord motif: the letters appear somewhat rough while the presence of tesserae of different dimensions indicates a restoration³⁴⁴. The text provides the indication of the name of the hegumen of the monastery, of a local merchant who financed the mosaic and the date of execution in June or July of the 14th indication of the year 838 of Pella, corresponding to June or July of A.D. 775/776³⁴⁵.

The presence of donors or other outstanding figures who gravitated towards the monastery is also attested in the small funerary complex developed in the area south-east of the basilica³⁴⁶. Three tombs were built in an underground chamber and could be reached after passing through an entrance with an architrave decorated with mosaic and going down a staircase with nine steps cut directly into the rock. Other dead were placed inside four tombs in trenches dug into the rock chamber to the east³⁴⁷. The water supply for the complex was guaranteed by seven

³⁴² The inscription near the baptistery reads: “+Offer of he of whom you o Lord + know the name for the forgiveness of sins and for a wish for long days+”. It is noteworthy that the cross of closure became a Christogram. See Piccirillo 2007, 100.

³⁴³ Piccirillo 2007, 100.

³⁴⁴ For the epigraphic analyses, see Di Segni 2006–2007, 579.

³⁴⁵ The translated text of the inscription is: “With the help of Christ, the mosaic pavement has been laid under Esion (?), the most God-loving priest and abbot, by the care of John, pulse merchant, for the succour of himself and (his) wife and his children, in the month of June (or July) of the 14th indiction, year 838 [of the city] of Pe[ll]a (?)”. Di Segni 2006–2007, 580.

³⁴⁶ Piccirillo 2007, 100; Piccirillo 2011, 109–110; Hamarnah 2014, 366.

³⁴⁷ MacDonald 2010, 79.



Fig. 124 Mar Liyas. Basilica, northern nave, central mosaic panel.



Fig. 125
Mar Liyas. Basilica,
southern nave, mosaic
panel with inscription.



Fig. 126
Mar Liyas. Monastic
room, mosaic panel with
inscription.

wells and cisterns connected to a system of channels developed around the church and made up of stone pipes faced with plaster³⁴⁸.

The different building phases of the monastic complex of Mar Liyas are today still only hypothetical. B. MACDONALD, on the basis of material data provided by archaeologists, indicates a first late Roman phase to which the wine-producing facility and the pottery found in the excavation of the northern *pastophorion* are believed to belong, followed by the construction of the small church in the 6th cent. A.D.³⁴⁹. For the basilica we have the evidence of the dedicatory inscription in the mosaic of the southern nave, which as seen suggests restoration work on the mosaic, or even complete rebuilding of the church in A.D. 622/623, at the height of the Persian occupation of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*³⁵⁰. The mosaic inscription found in the monastery informs us, finally, of building activity in A.D. 775/776 and, consequently, of a Christian monastic community that was still very active after the second half of the 8th cent. A.D.

What is certainly clear is that the monastic complex that stood on the hill near the village of Listib/al-Istib was visited by a growing number of pilgrims who went there to commemorate the place connected with the birth of the prophet Elijah. Although the archaeological data are still incomplete, it appears obvious that a possible presence of hermits, suggested by the pilgrim Egeria, was followed by the installation of a monastic community of the coenobitic type. The numerous burial places and accessories found would indicate the possible presence of graves of outstanding figures, as well as those for the monks, who wanted to be buried near the church that commemorated the prophet Elijah and therefore were willing to contribute economically to the wealth of the monastery.

3.3.2 The prophet Elijah: shrine in the Wadi al-Kharrar-Sapsaphas

The archaeological site of Bethany beyond the Jordan represents an important place for Christian pilgrims as it is linked to several Biblical episodes both in the Old and New Testaments. It is here that both the ascension to heaven by Elijah³⁵¹ (and according to some sources the prophet's taking shelter in the Cherith stream)³⁵², and the work of John the Baptist in his activity as Precursor of the Messiah and baptiser of Christ, are commemorated. The association of the two Biblical figures is clearly evident in many passages of the Gospels and therefore it is no coincidence that their memories are associated in the same topographical context³⁵³.

Without going into the questions on the identification of the site of the Baptism, after a brief, but indispensable textual and archaeological introduction for correctly contextualizing the site, attention will be paid to the monastic complex linked to the ascension of the prophet Elijah.

The first important distinction concerns the differentiation of the two shrines of Bethany which developed on the opposite banks of the River Jordan, as is clear both from the recent archaeological investigation and from the topographic documents, in particular the famous mosaic map of Madaba³⁵⁴. This iconographic document has two different toponyms: Bethabara on the west bank where St John the Baptist used to baptize and Ainon-Sapsaphas on the east bank where Christ was baptized³⁵⁵. Corresponding to the latter site is the mouth of a tributary of

³⁴⁸ MacDonald 2010, 79.

³⁴⁹ MacDonald 2010, 78.

³⁵⁰ B. MACDONALD reports the presence of mosaic fragments placed under the inscribed mosaic which could belong to the first basilica, perhaps of the 4th cent. A.D. The impossibility of directly observing the excavation data makes me exercise extreme caution in suggesting dating. See MacDonald 2010, 79, but also Piccirillo 2007, 100.

³⁵¹ 2 Kings, 2.11.

³⁵² See in the text 133–134. 141.

³⁵³ Matthew 17.10–13; Mark 9.11–13; Luke 1.17.

³⁵⁴ Piccirillo – Alliata 1999, 50. 55.

³⁵⁵ Piccirillo – Alliata 1999, 218–221; Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 195–196; MacDonald 2010, 84–89; Piccirillo 2016, 127–137.

the Jordan, the Wadi al-Kharrar, which, winding harmoniously towards the interior, encounters numerous hermitages of monks and two kilometres later, Tell al-Kharrar³⁵⁶.

Biblical memories and literary sources

Whilst privileging here the settlements of a monastic nature of Wadi al-Kharran, it is significant to examine the textual sources in their entirety to better trace the evolution of the site of Bethany. The accounts by a large number of pilgrims mention the place where John the Baptist used to baptize and some of them also mention the hill linked to the Ascension of the prophet Elijah. The oldest attestations of the name Bethany, yet corrected to Bethabara, are found in Book VI of the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* by Origen³⁵⁷ and in the *Onomasticon* by Eusebius of Caesarea³⁵⁸. These authors, however, restricted themselves only to the evangelical memory of John the Baptist. The first real account of the Ascension of Elijah is provided by the Anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux, who came to visit Jerusalem in A.D. 333:

«Five miles from there in the Jordan is the place where the Lord was baptized by John, and above the far bank at the same place is the hillock from which Elijah was taken to heaven.»³⁵⁹

The note of the *burdigalense* traveller, although brief, is significant precisely for the indication of the hill of Elijah.

Egeria's text deserves particular attention, especially in connection with what was stated previously for the shrine of Mar Lyias (*Itinerarium Egeriae*, XVI, 2–3). If the Cherith stream mentioned by the pilgrim is identified with the Wadi al-Kharrar, then the *monasterium* seen by Egeria could be part of that group of hermitages inhabited by monks in the region of the Jordan³⁶⁰. However, there is no specific mention of the place of the Ascension of Elijah in the *Itinerarium Egeriae*.

A richer description of the monastic structures is, on the other hand, provided by the pilgrim Theodosius who visited these places in A.D. 530:

«At the place where my Lord was baptized is a marble column, and on top of it has been set an iron cross. There also is the Church of Saint John Baptist, which was constructed by the Emperor Anastasius. It stands on great vaults which are high enough for the times when the Jordan is in flood. The monks who reside at this Church each receive six shillings a year from the Treasury for their livelihood. Where my Lord was baptized there is on the far side of the Jordan the "little hill" called Hermon — Mount Tabor is in Galilee — where Saint Elijah was taken up. The tomb of Saint Elisha is there at the place where he blessed the spring, and a church has been constructed over the tomb. It is five miles from the place where my Lord was baptized to the point where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea. This Dead Sea is the one where Sodom and Gomorrah were engulfed, with the other three which made up the five cities beside the Dead Sea. Lot's Wife is there who became a pillar of salt. When the moon waxes she grows, and when it wanes she shrinks»³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ For more on the topographical and geological context, see Waheeb 2016, 17–24.

³⁵⁷ Or. Jo. 40–60. Origen comments John 1.19–28, the replacement of the term is found in chapter 40, 204. For more on this topic, see Simonetti 1999 with an extensive bibliography.

³⁵⁸ Eus. onomast. 58–59. The sacramental and devotional practice of the *imitatio Christi* with the rite of baptism was already common amongst believers in the 3rd cent. A.D. and Eusebius writes that the Emperor Constantine himself wanted to be baptised there. See Eus. v. C. 4, 62, 1–2.

³⁵⁹ It. Burd. 598. «*Inde ad Iordane, ubi Dominus a Iohanne baptizatus est, milia quinque. Ibi est locus super flumen, monticulus in illa ripa, ubi raptus est Helias in caelum.*» trans. by J. Wilkinson 1999, 33.

³⁶⁰ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 196–197.

³⁶¹ Theod. De Situ, 20. «*In loco ubi Dominus baptizatus est, ibi est una columna marmorea, et in ipsa columna facta est crux ferrea, ibi est et ecclesia sancti Iohannis baptistae, quam fabricavit Anastasius imperator, quae ecclesia*

Theodosius recalls in the text the presence of a marble column surmounted by a cross in the middle of the river, commemorating the place where Christ was baptized, and places the church built by the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I (A.D. 491–518) on the west bank of the river. Like the Anonymous Pilgrim from Bordeaux before him, he also indicates that the site of the Ascension of Elijah was on the other side of the River Jordan corresponding to a natural piece of high ground. A group of monks had the task of supervising the shrine supported by the imperial treasury, but there is no topographical specification of where the monastery was.

More detailed information can be gained from the words of the Anonymous Pilgrim from Piacenza who visited Bethany in A.D. 570 to celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In particular he recalls the localization of the place of the Ascension of Elijah, on the hill known as Hermon, and the indication of the source where the Baptist used to baptize about two miles from the Jordan:

«Then we came to the place where the Lord fed the five thousand people with the five loaves. It is a wide plain with olive and palm groves, and from there we arrived at the place where the Lord was baptized. This is the place where the children of Israel made their crossing, and also where the sons of the prophets lost their axe-head, and where Elijah was taken up. In that place is the “little hill of Hermon” mentioned in the Psalm. At the foot of the mountain at seven o’clock in the morning, a cloud forms over the river, and it arrives over Jerusalem at sunrise, about the basilica on Sion and the basilica at Christ’s Tomb, the basilica of Saint Mary and Saint Sophia (once the Praetorium where Christ’s case was heard). Above these places the dew comes down like showers, and sick people collect it. In the hospices all the dishes are cooked in it, and in the places where this dew falls many diseases are cured. For this is the dew of which the Psalmist sings, “Like as the dew of Hermon which fell upon the hill of Sion”. In that part of the Jordan is the spring where Saint John used to baptize, which is two miles from the Jordan, and Elijah was in that valley when the raven brought him bread and meat. The whole valley is full of hermits»³⁶²

In this text the Anonymous Pilgrim from Piacenza mentions another episode from the Old Testament: the crossing of the River Jordan by the Israelites led by Joshua³⁶³. He also recalls that this valley, presumably Wadi al-Kharrar, was characterized by a massive monastic presence of the hermitage type and indicates this as the Biblical place where Elijah was fed by the ravens.

In another passage by the pilgrim, we learn of the existence of another monastery, called St John, which stood not far from the place where Christ was baptized. It is described as being

super cameras maiores excelsa fabricata est pro Iordane, quando implet; in quae ecclesia monachi morantur, qui monachi senos solido sper annum de fisco accipiunt pro vita sua transigenda. Ubi Dominus baptizatus est trans Iordanem, ibi est “mons modicus” qui appellatur Armona: mons Tabor in Galilaea est: ibi sanctus Helias raptus est. Memoria sancti Helysaei ubi fontem illum benedixit, ibi est, et super ipsa memoria ecclesia fabricata est. Ab unde Dominus baptizatus est, usque ubi Iordanis in mare mortuo intrat, sunt milia V, et ipse est maris mortuus, ubi Sodoma et Gomorra dimersae sunt cum aliis tribus, quae quinque civitates fuerunt iuxta mare mortuum. Ibi est uxor Loth, quae facta est statua salis, et quomodo crescit luna, crescit et ipsa, et quomodo minuitur luna, diminuit et ipsa” trans. by J. Wilkinson 2002, 112.

³⁶² It. Plac. 9. “*Deinde venimus in loco, ubi Dominus de quinque panibus et duobus piscibus quinque milia hominum satiavit extra parvulis et mulieribus, extensa campania, oliveta et palmeta. Exinde venimus ad locum, ubi baptizatus est Dominus. In ipso loco filii Israhel transierunt Iordanem et filii prophetarum perdiderunt securem. Et ex ipso loco Helias assumptus est in caelum inique mons Hermon modicus, qui legitur in psalmo. Ad pedes montis ipsius ascendit in fluvio nubes; ora prima, oriente sole Hierusolimam venit super basilicam, quae est in Syon, et super basilicam sanctae Mariae ad sancta Sophia quae fuit praetorium, ubi auditus est Dominus. Super his locis descendit ros sicut pluvia et colligunt eam medici et in ipso quocuntur omnes confectiones per synodochia. Nam multi languores sanantur ibi, ubi cadit ipse ros; ipse est enim ros, de quo propheta canit David: «Sicut ros Hermon, qui descendit in Syon». In illa ripa Iordanis est fons, ubi baptizabat sanctus Iohannes; inde usque Iordane milia duo. In ipsa valle inventus est Helyas, quando ei corvus deferebat panem et carnes. In circuitu autem vallis ipsium multitudo heremitarum”* trans. by J. Wilkinson 2002, 135. The pilgrim dwells on the practice of collecting dew as a curative method in reference to Psalm 133, 3.

³⁶³ Joshua 3, 1–17.

very large and characterized by two hospices for the accommodation of pilgrims. This monastic structure would have been on the western bank, presumably in connection with the church built by Anastasius I near the site of Bethabara³⁶⁴. M. PICCIRILLO connects this monastery with the liturgical practice of the celebration of the Epiphany of the Lord according to which on 6th January the assembly of faithful used to gather at the River Jordan in the church built inside the monastery of St John³⁶⁵.

The pilgrim Arculf, visiting in A.D. 670 in the time of the Umayyad rule, also recalls a large monastery built on the top of a hill in a dominant position with respect to the church dedicated to John the Baptist. The whole of the monastic complex was surrounded by a thick wall:

«Right at the river's edge stands a small rectangular church which was built, so it is said, at the place where the Lord's clothes were placed when he was baptized. The fact that it is supported on four stone vaults, makes it usable, since the water, which comes in from all sides, is underneath it. It has a tiled roof. This remarkable church is supported, as we have said, by arches and vaults, and stands in the lower part of the valley through which the Jordan flows. But in the upper part there is a great monastery for monks, which has been built on the brow of a small hill nearby, overlooking the church. There is also a church built there in honour of Saint John Baptist which, together with the monastery, is enclosed in a single masonry wall»³⁶⁶

The same distinction of the two places and the relative different toponyms is also recalled on the mosaic map of Madaba (second half of the 6th cent. A.D.) where a *laura* near Ainon and another one in Sapsaphas are indicated³⁶⁷.

The *Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus mentions the foundation of the complex of Sapsaphas by two monks in the time of the Patriarch Elijah (A.D. 496–516)³⁶⁸:

«They crossed the river Jordan but before they reached even the first mile-post the elder began to shiver with fever. As he was unable to walk, they found a small cave and went into it so that the elder could rest. He stayed in the cave for three days, scarcely able to move and burning with fever. Then, whilst he was sleeping, he saw a figure who said to him: "Tell me, elder, where do you want to go"? He replied: "To Mount Sinai." The vision then said to him: "Please, I beg of you, do not go there," but as he could not prevail upon the elder, he withdrew from him. Now the elder's fever attacked more violently. Again the following night the same figure with the same appearance came to him and said: "Why do you insist on suffering like this, good elder? Listen to me and do not go there." The elder asked him: "Who then are you"? The vision replied: "I am John the Baptist and that is why I say to you: do not go there. For this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Many times did our Lord Jesus Christ come in here to visit me. Give me your word that you will stay here and I will give you back your health." The elder

³⁶⁴ M. PICCIRILLO recalls that the monastery of St John, known in Greek as the *Prodromos* and in Arabic as Dayr Mar Yuhanna or Qasr al-Yahud, became the place of identification of the baptism from the 6th cent. A.D., see Piccirillo 2016, 134. L. DI SEGNI also discusses the subject in relation to the map of Madaba. See Di Segni 1999a, 118–119.

³⁶⁵ The practice was shown in the Georgian calendar of the Church of Jerusalem. See Piccirillo 2016, 134.

³⁶⁶ Adomnan, *De Locis Sanctis* 2, 16. *«In extremitate uero fluminis quaedam habetur parua quadrata ecclesia, in eo, sicut traditur, fundata loco ubi Dominica uestimenta hora illa custodita sunt qua bapuzatus est Dominus. Haec .iiii. lapideis suffulta cancris stat super aquas inhabitabilis, quia sub ipsam hinc et inde subintrant aquae. Haec desuper cocili protegitur creta. Inferius uero, ut dictum est, cancris et arcibus sustentata haec talis ecclesia in locis inferioribus illius uallis exstat, per quam influit Iordanis fluuius, in superioribus uero locis quoddam inest grande monachorum monasterium, quod supra discriptae supereminet ecclesiae in supercilio monticuli e regione constructum, ibidemque et ecclesia in honorem sancti bapuzatoris Iohannis fundata eodem monasterii circumdatur muro quadratis constructo lapidibus.»* trans. by J. Wilkinson 2002, 191. For a description of the other monumental evidence seen by Arculf, see Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 199; MacDonald 2010, 95.

³⁶⁷ Alliaia 1999a, 50–51, notes 26, 54.

³⁶⁸ See in particular Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 199–200.

accepted this with joy and gave his solemn word that he would remain in the cave. He was instantly restored to health and stayed there for the rest of his life. He made the cave into a church and gathered a brotherhood together there; the place is called Sapsas. Close by it and to the left is the Wadi Chorath to which Elijah the Tishbit was sent during the drought; it faces the Jordan»³⁶⁹

An important reference to the rocky hermitages spread in the Jordan valley comes from the text of the monk Epiphanius (second half of the 7th – first half of the 8th cent. A.D.). He describes the alleged cave in which John the Baptist would have lived. Noteworthy is the accurate description of the interior of the hermitage in which the pilgrim saw a natural shelf that he interprets as a bed, a small chamber and a spring:

«And by the little track which goes down from the Holy City to the River Jordan it is twenty-four miles, all down hill. The spring of Meras is there, and, about three miles beyond the Jordan a cave in which lived the Forerunner. There too is the bed on which he slept, a natural shelf in the rock of the cave, and a small chamber. Inside the cave is a sound of water, and in the room is a spring in which holy John the Forerunner used to baptise»³⁷⁰

Welcoming pilgrims to the monastery on the top of the *tell* was still practised towards the end of the 8th cent. A.D., as Epiphanius, who spent a night there, recalls³⁷¹.

The last mention of the monastic complex, inhabited by about twenty monks, dates back to A.D. 754, when the Bishop Willibald of Eichstätt went to visit the River Jordan to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany and stayed at the monastery:

«Departing thence, they came to Caesarea, where there was a church and a great number of Christians. They rested there for a short time and set out for the monastery of Saint John the Baptist, where about twenty monks were living. They stayed the night and then went forward about a mile to the Jordan, where our Lord was baptized. At this spot there is now a church built high up on columns of stone; beneath the church, however, the ground is dry. On the very place where Christ was baptized and where they now baptize there stands a little wooden cross: a little stream of water is led off and a rope is stretched over the Jordan and tied at each end. Then on the feast of the Epiphany the sick

³⁶⁹ Jo. Mos. prat. 1. “Καὶ διαβάντος τὸν Ἰορδάνην ποταμὸν, ὡς ἀπὸ σημείου ἑνός, ἤρξατο φρικτῶν ὁ γέρον καὶ πυρέσσειν. Ὡς δὲ οὐκ ἐδύνατο περιπατήσαι, εὗρον σπήλαιον μικρὸν, καὶ εἰσῆλθον ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸς τὸ ἀνεθῆναι τὸν γέροντα. Ὡς δὲ ἐπέμενε πυρέσσω καὶ μήτε κινηθῆναι σχεδὸν δυνάμενος (ἐποίησε γὰρ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ σπηλαίῳ), θεωρεῖ ὁ αὐτὸς γέρον καθ’ ὕπνου τινὰ λέγοντα αὐτῷ· Εἰπέ, γέρον, ποῦ θέλεις ὑπάγειν; Λέγει δὲ τῷ φανέντι αὐτῷ· Εἰς τὸ Σινᾶ ὄρος. Λέγει αὐτῷ· Μὴ, παρακαλῶ, μὴ ἀπέλθῃς. Ὡς δὲ οὐκ ἔπεισε τὸν γέροντα, ἀνεχώρησε ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ. Ὁ δὲ πυρετὸς πλέον ἐπετίθετο τῷ γέροντι. Πάλιν δὲ τῇ ἐπιούσῃ νυκτι, ὁ αὐτὸς παρίσταται αὐτῷ, τῷ αὐτῷ σχήματι, λέγων· Τί θέλεις, καλόγηρε, κοπωθῆναι; ἄκουσόν μου, καὶ μηδαμοῦ ἀπέλθῃς. Ἐφη αὐτῷ ὁ γέρον· Αὐτὸς γὰρ τίς εἶ; Απεκρίθη αὐτῷ ὁ φανείς· Ἐγὼ εἰμι Ἰωάννης ὁ Βαπτιστής· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο σοὶ λέγω, μηδαμοῦ ἀπέλθῃς· τὸ γὰρ σπήλαιον τὸ μικρὸν τοῦτο μεῖζον τοῦ Σινᾶ ὄρους ἐστίν. Πολλάκις γὰρ ἐν τούτῳ ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰσῆλθεν ἐπισκεπτόμενός με. Δός μοι οὖν λόγον ὅτι ὦδε κατοικεῖς, κἀγὼ σοὶ τὴν ὑγίαν παρέχω. Ὁ δὲ γέρον ἠδέως καταδεξάμενος συνέθετο μετὰ λόγου παραμένειν τῷ σπηλαίῳ. Παραχρῆμά τε ὑγίαν διέμεινεν ἐν αὐτῷ μέχρι τῆς αὐτοῦ ζωῆς· ποιήσας τὸ σπήλαιον ἐκεῖνο ἐκκλησίαν· συναγωγῶν δὲ καὶ ἀδελφότητα. Ἔστιν δὲ ὁ τόπος ὁ ἐπιλεγόμενος Σάνας. Τοῦτου ἐξ εὐωνύμων προπαράκειται ὁ χειμαρρὸς Χωράθ, εἰς ὃν ἀπεστάλη Ἡλίας ὁ Θεσβίτης ἐν καιρῷ τῆς ἀβροχίας, ὁ ἐπὶ πρόσωπον τοῦ Ἰορδάνου.” trans. by J. Wortley 1992, 4–5.

³⁷⁰ Eriph. Hagiorolita 31. “ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ καταβασίδιου τῆς ἀγί(ας) πόλεως, ἕως τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἰορδάνου, ἐν ᾧ ἔβαπτίσθη ὁ κ(ύρι)ος ἡμ(ῶν), εἰσι μίλια, κδ[·] ὑπάρχει δὲ ὄλον κατώφορον· ἐν ᾧ ἔστι καὶ πηγὴ τῆς μερᾶς· πέραν δὲ τοῦ ἰορδάνου, ὡς ἀπὸ μιλίων τριῶν, ἔστι σπήλαιον εἰς ὃ ὄκει ὁ πρόδρομος· ἔστι δὲ ἡ κοίτη αὐτοῦ εἰς ἣν ἀνεπαύετο, πεζούλιον αὐτοφουε· ἐκ τῆς αὐτῆς πέτρας ἦτοι σπηλαίου· καὶ καμάρα μικρὰ· ἔστι δὲ βρύσις ὕδατος ἔσωθεν τοῦ σπηλαίου· καὶ ἔνδον τῆς καμάρας, ἔστι πηγὴ εἰς ἣν ἐβάπτισεν ὁ ἀγι(ος) ἰω(άννης) ὁ πρόδρομος.” trans. by, J. Wilkinson 2002, 213–214.

³⁷¹ Hamameh – Roncalli 2009, 200; Piccirillo 2016, 136.

*and infirm come there and, holding onto the rope, plunge themselves in the water. Barren women also come there. Our Bishop Willibald bathed himself there in the Jordan.»*³⁷²

The Russian Abbot Daniel (A.D. 1106–1107), visiting the site of Sapsaphas, recalls the site of the Ascension of Elijah to heaven on a chariot of fire and a grotto in which the prophet lived with his disciple Elisha. The Russian monk also mentioned a second cave from which very cool water flowed which was drunk by John the Baptist³⁷³:

*«And there is a place here to the east some two bowshots distant from the river, where the prophet Elijah was carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot. And here also is the cave of St John the Baptist. And there is a beautiful torrent here full of water, which flows over the rocks into the Jordan; and this water is very cold and very sweet, and this was the water which John the Precursor of Christ drank when he was living in this holy cave. There is another remarkable cave here where the holy prophet Elijah lived with his disciple Elisha. And by the grace of God all this I have seen with my own sinful and unworthy eyes»*³⁷⁴

A similar description of the rock caves is given to us by the Greek pilgrim John Phocas, who visited the place of the Baptism in the times of the Crusades (A.D. 1177):

*«Across the Jordan, facing the Baptism, are some thickets, and among these, about a stade away, is the Cave of John Baptist. It is very small, and a tall man cannot stand upright in it. And there is another cave like it in the depths of the desert in which the prophet Elijah was staying when he was snatched away in the chariot of fire»*³⁷⁵

The memory of the grotto of St John the Baptist remained in favour until A.D. 1400, as we can read in the itinerary of the Archimandrite Grethenios, even though it was not visited for long out of fear of aggression by Arab bandits³⁷⁶.

The archaeological data

The monastic complex of Rotorius on the Tell al-Kharrar

Numerous textual references allow us to better contextualize the monumental evidence connected to the monastic presence which has come to light on the eastern bank of the River Jordan, on the top of the *tell* and in Wadi al-Kharrar. Modern archaeological research was started by Father

³⁷² The Hodoeporicon of St. Willibald, 166. “*Et inde pergentes, venerunt ad Cesaream, ubi fuit aecclesia et multitudo christianorum. Et ibi requiescentes aliquatum tempus, iterum pergebant ad monasterio Sancti Iohannis baptiste; et ibi erant fere 20 monachorum; unam noctem ibi manebant; et inde ibant super unum mil. ad Iordanne, ubi Dominus fuerant baptizatus. Ibi est nunc aecclesia in columnis lapideis sursum elevata, et subtus aecclesia est nunc arida terra, ubi Dominus fuit baptizatus in ipso loco; et ubi nunc baptizant, ibi stat crux lignea in medio, et parva dirivatio aque stat illic, et unus funiculus extensus supra Iordannem, hinc et inde firmatus: tunc in sollempnitate epiphaniae infirmi et egroti venientes et habent se de funiculo et sic demergant in aquam, sed et mulieres que sunt steriles venient ibi. Episcopus noster Willibaldus balneavit se ibi in Iordanne.*” trans. by C. H. Talbot 1995, 154.

³⁷³ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 200; Piccirillo 2016, 136–137.

³⁷⁴ Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel, 33, trans. by W. Ryan 1988, 137.

³⁷⁵ John Phocas, Ekphrasis, 25.1. “Πέραν δὲ τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, ἀντικρὺ τῆς Βαπτίσεως, εἰσὶ θάμνοι διάφοροι, καὶ μέσον τούτων ὡσεὶ σταδίου ἐνὸς ἀποθεν, ἐστὶ τὸ τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου σπήλαιον, μικρὸν πάνυ καὶ μὴ δυνάμενον δέξασθαι ὄρθιον ἄνδρα εὐμήκη. Καὶ τούτου κατίσον, περὶ τὸ βάθος τῆς ἐρήμου ἕτερόν ἐστι σπήλαιον, ἐν ᾧ ὁ προφήτης Ἠλίας διατῶμενος, ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρίνου ἠρπάγη ἄρματος.” trans. by J. Wilkinson, 331.

³⁷⁶ Grethenios, Le pèlerinage, 19. “*Le Jourdain est un petit fleuve, mais rapide. Vis-à-vis de l’endroit où le Christ fut baptisé, sur le rivage oriental, s’élevait une église de la sainte Trinité et il n’en est rien resté, excepté les fondements; et c’est là que le fleuve du Jourdain retourna en arrière. En remontant un peu plus haut, il est plus large et c’est là, où le Christ fut baptisé, que les chrétiens se lavent. Un peu plus bas se trouve un monticule semblable à une meule, du haut duquel le prophète Elie fut enlevé au ciel dans un char tiré par des chevaux de feu; on l’appelle Hermon. On dit qu’au-delà du Jourdain se trouve la grotte de saint Jean le Précurseur; et, à côté, à Enonesalem, il y a beaucoup d’eau, et c’est là que saint Jean baptisait le peuple. Nous n’y allâmes pas de peur des Arabes.*” trans. by B. de Khitrowo 1889, 187. See also Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 200.

FEDERLIN of the congregation of the White Fathers in the church of St Anne in Jerusalem who identified the ruins of Tell Mar Elias³⁷⁷. It was not until 1995 that M. PICCIRILLO, supported by the Hashemite Prince Ghazi, brought attention back to the site of the Baptism and the start of archaeological investigations promoted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan³⁷⁸.

Tell al-Kharrar stands about two kilometres from the River Jordan, between the *wadi* Nimrin and Gharaba on what is the south-eastern bank of the Wadi al-Kharrar³⁷⁹. The northern part of the hill was occupied by a vast monastic complex surrounded by walls (Fig. 127). The monastery stood on three distinct levels united by a ramp corresponding to the main entry. The two churches were situated on the lower level, on the middle level were located the tanks for collecting water, while the upper level included the rooms where the monks lived³⁸⁰.

The name of the monastery is connected with the hegumen Rotorius, whose actions are recalled in a mosaic epigraph in Greek found in the apse of the northern church³⁸¹. The archaeological finds suggest a continuity of life from the 5th to the second half of the 7th cent. A.D.³⁸².

In the southern area a large hall called Prayer Room and a structured system of water channels built from the 5th cent. A.D. have been identified³⁸³. The Prayer Room was made up of a rectangular-shaped building in local stone, the sides of which measure 11.75 m in the east-west direction and 7.30 m in the north-south direction. The room was paved with a white mosaic on top of which wooden remains of the beams of the roof were recovered during excavations³⁸⁴. Most of the finds discovered *in situ* allow the construction to be dated to before the 5th cent. A.D.³⁸⁵. Two smaller rooms developed close to the north-east corner of the room, perhaps used as additional rooms.

Not far away from the Prayer Room in the south-western corner of the *tell*, it is possible to glimpse the remains of what is known as the Church of the Arch. Of the structure, which measures 13.5 m in an east-west direction and 9 in a north-south one, only some rows of stones belonging to the perimeter walls and a small portion of the white mosaic pavement decorated with a cross motif remain³⁸⁶. The roof was supported by a system of three arches, one of which has been raised after complete restoration and has given its name to the church³⁸⁷. Towards the western corner of the building there was a courtyard, perhaps for the assembly of the faithful. The finds discovered in the excavations allow a probable dating sometime between the 4th and the 6th cent. A.D.³⁸⁸.

In this area of the *tell* there are many components of the water system that channelled the flow of water and redistributed it to the individual facilities on the hill. In particular, the different springs of Ain al-Kharrar, Ain Salim, Ain al-Fawara and Ain al-Hamman were connected by a closely-knit network of pottery channels that joined the Wadi al-Kharrar with the Wadi Kefrein and ar-Ramah³⁸⁹. The area of collection of the spring water was located near the Prayer Hall where a reservoir and two small tanks were built: the water flowed into a pool and into a

³⁷⁷ Federlin 1902, 154–156; Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 201.

³⁷⁸ For the narration of the first surveys, see Piccirillo 2016, 138–143.

³⁷⁹ Waheeb 2016, 41.

³⁸⁰ Waheeb 2016, 57.

³⁸¹ See below 148 and Waheeb 1998, 636.

³⁸² Waheeb 2016, 57.

³⁸³ Mkhjian 2005, 403–410, Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 206.

³⁸⁴ Waheeb 2016, 45.

³⁸⁵ Mkhjian 2005, 407.

³⁸⁶ Waheeb 2016, 46–47.

³⁸⁷ Mkhjian 2005, 407; Waheeb 2016, 46–47.

³⁸⁸ Waheeb 2016, 47.

³⁸⁹ Waheeb 2016, 48.



Fig. 127 Bethany beyond the Jordan. The monastic complex of Rotorius on the Tell al-Kharrar (© APAAME).

cistern from where, flowing into an aqueduct supported by pilasters in a north-eastern direction, it reached three other pools on the top of the *tell*³⁹⁰.

The pool (3 × 6.5 m), excavated directly into the rock of the hill and faced with stone slabs of limestone and plaster, had a vaulted roof with a mosaic pavement³⁹¹. The fragments of pottery suggest a date between the 5th and the 6th cent. A.D.³⁹². Not far away there was a cylindrical cistern with a diameter of 3.25 m and a depth of 5.4 m with a total capacity of 45 m³ of water³⁹³.

The southern rectangular pool (4 × 7.50 m)³⁹⁴ had steps along the eastern edge of which today only four steps remain, which allowed descent for ritual purposes³⁹⁵. Another two pools connected with one another were at the top of the *tell*. In the north-eastern one (3.40 × 4.30 m) some stone slabs used to go down into the reservoir have been identified, while under the north-western pool (2.5 × 4.85 m), the archaeologists have found a circular well (2.10 m in diameter and 12 m high)³⁹⁶. The archaeological materials suggest a dating from the 5th–6th cent. A.D. and a possible joint use with the liturgical services of the ecclesiastical buildings.

The most significant monumental evidence is related to the two churches built in the northern part of Elijah's hill. The northern church, with two accesses on the northern and western sides, is well preserved and is made up of the presbytery (4.15 × 4.20 m) and the nave (8.85 × 4.1 m)³⁹⁷. The building contained a polychrome mosaic with a geometric cross motif in red tesserae on a white ground. As mentioned earlier, the inscription found in the part of the apse commemorates the name of the hegumen who promoted the edification of the monastic complex³⁹⁸. The roof was made of wood and supported by a system of pilasters.

The western church was the one probably connected with the memory of the prophet Elijah. The apse of the presbytery (2.30 × 1.85 m) was obtained from a natural grotto dug in the slope of the hill and placed under the north-western pool³⁹⁹. Three naves developed from this, divided by two colonnades (9.65 m long by 14.55 wide)⁴⁰⁰. Small pieces of mosaic found during the excavations give a partial idea of the pavement of the building. Between the two churches there was another small room measuring 6 × 6 m with a mosaic, which was perhaps used for other requirements of worship.

Unfortunately, only a few isolated walls built of local stone remain from the original rooms inhabited by the monks. The top of the *tell* was closed off by a subsequent settlement between the 12th and 17th cent. A.D. which was used by a subsequent Greek Orthodox monastic community⁴⁰¹.

³⁹⁰ Waheeb 2016, 48. The aqueduct was built at a later phase because the pilasters that supported the water structure occupied part of the two additional areas of the Prayer Hall.

³⁹¹ Waheeb 2016, 49.

³⁹² Mkhjian 2005, 406–407; Waheeb 2016, 49–50.

³⁹³ Mkhjian 2005, 407.

³⁹⁴ These are the most recent data provided by the archaeologist M. WAHEEB, however, it has to be reported that R. MKHJIAN gives a different dimension for the southern tank: 5.30 × 3.70 m. See Mkhjian 2005, 407 and Waheeb 2016, 50.

³⁹⁵ Waheeb 2016, 50.

³⁹⁶ Waheeb 2016, 50.

³⁹⁷ Waheeb 2016, 50; a slight difference is noted in the architectonic survey in Mkhjian 2005, 407.

³⁹⁸ The inscription reads: "With the help of God, the whole monastery was built in the time of Rotorius, priest and abbot greatly loved by God. May God our saviour grant him mercy." For the details see Waheeb 1998, 636.

³⁹⁹ Waheeb 2016, 50.

⁴⁰⁰ Mkhjian 2005, 407.

⁴⁰¹ Waheeb 2016, 50.

The hermitage settlements in the Wadi al-Kharrar

The area of the Wadi al-Kharrar which stands about 300 metres from the River Jordan is characterized by a large presence of caves dug out of the whitish marl of the low reliefs of Lisan⁴⁰². The natural cavities were transformed into cells or small chapels inhabited by monks and hermits from the time of the pilgrim Egeria⁴⁰³. The excavations of 1999 by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan brought to light a small rock *laura* made up of three grottoes in the western side of the Tell al-Kharrar near two other natural cavities near the River Jordan⁴⁰⁴ (Fig. 128). These last two hermitages were placed about ten metres from the ground in a very panoramic point of the rocks situated exactly in correspondence with the ford of the river⁴⁰⁵. The elevated position, as well as being in agreement with the typical anchoretic practice of the Christian monks, also respected more practical needs such as protection from wild animals and possible floods.

The rock hermitages in the Wadi al-Kharrar were distinguished by a plan with an internal partition, usually dividing them into two rooms. The rooms, which opened with a narrow corridor, were made up of a main room, probably where the monk lived, and a second, more internal one, for prayer⁴⁰⁶ (Fig. 129). A series of small niches and alcoves enhanced the ascetic architecture⁴⁰⁷.

The *laura* on the western side of the *tell* had three grottos dug out at the same level which were structured along a north-south axis. The three cavities could be reached by steps in local stone, of which only two steps are preserved⁴⁰⁸. Of the first grotto, situated in correspondence with the south-western corner of the hill, only the arched entrance and the eastern apse wall are visible; unfortunately, the remainder has been lost due to the process of natural erosion⁴⁰⁹. The same situation also distinguishes the second grotto of which only the apse wall, 2.50 m long, remains⁴¹⁰.

The third grotto (2.25 m deep and 2 m high) is, on the other hand, situated near the entrance to the monastery of Rotorius, about six metres north of the second grotto. In the Byzantine period, the monks caused a monumentalization of the rock cavity which became the apse of a church built in front of its entrance⁴¹¹. A small mosaic fragment and remains of pilasters inform us of the architecture of the nave (13 × 13 m)⁴¹². An artificial channel about 6 m long which flowed under the floor of the church from the entrance of the grotto continued until Wadi al-Kharrar. The exact point of origin of the water is not clear, whether from a spring, from decantation pools or from the *wadi* itself⁴¹³. The ritual aspect of the areas, as well as the presence of the water, is also underlined by the discovery of the skull of a man of about twenty, buried in a ditch not far from the entrance to the grotto⁴¹⁴.

The pottery sherds recovered in the excavations of the grottos on the *tell* allow the hypothesis of an occupation as early as Roman times (1st cent. A.D.), followed by a sporadic presence in the 2nd and 3rd centuries and by the subsequent reorganization of the rock cavities by the monks in the Byzantine period (from the 4th cent. A.D.)⁴¹⁵.

⁴⁰² Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 210; Waheeb 2016, 50.

⁴⁰³ See above 149.

⁴⁰⁴ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 210; Waheeb 2016, 62–74.

⁴⁰⁵ Waheeb 2016, 63.

⁴⁰⁶ For a detailed description of the hermitages, see the excavation data in Waheeb 2016, 64–65.

⁴⁰⁷ Waheeb 2016, 64–65.

⁴⁰⁸ Waheeb 2016, 64–65.

⁴⁰⁹ Waheeb 2016, 66.

⁴¹⁰ Waheeb 2016, 66.

⁴¹¹ Waheeb 2016, 67.

⁴¹² Waheeb 2016, 67.

⁴¹³ For the numerous hypotheses, see Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 210 and Waheeb 2016, 68.

⁴¹⁴ M. Waheeb dwells on an anatomical detail of the skull. The four lines of stitches in the occipital area allegedly form a cross that could have made the monastic community make an intentional burial with ritual purposes. See Waheeb 2016, 68.

⁴¹⁵ Waheeb 2016, 69.

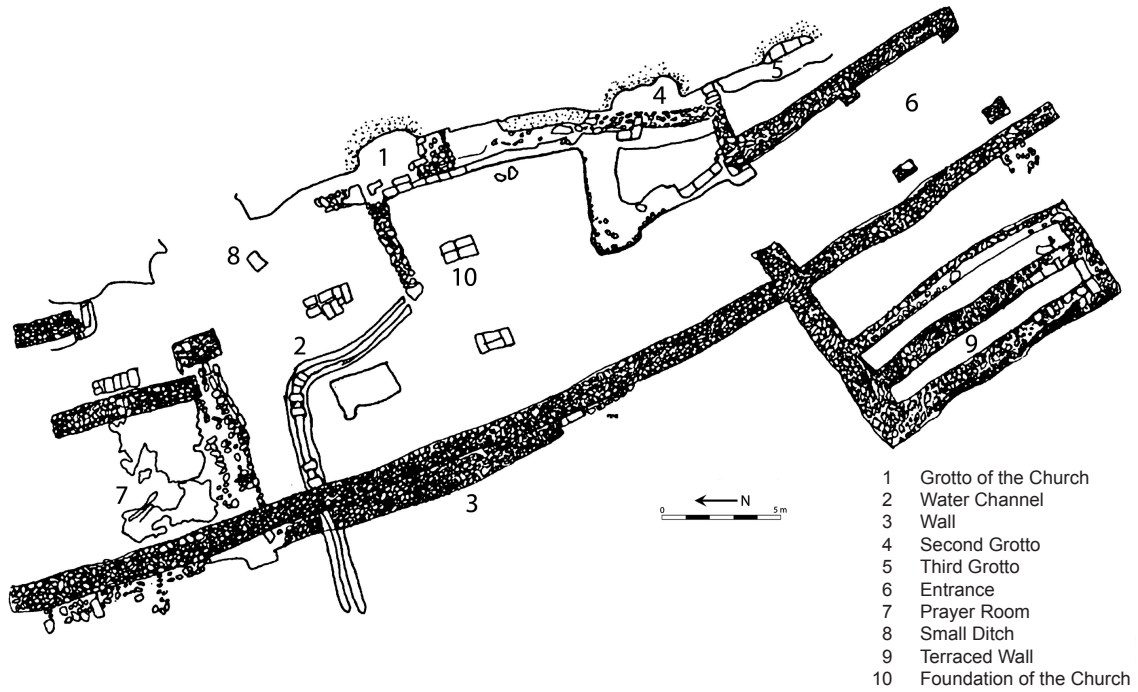


Fig. 128 Bethany beyond the Jordan. Hermits' settlements in the Wadi al-Kharrar. Plan of the western side of Elijah's hill (after Waheeb *et al.* 2011, 195, fig. 6).

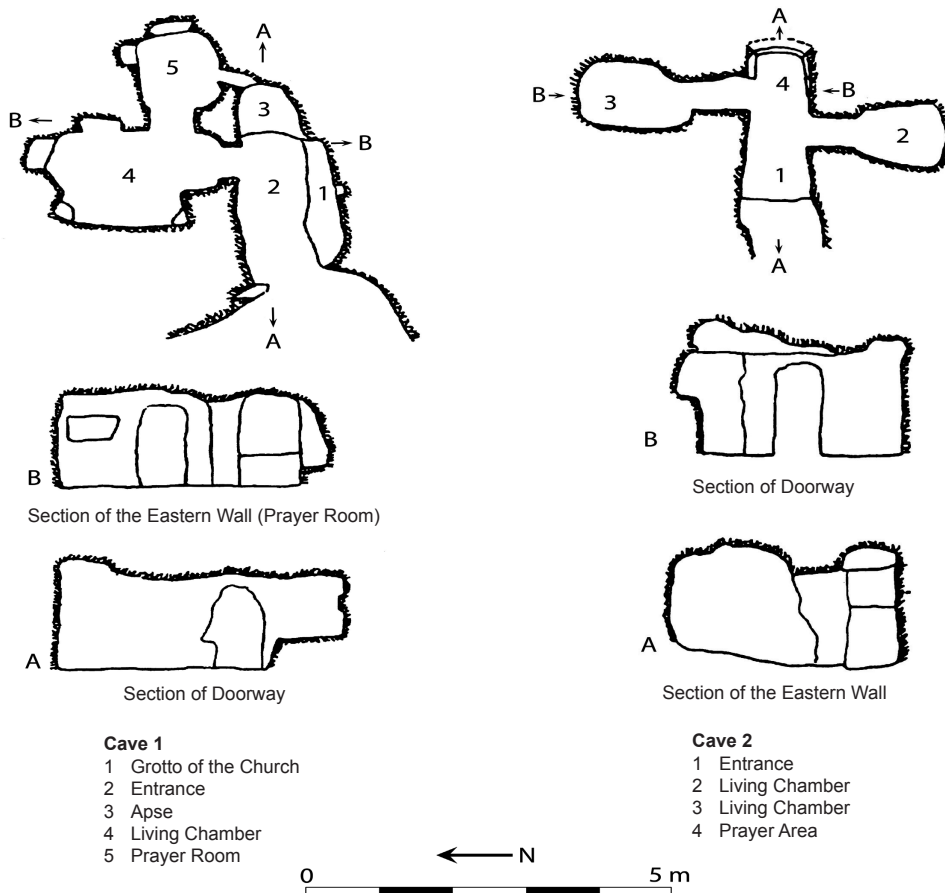


Fig. 129 Bethany beyond the Jordan. Hermits' settlements in the Wadi al-Kharrar. Plan and cross-section of the caves nos. 1–2 (after Waheeb *et al.* 2011, 192–193, figs. 1–2).

The absence of epigraphic texts does not allow the identification of whether a specific grotto connected with the shelter of the prophet Elijah or with John the Baptist existed. The natural elements, including the caves, the spring water and the hill, certainly formed the perfect topography for the practices of devotion to the prophet Elijah on which the memory of the Precursor of Christ was superimposed.

A set of other buildings of worship stood near the river, corresponding with the site of the Baptism of Jesus⁴¹⁶. While partially falling outside the subject of this discussion, on the memorials of Old and New Testament figures, attention has to be paid to these structures to complete knowledge of the local architectonic panorama.

The most important monumental evidence relates to three churches. Of the first, the foundations of the walls, a double row of pilasters and some mosaic fragments of the pavement of the ecclesiastical structure remain⁴¹⁷. The most significant particularity of the church was the platform, the massive pillars of which in local sandstone (from 1 to 1.5 m high) were planted in the swampy soil of the river bank⁴¹⁸. The pottery fragments which can be dated between the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. and some coins attributable to Anastasius I (491–518) together allow the supposition that the remains belong to the basilica built by this Byzantine emperor⁴¹⁹. A second building stood next to the previous one directly on the alluvial soil of the river. It was probably built shortly after the construction of the first church, but to date only some perimeter walls and the white marble pavement are visible⁴²⁰.

The last church was built reusing pilasters and masonry from the first building, probably destroyed due to frequent flooding by the river⁴²¹. Distinguished by a basilica plan of three naves (20 × 20 m) it had a fine pavement in *opus sectile* with a floral pattern made with polychrome marble of which a part, still *in situ*, is preserved in the area of the presbytery; other marble fragments are in the southern and northern nave⁴²². East of the altar, the archaeologists have identified the remains of steps⁴²³ which from the entrance door of the church led down towards the river⁴²⁴. At the bottom of the steps there was a small rectangular structure placed on a platform overhanging the river. Worthy of note are some devotional signs scratched by pilgrims on the northern wall of the sandstone steps⁴²⁵. The remains of a small building of worship of 6 × 4 m were identified east of the church of St John the Baptist⁴²⁶.

In correspondence with the river, a structure of 20.5 × 24.5 m was also identified of which only some parts of an elevated wall divided into three architectonic units remain⁴²⁷. The simplicity of the materials used for the construction and the floor of beaten earth allow the hypothesis that the building may have had a practical function, perhaps a shelter for the animals of the faithful and of visitors⁴²⁸. This element agrees with the numerous accounts of the pilgrims who report the practices of hospitality by the monks.

⁴¹⁶ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 202.

⁴¹⁷ For an analytical description of the pavement, see Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 203 and Waheeb 2016, 78–81.

⁴¹⁸ Waheeb 2016, 80.

⁴¹⁹ Waheeb 2016, 80–81.

⁴²⁰ Waheeb 2016, 82.

⁴²¹ Waheeb 2016, 82.

⁴²² Waheeb 2016, 82.

⁴²³ The stairs, 2.50 m wide, were formed of twenty-two steps, each of which had a height that varied from 17 to 23 cm.

⁴²⁴ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 203.

⁴²⁵ Hamarneh – Roncalli 2009, 206. For more details see Waheeb 2016, 84–92.

⁴²⁶ Waheeb 2016, 92–95.

⁴²⁷ Waheeb 2016, 96–99.

⁴²⁸ Waheeb 2016, 98–99.

3.3.3 The patriarch Lot: the monastic complex of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata

The shrine of Lot is an important monastery in the province of *Palaestina Tertia*. A settlement of monks developed in connection with the cave which, according to Biblical tradition, saw the nephew of Abraham, Lot, lie with his two daughters and thus give rise to the forefathers of the peoples of the Moabites and of the Ammonites respectively.

Biblical memories and literary sources

The life of the patriarch is described in certain verses of Genesis⁴²⁹, but here the episode that occurred after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen, 19, 30–38 is significant. The Biblical text informs us that Lot, having fled from the city of Zoara, decided to seek refuge in a grotto with his two daughters⁴³⁰. As the two young women had remained in isolation for a long time and were worried about having descendants, they got their father drunk to be able to lie with him.

The Christian veneration of the patriarch Lot, celebrated on 10th October⁴³¹, accentuates the positive qualities of the patriarch stated in the Book of Wisdom⁴³² and in the Second Letter of Peter⁴³³. His wish to obey the commands of God, his sense of justice, his hospitality for the angels and his purity of habits, not at all touched by the incestuous behaviour as forced by deceit and therefore deemed without fault, are positively emphasized. The cult of St Lot spread in Palestine and in Jordan where, as well as the monastic complex of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata, a church dedicated to the prophet in the village of Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, in the Mount Nebo region, was identified⁴³⁴.

The onomastic reference to the monastery of Lot appears near the present-day site of Ghor es-Safi, the Biblical city of Zoar, on the mosaic map of Madaba⁴³⁵. The document shows the iconography of a small building situated on the eastern reliefs near the Dead Sea. The unequivocal element for the identification of the place is the Greek inscription Τὸ τοῦ ἀγίου Λ[ώτ] (sanctuary –or place– of St Lot) which informs exactly of the existence of a complex dedicated to the patriarch⁴³⁶.

In the *Life of St Stephen the Sabaite*, by Leontius of Damascus, we learn that during their Lenten peregrinations, the monks who wandered in the desert near the Dead Sea usually stopped near Lot's grotto:

«He lived with them at a distance of fifteen, twenty or forty miles from the laura, near Calamone, in the caves of Arnūn, or Giarībā, or Cutila, or ar-Rūba, or Castellion, or mār Lūt, or mār Harūn or behind the Dead Sea, and there they would spend the whole of Lent, as the fathers did not tolerate being separated from him and remaining alone»⁴³⁷

The practice of venerating the patriarch Lot also continued during the medieval period as can be learned from the words of the Russian Abbot Daniel, visiting the city of Sigor, i.e. Zoar:

«From there to Sigor it is two versts. Here there are two tombs, the tomb of Lot and the tombs of his two daughters. And on the same mountain there is a great cave and it

⁴²⁹ Gen. 11, 31; Gen. 12–13. 18–19.

⁴³⁰ Gen. 19, 30.

⁴³¹ Saller – Bagatti 1949, 197.

⁴³² Wisdom. 10, 6; 19, 16.

⁴³³ 2 Pt 2.7. For further information on the sanctification of Lot and the numerous attestations in the oldest Christian martyrologies, see the study in Saller – Bagatti 1949, 194–199.

⁴³⁴ Piccirillo 1989a, 182–188.

⁴³⁵ Alliata 1999a, 58. 61; MacDonald 2010, 200–202.

⁴³⁶ MacDonald – Politis 1988; Politis 1999, 225–227; Alliata 1999a, 58; Politis 2012, 19–21.

⁴³⁷ V. Steph. Sab., 16, 2. Italian trans. by B. Pirone 1991, 96–97; English by the author.

was to this cave that Lot fled with his two daughters. Nearby are the remains of a city of the first inhabitants [of the place], high on the mountain, and this is called Sigor»⁴³⁸

Lastly, some testimonies of the Muslim period are interesting. The presence of an inscription in Kufic Arabic, with the usual initial invocation of Allah, would suggest an interest by pilgrims of the Muslim faith in the figure of Lot, moreover also mentioned in Surah 37, v. 134 of the Quran. In addition, in the 10th cent., the Arab geographer Yaqut ibn-‘Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi (A.D. 1179–1229) in his *Kitab mu‘jam al-buldan* recalls the Biblical episode of Lot, indicating the name of his two daughters as Rubbah and Saghur and identifying the two springs near their burial place⁴³⁹.

The archaeological data

The archaeological excavations at the monastic site of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata were carried out from 1986 to 1995, then followed by a period of post-excavation study. The investigations, directed by a multidisciplinary team under K. POLITIS were financed by the British Museum of London, the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the Greek government⁴⁴⁰.

The monastic complex extends in the valley of the Jordan to –253 m.a.s.l. and about three kilometres from the Dead Sea⁴⁴¹. The structures, which developed at the foot of the rocky slope that rises towards the plateau, included a large water tank, a *diakonikon*, a church with a three-nave plan with an adjacent cave, the living spaces for the monks and a hospice for the pilgrims⁴⁴² (Fig. 130).

The large tank is at the southern end of the complex and near the bed of a *wadi*⁴⁴³. The basin, about 6 m deep and with a capacity of almost 800,000 litres, had a roof supported by seven arches and internally showed a waterproof facing of crushed earthenware⁴⁴⁴. The almost disproportional dimensions of the tank reflect the difficulties of finding water in a particularly infertile area such as that of the Dead Sea. In addition, around the basin there was a close-knit system of pipes and channels to convey the water from the nearby *wadi* as well as from the roof of the church and the cistern itself⁴⁴⁵ (Fig. 132).

The *diakonikon* of the church extended beyond the basin, unfortunately found severely damaged. Some mosaic fragments inform us about the pavement of this area⁴⁴⁶. The mosaic with a white ground was set in a frame with three braided polychrome lines according to the *guilloche* model. The central part of the mosaic is occupied by a large *kantharos* with two handles from which sinuous vines appear and it is characterized by two inscriptions in Greek. Above the urn, there is a large pomegranate tree with on its right a hermaphrodite lion with a mane and four nipples and on the left a dog⁴⁴⁷. The first inscription consists of ten lines in the body of the vase and provides the date of repaving the room, between 22 March A.D. 572 and 21 March A.D. 573 in the time of the Bishop Peter of Zoara, while the second, enclosed in a decorative band on the shoulder, provides us with the name of the mosaic artist Kosmas⁴⁴⁸.

⁴³⁸ Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel, 56. Trans. by W. Ryan 1988, 148.

⁴³⁹ Politis 2012, 21.

⁴⁴⁰ For the history of the studies, see Politis 2012, 2–8.

⁴⁴¹ Politis 2012, 9–16.

⁴⁴² MacDonald 2010, 194–195.

⁴⁴³ MacDonald 2010, 195; Politis 2012, 115–123.

⁴⁴⁴ Politis 2012, 115.

⁴⁴⁵ Politis 2012, 115.

⁴⁴⁶ Politis 2012, 177 no. 7.

⁴⁴⁷ Politis 2012, 177 no. 7.

⁴⁴⁸ The inscription reads: “+ In the time of the most holy bishop Petros and of the hegumen Euzoios and of the *epitropos* (administrator) Ioannes and of the *oikonomos* (steward) Georgios (this mosaic pavement) was renovated in 467 (467 Era of Province Arabia = 22 March A.D. 572 – 21 March A.D. 573), [through the zeal] of the monks Ioannes, Theodoros (and) Ioannes”. The second inscription informs us of the name of the mosaicist: “+ Kosma (is



Fig. 130 Deir 'Ain 'Abata. Aerial photo of the monastic complex (© APAAME).



Fig. 131 Deir 'Ain 'Abata. Aerial photo of the monastic church (© APAAME).

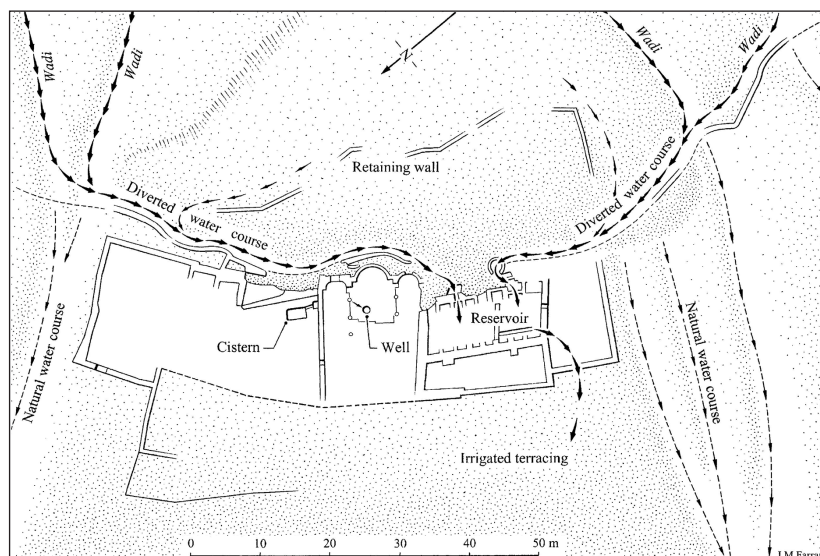


Fig. 132 Deir 'Ain 'Abata. Plan of the water system of the monastic complex (after Politis 2012, 121).

A terraced area at the side of the tank and of the *diakonikon* was used both as a garden probably for growing vines and as a point of access to the *diakonikon* itself and to the other areas of the monastery. In addition, it is also possible to imagine that this is where the pilgrims visiting the monastery were welcomed⁴⁴⁹.

The narthex developed beyond the *diakonikon* and from there, through three doors, it was possible to enter the hall of the basilica divided into three naves (Fig. 131). The church was paved with four mosaics, three of which have inscriptions in Greek. The mosaic in the north nave, qualitatively the best, presents a decoration with a geometric motif with a grid containing squares, diamonds and flowers on an even white ground⁴⁵⁰. Facing the entrance to the cave there is a mosaic inscription between a *tabula ansata* which reveals that the mosaic was produced between A.D. 605/607 in the time of the Emperor Phocas (A.D. 602–610) and the episcopate of Isaakios of Jerusalem⁴⁵¹. The entrance to the cave has two levels covered in mosaics, the lower one dated to the 5th–6th cent. A.D. with red and black tesserae, while the one above, dated to ca. A.D. 605, had multi-coloured tesserae arranged in a casual fashion⁴⁵² (Fig. 133). In the presbytery there was another mosaic dated to ca. A.D. 605, decorated with sinuous vines, inside of which there were birds, peacocks and a ram; at the centre, corresponding to the altar, there was a cup and below that a cross with the inscription Τέλος καλόν⁴⁵³.

The most significant data for understanding the monastic complex come from the second mosaic of the central nave, placed directly above the previous pavement of A.D. 605⁴⁵⁴. The

the) mosaicist". For the edition of the Greek text and the detailed critical apparatus, see Meimaris – Kritikakou-Nikolaropolou 2012, 393–400 no. 1.

⁴⁴⁹ The hypothesis is reinforced by the presence of a lower slope on this side of the complex that would have made access easier for the faithful. On this aspect, see Politis 2012, 122.

⁴⁵⁰ Politis 2012, 175 no. 3.

⁴⁵¹ The inscription reads: "In the time of our most holy father Iakovos, the bishop, and of Sozomenos, (the) hegumen, the laying of the mosaic was made in (the) month of April in (the) 10th indiction, (in the) year 500 (500 Era of Province Arabia = April A.D. 605, or 502 Era of Province Arabia = April A.D. 607)." For the attribution of the dating according to the chronological system used in the province of *Palaestina Tertia*, see Meimaris – Kritikakou-Nikolaropolou 2012, 401–403 no. 4.

⁴⁵² Politis 2012, 175 nos. 1–2.

⁴⁵³ The translation is: (May the) end (to life be) good. On this issue, see Politis 2012, 176 no. 4; Meimaris – Kritikakou-Nikolaropolou 2012, 400–401 no. 3.

⁴⁵⁴ For the data on this mosaic, see Politis 2012, 176 no. 5. 556, table 23.

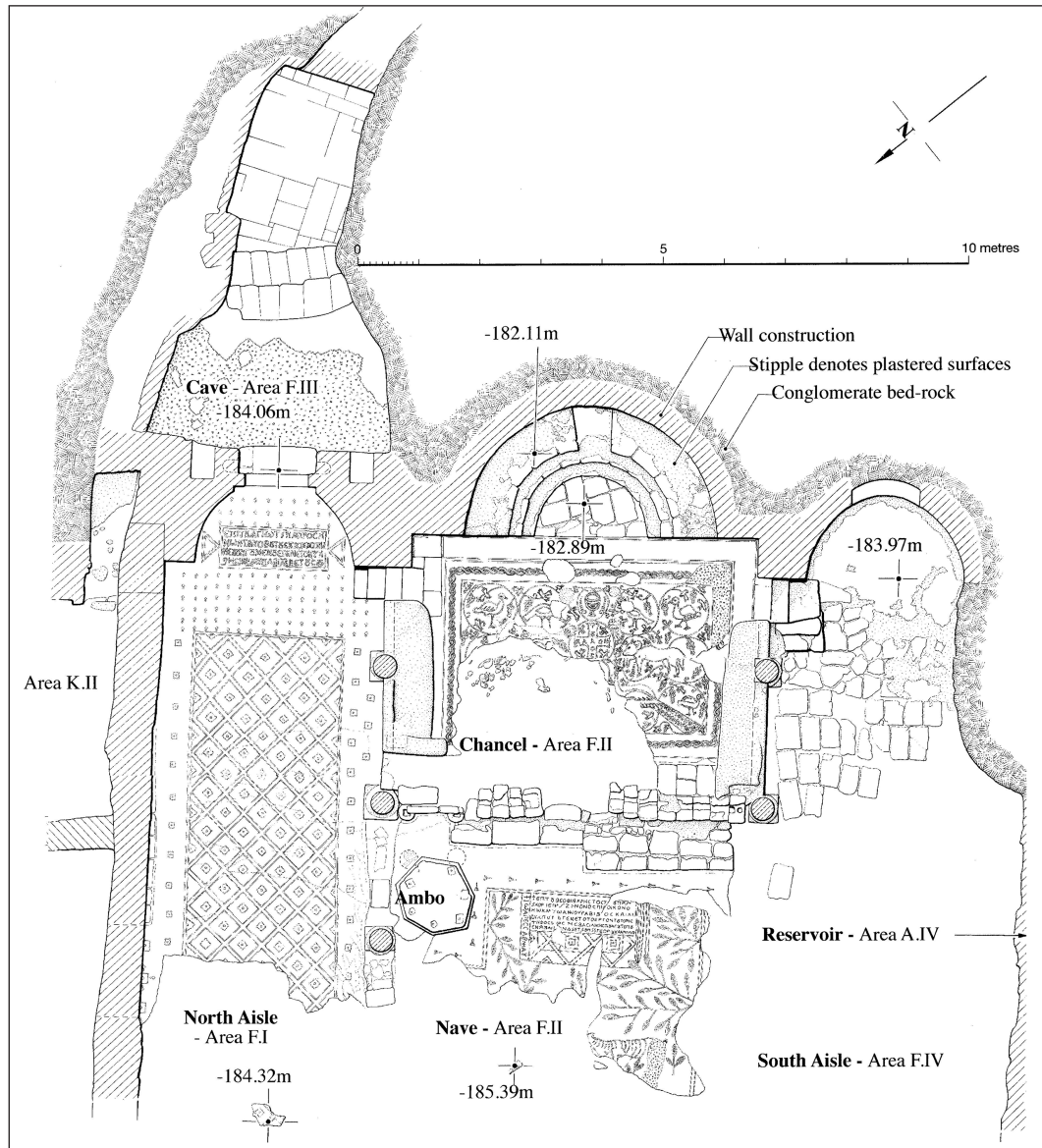


Fig. 133 Deir 'Ain 'Abata. Plan of the monastic church (after Politis 2012, 127).

mosaic shows an inscription in Greek on the ecclesiastical hierarchy active in the region of Zoara, on the Semitic social component, as can be seen from the name of the supposed mosaicist, Ioapes son of Sabneaos, and above all on the date it was made, A.D. 691 in the middle of the Muslim period⁴⁵⁵. A series of branches with freely drawn leaves, which according to K. POLITIS could have come from the previous Nabatean influx, and the body of an animal complete the pattern of the mosaic⁴⁵⁶.

⁴⁵⁵ The inscription (a) is set within a rectangular frame. At its left side there is inscription (b), which run vertically. "In the time of the most God-loving Cristophoros, (the) presbyter and *chorepiskopos* (country bishop), and of Zenon, (the) presbyter and *oikonomos* (steward), and of Ioannes son of Rabibos, [(the) presbyter?] and *dioketes* (administrator), this work of mosaic pavement of the basilica of the holy place was made in the month of *Xanthikos*, in (the) 5th indiction, in the (year) 586 (586 Era Province of Arabia = 22 March–20 April A.D. 692); and (in the time) of Georgios (the) *candelaptes* (candle lighter)". For (b) "Ioapes son of Sabneaos" the Greek edition of the text and the relative critical apparatus, see Meimaris – Kritikakou-Nikolaropolou 2012, 403–409 no 5.

⁴⁵⁶ Politis 2012, 176–177 no 6.

The most characteristic element of the complex is, however, the cave which is at the end of the north nave. The natural cavity connected with the Biblical memory of Lot and his daughters is linked to the church by an entrance with pilasters in sandstone, the capitals of which show engraved crosses and signs of red paint and an architrave, which also has a cross, with two lateral rosettes at its sides⁴⁵⁷. The internal room measures approximately 2 × 2.5 m and, as already observed, has two levels of mosaic pavements⁴⁵⁸. It is interesting to note the long occupation of the cave in the Ancient Bronze Age I (ca. 3300–3000 B.C.), as shown by fragments of small amphorae and cups associated with skeletal remains of collective burials⁴⁵⁹, in the Middle Bronze Age II (1900–1550 B.C.)⁴⁶⁰, in the late Hellenistic and Nabatean periods (in particular some ritual vessels dated between the 1st cent. B.C. and the 1st cent. A.D.)⁴⁶¹, in the first Byzantine period (4th–5th cent. A.D.) and in the Abbasid period (8th cent. A.D.). Evidence of Christian veneration of the site by pilgrims can also be observed in two inscriptions scratched into the plaster on the southern wall of the cave⁴⁶².

The site of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata stands out for the importance of the monastic facilities which allow detailed insights into aspects of the social life of the monastery. The most important nucleus is situated north of the basilica and has Lot’s cave as the focal point, an atrium, an open courtyard, the refectory and the single rooms for the monks and a hostel for pilgrims⁴⁶³. As for the basilica, the monastery also presents two phases of building, before and after 691 A.D. In the first phase, the church allowed accessibility to and from the northern sectors, whilst in the second phase this function seems to have been limited⁴⁶⁴.

The discovery of a collective burial place inside an abandoned reservoir (containing twenty-eight men, one woman and three children) and of some cist tombs with the bones of two children, a baby and a foetus deserves particular attention⁴⁶⁵. The anthropological investigations on the skeletons have confirmed the presence of numerous pathologies which would suggest that the people died during a period of treatment at the monastic hospice⁴⁶⁶.

The productive aspect of the monastery is found, on the other hand, on the western side of the mountain, where a complex system of agricultural terracing was used to produce the food necessary for the dietary requirements of the religious and of the pilgrims⁴⁶⁷.

3.3.4 The high priest and Saint Aaron: the monastery of Jabal Haroun near Petra

Biblical memories and literary sources

Without going into the numerous Biblical references which link the figure of Aaron to Moses, it is important here to examine the accounts by pilgrims which inform us of the death of the first high priest of the Jewish People and on the building of the relative Christian shrine.

⁴⁵⁷ Politis 2012, 129–134.

⁴⁵⁸ See above 155.

⁴⁵⁹ Politis 2012, 25–44.

⁴⁶⁰ Eighteen tombs found to the north of the monastic complex are dated to the same period. See Politis 2012, 45–105.

⁴⁶¹ Politis 2012, 107–114.

⁴⁶² The first graffiti inscription is in Greek and recalls a certain Zenobia, daughter of Anastasios, the second is in Kufic Arabic and contains the typical Muslim invocation to Allah. See in detail Politis 2012, 414–415 no. 18, table 22. 417 no. 1.

⁴⁶³ For the stratigraphic sequence of the individual areas with the relative bibliographic references, see Politis 2012, 142–157; for the analysis of the spatial dynamics of the monastery, see Chatford-Clark 2012, 169.

⁴⁶⁴ Chatford-Clark 2012, 169.

⁴⁶⁵ For the detailed study of the skeleton remains, see Gruspier 2012, 421–448.

⁴⁶⁶ Gruspier 2012, 421–448.

⁴⁶⁷ MacDonald 2010, 199–200.

The exact location of the place of the death of Aaron gave rise to numerous problems of identification because the Biblical text contains indications which are vague and in disagreement with one another. Specifically, Numbers 20, 22–29 and Deuteronomy 32, 48–51⁴⁶⁸ report that Aaron died on the peak of Mount Hor, after both brothers and Eleazar had left the camp of Kadesh, but without stating where the body was buried⁴⁶⁹. Deuteronomy 10, 6, on the other hand, says that Aaron died and was buried at Moserah.

There are numerous speculations on the identification of Mount Hor to be found in the literary sources. In particular, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, Flavius Josephus recalls that the two brothers climbed up a mountain near a city formally called Ἄρκη by the Arabs, but known as Petra⁴⁷⁰. The reference of the death of Aaron on Mount Hor, near Petra, is also found in the *Onomasticon* by Eusebius⁴⁷¹. Although these literary references are reconciled with what has been discovered during the archaeological investigations, modern historiographic criticism still suggests extreme prudence in identifying Mount Hor⁴⁷².

Unlike the shrines examined previously, the monastery of St Aaron is not mentioned in any travelogue of the Byzantine period, even though the site is not very far from the *Via Nova Traiana*, the road taken by numerous faithful who from Palestine usually went to the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai⁴⁷³.

Testimonies on the presence of monasteries in Petra are, on the other hand, attested in the documents of the councils of Jerusalem and Constantinople held in the middle of the 6th cent. A.D., but without specific indications of the monastery of Jabal Haroun⁴⁷⁴. More precise information can be gained from the Greek papyrus inv. 6a, recovered in 1993 during the excavation of the Byzantine church of Petra, which mentions a donation by a certain Obodianus, son of Obodianus on 15th June A.D. 573. The recipients are the “Holy House of our lord the Saint High Priest Aaron” (ἅγιος οἶκος τοῦ δεσπότητος ἡμῶν τοῦ ἁγίου ἀρχιερέως Ἀαρών) probably situated in the vicinity⁴⁷⁵ and the *xenodochium* of the saint and triumphant martyr Cyriac, perhaps to confirm the strong bond between the monastic institution and the function of hospice for pilgrims which was common after the imperial decree of Justinian I⁴⁷⁶.

Despite the progressive abandonment and the natural catastrophic events which struck the city of Petra, the flows of pilgrims attracted by the holiness of the place connected with Aaron did not lessen in the medieval period. In addition to the visits of many monks during their Lenten peregrinations in the desert, some literary accounts in Arabic and in Latin in the time of the Crusades inform us of the longevity of the monastery on Jabal Haroun. In particular, the Arab historian Abu al-Hasan ‘Ali al-Mas‘udi (A.D. 897–957) recalls in his *Muruj al-dhahab* that some faithful believed that Aaron died on Mount Moab and was buried there, whilst for others he was laid to rest inside a natural cave⁴⁷⁷. Furthermore, in his last work, *al-Tanbih wa l-ashraf*, the historian writes how Jabal Haroun remained a sacred mountain for the Christians of the Chalcedonian faith⁴⁷⁸.

⁴⁶⁸ B. MACDONALD identifies the Biblical oasis of Kades both with ‘Ain Qadeis and with ‘Ayn al-Qudeirat. See MacDonald 2000, 69 and MacDonald 2010, 210.

⁴⁶⁹ The passage in Deut. 32, 48–51 shows an interesting parallel with the death of Moses, to which we will return later.

⁴⁷⁰ Flav. Ant. Iud. 2, 82–83.

⁴⁷¹ Eus. onomast. 176.

⁴⁷² See in particular Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 10–11.

⁴⁷³ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 11.

⁴⁷⁴ See in particular the documents relative to the synod of A.D. 536, with the signatures of the hegumens and monks from the monasteries of the region of Petra. Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 12.

⁴⁷⁵ Gagos – Frösén 1998, 476–477 inv. 6a. 480 inv. 86; Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 12.

⁴⁷⁶ The practice was reinforced in particular after the great plague which started in Egypt in A.D. 542. See in this regard Miller 1985, 99–100; Frösén 2004, 143–144; Fiema 2006, 68–71; Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 12.

⁴⁷⁷ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 12 and note 116.

⁴⁷⁸ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, note 117.

During the Crusades, Fulcher of Chartres (A.D. 1059–1127) in his *Historia Hierosolymitana* describing the expedition of Baldwin in A.D. 1100 to Wadi Musa, also mentioned the monastery of Aaron:

«Furthermore we found at the top of the mountain the Monastery of St Aaron where Moses and Aaron were wont to speak with God. We rejoiced very much to behold a place so holy and to us unknown.»⁴⁷⁹

As J. FRÖSÉN points out, although Fulcher does not give any specific information on the monastic complex, it is easy to suppose that the monastery was still active and inhabited⁴⁸⁰.

The Benedictine abbot Guibert of Nogent (A.D. 1055–1124), in his *Gesta Francorum*, mentions a church on the top of Mount Hor, but which he confused with Mount Sinai and without any mention of a monastery⁴⁸¹.

The account by Magister Thietmar is more problematic. During his pilgrimage to Mount Sinai in A.D. 1217, he stopped near Mount Hor:

«At length I came to Mount Hor (Or), where Aaron died. On its summit a church has been built in which two Greek Christian monks are living. That place is called Moserah (Muscera) Mount Hor is very high and its ascent is difficult. It overlooks all the mountains of that province.»⁴⁸²

Although the text mentions the presence of a church and monks, J. FRÖSÉN suggests that there is no specific reference to the ruins of the monastery of Jabal Haroun or even that Thietmar did not personally climb the mountain⁴⁸³. However, the information regarding the two Greek monks, which may have reached the Crusader pilgrim through local guides or other written sources, nevertheless reflects a monastic presence that was still active in the area around Petra⁴⁸⁴.

Muslim veneration for Aaron in this place replaced the Christian one when, in the 12th cent. the Mameluke Sultans Baybars al-‘Ala’i al-Bunduqdari (A.D. 1223–1277) and Sayf al-Din Qalawun al-Alfi al-Mansur (A.D. 1222 ca–1290) gave orders to build a shrine to commemorate the brother of Moses on the top of Jabal Haroun⁴⁸⁵.

The archaeological data

The modern archaeological investigations started with the survey in 1991 by G. PETERMAN and R. SCHICK which allowed a general plan of the site to be made, and above all finding a correspondence between the literary and the historical sources⁴⁸⁶. On the basis of these data, a mission from the University of Helsinki gave rise to the Finnish *Jabal Hārūn Project* (FJHP)

⁴⁷⁹ Fulcheri Carnotensis, *Hist. Hier.* 2.5.9, 381. “*Invenimus insuper in montis apice Monasterium Sancti Aaron, ubi Moyses et ipse cum Deo loqui soliti erant. Unde multum laetabamur; cum loca tam sancta et nobis incognita intuebamur. Et quoniam ultra vallem illam terra erat deserta et inculta, ulterius progredi nolimus.*” trans. by Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 14 note 122.

⁴⁸⁰ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 13.

⁴⁸¹ Musil 1907, 161; Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 14.

⁴⁸² Mag. Thiet. *Iter ad Terram Sanctam* 16. “*Tandem veni ad montem Or, ubi Aaron mortuus fuit. In cuius summitate est ecclesia constructa, in qua habitant duo monachi Greci christiani. Qui locus dicitur Muscera. Mons Or altus est valde, et difficilis ascensus eius, et supereminet omnes montes illius provincie*” trans. by D. Pringle 2012, 121. See also De Sandoli 1983, 270–273 and for the extensive bibliography, see Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 19–20 note 142.

⁴⁸³ The description of the monastic community of Mount Sinai visited by Thietmar at the end of his pilgrimage is very different. See Peterman – Schick 1996; Pringle 1998; Walmsley 2001, 534; Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 14.

⁴⁸⁴ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 14.

⁴⁸⁵ The small Muslim shrine at the top of Jabal Haroun was constructed in the time of Sultan Nasir. See Walmsey 2001, 534; Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 15.

⁴⁸⁶ Peterman – Schick 1996, 473–480.

in 1997 with the purpose of studying the whole monastic complex, the results of which have recently been published⁴⁸⁷.

The top of Jabal Haroun (1340 m.a.s.l.) is today occupied by the Muslim shrine (*weli*) built in the 13th cent. A.D. in correspondence with the burial place of Aaron, which unfortunately has not been archaeologically investigated (Fig. 134).

The monastic complex, with a trapezoid shape, measures 62 m in a north-south direction and 48 in the east-west direction and is structured around four components organized around three courtyards⁴⁸⁸ (Fig. 135). The central portion is occupied by the basilica and the chapel. The western sector of the Byzantine monastery has a series of rooms which are independent from one another and stands on the structures of a previous Nabatean complex (1st cent. B.C. – 3rd cent. A.D.) built in front of a natural cavity in the rock and probably used as a cistern⁴⁸⁹. Research has indicated that some of these places, one of which can possibly be interpreted as a *triclinium*, were included in a *temenos* belonging to the previous Nabatean building⁴⁹⁰.

The western sector was probably used for the daily activities of the monks or for the aggregation of the faithful. The building of a containment wall dated to the 12th–13th cent. A.D. suggests the long life of this wing of the monastery⁴⁹¹.

The sector to the north of the chapel, made up of fourteen rooms which are arranged around a large courtyard, was probably used as a hospice for the pilgrims visiting the shrine⁴⁹². The archaeological excavations have highlighted a good stratigraphic sequence which allows the construction of the buildings to be dated to the 5th–6th centuries A.D.⁴⁹³.

The southern wing was also made up of a series of rooms for production as suggested by the remains of facilities for grinding wheat⁴⁹⁴.

The central courtyard represented the focal point of the complex on to which the building of worship looked (Fig. 136). The area paved with paving stones was characterized by the presence of a structured water system made up of three covered channels and a decantation tank which allows the discharge of water from the area of the church into a large reservoir⁴⁹⁵.

The architectonic evolution of the church and of the chapel is structured in fourteen distinct phases of building and destruction which took place over a wide span of time from the middle of the 5th to after the 10th cent. A.D.⁴⁹⁶. After it was built, the church (22.6 m long and 13.6 m wide) had the form of a basilica and was divided into three naves with a central apse and two lateral *pastophoria*⁴⁹⁷. The pavement consisted of wide slabs of marble stone of the Proconnesian type, perhaps taken from a previous Nabatean building⁴⁹⁸. The *bema*, with a rectangular shape, also had a marble facing and a *synthronon*⁴⁹⁹.

The chapel next to the church, with which it shared the northern wall, extended for 18.2 m in the east-west direction and for 6.5 m in the north-south direction⁵⁰⁰. The structure ended

⁴⁸⁷ Fiema *et al.* 2016.

⁴⁸⁸ Fiema 2003, 346.

⁴⁸⁹ Fiema 2012, 30; Lahelma *et al.* 2016, 17–63.

⁴⁹⁰ Lahelma *et al.* 2016, 17–63. For the description of the structures connected with the Nabatean phase, which lie outside the scope of this study, see Fiema *et al.* 2016.

⁴⁹¹ Frösén – Fiema 2004, 13.

⁴⁹² Fiema 2003, 346; Juntunen 2016, 75–107.

⁴⁹³ Frösén – Fiema 2004, 13.

⁴⁹⁴ MacDonald 2010, 222; Holappa – Fiema 2016, 115–128.

⁴⁹⁵ Fiema 2003, 346.

⁴⁹⁶ For a correspondence between the architectonic phases of the church and of the chapel compared with those of the monastic complex, see Fiema 2016, 588.

⁴⁹⁷ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 104.

⁴⁹⁸ Fiema 2003, 347 and Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 112.

⁴⁹⁹ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 109.

⁵⁰⁰ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 112.



Fig. 134 Jabal Haroun. Aerial photo of the monastic complex and of the *weli* (© APAAME).



Fig. 135 Jabal Haroun. Aerial photo of the monastic complex (© APAAME).

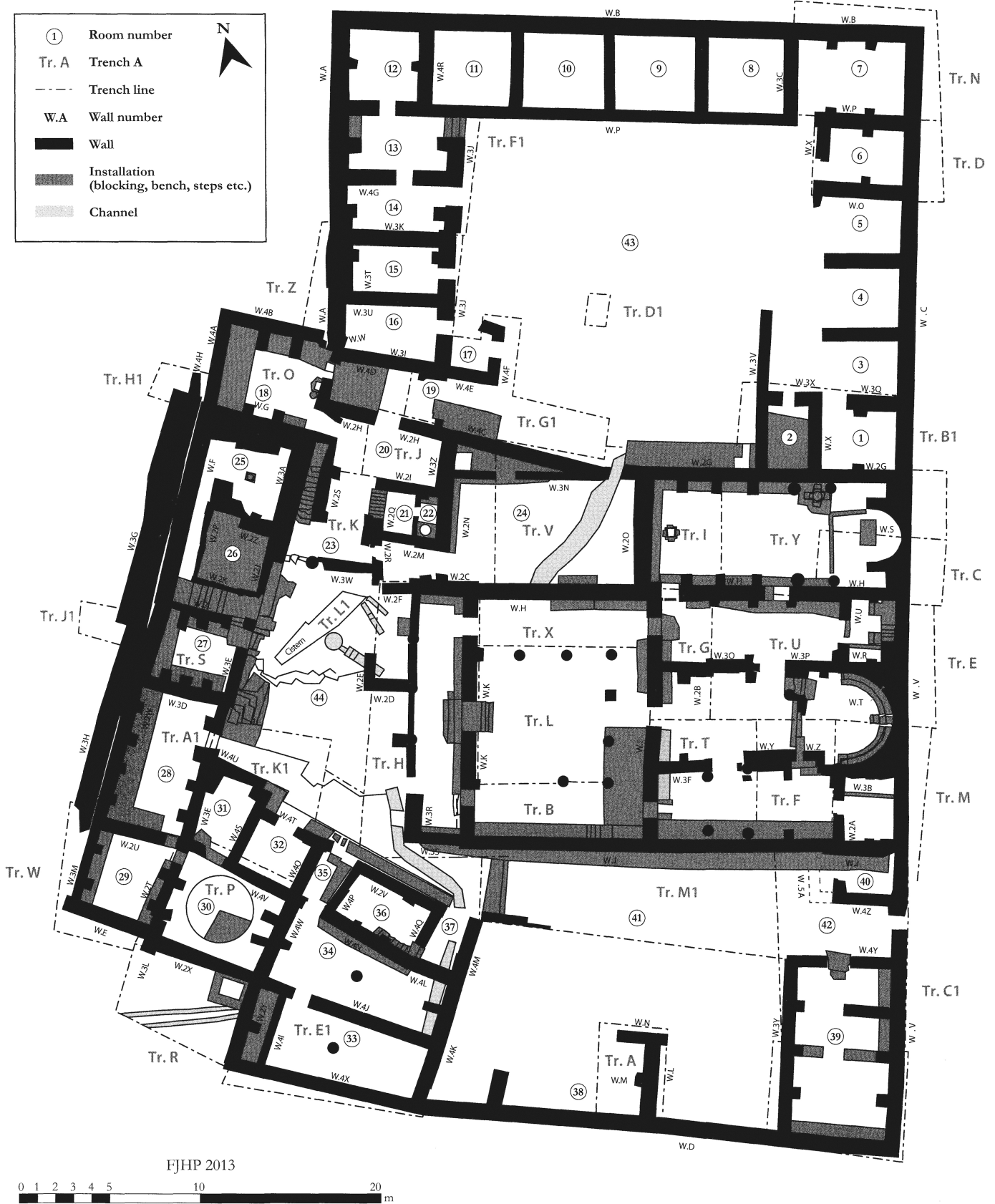


Fig. 136 Jabal Haroun. Plan of the monastic complex (after Frösén *et al.* 2016, 4.)

with an apse with two small rooms on the sides. A baptismal font placed in a ditch was at the end of the chapel, the *bema* of which must have been characterized by marble liturgical furnishings⁵⁰¹. The typology of the baptistery, although common in many monastic complexes, is found above all in monasteries associated with a devotional place frequented by pilgrims⁵⁰². A fragment of mosaic plaster has the term Πρόδρομος, because it was probably connected with the rite of baptism⁵⁰³.

Following a disastrous natural event in the middle of the 6th cent.⁵⁰⁴, the church underwent a substantial modification with it being divided into two distinct segments. The eastern part continued to function as a building of worship, while the western part was transformed into an open courtyard surrounded by a *triportico*⁵⁰⁵. The renovation entailed the replacement of the columns by a system of arches resting on pilasters, the lowering of the level of the *bema* (defined laterally by two low walls) and the inclusion of an episcopal throne at the centre of the *synthronon*⁵⁰⁶. The paving of the atrium in marble was replaced by blocks of local sandstone under which channels were built to collect rainwater. This had a mosaic, unfortunately damaged by later iconoclastic actions, characterized by armed human beings and wild animals with an almost symmetrical layout of the motifs on both sides of the central door of the atrium⁵⁰⁷.

A second destruction, in the first half of the 7th cent. A.D., entailed a subsequent phase of rebuilding in which the majority of the previous architectonic elements under examination were replaced by other simpler ones in masonry⁵⁰⁸. A new system of short arches in the north-south direction was conceived to support the roof, while the interiors of the basilica and of the chapel were rebuilt and at the northern end of the *bema* a structure of steps, plastered like an ambo, was completed. A new baptismal font and an altar base in masonry were installed in the chapel, perhaps to house relics brought here from the shrine on the top of the mountain⁵⁰⁹.

The earthquake in A.D. 749 damaged the church so badly that the monastic community renounced rebuilding it and the ruined parts were used to live in, whilst the chapel remained the only place for worship⁵¹⁰.

During the 9th cent. A.D., probably following a further catastrophe, the church and the chapel completely lost every type of religious function, but pottery sherds from the middle of the Abbasid period show that a monastic community was still active on the top of Jabal Haroun⁵¹¹.

The archaeological accounts relative to the last phases support the hypothesis that the site was frequented until the middle of the 13th cent. A.D., in agreement with the literary sources⁵¹². After this date, the whole complex was gradually abandoned.

⁵⁰¹ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 112.

⁵⁰² Fiema 2003, 348. On the topic, see Ben Pechat 1990.

⁵⁰³ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 116.

⁵⁰⁴ The sources attest two intense earthquakes in A.D. 551 and 559 with the epicentre in Wadi ‘Araba. See in detail Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 119 and relative bibliography.

⁵⁰⁵ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 119–120.

⁵⁰⁶ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 120–129.

⁵⁰⁷ For a detailed analysis of the mosaics, see the discussion in Hamarnah – Hinkkanen 2008, 247–262.

⁵⁰⁸ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 136.

⁵⁰⁹ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 136.

⁵¹⁰ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 148.

⁵¹¹ Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 148. 159–164.

⁵¹² For the last phases, see Mikkola *et al.* 2008, 164–170; Fiema 2016.

