

Between Hagiography and Archaeology: Pilgrimage and Monastic Communities on the Banks of the River Jordan

It is more or less impossible to imagine the Holy land without calling upon the collective association of monastic and pilgrim movements¹. The desert along the banks of the River Jordan has formed the ideal backdrop for the development over time of a strong collective mutual interaction². Written sources and pilgrim accounts, from the second half of the fourth century onwards, designate complex spatial and temporal settings. In spatial terms the earliest monastic settlements in *Arabia* and *Palaestina* were those of ascetic monks who dwelt in natural caves adapted to their use along the Jordan River Valley, the Judean Desert and the Dead Sea, in the Lisan peninsula, Uyun Mousa Valley and the Arnon (**fig. 1**)³. They settled following rocky spurs and *wadi* beds privileging a territorial radius of several hundred meters around sites that enjoyed a strong Biblical association⁴. These secluded spaces contributed to modelling sacred geography, creating a religious hinterland and shaping a new mentality of a close and direct association between monk and holy site.

Thus, the need to root the biblical event in the landscape was achieved by monks retrieving the historicity of the episodes, and putting forward, in a very systematic way, the enactment of the narratives that were at the centre of their daily life⁵. To obtain such association they called upon vague traditions, supernatural events or on pure inventions that were widely accepted as genuine. Hagiographic accounts contributed to creating a sacral aura reinforced by a repetition of *topoi*, according to which visions inspired monks to detect sites and burials of the most venerated biblical figures⁶, a method that had great success at that time, starting with Eusebius affirming how divine inspiration guided Constantine in his search of the tomb of Christ⁷.

A good example of this mediation with the holy is the story narrated in the *Pratum Spirituale* of John Moschus in

which an elder from the monastery of Eustorgios wanted to travel to Mount Sinai to pray there. While crossing the Jordan he was struck by fever to such an extent that he was unable to walk, thus he was forced to take refuge in a little cave. He then had a dream in which he saw John the Baptist who said to him: »I warn you, don't go anywhere, for this narrow cave is greater than Mount Sinai. For the Lord Jesus quite often used to come into this cave when he was visiting me«. Hearing this the old man stayed and »made that cave into a church and gathered a brotherhood together there«⁸.

Again, John Moschus refers to another prodigious revelation to a monk who: »was once passing by the banks of the Jordan and began thinking and wondering what had happened to the stones which Joshua had set in the middle for those whom he was leading through it. And as he was thinking, suddenly the waters divided this way and that, and he saw the twelve stones. He prostrated himself on the ground, gave thanks to the Lord and went his way«⁹.

The most significant chrono-spatial development of the area was strictly connected to *coenobitic* monasticism that appeared to be a natural response to the need of providing a proper administration of the holy shrines, especially since the practice of pilgrimage gained ground and popular favour¹⁰. Complex interests were at play. While the early imperial patronage focused on sites with a long Biblical tradition as expression of devotion and *pietas*, monasticism gave instead shape to more popular expectations¹¹, especially to the desire to experience the holy and have direct contact with it, beyond the boundaries of the holy city of Jerusalem.

Thus devotees (*spoudaioi*) of the most varied social backgrounds literally poured to the Holy Land, generously contributing to the transformation of the venerated sanctuaries

1 See Walker, *Holy City*; Perrone, *Holy Places* 6-7; Külzer, *Pilgrimage* 154-155; Hamarneh, *Monasteries* 275.

2 A good example of the close connection of the idea and the ideal of pilgrimage with holy sites is represented by the Madaba Mosaic Map dated to the second half of the sixth century. See Brubaker, *Conquest* 248-249.

3 Piccirillo, *Luoghi* 78-79; Hamarneh, *Fenomeno* 361-362; Piccirillo, *Arabia* 81.

4 Hamarneh, *Monasteries* 275.

5 Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims* 33-35. Egeria's visit to each of the holy sites included the reading of the appropriate passages from the Bible, reciting psalms, prayers and blessings.

6 Maraval, *Lieux saints* 43-47.

7 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3,26,6 (96,5-6); Maraval, *Lieux saints* 41; Perrone, *Jerusalem* 11; Peters, *One City* 21.

8 John Moschus 1 (66 Maisano; trans. Wortley 4-5).

9 John Moschus 11 (71 Maisano; trans. Wortley 9-10).

10 See discussion in Hamarneh, *Monastic Estates*.

11 Ashkenazi points to the fact that the holy man was mostly a product of hagiographic literature while the monk had a socially established role as part of the human landscape in the country side. Ashkenazi, *Holy Man* 748.



Fig. 1 Hermit cells near Mount Nebo. – (Photo D. Bianchi).

and triggering the growth of the built infrastructure of local monasteries¹². Most narratives emphasize that pilgrimage was only a prelude to the monastic experience, mentioning how pilgrims of different ethnic compositions joined desert communities as novices in the sixth to eighth centuries¹³.

Pilgrims diligently recorded how monks regulated the access to the *loca sancta*, offered hospitality, *eulogiae*, and religious services. The detailed account of the pilgrimage of Egeria bears vivid witness to the direct contact with monks in several destinations, who often *showed* her the places of Biblical memories or clearly conveyed the sacredness of the sites with stories of prodigious revelations¹⁴.

Few emblematic cases stand out as the Baptism site at Ainun-Sapsaphas; St. Elijah at Mar Elyas, of St. Lot in Ain Abata, the memorial of Moses at Mount Nebo and that of Aaron at Jabal Harun near Petra. These monastic shrines

located on the eastern side of the Jordan River, allow us to trace this homogeneous phenomenon in which the relation between biblical site, monk and pilgrim is evident (**fig. 2**).

The site of the Baptism at Ainun-Safsaphas shows holy *memoriae* of the Old and the New Testament located on both sides of the Jordan (**fig. 3**), as the baptism site and cave of the Forerunner, the spot of Christ's baptism and Saint Elijah's ascension.

Egeria, escorted by monks, visited in Ennon-Ainun »a pleasant orchard with a spring of excellent and pure water«. She mentions that the spring had a sort of a pool where the Forerunner fulfilled his ministry, there she received *eulogiae* from holy men living there¹⁵, yet she does not mention the site of the baptism of Jesus. The Bordeaux Pilgrim in 333, places the baptism site five miles from the Dead Sea although he does not cross the Jordan to visit it¹⁶.

12 Several pilgrims from *Pars Occidentis* of the empire came from the aristocracy or were retired officials, see Di Segni/Tsafrir, *Ethnic Composition* 413-417. 453. On pilgrims joining monastic communities in the Judean desert see Hamarneh, Roma.

13 Such were Elia who came from Provincia Arabia and became Patriarch of the Holy City in 494 (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 32 [Schwartz 51]); and Ste-

phen the Arab, abbot of St. Euthymios monastery in 513 (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 47 [Schwartz 68]).

14 Egeria travelled with monks as well as a military escort, Wilkinson, *Egeria* 115-116.

15 Egeria 15 (188-190 Maraval; 127 trans. Wilkinson, *Egeria* 127).

16 Bordeaux Pilgrim 598,1.2 (19 Geyer/Cuntz).

Theodosius, travelling around 518, gives historical evidence of the transformation of the site, when he mentions a church constructed by the Emperor Anastasius and a community of monks that received five *solidi* a year from the imperial treasury for their livelihood¹⁷. The *coenobium*, set on the spot, reinforced the traditional link with ascetics, as the Piacenza Pilgrim states that the valley running from the Baptism site to St. Elijah's ascension is studded with hermit cells¹⁸, he also mentions that Saint John's monastery included two *xenodochia*¹⁹.

The extant *coenobium* is recorded by Arculf in the seventh century²⁰; while Willibald, who visited it in the eighth century, recalls that a community of twenty monks was dwelling there²¹. These figures seem slightly different in the *Commemoratorium de Casis Dei*, dated between 808 and 814, with ten monks living in the monastery of John the Baptist, and thirty-five recorded in the nearby church²². In the twelfth century, the site is visited on the day of the Epiphany by the Russian Abbot Daniel²³. The Arab geographer Al-Idrisi in the eleventh century, locates in the Jordan Valley, not far from the sea of Sodom and Gomorrah, the monastery of St. John and its population of Greek monks²⁴; while other historians are informed of the tradition of the baptism in the river Jordan without giving further details.

The archaeological investigations carried out in Bethany beyond the Jordan, west of the village of el-Kafrayn (Ainun-Sapsaphas), identified a church (fig. 4) and a monastery built by Rhetorius the Abbot at the western edge of the *wadi* according to the Greek inscription, a second church in the same area uses a cave to form the absidal curve²⁵. Several rectangular pools alimeted by channels attest to the use of natural springs reinforcing the baptismal purpose of the sanctuary²⁶, which clearly corresponds to what pilgrims have recorded from the sixth century and at least until the twelfth and thirteenth century (fig. 5).

Moving northwards along the Jordan to Tishbeh, birthplace of prophet Elijah, we have solely an indication from Egeria, who sees a cave where the saint took refuge: »we suddenly saw the city of the holy prophet Elijah, that is Thesbe, whence he had the name of Elijah the Tishbite. There, to this day, is a cave wherein the holy man sat; there too is the tomb of holy Getha, whose name we read in the books of the Judges«²⁷.

The monastic shrine related to the Biblical memory of the prophet, set on the summit of Tall Mar Elyas²⁸, features a complex of monumental proportions as if it were built

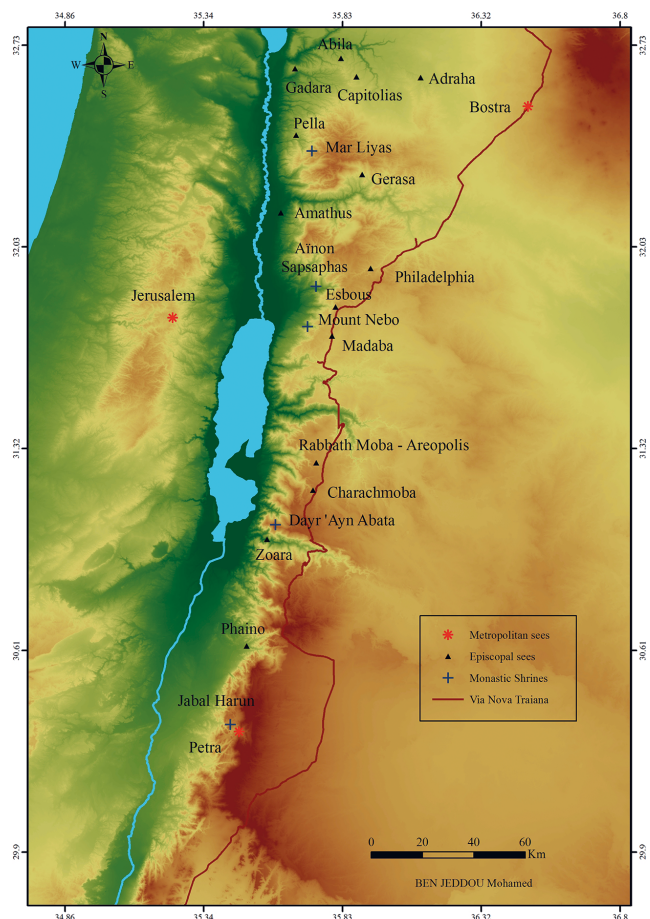


Fig. 2 Map indicating monasteries linked to Biblical sites to the East of the Jordan. – (Map M. Ben Jeddou).

according to a developed pilgrimage cult. It consists of two churches, a burial area, a baptistery and monk's cells on the slope of the hill (fig. 6)²⁹. The main church shows three naves concluded by a presbytery flanked by two side rooms set on a lower level. Each of the two side aisles is equipped with an additional apse, a unique architectural feature in the ecclesiastical architecture of the provinces to the east of the Jordan³⁰. The complex was preceded by a wide oval atrium and accessed by a monumental stair, while the surviving internal decoration showed an elegant mosaic floor consisting of geometric decoration (fig. 7)³¹. The Greek inscription in the south nave bears the name of the priest Saba, an invocation of Christ through prayer to Elijah and has the date of 623/624³². A second Greek inscription dated to 775/776, set

17 Theodosius, Topography 20 (121 Geyer; 15 trans. Bernard).

18 Antonini Placentini, Itinerarium 9 (134 Geyer; 81 trans. Wilkinson).

19 Antonini Placentini, Itinerarium 12 (136 Geyer; 82 trans. Wilkinson).

20 »While on the higher ground, overhanging it, a great monastery of monks is built on the brow of the opposite hill. There is also enclosed within the same wall as the monastery, a church in honour of St. John the Baptist, built of squared stones«. Adamnan, De locis sanctis II 16,8 (214 Bieler; 38 trans. MacPherson); Piccirillo, Ainon Sapsaphas 219.

21 Willibald, Hodoeporicon 16 (96 Holder-Egger; 18 trans. Brownlow); Mkhjian, Rhetorius Monastery 403.

22 Commemoratorium de Casis Dei 33-34 (210 McCormick; 138 trans. Wilkinson).

23 Daniel, Pilgrimage 29 (ed. Wilson).

24 Al-Idrisi, Opus Geographicum IV 361-362.

25 Waheeb, Betania 57.

26 Waheeb, Betania 48-52.

27 Egeria 16,1-2 (184 Maraval; 128 trans. Wilkinson).

28 See the identification in Augustinović/Bagatti, Escursioni 279-285; Augustinović, El Khader; Piccirillo, Chiesa 17; Piccirillo, Archeologia 99-100.

29 Macdonald, Pilgrimage 74-80.

30 Piccirillo, Archeologia 99. The main Church had probably a second reconstruction phase that included its transformation to a five-aisled basilica instead of three.

31 Nassar/Sabbagh, Mosaic 531-540.

32 Piccirillo, Archeologia 100.



Fig. 3 The Jordan river. – (Photo B. Hamarneh).

in one of the rooms of the monastic complex, mentions the hegoumen, a pulse merchant and his wife³³.

A second church to the south-west, was built in an earlier date, its structure is much smaller in size, it shows a triconch apse carved into a cave. The church had probably devotional importance, as it hosted four tombs that could be hypothetically considered as privileged burials³⁴. In fact, small niches were carved in the apse to fit oil lamps or candles, as traces of burning can still be seen (fig. 8)³⁵. It is easy to speculate that these tombs enjoyed particular status, perhaps because they housed the remains of local holy men or monastic leaders. It is also worth pointing out that the lack of descriptions of pilgrims regarding the church may suggest a later development of the sanctuary, which clearly fits the two dates registered in the mosaic inscriptions³⁶ and the typology of the geometric patterns used in the mosaic floor³⁷. The architectural setting of cave, burial and church is not casual, it may point to pil-

grimage that might have united the devotion to the Biblical figure of Elijah with that to a local holy man.

Ain Abata consists of a monastery linked to the veneration of St. Lot³⁸. The site finds its way in the account of Abbot Daniel, the Russian pilgrim in the twelfth century³⁹, while the Arab writers Yaqut al-Hamawi and Ibn-Abbas in the tenth century mention the story of Lot, adding the names of his two daughters as being Rubbah and Saghur, and identify the two traditional springs by which each woman was supposed to have been buried in the nearby area of the Ghor⁴⁰.

The church is also organized around a cave in which tradition locates the refuge of Lot and his daughters. It has a mosaic pavement with three Greek inscriptions. The first attests the renovation of the pavement in 573. It lies in the chancel of the church and consists of a medallion surrounded by grape vines, birds, a lamb and a peacock⁴¹. In the centre, at the spot where the altar once stood, is a stylised depiction of a chalice and below it an encircled cross inscribed with

33 Di Segni, *Variae Arabica* 579-580.

34 On burials in churches see Eger, *Necropolis* 161-167.

35 Macdonald, *Pilgrimage* 75.

36 The addition of a baptistery is an important indication of the pilgrimage practices as in the case of the Mount Nebo Basilica. Saller, *Memorial of Moses* 84-91; Piccirillo/Alliata, *Mount Nebo* 168-173; Piccirillo, *Archeologia* 100.

37 The reliance on geometric decoration and the technical features of the layout of the *tesserae* suggest a repaving in the late Umayyad period.

38 The site is listed in the Madaba Mosaic map dated to the second half of the sixth century. Politis, *Aghios Lot* 1-3.

39 Daniel, *Pilgrimage* 47 (Wilson).

40 Le Strange, *Palestine* 291-292; Politis, *Aghios Lot* 21-22.

41 Meimaris/Kritikakou-Nikolaroupulou, *Greek Inscriptions* 393-400.



Fig. 4 The Baptism church on the eastern shore of the Jordan. – (Photo B. Hamarneh).

the Greek words ΤΕΛΟΣ ΚΑΛΟΝ (literally: Good End). The second inscription is in the north aisle, leading to the cave enclosed within a tabula ansata. It names the Bishop Iakovos, the Abbot Sozomenos and gives a construction date of 605/607⁴². Two further mosaic floors were probably of the same early seventh century date.

The last mosaic inscription, located in the nave of the church and set in 691/692, describes the site as a Holy Place⁴³. Other inscriptions carved on stone or painted on plaster mention invocations of Lot. On the south side of the entrance of Lot's cave scratched designs, crosses and graffiti can be seen on the plaster. One in Greek named a local Christian woman as Zenobia daughter of Anastasios⁴⁴, while another is an invocation in Kufic Arabic⁴⁵. Several oil lamps dated to the eighth to ninth centuries attest to the continuity of the pilgrim devotional tradition.

The monastery of Mount Nebo (**fig. 9**) established on the site connected to the memory of Moses also developed



Fig. 5 Pilgrim graffiti on the lower part of the pillars near the Jordan River. – (Photo B. Hamarneh).

42 Meimaris/Kritikakou-Nikolaroupulou, Greek Inscriptions 401-403.

43 Meimaris/Kritikakou-Nikolaroupulou, Greek Inscriptions 403-407.

44 The graffiti is scratched on the plastered south-eastern wall of the north aisle, before the entrance to the cave. Meimaris/Kritikakou-Nikolaroupulou, Greek Inscriptions 414-415.

45 Macdonald, Graffito 417.



Fig. 6 Aerial photo of Mar Elias. – (Courtesy Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East APAAME_20060911_RHB-0033 R. H. Bewley).



Fig. 7 The monastic church of Mar Elias. – (Photo F. Sciorilli).



Fig. 8 The lower church of Mar Elias. – (Photo B. Hamarneh).



Fig. 9 The memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo. – (Photo F. Sciorilli).



Fig. 10 The tomb in the main nave of the monastic church of Mount Nebo. – (Photo D. Bianchi).

over time a monumental aspect. It had with a large atrium that allowed the access to the sanctuary through a flight of stairs. Admittedly, pilgrim records are extremely limited; we only have the visit of Egeria, who mentions monk's cells in the valley below the mountain⁴⁶, and later two visits of Peter the Iberian in 430 and in 477. He, in addition to Moses, mentions seeing a holy man from Skete in Egypt, «an ascetic and prophet, and full of the grace of God» who dwelt in solitude in one of the monastic cells for 40 years without crossing the threshold⁴⁷. He also calls upon a popular tradition according to which the whereabouts of the tomb of Moses was shown «as in a vision to a humble shepherd», who described «a very large cave, filled with much light, pleasing odour and splendour» and «saw a venerable old man whose face was brilliant and beaming with kindness, reposing on a luminous bed resplendent with glory and grace»⁴⁸.

The anonymous pilgrim of Piacenza in 570 relates that the spot where Moses died is not far from Segor, near the Dead sea⁴⁹; while Magister Thetmarus in 1217 declares to have climbed up and down the Mountain of Abarim (Nebo), but without giving any description of the aspect of the site⁵⁰.

Recent archaeological excavations conducted in the basilica suggest that the shrine has developed around a tomb set along the axis of the nave, exactly on the summit of the mountain. The burial place, though found completely empty, was embellished with much care by reused architectural marbles, coated with red plaster and only later covered by a mosaic floor (fig. 10)⁵¹. This particular *amenagement* may suggest that the burial had a purely symbolic value and could have served as a cenotaph at a very early stage. Several chapels were added in the sixth century as the new tri-apsidal presbytery and the *diakonikon*-baptistery⁵². At the end of the sixth century, a new mosaic floor replaced the previous one in the *diakonikon* under the patronage of bishop Sergius of Madaba and *hegoumenos* Martyrios and a new chapel with a baptismal font on the southern side of the basilica was added in 597/598⁵³. Finally, in the first decade of the seventh century, bishop Leontius of Madaba and *hegoumenoi* Martyrios and Theodoros promoted the construction of a chapel in honour of the Theotokos (fig. 11)⁵⁴. The building works produced an imposing monumental effect (fig. 12), while the monastery that developed around the memorial church,

46 Egeria 10,8 (170 Maraval; 121 trans. Wilkinson).

47 John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* (76 trans. Piccirillo).

48 John Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberi* (77-78 trans. Piccirillo)

49 Anonymous of Piacenza 10 (134 Geyer; 82 trans. Wilkinson); Piccirillo, *Pilgrims' Texts* 79.

50 Thetmarus, *Iter* 30 (Tobler; 79 trans. Piccirillo, *Pilgrims' Texts*).

51 Bianchi, *Sepulture* 39-41.

52 Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions* 429-431. Fragments of plaster with graffiti (letters and one bearing a cross) were discovered during the excavation of the *diakonikon*-baptistery. Some were painted in red or grey, others written with coal.

53 Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions* 431-433.

54 Piccirillo, *Monastic Presence* 196-198; Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions* 434.

according to material culture finds, was inhabited also in the eight to ninth centuries.

The survey must now turn to the Sanctuary of Aaron and the adjacent monastery located not far from the city of Petra (fig. 13)⁵⁵. Unlike the sanctuaries discussed earlier, the monastery of Aaron does not appear in any report of the Byzantine pilgrims' journey, though it is not set far from the route taken by those travelling to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai⁵⁶.

Monasteries in Petra are attested in the acts of the Church Councils of Jerusalem and Constantinople in the sixth century, however none has a specific indication concerning the monastery of Jabal Hārūn. The Petra papyri n. 6a, recovered in the excavation of the church of Petra, mentions a donation by Obodianus, son of Obodianus, on June 15, 573 to the »Holy House of our Lord the High Priest Aaron« (ἅγιος οἶκος τοῦ δεσπότητος ἡμῶν τοῦ ἀγίου ἀρχιερέως Ἀαρῶν) situated outside the city of Petra⁵⁷. The monastery is represented by Cyricus, son of Petrus presbyter and *hegoumenos*. At any rate, the site was well known not only among the population of Petra, but also among local monastic communities, as the *Life of St. Stephen the Sabaitē*, written by Leontius of Damascus in the eighth century, mentions how monks during Lent used to go to the caves around the Dead Sea and to Mar Lot and Mar Aaron⁵⁸.

The Arab historian al-Mas'ūdī (d. 957) recalls in his *Murūj al-Dhahab* that Aaron died on Mount Moab, and according to some, was buried, according to others just placed inside a natural cave that was well-known at his time⁵⁹. In his last work, *al-Tanbīh wa l-ashrāf*, he states that Jabal Hārūn was a holy mountain in the possession of Chalcedonian Christians⁶⁰.

The site appears more often in various Crusader Chronicles in the twelfth century. Fulcher of Chartres in his *Historia Hierosolymitana* describing Baldwin's expedition of the year 1100 in Wādī Mūsā, mentions the monastery of Aaron⁶¹. Although no description follows, we may safely presume that the *monasterium* was recognizable in its functional and architectural capacity⁶². By contrast, the contemporary account of the Benedictine Abbot Guibert of Nogent in his *Gesta Dei per Francos* simply refers to a church on the summit of Mount Hor, a mention that he clearly confuses with Mount Sinai⁶³.

Despite these attestations, the site is not included in Crusader period pilgrimages⁶⁴.

Archaeological excavations and surveys have evidenced that the sites above developed a very strong connection to ascetic monks and hermits settled on the spot or within a very limited spatial radius from the holy *memoriae*⁶⁵.

Pilgrimage was in fact triggered also by a strong physical attraction towards charismatic holy men or Desert Fathers, dwelling in isolated cells or in monastic settlements set along routes leading to the venerated holy sites. This inhabited space contributed to giving material shape to tangible holiness and caused not only significant transformations of the landscape, but also a dispersion of urban functions to other types of habitat, namely the rural monastery. This is the case of all the sanctuaries discussed above. The combination of evidence from written sources and archaeological data enables us to evaluate the manner and the extent to which monasticism and pilgrimage interacted, and how both contributed to the shaping of the society of the Byzantine Holy Land, both urban and rural.

Written accounts of *Lives* and *Miracles* of monks and holy men were most often linked to a region, and even to a smaller area, which could be considered as the primary area of circulation of such narratives. The collection of edifying stories, by contrast, is set most often in the place where an ascetic lived, any change in spatial conditions is connected to a detailed and well-grounded demonstration of ascetic virtues. This is well mirrored in the stories of Cyril of Scythopolis, Moschus, and those of the monk Antony of Choziba⁶⁶ just to mention a few. Thus the progressive expansion of monasticism in rural contexts provides evidence of the multiplying of thaumaturgic and therapeutic episodes performed by local monks and ascetics, attesting the dissemination of the narratives among the humble members of the society⁶⁷.

Despite the continuous archaeological occupation of our sites, a chronological gap regarding pilgrimage exists: the Sanctuaries of Lot, Moses, Aaron and Elijah are hardly visited by the pilgrim of Bordeaux, Theodosius and the Piacenza pilgrim, as if the sixth century western pilgrimage exclusively targeted the sites connected to the New Testament events and to martyrs mostly to the West of the Jordan.

It is worth of note that some of the above-mentioned monastic churches engulfed caves in its architecture, as in

55 Eusebius, *Onomastikon* s. v. Or mentions Mount Hor near Petra »Or the Mountain on which Aaron died near the city of Petra«. Allia, *Pilgrimage Routes* 122.

56 Frösén/Miettunen, Aaron 11.

57 The term »holy house« refers most probably to the monastic institution; Frösén/Miettunen, Aaron 12.

58 Leontius of Damascus, *Vita* 96-97.

59 al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab* I 54-55.

60 al-Mas'ūdī, *al-Tanbīh wa l-ashrāf* 133-134.

61 Fulcher of Chartres, *Historia Hierosolymitana* II 5,9 (381 Hagenmeyer).

62 According to Gilbert the Abbot, chaplain to Baldwin of Boulogne, the King entered the *ecclesia* to pray which may suggest that the monastic church was visible. Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta* 7,40 (255).

63 Guibert of Nogent, *Gesta* 7,40 (255).

64 Wilkinson/Hill/Ryan, *Jerusalem Pilgrimage* 55; Frösén/Miettunen, Aaron 13.

65 One must keep in mind the closeness of monastic sites to rural communities. See discussion in Ashkenazi, *Holy Man* 748. 751.

66 In the *Life of Saint George of Choziba* and the *Miracles of the Most Holy Mother of God at Ghoziba* written around the year 635. See Di Segni, *Nel deserto* 93-94. 99-100.

67 Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale* 56 (100 Maisano) recounts a story regarding the disciple of great elder who resided in the village of Parasema near Ptolemais in Phoenicia. »The disciple, named John who excelled in obedience, had a vision from God which said to him: »Whatever you lay your hand on, it shall be healed.« When morning came, by the providence of God a man arrived, bringing his wife who had a cancer of the breast. The man besought to heal his wife. The brother replied: »am a sinful man and unworthy of such an undertaking.« The woman's husband continued to beg him to accede to his request and to have pity on his wife. So the brother laid his hand on the diseased part and sealed it with the sign of the cross and she was immediately healed. From that time on God performed many signs through him, not only in his time, but also after his death« (trans. Wortley 44-45).



Fig. 11 The Chapel of the Theotokos at Mount Nebo. – (Photo F. Sciorilli).



Fig. 12 The Monastic Church of Mount Nebo. – (Photo F. Sciorilli).

Ainun-Safsaphas, Mar Elias, Deir Ain Abata. In other cases, oral tradition established a connection with burials set in caves as in Mount Nebo and Jabal Harun.

These sanctuaries may have developed at the same time as a local veneration towards ascetics or holy men, according to the definition of that time, who dwelt on the spot before the transformation of the site into a *coenobium* or in the monastery itself, as stated in several cases by John Moschus, or as described by Peter the Iberian who is aware not only of the Biblical tradition, but also of the holiness and righteousness of the elder from Skete.

To some extent, hermits dwelling in and around Biblical sites embodied a real and tangible holiness, and became after their death subject to veneration as can be evinced from the *Pratum Spiritual* of John Moschus and from Cyril of Scythopolis and other *Lives*.

The continuity of various forms of monastic asceticism, or at least of the hermitic tradition in the Umayyad period, is documented in the inscriptions of the small monastery of the Theotokos in the Wadi 'Ayn al-Kanisah not far from Mount Nebo. A Greek inscription dated to 762 mentions the jurisdic-



Fig. 13 The monastery of Jabal Haroun near Petra. – (Photo Courtesy Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East APAAME_20171001_REB-0642 by R. E. Banks).

tion of the »archimandrite of the whole desert«, George the recluse (Γεωργίος ἔγκλιστος) and a Stylite monk⁶⁸.

An important issue is the chronology, especially the inscriptions that attest building or other substantial works carried out in churches after the Arab conquest⁶⁹. In St. Lot and in Mar Elias, Greek inscriptions register a rather late date of the mosaic repaving of the monastic churches, which is the second half of the seventh and the first decades of the eighth centuries⁷⁰. This legitimately raises the question of the revival or the continuity of devotion to Biblical figures after the Islamic take-over.

A possible answer can be the fact that in Islamic theology twenty-five prophets *anbiya'* are mentioned. These prophets, most of whom are Biblical in origin, form the most respected group of Islamic saints. As Muslims shared in the devotion to Biblical figures, this veneration in a way probably formed the ground for a further enhancement of monastic shrines, or at least provided local authorities with the necessary acceptance as places of local Muslim veneration. Another aspect is

the well rooted tradition and story of Baḥīrā, or at least of Muḥammad's alleged encounters with a monk or monks, of which there are several in the Prophet's biography⁷¹.

Under the Umayyads, being People of Book, Christian communities flourished as subjects of the Commander of the Believers (*amīr al-mu'īnīn*⁷²), at least during the seventh century⁷³. The early concept of »Believers« was significant: it probably meant that the Umayyads considered Christians and other monotheists to be Believers and incorporated them into the government more or less as equal partners, thus allowing the continuity of independent religious and artistic identities.

In this regard the church of St. Lot is significant. On the south side of the entrance to Lot's cave, the plastered wall had a number of scratched designs, crosses and graffiti. Among these, one is in Kufic that states: »In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful. O God forgive Ġarīr his sin, [that which?] is past and is to come----and {provide sustenance for him} out of your bounty. Lord, you are the

68 The inscriptions give the name of the monastery, or at least the name that was given to it after its reconstruction in the eighth century. The date was calculated according to the Byzantine era of creation. See the discussion in Di Segni, *Inscriptions* 448-450.

69 A chapel dedicated to the Theotokos was built on Mount Nebo in 603-608 (Di Segni, *Inscriptions* 432-433 no. 11a-b). In St. Lot Monastery the repaving of the church at the time of Abbot Sozomenos is dated to April 605-607 (Meimaris/Kritikakou-Nikolaroupoulou, *Greek Inscriptions* 401-403 no. 4). See also Gatier, *Inscriptions* 146-151; Gatier, *Livias* 67-71.

70 Piccirillo, *Archeologia* 96-101.

71 Gero, *Legend*; Griffith, *Monk Bahira* 148.

72 The Greek inscription of Hammet Gader, which attests the restoration of the hot water system in 662, reflects this ideal: Mu'awiya is mentioned as *amīr al-mu'īnīn* and not as Caliph. Di Segni, *Hammet Gader* 237-240.

73 Borrut/Donner, *Introduction* 1-10.

best of sustainers«⁷⁴. This invocation that quotes the Qur'an shows awareness of the religious destination of the place.

Many ceramic oil lamps dated to the mid-eighth to early ninth centuries were found inside Lot's cave. These Umayyad/Abbasid types, which were also found on the church floors⁷⁵, date to the last period of occupation at the site and are a common feature in all the five excavated monasteries.

Additional information is provided by Arab writers who mention the Biblical stories and seem conscious of the location of the sites and of their traditions. In most cases Arab historians refer to monastic realities in Egypt, Syria, and the middle Euphrates. Al-Waquidi (d. 822) in *Futuh Bilad esh-Sham*⁷⁶ and Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967) in *Kitab al-Aghani* report stories involving monks⁷⁷, while the geographers al-Bakri (*Mu'jam ma ist'jam*), Yaqut al-Hamawi (*Mu'jam al-Buldan*) and especially al-'Umari (*Masalik al-Absar*) in the fourteenth century mention few monastic structures in the Ghor around Jericho⁷⁸. Some accounts do not focus on monasteries as Christian religious structures, but rather as places of affable and generous hospitality, others give detailed information on monastic possessions. Though the east of the Jordan is not included in these narratives, one may argue that monastic organisation was had common features in the whole area under Arab domain⁷⁹.

The question of when the central authority began to consider itself one of Muslims, distinct from Christians, Jews, and other monotheists, is still much debated. According to some Syriac sources, anti-Christian legislation was promulgated by 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz II (717-720). Although in the *Chronicle of 846*, the Caliph is described as being merciful, more so than others before him⁸⁰. By contrast, Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) referring to an edict of 'Umar II writes: »Umar, as soon as he took up the rule over the Arabs, began to mistreat the Christians and that for two reasons: firstly, because he wanted to honour and to affirm the laws of the Muslims; secondly, because of Constantinople, which the Arabs were unable to capture and before which many of them died [with loss of much] wealth. Rancour filled in his heart and he was very opposed to Christians in every way. He was declared to be a zealot for their laws and was considered to be God-fearing and he was averse to evil. He ordered oppression of the

Christians in every way to make them become Muslims. He legislated that every Christian who became a Muslim would not pay poll tax and many converted. He also decreed that Christians should not testify against Muslims, act as governors, raise their voices for prayer, strike the sounding-board (to call people to prayer), wear the overcoat, or ride in a saddle and (that) if an Arab killed a Christian he could not be executed for it, but just paid compensation of 5,000 silver coins. He forbade and terminated the exactions from dwellings, inheritances, and portions of the revenues from lands [, which were taken from] churches, monasteries, and poor people«⁸¹.

According to the *Life of St. Stephen the Sabaite* written by Leontius of Damascus around 807, local Christians suffered having to pay *kharaj* (the property tax) and the *jiziah* (annual tax per capita) to the central authority⁸². Some tax collectors even oppressed the monastery of Mar Saba⁸³, while Muslim officials, by order of the Caliph, confiscated the property of any pilgrim who died in Jerusalem⁸⁴.

These restrictions probably did not directly affect the monasteries linked to Biblical sites that enjoyed a longer period of continuity, as stated above. This did not depend solely on the economy of a self-sufficient structure, but mostly was due to the devotional nature of the monastic shrines that attracted local pilgrimage of Christians and Muslims alike.

The analysis of the monastic communities around the ninth century, based on the *Commemoratorium de Casis Dei*, illustrates the drop in the number of monks in local monasteries⁸⁵ at least to the west of the Jordan⁸⁶. According to Hirschfeld almost 72 % of the monasteries in the Judean desert was abandoned during the seventh century, shortly after the Arab conquest⁸⁷. However, monasteries specifically related to devotional pilgrimage and to theological purposes seem to have had a longer life. Some examples are the monasteries of Theodore and Cyriacus, active at the beginning of the ninth century, the monasteries of Euthymius, Kastellion, Chariton, Choziba, Gerasimus, John the Baptist and especially of San Saba which, despite the attacks in 797-809 and 813 continued to be active until the twelfth century⁸⁸. Although Biblical monasteries on the eastern banks of the Jordan relied on alternative local devotional paths they probably shared the same destiny.

74 Macdonald, Graffito 417.

75 da Costa, Lamps 258-278. 288-291.

76 Al-Waqidi, Conquest 33.

77 Isfahani's general work on monasteries, the *Kitab al-Diyarat*, is known only from quotations by other authors. Some information on monasteries is included in his other work *Kitab al-Aghani*; see also Shahid, Byzantium 159-160.

78 Shahid, Byzantium 157.

79 Hamarneh, Monastic Estates with the Arabic sources.

80 Chronicon AD 846, 177; Schick, Christian Communities 89; Reynolds, Monasticism 379.

81 Yarbrough, Umar 180.

82 According to the *Life of St. Stephen the Sabaite* local Christians had to pay large amounts of taxes to Muslim authorities. See Leontius of Damascus, Vita ch. 39 and 64 (203, 309-311 Pirone); Piccirillo, Arabia 224.

83 Schick, Christian Communities 98. The *Commemoratorium de Casis Dei* mentions that the Patriarch paid the sum of 580 dirham annually to the Saracens (60, 216 McCormick; 138 trans. Wilkison).

84 Leontius of Damascus, Vita ch. 64 (309 Pirone).

85 McCormick, Charlemagne's Survey 44 n. 62.

86 The only monastery to the east of the Jordan included in the list is that of the St. John the Forerunner and »another church where pilgrims go down to the River« (*Commemoratorium de Casis Dei* 33, 210 McCormick; 138 trans. Wilkison).

87 Hirschfeld, Monasteries 16-17.

88 Tobler/Molinier, Itinera I 301-305; Patrich, Impact 212.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Zwischen Hagiographie und Archäologie: Pilgerfahrt und monastische Gemeinschaften an den Ufern des Jordan

Die Wüste am Ufer des Jordan war mit Klostersgemeinschaften besetzt, wie schriftliche Quellen und Pilgerberichte aus der zweiten Hälfte des 4. Jahrhunderts belegen. Das Mönchtum war eine natürliche Antwort auf die Notwendigkeit einer ordnungsgemäßen Verwaltung und eines ständigen liturgischen Gottesdienstes an den Heiligen Stätten, insbesondere im Zusammenhang mit der Verbreitung der Pilgerfahrt.

Anhänger (*Spoudaioi*) mit den unterschiedlichsten sozialen Hintergründen strömten buchstäblich in das Heilige Land, trugen großzügig zur Verwandlung der verehrten Heiligtümer bei und lösten die wachsende Infrastruktur lokaler Klöster aus. Pilgerfahrt und Mönchtum entwickelten im Laufe der Zeit eine äußerst komplexe Interaktion, die sich in der hagiographischen Literatur gut widerspiegelt. Die meisten Erzählungen betonen, dass die Pilgerfahrt nur ein Auftakt für die Erfahrung des Klosters war, und erwähnen, wie Pilger verschiedener ethnischer Herkunft Wüstengemeinschaften im 6.-8. Jahrhundert als Novizen in die Wüstengemeinschaften aufgenommen wurden.

Auf einer anderen Ebene wurde eine zweite Form der Pilgerfahrt durch eine starke körperliche Anziehungskraft auf charismatische Wüstenväter ausgelöst, die in klösterlichen Siedlungen lebten, welche entlang der Wege zu den verehrten heiligen Stätten lagen. Dieses religiöse Hinterland trug dazu bei, der greifbaren Heiligkeit eine materielle Form zu geben, und verursachte nicht nur bedeutende Veränderungen der Landschaft, sondern auch eine Zerstreuung der städtischen Funktionen auf andere Arten von Lebensraum, nämlich das ländliche Kloster. Die Kombination von Beweisen aus der hagiographischen Literatur und archäologischen Daten hat es uns ermöglicht zu diskutieren, auf welche Weise Mönchtum und Pilgerfahrt miteinander interagieren und wie beide dazu beigetragen haben, dass die Gesellschaft des byzantinischen Heiligen Landes – sowohl im städtischen als auch im ländlichen Raum – geformt wurde.

Between Hagiography and Archaeology: Pilgrimage and Monastic Communities on the Banks of the River Jordan

The desert along the banks of the River Jordan was studded with monastic communities, as attested by written sources and pilgrim accounts from the second half of the fourth century onwards. Monasticism provided a natural response to the need for a proper administration and perpetual liturgical service at the Holy shrines, especially as the practice of pilgrimage spread.

Devotees (*Spoudaioi*), of the most varied social backgrounds, literally poured into the Holy Land, generously contributing to the transformation of the venerated sanctuaries and triggering the growth of the built infrastructure of local monasteries. Pilgrimage and monasticism developed over time an extremely complex interaction, well reflected in hagiographic literature. Most narratives emphasize that pilgrimage was only a prelude to the monastic experience, mentioning how pilgrims of different ethnic origins joined desert communities as novices in the sixth to eighth centuries.

On a different level, a second form of pilgrimage was triggered by a strong physical attraction towards charismatic Desert Fathers, dwelling in monastic settlements set along routes leading to the venerated holy sites. This religious hinterland contributed to giving a material shape to tangible holiness and caused not only significant transformations of landscape, but also a dispersion of urban functions to other types of habitat, namely the rural monastery. The combination of evidence from hagiographic literature and archaeological data, has enabled us to discuss the manner and the extent to which monasticism and pilgrimage interacted, and how both contributed to the shaping of the society of the Byzantine Holy Land, both urban and rural.

Entre l'hagiographie et l'archéologie: le pèlerinage et les communautés monastiques sur les rives du Jourdain

Comme le confirment des écrits et des récits de pèlerins de la deuxième moitié du 4^e siècle, des communautés monastiques étaient établies dans le désert bordant le Jourdain. Le monachisme offrait une réponse naturelle aux nécessités d'une administration correcte et d'un service liturgique régulier dans les Lieux saints, particulièrement avec la propagation des pèlerinages. Des croyants (*spoudaioi*) venant de milieux sociaux les plus divers se déversaient littéralement sur la Terre sainte, contribuant ainsi à la métamorphose des sanctuaires vénérés et déclenchant la croissance des infrastructures de monastères locaux. Les pèlerinages et le monachisme développèrent au fil du temps une interaction excessivement complexe qui se reflète bien dans la littérature hagiographique. La plupart des récits insistent sur le fait que le pèlerinage n'était que le prélu de l'expérience du monastère et relatent comment des pèlerins d'origines très diverses furent acceptés comme novices dans les communautés du désert.

A un autre niveau, une deuxième forme de pèlerinage fut déclenchée par la forte attirance physique exercée par des Pères du désert charismatiques qui vivaient dans des villages monastiques le long des routes vers les Lieux saints. Cet arrière-pays religieux contribua à rendre la sainteté encore plus tangible en lui conférant une forme matérielle, entraînant ainsi non seulement de profonds changements dans le paysage, mais encore une dispersion des fonctions urbaines sur d'autres types de milieux, à savoir les monastères ruraux. La combinaison de preuves issues de la littérature hagiographique et des données archéologiques nous a permis de discuter de la manière dont le monachisme et les pèlerinages interagissent et ont contribué à la formation de la société en Terre sainte byzantine, urbaine et rurale.

Traduction: Y. Gautier