

CONCLUSIONS

The monastic sanctuaries of the Biblical figures: architecture and devotion

The reassessment of the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo and the other Jordanian monasteries linked to the Biblical figures results in a clarification of some issues on monasticism in the provinces of *Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia*. The first data concerns the localization of the monasteries. As well as being linked to the sacred topography of the Biblical memorials, the coenobitic complexes stand in significant orographic positions, while in the surrounding valleys, many hermitages are often attested. This correlation indicates the strong cooperation between these two different forms of monastic life.

Although the five monasteries were located in a rural context, they were close to the Roman and Byzantine road system and were connected to the main pilgrims' itineraries. Architectonically, all the monastic complexes consist of one main ecclesiastical building, usually a church or a chapel, monastic cells, production facilities and rooms for pilgrims. From a liturgical point of view, the sanctuaries were also characterized by the presence of a physical memorial linked to particular Biblical figures that represented their devotional fulcrum. This element could be a cenotaph, as in the case of Moses and Aaron, or created with the architectonic monumentalization of special natural elements such as Lot's cave or the streams in the monastic complex of Wadi al-Kharrar.

Chronologically, the monasteries were built in the 5th–6th cent. A.D. and were active until the second half of the 8th – beginning of the 9th cent. A.D., yet in the case of the monastic complex of St Aaron, until the 13th cent. A.D.

Regarding the social and economic aspects of the monasteries, the Memorial of Moses is an important case study. The pilgrimage to this site allowed a constant flow of devotees who could have contributed to the wealth and the fame of the monastery. Larger donations by lay benefactors and diocesan bishops are attested in numerous mosaic inscriptions.

The discovery of agricultural terraces and productive facilities suggests that the cultivation of land plots and the processing of crops was highly developed in the Siyagha monastery; a common agriculture system between the individual monasteries of the Nebo region was also possible. Moreover, the peripheral monastic centres, as well as having an autonomous life, could be used as hermitages for the Lenten retreat of the hegumen of Mount Nebo or perhaps for monks from other regions of the Middle East, especially from Palestine. It is hoped that further investigations, aimed specifically at the study of agriculture, can provide new information on the production of wine and oil and better outline the type of relation these factors had with the monasteries and the nearby village of Khirbet el-Mukhayyat.

The monastic landscape of Mount Nebo: a slow epilogue

The study of the pottery found on the site of Siyagha has provided a better assessment of the phase of transition between the Byzantine era, the Umayyad and the Abbasid periods. Towards the middle of the 7th century, *terra sigillata* was no longer imported from Asia Minor, North Africa and Cyprus, but was replaced by a local production of fine tableware⁷⁷⁸. More specifi-

⁷⁷⁸ Sodini 2001, 3–4; Bianchi 2007, 170.

cally for the province of *Arabia* and the diocese of Madaba, the so-called *creamy ware* should be considered the first pottery result of the Muslim period⁷⁷⁹.

The excavations of the first two levels of the *synthronon* and of room no. 103 returned a heterogeneous *corpus* of pottery of the characteristic type with a majority of open shapes of tableware. The group belonging to cistern no. 8 is slightly different in composition, with a predominance of drinking vessels. Chronologically, it is possible to speak of homogeneous contexts in which, while finding some fragments relating to receptacles of the late Byzantine period, most of the vessels can be attributed to the period comprised between the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 9th centuries A.D. Some pottery materials of the cistern, stylistically similar to specimens found at the sites of Umm er-Rasas, Nitl, Jerash and Pella can be attributed to the height of the Abbasid period⁷⁸⁰.

The pottery data clarify some important building work that concerned the south-eastern rooms of the monastic complex. S. SALLER had already identified two distinct levels of occupation, which had as their result a different division of the spaces in this wing of the monastery⁷⁸¹. In particular, the remains of a wall in courtyard no. 83, which ran perpendicularly to the southern baptistery in a north-south direction, formed the external front of a group of rooms, which extended under the more recent ones nos. 92–102 and which were isolated from these by an accumulation of soil⁷⁸². The whole of the southern area is characterized by an orthogonal regularity of all the rooms, which allows the supposition of a possible restoration in the same period. Although the sector seems to have retained a productive vocation, it is possible that in the previous phases this had had a greater extension, as shown by the oven found in room no. 103.

Therefore, the ceramic study shows vitality in building that was still very active in the second half of the 8th cent. A.D., which concerned both the monastery's church and some of its rooms and facilities for the water supply. This is not surprising if placed into relation with the monastery of the Theotokos in the Wadi 'Ain el-Kanisah where, as well as common pottery elements, the restoration of the mosaic in A.D. 762 provides an important *terminus post quem* which can also be extended to the summit of Siyagha⁷⁸³. The other monastic complexes in the valleys around Mount Nebo and near the village of Khirbet el-Mukhayyat seem to have undergone a very different fate. In the valleys of the 'Uyun Musa no pottery or numismatic finds in the monastery of Deacon Thomas suggests an occupation after the 8th cent. A.D., with the exception of some small and sporadic finds of Umayyad pottery, linked to the abandonment phase⁷⁸⁴. The monastery of Kayanos, which developed in the vicinity, stopped being inhabited in the first half of the 7th cent. A.D., as shown by the absence of the typical forms of pottery of the layers of the 8th and 9th centuries A.D.⁷⁸⁵.

The monastery of el-Kanisah in the Wadi 'Afrit was also abandoned in the Umayyad period, probably following the fate of the village of Khirbet el-Mukhayyat, where the absence of pottery with a clear mixture, beige slip and red paint, commonly found in the region in contexts dated from the second half of the 7th cent. A.D., suggests a precocious depopulation of these areas⁷⁸⁶.

The restoration at Siyagha and the repaving of the nave of the church in the monastery of the Theotokos in the Wadi 'Ain el-Kanisah in A.D. 762 shows the vitality of the whole network of monasteries in the early Abbasid period. The mosaic restoration of the latter monastery has two noteworthy elements of this phenomenon. The first concerns the decision to restore some

⁷⁷⁹ Walmsley 2001, 302–313.

⁷⁸⁰ Cf. Chapter 2, 113–121.

⁷⁸¹ Saller 1941, 169.

⁷⁸² Saller 1941, 169–170; table 161.

⁷⁸³ Piccirillo 1994b.

⁷⁸⁴ For the pottery of the site, see Alliata 1990a, 247–261.

⁷⁸⁵ Piccirillo – Alliata 1989, 205–216.

⁷⁸⁶ On the subject, see Michel 1998a, 406; Pappalardo 2007, 577–579.



Fig. 167 Monastery of Wadi 'Ain el-Kanisah. Detail of the mosaic dated to A.D. 756 with the mention of the monk George the Recluse.

of the images to their original condition, including, in particular, the phoenix in the centre of the second row and the two birds towards the western end⁷⁸⁷. The element is worthy of note because, with the exclusion of the restored fish in the mosaic of the church of St Stephen in Umm er-Rasas⁷⁸⁸, all the repaving of the contemporary ecclesiastical buildings privileged patterns with geometric and plant patterns and no longer figurative ones⁷⁸⁹. The second element is relative to the system of dating used in the mosaic inscription which, as in other contemporary mosaics⁷⁹⁰, abandons the local system of the fifteen-year cycles *indictiones* in favour of a neutral system based on Christian conception of the date of the creation of the Earth⁷⁹¹. The long occupation of the monastery in the Wadi 'Ain el-Kanisah is probably connected with the special function of the complex as hermitage and refuge for stylite monks, as shown in the mosaic inscription mentioning the monk George the Recluse (Γεωργίος ἐγκλιστος) (Fig. 167)⁷⁹². In addition, the ruins of the foundations of a tower⁷⁹³ in this complex and in the monastery near the city of Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 168) show the continuity of the recluses in the Moab region, a phenomenon which had a brief renaissance in the 9th cent. A.D. in Mesopotamia, in Anatolia and in Palestine⁷⁹⁴.

Without new and more extensive research, it is not yet possible to establish exactly when the Siyagha monastic complex was abandoned. The multiple factors dealt with in this work should certainly have influenced monastic life on Mount Nebo, taking it towards a slow decline, which forced the monks to abandon the site. The pottery fragments published by S. SALLER include a diagnostic group⁷⁹⁵, unfortunately found without a precise stratigraphic context, which

⁷⁸⁷ Schick 2015, 138–139.

⁷⁸⁸ Piccirillo 1993, 239 fig. 385.

⁷⁸⁹ Schick 2015, 140.

⁷⁹⁰ In particular in the churches of St Stephen in Umm er-Rasas (A.D. 756); of Ramot, near Jerusalem (A.D. 762); in the church of the Virgin Mary in Madaba (A.D. 767); in the church of Khirbet el-Shubeika in Western Galilee (A.D. 785/786 or 801/802). See Piccirillo – Alliata 1994, 136–138; Arav – Di Segni – Kloner 1990 and Schick 2015, 140.

⁷⁹¹ On this subject in detail, see Di Segni 2006.

⁷⁹² The inscription is dated to A.D. 762. In this topic, see Di Segni 1998, 449–450 no. 56.

⁷⁹³ Piccirillo 1998b, 216–217.

⁷⁹⁴ Foran 2005, 68.

⁷⁹⁵ Saller 1941, pl. 154 nos. 4–7.

refers to the so-called “pilgrim’s flasks”, the containers used by travellers from Syria to Iran in the 12th-14th centuries A.D.⁷⁹⁶ The exclusivity of the find does not allow a stable human presence at Siyagha to be postulated, but probably only indicates sporadic visits that some figures made, with a detour of the usual travel itinerary. One example is given by Magister Thietmar, who mentioned the site during his exploration of the territories beyond the River Jordan in the post-Crusade period:

*«From here I came to Mount Abarim on which Moses died and was buried by the Lord; and no man can ever know the location of his tomb, whence this: ‘And he did not give to any man to explore the tomb.’ Whence the Lord said to him, ‘Ascend and contemplate the land; you shall see it but not enter it. This mountain is high and located in a plain. On the summit of the mountain is a beautiful monastery inhabited by Greek Christians, where I also spent the night. Around this mountain the children of Israel stayed for a while. In its neighbourhood is Mount Nebo, Mount Pisgah (Phasga) and Mount Peor (Phagor); and they are in the land of the Moabites and Midian.»*⁷⁹⁷

Although the text mentions a monastery inhabited by Orthodox monks on Mount Abarim, the location of this complex remains uncertain⁷⁹⁸. In all probability, the monastic complex of Mount Nebo has to be understood as abandoned before the period of the Crusades. The situation found on Jabal Haroun was very different, where Thietmar, referring to the monastery of Aaron, mentioned the presence of a church and of two Orthodox monks⁷⁹⁹. However, as J. FRÖSEN and P. MIETTUNEN have argued, the information reported by Thietmar could not be related to a visit to the place by him in person, but was probably simply suggested by previous travel chronicles or by some figure the traveller had met⁸⁰⁰. In his study on the monastery of Jabal Haroun, Z. T. FIEMA suggests that, although scaled down, it is possible to ascertain the continuity of life in the monastic complex of Aaron even in the period after the Crusades and, above all, that no traumatic event led to the violent destruction of the site⁸⁰¹. The scholar posits that the end of the Christian monastic community in the monastery of Jabal Haroun, which probably took place between A.D. 1271 and 1276, was: *«conscious, intentional and perhaps voluntary»*⁸⁰².

The late abandonment of the shrine of Aaron, with respect to the complex of Mount Nebo, can perhaps be attributed to the inclusion in the southern region of Transjordan into the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, a historical event which guaranteed a longer Christian control over these areas, but which with the first withdrawals of the Crusader soldiers entailed a gradual move by the Christians towards the coast⁸⁰³.

The veneration for the brothers Moses and Aaron, ultimately, also became part of the Muslim credo, which dedicated shrines (*weli*) of their own to them. For Aaron, the sultan an-Nasr Muhammad decided to build a cenotaph on the peak of Jabal Haroun in A.D. 1338–1139, whilst the devotion of Moses had a different fate⁸⁰⁴. In A.D. 1269, the Mameluke sultan Baybars

⁷⁹⁶ More in detail on this type of pottery, see Milwright 2009; Stern 2014, 80; Mulder 2014, 162–174.

⁷⁹⁷ Mag. Thiet. *Iter ad Terram Sanctam*, 13. “*Hic veni ad montem Abarim, in quo Moyses mortuus est et a Domino sepultus, cuius sepulchrum nullus hominum umquam scire potuit. Unde illud: ‘Nec cuiquam hominum dedit indagare sepulchrum.’ Ubi Dominus dixit ei: ‘Ascende et contemplare terram, videbis eam et non intrabis.’ Hic mons excelsus est et in plano positus. In summitate istius montis est pulchrum cenobium a Christianis Grecis inhabitatum, ubi etiam pernoctavi. Circa hunc montem filii Israel multam moram fecerunt. Hic in vicino est mons Nebo, mons Phasga, mons Phagor; et sunt in terra Moabitarum et Madia.*” trans. by Pringle, 119.

⁷⁹⁸ D. PRINGLE suggests that the aforementioned monastery lay somewhere in the vicinity of Madaba and Mount Nebo. See Pringle 2012, 119, note 177.

⁷⁹⁹ De Sandoli 1983, 270–273.

⁸⁰⁰ Frösén – Miettunen 2008, 14; Fiema 2016, 566.

⁸⁰¹ Fiema 2016, 566.

⁸⁰² Fiema 2016, 566.

⁸⁰³ For the archaeological researches on Medieval Petra, see Vannini – Vanni Desideri 1995; Schick 1997, 79–80; Vannini – Tonghini 1997; Vannini 2007; Vannini – Nucciotti 2009; Vannini – Nucciotti 2012; Fiema 2016, 566.

⁸⁰⁴ Walmsley 2001, 534.



Fig. 168 Umm er-Rasas. Tower known as "of the stylite".

al-‘Ala’i al-Bunduqdari built a shrine near the city of Jericho, in Palestine, as part of a wider general policy aimed at ennobling the Biblical prophets and the companions of Muhammad⁸⁰⁵. Maintaining the complex of Nabi Musa and its endowment (*waqf*) was thus guaranteed from expropriation of the ecclesiastical property that belonged to the precious Latin church of Jericho.

⁸⁰⁵ Frenkel 1997, 237–248; 246.