

5. FROM THE BYZANTINE PERIOD TO ISLAMIC RULE: CONTINUITY AND DECLINE OF MONASTICISM BEYOND THE RIVER JORDAN

One of the recent issues brought to scholarly attention in the last decades concerns the political and cultural transition between the Byzantine and the early Islamic era. In particular, research is focused on the linguistic, economic and social aspects, which in the course of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates resulted in changed circumstances. Monasticism therefore is very important for understanding life in the Christian communities after the Arab-Muslim conquest.

This chapter, in the light of the new archaeological data argued previously in the text, aims to look further into the last phases of monasticism in the regions beyond the River Jordan. First those elements of continuity which made the survival of the monastic estates possible after certain traumatic events (the Persian invasion of A.D. 614 and the subsequent Muslim conquest) will be analysed, followed by a reflection on a series of internal and external factors that undermined the monastic situation and which gradually led to its decline.

5.1 ELEMENTS OF CONTINUITY

5.1.1 Monastic life during the Persian occupation

The beginning of the 7th cent. A.D. represented a time marked by a series of particularly dramatic events for the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*. The first event that undermined the stability of the Byzantine rule was the Persian invasion in the spring of A.D. 614, when the Sassanid troops, moving from Damascus, penetrated through the region of Hawran in the Palestinian provinces, succeeding in conquering the city of Jerusalem before their retreat towards the North⁶⁵⁹. The dramatic nature of this episode, which entailed the destruction of numerous buildings of Christian worship, including the Constantinian basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, and the killing of numerous Christians in the place known as Mamilla, are related in the *Tale of the Taking of Jerusalem* by the monk Strategios of the monastery of St Saba and in the famous *Annals* by Euthymius, Patriarch of Alexandria (A.D. 877–940)⁶⁶⁰. The Persian occupation lasted until A.D. 630, when the Emperor Heraclius came to Jerusalem to sign the peace agreements with the Sassanid sovereign⁶⁶¹.

Regarding monasticism, literary sources report numerous cases of Persians looting the Palestinian monasteries. The *Epistle of Antiochus to Eustathius* shows that in the Laura of St Saba, the church was destroyed and forty-four monks were killed⁶⁶², whilst the monastery of Martyrius was emptied⁶⁶³. Because of the Persian attacks, the *Life of St George of Khoziba* recalls the hegumen and the many monks, in particular those of the Sabaite complex, who abandoned the Palestinian monasteries, seeking refuge in natural caves, while others crossed the River Jordan to flee to the territories of the province of *Arabia*⁶⁶⁴.

⁶⁵⁹ al-Tabari, 1, 1005. 1007; Ibn al-Athir, 1, 476. 479; Schick 1995, 20–21. See also Eut. Ann. 17, 25–26.

⁶⁶⁰ Eut. Ann. 18.

⁶⁶¹ Schick 1992, 111; Piccirillo 2007, 95.

⁶⁶² Epistola ad Eustathium, PG 89, 1421–1428; Patrich 1995, 326–328. Another case of the killing of a monk is attested in the Laura of Heptastomos in Choziba. See Patrich 1995, 110–113; Hirschfeld 2003, 189–203.

⁶⁶³ Magen – Talgam 1990, 91–152; Patrich 2011, 209.

⁶⁶⁴ Epistola ad Eustathium, PG 89, 1421–1428; see Schick 1992, 21; Patrich 2011, 208.

From literary sources it is possible to trace a very distinct territorial picture, but the analysis of the archaeological layers dating to the Persian period is not an easy task. Whilst some Palestinian monastic foundations had to face a first moment of political instability, the situation in the territories beyond the River Jordan should have been far calmer. This fact is confirmed by the mosaic inscriptions related to restorations carried out in the Jordanian monastic complexes during the years of the Persian occupation. Emblematic in this regard are a group of churches, in particular the one dedicated to St Nicephorus Constantine, brought to light in the village of Rihab in which the mosaic inscriptions mention building works carried out between A.D. 619 and 623⁶⁶⁵. Also the inscription in the monastic complex of Mar Liyas near Thisbe suggest one building phase of the church dated to A.D. 623⁶⁶⁶. It is noteworthy that these two archaeological sites are very close to one another and to Jerash, the seat of an important and flourishing diocesan centre⁶⁶⁷. However, the only two mosaic inscriptions found so far do not allow us to elaborate an archaeological pattern applicable to a regional level. Although it is possible to suggest that this region was only partially affected by the Persian occupation, above all because the armies gravitated mostly towards Jerusalem and along the Mediterranean coast in the centres of Caesarea and Gaza, the economic and social substratum of this rich diocese should also be taken into account. The restorations carried out in this region can be attributed to the high level of affluence and the relative autonomy of the Christian community in these ancient cities, as shown by recent excavations⁶⁶⁸. The building activities in the ecclesiastical and monastic complexes in the region would in this way be the sign of the existence of a sufficiently independent economic system in which the energetic acts of the local donors remained active throughout the 7th cent. A.D.

The archaeological data from the monastic complexes in the central and southern area of Transjordan are far more silent, with their building phases not recording substantial levels of destruction or renovation during the years of the Persian occupation. Some important building works took place just before A.D. 614, with the hegumens of Mount Nebo engaged in building the chapel of Theotokos (A.D. 603–608)⁶⁶⁹ and the abbot Sozomenos of the monastery of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata engaged in repaving the basilica in the month of April in A.D. 605 or 607⁶⁷⁰.

5.1.2 The monastic foundations under Islamic rule

The rise of Islamic rule, which occurred after the battle on the River Yarmuk in A.D. 636, was perceived by the local population in a much less traumatic way⁶⁷¹. As far as the religious policy is concerned, the caliph Omar explicitly prohibited acts of violence against churches and monasteries.

An emblematic testimony on the continuation of monastic life under Islamic rule is the *Life of St Stephen the Sabaite*, written in Arabic by his disciple Leontius of Damascus in approximately A.D. 807. Born in A.D. 725 in a village near Ascalon, the monk spent a good part of his life in the Laura of St Saba until A.D. 794⁶⁷². From the pages of Leontius, we learn that the

⁶⁶⁵ Many monasteries were built in the provinces of *Arabia* and *Palaestina Secunda*, in particular in the region of Rihab, the complexes of St Sophia in A.D. 605; of Khirbat ad-Duwayr in A.D. 608, Deir et-Tantour-Khirbet al-Musmar in A.D. 622–623, Khirbet Listib and St George in Samah in A.D. 624–625 and very probably the sites of Khirbet Daria, Deir as-Sa’nah, Khirbet el-Kursi and Deir Ma’in as well. For the bibliographical indications, see Hamarneh 2012, 284, for the review of epigraphs, see Di Segni 2017, 315–316.

⁶⁶⁶ Piccirillo 2007, 99–100.

⁶⁶⁷ On the diocesan centre and the episcopal succession, see Piccirillo 2005, 383–385. For more on the social and building aspects of Christian Jerash, see in detail Piccirillo 2002, 115–137.

⁶⁶⁸ Piccirillo 2002, 115–138; Piccirillo 2011; Walmsley 2015.

⁶⁶⁹ Di Segni 1998, 432–433 no. 11a–b.

⁶⁷⁰ Politis 2012, 401–403 no. 4.

⁶⁷¹ Piccirillo 2002, 220–222.

⁶⁷² For more on the life of Stephen the Sabaite, see the edition by Pirone 2001, 111–118.

administration of the new rulers did not make any substantial changes to the life of the monks and no specific mention appears of the obligation to pay the *kharaj*, the tax on land which the Christians, together with the annual per capita tax (*jiziah*), usually paid to the coffers of the central authority⁶⁷³. The biographer dwells on the description of some daily episodes involving the monks of the time, which confirm that the structure of monastic life was unchanged, including the erratic practice of the religious moving between the monasteries located in the valleys of the River Jordan⁶⁷⁴. Leontius also documents a discreet flow of pilgrims visiting the holy places, in particular those along the route from Jerusalem to the monastery on Mount Sinai⁶⁷⁵, as well as a series of economic activities controlled by Christian merchants⁶⁷⁶.

Another interesting element that can be inferred from the text concerns the social context from which the monks came, or from which they tried to attract new adepts. Browsing through the biographies of the figures described in the *Life of Stephen the Sabaite*, we learn how in many cases they came from the highest classes of society. An example of this is the trio of anachoretic nuns made up of a noblewoman and her daughters, heirs of archons or Roman patricians⁶⁷⁷ or the rich doctor of Moab invited to join the tranquillity of monastic life⁶⁷⁸. As L. DI SEGNI has furthermore argued, the monastic communities were often made up of religious individuals from transregional contexts, whose mobility required adequate financial resources for travel and whose high level of education and knowledge of Greek helped communication with the high classes of society⁶⁷⁹.

This last aspect is fundamental for the study of the monastic economy. Analysing the biography of the holy monk Stephen, we can guess how the property of the aspiring monks often flowed into the coffers of the monastery, which were exempt from taxation. Stephen himself, after the death of his uncle Zaccaria:

«...obeyed the precepts of the Holy Gospel and chose eternal glory, distributed everything that he had inherited to the monks and to the churches and remained without anything in his possession, except the beauty of the faith, humility and the poverty that is the source of every virtue. He accumulated and laid down all his wealth in the celestial treasures, where it is adulterated neither by ringworm nor by rust»⁶⁸⁰

The information is significant if compared with another passage from the text which tells of the right of pre-emption, often exercised by the Umayyad administration on the legacies of the Christians of the region:

«I have heard, son, that the sovereign of this country is despotic, takes with violence and loots the properties of the population, especially of the infirm and of the pilgrims and those against whom he puts forward claims in anger. I was told that a few days ago, a pilgrim died in the home of a Christian from here, leaving many heirs who unfortunately were not present at the time of his death. The sovereign thus took the opportunity and took everything that the deceased owned»⁶⁸¹

The lack of papyrus documentation on the individual monastic complexes makes it difficult to outline what we find in the biography of the saint; it is a common opinion of scholars that the hagiographic genre was a strong instrument of conversion and promotion of a specific cult. In addition, from the 7th cent. A.D., these narrations reinforce the topic of donations to the

⁶⁷³ In this regard, see Piccirillo 2002, 223–224.

⁶⁷⁴ V. Steph. Sab. 17; Piccirillo 2002, 223.

⁶⁷⁵ V. Steph. Sab. 64.

⁶⁷⁶ A clear example of this is the date merchant Petrona. See V. Steph. Sab. 36; Piccirillo 2007, 108.

⁶⁷⁷ V. Steph. Sab. 50.

⁶⁷⁸ V. Steph. Sab. 39.

⁶⁷⁹ Di Segni 2001, 35.

⁶⁸⁰ V. Steph. Sab. 9. Italian trans. by B. Pirone 1991, 52. English by the author.

⁶⁸¹ V. Steph. Sab. 64. Italian trans. by B. Pirone 1991, 52. English by the author.

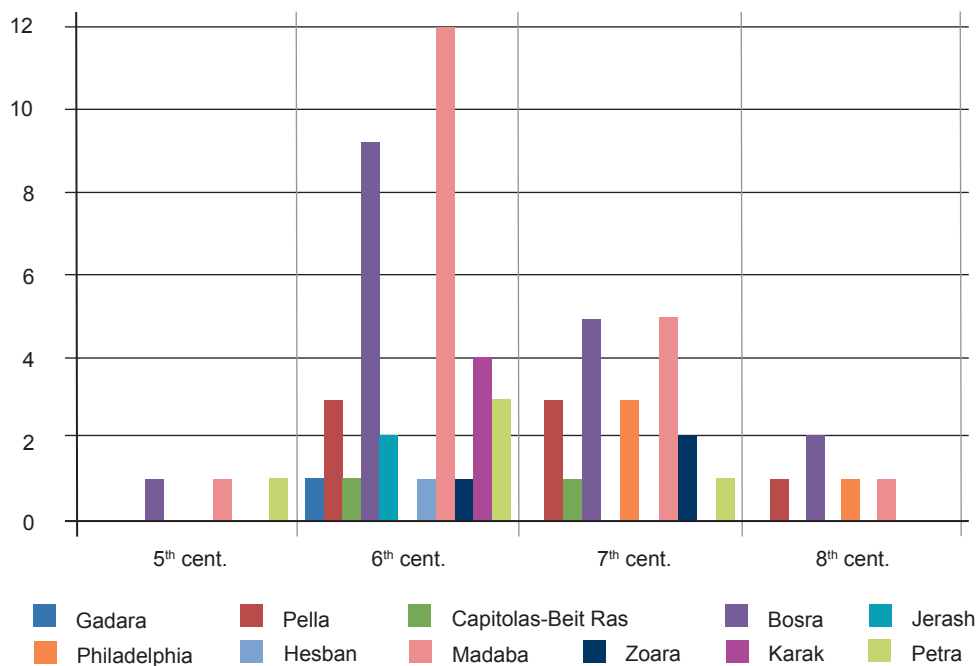


Diagram 5 The Inscriptions relative to building work in the Jordanian monastic complexes (by the author).

monastery, a necessary condition for those who wanted to join monastic life⁶⁸². This custom certainly had to be widespread in some other Egyptian monasteries and even in the West, where, from the 6th cent. A.D., the oblations of children took on a formal recognition and rigid series of rituals described in the rule of St Benedict⁶⁸³.

Going back to the archaeological evidence, we know that the system of monasteries in the dioceses of Jordan reached the apex of its diffusion in the 6th cent. A.D., while no new foundation seems to date from after the first quarter of the 7th cent. A.D. In this regard it is significant to look at the *corpus* of the inscriptions relative to the building activity carried out in the Jordanian monastic complexes⁶⁸⁴ (Diagram 5).

The data show how the architectonic restoration in the monastic complexes beyond the River Jordan, although very common in the Byzantine period, continued even in the Islamic times. In particular, during the Caliphate of the Rashidun and the Umayyad dynasty, the attestations are concentrated mainly in the provinces of *Palaestina Secunda* and *Arabia*, in the sites of Rihab⁶⁸⁵ Deir Ayyub⁶⁸⁶, El-Kafi⁶⁸⁷, Salkhad⁶⁸⁸, Rabbah⁶⁸⁹, and Khilda⁶⁹⁰. The financial resources of the

⁶⁸² The topic is extensively discussed by A. PAPAConstantinou through the study of Greek papyri relative to many Egyptian monasteries. Some fragments have confirmed the practice of donations: the novices of high classes contributed through the donation of arable land, the youngsters from poorer classes usually donated their work in total subservience. See Papaconstantinou 2012.

⁶⁸³ Regula Benedicti 59, PL 66.839a840B; for the translation De Jong 1996, 26. On this aspect, see Papaconstantinou 2012, 81–84.

⁶⁸⁴ The data are taken from the recent studies by B. HAMARNEH and L. DI SEGNI; see Hamarneh 2012, 289–291 and Di Segni 2017, 307–316.

⁶⁸⁵ Church of St George (ca. A.D. 634–639); Church of St Isaiah (February A.D. 635); St Sergius (1 February A.D. 661); St Philimos (A.D. 662/3). For the bibliographical indications, see Di Segni 2017, 316.

⁶⁸⁶ Monastery dated 25 July A.D. 641, see Di Segni 2017, 316.

⁶⁸⁷ Church of St George, 30 April A.D. 652, see Meimaris 1992, 299 no. 513.

⁶⁸⁸ Chapel of St George, A.D. 665–666, see SEG 50, 1542.

⁶⁸⁹ A.D. 687, see SEG 53, 1883.

⁶⁹⁰ Church of St Varus A.D. 687–688, see SEG 44, 1416.



Fig. 162 Umm er-Rasas. Mosaic inscription in the floor of the southern nave of the church of St Stephen.

great monastic complexes also allowed building activity in the later decades, even though, in the light of the epigraphic contents, this was mainly limited to simple restoration works.

Specifically, the repaving of the church of the monastery of Lot in Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata in A.D. 691⁶⁹¹; the complete restoration of the ecclesiastical building in the village of el-Quweismeh in A.D. 717–718⁶⁹², the repaving of the monastery of Wadi ‘Ain el-Kanisah in A.D. 762⁶⁹³ and of the monastery of Mar Liyas in A.D. 775–776⁶⁹⁴ as well as the important epigraphic evidence relative to a monk from the monastery of Phisga, i.e. Nebo, as one of the benefactors of the church of St Stephen in Umm er-Rasas dated to A.D. 756⁶⁹⁵ (Fig. 162). The excavation data also show lively building activity at the monastic site of Jabal Haroun⁶⁹⁶.

5.1.3 The continuity of the devotional practices in the monasteries

The analysis of the flows of pilgrims towards the monastic shrines located beyond the River Jordan can provide possible data regarding the effects caused by the Persian occupation and Islamic rule. This investigation therefore requires extreme prudence due mainly to the lack of specific literary sources on the subject and the difficulty of bringing material evidence to prove the flow of the faithful.

As has been argued in Chapter Three, the itineraries of the devotees to the Jordanian monastic foundations originated in the religious centres of Palestine. During the years of the Persian occupation a probable reduction in the number of the faithful occurred, due to the general political instability as well as to the destruction of the main places of Christian devotion. Whilst

⁶⁹¹ Politis 2012, 403–409 no. 5.

⁶⁹² Piccirillo 2002, 230; IGLS XXI 2, 53.

⁶⁹³ Di Segni 1994, 531–533.

⁶⁹⁴ Piccirillo 2007, 99–100.

⁶⁹⁵ Piccirillo 1994a, 251–252 no. 8.

⁶⁹⁶ Fiema 2016, 560–563.

hypothesizing a reduction in the arrivals of pilgrims from other regions of the empire, it is possible that devotional practices reduced to the local context were maintained.

This situation started to improve in the years A.D. 619–620 as recalled by the historian Pseudo Sebeos quoting the arrival of a group of Armenian pilgrims in Jerusalem in a letter sent to the Armenian Archbishop Komitas:

« “Blessed is God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies and God of all consolations, who consoled us in his great compassion for all our afflictions” in the coming of your flock. For did he not console us in their arrival? First, by recalling to us the previous journeys which they made to the venerable sites of Jerusalem. Secondly, because he gratified our mind at their coming, and we recognized that God had not completely abandoned us... »⁶⁹⁷

For a new possible line of research, a mapping of the finds of eulogies, whether moulds for Eucharistic bread or *ex-votos*, attributable scientifically to Jordanian monastic contexts, would be welcome. Unfortunately, even recent studies on these objects, very often kept in private collections and without certain excavation data have mainly concerned the iconographic elements, which has frequently conditioned their dating⁶⁹⁸. In this regard, an important mention of the devotional practice of oil lamps characterized by a votive function and often used by way of eulogies is necessary. These objects, as well as their well-known practical use, took on a sacred value⁶⁹⁹. In particular, some types of oil lamp have impressed on them the term *ευλογία* (eulogy) accompanied by some ritual forms of dedication to the light of Christ, to the mother of God, to St Elijah or the simple mention *λυχνάρια καλά* interpreted by S. LOFFREDA as “good oil lamp” i.e. eulogy⁷⁰⁰. The content of the inscriptions and their recurrence in sacred archaeological contexts has suggested to scholars that these oil lamps had a devotional function associated with specific holy places, above all in the area of Jerusalem⁷⁰¹.

Alongside the oil lamps of the inscribed type, it is possible to place, by shape, mixture and production technique, the so-called palm model, the resemblances of which suggest the same use and a similar diffusion⁷⁰². Following the assumption of J. MAGNESS and S. LOFFREDA, it is possible to consider this typology as a valid votive substitute of the oil lamps with inscriptions, but certainly cheaper in its production and therefore less expensive for the pilgrim who wanted to buy a devotional object in the holy place he/she visited⁷⁰³.

Looking at the Jordanian context, and more specifically at Mount Nebo, it has to be recalled that during an excavation in 1994 on the north-eastern slope of the peak of Siyagha, in one of the rooms of the north-eastern wing of the monastery, under the collapse of the basilica, a fragment of a mould for oil lamps of the palmette type⁷⁰⁴ was recovered, perfectly matching a specimen coming from room no. 56⁷⁰⁵ (Fig. 163). The find is significant because it attests the presence of a production *in loco* for this type of oil lamp⁷⁰⁶. This specimen is attested particularly in the central area of Palestine and Jordan, as shown by the cases in Umm er-

⁶⁹⁷ Pseudo Sebeos, *The Armenian History* 35, trans. by R. W. Thomson 1999, I, 70–71.

⁶⁹⁸ Reynolds 2015, 372.

⁶⁹⁹ For a study in detail, see Loffreda 1989, then updated in Loffreda 1995, 39–42.

⁷⁰⁰ Loffreda 1989, 223; Magness 1993, 176. On the subject see also Kennedy 1963, 89; Saller 1957, 180.

⁷⁰¹ The first scholar who proposed this association was C. CLERMONT-GANNEAU, acknowledging the formula “the light of Christ illuminates for all” in the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox during the ceremony of the Holy Fire in the church of the Holy Sepulchre. See in detail Magness 1993, 176–177.

⁷⁰² Magness 1993, 177.

⁷⁰³ Magness 1993, 172; Loffreda 1995, 39–42.

⁷⁰⁴ Catalogue no. S_18716 (Archaeological Museum of Mount Nebo).

⁷⁰⁵ Catalogue no. S_10417 (Archaeological Museum of Mount Nebo). The oil lamp was found in 1987 in room no. 56, belonging to the western sector of the monastery. For the archaeological context of reference, see Alliata 1994c, 638–640.

⁷⁰⁶ Another mould for the production of oil lamps was identified in the site of Ni’ane during the campaign directed by C. CLERMONT-GANNEAU in 1881 and today it is in the Louvre Museum (no. 282). See Da Costa 2012, 256.



Fig. 163 Oil lamp S_10417 and relative mould S_18716.

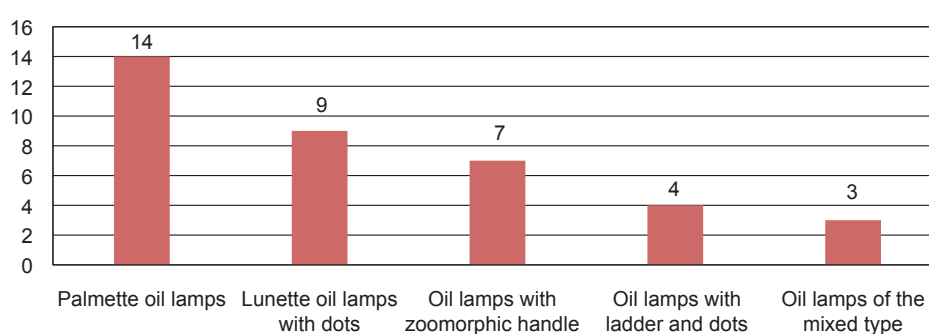


Diagram 6 Byzantine and early Islamic oil lamps found in Mount Nebo region

Rasas and in the area of Jerusalem⁷⁰⁷. It is therefore tempting to wonder whether the oil lamps made on Mount Nebo had a distribution that was solely limited to the monastery or whether they were made for a wider diffusion for votive purposes. The particular type of mould goes back to the late Byzantine period when perhaps the primitive eulogies, given to Egeria by the monks of the valley of ‘Uyun Musa, evolved into the practice of votive oil lamps⁷⁰⁸.

It is not rare to find an abundance of oil lamps in the shrines of the region, as shown by the massive finds of these objects in the monastery of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata. The excavations at this site have revealed an abundant quantity of oil lamps, one-third of which came from the grotto linked to the veneration of the patriarch Lot⁷⁰⁹. The samples of the oil lamps found in the area of Mount Nebo, although being much smaller than that of Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata, is particularly rich for the various types attested and the relative chronological context of reference⁷¹⁰.

Literary sources show that no particular restriction seems to have affected the pilgrimage at the local level after the Muslim conquest of the region. Fundamental in this regard are the accounts by religious and lay travellers⁷¹¹, dated from the 8th–14th cent. A.D., interested in visiting the monasteries of the desert⁷¹². The picture appears very different for those who came from Western Europe; the changed political conditions made the journey, if not actually

⁷⁰⁷ Pappalardo 2007.

⁷⁰⁸ It. Eg. 11, 1–5.

⁷⁰⁹ Da Costa 2012, 266–269.

⁷¹⁰ A joint study of the data found at the site of Umm er-Rasas and the region of Nebo is in Pappalardo 2007.

⁷¹¹ Reynolds 2015, 372.

⁷¹² Worthy of note is the proposal by D. M. NICOL, according to whom the Byzantines of the medieval period were more interested in visiting the places where the fathers of the desert lived, in particular in the deserts of Palestine and Egypt. See Nicol 1985, 199. More in general on the subject, see Talbot 2001, 101–102.

dangerous, definitely much more expensive for the pilgrims, with the exception of the bishops and the abbots who could have had far greater financial resources⁷¹³.

Nor should the appearance of a change in the destination of the pilgrimage, already started in the 7th cent. A.D., be forgotten. The faithful tended to reduce their visits to the memorials of the Biblical figures, preferring those to the shrines of local martyrs and the urban churches⁷¹⁴. A greater closeness in time and a more immediate identification with the martyrs, especially in the case of military saints, made the Christians intensify their devotion to the relics of the local saints. An archaeological proof of this religious devotion is the abundance of reliquaries widespread under the churches' altars of the region⁷¹⁵, as well as the letter that Pope Gregory the Great wrote to the Bishop Marian of Jerash in A.D. 610 for the shipment of local relics to Rome⁷¹⁶.

⁷¹³ The accounts of pilgrimages to the shrines beyond the River Jordan are attested in the writings of the Greek monk Epiphanius (8th cent. A.D.), the English Bishop Willibald (late 8th cent. A.D.) and the Russian Abbot Daniel (12th cent. A.D.). Cf. Chapter 3, 130–132.

⁷¹⁴ On the subject, see Michel 2001, 88–92; Chavarría 2011, 123–153; Hamarneh 2014.

⁷¹⁵ Duval 1994, 185–188.

⁷¹⁶ Piccirillo 2004, 327–330. Many bishops promoted the worship of relics of local martyrs in the provinces of *Arabia* and *Palaestina Tertia* by intensifying the construction of martyrdom churches. On this topic see, Hamarneh 2014.

5.2 FACTORS FOR THE DECLINE OF MONASTICISM

Having ascertained that the decline of monasticism beyond the River Jordan cannot be attributed to the political-military change under Islamic rule, or to mere natural events, such as the earthquake in A.D. 749, its possible causes still remain to be discussed. To understand such a complex phenomenon, subject to archaeological research still under way, the factors outside and inside the monastic movement which may have contributed to the gradual decline of the monasteries should be analysed.

5.2.1 The external factors

5.2.1.1 *The political and cultural elements*

A first element of change which concerned the Christian communities in the territories beyond the River Jordan came about with the passage of rule from the Umayyad dynasty to the Abbasid one, in A.D. 750. Although not explicitly anti-Christian, the caliphs of Baghdad gradually targeted some of the privileges enjoyed by the monastic foundations. In particular, the taxations reserved for lay Christians were increased and also extended to priests and monks⁷¹⁷. The jurists of the Abbasid caliphs prohibited the Christian religious from holding liturgical services aloud, using wooden knockers or sounding rattles to call the faithful to worship⁷¹⁸. The use of decorating the liturgical furnishings and the lighting systems with the symbol of the cross, although it was advised against in some literary testimonies, does not seem to have been the object of a Muslim normative prohibition⁷¹⁹.

One sign of the change in relations between Islamic society and the Christian society could be seen in the obligation for the Christians to be recognized visually by particular clothing⁷²⁰, and perhaps by the testimony of the destructions of some monasteries and churches, but limited to the Palestinian context⁷²¹. These elements are often greatly emphasized in the literary sources and therefore require extreme prudence in the interpretation of the factors that influenced the decline of monasticism. One example come from the Byzantine historian Theophanes who in his *Chronographia* recalls with harsh tones some dramatic events that took place after the death of the caliph Haroun al-Rashid (A.D. 786–809), including the destruction of churches and monasteries in Jerusalem and in the Judean Desert (complexes of St Chariton and St Cyriacus, Theodosius, Euthymius and St Saba)⁷²². However, the archaeological contexts suggest a tendency towards a form of peaceful abandonment of the monasteries as opposed to a violent destruction caused by man or by damage caused by natural events⁷²³.

5.2.1.2 *The data of sacred building*

Regarding the ecclesiastical building, which also includes the churches of monastic complexes, the Arab jurist Abu Yusuf (d. A.D. 798) mention the prohibition for Christians to build churches

⁷¹⁷ Patrich 2011, 209. See in detail Schick 1995, 167–170 and some episodes in the life of St Stephen the Sabaite in V. Steph. Sab. 29. 55. 64.

⁷¹⁸ See in particular the testimonies of the anonymous Syriac text *Chronicon anonymum ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, I, 307–308. For the bibliographical references, see Schick 1995, 166–167.

⁷¹⁹ Schick 1995, 163–166.

⁷²⁰ Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-kharaj*, 137; Schick 1995, 166–167.

⁷²¹ For the monastic complexes of Palestine, we have testimonies of an attack by Saracen troops on the monastery of Theodosius in A.D. 789, with the consequent destruction of churches and the killing of monks, followed by the attacks on the monasteries of Chariton and Euthymius in A.D. 796/797 and the massacre of twenty monks in the monastery of St Saba in A.D. 797. For the bibliographical references, see Patrich 2011, 209–210.

⁷²² Thphn. chron. 6301–6305.

⁷²³ Schick 1995, 128–129.

both in the existing centres and in the new Islamic urban settlements⁷²⁴. The topic of restoration and rebuilding of previous churches is not an easy task, as in the literary sources there is no univocal and critical vision in this regard⁷²⁵. However, as analysed in the previous paragraph, the inscriptions and pottery from numerous excavations of ecclesiastical buildings confirm the possibility of restoration in the existing complexes. Going back to the diagram 5, the restorations of the mosaics in the Abbasid period are shown by the inscriptions⁷²⁶ in the church of St Stephen in Umm er-Rasas (A.D. 756)⁷²⁷, in the monastery of Theotokos in the Wadi ‘Ain el-Kanisah (A.D. 762)⁷²⁸ together with the post-earthquake reconstruction on the peak of Siyagha⁷²⁹, in the church of the complex of Mar Liyas (A.D. 776)⁷³⁰, in the funeral chapel of Er-Rasif (A.D. 785)⁷³¹ and in the church of St Constantine in Rihab (A.D. 832?)⁷³². In addition, there is the later activity in the monastery of Jabal Haroun near Petra⁷³³ and the new pavement in the church of the Virgin Mary in Madaba (A.D. 767)⁷³⁴.

It has to be specified that mosaic repaving, following the Muslim conquest of the region, gradually tended to be abandoned, or the number of images in the decorative motifs were reduced in preference to abstract and geometric patterns⁷³⁵. In many cases, new neutral images replaced the gaps with floral or geometric designs as shown by the cases of the church of St Stephen in Umm er-Rasas⁷³⁶ (Figs. 164–165), in the monastery of ‘Ain el-Kanisah⁷³⁷, in the church of the Acropolis of Ma’in⁷³⁸, in the church of Massuh⁷³⁹, and in that of Bishop John of Zizia⁷⁴⁰ (Figs. 166) with the intention of restoring a decorative integrity to the pavement as well as the functional one. In other examples, such as the mosaic of the church built in Madaba in A.D. 767, a geometric decoration that totally excludes figurative representations can be seen⁷⁴¹. More generally, the restorations of the mosaic pavements in the Umayyad period present a smaller extension compared to the original plan of the ecclesiastical building, the sign of a possible contraction of the surface area of the place of worship⁷⁴².

In her study on the ecclesiastical buildings in the territories beyond the River Jordan A. MICHEL points out how a progressive, but slow abandonment of the churches in the region had already started in the Umayyad period (A.D. 660–720/725) during which about 37.8% of the one hundred and thirty-one abandoned buildings stopped being used in the urban areas and in the surrounding rural areas of the northern part of the province of *Arabia*⁷⁴³. The phenomenon underwent intensification in the last years of the caliphs of Damascus⁷⁴⁴ and above all in the

⁷²⁴ Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-kharaj*, 148–161. More in general Schick 1995, 161–162.

⁷²⁵ Schick 1995, 162–163.

⁷²⁶ See in detail Gatier 1992, 291–294.

⁷²⁷ Piccirillo 1989a, 269–293; SEG 37, 1553.

⁷²⁸ Di Segni 1994, 531–533.

⁷²⁹ See in detail in Chapter 1, 80 and Chapter 2, 100–108.

⁷³⁰ Di Segni 2006, 579–580 no. 2.

⁷³¹ Di Segni 2017, 316.

⁷³² Di Segni 2006, 578–579 no. 1.

⁷³³ Fiema 2016, 561–567.

⁷³⁴ Piccirillo 1989a, 41–49.

⁷³⁵ The causes that produced the phenomenon of iconophobia in the mosaic pavements in the churches of Transjordan, although considerably debated by scholars, remain to date without a convincing explanation. For an overview, see Hamarneh 2008, and, most recently Schick 2015, 132–143. For the examination of the Arabic and Byzantine sources on the phenomenon of iconophobia, see Bowersock 2006, 92–97.

⁷³⁶ Ognibene 2002, 320–321.

⁷³⁷ Ognibene 1998, 376–382.

⁷³⁸ Piccirillo 1993, 200–201.

⁷³⁹ Piccirillo 1983a, 335–346.

⁷⁴⁰ Piccirillo 2002, 364–384.

⁷⁴¹ Piccirillo 1989a, 45–47; Hamarneh 2008, 60–61.

⁷⁴² More in general, see Hamarneh 2008.

⁷⁴³ Michel 2011, 244, table 5.

⁷⁴⁴ Michel 2011, 247–250, table 7.



Fig. 164 Umm er-Rasas. Church of St Stephen, mosaic detail affected by iconophobic damage.



Fig. 165 Umm er-Rasas. Church of St Stephen, mosaic detail affected by iconophobic damage.



Fig. 166 Zizia. Church of Bishop John, mosaic detail affected by iconophobic damage.

early years of the Abbasid caliphate⁷⁴⁵ while excluding the main monasteries connected with the Biblical figures. Forty-two ecclesiastical buildings show traces of being reused in the decades following their abandonment, mainly linked with a domestic function or a new religious or civil purpose⁷⁴⁶. For the monastic context this phenomenon occurred only in the church of Aaron on Jabal Haroun⁷⁴⁷ and in the small monastery of Deacon Thomas at ‘Uyun Musa⁷⁴⁸.

The longevity of the monastic complexes should therefore be attributed to their specific devotional nature and by reflecting on the economic and social system that could support them. This statement finds an interesting confirmation in the analysis of the monasteries in the Palestinian context. Y. HIRSCHFELD suggests that most of the monasteries that grew up in the Judean Desert, almost 72% of the religious foundations recorded, were abandoned during the 7th cent. A.D., just after the Muslim conquest, even though the recent studies on pottery would shift the abandonment of these monasteries forward by almost one century⁷⁴⁹. The complexes that are linked to pilgrimage, whether they themselves are the destination of devotion or an intermediate point of call on a longer route, as well as the monastic centres which played an important role in theological education and study, appear to be excluded from this slow abandonment. Examples of this are the monasteries of Theodorus and Cyriacus (still active in the early 9th cent. A.D.)⁷⁵⁰, of Euthymius, Kastellion, St Chariton, Choziba, Gerasimus, John the Baptist and above all St Saba which, despite the attacks in A.D. 797–809 and 813 continued to be active in the 12th cent. A.D. and even until the present day⁷⁵¹.

The analysis of the lay and religious patronage in the early Islamic period is crucial to understand how the variation of some economic and social dynamics can have influenced the vitality of the monasteries. Since the 7th cent. A.D. a decline in epigraphic references to lay donations occurred in the monastic complex of Mount Nebo and more generally in the churches beyond the River Jordan⁷⁵². From this period onwards, the inscriptions mainly recall presbyters, hegumens and monks or more generally some rural communities⁷⁵³. It is possible that some changes in this system of donations took place during the Umayyad period and above all in the early Abbasid period, when the increased tax oppression on the Christian community, of which some cases are recalled in the text by Leontius of Damascus⁷⁵⁴, could have had an effect on the affluence of the Christian communities and, by extension, on lay donations. The settlement of the Muslim population and the reduction of the administrative offices held by Christians may in some way have undermined the previous balance in the system of donations from the local structure⁷⁵⁵. Other monasteries, however, depending on a wider system of inter-regional and inter-diocesan economic aid, may have suffered the reduction of lay donations to a lesser extent⁷⁵⁶.

⁷⁴⁵ Michel 2011, 250–251, table 8.

⁷⁴⁶ The phenomenon of reoccupation, although present in some cases in the Abbasid period, is mainly to be circumscribed to the Ayyubid and Mameluke epochs (in the churches of St George in Samah, of Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Umm es-Surab, the west church of Umm el-Jimal, the “cathedral” of Rihab and the church of St Sergius in Nitl. See in detail Michel 2011, 250–251.

⁷⁴⁷ Fiema 2016, 562–566.

⁷⁴⁸ Piccirillo 1990b, 244–246.

⁷⁴⁹ Hirschfeld 1999; Patrich 2011, 211.

⁷⁵⁰ Amit – Seligman – Zilberbod 2003, 139–148.

⁷⁵¹ In particular, the monastery of St Saba. For an analysis of the complexes, see Patrich 2011 and relative bibliography.

⁷⁵² On some of these epigraphs, see Hamarneh 2003, 230–241. For the bibliographical references, see Di Segni 2017.

⁷⁵³ Examples are the community of Khirbet es-Samra, near el-Quweismeh and Umm er-Rasas – Kastron Mefa’a. See in detail Hamarneh 2003, 232–237.

⁷⁵⁴ Cf. above 195.

⁷⁵⁵ Reynolds 2015, 367–368.

⁷⁵⁶ Reynolds 2015, 367–368.

5.2.1.3 *The data on the morphology of settlements*

The changes in the morphology of settlements during the early Muslim period which may have influenced the farming activities of the monastic complexes in the region also have to be taken into account. The new Umayyad ruling class gave rise to a close-knit network of large farms which grew up in the rural area, but close to important routes of communication, including an inhabited part and the land for cultivation⁷⁵⁷. The acquisitions of the farms started under the caliph ‘Uthman (who reigned A.D. 644–656) in particular in the areas of Darum in the south of the Palestinian territory to extend to Transjordan⁷⁵⁸. If at first these Muslim villages and farms developed far from the Byzantine villages, probably to avoid conflicts with the Christian owners, with the turn of the 8th cent. A.D., Arabic literary sources inform us of a considerable increase in farms on the lands of the Balqa⁷⁵⁹. The agricultural works were probably entrusted to workers who had converted to Islam or who had remained Christians, known as *mawali* who in virtue of a bond of servitude were linked to their Umayyad masters⁷⁶⁰.

The reason for establishing these *qusur* in the rural areas has still not been clarified. Probably, in addition to an obvious requirement for food by the new aristocratic and military classes, there was the transfer of the urban elites to the countryside, due to the outbreak of the plague, the decline of resources in the farming areas surrounding the cities and the changed requirements of the Arab nomads who were by now fully sedentarized⁷⁶¹. The territorial occupation underwent a slight fluctuation during the 8th cent. A.D., when there was an increase in the number of agricultural sites in the valleys, and a first depopulation of the places on higher land⁷⁶².

Going back to the monastic complexes, the arrival of the new rulers entailed the appearance of new subjects interested in exploiting the land and controlling the agricultural situation in Jordan. Although for the monasteries under examination no cases of expropriation are documented, the ancient monastic primacy in controlling a great deal of land changed. With the beginning of the 9th cent. A.D., the reduction of the monks together with the decrease of the Christian population, for natural causes or because they had converted to the new religion, could have compromised the lease of land owned by the monasteries and above all their cultivation, their farming production and possibly small-scale trade.

Some scholars also tend to see in the causes of the slow abandonment of these regions an intensification of the cultivation of the farming land by the Umayyad, clearly visible from the complex systems of water channels present on many estates⁷⁶³, which may have contributed to a gradual desertification of the areas beyond the River Jordan⁷⁶⁴. Recent geomorphological studies suggest that many areas in the valley of the Dead Sea, near agricultural settlements, show a considerable degradation of the soil caused by continuous ploughing, erosion and possible increases in droughts that compromised the fertility of these areas⁷⁶⁵.

⁷⁵⁷ Hamarneh 2010, 65.

⁷⁵⁸ Walmsley 2007, 335–336.

⁷⁵⁹ For in-depth study of the subject, see Northedge 1992, 51; Hamarneh 2010.

⁷⁶⁰ Hamarneh 2010, 65.

⁷⁶¹ Walmsley 2007, 337.

⁷⁶² Walmsley 2007, 350.

⁷⁶³ Walmsley 2007, 350.

⁷⁶⁴ Piccirillo 2002, 253.

⁷⁶⁵ Walmsley 2007, 350–351.

5.2.2 The internal factors

Other aspects that contributed to reducing the number of people joining monastic life and the decline of monasticism are of a demographic and spiritual nature. The hagiographic sources themselves recognize a change in the attitude to the monastic rules during the 8th cent. A.D. as Leontius of Damascus reminds us:

«We can now truly say that many and not a few ordeals struck the monks: the lack of virtue, hunger not for food for the body but hunger for the word of the spirit that warms and nourishes the soul, and also the decline of monastic life – who today could not recognize the penury of virtue in monks? –, the lack not only of philosophy of knowledge of action but also the lack of philosophy of the world, the disappearance of that way of meeting in which the Fathers saw one another, drawing reasons of spiritual teaching, sanctity, encouragement and zeal to do good, renouncing the demons and worldly things»⁷⁶⁶

Although these words refer to a prediction made by an elderly monk of Skete, certainly emphasized by an edifying and moralizing intention, this reflection, which seems to enunciate a form of spiritual crisis towards that life of sacrifices, isolation and asceticism sought out by the first fathers of the desert is noteworthy.

An interesting testimony on the number of monks active at the beginning of the Abbasid era comes from the *Commemoratorium de Casis Dei*, a report on the churches and monasteries of the Holy Land written in Latin in A.D. 808 and sent to Charlemagne⁷⁶⁷. Amongst the data useful for this study, the text indicates ten monks in the monastery of John the Baptist, and thirty-five responsible for the nearby church⁷⁶⁸. M. L. LEVY-RUBIN and B. Z. KEDAR postulate that the five hundred monks, mentioned by the text as belonging to the monastery of St Saba, are on the other hand to be understood as the total monastic population active in the entire Judean Desert, a figure which is greatly reduced with respect to those almost five thousand religious present during the 6th cent. A.D.⁷⁶⁹. As suggested by B. BITTON-ASHKELONY and A. KOFKY, it is possible that during the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. the novices of the monastic communities in the region decreased, gradually becoming smaller together with an internal transfer of monks to larger monasteries⁷⁷⁰.

No written document can provide precise demographic indications of the monasteries in Transjordan, however, the architectonic phases of the monasteries on Mount Nebo⁷⁷¹ and on Jabal Haroun⁷⁷² testify that the architectonic renovations after the earthquake in A.D. 749 led to a scaling down of the two complexes, reducing their extension.

Lastly, it should not be forgotten that unlike some Palestinian monasteries, especially the Laura of St Saba, none of the large monasteries beyond the River Jordan was characterized as a centre of *paideia* and erudition involved in the translations of the Greek texts into Arabic and in the training of those monks, such as John of Damascus⁷⁷³ or Theodore Abu Qurra⁷⁷⁴, who gave rise to the most important theological works of the time⁷⁷⁵. Although scaled down, some people of the Moabite joined the religious life also in the 8th cent. A.D. as can be seen from

⁷⁶⁶ V. Steph. Sab. 5. Italian trans. by B. Pirone 1991, 38. 40. English by the author.

⁷⁶⁷ Only one manuscript edition of the document survives, kept at the Universitätsbibliothek of Basel. See in detail Rubin – Kedar 2001, 63–72; Patrich 2011, 212.

⁷⁶⁸ Patrich 2001, 212.

⁷⁶⁹ Rubin – Kedar 2001, n. 41.

⁷⁷⁰ Bitton-Ashkelony – Kofsky 2006a, 287–288. The complex of St Catherine in Egypt seems to have been spared from this process, as at the beginning of the 8th cent. A.D. it still had one hundred monks. See Pringle 1998, 53–54.

⁷⁷¹ See the new excavation in room no. 103, Chapter 2, 100–108.

⁷⁷² Fiema 2016, 560–563.

⁷⁷³ For a general picture of reference, see Nasrallah 1950.

⁷⁷⁴ Lamoreaux 2002.

⁷⁷⁵ Griffith 1992; Schick 1995, 98–99; Bitton-Ashkelony – Kofsky 2006a, 288.

the testimony of the two brothers Theodore and Theophanes⁷⁷⁶. Born respectively in A.D. 775 and in 778 the two Grapti monks (i.e. marked with a burning iron) were educated in the monastery of St Saba and, after the death of Harun al-Rashid, set sail for Constantinople, where, together with Michael Synkellos, they ardently opposed the iconoclast measures of the Emperor Theophilos (A.D. 813–842)⁷⁷⁷.

⁷⁷⁶ Schick 1995, 99–100.

⁷⁷⁷ V. S. Theod. Grapti, PG. 116, 653–654; Schick 1995, 99–100; Piccirillo 2002, 248–252.

