DONATIONS AND DONORS AS REFLECTED IN THE MOSAIC PAVEMENTS OF TRANSJORDAN’S CHURCHES IN THE BYZANTINE AND UMAYYAD PERIODS

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Transjordan, which in the Byzantine period comprised Provincia Arabia and neighboring regions belonging to Palaestina Prima, Secunda, and Tertia, saw the founding of many churches between the fourth and the eighth century. Construction reached a peak in the sixth century and continued into the Umayyad period.

What is particularly striking is that despite Transjordan’s location on the desert margin, where the climate was harsh, the geographic conditions difficult, and the water in short supply, several churches were built at almost all of the sites. The apparent incongruity of this situation raises a number of questions. What were the circumstances and causes of the accelerated building of churches? Who was responsible for their construction and decoration? What was the relationship between the laity and the clergy, and what role was played by each group in the ambitious building program?

Using several different approaches in tandem may provide at least partial answers to these questions. With the tools at our disposal—study of the archaeological finds, deciphering of the inscriptions, and compositional-iconographic analysis of the mosaic pavements—we can establish the locations of dedicatory inscriptions, the identities of the donors and patrons, and the nature and position of their depictions in the mosaic pavements. This information may shed light on the nature and motivation of donations in Transjordan’s Christian community during the Byzantine and Umayyad periods.¹

¹ The figures from Transjordan are by courtesy of M. Piccirillo, to whom I am very grateful.
Dedication Inscriptions

In several chapels and churches in Transjordan, the east end of the nave is emphasized by a special panel in front of the liturgical space. This panel was the preferred location for dedicatory inscriptions, generally placed within a tabula ansata. The inscriptions include the names of the overseers and donors (both lay and clerical) responsible for the building and decoration of the church, the date, and a blessing or memorial dedication to the dead. Among the numerous examples, we may note a group of churches in northern Transjordan, such as the Hegumen Church and the churches of St. Peter (Fig. 1) and St. George at Khirbat al-Samra, the last containing an inscription alluding to anonymous donors: “In the month of Artemisius at the time of the tenth indiction of the year 5[32]. O Lord, have mercy and protect this village from the little one to the big one from now forever [AD 627]”; the churches of St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. Basil at Rihab, that of St. Paul containing an inscription that mentions the donors’ names and the date of the church’s construction: “At the time of the most holy and most blessed Archbishop Polieuctus, and of Bassus the most illustrious paramonarius, this Temple of Saint Paul was completed and paved with mosaics, thanks to the offerings of John and Elias, [sons of] Martyrius, in the month of June of the thirteenth indiction of the year 490 of the province [AD 595]”; the Church of the Virgin Mary at Madaba; the Church of Sts. Cosmas and Damianus at Khirbat Dariya/az-Za’tara/Smad; and the Church of St. Thomas at Khirbat Sa’ad. Dedicatory inscriptions have also been found in central Transjordan, in the Church of Sts. Lot and Procopius, the Church of St. George, and the Lower Chapel of the Priest John at Khirbat al-Mukhayyat; the monastery of al-Dayr at Ma’in; at Khilda in the region of Philadelphia-Amman; and the Church of John the Baptist at Gerasa.

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4 Di Segni (1992), 256–257, fig. 1.
5 Karasneh (1997), 21–26, fig. 12.
6 Sari (1995), 528, figs. 4, 5.
8 Piccirillo and Russan (1976), figs. 5, 6, pl. XXVIII:1.
9 Najjar and Sa’d (1994), 551, fig. 1, photos 3, 4, 9.
10 Welles (1938), inscr. 306.