An Investigation into the Geography, Theology, and Architecture of the Byzantine Monastery at Tel Masos

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ABSTRACT

CARRIE DUNCAN: An Investigation into the Geography, Theology, and Architecture of the Byzantine Monastery at Tel Masos
(Under the direction of Jodi Magness)

The impetus for this study was the seeming lack of interest in Tel Masos as the site of a potential second East Syrian monastery in Palestine. Upon closer examination, the monastery’s ascription as East Syrian was cast into doubt and a broader investigation began. It became clear that the monastery at Tel Masos had fallen into a void between academic disciplines. Geographically, the site falls within the discipline of Byzantine and early Islamic archaeology in Palestine, while theologically it belongs in the field of Syrian Christianity. Since the publication of the site, no one had taken the opportunity to bring the site into a dialogue wherein both facets, geographical and theological, were engaged. The main goal for this study was to start such a conversation.
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<tr>
<td>AASOR</td>
<td><em>Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research</em></td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td><em>The Biblical Archaeologist</em></td>
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<td>BASOR</td>
<td><em>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</em></td>
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<td>HTR</td>
<td><em>Harvard Theological Review</em></td>
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<td>JRA</td>
<td><em>Journal of Roman Archaeology</em></td>
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<td>LA</td>
<td><em>Liber Annuus</em></td>
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<td>NPNF</td>
<td><em>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</em></td>
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<td>QDAP</td>
<td><em>Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine</em></td>
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1: Origin and Organization of the Study

Tel Masos is an important Iron Age site in the northern Negev, which provides significant data for the hotly debated topics of Israelite origins and the Iron I to Iron II transition. Accordingly, publication of the material from the 1972-1975 excavations at the site of Tel Masos was a highly anticipated event.\(^1\) Relatively little attention, conversely, was paid to one chapter of the publication, which dealt with a late Byzantine/early Islamic period monastery. In a six page review article on the publication, one reviewer mentioned the monastery in only one sentence.\(^2\) It is, perhaps, not unexpected that the Iron Age material from the site received greater attention than did the Byzantine material, given that the former is more abundant at Tel Masos. Subsequent studies of Byzantine monasticism in Palestine have referred to the existence of the Tel Masos monastery, but without engaging or acknowledging the excavators’ most intriguing hypothesis: that the monastery was East Syrian.\(^3\)


East Syrian Christianity is not well attested in Palestine.\(^4\) Centered first at Antioch, and then at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, East Syrian Christianity predominantly extended south to the Arabian Peninsula and east along the Silk Road.\(^5\) Although literature testifies to East Syrian pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, only one monastery in Palestine has been identified definitively as East Syrian.\(^6\) It is reasonable to think that the possibility of a second East Syrian monastic structure in Palestine would have evoked interest from scholars in that field. Yet, either through ignorance of its existence or skepticism of its identification as East Syrian, minimal reference has been made to the monastery in studies of East Syrian monasticism.\(^7\)

An East Syrian monastery in southern Palestine has a foot in two disciplines: the archaeology of late Byzantine Palestine on the one hand, and Syrian Christianity on the other. An interesting phenomenon has occurred as a result of this disparity. The monastery at Tel Masos has been grouped together with all Palestinian monasteries by scholars in the field of its geographical setting, while at the same time it has been overlooked by scholars in the field of its potential theological setting. Consequently, the monastery does not make a significant contribution to either field. The apparent lack of interest in this site prompted this investigation.


\(^7\)The only reference located thus far is A. Desreumaux, ‘Des inscriptions syriaques de voyageurs et d’émigrés’, in F. Briquel Chatonnet, M. Debié, and A. Desreumaux (eds.), *Les inscriptions syriaques* (Paris, 2004), 45-53. I am grateful to Prof. L. Van Rompay for alerting me to this source.
The first and most basic question asked in this study is, therefore, whether the excavators are correct and the monastery of Tel Masos can be considered East Syrian with reasonable certainty. The excavators base their hypothesis on the interpretation of fragmentary Syriac inscriptions found at the site as having distinctively East Syrian characteristics. Epigraphic evidence often serves as a reliable source of information about a site: information that cannot be discerned easily from other remains in the archaeological record. Such was the case in the one definitive Palestinian East Syrian monastic structure mentioned above. This small structure, designated a hermitage by its excavators, is located just north east of Jericho and contains a well preserved mosaic floor with an eight line Syriac inscription. The inscription displays typical East Syrian spelling, contains a characteristically East Syrian theophoric name, and records the name of an individual known from other East Syrian sources. The inscriptions at the Tel Masos monastery, on the other hand, are poorly preserved and do not provide a coherent text. Although the extant fragments reflect possible indications of East Syrian origin, the epigraphic data ultimately are inconclusive. The possibility remains that the monastery instead could be West Syrian, which is itself an intriguing hypothesis. In either case, the religious affiliation of the Tel Masos monastery cannot be determined from its inscriptions.

The main goals of this study are to bring together as much information as is possible about the monastery at Tel Masos and its geographical, political, theological, and cultural milieu, and, using these data, to determine how the monastery fits into the environment of

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9 Baramki and Stephan, ‘A Nestorian Hermitage’, 83 n.1. This hermitage is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

10 While it is possible that the Tel Masos inscriptions were written by Chalcedonian Syrian Christians, East Syrians or West Syrians are more likely candidates (L. Van Rompay, pers. comm., 6/24/08).
late Byzantine Palestine. This introduction will conclude with a summary of recent research on monasticism in Byzantine Palestine and a concise description of the Tel Masos site. Chapter two will then provide a brief overview of monasticism in Palestine during the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods. Particular attention is given to the contemporary theological controversies and their reception among the monastic communities in this area. The effects of the Muslim conquest on settlement in Palestine are also investigated. These discussions help clarify the religious and political environment in which the Tel Masos monastery existed.

Chapter three focuses on the development of the East Syrian church. In particular the chapter addresses the East Syrian Church’s relationship to the Byzantine religious establishment as well as to the Muslim conquerors. This section investigates when and why the East Syrian Church might have expanded into Palestine and discusses the East Syrian hermitage near Jericho as an example of this phenomenon.

The fourth chapter compares and contrasts the layout, design, and decoration of churches and monasteries in several regions of the Near East. The discussion starts with the East Syrian churches of southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region, to see if the Tel Masos monastery could be part of the East Syrian expansion south and west of its Persian heartland. Next, the chapter addresses the churches of Syria with which the Tel Masos excavators most closely identified the monastery. Finally, the study turns to the churches and monasteries of Palestine, to discover the degree to which local influence was responsible for the architectural and decorative features of the Tel Masos monastery. Chapter five presents the conclusions of the study.
Apart from inquiries into Tel Masos specifically, a more general question arises: whether in the absence of clear epigraphic data it is possible to determine the religious affiliation of a monastic complex. More specifically, is an archaeological understanding of the term “East Syrian,” in the sense of Herodian masonry or a Philistine pot, possible? Is there anything in the archaeological record that can be associated reliably with East Syrian Christianity? The instinctive answer is negative; archaeology recovers a record of people’s actions, not their beliefs. Yet, in some cases belief governs action. It is possible that some aspect of East Syrian theology influenced some feature of East Syrian church or monastery layout, decoration, or furnishings in a consistent and archaeologically recoverable way. Recognition of such a feature would have implications beyond just determining the religious affiliation of the Tel Masos monastery. It would complicate and nuance discussions of monasticism in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods in new and interesting ways.

1.2: Recent Research on Byzantine Monasticism in Palestine

Over the past 15 years, numerous studies have examined various aspects of monasticism and monasteries in Byzantine Palestine. While many are organized geographically, others are thematic in nature. All studies included in this discussion mention the Tel Masos monastery in some capacity.

Schick does the most thorough job, among the studies discussed here, of acknowledging the wide variety of Christianities that existed in Palestine during the periods in question. He notes that although the majority of Christians in the area were Byzantine, in

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11 Examples include the numerous miqvaot at Qumran, the location of a miqrab within a mosque, and the orientation of burials: all are reflective of actions taken by people based on their beliefs.

12 Two classic studies of Byzantine monasticism, Y. Hirschfeld, The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period (New Haven, 1992) and J. Patrich, Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism (Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), are not included in this summary because their scope does not cover Tel Masos.
the sense that they adhered to the doctrines of the Council of Chalcedon, there were also Miaphysite Christians living in Palestine. Schick comments that there is no archaeological evidence for East Syrian presence in Palestine prior to the construction of the Tel Masos monastery, which he places around 700 CE, although literature attests to East Syrians traveling within Palestine from the first half of the 7th century. He agrees with the excavators’ suggestion that an East Syrian monastery in Palestine is best understood as a post-634 CE phenomenon. Schick also describes the difficulties inherent in any attempt to differentiate between various Christian communities on the basis of archaeological remains. Schick concludes that the Muslim conquerors treated all varieties of Christianity equally, based on the fact that no legal distinctions are made between them in Muslim juridical texts. This conclusion argues from silence, however, and Schick’s discussion does not explore varying reactions to the Muslims on the part of different Christian groups.

Figueras deals with the monasteries of the Negev in the Byzantine period, correcting a gap the author perceives in current research. Seventeen sites in the Negev are discussed using a combination of archaeological and literary sources. The study is useful in that it differentiates between types of monastic structures and their varying degrees of proximity to local population centers. Aside from noting that literary evidence attests to the monks of

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13 Schick, *The Christian Communities*, 9-13. The term ‘miaphysite’ better describes the theological position of those usually called ‘monophysite’ and will be employed here. I am grateful to Dr. M. Penn for giving me this information.


18 Figueras, ‘Monks and Monasteries’, 401.
Aila being Orthodox, Figueras does not engage variation in Christian affiliation in his analysis.\textsuperscript{20} In the many cases in which no clue as to monastic affiliation is available, his choice is understandable. In the case of Tel Masos, however, Figueras not only rejects the excavators’ evaluation of the inscriptions as East Syrian, but he also avoids the logical consequence of his rejection: that the inscriptions would in that case be West Syrian.\textsuperscript{21} Not to mention this interesting possibility is regrettable.

Hirschfeld includes Tel Masos in his summary of monasteries that lay within the cultural sphere of Gaza during the Byzantine period. He uses a system of concentric circles to describe the proximity of various monasteries to Gaza, utilizing literary and/or archaeological data as available.\textsuperscript{22} Tel Masos falls within the third ring of monasteries, those 25 km or more from Gaza. Hirschfeld mentions the excavators’ ascription of the monastery as East Syrian and notes Figueras’ objection, but does not bring the subject into conversation.\textsuperscript{23} Given that the Gazan area has been characterized by some as strongly Miaphysite, it is unfortunate that this issue remains unexplored in this study.\textsuperscript{24}

Heiska’s 2003 M.A. thesis from the University of Helsinki explores the economic and subsistence practices of Palestinian monks during the Byzantine period. In this context, she utilizes data from plant, skeletal, ceramic, metal, and architectural analyses in the Tel Masos

\textsuperscript{19}Figueras, ‘Monks and Monasteries’, 447-448.
\textsuperscript{20}Figueras, ‘Monks and Monasteries’, 406.
\textsuperscript{21}Figueras, ‘Monks and Monasteries’, 443.
\textsuperscript{23}Hirschfeld, ‘The Monasteries of Gaza’, 85.
\textsuperscript{24}On the religious affiliation of monks in the Gaza region, see B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky, The Monastic School of Gaza (Leiden, 2006).
publication, among others, to discuss diet, nutrition, pilgrimage, and cultivation. No differentiation between Christian communities is made in the study. On one hand, this is understandable given that subsistence practices are unlikely to vary greatly even between monastic and lay populations, much less between theologically differentiated monks. On the other hand, Heiska invokes monastic regulations set out in the canons of the Council of Chalcedon as sources of information on Palestinian monastic practice. Neither Miaphysite nor East Syrian affiliated monasteries necessarily would have been obliged to adhere to these canons. In the context of this study, Palestinian monasteries, including that at Tel Masos, are treated uniformly as Chalcedonian.

Bar’s study of the influence of rural monasticism on the Christianization of Palestine cited Tel Masos as an example of a monastery situated on the southern edge of a settlement. The author’s main interest is in the process by which rural pagans converted to Christianity under the influence of monks in strategically located monasteries. Although convincing in many of its points, the article’s simple juxtaposition of Christianity and paganism leaves both seeming like monolithic entities. A more nuanced view of “Christianization,” wherein various Christian sects vied for converts among various pagans as well as other Christians, would be welcome.

Finally, Ribak’s detailed analysis of the spatial distribution of religious structures and artifacts provides important information on the distribution of religious populations in Byzantine Palestine. Ribak concludes that Christians and Jews lived in closer proximity than

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26Bar, ‘Rural Monasticism’, 56. There is no indication of a settlement at Tel Masos contemporaneous to the monastery. On this point, Figueras is correct to list Tel Masos as an isolated monastery rather than as adjacent to a town, ('Monks and Monasteries’, 447).
had hitherto been thought.\textsuperscript{27} Despite all the valuable contributions this study makes, Christianity is nevertheless treated as a unified institution in nearly all contexts. Ribak’s section on religious life in Byzantine Palestine gives no indication that multiple varieties of Christianity existed in Palestine at this time.\textsuperscript{28} Only in the context of an analysis of church architecture are Syrian churches differentiated from Byzantine.\textsuperscript{29} Tel Masos is listed in the catalogue of Byzantine religious sites, without any reference to its possible East Syrian affiliation.\textsuperscript{30}

In some senses, the failure of the above-mentioned studies to account for the varieties of Christianity that existed in Byzantine Palestine, and more specifically, the possible East Syrian affiliation of the Tel Masos monastery is understandable. In some cases, such detail is outside the scope of their inquiry. In many cases there is simply nothing to say: no data can be brought to bear on the subject. In a few instances, however, there is some clue that can be used to complicate and enrich the representation of Byzantine Palestine being drawn. An acknowledgement, if nothing else, of the complexities that exist beyond the reach of modern scholars to recreate could produce a framework in which to insert the rarely found piece of greater detail. A simple example of implementing this practice would be to include a category for affiliation in a site catalogue like that of Hirschfeld or Ribak. Even though most entries would read “unknown”, such a practice would acknowledge rather than ignore this gap in knowledge.

\textsuperscript{27}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 77-81.

\textsuperscript{28}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 114-20.

\textsuperscript{29}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 37-38.

\textsuperscript{30}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 190-191.
1.3: Overview of the Tel Masos Monastery

A brief description of the remains of the Tel Masos monastery will complete the introduction to this topic. As noted above, the monastery constitutes a reoccupation of the Iron Age site after many centuries of abandonment. The site itself straddles Nahal Beersheba, with the Bronze Age remains on the south side of the wadi and the Iron Age remains on the north side. The monastery is located on the southern edge of the Iron Age tel; some of the southernmost exterior walls have been destroyed by erosion from the wadi.

The monastery measures roughly 20 by 30 meters and is made up of a series of rooms surrounding an interior courtyard.\(^{31}\) The entrance is located on the southern side of the monastery and leads from an exterior courtyard into an entry room. From there one could go up a flight of six steps on the right into the church or proceed straight into the interior courtyard. The eastern fifth of the courtyard is partitioned off by a series of columns into a sort of corridor.

A single line of rooms surrounds the southern, western, and northern sides of the courtyard: two on the south, three on the west, and two on the north.\(^{32}\) The southwestern, western, and northern rooms were not cleared.\(^{33}\) Remains of charred cedar beams and nails in the northwestern room (632) indicate that a timber ceiling supported an upper storey above the rooms surrounding the courtyard. The room (637) on the northeastern side of the courtyard was a kitchen, which contained two ovens, a ventilation system, and a drain.


The eastern side of the monastery preserves a double line of rooms, the northern two of which were not cleared. Directly east and accessible from the courtyard’s partitioned corridor stands another room (611), which contains a limestone altar panel the excavators suggest had been brought there from the church’s sanctuary. This room has two sets of stairs in the southeast corner, one of which leads south into the church and the other east into another room (610). Almost all of Room 610 had collapsed into the crypt below; only the southern edge of the floor is preserved.

The crypt holds seven graves covered with limestone slabs: five along the western wall, one on the north and one on the south and all oriented east-west. Each grave contained two or three bodies. Although two of the burials were undisturbed, no grave goods were found. Included among the rubble of the collapse of Room 610 were fragmentary pieces of wall plaster with Syriac writing, which the excavators suggest identified the dead. The crypt was accessed by a door through the monastery’s eastern exterior wall.

The church’s vaulted ceiling was supported by three transverse arches sprung from pairs of pilasters on the north and south walls. The eastern quarter of the church was partitioned first by columns and subsequently by a dividing wall into a broad, rectangular sanctuary. The floor is paved with limestone slabs, arranged in a north-south orientation in the nave of the church, but laid east-west in the sanctuary. Depressions in the limestone floor of the sanctuary indicate the location of the altar table. The excavators characterized the church as Syrian in style, finding the closest parallel at ‘Anz in the Hauran. According to the excavators, particularly Syrian characteristics of the Tel Masos church include the

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34 Fritz and Kempinski, *Hirbet el-Msas*, 143-144.

rectangular shape of the sanctuary, which is atypical for churches in Palestine, and the slightly raised floor level in the sanctuary.\footnote{Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 142.}

Room 610 and the nave of the church are at the same elevation, approximately one meter higher than the other rooms at the monastery, indicating a functional and symbolic relationship between the two rooms. This relationship is supported by the presence of a doorway on the south side of room 610 leading into the nave of the church immediately west of the sanctuary. The excavators are unsure whether this doorway was original or secondary to the construction of the church, and lean toward the latter option.\footnote{Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 141-142.} Direct access between the rooms only makes sense, however, given their equal elevation. It is possible that room 610 functioned as a subsidiary room of the sanctuary, a feature common to Byzantine churches.\footnote{One would expect the access point between the church and room 610 to be within the sanctuary if room 610 functioned as a subsidiary room, but there are many variations on the arrangement of these rooms. See below, Chapter Four.} Another possibility, given the location of the crypt, is that room 610 served as a \textit{martyrium}. The collapse of the floor in room 610 makes it difficult to determine the room’s function with any degree of certainty.

Two rooms were found in the exterior courtyard, just south of the church abutting the monastery’s exterior wall.\footnote{Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 145.} These rooms might have served as travelers’ quarters. Additional lines of walls appear to the south and east of the monastery, but this area was not excavated.
Fifty-one complete or nearly complete ceramic vessels were found in the monastery, most from the courtyard corridor and the entry room.\textsuperscript{40} They are local wares with parallels at Nessana, Sobota, Ramat Rahel and Khirbet el-Mefjer. The vessels can be dated generally to the seventh century, but given the uniformity of Byzantine pottery over time, a more precise date cannot be established.

Four incised drawings were found on limestone blocks in the rubble of rooms 611 and 610, as well as in the partition wall between the nave and sanctuary.\textsuperscript{41} These include two drawings of ships, one of a bird, and one of figures outside of a tent. Traces of limestone plaster indicate that the walls were originally covered, so these drawings must have been made prior to or during construction.

During the course of excavation, five limestone blocks were found in the vicinity of the church and its adjoining rooms which display Syriac and Greek inscriptions.\textsuperscript{42} The inscriptions preserve isolated words and personal names, but no coherent text.\textsuperscript{43} One interesting feature of the longest inscription (Inschrift Nr. 1) is that while most of the Greek words are written in a regular left to right orientation, the phrase METPONPI is written in a vertical column. This choice might have been made in an attempt to render the Greek in a characteristically Syriac manner. The individual Greek letters, however, are oriented vertically, unlike Syriac letters, which are oriented 90 degrees counter-clockwise.\textsuperscript{44} The manner in which these inscriptions were made has interesting implications for their makers.

\textsuperscript{40}\textsuperscript{40}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 153-158.

\textsuperscript{41}\textsuperscript{41}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 148-153.

\textsuperscript{42}\textsuperscript{42}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 158-159; Plates 81-83.

\textsuperscript{43}\textsuperscript{43}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 159-170.

\textsuperscript{44}\textsuperscript{44}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 161; Plate 120.
The facility with which the Syriac is rendered and the contrasting awkwardness of the Greek implies that the writers were native Syriac speakers with limited familiarity with Greek epigraphic style. This conclusion will lend weight to the point argued below that the monastery at Tel Masos was a wholly Syrian enterprise and not an example of one or more Syrians having joined a local Byzantine monastic community.

The Syriac inscriptions on plaster were found in the rubble of the crypt, perhaps from the walls of either room 610 or the crypt, or from a memorial plaque as the epigrapher suggests. The pieces are very fragmentary and cannot be reconstructed into a coherent text. The script in which the inscriptions were written is called Estrangela, a type of script used in both the East Syrian and West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) churches through the tenth century. Consequently, it is often difficult to determine whether an early Estrangela text is East Syrian or West Syrian. In either case, the form of the letters indicates that the text was written in the seventh or eighth centuries.

Despite the fragmentary condition of the inscriptions and the ambiguous script in which they are written, two factors led to the identification of the Tel Masos inscriptions as East Syrian. First, one fragment preserves two diagonal dots below the line of the text, which can be read as the East Syrian vowel ē. West Syrian texts do not use this type of vowel marker. Second, another fragment preserves the Syriac word Išo (Jesus). Theophoric names incorporating Išo are very common in East Syrian tradition, but are never used among West Syrians.

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45 Fritz and Kempinski, Hirbet el-Msas, 158.

46 L. Van Rompay, pers. comm. 7/20/08.

47 Fritz and Kempinski, Hirbet el-Msas, 175; Pl. 122A8.

Although these factors suggest that the monastery at Tel Masos was East Syrian, they are not definitive evidence. First, the fragmentary state of the plaster piece on which the two dots representing the vowel ē appear and the fact that the piece is presented only in a line drawing make it difficult to know with certainty that the two dots represent an East Syrian vowel marker. Second, the term Išo appears in isolation on its plaster fragment and is not necessarily part of a theophoric name. It is possible that the term could be read simply as Jesus or Jesus Christ; these readings are equally possible in East Syrian or West Syrian texts.⁴⁹

This overview is intended as a preliminary familiarization with some of the artifacts and architectural features that will become important in the fourth chapter of this study. Although it is not large or ornate, there are many intriguing and unsolved aspects to the Tel Masos monastery that warrant further exploration. This study will commence with an overview of Palestinian monasticism in the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods.

⁴⁹I am grateful to Prof. L. Van Rompay for his many insights on these inscriptions over the course of several conversations.
Chapter Two: Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Monasticism in Palestine

2.1: Distribution of Monastic Structures

Although monasteries were located throughout Palestine during the Byzantine Period, most fell within three main areas: Galilee, Jerusalem, and Gaza.50 The geographical location of a monastery could influence the position of its inhabitants on political and religious issues, as will be seen in the next section. Therefore, understanding the geographical distribution of monasteries is an important preliminary step to comprehending the political and religious events of the period. This overview will use both literary and archaeological data to provide a full, though brief, summary of the distribution of monastic structures in Palestine.51

Despite a strong Christian presence in the Galilee during the Byzantine Period, the number of sites identified as monasteries is small. This fact is somewhat surprising, given the centrality of the Galilee in New Testament events and the association of many towns there with the early Jesus movement. In all probability, the dearth of evidence for monastic

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50 Ribak, Religious Communities, 16; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, Monastic School, 6. This overview will be restricted to within the three provinces of Byzantine Palestine. For information on monasticism in Sinai and Egypt, see respectively U. Dahari, Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains (Jerusalem, 2000) and O. Meinardus, Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts (Cairo, 1989).

51 A few methodological inconsistencies present themselves when studies on this subject are examined. There is some ambiguity, for example, as to what constitutes a monastery. Y. Hirschfeld, in ‘The Anchor Church at the Summit of Mt. Berenice, Tiberias’, BA 57.3 (1994), 122-133, comments that the church supported a community of monks, who operated the oil press (126). Does the presence of monks make the Anchor Church a monastery? Ribak, on the other hand, labels the site as a church (Religious Communities, 227-228; Map Three). Further, some studies make use of archaeological materials exclusively, while others also take advantage of literary evidence in constructing their picture of Byzantine Palestinian monasticism. Both methods can be appropriate in different contexts, but the choice can have a drastic effect on the characterization of a region. For example, Ribak, relying exclusively on archaeological materials, numbers the monasteries near Gaza at two (Religious Communities, Map Two) while Hirschfeld, using archaeological and literary evidence, counts 18 monastic sites (‘The Monasteries of Gaza,’ 67-87).
occupation is not due to accident of excavation. Excavation in the Galilee has been extensive, aided by its relative lack of political significance and its limited modern population density as compared to other parts of the country.\textsuperscript{52} The limited monastic presence in Galilee is more likely due to the region’s mild climate or lack of famous ascetics. Monasteries in the Near East tended to be located in remote areas such as deserts, as will be seen in the Judean Desert.\textsuperscript{53} In the case of monasteries located near population centers, as at Gaza, their establishment often was a result of the proximity of renowned ascetics, around whom monks tended to congregate.\textsuperscript{54} Lacking either of these features, the monastic presence in Galilee in the Byzantine Period appears to have remained limited.

The greatest concentration of monasteries in Byzantine Palestine was in the area of Jerusalem, and more specifically in the region east of Jerusalem known as the Judean Desert. This 25 km by 90 km strip of land supported over sixty monastic structures during the Byzantine Period.\textsuperscript{55} Although hagiographic writings from the area of the Judean Desert exist, most of what is known about these monasteries comes from archaeological survey and excavation.\textsuperscript{56} The area is nearly ideal for archaeological preservation. The arid climate, extremely low population density, and challenging accessibility all contribute to the excellent condition in which many of the monasteries are found.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{52}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 44.

\textsuperscript{53}On this phenomenon, see D. Chitty, \textit{The Desert a City} (Oxford, 1966).

\textsuperscript{54}In Gaza, the precipitating holy man was Hilarion. The situation was not always either/or, of course. Egypt was fortunate in having both expansive deserts and a multiplicity of holy men.

\textsuperscript{55}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 10.

\textsuperscript{56}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, xiv-xv.

\textsuperscript{57}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 5.
The Judean Desert provides examples of the several types of monasteries that existed in Byzantine Palestine. Hirschfeld’s study of the area categorizes these monasteries using two sets of criteria: whether they are lauras or coenobia and whether they are built on cliffs or on level ground.\textsuperscript{58} A laura consists of individual cells, either caves or built structures, connected to one another by paths. Communal buildings, including a church and a bakery, are centrally located among the cells. Monks in a laura live a mostly eremitic lifestyle, spending the week in isolation and coming together on weekends for communal worship and food. In a coenobium, monks live in daily community. Although they vary greatly in size, coenobia generally contain living quarters, a kitchen, a communal eating area, and a communal worship area, all surrounded by a stone enclosure wall.\textsuperscript{59} In terms of location, cliff monasteries – both lauras and coenobia – were typical in early periods. Over time, monasteries, particularly coenobia, demonstrate a preference for level ground.\textsuperscript{60} Cliff lauras tend to be more haphazardly arranged than level ground lauras, given the former’s more restrictive geographical constraints.\textsuperscript{61}

In addition to its appealingly desolate landscape, the Judean Desert also had its share of renowned ascetics. Chariton is often considered a key figure in the foundation of Palestinian monasticism.\textsuperscript{62} After visiting Jerusalem, he is reputed to have founded three monasteries in the Judean Desert. Chariton was followed by Euthymius, Gerasimus, and

\textsuperscript{58}Hirschfeld gives the further sub-divisions of monasteries founded on the remains of fortresses and monasteries built next to memorial churches. While the former sub-type includes both lauras and coenobia, the latter type includes only coenobia (\textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 47-58).

\textsuperscript{59}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 33-47.

\textsuperscript{60}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 20; 34.

\textsuperscript{61}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, 20.

Sabas, among others. These famous figures drew monks from all over the world to their monasteries, often by way of Jerusalem. The proximity of Jerusalem, the financial support provided by the Jerusalem ecclesiastical hierarchy to many of the monasteries, the desert climate, and famous monks guaranteed the Judean Desert as a flourishing monastic center.

The region of Gaza differs substantially from both Galilee and the Judean Desert because of its population density, both ancient and modern. Archaeological research in the area is stymied by robbing of materials, modern habitations, and ongoing political problems. Much of what is known of Gazan monasticism is therefore derived from literary sources. Fortunately, however, these sources are not confined to a single genre, such as hagiography, but instead encompass a wide variety of literary types. By combining the limited archaeological data with these literary sources, a reasonably clear picture of Gazan monasticism in the Byzantine Period emerges.

Just as Chariton is credited with the establishment of monasticism in the Judean Desert, Hilarion is associated with the beginnings of monasticism in the Gaza region. Jerome’s *Life of Hilarion* reports that Hilarion was born in the village of Thabatha, just outside Gaza, and was sent by his pagan parents to Alexandria for his education. While in Egypt, Hilarion became a follower of Antony. He returned to the Gaza region and lived a life of seclusion for over twenty years before his mass of followers necessitated the building

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64 Monasteries flourished in Jerusalem as well, although they are better known from literature than from excavation. See A. Ovadiah, *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land* (Bonn, 1970), 75-98; Chitty, *A Desert*, 46-52; Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors*, 84-85.


of a monastery. Sozomen’s *Ecclesiastical History* records the same biographical details as well as information about Hilarion’s disciples. This source, along with the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, reveals a Gazan monasticism heavily influenced by Egypt. Nearly all the prominent monks in the area had either studied in Egypt, studied with a native Egyptian, or were themselves Egyptian.

Some monasteries adopted a compromise between eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. Abba Isaiah, a well-known Egyptian monk, was unable to realize his desire for seclusion because of his popularity. He established a coenobitic monastery near Gaza to house his followers, but lived outside the monastery in seclusion. Nevertheless, Isaiah maintained contact with his followers through an intermediary, and in that way oversaw the spiritual direction of those in the monastery. A similar relationship existed between the ascetics Barsanuphius and John and the members of the monastery of Seridus at Thabatha. Moreover, the spiritual guidance provided by these anchorites was not limited to monks of the monastery, but extended to lay persons, secular rulers, and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Gazan monasticism had a strong intellectual character. Gaza’s reputation as a center of philosophy and rhetoric during the Byzantine Period is undoubtedly a contributing

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factor. In addition, many monks who became prominent in Gaza during the late fifth and early sixth centuries were recruited by Peter the Iberian, bishop of Maiuma, from a famous law school in Beirut. These figures included John Rufus, Theodore of Ascalon, Evagrius, Zacharias Rhetor, and Severus of Sozopolis, the future patriarch of Antioch. Several of these figures would become major players in the ecclesiastical politics of their day. Despite occasional indications of anti-intellectualism among Gazan monks, erudition was a common feature of monasticism in this region.

Literary sources mention numerous lauras and coenobia in the Gaza region, but few have been discovered. The *Correspondence of Barsanuphius and John* and Dorotheus’ *Instructions* provide many details about the coenobitic monastery of Seridus. The *Life of Peter the Iberian* describes details of how a laura in which Peter lived, near Gaza’s port city of Maiuma, was converted into a coenobium after his death. Only one Byzantine monastery has been excavated and published to date within a 25 km radius of Gaza. This monastery, east of Gaza at Khirbet Jemameh, is a small coenobium dated by the excavators to the late sixth and early seventh centuries CE. A large monastery, tentatively identified as that of Seridus, has been excavated southwest of Gaza at Deir e-Nuserat. Unfortunately,

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73 Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky cite seemingly anti-intellectual statements in Abba Isaiah’s Asceticum and some letters of Barsanuphius and John (*Monastic School*, 22). In the case of the latter, the perceived anti-intellectualism is likely inferred from advice given by Barsanuphius and John that the monks not involve themselves in the theological controversies of the day, but instead focus on perfecting their ascetic practice. The Old Men themselves display a thorough knowledge of philosophical and theological texts that belies a characterization of them as “anti-intellectual”. The term ‘anti-intellectual’ is sometimes used as a euphemism for ‘anti-Origenist’, which might be the case here. I am grateful to Prof. E. Clark for this information.


the site is still unpublished. The several churches of the Byzantine Period have been excavated in the area, but it remains unclear whether they were associated with monastic complexes.

From even a brief examination of the literary texts, the picture of a vibrant monastic culture centered on Gaza emerges. Gazan monasticism had its roots in Egypt, developed a middle ground between coenobitic and eremitic monasticism, and embraced the intellectualism of Gaza. The foregoing survey of the distribution of monasteries in Palestine sets the stage for a discussion of the theological controversies of the Byzantine Period, which were closely related to geography.

2.2: Theological Controversies

Differences in theology and accusations of heresy were a common feature of the Christian Church during the Byzantine Period. Without denying the complicated and interrelated nature of these differences, the following summary will attempt to distill the arguments relevant to this study and examine their effect on monasticism in Palestine.

The Council of Nicaea of 325 CE was convened in large part to address Arianism’s perceived misrepresentation of the Logos. The resulting creed established the Son of God

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77See Hirschfeld, ‘The Monasteries of Gaza’, 80-83. At the site of Yattir, for example, one of the churches is known to have been associated with a monastery because of the inscription it bears. The monastery itself, however, was not revealed in excavation. See H. Eshel, J. Magness, and E. Shenhav, with J. Besonen, ‘Interim Report on Khirbet Yattir in Judaea: A Mosque and a Monastic Church’, JRA 12 (1999), 411-422. Some texts also provide an indication that the scattered monasteries of the Negev were influenced by Gaza. For example, Barsanuphius had a correspondent from Beersheba (Barsanuphe et Jean 1-54) and Hilarion visited the area of Elusa as part of his administration of area monasteries (V. Hilar. 25). Most monasteries in the Negev are known from survey rather than excavation, which makes their identification somewhat suspect. For example, of the 17 Negev monasteries identified by Figueras (‘Monks and Monasteries’), only five, including Tel Masos, are known from published excavation reports (Mamshit, Nessana, Oboda, and Ruheibeh). For the others Figueras cites either unpublished descriptions or results from survey. For the problems associated with data gathered exclusively from survey, see J. Magness, The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine (Winona Lake, 2003), 6-8. It is interesting to note that of the four excavated, published monasteries mentioned above, all come from large towns. It is likely that the tendency to excavate large sites is responsible for the resulting implication that monasteries in the Negev usually existed in proximity to large towns. Additional excavation of smaller sites will be needed to correct this misleading statistic.
as fully divine and consubstantial with God, using the term *homoousios* despite its unpopularity among eastern theologians. The council, however, did not address how to understand the relationship between full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. As a result, the subsequent century teemed with attempts to reconcile these aspects.

One of the first to respond was Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea. He argued that Christ possessed the divine Word in place of a human mind, because the sinfulness inherent to the human mind was incompatible with the sinless nature of Christ. Apollinaris’ explication was seen as an elaboration of arguments against Arianism, but was deemed to have gone too far in the opposite direction. The Council of Constantinople condemned Apollinarianism in 381 CE.

A different approach to the problem came from the area of Antioch. Diodore, bishop of Tarsus and Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia argued that the human and divine elements of Christ each had a separate nature, and that these two natures were perfectly united in one person (*prosopon*). Their approach addressed the problem raised by Gregory of Nazianzus against Apollinaris’ doctrine: what Christ has not assumed, he has not healed. By asserting

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80See the note on Apollinaris in H. Bettenson and C. Maunder (eds.), *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1999), 49.


84Gregory of Nazianzus, *To Cledonius the Priest against Apollonarius* ep. ci, trans. C. Browne and J. Swallow in P. Schaff and H. Wace (eds.), NPNF 2.7, 439-443.; Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 159. This idea is found as early as Tertullian, see Frend, *Monophysite Movement*, 131.
Christ’s fully human mind, Gregory claimed that Christ’s soteriological power is effected through his full participation in the human experience.\(^8^5\) The two-nature doctrine advocated by Diodore and Theodore allowed for both Christ’s free will and his salvific capacity.\(^8^6\)

Despite Apollinarianism’s condemnation by the Council of Constantinople, its theology remained popular among eastern theologians and lay persons. Aside from its appealing simplicity, the doctrine remained popular because of its compatibility with the widely used honorific term for Mary of God-bearer (\textit{theotokos}). This term is accurate within a one-nature theology, in which Christ is a flesh covered god. For a two nature doctrine, however, the more accurate honorific is Christ-bearer (\textit{Christotokos}), which many rejected as an unacceptable demotion of Mary and a dangerous return to an overemphasis of Christ’s humanity.\(^8^7\) The term \textit{theotokos} became the point of provocation that split the Church in three parts.

The precipitator of this split was Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, whose motivation in doing so was likely as much political as it was theological.\(^8^8\) He was greatly influenced by Apollinaris, whose writings were circulating in the early fifth century under the names of orthodox figures such as Julius of Rome and Athanasius.\(^8^9\) Cyril advocated a one-nature doctrine in which the divine Word voluntarily and temporarily emptied itself to adopt a human soul and flesh. In this way Cyril could assert the full humanity of Christ while

\(^{8^5}\)Frend, \textit{Monophysite Movement}, 118.

\(^{8^6}\)This is not meant to imply that Apollinaris was unconcerned with Christ’s salvific powers. He thought Christ’s redemptive abilities lay in his divinity rather than his humanity: a view that ultimately was rejected. See Frend, \textit{Monophysite Movement}, 115-116.

\(^{8^7}\)Frend, \textit{Monophysite Movement}, 14; Hall, \textit{Doctrine and Practice}, 212-213.

\(^{8^8}\)Vine, \textit{Nestorian Churches}, 29.

\(^{8^9}\)Frend, \textit{Monophysite Movement}, 120. Raven characterizes Cyril as, ‘the Apollinarian who was too clever to acknowledge his master,’ (\textit{Apollinarianism} 231).
maintaining that he had only one, divine nature (*physis*). ⁹⁰ In 428 CE a collection of sermons began to circulate around Alexandria, which argued that the term *theotokos* was inappropriate. ⁹¹ Cyril perceived this claim as a threat to his one-nature doctrine, to the sensibilities of Alexandrian Christians who venerated Mary as *theotokos*, and to the ecclesiastical primacy of Alexandria. ⁹²

The sermons in question had been written by Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, a student of Theodore of Mopsuestia. Following his teacher’s line of reasoning, Nestorius considered acceptance of the term *theotokos* as opening a point of vulnerability to Arianist argumentation. A one-natured Christ who suffers and dies cannot be thought to be of the same substance as the transcendent God, and therefore could be considered divine only in some inferior way. ⁹³ Furthermore, the term was not found in scripture or used in the Nicene Creed. ⁹⁴ Ironically, Nestorius’ attempt to preserve the full divinity of Christ by rejecting the term *theotokos* was taken in the opposite way: as reducing Christ to a mere human. ⁹⁵

Cyril succeeded in painting Nestorius as an Arian by making the claim that if Mary were not *theotokos* then Christ was not God. ⁹⁶ Nestorius was condemned and deposed at a council convened by emperor Theodosius II in Ephesus in 431 CE and the term *theotokos* was established as orthodox. ⁹⁷ After a few years of negotiation, Cyril and Antioch’s new

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⁹⁰Cyril uses the terms *hypostasis* and *physis* interchangeably, see Frend, *Monophysite Movement*, 122-124.

⁹¹Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 76.


⁹³Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 212-213.

⁹⁴Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 79.

⁹⁵Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 213.

⁹⁶Wessel, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 77.
bishop John were reconciled and they agreed upon a Formula of Reunion, which stipulated, among other things, that Christ was an unconfused union of two natures. Cyril relinquished his one-nature (*mia physis*) terminology and John agreed to the condemnation of Nestorius.98

The next two decades witnessed this shaky peace give way to a renewal of the struggle between Alexandria and Antioch. Cyril’s successor, Dioscorus, was determined to eradicate the vestiges of Nestorianism he perceived in Theodoret, bishop of Cyrhus and Ibas, bishop of Edessa, using as a rallying cry the early Cyrillic position, ‘After the union, one.’99 In 449 CE, Dioscorus succeeded in convincing emperor Theodosius II to assemble a council at Ephesus with the intention of rehabilitating his (Dioscorus’) partisan Eutyches and of punishing Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, who had convicted Eutyches of heresy for not accepting the Formula of Reunion.100 If successful, the Formula would be rendered meaningless and the more conservative one-nature theology that Cyril had relinquished for the sake of compromise with Antioch could be reinstated. Dioscorus accomplished all his goals: the Formula was struck down, Eutyches was cleared, and Theodoret and Ibas were deposed.101

Flavian and Theodoret appealed to Pope Leo to reverse the decisions made at Ephesus. Although Leo was an influential figure, it is possible that Dioscorus would have carried the day nonetheless. In 450 CE, however, the pro-Alexandrian emperor Theodosius II died and was replaced by his sister, Pulcheria. Another council at Chalcedon was held the

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100Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 226.
101Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 229.
next year, which deposed Dioscorus, reinstated Theodoret and Ibas, upheld the conviction of Eutyches, established as orthodox the Tome of Leo, and reaffirmed the condemnation of Nestorius.  Leo had written his Tome for the 449 CE council at Ephesus, but it arrived a month after the proceedings had concluded. The Tome espoused a two-nature doctrine in which the two natures of Christ came together in one person while retaining their distinctiveness. Nestorius, from his exile in Egypt, is said to have recognized his own theology in Leo’s Tome; a supreme irony given that the Council of Chalcedon established the Tome as orthodox but reaffirmed Nestorius as heretical.

Ibas and Theodoret had been reinstated by the Council of Chalcedon, but on the condition that they anathematize Nestorius. Although they complied, many within their own dioceses continued to regard them with suspicion. Over the course of the second half of the fifth century, adherents of the doctrines of Theodore of Mopsuestia and his student Nestorius drifted eastwards into the Sasanian Empire and coalesced into the East Syrian Church.

Although the decisions made at Chalcedon were the first in a series of steps that separated the Byzantine Church from the future East Syrian Church, these events simultaneously precipitated the divide between the Byzantine Church and those adhering to a one-nature doctrine. The Chalcedonian position was just as unpopular among supporters of Cyril and Dioscorus as it was among partisans of Theodore and Nestorius. Pro-Cyrillian

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103 Hall, Doctrine and Practice, 227-228.

104 Vine, Nestorian Churches, 34; Frend, Monophysite Movement, 134.

105 Vine, Nestorian Churches, 41.

106 A brief history of the East Syrian Church after 451 CE will be given in Chapter Three.
riots broke out in Alexandria and Jerusalem, which were quelled with soldiers dispatched from Constantinople. Those who refused to relinquish Cyril’s one-nature doctrine became known as Miaphysites, and were influential particularly in Egypt and Syria.

Despite its initially violent anti-Chalcedonian outburst, Jerusalem came to be a strong Chalcedonian center. Juvenal, bishop of Jerusalem, recognized the political expediency of acquiescing to imperial policy, as did Eudocia, the dowager empress who lived in Jerusalem. Their acquiescence to Chalcedon bought an upgrade in status for Jerusalem to a patriarchate. Under the influence of Euthymius, a prominent monk of the Judean Desert, most of the monks in Jerusalem and the Judean Desert reconciled themselves to Chalcedon. The acceptance of Chalcedon by both the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Jerusalem and the monastic community of the Judean Desert was an essential element of their future relationship. These monasteries would supply Jerusalem with pro-Chalcedonian church leaders throughout the late fifth and early sixth centuries as opposition to Chalcedon continued in Egypt and Syria.

Unlike Jerusalem, Alexandria and the Egyptian monasteries continued to embrace the Miaphysite cause. The Chalcedonian bishop of Alexandria, Proterius, was lynched by his constituency in 457 CE and replaced by the Miaphysite Timothy. Given the influence

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107 Chitty, The Desert, 90; Frend, Monophysite Movement, 149.

108 Frend, Monophysite Movement, 144-145.

109 Frend, Monophysite Movement, 149, 153.


111 Chitty, The Desert, 89; Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, Monastic School, 3.

112 Hirschfeld, Judean Desert Monasteries, 13-14.

113 Frend, Monophysite Movement, 155.
exerted on the Gazan monasteries by Egypt, it is no surprise that Gaza became the center of anti-Chalcedonian activity in Palestine.

One of the chief engineers of Gazan anti-Chalcedonianism was Peter the Iberian, who was elected bishop of Maiuma during the post-Chalcedon riots. After Jerusalem returned to Chalcedonian control, Peter chose self-imposed exile in Egypt and participated in the Miaphysite movement there. Peter returned to Palestine at the end of the reign of Chalcedonian emperor Leo and began openly to recruit monks for the Miaphysite cause. As a result, a network of anti-Chalcedonian monasteries grew up around Gaza in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, at Maiuma, Caphar She’arta, Migdal Thabatha, Kanopis, Beth Dallatha, Gerar, and Peleia.

In 488 CE, Peter and his mentor Abba Isaiah were summoned to Constantinople by emperor Zeno to sign the *Henotikon*, Zeno’s attempt to reconcile the Alexandrian church with Constantinople. The *Henotikon* rejected any addition to doctrine beyond the Nicene Creed, but did not explicitly anathematize the Council of Chalcedon or the *Tome* of Leo. Zeno’s efforts at reconciliation did not go far enough in the eyes of many Miaphysites. Peter and Isaiah avoided the confrontation, the former by hiding in Phoenicia and the latter by feigning illness.

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120Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, *Monastic School*, 23. There does seem to be some disagreement among scholars on this point. Frend comments that Peter was satisfied with the *Henotikon* (*Monophysite Movement*, 29
The Miaphysite party received a respite with the ascension of emperor Anastasius in 491 CE. Although Anastasius upheld Zeno’s *Henotikon*, he was also sympathetic to the Miaphysites, in part because of his close relationship with Severus, bishop of Antioch and associate of Peter the Iberian.¹²¹ Anastasius’ reign is characterized by a shaky peace and continued attempts at reconciliation.¹²² A week after his death in 518 CE, however, pro-Chalcedonian riots broke out in Constantinople and throughout the empire. The new pro-Chalcedonian emperor Justin deposed Severus, who fled to Egypt.¹²³

Justin began his reign by enacting a policy of purging Miaphysite clergy and monks from all parts of the empire except for Egypt. The bishops of Syria were given the option to sign a statement supporting Chalcedon or to be removed from their sees.¹²⁴ The abbots and monks of Miaphysite monasteries in Palestine were expelled south into Egypt if they chose to reject Chalcedon.¹²⁵ A temporary moderation of imperial policy towards Miaphysites began 520 CE and aimed to reintegrate anti-Chalcedonians into the fold of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, but was unsuccessful and culminated in the Edict on Heretics in 527 CE.¹²⁶

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¹²⁶Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 242-244.
A second series of attempts towards reconciliation began in 532 CE, at which time emperor Justinian invited Miaphysite bishops to a conference at Constantinople.\textsuperscript{127} Although reconciliation was not achieved at the conference, Justinian continued to support policies designed to reduce Miaphysite objections to Chalcedonianism, such as the condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Ibas at the Council of 553.\textsuperscript{128} At the same time, however, Justinian’s deposition of Theodosius, the Miaphysite bishop of Alexandria, in 536 CE resulted in the development of a shadow Miaphysite ecclesiastical hierarchy in Egypt, which paralleled the Chalcedonian hierarchy imposed by the emperor.\textsuperscript{129} While it became clear that the Miaphysites were unlikely to become reconciled to Chalcedonian orthodoxy, they were permitted, and at times encouraged, by Constantinople to engage in missionary work in Arabia and Nubia.\textsuperscript{130}

After the failure of reconciliation attempts between Miaphysites and Chalcedonians, it appears that the Byzantine Empire settled on a policy of encouraging anti-Chalcedonian Christians to spread their message outside of Byzantine territory.\textsuperscript{131} It is possible, therefore, that by the middle of the sixth century all the monasteries in Palestine were of the Chalcedonian variety, with East Syrians in Persia, eastern Arabia, and central Asia and Miaphysites in Persia, Egypt, Nubia, western Arabia, and Armenia.\textsuperscript{132} There are some indications, however, that official Byzantine policy might have differed from reality. Bitton-

\textsuperscript{127}Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 245-246.

\textsuperscript{128}Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 247-248.

\textsuperscript{129}Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 247.

\textsuperscript{130}Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 248-251.

\textsuperscript{131}Egypt was likely considered a lost cause, see Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 242.

\textsuperscript{132}Frend, Monophysite Movement, 296-297; Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, Map 8. On the distribution of East Syrian Monasteries, see Chapter Three.
Ashkelony and Kofsky have posited that some Gazan monasteries retained crypto-
Miaphysite tendencies into the mid- and late sixth century.\textsuperscript{133}

Only a few decades separated the hegemony of Gaza as an anti-Chalcedonian
stronghold and the post-expulsion environment in which the \textit{Correspondence of}
Barsanuphius and John began. Although none of the over 800 letters mentions Chalcedon
specifically, several factors point to possible Miaphysite leanings on the part of the authors.
First, Barsanuphius was from Egypt, an area with strong Miaphysite ties, particularly among
the monks.\textsuperscript{134} Second, both the style and content of Barsanuphius’ and John’s teachings
borrow heavily from the Miaphysite Abba Isaiah.\textsuperscript{135} Third, the ascetics avoided engaging in
theological debates and urged their correspondents to refrain also. This was a common tactic
among those who disagreed with the Chalcedonian position but wished to avoid
controversy.\textsuperscript{136} Last, John received correspondence from Miaphysite laypersons fearing
persecution and asking advice.\textsuperscript{137} The late sixth century writings of Dorotheus, a student of
Barsanuphius and John, reflect their teachings as well as those of Abba Isaiah but do not
contain any explicit Miaphysite theology. A certain Dorotheus is mentioned on a list of
Miaphysite individuals by Sophronius in the seventh century, along with a Miaphysite
heretical group called Barsanuphians. Similarly, a ninth century text accuses one Theodore

\textsuperscript{133}Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, \textit{Monastic School}, 213-222.
\textsuperscript{134}Frend, \textit{Monophysite Movement}, 136-137.
\textsuperscript{137}Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, \textit{Monastic School}, 218.
of Studios of recognizing the heretics Barsanuphius and Dorotheus.  Although these factors cannot establish Barsanuphius, John, or Dorotheus as Miaphysites conclusively, they can open the possibility that Palestinian Christianity in the late sixth century was more varied than previously thought.

Theological controversies of the Byzantine period had a profound effect on the monastic communities of the empire. The preceding summary was intended to complicate the picture of monasticism in Palestine by factoring in the strife, national and local, that periodically swept up those who sought to withdraw from the world. Having observed the distribution of monasteries in Palestine and examined the religious discord of the Byzantine Period and the variety of theological positions generated by it, this study now turns to the Muslim Conquest and its effect on Palestinian Monasticism.

2.3: The Effects of the Muslim Conquest

Scholarship on the Muslim Conquest of Palestine had been influenced by two related presuppositions: that Byzantine Palestine in the sixth century was in a period of economic and social decline and that widespread destruction and/or abandonment of sites resulted from the conquest. Several recent studies have questioned these assumptions. As a result, a more nuanced view of Byzantine Palestine’s reaction to the Muslim Conquest is developing.

The idea of decline in the Byzantine Period is not limited to the area of Palestine. This paradigm has been dominant for the entire Mediterranean world at least since the publication of Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in the late eighteenth century. The concept of decline, however, is predicated upon the notion of a static

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138Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, Monastic School, 218-221. Whether these references are to the same Dorotheus and Barsanuphius discussed here cannot be determined.

139Chitty, for example, comments that Barsanuphius and John “certainly accepted Chalcedon” (The Desert, 132).
entity of ‘Late Antiquity,’ and ignores the inherent flux to which civilizations are subject.\textsuperscript{140}

In Palestine, the idea of decline has been used to explain how the Muslim Conquest was accomplished with such seeming ease.

Prior to the arrival of the Muslims, Syria (613 CE) and Palestine (614 CE) were invaded and occupied by the Sasanian Persians. Jerusalem was besieged and sacked.\textsuperscript{141} War between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires continued for fourteen years until the Sasanians were defeated in 628 CE.\textsuperscript{142} When the Muslims arrived six years later, however, the Byzantine armies could not overcome their offensive. The Muslims won three important battles between 634-637 CE. Jerusalem surrendered in 638 CE and Caesarea fell in 642 CE.\textsuperscript{143}

Traditional explanations for the rapidity of the Muslim Conquest of Syria and Palestine have included the weakened state of the Byzantine army after its long fight with the Sasanians and animosity of local populations towards the government on account of internal religious conflicts.\textsuperscript{144} Kennedy considered these factors insufficient to explain the circumstances of the Muslim Conquest and, using literary and archaeological sources, looked to economics. He noted that with the exception of Caesarea and Damascus, the cities of Syria and Palestine fell to the Muslims with little resistance, despite the fact that literary

\textsuperscript{140}See A. Cameron, \textit{The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-600} (London, 1993), 198.
\textsuperscript{141}Schick, \textit{The Christian Communities}, 33-47.
\textsuperscript{142}Schick, \textit{The Christian Communities}, 68.
\textsuperscript{143}Cameron, \textit{The Mediterranean World}, 187.
\textsuperscript{144}H. Kennedy, ‘The Last Century of Byzantine Syria: A Reinterpretation,’ \textit{Byzantinische Forschungen} 10 (1985), 142.
sources depict the Muslims as inexperienced with siege warfare. Further, Early Islamic tax records indicate that payments were made overwhelmingly in agricultural products rather than manufactured goods, as might be expected of large, flourishing cities. Kennedy suggested that the cities of Syria, particularly those along the coast, experienced a severe depopulation in the sixth century resulting from the influence of the Ghassanid tribes’ redistribution of wealth to extra-urban areas and the decimation of urban populations by plague. Rather than prosperous cities, the Muslims found a weakened pastoral society susceptible to invasion.

Related to the idea of decline is the tendency among archaeologists to use the Muslim Conquest to date the destruction or abandonment of Byzantine sites. This uncritical reliance on historical factors to date sites is exacerbated by a Byzantine ceramic typology in which little change occurs in pottery types from the late sixth to early eighth centuries. Without the guidance of chronologically specific ceramics and with the preconception of a weak society ripe for destruction, the conceptualization of the Muslim Conquest as responsible for extensive destruction of sites has taken root. For example, excavations carried out at Dehes, in north Syria, during the late 1970s revealed a group of domestic structures in the center of the town. The excavators associated the structures with two building phases, one in the third to fourth centuries and one in the late fifth to early sixth


146Kennedy, ‘The Last Century,’ 148.

147Kennedy, ‘The Last Century,’ 180-183.


149Magness, *Early Islamic Settlement*, 199.

centuries. In the excavators’ analysis, the seventh century at Dehes witnessed a long decline marked by partition of the houses and accumulation of debris.\textsuperscript{151} If the presuppositions of pre-Conquest decline and Conquest destruction are abandoned, however, and the archaeological evidence is examined carefully, a different picture of the Muslim Conquest emerges.

Examination of the archaeological material from the village of Dehes in north Syria, as well as from Antioch and Caesarea contradict both Kennedy’s theory of an economically weakened Syria and the general idea of destruction and abandonment associated with the Muslim Conquest. When examined stratigraphically, the ceramics from Dehes indicate that the domestic structures were built during the seventh century and were continuously occupied until the ninth or tenth centuries.\textsuperscript{152} Rather than decline, the city of Antioch appears to have thrived in the sixth century and after. A substantial amount of imported pottery from the sixth and seventh centuries indicates the continuation of international trade. The narrowing of the streets, cited by Kennedy as evidence of decline, instead represents a different aesthetic characteristic of Early Islamic urban planning.\textsuperscript{153} Caesarea, considered by Kennedy to exemplify the decline of the coastal cities, was prosperous in the century prior to the Muslim Conquest, as is attested by imported ceramics, gold objects, and amphorae related to trade. Numerous private and public buildings were also constructed during the late


\textsuperscript{152} Magness, \textit{Early Islamic Settlement}, 205-206.

\textsuperscript{153} Magness, \textit{Early Islamic Settlement}, 206-209.
sixth and early seventh centuries. One sixth century church continued as a Christian worship place into the eighth century.\textsuperscript{154}

The examples of Dehes, Antioch, and Caesarea contradict Kennedy’s theory of decline in the Late Byzantine period and challenge the practice of using historical events to date archaeological remains. Although there does appear to be a general trend towards consolidation of settlement in Palestine, it seems to have occurred gradually over the seventh to ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{155} Data from recent excavations demonstrate a similar phenomenon in Christian structures throughout Palestine.\textsuperscript{156}

Excavations in Judea, the Galilee, and the Negev attest to continuity, renovation, and new construction of churches and monasteries in the seventh and eighth centuries.\textsuperscript{157} Excavations at Ramot, outside Jerusalem, revealed a monastery constructed in the eighth century.\textsuperscript{158} In Jerusalem, two fifth century monastic structures received Early Islamic period renovations. The Cathisma church on the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road was renovated in the ninth century, while a monastery on Mount Scopus was enlarged substantially in the late seventh or early eighth centuries.\textsuperscript{159} Near Gaza, the fifth century ecclesiastical complex at Jabaliyah received renovations in the sixth and eighth centuries.\textsuperscript{160}


\textsuperscript{155}Magness, \textit{Early Islamic Settlement}, 215-216.

\textsuperscript{156}Di Segni, ‘Christian Epigraphy’, 257.

\textsuperscript{157}Di Segni, ‘Christian Epigraphy’, 247.


Examples of construction and renovation are not restricted to sites in proximity to population centers: remote sites demonstrate a similar pattern. At the ancient village of Aristobulias in the Hebron hills, a church was founded in the early eighth century while at Khirbet Yattir, in the northern Negev, a monastic church was built in the late seventh century and renovated in the early eighth.\textsuperscript{161} At the village of Shubeika in the western Galilee, a church constructed in the seventh century was first renovated in the late eighth or early ninth centuries and was again on two separate subsequent occasions.\textsuperscript{162}

There is insufficient archaeological evidence at present to make general statements about the fate of monasteries in the Muslim Conquest. The examples cited above, however, support the premise of a continuous and vital Christian presence in Palestine from the Byzantine period through the seventh and eighth centuries. As the perception of widespread post-Conquest abandonment of monasteries diminishes, other examples should support this hypothesis. In the case of Tel Masos, the excavators used the historical event of the Muslim Conquest to date the construction, rather than the destruction, of the monastery. As will be argued in Chapter Three, there is no more reason to assume that an East Syrian monastery could not have been built before the Conquest than there is to assume that Chalcedonian monasteries could not have been built afterwards. A construction date for the Tel Masos monastery cannot be assigned by association with a historical event.

\textsuperscript{160}Di Segni, ‘Christian Epigraphy’, 251.

\textsuperscript{161}Di Segni, ‘Christian Epigraphy’, 252-256. These dates are established using the calendrical era of Eleutheropolis. If the era of Arabia is used instead, the construction and renovation of the church would date to the late sixth and early seventh centuries, respectively. See H. Eshel, J. Magness, and E. Shenhav, ‘Khirbet Yattir, 1995-1999: Preliminary Report’, Israel Exploration Journal 50 (2000), 153-168 (158-162). Which calendrical era should be used is a matter of uncertainty, as no datable material was found that can clarify the chronology of the church (J. Magness, pers. comm. 7/7/08).

This chapter has discussed the geographic, religious, and political environment of Palestine in the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Far from being withdrawn from the world, the monks of Palestine were affected by, and sometimes contributed to, the upheavals of their time. The next chapter will address the development of the East Syrian Church under the Sasanians and Muslims, and the return of East Syrians to Palestine.
Chapter Three: The East Syrian Church

3.1: The East Syrian Church and the Byzantine Empire

The story of the East Syrian Church was suspended in Chapter two when, after the condemnation of Nestorius by the Council of Chalcedon, his adherents crossed into the Sasanian Empire in the late fifth century.¹⁶³ Scholars disagree about the point in the fifth century at which the East Syrian Church should be considered independent from the Byzantine Church.¹⁶⁴ In any case, the framework around which an autonomous East Syrian Church coalesced had been growing for centuries.

Although legend describes Jesus corresponding with Abgar V, king of Edessa, Christianity probably was brought east during the second century by traders and those seeking protection from discrimination under Roman rule.¹⁶⁵ Christians were tolerated in the Sasanian Empire, despite its official Zoroastrian faith, for as long as they were rejected by Rome. With the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century and its adoption as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire, the situation changed. Christians in the Sasanian Empire began to experience periodic persecution in spite of their participation on the side of the Sasanians in the wars against the Byzantine Empire. Christianity was regarded by the

¹⁶³See above, pg. 27.

¹⁶⁴W. Baum and D. Winkler, The Church of the East: A Concise History (London, 2003) consider the East Syrian Church independent starting from the synod of 410 (17), while Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia, consider the synod of 424 as establishing East Syrian autonomy (116).

Sasanians as the religion of Caesar and its adherents were subject to financial penalties and physical harm.\textsuperscript{166} The persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire was alleviated in the early fifth century with formal recognition of the Church by the Sasanian government during the reign of the peaceably minded Yazdgird I.\textsuperscript{167}

Although some ecclesiastical structure was developing among Christians in the Sasanian Empire during the third and fourth centuries, there is little historically reliable information about religious offices or their occupants during this time.\textsuperscript{168} The first recorded data comes from a synod held in 410 CE at Selucia-Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital, at the instigation of Yazdgird I.\textsuperscript{169} The Synod of 410 established a hierarchy of primacy among eastern bishops parallel to those in the west. According to this hierarchy, the bishop of Selucia-Ctesiphon was preeminent, followed by the bishops of Khuzistan, Nisibis, Basra, Arbela and Kirkuk.\textsuperscript{170} Equally significant was the synod’s acceptance of instructions delivered to it from an assortment of Byzantine bishops, including those of Antioch and Edessa. These instructions included limiting the number of bishops from a given region to one, celebrating feast days according to the Roman calendar, and formally ratifying the creed and canons established at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE.\textsuperscript{171} Although some scholars view the synod of 410 as marking the establishment of an autonomous Christian Church in the

\begin{itemize}
\item $^{167}$Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 112.
\item $^{168}$Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 9.
\item $^{169}$Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 112.
\item $^{170}$Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 15.
\item $^{171}$Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 15.
\end{itemize}
Sasanian Empire, they overstate the case.\textsuperscript{172} The impetus for the synod came from the Roman ambassador to the Sasanians, who co-moderated the event.\textsuperscript{173} Further, since the synod acceded to all the instructions sent to them from the Byzantine bishops, the autonomy of its decisions remained untested. What the reaction of western bishops would have been to the synod’s refusal of their demands is unknown.

More significant for the autonomy of the Christian Church in the Sasanian Empire were the results of another eastern synod in 424 CE.\textsuperscript{174} Previously, the western bishops had established themselves as a resource for appeal and mediation in disagreements between eastern bishops. The synod of 424 specifically prohibited any appeal to western authorities and established the primacy of the bishop of Selucia-Ctesiphon as absolute.\textsuperscript{175} The synod of 424 established the ecclesiastical independence of the East Syrian Church, but simultaneously confirmed the theological unity between Christians in the Sasanian Empire and those in the Byzantine Empire.\textsuperscript{176}

Despite the theological unity established by the synod of 424 CE, a formal theological rift between the two groups began to develop in 431 CE with Cyril of Alexandria’s assault upon Nestorius and diphysite theology. The groundwork for this rift, however, had been laid already. A large percentage of eastern Christian leaders were educated at the theological school in Edessa, where the translated works of Theodore of Mopsuestia were a core part of

\textsuperscript{172}Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 14-17.

\textsuperscript{173}Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 15;17.

\textsuperscript{174}A second synod had been held in 420 CE, which gave blanket confirmation to the decisions of a number of fourth century western synods. See Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 18.

\textsuperscript{175}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 114.

\textsuperscript{176}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 114.
the curriculum. As a result, diphysite theology spread throughout the Sasanian Empire during the early fifth century as the graduates of the Edessa school obtained positions of influence. At the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, Cyril was so successful in misrepresenting Nestorius’ theological positions, and by extension those of Theodore, that Edessa was torn in two between miaphysite and diphysite factions. Edessa’s bishop, Rabbula, originally a supporter of Nestorius at Ephesus, switched his allegiance to Alexandria immediately after the council and had the teachings of Theodore burned and replaced by those of Cyril. The school alternated between miaphysite and diphysite affiliation, in line with the position of the current bishop of Edessa, for nearly fifty years until it was closed by Emperor Zeno in 489 CE. In the meantime, the diphysite bishop of Nisibis, Bar Sauma, was able to persuade Narsai, the head of the school in Edessa, to transfer himself and many members of the school to Nisibis, which lay just over the border in Sasanian territory, in 471 CE. The school at Nisibis took over Edessa’s role of teaching the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia and supplying the Christian church in the Sasanian Empire with diphysite leaders.

Although East Syrian synods in 484 CE and 486 CE confirmed diphysite theology and the teachings of Theodore as authoritative, a relationship between the East Syrian Church and that of the Byzantine Empire persisted. As discussed above, by the late fifth century the Byzantine Church’s main theological challenge was to defend the Chalcedonian position against that of the Miaphysites. Since the East Syrian Church was assuredly not Miaphysite,

177 Baum and Winkler, The Church of the East, 22.
178 Baum and Winkler, The Church of the East, 25; Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia, 50-51.
179 Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia, 117.
180 Gillman and Klimkeit, Christians in Asia, 116-117.
it was seen by Constantinople as a potential ally and as such the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon went as an ambassador to the Byzantine capital on multiple occasions.\(^{181}\)

The presence of Miaphysite Christians in the Sasanian Empire increased dramatically during the sixth century. Their influence in the Sasanian Empire was augmented by the works of the charismatic Miaphysite Jacob Baradai.\(^{182}\) Although Miaphysites were never as numerous as East Syrian Christians in the Sasanian Empire, they were granted official recognition and enjoyed considerable influence at court.\(^{183}\) Being at theological odds with the Byzantine Empire, the same strategy that had worked for the East Syrians during the fourth and fifth centuries, worked also for the Miaphysites in the sixth century.

The sixth century witnessed the continuing development of theological differentiation between the Byzantine and East Syrian Churches. The East Syrian synod at Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 486 CE had formulated a creed confessing two natures and one *prosopon*, while another synod in 544 CE confirmed the East Syrian Church’s acceptance of ‘the faith of Nicea, as expounded by Theodore [of Mopsuestia]’.\(^{184}\) For its part, the Byzantine Church, at a synod in Ephesus in 553 CE, officially condemned Theodore of Mopsuestia and his writings.\(^{185}\)

Many of the perceived differences between Byzantine and East Syrian theology resulted from the incorrect equation of the Syriac term *qnoma* with the Greek term

\(^{181}\)Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia*, 120.

\(^{182}\)Hence the term ‘Jacobite’ is used by some for Miaphysite Christians in Syria and Persia.


\(^{185}\)Hall, *Doctrine and Practice*, 235.
hypostasis. From the Greek speaking Byzantine perspective, the East Syrian insistence on Christ’s having two *qnome* meant that for them Christ existed in two persons. From the Syriac speaking East Syrian point of view, *qnoma* is not self-existent but rather refers to the individuality and concreteness inherent to each of Christ’s two natures. Similarly, the expression of Chalcedon that Christ existed in one *hypostasis* sounded to the East Syrians as though the human and divine elements of Christ were mixed while for the Greeks, the one *hypostasis* of Christ confirms his being of one substance.

Although their positions seem antithetical, the synodal decisions made by the East Syrian and Byzantine churches during the sixth century do not appear to have affected negatively the relationship between the two churches. For example, Paul, bishop of Nisibis, was sent with other East Syrian clergy to meet with Justinian in 544 CE. Ishoyahb I, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was sent to broker a peace between the Sasanians and Byzantines in the late sixth century. While there, he gave the bishops of Constantinople and Antioch a written creed of the East Syrian Church, which they judged to be orthodox.

After the Byzantine victory over the Sasanians in 628 CE, East Syrian bishops again served as ambassadors to Byzantium, this time at Aleppo. Along with treaty terms, the East Syrian bishops discussed theology with their Byzantine counterparts. In the end, Ishoyahb II, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, celebrated the liturgy with and gave communion to the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius and his bishops. As in the sixth century, the early seventh

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188Van Rompay, ‘Society and Community’, 259.
189Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 36.
century witnessed harmony between East Syrian and Byzantine Christians in spite of their doctrinal disagreements.

From the fifth to seventh centuries, the East Syrian Church developed first ecclesiastical and then theological distinctions between itself and the Church of the Byzantine Empire. Despite these differences there appears to be minimal antagonism between the two, which is surprising considering the rancor of the original argument between Cyril and Nestorius. Although pressured to leave, monks and bishops of the diphysite theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia were never forced to leave the Byzantine Empire as were the Miaphysites. These issues will be considered further when discussing the possible presence of East Syrians in Byzantine Palestine.

3.2: The East Syrian Church under Muslim Rule

Both Muslim and East Syrian traditions assert early contact between Muhammad and East Syrian Christianity. A tenth century Muslim writer comments that Muhammad was influenced by the preaching of an East Syrian bishop in Ukaz, while a twelfth century East Syrian source alleges that Muhammad granted the East Syrian church special privileges.\(^{191}\) Although these reports cannot be verified, the pre-Islamic East Syrian presence in the Arabian Peninsula renders them plausible.\(^{192}\) Whether East Syrian Christians derived any benefit from their purported contact with Muhammad is debated.

The Muslim defeat of the Sasanian Empire was a protracted affair lasting from 632 CE, when the Muslim army scored its first decisive victory, to 652 CE, when the few

\(^{190}\)Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 40-41.


\(^{192}\)See, for example, H. Bin Seray, ‘Christianity in East Arabia’, *Aram* 8 (1996), 315-332; P. Hellyer, ‘Nestorian Christianity in Pre-Islamic UAE and Southeastern Arabia’, *Journal of Social Affairs* 18.72 (2001), 79-99.
remaining cities were taken after the assassination of the last Sasanian ruler.\textsuperscript{193} Scholars differ in their evaluation of how non-Muslim religious groups in general, and East Syrians in particular, were treated in the years during and after the conquest. On one hand, the status enjoyed by the East Syrian Church as an officially recognized group under the Sasanians was diminished after the Muslim Conquest. One East Syrian source is quoted as lamenting the toleration of the Muslims, which lead them to treat pagans, Christians, and Jews equally.\textsuperscript{194} On the other hand, the Muslims inherited and perpetuated the Sasanians' systems of organization and taxation for religious minorities. So long as taxes were paid, religious communities were permitted to order their own ecclesiastical and secular affairs.\textsuperscript{195}

Although the general impression of religious minorities under Muslim rule is one of isolated communities, important exceptions existed.\textsuperscript{196} Most notable was the reliance of the Muslims on Christians and Jews for the administration of their new empire.\textsuperscript{197} The Muslim rulers supported the East Syrian schools at Nisibis, Gundeshapur and Merv, and from their graduates recruited accountants, teachers, translators, scribes, and physicians.\textsuperscript{198} One such graduate, Jurjis b. Bakhtishu, became the personal physician of the caliph Mansur in the eighth century. This appointment commenced a six generation tradition of East Syrian personal physicians to the caliphate.\textsuperscript{199} Although the placement of Christians in positions of

\textsuperscript{193}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 127.

\textsuperscript{194}M. Morony, ‘Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq’, \textit{Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient} 17.2 (1974), 113-135 (120).

\textsuperscript{195}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 127-128.

\textsuperscript{196}Morony, ‘Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq’, 134-135. Morony emphasizes the interaction of groups on a popular level, such as Christians going to Jewish taverns, but does not discuss more official interaction.

\textsuperscript{197}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 127.

\textsuperscript{198}Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 43; Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 130.
authority did occasion Muslim ill feeling at times, it also provided an opportunity for East Syrians and other religious minorities to influence the caliphate’s treatment of their communities.\textsuperscript{200}

Persecution of Christians and other religious minorities under Muslim rule was an exceptional rather than customary occurrence, usually precipitated by a specific event.\textsuperscript{201} Churches and monasteries typically were not destroyed by the Muslims during their conquest of the Sasanian Empire, so long as the terms of the peace treaty were met. These terms included payment of taxes and promises to refrain from building new churches.\textsuperscript{202} There is no indication, however, that the latter term was honored by East Syrian Christians. In fact, churches and monasteries were built in large number after the conquest, despite the potential for retaliation by the Muslim government.\textsuperscript{203}

The position of the East Syrian Church under Muslim rule is illustrated well in the following anecdote.\textsuperscript{204} In the late eighth century, Byzantine Emperor Leo IV scored a series of military victories over Caliph al-Mahdi. The Caliph, believing his Christian subjects had prayed for Leo’s victory, destroyed a number of churches. His East Syrian physician intervened, explaining to the Caliph that the East Syrians and the Byzantines were not friendly. A Byzantine captive affirmed his statement and described the East Syrians as

\textsuperscript{199}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 131.
\textsuperscript{200}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 130; 134.
\textsuperscript{201}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 134.
\textsuperscript{202}Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 128.
\textsuperscript{203}Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 44; Gillman and Klimkeit, \textit{Christians in Asia}, 134.
\textsuperscript{204}Taken from Baum and Winkler, \textit{The Church of the East}, 60.
hardly even Christian. Al-Mahdi was mollified and the East Syrians were permitted to rebuild their churches.

With periodic exceptions, the East Syrian Church prospered under Muslim rule as it had under that of the Sasanians. In fact, the seventh through ninth centuries witnessed a great expansion of East Syrian Christianity, extending from China to Egypt. Whether this expansion is responsible for bringing East Syrians to Tel Masos remains to explore. Focus will now return to Palestine, to consider when and why East Syrians might have established a monastery there.

3.3: East Syrians in Palestine: When and Why

Since the nature of the ceramic assemblage at Tel Masos is ambiguous and, like other Byzantine period assemblages, cannot provide specific dates for the site within the period of the late sixth to early eighth centuries, the excavators used other means to date the site. Their interpretation of the inscriptions as East Syrian led them to date the site to the mid-seventh century, based on the commonly held assumption that an East Syrian monastery in Palestine would be unlikely until after the Muslim conquest. The validity of this assumption has not been established, however, and will be investigated here.

Legislation enacted by Emperor Justinian in 535 CE required that the establishment of any new monastery be sanctioned by the local bishop. By the time of Justinian it is unlikely that any Byzantine bishop who was an adherent of an Antiochene type of diphysite

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205 Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 60-61.


207 C. Frazee, ‘Roman and Byzantine Legislation on the Monastic Life from the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries’, *Church History* 51.3 (1982), 263-279 (268; 272).
theology would remain in his see. It is difficult to imagine a Chalcedonian bishop endorsing the construction of an East Syrian monastery, so the assumption of an East Syrian presence in Palestine only after the Muslim Conquest might appear justified.

As it turns out, however, not all of Justinian’s legislation was observed universally. For example, section three of Justinian’s law required that all monks within a coenobitic monastery share a common dormitory. There is ample evidence, however, of coenobitic monasteries in which monks had individual cells. Further, Justinian’s law forbade the establishment of double monasteries, in which men and women lived in contiguous, though separate, communities, and called for the dissolution of those already in existence. Many double monasteries continued to function, however, as is evident from legislation enacted in the synod of Nicea II in 787 CE, which again forbade the construction double monasteries, but permitted those already in existence to continue. The inconsistent manner in which Justinian’s laws were observed raises the possibility that the local bishop’s authorization was not always required or obtained prior to the construction of a new monastery.

Even if official endorsement by the local bishop was, in practice, not necessary, it is pertinent to ask whether the local Byzantine population would tolerate an East Syrian monastic presence. It has been suggested that during the fifth and even sixth centuries the

208Southern Palestine was not influenced greatly by Theodore of Mopsuestia and his typically Antiochene theology, falling instead under the influence of Alexandria. If the bishops in the areas around Tel Masos dissented from Chalcedon, either openly or secretly, their preference would more likely be towards Miaphysite theology.

209Frazee, Roman and Byzantine Legislation, 272.


211Frazee, Roman and Byzantine Legislation, 275.

212Frazee, Roman and Byzantine Legislation, 275; 278.
lay populations of the towns around Gaza were strongly Miaphysite in affiliation.\textsuperscript{213} Even if this were the case, Tel Masos lay 55 km from Gaza and the degree to which the rural populations were guided by its influence is questionable.\textsuperscript{214} Other studies have argued that the Negev still contained substantial non-Christian populations during the fifth and sixth centuries.\textsuperscript{215} If this theory of a religiously diverse rural population is correct, the presence of a small East Syrian monastery is rendered more feasible. In addition, unlike many Negev monasteries, Tel Masos was not located in proximity to a village.\textsuperscript{216} Instead it stood at the top of the Iron Age tel, several kilometers from the nearest population center.\textsuperscript{217} It does not appear, therefore, that the objection of the local population would prohibit the possibility of an East Syrian monastery in Palestine during the Byzantine period.

Having argued that the presence of an East Syrian monastery in Palestine prior to the Muslim Conquest is feasible, since neither ecclesiastical oversight nor local sensibility would seem to prevent the possibility, the question remains whether the East Syrians would have had any objections to being in the area during the Byzantine period. Given the periodic amicable exchanges between the Byzantine and East Syrian churches in the sixth and early seventh centuries described in the previous section, there is no reason to think the East Syrians would have any such reservations. The supposition that an East Syrian monastery could only exist in a post-Conquest Palestine is unwarranted.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{213}Bitton-Ashkelony and Kofsky, \textit{Monastic School}, 213.
\item \textsuperscript{215}Bar, ‘Rural Monasticism’, 63.
\item \textsuperscript{216}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 152.
\item \textsuperscript{217}Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, 153.
\end{itemize}
The conclusion that an East Syrian monastery could exist in pre-conquest Palestine does not require that the Tel Masos monastery was, in fact, built prior to the Muslim conquest. Rather, the discussion is meant to counter the *a priori* assumption that it could not have been. Whether in the Byzantine or early Islamic period, the motivation for the East Syrian expansion into Palestine would be the same: to support East Syrian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Egypt.

Pilgrimage to Egypt and Jerusalem was an important element of East Syrian tradition. Sources record pilgrims traveling to Egypt as early as the fourth century, and while these traditions are not necessarily accurate, they do preserve the authors’ perception that such travel was possible. More reliable are the reports of sixth century visits to Palestine and Egypt by notable members of the East Syrian ecclesiastical hierarchy, some of whom stayed in Egypt for long periods of time among the Miaphysite Coptic monks. Travel continued in the seventh and eighth centuries, during which time East Syrians began to settle permanently in Egypt.

Some scholars have argued that, in practice, pilgrimage was not as important in East Syrian monastic tradition as had previously been thought. One seventh century source preserves the rebuke given by an East Syrian ascetic to one of his fellows who wanted to travel to Jerusalem. The ascetic writes that monks’ desire should be to reach Jerusalem on

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high, and not the physical Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{223} Many of the figures recorded in various sources as having gone on pilgrimage did so prior to becoming monks. Other accounts of pilgrimage are clearly fictitious.\textsuperscript{224} It has been suggested, therefore, that earthly pilgrimage was not a common or desirable occurrence. When undertaken, it was more often a lay practice than a monastic one and was of most benefit to those unsuited to spiritual journey.\textsuperscript{225}

It is true that only a small percentage of East Syrian monks ever went on pilgrimage, that some sources argue against the desirability of earthly pilgrimage, and that lay persons, as well as monastics, went on pilgrimage. It is also likely that some records of East Syrian pilgrimage are not historically accurate, but rather are examples of a literary convention at work.\textsuperscript{226} None of these factors, however, necessarily argues against the perception of importance that pilgrimage held for many East Syrians, for reasons given below.

First, it is expected that the majority of East Syrian monks did not have the means for long distance travel. Although many East Syrian monasteries were quite wealthy, the communal resources of a monastery were under the control of its abbot.\textsuperscript{227} Financial considerations might limit the number of monks able to go on pilgrimage, but such restrictions are more likely to elevate the importance of the practice rather than detract from it. Second, a literary source arguing for the superiority of spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem on high in contrast to physical pilgrimage to Jerusalem on earth attests to the popularity of the latter practice. Such an argument would not be necessary were there but little interest in

\textsuperscript{223}Teule, ‘Perception of the Jerusalem Pilgrimage’, 312.

\textsuperscript{224}Teule, ‘Perception of the Jerusalem Pilgrimage’, 316; n.25.

\textsuperscript{225}Teule, ‘Perception of the Jerusalem Pilgrimage’, 318-319.


earthly pilgrimage among East Syrian monks. Third, the fact that pilgrimage was practiced among lay persons has no bearing on the perception of the custom among ascetics. Last, the literary convention of the monk on pilgrimage, rather than diminishing the importance of pilgrimage by rendering some accounts spurious, actually attests to its perceived significance.\textsuperscript{228} Renowned East Syrian ascetics are unlikely to be cast in literary topoi that do not enhance their reputations.

The preceding section addressed when and why East Syrians might have expanded into the area of Palestine. As regards when, an East Syrian presence in Palestine is feasible in both the Byzantine period and the early Islamic period. As for why, the East Syrian tradition of pilgrimage to Palestine and Egypt, although perhaps not overwhelming in volume, is well established. These pilgrims would need facilities for support on their journey. Focus will now turn to evidence for long term East Syrian presence in Palestine, a presence necessitated by the practice of pilgrimage.

3.4: Precedent: East Syrian Monasteries in Palestine

Having established that an East Syrian monastery in Byzantine or early Islamic Palestine is both feasible and practical, the question turns to precedent. Examples of other East Syrian monasteries in Palestine would lend credence to the identification of Tel Masos as another example of the phenomenon. Two such examples exist, one from literary and the other from archaeological sources.

The ninth century Book of Chastity, written by Ishodenah, bishop of Basra, records short biographical information about 150 East Syrian monastery founders, many of whom were students of the great monastic reformer Abraham of Kashkar.\textsuperscript{229} One of these entries

\textsuperscript{228}Tamcke, ‘Abraham of Kashkar’s Pilgrimage’, 479-480.
concerns Joseph Marwazaya, a wealthy man from Merv. After becoming a monk under Abraham at the monastery of Mount Izla, Joseph went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He remained in Palestine and founded a monastery in the hill country of Ephraim. Abraham died in 588 CE, thus presumably his students, including Joseph, would have been active during the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

Although the veracity of Ishodenah’s entry on Joseph cannot be ascertained, the straightforward nature of the entry is informative in itself. The author evinces no need to explain or elaborate on the circumstances that made Joseph’s Palestinian monastery possible. The Book of Chastity demonstrates that in the ninth century the idea of earlier East Syrian monasteries in Palestine was in no way surprising.

A more substantial example of East Syrian monastic presence in Palestine is known from archaeology. In Chapter One, a site near Jericho was mentioned as the only definitively East Syrian structure known in Palestine. The remains consist of a rectangular room, approximately four by nine meters, which gave access to a chapel of four by five meters. The mosaic inscription in the chapel identified the structure as East Syrian on linguistic and contextual grounds, such as characteristically East Syrian spellings and personal names, as well as references to ecclesiastical jurisdictions known from East Syrian literary sources.

The hermitage lay approximately three km east of the road leading from Scythopolis to


231 Le Livre de la chasteté, n. 37.


Jerusalem and three km north of the road from Jericho to Philadelphia and the eastern Decapolis cities.\textsuperscript{234} Hence the site would be accessible to pilgrims traveling south by land to Jerusalem from Damascus.\textsuperscript{235}

The excavator dated the structure, which he called a hermitage, to the ninth century, a date he describes as, “tentatively deduced from the inscription.”\textsuperscript{236} Nowhere in the subsequent description of the mosaic inscription, however, are any data provided in support of a ninth century construction date. It is possible that the epigrapher associated the construction of the hermitage with the establishment of an East Syrian see in Jerusalem during the ninth century.\textsuperscript{237} The inscription itself contains information that can be used to derive an earlier \textit{terminus ante quem} for the construction of the hermitage.

The inscription states that the hermitage was built in the days of four individuals: Daniel of Ahwaz, John the Persian, Ishodad of Qatraye, and Buya of Shahorzur.\textsuperscript{238} The suggestion has been made that the second of these figures, John the Persian, is the same John the Persian who was a contemporary of Rabban Hormizd in the mid-seventh century and who founded a monastery at the foot of Mt. Judi in northern Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{239} This identification

\textsuperscript{234}See Y. Tsafrir, L. Di Segni, and J. Green, \textit{Tabula Imperii Romani Iudaea Palaestina} (Jerusalem, 1994).

\textsuperscript{235}See A. Palmer, ‘The History of the Syrian Orthodox in Jerusalem, Part One’, \textit{Oriens Christianus} 75 (1991), 16-43 (Fig. 1).

\textsuperscript{236}Baramki and Stephan, ‘A Nestorian Hermitage’, 83.

\textsuperscript{237}Baramki and Stephan, ‘A Nestorian Hermitage’, 84. Stephan dates the establishment of the Jerusalem See to the early ninth century, while Fiey dates it to nearly a century later. See J.M. Fiey, \textit{Pour un Oriens Christianus Novus. Répertoire des diocèses syriques orientaux et occidentaux} (Beirut & Stuttgart, 1993), 97. I am grateful to Dr. L. Van Rompay for alerting me to this discrepancy.

\textsuperscript{238}Baramki and Stephan, ‘A Nestorian Hermitage’, 83.

\textsuperscript{239}J.M. Fiey, ‘Rabban Buya de Shaqlawa et de Jéricho’, \textit{Proche Orient Chrétien} 33 (1983), 34-38 (38). Fiey’s primary aim is to date the fourth individual on the list, Buya of Shahorzur, who is identified as Rabban Buya of Shaqlawa, Shahorzur being a smaller territory within Shaqlawa (38). Rabban Buya is a figure associated with a Christian religious site in modern Kurdistan, but for whom no dates are known (35-36). The doubt cast upon
cannot be substantiated, however, given the likely innumerable East Syrian “Johns” from Persia. More promising, however, is the third figure: Ishodad of Qatraye. While the individual himself is unknown, his area of origin provides a possible clue for the date of the hermitage.

The region of Bet Qatraye encompassed the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula and was part of the province of Rev-Ardashir, as established at the East Syrian synod of 424 CE. Christianity flourished in this region, which produced the eminent East Syrian theologian Isaac of Nineveh. The East Syrian synod of 676 CE is the last, however, at which bishops from Bet Qatraye are represented. The last references to Christians in Bet Qatraye are from the eighth century. There is little direct evidence that a Christian presence remained in the eastern part of Arabia very far into the ninth century.

The name of Ishodad of Qatraye in the inscription indicates that the Jericho hermitage was built at the latest in the eighth century, and possibly much earlier. The presence of a glazed bowl hidden in a niche at the site provides a tentative indication that the hermitage was occupied until at least the early ninth century. Although conjectural, these dates would coincide with the general, gradual depopulation of religious sites in Palestine in the early Islamic period discussed in Chapter Two.

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Fiey’s identification of ‘John the Persian’ as John the seventh century contemporary of Rabban Hormizd negates his conclusion of a specifically mid-seventh century date for Buya of Shaqlawa.

240 D.T. Potts, The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity II: From Alexander the Great to the Coming of Islam (Oxford, 1990), 244.


242 Potts, The Arabian Gulf, 262.


244 Baramki and Stephan, ‘A Nestorian Hermitage’, 82; pl. LIII2b. On the dating of glazed wares in the vicinity of Jerusalem, see J. Magness, Jerusalem Ceramic Chronology (Sheffield, 1993).
This chapter has addressed how the East Syrian Church related to its Byzantine counterpart, maintaining a surprisingly amicable relationship despite theological differences. The ability of the Church to function successfully as a minority religion under two different political regimes has also been examined. Finally, the presence, both temporary and permanent, of East Syrians in Palestine has been analyzed using literary and archaeological sources. Chapter Four will address whether the monastery at Tel Masos can be added to these data.
Chapter Four: Comparison of Church Architecture

4.1: Mesopotamian and Arabian Architectural Forms

Prior to the past two decades, information about East Syrian church architecture was derived almost exclusively from the abundant East Syrian liturgical sources.245 Conversely, archaeological examples of East Syrian churches were scarce. Only three churches, one at Ctesiphon and two at Hira, provided archaeological data to supplement the literary sources.246 As a result, early perceptions of the typical layout of East Syrian churches were influenced unduly by literature and by a limited amount of archaeological data.247 One effect of reliance on liturgical texts for reconstructing East Syrian church layout was the idea that all East Syrian churches contained a bema.248

The bema originated in synagogue architecture, perhaps as early as the first century CE, as a wooden platform in the center of the synagogue from which scripture was read during services.249 This feature was adopted in both East Syrian and West Syrian traditions,

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246D. Talbot Rice, ‘The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931’, *Antiquity* 6 (1932), 276-291; O. Reuther, ‘The German Excavations at Ctesiphon’, *Antiquity* 3 (1929), 434-451. It is unclear why these three churches are considered definitively East Syrian, since no conclusive evidence is given for this fact in either excavation report.


248Specifically, a bema in the Syriac sense as discussed in E. Loosley, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth Century Syrian Churches* (Kaslik, 2003), 81-86.
as well as by Manichaeans. The bema was not used in Christian traditions of Greek
derivation, which preferred a smaller structure akin to the modern pulpit. The use of a
synagogue style bema by the East and West Syrian churches emphasizes the semitic heritage
of these groups.

East Syrian liturgical literature, in describing the use of the bema in religious ritual,
provides detailed information regarding its design in an East Syrian context. According to
liturgical sources, the bema was a raised platform, located in the center nave of the church,
which accommodated an altar, pulpits for readings, and seats for bishops and priests. A path,
known as a bet-šqaqona, linked the bema to the sanctuary at the east end of the church. The bema played a seemingly integral role in East Syrian liturgical rites as described in the
literature and as a result the concept of an East Syrian church obtained from these sources
would consider a bema an essential element.

Two churches, church V and church XI at Hira, provide evidence for the presence of
bemata in East Syrian architectural design. Church XI at Hira was constructed of mud brick
coated with plaster. It is divided into three naves by four pairs of detached columns. A
fifth pair of attached columns abuts the dividing wall between the central nave and the
sanctuary. Pilasters abut the northern, western, and southern sides of the nave in alignment

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249Loosley, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema, 44-45. On the connection between bemata in Jewish and


251Taft, ‘Some Notes on the Bema’, 331. The Greek pulpit, an ambo, was used for many of the same functions
as the Syrian bema, but did not have the same symbolic meaning. The Greek term βημα was used to denote the
sanctuary. See Loosley, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema, 29; 84-86.

252Loosley, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema, 47.


254Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, Fig. 1.
with the columns. A barrier extends north-south across all three naves at the second column pair from the west, effectively dividing the western two-fifths of the naves from the east. East of this barrier and occupying the space of the central nave as far east as the next set of columns is the bema. The north and south walls of the bema curve outwards and contain benches.255 The east end of the church is divided into three rooms: the sanctuary in the center and the pastophoria on either side.256 Direct access between the sanctuary and the pastophoria is made through narrow doorways on the west side of these rooms. The sanctuary is nearly square, with rectangular niches cut on all sides. The rectangular prothesis and diaconicon are narrow due to the thickness of the walls that divide them from the sanctuary, but their exterior walls remain in line with those of the side naves. The church is oriented south of east.

Church V at Hira is not as well preserved as church XI, but demonstrates some similar features. It was also built of mud brick and contained the remnants of a bema in the western area of the central nave.257 The square sanctuary directly accesses the diaconicon, but not the prothesis. Both pastophoria are wider than their counterparts at church XI. Church V appears to be a single nave structure, although it is possible that columns existed in the unexcavated sections. Church V was oriented south of east, almost exactly like church XI.

Plaster plaque crosses decorated both churches, although which church specific pieces belonged to is not clear. On some examples the designs were incised and colored in


256That these rooms functioned as prothesis (north) and diaconicon (south) in the liturgical sense is not assumed; the terms are used as a convenience to describe architectural layout without reference to function.

257Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, Fig. 2.
red, while others were carved in relief.\textsuperscript{258} The pieces are fragmentary, but clearly incorporate geometric and floral designs. Many of the crosses have slightly flared arms, most with rounded rosettes or buttons at their tips.\textsuperscript{259} Some of the crosses sit on a base or pedestal from which ribbons or leaves emerge, to which the excavator finds parallels in medieval Georgia and Armenia.\textsuperscript{260}

The church at Ctesiphon was a single nave mud brick structure. Four pairs of pilasters against the north and south walls supported the vaulted roof.\textsuperscript{261} The sanctuary and pastophoria are deeper than they are wide. The sanctuary has rectangular niches cut in the north and south walls and accesses the prothesis and diaconicon via narrow doorways on the west edge of those rooms. The diaconicon is elongated to the east by means of a rectangular niche, but its extra length is not discernable from the exterior. The prothesis contains a pair of niches on the northern side and one on the east.

An East Syrian ostracon from a deposit under the floor of the church gives a \textit{terminus post quem} of the seventh century for its construction.\textsuperscript{262} Sealed under the floor of a later Islamic occupation of the site were decorative elements belonging to the church. These decorations include geometric and floral designs and the torso of a statue, which the excavator suggests belonged to the church’s dedicatory saint.\textsuperscript{263}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{258}Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, 282.
\item \textsuperscript{259}Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, Fig. 3a, 3c, 3d, 3f, 3g, and 4a.
\item \textsuperscript{260}Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, Fig. 4a and 4c; 282.
\item \textsuperscript{261}Reuther, ‘Ctesiphon’, Fig. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{262}E. Hunter, ‘A Syriac Ostracon from Ctesiphon’, \textit{Al-Rafidan} 18 (1997), 361-367 (366). Reuther identified an earlier church on the same site, but gives little information about it (‘Ctesiphon’, 450). The ostracon appears to have been sealed in the level below the second church floor.
\item \textsuperscript{263}Reuther, ‘Ctesiphon’, 450.
\end{itemize}
Along with literary sources, early ideas about East Syrian church architecture were heavily influenced by the three East Syrian churches excavated in Mesopotamia at Hira and Ctesiphon during the early twentieth century. All three churches have a flat eastern end and a square or rectangular sanctuary, which have been considered characteristically East Syrian features derived from Assyrian and Babylonian temple architecture. These features differ from those found in West Syrian and Byzantine church architecture, which were inspired by Roman architectural forms, specifically the apsidal basilica. As a result of the limited archaeological examples available, flat eastern sides and square or rectangular sanctuaries were considered typical of East Syrian churches.

Despite early reliance on the churches at Ctesiphon and Hira to confirm the idea of the typical East Syrian church developed from literary sources, one important element is missing at Ctesiphon. Unlike the two churches at Hira, there is no indication that the church at Ctesiphon contained a bema. The influence of the liturgical emphasis on the bema in the literary sources was sufficiently heavy that the lack of a bema at Ctesiphon was treated as an aberration rather than as an indication that bemata might not be as ubiquitous in East Syrian churches as had been thought.

Data obtained from several excavations in southern Iraq and the Persian Gulf region over the past two decades have added to the number of East Syrian churches available for study. The excavated churches differ in some respects both from the literary descriptions of

\[\text{264Loosley, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema, 40; Talbot Rice, ‘Hira’, 279.}\]

\[\text{265Loosley, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema, 67.}\]

\[\text{266Fiey, Mossoul Chrétienne, pl. II.}\]

\[\text{267Reuther, ‘Ctesiphon’, 449; Figs. 1-2.}\]

\[\text{268Cassis, ‘The Bema in the East Syriac Church’, 7.}\]
church layout and from the examples at Hira and Ctesiphon. Moreover, these churches chart the southern and western expansion of the East Syrian Church in the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods. The remainder of this section will examine these churches to see if any common elements can be identified and to determine whether the monastic church at Tel Masos could fit into their milieu.269

Excavations at the site of Ain Sha’ia in southwestern Iraq have uncovered remains of a monastery, which contained fragmentary East Syrian inscriptions.270 The monastic church is a triple nave mud brick structure measuring approximately 14 by 22 meters.271 The naves are divided by solid partition walls, with three access points along their length and terminate at a narthex on the western side. The sanctuary is rectangular and deeper than it is wide, with *pastophoria* on either side in alignment with the naves. The sanctuary end of the church, which deviates 60 degrees from east, is flat. The sanctuary is elevated 0.3 meters above the naves and the *pastophoria*.272 The excavators date the abandonment of the church to the ninth century.273

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269 The excavated Persian Gulf churches are regarded as East Syrian, although only one site, Ain Sha’ia, displays independent evidence for this ascription. The other churches are associated with East Syrian Christianity based primarily on their location in southern Mesopotamia and the eastern Arabian Peninsula: areas known from literature to have supported a substantial East Syrian presence. This assumption is reasonable and accepted for the purposes of this study, although it should be noted that literary sources record a West Syrian bishopric established in the late sixth century, which encompassed Mesopotamia and Bahrain. See Potts, *The Arabian Gulf*, 254. See also V. Bernard, O. Callot, and J.F. Salles, ‘L’église d'al-Qousour Failaka, État de Koweit. Rapport préliminaire sur une première campagne de fouilles’, *Arabian archaeology and epigraphy* 2 (1991), 145-181 (164-165).


271 Y. Okada, ‘Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-Western Desert’, *Al-Rafidan* 12 (1991), 71-83 (Fig.1).


Pieces of twelve plaque crosses made of various materials were discovered in several locations during the excavations at Ain Sha’ia. All the crosses have slightly flared arms terminated with circular buttons on the corners. Some plaques incorporate floral or geometrical motifs, or locate the cross beneath an arch. Red paint was preserved in some examples. None of the crosses were found within the naves or sanctuary of the church and it is unclear from the excavation report whether most of the crosses were thought to have been found in situ.

Excavations at the site of al-Qusur on the Kuwaiti island of Failaka have uncovered a mud brick triple nave church, similar in many respects to that at Ain Sha’ia. The church measures 36 by 19 meters, excluding several subsidiary rooms on the southern side. As at Ain Sha’ia, solid partition walls with three access points along their length divide the naves, the rectangular sanctuary is deeper than it is wide, and the pastophoria are in alignment with the naves. The east end of the church is flat and is oriented slightly north of east. A narthex is located on the west side. Two burial niches are located in the southern nave within the partition wall. One niche was empty, but the other contained remnants of human remains along with shells. The excavators suggest an early seventh century date for the construction of the church and the late eighth or ninth for its abandonment.

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274 Y. Okada, ‘Reconsideration of the Plaque-Type Crosses from Ain Sha’ia near Najaf’, Al-Rafidain 11 (1990), 103-112 (105).
275 Okada, ‘Reconsideration of the Plaque-Type Crosses’, 104.
276 Okada, ‘Reconsideration of the Plaque-Type Crosses’, 109. Cross nos. 8 and 10 are described as coming from “upper filling” (104).
277 V. Bernard and J.F. Salles, ‘Discovery of a Christian Church at al-Qusur, Failaka (Kuwait)’, Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 21 (1991), 7-22 (Fig.1).
The *pastophoria* at al-Qusur preserve interesting features. Each contains niches on the north, south, and east sides. In the eastern niche of the *prothesis*, four grooves in the plaster floor indicate the presence of a table or altar. The *diaconicon* extends 1.7 meters farther west into the nave than its counterpart. A basin or drain is located in the southwest corner of the room.

Two monumental plaque crosses in plaster were also preserved at al-Qusur. The first plaque, found in the southern nave, depicts a cross surrounded by a geometrical and floral border. The arms are flared with circular buttons at the corners in all but the top arm. The cross sits on a pedestal with two ribbons arching upwards from it. Foliage hangs from the upper corners of the borders down towards the center of the cross. The second cross is similar though more elaborate and was found in the *diaconicon*. Again the cross sits on a pedestal surrounded by a geometric and floral borderer. The arms are flared and all are tipped with circular buttons. In this example, foliage extends out from the center of the cross towards the corners of the plaque. The pedestal ribbons are decorated and intersect the horizontal arm on both ends. An arch surrounds the upper half of the cross and foliage fills the space in the upper corners between the arch and the border.

A settlement on the island of Sir Bani Yas in Abu Dhabi was discovered in the course of survey work, and subsequent excavation revealed a monastic complex. The triple nave

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280 Bernard, Callot, and Salles, ‘L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka’, Fig. 11.
281 Bernard and Salles, ‘Discovery of a Christian Church’, 9; Bernard, Callot, and Salles, ‘L'église d'al-Qousour Failaka’, Fig. 15.
283 Bernard and Salles, ‘Discovery of a Christian Church’, Fig. 2.
church measures approximately 15 by 11 meters, although the excavators suggest the church was constructed in stages, with the addition of the north nave and the narthex occurring some time after the initial construction.\textsuperscript{285} The east end of the church is flat, the sanctuary and \textit{pastophoria} are rectangular, deeper than they are wide, and in line with the naves. In these features the church at Sir Bani Yas is comparable to those at Ain Sha’ia and al-Qusur. In contrast, although it is difficult to discern from the schematic plan, there do not appear to be any access points between the naves.\textsuperscript{286} The \textit{pastophoria} are not accessible from the sanctuary, and the sanctuary opens into the central nave only in its southwest corner. The \textit{diaconicon} is divided by a north-south wall creating two tiny rooms linked by a doorway at the south. The excavators suggest that this area formed the base of a tower.\textsuperscript{287} The monastic complex is thought to have been occupied during the sixth and seventh centuries, although these dates are assigned tentatively given the lack of established ceramic chronology for the area.\textsuperscript{288}

Excavations at Sir Bani Yas recovered a large amount of decorative plaster from the interior and exterior of the eastern end of the church. The decoration includes geometric and floral motifs, as well as a number of crosses. Only a few examples are provided in the


\textsuperscript{286}King, ‘A Nestorian Monastic Settlement’, Fig. 2).

\textsuperscript{287}Elders, ‘The lost churches of the Arabian Gulf’, 51. Elders discusses these features as part of the “north-eastern room of the church”, but mostly likely means south-eastern, given the plan of the church and his own subsequent discussion of a similar feature at Marawah (Fig. 5).

\textsuperscript{288}King, ‘A Nestorian Monastic Settlement’, 231.
publications, but those given bear minimal similarities to the decoration at Ain Sha’ia and al-Qusur beyond the general motifs. Many of the crosses at Sir Bani Yas are squat in form with *fleur de lis* shaped decoration, others are bereft of the ornate geometric and floral decoration typical of the plaque crosses elsewhere.\(^{289}\) It is possible, however, that when a full catalogue of the plaster decoration from Sir Bani Yas is published, a greater degree of similarity will become apparent.

Sixty kilometers east of Sir Bani Yas, excavations revealed another structure on the island of Marawah.\(^{290}\) The identification of the building as a church is tentative as only the southeast corner was excavated and no decorative elements were found. The layout and size of the excavated portions, however, are nearly identical to the corresponding sections of the church at Sir Bani Yas.\(^{291}\) The identification of the partially excavated structure on Marawah as a church is reasonable.

The excavated areas of the Marawah church include the *diaconicon*, the eastern part of the south nave, the south east corner of the central nave, and the sanctuary, minus its northwestern corner. As at Sir Bani Yas, the *diaconicon* is divided by a north-south wall into two small chambers, which the excavator suggests supported a tower.\(^{292}\) Unlike the church at Sir Bani Yas, both the eastern room of the *diaconicon* and the sanctuary have an internal apse. There are also semi-circular buttresses at the intersections of walls, both internal and external, as well as at the external corners of the church. These rounded elements make for a striking stylistic change from the blocky church at Sir Bani Yas, their similarities in size and

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\(^{289}\) King, ‘A Nestorian Monastic Settlement’, Figs. 6-9.


\(^{291}\) Elders, ‘The lost churches of the Arabian Gulf’, Fig. 5.

layout notwithstanding. Using C-14 dating, the excavator proposes a mid-seventh century date for the abandonment of the monastery.²⁹³

Excavations on the Iranian island of Kharg occurred in the mid-twentieth century, but were published only in an informal and partial manner.²⁹⁴ Even so, many details can be ascertained about the church at the large monastic complex excavated there. Built of stone, the church has three access points in the solid partition walls dividing the three naves. The east end is flat, but the prothesis and sanctuary do not extend all the way to the wall of the church as the diaconicon does. Instead, a room behind the prothesis connects to a corridor behind the sanctuary, leading to another section of the monastery. As at al-Qusur, the diaconicon extends into the nave slightly. The church is oriented slightly north of east.²⁹⁵ The excavator suggests a date of the fifth or sixth century for the construction of the church, although others have suggested a slightly later date.²⁹⁶

The decorative elements at Kharg bear a great resemblance to those at Ain Sha’ia and al-Qusur. Geometric and floral designs in stucco decorated the area of the sanctuary and pastophoria, while crosses were located above the doorways that connected the naves.²⁹⁷ The depiction of one of the crosses shows flared arms with round buttons at the corners, rosettes at the ends of the arms and in the corners where the arms intersect, and two ribbons

²⁹³Elders, ‘The lost churches of the Arabian Gulf’, 56. No date is given for the church’s construction.


²⁹⁵The orientation of the church is not immediately apparent, as Ghirshman’s description of the monastery does not harmonize with the cardinal directions as labeled on the site plan (Pl. 12). Ghirshman’s description of the library and Capitulary Chamber and the corridor off the diaconicon indicates that the church was oriented as expected, towards the east (The Island of Kharg, 19-21). This point has generated confusion, as is clear from King’s description of the monastic dwellings at Kharg as being on the eastern and southern sides of the monastery (‘A Nestorian Monastic Settlement’, 232). The monks’ cells are on the western and northern sides of the monastery.


²⁹⁷Ghirshman, The Island of Kharg, 21.
arcing up from the base of the cross. The bottom portion of the plaque is not preserved, but it is likely that the cross stood on a pedestal, from which the ribbons originated. The arms of the cross are framed by arches, the ends of which meet at the rosettes in the intersection corners. The entire plaque is bordered with geometric and floral patterns.

Surveys at the site of Qusayr in southwestern Iraq revealed remnants of two churches, of which one preserves substantial remains. The central nave of what was originally a triple nave church terminates on the east side in a square sanctuary with a domed ceiling. Doorways on the north and south of the sanctuary suggest the presence of pastophoria. A shallow curved niche on the eastern side of the sanctuary is suggestive of a nascent apse. The only remains of the side naves are the western end and southwest corner of the south nave. Five irregularly spaced doorways in the solid partition walls connected the naves. The doorway into the central nave, perhaps from a narthex, is offset to the south slightly. The church was constructed with stone foundations and mud brick walls coated by plaster. Not including a hypothetical narthex, the original church measured approximately 20 by 40 meters. No decorative elements were preserved. The church is dated to the late sixth or early seventh century.


300Finster and Schmidt, *Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen*, Fig. 7.

301The surveyors also note that the volume of debris surrounding the site indicates the presence of side naves, see Finster and Schmidt, *Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen*, 30.

302So much of the church’s plan is hypothesized that this measurement is conjectural. It does respect the surveyors’ note that the detritus of the collapsed naves disappears 3.8m west of the external east wall of the sanctuary (*Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen*, 30).

303Finster and Schmidt, *Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen*, 35.
The church at Rahaliya in southwestern Iraq was constructed of stone and mud brick and measures 15 by 23 meters, with subsidiary rooms to the south.\textsuperscript{304} The church is divided into three naves by five pairs of pillars. The far western and eastern pillar pairs are attached to the far west wall and the wall dividing the nave and sanctuary, respectively. The sanctuary is square and accessed the central nave by a narrow door in the otherwise solid dividing wall. There is no access to the pastophoria from the sanctuary, although broad doorways lead from the side naves into these rooms. The diaconicon contained a ceramic tub against the eastern wall, suggesting to the authors the room’s function as a baptistery.\textsuperscript{305} No decorative elements are described. The church was dated to the late Sasanian period based on ceramics in the surrounding area.\textsuperscript{306}

Ten churches have been discussed in this section: six from southern Mesopotamia and four from islands in the Persian Gulf. Although this is a small number of samples from which to draw conclusions, some general observations about their shared characteristics will be made. As others have observed, the most surprising result of the recent excavations is that none have revealed a church with a bema.\textsuperscript{307} The two churches at Hira remain the only examples of bema churches in the group of ten.\textsuperscript{308} Eight of the ten churches are triple nave,

\textsuperscript{304}Finster and Schmidt, \textit{Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen}, Fig. 13. The authors suggest the subsidiary rooms served as a martyrium, hermitage, or both (42).

\textsuperscript{305}Finster and Schmidt, \textit{Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen}, 42.

\textsuperscript{306}Finster and Schmidt, \textit{Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen}, 43.


\textsuperscript{308}Additional bema churches have been discovered in northern Mesopotamia, but will not be included here because it is equally possible for them to be East or West Syrian. See Taft, ‘Additional Notes and Comments’ in R. Taft (ed.), \textit{Liturgy in Byzantium and Beyond} (Aldershot, 1995), 1-6 (3); Cassis, ‘The Bema in the East Syriac Church’, 6-7. The question of how, if the bema was as essential to East Syrian church practice as the literature indicates, services were conducted in churches without bemata is outside the scope of this study. See Loosley, \textit{The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema}, 105-133. For additional information on the bema in the
the exceptions being Ctesiphon and church V at Hira. Of these eight triple nave churches, six
are divided by solid partition walls and two by column pairs. Only Marawah and Qusayr had
sanctuaries and/or pastophoria with even a partial apse; the other eight churches had square
or rectangular sanctuaries and pastophoria. All ten churches had both a prothesis and a
diaconicon. Inscriptions were found only at Ain Sha’ia and Ctesiphon. Decorative elements
were described or depicted in the publications of six of the ten churches, five of which
demonstrate a clear similarity of style: Hira V and XI, Ain Sha’ia, Kharg, and al-Qusur.309
Building materials varied by region. Kharg has an abundance of stone, which was used to
construct the monastery. The churches in southern Mesopotamia, on the other hand, were
made of mud brick or mud brick with stone foundations.

The commonalities among these examples offer an opportunity to develop a tentative
East Syrian church paradigm for the area of southern Mesopotamia and eastern Arabia. This
paradigm features a triple nave divided by a solid partition wall, with access points between
the naves at regular intervals. Sanctuary, prothesis, and diaconicon are rectangular, each
with a doorway to its respective nave. The paradigm church does not have a bema, but is
decorated with plaster cross plaques incorporating ornate geometric and floral designs.

Several studies on aspects of church architecture have emphasized the importance of
regional and local influence on church layout.310 The degree to which the churches discussed
here owe their design and execution to Sasanian or Babylonian temple and palace

309The publication of Hira does not distinguish between the decorative elements found at church V and those
from church XI. See above, p. 55-56.

and Schmidt, Sasanidische und frühislamische Ruinen, 36; Viviani R., M.T., ‘The Jordan River as a Natural
Barrier between two Expressions of Christianity. An Architectural Analysis: Palestine and Hawran (300-700
architecture is not relevant specifically to this study. More important here is the question of how similar the paradigmatic southern Mesopotamia/eastern Arabian East Syrian church derived from the ten examples discussed is to the monastic church at Tel Masos.

Comparison of the paradigm church to the church at Tel Masos reveals that commonality is limited to the absence of *bemata* and the lack of apsidal sanctuaries. In most other respects, the church at Tel Masos differs substantially from characteristic East Syrian churches in southern Mesopotamia and eastern Arabia. First, the church at Tel Masos has a single nave. It could be argued that the single nave was dictated by size, given that the church at Tel Masos is very small. The church at Sir Bani Yas, however, is not much bigger than that at Tel Masos, so size does not appear to be a limiting factor. Second, unlike the sanctuaries at all the churches discussed above, the sanctuary at Tel Masos is as wide as the church itself. Even the other examples of single nave churches, at Ctesiphon and Hira V, had an eastern end divided between the sanctuary and the *pastophoria*. Third, in none of the churches discussed above did the *pastophoria* extend beyond the northern or southern edges of the nave. Room 610 at Tel Masos has been posited as a possible subsidiary sanctuary room on the basis of its elevation and direct access to the sanctuary, but its location has no parallel in the examples discussed. Fourth, the decoration at Tel Masos does not resemble that found at the other churches. No decorative pieces were found among the plaster inscriptions. The two decorative crosses found at Tel Masos are austere, without any floral or geometric ornamentation.\(^{311}\) Thus, the only characteristics the church at Tel Masos shares with the East Syrian churches of southern Mesopotamia and eastern Arabia are a lack of apse, a consequent flat eastern wall, and a lack of *bema*.

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\(^{311}\) Fritz and Kempinski, *Hirbet el-Msas*, Pls. 101D, 114A.
This conclusion does not invalidate the East Syrian attribution of the Tel Masos monastery necessarily; rather, the data show that Tel Masos does not appear to participate in the East Syrian architectural milieu of southern Mesopotamia and eastern Arabia. The excavators of Tel Masos found parallels to the architecture of the monastery and its church in Syria. This study will now turn to the churches of Syria to see if they indeed provide exemplars for some of the features found at Tel Masos.

4.2: Syrian Architectural Forms

The small church in southern Syria at Anz was thought to bear the closest resemblance to Tel Masos by the excavators. The two churches share many features, including a single nave, a rectangular sanctuary as wide as the nave, and division by transverse arches into four bays including the sanctuary. No other example displays all these features. Moreover, Anz is relatively close to Palestine, just east of the road from Philadelphia to Damascus. On the other hand, the church at Anz is dated to the fourth century, several centuries earlier than Tel Masos. A brief discussion of the development of church architecture in Syria will be necessary if more contemporaneous parallels for Tel Masos are to be found.

During the fourth century, southern Syria saw two general categories of rectilinear churches: single nave churches with transverse arches, having rectangular or apsidal

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312 Fritz and Kempinski, *Hirbet el-Msas*, 142-143, esp. n. 4-7.


314 Butler, H.C., *Early Churches in Syria, fourth to seventh centuries* (Princeton, 1929), Ill. 12. No justification is given for dating the church at Anz to the fourth century, which allows the possibility that the two sites are in closer chronological proximity than has been thought.

sanctuaries, and triple nave churches, also with transverse arches. In the fifth century, single nave churches with transverse arches remained popular, but a semicircular apse, either protruding or hidden by the east wall of the church, replaces the rectangular sanctuary. Triple nave churches, on the other hand, switched to a longitudinal arch system at this time, with a narrow apse either standing alone or flanked by pastophoria. During the sixth century, the triple nave longitudinal plan was typical, with transverse arches found only occasionally in square chapels. Moreover, in no case did these chapels feature the broad rectangular sanctuary seen at Anz. Thus, by the sixth century, two of the main features which Anz and Tel Masos have in common – single nave and broad rectangular sanctuary – had disappeared from the region.

During the fourth century in northern Syria, the triple nave church with longitudinal arches is ubiquitous. Another type, which will become more popular in the subsequent century, is a single nave chapel with broad rectangular sanctuary, such as that at Qirqbize. This type of church differs from the example at Anz in that it does not have transverse arches.


319 Butler conflates the sixth and early seventh centuries into one unit, see *Early Churches in Syria*, 115; 120-121.


in the nave. Instead, the chapel at Qirqbize has straight walls and a pitched roof, with a
game arch and low partition wall separating the nave from the slightly elevated sanctuary.

The triple nave church with longitudinal arches continues to be popular during the
fifth century in northern Syria. In addition, the number of single nave chapels with broad,
rectangular sanctuaries increases. These chapels employ either an arch or a pair of
columns supporting rails or an architrave to divide the nave from the sanctuary. Several of
the single nave chapels are built over crypts, or with a chamber to the side of the sanctuary to
house a sarcophagus or burial niche.

During the sixth century the triple nave, longitudinally arched church, with either
apsidal or rectangular sanctuary, remains dominant in northern Syria. Alongside this type,
the single nave chapel continues, albeit with greater variation in the organization of the
sanctuary. The practice of broadening the sanctuary beyond the width of the church or of
appending additional rooms to the north or south of the sanctuary, seen already in the fifth
century, continues. This feature differs from the arrangement of sanctuary and pastophoria
seen elsewhere, where the eastern end of the church is divided between the three rooms.

Instead, at sites such as Kefer Finšé and Serğible the extra room/s or breadth of the sanctuary

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322 G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord: le massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine*, vol. II (Paris, 1953), Pls. CIII-CVI. This church also contains a bema.


324 The churches at Banakfur and Burdj Hedar had crypts under the church, while the chapel at Brad contained a sarcophagus in the southern extension of the sanctuary. See Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, 75-76; 109-110. There is one possible example of a single nave chapel with broad sanctuary and transverse arches, at the site of Gubenli in Jebel Sim’an. It is difficult to discern from the publication whether the nave was divided in this manner, although the transverse arch dividing the sanctuary from the nave is preserved. J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie* (Paris, 1947), Fig. 19; Pl. XXXII-4. Lassus dates the church to the fifth century, although no justification is given for this date.


extend beyond the width of the single nave.\textsuperscript{327} The purpose of this extra space is not discernable in every example, but an additional case of the space being used for a burial argues for a continuation of this fifth century practice.\textsuperscript{328}

Therefore, although the triple nave church with longitudinal arches is the most common type in northern Syria from the fourth through the sixth centuries, the single nave chapel with broad rectangular sanctuary is also present. It occurs first in the fourth century and appears to become more popular in the fifth and sixth centuries. Thus two of the three features shared by the churches at Anz and Tel Masos are used in churches of northern Syria.

The fourth century church at Anz is the closest architectural parallel to the church at Tel Masos, sharing the features of single nave, broad rectangular sanctuary, and transverse arch system. The chronological gap between the two churches, however, makes their comparison problematic. All three features are found in Syria in the fifth and sixth centuries, but never in the same region. The south retains the transverse arch system in a limited capacity, but loses first the broad rectangular sanctuary and then the single nave. The north never adopts transverse arches, but develops its own version of single nave chapels with rectangular sanctuaries using straight walls and pitched roofs.

The monastery at Tel Masos appears to borrow features from both the northern and southern regions on Syria. The recent emphasis of local influence on architectural forms, noted above, requires this study also to examine examples of church architecture in Palestine and to consider the possibility that some features of the church at Tel Masos were inspired by local architectural conventions.\textsuperscript{329} The next section discusses whether any or all of the

\textsuperscript{327}Tchalenko, \textit{Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord} II, Pl. XIII 5, 11.

\textsuperscript{328}Butler, \textit{Early Churches in Syria}, 151.
features common to the churches at Tel Masos and Anz appear in the churches of Byzantine Palestine.

4.3: Palestinian Architectural Forms

The study of church architecture in Palestine benefits from a number of studies which present broad surveys of the available data as well as a wealth of excavation reports on individual churches and monasteries.\textsuperscript{330} After examining the surveys for examples of the architectural features found at Tel Masos, this section will focus briefly on a sampling of individual churches in the temporal and geographical vicinity of Tel Masos. These sources should provide a feeling for the architectural environment in which the monastery of Tel Masos was constructed.

Single nave churches are not uncommon in Palestine during the Byzantine period. One study claims that they make up 17\% of all churches in the region.\textsuperscript{331} Unfortunately, it is not easy to tell from the available literature how many of these single nave churches employed a transverse arch system in their construction.\textsuperscript{332} A few churches do display pairs of piers along the north and south walls comparable to those at Tel Masos, which indicate that the transverse arch system was in use in Palestine during the Byzantine period, at least in a limited capacity.

\textsuperscript{329}See above, n. 310.

\textsuperscript{330}These surveys include Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, and Ovadiah, \textit{Corpus of Byzantine churches}, which have been cited previously.

\textsuperscript{331}Ribak, \textit{Religious Communities}, 21. Ribak uses the term “hall” for what this study has described as a single nave church.

\textsuperscript{332}Ribak notes that this type of church “appears to have been vaulted, but little evidence has been preserved regarding its roofing” (\textit{Religious Communities}, 21).
A single nave church at 'Ein ha-Shiv’ah in the Galilee is one example of the use of the transverse arch system, employing three pairs of piers. The church is dated to the fourth century, although not on archaeological grounds. Another example, from the late fifth century, comes from the monastery of Sabas in the Judean Desert. The Kastellion chapel at the monastery makes use of a transverse arch system, again with three pairs of piers. Both of these examples have a single nave and an external apsidal sanctuary. A third possible example of the transverse arch system used in Palestine is at Khan el-Ahmar in the Judean Desert. This triple nave monastic church appears to have used a combination of transverse and longitudinal arches in its construction. It is possible there are additional examples of transverse arch systems among the single nave churches of Palestine, but they cannot be identified from the sources available currently.

Although 11% of sanctuaries in the churches of Byzantine Palestine are said to be square rather than apsidal, very few of them are the broad rectangular type of sanctuary seen at Tel Masos. In fact, the excavators of Tel Masos were only able to identify one other church with a rectangular sanctuary in Palestine, at Beth Jimal in the Judean Hills. Although broad, its rectangular sanctuary does not extend the entire breadth of the church. Additional possible examples of broad rectangular sanctuaries in Palestinian have since come

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334 Ovadiah, *Corpus of Byzantine Churches*, 56.

335 Patrich, *Sabas*, 142; Fig. 62a. It is possible that the Theotokos church at the monastery of Sabas used transverse arches as well, but the continual use and renovation of this church make it difficult to establish what it looked like originally. Patrich does not think the current system, which uses transverse and longitudinal arches, is original, see *Sabas*, 72.


337 Ribak, *Religious Communities*, 23; Fig. 2.

to light: one in a triple nave church and two in single nave churches. All four examples, however, are problematic in some way.

The triple nave church at Khirbat Es-Samra in the Galilee contains a raised rectangular sanctuary on its east end. It is unclear, however, how the sanctuary is divided from the nave and what its exact shape is. Likewise, a church at Khirbet en-Nitla near Jericho appears to have a rectangular apse the width of its single nave. This single nave church is actually a renovation of an earlier triple nave structure, and the original rectangular diaconicon is now used for the sanctuary. Therefore, although this example fits the criterion of having a broad rectangular sanctuary this feature was not part of its original construction. Moreover, the dating of the phases at Khirbet en-Nitla is problematic. The third example of a church with broad rectangular sanctuary comes from Arraba in the Galilee. This church was not thoroughly excavated, but appears to be a single nave building with a simple dividing wall on the east side, marking off that end as the sanctuary.

From the several surveys of churches in Byzantine Palestine available, the following generalizations can be made. First, single nave churches, although a minority, constitute a significant portion of Palestinian churches. Second, whether many or most of these single nave churches employed a transverse arch system cannot be determined at present, but a handful of examples are known. Third, broad rectangular sanctuaries are rare. Having garnered what information is available from surveys, a brief examination of churches in relative proximity to Tel Masos will conclude this section on Palestinian church architecture.

339Ribak, Religious Communities, 162.
341Ribak, Religious Communities, 177.
342Ribak, Religious Communities, 128.
The monastery of St. Martyrius in the Judean Desert is one of the largest of the level coenobia of the region at approximately 6400 square meters and dates from the mid-fifth century to the early seventh.\textsuperscript{343} It contains all the features necessary for a monastery, including living quarters, kitchen, church, refectory and burial cave, and some which might not be considered necessary, such a bathhouse and stables.\textsuperscript{344} Colorful mosaics decorate not only the churches, but also the refectory, kitchen, and hospice chapel.\textsuperscript{345} The monastery has a double church. The main church is a large single nave hall with an apsidal east end and a narthex in the west. To its south and connected by a doorway is a chapel of half the size in the same plan.\textsuperscript{346} Aside from those features common to monastic life, the monasteries of St. Martyrius and Tel Masos bear little resemblance to one another in style or layout. One exception, however, is in decorative stonework. A cross carved in relief on a column capital from the St. Martyrius refectory is very similar to one found on an altar piece at Tel Masos.\textsuperscript{347} Both have arms of equal length that flare sharply, although the St. Martyrius column capital includes scrollwork.

Salvage excavations on the eastern slope of Mount Scopus outside Jerusalem revealed a large monastery, known as the monastery of Theodorus and Cyriacus. These individuals are named in a mosaic inscription, which describes them as abbot and monk in the days of


\textsuperscript{344}Hirschfeld, \textit{Judean Desert Monasteries}, Fig. 21. It is interesting to note that the bathhouse is located deep inside the monastery proper, not in proximity to the guest house, and therefore must have been for the monks’ use. See Magen, ‘The Monastery of St. Martyrius’, 188.


\textsuperscript{346}Magen, ‘The Monastery of St. Martyrius’, 177-180.

\textsuperscript{347}Magen, ‘The Monastery of St. Martyrius’, 195; Fritz and Kempinski, \textit{Hirbet el-Msas}, Pl. 114A
the monastery’s construction or one of its several renovations. Built around a large central courtyard, the monastery includes stables and agricultural installations, tombs, assembly rooms, and storage facilities. The excavators suggest that living quarters occupied the second story of some or all of these areas. On the north side of the monastery stands the church, which was poorly preserved. From what does remain, the church appears to have been a single nave structure with a geometric mosaic floor. The east end of the church was destroyed completely, so nothing can be said about the arrangement of the sanctuary. Additional large halls were found on the north and west sides of the church. The south side of the monastery features an elaborate bathhouse, added some time after the original construction and decorated with geometric mosaics and glass windows. Unlike the bathhouse at the monastery of St. Martyrius, the location of the bathhouse at the monastery of Theodorus and Cyriacus in a southern extension of the facility makes it possible that the bathhouse was an amenity intended as much or more for guests than for the resident monks. The monastery contained several decorative elements in marble and glass, as might be expected in a facility near Jerusalem. There is little similarity between this monastery and that at Tel Masos.

The small rural monastery at Khirbet Jemameh, east of Gaza, is on a scale comparable to Tel Masos, but stylistically the two monasteries are rather different. Khirbet

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348 Amit, Seligman, and Zilberbod, ‘The Monastery of Theodorus and Cyriacus’, 143. The excavators suggest the monastery was in use from the sixth century through the late eighth or early ninth centuries, with several renovations occurring during that time (147-148).

349 Amit, Seligman, and Zilberbod, ‘The Monastery of Theodorus and Cyriacus’, 142; Fig. 1.


Jemameh did not become a monastery until its last occupational phase in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, according to its excavators. The southern side of the complex was destroyed, but the rooms north and west of the interior courtyard were preserved, as was the small church on the eastern side. The church is of an unusual plan, with a broad hall opening onto an apsidal sanctuary on its eastern, long wall and a subsidiary room to the north east. Fine geometric and floral mosaics decorate the church hall and a long room, possibly a refectory, on the northern side of the courtyard. Facilities at the monastery include a vaulted tomb beneath the courtyard, cisterns, a stable room, and possible evidence of a second story for living quarters. Although both are small and rural, the monastery at Khirbet Jemameh aspires to the decorative ranks of larger, more ornate monasteries, while the monastery at Tel Masos is conspicuous in its austerity.

Although the church complex at Horvat Beit Loya has been described as a monastery, excavations have uncovered only the church and associated agricultural facilities. The church is a triple nave structure with a narthex, apsidal sanctuary and square pastophoria. All these areas were originally paved in elaborate mosaics, although only those in the naves are preserved. Additional rooms are accessible from the north and south naves on the western end of the church as well as on the south side of the narthex. All these rooms are paved in mosaics as well. Adjacent to the church on its southern side are remains of an olive

357Patrich and Tsafrir, ‘A Byzantine Church Complex’, 266.
press, while a wine press was discovered immediately east of the church.\footnote{Patrich and Tsafrir, ‘A Byzantine Church Complex’, 271-272.} The crypt was located north of the church, outside the monastery’s enclosing wall.\footnote{Patrich and Tsafrir, ‘A Byzantine Church Complex’, 272.} Although small and rural, the church complex at Horvat Beit Loya is elaborately decorated. It stands in even greater contrast than Khirbet Jemameh to the monastery at Tel Masos.

The most noticeable difference between these Palestinian monasteries and Tel Masos is the latter’s lack of ornate decoration. Neither size nor proximity to an urban center appear to influence the desire of monks in Palestine to decorate their facilities with mosaics, although a monastery’s financial status might dictate how elaborate those decorations could be. The Tel Masos monastery was of careful and solid construction; it seems unlikely that its builders were prevented by financial or other considerations from decorating the monastery as they wished. The monastery’s austere style is more likely a deliberate choice, reflecting the priorities of its inhabitants. More than its single nave, rectangular sanctuary, or transverse arches, it is the austerity of the Tel Masos monastery which sets it apart from other monasteries in Palestine.

Finally, the site of Khirbet es-Samra in northern Jordan contains three churches, which offer potential parallels to some of the features of the church at Tel Masos. Church 20 is a small, single nave church with a broad, rectangular sanctuary and four pairs of pilasters along the northern and southern walls the nave, which could have supported transverse arches.\footnote{A. Desreumaux and J.-B. Humbert, ‘Les vestiges chrétiens de Khirbet es-Samra en Jordanie’, in N. Duval (ed.), Les églises de Jordanie et leurs mosaïques: Actes de la journée d’études organisée le 22 février 1989 au musée de la Civilisation gallo-romaine de Lyon (Beirut, 2003), 23-34.} Two other churches at es-Samra, 81 and 90, are also single nave structures with pairs of pilasters, although Church 90 has an apsidal sanctuary, while the eastern end of
Church 81 is not preserved. These two latter churches also have a small subsidiary room attached to their northern and western sides, respectively. In terms of decoration, both Church 20 and Church 81 are paved with geometric and floral mosaics, and preserve inscriptions in Greek.\textsuperscript{361} Church 90, on the other hand, is paved with rough stones; only the floor of the northern subsidiary room contains a small decorative element.\textsuperscript{362} The excavators suggest that the site of es-Samra was occupied from the mid-sixth century through the mid-eighth century, based on ceramic and numismatic evidence.\textsuperscript{363} Architecturally, therefore, several churches at es-Samra share elements in common with the church at Tel Masos. Church 20, the closest architectural parallel, however, is decorated in a significantly different style. Nevertheless, the churches of es-Samra supply contemporaneous examples of architectural parallels to Tel Masos, which no other region has provided.

Having examined churches in southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region, northern and southern Syria, Jordan, and churches and monasteries in Palestine, it is necessary to conclude that no direct, contemporaneous parallels for the monastic church at Tel Masos have been found. Its influences are drawn not from the east, as might have been expected were Tel Masos part of the East Syrian expansion west and south from southern Mesopotamia. Instead, the Tel Masos church clearly draws upon architectural features from the north, referencing forms found in both the northern and southern parts of Syria and executing these in a sober style that stands in stark contrast to the elaborate decorative schemes of its Palestinian neighbors. These Syrian architectural features cannot be associated

\textsuperscript{361}Desreumaux and Humbert, ‘Khirbet es-Samra’, Fig. 6. Detail of the inscription from Church 20 is not given.

\textsuperscript{362}Desreumaux and J.-B. Humbert, ‘Khirbet es-Samra’, Fig. 14.

with a specific type of Syrian Christianity at present. Additional excavation in Syria will be necessary to illuminate this question.
Chapter Five: Conclusions

The impetus for this study was the seeming lack of interest in Tel Masos as the site of a potential second East Syrian monastery in Palestine. Upon closer examination, the monastery’s ascription as East Syrian was cast into doubt and a broader investigation began. It became clear that the monastery at Tel Masos had fallen into a void between academic disciplines. Geographically, the site falls within the discipline of Byzantine and early Islamic archaeology in Palestine, while theologically it belongs in the field of Syrian Christianity. Since the publication of the site, no one had taken the opportunity to bring the site into a dialogue wherein both facets, geographical and theological, were engaged. The main goal for this study was to start such a conversation.

Palestine in the Byzantine period was a religiously diverse area, with deep regional divisions among Christian populations precipitated by the machinations of various ecclesiastical authorities in their quest to explicate the nature of Christ. This study has argued for the persistence of that diversity, the Byzantine condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia and the unseating of Miaphysite bishops notwithstanding. This diversity continued even after the Muslim Conquest of Palestine, as the evidence for occupational continuity, renovation, and new construction at Christian sites presented here suggests.

The East Syrian Church sustained an unexpectedly amicable relationship with the Byzantine Church, even while establishing its ecclesiastical and theological independence. It is argued here that this cordiality likely facilitated the East Syrian practice of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Similarly, the East Syrian Church, even as a minority religion, was able to
survive and even prosper under the political auspices of first the Sasanians and then the Muslims.

Archaeological data from various locales in the Near East have provided sufficient information to draw some conclusions about the origin of the architectural design and decoration of the Tel Masos monastery. The Tel Masos monastery bears very little similarity to the East Syrian church style predominant in southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region. Had the opposite been true, the identification of the Tel Masos monastery as East Syrian would have received strong support. Nor does the Tel Masos monastery resemble the monasteries of Byzantine Palestine in either layout or decoration. Most of the distinctive architectural features of the Tel Masos monastery are found in the regions of northern and southern Syria, with a few additional examples in northern Jordan. Taken with the East Syrian hermitage at Jericho, Tel Masos could represent an East Syrian expansion moving west and south from Syria towards the Negev, distinct from that which burgeoned out of Mesopotamia into the Persian Gulf.

The following conclusions regarding the Tel Masos monastery can be derived from the information presented. First, the ceramic and epigraphic evidence attest to the monastery’s occupation in the seventh and/or eighth centuries, but cannot inform on either the date of the monastery’s construction or of its abandonment. A more specific date cannot be determined from the pottery, due to the uniformity of the late Byzantine corpus. The inscriptions most likely date to the late seventh or early eighth centuries on paleographic grounds, but could have been written at any point during the monastery’s occupation. Therefore, the monastery could have been constructed any time between the late sixth century and the early eighth century, and was abandoned probably by the mid-eighth century.
The presence of Syriac inscriptions, regardless of whether they are East Syrian or West Syrian, indicates that the inhabitants of the monastery were not local. The fact that the Tel Masos monastery looks nothing like other Byzantine monasteries in Palestine supports this conclusion. Although many monasteries attracted disciples from other countries, this does not appear to be the case at Tel Masos. Rather than a few Syrian monks joining a Palestinian monastery, the occupation of Tel Masos was most likely an entirely non-indigenous project.

The monastic immigrants in question certainly came from Syria, as is clear from the architectural features of the Tel Masos monastery. Unfortunately, Syria had a highly diverse Christian population, so the question of whether the monks were East Syrian or West Syrian cannot be answered from this conclusion. On one hand, the existence of a possibly contemporaneous East Syrian monastery near Jericho supports the East Syrian ascription of Tel Masos. On the other hand, if Miaphysite feeling lingered in southern Palestine, as has been argued by some, West Syrians could have found the area favorable to settlement. Both groups placed a high value on the practice of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and it is likely that facilitation of this ritual was the instigation for the monastery’s construction. The monastery’s austere decorative scheme also indicates that the inhabitants practiced a particularly ascetic lifestyle, at least as concerns decoration.

As for the general question of whether, in the absence of clear epigraphic evidence, it is possible to determine a structure to be East Syrian from an architectural or decorative feature, the answer must be: not at present. The limiting factor is most structures that can be identified as East Syrian with confidence are located in proximity to one another.

Consequently, any similarities could result from regional rather than theological influence. Churches of differing, identifiable affiliation located in the same geographical setting will be necessary to answer this question. With more and better excavation and publication of monastic sites, renewed focus on the diversity of churches of Syria, and greater commitment to interdisciplinary research, this goal could be accomplished.
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